Ethical Theory and Moral Practice (2019) 22:685–700
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-019-10017-7

The Impossibility of a Virtue Ethic

Loren E. Lomasky[1]

Accepted: 10 July 2019 / Published online: 30 July 2019

Abstract
Virtue ethics is increasingly regarded as a viable alternative to consequentialist or deontological systems of normative ethics. This paper argues that there can be no such triumvirate of contending comprehensive ethical systems. That is not because virtue is unimportant but rather because genuine virtue is excellent and therefore rare. For most people in most morally salient situations there is no possibility of virtuous response because possession of the relevant virtues simply does not obtain nor can be usefully simulated. Instead, the much more universal and important moral requirement is suitable moderation of one's vices. Nor should it be supposed that the absence of virtue(s) necessarily diminishes the quality of an individual's life and that person's value to others. Rather, moral deficiencies are compatible with other excellences and may indeed contribute to them. I conclude that virtue ethics is less worthy of pursuit than vice ethics.

Keywords Vice · Virtue ethics · Character

1 I

Virtue is to be prized wherever it presents itself; this is almost uncontroversial.[1] If acceptance of this proposition sufficed to qualify a theory as falling within virtue ethics, however, very little would be excluded. Rather, what qualifies an account of morality as an instance of virtue ethics is that it conceives of virtue not only as *valuable* but also as *central*. Agents need not continuously monitor their own or other people's virtues, but attentiveness to virtue is, for theorists, conceptually primary in understanding how people should act, feel and be. Headway with moral problems is, for the most part, to be made by working out ramifications of the various ways in which human virtue is to be nurtured, cultivated and deployed. Advocates of a

[1] "Almost" because of skepticism concerning the existence of (virtuous) character. See Doris (2002), Gilbert Harman (1999).

✉ Loren E. Lomasky
lel3f@virginia.edu

[1] Philosophy, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, USA

virtue ethic take it to rival in comprehensiveness the theories of Kant and Mill and to be their superior with regard to the capabilities of actual human beings.[2]

I refrain from proffering a more precise definition of 'virtue ethic' both to avoid unproductive semantic disputes and also because one may doubt that there is a bright line separating those constructions that fall within the charmed circle from those on the outside. Instead I take those philosophers who claim to be advancing a virtue ethic at their word. Both within the professional literature and in pedagogical materials aimed at the captive "Introduction to Ethics" student, advertisements on behalf of virtue ethics are encountered with increasing frequency. Virtue-based treatments claim equal time against traditional deontology and consequentialism. Against such calls for a broadening of the typology of ethics, this essay argues that virtue ethics is not a respectable alternative to other broad currents of moral philosophy. That is because a genuine virtue ethics is not possible. Just what this denial of possibility amounts to will be set out in some detail below. Here is a hint: virtue is excellent, and like most other truly excellent things it therefore is rare.[3] There is simply not enough virtue available to imperfect human beings to go very far in helping them confront the conundrums and temptations that life affords. As valuable as virtue may be, its rarity renders it marginal in most practice. By way of contrast, consequences are ubiquitous in choice situations, and obligation-creating circumstances almost as much so. That is why the standard theoretical duality cannot be transformed into a trio.

No more decisive refutation of an impossibility claim can be proffered than exhibition of an actual instance of the kind. So against my claim self-professed virtue ethicists will be tempted in the first instance to respond by exhibiting an actual virtue-based ethic, that of Aristotle. Section 2 responds by suggesting that it is questionable whether Aristotle's own theory is a virtue ethic and, even if it be accorded that status, it does not comfortably make the transition into modernity. Section 3 addresses the contention that human lives and human societies are miserable in the absence of virtue, and Section 4 argues that possession of moral virtue is not an unalloyed benefit. Section 5 examines better and worse alternatives to moral excellence. I suggest that virtue is not available to everyone and that even those for whom it is feasible may do better with regard to their own flourishing and the flourishing of those with whom they interact by developing character traits incompatible with the moral virtues. Section 6 speculates as to why a form of ethics that is impossible nonetheless has attracted so many exponents. Section 7 concludes with a modest analogy.

2 II

Almost always when virtue ethics is assigned a seat at the contemporary philosophical table it is represented by Aristotle. This circumstance could be otherwise. Plato's emphasis on the centrality of virtue is no less prominent than Aristotle's, yet it does not seem to have

[2] It is no part of the ambition of this paper to adjudicate what lies inside and what is outside the perimeter of virtue ethics. To put (some of) my cards on the table, I take Hursthouse (1999) to be a paradigm instance of the genus. Also central are Driver (2001) and Christine Swanton (2003). Preceding these and influential across a wide range of professed virtue ethicists is Foot (1978). Arguably the work that birthed the entire line of thought in which virtue ethics finds a home is Anscombe (1958). The argument of this essay abstracts from what is distinctive in these and other contributions to the virtue ethics literature in order to construct a general critique, so I apologize in advance for riding roughshod over nuances.

