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# A Defence of Theological Virtue Ethics

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2014

# A Defence of Theological Virtue Ethics

Adam M. Willows

## Material Abstract

In this thesis, I show that the commitments of a theological tradition are a conceptual resource which allows new and more robust responses to criticisms of virtue ethics. Until now, theological virtue ethics has not provided a distinctive response to these criticisms and has had to rely on arguments made by secular virtue ethicists. These arguments do not always address theological concerns and do not take advantage of the unique assets of theological ethics.

This thesis resolves this problem by providing a chapter-by-chapter confrontation of criticisms of virtue ethics and offering a specifically theological response to each one. In so doing, it identifies the key theological commitments that enable these responses and constitute a particular strength of theological virtue ethics.

I consider criticisms that attack the internal coherence or completeness of virtue ethics as well as those which associate virtue ethics with other problematic philosophical positions. In the former group, I address the claims that virtue ethics is not a complete moral theory, that it cannot explain right action, and that it relies on a flawed concept of character. In the latter, I deal with the arguments that virtue ethics must subscribe to moral particularism, moral relativism or egoism. The final part of the thesis returns to the previous chapters to draw out the concepts that are central to these responses.

Theological work on the virtues has made important contributions to ethics but has so far been vulnerable to criticism. This thesis addresses this gap and highlights the advantages that theological commitments have to offer virtue ethics.

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## Declaration

Chapter 4 of this thesis builds, in part, on work developed previously at Master's level.

## Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

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# Introduction

My claim in this work is that explicitly theological commitments can offer great benefits to virtue ethics and that because of this theological virtue ethics is often more able to respond to criticism than its secular counterparts. So far theological virtue ethics has failed to recognise this and lacks any coherent response to current secular criticisms. This thesis's contribution is to fill this gap by providing a critical foundation for virtue ethics which is explicitly theological and by so doing demonstrate the distinctiveness and integrity of theological virtue ethics. This takes the form of a chapter-by-chapter confrontation of the criticisms of virtue ethics from a theological standpoint. In some cases I will show that the theological tradition has access to conceptual resources which strengthen existing secular responses or provide new ones. In other cases, features of virtue ethics which are typically unremarkable from a secular standpoint will prove to be problematic from a theological one. After an initial chapter introducing the problem and the state of theological virtue ethics, the chapters are divided into two main sections. Chapters 2-4 defend the integrity of theological virtue ethics. They focus on showing that it is consistent and irreducible to other ethical claims. Chapters 5-7 deal with external threats. They address suggestions that theological virtue ethics has some problematic tendencies or implications. Finally, in Chapter 8 I focus on the strengths of theological virtue ethics. Chapters 2-7 will show that a theological tradition offers particular insights and strengths which I use to respond to criticisms of virtue ethics. Chapter 8 returns to these insights to show how they enrich theological virtue ethics and ethics as a whole.

Interest in the virtues has grown enormously over the past half century. This general trend has had a significant effect on theological ethics. However, this contemporary work in theological virtue ethics is markedly different from that done in secular ethics. There is a proportionally greater focus on applied virtue ethics, due at least in part to the work of Stanley Hauerwas. Other areas of focus include

the nature and content of Christian virtues, Christian community, narrative, and the relationship of virtue theory to doctrine. Thomist scholars, especially Jean Porter (*The Recovery of Virtue*), provide the essential structure of a theological virtue ethic in much the same way that Aristotelian scholars have provided the foundation for the majority of secular virtue ethics. So far, these are understandable differences and not unrepresentative of the difference between theological and secular ethics as a whole. The major and more serious difference is to be found in the way each tradition responds to criticism.

Secular virtue ethics has a substantial body of work engaging with attacks on virtue theory, spearheaded by major thinkers such as Rosalind Hursthouse, Michael Slote and Christine Swanton. By contrast, any theological response to these criticisms tends to be piecemeal, tangential or implied if it is present at all. Worse, in some areas the theological tradition seems to be simply unaware of serious and damaging problems. This is the case, for example, with criticisms of character theory based on situationist moral psychology. Currently, the only option available is for theologians to rely on the secular responses to these problems. This is not ideal for several reasons. The tradition behind theological virtue ethics has different requirements and also provides different resources. Theologians are likely to be committed to ontological and epistemological positions which are not easily available to secular thinkers. This means that theological virtue ethics is not well suited to lean on secular virtue ethics for defence. In some areas a response that is sufficient for secular virtue ethics does not deal with all the problems it raises for theological ethics. This is the case when virtue ethics is accused of moral relativism or egoism. In other areas these ontological and epistemological commitments mean that theological virtue ethics can offer new and compelling defences of virtue ethics that secular virtue ethics cannot – for example, in responding to situationist criticism or constructing a theory of right action. There are also some problems which pose a serious challenge to theological virtue ethics but hardly arise for secular virtue ethics. The connection between virtue ethics and moral particularism is one such problem. Finally, theological virtue ethics should not be seen as a

subsidiary of secular virtue ethics. Without a distinctive response to these criticisms, it is forced to rely on the less than ideal responses provided by another tradition.

It is not my claim that the work already done in theological virtue ethics is poor or somehow inferior. My claim is that it lacks an effective defence. This defence is not necessarily the task of other virtue ethicists, and I do not believe it to be an omission or flaw in any one body of work. However, there are gaps in the tradition as a whole. Although I think that the tradition has the resources to deal with these gaps, the resources have not been employed and responses are hard to find. In responding more explicitly to these problems, I hope to provide a critical structure which will be useful in supporting theological virtue ethics. As there are multiple forms of theological virtue ethics, I will not try to produce an entirely rigid response to each criticism. My hope is that each response will suggest an approximate template for theologians to follow in order to be secure in that particular area. To this end, I will occasionally supply more than one response to a criticism, or suggest further areas for exploration which might prove fruitful. In each case, I will show how my response is (or can be) compatible with the work of important thinkers for theological thought on the virtues – often Aquinas, Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas.

My first chapter will make the case for a sustained theological response to the various criticisms of virtue ethics. This will be done in three parts. The first part will look at the recent history of virtue ethics and the way in which both theological and secular versions have developed over the last half century. The second examines more fundamental differences between secular and theological virtue ethics by looking at their respective historical sources – Aristotle and Aquinas. These differences include the nature of humanity's ultimate end, Aquinas's conception of humanity's twofold good and his theory of natural law. Taken together, these two sections set the scene for the following chapters by providing an overview of virtue ethics. They also form the background to my third section, in which I give an extended argument for my central claim: that theological virtue

ethics needs a distinctive response to criticisms of virtue ethics. I will argue that a response is necessary for several reasons. It is needed in order to properly defend ideas specific to theological virtue ethics. It is also important because a critical response which relies on key theological commitments demonstrates the strength and distinctiveness of theological virtue ethics. Having made my claim, I will begin addressing the various criticisms. Each subsequent chapter will take the form of a response to a different problem with virtue ethics. In each case, I will show why the criticism poses a problem for theological ethics and argue for a response which is distinctly theological.

Having set the scene in Chapter 1, I will begin my first main section. The three chapters here will be centred on the internal coherence of virtue ethics. The first step will be to argue for the independence and irreducibility of theological virtue ethics. The second chapter will therefore deal with the criticism that virtue ethics should be subordinated to deontic or consequentialist ethics, rather than being a separate normative theory. It will focus on explaining why the virtues have a scope beyond other normative theories, as well as showing that they can provide action guidance and account for moral principles and obligation (a theme that will be important in Chapters 5 and 6). Unusually, this topic has been engaged by theologians as well as philosophers. This criticism makes three central complaints: that virtue ethics cannot provide action guidance, that it does not leave room for moral rules and that it does not give sufficient importance to moral obligation. For one or all of these reasons, virtue ethics cannot be considered as a separate normative theory in the same way as consequentialism or deontology. At best the role of virtue theory is to enrich other normative theories. Major proponents of this view include Alan Gewirth, who argues that moral rules form the fundamental structure of morality, and William Frankena, who subordinates the development and exercise of virtue to deontic principles.<sup>1</sup> From a theological perspective, Phillip

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Gewirth, *Reason and Morality* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1978); William K. Frankena, 'Prichard and the Ethics of Virtue' in *Perspectives on Morality: Essays by William K. Frankena*, ed. by K. E. Goodpaster (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), pp. 148-160.

Quinn argues that divine commands should be prior to virtue.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of my response to each of these criticisms is the claim that virtue ethics has a very broad view of morality. Its focus is on how a life is to be lived well, rather than exclusively on action. This means that it does not exclude action guidance or rules, but that they are not as central as in other theories. This position is supported by several virtue ethicists including secular ethicists like Hursthouse and theologians such as Hauerwas, who argues that ethics should encompass all areas of life, rather than being limited to areas of moral obligation.<sup>3</sup>

The next task in arguing for the internal consistency of theological virtue ethics is to show that it is properly equipped to deal with moral discussion. Here virtue ethics faces one criticism in particular that has drawn a lot of discussion from secular ethicists. Chapter 3 will address the argument that virtue ethics cannot provide a plausible account of right action that relies on virtue. Other normative theories make a distinction between goodness and rightness. Goodness in action refers to the motive for the act, whereas rightness refers to the event itself. In this way it is possible to explain how someone can do the wrong thing from good motives (and vice versa). Critics argue that virtue ethics is not equipped to make this distinction, because any attempt to describe the moral status of an event in terms of virtue seems to tie it to the motive with which it is done, meaning that the moral status of the event and the moral status of the motive cannot be separated. Despite substantial philosophical interest in this criticism, theological virtue ethics has not yet engaged with it.<sup>4</sup> However, I intend to show that Aquinas's view of action provides an easy answer to the problem, and that theological ethics has a great deal to contribute to this topic. The existing debate on this topic has not taken this route, largely because it assumes a contemporary action theory. The majority of this chapter will consist of a defence of Aquinas's model of action, with

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<sup>2</sup> Philip L. Quinn, 'The Primacy of God's will in Christian Ethics', in *Christian Theism and Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Michael Beaty, Carlton Fisher and Mark Nelson (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998), pp. 261-285.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, 'Virtue Christianly Considered', in *Christian Theism and Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Michael Beaty, Carlton Fisher and Mark Nelson (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998), 287-304.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 20 (1991), 223-246.

reference to the efficient-causal theory underpinning the modern view, as opposed to Aquinas's four-cause view.<sup>5</sup> A brief alternative answer not reliant on the four-cause model will be attempted for theologians who subscribe to an alternative action theory.

The final step in arguing for the consistency of theological virtue ethics is to address criticism of a concept vital to its success. If it is reliant on flawed ideas, then theological virtue ethics will not be coherent. In Chapter 4 I deal with criticisms of the concept of character. I will respond to the claim that social and psychological experiments have shown that behaviour is determined by circumstances rather than character, rendering an ethics of virtue unimportant at best and dangerously misleading at worst.<sup>6</sup> Character is a key concept in virtue ethics. It is the part of the person that possesses the virtues and so is central to virtue ethical models of moral action and evaluation. After showing the importance of character to theological virtue ethics, this chapter will argue that character-based ethics can accommodate the findings of these experiments, as long as the situation-specific nature of virtue is understood.<sup>7</sup> The final part of the chapter will show how this revised understanding of virtue can still accommodate existing conceptions of virtue. This is an area in which theological virtue ethics is particularly strong, since Christ can play the role of a moral exemplar able to resist situational pressures.

By the end of this section, I will have shown that theological virtue ethics is equipped to be a consistent and independent normative theory. In the next section, Chapters 5-7 address more external problems for theological virtue ethics. These are criticisms based around association with undesirable theories. They say that virtue ethics contains certain tendencies which mean that to hold to virtue ethics is to be committed to these theories. Another common theme of this section is that each problem is more pressing for theological virtue ethics than for secular virtue

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<sup>5</sup> Alicia Juarrero, *Dynamics in Action: Intentional Behaviour as a Complex System* (London: MIT Press, 2002), p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Harman, 'Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 99 (1999), 315-331.

<sup>7</sup> John Sabini and Maury Silver, 'Lack of Character? Situationism Critiqued', *Ethics*, 115 (2005), 535-562.

ethics. Each of the associations is in some way particularly unpalatable for theological ethics. This means that there is less secular engagement with these topics, and that the engagement that exists clearly leaves theological concerns unanswered. I hope to show that theological virtue ethics has the resources to make stronger responses to these problems than secular virtue ethics has. Chapters 5 and 6 are closely related – both deal with a perceived leaning away from absolute or objective moral statements. In Chapter 5 I tackle the accusation that virtue ethics is committed to a denial of moral principles. In Chapter 6 I deal with the allegation that virtue ethics is relativist. The final supposed tendency inherent in virtue ethics has to do with its focus on the development of character. In Chapter 7 I look at the criticism that virtue ethics contains some form of moral egoism. My response to all of these will concentrate on the link between theological virtue ethics and the various theories. In each case I will try to show that the link is non-existent or small enough to be insignificant.

The first chapter in this section will look at the connection between theological virtue ethics and moral particularism. Moral particularism is the view that there are no general moral principles or that such principles are not as important as usually thought.<sup>8</sup> Although particularism is happily accepted by many neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists, it will be harder for theological virtue ethicists to do the same. This is because particularism seems to be incompatible with theological commitments to universalist or generalist understandings of the virtues.<sup>9</sup> These theological commitments are not necessarily shared by other forms of virtue ethics, meaning that this is principally a problem for theological virtue ethics. Because of this there is little explicit discussion of the relationship between virtue ethics and particularism. The connection is based on the fact that the agent-centred nature of virtue ethics tends towards particularism because less emphasis is placed on rules for action. The chapter will aim to show that although the connection between

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Dancy, 'Moral Particularism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2009) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/moral-particularism/>> [accessed 09 February 2012] (para. 1 of 49).

<sup>9</sup> Robert P. George, 'Moral Particularism, Thomism, and Traditions', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 42 (1989), 593-605.

virtue ethics and particularism is a real one, the only necessary link is to a form of particularism so weak that it does not threaten theological virtue ethics. The final section will look at the historicism of MacIntyre and Hauerwas and show that it does not necessitate a more troubling particularism.<sup>10</sup>

Even if virtue ethics is shown to be able to accommodate moral principles, there is a further problem. It is a common claim that since understandings of virtue tend to be culturally relative, virtue ethics is morally relativist or at least tends towards moral relativism. Most philosophers accept a fully or partially relativist virtue ethic, but theologians are likely to be more concerned to preserve a commitment to moral absolutes.<sup>11</sup> However, one of the most prominent theological virtue ethicists – MacIntyre – is often accused of relativism. In Chapter 6 I will come at this problem from two angles. The first approach will argue that theological virtue ethics is compatible with a more thoroughgoing non-relativist position. The second will be an attempt to show how versions of theological virtue ethics like MacIntyre's which tend towards relativism can still be accommodated or perhaps avoid relativism altogether.<sup>12</sup> I hope to argue that prior ontological commitments provide the resources for an effective theological answer here.

The last unwelcome association I address in this section is between theological virtue ethics and moral egoism. Opponents argue that virtue ethics is inherently and problematically egoistic or self-centred. They point out that the morally motivating factor for virtue ethicists is *eudaimonia* (happiness, flourishing) and so the good of the agent is always the goal of moral action. I show that egoism encompasses a range of positions. It may refer to the view that every action should be exclusively in the agent's interest; or that every action should be exclusively motivated by self-interest; or simply that every act should benefit the agent in some way.<sup>13</sup> In order to avoid egoism, virtue ethics must become self-effacing – it

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<sup>10</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice: Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (London: SCM, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Onora O'Neill, 'Kant's Virtues', in *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*, ed. by Roger Crisp (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), pp. 77-97 (pp. 78-9).

<sup>12</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1985), pp. 169-189.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Regis Jr., 'What is Ethical Egoism?', *Ethics*, 91 (1980), 50-62.

must not allow the agent to consider their motivations. It also seems vulnerable to charges of self-centredness. I show that Aquinas's focus on God as the purpose and fulfilment of human life allows theological virtue ethics to avoid both of these problems.

My final chapter plays a unifying role. It will look back over the responses to these criticisms and try to identify areas where theological virtue ethics is strong. It will identify where it has unique insights and where different positions are available. I show that theology's prior epistemological and ontological commitments, far from being a burden, are an excellent conceptual resource and source of strength. These prior commitments are used throughout the thesis to respond to the various criticisms. They include God's role as the ground of goodness and being, Aquinas's account of causation, the role of Christ as an exemplar and the natural law. Some of these are doctrines which are difficult or impossible for secular ethicists to accept or rely on, but which allow theological ethicists to respond to challenges in new and more robust ways. The goal of this chapter is to show that theological virtue ethics already contains the tools for an effective defence, and that a form of virtue ethics which takes care to include them will be able to rely on my responses to criticisms developed throughout the thesis.

The failure to respond to criticism is a gap in current theological virtue ethics. This project aims to respond to the failure and fill that gap. However, in responding to those criticisms there is more to be achieved. Sometimes defending prior theological commitments represents an additional challenge for theological virtue ethics. I show that more often than not they are a great resource and allow theology to take positions unavailable to secular thinkers. Identifying them also makes clear the positions that theological virtue ethics should cling to and those it should avoid. As well as dealing with its weaknesses, this thesis brings out the strengths of theological virtue ethics and highlights the key commitments for current and future projects.

# Chapter 1

## The Need for a Defence of Theological Virtue Ethics

This chapter will make the foundational argument of this thesis: that theological virtue ethics lacks a sufficient response to criticism, and that this lack needs to be addressed. To make this argument I will compare theological and secular virtue ethics on a practical level by looking at what they have concentrated on so far and on a conceptual level by examining fundamental differences in theory between them. This chapter will also serve as an overview of virtue ethics, which will be useful for the rest of the thesis. The first section will focus on the state of virtue ethics today, looking at the initial interest in the virtues as an alternative to the available moral systems and the later development of the theory in neo-Aristotelian and other forms. I will then chart the development of theological virtue ethics, including the focus on community and the rise of interest in Aquinas. Having given a brief overview of both forms of virtue ethics, I will look at some of the major differences in focus between them. These include different emphases on the social nature of ethics and a proportionally greater focus on applied ethics from theologians. The main difference, though, is the relative lack of critical discussion present in theological ethics. I will show that theological responses to criticism are often piecemeal or incomplete, where they are present at all.

The second section will explain some of the main differences between the two forms of virtue ethics. The goal is to show that the differences are significant enough that theological virtue ethics ought not to rely on its secular counterpart for responses to criticism. As they form the background to many of the modern theories, I will concentrate on Aristotle and Aquinas here. I will examine differences in their understanding of flourishing, the natural law and the exact nature of the virtues. I will also note some of the basic commitments required by a theological ethic which will affect responses to the various criticisms. The third section will draw on the first two to argue that a theological response to criticism is needed for

three reasons: firstly, the differences in theory may make theological ethics more vulnerable. Secondly, those same differences may allow new responses or positions. Thirdly, the process of responding to criticism may help guide the shape of theological virtue ethics. In the final section I give a brief overview of the thesis, focusing on the crucial arguments and positions which will form my response to each criticism.

## Section 1: The State and Development of Modern Virtue Ethics

This section will look at modern virtue ethics, covering the rise in interest in the last half century and the state of virtue ethics today. It will begin with secular virtue ethics, looking at the concerns that early virtue ethicists like Anscombe, Williams and MacIntyre had regarding the state of moral philosophy. I will then show how virtue ethics was developed by thinkers like Hursthouse and Foot and make a distinction between Aristotelian virtue ethics and the non-Aristotelian virtue ethics proposed by thinkers like Swanton and Slote. Turning to theological virtue ethics, I will cover the focus on community, the historicism of Hauerwas and MacIntyre and the rise of interest in Aquinas. The last part of this section will draw attention to similarities and differences in focus between the two kinds of virtue ethics.

Crucially, the response to criticism from secular virtue ethics is much more developed. Theological responses are often implicit, fleeting, or simply absent. Even when present they tend to only address part of the problem. The aim of this section is to provide a general overview of virtue ethics and to lay the groundwork for my claim that theological virtue ethics needs to offer a response to criticism.

### The Renewal of Virtue

Since virtue ethics is a term which represents several different moral theories, it is worth beginning this overview with a short look at what those theories have in

common. Put simply, the main unifying factor is that virtue ethics prioritises the virtues in moral thought, where a virtue is a desirable habit, disposition or character trait. This may seem self-evident; but it distinguishes virtue ethics from virtue theory, in which the virtues are considered but are not necessarily prioritised. So the common Kantian position that a virtue is a trait which helps obedience to the moral law or the consequentialist claim that a virtue is a trait which helps to produce maximal utility both engage in virtue theory but not virtue ethics. This is because in each case virtue is subordinate to some more basic moral concept – the categorical imperative and the principle of utility respectively.

Another identifying factor is that virtue ethics tends to emphasise the role of the agent and their character in moral decision-making and evaluation. This is a direct result of the prioritisation of virtue. Since the virtues are character traits, the character of the agent will obviously be central to how they act and how they are judged. Negatively, virtue ethics is often defined as being opposed to the use of moral rules, law and obligation and as being agent-focused rather than action-focused. It is true that virtue ethics concentrates less on these things than other moral theories; but as will be shown in Chapter 2, it is a mistake to suppose that they are not considered at all.

So 'virtue ethics' refers to any moral theory that emphasises cultivation of the virtues and considers the agent and their character to be at least as important to moral evaluation and decision-making as the actions which the agent performs. The background to virtue ethics as a moral theory is both ancient and recent. Ancient, because it has its roots in Greek philosophy culminating with Aristotle. Recent, because for several centuries prior to the late 1950s virtue ethics was largely absent from moral theory. When the virtues did receive attention, they typically played a supporting role to another moral theory – that is, there was some virtue *theory* but little or no virtue *ethics*. The renewal of interest in the virtues began with thinkers concerned with the state of moral philosophy. Early modern virtue ethics substantially took the form of a reaction against other kinds of ethics. Typically this reaction criticised the central role of obligation and rules in moral

thought, the restriction of 'morality' to a small part of human life and the apparently confused and intractable nature of moral debate at the time. Two notable thinkers responsible for these claims are Elizabeth Anscombe and Bernard Williams; of particular importance is Anscombe's article 'Modern Moral Philosophy', in which she argues that moral philosophy is no longer profitable.<sup>14</sup> 'Modern Moral Philosophy' is typically credited as the original source of much of the reaction against standard ethical thought which formed modern virtue ethics.

The most complete account of this reaction comes not from Williams or Anscombe but Alasdair MacIntyre. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre claims that there is a crisis in moral philosophy, that it is relying largely on concepts that have lost their meaning, and that the philosophical and social traditions of the Enlightenment have failed to equip us for effective moral reasoning.<sup>15</sup> He argues that modern thought must inevitably lead to emotivism and ultimately a Nietzschean position.<sup>16</sup> Instead, he proposes a modernised Aristotelianism and a return to the virtues, with a focus on society and social practices as central to human goods and understanding.

The next stage in the development of modern virtue ethics was the development of virtue ethics as a moral theory.<sup>17</sup> Some of the most important work here is that of Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse. They develop a clearer explanation of how the virtues operate; provide a modernised Aristotelianism, in particular addressing the nature of the human good (Aristotle's *eudaimonia*); begin to show how a virtue ethical approach can inform applied ethics (notably on the question of abortion); and deal with criticisms of virtue ethics. Other thinkers joined them in this task – of note are Julia Annas and Martha Nussbaum. Arguably, Foot and Hursthouse are the two thinkers most responsible for the 'standard' form of virtue ethics today – a secular neo-Aristotelianism.

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<sup>14</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy*, 33 (1958), 1-19.

<sup>15</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

<sup>16</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, 'The Claims of *After Virtue*', in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. by Kelvin Knight (Polity: Cambridge, 1998), pp. 69-72.

<sup>17</sup> My ordering of the 'stages' in the development of virtue ethics is primarily conceptual, and only loosely temporal. For example, Bernard Williams's criticism of moral philosophy in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* belongs to the first stage, despite being preceded by some of Foot's work.

Although Aristotle is the classical source for the significant majority of modern virtue ethics, other versions have been developed. Michael Slote draws heavily on Hume's sentimentalism and Platonic and Stoic thought in developing his 'agent-based' modern virtue ethic.<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche (as well as Aristotle) is a crucial influence on Christine Swanton's *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*.<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that throughout this thesis I concentrate on Aristotle and the neo-Aristotelian tradition as representative of secular virtue ethics. This is for two reasons: the significant majority of modern secular work on the virtues is neo-Aristotelian; and the similarity between Aristotle and Aquinas makes for easier comparison between theological and secular virtue ethics. Virtue ethicists who are not exclusively neo-Aristotelian do appear – notably Swanton – but by and large I will be working with neo-Aristotelians.

### The Development of Secular and Theological Virtue Ethics

The rise of interest in virtue is common to both secular and theological ethics. MacIntyre is the main thinker common to both traditions, and his turn to Thomism in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is particularly important.<sup>20</sup> Hauerwas has produced an enormous amount of virtue ethical moral theory and applied ethics, and Jean Porter has led a re-interpretation of Aquinas which identifies him as the key historical figure for theological virtue ethics.<sup>21</sup> There are many similarities between secular and theological virtue ethics. Both owe a great debt to Aristotle, although in the case of theological ethics this is largely due to his influence on Aquinas. This debt means that both are typically *eudaimonist*. Eudaimonism defines the virtues with reference to the good or flourishing human life – what Aristotle calls *eudaimonia*. I said above that the virtues are desirable character traits;

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Slote, *Morals From Motives* (Oxford: OUP, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*.

<sup>21</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).; Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (London: SPCK 1994).

according to a eudaimonist virtue ethic, the virtues are desirable because they are those habits of character which lead to and are partly constitutive of the good life.

There are some distinctions to be made between secular and theological virtue ethics, both in terms of theory and in the way each happens to have developed. I will discuss theoretical differences in the next section. For now I will concentrate on the differences of direction between theological and secular virtue ethics. These differences do not (with a couple of partial exceptions) seem necessary to me. That is, either form of virtue ethics could have developed in different ways with different focal points to those they actually have; but as a matter of fact they have developed in the ways I am about to show.

The first significant difference between theological and secular virtue ethics is to do with their respective emphases on history and community. I explained above that virtue ethics places more emphasis on the agent and their character than other forms of ethics. Theological ethics has explored in great detail the extent to which character is formed by one's history and so necessarily by the community in which one lives. For some good examples, see MacIntyre's emphasis on communal practice as the main arena for virtue and Hauerwas's focus on constructing a Christian social ethic.<sup>22</sup> This focus on community also leads to the historicism of MacIntyre and Hauerwas. Historicism is the view that thought can or should only take place within a particular historical and communal framework. I explore this idea further in the chapters on relativism and particularism. Compared to theological virtue ethics, secular virtue ethics does not focus as much on community, history or narrative. There is certainly acknowledgement that our development of the virtues is affected by our past and those around us – see for example Linda Zagzebski's exemplarism or the work of Foot and Nussbaum on moral relativism.<sup>23</sup> However, secular virtue ethics has tended to focus more on the

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<sup>22</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue* pp. 169-209.; Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretative Power of the Christian Story', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 8 (1980), 55-82.

<sup>23</sup> Linda Zagzebski, 'Exemplarist Virtue Theory', *Metaphilosophy*, 41 (2010), 41-57.; Philippa Foot, 'Moral Relativism', in *Moral Dilemmas: and Other Topics in Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Philippa Foot (Oxford: OUP, 2002), pp. 20-36.; Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach', in *The Quality of Life*, ed. by Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: OUP, 1993), pp. 242-269.

way an individual may develop the virtues, whereas theological virtue ethics emphasises the role that community plays in virtuous development.

Theological virtue ethics has also shown a proportionally greater interest in applied ethics. This is due almost entirely to the work and prolific nature of Stanley Hauerwas. There are secular virtue ethical discussions on specific moral problems – Foot and Hursthouse have both made contributions to the work on abortion mentioned earlier.<sup>24</sup> However, Hauerwas has covered topics including sexual ethics, ethics of disability and dying, just war, social and political ethics as well as abortion, suicide and euthanasia.<sup>25</sup> This is a good example of an unnecessary difference between theological and secular virtue ethics. There is no reason that secular ethics should not speak on these issues; indeed, it has to some extent; but I think it is fair to say that theology leads the way in applying thought on the virtues.

One difference in focus which does seem more necessary is that theological virtue ethics has spent a great deal of time on doctrinal questions. This includes both an exploration of the theological foundations for virtue ethics and a response to those who for whatever reason see virtue ethics and Christian theology as in some way incompatible. Oliver O'Donovan's *Resurrection and Moral Order* is an excellent example of the first part of this focus, the first two sections of the book laying the theological and doctrinal groundwork for the more direct moral theorising of the third.<sup>26</sup> Much of Hauerwas's work covers similar ground, although O'Donovan rejects the kind of historicism embraced by Hauerwas. It is also notable that both Hauerwas and O'Donovan would not primarily identify themselves as 'virtue ethicists' but as Christians and theologians. They are both clear that the foundation for their thought is Jesus and the Christian tradition, not philosophical ethics. As long as this is understood, I think there is little harm in continuing to refer to them as virtue ethicists, as virtue and character are clearly key concepts for their thought. Regarding the second part of the focus on doctrine, Joseph J. Kotva's *The*

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<sup>24</sup> Philippa Foot, 'The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect, in *Virtues and Vices: and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Philippa Foot (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), pp. 19-32.; Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion'.

<sup>25</sup> Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*.

<sup>26</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: Apollos, 1986).

*Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* offers a thorough and clear discussion of the scriptural and theological reasons for supposing that Christianity is compatible with virtue theory.<sup>27</sup> In some ways his project mirrors my own. He defends theological virtue ethics against criticism from within the Christian tradition; I am defending it against criticism from without.

It is the last unnecessary difference between secular and theological ethics which I believe to be the most significant and which is the basis for my project. The vast majority of critical discussion in virtue ethics takes place in secular ethics. By critical discussion I mean levelling of criticism and identification of potential problems, responses to those criticisms and problems, and reshaping or development of theory in light of them. Take the following examples: the claim that virtue ethics cannot explain right action is probably the most well-known criticism in secular virtue ethics. Discussions of the claim appear in encyclopaedias, journal articles and most books on virtue ethics. It appears in at least four of Hursthouse's works (the most comprehensive treatment is in *On Virtue Ethics*) as well as articles and books by Slote, Annas, and Swanton.<sup>28</sup> There are several responses to the criticism – most notably Hursthouse's specification of right action with reference to the virtuous exemplar and Swanton's target-based view. As far as I am aware, there is no explicit theological engagement with this problem. This does not mean that theological virtue ethics can give no response, but that so far no response has been given. The resources are certainly there – both Hauerwas and MacIntyre discuss action theory – but they remain unused.

A slightly better response is available for the claim that virtue ethics ought to be subordinated to other moral theories. Here both the secular and theological responses are a little scattered; that is, the claim is made in several ways and a complete response to all of them is difficult to find in one thinker. However, the

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph J. Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 25-42.; Slote, pp. 5-7.; Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, pp. 227-248.; Julia Annas, 'Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 78 (2004), 61-75.

secular response comes closest here, again in the work of Hursthouse.<sup>29</sup> More importantly, the secular response is larger. There is more said on the subject, which means that it is better positioned to claim a complete (if scattered) response to the problem. This is not necessarily the fault of theological virtue ethics. It is simply a smaller field, and thinkers within it are often engaged with other concerns. Nevertheless, the fact remains that there is not as much said on the topic. What there is again comes from Hauerwas and MacIntyre – the former’s discussion of moral obligation and the latter’s attack in *After Virtue* on Gewirth’s account of morality are particularly relevant.<sup>30</sup>

Theological virtue ethics is best equipped to respond to criticism when it comes to the charge of relativism. Here there is real engagement with the topic, due largely to the fact that both Hauerwas and MacIntyre have had the charge levelled at them personally. Their approaches are different – MacIntyre insists that his position does not entail relativism, whereas Hauerwas accepts some form of relativism but tries to diminish the sting.<sup>31</sup> The secular response is broadly similar to Hauerwas’s. This seems to be for two reasons – secular ethics is less concerned to avoid relativism, and it lacks the resources to make a full rebuttal. This is evident in the work of Foot and Nussbaum, who both fail to avoid relativism because they are unable to provide a definition of *eudaimonia* which is not at least partly culturally relative. This is a clear contrast with more firmly absolutist theologians like O’Donovan and Kotva, who connect their opposition to relativism to an objective natural teleology. Neither O’Donovan nor Kotva’s responses are ideal. Kotva’s is very brief and O’Donovan’s is largely indirect and bound up with discussion of related subjects such as an attack on historicism and a discussion of particularism.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.; Rosalind Hursthouse, ‘Normative Virtue Ethics’ in *How Should One Live?: Essays on the Virtues*, ed. by Roger Crisp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 19-36.

<sup>30</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Obligation and Virtue Once More’, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 3 (1975), 27-44.; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>31</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Moral relativism, truth, and justification’, in *The Tasks of Philosophy*, ed. by Alasdair MacIntyre (Cambridge, CUP 2006), pp. 52-73.; Hauerwas, ‘The Church in a Divided World’, 55-82 (pp. 67-74).

<sup>32</sup> Kotva, pp. 153-155.; O’Donovan, pp. 220-222.

Although relativism has had the most complete response from theological ethicists, it is still worth examining. The most direct responses are from MacIntyre and Hauerwas, meaning that a more firmly absolutist stance is lacking. Also, part of the benefit of responding to these criticisms is that the responses should help to show the strengths of theological virtue ethics and a broader response that takes into account multiple views will be better suited to this.

I think that the lack of critical discussion is a significant lacuna in theological virtue ethics, and following chapters will make this point again with reference to more criticism than the examples above. In what remains of this chapter I will show that this shortcoming needs to be dealt with, and that even where there is some theological response to criticism (as in the case of relativism) more work needs to be done. So far I have looked at differences in the development of secular and theological virtue ethics. In the next section I will look at the deeper theoretical differences between them, primarily with reference to Aristotle and Aquinas. It will be made clear that the differences between theological and secular ethics are too great for theologians to rely on secular arguments alone as a response to criticism.

## Section 2: Differences in Theory and Commitments between Theological and Secular Virtue Ethics

The previous section looked at the development of modern virtue ethics and the differences in development between the theological and secular versions. This section will cover some of the more fundamental differences, mainly by looking at Aquinas and Aristotle. There are a great many similarities between these two thinkers, and these have been explored in depth elsewhere. I do not want to deny the close connection between them, but for my present purposes it is their differences and not their similarities which are important.

The first major difference is in their understanding of the good life for humanity. I said above that both Aristotle and Aquinas are eudaimonist; the virtues

are defined in terms of the flourishing, happy, fulfilled life as those traits which lead to and are part of that state. They differ, though, over the specific nature of the fulfilled life. As I have said, Aristotle's term is *eudaimonia*. The Thomist equivalent is *beatitudo*. There are some similarities between them. For example, both Aristotle and Thomas think that the good life consists in contemplation: 'We have already said that it [happiness] is a contemplative activity'.<sup>33</sup> Aquinas, referencing the above section from Aristotle, says that fulfilment is to be found through the speculative intellect, and hence 'happiness consists principally in such an operation, viz. in the contemplation of Divine things'.<sup>34</sup>

Although he draws on *eudaimonia* for his concept of *beatitudo*, Aquinas goes beyond Aristotle in two important ways. The first is his clear identification of *beatitudo* with God: 'God alone constitutes man's happiness'.<sup>35</sup> The second is that he has a twofold description of the good. As far as Aristotle is concerned, happiness is something to be achieved (or not) in this life. This means that it is subject to worldly needs such as basic health, food and comfort. It may also be affected by luck, whether it is the luck of being born into a situation which provides for our needs, or bad luck which prevents our lives from ever being *eudaimon*. Such is the case of Priam, who met with terrible tragedy in old age.<sup>36</sup> Aquinas agrees that there may be things which prevent happiness in this life, but says that there is a better, more complete happiness available in the next life. In the next life we will not be subject to the needs we have in this life and will be able to clearly contemplate the divine:

The last and perfect happiness, which we await in the life to come, consists entirely in contemplation. But imperfect happiness, such as can be had here,

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by J.A.K. Thomson and Hugh Tredennick (London: Penguin, 2004), 1177a 15-20.

<sup>34</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1948), 1a2ae 3:5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1a2ae 2:8.

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, 1100a 5-10.

consists first and principally in contemplation, but secondarily, in an operation of the practical intellect directing human actions and passions.<sup>37</sup>

This means that unlike Aristotle, Aquinas allows for the possibility of complete fulfilment for everyone. Both Aristotle and Aquinas define virtue in terms of the life well lived; but Aquinas sees this good life as twofold – one life in this world, one beyond – with both parts focused on God.

The next major difference between Aristotle and Aquinas is the role of natural law in their thought. The natural law – our inherent, embedded recognition of the eternal law – is a major part of Aquinas’s ethics. So much so that a great deal of Thomist scholarship identifies him as primarily a natural law theorist, rather than a virtue ethicist. Porter’s work in *The Recovery of Virtue* has shown this to be an error, but her most important work on natural law is in *Nature as Reason*. She shows that natural law and virtue are intertwined in Thomas’s thought, such that one cannot be understood without the other. The natural law prescribes acts of virtue; and virtue inclines us to act according to the natural law. This feature of Aquinas’s thought will be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters, especially Chapter 2. For now, it is enough to note that there is no such focus on the natural law in Aristotle’s ethics. He does mention it very briefly in discussing the difference between it and political law; and there are certainly arguments that this passage is important for understanding the rest of his ethics.<sup>38</sup> However, it is not as significant for him as it is for Thomas. Just as importantly for my purposes, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics often avoids Aristotle’s natural teleology, meaning that it tends to shy away from that part of his thought which provides the basis for natural law. Natural law is therefore a much more significant feature of the Thomist tradition.

The categories of virtue are the next difference between Aristotle and Aquinas. Both have the two categories of moral virtue and intellectual virtue, but Aquinas adds a third – theological virtue. Moral virtues are good habits and

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<sup>37</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 3:5.

<sup>38</sup> Tony Burns, 'Aristotle and Natural Law', *History of Political Thought*, 19 (1998), 142-166.

dispositions of the appetite or desire; intellectual virtues are good habits and dispositions of reason. The theological virtues are different from either of these and are so called for three reasons: 'First, because their object is God, inasmuch as they direct us aright to God: secondly, because they are infused in us by God alone: thirdly, because these virtues are not made known to us, save by Divine revelation'.<sup>39</sup> Thomas thinks that the theological virtues are beyond our nature and are necessary for the supernatural happiness which is only possible in God.

The final important difference between Aristotle and Aquinas follows on from the previous one; they have a different list of virtues. This is important, because they both think that the virtues partly constitute *eudaimonia* and *beatitudo*. A different list of the virtues suggests a different idea of what the good life is, and so a different explanation of the task and goal of ethics. Someone who identifies honour, pride, courage and ambition as central virtues will have an entirely different understanding of fulfilment from someone who prioritises creativity, social awareness, wit and artistry. The difference between Aristotle and Aquinas is not as great as that. They do share many virtues, but differ on some. This is a concern for Hauerwas in particular. Contrasting Aristotle's virtue of magnanimity with the theological virtue of charity, he argues that the Greek virtues are essentially virtues of war whereas the Christian virtues are those of love and peace.<sup>40</sup>

Above is a short description of the key differences between Aristotle and Aquinas's ethics. Although similar, they do not agree on the nature of the good life, the categories of virtue and the role of the natural law. All of these individual differences are important and all have an impact on the nature of secular and theological virtue ethics. However, there is one further difference between them which is even more significant, because it is a difference in method as well as specific beliefs. Theological ethics is, understandably, ethics done from within a theological framework. This means that it is committed not just to careful and consistent moral thinking but also to a wide range of ontological and

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<sup>39</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 62:1.

<sup>40</sup> Hauerwas and Pinches, 'Virtue Christianly Considered', pp. 294-304.

epistemological claims. Some examples include: belief in the existence of God; belief in some form of moral absolutism; acceptance of basic Christian claims about Jesus Christ; belief in an afterlife; belief in a natural norm and *telos* for humanity; and belief in the Holy Spirit.

It is not always immediately obvious how these commitments impact on the moral claims made by theology. Demonstrating that they do has been a significant part of the work of theological ethicists – in particular, O'Donovan has shown how central Christian beliefs cannot fail to shape Christian moral thinking, and that an ethics which does not allow this will not be a truly theological ethics.<sup>41</sup> Secular ethics tends to be done as much as possible from a blank canvas; it will make few assumptions and avoid large claims not immediately related to the discussion at hand. On the other hand, theological virtue ethics makes claims like those above and operates on the basis that they are true without always arguing for them or making them explicit. This is made possible by the fact that it is ethics done from within a tradition of thought which provides or attempts to provide those arguments, and so it is not always incumbent upon each individual ethicist to make those claims again.

I will not be arguing for these claims in this thesis. Instead, part of my task will be to show that if they are accepted, they become a significant resource for the ethicist, allowing for new and sometimes stronger responses to criticisms of virtue ethics. Some but not all of them are specifically Christian claims. It seems possible that some of what I have to say could be of use to non-Christian traditions. I will not investigate whether this is the case, since I am simply interested in showing how a theology which does accept these claims may find them useful in defending virtue ethics from criticism.

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<sup>41</sup> O'Donovan.

### Section 3: The Case for a Theological Response to Criticism

The first two sections have provided the groundwork needed for the claim of this section: theological virtue ethics needs a theological response to criticism. Here I will run through the main points of the sections above and show why such a response is necessary.

Section 1 began with an introduction to modern virtue ethics. Although they share much of the same background – primarily dissatisfaction with the state of moral reasoning – secular and theological virtue ethics have developed in different ways. Theological virtue ethics could broadly be described as more social and practical than its secular counterpart. It has a proportionally greater emphasis on the social nature of the virtues and on their application to particular moral problems. There is also a great deal of work done towards integrating virtue ethics with Christian doctrine. However, I showed that secular virtue ethics has engaged in a great deal more critical discussion than theological virtue ethics. In some cases, theological responses to criticism are half-hearted, short or piecemeal; in others, they are not present at all. Section 2 explores the deeper theoretical differences between Aristotle and Aquinas's moral thought. Aquinas breaks from Aristotle in his twofold conception of the good life, his use of natural law and the theological virtues, and his list of the virtues. A more general difference is that Aquinas's thought rests upon the Christian tradition and so has various theological commitments absent from Aristotle (and especially from neo-Aristotelianism).

These two sections together provide the justification for my claim that a specifically theological response to criticisms of virtue ethics is needed. Section 1 shows that so far there has been no such response. In itself, this is not sufficient to show that there ought to be one. For one thing, there is substantial critical discussion in secular ethics. It might be thought that this is enough; theological ethics can simply rely on the responses already provided. That this is not the case can be seen from Section 2. Firstly, theoretical differences mean that secular

responses to the criticisms may not be sufficient for theology. Even if they function as intended, they may not do enough to safeguard theological commitments. This is the case with claims that virtue ethics is relativist or particularist. Most secular virtue ethicists are willing to accept these positions (sometimes in a partial or revised form). These are much more likely to be problems for theological ethics, given the importance of moral absolutism in theology.

Secondly, these same commitments which mean that the theological ethicist cannot take some positions available to the secular ethicist also allow some much stronger responses to criticism which are not available to the secular ethicist. This will prove to be the case for several criticisms. The role of Christ as a virtuous exemplar is important for responses to situationism and the claim that virtue ethics does not provide action guidance. The increased role of natural law in Aquinas's thought will provide excellent grounds for a response to accusations of particularism, and his twofold model of the human good allows a response to the egoist challenge not available to neo-Aristotelian ethicists. Aquinas's *beatitudo* will also be important in responding to relativism, as an example of a firm commitment to a single conception of the human good which is present in Aristotle but largely absent from neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Finally, a theological response will be useful because it may help to sketch a theoretical structure for virtue ethics. By examining the various criticisms and providing responses, it can be made clear which positions theological virtue ethics should avoid and which it should cling to. This will be the task of my final chapter. The goal is not to provide a complete theory, but to pick out some points which will be useful in the construction and defence of various different kinds of theological virtue ethics.

## Section 4: Central Claims of the Thesis

Before beginning to respond to the various criticisms of virtue ethics, I want to cover some of the key points in each chapter. I have already mentioned the structure and topics of the thesis in the introduction. This section will focus on the conclusions and central claims of each chapter, without necessarily giving a structured overview. Some of these topics recur throughout the thesis and will be covered in more depth in Chapter 8. Others are unique to the chapter in which they appear.

In Chapter 2, I argue that virtue ethics contains sufficient resources to work as a stand-alone normative moral theory. The main response to all of the claims to the contrary is that virtue ethics is quite different to other normative theories. The question at the centre of virtue ethics is 'How should I live?' rather than 'What should I do?'. This sometimes gives the impression that rules, right action and moral obligation are unimportant. In fact, they receive less attention because the scope of virtue ethics is broader than other moral theories, not because these concepts do not matter. Theological virtue ethics can use the concepts of Christ as a moral exemplar and Aquinas's theory of natural law to show how rules and action guidance are to be incorporated into virtue ethics.

Leading on from Chapter 2, Chapter 3 focuses on the criticism I identified as the most well-known attack on virtue ethics. In order to show that virtue ethics can explain right action while keeping virtue central, I investigate Aquinas's action theory. His commitment to final causation means that he can identify one of the causes of an action as part of the act itself. This means that there are multiple parts to the action, allowing him to say that an action can be right in one part but fail to be virtuous, without making virtue superfluous to fully right action.

Chapter 4 deals with the claim that experiments in psychology have shown that the virtue ethical idea of character is flawed. I show that the best way to account for these experiments is not to deny the existence of moral character, but

to see virtues as fine-grained and precise traits, rather than broad habits. This allows an explanation for a person acting honestly in one situation but dishonestly in another – for example, a truthful person who cheats on a test. It is not that they necessarily lack a consistent character, but that it is not exactly the same virtue at work in each situation. Christ's role as a virtuous exemplar is important again here, as the research casts doubt on the reliability of other exemplars.

From Chapter 5 onwards, I deal with unpalatable associations between virtue ethics and other theories. The first of these is moral particularism – the view that general moral principles are useless or actively unhelpful in moral theory. I show that it is fairly clear that virtue ethics *per se* is not committed to any strong form of particularism. In the case of historicists like Hauerwas and MacIntyre, however, there is more work to do. I use Aquinas's natural law to show how a theory of ultimate reasons can be incorporated into virtue ethics. This is the view that reasons for action which may change their moral status are dependent on deeper, 'ultimate' reasons which cannot. For example, 'I will stop Tim from leaving if I intervene' may be a reason for or against acting and so cannot form the basis of a general principle. However, there is a reason *behind* this reason for acting (e.g. 'I want to act for the good of others'), which gives it its force and determines whether the initial reason is a reason for or against action in each circumstance. This deeper reason can operate as a general principle. Historicism can incorporate a basic theory of ultimate reasons, which means that it can avoid particularism.

Chapter 6 covers a similar topic – moral relativism. As I said above, virtue ethicists have often been accused of relativism. Here, theological virtue ethics is strong. The best way to avoid relativism is to offer an absolutist account of the human good, which is the foundation for virtue ethics. Aquinas's twofold good, the natural law and causal theory all come together to provide exactly that. I show that the grounding of the human good in God gives theological virtue ethics an effective response to the accusation of relativism. I look at historicism and show that, as in the case of particularism, it need not commit the thinker to relativism.

In Chapter 7, the last chapter to address a criticism, I argue against the complaint that virtue ethics is egoist. This is relatively easy to dismiss, but the closely related charge of self-centredness gains more traction. In order to avoid it, secular virtue ethicists have turned to self-effacingness. This requires the virtuous agent to be unaware of their reasons for acting. Aquinas's twofold good allows him to avoid this, as it clearly shows that God, not the virtuous agent, is the centre of the moral life.

Chapter 8 ends the thesis by returning to each of the criticisms. Here I highlight key points that theological virtue ethics would do well to stick to. These points each play an important role in allowing unique and strong theological responses to the criticisms above. I explain again why they are important and how they are compatible with various kinds of theological virtue ethics, rather than just a single theory. The five concepts are: Christ as a virtuous exemplar; final causation; the twofold good; natural law; and situation-specific virtues. I show that a theological virtue ethic which includes each of these points will be well placed to respond to any of the criticisms in this thesis.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter by describing the growth of modern virtue ethics, both secular and theological. Of the differences in their development, one stands out: theological virtue ethics has largely failed to respond to criticism. As the examples I offered show, this failure is varied. Sometimes a response is simply absent: theologians seem entirely unaware that there is a problem. In other cases, there is some attempt to provide a response but it is half-formed or does not fully address the question. Even in the best-case scenario – a response to accusations of relativism – the response is not complete or representative of theological virtue ethics as a whole. I then looked at some of the key differences between secular and theological virtue ethics by examining their historical sources – Aristotle and Aquinas. I showed

that there are some important differences between them. I think that these differences are sufficient to justify a more thorough theological response to criticisms of virtue ethics. If it is not involved in the critical discussion, theological virtue ethics will be weaker in areas where the secular responses do not suffice and fail to exploit its strengths in areas where its prior commitments may make new positions available. Finally, the critical discussion should itself serve to sketch a 'shape' for theological virtue ethics by identifying particular claims that it would do well to make or avoid. My final section begins this by indicating the main arguments and commitments of each chapter and the criticisms to which they respond. In what follows, I attempt to provide a theological response to these criticisms. I will begin by considering criticisms internal to virtue ethics – that is, criticisms that identify a flaw with its structural coherence. The first of these is the claim that virtue ethics is not sufficient for an independent normative theory.

## Chapter 2

### Virtue Ethics as an Independent Normative Theory

This chapter will consider various claims to the effect that virtue ethics is not sufficient for a moral theory. Instead, it ought to be subordinated to rule-based or action-based theories. I will begin by looking at some of the basic differences between virtue ethics and other moral theories. Although they draw very different conclusions, consequentialist and deontological theories often address similar questions or prioritise certain approaches to those questions. Virtue ethics shares some of this approach, but also focuses on ideas and topics which have tended to be marginalised by the other theories. In doing so, it also gives less weight to ethical approaches or topics which were previously taken to be central to moral enquiry. This means that while virtue ethics is recognisably *ethics*, it is ethics done in a different manner and with quite a different tone. It is this difference which is the impetus for the criticisms in this chapter, and so my first task will be to explain it.

Once I have outlined some of the key differences between virtue ethics and other moral theories, I will begin my first main section. This will focus on action guidance. Various criticisms say that virtue ethics does not properly provide action guidance. These either claim that virtue ethics cannot provide a theory of right action, or that if it does it is in some way deficient in guiding action. The former problem is significant enough to be dealt with in a separate chapter, but I address the latter here. First I point out that one of the important differences between virtue ethics and other normative theories is that it does not have an exclusive focus on action and this is not necessarily a negative thing. Despite this, I will show that virtue ethics is able to provide some of the action guidance expected of it. This is largely done through the use of thick concepts and moral exemplars. I will argue that the virtuous exemplar is of particular use to theological virtue ethics, as it need not make the choice between a flawed or hypothetical exemplar. Then I will look at

the debate over the nature of thick concepts and show that this does not impact on their practical usefulness to virtue ethics. Finally, I show that prudence ought to provide some of the more specific action guidance offered by other theories.

The next section deals with the fact that moral rules have a significantly reduced role in virtue ethics. The first complaint here is simply that virtue ethics does not leave room for moral rules. This is also addressed at length in another chapter, but I will spend some time here looking at Aquinas on natural law. Aquinas's theory is a good example of the way rules fit into a virtue ethical theory. They may be useful and important, but they do not have the centrality they do in other normative theories and are subordinated to or at most work alongside virtue. The second criticism is a more serious problem. It argues that in diminishing the role of rules, virtue ethics has made a big mistake about the nature of moral enquiry. Rules are not just a useful way of navigating common moral dilemmas; they are embedded in the structure of morality. This means that rules necessarily take priority over virtue. Here I focus on the disagreement between Alan Gewirth and MacIntyre, and Gewirth's claim that the conditions of rational action necessarily imply certain moral rules. I argue that Gewirth's argument works on its own terms; but that he is operating with a restricted view of morality. Once it is understood that the scope of morality under virtue ethics is very broad then Gewirth's argument does not work.

The final section shifts focus from action guidance to the reasons behind action. Here I will look at moral obligation – specifically, the argument that obligation rather than virtuous motives should be the primary reason for action. This criticism is largely based on a common reading of Kant's *Groundwork* which understands him to be arguing that it is the motive of duty alone which confers moral value on an action. By contrast, virtue ethics seems to place more value on virtuous feeling and less on obligation. I look at some different interpretations of Kant, including Hursthouse's claim that Aristotle and Kant are closer than first appears. I will argue that Kant's discussion of duty has in mind a different concept of morality. Fully virtuous motives are beyond the scope of this kind of morality, but

they are no less admirable for that. Virtuous motives are not moral in Kant's sense, but they are certainly good. I will also show that virtue ethics can agree that self-control and duty are sometimes more important than inclination, and that inclination alone is not sufficient to guarantee virtue.

I then look at an interpretation of Aquinas which reads him as saying that virtues are entirely subordinate to divine commands and are merely habits of obedience. I argue that obedience is important to Aquinas because it plays a role in supporting the moral virtues, not because it is primary. At the end of the section I examine a disagreement between Frankena and Hauerwas in which Frankena argues that an ethics of obligation is better than an ethics of virtue. I will show that virtue can account for obligation, and that Frankena's view only appears plausible because he is operating with a restricted view of morality.

## The Scope and Style of Virtue Ethics

The modern interest in virtue ethics can be traced back to Elizabeth Anscombe's article 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. In the first paragraph of the paper, she says that:

the concepts of obligation, and duty – moral obligation and moral duty, that is to say – and of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of 'ought,' ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible.<sup>42</sup>

Later on the same page, she notes that 'the term "moral" itself, which we have by direct inheritance from Aristotle, just doesn't seem to fit, in its modern sense, into an account of Aristotelian ethics'.<sup>43</sup>

The sense that the terms and concepts central to ethics were in fact a hindrance, and that ancient ethics offered an alternative, are together responsible for the shift towards virtue. It is true that the starting point for moral enquiry in

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<sup>42</sup> Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

virtue ethics is quite different. Prior to Anscombe, to do modern ethics was to study a particular area of human life – namely, a particular type of action. Moral questions dealt with the terms and criteria needed to assess these actions. Hence G.E. Moore tells us that ‘Ethics has always been predominantly concerned with the investigation of a limited class of actions’, and goes on to explain that the two kinds of questions which ethics may ask are whether these actions are good in themselves, and whether they have good consequences.<sup>44</sup> Bentham’s principle of utility, the foundation of his moral enquiry, is ‘that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever’.<sup>45</sup> Kant’s categorical imperative is that ‘I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law’.<sup>46</sup>

All of these theories take the task of morality to be to do with action, and think that the goal of normative ethics is to discern the correct way to guide or prescribe for action. The approach to morality in virtue ethics differs significantly. This is down to its basis in ancient ethics and particularly Aristotelianism. Julia Annas explains the focus of ancient ethics in this way: ‘In ancient ethics the fundamental question is, How ought I to live? Or, What should my life be like?’.<sup>47</sup> In ancient ethics morality has a much broader scope than in the examples given above. This wide range is present in modern virtue ethics as well, in both its secular and theological forms. It is common for virtue ethicists to characterise other forms of ethics as overly focused on actions, obligation and the moral law.<sup>48</sup>

So moral enquiry – and indeed the word ‘moral’ – are much more extensive concepts in virtue ethics. Virtue ethics has to do with the best way to live a life as a whole, whereas other forms of ethics have historically had a narrower focus on right conduct. This means that there are topics which are central to virtue ethics which are of marginal importance in other normative theories. One of these topics is

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<sup>44</sup> George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: CUP, 1966), p. 24.

<sup>45</sup> Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. by J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London: Athlone, 1970), I-2.

<sup>46</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> Roger Crisp, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy and the Virtues’ in *How Should One Live?: Essays on the Virtues*, ed. by Roger Crisp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1-18 (pp. 1, 5-8).

character. Because the ultimate goal of virtue ethics is to live a good life (whatever that might be) rather than to do the right thing (important though that is), the person living the life is obviously very important. This is why virtue ethics is sometimes described as 'agent-based' or 'agent-focused' rather than 'action-based'. It gives more importance to things which affect character, such as habit and disposition, and uses words suited to describe character like 'honest', 'cruel', or 'weak-willed'. Michael Slote makes this point well:

Thus an ethics of virtue thinks primarily in terms of what is noble or ignoble, admirable or deplorable, good or bad, rather than in terms of what is obligatory, permissible, or wrong, and together with the focus on the (inner character of the) agent, this comes close enough, I think, to marking off what is distinctive of and common to all forms of virtue ethics.<sup>49</sup>

Before moving on to look at some of the problems this difference from other moral theories causes for virtue ethics, it is worth pointing out that virtue ethics does not treat action or moral rules as useless. Thought about these things is not to be abandoned. However, unlike other forms of ethics they are not of central or ultimate importance. Action, for example, is very important in virtue ethics because the consequences of our actions significantly affect our character and the way our life is lived. Action gains its importance from its relation to the central question of virtue ethics – 'How should I live?'. I think that this is the essence of Foot's claim that morality is composed of hypothetical imperatives – that moral laws are important because they point us towards some further end that we desire, not because they exhibit their own peculiar binding force.<sup>50</sup> Hauerwas is making the same point when he says 'The language of character does not exclude the language of command but only places it in a larger framework of moral experience'.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Slote, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Philippa Foot, 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' in *Virtues and Vices: and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Philippa Foot (Oxford: OUP, 1978), 157-73.

<sup>51</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (Notre Dame: Trinity University Press, 1975), p. 3.

So far I have looked at the difference between virtue ethics and other normative theories. I have shown that along with ancient ethics, modern virtue ethics asks the question 'How should I live?' rather than the more restricted question 'How should I act?' which is common in other moral theories. Seeking an answer to this question leads virtue ethicists to consider character and disposition and to rely less on moral laws and obligation. Action and command do have a place in virtue ethics; but it is not the same place as in other moral theories. These differences are important because they have led to various criticisms of virtue ethics. In the following section, I will turn to the first type of criticism – that virtue ethics does not provide proper action guidance.

## Section 1: Action Guidance

In this section I am going to deal with the complaint that virtue ethics does not or cannot provide adequate action guidance. This is quite a common criticism of virtue ethics and has been the focus of much discussion. I will begin by outlining the various forms of the problem, before beginning a twofold response. I hope to show both that action guidance is not the only or central task of ethics and that despite this virtue ethics does in fact provide some action guidance. Aside from the work of virtue ethicists who consider particular moral situations, it provides action guidance in two important ways. These are the use of thick concepts and the need for a moral exemplar.

The first criticism virtue ethics faces to do with action guidance is the argument that it cannot explain what a right action is with reference to virtue. This is because it is not the same thing for an action to be virtuous as it is for it to be right. It seems perfectly possible to do the right thing for selfish motives, or to fail to act rightly despite the best intentions. This means that a virtue ethicist cannot make a statement like 'an act is right if it is a virtuous one'. But if a moral theory is going to talk about which actions are right and which are wrong – in short, if it is

going to engage in guiding action – then it must begin by explaining what a right action is, and how it is to be differentiated from a wrong one. If virtue ethics cannot do this with reference to virtue, it seems it will have to look elsewhere. Right action might have to be defined in terms of utility, or the categorical imperative, and if this happens then virtue ethics is no longer a complete moral theory on its own merits. It will simply be a derivative of Kantianism or consequentialism.

This is one of the most common criticisms of virtue ethics, and it is too large a problem to deal with here. Instead, Chapter 3 is entirely devoted to addressing this problem. I believe that virtue ethics can answer this criticism; but some of the current responses are not sufficient. I will argue that the best way to respond to this complaint is to rely on ancient and medieval action theories which see an action as comprised of several constituent parts, each of which can be individually morally assessed. In seeing an action as a single discrete event modern action theory does not allow virtue ethics to say both that an action can be right but not virtuous, and that virtue is determinative of rightness. This causes a problem which would not have existed for Aristotle or Aquinas. In order to support this argument, I need to show that the causal theory that lies behind their action theories is still viable.

Even if this criticism is answered, it leads to a further problem. The critic may accept that virtue ethics can explain what a right action is, but protest it does not in fact tell us what sort of actions these are. Although it does have an acceptable theory of right action, it does not spend enough time prescribing for particular actions. Prescribing for actions is the task of a normative theory; and virtue ethics fails in this task.

This particular criticism seems to be of more concern to virtue ethicists than anyone else; in fact, despite the many responses to it from virtue ethicists it is difficult to find anyone who makes it. This may be partly due to the fact that virtue ethicists quite clearly engage in discussion about practical moral problems. Of particular note are Foot and Hursthouse's discussions of abortion, and in fact Hursthouse's reason for discussing abortion is precisely to show how virtue ethics

functions as a normative theory.<sup>52</sup> In theological ethics, Hauerwas has written extensively on medical ethics, sexual ethics and many areas of Christian discipleship.<sup>53</sup>

I think that this criticism can be rephrased in such a way that simply showing that virtue ethics can and does address moral problems does not dismiss it. The critic may be making the point that the task of normative ethics is to help solve problems. If this is the case, then virtue ethics is in trouble on two counts. Firstly, the focus on character, habit and so on seems unnecessary. Secondly, although it discusses moral dilemmas it may seem that virtue ethics shies away from giving a definitive *answer*.

In response to the first problem, I think that there is little to do but note the difference between virtue ethics and other normative theories. As discussed above, virtue ethics sees morality as a much broader category which encompasses the way a life is lived, including but not limited to the actions which are part of that life. The claim that normative ethics is supposed to assist in solving problems seems to stem from the belief that the sole task of ethics is to show us what to do, and especially in difficult situations where the right course of action is not always obvious. I have already shown that this is not the approach virtue ethics takes. If the critic is operating with a more restricted definition of morality then the focus on character and habit will indeed appear superfluous or at least not of central importance to moral enquiry.

This complaint is misguided. One easy response is for the virtue ethicist to accept that their theory contains elements not relevant to assessing human action, but to say that that is not all that they are trying to do. There is, however, a stronger position available. As well as the response above, I think that virtue ethics has at least as good an answer to the question 'How should I act?' as other normative theories, despite the fact that such an answer is not the exclusive goal of virtue ethics. This brings me to a response to the second complaint above – that

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<sup>52</sup> See Foot, 'The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect'; Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion'.

<sup>53</sup> Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*.

virtue ethics does not provide answers to moral problems. To show how virtue ethics goes about dealing with such problems I am going to look at three topics: moral exemplars, thick concepts, and prudence.

## Moral Exemplars

One of the primary ways in which virtue ethics offers action guidance is through moral exemplars. Learning from a person more skilled than oneself is one of the primary ways in which virtue is developed. The moral exemplar is particularly important in some forms of modern virtue ethics. Hursthouse's work is a good example of this. Not only is the exemplar important for moral learning, they are definitive of right action:

But if the question is, 'How can virtue ethics give an account of right action in such a way as to provide action guidance?' the answer is easy. Here is its first premise.

P.1. An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.<sup>54</sup>

Linda Zagzebski's exemplarist virtue theory goes even further. Zagzebski argues that rightness, virtue, good states of affairs and the good life should all be defined with reference to a good person. A good person is a natural kind identifiable by a community and by the emotion of admiration. Hence, a virtue is an admirable trait possessed by an exemplar; to live well is to live in the same way as an exemplar; and so on.<sup>55</sup> In both of these theories, moral exemplars are one way in which virtue ethics provides action guidance. This is because the kind of acts that are desirable – right actions – are simply the kind of acts that exemplars do. When these theories

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<sup>54</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 28.

<sup>55</sup> Zagzebski, pp. 54-5.

are faced with the question 'How ought I to act in this situation?' the response is 'Act in the way that this person (an exemplar) would act'. Observation and understanding of the exemplar is therefore directly action-guiding. The moral exemplar is the first way in which virtue ethics provides action guidance.

There are a couple of drawbacks to relying on a virtuous exemplar for moral guidance. The first, as several virtue ethicists have recognised, is that it is not enough to simply copy the actions of the exemplar. There are two reasons for this. The first is that there may be situations in which the right action for a morally weak person would not be the action which the exemplar performs. Some examples include asking a more virtuous person for guidance, acting so as not to test one's weak character, and acting in an attempt to morally improve oneself.<sup>56</sup> Instead, acting as the virtuous exemplar does should be seen as aiming to act with the same skill and virtue that they do; doing this may result in quite a different event. Thus Aristotle can say:

Acts... are called just and temperate when they are such as a just or temperate man would do; but what makes the agent just or temperate is not merely the fact that he does such things, but the fact that he does them in the way that just and temperate men do.<sup>57</sup>

Hauerwas puts it this way:

No one can become virtuous merely by doing what virtuous people do. We can only be virtuous by doing what virtuous people do in the manner that they do it. Therefore one can only learn how to be virtuous, to be like Jesus, by learning from others how that is done. To be like Jesus requires that I

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<sup>56</sup> Frans Svensson, 'Virtue Ethics and the Search for an Account of Right Action', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 13 (2010), 255-271 (pp. 260-261).

<sup>57</sup> Aristotle, 1105b 5-10.

become part of a community that practices virtues, not that I copy his life point by point.<sup>58</sup>

Thus the action guidance that the exemplar provides will not always be clear-cut. It requires a certain amount of moral discernment for the agent firstly to observe the virtues which are behind the exemplars' actions, and then to understand how they are best acted upon in her own situation. The exemplar will be useful for moral guidance, but not always easy to follow.

The second drawback has to do with the kind of exemplar being discussed. It seems there must be a choice made between following an actual human exemplar or a hypothetical 'ideal' exemplar. There are problems for each choice. Both Hursthouse and Zagzebski base their theories on real exemplars. The advantage here is that it is easy to work out what the exemplar would do and why:

It is worth pointing out that, if I acknowledge that I am far from perfect, and am quite unclear what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances in which I find myself, the obvious thing to do is to go and ask one.<sup>59</sup>

Interaction with the exemplar will no doubt be a very important tool in discerning what virtuous behaviour looks like. The problem is that there is always the chance that the exemplar will not do the virtuous thing. Most of the time their guidance will be correct; but it may occasionally go awry. This is not just the point that no-one is perfect – Hursthouse's clause that the virtuous agent must be acting in character was inserted to deal with just this complaint. Rather, even if we are guaranteed that the exemplar will act according to character in a particular situation, they may still make factual errors and guide us wrongly. Christine Swanton argues that ignorance and confusion about topics such as the science of climate change or genetically modified food may mislead the exemplar without representing a failure

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<sup>58</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 76.

<sup>59</sup> Hursthouse, 'Normative Virtue Ethics', p. 24.

of virtue.<sup>60</sup> It is particularly vital for those just beginning to develop virtue that the exemplar be reliable. In a discussion of Augustinian moral enquiry, MacIntyre notes that at an early stage the learner must 'have inculcated into him or herself certain attitudes or dispositions, certain virtues, *before* he or she can know why these are to be accounted virtues... this reordering requires obedient trust'.<sup>61</sup> The learner in virtue will be unable to reliably identify virtuous behaviour without help. For the exemplar to mislead someone at this stage would therefore be disastrous.

If actual exemplars may mislead, the alternative is a hypothetical 'ideal' exemplar who is completely informed and totally virtuous. This kind of exemplar need never act in a non-virtuous fashion and so always offer perfect guidance. The problem is that it is impossible to observe or consult such an exemplar in the same way. Understanding of what this exemplar will do is a matter of supposition – and since the supposing must be done by people who are not themselves fully virtuous it is unlikely to be always accurate. Annas says that if we do not refer to an actual virtuous person for an account of right action, 'the account will now be vague, and it will not be obvious how it is supposed to apply to particular circumstances'.<sup>62</sup> So the virtue ethicist has a dilemma. Either the exemplar is actual, in which case it is easy to see how they act and why but their actions will not always provide good guidance. Or the exemplar is hypothetical, in which case their supposed actions will always provide good guidance but it is not clear what those actions would be.

I think this is a significant problem, but it is not one which Christian virtue ethics faces. One of the great strengths of this form of ethics is that it has an exemplar who is at once ideal and actual; one who is perfectly virtuous and fully informed, but who has set and continues to set a real rather than imagined example. Jesus is a virtuous exemplar who has the strengths but not the weaknesses of each side of the dilemma. This idea has grounding in scripture as

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<sup>60</sup> Christine Swanton, 'A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action', *Ethics*, 112 (2001), 32-52 (p. 35).

<sup>61</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990), p. 82.

<sup>62</sup> Annas, 'Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing', p. 67.

well as in modern Christian ethics.<sup>63</sup> Hauerwas again is an excellent example of a thinker whose ethics relies on the need to follow Jesus:

We are called to be like God: perfect as God is perfect. It is a perfection that comes by learning to follow and be like this man whom God has sent to be our forerunner in the kingdom. That is why Christian ethics is not first of all an ethics of principles, laws, or values, but an ethic that demands we attend to the life of a particular individual – Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>64</sup>

This does not exclude the possibility of learning from other exemplars; but those exemplars themselves must be evaluated and chosen with reference to the example set by Jesus. I explore this strength of theological virtue ethics further in my chapter on situationism. For now, it is enough to note that the action guidance provided by an exemplar will be more useful and reliable in theological ethics.

Before I look at other ways in which virtue ethics provides guidance, I want to note that there is a further problem for fully exemplarist ethics like Zagzebski's. I think that by basing good and the good life on the exemplar, she runs the risk of relativism. If everyone admires someone who is living a bad life (or more likely, a not fully virtuous life) then according to Zagzebski we can identify that person as an exemplar. Other forms of virtue ethics do not have this problem, since the exemplar is someone who models the good life and the good life may be defined in an absolutist manner. Zagzebski is aware of this problem and suggests that admiration of a potential exemplar is trustworthy when it stands reflection and critique by others. I do not think that this does enough to escape relativism *per se*, although it may be enough to avoid some of the more serious problems in practice.

I am not going to follow this any further, since most forms of virtue ethics are not like Zagzebski's and there are other ways in which virtue ethics provides action guidance. So far, I have shown how a virtuous exemplar can provide action

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<sup>63</sup> Gregory R. Peterson and others, 'The Rationality of Ultimate Concern: Moral Exemplars, Theological Ethics, and the Science of Moral Cognition', *Theology and Science*, 8 (2010), 139-161 (pp. 146-47).

<sup>64</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, pp. 75-76.

guidance. They are a model for virtuous activity, meaning that we ought to act as the virtuous exemplar would act (that is, by expressing the same virtues).

However, understanding how to follow the exemplar requires a certain amount of moral discernment, and secular virtue ethics must choose between an actual or hypothetical exemplar. I argued that theological virtue ethics is not subject to this problem because Jesus is a perfect but actual exemplar. This is a significant strength of Christian virtue ethics. Even so, the need to follow an exemplar is not the only way that virtue ethics guides action. I am now going to look at how thick concepts are another way for virtue ethics to answer the question 'what should I do?'.

### Thick Concepts

A thick concept is a term which contains both evaluative and descriptive meaning. This means, broadly, that a thick concept should give us both an idea about what something is like and an idea of whether we should approve of it or not. They are contrasted with thin concepts, which give either descriptive meaning or evaluative meaning, but not both. So for example, words like 'red' or 'tall' are descriptive and thin concepts, whereas 'good' or 'right' are evaluative and thin. Calling something 'red' gives me no idea whether I should approve of it or not; likewise, calling something 'good' gives me no information about its colour, or height, or anything else about it. A thick concept will combine both of these.

Thick moral concepts are words like 'thoughtful', 'cruel', 'generous', 'rude' or 'gentle'. If I use one of these words to describe a person or situation, I am saying both something about the moral status of the thing in question and about what it is like. For example, if I am told that John is cruel, then I know that John is not a good person. But I also know something about the nature of John's badness; I can suppose that he takes pleasure in the pain of others (perhaps people or animals), and that he seeks to cause or fails to prevent such pain. If I were told instead that

John is light-fingered, or a liar, then I might still think of John as a bad person; but I have been told something quite different about the way John is. Virtue terms tend to be thick concepts. Even the more general virtues, such as Aquinas's four cardinal virtues, tell us something about their nature beyond their goodness:

prudence is merely a certain rectitude of discretion...; justice, a certain rectitude of the mind...; temperance, a disposition of the mind, moderating any passions or operations, so as to keep them within bounds; and fortitude, a disposition whereby the soul is strengthened.<sup>65</sup>

More specific virtues that Thomas mentions, such as sobriety, chastity and humility, are more obviously thick concepts.

It is Bernard Williams who applied the distinction between thick and thin concepts to ethics, and his explanation of them gives a good idea of why they are important to virtue ethics:

thick ethical concepts I have often mentioned... are characteristically related to reasons for action. If a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action... We can say, then, that the application of these concepts is at the same time world-guided and action-guiding.<sup>66</sup>

Thick concepts tell us both what something is and whether or not it is good – and hence whether we should act in accordance with or to promote it. This means that the language of virtue ethics is inherently action-guiding. This is an important part of virtue ethics because it means that even when it is not possible to understand or follow an exemplar, it is still possible to have action guidance.

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<sup>65</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 61:4.

<sup>66</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) pp. 140-41.

So trying to decide what to do within the framework of virtue theory is not, as some people seem to imagine, necessarily a matter of taking one's favored candidate for a virtuous person and asking oneself, 'What would they do in these circumstances?'... The agent may instead ask herself, 'If I were to do such and such now, would I be acting justly or unjustly (or neither), kindly or unkindly [and so on]?'<sup>67</sup>

Thick concepts are another way in which virtue ethics provides action guidance. Before moving on, I want to look quickly at some potential problems with thick concepts. Although they have been criticised, I want to show that it is not in a way that reduces their usefulness in guiding action. The two criticisms I have in mind are that there is not a clear distinction between thick and thin concepts and that thick concepts can be split into their separate evaluative and descriptive components.

The first criticism seeks to show that it is a mistake to think of moral concepts as either thick or thin. In fact, there is no clear distinction between concepts which are both evaluative and descriptive and those which are purely evaluative. This charge is brought up as evidence against William's argument that moral philosophy has become impoverished by relying exclusively on thin concepts. In his review of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Samuel Scheffler offers a list of terms which he thinks are not clearly thick or thin. These include equality, well-being, autonomy and fairness. His point is not that it is impossible to identify evaluative or descriptive components to these terms, but that some seem to be more descriptive or evaluative than others. This suggests a gradual gradation of terms with fully thick or thin representing opposite ends of the spectrum, rather than a simple two-tier distinction. For example, it may be possible to distinguish evaluative and descriptive components to both 'fairness' and 'autonomy'. However, it seems that the evaluation expressed by 'fairness' is clearer or more forceful than the evaluation expressed by 'autonomy'. This leads Scheffler to say that 'any

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<sup>67</sup> Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion', p. 227.

division of ethical concepts into the two categories of the thick and the thin is itself a considerable oversimplification. Our ethical vocabulary is very rich and diverse...'.<sup>68</sup> This may be a problem for Williams; but it does not matter for the virtue ethicist who wants to claim that virtue terms are action-guiding. I am inclined to think that Scheffler is correct, and that some terms are 'thicker' than others. To take two examples from Aquinas above, I think that more information is given if I describe someone's abstentious behaviour as an example of sobriety than if I describe it as temperate. Nevertheless, both descriptions are accurate and both are action-guiding. There does not need to be a clear distinction between thick and thin concepts for thick concepts to be useful as a guide to action.

The second criticism argues that the language of thick concepts is actually a marker for two separable thin concepts, one descriptive and one evaluative. Thus the statement 'Mary is humble' can be analysed as 'Mary accurately assesses her character and refrains from self-aggrandisement' alongside a statement of approval. There is nothing beyond this which is contained in the word 'humble'. This argument is made by non-cognitivists who think that the idea of thick concepts threatens the fact-value distinction. Their concern is that if there are such things as thick concepts, then certain facts about the world necessarily contain a moral judgement, meaning that moral statements can have truth-value.<sup>69</sup> If the non-cognitivist is correct, however, this does not detract from the action-guiding feature of thick concepts. If a virtue term is simply shorthand for describing a feature of a character or situation and indicating approval or positive moral evaluation of that feature, this can still function as action-guiding. The exact nature of thick concepts does not matter to the virtue ethicist on this point.

There is one criticism of thick concepts which may threaten their status as action-guiding. This is the claim that thick concepts do not in fact exist; terms like those discussed above are purely descriptive, and any evaluative gloss is simply

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<sup>68</sup> Samuel Scheffler, 'Morality through Thick and Thin: A Critical Notice of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*', *The Philosophical Review*, 96 (1987), 411-434 (p. 418).

<sup>69</sup> A good discussion of this topic can be found in Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn, 'Morality and Thick Concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 66 (1992), 267-283, 285-299.

provided by the context. If this is correct, then the action-guiding force of virtue terms will be diminished. They may still guide action in particular situations where the user can be clear about whether the term is being used positively or negatively; but they will be of less use as a general guide to future behaviour. For example, if the term 'coward' is simply descriptive, then being told that I am a coward will not give me any information about how or whether I should attempt to revise my character in light of that fact. This is a position Bruce Brower calls 'descriptivism'. To support his claim that thick concepts do not exist, he argues that for any given virtue, there is a possible world in which the exhibition of that virtue has negative value. As examples, he imagines a world in which any display of courage is immediately and inescapably punished and a world in which exhibitions of kindness lead to mental degeneration.<sup>70</sup> Since we can conceive of worlds in which courage and kindness are negative things, the terms themselves cannot have inherent evaluative content. If they did, they would still be thought of as valuable even in these possible worlds.

The structure of Brower's argument is sound, but his examples do not do the work he needs. I think that courage and kindness would be good, even in the examples he suggests. In both cases, Brower has failed to understand that the good a virtue confers is not merely to be found in the actions and consequences it produces. Take the world in which courage is immediately punished; on Brower's terms it certainly seems that no value can come from acting courageously. However, Brower seems to be calculating value exclusively in terms of utility: 'we might say that an action is worth the risk if it maximizes expected utility'.<sup>71</sup> The goal of moral action for the virtue ethicist is not utility but *eudaimonia* or *beatitudo*. This means that consequences are not the only way in which a good can be measured. In Brower's possible world, it may be impossible to act courageously (those acting defiantly know they will be caught, making them reckless), and without the ability to act courageously it may be impossible to actually develop

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<sup>70</sup> Bruce W. Brower, 'Virtue Concepts and Ethical Realism', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 85 (1988), 675-693 (p. 679).

<sup>71</sup> Brower, p. 682.

courage. Neither of these facts affects the fact that a right attitude to fear and bravery would be an important part of complete human flourishing in this world. Rather than being a world in which courage has no value, I think it is a world in which courage is a good which can never be obtained, meaning that no-one will be able to flourish fully.

Next consider the world in which kindness causes mental degeneration. To begin with note that if this is supposed to be a world in which mental degeneration is necessarily linked to kindness then I deny that it is a possible world at all. The concept of kindness is not one that necessarily includes any kind of mental degeneration. The link between the two in this possible world must be contingent. This means that the case is similar to the world in which courage is punished. It may be impossible to consistently exhibit kindness due to the circumstances. This is tragic, but does not change the fact that kindness is one of the goods needed for human flourishing. This means that even in a world in which it caused mental degeneration, kindness *per se* would still be a good. Brower anticipates a response along these lines – that virtues are intrinsically valuable – and argues that it begs the question against descriptivism, which is attempting to show precisely that thick concepts have no intrinsic value. However, I am not arguing that virtue is intrinsically valuable but that it gains its value from the role it plays in the good life. Brower assumes that virtue gains its value from utility; if this is denied, then it is possible to argue that thick concepts always have the same value because they gain their value from their role in human flourishing.

By combining description with evaluation, thick concepts can be used to provide action guidance for virtue ethics. There is debate over whether there is a clear distinction between thick and thin concepts and whether thick concepts can be separated into two thin concepts. Although important, neither of these discussions affects the action-guiding role of thick concepts. The claim that thick concepts do not exist must assume that utility and not the good life is the source of value and in doing so begs the question against virtue ethics. Next I am going to explain the final and most important part of action guidance in virtue ethics – prudence.

## Prudence

So far I have shown how virtuous exemplars and thick concepts provide action guidance in virtue ethics. In both cases, however, there may still be difficulty over how the guidance from each is to be applied. Given that following the exemplar does not simply mean copying their actions, it may not always be clear how to be like them. Similarly, a thick concept gives some information about how to act; if I am told 'be humble', I know that I need to have a good attitude towards my own abilities. But how do I know what that looks like when asked to assess myself? It may be difficult to avoid self-aggrandisement, false modesty, self-deprecation or pomposity all while remaining honest and humble. The answer to both of these problems is prudence. Aquinas calls prudence 'right reason about things to be done'.<sup>72</sup> It is the intellectual virtue by which we know how to put into practice our morally virtuous inclinations. So I may see an exemplar refuse to lie or hear that I ought to be honest. Both of these things provide action guidance, but it is prudence which tells me that it is acceptable to lie during the card game 'Cheat' but not to a police officer.

So prudence is what makes it possible to put the other forms of action guidance into effect. What about someone who does not have prudence? Just like other virtues, it needs to be learned through practice. Here moral exemplars become important again. Thomas specifically discusses exemplars when he covers prudence. He explains that we can act from prudence by taking the counsel of others, but that this is an intermediate stage on the journey to true prudence: 'When a man does a good deed, not of his own counsel, but moved by that of another, his deed is not yet quite perfect'.<sup>73</sup> Prudence, like other virtues, will develop over time.

I think that it is clear that virtue ethics can offer action guidance. Good advice can be received from exemplars and by paying attention to thick concepts.

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<sup>72</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 57:5.

<sup>73</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 57:5.

Prudence then allows us to work out how to put this into practice in any given situation. However, all of this might still not be enough to answer the complaint. Perhaps what is meant by the criticism that virtue ethics does not provide action guidance is not that virtue ethics cannot teach us how to act well, but that it does not directly tell us what to do. I have shown that virtue ethics provides the tools needed to work this out; but perhaps a moral theory should tell us ahead of time. So far I have not shown that virtue ethics can give a clear answer to the question 'In situation A, should I perform action X or action Y?'

My response to this is twofold. Firstly, note that this question is not as pressing for virtue ethics as it is for other moral theories. In my introductory section, I explained that the central question of virtue ethics is 'How ought I to live?' rather than 'How should I act?'. The tactic taken by virtue ethics in providing action guidance is to explain how one can work out how to behave and learn virtuous behaviour. This is exactly what is needed to answer the question 'How ought I to live?'. Spelling out exactly what action ought to be performed is more important for a moral theory which is entirely focused on how to act. Zagzebski explains this well:

But even though I think that we hope to get moral guidance from a good theory, a moral theory is not primarily a manual for decision making, and it is not constructed to be a manual... I think, then, that moral theory aims primarily at explaining and justifying moral beliefs and practices, and correlatively, showing us which beliefs and practices are unjustified. The aim of telling us what to do in any given situation is secondary.<sup>74</sup>

I think Zagzebski is quite right. The goal of a moral theory is not to provide exact specifications for every action. Still, I made the point earlier that virtue ethics does not exclude the question 'How should I act?', but simply sees it as a single part of the broader question 'How should I live?'. This brings me to the second part of my

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<sup>74</sup> Zagzebski, p. 43.

response. I think that virtue ethics can provide satisfactory answers to very specific questions about action. In the next section, I will show this by looking at the role of moral rules in virtue ethics.

## Section 2: The Centrality of Rules

This section deals with two main complaints. The first is an extension of the problem above: it says that virtue ethics does not leave room for moral rules. I plan to show that rules do have a role in virtue ethics, although it is not the same as in other normative theories. Aquinas's discussion of natural law will be vital to explaining how rules function in a theological virtue ethic. The second complaint is a deeper and more serious criticism. It argues that virtue ethics misrepresents the structure of morality. Moral rules, not virtue, are the key normative category. Virtues may sometimes be relevant, but they must be subordinated to moral principles. This problem is at the heart of a disagreement between MacIntyre and Gewirth. I will argue that the difference between them is due to their different views about the scope of ethics and that to some extent they are not dealing with the same question. However, insofar as they do relate I believe MacIntyre's position to be superior.

At the heart of the complaint that virtue ethics does not provide specific action guidance in advance is the idea that this kind of action guidance is provided by moral rules. Since virtue ethics does not rely on rules, it is not able to give such specific action guidance. I discuss the role of rules in virtue ethics at length in my chapter on moral particularism. I show that virtue ethics does allow that rules can be useful, but denies that they are sufficient for moral decision-making. Since I show elsewhere that rules are not excluded from virtue ethics, I am not going to replicate that discussion here. Instead I am going to explore exactly how rules work in virtue ethics and whether they can ever provide the precise action guidance

required by this complaint. The best way to do this is to look at Aquinas's account of natural law.

According to Aquinas, all things share in the eternal law – the governing of the universe by divine reason – because they are ruled by it and it is imprinted on their being. The natural law is the participation of the eternal law in rational creatures. Their share in divine reason gives them inclination to 'proper acts and ends'<sup>75</sup>. This inclination provides the first precept of the natural law that 'good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided'.<sup>76</sup> This then unfolds by use of practical reason into various more specific principles, which depending on their nature may be evident to all, easy to grasp, comprehensible by the wise, or only accessible by divine instruction. These principles can be moral rules in the sense required by the criticism – Aquinas specifically identifies the Decalogue as an example of the natural law, with the different precepts being variously easy, difficult or impossible to grasp without divine instruction.<sup>77</sup> So the natural law provides moral rules.

How then does this fit with a virtue ethic in which prudence guides action? It seems as though there is a conflict; either it is prudence which tells us what to do, or it is the principles of the natural law. To see that there is no such conflict, there are two key points to be made. The first is that the practical reason which understands the unfolding of the natural law is the same practical reason which guides the application of virtue. The second is that Aquinas is clear that the natural law may not be able to provide very narrow or precise action guidance, because the moral requirements in specific situations are always affected by the circumstances, something which a general rule cannot fully account for.<sup>78</sup> Jean Porter provides the following explanation: 'moral concepts are always indeterminate to some degree... Hence, the application of moral rules itself requires some exercise of judgement'.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 91:2.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 1a2ae 94:2.

<sup>77</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 100:1.

<sup>78</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 94:4.

<sup>79</sup> Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 318.

There is no conflict between following prudence or the law. Doing one requires the other.

Aquinas also says that the natural law prescribes all acts of virtue.<sup>80</sup> This is because to act virtuously is to act according to reason, the same reason which gives the agent their inclination towards the good which is the natural law. This does not mean that virtue is subordinated to the natural law, however. The natural law and the virtues are referring to the same thing – rational behaviour in accordance with our inclination towards the good. How this rational behaviour is achieved is different. The natural law can to some extent be codified by working out what follows from the first precept, and this codification serves to guide behaviour. The moral virtues are right inclinations developed by habit. Both are guided as to their application by prudence. Natural law and the virtues work in an interlocking fashion, each supporting the other. Virtue is prescribed by the natural law; but it may guide action rightly in cases where the natural law is not known without further investigation. I think that in these cases the rules produced by the natural law will be rules to be virtuous, such as 'Be honest' or 'Do not act cruelly'.

The idea that moral rules are rules to be virtuous is one shared by modern virtue ethicists. Hursthouse calls these sort of rules 'v-rules' and points out that rules including thick or semi-thick concepts are in common use among non-virtue ethicists.<sup>81</sup> However, there is some recognition that these are not the only kind of rules available. Some rules do not rely on thick concepts like the virtues and therefore provide more direct action guidance. This is because they can simply describe an action which is to be done or avoided, whereas rules containing thick concepts will require the agent to work out whether a particular action falls under the remit of that particular concept. For example, the rule 'Be honest' requires me to consider on each occasion whether my planned action is honest or not, and so will rely on my grasp of the subtleties of honest behaviour. By contrast, it will be

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<sup>80</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 94:3.

<sup>81</sup> Hursthouse, 'Normative Virtue Ethics', pp. 25-27.

much easier to determine whether or not I have followed the more descriptive rule 'do not lie'. This leads to the following concern:

rules such as 'Act honestly', 'Do not act uncharitably', etc. are, like the rule 'Do what the virtuous agent would do', still the wrong sort of rule, still somehow doomed to fail to provide the action guidance supplied by the rules (or rule) of deontology and utilitarianism.<sup>82</sup>

Edmund Pincoffs describes the distinction as one between rules that are like standing orders, which 'say what is wanted, but not what to do', and rules which are like commands and are made up of 'specific injunctions and directions'.<sup>83</sup>

Both Pincoffs and Hursthouse seek to deal with this by attacking the distinction between the two kinds of rules. Hursthouse argues that without referring to some thick concepts like 'justice' or 'innocence', the deontologist will be very limited in which rules she employs. Pincoffs agrees that even more apparently precise rules rely on our interpretation and are thereby affected by our character. Both seem to be relying on a similar point to Scheffler – that there is no clear distinction between thick and thin concepts. This means that many rules which are 'thinner' than others still employ some evaluative component. The critic is caught in a dilemma. If they allow that use of semi-thick concepts in rules is legitimate and provides sufficient action guidance, then the virtue ethicist can lay claim to this sort of rule. If they deny this, then they are very restricted in the kinds of concepts they can employ in their rule-making. Terms like 'just', 'murder', 'honour' and 'envy' will all be out. Hursthouse and Pincoffs make a good argument and it seems to me to be enough to deal with the criticism. However, I think that Aquinas's position is stronger still, as it allows for use of even the more descriptive, precise rules.

This is possible because different areas of virtue are differently subject to rules. Porter explains that this is because depending on the area of human

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<sup>82</sup> Hursthouse, 'Normative Virtue Ethics', p. 25.

<sup>83</sup> Edmund Pincoffs, 'Quandary Ethics', *Mind*, 80 (1971), 552-571 (p. 562).

behaviour in question, the virtuous mean is calculated in different ways.<sup>84</sup> In the case of virtues which refer to the state of the agent's passions – temperance and fortitude – the mean will be calculated according to what the agent needs for well-being. So a healthy person who gorges themselves may be a glutton; but a starving man who does the same is not. This is because the mean of virtue in this case depends on the state of the person themselves. For virtues such as this, the only rules that can be prescribed will be rules to be virtuous. Any rule that seeks to prescribe specific behaviour in this area, such as 'Never eat more than 2500 kilocalories in a day' or 'Never eat enough to cause stomach pain' will be insufficient. Instead a rule like 'Avoid gluttony' is needed.

The virtue of justice is not like the virtues of temperance and fortitude. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle in listing justice as a virtue to do with operation, rather than passions. He says that 'good and evil, in certain operations, are taken from the very nature of those operations, no matter how man may be affected towards them'.<sup>85</sup> Because justice has to do with operation and the relationships between agents, the mean can be calculated without necessarily needing to refer to the state of the agents involved. Porter says that justice 'is determined by relationships of equality and equity which can be objectively established without considering the personal characteristics of the agents involved (except in so far as they are relevant to the criteria for distributive justice)'.<sup>86</sup> This means that in the realm of justice it is possible to set much more precise rules for action, because the mean at which justice aims will not be so subject to circumstances. It ought to be possible to determine objectively what the just state of affairs will be and set moral norms accordingly. This still does not allow for a rule to cover every conceivable situation. Aquinas's caution that rules can lose their reliability in specific situations still applies. Moreover, prudence is still needed to guide the application of these

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<sup>84</sup> Jean Porter, 'What the Wise Person Knows: Natural Law and Virtue in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 12 (1999), 57-69 (pp. 62-63).

<sup>85</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 60:2.

<sup>86</sup> Porter, 'What the Wise Person Knows', p. 63.

rules, and so the natural law still relies on a good application of the virtues.

Nevertheless, Aquinas's use of natural law does make room for more specific laws.

Secular virtue ethicists have (with some exceptions) been wary of setting natural norms and absolute conditions for human flourishing. There are movements in that direction, but they tend to be cautious and are not as clearly absolutist as Aquinas's position. This means that it is harder for them to refer to absolute standards for justice. This topic is the focus of my chapter on relativism, and so I will not explore it in depth here. Suffice to say that Aquinas's natural law theory allows him to set the absolute standards for justice necessary to provide more specific action-guiding rules. Although they are able to respond to the claim that virtue ethics does not provide moral rules, secular virtue ethicists are unable to take Aquinas's position. This, then, is a strength of theological virtue ethics; it can provide a strong account of moral rules without subordinating virtue.

Before moving on to the next part of this section, it is worth noting that both forms of virtue ethics see a role for more specific rules in moral education. Hursthouse says that alongside rules to be virtuous, we should still give children specific injunctions such as 'keep promises' or 'don't lie'. The point of setting these rules is to encourage recognition of the virtues and the good at which they aim:

Virtue ethicists want to emphasize the fact that, if children are to be taught to be honest, they must be taught to prize the truth, and that *merely* teaching them not to lie will not achieve this end. But they need not deny that to achieve this end teaching them not to lie is useful, even indispensable.<sup>87</sup>

Similarly, in his discussion of human law Aquinas acknowledges that human actions are about singulars and that laws cannot cover every situation. Nevertheless, they are useful for training us in virtue: 'Consequently a man needs to receive his training from another, whereby to arrive at the perfection of virtue... Now this kind

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<sup>87</sup> Hursthouse, 'Normative Virtue Ethics', p. 27.

of training, which compels through fear of punishment, is the discipline of laws'.<sup>88</sup> Because laws cannot cover every situation, it is not enough to continue using them as the only guide to moral action. Porter says that someone like this will not develop prudence and either become morally lax (presumably from seeing that the law does not always work) or insist on always following the rule for its own sake.<sup>89</sup> Rules are not a replacement for virtue, but can be a useful tool in its development. As well as a directly educational function, rules might act as useful summaries of previous moral decisions or prove helpful in cases where there is little time to make a decision or emotions are running high.<sup>90</sup>

So far in this section I have shown how virtue ethics accounts for moral rules. Aquinas's theory of natural law works together with virtue to guide behaviour to the good. Often the rules produced will be rules to be virtuous. It might be objected that rules to be virtuous still do not provide enough action guidance. However, rules that do not employ thick concepts like this will not be sufficient for a moral theory. In any case, a strength of Aquinas's virtue ethic is that justice does allow the creation of somewhat specific moral rules. More specific rules than this will not reliably guide action. Even these kinds of rules can be used in order to further a virtuous education. So although they are not primary, rules do have a role in virtue ethics. Next, I am going to look at the criticism that even if virtue ethics does account for rules, this is not enough. Rules ought to be at the centre of any normative theory.

## Rights and the Structure of Morality

I now turn to address the second complaint mentioned at the start of this section. This criticism is that virtue ethics has got it backwards. It is not that moral rules are rules to be virtuous, but that the virtues are dispositions to obey moral rules. This view is debated in a disagreement between MacIntyre and Gewirth. I will show that

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<sup>88</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 95:1.

<sup>89</sup> Porter, *Nature as Reason*, p. 319.

<sup>90</sup> Kotva, pp. 35-6.

this position relies on the restricted, exclusively action-focused view of morality discussed in Section 1 and so is not an effective criticism of virtue ethics.

In *Reason and Morality*, Gewirth aims to develop a supreme moral principle which cannot be rationally denied and from which all other moral principles can be derived. Briefly, his argument is as follows:

- 1: All agents regard their purposes in acting as a good. By implication, they must also regard the necessary conditions of their acting for their purposes as good. The general conditions for any action are freedom and basic well-being.
- 2: In acting, the agent must make an implicit claim that they have a right to the goods which are necessary conditions for action.
- 3: 1 and 2 are reached simply on the basis of the agent having a purpose in acting. Therefore on pain of self-contradiction, the agent must accept that the same rights apply to all purposive agents.

This leads to what Gewirth calls the Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC): 'Act in accord with the generic rights of your recipients as well as of yourself'.<sup>91</sup> Gewirth then argues that various moral rights and rules can be derived from the PGC. These rights and rules form the structure of morality.

Gewirth's position relates to the argument that virtues are just inclinations to obey the moral rules because it treats the PGC, rather than the good or flourishing, as the foundation of morality. When based on the PGC, morality is entirely constructed of rules. In a short discussion of virtue at the end of *Reason and Morality*, Gewirth is clear that virtues are entirely subordinate to rules:

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<sup>91</sup> Gewirth, *Reason and Morality*, p. 135.

Now since every agent has the moral duty to obey the *PGC*, if there are any personal, self-regarding qualities or prudential virtues that he can inculcate in himself and that are such that his having them is necessary or highly conducive to his obeying the *PGC*, then it is his duty to inculcate in himself such qualities.<sup>92</sup>

The entire point of the virtues is to aid in the following of moral rules, and they are only desirable insofar as they assist in this. In fact, Gewirth does not think that the virtues belong to the moral sphere at all, since they are self-regarding and morality is essentially other-regarding. He even cites Aristotle (among others) in support of this claim. It is true that Aristotle says that 'justice and injustice must always involve more than one person'.<sup>93</sup> However, his mistake is to assume that justice for Aristotle is synonymous with morality, rather than one of several virtues.

Gewirth's view on the position of the virtues is much clearer in his response to MacIntyre, and so it is to MacIntyre's criticism that I now turn. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre refers to Gewirth as one of several thinkers who fail in a project to establish objective moral rules on the basis of reason. His problem with Gewirth's position is at the second stage of the argument for the *PGC*. He agrees with Gewirth that all agents view their purposes as a good, but argues that the step from regarding freedom and well-being as goods necessary for action to saying that we have rights to these goods is illegitimate.<sup>94</sup> For one thing, desiring a good is not the same thing as having a right to it, and so Gewirth is not justified in saying that all agents claim their desired goods as rights. For another, he says that the idea of a right is socially specific and need not occur in the same way in all cultures, meaning that attempting to universalise the *PGC* would be like 'presenting a check for payment in a social order that lacked the institution of money'.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Gewirth, *Reason and Morality*, p. 334.

<sup>93</sup> Aristotle, 1138a 20-21.

<sup>94</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

In response to MacIntyre's first point, Gewirth agrees that to want something is not the same as to claim a right to it, but says that this is not the point of his argument. He is not saying freedom and well-being are claimed as rights because they are desirable. They are claimed as rights because they are necessary conditions for any action. Gewirth's starting point is actually very Thomist. In acting, everyone desires a good end and also the means towards that end. This is very close to what Aquinas says in his discussion of the last end for man:

Man must, of necessity, desire all, whatever he desires, for the last end... whatever man desires, he desires it under the aspect of good. And if he desire it, not as his perfect good, which is the last end, he must, of necessity, desire it as tending to the perfect good...<sup>96</sup>

If in acting it is necessary to desire one's end and the means towards it, Gewirth says that it would be inconsistent to then allow that another may interfere with the means towards one's end. Since freedom and well-being are necessary for every action, the agent must necessarily claim that their freedom and well-being ought not to be interfered with; and this, Gewirth thinks, is sufficient to constitute a claim to the rights of freedom and well-being. Regarding MacIntyre's second criticism, he argues that the existence of rights is not dependent upon whether or not a community recognises them: 'If persons have the *concept* of human rights, then they can know that such rights normatively exist even though they lack some single *expression* for them'.<sup>97</sup>

Gewirth then turns his attention to MacIntyre's own project to restore the virtues. His main criticism is that MacIntyre falls prey to relativism, or 'moral indeterminacy'. MacIntyre is at best unclear about how he avoids relativism in *After Virtue* and does much to address this problem in *Whose Justice? Which*

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<sup>96</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 1:6.

<sup>97</sup> Alan Gewirth, 'Rights and Virtues', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 38 (1985), 739-762 (p. 747).

*Rationality?*. I discuss whether his position is relativist in Chapter 6, so I will not investigate it here. What I am interested in at this point is the reason Gewirth gives for why MacIntyre cannot avoid relativism. It is because he gives the virtues primacy over moral rules:

This centrality of the virtues is a reversal of a traditional conception of the relation between moral virtues and moral rules. In this conception, moral virtues derive their contents from the requirements set by moral rules: to have a moral virtue is to be disposed to act as moral rules direct.<sup>98</sup>

Gewirth thinks that because MacIntyre fails to ground the virtues in moral rules, they can have no ground at all: 'When the criterion for a quality's being a virtue does not include the requirement that the virtue reflect or conform to moral rules, there is no assurance that the alleged virtue will be morally right or valid'.<sup>99</sup> So Gewirth's position can be summarised as follows: The grounding principle of morality is a moral rule (the PGC) from which other moral rules are derived. If the virtues are not dispositions to obey these rules (and hence subordinate to them) they will have no necessary connection to the supreme moral principle and hence cannot be relied upon to produce morally right actions.

I think that Gewirth's position has merit, up to a point. The problem is that it begs the question against virtue ethics by assuming a model of morality to which virtue ethics does not subscribe. Gewirth explicitly says in several places that he thinks ethics is entirely concerned with action: 'Morality, however, is primarily concerned with interpersonal actions'.<sup>100</sup> This is the reason behind his previously mentioned belief that self-regarding virtues cannot belong to the moral sphere. It is also the reason for his emphasis on rights, because he believes that 'Rights-claims are... essentially linked to action'.<sup>101</sup> Morality is concerned with action; and action

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<sup>98</sup> Gewirth, 'Rights and Virtues', p. 751.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 752.

<sup>100</sup> Gewirth, *Reason and Morality*, p. 129.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

and rights are essentially linked. Given these two views, it makes sense that the basis of Gewirth's morality should be in rules and rights-claims, and that insofar as virtue is useful it is because it promotes rule-following. The problem here is that, as I explained at the beginning of this chapter, virtue ethics does not accept that morality is entirely about action. If the primary question of ethics is 'what should I do?' then Gewirth's attempt to find the ground of morality in the necessary conditions for action is a reasonable approach. If the question is 'how ought I to live?', then such an approach seems entirely misguided. It is better to look for the ground of morality in the model of a good life, as virtue ethics in fact does. I think that this is the basic problem with all criticisms like Gewirth's. Walter Schaller cites Gewirth as one of many proponents of the 'Standard View' which holds that virtues are simply a disposition to obey moral rules.<sup>102</sup> The Standard View clearly sees action as the central focus of moral rules and morality, and so only sees the virtues as tools to produce right action.

As I have said, I think that Gewirth's position is a reasonable approach if it is assumed that morality is entirely focused on action. However, I want to show that although it denies this, virtue ethics does not have to do away with Gewirth's language of rights. I disagree with MacIntyre's claim in *After Virtue* that rights are non-existent.<sup>103</sup> Just as with moral rules, human rights can have a place in virtue ethics. In various areas of her work, Porter explores the development of 'rights' language from natural law theory in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Aquinas himself does not have a theory of rights *per se*, although he comes very close – for example, when he claims that a poor person who takes what is necessary to survive may not be pursued and bears no guilt.<sup>104</sup> Porter argues that there are certain implications of Aquinas's natural law theory which lead naturally (although not necessarily) to a Thomistic theory of natural rights. These implications are:

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<sup>102</sup> Walter Schaller, 'Are Virtues No More than Dispositions to Obey Moral Rules?', in *Ethics: The Big Questions*, ed. by James P. Sterba (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 297-304 (pp. 297-98).

<sup>103</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 66-7.

<sup>104</sup> Jean Porter, 'From Natural Law to Human Rights: Or, Why Rights Talk Matters', *Journal of Law and Religion*, 14 (1999-2000), 77-96 (pp. 86-87).

the human person properly enjoys freedom in some sphere of life; this freedom can properly be asserted, and should be safeguarded, even over competing claims; and finally, this claim has legal force, and if no mechanisms for defending it exist, they should be created.<sup>105</sup>

I think these claims are very close to the claims behind the PGC – that everyone desires and necessarily claims freedom and well-being. As such, they seem to be a reasonable basis for a system of rights not dissimilar to Gewirth's. The difference is that such a system would depend on the natural law, which as I have shown works with virtue and does not subordinate it. MacIntyre thinks that there is no room for a system of natural rights in a Thomist framework.<sup>106</sup> However, he has in mind an account whereby human rights replace appeals to the virtue of justice and the common good. This is not the same as a system of rights based on virtue and the natural law. Virtue ethics can accommodate human and natural rights, but they are not made the foundation of morality.

I began this section by arguing against the claim that without rules, virtue ethics cannot provide action guidance. I used Aquinas's theory of natural law to show how rules can be used in virtue ethics without subordinating virtue. A particular strength of theological virtue ethics here is that an objective theory of human flourishing makes it easier to use more specific rules for action guidance, although any rule that is too specific will be flawed. I then looked at the argument that virtue ought to be subordinated to rights, which must be at the centre of moral theory. Using Gewirth as an example, I showed that this claim relies on the view that morality is entirely action-focused, a position that virtue ethics rejects. Finally, I gave a brief outline of Porter's discussion of rights and the natural law to show that virtue ethics need not exclude the language of rights even though it does not make it primary. In the final part of this chapter, I am going to argue against the

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<sup>105</sup> Porter, *Nature as Reason*, p. 355.

<sup>106</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, pp. 163-164.

claim that virtue ethics cannot be a stand-alone moral theory because it does not give a proper place to moral obligation.

### Section 3: Moral Obligation

So far I have shown that virtue ethics can provide action guidance and accommodate theories of moral rights and rules, although none of these things are the exclusive focus of virtue ethics. In this section, I am going to deal with the criticism that virtue ethics does not properly value moral duty and obligation, and instead places too much emphasis on the emotions to provide moral motivation. Duty and obligation are central parts of any moral theory, and therefore virtue ethics is not sufficient for a normative theory. This criticism is largely based on a Kantian position which sees duty as the only motivation which confers moral value. I will argue both that virtue ethics does value the motive of duty and that Kant values other motivations to good action. I will also look at Aquinas's discussion of obedience to show that while he values moral obedience, it is not the primary virtue. Finally, I will look at a disagreement between Frankena and Hauerwas to show that an ethics of virtue does not exclude obligation.

This criticism begins with a common reading of Kant on moral motivation. Near the beginning of the *Groundwork*, he says that an act has value when it is done from a motive of duty and not from the inclinations of the agent.

To be beneficent where one can is a duty, and besides this there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth but is on the same footing with other inclinations, for example,

the inclination to honour, which, if it fortunately lights upon what is in fact the common interest and in conformity with duty and hence honourable, deserves praise and encouragement but not esteem; for the maxim lacks moral content, namely that of doing such actions not from inclination but *from duty*.<sup>107</sup>

Kant is saying that the only motive that can confer moral worth on an action is that of duty. A virtuous emotion, while praiseworthy, cannot do the same. This seems to be significantly at odds with what Aristotle and Aquinas have to say about continence. The continent person has misaligned or non-virtuous emotions, but resists them by use of reason to discern the right action. Because of this Aquinas, citing Aristotle, says that continence is not a full virtue:

In this way continence has something of the nature of a virtue, in so far, to wit, as the reason stands firm in opposition to the passions, lest it be led astray by them: yet it does not attain to the perfect nature of a moral virtue, by which even the sensitive appetite is subject to reason so that vehement passions contrary to reason do not arise in the sensitive appetite. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. iv, 9) that *continence is not a virtue but a mixture*, inasmuch as it has something of virtue, and somewhat falls short of virtue.<sup>108</sup>

It seems that the Kantian and virtue ethical positions are directly at odds. Kant says that a benevolent disposition is praiseworthy but does not confer moral value, whereas Aquinas and Aristotle think that without rightly ordered passions virtue is not possible. Kant thinks that the motive of duty alone confers moral value; Aquinas and Aristotle think that it only produces the partial or incomplete virtue of continence. This apparent dispute is not helped by attacks on the concept of moral

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<sup>107</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 11.