[3] Smith (1982), p. 25 concurs: "[I]n the common degree of the moral, there is no virtue. Virtue is excellence, something uncommonly great and beautiful, which rises far above what is vulgar and ordinary. . . There is, in this respect, a considerable difference between virtue and mere propriety; between those qualities and actions which deserve to be admired and celebrated, and those which simply deserve to be approved of."

engendered a coterie of contemporary disciples. Stoicism offers a distinctive theory of human moral excellence as, from a very different perspective, does Confucianism. Closer to us in time, Hume offers in the *Treatise* an influential catalog of natural and artificial virtue. Nonetheless, these are not alternative founts of virtue-based conceptions of ethics. It is either some variation on Aristotle or it is (almost) nothing.

There is no need to rehearse here the monumental accomplishment of *Nicomachean Ethics*. Nowhere in the classical literature is there so comprehensive and systematic a treatment of the underpinnings of moral life, indeed one that seamlessly leads into a theory of politics. Nor is its interest primarily antiquarian; what Aristotle has to say about the roles of reason and emotion, of courage, temperance, justice, and friendship, of pleasure and pain possesses ready application to twenty-first century lives. His is a theory in which virtue figures prominently, but is it a virtue ethic?

Aristotle himself cautions that the teachings of *NE* are not for everyone but rather only for those who are well-brought-up (1095b5–10). Not much more than hints are supplied as to the mechanics of character formation in the young – habituation, twin levers of pleasure and pain – but no more can reasonably be called for in a series of lectures that constitute an advanced course for young men. Appropriate primary education is to be understood as whatever will best serve as the precondition for adult virtue, and this is plausibly an empirical matter ascertained through experience and thereafter prefaced to the advanced course. Entirely omitted from the lectures, however, is the normative theory of how those who have not been the fortunate beneficiaries of a fully satisfactory primary moral education should direct their lives. This is not a minor gap in what is otherwise a comprehensive theory. Rather, it appears to render that account altogether inapplicable to those whose upbringing was suboptimal. Like one who finds himself in an advanced calculus class without having previously mastered first-year algebra, the morally unformed individual lacks the prerequisites to undertake the study on offer. An optimistic rendering is that only some 95% of people are thereby disqualified from a life of activity in accord with virtue. "Ethics is not rocket science" – no, it is much more exclusive.

The Aristotelian virtue theorist can respond with the subjunctive counterfactual that were one to have been brought up appropriately, then *these* – pointing to various sections in *NE* – are the dicta and dispositions that would have been absorbed. Even if that is correct, the practical significance of that proposition is questionable. The problem that individuals confront is, of course, to navigate their lives from where they find themselves, not from a vantage that has not been attained and that may for them now be unattainable. Arguably more helpful is the suggestion that the virtuous serve as role models for those who themselves fall short of moral excellence. One is enjoined to carry oneself as they do, perhaps with the prospect eventually of becoming a member of that coterie, but at least performing up to whatever level one's own prior attainments have rendered feasible. The expert in any field sets the standard of what constitutes fully capable activity in that field; those who lack expertise but nonetheless find it worthwhile to practice that activity will emulate as best they can. The tyro who hacks away at tennis balls cannot expect now or ever to compete at the level of Serena Williams, but by judicious observation and emulation of what she does so consummately well may succeed in ascending rung by rung the ladder of mediocrity. It is in this way that excellence is the touchstone of the many and not only the privileged few. The universality of virtue ethics is, then, that in those for whom it is not *operational* virtue is properly *aspirational*.

Unless some such response is supportable, virtue ethics is a non-starter. A fuller examination of this thesis of Virtue for the Rest of Us will be taken up in the next section. For now it is worthwhile to keep in mind that not everything that is worth doing well remains worth doing at a lesser level of accomplishment. Instances of the latter include sword-swallowing, tightrope

walking, bomb defusing, climbing in the Himalayas, writing exegetical essays on Aristotle; those not expert are advised to stay far away. Even tennis playing is a different activity when pursued professionally rather than as an amateur; most people would be making a serious error if they devote themselves to working toward a Wimbledon appearance.[4] It is, then, not as obvious as it may at first seem how to respond to the question: Is virtue best left to the virtuous?