<sup>108</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a2ae 155:1.

obligation by some modern virtue ethicists. I have already mentioned Anscombe's call in 'Modern Moral Philosophy' to do away with the concepts of duty and obligation. Williams also makes a strong call to reject the 'peculiar institution' of morality which is characterised by moral obligation (as opposed to general obligation).<sup>109</sup>

So the problem is twofold. Virtue ethics seems to think that obligation is not important, and the Kantian interpretation seems to say that virtuous emotions are not (morally) important. This leads to the general criticism that obligation is a central feature of ethics which virtue ethics does not consider. I am going to attack this criticism by showing that neither of its supporting statements is true. Virtue ethics does give credit to those acting from the motive of duty, and Kant does value good emotions in a similar way to the virtue ethicist. I will begin by looking at some different interpretations of Kant.

The basic Kantian position has come in for its fair share of criticism. It seems that insisting that duty is the only morally worthy motive leads to some strange moral conclusions – for example that a person who visits her friend in hospital simply because she is obliged to performs a morally worthy action, while the person who visits her friend because she cares about her does not.<sup>110</sup> This has led both Kantians and non-Kantians to attempt re-interpretations of the basic view described above. The first possibility is that Kant allows moral worth to attach to an action which is overdetermined. This means that the agent has multiple motives for performing the action. A stronger definition requires that any one of the motives would have been a sufficient motive by itself. As long as the motive of duty is a sufficient motive for performing an action, then it has moral worth. This means that an agent can act with a benevolent, virtuous motive and the act can still have moral worth as long as they also act from duty. There are a couple of problems here. One is that it is not clear whether Kant would have endorsed this position or

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<sup>109</sup> Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 174-196.

<sup>110</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 94.

not, and there is certainly disagreement among Kantians on this point.<sup>111</sup> Even if overdetermination is possible it does not solve the problem for the virtue ethicist. This is because the key motive is duty alone and not virtue. It looks very much like solving Kant's problem by allowing overdetermination of actions will subordinate virtue to duty.

Hursthouse offers a better approach, in which she seeks to reconcile Aristotle and Kant by arguing that the two are much closer than first appears. She gives various reasons for this.<sup>112</sup> The first is that Aristotle (and Aquinas) is quite clear that simply feeling the correct emotion is not sufficient for virtue. One of Kant's concerns is that someone who feels an emotion which leads them to do the right thing may not be morally reliable, but this is backed up by virtue ethics. Kant is right that a good emotion is not enough to guarantee good behaviour. The emotion must be a stable disposition towards the good. It must be felt in the right way, in the correct circumstances, towards the right people and so on. Most importantly, it must be guided by reason in the form of prudence. This is the first step towards answering the claim that virtue ethics does not value duty or obligation, but by itself it is not enough.

Hursthouse rightly recognises that virtue ethics faces a reversal of the critique levelled at the Kantian position. Just as only valuing duty seems to lead to strange moral conclusions, not valuing duty seems to do the same. For example, if it is only the disposition to act in the right way and not a feeling of obligation which is morally worthwhile, then a soldier who conquers his fear and faces his enemy because it is his duty is not to be admired, whereas a soldier who wants to fight would be. The next stage in Hursthouse's argument is to show that virtue ethics does value the soldier who conquers fear and so can value duty and obligation. She does this by making a distinction between someone who finds virtuous activity hard because of their character, and someone who finds it hard because of their

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<sup>111</sup> See the discussion between Richard Henson and Barbara Herman in Richard G. Henson, 'What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action', *The Philosophical Review*, 88 (1979), 39-54.; Barbara Herman, 'On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty', *The Philosophical Review*, 90 (1981), 359-382.

<sup>112</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 91-107.

circumstances. She uses the example of someone who returns a lost purse full of money. They may struggle to return it because they are weak and selfish, and so less than fully honest. This does represent a defect in character and a moral failing. On the other hand, they may find it hard to return it because they are poor and suffering, and the money would provide a great relief. Such a person is to be especially admired for returning the purse, not despite but because of their struggle. Virtue ethics certainly takes into account the way the circumstances change the moral features of a situation, and there is an interesting parallel between Hursthouse's example and Aquinas's previously mentioned claim that guilt does not attach to a person who steals to survive. In both cases there is recognition that circumstances can make virtuous behaviour harder and the moral features of the situation change accordingly. So acting solely from the motive of duty need not indicate a lack of virtue. The virtue ethicist may praise or censure someone who acts from this motive depending on the circumstances, and so it is not the case that virtue ethics fails to value dutiful behaviour.

Hursthouse goes on to argue that Kant's examples of someone acting only from the motive of duty are of the kind the virtue ethicist can endorse. In each case it is the circumstances rather than the character of the agent which makes their action hard and therefore their decision to act dutifully a morally admirable one. She also argues that his examples of people acting from benevolent emotions are not examples of people acting from virtue, because they do not seem to deliberate or be guided by reason. Hursthouse's argument seems plausible to me, but I do not think it particularly matters. I think that there is a significant difference between Kant and Aristotle or Aquinas which renders the Kantian criticism of virtue ethics invalid. It is the same point which was the downfall of the critics in the previous two sections. When he discusses morality, Kant is not talking about the same thing that the virtue ethicist is when they say 'morality'. He is dealing with a much narrower concept.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> I am indebted to Chris Insole for the following interpretation of Kant.

I have already explained at length that virtue ethics is concerned with how to live a good life, and that it sees the task of morality as including but not confined to a consideration of action. This is not what is meant by Kant's use of the term 'morality'. It seems that the moral will, for Kant, is a will which is not yet entirely good. Morality deals with situations in which the will is inclined to do other than the good. Kant says that the task of moral philosophy is to determine 'laws of the human being's will insofar as it is affected by nature... laws in accordance with which everything ought to happen, while still taking into account the conditions under which it very often does not happen'.<sup>114</sup> Later, he says that morality is concerned with action, and explains why a will which is perfectly good is not within the moral realm:

*Morality* is thus the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will, that is, to a possible giving of universal law through its maxims... A will whose maxims necessarily harmonize with the laws of autonomy is a *holy*, absolutely good will. The dependence upon the principle of autonomy of a will that is not absolutely good (moral necessitation) is *obligation*. This, accordingly, cannot be attributed to a holy being.<sup>115</sup>

Kant thinks that morality is to do with the relationship between actions and the will. A completely good will would not be obligated by the principle of autonomy because it is already aligned with its laws, and so moral necessitation is not attributed to it.

It should be clear that the scope of Kant's moral realm is much smaller than the moral realm considered in virtue ethics, which includes character as well as action and is certainly concerned with the truly good will. This is not necessarily a problem for Kant himself. He is not attacking virtue ethics and is simply addressing a different question – not how to flourish, but what to do given that we can do other than we ought. It is a problem for those wanting to criticise virtue ethics from

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<sup>114</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 1.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

a Kantian position. To say that obligation or duty are of central importance to morality makes sense to the Kantian; in fact, Kant says as much himself.<sup>116</sup> To claim that it is a failing of virtue ethics that it does not treat obligation and duty in the same way is mistaken, since even from the Kantian perspective obligation and duty would not be of unique or supreme importance if morality were defined as broadly as it is within virtue ethics. I have shown that virtue ethics does value duty; but it is not required to go beyond this and make it of central importance. Both duty and the virtuous emotions play a part in moral motivation, and their role varies depending on the circumstances.

There is an interpretation of Aquinas which sees him as supporting the more hard-line Kantian position, which I want to address. Philip Quinn argues that the virtues in Aquinas are entirely subordinate to divine commands and are merely habits of obedience. The virtues 'will have a distinctly secondary role to play', and obedience to God's commands 'will be the master moral virtue and should occupy centre stage in moral theory'.<sup>117</sup> I have already shown in my discussion of the natural law that Aquinas sees virtue and the law as intertwined and mutually supportive, and that he does not see virtue as subordinate to the law. However, I want to look at the evidence for Quinn's argument. He relies on the fact that Aquinas identifies obedience to God as the greatest of the virtues. It is true that Aquinas says that the virtue of obedience is 'more praiseworthy than the other moral virtues'.<sup>118</sup> However, this is not sufficient to make Quinn's point. In the first place, Aquinas specifies several virtues as primary in one way or another, including justice, mercy and charity.<sup>119</sup> In the discussion of obedience he specifically says that it is lower than the theological virtues. In what way, then, is obedience the greatest of the moral virtues? Aquinas says that it is because it involves the denial of our own will for God, and because obedience protects all other virtues. In fact, he has in mind the close relationship between natural law and virtue described

<sup>116</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>117</sup> Philip L. Quinn, 'The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics', in *Christian Theism and Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Michael Beaty, Carlton Fisher and Mark Nelson (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998), 261-285 (p. 283).

<sup>118</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a2ae 104:3.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 1a2ae 66:4, 2a2ae 22:6, 30:4.

earlier. He says that 'All acts of virtue, in so far as they come under a precept, belong to obedience'.<sup>120</sup> This recalls the earlier point that all acts of virtue are prescribed by the natural law. But this statement needs to be balanced by the one which follows. He says that obedience does *not* come before all other virtues, because 'though an act of virtue come under a precept, one may nevertheless perform that virtue without considering the aspect of precept'.<sup>121</sup> Finally, recall that often the rules that the natural law and obedience prescribe will be laws to be virtuous. Obedience supports the other virtues, which is why it is vital; but this does not mean that the other virtues are subordinate in the sense of being less important to the moral life, which is what Quinn requires. Aquinas's discussion of obedience is fully compatible with his earlier discussion of the natural law, and neither subordinate virtue.

In his discussion of gratitude, Meilaender gives a good example of the way obligation to God does not subordinate virtue, but works alongside it. Obligation, guided by prudence, may be fulfilled in many different ways. God's gifts create an obligation of gratitude; but this obligation is not a 'moral strait jacket', demanding a particular course of action.<sup>122</sup> Instead, the individual may choose to express their gratitude in various virtuous ways: 'Although the obligation of gratitude is universal, we cannot universalise the ways in which it is shown or lived'.<sup>123</sup> I think that this offers a much more nuanced description of how obedience to God might work in the Christian life. Rather than simply subordinating other virtues, obedience or obligation can work alongside them, as Meilaender and Aquinas say.

I am going to finish this section by briefly looking at a disagreement between Hauerwas and Frankena. This is a useful debate because Frankena's discussion is carefully considered but characteristic of the attacks on virtue ethics so far in this chapter, and part of Hauerwas's response is the same as mine. I want to show that I am not alone in using this response, and that it is a viable one for

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 2a2ae 104:3.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 2a2ae 104:3.

<sup>122</sup> Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 159.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

theological virtue ethics. Frankena, commenting on Prichard, draws a distinction between 'morality' and 'virtue'.<sup>124</sup> Morality deals with the goodness of actions and dispositions stemming from obligation. Virtue deals with good motives and actions when obligation is not present. Interestingly, Frankena notes the ambiguity of the term 'morality' and says that depending on the meaning it is given virtue may or may not come under its purview. He thinks that virtue may become part of morality, indeed that morality may be impoverished without it. It must, however, be subordinated to obligation. He does not consider the possibility that morality could have a much broader meaning in line with the virtue ethicist's question 'how ought I to live?'

Hauerwas discusses Frankena's position in an early article of his own, and again briefly in an essay on the distinction between Christian and Aristotelian virtue. He argues that it is a mistake to draw such a sharp distinction between an ethics of obligation and an ethics of virtue. The judgements of morality cannot be made apart from an understanding of the agent and the life at which she aims, and the force of obligation cannot be separated from the character on which the force is exerted.<sup>125</sup> Hauerwas thinks, as I have argued, that an ethic of virtue encompasses rather than contrasts with an ethic of obligation: 'I have no stake in defending anything like what Frankena understands as a "pure" theory of virtue. Indeed such a theory has all the marks of a red herring... the language of virtue and obligation are interdependently related'.<sup>126</sup> He also presses the point that ethics is to do with how one should live and is not 'a special realm into which we sometimes step' and says that part of the point of using the language of virtue is to avoid that impression and remind us that 'for Christians our lives are not constituted by what we (sometimes) do but rather who we (always) are'.<sup>127</sup> In *The Peaceable Kingdom*, he makes the same point regarding both obligation and rules. The focus on both

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<sup>124</sup> Frankena, 'Prichard and the Ethics of Virtue', p. 148.

<sup>125</sup> Hauerwas, 'Obligation and Virtue Once More', pp. 28-29.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>127</sup> Hauerwas and Pinches, 'Virtue Christianly Considered', p. 289.

ignores the agent and the way that their actions are fundamentally linked to their community and history. Hence he says that:

While I have no wish to argue that an 'ethics of virtue' should be prior to an 'ethics of obligation', it is nonetheless the case that concentration on the latter has left us with too few resources to face the moral dangers of a violent world.<sup>128</sup>

Hauerwas's point is exactly the same as mine. The claim that virtue ethics does not deal with obligation is mistaken. Obligation and duty are included but are not central, because the morality that virtue ethics is addressing is broader than a morality of action, duty or obligation.

It might be protested that in insisting on such a broad understanding of morality, I am misusing the term. Morality simply *is* a special realm of obligation, duty and rules; that is what the word means. Virtue ethics cannot use the term to refer to all the things required to lead a good life without abusing its meaning. If this claim is made, I think that all the virtue ethicist need say is 'so much the worse for morality'. This is exactly the response found in Anscombe and Williams. Their attacks on moral obligation mentioned above are not attacks on obligation *per se*, but on the idea that ethics and morality refer to a special, closed off part of life which we deal with on occasion but do not inhabit. Williams especially attacks the institution of morality so understood and would prefer to do without it. I would prefer to keep the term, if for no other reason than to avoid the suggestion that virtue ethics is not really ethics, for it undoubtedly is. This chapter has shown repeatedly that whether the realm of virtue ethics is called morality or not, it can address all that the narrow understanding of morality requires. Whether it is action guidance, moral rules or a respect for obligation, virtue ethics accounts for them all. Once this is understood, a critic can be allowed to insist that virtue ethics is misusing the term morality, as the complaint will have no force. Whether the term

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<sup>128</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, pp. 75-76.

is defined narrowly or broadly, the content of morality is included within virtue ethics. As such, it is sufficient for a stand-alone normative theory.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter with an exploration of the difference between virtue ethics and other normative theories. I showed that the key difference is one of scope. Other normative theories are largely or exclusively focused on action, whereas virtue ethics considers the agent as well. The central question of deontological and consequentialist theories is typically 'How should I act?' whereas the question for virtue ethics is 'How should I live?'. So the scope of virtue ethics includes but is not exhausted by the scope of other normative theories.

The first main section addressed claims that virtue ethics does not provide action guidance. To show that this is not the case, I looked at the three main ways in which virtue ethics tells us how to act: moral exemplars, thick concepts and prudence. I showed that exemplars are used to guide action in both secular and theological ethics. However, secular ethics faces a choice between accessible but fallible actual exemplars, or infallible but inaccessible hypothetical exemplars. I looked at Hauerwas to show that Christian virtue ethics avoids this dilemma by relying on Christ as an actual perfect exemplar and suggested that this is a particular strength of theological virtue ethics. Next I showed how the use of thick concepts – terms which are both descriptive and evaluative – means that the language of the virtues provides action guidance. Although there is disagreement over the exact nature of thick concepts, most of the criticism of thick concepts as presented does not threaten their role in action guidance. The only potential problem is Brower's argument that thick concepts do not exist. He attempts to show this by giving examples of supposedly thick concepts which do not maintain their evaluative status. I showed that his argument relies on utility in the form of consequences being the only source of value. Virtue ethics finds value in the agent

and ultimately *eudaimonia* or *beatitudo*, meaning that even in circumstances where they produce no good consequences, the virtues can still be identified as goods. This means that they maintain their evaluative status and can properly be identified as thick concepts. Finally, I showed how prudence is supposed to enable the agent to put the guidance received from the exemplar and thick concepts into action. It is not the entire goal of virtue ethics to provide action guidance, but it can still do so effectively.

In the second section I looked at the criticism that virtue ethics does not properly deal with moral rules. This was split into two claims. Firstly, that virtue ethics simply cannot accommodate rules; secondly, that whether or not it does include them it is rules and not virtues which should form the focus of a moral theory. In response to the first I examined Aquinas's natural law theory, in which rules and virtue are interlocking and mutually supportive. The law prescribes acts of virtue, but virtue guides the agent in cases that the law cannot prescribe for, and often the rules of the natural law are rules to be virtuous. Ultimately, both are directed by humanity's natural inclination towards the good. I also showed that theological virtue ethics is particularly strong here because it is able to base its rules on an objective natural norm. This means it is able to refer to absolute standards for justice and more easily make more specific rules. Finally, I showed that all forms of virtue ethics have a use for even very specific rules in moral education.

To deal with the second criticism I looked at a disagreement between MacIntyre and Gewirth. Gewirth's search for a supreme moral principle based on the necessary conditions for action yields a moral system centred on rights and rules. He argues that MacIntyre's project to restore the virtues is relativist and must remain so unless the virtues are subordinated to morally absolute principles. I argued that Gewirth's project is reasonable for a more narrowly focused morality, but that it does not make sense when considered as part of a virtue ethical morality aiming to determine the best way to live and not simply how to act. Finally, I looked briefly at Porter's discussion of how theories of human rights arise out of

theories of the natural law to show that virtue ethics need not dispense entirely with the language of rights.

The final section was focused on the idea that obligation and duty, not virtue, should be the central concepts in a moral system. This is largely based on the Kantian view that duty is the only morally valuable motive. The idea that the Kantian position allows the overdetermination of moral acts still subordinates virtue. Instead, I used Hursthouse's argument to show that dutiful action in difficult situations is encouraged by virtue ethics and can be valued when the difficulty stems from the situation and not the agent's character. I also argued that as with other thinkers discussed here, Kant sees morality as a narrower concept than virtue ethics does. This need not be a problem for Kant, but it is a problem for those using Kant to attack virtue ethics. This is because virtue ethics does not accept a model of morality to which duty would be central. I then briefly showed that Aquinas's discussion of obligation does not mean that he takes the Kantian position. Finally, I looked at Hauerwas's criticism of Frankena to show that the view that morality encompasses the entire life is a common point among virtue ethicists. All of the criticisms of virtue ethics in this chapter are in some way based on the view that morality is a special or privileged realm of human experience, exclusively concerned with action, rules, rights, duty and obligation. Once this is denied the criticisms tend to lose their force. They all claim that these concepts should be central to a moral theory, but this only applies when the moral theory in question subscribes to a narrower view of morality – one which asks 'How should I act?' rather than 'How should I live?'. I have shown that virtue ethics does consider and value all of these things, but does not make them of supreme importance. This in no way detracts from its ability to work effectively as a normative moral theory.

## Chapter 3

### Virtue Ethics, Right Action and Aquinas

In the first section of the previous chapter, I addressed the criticism that virtue ethics fails to provide action guidance. This criticism was divided into two parts. One part of the criticism was that virtue ethics does not direct or prescribe for action. This was dealt with at the time by looking at moral exemplars, thick concepts and prudence. The other part of the criticism is more serious; it says that virtue ethics is unable to explain what a right action is. In Chapter 1, I identified it as the most discussed criticism of virtue ethics. As such it requires a separate chapter. This chapter is dedicated to answering the criticism that virtue ethics cannot provide an account of right action.

The critic's claim is that in order to retain the centrality of virtue in any virtue ethic, the rightness of actions must be derived from virtue. That is, the reason an action is right or wrong must in some way be related to the virtues or vices which motivated or were expressed in the act. Any attempt to explain right action in this way will fail, since virtue principally affects the moral status of character, not action. This means that an act can be virtuous but not right, or not right but virtuous. Virtue ethics is therefore unable to properly explain right action, which shows that it is not a sufficient theory for moral reasoning. In the first section of this chapter I explain the problem in more depth and look at some variations. Secular virtue ethicists are well aware of this criticism. I examine three different responses from Slote, Hursthouse, and Swanton and show that none is free from problems. Swanton is the most convincing, but her definition still faces charges of circularity. The second section forms the body of this chapter and is focused on developing a theological response to the problem. I show that Aquinas's action theory enables a surprisingly easy answer, by making virtue a necessary but insufficient condition for right action. I suggest that the reason this is not used by modern virtue ethicists is that Aquinas's action theory is very different from the

current standard model. In order to defend Aquinas, I investigate alternative action theories from thinkers such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Harry Frankfurt. These theories are compatible with Aquinas's action theory, but struggle to provide a clear picture of the causes of action. I show that this is because they are working with a modern understanding of causation, and recommend a return to the four-cause model and especially final causation or teleology. Once final causation is allowed to influence action theory, Aquinas's account of right action can be used. In the third and final section I look at whether theological virtue ethicists can use this answer, focusing on MacIntyre and Hauerwas. MacIntyre's position is very similar to my own, but Hauerwas has some differences in his action theory. I argue that he can use my answer despite this. Finally, I provide a revised version of Swanton's response for those unwilling to accept Aquinas's action theory.

## Section 1: Difficulties with Explaining Right Action

A key criticism of virtue ethics is that there is no way for it to effectively explain right action while remaining distinctively virtue ethical. To do this, the virtue ethicist must hold two seemingly incompatible positions:

(A) Rightness is defined in terms of virtue; an act is right if and only if it is virtuous.

(B) It is possible for an act to be right but not virtuous, or virtuous but not right.

(A) must be held in order to remain fully virtue ethical. If rightness were defined in other ways (for example, by consequences or the act in itself) then virtue would not be required to act rightly. All that would be needed is an understanding of the conditions for rightness, whatever they may be. Working out how to act in the right

way is important to any normative ethic. I showed in the last chapter that virtue ethics has a broader view of morality and so places proportionally less emphasis on evaluating action, focusing more on developing a good character. This does not get the virtue ethicist off the hook; I also showed that guidance and assessment of action is still important to virtue ethics. If virtue is not necessary for this then it will have at best a reduced part to play in moral theory. Any ethic that took this position would likely resemble the virtue theories I mentioned in Chapter 1 – consequentialist or deontologist ethics with a focus on virtue, rather than a stand-alone virtue ethic. So (A) is essential to a complete virtue ethic. However, (A) seems to be in direct opposition to (B). If an act is right if and only if it is virtuous, it seems impossible for an act to be right but not virtuous. The problem is that (B) seems intuitively correct, and examples seem to bear this out. Suppose I were to see a child fall into a river. Wanting to impress the child's watching mother, I jump in and pull the child out. Here I have done the right thing; the child has been saved. But I have not done a virtuous thing. My only motive was to impress someone else, for selfish gain. I did not care about the well-being of the child. Conversely, suppose a judge has been presented with misleading evidence, on the basis of which he convicts an innocent man. He may sentence the man from entirely just and therefore virtuous motives – but it is not the right thing to do. These two examples show how an act can be right but not virtuous, or wrong but virtuous. It seems that virtue ethicists who hold (A) at the expense of (B) are confusing rightness and goodness.<sup>129</sup>

As they are often analysed, rightness has to do with the moral status of actions, whereas goodness has to do with the moral status of character. Virtue, being related to character, can determine goodness but not rightness. The distinction makes the separate assessment of actions and motives easier. In jumping into the river, I do the right thing (saving the child) but my act is not good. In sentencing the innocent man believing he is guilty, the judge does a good thing (his motives are just) but not the right thing. It seems that any ethic that

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<sup>129</sup> Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice and Value* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 224.

rejects (A) will not be truly virtue ethical, whereas any ethic that rejects (B) will be deeply counter-intuitive. In what follows I will look at different attempts by virtue ethicists to deal with this problem, including a suggestion for a virtue ethic that rejects (A), a virtue ethic that rejects (B), and two positions that try to show that (A) and (B) are compatible. I will begin with a short look at a proposal for how a virtue ethic could reject (A).

When making the above criticism, Thomas Hurka divides virtue ethics into two categories: morality-based and rationality-based.<sup>130</sup> Morality-based virtue ethics represents the majority of virtue ethics. These theories do hold to (A); the rightness of an act is derived from the virtues, meaning that the role of the virtues in action is to provide moral assessment or guidance – hence the term 'morality-based'. Rationality-based virtue ethics does not hold to (A). Instead, the rightness of actions is determined by something else. As an example, Hurka suggests Anscombe's virtue ethics in which rightness or wrongness is intrinsic to the act. Rationality-based virtue ethics includes virtue in action by making *eudaimonia* (happiness, flourishing) and hence virtue the *reason* to act. This works as follows: I may be presented with the opportunity to lie or be truthful. The act of lying is intrinsically wrong, and truth-telling intrinsically right. According to Hurka, Anscombe thinks that these facts do not in themselves provide me with a reason to act one way or the other. The fact that truth-telling is intrinsically right does not give me a reason to tell the truth. The incentive for me to tell the truth is that performing right actions will help me to achieve *eudaimonia*. Morality-based and rationality-based virtue ethics approach the way virtue and action are related differently. The former says that something is right because it is virtuous; the latter says that something is virtuous because it is right. Rationality-based virtue ethics is therefore able to reject (A) while keeping virtue necessary for action, since without virtue there will be no *reason* to act. It is therefore free to define right action in various different ways.

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<sup>130</sup> Hurka, pp. 220-222.

I think that there are several reasons to avoid this way of dealing with the problem. Firstly, Hurka's division of virtue ethics into 'rationality-based' or 'morality-based' theories is distinctly unhelpful. The following passage indicates why:

Morality concerns the status of actions as just, right, and so on; rationality concerns a person's reasons to perform such actions. Though the virtues play no role in Anscombe's account of morality, they are vital to her account of rationality. I will therefore call hers a *rationality* version of virtue ethics, since it uses virtue to establish not moral claims but only claims about what people have reason to do.<sup>131</sup>

Hurka uses the word morality in the narrow sense discussed in the previous chapter, which is the sense in which Anscombe (and other virtue ethicists) object to it. To say that Anscombe does not use virtue to establish moral claims is misleading and only true with reference to the stunted morality to which she objects. Consider the following position, suggested by Anscombe as typically Aristotelian: 'essentially the flourishing of a man qua man consists in his being good (e.g. in virtues)... so a man needs, or ought to perform, only virtuous actions'.<sup>132</sup> When morality is understood in a broader sense, Anscombe clearly does use virtue to make moral claims. Like other virtue ethicists, she makes both (broad) moral claims and claims about what is rational with reference to virtue. In fact, according to both Aristotle and Aquinas, to act virtuously (and hence morally) is to act rationally. In his definition of virtue, Aristotle says both that a virtue is 'determined by a rational principle' and that it represents an extreme of 'what is right and best'.<sup>133</sup> By making the moral evaluation of action separate from the moral evaluation of character, Hurka's rationality-based virtue ethics becomes fragmented. In fact, it is closer to virtue theory than virtue ethics. It will prioritise other ways of determining

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<sup>131</sup> Hurka, p. 221.

<sup>132</sup> Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', p. 18.

<sup>133</sup> Aristotle, 1107a 1-10.

rightness, perhaps in a deontological or consequentialist way, and use virtue as moral motivation and nothing more. It turns out that although Hurka's virtue ethic is able to reject (A) and so avoid the dilemma, it is not a real virtue ethic but merely an example of virtue theory. The dilemma was right to suppose that (A) is essential to a true virtue ethic. A sufficient answer to the problem at hand must defend a form of virtue ethics which does accept (A).

The next position I want to look at is one which rejects (B). Michael Slote takes a position that 'treats the moral or ethical status of actions as entirely *derivative* from... the motives, dispositions or inner life of moral individuals'.<sup>134</sup> This means that 'acts are right *because* virtuous individuals would perform them'.<sup>135</sup> He introduces a threshold concept of virtue; motives must attain a certain amount of goodness in order to be virtuous: 'if an action reflects good enough overall motivation, then an agent-based virtue ethics will want to insist that it *is* morally acceptable'.<sup>136</sup> An act will be virtuous if its motives are 'good enough'. If they are below this standard the act will not be virtuous and hence wrong.

I will not spend a great deal of time on Slote's view, as I think it is seriously flawed. Wherever the threshold of virtue is, it will be implausible. If it is too low, most acts will be right; too high, and almost none will be. In any case, the view cannot explain situations where an act is right despite not being virtuous – such as the example of my saving the child. It must say that my saving the child was wrong. Any virtue ethic which fully rejects (B) will evaluate many situations like this and therefore be deeply counter-intuitive. Slote does discuss ways in which moral intuition can be inconsistent; but he also acknowledges that it has 'considerable weight' and criticises theories which are too anti-intuitive.<sup>137</sup> Unfortunately, I think that when it comes to explanations of right action, his own theory falls into this category. It seems that so far, the dilemma is holding up. (A) is indeed necessary for a complete virtue ethic and Slote's attempt at a rejection of (B) is counter-

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<sup>134</sup> Slote, p. 7.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>137</sup> Slote, pp. 11-13.

intuitive. I will now turn to solutions which seek to make (A) and (B) compatible. In my view, these are much more appealing.

### The Virtuous Exemplar

It seems that virtue ethics must find a way to describe rightness in terms of virtue while avoiding the apparently counter-intuitive results that such attempts seem to produce. Rosalind Hursthouse's view is the best known answer to this problem. In the readings of (A) and (B) so far, the virtues or vices which the virtue ethicist may use to determine rightness and goodness both belong to the agent. Hursthouse's solution is to separate the virtue that determines rightness from the agent. Instead, she suggests that rightness should be determined by the virtuous behaviour of a fully virtuous person. She provides the following definition, which I will call (H): 'An act is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e., acting in character) do in the circumstances'.<sup>138</sup> In any given situation, the person acting may or may not be virtuous. This does not affect how (H) determines rightness, because it is not the agent's personal virtue (or lack of it) which is important for the rightness of the action. What matters is whether the act matches up with what an ideally virtuous person would do. The virtue of the agent is important because goodness is still determined by the virtue of the person actually acting. This means that both goodness and rightness are determined by virtue without being linked in a problematic way. (H) can account for situations in which an act is good but not right. Taking the example of my saving a child to impress its mother, the act is right because it is what a virtuous agent would do. However, it is not a good act because I do not have a virtuous motive myself. So far (A) has been read as meaning that an act is right if it is done from a virtuous motive. (H) takes it to mean that an act is right if it is what a virtuous agent would do. Whether something is right or not becomes completely independent of the person doing it, while still being determined by virtue.

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<sup>138</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 28.

This definition of right action does not deal so easily with the opposite example – when an act is wrong despite its being good. The most obvious examples of an act being good but wrong are dependent on the agent being ignorant of some key fact.<sup>139</sup> In the example above, the judge sentences an innocent man from a good motive because he mistakenly believes him to be guilty. The problem for (H) is that it seems possible that an entirely virtuous agent could be similarly mistaken. This is something I covered in the last chapter during my discussion of the virtuous exemplar. If even an ideal exemplar could be mistaken, then they could still fail to do the right thing – in which case rightness cannot be defined in terms of the virtuous agent's actions. Some instances of this problem can be resolved by an understanding of the virtue of *phronesis*, or prudence. As previously discussed, prudence is a right understanding of how to act – it enables the practical implementation of the virtues. Suppose I am at a party and (knowing that I have a weakness in this area) am determined not to drink alcohol. I might loudly announce my intention at the beginning of the night, with the result that I am not offered a drink but I have created an awkward situation and the host is offended. Alternatively, I might politely refuse any drink I am offered without drawing attention to myself. In both instances I am motivated by the virtue of temperance; however, in the first example I have not seen how best to express this virtue, whereas in the second I have. This illustrates the difference between someone who possesses prudence and someone who does not. To an extent, then, prudence eliminates the problem of Hursthouse's virtuous agent being mistaken. The virtuous agent possesses prudence and so typically knows how to implement the virtues.

Although helpful, this does not entirely deal with the problem. Swanton rightly points out that prudence does not imply omniscience, and there are many examples in which possession of prudence would not necessarily entail possession of all relevant facts.<sup>140</sup> She suggests a situation in which a fully virtuous agent might make an environmentally disastrous policy decision because they are lacking

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<sup>139</sup> Hurka, p. 224-5.

<sup>140</sup> Swanton, 'A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action', p. 35.

or are mistaken about scientific information. Swanton thinks that this problem with Hursthouse's answer is insurmountable. I do not want to go that far, but accept that it is a problem. In Chapter 2, I showed that the secular virtue ethicist faces a dilemma regarding the virtuous exemplar. Either the exemplar is real, in which case they can provide effective action guidance but will be fallible. Or the exemplar could be hypothetical, in which case they need not be fallible but it will be very difficult to work out what they would do. This dilemma has to do with using the exemplar to provide effective action guidance. I think that it does not have the same force when it comes to defining right action. The fact that a hypothetical exemplar may provide less effective action guidance need not affect its use in a definition of right action. If the right action is what the hypothetical virtuous agent would do, then it may not always be easy or even possible to determine whether an action was right or not. However, to ask whether the moral status of an action is right or wrong is not the same question as asking what gives it that status. Hursthouse may answer the latter by saying that in all cases, the hypothetical exemplar determines rightness, at the cost of occasionally being unable to answer the former. This is not ideal, but I do not think it is disastrous. Hursthouse could plausibly argue that this result is representative of our actual moral experience; sometimes it simply is very difficult to determine whether an act was right or wrong.

In any case, in my discussion of the virtuous exemplar I showed that theological virtue ethics has a stronger alternative, since Christ can play the role of an omniscient and fully virtuous exemplar who actually exists. This means that theological virtue ethicists have the advantages of a hypothetical exemplar without the disadvantages. Even if Swanton's problem were sufficient to eliminate (H) as a definition of right action for secular virtue ethicists, it would not do so for theologians. As I am trying to provide a theological response to these problems, it is worth investigating Hursthouse's approach further.

There is a further problem with (H), which I think is ultimately more damaging. It seems that there are some right acts that a virtuous person would not do – either because they would not have the opportunity, or because such acts are

only virtuous when done by an agent who is not entirely virtuous themselves. The first kind of situation might occur when I ought to apologise for something I have done wrong; presumably the virtuous agent would not do this, since they would not have done something wrong in the first place. The second kind of situation might include acts such as self-regulation. Robert Johnson uses the example of a habitual liar who, wanting to change, goes to a therapist and starts to write down every lie he tells.<sup>141</sup> In these situations the right thing to do is not the same as what a fully virtuous agent would do, suggesting that (H) is incorrect. Julia Annas shows that these examples are operating on a misunderstanding of how we should try to copy the virtuous exemplar. She suggests that the process of becoming virtuous is like learning a practical skill:

The development from learner to expert essentially involves acquiring your own understanding of the field you are learning... The expert in a practical field aims not to produce clone-like disciples who will mimic what she does, but pupils who will go on to become experts themselves... The person who succeeds in playing like Alfred Brendel ends up performing in a way which sounds rather different.<sup>142</sup>

Acting like the virtuous exemplar does not mean copying exactly what they do; instead, it means finding the appropriate way to express the same virtue as them. This will include taking into account one's own state as a less than fully virtuous agent.

I think that Annas is right about this. Doing what the virtuous agent does does not mean performing exactly the same actions, and so it is still possible that following the virtuous agent would result in acting rightly in every situation. But this amendment puts Hursthouse in a difficult position. Her definition might now be more correctly read as (H2): 'An act is right if and only if it expresses the same

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<sup>141</sup> Robert N. Johnson, 'Virtue and Right', *Ethics*, 113 (2003), 810-834 (pp. 817-818).

<sup>142</sup> Annas, 'Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing', p. 69.

virtue as a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e., acting in character) express in the circumstances'. Crucially, the criterion for a right act looks as though it may have shifted from exactly what is done, to what kind of thing is done. This means that acting rightly no longer depends on doing exactly the action that the virtuous agent does, but just on doing the same sort of thing – expressing the same or similar virtues. Considering this alongside the fact that the virtuous agent does not determine what virtues are right for each situation, it seems possible to entirely eliminate the virtuous agent from the definition. The virtues which are expressed by the virtuous agent in (H2) are exemplified by them; but they are not exclusive to the agent. Consider (H3): 'An act is right if and only if it expresses the appropriate virtue'. (H3) is simply a neater version of (H2). But it also seems dangerously close to the original reading of (A) – that an act is right if and only if it is done from a virtuous motive. The question is, what exactly does 'expressing a virtue' involve? It does not seem too great a leap to suppose that it involves acting with the right motives – in which case (H3) will indeed devolve into the damaging version of (A), once again unable to explain how an act can be right with wrong motives etc..

Hursthouse is ultimately caught in a dilemma. She may stick to (H), in which case there will be situations such as self-regulation in which the right thing to do is not what the virtuous agent would do. Or she may agree with Annas's analysis of what it means to do as the virtuous agent does and accept (H2), which ultimately results in a return to the position she set out to avoid. I think that there is a way out of this dilemma; it involves developing an explanation of 'expressing a virtue' which does not rely solely on motive. I think that this is successfully done by the last thinker I will look at – Christine Swanton.

### Target-based Right Action

Swanton produces a target-based account of right action:

(1) an action is virtuous in respect V (e.g., benevolent, generous) if and only if it hits the target of (realizes the end of) virtue V (e.g., benevolence, generosity); (2) an action is right if and only if it is overall virtuous.<sup>143</sup>

Here 'hitting the target of a virtue' performs roughly the same function as 'expressing the appropriate virtue' does above; both refer to the way in which a virtue is exhibited in right action. The key for Swanton is to define 'hitting the target' in a way that does not depend exclusively on virtuous motives, and I think she does this successfully. She says that an act hits the target of a virtue if it is successful in acknowledging or responding to the aim of a virtue in that context. The important thing is to determine what the aim of a virtue is. This will obviously be dependent on the virtue in question as well as the context, so it would be impossible to provide an exhaustive guide. In most situations it ought to be relatively easy to recognise the aim of a virtue, since virtues aim at certain goods and so an act that promotes that good will typically hit the target of the virtue. Swanton does provide some more general observations about the aim of a virtue for more complex situations:

(1) there are several modes of moral response or acknowledgement appropriate to one kind of item in a virtue's field, so hitting the target of a virtue may involve several modes of moral response; (2) the target of a virtue may be internal to the agent; (3) the target of a virtue may be plural; (4) what counts as the target of a virtue may depend on context; (5) the target of a virtue may be to avoid things.<sup>144</sup>

To summarise, an act is right if it hits the target of a virtue; the target of a virtue will vary depending on the circumstances but will involve promoting the good related to that particular virtue. Crucially, hitting the target of a virtue does not

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<sup>143</sup> Swanton, 'A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action', p. 34.

<sup>144</sup> Swanton, 'A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action', p. 39.

depend on virtuous motives, meaning that rightness does not depend on goodness. Swanton can affirm (A) – an act is right only if it is virtuous (i.e. hits the target of the virtue) but is still able to hold to (B). In the examples used above, my saving the child would be right because it hit the target of the relevant virtue (perhaps benevolence). However, it is not good because it is not motivated by that virtue. Likewise, the judge's act is good because it is motivated by the virtue of justice. However, the target of justice will include fairness and correct redress for someone's actions. In this case the judge's act does not achieve that, so it is not right.

I think that Swanton's account so far is convincing, but there is another problem. Ramon Das argues that this target-based definition of right action is damagingly circular; it relies itself on a definition of right action which is not provided.<sup>145</sup> Swanton is clear that the target of a virtue will change depending on the context. Although she provides some analysis of the form that that target might take, the actual identification of the target is unclear. There are a couple of possibilities, but both have flaws. The first is that the target of the virtues could be specified in terms of *eudaimonia*; that is, an act hits the target of a virtue if it contributes to *eudaimonia*. Das thinks that the concept of reaching *eudaimonia* itself relies in part on a definition of right action. He says that Aristotle thought that *eudaimonia* required being taught what to do and what not to do, which involves 'an evaluative claim with respect to certain acts'.<sup>146</sup> This means that *eudaimonia* is partially dependent on this evaluative claim – which looks like a judgement regarding the rightness or wrongness of certain acts. If *eudaimonia* relies on a concept of right action, then it will be circular for the target of virtue (and hence the definition of right action) to rely on *eudaimonia*.

The second possible way of specifying the target of a virtue is that it could be based entirely internally – on states, motives and emotions belonging to the agent. Rather than producing certain virtuous behaviours, the target would be

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<sup>145</sup> Ramon Das, 'Virtue Ethics and Right Action', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 81 (2003), 324-339.

<sup>146</sup> Das, p. 332.

entirely aimed at producing particular states of mind. This would not involve any concept of action and so would not be circular. There are two problems with this. Firstly, Swanton explicitly says that many targets of virtues are external, and it does seem odd for the virtues to be aimed entirely at inner states of the agent.<sup>147</sup> More importantly, Das points out that if this route is taken, it undermines a key distinction in virtue ethics. Swanton, drawing on Aristotle, distinguishes between a virtuous act and an act from virtue.<sup>148</sup> A virtuous act is one that 'hits the target' of virtue – it is the kind of act that a typically virtuous person would normally do. An act from virtue is an act motivated by a virtuous inner state. This distinction is how virtue ethicists separate non-virtuous people who happen to act in the right way (by doing virtuous acts) from the truly virtuous (who act 'from virtue'). This distinction will be important shortly in explaining Aquinas's account of right action. Das points out that this distinction serves to 'distinguish actual virtuous inner states from their characteristic and (largely) *external effects*'.<sup>149</sup> If a target of a virtue is entirely aimed at producing desirable inner states of the agent, then it will be difficult or impossible to distinguish between someone who does virtuous acts and somebody who acts from a virtuous motive.

With the failure of these attempts to explain what the target of a virtue depends on, Das concludes that identification of the target seems to rely on intuition. This causes a problem, since the intuition relevant to whether an act hits the target of a virtue is surely an intuition about whether that act is right or wrong. This means that an act is right if it hits the target of a virtue; and an act hits the target of a virtue if my intuition suggests that it is right. Swanton's definition of right action turns out to be circular. Despite this, I think that Swanton's position is the most convincing, and I will return to it later in an attempt to resolve the problem of circularity. For now, I want to move on to look at an entirely different theory of right action.

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<sup>147</sup> Swanton, 'A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action', p. 41.

<sup>148</sup> Swanton, 'A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action', p. 45.

<sup>149</sup> Das, p. 336.

Virtue ethics must provide a convincing account of right action, but the necessity of linking right action to virtue means that it struggles to do so. All of the attempts I have looked at face problems. Hurka's rationality-based virtue ethics fails to prioritise the virtues and in fact is not virtue ethics at all, but virtue theory. Slote's position is unable to explain how an action may be right but not good, or good but not right. Hursthouse's definition based on what a virtuous exemplar would do initially appears to avoid this problem, but in order to do so must take a form that means that there will be right actions that the virtuous agent would not do. Finally, Swanton's target-based view appears circular. I think that all of these attempts to define right action in terms of virtue are flawed. In what follows, I intend to construct an alternative answer based on Aquinas's theory of action. I will show that there is a simple way for virtue ethicists to define right action that has not been used due to their reliance on a standard causal model of action.

## Section 2: Aquinas's Action Theory

### Aquinas and Right Action

Modern virtue ethicists have struggled to explain right action adequately while maintaining the centrality of virtue. In this section, I will argue that a different understanding of the nature of action provides Aquinas with an easy way around this criticism. I will begin by explaining what Aquinas thinks constitutes an action. I will show that because he understands action to have several component parts, he is able to say that virtue is a necessary but insufficient part of right action. This understanding of action is controversial and needs to be defended. I will investigate current action theory and show that non-standard views that make intention central to the act are suited to a defence of Aquinas. I will argue that these views struggle to explain how action fits with other events because they are working with an exclusively efficient-causal model of causation. In order to defend Aquinas's model

of action I will defend the use of final causation and attack the standard efficient-causal model. I will set out a problem known as causal deviance and argue that where standard models of action avoid this problem they rely on a hidden use of final causation. Allowing final causation a place in action theory results in a better understanding of action, and results in a model that allows Aquinas to easily explain the relationship of virtue to right action.

Aquinas says that the goodness of an action consists of four parts. One part is the goodness inherent in everything as a result of its existing. This part is not morally relevant since it is a necessary part of everything that exists. The deficiency or sufficiency of goodness in each act will come from the other three parts. These are the object, the end, and the circumstances, and each must be good in order for the act as a whole to be good.<sup>150</sup> The object is the act in itself – the event that occurs. The end is the intention or purpose of the act. Every act aims at a perceived good, and this is the end of the act. In some cases, it can be difficult to distinguish between the object and the end of an act. This is because the same act may be described in different ways and hence have several different objects.<sup>151</sup> It may be that a particular description conflates the end and object of an action. Nevertheless, Aquinas insists that the two are distinct. I think that having several necessary but insufficient conditions for the goodness of an action gives Aquinas an effective answer to the criticism that virtue ethics cannot explain right action. To reiterate, the criticism is that virtue ethics cannot explain how an act can be right while still having bad motives, unless it drops its claim that virtue is determinative of rightness. If Aquinas is right that an act has several moral components, then if virtue is identified with one of those components it will be necessary but insufficient for right action. I will show how Aquinas links virtue to the end of an act before looking at why modern virtue ethicists have not responded along these lines. The answer reveals a problem for Aquinas's model of action.

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<sup>150</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 18:2-4.

<sup>151</sup> Ralph McInerney, *Ethica Thomistica: The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), p. 82.

According to Aquinas, virtue is necessary for an act to be good because virtue is a stable disposition towards good. There are two kinds of natural virtue: intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtue involves perfecting the intellect or reason so that action may be good. Moral virtue has to do with perfecting a desire or inclination towards action. This means that moral virtue is found in the appetitive faculty, because the appetitive faculty is the faculty which involves desire and inclination.<sup>152</sup> The sensitive appetite is able to influence the will: 'Now it is evident that according to a passion of the sensitive appetite man is changed to a certain disposition... And in this way, the sensitive appetite moves the will'.<sup>153</sup> So a virtue is able to move the will, and the will is necessary for action: 'There must needs be something voluntary in human acts'.<sup>154</sup> Finally, Aquinas says the will as a power encompasses the object and the end, but in acting the will has only to do with the end: 'If, however, we speak of the will in regard to its act, then, properly speaking, volition is of the end only'.<sup>155</sup>

Now it is possible to see exactly the role that virtue plays in action. Suppose someone has the virtue of honesty, which leads her to tell the truth in a difficult or awkward situation (suppose she has forgotten to attend an appointment and is asked why she was not there). What occurs is as follows: her possession of the virtue of honesty means that she will normally desire to tell the truth (a stable disposition). When asked why she missed the appointment, this stable disposition results in a specific desire (located in the sensitive appetite) to confess that she simply forgot rather than making up an excuse. In turn, the desire moves her will – she wills to tell the truth, and so she does. If no will to act existed, she could not have acted (she could, of course, have lied; but this would simply involve a different act of the will). When she willed to act, she had in mind a particular aim or end – in this case the end could include things such as respecting truth and the person who asked the question. This meant that she also willed the means to that

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<sup>152</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 58:1

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 1a2ae 9:2

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 1a2ae 6:1

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 1a2ae 8:2

end (her telling the truth), but the means were only incidental to the end. This is what Aquinas means by the will encompassing the object as a power, but not in regard to the act. In order to reach the end (i.e., when acting as a power), the will has to include the object (her act of truth-telling). When considered apart from that, she simply wills the result or end of her act. The object was not willed for its own sake, but simply for the sake of the end. So her virtue of honesty results in a will to act for a particular end, but not in a desire for a particular object. If her goal of respecting truth and the other person could have been reached in a way other than telling the truth, that way would be just as desirable.

This shows how virtue is necessary but insufficient for right action: it is a stable disposition that affects the will and directs it towards good. The will is necessary for action (and consequently good will is necessary for good action). However, in the context of acting the will is only related to the end. In order for an act to be fully good the object and the circumstances must be right as well, and these are not determined by virtue. In the example above, suppose that the truth-teller is struck by a sudden cough, and so the truth is not told. In this case, the end is good (because it is virtuous) but the act overall is not good because what is in fact done (the object) is not good. Or suppose the truth is told but the questioner mishears the answer and believes they are being insulted. Here the act of truth-telling is virtuous, but the overall act is not good because of an external circumstance (the mishearing). So moral virtue is necessary but insufficient for right action. Before going on to look at why modern virtue ethicists have not used this answer, I want to clear up two smaller problems or questions about this answer to the problem.

The first problem is that this answer does not appear, strictly speaking, to make virtue a requirement for right action. As stated above, a virtue is a stable disposition to act well. What about someone with an *unstable* disposition to act well? It is possible for people who typically behave badly to have the unusual desire to do something good. In such an instance, the will and hence the end would be good, but virtue would not be involved. This is not a problem unique to Aquinas. I

think that it can be cleared up by examining a distinction that Aristotle draws between what makes an act virtuous and what makes a person virtuous. He says:

Acts, to be sure, are called just and temperate when they are such as a just or temperate man would do; but what makes the agent just or temperate is not merely the fact that he does such things, but the fact that he does them in the way that just and temperate men do.<sup>156</sup>

I mentioned this in Section 1, where Swanton describes it as the distinction between a virtuous act and an act from virtue.<sup>157</sup> A virtuous act is what a virtuous person would ideally do, but may have many different motivations, not necessarily virtuous ones. Conversely, an act from virtue is an act motivated by virtue. A non-virtuous person can perform a virtuous act, but not an act from virtue. Even if the agent is not virtuous, a good action will still be a virtuous one. This means that virtue is still necessary for right action. To return to the example of the truth-teller above, in telling the truth because she wants to be honest she is performing an act from virtue. If she lacked the virtue of honesty and told the truth simply from a selfish desire of self-preservation, then she would still have performed a truthful act, but this would not make her a truthful person. It would be a virtuous act, but not an act from virtue. Either way, virtue is still involved in the rightness of the act.

The second problem has to do with different uses of the word 'good'. I mentioned above that some modern ethicists such as Hurka draw a distinction between rightness and goodness.<sup>158</sup> Rightness has to do with the moral status of the event or action as such, whereas goodness has to do with the motive behind the action (I will call this understanding G1). Aquinas does not have this distinction. He thinks that something is good if it fulfils its divinely intended function (I will call this understanding G2). G2 is a much wider category. It encompasses G1 but is not completed by it. For an act to be G1, all it needs is a good motive. For an act to be

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<sup>156</sup> Aristotle, 1105b 5-10.

<sup>157</sup> Swanton, 'A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action', p. 45.

<sup>158</sup> Hurka, pp. 220-222.

G2, it needs to have a good motive, object and circumstances. G2 seems to be roughly equivalent to G1 and rightness combined. G1 for Aquinas is equivalent to the goodness of the end, whereas rightness seems to be parallel to the goodness of the object and the consequences combined. Only when an act has all three of these is it fully G2. This broader understanding of goodness is closely related to the broader understanding of morality I described in Chapter 2. Morality has to do with the good, and the virtue ethicist thinks that morality encompasses both action and character. Therefore it makes sense for goodness to do so as well. Once the different uses of the term 'goodness' are understood, a critic might complain that my proposed answer to the question does not correctly address it. The virtue ethicist is challenged to explain how virtues affect rightness – i.e. the G2 of the object/circumstances. My suggested answer is that virtues are a necessary part of action because they are intrinsic to the G2 of the end – something that the modern ethicist sees as distinct from rightness and action. The equivalent challenge for Aquinas is to link virtue to the object/circumstances – something that he will struggle to do. If the criticism is put in this way, then my response is that Aquinas is not vulnerable to it. He does not need to link virtue to the object/circumstances in the same way that the modern virtue ethicist does. This is because he has a very different understanding of what an action is – something that I will now explore in more depth.

### Different Action Theories

Aquinas is able to explain the connection between virtue and right action by saying that virtue is a necessary but insufficient part of right action. Contemporary virtue ethicists have not answered along these lines. I think that this is because they are working with a view of action that does not allow virtue to be intrinsic to the act. The standard view of action is 'a bodily movement that is caused by the desires and

beliefs that rationalize it'.<sup>159</sup> This view of action is notably different to Aquinas's. I have shown that Aquinas identifies three key parts to each act: object, end and circumstances. A 'bodily event' could correspond to the object and potentially to the circumstances (depending upon how the act was described). However, on this model the end is separated from the rest of the act. The intention behind the act is located with the 'preceding desires and beliefs', which on the standard model are not part of the act. Since virtue has to do with intention, the standard model is not able to claim that it is a part of action. It is only because Aquinas sees intention and the will as intrinsic to action that he is able to make virtue a necessary part of a good act.

In order to understand why the standard theory separates intention from acts, it is necessary to examine what exactly qualifies as an action under the standard theory. Both Aquinas and the standard theory accept that in order for something to be an action, it must be intentional. Modern action theorists have noted that intention is not in itself sufficient for an event to qualify as an action. A bodily event may be preceded by an intention without being an action. For example, if I intend to raise my arm and just then an involuntary spasm causes me to raise it, the raising of my arm is not an action despite the fact that I had intended to raise it when I did. The presence of intention *per se* is not sufficient to qualify an event as an action – the connection between the event and the intention must be of the right kind. Supporters of the standard theory argue that the appropriate type of connection is a *causal* connection.<sup>160</sup> This results in the rough definition above – that an action is a bodily movement *caused* by preceding desires and beliefs. It is this belief that the connection between intention and action must be causal that results in their separation, due to the generally accepted belief that nothing can cause itself.<sup>161</sup> If intention is the cause of action, and nothing can cause

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<sup>159</sup> Jennifer Hornsby and Naomi Goulder, 'Action', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Craig (2012) <<http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/V001>> [accessed 01 March 2012] (para. 3 of 5).

<sup>160</sup> Berent Enç, *How We Act: Causes, Reasons, and Intentions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 40-41.

<sup>161</sup> Juarrero, *Dynamics in Action*, p. 18.

itself, then action and intention must be distinct. Donald Davidson is very clear about this: 'Causal relations, however, demand distinct events... to describe an event in terms of its cause is not to confuse the event with its cause'.<sup>162</sup>

If the standard theory is right that the connection between intention and act is causal, then it seems Aquinas's theory of action must be mistaken. Intention precedes action and cannot be part of it. However, there are some action theorists who try to make intention internal to the act. Their ideas are usually called non-causal theories. I will suggest later that this is misleading, and that these accounts of action are causal. The difference is that the causation involved is final rather than efficient. For now, I will continue to use the standard terminology to avoid confusion. Two thinkers that make intention internal to action are Anscombe and Frankfurt. They rely on finding a different criterion for action. If intention is freed from its role as a causal qualifier of action, then it no longer needs to be external to the act. Anscombe's qualifier for (intentional) action is an action 'to which the question "Why?" is given application, in a special sense'.<sup>163</sup> If it makes sense to ask a particular type of 'Why' question of an event, then that event qualifies as an action. The special senses of the question 'Why?' to which Anscombe refers are as follows:

the question has not that sense if the answer is evidence or states a cause, including a mental cause; positively, the answer may (a) simply mention past history, (b) give an interpretation of the action, or (c) mention something future. In cases (b) and (c) the answer is already characterised as a reason for acting... in case (a) it is an answer to that question if the ideas of good or harm are involved in its meaning as an answer; or again if... it is connected with 'interpretative' motive, or intention *with which*.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Donald Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes' in *Essays on Actions and Events*, ed. by Donald Davidson (Clarendon: Oxford, 2001), pp. 3-19 (p. 14).

<sup>163</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (London: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 24.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

Crucially, Anscombe rejects situations where the answer is a mental cause, because she thinks that there are also unintentional events which may be mentally caused. Intention is needed for something to qualify as an action, but it does not play a causal role. This means that intention is able to be internal to the act.

Frankfurt has a similar model of action. He criticises causal theories of action for assuming that there is no way to distinguish internally between actions and mere happenings. By this he means that they assume that there can be nothing about a particular event (say, my arm being raised) that in and of itself makes the event an action and not just a simple event. This means that whatever makes that event an action (my intention to raise my arm) as opposed to a mere happening cannot be part of the event. Once intention is identified by standard theorists as the criterion for action, it is this assumption that leads to the separation of intention and act. Frankfurt thinks that this means that causal action theories possess a very odd characteristic: 'The only conditions they insist upon as distinctively constitutive of action may cease to obtain... at precisely the moment when the agent commences to act'.<sup>165</sup> He thinks that it makes more sense for actions to be intrinsically different from mere happenings. The intrinsic difference is that actions are 'intentional movements'. By 'intentional movement', Frankfurt means a movement that is guided by the agent. Such a movement need not be preceded by an intention – it is intentional as long as the agent is directing or governing the event. This is a clear move to make intention intrinsic to action. Like Anscombe, Frankfurt seeks to keep intention as the qualifier of action without necessarily assigning it a causal role. He thinks that behaviour may be explained in terms of a causal mechanism, but this is not the same thing as advocating a causal theory of action. He uses the example of a man content to let his car coast down a hill. There is no adjustment to the movement of the car, yet it is still under the guidance of the driver.

Both Anscombe and Frankfurt's theories are compatible with Aquinas's

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<sup>165</sup> Harry Frankfurt, 'The Problem of Action' in *The Philosophy of Action*, ed. by Alfred R. Mele (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp. 42-52 (p. 43).

answer to the problem of right action. By making intention intrinsic to action, the end of an action becomes part of the act itself. This makes it possible to keep virtue as a necessary but insufficient part of right action because the end (and therefore virtue) is part of but not the whole of the act. However, standard theorists argue that Anscombe and Frankfurt's observations can be explained by a causal theory. For example, Alfred Mele claims that in Frankfurt's example, the driver must have a desire for the car to continue to coast, and this desire is the mental cause of him not operating the brake.<sup>166</sup> The problem for non-causal theorists like Anscombe and Frankfurt is that it always seems possible to identify a cause of behaviour. Actions, like other events, are always part of a causal chain. Standard theorists can just claim that defining action is simply a matter of determining the right kind of preceding cause. I think that by examining the understanding of cause underlying the standard theory, it will be possible to clearly identify the problems with it. This process should also show why non-causal theorists have struggled with the standard theory.

### Causation and Action Theory

Aquinas shares with Aristotle a 'four-cause' model of causation: 'There are four kinds of cause, viz., final, formal, efficient and material'.<sup>167</sup> The final cause is the purpose, goal or end of something – the reason for which something is done. The formal cause is the shape or essence of something – what makes it what it is. The efficient cause is the preceding event that produces the thing in question. Finally, the material cause is the substance out of which something is made. The four causes are linked to Aristotle and Aquinas's views on change. All change involves going from potentiality into actuality. The role of the causes is to move something from potentiality into actuality. Something receptive to change is passive; something able to effect change is active. This is where the idea (mentioned above)

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<sup>166</sup> Alfred R. Mele, *The Philosophy of Action* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>167</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a2ae 27:3.

that nothing can cause itself originated, since for something to cause itself it would have to be both active and passive at once. By using the four causes, it is possible to explain how a creature can act without technically moving itself. The soul is the efficient cause of the bodily movement, and something external is the final cause of the soul's movement.<sup>168</sup>

Modern action theorists operate with a very different understanding of causation. With the arrival of Newtonian science in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was believed that everything could be adequately explained using atomism and efficient causation. The other three causes – final, formal and material – were rejected as superfluous. By the time Hume came to his famous discussion of causation as constant conjunction, Aquinas's definition of causation had been replaced by something very different: 'We may define a cause to be an object, followed by another, and where all objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second'.<sup>169</sup> This is a purely efficient-causal understanding of causation, and it is this model that most standard theorists use when constructing their action theory. This is explicit in Davidson's essay 'Causal Relations' and evident elsewhere.<sup>170</sup> However, despite the fact that it originated within the context of Aristotle's four causes, the idea that nothing can cause itself is kept. The retention of this view, along with rejection of all but efficient causation, has significant consequences for action theory.

Without final causation, there is no way to effectively explain how an intention may cause an action without being external to it. With final causation, an intention can cause an action without being a separate event. In his discussion of intention, Aquinas argues that an end and the subsequent intention to enact the means to that end come under the same movement of the will:

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<sup>168</sup> Juarrero, pp. 17-19. Juarrero's book is in two parts; the first identifies the problems with action theory and its roots in the loss of the four-cause model. The second develops a new action theory which draws on theories in thermodynamics. I am not investigating this possibility because I am advocating returning to previous action theories like Aquinas's.

<sup>169</sup> David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. by Peter Harold Nidditch (Oxford: OUP, 1975), p. 76.

<sup>170</sup> Donald Davidson, 'Causal Relations' in *Essays on Actions and Events*, ed. by Donald Davidson (Clarendon: Oxford, 2001), pp. 149-162 (pp. 149-150).

For when I say: I wish to take medicine for the sake of health, I signify no more than one movement of my will. And this is because the end is the reason for willing the means. Now the object, and that by reason of which it is an object, come under the same act.<sup>171</sup>

Here he establishes that desire for a goal (or final cause) and intention to achieve that goal are effectively the same act of will. Later, he describes two parts of an action; the physical event, and the intention: 'Now, in a voluntary action, there is a twofold action, viz., the interior action of the will, and the external action'.<sup>172</sup> So intention is established as part of an act by way of final causation. An efficient cause is always an event in itself, meaning that if intention is understood as an efficient cause it cannot be the same event as the act. Final causes are not necessarily events, which means that intention understood as final cause can be a component part of an action, internal to it.

I think that the loss of the four-cause understanding of causation is why thinkers like Anscombe and Frankfurt struggle to refute the standard model of action. I think that their action theories are clear attempts to use final causation in action. Anscombe's linking of intention to the reason for the act and Frankfurt's discussion of an act being under the guidance of the agent both employ the idea that a goal (and the agent's desire to achieve that goal) are central to action. However, both are hamstrung by the context; a solely efficient-causal model of causation. It is this that leads Frankfurt to claim that an action need not necessarily have 'a cause or causes at all'.<sup>173</sup> Similarly, Anscombe explicitly rejects mental causes as qualifiers for action, despite the fact that her account relies entirely on mental (final) causes. Rather than offering a non-causal model of action, Anscombe and Frankfurt are actually offering a *final*-causal model of action, as opposed to the standard efficient-causal model. I think that their accounts of action (particularly Frankfurt's) are robust; but the language of causation which they use results in

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<sup>171</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae, 13:4.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 1a2ae 18:6.

<sup>173</sup> Frankfurt, p. 42.

confusion and opens the door to criticism. At the beginning of my discussion of action theory, I showed that the connection between action and intention must be of a certain kind. I think that all parties (including Aquinas) believe that the connection is causal. The difference is that for Aquinas, Anscombe and Frankfurt, the causation at work is final, not efficient. Returning final causation to its role in action allows intention to be internal rather than external to the act.

I want to briefly mention a third possibility in action theory, which has an entirely different approach to causation. Agent-causal theories of action do not advocate 'non-causal' (final-causal) theories of action, but still make intention part of the act. This is done by making the agent an 'uncaused cause' of the act.<sup>174</sup> The agent causes the act, but nothing prior to this causes the agent to do so. This theory is popular in libertarian free-will theories, because there is nothing determining the agent's action. Nothing but the agent (including intention) is the cause of the act. This means that intention is 'freed' from its role as the efficient cause of the act. If it is not an efficient cause, then it need not be a separate event and so can be part of the act. I do not wish to investigate agent-causal theory in depth for two reasons. Firstly, I think that Aquinas's action theory is superior, as it includes both final and efficient causes as part of an act. This means that it has more explanatory power – Aquinas is able to include efficient causation in the description of an action while keeping the benefits of a final-causal action theory, whereas the origins of an agent-causal action are more mysterious. Secondly, there are several criticisms of agent-causal theory. In particular, I think it is hard to explain how the act is not simply random, if nothing prior to the agent's act causes his decision. This does not sit well with virtue ethics, which is usually concerned to preserve a clear link between the agent and their action in order to show that each affects the other. It is especially at odds with historicist thought and the focus on community in theological ethics, which says that a person's history and the

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<sup>174</sup> Randolph Clarke, 'Incompatibilist (Nondeterministic) Theories of Free Will', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2012) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/incompatibilism-theories/>> [accessed 20 July 2012] (para. 61 of 87).

community in which they live will shape their actions. I mention it here because one of the theologians I will discuss later uses it in his action theory.

### Restoring Final Causation

It is now clear how Aquinas's position is to be defended. Modern virtue ethicists are unable to describe virtue as a necessary but insufficient part of right action because they rely on the standard model of action, which is based on the exclusively efficient-causal understanding of causation. In order to defend Aquinas, I will first argue that final causation has a legitimate place in causal theory. By doing so, I will establish final-causal models of action as legitimate alternatives to the standard theory. There are two important criticisms of final causation that I want to address. The first is that it allows backwards causation; the second is that it is explanatorily useless. Secondly, I will attack the efficient-causal model of action. I will argue that it is vulnerable to the problem of causal deviance and that theorists who appear to have solved the problem are relying on a hidden use of final causation.

Some critics have argued that final causation cannot be a real example of causation because it relies on backwards causation. Backwards causation takes place when an effect precedes its cause, and is extremely controversial. Although there are some philosophers who defend it, there seem to be several serious problems with the idea, not least that it seems to generate paradoxes.<sup>175</sup> Max Black points out that it seems that it would be possible to intervene after the effect had occurred to prevent the cause.<sup>176</sup> On the face of it, final causation does appear to be advocating backwards causation. Suppose my goal is to reach home by 5pm, to which end I leave work at 4:30. If I say that my reaching home at 5pm is the final cause of my leaving work, then it seems that the effect (my leaving work) has happened before the cause (my reaching home). Aquinas sees all action as done for

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<sup>175</sup> Jan Faye, 'Backward Causation', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2010) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/causation-backwards/>> [accessed 30 April 2012] (paras. 6-23 of 46).

<sup>176</sup> Max Black, 'Why Cannot an Effect Precede Its Cause?', *Analysis*, 16 (1956), 49-58 (p. 54).

the sake of some future good. Does this mean that his account of action requires backwards causation? In order to answer this, I need to distinguish between two types of final causation: telos as a purpose and telos as an end. Telos or final causation as a purpose involves intention; it is the kind of final cause that provides the reason for which something is done. Telos as an end refers to the function of a particular thing – what it is for.<sup>177</sup> The kind of final causation involved in action is telos as a purpose, and I think it is relatively easy to see that it need not entail backwards causation. When we say that a future end motivates action, I think it makes most sense to take this to mean that it is the *anticipation* of the end that is the immediate motivator – and the anticipation is prior to (or alongside) the act. Strictly speaking, it is only this kind of final causation that is needed to defend Aquinas's model of action. However, I want to suggest how final causation as an end may occur without backward causation. Henry Wang says that 'Aristotle's teleology is based on a postulation of God, which as pure actuality constitutes the ultimate end of the cosmos'.<sup>178</sup> Aquinas is clear that the ultimate end of all things is contained within, and is, God. Since God is eternal, he will precede any example of telos as an end, meaning that this kind of final causation does not place the cause before the effect.

Another criticism of final causation is that it is useless since it serves no explanatory function; efficient causes can account for everything. To make this criticism against me would be question-begging; it is exactly my claim that efficient causes *cannot* account for everything – specifically, that they cannot by themselves produce a satisfactory theory of action. In any case, it indicates a misunderstanding of the four-cause model. The concern behind this criticism is that a final-causal explanation will be used to rule out an efficient-causal explanation. The four causes do not compete to provide the single explanation for any particular thing or event. Instead, they are complementary. To provide an explanation in terms of final causation does not rule out an explanation in terms of efficient causation. I do not

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<sup>177</sup> Henry Wang, 'Rethinking the Validity and Significance of Final Causation: From the Aristotelian to the Peircean Teleology', *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 41 (2005), 603-625 (p. 604).

<sup>178</sup> Wang, p. 609.

claim that actions do not have efficient causes, or that apprehending an act's efficient cause will not add to the understanding of the act. Rather, I claim that what makes an event count as an action has to do with its final cause, not its efficient cause. An explanation of something which refers to all four causes will be richer than one relying simply on efficient cause.

I have shown that there is no reason why final causes should be necessarily ruled out from any model of causation. I now hope to go further and show that it is necessary for a coherent understanding of action. I think that the standard efficient-causal model of action falls foul of the problem of causal deviance. This is a well-known criticism of the standard model, with several attempts at an answer. I will argue that there are some successful answers, but that those answers are only successful by introducing final causation into their account. A basic summary of the standard theory's position is that an event counts as an action when it is (efficiently) caused by the agent's preceding intention. Causal deviance occurs when the conditions for action are met (the intention causes the event) but it appears that either there is no action or that the action is not intentional. This problem has led to increasingly complicated definitions of action, as defenders of the standard theory try to specify additional conditions for action that will eliminate causal deviance.

There are two types of causal deviance: antecedential deviance and consequential deviance.<sup>179</sup> Antecedential deviance occurs when an intention causes a bodily movement that does not appear to be an action. For example, an actor may intend to appear nervous on stage, but his intention to act causes stage fright, meaning that he appears nervous. Here his intention is the cause of his appearing nervous, but the stage fright is not an action. This is principally a problem for definitions of action *per se*. In the example above the event was caused by the intention, fitting the standard definition, yet the appearance of nervousness is not an action. Consequential deviance occurs when an action does not appear to be

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<sup>179</sup> Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting: Toward a Naturalized Action Theory* (London: The MIT Press, 1984), pp. 17-18.

intentional, despite producing the intended result. Suppose I intend to shoot someone, but aim badly. The bullet ricochets and hits the person I aimed at. Here the result is what I intended, but it does not seem to be an intentional action. Consequential deviance is a problem for definitions of *intentional* action. The shooting of the person qualifies under the standard theory as an intentional action, despite the fact that it does not seem to be properly intentional. I think that Davidson's discussion of antecedential deviance is extremely telling. He concedes that the causal conditions of action cannot be identified: 'we cannot hope to define or analyse freedom to act in terms of concepts that fully identify the causal conditions of intentional action'.<sup>180</sup> However, he insists that it is still possible to say that action has to do with the causal power of the agent. I think that as long as efficient causation is the only type of causation available, Davidson is correct in saying that the causal conditions of action cannot be identified. A final-causal model, however, can provide a comprehensive account and for this reason is superior to the efficient-causal model.

Other action theorists have argued that it is possible to deal with the problem of causal deviance. In his answer to the problem of consequential deviance, Myles Brand argues that in order for an event to qualify as part of an intentional action it must be included in the plan or goal for that action: 'S's Aing during *t* is an intentional action *iff...* S has an action plan *P* to *A* during *t* such that his Aing is included in *P* and he follows *P* in Aing'.<sup>181</sup> Here Brand eliminates the problem of consequential deviance. My shooting a man via a ricochet does not count as an intentional action because the bullet ricocheting was not included in my action plan. Berent Engç has a similar answer to the problem of antecedential deviance: 'The behavioural output of an organism is an intentional action *A* if it is caused in the way it is supposed to be caused by an intention to do *A*'.<sup>182</sup> According to Engç, an event is caused in the way it is supposed to be caused only if any

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<sup>180</sup> Donald Davidson, 'Freedom to Act', in *Essays on Actions and Events*, ed. by Donald Davidson (Clarendon: Oxford, 2001), pp. 63-81 (p. 81).

<sup>181</sup> Brand, p. 25.

<sup>182</sup> Engç, p. 112.

intermediate link in the causal chain is explained by the fact that it causes that event. Returning to the example of the nervous actor, his appearing nervous will not qualify as action under Enç's definition because the intermediate stage between his intention and the event (the actual nervousness) is not explained by the fact that it causes the appearance of nervousness. I think that both of these answers are effective. However, a closer look at the additional conditions will reveal why. Both are relying on final causation. According to Brand, an event must follow a plan to be an action; according to Enç, the links in the causal chain that lead to an act must be aimed at producing the final act. Both are introducing the idea of purposiveness into their theories of action. This has the effect of solving the problem of causal deviance at the cost of the exclusively efficient-causal definition of action. More importantly, the purposive or final-causal nature of the event is what qualifies an event as an action.

I think that Brand and Enç are inadvertently shifting to a position that shares the same basis as Anscombe and Frankfurt. Both struggle with fully recognising the role that final causation plays in their thought. Anscombe and Frankfurt understand that the purposiveness of action is distinct from its efficient cause, but do not realise that it can be assigned a truly causal role. Brand and Enç recognise that purposiveness can be a cause, but believe that it is an efficient cause when in fact it is a final cause. Their theories show that they are unable to explain action using only efficient causation. They end up extending intention beyond the role it has as an efficient cause and using it as a guide for other parts of the act. A model of action that refers to both efficient and final causation will be the most effective. This is exactly what Aquinas has. He is perfectly aware of the role final causation plays in action. By constructing an action theory which recognises intention via final causation as the qualifier of action without excluding efficient causation, he is able to give intention a role throughout the act. It is now possible to return to the question with which I began – how to describe right action in terms of virtue. Aquinas is able to do this by arguing that virtue is a necessary but insufficient part of right action. Virtue (as intention) is one of several components of

action. Intention can be a cause of action while remaining part of the act because it is an example of final causation.

I began this section by explaining how Aquinas's model of action leads to a very different explanation of right action to those offered by contemporary virtue ethicists. His description of good action as having several component parts, and the identification of virtue with one of those parts, means that virtue can be a necessary but insufficient part of right action. I explained that this answer is not available to modern virtue ethicists because of the standard model of action and its separation of intention and act. I looked at the standard theory and its opponents and argued that a return to the four-cause model of causation, and especially final causation, would produce a more coherent action theory. I defended final causation and showed that as far as standard theorists have successfully responded to the problem of causal deviance, they have relied on final causation. It is legitimate to introduce final causation into action theory, meaning that Aquinas's answer to the problem of right action stands. In the next section I want to look at two contemporary theological virtue ethicists – Hauerwas and MacIntyre. I will investigate their theory of right action, and whether it is compatible with Aquinas's. I intend to show that both can use Aquinas's theory of right action with some adaptation.

### Section 3: Theological Virtue Ethics and Right Action

I have shown that Aquinas's theory of action provides an easy way for virtue ethicists to explain right action. By accepting a model of causation that includes final causation, it can be seen that an act has more than one component. This enables the virtue ethicist to say that virtue is a necessary but insufficient condition for right action. Secular virtue ethicists have not used this answer, and I suspect that this is because they either assume or are committed to a modern understanding of causation that is exclusively efficient-causal. Although I am not

particularly concerned to investigate individual philosophers to establish whether or not this is the case, it does raise the question of whether theological virtue ethicists are in a similar position. In this section, I want to look at two such thinkers; Hauerwas and MacIntyre. I will argue that both are affected by a modern understanding of causation. I think that this has more of a constraining effect on Hauerwas, leading him to an agent-causal theory of action. I think that his work could be easily adapted to make use of Aquinas's action theory and hence use my definition of right action. MacIntyre's view is very similar to my own, although it could do with some clarification. Having shown that both of these thinkers can use my definition of right action, I will attempt to provide an alternative account for those who are unhappy with my rejection of the standard model of action. I will return to Swanton's target-based definition and use Aquinas's version of *eudaimonia* to refute the charges of circularity. Finally, I will argue that although it is a viable alternative, Swanton's view has no real benefits over my own since it also relies on final causation.

### MacIntyre's Action Theory

MacIntyre discusses the topic of action and causality in his article 'The Antecedents of Action'. He expresses a view close to mine, although he is still partly influenced by a purely efficient-causal understanding of causation. He does not produce a complete account of the relationship between action and causality in the article. Instead, his goal is to demonstrate that the rival explanations of action available are all flawed, largely because they insist that action must be entirely causal (in an efficient-causal sense) or entirely non-causal. Instead of either of these options, he calls for 'a much fuller characterization of the concept of the human person in which the role of both causes on the one hand and of motives, reasons and intentions on the other will become clear'.<sup>183</sup> Here is a strong suggestion that MacIntyre would

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<sup>183</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, 'The Antecedents of Action', in *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, ed. by Alasdair MacIntyre (London: Duckworth, 1971), pp. 191-210 (p. 207).

welcome Aquinas's action theory, since Aquinas gives both efficient causation and intention (in the form of final causation) a role in action. MacIntyre describes the kind of action theory he is looking for as partly causal and partly non-causal, whereas I would describe it as partly efficient-causal and partly final-causal.

However, he does not directly endorse such a theory. In a preliminary discussion, he suggests three possible definitions of causation: (1) That a cause is an event which is a necessary and sufficient condition for a later event ('Humean' causation); (2) That a cause is a necessary but not necessarily sufficient condition for a subsequent event; and (3) that a cause is a means of producing another event (compatible with (1) and (2)). This view of causation is broader than modern causal theory – (3) especially seems to have room for a wider understanding of causation. However, it is still some way short of four-cause Aristotelian causation. MacIntyre mentions without challenge the view that 'a cause must, so it is argued, always be a separate event from that which is its effect'.<sup>184</sup> Final, material and formal causes are or need not be such an event, and so MacIntyre seems to have some way to go before reaching a causal theory like Aquinas's.

That MacIntyre would be willing to move in that direction, though, is clear from his distinct unease with both the standard causal and 'non-causal' accounts of action. Against the first, he is clear that action is distinct from bodily movement: 'to speak of human actions is to speak at a different logical level from that at which we speak of bodily movements'.<sup>185</sup> Here MacIntyre sets himself apart from standard theorists like Davidson. MacIntyre is not saying that action cannot involve movement of the body, but that the action-event possesses some quality that makes it distinct from a mere bodily movement. Conversely, the standard theorist views the action-event as essentially the same as a bodily movement and it is only the presence of another event (prior intention) that distinguishes an act from a bodily movement. MacIntyre has taken a position similar to Frankfurt's. He believes (correctly) that the distinction between action and mere bodily movement must be

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<sup>184</sup> MacIntyre, 'The Antecedents of Action', p. 201.

<sup>185</sup> MacIntyre, 'The Antecedents of Action', p. 198.

internal to the event. This distinguishing feature internal to the act is intention, and MacIntyre is very clear about the role that it plays:

Just because the intention resides *in* the action, it comes too close to it to play a causal role; nor could we say what the action was, apart from specifying the intention to at least some degree. An intention, unlike a cause, does not stand in an external, contingent relation to an action.<sup>186</sup>

Despite his insistence that intention is internal to action, MacIntyre is unhappy with 'non-causal' action theorists. He recognises that intention is internal to action, and that this excludes it from playing an (efficient) causal role. However, he does not want to entirely exclude efficient causes from action:

although the notion of bodily movements may be of a different logical order from that of an action, it certainly cannot follow that the word 'cause' is restricted to the stratum to which 'bodily movement' belongs and denied to the stratum to which 'action' belongs.<sup>187</sup>

He is clear that it is intention which distinguishes actions from general events, and that intentions do not function as the efficient causes of actions. 'Human actions are made intelligible by reference to intentions... These do not function as causes'.<sup>188</sup> His complaint regarding 'non-causal' action theory is that it suggests that causation has no role in action. MacIntyre points out that a cause may well be a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for action, and that explanations of action may be given with reference to causation. This is why MacIntyre wants an action-theory with a central, non-causal role for intention without excluding efficient causation. This is almost exactly the kind of action-theory which Aquinas offers.

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<sup>186</sup> MacIntyre, 'The Antecedents of Action', p. 200.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

MacIntyre's understanding of causation that excludes final causes is the only notable difference between the action theory MacIntyre desires and the action theory which Aquinas offers. I do not think that this causal theory is integral to MacIntyre's position. There are two points which might make this clear. The first is that he is reacting against the dominance of efficient causation in action theory. By using intention in the way he does, he is already making use of final causation in his action theory, but like Anscombe and Frankfurt describes it as 'non-causal'. The second point is that MacIntyre makes substantial use of teleology in his later work, especially in his description of the narrative life.<sup>189</sup> With this in mind, I think it is fair to say that MacIntyre's thought is compatible with final causation. There is no real obstacle to MacIntyre using Aquinas's action theory and hence being able to rely on Aquinas's description of right action.

### Hauerwas's Action Theory

I have shown that MacIntyre is easily able to use Aquinas's action theory. I now want to look at Hauerwas. When it comes to his action theory, Hauerwas is unusually precise. His thought is not as closely related to mine as MacIntyre's, but I will argue that there is sufficient common ground that it is possible for him to use Aquinas's understanding of right action. At the level of right action, Hauerwas explicitly agrees with Aquinas. He clearly agrees that a good act consists of several good parts. This is also partially played out at the level of action theory; like Anscombe, Frankfurt and MacIntyre, Hauerwas sees intention as an integral part of the act. 'Action is not called intentional in this sense as a way of indicating some extra feature that exists when it is performed, but as a way of indicating what makes it action at all'.<sup>190</sup> He also says that 'action as I have analyzed it seems to be irreducibly a teleological concept'.<sup>191</sup> All the groundwork necessary for a component theory of action involving both final and efficient causation is here, but this is not

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<sup>189</sup> MacIntyre, pp. 200-201.

<sup>190</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, p. 97.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

the route that Hauerwas takes. Instead, he argues for an agent-causal action theory; one in which the agent is an uncaused power.

On the basis of the argument being put forth here, there cannot be any event, process or state not identical with myself as agent which can be the real cause of my act... there is a sense in which I am an uncaused power since no other event is necessary to explain my act other than that I as an agent did it.<sup>192</sup>

Saying that each action has no cause beyond the agent is another way to solve the problem of how to make intention an essential part of the act, rather than a separate efficient cause. My solution is to argue that more than one kind of causation can apply to action. Hauerwas's is to say that there is no external cause of action at all (that is, the agent causes the event but in doing so they themselves are entirely uncaused). This means that intention cannot play the role of an external efficient cause. However, intention does cause action in the sense that the intentions are embodied by the agent, who causes the action. To illustrate the differences between the two theories, take this example. Suppose I become hungry and eat an apple. I would describe the act of eating as being formed by two causes: an efficient cause (in this case hunger pangs) and a final cause (my goal is to satisfy my hunger). It is the final cause which contains my intention and which serves to distinguish my action from a mere happening. Hauerwas would describe my decision to eat, and hence my act of eating, as a spontaneous uncaused act of agency:

cause can be, and indeed is derived, from men's ability to act and change their environment in a spontaneous fashion. (Spontaneous in the sense that

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

the action is not dependent upon anything further than that this man decided to do it).<sup>193</sup>

My prior hunger may play a part in my decision, but it does not determine that I eat. My intention is part of my uncaused decision to eat and so a necessary part of the act. I think it is clear that intention is playing the role of a final cause, especially given that Hauerwas describes his theory as teleological. However, he continues to describe the act as uncaused (or rather, only caused by the agent).

It may seem curious that Hauerwas adopts this action theory. He is insistent on the importance of communal history and narrative in shaping our character and therefore our actions. This seems at odds with an action theory which says that the agent's action is not causally dependent upon anything other than the agent's decision. My objection to agent-causal theory in Section 2 was that it makes the act seem apparently random and so unconnected to the agent. This seems to exacerbate the problem. How can a thinker so committed to the role history plays in shaping action adopt an agent-causal action theory? In fact, Hauerwas is an agent-causal theorist precisely because he thinks that it *increases* the agent's connection to the action. He thinks that making the agent the sole cause of the act allows the cause to be intentional, while also making intention internal to the act – in one example, he says that 'walking is at once an action and an end'.<sup>194</sup> He also thinks that the action will still be affected by society and history. He says that an agent can only intend to do actions which they can describe to themselves or make sense of, and that I will only be able to make sense of those actions which are comprehensible within my social framework. I think Hauerwas does manage to show how a commitment to narrative and an agent-causal theory of action can be held together. I am not so sure that he is able to deal with the problem of apparent randomness in action. It seems that either social factors will influence the agent enough to constitute a sufficient explanation for her action, or that they will not. If

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<sup>193</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, p. 88.

<sup>194</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, p. 95.

the former, then the action seems to be caused by something beyond the agent and agent causation is lost. If the latter, then there is still something unexplained and so apparently random in the agent's acting – of all the actions available to me within my social context, why did I choose one rather than another?

I am not completely convinced by Hauerwas's action theory, but when it comes to explain right action I do not think that this is a significant problem. For one thing, although we are at odds I think that Hauerwas could easily adapt to use my action theory. His acceptance of Aquinas's theory of good action and his insistence that intention is necessary for action put him in a good position. As I say above, all the tools needed for a component theory of action are present. I think that Hauerwas recognises that a solely efficient-causal model of action is problematic. Because he is partially constrained by the solely efficient-causal model of causation, he attempts to deal with this by removing efficient causes entirely from action. There are signs that he would be open to changing this position. He is clearly open to the use of teleology in action theory. More importantly, in the preface to a later edition of *Character and the Christian Life* he also says that he was 'insufficiently critical of some of the presuppositions involved in the theory of action'.<sup>195</sup> I think that these observations are enough to suggest that Hauerwas's action theory could be amended to a component theory without doing damage to his thought. However, he does advocate the agent-causal theory, which is incompatible with my view. Although I do not think that this is particularly central to his ethics, my goal is to defend theological virtue ethicists as they are, rather than force them into a particular mould. To this end, I will return to Swanton's target-based view of right action to show how an alternative model of right action might be constructed.

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<sup>195</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, p. xxii.

## A Return to Target-based Right Action

In my discussion above of the various attempted answers to the problem of right action, I said that Swanton's target-based view was the most effective. I think that Aquinas can provide the resources to deal with the problem of circularity. I will show that the criticisms of this view can be answered, but that it does not have any real advantages over my own. In my original discussion of Swanton's target-based view, Das argues that Swanton's account is circular, because the idea of a target relies on *eudaimonia* which itself relies on a concept of right action.<sup>196</sup> I am not sure that Das is entirely correct in his analysis of *eudaimonia*. Although the learning and practice of the virtues does involve right action, *eudaimonia* is essentially a description of the highest good for man.<sup>197</sup> The question is whether the highest good is itself defined in terms of right action, and I think it is far from clear that it is. Aristotle and Aquinas both agree that the highest good is contemplation.<sup>198</sup> This is clearest in Aquinas, since he says that there are two ends for man – an imperfect one in this life and a perfect one in eternity. Aquinas's contemplative person can continue to exist in *beatitudo* uninterruptedly. True happiness, *beatitudo*, is the vision of the divine essence.<sup>199</sup> This vision is in some sense active; Aquinas calls it intellectual activity. I do not think that it is active in the sense that Das needs for his charge of circularity to work. This description of *beatitudo* does not involve 'an evaluative claim with respect to certain acts'.<sup>200</sup> Das correctly recognises that any account of how to reach *eudaimonia* will involve such an evaluative claim, but it is not the process by which *eudaimonia* is gained but *eudaimonia* itself which the target of a virtue relies on. Aquinas's *beatitudo* in particular does not involve this. An investigation of what exactly *eudaimonia* involves frees Swanton from the charge of circularity because it does not contain a concept of right action.

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<sup>196</sup> Das, pp. 334-337.

<sup>197</sup> Aristotle, 1097b 15-25.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 1177a 15-30.

<sup>199</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 3:3.

<sup>200</sup> Das, p. 332.

I think that Aquinas can provide answers to the problems with Swanton's theory. On the face of it, Swanton's target-based view is preferable to my own, since it does not necessarily involve commitment to a particular action theory. It looks as though it would be suitable for use by virtue ethicists who want to use the standard efficient-causal theory, or Hauerwas's agent-causal theory. I think that a closer analysis shows that although viable, Swanton's answer does not offer anything over mine, and is in fact not compatible with standard action theory. This is because Swanton's view also uses final causation as part of an act. The first thing to note is that Swanton's entire theory uses teleological language. The terms 'target', 'aim' and 'goal', all of which are central to the theory of right action, are inherently teleological. The fact that she uses teleological language is not in itself enough to show that final causation is part of her action theory. What is needed is for the final cause to be at least part of the *criteria* for action – that is, something is not an act if it does not have a final cause. Although Swanton does not discuss action theory explicitly, there is ample evidence that final causes are indeed part of her criteria for action. Her discussion of a virtue makes clear that virtues have particular aims, or targets. An act motivated by virtue will therefore have these particular goals. Virtuous acts are virtuous *because* they have a virtuous goal rather than a non-virtuous goal. The implication is that non-virtuous acts are non-virtuous because of their particular goals. It is the target – the final cause – of a particular act which determines what kind of act it is. If final causes were not a necessary part of action, they could not play this role. The focus on the target of a virtue means that the theory must advocate final causation to work. This means that Swanton's view is not compatible with the standard model of action, because that theory excludes final causes from action. It is, however, compatible with Hauerwas's agent-causal model (which excludes efficient causes from action). I have said that I think there are some potentially serious problems with agent-causal theory, and that I am not convinced that Hauerwas can answer them. I also think that Aquinas's account of right action is superior because it offers a full understanding of how different parts of an act contribute to its moral status, as well

as explaining the causal underpinnings of action. Considered simply as an alternative answer to the problem of right action, however, I think Swanton's response is effective. For theological virtue ethicists who for whatever reason do not wish to make use of Aquinas's action theory, a target-based account of right action may be a viable alternative.

## Conclusion

I began by looking at the criticism that virtue ethics cannot explain right action. I briefly explained three different responses to the problem. Although Hursthouse and Swanton's answers are promising, they are subject to some criticism. I then showed that Aquinas's theory of action provides a simple answer; virtue is a necessary but insufficient part of right action. This is not used elsewhere because Aquinas's action theory is very different to contemporary accounts. Aquinas's action theory includes intention as part of the act, as well as the physical event. I argued that this relies on a four-cause model of causation, rather than the modern single-cause view. The pervasiveness of the single-cause view is why modern action theories similar to Aquinas's struggle or are unclear in parts. I defended final causation from problems such as backward causation in order to show that Aquinas's action theory is a legitimate alternative to the standard model. This means that his answer to the problem of right action can be used. In this last section I have looked at two theological virtue ethicists to see whether they can use my answer. MacIntyre's theory is very similar to mine, although I think he could be clearer about final causation. Hauerwas's position also shares some common ground, although he turns to agent causation as a way to make intention central to the act. Although I think Hauerwas could use my position, I suggest that Aquinas offers insights that solve some problems with Swanton's target-based model of right action. This provides an answer compatible with agent-causation, for those

committed to it. However, since it is not compatible with a single-cause model of causation I do not see the advantage of this position.

I have shown that theological virtue ethics has the resources to provide a compelling account of right action. It does require acceptance of non-standard accounts of action and causation, but given prior commitments I think this is unlikely to be a problem for theologians in the same way that it might be for secular virtue ethicists. Aquinas's virtue ethics can successfully provide an account of right action.

## Chapter 4

### Situations, Virtue and Christ

So far in this thesis, I have been looking at problems internal to virtue ethics – criticisms which claim it is incomplete or incoherent. The last of these internal problems stems from developments in moral psychology and the study of human behaviour. In this chapter I consider the claims of situationism. This is the view that there is no such thing as ‘character’ in the virtue ethical sense, and that human behaviour is principally guided by situations rather than personality. I will begin with an examination of the importance of character to virtue ethics, looking at Aristotle and Hauerwas to show how character features both in a standard virtue ethical system as the bearer of the virtues and in a more explicitly theological one as the focal point of narrative and sanctification. I then turn to situationism, looking at three important experiments which are taken to demonstrate the truth of the situationist thesis – The Milgram experiment, the Good Samaritan experiment and the Cheating experiment. After looking at different ways situationists interpret the available data, I consider several virtue ethical responses. Some – such as the claim that virtue is not represented in the experiments because of its rarity – do not eliminate the situationist challenge. I argue that the most plausible position is the ‘integrationist’ attempt to unify the claims of virtue ethics with the experimental data and show that this is best achieved by using precise and non-general virtue terms. I look at Aquinas’s account of the way lesser virtues contribute to greater ones to show that theological virtue ethics is well placed to adopt the integrationist position. Finally, I look back at discussion of the virtuous exemplar in Chapter 2 and argue that situationism strengthens the position of theological virtue ethics by increasing the need for an infallible exemplar.

## Section 1: Virtue Ethics and the Importance of Character

Before examining the claims of situationism directly, I am going to explore the role of character in virtue ethics. I touched on the importance of character in my introduction to virtue ethics in Chapter 1 and in discussing the differences between virtue ethics and other normative theories in Chapter 2. It is worth going a little deeper here, because showing precisely how character features in a typical virtue ethical system will make it clear just how serious the situationist attack is when I turn to it in Section 3.

Because discussion of situationism will be confined to later sections, I do not aim in this section to argue either for or against the idea of character, but simply to show how useful it is in virtue ethical thought. This will include an account of how character is formed, how it is connected to the possession of the virtues, and the relationship between character and action. I will also show its further importance to theological ethics by looking at Hauerwas's work on freedom, sin, Christ and sanctification. In all of these areas of Hauerwas's thought, character plays an important or central role.

### The Necessity of Character for Virtue Ethics

I have already shown that character plays much more of a role in virtue ethics than it does in other moral systems. Virtue ethics is agent-focused rather than action-focused.<sup>201</sup> This means that moral thought and evaluation primarily consider the agent – although as I showed in Chapter 2, action is not excluded from virtue ethical thought precisely because it has a significant impact on the agent. In what follows, I will show how character has been used in virtue ethics and why it is so important. I will focus on Aristotle here, as although they may have a different

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<sup>201</sup> Slote, pp. 4-5.

context the structure of Aquinas's account of character is very similar to Aristotle's.<sup>202</sup>

A large part of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is dedicated to the exact nature of the virtues. Before looking at some specific examples, Aristotle provides a more general analysis of precisely what virtue is and how it operates. In his opening discussion of the good life, he concludes that it is 'activity of the soul in accordance with virtue'.<sup>203</sup> His next step in understanding the operation of virtue is therefore to investigate the activity of the soul. He says that the soul is torn between two forces, reason and desire, although desire can listen to reason.<sup>204</sup> In a self-controlled person, desire obeys reason, and in a virtuous person the two are in harmony. This is because a truly virtuous person *wants* to act virtuously, rather than simply making themselves do so.

Virtue is an activity of the soul, and the soul is in two parts. Hence there are two categories of virtue corresponding to the two parts of the soul. The first is intellectual virtues, which are concerned with the rational part of the soul. These include things like judgement, intelligence and wisdom, as well as scientific knowledge. The virtues of the desiring part of the soul are virtues of character, and these are the moral virtues:

Some virtues are called intellectual, and others moral; wisdom and understanding and prudence are intellectual, liberality and temperance are moral virtues. When we are speaking of a man's *character* we do not describe him as wise or understanding, but as patient or temperate.<sup>205</sup>

This shows why character is so important for virtue ethicists: the moral virtues are virtues of character. Having a good character is necessary to be moral. Our character is formed by what virtues (or vices) we possess. This helps to explain

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<sup>202</sup> McInerny, p. 91.

<sup>203</sup> Aristotle, 1098a 15-20.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 1102a 25 - 1103a 10.

<sup>205</sup> Aristotle, 1103a 5-10.

why Aristotle classifies traits such as wittiness as virtue, even though they may not seem morally relevant. They are listed because Aristotle considers them traits that contribute to human flourishing and that are connected to the desiring or affective part of the soul.

Having distinguished the two types of virtue, Aristotle looks in detail at the virtues of character. The moral virtues are not gained by teaching (this is how we acquire the intellectual virtues). Nor are they natural, since if they were part of our nature they could not be changed. Instead, he concludes that the moral virtues are products of *habituation*. In order to develop a virtuous character, I must practice behaving in a virtuous manner. Our actions over time will form our character, which will in turn form our actions. The earliest habits we form can make 'all the difference in the world'.<sup>206</sup> This is why virtue ethics (and theological virtue ethics in particular) places so much importance on the ideas of history and narrative. It is our history (the things we do and the things which happen to us) which forms our character and hence forms our future actions. Note that the fact that moral virtues are not taught does not mean that there is no room for the virtuous exemplar discussed in Chapter 2. Learning from others is still important because a more virtuous person may show what virtues we ought to have or how we should exhibit them. I will return to this in the last two sections, where I will discuss the impact situationism has on the idea of the virtuous exemplar. Whether guided by an exemplar or not, though, the only way to actually acquire virtues is by habit. Aristotle has now shown what he thinks the moral virtues belong to (our character) and how our virtues or vices and hence our characters are formed (by habit). Next he looks at what a moral virtue actually is.

Aristotle has said that virtue has to do with the soul. Whatever is in the soul must be one of three things – a feeling, a capacity, or a disposition/state.<sup>207</sup> He argues that virtue cannot be a feeling, since we are praised or blamed for our virtues, but not our feelings. We also have a hand in what virtues we possess, but

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<sup>206</sup> Aristotle, 1103b 25.

<sup>207</sup> Aristotle, 1105b 20-25.

we cannot help our feelings. Nor is virtue a capacity, since these can be possessed by nature – and he has already argued that virtues cannot be gained in this way.<sup>208</sup> Virtues of character are dispositions: 'If the virtues are neither feelings nor faculties, it remains that they are dispositions'.<sup>209</sup> If someone has a particular virtue, it means that they will be disposed to behave in the right way in relevant situations. It is now possible to form a clear understanding of the place of character in Aristotle's thought. Our character is the part of the soul which is concerned with the moral virtues. This means that it is constructed by our various dispositions and is formed by habit. A virtue is an excellence of character.<sup>210</sup> Everyone has a character, and we morally evaluate people by looking at their character. In order to be a good person, I must develop my character in the right way.

Virtue ethical thought continues to rely on the idea of character for its development. As well as taking largely the same role that it does in Aristotle's thought, it features in responses to some of the criticisms levelled in this thesis. It plays an important role in Hursthouse's explanation of right action in the previous chapter, where the character of the virtuous exemplar provides the benchmark for right action. A close analysis of the status of character in moral consideration will prove central to the claim that virtue ethics is self-centred, discussed in Chapter 7. Finally, character is needed for a complete virtue ethical account of moral development. This is because if goodness depends on virtue, it seems that a non-virtuous person cannot progress towards *eudaimonia*. How is someone who is not already virtuous supposed to develop virtue? Part of the answer to this relies on the idea of character development or moral education. A good action done from wrong motives is not fully good because it is not virtuous, but it is still important because it educates the person doing it.<sup>211</sup> The more right actions I perform, the more they will become a habit. Eventually, I will develop the virtues necessary to perform the right actions from the right motives and hence progress towards *eudaimonia*. It is

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<sup>208</sup> David Bostock, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 36-38.

<sup>209</sup> Aristotle, 1106a 10-15

<sup>210</sup> Swanton, 'A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action', p. 38.

<sup>211</sup> Annas, 'Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing', p. 71.

only by using the idea of character development and a unified self that virtue ethics can deal with this problem.

In this section, I gave an overview of the role of character in virtue ethics. My character is the part of me that possesses the moral virtues. It is developed by habitual behaviour and is formed from my various dispositions. Character is useful in explaining how virtue and action are connected and how they are to be evaluated. I have shown how central character is to virtue ethics in general. This is important to my later discussion, as it shows how serious criticisms of the idea of character are for virtue ethics. The next section shows that the stakes are even higher. In what follows, I will look at some of Hauerwas's work to show that as well as continuing to use character in the ways discussed above, theological ethics relies on the idea of character in discussions of sin and sanctification.

## Section 2: Christian Character and Hauerwas

In this section, I aim to show how character has additional importance for theological virtue ethics. Although I touch on other thinkers, I focus on Hauerwas because character is a central theme in both his ethical and doctrinal thought. This makes it easy to see how ideas shared with secular virtue ethics extend into other areas of theological thought. I aim to set out Hauerwas's views in a more structured and analytic way than he does himself. This will help to make clear why he (and theological virtue ethics in general) is vulnerable to criticisms from an analytic approach to secular virtue ethics, as well as how best to respond.

Hauerwas shows that theological virtue ethics has an even stronger commitment to the idea of character than secular virtue ethics. I will look at his idea that character and narrative are the basis of freedom and how he relates character to sanctification. My aim here is to show that theological virtue ethics cannot do without the idea of character and so must respond to the situationist challenge.

## Character, Freedom and Narrative

Hauerwas is critical of the understanding of character and the self that is accepted by other moral theories. These theories treat the self as separate from the actions that it initiates. On this understanding, my objectivity and ability to make moral decisions remain unaffected by my actions. The relationship between agent and action is similar to the relationship between cause and effect.<sup>212</sup> As I showed in Chapter 2, Hauerwas thinks that the self and action are intrinsically connected, and a complete ethics will take account of both. Character, in the form of virtues and vices, affects our behaviour by disposing us towards a particular course of action. Conversely, our actions are precisely what form and reinforce our habits and so our character. This means that an understanding of our character will be impossible without an understanding of our history and especially our past actions. The understanding of self which Hauerwas is attacking lacks historical continuity. On this understanding, I approach all my decisions from the same unaltered viewpoint, regardless of what I have done previously. The idea that the things I do have no effect on me seems implausible, and Hauerwas's definition of character reflects this: 'the qualification of a man's self-agency through his beliefs, intentions, and actions, by which a man acquires a moral history befitting his nature as a self-determining being'.<sup>213</sup>

Hauerwas's position has a serious problem which he sets out to answer. If he is right that my character is formed by my history, how can I be free? Although my actions are an important factor, there are significant parts of my history which were beyond my control: 'It remains difficult to maintain that... there is a fundamental distinction between what happens to us and what we do'.<sup>214</sup> I do not control or foresee all the consequences of my actions, and my beliefs (especially in childhood) are likely to be affected by the views of those around me. Significant

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<sup>212</sup> Emmanuel Kantongole, *Beyond Universal Reason: The Relation between Religion and Ethics in the Work of Stanley Hauerwas* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) pp. 34-35.

<sup>213</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, p. 11.

<sup>214</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 41.

character-shaping events may occur by chance – for example, if a loved one were to die in an accident. If all of these things which are beyond my control shape my character, and in turn my future actions, how are those actions free? What I do seems to be determined by my past. To answer this, Hauerwas departs from definitions of freedom that focus on having choice in acting. He argues that I am free to the extent that I am able to ‘claim’ my actions and my history and fit them into my story, or narrative.<sup>215</sup> By fitting an action into my story, I make it *my* action, rather than a simple event. If an action is mine in this way, it is a free action. This means that character is necessary for freedom, as it is what enables me to make an action part of myself.

Hauerwas is not alone among theological virtue ethicists in denying that what matters for freedom is variety of choice. Oliver O’Donovan argues that freedom consists in acting in accordance with reality – by which he means the good for humans as revealed and determined by God: ‘freedom is the character of one who participates in the order of creation by knowledge and action... Nothing could be more misleading than the popular philosophy that freedom is constituted by absence of limits’.<sup>216</sup> Despite this, O’Donovan thinks that there must be some choice present to make room for freedom. The presence of choices enables, but does not necessitate, free action – because it is entirely possible to choose ‘unfreedom’ by sinning.

This suggests that Hauerwas has not entirely dealt with the problem. He has said that it does not matter that my actions are shaped by history, as long as I am able to make that history my own. Suppose that circumstances make it impossible to participate in the forming of my character and make my own history? In O’Donovan’s terms, it may be that we are in a situation which eliminates choice entirely. Hauerwas’s answer is that although some people may find it harder than others, Christians must believe that God will never allow someone to be wholly incapable of forming their own character: ‘it is the Christian claim that no one is so

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<sup>215</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>216</sup> O’Donovan, p. 107.

completely determined that he or she lacks all means to respond to the story of God'.<sup>217</sup> In fact, seeking God is the only way we can be truly free. This is because we only learn to critically assess and develop our character by comparing ourselves to others, trying to imitate them and seeing their expectations. The presence of others frees us from our focus on ourselves and allows us to see our character in a wider context. In this way, character and narrative are necessarily social. God is a perfect other, and hence by following him we can fully develop our character and so be fully free. Hauerwas thinks that this involves making our stories part of God's story.<sup>218</sup>

Here Hauerwas is dealing with part of the challenge posed by situationism (although he does not see it in that way). Although situationists tend to argue that much smaller factors than a life-changing event shape our behaviour, there is a clear connection. It is the situationist claim that our behaviour is largely due to external influences – situations which we find ourselves in. To an extent, Hauerwas is able to accept this, as long as we can claim our actions. It is clear, though, that he cannot fully accommodate situationism – some level of character and self-formation is vital for freedom. This is one of the areas of theological virtue ethics that situationism will cause problems for when I discuss it later.

## Character and Doctrine

Character is also used by Hauerwas to answer some doctrinal problems. In *Character and the Christian Life*, he sets out to investigate how the Christian moral life is determined by Christ.<sup>219</sup> He aims to show what difference Christ makes in the life of the believer and how that difference comes about. To do this, he looks at the doctrine of sanctification. This is the doctrine that the work of Christ results in a renewal and setting right of the believer's being, enabling them to live and behave differently. Hauerwas begins by noting a tension between two points that are

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<sup>217</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 44.

<sup>218</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, pp. 44-46.

<sup>219</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and The Christian Life*, p. 181.

important to this doctrine. The first is that Christ must be the focus of Christian life. It is not possible to live well by following rules or exhibiting virtues defined without reference to him. Good actions alone are insufficient. The second point is that Christian belief must result in a real, behavioural change in the believer. The first point suggests that good actions are not truly important – they are not enough for the Christian life. The second suggests that a behavioural change (and so good actions) is very important for the Christian life. Hauerwas thinks that the idea of character can deal with the problem posed by this tension.

Hauerwas connects this problem to the relationship between the doctrines of justification and sanctification. These are 'but two modes of the one work of Christ for the believer'.<sup>220</sup> One does not happen without the other. Justification is by faith; good works are neither necessary nor sufficient to be made right before God. Why, then, is the Christian sanctified in order to do good works? On one hand, good works do not seem to play a part in the work of Christ for the believer. On the other, they are central. Hauerwas looks at the understanding of sanctification in Calvin, Wesley and Edwards. He argues that although each is different, they share common themes which point to a character-based understanding of sanctification. He thinks that this enables him to explain the work of Christ for the believer 'without necessarily destroying the tension between the "already but not yet" quality of the Christian life'.<sup>221</sup> All three thinkers emphasise the 'person' as the central element in the change wrought by sanctification. This is because it is not enough for sanctification to perform certain acts – how those acts are done matters.<sup>222</sup> As with the broader understanding of morality discussed in Chapter 2, the intentions and beliefs behind actions must be taken into account. Sanctification involves a general orientation and is inward as well as outward.

Hauerwas thinks that these common points indicate that sanctification should be understood as a character change:

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<sup>220</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and The Christian Life*, p. 186.