The discussion has proceeded as if we understand with tolerable clarity what it is to be virtuous. That may have been a reasonable presumption for Aristotle and his interlocutors but it is one to which our own entitlement is considerably less secure. Some of the standards in the classical catalog of canonical virtues have survived with their moral prestige intact: courage and temperance probably, justice certainly. Others such as *megalopsychia* ("greatsouledness", "magnanimity") have fared less well and are almost unrecognizable[5] in contemporary moral discourse.[6] Christian virtues are, of course, excluded from the classical roster as is the central virtue of liberalism, toleration. The term "virtue" has had ups and downs over the past century, although at least in philosophical settings it is once again riding rather high, but the generally honorific force that it possesses does not guarantee that its reference is clear. Indeed, it cannot be so for us as it was for Aristotle because we do not share his commitment to the ideal of the one best mode of life. The tuition drachmas that flowed into the Lyceum were from young well-born men aspiring to a career of political involvement in the life of the polis. Accordingly, the account of the virtues that they are provided is responsive to the imperatives of this distinctive mode of life. That does not mean that it is the only significant mode of life in Aristotle's own day; neither women nor menials nor non-citizens could enjoy it.[7] This should not be construed as a lamentable but understandable lack of diversity that is ameliorated by our own more open standards of inclusion. Rather, it underscores the relativity of virtue in the sense that excellence is always excellence in the service of some φ and thus not interchangeable across practices. It is possible that the qualities that made for a successful Athenian gentleman are qualities advantageous to ourselves, but this is not something that can be determined a priori. Rather, it requires at some level of specificity an examination of the various species of flourishing open to us. Even prior to that examination, however, we can be quite certain that any plausible contemporary ethic must be far more capacious than that of Aristotle. There are many avenues along which we can live well and thus can also fail to do so. No one set of central virtues is adequate to all.

It follows that the classical conception of the unity of the virtues has been rendered altogether implausible.[8] Because the dispositions needed to do well as a soldier, legislator, software entrepreneur, performance artist, priest, surgeon, tennis pro, philosopher pull in

[4] Serena Williams's swinging forehand volley is a marvelous stroke but not for the masses (including the author of this essay).

[5] Perhaps even this outlier can, with suitable plastic surgery, be rendered recognizable to contemporary sensibilities. See Chappell (2014), Ch. 7 "Glory as an ethical idea".

[6] The Platonic dialogue *Euthyphro* is wonderfully teachable except for the opening hurdle of clarifying the unfamiliar sense of 'piety' being employed by Socrates and Euthyphro. It is not a virtue concept easily accessible to contemporary sensibilities.

[7] Aristotle himself is a *metic*, a resident alien in Athens and thus excluded from playing the public role to which his own students aspire. Many readers of *NE* have been puzzled by the abrupt transition in the final book from political to philosophical activity as an ideal. One may suspect that Aristotle's reflections on his own status as opposed to that of the young men he instructs provides a big part of the explanation.

[8] See for example Badhwar (1996). As the title of this essay indicates, she is one among many contemporary virtue ethicists who are willing to jettison in whole or part the traditional Aristotelian unity of the virtues.

various incompatible directions, what might constitute an ethic of virtue for one will for others be a prescription for failure. Absent knowledge of an individual's distinctive commitments and appraisals, only the vaguest appraisals of her choices and emotions are feasible. That isn't to deny that for the individual there are genuine excellences of character, but these are derivative, not ethically foundational.

3 III

All virtues are excellences, but not all excellences are created equal. The contemporary Aristotelian will distinguish those that are specialized from those that are necessary for living any kind of good human life. It will be argued that there are a great number of virtues that, depending on one's calling, can be dispensed with, but a central core is essential across the range. Courage, temperance and especially justice are venerable candidates for that standing, and more recent entrants may include open-mindedness and integrity. To lack any of these is to be diminished. On this view philosophy does not aspire to provide sufficient moral conditions for human flourishing but does maintain with regard to some that they are necessary. Consider courage, for example. Someone frozen by apprehensions of danger will be disabled from acting vigorously when crucial ends are in jeopardy. Similarly, the person who can't control her passions will be deflected from acting consistently and efficiently in pursuit of what in a cool moment is judged worth achieving. That will be the case regardless of whether the individual's project is to achieve victories on the tennis court, further world peace, or to prove logic theorems.

The claim that the virtues, at least if understood as a central core, are necessary for living a good human life is a staple of contemporary virtue ethics.[9] No such proposition is sustainable. It is barely plausible that a superlatively fine life requires full possession of all the core virtues, but that's a bit of a reach for almost everyone. Rather, what is needed to achieve one's goals is an allotment of moral assets adequate to the task at hand. Sometimes that will be an appreciable allotment but for the most part no more than a *decent minimum* is called for. Navy Seals had better be prepared to confront grave dangers without flinching, while philosophers will rarely need more than a modest allotment of the qualities that make for courage in order to be able to pursue their goals with a reasonable chance of success.