<sup>221</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and The Christian Life*, p. 183.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

To be sanctified is to have our character determined by our basic commitments and beliefs about God... Christian character is the formation of our affections and actions according to the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith and life.<sup>223</sup>

Since character shapes our actions, sanctification will result in good works – which will be signs that sanctification has occurred. These good works are meaningless unless they result from a sanctified character. Saying that sanctification is about character change solves the problem of relating the doctrines of justification and sanctification. Regarding the doctrine of justification, Hauerwas thinks that good works are neither sufficient nor necessary. This remains the case with the doctrine of sanctification – what is needed is character change. Good works will be the outward sign of character change, and so they are important only as they point to a sanctified character.

As with his conception of freedom, Hauerwas is not alone here. Beginning from Hauerwas's work, Joseph J. Kotva looks at Reformed, Baptist and Anglican accounts of sanctification and argues that although different, they share certain key points which suggest that all of them sit well with virtue ethics. Among these points is the claim that sanctification involves 'transformation of the self and development of character traits or virtues'.<sup>224</sup>

The character-based model of sanctification has other benefits. Firstly, it makes it easier to avoid the suggestion that Christianity simply involves an adherence to external rules. An act-based understanding of sanctification runs this risk. The character-based model is also helpful for understanding Christian growth and progress, which Hauerwas says involves the continued narrative formation of character. By understanding Christian growth as narrative, it helps to explain why the Christian life must involve progress. It is not because Christ's work is incomplete, but because the stories of those being sanctified are not yet finished.

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 203

<sup>224</sup> Joseph J. Kotva, Jr., p. 73.

One criticism of this model is that since everyone's character and narrative are different, the Christian life 'is what every believer wants to make it'.<sup>225</sup> Hauerwas avoids this by emphasising that although every character is different, each one must be focused on and directed by Christ in order to be a Christian character.

In *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Hauerwas provides a brief analysis of the relationship between sin and character. He argues that sin should be understood as the attempt to fully create and possess our character.<sup>226</sup> This is related to his view that in order for a good character to develop, it must be social – formed by others, especially God. In order to avoid sin, we must receive our self from God, rather than trying to take control ourselves.

In this section, I have shown how work in theological virtue ethics has an even deeper commitment to the idea of character than standard virtue ethics. Hauerwas makes character necessary for freedom and narrative. He also uses it to aid understanding of the relationship between the doctrines of justification and sanctification, as well as the nature of Christian growth and sin. Without the idea of character, virtue ethics and theological virtue ethics in particular will be severely weakened. In the next section, I will look at the situationist attack on character.

### Section 3: The Challenge of Situationism

I have already mentioned the importance of Anscombe's influential article 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. At the very beginning of the article, Anscombe says that 'it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy... until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology'.<sup>227</sup> That is, the turn to virtue would be useless without an understanding of what role virtue plays in our nature and how it relates to our actions. Anscombe's proposed turn to virtue has occurred, but it is the claim of situationists that it has not been accompanied by an accurate moral psychology. They believe that the makings of such a psychology are available, but that the

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<sup>225</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and The Christian Life*, p. 212.

<sup>226</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, pp. 46-49.

<sup>227</sup> Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', p. 1.

evidence shows it to be seriously at odds with virtue ethics in its current form.

Situationism claims that character as conceived by virtue ethicists simply does not exist – it is not an accurate account of human nature.

Following this claim, situationists advocate different courses of action.

Gilbert Harman argues that all ethics of character are dangerous and should be avoided.<sup>228</sup> John Doris says that although there may be a role for talk of virtue, the focus of moral effort and education should be on situations rather than character.<sup>229</sup>

Owen Flanagan argues that the apparent conflict between virtue ethics and situationism is due to differences in language.<sup>230</sup> In this section I will examine their arguments and the consequences for virtue ethics. I will describe the situationist position, looking at the evidence used and the problems it causes, before explaining the views of three important situationists. I will begin by giving Doris's summary of situationism. I will then look at three important experiments which situationists refer to and indicate the typical situationist conclusions drawn from them. I shall show what the consequences for an ethics of character are, before looking at each thinker in more depth and discussing the conclusions they draw from the experiments. My critical discussion of situationism is reserved for the following section. Here, I intend to give a picture of the challenges facing virtue ethicists in order to prepare for my later response.

## The Basis of Situationism

Doris gives a very useful summary of situationism's three main theses. These are as follows:

- (i) Behavioural variation across a population owes more to situational differences than dispositional differences among persons. Individual

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<sup>228</sup> Harman, 'Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology', pp. 315-331.

<sup>229</sup> John Michael Doris, 'Persons, Situations and Virtue Ethics', *Nous*, 32 (1998), 504-530.

<sup>230</sup> Flanagan, Owen, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 276-314.

dispositional differences are not as strongly behaviourally individuating as we might have supposed; to a surprising extent we are safest predicting, for a particular situation, that a person will behave pretty much as most others would.

- (ii) Empirical evidence problematises the attribution of robust traits. Whatever behavioural reliability we do observe may be readily short-circuited by situational variation: in a run of trait-relevant situations with diverse features, an individual to whom we have attributed a given trait will often behave inconsistently with regard to the behaviour expected on attribution of that trait. Note that this is not to deny the possibility of temporal stability in behaviour; the situationist acknowledges that individuals may exhibit behavioural regularity over time across a run of substantially similar situations.
- (iii) Personality structure is not typically evaluatively consistent. For a given person, the dispositions operative in one situation may have a very different evaluative status than those manifested in another situation – evaluatively inconsistent dispositions may ‘cohabit’ in a single personality.<sup>231</sup>

So it is situations rather than persons which chiefly guide behaviour (i); the power of situations to guide behaviour is such that character traits are not apparent across situations (ii); and because they are so affected by situations, people do not behave in a way that allows easy evaluation of character (iii). Note that the situation which situationists believe has such an impact on behaviour is subjective. It is the perceived situation – the situation I think I am in – rather than the actual situation which matters: ‘subjects in the same situation, objectively speaking, are not in the same situation on the situationist understanding, because their subjective

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<sup>231</sup> Doris, ‘Persons, Situations and Virtue Ethics’, p. 507.

construals of the situation may vary'.<sup>232</sup> In what follows, I will take Doris's three theses to be representative of situationism. Before I look in further depth at some situationist thinkers, I will summarise three experiments on which situationists draw.

The first and most famous of the experiments is the Milgram experiment. This experiment was designed to test how obedient people are to authority.<sup>233</sup> The subject was told that they were participating in an experiment to test the effects of punishment on learning and given the role of 'teacher'. They had to read a series of questions to a 'learner' (in fact a confederate) in another room. For each question the 'learner' got wrong, the teacher was told to administer an increasingly severe electric shock, ranging from 15 to 450 volts (no shock was actually administered). After the shock reached a certain level, the confederate would bang on the wall and stop answering the questions. In later experiments, as the intensity of the 'shock' increased the confederate would make noises as though they were in pain. They would ask and then demand to be let out, sounding increasingly panicked. They would eventually fall silent. If the subject asked about the learner or demanded to stop the experiment, the experimenter would say one of four similar statements in sequence, each telling the subject to continue. If the subject continued to express concern or ask to leave after these four statements, they were allowed to leave.

The experimenters expected almost everyone to stop early on in the experiment. In fact, the majority of subjects (about two thirds) went on to administer the full 450 volt shock. There was no significant personality difference between those who administered the full shock and those who did not.<sup>234</sup> Situationists believe that this result demonstrates that a character-based account of behaviour is flawed. This is because such a large number of people administered the full shock. As far as the subjects knew, they were shocking an innocent person to the point of unconsciousness or death. To explain this, it seems that virtue

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<sup>232</sup> Rachana Kamtekar, 'Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character', *Ethics*, 114 (2004), 458-491 (p. 470).

<sup>233</sup> Stanley Milgram, 'Behavioural Study of Obedience', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67 (1963), 371-378.

<sup>234</sup> Flanagan, p. 294.

ethicists must attribute an extremely serious character defect to the majority of the population. Situationists conclude that this is unrealistic, and the results are better explained in terms of the pressures of that particular situation. If this is correct, then the Milgram experiment appears to support the first of Doris's three theses – that situations, rather than persons, guide behaviour.

I will call the second experiment the 'Good Samaritan' experiment. It was designed to test which of three variables might have most impact on a person's behaviour: someone's personality or character; whether or not that person had their mind on religious matters; and whether or not they were in a hurry.<sup>235</sup> The subjects were students at Princeton Theological Seminary. Each was given a questionnaire about their moral and religious views. This was to assess the first variable – personality/character. They were then told they were to give a presentation on one of two subjects: either the parable of the Good Samaritan or career opportunities for graduates. This was to assess the second variable – whether they were thinking of religious matters. Finally, they were told that they were early, late, or just on time to deliver their talk in another building. This was to assess the final variable – whether or not they were in a hurry. On the route to the talk, there was a confederate slumped in a doorway, apparently in need of help. The only variable that affected whether the student stopped or not was how much of a hurry they were in. 63% of those who were early stopped to help, 45% of those who were on time, and 10% of those who were late. The student's answers to the questionnaire and the content of their talk made no difference. Situationists take this to show that situation (being rushed or not) rather than character is the main determinant of behaviour, because it was the only variable that had any impact on whether or not someone stopped to help. If character was more than or even equally as important as the situation in determining behaviour, the results of the personality tests ought to have had similar or greater weight than the situation on whether a subject stopped or not. The fact that the personality tests were not

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<sup>235</sup> C. Daniel Batson and John M. Darley, 'From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behaviour', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27 (1973), 100-108.

helpful in predicting behaviour suggests that character either does not exist or is inconsequential. Like the Milgram experiment, this seems to support the first of Doris's theses. To some extent, it also seems to support the other two theses. If the personality test could not predict behaviour, this suggests that any traits it observed will not be applied consistently (point ii) and this in turn suggests that it will be difficult to consistently evaluate the agent (point iii).

In the final experiment, several thousand children between the ages of eight to sixteen were placed in four different situations, each tempting in a different way.<sup>236</sup> I will call this experiment the 'Cheating' experiment. The first situation gave them the opportunity to cheat on a test. The second gave them a chance to cheat in another way (in athletics, homework or a party game). In the third they had the opportunity to steal money. In the fourth, they had the chance to lie about their conduct in one of the earlier tests. In any one situation, the correlation of behaviour was quite high – most children did the same thing in each test. However, the correlation of behaviour across situations was low, about .2 or .3. This means that a child's giving in to or resisting temptation in one situation gave little indication as to what that particular child would do in the next situation. If a child cheated on an exam, they were likely to do so again – but this fact gave very little indication about whether that child would steal the money. Situationists think that this shows that the virtue ethical understanding of character is mistaken. This is because virtue or character is seen as a disposition and hence should apply across all relevant situations. Whether a child had the virtue of honesty or the vice of dishonesty, a virtue ethical understanding would expect each child to behave in a largely consistent manner in all of the situations. The fact that they did not behave in a consistent way suggests that even if character exists, it is not as the virtue ethicist conceives it. Character traits are not *cross-situational*. The Cheating experiment looks like strong evidence for Doris's second and third theses – any patterns of behaviour are not cross-situational, and so evaluation of the subjects in this experiment looks as though it must be on a case-by case basis.

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<sup>236</sup> Kamtekar, pp. 465-466.

### Three Situationist Positions

These experiments are representative of those used by situationists to support their arguments. However, not all of those arguments are the same. Although there is reason to think that Doris's theses are backed up by the evidence, different situationists seem to draw different conclusions from this. The three thinkers mentioned previously – Harman, Doris and Flanagan – take quite different positions. Of the three, Harman's is the most opposed to virtue ethics. He focuses on a criticism of 'folk morality'. This begins with the point that just like our intuitions about the physical world, our moral intuitions are sometimes shown by experimentation to be inadequate. In particular, he thinks that people tend to make the 'Fundamental Attribution Error'.<sup>237</sup> The Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE) is as follows: when trying to explain a particular action, people will tend to posit a relevant characteristic of the agent and overlook relevant parts of the agent's situation. The action is attributed to a character trait rather than the situation. This is a mistake because experiments like those above show that character traits do not exist.

Harman suggests two psychological reasons why people might commit the FAE. One is a tendency to pay more attention to figure rather than ground – in moral situations, the agent is typically the figure and the situation the ground. Another is confirmation bias – the tendency to look for and accept evidence that supports already held beliefs. Based on the FAE, Harman argues that belief in character is morally dangerous, as it will lead people into situations conducive to immoral behaviour by overreliance on character. This means that virtue ethics, with its reliance on character, should be rejected as well. He does say that a form of virtue ethics which limited itself to assessment of actions only (using virtue terms) would avoid the FAE; but this is at odds with the significant majority of virtue ethics, and in particular the broad understanding of morality discussed in Chapter 2. He also thinks that a better understanding of the FAE will lead to improvements

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<sup>237</sup> Harman, 'Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology', pp. 315-316.

in other areas of moral discourse, both practical and theoretical. It helps to deal with apparent problems of moral luck, which are cases where a bad event is mistakenly connected to the intention of the agent. Moral education will be improved without the idea of building character. Finally, an understanding that it is chiefly situations, not agents, which cause bad actions may increase tolerance and lead to better resolutions of those situations.

Although Doris is not as dismissive of virtue ethics as Harman, he still identifies problems with it. He thinks that the experiments above show that virtue ethics is descriptively inadequate. He highlights two features of Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian psychology that are problematic.<sup>238</sup> The first is that according to Aristotle, virtues and character are robust: they are hard to change, and not vulnerable to situational pressures, with corresponding consequences for action. The second is that as well as being situationally consistent, a good character is seen as evaluatively consistent. If a person possesses one virtue, they are likely to possess others. A character that is a mix of virtues and vices – for example, someone who is honest but cruel – is a flawed character. Doris says that if personality is structured in the way Aristotle thinks it is, people would show behavioural reliability or consistency across situations – and this is exactly what the evidence suggests they do not do. Looking back at the experiments above, the Milgram and Good Samaritan experiments in particular seem to cause problems with the idea of robust, action-guiding traits, while the Cheating experiment suggests that people cannot be evaluated as a whole. Instead, he uses the three situationist theses outlined above as an alternative description of moral psychology.

Although Doris thinks that virtue ethics is descriptively inadequate, he does not think that this shows it is normatively inadequate. It does not properly describe the way I am, but it may still be useful in explaining how I ought to behave. He argues that some useful features of ethical thought associated with virtue ethics, such as thick concepts, are still valid. Although some thick evaluative concepts such as honesty imply an Aristotelian character, others such as liberty do not. Doris

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<sup>238</sup> Doris, 'Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics', pp. 506-507.

recommends constructing a new vocabulary of thick concepts that are more situation-specific. He also thinks that character is not necessary for moral evaluation and attributing responsibility. He points to Kantian models of responsibility and argues that people's situation-specific dispositions can still be evaluated. He argues that character-based ethics causes some moral emotions such as shame to become globalised – people become ashamed of their bad character, rather than a specific area of bad conduct. This can 'poison understandings of self and others'.<sup>239</sup>

Doris concludes that a normative virtue ethic is still viable if it does away with reliance on Aristotelian character and properly accounts for a situationist moral psychology. He suggests a virtue ethic that involves following the advice of a hypothetical virtuous agent, who can take account of situational pressures. I do not think that Doris is fully aware of the consequences for virtue ethics of removing an Aristotelian account of character. In general terms, Doris seems to be moving in the same direction as Harman, towards a 'virtue ethic' which eliminates or reduces the role of the agent and simply relies on virtue terms to guide action. A situationist model of character lacks an account of moral development. This is especially serious for Hauerwas's virtue ethics, as narrative and historical continuity of character will not fit with situationism. According to the situationist, our lives do not form a story, as any perceived consistency will be due to being in the same situation several times. Without narrative and enduring character, Hauerwas's account of freedom will not work. Finally, the efforts Doris makes to preserve a form of virtue ethics is damaging for Hauerwas's work on sin and sanctification, as both involve the shaping of a person over time in a way that situationism does not allow. As I said above, elements of Hauerwas's thought might fit with situationism, since he emphasises the importance of structure and society in the moral life. Despite this, he cannot accept situationism as it is without causing severe damage to other areas of his work. Doris's approach is less extreme than Harman's, but

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<sup>239</sup> John Michael Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behaviour* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 169.

cannot realistically fit with virtue ethics and especially theological virtue ethics. In the next section, I will criticise Doris and show that theological virtue ethics can be integrated with some of the observations of situationism.

Flanagan takes a much less extreme view than either Harman or Doris, in that he tries to preserve more of virtue ethical thought. He argues that there are character traits and that situationist observations can be accommodated by virtue ethics. The language of virtue ethics and the language of situationism cause a divide which is not as serious as it appears. In particular, the language of traits and virtues implies the ascription of very general dispositions, when this is often not the intention:

Forming the impression that John is friendly is more economical than remembering how, exactly, John acted in each and every situation... the trait term cannot by itself reveal the precise nature of the regularity it implies... Nonetheless, the user of some trait term may intend a perfectly clear (to himself) and fairly specific meaning when he uses a trait ascription.<sup>240</sup>

Flanagan thinks that the context in which trait terms are used and the individuals to which they are ascribed are very important. For example, a helpful act which might be expected from a friend or a spouse may be extremely generous if performed by a stranger. Conversely, I may be sensible to refuse a lift in my car to a stranger but rude and uncaring if the person asking is a friend. Flanagan is critical both of the way in which virtue ethics implies very broad generic traits and of the way in which other situationists have interpreted the results of the above experiments. He argues that the results do not show anything especially curious, once trait language is properly understood. He also says that our expectations of people's behaviour in those contexts are more normative than empirical. Finally, he notes that Western culture is particularly disposed to over-generalised trait ascriptions. For example, people from another culture were more likely to say that someone was hesitant to

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<sup>240</sup> Flanagan, p. 279.

give money to their family, whereas Americans were more likely to say that that person was selfish.<sup>241</sup> Flanagan thinks that if virtue ethics avoids generalising the virtues, it is not vulnerable to the criticisms levelled by other situationists.

I have given an overview of situationism and looked at three experiments that situationists use. The main claims behind the situationist attack on character are that traits are not robust, character is not unified, and situations have more impact on action than is usually assumed. Harman argues that virtue ethics should be abandoned on these grounds. Doris thinks that it is possible to salvage something of virtue ethics, but does away with many of the main benefits. His solution is not sufficient for theological virtue ethics. Flanagan thinks that the results of the experiments are not as remarkable as they appear, and virtue ethics is compatible with situationism. I think that Flanagan is right. In the next section, I will discuss some criticisms of situationism and argue for its integration with virtue ethics.

#### Section 4: Criticisms and Integrationism

In this section, I will look at different responses to situationism from virtue ethicists. I will argue against Harman and Doris's interpretations of the experiments and suggest an integrated theory of character based on Flanagan's theory. The first replies to situationism I will look at are less than satisfactory and can only form part of the virtue ethical response at best. These include the claim that situationism has an overly simplistic view of character and that virtuous people are perhaps rarer than expected. The claims of situationism are too strong for virtue ethics to dismiss them entirely; but equally, it is a mistake for situationists to try to do away with virtue ethics. To show this, I suggest alternative interpretations of the experiments described in the previous section which demonstrate that situationism alone is not explanatorily satisfactory. I will then argue that an adequate moral

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<sup>241</sup> Flanagan, p. 281.

psychology should account for both character and situational pressures and will show how this model fits with theological ideas of character and narrative. The real problem is with virtue ethical language, which implies broader traits than the situationist's experiments can support. Aquinas and MacIntyre's thought on the nature of the virtues shows that there is room for virtue ethics to adapt by describing narrow virtues as component parts of broader ones.

## Responses to Situationism

One defence of virtue ethics argues that there are some truly virtuous characters, but such people are rare. For example, in the Milgram experiment some people refused to administer the shocks; in the Good Samaritan experiment, some hurried people stopped to help; and there were some children who were consistently honest in the Cheating experiment. The experiments seem to support the situationist view of character, but they are also compatible with the view that most people are an inconsistent mixture of virtue and vice. One reply to Harman makes this argument: 'Moral behaviour... is a possibility, rather than an actuality for the majority... Virtue ethicists do not and need not argue that most people are indeed virtuous'.<sup>242</sup> Purely as a response to situationism, I think this argument is successful; but it comes at a cost. It causes problems for other areas of virtue ethics, specifically the idea of moral development. This is touched on by Harman, but is best expressed by Doris.<sup>243</sup> Virtue is supposed to be achievable, or at least approachable. If virtue is as rare as suggested, most people will never be virtuous and hence not achieve *eudaimonia*. My discussion of action guidance in Chapter 2 made it clear that moral education and development is an important part of virtue ethics. Moral education is also important as it is one of the reasons that moral rules can be important for virtue ethics. If successful moral development is an unlikely prospect, the importance of rules will be diminished. There is less of an incentive to

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<sup>242</sup> Nafsika Athanassoulis, 'A Response to Harman: Virtue Ethics and Character Traits', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 100 (2000), 215-221 (p. 217).

<sup>243</sup> Doris, 'Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics', pp. 511-512.

develop the virtues or follow moral rules. Virtue also loses its usefulness as an explanation for behaviour – it is not the reason that most people act the way that they do.

It might be thought that theological virtue ethics is better equipped to argue for the rarity of virtue by drawing on ideas of sin and imperfection to show that Christ is the only truly virtuous agent. I made a similar point in discussions of the virtuous exemplar in Chapter 2 and I will return to it in greater depth in the last section. However, relying on this response alone will cause problems for Hauerwas's ideas of narrative and freedom, because it involves accepting that most people do not or cannot have a coherent narrative structure to their lives. To protect the idea of narrative, it is important to deal with the situationist claim that people do not exhibit cross-situational consistency, and the rarity response does not do this.

Another response to situationism tries to deal with this problem and show that people do in fact act consistently across different situations. It looks at the statistical significance of the experiments and argues that they are not incompatible with a consistent character. This is important for responding to the conclusions drawn from the Cheating experiment. Sabini and Silver make several different observations, each aimed at weakening the situationist position.<sup>244</sup> Firstly, they note that although the behavioural correlation across situations may be lower than expected, it is not zero. The way someone behaves in one situation does give us some information about how they will behave in other situations where similar traits might be exhibited. The question is, is the correlation enough to support the idea of robust character traits? Next, they point out that even apparently small differences can have a large effect over time. They use the example of baseball players: the difference between the batting averages of the best and worst players 'accounts for .33 percent and 1 percent of the variance in whether these particular batters will get a hit on a particular occasion'.<sup>245</sup> This is less predictive than the

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<sup>244</sup> Sabini and Silver, pp. 540-544.

<sup>245</sup> Sabini and Silver, p. 542.

behavioural correlation in the Cheating experiment, yet it makes a significant difference over time. This suggests that behavioural correlation may not need to be as high as expected to support the idea of robust character traits – or that correlation is not a good indicator of whether people have robust traits.

They also point out that virtue ethics does not require vicious people to be consistent. A vicious person may be honest or dishonest as it suits their ends. Measures of behavioural correlation will not be accurate for the type of consistency that virtue ethics requires, since it will treat virtuous and vicious consistency as the same. This is not a useful point for virtue ethicists – the effect of including consistently dishonest people in the statistics will be to increase the average cross-situational consistency. If they are removed, the correlation across situations will be even lower. However, their final point is very important. They note that there are factors other than the presence or absence of the relevant trait (e.g. honesty) that affect measures of behavioural correlation. One relevant factor for the Cheating experiment is how intelligent the participants are. One participant may be dishonest, but also very intelligent, and hence have no need to cheat on the test. Another may usually be honest, but unintelligent, and so be sorely tempted to cheat. Other factors such as perseverance, past experiences, and ambition may also play a part. This is in line with Aquinas's insistence that the circumstances of an act must be understood in order to properly assess it. The goodness of an action 'does not consist wholly in its species, but also in certain additions which accrue to it by reason of certain accidents: and such are its due circumstances'.<sup>246</sup> Hauerwas makes a very similar point, arguing that 'The "situations" we confront are such only because we are first a certain kind of people... "Situations" are not "out there" waiting to be seen but are created by the kind of people we are'.<sup>247</sup> No two people act in the same circumstances or with the same background.

What this means is that each person in the Cheating experiment will experience different pressures. As explained above, on the situationist

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<sup>246</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 18:3.

<sup>247</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 116.

understanding they are not tested in the same situations because they each perceive the situation differently. I think that this does away with the problem caused by the Cheating experiment for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that the experiment does not give an indication about how the average person might act in a given situation, since on a situationist understanding each person was tested in a different situation. Secondly, it shows that there are many factors that can affect behaviour in a certain situation, not just the presence or absence of a particular trait. Therefore, low behavioural correlation does not show that such traits do not exist across situations. However, this move involves making a serious admission that some virtue ethicists may want to avoid – it accepts that features of the perceived situation can have a significant impact on behaviour. This is not merely the standard virtue ethical claim that action forms character, but that situations as well as characters form actions. In Hauerwas's terms, events beyond my control play a more significant role in my history than previously anticipated. If this is accepted, the virtue ethicist must explain how character traits and situational pressures can both be accounted for in moral psychology. This is the integration suggested by Flanagan, and I think it offers the best solution to the situationist problem.

Although the role of circumstances might require more emphasis than it has been given previously, the integrationist position does fit with the thinkers considered so far. I have already mentioned that Aristotle thinks that the achievement of *eudaimonia* is subject to goods beyond our control as well as virtue: 'happiness needs the addition of external goods... it is difficult if not impossible to do fine deeds without any resources'.<sup>248</sup> Aquinas comes even closer to a situationist understanding of action by describing how a particular circumstance might interfere with the moral knowledge and actions of a typically virtuous person: 'Sometimes man fails to consider actually what he knows habitually, on account of some hindrance supervening, e.g. some external occupation, or some bodily

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<sup>248</sup> Aristotle, 1099a 30-35.

infirmity'.<sup>249</sup> Finally, Hauerwas is acutely aware of the fact that our circumstances and actions are not always in our control, and it shapes his discussion of freedom.

I think that an integrationist position can be accommodated by the virtue ethical tradition. In what follows, I will argue for an integrated moral psychology by showing how the insights of situationism and virtue ethics are complementary. Situationists must accept that a person's history and character fundamentally determines the situations they find themselves in, and Aquinas's explanation of the cardinal virtues and especially prudence shows that theological virtue ethics could accommodate a move towards more precise virtue language.

### Integrating Virtue Ethics and Situationism

Virtue ethicists argue that situationists have a basic and narrow idea of character. I think that by looking at these arguments it will be possible to show how a more rounded view of character can incorporate the understanding that situations can have a significant impact on behaviour. One error in the situationist view of character is that it is assumed that traits must be distinctive. In the first of his three theses, Doris is clear that if dispositional differences such as character traits or virtues exist, he would expect them to be 'strongly behaviourally individuating'.<sup>250</sup> The problem with this view is that it means if everyone acted virtuously, there would be no distinct behaviour and hence no virtues.<sup>251</sup> This is clearly incorrect – as soon as the majority possess a character trait, it would cease to be a trait. Since virtues are internal habits or dispositions, they cannot be affected by whether or not someone else has the same disposition. It is more accurate to say that character traits *can* be distinctive, but are not necessarily so. This means that experiments showing that most people behave a certain way in a certain situation do not show that their behaviour is due to situational pressures

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<sup>249</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 77: 2.

<sup>250</sup> Doris, 'Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics', p. 507.

<sup>251</sup> Kamtekar, pp. 467-468.

rather than traits. It is possible that those situations encourage or require acting in accordance with a common disposition.

This supports a further argument which shows that situationism is unable to fully explain behaviour without relying on character traits. As I noted above, the 'situation' in situationism is in fact the agent's subjective construal of the situation, rather than the objective situation *per se*. In this case, it seems that the way I perceive situations might be part of my character.<sup>252</sup> Situationists might resist this conclusion, as the way I perceive situations does not seem distinctive – but as I have shown, distinctiveness is not a prerequisite of character traits. Although situationists are unclear on what exactly forms the way I perceive situations, it seems fair to suggest that things such as my goals and desires will have an impact. For example, in the Cheating experiment a child's desire to succeed and their desire not to be punished will both have an impact on how they see the situation in which they have the opportunity to cheat. Presumably, if one child had no desire to succeed, they would perceive the situations as significantly less tempting. Desires such as this often appear to be cross-situational in the case of long-term goals. In virtue ethics, desire is an important part of character. I showed in the first section that Aristotle thinks it is the desiring part of the soul to which character belongs, and desire must be aligned with reason in a virtuous person. In order to argue that the way different people perceive situations has a significant impact on behaviour, the situationist must accept part of the virtue ethical view of character.

I also think that virtue ethicists must accept that situations have an impact on behaviour at a fundamental level. It is the situation that determines which virtue it is appropriate to exhibit and how strong the exhibition of that trait must be to be virtuous. Aristotle and Aquinas agree that something is only virtuous if it is done 'for the right reason and in the right way and at the right time'.<sup>253</sup> This means that the situation determines what the virtuous action will be and therefore has an impact on the virtuous person's behaviour. This point is not the same as the

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<sup>252</sup> Kamtekar, pp. 470-473.

<sup>253</sup> Aristotle, 1115b 15-20.

situationist claim that situations rather than traits have the dominant role in our reasons for action. To be fair to virtue ethicists, they have never argued that situations do not affect actions – only that they do not do so to the extent that the situationist claims. What the experiments show is that there are many complex narrow virtues at work – and this fits just as well with the evidence as the situationist criticisms. However, I think that this has not been made sufficiently clear in the current responses to situationism. Coupled with the criticism of situationism above, this point shows that both theories require some of the aspects of the other in order to function. Neither theory can claim that action is determined wholly by character or situations – both must acknowledge interplay between the two.

I think that this interplay can be best understood by developing Flanagan's view that virtue ethics has over-generalised trait language. I will attempt to do this by showing how narrower traits can be accounted for, as well as showing that some broader traits can still be accommodated on the situationist view. Flanagan argues that the language of virtue ethics gives the impression that traits are broader than they are (and broader than we actually expect them to be). Rachana Kamtekar suggests a way in which a group of narrow traits can give the impression of being a single, broader trait: 'although we use a single word, "honest", to describe the behaviors of not lying, not cheating, and not stealing, it does not seem obvious that not lying, not cheating, and not stealing are the same sort of thing'.<sup>254</sup> Perhaps the word honesty refers to several different virtues. Kamtekar also suggests that the cultivation of several narrow virtues could construct what appears to be a broader trait. If I reflect that cheating on a test involves the same kind of deception as stealing (to which I object), I may develop the trait of not cheating. These together may be taken to be the trait of honesty – but if I regress and cheat again, it does not mean that I will suddenly be willing to steal. It would take a lot of work to develop enough virtues to appear to have a broad trait.

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<sup>254</sup> Kamtekar, pp. 468-469.

There is good evidence to suggest that this position might fit well with theological virtue ethics. Aquinas is one of the main theological sources in this thesis, so I will begin by considering how more precise virtues might be accounted for in his work. It might be thought that this is likely to be a difficult task. Aquinas thinks that the entire moral sphere comes under the four cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. It is these kinds of broad virtue descriptions which Flanagan sees as the problem. A virtue like temperance – a disposition which curbs the passions to prevent them interfering with reason – seems much less likely to be displayed consistently than a disposition to be hospitable to strangers. However, a closer examination of Aquinas’s description of the cardinal virtues reveals that other virtues are seen as part of the cardinal virtues. Each of the broader virtues is partly constituted by several more specific ones. These smaller virtues go together to make one larger one: ‘So that, for instance, any virtue that causes good in reason’s act of consideration, may be called prudence’.<sup>255</sup> Later, when Aquinas comes to discuss prudence in more depth, he says that there are many different parts to prudence. Some of these parts are virtues in themselves, ‘directed to certain secondary acts or matters, not having, as it were, the whole power of the principal virtue’.<sup>256</sup> Some of the secondary virtues connected to prudence are good counsel and good judgement. There are similar secondary virtues connected to each of the cardinal virtues.

This seems to fit precisely with Kamtekar’s suggestion above. Several narrow virtues, when taken together, may construct or be identified as a broad trait. I do not think that Aquinas’s position in itself is the integration I am looking for. Even his secondary virtues are too broad. What it does show is that an attempt to describe a single broad virtue at least partly in terms of multiple more precise ones is one that could fit easily with Aquinas’s work. Also in my favour is the fact that Aquinas takes care to stress how important awareness of the situation is when acting. The importance of particular situations is why he says that no individual

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<sup>255</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 61:3.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 2a2ae 48:1.

action can be morally indifferent – even if it is neutral in its species, the circumstances will affect its moral standing.<sup>257</sup> He also warns that a general law may fail in specific situations, a point I have already mentioned and which will be significant in later chapters.<sup>258</sup> I think that this suggests a project to identify more precise virtues would work well within theological virtue ethics.

When it comes to modern virtue ethics, MacIntyre shares my interpretation of Aquinas on the various parts of the cardinal virtues:

What are accounted other virtues are all in some way parts or aspects of the cardinal virtues, and someone may possess one of the cardinal virtues while not yet having learned how it needs to be exercised in all of those particular areas which are each the province of some one of the subordinate virtues.<sup>259</sup>

This could explain, for example, why someone might be described as honest yet fail to own up to an incidence of cheating, because although broadly honest they have not yet mastered honesty and in particular the part of honesty which would have led to them owning up. MacIntyre's position leaves more room for a partially developed character, one which has not yet fully developed the cardinal virtues but may still be called temperate, just and so on.

Two more observations about character may strengthen this position. Firstly, character traits do not operate in isolation. One situation may call on several different character traits, and the extent to which each trait is developed towards virtue will have an impact on the final action. For example, there are several different pressures in the Milgram experiment which contribute to how difficult subjects found it to disobey. These include the 'slippery slope' produced by gradually increasing the shocks, the experimenter in roles as an authority figure and as a guide to the situation, and the social pressure against confronting another

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<sup>257</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 18:8-9.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 1a2ae 94:4.

<sup>259</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 198.

person.<sup>260</sup> A subject may need to be sufficiently virtuous in several different areas, such as dealing with peer pressure, thinking for oneself and attitudes to authority in order to resist. The need for several different virtues working in combination may be why most people did not stop the experiment. The second observation is that acting consistently with respect to long-term goals may encourage apparently inconsistent behaviour in specific situations. In the Good Samaritan experiment a subject's long-term goal of helping people through ministry may have encouraged them to give their presentation on time, even though it resulted in non-helping behaviour on that occasion. Neither of these observations excuses the subject's actions, but suggests a way of understanding them on a virtue ethical model which includes robust character.

The claim that broad virtues are composed of narrow ones solves the virtue ethicists' problem. It explains why overly broad traits might be ascribed (a group of traits is mistaken for one trait) and why people can exhibit consistency in similar situations, but not always across situations (they have one relevant virtue, but not the other). Virtue ethics can say that virtues and hence character still exist, even though people are sometimes not consistent in their behaviour across situations. This is because they are consistent in similar situations, where traits apply. If this is correct, then the main criticism of virtue ethics from situationists – that the evidence suggests there is no such thing as character – is defeated. I have shown that in order to fully understand the role of situations in forming behaviour, some understanding of character is necessary. Without this, the situationist cannot explain the way in which the subjective situation an agent is in will be shaped by their history and desires. Even the situationist needs the concept of character. Fortunately, the evidence is consistent with a character composed of narrow virtues which contribute to larger ones. Such a position satisfies the need for character in explanations of behaviour and accounts for the results of the experiments above.

The virtue ethicist can accept that situations can have an impact on behaviour, but argues that character also plays an important part. Barbara Krahe

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<sup>260</sup> Sabini and Silver, pp. 549-553.

calls this an interactionist theory of behaviour: 'On the person side of the interaction, cognitive and motivational factors are essential determinants of behaviour... On the situation side, the psychological meaning of situations for the individual is the important determining factor'.<sup>261</sup> Now that I have shown that the idea of character can survive the situationist challenge, Krahe's interactionism can be incorporated into virtue ethics by remembering that certain situations require certain virtues, and accepting that situational pressures may make it harder or easier to exhibit the appropriate virtue.

It might appear that this solution is problematic for Hauerwas's ideas of narrative. If virtues have narrower applications than expected, it may be a harder and more complex task to construct a narrative. More importantly, if our behaviour is subject to situational pressures beyond our control, could it not become impossible for a particularly unfortunate person to be unable to construct a narrative? I think that Hauerwas is equipped to respond to this problem (although he is not aware of it in these terms). I have already described his view that although some people may find it harder to construct their history, part of the Christian claim is that God will not allow someone to be entirely unable to form a narrative. I think that this view shows that he is able to incorporate situational pressures into his view of narrative. Hauerwas certainly leaves room for the general impact of situationism on theological virtue ethics. He says that people's choices are restricted by culture, psychology, and situation and that 'the importance of physiological and environmental factors is not to be underestimated'.<sup>262</sup> Unfortunately, he does underestimate these factors in his use of broader trait terms. However, he is not alone in this, and it is not an irresolvable problem. As long as virtue ethicists are careful not to be too general in their language about the virtues, it will be possible maintain an account of behaviour that includes both character and situational pressures.

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<sup>261</sup> Barbara Krahe, *Personality and Social Psychology: Towards a Synthesis* (London: Sage, 1992), pp. 70-71.

<sup>262</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (Indiana: Fides, 1974), p. 55.

In this section, I have argued that virtue ethics can incorporate situationist observations about behaviour, and that the most accurate account of action will include an assessment of character and of situational pressures. I began by showing that although it makes a useful point, the argument that virtue is rare is not sufficient because if used alone it causes problems for the use of moral exemplars and incentives. I then showed that low behavioural correlation does not show that virtues do not exist, but the response to this involves accepting that situations can also affect behaviour. I criticised the situationist understanding of character and argued for a narrower understanding of the virtues. I showed that this model can explain the results of the experiments and is compatible with the view that situations have an effect on behaviour. Although theological virtue ethics does not have a sufficiently specific account of the virtues, Aquinas and MacIntyre's comments on the way greater virtues are composed of lesser ones suggests that theological virtue ethics can accept this approach. In the final section, I will show that a theological approach to integrationism may confer some advantages to the virtue ethicist.

## Section 5: Narrative and the Virtuous Exemplar

Before finishing this chapter, I want to look at two areas of theological virtue ethics which may make it particularly well suited to adopting the integrationist approach. One is the importance of narrative to theological virtue ethics. The second is Jesus's role as a virtuous exemplar.

I said in the last section that virtue ethics needs to begin using narrow or specific virtue terminology in order to fit the concept of character with the experimental evidence. Theological virtue ethics can clearly accommodate such a move, but I think that it may also have something of a head start over secular virtue ethics. I mentioned in Chapter 1 that theological virtue ethics places more importance on history, community and narrative. This focus of theologians on

narrative accounts of the moral life may prove important in developing narrower virtue language. I want to suggest that the role stories and narrative play in shaping theological virtue ethics could be a good starting point for identification of specific virtues. This is because by its nature, a story deals with a particular situation. This may provide a way to discuss precise, situationally sensitive virtues. I have already covered the importance of narrative in Hauerwas's thought. The advantages of a narrative approach to integrationism are best demonstrated by two other thinkers – Gilbert Meilaender and the previously mentioned Kotva.

Meilaender discusses the importance of stories and points to MacIntyre, Hauerwas and Plato as thinkers who all see stories as vital for moral education. His own belief is that an important way of teaching virtue is 'the telling of stories which transmit images and examples of moral virtue and in so doing begin to shape character by awakening a love for what is good'.<sup>263</sup> In a discussion of biblical connections to virtue ethics, Kotva argues that the role narrative plays in the gospel of Matthew is similar to its role in virtue ethics. Notably, he mentions several character traits of the disciples, some of which are relatively situation-specific such as attentiveness, tendency to despair and vulnerability. These characters and traits are used by Matthew to 'school the reader in the character and traits appropriate to discipleship'.<sup>264</sup> Aquinas and MacIntyre showed that theological virtue ethics could accommodate a narrower account of virtue. Work on narrative may provide the first step in developing this account.

Aside from narrative, the other distinct advantage for theological virtue ethics in embracing an integrationist position is the role Christ plays as a virtuous exemplar. I discussed virtuous exemplars at length in Chapter 2. To recap, exemplars are important in modelling the virtues and thereby providing practical guidance and moral education. They are also used in explanations of right action (recall Hursthouse's definition of right action in Chapter 3) and even, in the case of Zagzebski's 'exemplarism' as the foundation of the entire virtue ethical theory.

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<sup>263</sup> Meilaender, pp. 54-5.

<sup>264</sup> Joseph J. Kotva, Jr., p. 112.

Unfortunately, secular virtue ethics faces a dilemma. It must choose between an actual (and hence potentially fallible) person for its exemplar, and a hypothetical person who is totally virtuous but will not provide such clear action guidance.

This problem is clearly exacerbated by situationism or an integrationist approach to virtue ethics. Typically, virtue ethicists refer to actual moral exemplars. I mentioned in Chapter 2 Swanton's argument that circumstances may cause the exemplar to be unreliable despite a good character. Situationism reinforces that point. Exemplars, like everyone else, will be affected by their situation. The more situational pressures are in play, the more likely it is that the exemplar will become unreliable at the moment their example is needed most. It may be possible to mitigate the problem by raising the bar for the exemplar – perhaps demanding that they are generally well-informed and display all the relevant virtues needed to resist situational pressures. Note, however, that the more stringent the criteria for a moral exemplar become, the fewer people will satisfy them. This begins to defeat the point of having an actual exemplar, which is that they should be accessible – present and able to provide guidance.

As I showed in Chapter 2, this is simply not a problem for theological virtue ethics. This is because Jesus is an actual but fully reliable exemplar. Aquinas is clear that Christ is an example: 'Christ's action is our instruction'.<sup>265</sup> Nor is Jesus simply a good person to follow; he reveals how we are to reach our fulfilment. This is because he reveals the new law, which guides us to *beatitudo*: 'the law that brings all to salvation could not be given until after the coming of Christ'.<sup>266</sup> By his example, Jesus reveals and makes it possible to reach our final end: 'Undergirding Jesus's moral exemplarity is his ontological exemplarity whereby we become increasingly like him'.<sup>267</sup> Hauerwas, like Aquinas, thinks that Christ is the one who guides our action: 'to have Christian character is to really be changed and directed by Christ'.<sup>268</sup> The importance of Christ as an exemplar is increased by the attempt

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<sup>265</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3a 40:1.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 1a2ae 91:5.

<sup>267</sup> Nicholas M. Healy, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 38.

<sup>268</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, p. 221.

to integrate virtue ethics with situationism. Theological virtue ethics has an exemplar who is fully virtuous; can guide others; and is able to resist situational pressures to sin. Theological virtue ethics is in a better position than its secular counterpart to undertake the task of integrating virtue ethics with situationism. Its emphasis on narrative gives it a good starting point for a new, precise description of specific virtues and it is not vulnerable to the increased problems that situationism causes for the use of a virtuous exemplar.

## Conclusion

I began by showing the centrality of character to virtue ethics and the particular role it plays in theological virtue ethics. It is necessary for the possession of the virtues and for explaining the role of action in virtue ethical thought. Hauerwas's ideas of freedom and narrative rely on character, as well as his understanding of sanctification. I then turned to the situationist claim that character as the virtue ethicist conceives it does not exist, which if true is devastating for virtue ethics. I looked at some of the experiments which situationists use to support their conclusion and showed that situationists have different views on what their findings mean for virtue ethics. I examined some of the virtue ethical responses to situationism, including the argument that virtue is rarer than expected and the claim that the statistics can still support the idea of robust character traits. I then argued that by seeing character traits as 'narrower' and as working in different combinations, the claims of situationism and virtue ethics can be integrated to produce an effective moral psychology that takes account of both character and situational pressures. Although this narrower view of the virtues is not fully present in theological virtue ethics, I showed that Aquinas and MacIntyre's work suggests that there is ample room for its development. The importance of narrative in theological virtue ethics may prove a useful way to begin this project. Finally, I returned to my discussion of the virtuous exemplar from Chapter 2. The

acknowledgement that situations can affect behaviour exacerbates existing problems with the use of an actual virtuous exemplar. This is a serious difficulty for secular virtue ethics. By identifying Christ as the virtuous exemplar, theological virtue ethics can respond to this problem without suffering the same cost. Although other forms of virtue ethics can deal with the challenge of situationism, theological virtue ethics is particularly well-placed to do so.

## Chapter 5

### Virtue Ethics and Moral Particularism

Up until now, I have covered what I called 'internal' problems with virtue ethics. The three criticisms covered in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 all represented direct attacks on virtue ethics. They argued that it is not fit for purpose (Chapter 2) or that some of its central claims are flawed or mistaken (Chapters 3 and 4). I now turn to 'external' problems with virtue ethics. These are criticisms by association, which do not identify a problem with virtue ethics *per se* but take it to be linked to another theory which is itself open to criticism. My main task will therefore be to break the supposed link between virtue ethics and these theories. I have only a secondary interest in refuting the theories themselves and indeed try to leave room for virtue ethicists who wish to hold them.

In this chapter I am interested in refuting the criticism that virtue ethics is committed to a damaging form of moral particularism. My argument will hinge on carefully distinguishing between different types of particularist and anti-particularist positions. I intend to show that although virtue ethics is committed to some form of particularism, the particularism in question is very weak and uncontroversial. I will begin by defining the key terms and positions in this debate: particularism, generalism and universalism. It is important to distinguish between universalism and generalism, and I will show that while generalism is opposed to particularism, universalism need not be. I will explore the different applications of particularism and the opposing positions with regard to rules, reasons, and motives, and I will look at Rossian generalism as an alternative to standard generalism. Having clarified the different types of particularism and the opposition to them I will turn to the relationship between particularism and virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is often thought to entail particularism due to an emphasis on moral judgement rather than rule-following. I will look briefly at some prominent virtue ethicists who are also particularists, before laying out the problems that the association could cause.

These are that particularism seems opposed to consistency in ethics and that there is a strong theological commitment to some form of moral principles. I intend to argue that virtue ethics is committed to a weak form of rule particularism, but that this form is uncontroversial and is accepted by some generalists. Finally I will turn to particularism in theological virtue ethics. Both MacIntyre and Hauerwas argue for a form of historical particularism. I will argue that this kind of particularism may entail a stronger moral particularism, but this falls short of being damaging.

## Section 1: Exploring Particularism

### Outline and Definitions

Broadly speaking, moral particularism is opposed to the use of moral rules or principles in ethics. This means that it shares some ground with virtue ethics, which typically downplays the moral importance of rule-following in favour of character development and practical wisdom. I showed in Chapter 2 that virtue ethics does leave room for and make use of moral rules; but it also gives them a less prominent role compared to other moral theories. It may therefore appear that virtue ethics entails moral particularism. Particularism is a controversial theory which has come in for a lot of criticism. Theological ethics is especially likely to have a problem with particularism, since theology tends to place a high value on moral principles. Virtue ethics is certainly compatible with particularism and some virtue ethicists are also particularists. However, if it is also the case that virtue ethics *entails* moral particularism then this will weaken virtue ethics and especially theological virtue ethics by opening it up to criticisms of particularism. I intend to show that this is not the case. Before I explore the problem in more depth, it is necessary to make some more precise definitions. There are several important terms in this debate, some of which are closely related but are mistakenly used interchangeably. This warrants a deeper look at the terms in question.

All forms of moral particularism are opposed to the use of moral principles in ethics. Depending on the strength of any given particularist position, this opposition may be of varying strength, arguing that the relationship of moral principles to ethical theory is either minimally relevant, irrelevant, or actively negative/dangerous. It is harder to generate a more positive definition, but particularism tends to claim that something that is morally relevant in one situation may in another situation become irrelevant or reverse its moral 'polarity' (i.e. whether it counts for or against an act). Dancy gives an example of how this switch in polarity can occur in reasons for action: 'I offer a family game... The game requires them to lie; if one doesn't do plenty of lying, it spoils the game. That an action is a lie is commonly a reason not to do it; here it is a reason in favour'.<sup>269</sup> It is easy to see how this results in an opposition to moral principles; if the same moral features can change their relevance between situations, it will be impossible to produce effective or useful rules. Note that particularism is not making the obvious claim that different situations have different moral features. Rather, it says that *exactly the same feature* may act differently depending on the situation.

Generalism is the view directly opposed to particularism. It involves the denial of the particularist theses and champions the use of moral principles. A basic generalism would imply that moral principles are cross-situational and inviolable. This kind of generalism has some attendant problems. Firstly, it does not allow any possible exceptions to its principles. This is not necessarily a devastating criticism – Kant famously defends this position in his example of the liar and the murderer.<sup>270</sup> A more serious problem for this kind of generalism is the possibility of conflict between principles. This kind of generalism will not be able to explain situations in which two or more principles conflict, and I think that it is likely to be forced to resort to over-generalised and uninformative principles in order to avoid such situations. Rossian generalism (named for W.D. Ross) is a more nuanced form of

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<sup>269</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 60-61.

<sup>270</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals with On A Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*, trans. by Ellington, James W., 3rd edn (Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), pp. 63-65.

generalism which is not vulnerable to these problems. Although it still argues for moral principles, it holds that they do not have a strict hierarchy and are not inviolable. Instead, moral principles contribute a certain amount of moral 'weight' towards a decision. This allows principles to interact by conflicting and being overruled by one another, which can lead to highly situation-specific results.<sup>271</sup> Ross explains how this interaction between principles can be expected to work:

Every act, therefore, viewed in some aspects, will be *prima facie* right, and viewed in others, *prima facie* wrong, and right acts can be distinguished from wrong acts only as being those which, of all those possible for the agent in the circumstances, have the greatest balance of *prima facie* rightness.<sup>272</sup>

This version of generalism relies on the agent's moral discernment to calculate the right action based on which principles apply in which circumstances. Because it is highly situation-specific, Rossian generalism can appear similar to particularism. Both emphasise the importance of situational awareness and prudence in determining the right action. The difference lies in how they believe morally relevant features of a situation act. Take Kant's example of the murderer who asks for the location of your friend. The basic generalist would tell the truth so as not to violate the principle against lying. A particularist would lie, arguing that in this instance lying actually counts towards the good of the act. A Rossian generalist would also lie, but would maintain that lying counted against the act. However, in this circumstance the badness of lying is overruled by the greater goodness of protecting your friend. For a generalist, if a moral feature counts for or against an act, then it will count the same way for all other acts of which it is a feature. The Rossian generalist thinks that it may be 'overruled' by other moral features.

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<sup>271</sup> Brad Hooker, 'Moral Particularism: Wrong and Bad', in *Moral Particularism*, ed. by Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), pp. 1-22 (pp. 2-6).

<sup>272</sup> William David Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: OUP, 1930) p. 41.

The final position I want to look at is universalism. Universalism is the view that a feature of a situation must be universalisable in order to be morally relevant. A feature is universalisable if it 'applies to *all* cases answering to the description it gives, and this [the description] uses only universal terms'.<sup>273</sup> A term is universal if it can be defined without reference to an individual (except for comparisons of the form like/unlike). Depending on the description, a feature may be both universal and highly specific. For example, 'Always lie about the location of others when asked by an angry murderer' is extremely specific but also a universal principle, because it states that in *every* situation which possesses the features of a questioning murderer and a hiding friend, one should lie. Although in some cases the term 'universalism' is treated as synonymous with generalism, it is not. Universalism is compatible with some weaker forms of particularism. In what follows, I will look at the different forms of particularism, as well as the generalist and universalist responses.

### Applications of the Definitions

So far I have defined particularism, generalism, and universalism. Now I will explore the different types of particularism. I will focus especially on particularism about rules and particularism about reasons. I will also explain the generalist and universalist positions in these areas. My aim here is to give clear examples of the different types of particularism and the conflicts that each type causes. This will enable me to explore in detail the potential commitment of virtue ethics to different kinds of particularism.

It is possible to be particularist, generalist and/or universalist about rules. Particularism about rules is the view that any rule may be useless as a guide to moral action even in a situation in which it appears to apply.<sup>274</sup> For example, a

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<sup>273</sup> Richard Mervyn Hare, 'Universalizability', in *Encyclopaedia of Ethics*, ed. by Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker, Vol. 3 (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1734-1737 (p. 1734).

<sup>274</sup> Roger Crisp, 'Particularizing Particularism', in *Moral Particularism*, ed. by Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), pp. 23-47 (pp. 24-6).

particularist about rules would say that the rule 'Do not lie' is not helpful for deciding what to do when threatened by a murderer, even though it applies to the situation. This kind of particularism entails that it is possible for moral principles to 'run out' or become useless in certain situations. Crucially, it is not possible to work out which situations a rule will apply to beforehand (otherwise this knowledge could be included in the rule). Instead the agent needs to use their own moral discernment (akin to Aristotelian *phronesis* or prudence) to decide what to do. Conversely, generalism about rules will hold that a complete set of rules can prescribe correctly for every situation. Universalism about rules is the view that rules are applicable to every relevantly similar situation which they govern.

Particularism about rules is a weaker form of particularism. The main body of particularist thought is particularism about reasons. Dancy puts this position as follows: 'The leading thought behind particularism is the thought that the behaviour of a reason (or of a consideration that serves as a reason) in a new case cannot be predicated from its behaviour elsewhere'.<sup>275</sup> The same morally relevant reason may be used for or against an action in different cases. In the example of deceiving the murderer, that it is a lie is a reason in favour of directing the murderer away from your friend. In other cases the same reason (this is a lie) operates quite differently. The same morally relevant reason may be used for or against an action in different cases. Nor is it possible to tell how that reason will operate in the abstract; it has to be assessed situation by situation. Dancy argues that this is a common-sense view and that the idea of a single reason functioning in multiple ways only causes confusion because it does not fit with standard moral theory. Both generalists and universalists refute this and argue that reasons will always function in the same way regardless of the situation, although they may be outweighed by other reasons. There is an analogous view about motivations. The particularist about motivations thinks that a belief may motivate in one case, but not in another. Since this view is closely related to particularism about reasons, I will not discuss it but concentrate on particularism about rules and reasons.

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<sup>275</sup> Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, p. 60.

In this section I have focused on explaining the different kinds of particularism and its opponents. I now turn to the relationship between virtue ethics and particularism. I want to consider why virtue ethics might be linked to particularism and what kind of problems such a link would cause for theological virtue ethics.

## Section 2: The Link to Virtue Ethics

So far I have simply described the different types of particularism. Now I want to show why there could be a link between particularism and virtue ethics. Unlike other topics discussed in this thesis, there is not an obvious or irrefutable link between particularism and virtue ethics. It is not clear either that virtue ethics is necessarily particularist, or that particularism is immediately damaging to virtue ethics. In what follows I will explain why these two possibilities might be the case. I intend to show that virtue ethics is committed to a weak form of particularism but that this commitment does not pose a serious problem.

The principal reason that virtue ethics might be linked to particularism is that it stresses the importance of applying moral judgement when making decisions. I have already discussed prudence in the context of action guidance in Chapter 2. I showed at the time that prudence is used to identify when certain actions are right or not – for example, it is prudence that allows us to discern the difference between lying in a game which requires it and lying to a person in authority. Prudence is needed to follow the other forms of action guidance which I identified. It is to be expected, then, that Aristotle and Aquinas emphasise the role of prudence or practical wisdom in the moral life. Aquinas makes it clear that prudence is vital: 'Prudence is a virtue necessary to lead a good life'.<sup>276</sup> In Aristotle's discussion of prudence, it is evident that he sees it as the key to situational decision-making: 'It is thought to be the mark of a prudent man to be

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<sup>276</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 57:5.

able to deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous for himself... nobody deliberates about things that are invariable'.<sup>277</sup> The prudent man deliberates about what is good for himself, and that good is variable. The central role of prudence is also present in more modern virtue theories, both secular and theological. Hauerwas says that 'Only when our action is formed by practical wisdom does it become good action'.<sup>278</sup> The shared insistence on prudence with particularism is how virtue ethics appears to lead to particularism. In particularism, prudence is paired with the rejection of generalism, taking the place as a guide to action that rule-following occupies in (basic) generalism. This usurping of the role of rules in particularism suggests that prudence plays the same role in virtue ethics. I think that this is certainly possible, but not a necessity. To see why, consider that the two theories arrive at the need for prudence in different ways. The particularist's denial of generalism and the subsequent loss of moral rules force them to rely on prudence to guide moral decisions. Conversely, the virtue ethicist advocates prudence as a way to guide the virtues to the 'golden mean' – the ideal expression of virtue in any situation. The particularist advocates prudence because they reject generalism; it is not necessary for the virtue ethicist to reject generalism because they advocate prudence. However, the reliance on prudence does mean in both cases that rules will be *insufficient* for decision-making. The particularist will push this further and argue that rules are unnecessary or even useless for decision-making. The virtue ethicist need not. The use of prudence does not force the virtue ethicist into particularism, but it certainly represents shared ground and a certain affinity between the two theories. Fortunately I do not intend to argue that virtue ethics is not or must not be particularist; my case is merely that it need not be.

The second reason that virtue ethics appears particularist is because of prevailing opinion. Perhaps because of the shared emphasis on prudence, some

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<sup>277</sup> Aristotle, 1140a 25-35.

<sup>278</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, p. 57.

prominent virtue ethicists are particularists. John McDowell is an excellent example, having argued strongly for a particularist virtue ethic:

If one attempted to reduce one's conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong – and not necessarily because one had changed one's mind; rather, one's mind on the matter was not susceptible of capture in any universal formula.<sup>279</sup>

Although she has argued against the idea that virtue ethics is a recognisably separate category in moral theory, Martha Nussbaum's work in Aristotelian ethics is distinctly particularist. She says that:

Good deliberation is like theatrical or musical improvisation, where what counts is flexibility, responsiveness, and openness to the external; to rely on an algorithm here is not only insufficient, it is a sign of immaturity and weakness.<sup>280</sup>

The fact that virtue ethicists like Nussbaum are arguing for particularism might seem at odds with my argument in Chapter 2 that rules, although not the focus of the moral life, are still important and of use in virtue ethics. This is not the case. Both McDowell and Nussbaum are particularist about rules, a milder position than Dancy's reasons particularism. Nussbaum does not completely exclude rules from moral deliberation, but thinks that they must function as a law which 'is authoritative insofar as it is a summary of wise decisions. It is therefore appropriate

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<sup>279</sup> John McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', *The Monist*, 62 (1979), 331-350 (p. 336).

<sup>280</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C., 'The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality' in *Love's Knowledge*, ed. by Martha C. Nussbaum (Oxford: OUP, 1990), pp. 54-105 (p. 74).

to supplement it with new wise decisions made on the spot'.<sup>281</sup> Any rules are wholly subordinate to situationally sensitive practical reasoning. Hursthouse, whose position on rules I have already examined, takes a similar position to Nussbaum. She argues that wisdom, rather than what she calls the 'strong codifiability thesis' (the view that rules should provide a decision procedure applicable by anyone) is what should guide normative ethics.<sup>282</sup> Taken alongside the joint focus on prudence, the fact that several virtue ethicists appear to be particularists shows a clear connection between the two theories. I intend to show that the connection is not a necessary one, especially in the case of particularism about reasons.

Before I do so, I want to look at two reasons why I think this connection ought to be resisted. The first has to do with particularism's implications for moral education and the second has to do with the role of rules in theological ethics. These are certainly not the only or indeed the main complaints about particularism. I have chosen them because I think that they show why virtue ethicists and theologians may want to avoid particularism; that is, they touch on areas that are likely to be of more concern to a virtue ethicist (in the first case) and a theologian (in the second case) than to a neutral observer. As my aim is to protect theological virtue ethics rather than to resolve the particularist–generalist debate, I will not touch on other criticisms of particularism here.<sup>283</sup>

### Dangers of the Connection

I have already discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 the role education and especially exemplars play in virtue ethics. To recap, the virtues (including prudence) are developed over time by practice and observation. More virtuous people who serve as examples are crucial in this process. Aristotle likens the process of becoming virtuous to learning a craft. There are two things essential to the learning of a craft.

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<sup>281</sup> Nussbaum, 'The Discernment of Perception', p. 69.

<sup>282</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 56-9.

<sup>283</sup> *Challenging Moral Particularism*, ed. by Mark Norris Lance, Matjaž Potrč and Vojko Strahovnik (London: Routledge, 2008) contains several articles which address wider criticisms of particularism.

The first is practice, which is vital for the formation of habit: 'the virtues we do acquire by first exercising them'.<sup>284</sup> The second way we learn a craft is by following someone who has already mastered it.

We should therefore pay no less attention to the unproved assertions and opinions of experienced and older people [or of prudent people] than to demonstrations of fact; because they have an insight from their experience which enables them to see correctly.<sup>285</sup>

The virtues are learned by the character formation provided by our past actions, or by the observation of other's actions. Aristotle is clear that experience is absolutely essential to the development of virtue; unlike mathematics, it cannot be learned simply from study.<sup>286</sup> The focus on virtuous education and the need to learn by practice and example is carried forward into today's virtue ethics by thinkers such as Hursthouse and Julia Annas. The problem particularism poses here is that it seems to remove consistency in ethics and the ability to discern moral patterns. Hence it curtails our ability to learn from previous situations. This is not only a problem for virtue ethics but given its dependence on experience as a teacher of the virtues I think it becomes particularly acute.

Consider my previous discussion of moral exemplars and thick concepts – other than prudence, the main ways in which virtue ethics provides action guidance. By removing consistency, particularism will make it impossible to learn from the exemplar, since it will never be possible to extrapolate from their behaviour to what one ought to do. Note that this is not the same as the criticism that the exemplar may become unreliable – a problem exacerbated by situationism. A moral exemplar may accurately track changes in the moral polarity of relevant factors; but an agent not possessed of similar moral wisdom will not be able to do so. Without any apparent consistency in action, it will be harder to act as the

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<sup>284</sup> Aristotle, 1103a 30-35.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 1143b 10-15.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 1142a 10-20.

exemplar does because it will be impossible to apply principles from one situation to another. Similarly, if thick concepts may change polarity they will lose their action-guiding features. My discussion in Chapter 2 assumed that the evaluative component of concepts like 'honesty' is set. If it may change depending on the situation, then a statement like 'that would be the honest thing to do' will provide no action guidance unless I already understand whether or not honesty is a good thing in this situation. As well as attacking rules, particularism seems to remove or at least weaken two of the main methods of action guidance in virtue ethics.

Dancy's particularism about reasons holds that a reason for action may change its moral 'polarity' across situations, and that this change cannot be predicted from its behaviour elsewhere. This means that the fact that in one situation 'that is a lie' may function as a reason against an action does not tell us whether 'that is a lie' will function for or against an action in a different situation. A useful way of understanding this is in terms of patterns. Consider the following pattern:

If  $x=1$ , then a

If  $x=2$ , then b

If  $x=3$ , then a

It is possible to recognise a pattern in these conditionals and extrapolate from it (If  $x=4$ , then b, etc.). What particularism about reasons denies is that it is possible to extrapolate to new examples in moral situations. In the example above, the pattern indicates that when  $x$  is an odd number a obtains, when it is even, b. This enables us to work out what will happen when  $x=4$ , or when  $x=83$ . The particularist about reasons thinks that it is not possible to perform this kind of working out in moral situations. Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit and Michael Smith make this point as follows:

The contention of the particularists is that, when given a list of conditionals of the form

If  $D_i$  then  $E$

where the  $D_i$  are various descriptive states of affairs in which some particular moral claim  $E$  is true, no matter how long and varied the list may be... There is no pattern *in the  $D_i$ s*, the grasping of which would enable you to write down new members of the list.<sup>287</sup>

If this is the case, it seems that Dancy's particularism will make it impossible to learn from experience. If it is impossible to extrapolate any information about how to act in present or future moral situations from our actions in previous ones, in what way can those previous actions be said to have informed our current decision-making? Dancy's response is that experience is relevant because it enables us to recognise certain decisions as belonging to a particular set:

But there need be nothing one can point to in the past cases which can determine or even guide his choice; what makes his choice right is not that it is dictated or even made probable by principles created by the past instances, but simply our acceptance of the choice as an instance of carrying on as before.<sup>288</sup>

I think this is a weak response and does not capture what is meant by learning from experience. If someone were to say 'I recognise that if I act this way it will be just like all the times I have done something similar in the past, with the same results; but that doesn't help me to decide what to do in this case' I would not say that that person had learned from their experience. For experience to be relevant, it must do more than enable us to categorise our actions; it must *guide* them as well. Carrying on as before has no moral value unless it is possible to identify a common moral theme in previous actions which will continue in this action. There are forms of particularism which do allow experience to inform action, such as

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<sup>287</sup> Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, 'Ethical Particularism and Patterns', in *Moral Particularism*, ed. by Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), pp. 79-99 (p. 83).

<sup>288</sup> Jonathan Dancy, 'Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties', *Mind*, 92 (1983), 530-547 (p. 545).

Nussbaum's rule particularism or a weaker reasons particularism. Dancy's strong reasons particularism is unable to do this. I suggest that the ability to categorise actions does not assign enough of a role to experience to satisfy virtue ethicists' reliance on moral education. At the very least, virtue ethics must avoid this kind of particularism. The implications of particularism for moral education are one reason why it is important to show that virtue ethics does not entail particularism – or if it does, that it does not entail Dancy's strong reasons particularism.

The second reason I think it is especially important to avoid committing virtue ethics to particularism is that particularism is likely to be especially unpalatable to theologians. Law, both in the moral and legal sense, has a significant part to play in both scripture and tradition. The exact role of law varies between traditions and depends at least in part on the way they understand the relationship between grace and the law. Nevertheless, it is a common theme throughout Christian theology that reliable moral truths can be captured in general principles.<sup>289</sup> In her discussion of moral rules in Aquinas's thought, Jean Porter provides a helpful framing of the debate over the function of rules in Catholic theology. On the one side are the traditionalists, who take a position similar to basic generalism. On the other are the proportionalists, who are closer to Rossian generalists.<sup>290</sup> The key point for my purposes is that although exactly how rules function is open to discussion, neither side is particularist. There is a general agreement that however they work, rules are a crucial part of moral discourse. I showed in Chapter 2 that Aquinas's natural law allows him to include more directly action-guiding rules in his virtue ethics. This is a topic I return to in the following chapter. The increased role of rules in theological virtue ethics is a real strength of the tradition. It would therefore be especially unfortunate if theological virtue ethics were found to be necessarily connected to particularism and any attendant rejection of rules. I am not denying the possibility of a particularist theological

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<sup>289</sup> Albrecht Peters, 'Law', in Erwin Fahlbusch et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Christianity* Vol 3. (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 208-216.

<sup>290</sup> Jean Porter, 'Moral Rules and Moral Actions: A Comparison of Aquinas and Modern Moral Theology', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 17 (1989), 123-149 (pp. 123-129).

ethic. But I think that any ethic that is necessarily particularist will be at odds with much of Christian tradition and hence less likely to appeal to theologians.

### Section 3: Is Virtue Ethics Committed to Particularism?

So far, I have explained the debate between particularists and generalists and why I think it is important to maintain some distance between particularism and virtue ethics. In this section I want to investigate whether there is a necessary connection between the two and if so what nature that connection takes. I intend to show that there is a necessary link to a weak form of rule particularism, but that this is not a problem. In fact, the rule particularism is so weak that it barely qualifies as particularist at all.

Virtue ethics is in one sense committed to particularism about rules. At the beginning of this chapter, I gave a definition of particularism in terms of its opposition to generalism. I said that 'this opposition may be of varying strength, arguing that the relationship of moral principles to ethical theory is either minimally relevant, irrelevant, or actively negative/dangerous'. In the section above I discussed the role of prudence in particularism and virtue ethics. Although the importance of prudence does not necessitate the rejection of rules, I acknowledge that it does mean that rules are insufficient for proper moral decision-making. This could form the basis of a very weak rule particularism, which simply holds that rules cannot successfully prescribe for action in every case because prudence is also needed. This could fit with the view that moral principles are minimally relevant. I accept that virtue ethics is committed to this kind of weak rule particularism, but I do not think it is a problem. This version of particularism is so weak that it carries with it almost none of the philosophical problems that a stronger particularism brings. It does not necessarily entail a lack of consistency in ethics or a rejection of moral tradition. It can even allow that rules may be useful in every situation since it may be helpful for the prudent person to know what would

normally be done, even if something different should be done in a particular case. In fact, it is not even clear that this position is properly particularist. Because it gives situational judgement priority over rules, Rossian generalism is perfectly compatible with this position. Despite the significant role that law plays in his thought, Aquinas seems to advocate a very similar position. In his discussion of the virtue of *epikeia*, or equity, he argues that

since human actions, with which laws are concerned, are composed of contingent singulars and are innumerable in their diversity, it was not possible to lay down rules of law that would apply to every single case... if the law be applied to certain cases it will frustrate the equality of justice and be injurious to the common good, which the law has in view.<sup>291</sup>

Precisely because this position is compatible with Rossian generalism, strong particularists like Dancy distance themselves from it: 'Underlying this particularism cannot just be the view that no set of principles will succeed in generating answers to questions about what to do in particular cases. Ross, who stands here as the classic generalist, knew this perfectly well'.<sup>292</sup> Virtue ethics is necessarily particularist, but in such a weak sense that it is not really problematic. In fact, I think it would be more informative to say that virtue ethics rejects basic generalism as described above. This is certainly entailed by the priority of prudence over rules, and describing the position in this way avoids any confusion over the shared ground between Rossian generalism and weak rule particularism.

### Theological Virtue Ethics, Ultimate Reasons, and Particularism

I have shown that the connection between virtue ethics and particularism is minimal at best. I now turn specifically to theological virtue ethics, where there is

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<sup>291</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a2ae 120:1.

<sup>292</sup> Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, p. 56.

another problem which I want to address. Although virtue ethics *per se* is only very weakly particularist, the structure of both Hauerwas and MacIntyre's ethics suggests a much stronger particularism with attendant consequences. Again, I do not want to show that these ethics cannot be particularist. As explained above, I think that particularism can pose problems for virtue ethics and theologians. By showing that neither Hauerwas nor MacIntyre's ethics necessitate strong particularism, I aim to make them accessible for those who do not want to accept the implications of a strong particularist position.

Aquinas is the basis for most theological virtue ethics, including those of Hauerwas and MacIntyre. I think Aquinas's position only entails the very weak rule particularism common to most virtue ethics as outlined above. However, both Hauerwas and MacIntyre also take a position which looks much more strongly particularist. They are both historical (rather than moral) particularists. For the sake of convenience I shall call historical particularism 'historicism' and continue to use particularism to refer to specifically moral particularism. Historicism is the view that thought should (or can only) take place within a specific historical, communal, and narrative framework and that thought above the level of these traditions should be excluded. A weaker version might hold that such thought is possible, but unnecessary. Here is MacIntyre on his historicist position:

There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some tradition or other.<sup>293</sup>

Here is Hauerwas:

More importantly, I will begin to show why Christian ethics must insist on the significance of the qualifier 'Christian.' In contrast to the universalizing tendency, I will argue that Christian ethics reflects a particular people's

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<sup>293</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 350.

history, the appropriation of which requires the recognition that we are sinners... There is not one 'moral system', but many moral systems. Moreover it is not obvious that such systems are primarily constituted by 'moral rules'.<sup>294</sup>

I am not aiming to defend historicism *per se*, but I do want to look at whether it entails or is entailed by any kind of moral particularism. My purpose here is twofold: firstly, I want to show that theological virtue ethicists need not be historicists; secondly, I want to show that those who are historicists are not also committed to an extreme form of particularism. I think that my first point will be easily made. My second point will be harder to make and only a partial success – although I believe it is an acceptable one.

I think that it is fairly easy to see that virtue ethics and the mild particularism to which it is committed need not be historicist. In fact, the thought which forms the basis for most modern virtue ethics is not historicist. MacIntyre is at pains to point this out, lest he be accused of misinterpreting Aristotle. He is well aware that his historicism is 'unAristotelian'.<sup>295</sup> Aristotle is able to maintain the mild rule particularism which I described above without taking a historicist position or becoming inconsistent. A virtue ethics which is historicist as well as particularist must both deny that rules alone can form an effective moral system, and that there is a neutral, universal ground available for rational enquiry. As I have shown, virtue ethics must accept some form of the first statement; but this does not mean that it must accept the second. It is perfectly possible to argue that rules are inadequate *in the same way* for all people, times, cultures and places. It is also possible to argue that prudent moral reasoning functions *in the same way* in every circumstance; that is, it begins from the same principles and exercises the same kind of rationality. I think it is clear that rule particularism does not entail historicism and hence virtue ethics need not be historicist. I now turn to the more

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<sup>294</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>295</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 137.

interesting question – whether historicists like Hauerwas and MacIntyre must also be strong particularists.

At least one theological ethicist thinks that historicism does lead to particularism. O'Donovan is fiercely critical of what he calls an 'all-pervasive' turn to historicism, precisely because he thinks it must result in particularism and relativism.<sup>296</sup> The problem as he sees it is that if historicism is accepted, then there can be no 'universal order of meaning and value' because there will be no 'transhistorical values'.<sup>297</sup> Without such a universal order, values depend on the historical culture which they inhabit. This means that a rule or reason might have a different 'polarity' in a different culture. O'Donovan himself carefully sketches out a theological Rossian generalism similar to Aquinas's:

The plurality of situations and events which characterizes the experience of history... can be seen as a pluriformity in the world-order, which is a capacity for different things to transpire and succeed one another within a total framework of intelligibility... Without a generic order new things would indeed be incomprehensible, for they would be absolutely particular.<sup>298</sup>

At first, it seems that historicism is forced into a strong particularism about both rules and reasons. If, as MacIntyre claims, there are 'rationalities rather than rationality', then surely there are moral rationalities rather than moral rationality.<sup>299</sup> With regard to rules, this means that a rule which applies within one tradition may not apply within another. Suppose I am a member of a tradition which shows respect by taking an interest in others. There might be a rule or social norm of the sort 'always stop and talk to casual acquaintances when possible'. Now suppose someone else is a member of a tradition which shows respect by valuing other people's time. Not only would the previous rule not make sense or apply to

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<sup>296</sup> O'Donovan, p. 58.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>299</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 9.

members of this tradition, they might be expected to conform to a contradictory rule – 'never bother casual acquaintances unless necessary'. If historicism is correct, it does not seem possible that moral rules can apply universally, since any rules will be developed from starting points which may not be accepted by members of another tradition. It may be pointed out that as a matter of fact all traditions do agree on certain rules – perhaps every tradition happens to have derived the rule 'do not kill innocent people' from their starting point. This is not sufficient to avoid particularism, since it is possible for a tradition to exist without that rule (even if in fact one does not). This means that the rule does not correctly guide action in every circumstance in which it could apply.

The same factors suggest that historicism entails reasons particularism. It seems perfectly possible for the same reason to change polarity across traditions. To take the example of two traditions above, the observation 'this conversation will take at least 10 minutes' could very well act in the first tradition as a reason for initiating conversation. In the second tradition, it is likely that it will act as a reason against initiating conversation. The fact that the two traditions are beginning their moral reasoning from different positions brings out Dancy's contention about reasons well. In the first case the length of the conversation is a reason for initiating it. In the second case, it is not that this reason is overridden. Rather, the length of the conversation is precisely why it should *not* be initiated. The possibility for rationality to change across traditions means that the historicist seems to be forced to accept a strong particularism about both reasons and rules. I think this argument is correct; historicism *does* entail particularism, at least in some sense. But I also think that depending on the strength of the historicism it is possible to weaken the particularism to which the historicist is committed. A strong historicism entails a strong particularism; a weak historicism entails a weak particularism. I will now try to show why this is the case with reference to a criticism of particularism based on different types of reasons. I will then finish this chapter by arguing that neither Hauerwas nor MacIntyre are so strongly historicist as to be committed to an unpalatable particularism.

The distinction I want to make is between what are called ultimate and non-ultimate reasons. This distinction is made by Roger Crisp in his argument against Dancy's particularism.<sup>300</sup> Crisp argues that only certain kinds of reasons (non-ultimate reasons) can change their polarity. Ultimate reasons have a fixed moral polarity. An ultimate reason is one which 'grounds' the action in question – that is, the reason *behind* the immediate reason. A non-ultimate reason must itself rely on an ultimate reason to be a legitimate reason. Without an ultimate reason supporting it, a non-ultimate reason will cease to function as a reason. For example, truth-telling is a reason for action *because* it is in accordance with the virtue of honesty. Non-ultimate reasons may change their polarity, but ultimate reasons do not. So truth-telling is a non-ultimate reason because in the context of a game or play it may count *against* an action. This is because in this case not telling the truth does not go against the virtue of honesty – the ultimate reason for action. Dancy attacks Crisp's account of ultimate reasons, saying that Crisp is wrong to identify non-ultimate reasons as partial, and that they can be complete reasons for action by themselves.<sup>301</sup> He argues that a non-ultimate reason may be a complete answer to the question 'What makes this action right?'. I think that Dancy has misunderstood Crisp's position. Crisp is not arguing that a non-ultimate reason is incomplete, at least in the sense that Dancy takes it. Crisp's argument rests on the idea that there can be multiple descriptions of one action.

Elizabeth Anscombe brings out this idea well. She supposes a scenario in which a man poisons a water supply. His single act has several descriptions, each related to one another. Each description functions as a legitimate reason for action; but none would function in this way without his chief intention:

For moving his hand up and down with his fingers round the pump handle *is*,  
in these circumstances, operating the pump; and, in these circumstances, it

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<sup>300</sup> Crisp, 'Particularizing Particularism', pp. 36-40.

<sup>301</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p. 97.

*is* replenishing the house water-supply; and, in these circumstances, it *is* poisoning the household.

So there is one action with four descriptions, each dependent on wider circumstances, and each related to the next as description of means to end; which means that we can speak equally well of *four* corresponding intentions, or of *one* intention – the last term that we have brought in in the series... the last term we give in such a series gives the intention *with* which the act in each of its other descriptions was done, and this intention so to speak swallows up all the preceding intentions.<sup>302</sup>

An ultimate reason acts just like the last term in one of Anscombe's series of intentions; it is the reason which swallows up the other reasons. Because there are several possible descriptions of a single action, it is possible to give several different reasons for the same act. Dancy's point is that a reason which is not a last term – a non-ultimate reason – is just as good a reason as an ultimate reason, in that it provides just as acceptable an explanation of the act. I think that he is correct, but he has missed the point. Crisp is not saying that non-ultimate reasons are incomplete or insufficient explanations. He is saying that unless one of the possible descriptions of an action involves an ultimate reason, then all the other reasons will cease to function as reasons. To use Anscombe's example, 'To operate the pump' and 'to poison the household' are equally good answers to the question 'Why are you doing that?' But if the second reason did not exist (suppose the household is away), then the first reason would no longer be a reason either (unless there is another reason to replace household-poisoning). Crisp is not saying that no description of an action will be satisfactory unless it refers to an ultimate reason; he is saying that at least one of the possible descriptions of every action *must* be an ultimate reason. What this means is that although there will be reasons for action which can change their polarity, at least one description for every action will refer to a reason which cannot change its polarity.

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<sup>302</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 46.

I think the distinction between ultimate and non-ultimate reasons is made by both Aristotle and Aquinas in their discussions of how we act for a final end. I covered in Chapter 1 their shared view that the immediate goals of human action are governed by an ultimate goal – *eudaimonia* or *beatitudo* respectively. The only reason that intermediate goals are sought is that they are thought to aid the pursuit of the ultimate goal: 'It is different with honour, pleasure, intelligence... we choose them also for the sake of our happiness'.<sup>303</sup> This means that ends or reasons for action are done for the sake of a further end; if they no longer serve that further end, then they will no longer be reasons for action or may even count against it. I think this is exactly what Crisp is saying. He is not denying that reasons may change their polarity, or that rules may cease to apply. He is arguing that when this happens, it is because they have ceased to serve the ultimate rule or reason which does not change its polarity. I mentioned in Chapter 2 Aquinas's discussion of natural law, which brings this out well:

Consequently we must say that the natural law, as to general principles, is the same for all, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge. But as to certain matters of detail, which are conclusions, as it were, of these general principles, it is the same for all in the majority of cases... and yet in a few cases it may fail, both as to rectitude... and as to knowledge.<sup>304</sup>

Here Aquinas says that general principles of the natural law always apply, but that more specific principles may not, as they may not always follow from the general principles. I think that Crisp's claim that reasons can be categorised as either ultimate or non-ultimate is correct. I now want to show how this may protect Hauerwas and MacIntyre from extreme particularism.

Strictly speaking, a theory of ultimate reasons defeats particularism, since particularism claims that all rules or reasons can change polarity or become

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<sup>303</sup> Aristotle, 1097b 1-5.

<sup>304</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 94:4.

ineffective. If Crisp is correct then every action has at least one reason which cannot change polarity. In practical terms it may still appear particularist, because it can allow the vast majority of rules or reasons to change polarity. Any theory of rules or reasons which makes the distinction between ultimate and non-ultimate will appear more or less particularist depending on how many ultimate reasons it acknowledges and how abstract they are. Many relatively specific ultimate reasons will allow for several unbreakable rules; a single general ultimate reason will not. Along with Aquinas and Aristotle, I want to suggest that there is a single ultimate reason – good (for Aquinas, synonymous with God). This seems to mean that every other reason and rule is non-ultimate, and so for the main part the particularist is correct. However, I think that it is possible for this view to encompass more specific rules and reasons which do not change their polarity. This is because it is possible to identify certain modes of action which are always in accordance with the good and so in this sense function as ultimate reasons. These modes of action are the virtues. The virtues, guided by practical reason, are always directed towards the good. This means that there is never a situation in which they are not serving the ultimate reason, meaning that in practical terms they can be treated as ultimate reasons themselves.

This protects Hauerwas and MacIntyre from historicism in the following way. If it is possible for there to be ultimate reasons which apply across traditions, then their historicism will not necessitate particularism. What is needed is for there to be a single goal (e.g. the good) which all traditions are aiming for. To take the example of two different traditions above, the reason 'this conversation will take at least 10 minutes' can function in different ways in different traditions. However, each tradition has something in common – they are trying to show respect. Here, conversation-length will function as a non-ultimate reason, whereas showing respect will function as an ultimate reason. It is therefore possible to make a cross-traditional rule 'always show respect'. I think that MacIntyre and Hauerwas both leave space for this possibility. MacIntyre seems to suggest this during a discussion of the virtues, when he says:

The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to those practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good.<sup>305</sup>

Here he seems to make a distinction between goods that are specific to practices and traditions, and the good which appears to be their ultimate goal. The good appears to be cross-traditional. This interpretation seems consistent with MacIntyre's later discussion of Aquinas on prudence, where he makes clear that he thinks the situational, precise judgement of prudence can work together with moral rules: 'There is... certainly no contradiction between Aquinas's emphasis on the indispensability of rules as such and his equal, if not stronger, emphasis on the limitations of rules as such'.<sup>306</sup> He thinks that any attempt on the part of a tradition to avoid providing an 'overriding theory of the good' will necessarily embody such a theory of the good in practice.<sup>307</sup> However, he also says that there is no way to appeal to a universal standard of practical rationality or justice. We can only refer to a tradition-dependent standard.<sup>308</sup> So traditions must make a general claim about the good, but there is no neutral ground from which to make such a claim. I think this is enough to support a theory of ultimate reasons; although traditions may disagree over what the good is, they will all make some claim about it. 'This is good' (whatever good is) will function as a reason in favour of action across traditions. Nor do I think MacIntyre's position rules out the possibility that there is a universal good, but only says that there is no way to access it from a neutral, tradition-independent standpoint. This is his position on truth, which will become important in my discussion of relativism in the next chapter.

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<sup>305</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 204.

<sup>306</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice: Which Rationality?*, p. 196.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

Similarly, Hauerwas insists that there is some ground common to all morality: 'The principle of universalizability is a criterion of moral principles that everyone in fairness must acknowledge regardless of his status, peculiar biographical history, or the commitments and beliefs he holds'.<sup>309</sup> Although they both make room for universal grounds in morality, Hauerwas and MacIntyre elsewhere make explicitly particularist claims. I am not seeking to deny this. I simply want to show that the particularism to which they are committed is a mild one, and not too far distanced from that to which virtue ethics is already committed. Even if either thinker were to commit to a more extreme particularism, the important point is that such a commitment is not necessitated by their historicism. I think that their claim is that there are certain broad principles on which all ethics are founded, or perhaps a single principle – that the good should be pursued. This functions as an ultimate reason. All other moral rules or reasons are internal to traditions, and hence may not always apply (although they may be universal within their own tradition). From the quote above, Hauerwas goes on to say:

It might be objected that I have now given up my claim for the specificity of theological ethics. I have not. The principle of universalizability is a necessary condition of morality, not a sufficient condition. This means that any religious ethics that contradicted the principle would be morally unacceptable, but a religious ethics is not limited to what can be said using the principle as a criterion. Moreover, though I have admitted there is a realm of morality accessible to all men, it is not clear that this merely has a single content. It is a peculiar temptation to think that if morality is objective that it must be one thing, or at least have a single and simple basis.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Self as Story: Religion and Morality from the Agent's Perspective', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 1 (1973), 73-85 (p. 81).

<sup>310</sup> Hauerwas, 'The Self as Story', p. 81.

I think that here is an example of my above claim. Although it is vital, Hauerwas thinks that there is more to morality than universalizability; and this further aspect is contained in traditions and the particular. I do not want to make a claim about exactly how many universals Hauerwas and MacIntyre may allow to apply across traditions. It may be that nothing but 'x is good' will be able to function as an ultimate reason. This does mean that it will be harder to make general (cross-traditional) moral statements, a fact that MacIntyre seems to recognise: 'those conceptions of universality and impersonality which survive this kind of abstraction for the concreteness of traditional or even nontraditional conventional modes of moral thought and action are far too thin and meagre to supply what is needed'.<sup>311</sup> Fortunately it does not entail a strong particularism, as Rossian generalists also agree that 'x is good' is the only true ultimate reason.<sup>312</sup> The theory of ultimate reasons shows that historicism does not entail reasons particularism. In practical terms it may well appear particularist, depending on how many universal reasons are allowed. For Hauerwas and MacIntyre, there will be at least one universal reason, meaning that it will be possible to generate at least some rules across traditions.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter with an extended discussion of the different kinds and strengths of particularism. I explained the basic particularist and generalist positions as well as rule and reasons particularism and Rossian generalism. In the second section I turned to the supposed link between virtue ethics and particularism. I argued that this is principally based on the shared use of prudence and the number of particularist virtue ethicists. I then argued that theological virtue ethics ought to resist this link for two reasons. Firstly, some forms of particularism cause problems for moral education, which plays an important role in virtue ethics.

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<sup>311</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice: Which Rationality?*, p. 334.

<sup>312</sup> Hooker, pp. 1-2.

Secondly, there is a large theological tradition which emphasises the importance of law and rules in moral behaviour and is likely to be at odds with particularism. I then argued that because it argues that rules are insufficient, virtue ethics is committed to rule particularism. This form of particularism is so weak that it is compatible with Rossian generalism and is better understood as a rejection of basic generalism. Virtue ethics is not committed to any kind of reasons particularism. In the final section, I explored the implications of Hauerwas and MacIntyre's historicism. I used the idea of ultimate reasons and final ends to show that it is possible for the historicist to avoid extreme particularism. I argued that because they see some things (notably the good) as applying across traditions, Hauerwas and MacIntyre do indeed avoid an extreme particularism. Neither virtue ethics in general nor theological virtue ethics is committed to any serious form of moral particularism and its attendant problems.

## Chapter 6

### Virtue Ethics and Moral Relativism

In the previous chapter I investigated whether there was a damaging link between virtue ethics and particularism. In what follows, I turn to another theory often associated with virtue ethics: moral relativism. Broadly speaking, moral relativism is the view that there is no absolute standard of morality. It is commonly connected with virtue ethics in a similar manner to the perceived connection between virtue ethics and particularism. Secular virtue ethicists have shown more resistance to relativism than particularism, but typically make at least some concessions. Prior commitments to an ultimate standard of morality grounded in God will make any connection to relativism more problematic for theological virtue ethicists.

Fortunately for theological virtue ethics, those same prior commitments enable it to make a more robust response to the challenge. My goal here is to show that theological virtue ethics is not vulnerable to criticisms which apply to moral relativism, by denying any necessary link between the two theories. I am not aiming to refute moral relativism, and criticisms of it are only discussed in order to show the challenge that theological virtue ethics faces.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first, the nature of relativism and the problems it might cause for virtue ethics are examined. I give clear definitions of relativism and important opposing positions, look at the problems that relativism can cause for moral theory, and examine the nature of the connection between virtue ethics and relativism. I will show that the real problem for virtue ethics has to do not with the apparent cultural relativity of the virtues, but with the relativity of the conception of human flourishing from which standards of virtue are derived. In the second section I look at how virtue ethicists have had to make some concessions to relativism and show that a Thomist understanding of the good for man allows theological virtue ethics to take a more firmly anti-relativist stance. In the third section I address the associations between relativism

and the historicism of MacIntyre, and show that he is able to avoid relativism – although he does have to leave open the possibility of irresolvable moral disagreements. Finally, I look at Hauerwas’s ethics. Although Hauerwas’s exact position is not especially clear, he provides a good example of how theological virtue ethics can avoid some of the more damaging implications of relativism.

## Section 1: Relativism and the Association with Virtue Ethics

### Defining Relativism

There are three different versions of moral relativism: descriptive, normative and metaethical. I am principally concerned with metaethical relativism, but a full treatment of the connection between virtue ethics and relativism will require an understanding of all three types. Here I give definitions for each version, as well as examples of stronger and weaker types of each. I will also define some other key positions which are related or opposed to relativism, such as objectivity and universality.

The first type of relativism, descriptive relativism, is more of an observation than a moral theory. It simply states the following:

As a matter of empirical fact moral disagreements exist, and these disagreements are often between cultures as well as individuals.

Stronger versions may argue that the disagreement is fundamental – that is, it does not depend on misunderstanding or a disagreement about facts.<sup>313</sup> They may also argue that the moral disagreements are more widespread, significant or pronounced than any moral agreement that exists. Descriptive relativism is principally important because it often serves as a basis for the other two types of

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<sup>313</sup> Richard Brandt, 'Ethical Relativism', in *Moral Relativism: A Reader*, ed. by Paul K. Moser and Thomas L. Carson (Oxford: OUP, 2001), pp. 25-31 (pp. 25-6).

relativism, and as such the stronger forms have drawn some attention and criticism.<sup>314</sup> Nevertheless, most ethicists at least accept a weaker form of descriptive moral relativism and there is more significant debate surrounding the other two types of moral relativism.

The second type of moral relativism is normative relativism. Normative relativism claims that:

If a particular moral statement is believed to be correct by a society, then it *is* correct for that society.

For example, suppose that in society A it is believed that eating meat is always wrong, whereas in society B it is seen as perfectly acceptable. Normative relativism holds that, all things being equal, it is wrong to eat meat when in society A *just because* those in society A believe that it is wrong to eat meat. Similarly, it is fine to eat meat in society B because those in society B believe it to be an acceptable thing to do. The moral status of the same action changes depending on the society you happen to find yourself in; it is relative to the society.

More extreme versions of normative relativism may hold that moral truth is relative to each individual person, rather than societies. There is also a weaker form which does not necessarily claim that moral truth varies in such a strong manner, but argues that if a particular moral statement is believed to be correct by a person or society, then they ought not to be condemned for holding or acting in accordance with it. Normative relativism is often associated with tolerance, but the connection is flawed.<sup>315</sup> In order to make this connection, it is assumed that accepting that moral truths vary from culture to culture necessitates the view that other's moral beliefs are just as valid as one's own, and that they ought to be tolerated. The problem with this is that if different moral beliefs can be equally

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<sup>314</sup> Christopher W. Gowans, 'Moral Relativism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2012) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/moral-relativism/>> [accessed 03 June 2013] (paras. 19-29 of 72).

<sup>315</sup> Gordon Graham, 'Tolerance, Pluralism and Relativism' in *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, ed. by David Heyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 44-59 (pp. 46-48).

valid, then normative relativism offers no prescription against moral beliefs intolerant of the views of others. If a society were to believe (among other things) that the correct moral response to opposing views was complete intolerance, then according to normative relativism complete intolerance to opposing views would be the correct behaviour for members of that society.

Metaethical relativism is the third kind of moral relativism and sits at the heart of the connection between virtue ethics and relativism. Metaethical relativism argues that:

Moral statements do not hold absolute truth-value.

This means that any moral statement such as 'Eating meat is bad' can only be true or false relative to something else – usually an individual, society or tradition. So 'Eating meat is bad' may be true for me or for my society, but it is not a universal truth. Stronger versions of metaethical relativism say that all moral statements lack absolute truth-value. Weaker forms may say that this is only the case for some moral statements. Note that metaethical relativism does not claim, as non-cognitivism does, that moral statements have no truth-value but merely that the truth-value that they have is relative.

It is also important to note that even if metaethical relativism is false, it is still possible for the same act to be right in some circumstances and wrong in others if the (absolute, universal) principles which guide action require situational sensitivity. Such a system would not be relativist, but may still *look* like relativism in practice. Metaethical relativism allows that it may be wrong to eat meat in society A and fine in society B because the truth of the statement 'Eating meat is bad' is relative to society A. It is possible to deny metaethical relativism and still say that it is wrong to eat meat in society A and fine in society B – this time, because I am consistently trying to be respectful of traditions where possible. As context is typically very important for virtue ethics, this will become important later when I discuss non-relative virtue.

Finally, I want to point out that although they share some strong similarities, metaethical relativism does not entail normative relativism. It would be consistent with metaethical relativism to say that in every circumstance the truth-value of a moral judgement is *exactly the opposite* of what the relevant society believed it to be. In this case, the truth-value of a moral judgement would be relative to the society in which it was made, but it would not be the case that if a society believed a certain moral judgement to be correct, then it would be correct in that society. This would be a very unusual position. It is typically the case that both normative and metaethical relativism are held together, and a distinction is not always made between them. For this reason, when I refer to relativism in this chapter it should be understood as referring to a position which holds both the standard normative and metaethical relativist positions. I do, however, think that my argument is valid when applied to either position individually.

Before I look at the consequences of a relativist position, I want to clarify the terms most often used in opposition to relativism: absolutism and objectivism. There is some confusion of terms here, and it is not easy to extricate them from each other. The word 'objective' is often used in opposition to 'relative', or to indicate a single standard. Both Foot and Nussbaum, who I will look at shortly, use it in this fashion. However, 'objective' can also have another more specific meaning of 'mind-independent'.<sup>316</sup> When used in this fashion objectivism is opposed to subjectivism and forms part of the moral realist/anti-realist debate. On this understanding it is possible to have an objective relativism (or a subjective non-relativism). For example, the statement 'It is wrong for any society in the northern hemisphere to eat meat' is both relativist (the moral status of eating meat is relative to the society one is in) and objectivist (the relevant factor, geographical location, is mind-independent). 'Moral objectivism' is used to refer to both uses of the term 'objective'. This is especially confusing because the opposing positions of the two forms of objectivism, relativism and subjectivism, are themselves often

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<sup>316</sup> Richard Joyce, 'Moral Anti-Realism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2009) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/moral-anti-realism/>> [accessed 01 June 2013] (para. 47 of 76).

confused despite having some crucial differences. Using the term objective in either sense seems liable to lead to more confusion, so I will avoid using it wherever possible. If it does appear (in quotations etc.) it should be taken as synonymous with absolutism unless otherwise indicated.

Moral absolutism is the position directly opposed to moral relativism. It argues that the truth-value of moral judgements is universal. I defined universalism in the previous chapter on particularism, where it was differentiated from generalism and particularism. To recap, something is universal if its definition does not require reference to an individual. In the case of moral absolutism, that means that the terms right and wrong do not need to refer to individuals. 'X is right because it is in accordance with the views of society A' is relativistic because it refers to an individual (society A) whereas 'X is right because it is in accordance with the categorical imperative' is absolutist because it does not refer to an individual. If something is absolute or universal it cannot be relativist. A good way of understanding the central question for virtue ethics in this chapter is to ask whether or not virtue terms refer to individuals. Before I explore this in more depth I am going to look at some of the problems with relativism.

### Problems with Relativism

This chapter aims to show that there is no necessary connection between relativism and virtue ethics. Before I explain the supposed connection, I want to look at why it is worth avoiding. To do that, I am going to look at some common complaints about relativism. I am not trying to refute relativism, and so I will not discuss the criticisms in depth. James Rachels outlines three important consequences for ethics if moral relativism is correct. Any theory connected to relativism will have to deal with the following problems:

1. 'We could no longer say that the customs of other societies are morally inferior to our own'.<sup>317</sup> This is particularly unpalatable when it is remembered that this does not involve an exhortation to tolerance, which is perfectly possible without holding moral relativism. It also means that there is no way to say that even the most horrendous practices are wrong (except within the bounds of our own society) when practiced in another society. Nor would it be possible to say that the practices of one society are better than another. This problem is more pronounced for forms of relativism which focus on the individual rather than on cultures, simply because such forms of relativism offer many more opportunities for moral variance.
  
2. 'We could decide whether actions are right or wrong just by consulting the standards of our society'.<sup>318</sup> This point is a corollary of the first. If it is not possible to criticise other cultures, it will not be possible for individuals to criticise their own cultures. It will be very difficult for a minority group to effect cultural change because as long as a particular moral view is the cultural standard, then that view will be the correct one. In fact, it will often be the case that dissenting voices are in the wrong *precisely because* they are dissenting. Unlike the first point, this problem will not matter for individualist forms of relativism because they make moral statuses relative to a single opinion, rather than a group.
  
3. 'The idea of moral progress is called into doubt'.<sup>319</sup> It is not only current cultures which relativists cannot criticise but also past ones. It is common to see changes in moral standards as progress but this involves the view that the current standard is morally superior to the previous one, which is not possible for a consistent relativist to hold. Rachels does point out that if

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<sup>317</sup> James Rachels, 'The Challenge of Cultural Relativism' in *Moral Relativism: A Reader*, ed. by Paul K. Moser and Thomas L. Carson (Oxford: OUP, 2001), pp. 53-65 (p. 57).

<sup>318</sup> Rachels, p. 58.

<sup>319</sup> Rachels, p. 58.

moral rightness is relative to cultural ideals rather than opinions or current behaviour then it is possible to understand progress as a culture acting more in accordance with its ideals. Even taking this into account, there is very little room for progress as any change in the ideals themselves will not count.

These criticisms are obviously important. If correct, the relativist is relegated to a very limited form of moral discourse. I also think that many forms of theological ethics may find these problems exacerbated by prior commitments. Below is a short look at each of the criticisms with theological commitments in mind:

- 1a. Different behavioural customs are not necessarily problematic. However, there is usually at least some degree to which theological ethics wants to say that there is a right way to live and act and that this has to do with orientation towards God's purpose and laws. To the extent that a society was opposed to this theological ethics would want to say that they were mistaken. A relativist theological ethic would be denied this.
  
- 2a. Insofar as it is possible, theological ethics will typically look to determine right and wrong with ultimate reference to God's standards, not ours. If relativism is correct, not only is moral dissent difficult or impossible, but right and wrong will be determined by cultural standards and not God's.
  
- 3a. Depending on the ethic, theological ethics might not require any special commitment to a belief that moral progress is being made, but it would want to insist that such moral progress will come about in the kingdom of God. If relativism is correct, there is no real way to say that the kingdom of God is a morally superior society.

For any ethic, being committed to these views would be limiting. Other normative theories are not necessarily committed to either a relativist or non-relativist stance and can choose whether or not to deal with these problems. If virtue ethics is linked to relativism, there will be no such choice – all virtue ethicists will have to answer these complaints. Before I end this section, I will look at how the connection between virtue ethics and relativism is made.

### The Connection between Virtue Ethics and Relativism

On a loose definition of virtue ethics there is no necessary connection between relativism and virtue ethics. If virtue ethics is simply understood as a form of ethics which focuses on character traits rather than acts then it is difficult to see a connection. However, there may be a closer connection between Aristotelian virtue ethics and relativism. I said in Chapter 1 that besides being the most common form of virtue ethics, Aristotelian virtue ethics is also a eudaimonist virtue ethic. This means that it sees *eudaimonia* (the good or flourishing life) as the goal of all action and the virtues as those character traits which lead to *eudaimonia*. It is eudaimonism which makes the connection between virtue ethics and relativism harder to avoid.

On a superficial level, the connection can be made by observing that conceptions of virtue or virtuous behaviour vary across cultures. One culture may value humility; another, pride. One culture may see conscientious objection as cowardly; another, as one form of courage. This is not uniquely a problem for virtue ethics. It is quite possible for moral principles or the idea of happiness to vary across cultures as well. In any case, it does not necessarily entail relativism. It is possible that the virtues are stable across cultures, but are expressed in different ways. For example, both a culture which dislikes conscientious objection and one which permits it may value a right attitude to danger and fear. On its own, cultural

variance in the virtues does not mean that virtue ethics is necessarily relativist, but it does point to a deeper connection. This is recognised by Bernard Williams:

In some part, Aristotle's account of the virtues, with regard to courage, for instance, or self-control, seems very recognizable; in other respects it belongs to another world. What matters for moral philosophy is whether the elements that are culturally more specific can be separated from the main structure.<sup>320</sup>

It is whether the 'main structure' of virtue ethics is relativist which is the real focus of the debate over virtue ethics and relativism.

The true link between virtue ethics and relativism is found in Aristotle's eudaimonism – his connection between the good life and virtue: 'happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with perfect virtue'.<sup>321</sup> The crucial question, then, is not whether the expression of the virtues changes across cultures, but whether the good life – human fulfilment – is culturally specific. For Aristotle, this is certainly not the case. He grounds his conception of the good life in what he takes to be objective facts about humanity. Modern Aristotelians have found it harder to make this claim and have tended to accept that to some extent human fulfilment is culturally relative – in which case, virtue must also be culturally relative.<sup>322</sup>

So the claim that virtue ethics is necessarily relativist rests on the argument that the good life is culturally relative. The fact that virtues vary between cultures is not itself the centre of the argument, but is taken as a symptom of the variance in the good life. Martha Nussbaum picks up on this:

It is not only that the specific forms of behaviour recommended in connection with the virtues differ greatly over time and place, it is also that

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<sup>320</sup> Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 35.

<sup>321</sup> Aristotle, 1102a 4-6, p. 27.

<sup>322</sup> Christopher W. Gowans, 'Virtue Ethics and Moral Relativism' in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. by Steven D. Hales (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 391-410.

the very areas that are singled out as spheres of virtue, and the manner in which they are individuated from other areas, vary so greatly.<sup>323</sup>

Williams has a useful discussion which contains a couple of examples of deeper elements of Aristotle's understanding of the good life displaying cultural variance: the unity of the virtues and the view of the self.<sup>324</sup> He argues that different cultures treat the idea of an egoist or self-focused virtue ethics differently, and that while Aristotle thought it impossible to possess one virtue without the others, we see this as almost trivially false. In order to show that virtue ethics need not be relativist, it will be necessary to show that an absolutist conception of the good life is possible.

So far, I have explained the different types of moral relativism – descriptive, normative and metaethical. I also set out the opposing position, moral absolutism. I looked at the consequences of a relativist ethic and the particular theological implications. Finally, I have shown that the connection between virtue ethics and relativism lies in the supposed cultural relativity of human flourishing, of which the relativity of the virtues is a sign. In the following section, I look at two unsuccessful attempts by Neo-Aristotelian ethicists to deal with relativism before showing that Aquinas's natural law theory provides the universal standard for human flourishing necessary to avoid relativism.

## Section 2: Forming an Absolutist Virtue Ethic

So far I have looked at relativism and its connection to virtue ethics. In this section I look at how Philippa Foot and Martha Nussbaum approach the challenge of moral relativism, and how their shared problems can be resolved by theological virtue ethics. Both struggle to offer an absolutist standard for flourishing, although Nussbaum comes closer than Foot. They each end up adopting a partial form of relativism which Aquinas is able to avoid by grounding the good life in God.

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<sup>323</sup> Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues', p. 244.

<sup>324</sup> Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 35-6.

## Philippa Foot

Foot begins her discussion of relativism by observing that in some arenas, there are disagreements in which no side 'appears to have any more claim to truth than any other'.<sup>325</sup> This is an important part of relativism – that not only are there disagreements, but that no one side seems more true than the other.<sup>326</sup> Having said this, she suggests that this cannot be the whole story. If relativism is true in every sphere, she asks, how can we be sure that the conflicting judgements are about the same thing? For example, if ideas of beauty are entirely relative then it seems that when I say 'A is handsome' and you say 'B is handsome', we are using the word handsome to talk about entirely different things. If, however, we were talking about exactly the same thing then the idea of handsomeness would be absolute. There would be one meaning of the word 'handsome' and so a single standard.

Foot thinks that when it comes to moral judgements or even judgements of taste, there are at least some contexts in which everyone is talking about the same thing – at least some absolute standards. She suggests that anyone who said that the Hunchback of Notre Dame was handsome or that the behaviour of the Nazis was good are clearly wrong – there is some sense in which they are mistaken about the absolute standards of handsomeness or goodness. There must be some basic cross-cultural moral principles, without which the ideas of good and bad cannot 'hold steady'. However, there may be other disagreements which are irreducible:

It is not possible that there should be two moral codes the mirror images of each other, so that what was considered fundamentally right in one community would be considered wrong at the same level in the other...

Nevertheless it does not look as if a correct account of what it is to have a

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<sup>325</sup> Foot, 'Moral Relativism', p. 22.

<sup>326</sup> This is not a full explanation of relativism, however. Some forms of subjectivism, non-cognitivism, and error theory all hold this position as well.

moral thought... will suffice to dismiss relativism throughout the moral sphere.<sup>327</sup>

Foot's position is a partial concession to relativism. Her main concern is with Rachel's first problem above – she does not want to allow that cultures are immune from criticism no matter what their moral position. She avoids this by arguing that the nature of human flourishing allows us to identify certain things we need to be happy. 'It isn't true to suppose that human beings can flourish without these things'.<sup>328</sup> Identifying universal components of the good life, like community and affection, allows us to determine the moral status of some kinds of action, because 'These things have different harvests, and unmistakably different connections with human good'.<sup>329</sup> However, she does not think it possible to provide a sufficiently clear account of the good life to avoid relativism altogether. In order to resolve these disagreements or provide absolute standards, we would need to have a more complete idea of human nature, human life, and happiness which Foot does not think possible:

My thought is that there are some concepts that we do not understand well, and cannot employ competently in an argument, but which are, unfortunately, essential to genuine discussions of the merit of moral systems.<sup>330</sup>

Foot thinks that it is possible to give some idea of what the good life is, but a closer definition is not possible. This means that we can identify a few absolute judgements about moral views that are more extreme because they are clearly in or out of the definition of a good life. Less extreme judgements will still be relative because it is not clear whether or not they can be part of the good life. Foot comes

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<sup>327</sup> Foot, 'Moral Relativism', p. 31.