It can be objected that this is to take too narrow a view of the virtue in question. Philosophers do not need an abundance of steel in the soul to keep from quaking in the presence of the college dean, but they do require tenacity in pursuit of discursive reasoning to carry out their own projects. Is this not also a species of courage?

I believe that it is not. Resisting dangers is one thing; resisting distraction or boredom or ennui is quite another. What philosophers probably should resist is the temptation to poach excellences from another domain to adorn their own. Perhaps bespeaking a lack of courage on my own part, I do not wish to take a firm stand on this issue. If someone is inclined to distinguish the warrior's Courage_1 from the pedagogues Courage_2, claiming that they bear a family resemblance, the claim can readily be conceded, but with the observation that these two

[9] "Men and women need to be industrious and tenacious of purpose not only so as to be able to house, clothe, and feed themselves, but also to pursue human ends having to do with love and friendship. They need the ability to form family ties, friendships, and special relations with neighbours. They also need codes of conduct. *And how could they have all these things without virtues?*" Foot (2001), pp. 44–45 (emphasis added).

species of Courage are so fundamentally different that it would be altogether fatal to the pursuits of the warrior if he were instead to find himself with the philosopher's brand of so-called courage and vice versa. It can be objected that there is a core common to both species, a certain *fortitude*. That may well be correct, but the fortitude that that underlies Courage_1 is not in any obvious way transferable to Courage_2, and vice versa. No improvement has been achieved by now introducing a Fortitude_1 as distinct from Fortitude_2. The separability of the virtues remains.

Of course no one is a warrior or philosopher simpliciter; lives are lived along several avenues simultaneously or seriatim. The virtue theorist therefore could respond that while a minimal virtue, Courage_2 say, might suffice to assist an individual in pursuit of some particular calling or role, preparation for the variety of circumstance and opportunity that might open before someone requires broader attainments. Courage adequate to the entire spectrum of undertakings in which the individual will engage (or would engage if morally well-armed enough to do so) is not some narrow specialization of character. Precisely because it is both wide-ranging and open-ended, only this deserves to be accorded recognition as a moral excellence. Warriors at their best possess this as do philosophers at theirs. To put it another way, virtue is a characteristic of the generalist, not a specialized presence.

In one sense the response is unobjectionable; a capacity to deal with a multitude of kinds of dangers and temptations is a characteristic more valuable than, say, a courage that expresses itself only or primarily in the arts of war. More of a good thing is to be preferred to less of it; the complete set of excellences is more valuable than any proper subset. Therefore, the kind of wish that might be granted by a benign genii will be for global virtue. But as Aristotle well knew and we no less well know, virtuous character is not achieved as a fortuitous gift but rather is developed and sustained over an extended period through disciplined activity. That is to say, it is *costly* in the opportunity sense. Time and effort expended in habituating the agent for one range of emotions and decisions is time and effort not available for alternative varieties of moral education. It may well be that the philosopher's life-options would be usefully expanded by extended drills preparatory to meeting mortal danger without flinching, yet the resources invested along that line may not contribute much if at all to tenacity in dealing with skeptical objections to one's arguments. If so, then choices must be made, tradeoffs confronted. Admittedly, nothing said so far rules out the possibility that there exists some one regimen of moral education optimal across the whole range of activities in which virtue (or, more modestly, some one virtue) is manifested, but neither is there any reason to believe that this is so. The vast range of pedagogies across human cultures and subcultures strongly suggests the contrary. Surely Aristotle, that great observer of practices, would be resistant to all versions of the genii hypothesis. He would not insist that the curriculum he endorses for well-born young Athenian gentlemen launching themselves on a political career would be appropriate for all other people alive at that time, let alone for those who are living today.

The upshot is that only if there were one best mode of life for all people would an ethic of canonical virtues provide powerful direction toward living well. That this is not the case should be altogether obvious. As noted previously, even Aristotle explicitly sneaks in philosophy as a worthy alternative to the officially endorsed political life. He also acknowledges that the teachings of *NE* are for the well-brought-up, thereby consigning to the margin those who are not financially secure free Greeks living in politically open societies. And it goes without saying that only males need apply; the excellences of female lives are different from those of their male counterparts and (rightly or wrongly) would have been regarded as inferior. It follows that even in the version that has been as adopted as authoritative by most

contemporary theorists, virtue ethics is distinctly a minority calling. Stepping forward into modernity, the presumption that only active civic engagement constitutes doing well is altogether untenable. "How shall I live?" is a pivotal question that admits of a multiplicity of intelligent answers and perhaps a yet greater number of misbegotten decisions. No one-size-fits-all conception of virtue is adequate either for Aristotle's contemporaries or ours.