<sup>328</sup> Foot, 'Moral Relativism', p. 33.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>330</sup> Foot, 'Moral Relativism', p. 34.

to a moderately relativist position. In order to be less relativist, she says that a greater understanding of the good life would be necessary. This is precisely the problem mentioned in Section 1 above. She is unable to reach an absolute standard for human fulfilment apart from a few basic principles and is therefore unable to avoid a partial relativism.

### Martha Nussbaum

Nussbaum attempts to recover absolutism for virtue ethics by providing the more complete idea of human nature Foot is looking for. Her aim is at least partly exegetical – she is trying to show that Aristotle can be a consistent absolutist.<sup>331</sup> She offers a list of unifying human experiences which might represent the correct spheres of virtue. Because the spheres of virtue will demarcate the bounds of human flourishing, this approach should lead Nussbaum away from relativism.

Nussbaum says that Aristotle identifies virtues that pertain to areas of human existence that everyone will have to experience. These areas are those in which 'more or less any human being will have to make some choices rather than others'.<sup>332</sup> Each area has a corresponding virtue. For example, the virtue pertaining to the distribution of limited resources is justice, and the virtue pertaining to the appetites is moderation. Everyone will have to make decisions about each sphere of virtue, which means that regardless of culture we can be sure that, to use Foot's phrase, everyone is talking about the same thing.

Nussbaum advocates 'objective human morality based upon the idea of virtuous action – that is, of appropriate functioning in each human sphere'.<sup>333</sup> The rest of Nussbaum's article is dedicated to considering three objections. The second and third objections are focused on whether there are universal spheres of human experience, and if so whether they exist in the way Nussbaum suggests. I am not going to consider these objections here because even if Nussbaum is given the

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<sup>331</sup> Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues', p. 244.

<sup>332</sup> Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues', p. 245.

<sup>333</sup> Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues', p. 250.

benefit of the doubt, she cannot fully refute relativism. She admits as much in her discussion of the first objection.

The concern in the first objection is that even if Nussbaum has correctly identified universal spheres of virtue, she has not managed to show that there need be unity within the spheres. As long as a society is making decisions in the correct sphere, it will be difficult to say that one of those decisions is better than the other. Suppose there are three societies A, B and C. Those in society A believe that resources ought to be distributed roughly equally, with more given according to merit and need. Those in society B believe that resources ought not to be wasted on the weak, but given to those who are already strong. Those in society C have no opinion; if they ever consider the use of resources, it does not strike them that there need be any decision made on the matter at all. Nussbaum's position allows us to say that society C is wrong; decisions such as these need to be made. But this does not take us very far. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a society like C at all. Surely even a society in which justice was not discussed would make decisions about it when acting? When it comes to societies A and B, Nussbaum cannot say that one is better than the other. Both are making decisions within the sphere of human experience which corresponds to justice.

Nussbaum is at pains to point out that there may be different ways of expressing the same virtue in different cultural contexts, and that this does not entail relativism. Respect of other persons, for example, may be expressed in different ways depending on the context. While this is an important point, it is more relevant to the discussion of particularism in the previous chapter. It does not really address the problem here. Nussbaum is right that two different behaviours within (for example) the sphere of justice may represent two different expressions of the same understanding of justice. The problem is that this does not preclude those two different behaviours actually being representative of two entirely different understandings of what justice is. It is this that Nussbaum needs to avoid, but she allows that it is possible within her system. Like Foot, she also believes that there will be some standards which can be identified as absolute, and so some

understandings of virtue that can be positively identified as correct or incorrect. Even so, she is aware that this does not avoid relativism:

The process of comparative and critical debate will, I imagine, eliminate numerous contenders... But what remains might well be a (probably small) plurality of acceptable accounts. These accounts may or may not be capable of being subsumed under a single account of greater generality.<sup>334</sup>

In responding to this objection, Nussbaum accepts that all she may be able to achieve is to limit the plurality of virtuous responses – again, a concession to relativism. Note, however, that the attempt to define part of the good life is what allows her to limit these concessions. By identifying the spheres of the good life she is able to identify the correct spheres for moral behaviour. She is less relativist than Foot, but not wholly absolutist. This is a direct consequence of having a more complete but still (for my purposes) insufficient account of the good life. Foot and Nussbaum's positions are not necessarily untenable but they are necessarily relativist. Some virtue ethicists may find this kind of partial or restricted relativism satisfactory, but I want to show that it is possible to avoid it altogether.

### Aquinas, Natural Law, and a Universally Good Life

Both Nussbaum and Foot recognise that a universal account of human flourishing will enable virtue ethics to avoid relativism, but neither is able to provide one. I think that Aquinas manages this in his account of natural law. To finish this section I will explain the account and why it avoids relativism. I want to show that it is Aquinas's reliance on God as the goal of human action that allows him to do this, meaning that theological virtue ethics is better placed than secular virtue ethics to avoid relativism.

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<sup>334</sup> Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues', p. 256.

One of the key differences between Aristotle and Aquinas which I discussed in my introductory chapter is their different conceptions of humanity's end. Aquinas and Aristotle agree that there is a single ultimate end or goal for human life and action, although they differ on what this end consists in. Both think that humanity can currently only access an incomplete version of this end.<sup>335</sup> Whereas Aristotle thinks that this is the only version of the ultimate end that can be reached, Aquinas says that there is a twofold good. It is possible to reach a second, complete version of the ultimate end (the vision of God) in the next life:

For man's happiness consists essentially in his being united to the Uncreated Good, which is his last end, as shown above... nevertheless the operations of the senses can belong to happiness, both antecedently and consequently: antecedently, in respect of imperfect happiness, such as can be had in this life, since the operation of the intellect demands a previous operation of the sense; consequently, in that perfect happiness which we await in heaven.<sup>336</sup>

Aquinas says that the desire for God as the ultimate end is universal. Crucially, God is the end of all things, not just humanity: 'God is the last end of man and of all other things'.<sup>337</sup> So, unlike Foot, Aquinas is able to give a clear explanation of what human happiness consists in. All humanity – in fact, all creation – finds fulfilment in being 'united to the uncreated Good'. This provides for Aquinas a universal standard of human flourishing. Since the virtues are those character traits which lead to flourishing, Aquinas also has a universal standard for the virtues. Every culture has the same goal in action – unity with God. This means that in every culture, those dispositions which lead towards this goal are the virtues, and dispositions which do not lead to God are not virtues. Crucially, this is not dependent upon (and hence relative to) the beliefs of the culture. The good life – and therefore virtue – is absolute.

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<sup>335</sup> Aristotle, 1101a 20.

<sup>336</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 3:3.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 1a2ae 1:8.

Strictly speaking, this is all that Aquinas needs to successfully avoid relativism. However, as things stand his theory will look very like relativism. So far, he can say that the virtues are absolute and that they are those traits which lead to God. However, this does not actually tell us a great deal about what the virtues are. With no further information we will not know whether or not a particular action is virtuous or not. For the purposes of refuting relativism, this does not really matter; the rightness or wrongness of an action is absolute. For the purposes of a complete moral theory, it is extremely important. The confidence that an action is universally, absolutely either virtuous or not will not be very useful unless there is some way of telling which it is. Without this it seems that Aquinas would still be vulnerable to some of Rachel's criticisms of relativism. It would not be possible to criticise other cultures or our own culture, past or present. Note that it would not be because all cultures are equally right (as with relativism) that we could not criticise them; it would be because we could not tell which were right and which were wrong.

Fortunately, Aquinas has something to say about the content of the virtuous life. We can know more about human flourishing because of the natural law. I covered the relationship between natural law and virtue in Chapter 2, and touched on it again in the last chapter. The natural law is our participation in the eternal law, which is the governing of the whole universe by divine reason.<sup>338</sup> It inclines us to act towards the last end in accordance with our nature. Some of these inclinations are shared with other beings and things (e.g. the desire to preserve our being) and others are unique to us:

Because in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances: inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being... Secondly, there is in man an inclination... according to that nature which he has in common with other animals... such as sexual intercourse, education of offspring and so

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<sup>338</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 91:1-2

forth. Thirdly, there is in man an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society: and in this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to the natural law; for instance, to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things regarding the above inclination.<sup>339</sup>

Aquinas thinks that we have a natural inclination towards our goal in God. From this, we can identify which habits are virtuous – they are the ones which fulfil the natural inclinations outlined above. This gives a good deal more content to work with when identifying virtues. Not only can Aquinas avoid relativism, but he also provides a way to discern where a particular habit or action lies according to the absolute standard of human good found in God. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Aquinas thinks that all acts of virtue are prescribed by the natural law – although not all of its principles are easily grasped.

Finally, I want to note that Aquinas, like Nussbaum, is aware that situational sensitivity does not require relativism. He is clear in his discussion of natural law that acting in accordance with it will require practical wisdom and an awareness of context:

The practical reason, on the other hand, is busied with contingent matters, about which human actions are concerned: and consequently, although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects... in matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 1a2ae 94:2.

<sup>340</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 94:4.

He gives the example that goods held in trust ought to be returned, but that this principle can be waived in some specific circumstances. He is clear that in these circumstances there is still a universal good indicated by the natural law – but this may have to be expressed in different ways depending on the circumstances. This variation means that although Aquinas's ethic is not relativist, the virtuous thing to do may still depend on cultural norms. It is an example of the kind of ethic discussed above – one in which the absolute, universal principles which guide action require situational sensitivity. Although this may look like relativism in practice, none of Rachel's consequences discussed in Section 1 apply. It is still the case that different cultures may be more or less right, that we may criticise our own culture, and that we may see moral changes as progress (or regress).

Aristotelian ethics is grounded in observations about the human good. This is also the case for Aquinas, but he goes further; the ground of the human good itself is in God. Everything finds its good in God. Modern Aristotelian forms of virtue ethicists, like Foot and Nussbaum, struggle to provide an absolutist ethic because they lack a picture of a unified human good. Aquinas provides this. He can also accept that the actions required by the natural law may vary in particular circumstances without losing their absolute moral status, since right and wrong will always be determined by whether an attitude/action is oriented towards God. Theological virtue ethics is able to avoid relativism because God, rather than particular facts about humanity, is the ground for human flourishing. In the next section I want to look at two theological ethicists who have been accused of relativism and how they might respond.

### Section 3: Relativism in MacIntyre and Hauerwas

So far I have explained the different forms of relativism and how they are connected to virtue ethics via eudaimonism. I have shown that an inability to provide a universal conception of the good life leaves secular virtue ethicists unable

to avoid relativism. Aquinas's reliance on God as humanity's final end means that theological virtue ethics does not face these problems. I have shown that theological virtue ethics is not necessarily relativist; this does not mean that it must not or cannot be relativist – it is not restricted. Any theological ethic which is relativist will have to deal with some of the attendant criticisms outlined above. In this section, I am going to look at relativism as it appears in MacIntyre and Hauerwas. I want to show that MacIntyre, although often accused of being a relativist, need not be. Aquinas will prove useful in understanding why this is the case. Hauerwas makes both relativist and absolutist statements, but treated as a relativist I think that he may be able to avoid some of Rachel's criticisms. In the last part of this section I briefly point to how this might be done.

### MacIntyre's Historicism and Relativism

As discussed in my chapter on particularism, historicism is the view that thought should (or can only) take place within a specific historical, communal, and narrative framework and that thought above the level of these traditions should be excluded. Both MacIntyre and Hauerwas are historicists and both have been accused of relativism. In this section I want to look at the connection drawn between relativism and historicism, and whether it can be avoided.

The link made is as follows: If each tradition includes a separate, self-contained moral structure, then each tradition will have different and to some degree conflicting moral views. There is no way to assess these views from a neutral, non-tradition bound standpoint. In this case, the truth-value of moral statements will be relative to the tradition in which they are made. What is right in one tradition may be wrong in another. Because thought is restricted to the level of tradition, it will be impossible to access any kind of universal standard. Moral thought is not the only form of reasoning to be limited in this way; rationality in general is unable to reach beyond traditions.

If this is the case, then it seems that as well as particular moral judgements being relative, any conception of the human good will necessarily be culturally relative, putting the historicist in the same boat as Foot and Nussbaum. O'Donovan, whose opposition to historicism I mentioned in the last chapter, directly refers to MacIntyre as an example of a modern eudaimonist who cannot avoid relativism. O'Donovan's complaint is that by rejecting Aristotle's natural teleology, MacIntyre has no cross-cultural account of the human good and so no way to avoid relativism: 'MacIntyre cannot break with the modernity which he repudiates; and that is because he believes the moderns rather than Aristotle on the question of natural teleology'.<sup>341</sup>

MacIntyre himself gives an example of the differences between traditions which nicely illustrates his position's similarity to relativism. In Chapter 17 of *After Virtue* he asks us to consider a dispute between two people, A and B. A believes that he ought not to be taxed very highly, as he has a right to his property and earnings. B believes that higher taxation is the only just and effective way of rectifying social inequalities and helping the poor.<sup>342</sup> MacIntyre's point is that there are different and incompatible traditions of justice at play here, and that these differences are reflected at the level of moral philosophy. Note, though, what he says in explaining the point: 'Our pluralist culture possesses no method of weighing, no rational criterion for deciding between claims'.<sup>343</sup> And later: 'Moral philosophy... reflects the debates and disagreements of the culture so faithfully that its controversies turn out to be unresolvable in just the way that the political and moral debates themselves are'.<sup>344</sup>

I think it is understandable that MacIntyre has been accused of relativism. These quotes are just something a relativist might say. After all, according to relativism, MacIntyre is quite right that there is 'no rational criterion for deciding between claims'. Nevertheless, there is more to it. For one thing, MacIntyre himself

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<sup>341</sup> O'Donovan, p. 222.

<sup>342</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 227-229.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

is adamant that he is not a relativist. He addresses the accusations of relativism in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*.<sup>345</sup> He argues that each tradition is not only subject to its own standards, since it may be that it shares some principles with another tradition, meaning that it would have to accept criticism from that tradition as long as it was based on shared standards. So, for example, traditions A and B may share moral principle P. This means that judgements based on P are not relative to either tradition A or B. Each tradition may be criticised or praised by the other because of their shared principles.

I think this misses the point. On MacIntyre's account, there is still no way to hold to account a tradition which does not share principles with other traditions. A moral judgement based on P may be shared by traditions A and B, in which case it is not relative to either A or B alone. However, it *is* relative to A and B together, and there is no reason that A and B's shared values should be absolute and universal. Suppose that tradition C does not share P with A or B. There is no way for A or B to criticise C and no way to judge which is better. It is perfectly possible for cultures *not* to share principles, in which case their moral decisions will be relative to their (differing) cultures. To avoid relativist consequences it would have to be the case that every culture shared every principle, which is unlikely in the extreme – and in any case, this would still technically be a relativist position. It would just have happened that all the culturally relative moral judgements were the same across cultures. The judgements in question would still not be absolute, since it would be hypothetically possible for a culture to exist which was not bound to them.

MacIntyre also argues that there is no tradition-based standpoint from which it would be possible to be a relativist. This is because to be in a tradition one has to accept its principles as true. Since it is impossible to act from outside a tradition, one cannot act as though (or even believe that) other traditions may be just as true.<sup>346</sup> There are two problems with this response. Firstly, Christopher Gowans

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<sup>345</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, pp. 349-369.

<sup>346</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, pp. 367-8.

points out that by MacIntyre's own account a tradition may be in 'epistemological crisis', which may allow someone to be both part of a tradition and relativist.<sup>347</sup> If a tradition is in flux, it is indeed possible for its members to think that other opposing principles may be correct. Secondly, even if MacIntyre is correct this claim does not do the work he needs. Even if by virtue of their traditions no-one was able to believe in the truth of moral relativism, this would not in itself affect whether relativism was actually true or not. The truth-value of the thesis of moral relativism is not itself relative to cultures or individuals. Moral relativism is not necessarily attendant with cognitive or epistemological relativism, which is what would be required for MacIntyre's point to stand.<sup>348</sup>

On this account, I do not think MacIntyre can avoid relativism. He may avoid the second and parts of the third problem with relativism discussed by Rachels. MacIntyre is quite careful to say that a tradition can grow and change, and that there may be development of its own principles. In this case, then, it may be possible for a tradition to critique its past self for not correctly understanding its own principles. It may also be possible to view this as a form of moral progress. However, criticism of other cultures and of one's own tradition (insofar as past versions had truly different principles) is still invalid. In a later article 'Moral relativism, truth, and justification', MacIntyre seems to take a stronger position. Here he argues that truth is something tradition-independent which all moral discourse in all traditions aims at. This seems similar to the universal good discussed when I looked at MacIntyre during my chapter on particularism. He says that attaining truth involves 'transcending the limitations of... particular and partial standpoints' and that all traditions make a 'claim to substantive truth for their accounts of the nature, status and ground of moral practices and judgement'.<sup>349</sup> I think that this allows him to avoid relativism, since it does provide an absolute standpoint. There may still be cultural variation in how a true moral judgement is

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<sup>347</sup> Christopher W. Gowans, 'Virtue Ethics and Moral Relativism' pp. 401-402.

<sup>348</sup> Emrys Westacott, 'Cognitive Relativism' in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by James Fieser and Bradley Dowden <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/cog-rel/>> [accessed 04 July 2013] (paras. 1-4 of 38).

<sup>349</sup> MacIntyre, 'Moral relativism, truth, and justification', pp. 58, 61.

expressed or correctly acted upon, but whether or not the judgement is correct will be universal.

It is not initially clear whether this is consistent with his historicism. Perhaps Hauerwas offers an answer in his article *The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre*, when he says that MacIntyre is arguing, with Aquinas, that 'first principles are not simply given before our engagement in a mode of enquiry'.<sup>350</sup> MacIntyre is saying that truth (as well as other universals) is not something humans can access from outside a tradition, because we can only know these universals through their effects, which will always be received through the mediation of a tradition. Truth is something tradition-independent, but it cannot be accessed independently of tradition. This means that MacIntyre can have a universal standard for moral judgement and still consistently hold the central historicist claims that thought can only take place from inside a tradition, and that thought outside a tradition is impossible.

MacIntyre has said that truth is the absolute standard on which his non-relativist moral theory hangs. In another essay, he says more about what truth is and how it is connected to moral enquiry. He argues that an adequate conception of truth must 'be embedded in a larger teleological view of human nature'.<sup>351</sup> He advocates Aquinas's view that 'Every human being... has by nature a desire for that happiness which is only achieved in union to God, integral to which is a recognition of God as the truth and of all truth as from God'.<sup>352</sup> MacIntyre's absolutist claim turns out to be founded on the same understanding of human flourishing as Aquinas: 'True happiness consists in seeing God, who is pure truth'.<sup>353</sup> This determination of truth by and in God links nicely with the avoidance of relativism discussed above, and allows MacIntyre a response to O'Donovan's complaint that he has no universal account of human flourishing.

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<sup>350</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre', in *Learning to Speak Christian*, ed. by Stanley Hauerwas (London: SCM, 2011), pp. 202-213 (p. 209).

<sup>351</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Truth as a good: A reflection on Fides et Ratio', in *The Tasks of Philosophy*, ed. by Alasdair MacIntyre (Cambridge, CUP 2006), pp. 197-215 (p. 213).

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>353</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 5:1.

On MacIntyre's view, God will still provide an absolute standard for morality. The implications of his historicism are that there may be no clear way to resolve disagreements, since although there is an independent standard, we cannot know it from outside a tradition. He says as much in *Whose Justice*. The fact that it may be impossible for us to determine the absolute truth-value of a particular moral statement may be unfortunate; but it does not follow that there is no such absolute truth-value. I think that MacIntyre's position is similar to that of Aquinas without the natural law discussed above.<sup>354</sup> He has successfully refuted relativism, but his system may look very like relativism in practice. Although there is an absolute standard for the good life and virtue, it will not be possible to determine in a tradition-independent way what it is. MacIntyre therefore has limited success. He is not a relativist, and his historicism means that he can avoid some of the problems attendant with relativism. However, he is forced to admit that it will be difficult and sometimes impossible to judge or criticise other societies.

### Hauerwas and an Acceptable Relativism

In the final part of this chapter I want to look at the relationship between Hauerwas and relativism. My discussion will be brief; my objective was to show that theological virtue ethics is not necessarily relativist, and to examine what such an absolutist ethic looks like. In my discussions of Aquinas and MacIntyre, I have achieved this. I now want to look at Hauerwas to show how relativism might be accommodated within theological virtue ethics. Hauerwas's position on relativism is difficult to pin down. In at least one place, he seems to say clearly that he is a relativist: 'I cannot (nor do I wish to) deny that the position I hold involves a certain kind of relativism'.<sup>355</sup> Elsewhere, he seems to take a position closer to MacIntyre:

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<sup>354</sup> He is free to discuss the natural law, and in fact cites it positively – but from within a tradition. Its presence in his later Thomism does not therefore form part of his rejection of relativism.

<sup>355</sup> Hauerwas, 'The Church in a Divided World', p. 67.

I have no reason to deny that human nature may well require a fundamental orientation to truth, but I do not think it possible to abstract such truthfulness from its various narrative contexts in order to make it the basis of a 'universal' and 'objective' ethic.<sup>356</sup>

This suggests a position similar to Aquinas without natural law, where there is a universal model for human flourishing but it is difficult to extract from that the nature of the virtues. Moral judgements and the virtues are not relative, but it is impossible to know what the correct (absolute, universal) values are. As I said above, this is not a relativist position, although in practice it will function in a very similar fashion.

Hauerwas's view is complicated further by his uneasy relationship with natural law, which he thinks may lead to legalism but recognises as in some way important to theological ethics. I explore this a little further in Chapter 8. Whether Hauerwas has a consistently relativist or absolutist position is unclear. Whatever his exact stance he is clearly comfortable with some form of relativism. Working with the assumption that he is a relativist, it becomes clear that Hauerwas's thought offers a useful navigation of how relativism and theological virtue ethics might fit together.

I have been clear that just as theological virtue ethics is not necessarily relativist, it is not necessarily absolutist. I want to indicate how an avowedly relativist theological virtue ethics might go about avoiding the problems raised by Rachels above. To recap, the problems were that relativism precludes criticism of other cultures, criticism of one's own culture by minorities, and the idea of moral progress. Hauerwas argues that the characters and narratives of individuals and societies provide a basis for cross-cultural discussion and occasional criticism:

The truthfulness of Christian convictions resides in the power of those convictions to form a people sufficient to acknowledge the divided character

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<sup>356</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 59.

of the world... The task of the Christian is not, therefore, to demonstrate that all other positions are false – though critical questions may often be appropriate – but to be a witness to the God that they believe embraces all truth.<sup>357</sup>

Hauerwas's claim is that although there is no way to achieve an absolutist understanding of the good for humanity, there is a way to communicate with other cultures through the narrative of our own:

But objectivity is achieved in neither instance by positing a position that assumes that we can find a place to stick our heads above history. Rather objectivity comes from being formed by a truthful narrative and community from within history. Christians claim that by conforming our lives in a faithful manner to the stories of God we acquire such skills as a community and as individuals. Of course, this remains a 'claim' as there is no way within history to prove that such a story must be true. This does not however mean that we are without resources for testing such a claim since the very story they hold directs us to observe the lives of those who live it as a crucial indication of the truth of their convictions.<sup>358</sup>

Hauerwas's position is that the members of a Christian community will be living evidence of the truth of their claims. If this is the case, then the living evidence of individual and cultural narratives will speak to (and presumably sometimes against) the moral judgements of other cultures and individuals.

I think that Hauerwas manages to reduce but not eliminate the sting of some of the consequences of relativism. His position does not really allow direct criticism of other cultures, but it does allow discourse, comparison, and the setting of examples. Presumably the same will be true for individuals and minority groups

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<sup>357</sup> Hauerwas, 'The Church in a Divided World', p. 60.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62-3.

within their own cultures, and to some extent a culture will be able to compare itself to its past self. Although moral discourse will be possible, the ability to resolve disputes is limited. Beyond setting a better example, there is not much room to say that one culture is more right than another. In any case, the idea of one narrative setting a 'better' example than another is problematic, since what makes one narrative better than another will presumably be relative to culture. Perhaps this problem can be partially resolved by referring to a more attractive example rather than a better one – although it seems to me that this would bring Hauerwas very close to the view that the more attractive a society, the more morally right it is. I doubt that Hauerwas's position will suffice for everyone, but it does offer another way for theologians to approach moral relativism.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown why moral relativism might be a problem for theological virtue ethics and how it can be avoided or dealt with. I began by explaining the different kinds of moral relativism and the opposing position – moral absolutism. I looked at the criticisms which relativists are faced with, and explained how virtue ethics and relativism are supposedly linked because virtue ethics cannot provide an absolutist *eudaimonia*. In the second section I looked at two examples of this – Foot and Nussbaum's attempts to avoid relativism result in two partially relativist virtue ethics which are only able to avoid relativism when it comes to more extreme moral judgements. Aquinas is able to avoid this with his claim that God is the source of the good life. God and the natural law allow theological virtue ethics to take the fully absolutist position which secular virtue ethics cannot. Finally, I looked at the historicist ethics of MacIntyre and Hauerwas. MacIntyre takes a Thomist position which allows him to remain absolutist, although his historicism leaves him vulnerable to some of the problems which beset relativism. Hauerwas shows how theological virtue ethics might build a more acceptable relativism by

focusing on narrative to build discourse between cultures. MacIntyre and Hauerwas are excellent examples of the way in which theological virtue ethics is free from any necessary commitment either for or against relativism. Aquinas offers the secure grounding for human flourishing that secular virtue ethics lacks, and in so doing ensures that theological virtue ethics is not necessarily relativist.

## Chapter 7

### Is Virtue Ethics Egoist?

In this chapter, I will look at the claim that virtue ethics is egoist. The idea that virtue ethics in some way advocates a selfish or self-interested moral agenda is one of the more persistent accusations against it. This is at least partly because there are so many forms of the criticism; single-argument answers cannot effectively deal with all the different nuances of each complaint. With this in mind, I begin this chapter with a section differentiating between different forms of egoism; rather than providing a single definition, I show that the term 'egoism' and a companion term 'self-centredness' represent several positions. Once they are clear, I look at some of the main complaints about egoism in general, including the claim that it is inconsistent and that it is not a moral theory at all. I then explain the connections made between virtue ethics and egoism. The main link involves the self-focused nature of *eudaimonia*, but there are other connections made based on the central role of character to virtue ethics and the fact that possession of the virtues is beneficial.

Once the various positions and their supposed connection to virtue ethics are understood, I look at each form of egoism and argue that none of the connections are necessary. The strongest forms of egoism are clearly not linked to virtue ethics. Although the association between virtue ethics and weaker versions of egoism gains some traction, it can be avoided. In doing so, however, the virtue ethicist may have to accept a self-effacing position, which may be a problem. The link between virtue ethics and self-centredness is much more tenacious. It is very difficult for the virtue ethicist to deny that the agent's character is more central to moral deliberations than the character of others. The best response to this problem is a *tu quoque*, which is not altogether satisfying.

Having shown which forms of egoism and self-centredness cause most difficulty for virtue ethics, I argue that the prior ontological commitments of

theological virtue ethics allow it to avoid any necessary association with either self-effacingness or self-centredness. I show that Aquinas's belief that God is the last end and universal good means that his ethics is God-centred rather than agent-centred.

## Section 1: Several Kinds of Egoism

As I have said above, there are many different definitions of egoism. Perhaps the only common theme is that in any egoist theory, self-interest plays a central or foundational role, beyond that which it plays in other related theories. This role can be either explanatory or normative. Often (but not always) this is accompanied by regard for others playing a correspondingly diminished role in the theory. Although a helpful starting point, this is clearly not sufficient for a useful definition. For one thing, non-egoist theories usually have some role for self-interest and so the line between what is, or is not, an egoist theory is not necessarily clear. In this first section I will make some general category distinctions before setting out in more detail the versions of egoism which are potentially connected to virtue ethics.

The first distinction I want to make is between psychological, rational, and ethical egoism. Psychological egoism is a descriptive view that as a psychological fact people typically or always act from self-interested motives.<sup>359</sup> Although it may serve for a justification or basis for normative forms of egoism, it is not in itself a moral theory and will not be discussed here. I am also going to avoid discussion of rational egoism. This is the view that it is necessary and sufficient for character or actions to be rational that they promote or maximise the agent's self-interest.<sup>360</sup> Like psychological egoism, rational egoism will likely have moral implications if accepted; but since it makes no direct moral claims, I am not concerned with it

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<sup>359</sup> Richard Kraut, 'Egoism and altruism', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Craig (2013)

<<http://www.rep.routledge.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/article/L126SECT1?ssid=1302287384&n=2#>> [accessed September 16 2013] (para. 3 of 3).

<sup>360</sup> Robert Shaver, 'Egoism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2010) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/egoism/>> [accessed 17 September 2013] (para. 50 of 71).

here. The kind of egoism I am going to concentrate on is ethical egoism (henceforth egoism).

As I have said, egoism is difficult to pin down. Perhaps all that can be said in general is that according to all forms of egoism, self-interest plays a central role in determining moral standards and as such the pursuit of self-interest is in some way morally obligatory. Differences in definitions arise over *which* moral standards are determined by self-interest and over the nature of the requirement which this produces. For example, one form of egoism may claim that rightness in action is determined by self-interest, tending towards a more consequentialist ethic in which the production of self-serving results is paramount. Another may say that self-interest is in fact determinative of goodness in motive or character, meaning that self-interested intentions may be what is morally important. Further splits may appear over whether self-interest is both necessary and sufficient, or merely necessary, for moral goodness or rightness in the relevant sphere. Forms of egoism which see self-interest as both necessary and sufficient (in whatever way) can entirely exclude concern for others from moral deliberation.

Any single definition of egoism will either exclude some versions of the theory or be unhelpfully vague. It is more helpful to break the term into several different definitions. By doing this, it will be easier to make clear exactly which aspects of egoism are connected to virtue ethics, and why they might cause problems. First, I want to make a distinction between individual and universal egoism. The individual egoist follows the principle that they ought to act to promote their own self-interest.<sup>361</sup> They are entirely uninterested in what others do, and do not see it as a moral question at all. The universal egoist extends this principle to all agents, arguing that everyone ought to act to promote their own self-interest. Individual egoism suffers from a serious and obvious inconsistency. It believes that the good of the self is a moral good, but the good of others is not. It makes no distinction between the two, other than the fact that my good is *mine*, and

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<sup>361</sup> J. A. Brunton, 'The Devil Is Not a Fool, or Egoism Re-Visited', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 12 (1975), 321-330 (p. 327).

therefore morally important whereas the good of others is not. It thereby breaks the common demand that morality be universal. As it is largely discredited, I will not consider individual egoism in any depth here.

I will begin with the following definition of egoism: 'self-interest ought to be one's exclusive or only concern'.<sup>362</sup>This is a fairly common kind of egoism.<sup>363</sup> As it stands, it allows for some very strong positions. The strongest (and least plausible) takes the following position: that one ought to be exclusively concerned with exclusively self-interested actions. This rules out for the egoist any act which benefits another, even if it would also benefit the egoist as well. Only acts which are entirely and exclusively self-serving will count. This means that the egoist will be prevented from many actions which would benefit them if those actions would also benefit someone else. This range of actions is so broad I find it difficult to see how this kind of egoist could function effectively at all. At the very least, they would be prevented from entering employment or forming any but the most warped kind of human relationship. A more plausible approach is to restrict the exclusivity to motives. This would mean that any act performed by the egoist would have to be motivated only by self-interest. On this understanding, the range of acts available to the egoist is completely open. It is perfectly possible to act in a way that benefits others as well as oneself. In fact, the egoist could act in a way that exclusively benefited others, although this would require that they mistakenly believed that the act would benefit them as well. As long as the egoist is only motivated by their own self-interest, any action is permissible.

This second kind of egoism does allow the agent to function somewhat normally, but there is another problem. It allows the maltreatment of other people as long as such maltreatment serves the agent's interest. In fact, if the agent is required to maximise rather than simply seek their own self-interest, this theory will actually demand that the agent mistreat others in certain circumstances. Not all

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<sup>362</sup> Regis, Jr., p. 51.

<sup>363</sup> See: Bernard Williams, 'Egoism and Altruism' in *Problems of the Self*, ed. by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), pp. 250-265., Daniel Putman, 'Egoism and Virtue', *The Journal of Value Enquiry*, 26 (1992), 117-124.

egoists see this as a flaw in the theory. In his article 'In Defense of Egoism', Jesse Kalin says: 'a person could be morally justified in cheating on tests, padding expense accounts, swindling a business partner, being a slum landlord, draft-dodging, lying, and breaking promises... Judged from inside "standard morality" the first actions would clearly be immoral'.<sup>364</sup> A much weaker version of egoism removes exclusivity from the definition, and simply requires that the agent act so as to promote their own self-interest. This weaker theory can sit alongside other requirements such as a requirement to consider the interests of others. However, it is so weak that it is doubtful whether it is sufficient to differentiate egoism from other moral theories. It would be a strange moral theory which had no provision for the agent's interest, or did not (all things being equal) advocate acting to promote it.<sup>365</sup>

Edward Regis offers a good general definition of a strong egoism:

Such a definition must satisfy three conditions: (a) it must emphasize pursuit of self-interest (in order to properly qualify as egoistic); (b) it must neither require such pursuit to be the exclusive or only end of action, nor that one do all those actions which might be to one's interest (satisfaction of this condition would make possible the introduction of constraints against conduct harmful to others); and (c) it must deny that positive action for the good of others is morally obligatory (this condition separates egoism from other ethical theories which, while permitting self-interested action, demand action for the interests of others).<sup>366</sup>

There are obviously some differences between this definition and the ones above. It finds a middle ground between the stronger, more objectionable versions and the weak and ineffectual one. The removal of the demand for exclusively self-interested

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<sup>364</sup> Jesse Kalin, 'In Defense of Egoism' in David P. Gauthier (ed.), *Morality and Rational Self-Interest* (London: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 64-87 (p. 65).

<sup>365</sup> Regis, Jr., pp. 54-55.

<sup>366</sup> Regis, Jr., p. 60.

actions or motives means that there is no demand that the agent act uncharitably. However, the prioritisation of self-interested behaviour along with the explicit denial that concern for others is obligatory means that it retains a distinctively egoistic character. I will take this definition as my working representation of a strong form of egoism.

I also need to provide a useful representative for weaker forms of egoism. The weak form above – that the agent ought to act to promote their own self-interest – can be interpreted in such a broad way that it is unhelpful. Julia Annas offers a good candidate. According to her, egoism is the view that ‘my own good is the ethical standard for what it is right for me to do’.<sup>367</sup> This is a helpful definition because it captures the spirit of the previous weak definition while remaining distinctive. Under Annas’s definition, the advancement of the agent’s self-interest is their moral priority. Unlike the stronger definitions, moral action for the sake of others may be required – but this will always be secondary to the pursuit of the agent’s own good. In order to distinguish it from self-centredness (described below) I want to add a clause to the definition. I suggest that weak egoism is the view that ‘my own good is the ethical standard for what it is right for me to do, and my primary goal in acting.’ I will take this amended version of Annas’s definition as a good example of a weaker egoism.

There is a further distinction to be made between this weak form of egoism and ‘self-centredness’. Unlike egoism, self-centredness does not necessarily prioritise self-interested action or motives. What it does do is make the agent the only thing of non-conditional moral value. All other things – moral principles, other people, particular actions etc. – gain their moral value from their relationship to the agent. So a self-centred theory might demand that the agent act only from a desire to help others, but the reason for this demand would be that it was in some way

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<sup>367</sup> Julia Annas, ‘Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism’ in *Morality and Self-Interest*, ed. by Paul Bloomfield (Oxford: OUP, 2008) pp. 205-221 (p. 205).

important to the agent (perhaps to improve their character). In a self-centred theory, 'nothing is loved truly for its own sake – except the agent himself'.<sup>368</sup>

It is clear that thinking of egoism as a single fixed position is not helpful. It is better thought of as a spectrum of views, which includes the strong and weak definitions given, as well as self-centredness. Later in this chapter, I will examine whether or not these views are linked to virtue ethics. I plan to show that the strength of the egoist view is inversely related to its connection to virtue ethics; as the view becomes weaker, the connection to virtue ethics becomes stronger. Before I show how this happens, I will look at some of the problems with egoism to explain why such a connection could be a problem for virtue ethics.

## Section 2: The Trouble with Egoism and the Link to Virtue Ethics

The point in this chapter, along with the chapters on particularism and relativism, is to disconnect theological virtue ethics from some other moral theories that can be associated with it. This serves several purposes. Most importantly, it means that virtue ethics need not be vulnerable to criticism by association with the separate theories. It also means that the virtue ethicist is less restricted regarding their other metaethical and normative views. In this section, I want to take a quick look at some criticisms of egoism. As in previous chapters, the aim here is not to defeat the theory associated with virtue ethics. This means that I will not give an extended discussion of the criticisms, or attempt to refute them here (although some may be discussed further later). The aim in this section is to show why a link between egoism and virtue ethics may be problematic, and that if possible it is best avoided. Having done this, I examine the ways in which virtue ethics and egoism are thought to be connected.

One of the main concerns about egoism is that it is not really a *moral* theory at all – that it is excluded, or partially excluded, from morality. The most obvious

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<sup>368</sup> Christopher Toner, 'The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics', *Philosophy*, 4 (2006), 595-618 (p. 605).

target of this criticism is individual egoism, as it forgoes the universality essential to a moral theory. Strong egoism, however, is also vulnerable. The central claim in this criticism is that altruism or concern for others is a necessary part of any moral theory. Egoism does not allow altruism, and so it cannot be a moral theory. Good examples of critics who take this line are Bernard Williams and William Frankena. Williams is interested in whether or not egoism can be rational while rejecting altruism and morality. Although he thinks that egoism is not a moral theory, he does not see this as an immediately devastating problem for the egoist (although potentially restrictive). He rightly points out that if egoism is not a moral theory, then a moral argument 'could not possibly have any force with the egoist unless he had already given up being one'.<sup>369</sup> Frankena is clear that even if morality requires altruism, this does not exclude all kinds of egoism: 'It might be, for instance, that the most effective way for one to serve the welfare of others is to do always what is most to one's own interest'.<sup>370</sup> Weaker forms of egoism which may demand altruistic behaviour are not necessarily vulnerable to this criticism. It depends on where the altruism is required. If morality requires altruistic actions, then a weak egoism can satisfy this condition. If, on the other hand, it requires altruistic motives or even an ultimately altruistic foundation, then weak egoism and self-centredness may both be vulnerable.

H.A. Prichard claims that egoism does not fit with our ordinary moral intuitions. When we refer to a moral duty, we think it fundamental to that duty that its rightness is constituted by something other than whether or not it is in our own interest.<sup>371</sup> This criticism needs to be carefully formulated to avoid begging the question, but if it avoids that pitfall it may well be effective. Egoism also faces various accusations of inconsistency. G.E. Moore argues that it follows from egoism that every person's personal good is the sole universal good. Assuming that human goods are not all compatible, egoism becomes inconsistent. Another complaint is

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<sup>369</sup> Williams, 'Egoism and Altruism', p. 252.

<sup>370</sup> William K. Frankena, 'The Concept of Morality', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 63 (1966), 688-696 (p. 692).

<sup>371</sup> Harold Arthur Prichard, *Moral Writings*, ed. by Jim MacAdam (Oxford: OUP, 2002) p. 29.

that in acting for my interests, egoism tells me that I am doing both right and wrong. Right, because my good ought to be pursued. Wrong, because the good of other agents should be pursued (as is recommended to them).<sup>372</sup> It seems to me that these rely on a misunderstanding of the egoist position: namely, that egoism believes in universalising the pursuit of each individual's good. In fact, egoists believe in universalising some form of the claim that each individual ought to pursue their own good – quite a different position. Still, they are worth mentioning for the sake of comprehensiveness.

### The Connection between Virtue Ethics and Egoism

I now turn to the connection between virtue ethics and egoism. Here, I look at which characteristics of virtue ethics have been thought to imply an egoist perspective. In the next section, I investigate how these connections can be avoided. Initially, it may seem that there is no real connection between virtue ethics and egoism. Virtue ethics clearly advocates other-regarding virtues like friendship and kindness. These do not seem compatible with egoism.

Looking at *why* virtue ethics insists on virtues like friendship (and all other virtues) reveals the problem. The reason that virtue ethics calls for pursuit of the virtues is that it aims at a final end – *eudaimonia*. As discussed in Chapter 1, *eudaimonia* is the complete, happy, flourishing life – the good for humanity. Everyone desires their own good, and so pursues *eudaimonia*. In order to develop *eudaimonia* one must be virtuous. Hence, one ought to pursue virtues like friendship and kindness. It seems that the ultimate reason for pursuing the virtues is that they are in the agent's self-interest. Underlying virtue ethics' call to be altruistic is a thoroughly egoistic motive: 'A flourishing-based theory... says a person has reason to act rightly only or ultimately because doing so will contribute to her own flourishing'.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Regis, Jr., pp. 55-56.

<sup>373</sup> Hurka, p. 246.

There is a further, lesser connection between virtue ethics and egoism. In virtue ethics, the agent's own character is the focus of moral consideration. The answers to moral questions will all be decided with reference to the agent. Whenever I have to make a moral decision, my ultimate focus will be on myself. Suppose I have to decide whether or not to lie. I might think 'I ought to tell the truth, because honesty is a virtue'. The next step in this train of thought would be 'I ought to be virtuous, because the virtues will help me flourish'. My moral decisions are grounded in an inevitable self-reference. This is more an accusation of self-centredness than egoism.<sup>374</sup>

Theological virtue ethicists have expressed concern that these apparent connections to egoism may make virtue ethics incompatible with Christian belief.<sup>375</sup> Meilaender worries that 'Concentration on the gradual development of one's character... may seem too self-centred, a failure to focus one's attention upon God and the neighbor'. He thinks that theological thought about virtue must hold a fundamental tension between 'the self-mastery of moral virtue and a self perfectly passive before God; the tension between a virtue which we can claim as our possession... and a virtue which must be continually re-established by divine grace'.<sup>376</sup>

The focus on the self is not something all virtue ethicists necessarily want to shy away from. Rosalind Hursthouse has an extended discussion regarding the fact that the virtues benefit their possessor. She notes that if virtue ethicists describe a virtue as a character trait on a particular given list (e.g. honesty, charity, temperance) they invite the question 'Is that the right list? How do you know?'.<sup>377</sup> Instead, they ought to define virtues as character traits necessary for *eudaimonia*. Making this claim involves saying both that the virtues make their possessor a good human being, *and* that they benefit their possessor. *Eudaimonia* does make people good human beings, with corresponding benefits to others; but it also benefits its

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<sup>374</sup> David Solomon, 'Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics', in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. by Daniel Statman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 165-179 (p. 169, 171-2).

<sup>375</sup> Kotva, Jr., p. 49.

<sup>376</sup> Meilaender, pp. 36, 122.

<sup>377</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 164.

possessor. The case for virtuous education and motivation reflects this. It should not be made by simply arguing that virtuous action will always be in the agent's self-interest; nevertheless, it is right to teach that although they ought to desire virtue for altruistic motives, the virtuous can nevertheless expect to benefit:

We think that (for the most part, by and large), if we act well, things go well for us. When it does not, when *eudaimonia* is impossible to achieve or maintain, that's not 'what we should have expected' but tragically bad luck.<sup>378</sup>

Although she thinks that they differ, she acknowledges that there is overlap between this perspective and that of the egoist. The expectation that their chosen way of life will be beneficial to them is common ground between the virtue ethicist and the egoist.

### Section 3: Counter-claims, Self-effacingness and Self-centredness

I have shown why virtue ethics may be egoist. The link lies in the virtue ethicist's pursuit of *eudaimonia* – a goal that seems to put the agent and their interest at the centre of the moral life. I will now look back at the different forms of egoism discussed earlier, to see which (if any) forms of egoism have a valid connection to virtue ethics.

Firstly, note that virtue ethics is definitely not connected to the strongest forms of egoism. The definition I settled on had three conditions: that pursuit of self-interest is emphasised; that self-interested action is not always obligatory; and that altruistic action is never obligatory. It is a matter for debate whether or not virtue ethics shares with strong egoism the first two conditions, but it is plainly incompatible with the third condition. Virtue ethics strongly insists on the moral

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<sup>378</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 185.

necessity of altruistic behaviour. Aristotle's discussion of friendship makes this extremely clear. After identifying friendship as a virtue, he identifies three kinds of friendship. The first two are based on utility and pleasure respectively. In each case the friend is valued for what they provide the agent. This is not the case with the third and most perfect kind of friendship:

Only the friendship of those who are good, and similar in their goodness, is perfect. For these people alike wish good for the other *qua* good, and they are good in themselves. And it is those who desire the good of their friends for the friend's sake that are most truly friends, because each loves the other for what he is, and not for any incidental quality.<sup>379</sup>

Whatever its connections to weaker forms of egoism, virtue ethics is firmly at odds with strong egoism.

Supporters of virtue ethics have also denied that it is connected to other forms of egoism. Julia Annas argues that virtue ethics is not egoist because it requires motives and actions which are not exclusively self-interested, or that are not self-interested at all. It would be a mistake to think of a virtue as something motivated by self-interest: 'if my motivation is egoistic then I am not acting virtuously'.<sup>380</sup> Looking again at the passage from Aristotle above, he is clear that not only does friendship require acting in another's interest (thus excluding strong egoism), it also requires loving the friend for their own sake. A friendship motivated by self-interest is not a true virtuous friendship. It seems then that virtue ethics is not compatible with weak egoism either. My definition required that self-interest be the 'primary goal in acting', but it is not possible to be fully virtuous with such a goal in mind.

This response is successful, as far as it goes. It does seem that some virtues rule out even weak egoism. However, returning to the supposed connection

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<sup>379</sup> Aristotle, 1156b 5-15.

<sup>380</sup> Annas, 'Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism' p. 208.

between virtue ethics and egoism reveals a problem. If *eudaimonia* is the ultimate end of all the virtues, is this not a self-interested end? Aristotle's definition of friendship seems to rule out any self-interested motivation. How then is it possible for the virtuous agent to aim at *eudaimonia* and friendship? It does not seem possible to do both. To illustrate the problem, here is another passage from Aristotle:

Well, happiness more than anything else is thought to be just such an end, because we always choose it for itself, and never for any other reason. It is different with honour, pleasure, intelligence and good qualities generally. We do choose them partly for themselves... but we also choose them for the sake of our happiness, in the belief that they will be instrumental in promoting it.<sup>381</sup>

Here Aristotle says that all the virtues are desired because they are instrumental in promoting our happiness. Compare this to the earlier quote, in which Aristotle says that true friendship involves desiring the friend's good for their own sake and not for any 'incidental quality'. There seems to be a contradiction. For friendship to be true friendship, it must be motivated by desire for the friend's good, not our own. But all virtues (including friendship) are desired because they promote our good.

Thomas Hurka argues that in order to avoid this contradiction, virtue ethics must take one of two positions. It may abandon the claim that virtues like friendship are not motivated by self-interest, and so become (weakly) egoistic. If it does not do this, it must become self-effacing. This involves 'telling agents not to be motivated by or even to think of their claims about the source of their reasons'.<sup>382</sup> It is possible that at times when people are not acting, but simply considering virtue, they may acknowledge that *eudaimonia* is the source of virtuous motivation; but to do it while acting is impossible. If virtue ethics is self-effacing,

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<sup>381</sup> Aristotle, 1097a 30 - 1097b 10.

<sup>382</sup> Hurka, p. 246.

then it can both argue that true friendship is only motivated by care for the friend, and that it is instrumental for the ultimate end, *eudaimonia*. When acting, the virtuous agent must not consider or be aware of *eudaimonia*; only the good of their friend.

This seems rather an odd position to have to take, requiring some complex mental gymnastics on the part of the agent. Worse, Hurka says that it effectively amounts to self-criticism: 'To avoid encouraging self-indulgence, it must say that being motivated by its claims about the source of one's reasons is in itself and necessarily objectionable. Is it not odd for a theory to so directly condemn its own practical influence?'.<sup>383</sup> A self-effacing virtue ethic says both that we are motivated by *eudaimonia*, and that being so motivated is (on some occasions) bad. Not only that, but a constant and determined motivation towards *eudaimonia* will paradoxically result in the agent failing to achieve it. Only by 'forgetting' their goal can they reach it.

Annas disagrees, arguing that a self-effacing virtue ethics is acceptable. This is because she thinks it is a natural effect of developing a virtuous character. A beginner in virtue must regularly think of *eudaimonia* as they train themselves to be virtuous. However, to the truly virtuous person behaving virtuously is an act of instinct, or habit. They do not need to consider their goals every time, as they will have developed a kind of virtuous 'reflex'. It is quite possible for them to consider their ultimate motivations, just as the beginner in virtue does; and when they teach others, they refer to this. In acting, though, they have trained themselves to respond virtuously without needing to consider their chain of motives. I am not sure whether this is sufficient. Although Annas takes much of the sting out of self-effacingness, it still seems that the virtue ethicist must say that to consider one's motives when acting is bad (or at least not fully virtuous). I also think that even an extremely virtuous person may have to return to the deeper theory when faced with a particularly difficult moral dilemma (say, the choice between saving one of their two children), and that if they were then to act rightly (whatever this would

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<sup>383</sup> Hurka, p. 247.

mean in that situation), it would be to their credit – despite their having considered their motives. Perhaps someone's failure to act on virtuous instinct in such a situation would simply show that they had failed to achieve complete and full virtue; or perhaps acting on instinct would itself indicate a failure to take a difficult moral decision seriously. I am not sure. I think that it may be possible for a self-effacing virtue ethics to work; but I find it at least somewhat unsatisfactory.

Christine Swanton argues that the virtue ethicist can take the other horn of Hurka's dilemma, but without thereby becoming egoistic. The problem, she thinks, is that those making accusations of egoism have misunderstood the concept of *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* does involve a pursuit of one's own good; but this is not all: 'to be good qua human being also involves a sensitivity to the goodness of human ends, and although these include personal flourishing they are by no means egoistic'.<sup>384</sup> To be *eudaimon* means more than simply having one's own self-interest in mind. It means being concerned that one is a good person, a rational agent. I do not think that this does enough; self-interest is still at least part of the virtuous agent's primary motivation. More importantly, concern for others is not. In any case, I think that Swanton is partly relying on a distinction between self-interest and the human good, where self-interest refers to a narrow focus on one's own gratification. Egoism is a broader thesis than this; note that the definition of weak egoism holds that 'my own good is the ethical standard'. To rephrase *eudaimonia* as true rationality or human goodness does not help matters. True rationality and human goodness are both my good, and may therefore still be egoist motivations.

I have shown that virtue ethics is not strongly egoist. The requirement for the virtuous agent to act in the interest of others prevents this. It is also possible for virtue ethics to avoid weak egoism, but at the cost of becoming self-effacing. For some virtue ethicists like Annas, this is sufficient; I do not think that it is. In what follows I will show that even though it may avoid egoism, virtue ethics seems to be self-centred.

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<sup>384</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, p. 79.

## Self-centredness

I have said that virtue ethics does seem to avoid egoism proper (whether or not it is forced to be self-effacing in doing so is another matter). It does seem, though, that it might be objectionably self-centred. To recap, a theory is self-centred when it makes the agent the ground of moral value. All other things have a conditional moral value based on their relationship to the agent. A self-centred position does not simply make the trivial claim that I act from my own perspective and not that of another. Rather, it makes the agent in some way more important or indispensable to moral theory in a way that other people are not. This does not mean that if I am self-centred I must always act in a self-interested manner, but that my reasons for acting will always point to myself. Looking again at the example of friendship, it seems that here even a self-effacing virtue ethics is self-centred. Even if I am one of Annas's fully virtuous agents who instinctively acts virtuously, it is still the case that my acts of friendship gain their value because they contribute to *eudaimonia* – and *eudaimonia* is *my* flourishing.

This is a problem because it may result in us wanting different goods for others than we want for ourselves. David Solomon points out that in virtue ethics there seems to be an 'asymmetry' between my regard for my own character and that of others:

Since an EV requires me to pay primary attention to the state of my own character, doesn't this suggest that I must regard my own character as the ethically most important feature of myself? But if so, and if I am suitably concerned about others, shouldn't my concern for them extend beyond a mere concern that their wants, needs, and desires be satisfied, and encompass a concern for *their* character?<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Solomon, p. 172.

The charge is that eudaimonism requires that I see my own character as my most morally important feature. My material happiness, desires etc. are secondary concerns. But the other-regarding virtues only encourage us to have concern for what is of secondary importance to others, and not their actual character. Even were the virtues to require concern for the character of others, there would still be an asymmetry in the way the agent's character and the character of others are treated. If *eudaimonia* is the goal of all virtue, then a virtuous concern for the character of another only matters because of its relation to *my* character. I think that this suggests that virtue ethics is self-centred – it values the character of the agent above others.

Solomon relies on a *tu quoque* response, as he sees self-centredness as an ineliminable aspect of virtue ethics. He argues that both consequentialist and deontological theories place more importance on the agent's character than that of others.<sup>386</sup> Deontological ethics would typically say that the agent ought not to do one bad act in order to prevent two equally bad acts. Solomon says that this suggests that the agent's moral status is more valuable than that of the others who are allowed to perform their bad actions. Regarding consequentialism, Solomon argues that it is important that others desire good consequences because this aids in their maximisation; but the fact that the agent desires good consequences cannot be valued in this way, because it is central to the theory as a whole. I may want others to desire good consequences because such desires will likely lead them to act to produce good consequences. My own desire for good consequences cannot have only this status. I cannot value good consequences solely because so doing will produce good consequences, or there will be no ground of value.

Even if Solomon's response is effective, Christopher Toner suggests that this is simply 'so much the worse' for consequentialism and deontology.<sup>387</sup> John Hare makes a further self-centredness accusation from a position apparently immune to Solomon's *tu quoque*, as it is neither deontological nor consequentialist. Hare says

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<sup>386</sup> Solomon, p. 172-174.

<sup>387</sup> Toner, p. 605.

that eudaimonism does not recognise the claims of others *as other*, but only as related to the agent. Further, the happiness of others is only relevant insofar as it is constitutive of the happiness of the agent.<sup>388</sup> I think that these are fair points. Even if Solomon's *tu quoque* were successful, it would not make it satisfactory that virtue ethics is self-centred, and he sees it as an ineliminable part of the theory. I think that virtue ethics as described is inescapably self-centred.

So far, I have shown that virtue ethics is not necessarily egoist – but it appears that it is self-centred. In order to avoid weak egoism, it must also become self-effacing. In the final section of this chapter, I will look at these problems from a theological perspective. I will show that placing God at the centre of ethics means that theological virtue ethics is neither self-centred nor self-effacing.

#### Section 4: A Response from Aquinas

In what follows, I intend to show that theological virtue ethics is not vulnerable to criticisms of egoism, self-centredness or self-effacingness. I am going to look at Aquinas to show that this is the case. The problems for virtue ethics so far are all connected to *eudaimonia*. The central place of the self in the ultimate goal for action is the foundation for these accusations. By looking at Aquinas's description of the last end, I hope to show that there is no such foundation for criticism present in theological virtue ethics.

One of the major differences between Aquinas and Aristotle is their understanding of the last end, or human good. According to Aristotle, this is *eudaimonia*, a flourishing of the self. Achievement of it is subject to good fortune as well as personal virtue. It is quite possible for the virtuous person to suffer a tragedy which means that they can never be *eudaimon*, no matter how virtuous they are. Aquinas's view is different. He has a twofold understanding of the good.

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<sup>388</sup> John Hare, 'Scotus on Morality and Nature', *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 9 (2000), 15-38 (pp. 34-38).

There is one imperfect form confined to this life (similar to *eudaimonia*), and another more perfect form available in the next life.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas thinks that the last end will result in the perfection of the agent.<sup>389</sup> Unlike Aristotle, though, he does not think that this perfection is what the last end consists in: 'God is the last end of all things... man and other rational creatures attain to their last end by loving and knowing God'.<sup>390</sup> Aquinas thinks that in acting, we desire the universal good, and this is God. If we achieve the universal good, it is true that it will result in our own perfection and the satisfaction of all our desires; but our own perfection is not the *focus* of our desire. All things gain their goodness from God, so finding our good in God means that we will be perfected:

It is evident that naught can lull man's will, save the universal good. This is to be found, not in any creature, but in God alone; because every creature has goodness by participation... Therefore God alone constitutes man's happiness.<sup>391</sup>

This means that in Aquinas's model of the human end, desire for God is prior to any desire for one's own perfection or self-interest. I think it is now clear that Aquinas's ethics is not egoist. It avoids strong egoism in the same way that other forms of virtue ethics do – by requiring altruistic action. Where virtue ethics struggled, though, was with the charge of weak egoism. Here is the definition again: 'my own good is the ethical standard for what it is right for me to do, and my primary goal in acting'. Aristotle's *eudaimonia* does seem to satisfy this definition, but it is clear that Aquinas's account of the human good does not. God, not our own good, is the ethical standard and goal in acting. Our own good may be a result of pursuing our primary goal; but it is not the goal itself. This means that Aquinas can say that 'since God is the universal good, and under this good both man and angel and all

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<sup>389</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 1:7.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 1a2ae 1:8.

<sup>391</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 2:8.

creatures are comprised... angel and man alike love God before themselves and with a greater love'.<sup>392</sup>

Nor is the self loved more than others. Aquinas's discussion of charity makes clear that the love of God (which is the perfection of charity) leads to love of others:

Now the aspect under which our neighbour is to be loved, is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbour is that he may be in God. Hence it is clear that it is specifically the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbour.<sup>393</sup>

In the same question, he considers whether charity should produce self-love. He says that the agent is one of the things of God, and therefore 'Among these other things which he loves out of charity because they pertain to God, he loves also himself out of charity'.<sup>394</sup> The charitable agent should love themselves and their neighbour in the same way – because they are both things of God. The agent and the other have the same standing.

This also means that Aquinas's ethics need not be self-effacing. Recall that the reason for virtue ethics to be self-effacing was to avoid the inconsistency between demanding that our primary motives be both other-regarding and self-regarding. By forgetting the ultimate end when acting, the virtuous agent can avoid egoism and make the good of others their primary goal. The difference here is that Aquinas does not demand that our primary motives be self-regarding. Instead, they are 'God-regarding'.

It might be thought that there is still a problem for Aquinas when it comes to virtues which require altruism. He is very similar to Aristotle in his view of friendship:

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 1a 60:5.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 2a2ae 25:1

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 2a2ae 25:4

the happy man needs friends, as the philosopher says, not, indeed, to make use of them... but for the purpose of a good operation, viz., that he may do good to them; that he may delight in seeing them do good; and that he may be helped by them in his good work.<sup>395</sup>

Aquinas, like Aristotle, thinks that true friendship involves a desire for the other's good. Even though Aquinas is not an egoist, it seems that he might require a new kind of self-effacingness. He has said that we all desire God as our last end; but in friendship, we desire the good of the friend. Perhaps it is still necessary to 'forget' the last end in order to truly desire the friend's good. I think that this is mistaken. Because all people have the same end and good in God, the good and desire of my friend will be God, just as God is my desire and good. This means that a desire for the good of my friend will also be a desire for God. It is not necessary to be self-effacing in order to separate the desire for God and the desire for the good of a friend, because they are the same thing. There is no problem between our motives needing to be God-regarding and other-regarding, since God is the last end of all things. A truly other-regarding motive will also be God-regarding.

Finally, it should be clear that Aquinas's ethics is not self-centred, but God-centred. It is not the case that the agent is the only thing of unconditional moral value, or that I am the ground for all moral decisions. In Aquinas's theory, God takes this place. Solomon's problem that my character is given a different status to that of others can gain no traction here. My character does not play such a central role in the theory and Aquinas's discussion of charity shows that it is possible to be just as concerned for the character of another as I am with my own. What is not possible is to care about a person (whether myself or another) as much as God. This still means that friendships, as all things, are instrumental towards the last end. I do not think this is a problem; Aquinas's virtue ethics is clearly other-regarding. The real concern was not that others be given the most fundamental moral value, but that they be given a value equal to the agent, and this has been

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<sup>395</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 4:8.

done. Aquinas's position seems to me to represent an effective management of the tension Meilaender refers to between the self-improvement of the virtuous life and the need to submit to and focus on God.

Perhaps a complaint could be still be made that even if we value our self and the selves of others equally, the desires of others are still not given the same place as one's own desires. I think that all this complaint could now achieve is to point out that according to Aquinas, an agent desires what he or she desires and not what someone else desires. Essentially, this criticism complains that our desires do not have the same *psychological* place as the desires of others, nor the same role in our action. This is the trivial claim I mentioned at the start of the section on self-centredness. It has nothing to say about the moral status of our desires compared to the desires of others. To deal with accusations of self-centredness and egoism it is not necessary to refute the truism that I act from my own perspective. All that is needed is to show that Aquinas's virtue does not place the self at the centre of his ethics.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter by showing that egoism is a varied term, and a single definition would be unhelpful. Instead, I looked at various egoist positions before giving a general definition for strong and weak egoism, as well as self-centredness. I then showed that egoism faces various criticisms, the most prominent being that it is not a proper moral theory because it does not have any place for altruism. Virtue ethics is supposedly linked to egoism through *eudaimonia*, which places the flourishing of the self at the heart of moral motivation. I argued that although virtue ethics is clearly not strongly egoist, it does come close to weak egoism. This can be avoided by adopting a self-effacing position, but this may not be entirely satisfactory. I then showed that even if it avoids weak egoism in this way, virtue ethics does appear to be self-centred. It makes the character of the agent of

primary moral importance, and values the character of others differently. In my final section, I argued that Aquinas's ethics is not vulnerable to either of these problems. By making God, not personal well-being, the final end, Aquinas's ethics avoids placing the agent at the centre of his moral theory and so is neither egoist nor self-centred.

## Chapter 8

### Key Positions in Theological Virtue Ethics

Until now, I have been considering the various problems with virtue ethics. Each chapter has looked at a particular criticism and provided a theological response. Chapters 2-4 covered problems internal to virtue ethics, and showed that it can operate as a complete normative theory, explain right action and incorporate discoveries made in the behavioural sciences. Chapters 5-7 focused on external problems, criticisms which associate virtue ethics with another theory. I showed that virtue ethics is not necessarily relativist or egoist and that it is only particularist in an extremely weak and non-damaging sense. In dealing with the various criticisms, I have shown that the prior commitments of theology allow new responses and stronger positions. In this chapter I will return to those commitments which I think should be a part of any theological virtue ethics.

The ideas to be covered are as follows: Christ's role as a moral exemplar, final causation or teleology, Aquinas's twofold good, the natural law, and precise definitions of virtue. These are ideas which have been particularly important in refuting the various criticisms, often appearing in multiple chapters. They are also ideas which are or could become particular strengths of theology, and are either unavailable to secular ethics or, if available, are better placed to be part of a theological ethics. To show that these ideas are or could be particular strengths of theological virtue ethics, I will review their use in the previous chapters and consider how they are (or could be) used by theologians.

Before I begin, I should make clear that I am not trying to construct a complete ethic, either in this chapter or in this thesis. That would mean ruling some virtue ethicists in and others out – something which I have tried to avoid. I choose these ideas because I think they do not exclude either traditional Thomists or modern virtue ethicists like Hauerwas. These are commitments which can be and are used by different kinds of theological virtue ethics. Most theological virtue

ethicists are likely to accept them in some form. Rather than (significantly) restricting the form theological virtue ethics takes, I hope to show which parts of it should be emphasised. This will necessarily have the effect of forming the nature of theological ethics somewhat; but I intend it to be a relatively loose boundary, one which merely suggests a rough outline and a few starting points. A theological virtue ethics which makes clear its commitment to these positions will be well equipped to deal with the criticisms covered in this thesis, but should not find itself significantly restricted in doing so.

Nor am I saying that these are the only or most foundational commitments necessary for a theological ethic. I am simply identifying those parts of theological virtue ethics most useful for responding to criticism. Other commitments will be vital for constructing a complete ethic. For example, the belief that God exists is more foundational than the claims discussed here; without it, they would not stand. The role of the church as a virtuous community does not feature significantly in this thesis; but it is central to theological virtue ethics as a whole (see Hauerwas). A theological virtue ethic without these claims (and others) would not be a theological ethic at all.

## Section 1: Christ as Exemplar

People who model the virtues play an important part in virtue ethics, for two main reasons. The first is that they are the teachers of virtue. Such teachers are vital, because the insistence in virtue ethics on the guiding force of habit and the character it develops cuts both ways: a habitually virtuous person will naturally and sometimes easily tend towards the good. One who is not habitually virtuous will find in themselves a similar tendency toward vice, or at best a haphazard moral incontinence which subjects their reason to their will. Worse, the task of self-improvement for the non-virtuous is not just a case of fighting to develop newly virtuous habits and cast off the old ones, difficult though that is. Such a task would

require the non-virtuous person to know what virtue is. But the ability to recognise virtue is itself a virtue – prudence, or moral wisdom. Without prudence, a non-virtuous person will not be able to recognise what virtue is at all. This is why Aquinas says that ‘It [practical wisdom] brings to completion all the moral virtues... practical wisdom is the cause of all the virtues of the desiring part’.<sup>396</sup>

The fact that virtue begets virtue, Aristotle thinks, is precisely why we need moral teachers:

Men will become good builders as a result of building well, and bad ones as a result of building badly. Otherwise there would be no need of anyone to teach them: they would all be *born* either good or bad. Now this holds good also of the virtues.<sup>397</sup>

Regarding the above passage, Julia Annas says:

The beginning builder has to learn by picking a role model and copying what she does, repeating her actions. Gradually, he learns to build better, that is, to engage in the practical activity in a way which is less dependent on the examples of others and expresses more understanding of his own. He progresses from piecemeal and derivative understanding of building to a more unified and explanatory understanding of his own.<sup>398</sup>

Virtuous people, like good builders, are needed as good examples for others to copy and so grow in virtue themselves. I discussed in Chapter 2 the way in which moral exemplars are one of the main ways in which virtue ethics can provide action guidance. This is the first reason that moral exemplars are important for virtue ethics.

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<sup>396</sup> Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, trans. by E. M. Atkins, ed. by E. M. Atkins and Thomas Williams (Cambridge: CUP, 2005) *DQVirtGen* 6 rep.

<sup>397</sup> Aristotle, 1103b 5-15.

<sup>398</sup> Annas, ‘Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing’, p. 69.

The second important role for moral exemplars in virtue ethics is that they help us to understand or even define what virtue is. This is a development of the point that without virtue, we cannot know what virtue is. One of the best ways to work it out is by observing someone more virtuous than ourselves. The virtuous exemplar is helpful in understanding, describing, and even defining virtue. In Chapter 3 I showed how the virtuous exemplar is used by Hursthouse in explaining right action – a right act is an act which a fully virtuous agent would do.<sup>399</sup> It is even more important for Zagzebski, who makes the exemplar the foundation of her virtue ethics.<sup>400</sup>

However, the secular virtue ethicist faces a problem, already mentioned in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. The exemplar must be actual or hypothetical. If actual, then the exemplar will be fallible. Even if we allow the unlikely scenario that the actual exemplar possesses near-perfect virtue, Swanton has shown that other restrictions on the exemplar may result in them failing to guide us well.<sup>401</sup> If the agent is hypothetical, then they need not be subject to such restrictions, but the complaint anticipated by Hursthouse in her discussion of the virtuous agent will take on particular force: 'Who are the virtuous agents?'.<sup>402</sup> It will be much harder to learn from or follow the actions of a hypothetical agent. In fact, because a proper understanding of what virtue is belongs to the already virtuous, it may be impossible for the non-virtuous to accurately predict the actions of a hypothetical virtuous agent.

Typically, secular ethicists have chosen the former option; they rely on actual virtuous agents. The possibility that the exemplar may be mistaken is perhaps mitigated by the fact that virtue ethics provides other ways to guide action – thick concepts in particular are important, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, the problem with actual people operating as virtuous exemplars is exacerbated once the experiments discussed in Chapter 4 are taken into account. Situational

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<sup>399</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 28.

<sup>400</sup> Zagzebski, pp. 41-57.

<sup>401</sup> Swanton, 'A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action', p. 35.

<sup>402</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 28.

pressures mean that the virtuous exemplar is most likely to be fallible just when they are needed most, and their reliability in past situations may not indicate that they are to be trusted when a newly challenging situation arises.

Each time the exemplar has appeared in this thesis, I have shown that theological virtue ethics has another option. Here, the moral exemplar is not a fallible, actual agent or an unknowable hypothetical one. It is Christ, who is both actual and infallible. Theological virtue ethics possesses an exemplar that can teach and challenge while also being a perfectly reliable model of virtue.

This means that theological virtue ethics is able to affirm more strongly the need to follow this particular virtuous exemplar. This proved important in responding to two criticisms in particular. The first appeared in Chapter 2, with the claim that virtue ethics does not provide action guidance. Part of the response to this is to point to the exemplar. Without Jesus as an exemplar, secular virtue ethics cannot be as confident in offering reliable action guidance. The second appeared in Chapter 4. The response to situationism requires a concession, or at least some new claims: firstly, our language of virtue is too generalised (I will return to this shortly). Secondly, it must be accepted that even the best of people are subject to situational pressures; situationism shows more clearly the extreme nature of the challenge to be virtuous. The claims of situationism make the exemplar less reliable and so the need for a truly perfect example all the more pressing. Because Jesus is such an example, theological virtue ethics can respond without loss to situationism. Secular virtue ethics, on the other hand, cannot be as confident in the exemplar as before.

It should be clear that the role of Christ in theological ethics is much more than that of an exemplar. I have concentrated on this aspect because it is useful for refuting the above criticisms. As I have said, I am not aiming to construct a functioning ethic but to defend existing ones. Jesus is clearly much more than a mere example in those existing theological ethics. One of the best examples is O'Donovan's work. Here is part of his discussion of the moral authority of Jesus:

Jesus is not only a witness to the restored moral order, however indispensable; he is the one in whom that order has come to be... He exists not merely as an example of it, not even as a prototype of it, but the one in whom it is summed up.<sup>403</sup>

Here, O'Donovan shows that theological virtue ethics shares some similarities with Zagzebski's exemplarism. Jesus is not just the guide to virtue, but the ground of it because God – and hence Jesus – is the ultimate end of human action, the one in whom the moral order is 'summed up'. This is a common theme. Here is Kotva: 'By looking at Christology, we see that the life and way of Jesus of Nazareth help provide the end's content... This claim that the human *telos* is seen in Christ is not trivial'.<sup>404</sup>

Hauerwas talks about following Jesus in the context of his revelation of the kingdom of God. Following Jesus and becoming like him involves learning how to be citizens of the kingdom. He is clear that this is not the only thing to be said about him (although he thinks it foundational):

Insisting that Jesus is the initiator and presence of the kingdom, of course, does not mean that he was not the Christ, or that he is not God incarnate, or that his death and resurrection has nothing to do with the forgiveness of sins, but it does mean that each of those claims are subsequent to the whole life of this man whom God has claimed as decisive to his own for the presence of his kingdom in this world.<sup>405</sup>

All of the above thinkers are clear that Jesus is a vital moral example and that he is more than one exemplar among many. The role of Christ as an exemplar is clearly an important one to theological virtue ethics. I have shown that it allows a stronger reliance on the virtuous exemplar than is available to secular virtue ethics. As long

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<sup>403</sup> O'Donovan, p. 150.

<sup>404</sup> Kotva, Jr., p. 87.

<sup>405</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 74.

as it continues to point to Jesus as the complete model of virtue, theological virtue ethics will maintain that advantage. I now turn to the next strength of theological virtue ethics – the space it leaves for final causation.

## Section 2: Final Causation

I discussed in Chapter 3 the way in which the modern understanding of causation is significantly different from the ancient account accepted by Aristotle and Aquinas. Of their four causes – efficient, final, formal and material – only efficient causes survive to be counted as a true cause. To recap, a material cause is the thing or substance from which something is made. The formal cause is the shape or pattern of something. An efficient cause is an event which produces change resulting in the thing caused. The final cause of something is what it is for – its purpose, or the reason something is done. For example, the final cause of my running may be to improve my health, or to make sure that I get somewhere on time. The final cause of something is also called its *telos*. Teleological explanations are those which refer to final causes.<sup>406</sup>

One of the reasons final causation is important for virtue ethics is that it makes *eudaimonia* or *beatitudo* intelligible. Aristotle describes *eudaimonia* as 'the first principle and cause of what is good'.<sup>407</sup> The cause in question here is a final cause: *eudaimonia* is that for which all things are done.<sup>408</sup> Likewise, Aquinas begins the *Prima Secundae* by saying that 'the last end of human life is stated to be happiness'.<sup>409</sup> Fulfilment, whether *eudaimonia* or *beatitudo*, is the final cause of human action and of good things. That is, it is what all other human ends are *for*. Without final causation, it is not possible to make the same claim. This is because the idea that there can be a purpose to moral action is lost. MacIntyre discusses

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<sup>406</sup> Andrea Falcon, 'Aristotle on Causality', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2011) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/aristotle-causality/>> [accessed 30 April 2012] (paras. 4-5 of 20).

<sup>407</sup> Aristotle, 1102a 1-5.

<sup>408</sup> Thomas M. Tuozzo, 'Aristotle's Theory of the Good and Its Causal Basis', *Phronesis*, 40 (1995), 293-314, (pp. 308-309).

<sup>409</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 1.

this in *After Virtue*. Talking about enlightenment thinkers like Kant, Hume and Kierkegaard, he says:

All reject any teleological view of human nature, any view of man as having an essence which defines his true end. But to understand this is to understand why their project of finding a basis for morality had to fail.<sup>410</sup>

It is notable that although MacIntyre rejects Aristotle's 'biological teleological' support of the virtues, he replaces it with his own 'socially teleological' one.<sup>411</sup>

Without some form of teleology, or final causation, there is no way for purpose to play the same role in moral thought. Thus there can be no *eudaimonia* or *beatitudo* and hence no virtues – because they are those traits which lead to and partly constitute *eudaimonia*. Non-eudaimonist virtue ethics is possible; but the significant majority of virtue ethicists I have considered, including Aristotle and Aquinas, are eudaimonist. Without final causation, their virtue ethics will not work.

The need to have a comprehensible account of human fulfilment is not the only reason that final causation is important for virtue ethics. In Chapter 3 I showed that it is also crucial for action theory. This is because it allows what I called a 'component' theory of action, where intention is internal to the event constituting the act. This kind of action theory eliminates the need to answer the accusation that virtue ethics cannot provide a reliable account of right action. It means that Aquinas can say that there are multiple parts to an action, each of which can be assessed separately as good or bad while remaining part of the same act. Hence he can describe a virtuous action as bad (for example in the sense that it has bad results) while still maintaining that an act must be virtuous to be good.

In the previous section, I discussed Christ's role as a virtuous exemplar – an advantage exclusive to theological virtue ethics. This section is a little different. Neither of the advantages that final causation brings to virtue ethics is necessarily

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<sup>410</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 52.

<sup>411</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 183.

linked to theological ethics. Despite this, I still think that it is fair to describe final causation as a strength (or potential strength) of theological virtue ethics. This is because although secular virtue ethics is not logically excluded from using final causation, there are features of theological ethics which make it a more palatable option; acceptance of final causation is easier from within a theological framework. In Chapter 3 I suggested that the existence of God makes it easier to resolve one of the main problems with final causation. The argument that final causation is an example of backwards causation – a future event causing something in the present – seems to pose a problem for virtue ethics. How can the function of humanity be contained in a potential future state (*eudaimonia*), which may not ever be achieved? That is, my fully virtuous self or my life of contemplation does not yet exist and may never do. Yet if virtue ethics is right about final causation, it is that state of existence which provides me with my function and purpose – it is my final cause.

It may be possible to provide a more general resolution to this problem. I simply want to point out that theology has an easy answer not available to secular ethics. Aquinas says that God is the final cause of all things: 'God is the last end of man and of all other things'.<sup>412</sup> Because God is the *telos* of humanity, there is no suggestion that there is backwards causation at work, since God is eternal.

Identifying God as humanity's final cause gives theological virtue ethics another advantage. The most notable difference between Aristotle and Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists is the Neo-Aristotelian's rejection of a unified final cause. I covered this in Chapter 6, when I showed that Foot and Nussbaum's attempt to provide a universal standard for human good is a partial success at best. Hursthouse's use of 'ethical naturalism' in her work is another good example of this. Like Foot and Nussbaum, she argues that there are some common features of human existence and activity from which we can derive the virtues, and identifies rationality as that which differentiates humans from other animals. Like Foot and Nussbaum, she does not identify a single final cause beyond 'human needs,

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<sup>412</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 1:8.

interests and desires'.<sup>413</sup> She perhaps comes closer than Foot and Nussbaum to absolutism, but says that there are some kinds of objectivity which must be excluded – including the possibility of a neutral objectivity apart from particular societies.<sup>414</sup> Here she seems close to MacIntyre's view that it is difficult or impossible to decide between conflicting views from separate traditions. She is markedly less absolutist than Aquinas, and there does not seem to be an obvious way for her to become more absolutist (not that she wants to). God as humanity's final cause gives theological virtue ethics a universal ground of value which allows a more clearly absolutist position.

Final causation is useful in making sense of *eudaimonia* and in constructing an alternative to the modern efficient-causal theory of action. If God is the final cause of humanity, then it becomes easier for virtue ethics to take an absolutist position. It also allows obvious ways of responding to one of the most common criticisms of final causation. A commitment to final causation would not necessarily commit the ethicist to all of the positions described. For example, Hauerwas could rely on final causation to explain human flourishing while still holding his relativist position. I showed in Chapter 3 that even when it is not avoided entirely, modern thinkers are not always comfortable with final causation, often describing final-causal theories as 'non-causal'. Given its importance to virtue ethics, I suggest that theological virtue ethics should clearly commit to final causation. This would ensure that it could make use of it in the ways described above, and be stronger as a result.

### Section 3: The Twofold Good

In the last section, I looked at the need for final causation in constructing *eudaimonia* and *beatitudo*. I mentioned that some idea of the good, happy, flourishing life is central to most forms of virtue ethics. In a eudaimonist virtue

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<sup>413</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 230.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

ethic, the virtues are defined as those habits which contribute to human well-being, both in the sense that they lead to it and in the sense that well-being is at least partly constituted by the possession of those habits. Although both Aristotle and Aquinas's ethics take this form, the way in which they describe the human good is one of the key differences between them. I mentioned this in Chapter 1 and have returned to it throughout the thesis. To recap, Aristotle's discussion of *eudaimonia* is confined to this life: 'it is questionable whether the departed have any participation in good or its opposite'.<sup>415</sup> It is also imperfect – subject to material needs and the whims of fate. He describes the fully virtuous person as 'supremely happy – but with a human happiness'.<sup>416</sup> Aquinas references this passage in discussing the nature of happiness:

In the present state of life, perfect happiness cannot be attained by man. Wherefore the Philosopher, in placing man's happiness in this life, says that it is imperfect, and after a long discussion, concludes: *We call men happy, but only as men*. But God has promised us perfect happiness, when we shall be *as the angels... in heaven*.<sup>417</sup>

Aquinas's version of human flourishing is called *beatitudo*, and has two parts. The first part is the same as Aristotle's *eudaimonia* – it is the best we can do in this world. However, in the life beyond it is possible to attain a perfect happiness. The imperfect happiness available here is simply a likeness of the happiness which can be had in the next life: 'Man's happiness is twofold, one perfect, the other imperfect. And by perfect happiness we are to understand that which attains to the true notion of happiness; and by imperfect happiness that which... partakes of some particular likeness of happiness'.<sup>418</sup> In the last section I mentioned that Aquinas sees God as the final cause of all things. This means that perfect happiness involves

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<sup>415</sup> Aristotle, 1101a 20-25.

<sup>416</sup> Aristotle, 1101a 35 - 1101b 5.

<sup>417</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 3:2.

<sup>418</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 3:6.

being united with him – for humanity, this means rational contemplation. In fact, both forms of the good life involve contemplating God. The difference is that the imperfect form must also include action of the practical intellect ‘directing human actions and passions’.<sup>419</sup>

So Aquinas’s twofold good differs from Aristotle’s account of human happiness by identifying God as the source and goal of our happiness, and by describing two distinct states of fulfilment – a this-worldly, incomplete version and a complete happiness to be found in the next life. Both of these features were important in previous chapters. Firstly, the fact that there is a complete happiness in the next life featured in Chapter 3 as I suggested a way in which Swanton’s target-based theory of right action could respond to criticism. The perfect life and target of virtuous action consists entirely in contemplation, making it easier to defend against the claim that Swanton’s theory is circular because it includes a concept of right action in its definition of the target of virtue. Although I think this defence could be made by an Aristotelian, it is made easier with Thomas’s theory of the good life because he can entirely exclude the action of the practical intellect from *beatitudo*, as discussed above. This makes it clearer that his theory does not involve a definition of right action in any damaging sense. This is not central to my thesis, as I advocate a Thomist action theory which does not face the same problems in defining right action as Swanton. Still, it is useful in defending theologians like Hauerwas whose action theories are different.

There is another benefit to Thomas’s *beatitudo* which did not feature heavily in the preceding chapters, but which I want to draw out here. Because the good is completed in the next life, theological virtue ethics can accept that someone has little or no chance of flourishing now while denying that they are beyond hope. Aristotle seems to reach a rather gloomy position regarding those who suffer tragedy – ‘he cannot be entirely happy if he falls in with fortunes like those of Priam’.<sup>420</sup> Hauerwas also points out that Aristotle does not seem to have a

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<sup>419</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 3:5.

<sup>420</sup> Aristotle, 1101a 5-10.

satisfactory answer to the question of how those trapped by circumstance or their own bad choices can develop virtue. Aristotle says that the right recognition of the end is a 'natural gift', leading Hauerwas to ask 'what if we do not have such a natural gift?'.<sup>421</sup> He eventually concludes that 'it is the Christian claim that no one is so completely determined that he or she lacks all means to respond to the story of God', and that this is because of 'God's unrelenting desire to have each of us serve in the kingdom'.<sup>422</sup> This is quite a contrast to Aristotle's claim that 'The bounty of nature is clearly beyond our control... it is a regrettable fact that discussion and instruction are not effective in all cases'.<sup>423</sup> The possibility of a life in the kingdom – Aquinas's complete happiness – is the possibility of freedom from tragedy or a character prevented from fully developing by the past. In other words, theological virtue ethics offers hope. Aquinas says of hope that it concerns 'a future good, difficult but possible to obtain... Such a good is eternal life, which consists in the enjoyment of God himself'.<sup>424</sup> Hope – and the twofold good – means that theological virtue ethics is more clearly able to offer the possibility of fulfilment to everyone, whereas Aristotle says that it is out of reach to all but the fortunate.

The next feature of the twofold good which has been important in responding to criticism is the fact that it is grounded in God. I mentioned in the last section that this is useful for defending final causation. It also had a more direct impact in Chapters 6 and 7. In Chapter 6, it supported a stronger absolutist ethic than secular thinkers were able to supply. This works in tandem with the point made in the previous section about Foot and Nussbaum's inability to support relativism. In this case, the grounding of the twofold good in God is important because it means that God is the final cause of humanity. This in turn means that Aquinas has a single, unified goal of the virtues and it is this which allows him to develop a more absolutist virtue ethic.

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<sup>421</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 38.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>423</sup> Aristotle, 1179b 20-25.

<sup>424</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a2ae 17:1-2.

The importance of God's role in the twofold Good appeared in another way in Chapter 7. Here, it made it possible for theological virtue ethics to deal with accusations of weak egoism, self-effacingness and self-centredness. This is because although the ultimate goal of human action (contemplation of God) results in human flourishing, this is not the reason for which it is pursued. This means that the virtue ethicist can keep their goal in mind when acting without becoming egoist, thereby avoiding the need to become self-effacing. It also means that theological virtue ethics is not self-centred. The virtuous agent is neither the ground for moral decisions nor the only thing of ultimate moral value; both of these traits belong to God.

I have addressed this topic on Aquinas's terms because so many theologians draw on him in constructing their virtue ethic and because his account is quite clear. Although it is not always quite as explicit as it is in Aquinas's work, the twofold good is already present in other areas of theological virtue ethics. There is a clear emphasis on the eschatological nature of human flourishing. It appears in Hauerwas's focus on the kingdom of God, which is both present in the church and yet to come.<sup>425</sup> O'Donovan, in discussing the end of the moral life, says that 'The conviction of a final triumph of God's will, in which every other created will is conformed to it, makes sense of our present relative and imperfect commitment to doing God's will'.<sup>426</sup> I think that these are indicative of a twofold model of the human good similar to Aquinas's.

A twofold model of the human good has many benefits for theological virtue ethics. It allows thinkers like Hauerwas who may not agree with Aquinas's action theory to defend a target-based account of right action. It offers hope to those who may not be able to reach fulfilment in this life. It was also vital (along with final causation) in allowing a more absolutist ethic and it helps theological virtue ethics to resist the charge that it is self-centred. As long as they take care to be clear about the importance of the twofold good, theological virtue ethicists will have no

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<sup>425</sup> Hauerwas and Pinches, 'Virtue Christianly Considered', p. 304.

<sup>426</sup> O'Donovan, p. 247.

problem in relying on my responses to some of the criticisms described in previous chapters.

## Section 4: The Natural Law

The next advantage of a theological tradition for virtue ethics is the natural law. There is more disagreement over this point than my previous ones among theological virtue ethicists. This is largely because natural law theory has previously been seen as focused on rules and obligation, and hence somewhat at odds with an ethics of character. Jean Porter's work on Aquinas has gone a long way towards showing that this is not necessarily the case.<sup>427</sup> I have discussed the way that Thomas's natural law theory fits with his virtue ethics in several chapters – in particular in Chapter 2. Thomas says that there is an eternal law, which is the governing of the universe by divine reason. The natural law is the participation of the eternal law in rational creatures.<sup>428</sup> It gives us a natural inclination towards the good and so prescribes acts of virtue. The relationship between virtue and the natural law is reciprocal – the natural law guides virtue, and virtue (especially prudence) shows us how to put the law into practice.

As I mentioned in Chapter 6, Hauerwas's work gives a good idea of the way some virtue ethicists are uneasy about natural law. He is aware of the difference between Aquinas's natural law and later interpretations:

One of the difficulties of Catholic moral theology has been its assumption that it is rooted in so-called natural law. Christian ethics, then, is said to be about certain presumptions that all people share... Aquinas's account of natural law is quite different from these presumptions... Natural law for

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<sup>427</sup> Porter, *Nature as Reason*.

<sup>428</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae 91 1-2.

Aquinas was a way of saying that all people have the same destiny in God.<sup>429</sup>

This understanding of different approaches to the natural law is why he worries that natural law is too abstracted, 'free from historic communities' and that 'violence and coercion become conceptually intelligible from a natural law standpoint'.<sup>430</sup> It is also why, in the same book, he can say that 'some kind of natural law assumptions, at least in a qualified form, are integral to Christian ethics'.<sup>431</sup> My focus has been on natural law as Aquinas understands it – integrated with virtue, and not the exclusively legalistic kind which causes Hauerwas so much concern. Although this is more acceptable to him, the more developed the natural law becomes the more it seems to be at odds with historicism. This is because the natural law gives moral prescriptions which apply to all rational beings, suggesting that there is no need to consider particular communities or traditions in making those prescriptions. This is why, compared to Aquinas, historicists like Hauerwas and MacIntyre have a reduced role for natural law in their thought.

I have relied on the natural law in several ways throughout this thesis. In Chapter 2, it was important for showing that theological virtue ethics can accommodate rules. This is also possible for secular virtue ethicists, but natural law tends to be absent or only present in a weaker form in their theories. The way Thomas unites virtue and natural law means that theological virtue ethics can fully accept the importance of moral rules without diminishing or negating the role of virtue. In Chapter 5, the natural law was useful in refuting particularism. Here, it was the most obvious indication that Aquinas could accept Crisp's distinction between ultimate and non-ultimate reasons. Allowing the presence of some reasons with a 'fixed' moral polarity enables a response to a strong particularism about reasons. Allowing at least one ultimate reason for action – the good – enables

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<sup>429</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, 'Christianity: It's Not A Religion, It's an Adventure' in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 522-535 (p. 524).

<sup>430</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, pp. 58, 61.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

historicists like Hauerwas and MacIntyre to avoid any necessary commitment to (damaging) particularism.

Like final causation and the twofold good, natural law was also useful in allowing the virtue ethicist to avoid relativism. In fact, the more committed a thinker is to natural law the less trouble they are likely to have with relativism. As discussed in Chapter 6, natural law does not form part of MacIntyre's rejection of relativism, although he is aware of its importance to the Thomist tradition in which he places himself.<sup>432</sup> Although he can avoid a complete relativism, it is only just possible and Aquinas's ethics is much more clearly absolutist. Contrast this with O'Donovan, who discusses Aquinas's natural law with some approval. His only concern is that it does not go far enough – that the sphere of natural law is 'narrowly defined' and that Aquinas gives 'a false prominence to the rational *a priori* at the expense of the objective and empirically observable regularities of the natural order'.<sup>433</sup> This strong insistence on a well-developed natural law goes along with O'Donovan's firm rejection of relativism. As I mentioned in Chapter 6, in accusing MacIntyre of relativism he cites his rejection of 'natural teleology' – something without which a complete natural law is difficult – as the reason he cannot fail to be relativist.<sup>434</sup>

The natural law does not fit as well with all forms of theological virtue ethics as the twofold good. However, it is extremely useful in responding to criticisms. It can be used to answer accusations that virtue ethics leaves no room for moral rules and was important in responding to arguments that virtue ethics is particularist or relativist. Thinkers closer to Aquinas can make full use of the natural law, and are rewarded with strong responses to all of these criticisms. I think that even those ethicists who want to focus on historicism can leave some room for a basic acknowledgement of natural law, as Hauerwas does. Even though Hauerwas wants to accept some form of relativism, the natural law will be useful in dealing with other problems. A reduced role for natural law can result in difficulties or a weaker

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<sup>432</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, pp. 133-139.

<sup>433</sup> O'Donovan, p. 134.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221-222.

position, and it is up to the ethicist in question to determine whether or not this is worth it. Whatever the exact status of the natural law in each particular theory, as long as it is present in some form theological virtue ethics will be strengthened.

## Section 5: Specific Virtues

This final section looks at an area that theological virtue ethics would benefit from developing further. In Chapter 4 I showed that experiments in behavioural psychology seem to suggest that character in the way virtue ethics conceives of it does not exist. There are various attempted responses, but the best one is to argue that virtues can be highly situation-specific. This does not rule out virtues like justice or charity which seem to cover large areas of activity, but it does mean describing them as at least partly composed of smaller virtues with a more precise function. Theological virtue ethics is weakest on this point. Unlike the other topics discussed above, a more specific account of the virtues has not yet been developed in such a way that it can be used to respond to the problem. This does not mean that virtue ethics is necessarily vulnerable, but that it would be more obviously secure were such an account to be developed. I think that theological virtue ethics is capable of producing such an account. In Chapter 4, I suggested how it might begin this task.

The cardinal virtues as Aquinas describes them are far too broad to satisfy the need for specific virtues. However, Aquinas conceives of these larger virtues as formed at least in part by smaller virtues which each play a part in constructing a larger virtue. So, for example, patience and magnificence are cited as 'potential parts' of fortitude – secondary virtues which are annexed to a primary virtue.<sup>435</sup> Similarly, MacIntyre discusses 'subordinate virtues' which may belong to a cardinal virtue and are required for its completeness.<sup>436</sup> Although it is not a complete response, the idea that the general virtue terms may be broken down into more

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<sup>435</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a2ae 128:1.

<sup>436</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 198.

specific ones offers an excellent starting point for a catalogue of virtues which satisfies the requirements of my integrationist response to situationism. In Chapter 4 I mentioned that Flanagan shows that Western cultures are particularly likely to use generalised trait language. It may be that all that is required is an effort on the part of virtue ethicists to refer when possible to specific virtues – ‘resistance to peer pressure’ or ‘bravery in battle’ rather than ‘courage’. Where a general virtue term is more useful, it would be worth making clear that such a broad virtue is constructed by many more specific ones.

Three more points already mentioned throughout this thesis are important here. Firstly, Aquinas sees an act’s circumstances as one of the three determining factors of its goodness. Secondly, he thinks that a general law will not always work in specific situations. Taken alongside Aquinas and MacIntyre’s account of ‘subordinate’ virtues, I think that these points suggest that theological virtue ethics is well placed to incorporate the evidence from experiments on which situationists draw. Finally, I mentioned in Chapter 4 that work on narrative may prove useful in developing a more precise account of the virtues. By showing how virtues are exhibited in a particular setting and by referring to precise character traits, existing work on narrative may provide a basis for situation-specific virtue language. None of these avenues are closed to the secular virtue ethicist; but theological virtue ethics clearly has a strong position from which to begin. Narrative in particular is one of the main differences in focus between secular and theological virtue ethics. If it is useful in forming virtue language, then the work of Hauerwas, Meilaender and Kotva will give theological virtue ethics an excellent ground to work from. Although virtue ethical language is not usually precise enough to integrate with the findings of situationism, there is no barrier to changing this. Aquinas and MacIntyre’s view that lesser virtues may contribute to greater ones and the importance of narrative and stories in the work of its proponents mean that theological virtue ethics is in a strong position to do so.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that theological virtue ethics has great resources across the tradition, enough to support responses to the criticisms discussed in the rest of the thesis. I covered five of the key areas that theological virtue ethics should insist on in order to make those responses. I was clear at the beginning that these are neither the only nor even the most important principles necessary for theological virtue ethics; they are simply the ones which ensure a strong critical foundation.

I began by looking at the importance of Christ as a virtuous exemplar. Because theological virtue ethics has an exemplar that is both actual and reliable, it is able to place more emphasis on the role of the exemplar in virtue ethics. This gives it an advantage in offering action guidance as well as providing an exemplar not vulnerable to situational pressures. Next, I showed that final causation is more easily included in a theological ethic, and that this allows strong responses to the claims that virtue ethics cannot explain right action and that it is necessarily morally relativist. It is also useful in forming an account of human flourishing. As well as final causation, both Aquinas's model of the twofold good and the natural law are useful in responding to relativism, the three working together to secure an absolutist virtue ethic (although, as Hauerwas shows, they do not rule out a relativist position). The twofold good is also important in securing an alternative theory of right action and in showing that theological virtue ethics is not self-centred. It also allows for the possibility of fulfilment even for those who have suffered tragedy. Apart from its role in resisting relativism, the natural law was useful in showing how theological virtue ethics can incorporate rules. Further, it is important in my argument for a theory of ultimate reasons which can reject particularism. In the last section, I showed that theological virtue ethics does not yet have a sufficiently precise account of the virtues. This is not a serious problem, as Aquinas's view that the cardinal virtues can be divided into lesser ones makes it clear that such an account would be compatible with theological virtue ethics. The

emphasis on narrative in writers like Hauerwas and Meilaender may be a useful starting point for this task.

I suggest that theological virtue ethics should insist on these five points in the future. In cases where they are not always used or are present in a weaker form – as is sometimes the case with natural law – it is worth being aware that without them the thinker will be vulnerable to criticism and may need a separate response, like Hauerwas's attempt to mitigate the sting of relativism. As well as being the foundation of a response to the criticisms in this thesis, they are also evidence of the particular strength of theological virtue ethics. Two of the points above – Christ as exemplar and the twofold good – are in principle unavailable to secular ethics. Some form of final causation and natural law may be possible for secular ethicists, but only in a weakened fashion. Only the final point that virtue ethics should refer to situationally specific virtues seems truly available to both. Even here, theological virtue ethics' emphasis on narrative may give it an easier start in this project. The resources of a theological tradition, far from being a hindrance to virtue ethics, enable it to respond to criticism in new ways, many of which are unavailable to secular ethics. Theological virtue ethics is at its strongest when it relies on this tradition.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to provide a distinctively theological response to criticisms of virtue ethics and in so doing show that theological commitments are a conceptual resource which strengthens virtue ethics. Although theological virtue ethics has offered little response to these criticisms before now, it is in fact often in a position to make stronger replies than secular virtue ethics. After setting out my case in the first chapter, I addressed six important criticisms. Three were what I called internal criticisms, focused on the coherence of virtue ethics. These were covered in Chapters 2-4. The other three were external criticisms, which sought to associate virtue ethics with a separate, unpalatable, theory. I discussed these in Chapters 5-7. Finally, in Chapter 8 I reviewed the key ideas which made my responses possible. Exploring each of these criticisms does not only show that theological virtue ethics is well equipped to deal with them. It also highlights the particular theories which set theological virtue ethics apart. Identifying these allowed me to suggest a loose template for theological virtue ethics which will allow various kinds of virtue ethics while strengthening them against criticism.

This thesis has not sought to prescribe or argue in favour of a particular kind of theological virtue ethics. As the source for much of the work in this area, Aquinas has been the main resource but I have aimed to make my replies to each criticism accessible to thinkers like Hauerwas and O'Donovan who often take different positions. Nor do I insist on a single response to each criticism unless only one response seems viable. Hauerwas is a good example of a thinker who might wish to take an alternative route – for example in response to the claim discussed in Chapter 3, that virtue ethics cannot explain right action. Finally, I have been clear that although I resist several associations between virtue ethics and other theories in this thesis, there is no obligation for every virtue ethicist to do so. Theological virtue ethics is entitled to be particularist, relativist, egoistic and self-centred. If it chooses to be so, it must deal with the problems associated with these theories. I

have simply shown that theological virtue ethics need not take up these positions; not that it cannot.

My initial claim in Chapter 1 was that there are some important differences between secular and theological virtue ethics. Some of these differences are fundamental theoretical ones, while others are simply a product of how the two fields have developed. Chief among the latter is the effort that secular virtue ethicists have made to respond to criticisms. This is simply not matched in the work of theological virtue ethicists, who have tended instead to explore areas like doctrine and the importance of narrative and history. After exploring some of the more fundamental differences by looking at Aristotle and Aquinas, I argued that there are some good reasons to suppose that theological virtue ethics ought to offer its own responses, rather than relying on existing secular arguments. Firstly, not all counter-claims by secular virtue ethicists meet the needs of a theological virtue ethic. This is because theological ethics tends to have commitments that secular ethics does not, and these commitments may require extra work to support them or render some responses unhelpful. This is particularly clear from Chapters 5 and 6. Many secular virtue ethicists are willing to embrace some form of particularism or relativism, whereas there is a stronger theological commitment to absolutism. Secondly, the same commitments which render secular responses inadequate for the theologian often allow new and stronger defences of virtue ethics. This is one of the main claims of the thesis and appears in every chapter – most notably Chapter 8. Thirdly, the process of responding to criticism makes it possible to identify my previously mentioned template for theological virtue ethics – five key points which, if held to, will enable effective responses to criticism. I argued that these three reasons are sufficient to justify a separate theological response to criticism – a task which I began in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 dealt with probably the deepest or most fundamental criticism of virtue ethics – the claim that it is not a sufficient normative theory. I showed that this criticism in fact represents several separate arguments which each in some

way aim to show that virtue ethics alone does not do the job of a moral theory.

These arguments generally take one of three forms:

1. Virtue ethics does not provide action guidance.
2. Virtue ethics does not leave room for moral rules.
3. Virtue ethics fails to recognise the importance of moral obligation.

One form of 1 – the claim that virtue ethics lacks a workable theory of right action – is sufficiently serious to merit a separate chapter. The argument dealt with in Chapter 2 says that regardless of action theory, virtue ethics lacks any useful tools to guide action. I looked at three methods of virtue ethical action guidance – moral exemplars, thick concepts and prudence – to show that this is not the case. In response to 2 I looked at Aquinas's natural law theory to show that virtue ethics does make room for rules. I also showed that Gewirth's claim that rules ought to be the basis for a moral theory fails to appreciate that virtue ethics views 'morality' as a broader term than other normative theories. Finally, I show that 3 makes a similar mistake – obligation is important in virtue ethics, but due to the broad scope of morality it does not have a central role.

In Chapter 3, I returned to the argument mentioned in Chapter 2 – that virtue ethics cannot explain right action. I began with some secular virtue ethicists' attempts to answer this problem. Most notable is Hursthouse's definition of right action based on the virtuous exemplar. Unfortunately, it must either fail to accurately identify all instances of right action or devolve into a more basic, unsatisfactory view. I then showed that Aquinas's account of action allows a very simple response – virtue is necessary for right action without being sufficient. This is not used by modern virtue ethicists because Aquinas has a different 'component' action theory which allows him to identify several different parts of an action. This in turn is supported by Aquinas's ancient causal theory. Modern causal theory does

not allow an action theory like Aquinas's because it has only one kind of cause and takes each cause to be a distinct event. I argued that the view that God is the final cause of all things allows Aquinas to avoid some of the problems associated with final causation. Furthermore, attempts by modern action theorists to resolve the problems of consequential and antecedential deviance cause them to unwittingly introduce final-causal concepts in their action theories. Aquinas's action theory passes muster and allows him to provide a satisfactory definition of right action.

The final internal criticism argues that virtue ethics is reliant on an inaccurate view of character. Situationism draws on studies in behavioural psychology such as the Milgram experiment to show that it is situations, rather than character, which primarily affect our behaviour. Based on this evidence, situationists recommend the rejection of virtue ethical claims about character. I looked at the role character as a concept plays in virtue ethics to show that it is absolutely central as the bearer of the virtues. It has further importance in theological ethics like Hauerwas', where it is at the core of accounts of narrative and sanctification. I showed that some reappraisals of the situationist evidence by virtue ethicists take some of the sting out of the criticism. However, it is important to acknowledge that circumstances as well as disposition have an impact on behaviour. In order to accommodate the evidence, I argued that virtue ethics should try to use precise virtue terms wherever possible. That this is a reasonable option is suggested by the fact that both Aquinas and MacIntyre think of lesser virtues as constituent parts of greater ones. Finally, I argued that theological virtue ethics is well placed to make this move as Christ's role as the virtuous exemplar means that it is not vulnerable to any problems that situationism may cause for virtue ethical use of exemplars.

This brought me to the end of internal criticisms of virtue ethics. In Chapter 5 I dealt with the first external criticism – the complaint that virtue ethics is in some way particularist. I began by explaining the difference between particularism about rules and particularism about reasons, as well as the differences between universalism and generalism. Both virtue ethics and particularism emphasise the

role of prudence in moral deliberation. I showed that this does not necessitate a connection between them. Although some secular virtue ethicists (such as Nussbaum) are particularists, I argued that a particularist virtue ethic will make it harder to learn from experience (and the moral exemplar) and cause problems for the use of principles. The latter is likely to be particularly unpalatable to theological ethicists. Fortunately, I showed that any necessary connection between virtue ethics and particularism is so weak as to be negligible, and is better characterised as a rejection of basic generalism. In the last section, I examined whether the historicism of MacIntyre and Hauerwas entails a more substantial particularism. I argued that Crisp's theory of ultimate reasons can be found in Aquinas's work, and is present in some form in MacIntyre and Hauerwas. Even a single ultimate reason which is the focus of all other reasons will allow them to avoid particularism. Aquinas's natural law theory allows a stronger theory of ultimate reasons and hence a stronger rejection of particularism.

After Chapter 5, Chapter 6 covered a closely related accusation. Several critics have argued that virtue ethics is relativist. Of all the criticisms dealt with in this thesis, this is the one with the most substantial response from theological ethicists. In the first section I explained the different kinds of relativism and the reasons to resist any necessary connection between it and virtue ethics. A relativist virtue ethic will have to respond to criticisms of relativism. I picked out Rachel's three complaints as an example:

1. Relativism removes the possibility of morally comparing or assessing separate societies.
2. Relativism entails that a society can determine what is right simply with reference to its existing standards.
3. Relativism suggests that there is no such thing as moral progress.

Although cultural relativity of the virtues may suggest relativism, the real connection between virtue ethics and relativism is to be found in the apparent relativity of *eudaimonia*. I showed that thinkers like Foot and Nussbaum must accept some form of relativism because they are unable to offer an absolutist account of human flourishing. I returned to Aquinas's natural law along with his account of the twofold good to show that the virtues are all derived from the universal desire for God. This allows him to avoid relativism. I also returned to historicist virtue ethics and argued that they are not necessarily relativist, as they may allow for tradition-independent standards. Finally, Hauerwas's uncertain stance offers an insight into how a relativist theological virtue ethic might operate.

The final criticism in this thesis was the argument that virtue ethics is egoistic or self-centred. Here I began by showing that the term 'egoism' represents a spectrum of views, often quite different. For the purposes of discussion, I settled on strong and weak definitions of egoism alongside a definition of self-centredness. Strong egoism emphasises self-interested action without demanding that all action be exclusively self-interested. It also denies that altruistic behaviour is obligatory. Weak egoism makes the agent's good the moral standard and primary goal in acting. Self-centred views make the agent the ground of moral value. I showed that egoism tends to face claims that it somehow misrepresents the nature of morality, which demands an altruistic focus. These accusations suggest that virtue ethics ought to resist any necessary link to egoism. However, the apparently egoistic nature of *eudaimonia* suggests such a connection to weak egoism (a fact which has concerned some theologians) and while a self-effacing ethic may escape this problem it is an awkward solution. In any case, it does not seem to avoid the criticism that it is self-centred. Theological virtue ethics has a unique way to deal with this problem. Aquinas's ethics is God-centred, not self-centred. This means that his virtue ethics is neither egoist nor self-centred.

Chapter 8 played a unifying role in the thesis. Although Chapters 2-7 addressed very different criticisms, each response drew on at least one of five particularly helpful theological resources. Chapter 8 identifies and discusses these

concepts. I argue that in strengthening theological virtue ethics against criticism, they also form the previously mentioned template for theological virtue ethics. An ethic which includes commitments to these concepts or positions will be well equipped to respond to the criticisms discussed in this thesis. They are as follows: Christ as a moral exemplar; final causation; the twofold good; the natural law; and precise virtue terms. In my discussion, I gave a brief recap of each position and discussed why they represent a particular strength of theological ethics. Two of them – Christ as an exemplar and the twofold good – are in principle unavailable to a secular ethic. The natural law and final causation might be used by secular virtue ethicists, but are likely to be more easily adopted by a theological ethic. Finally, although neither secular nor theological ethics yet has a satisfactory catalogue of specific virtue terms, theological virtue ethics seems best placed to embark on this task.

As I showed in Chapter 1, theological virtue ethics has made and continues to make important contributions to moral thought. The lack of substantial critical discussion is not a failure on the part of any one ethicist. Despite this, it does represent a weakness in the body of work as a whole. The purpose of this thesis was to eliminate this weakness. In so doing, it has identified several conceptual strengths that are unique to theological virtue ethics. Far from being dependent on secular virtue ethics for defence against criticism, theological virtue ethics is in many areas better equipped to respond to these problems. This thesis has provided theological virtue ethics with its own responses to criticism. By holding fast to explicitly theological commitments, theological virtue ethics can rely on these responses. It is these commitments that establish theological thought on the virtues as a strong and distinctive ethic.

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