The response might be that this amounts to a misapprehension of the aims of virtue ethics. As previously noted, it is not advanced as providing *sufficient conditions* for living well but rather as a *necessary condition*. The virtues are not the only traits of character that people of different callings need to conduct their affairs well, but without them one's life will be inferior. Unless seasoned by courage, temperance, justice, thoughtfulness, beneficence, open-mindedness – lists can differ – one's projects and aspirations will be crippled. It is because we *need* virtue to lead flourishing lives that a virtue ethic commends itself, not because we need nothing else.

Suppose that this is acceptable. (The next section will argue that it is not.) It therefore follows that virtue ethics is a *limited, incomplete* theory of morality. Answering questions about how a person should think and act will require further resources, including consequentialist appraisals and attention to rules and duties.[10] This is to abandon the contention that virtue ethics can stand as a serious competitor as a comprehensive theory of morality to deontology and consequentialism. At most it supplements them. I say "at most" because each of the other two claims to *derive* an account of the virtues. This is not the occasion to inspect those pretensions, but it can provisionally be concluded that virtue ethics as a systematic elucidation of necessary conditions for moral success presents itself with lesser ambitions than some exponents have suggested. The next section argues that even in this more modest garb virtue ethics is unsustainable.

4 IV

Do we need the virtues? The question is ambiguous. It can be understood as asking whether to live a satisfactory life one must possess the full excellence of courage, temperance, prudence, etc. or whether one entirely bereft of courage can do well. The answer that the virtue theorist needs if it is a theory of human excellences is the former, but for reasons already suggested in the preceding section it is the latter that is the more plausible. Indeed, Aristotle himself seems to lend credence to that reading when he asserts:

> [N]o one would maintain that he is happy *who has not in him a particle of courage or temperance or justice or practical wisdom*, who is afraid of every insect which flutters past him . . . These propositions are almost universally acknowledged as soon as they are uttered, but men differ about the degree or relative superiority of this or that good. Some think that a very moderate amount of excellence is enough. *Politics* 1323a 27-37 (emphasis added).

Admittedly, he can be interpreted as discussing only the conditions necessary for a non-miserable life, not the underpinnings for a life very much worth living, so I refrain from exercises in petard-hoisting. The contentions to be examined are:

[10] Additional character traits specific to one's occupation, affections, ethnic identity, religious or ideological convictions and other commitments will also figure as inputs into the equations.

(1) A life of full virtue is better than a life of only partial virtue;
(2) A life comprising a set V of virtues is better all else equal than a life comprising only a proper subset of V;
(3) The absence of some virtue can be made good only by the presence of some other virtue.

The first of these can be quickly disposed of. In our world if not in Aristotle's, not all virtues are compossible. Therefore, full virtue is an empty notion. Perhaps there is some way of constructing a sense of *maximally virtuous character*, with the understanding that some excellences will not fit in, but not only will this be theoretically challenging, it would seem to be more a matter for psychological science than moral philosophy.

The second proposition is more interesting. Although its truth may seem intuitively obvious, that is because a great deal has been left hanging on the ceteris paribus clause. In a world in which attainment and maintenance of a virtue is costly – e.g., our world – the benefit of possessing the larger set V can be outweighed by what is given up to expand beyond the subset. That was the point of the discussion in the earlier section of different species of courage. If the cost of adding Courage_2 to Courage_1 is some smaller quantity or quality of the latter, then one may be well-advised to do without. In that case, however, the set/subset comparison would have been altered by the inculcation process. The point is a fine one and readers may judge for themselves how that example bears on (2).

Most controversial is (3) insofar as a negative answer undercuts the primacy of moral qualities in making judgments about the admirability of a life. I do not mean to be making a cheap point (or at least not *merely* a cheap point) by observing that as nearly all moral philosophy is written by moral philosophers, the literature is apt to display bias concerning the relative importance of moral/nonmoral factors. There are many dimensions along which a life can dazzle, and these include excellences of character that are not plausibly deemed moral. More strongly, some of these can display themselves as counter-moral, in tension with the virtues as we normally think of them.

Readers who wish to convey their views concerning this essay may choose to write out a response, phone, or text. If you do so on a Mac or iPhone, you are living in the world that the late Steve Jobs made. (If your church is Android, then you orbit a satellite of that world.) Jobs is the great creative genius of design and production who revolutionized the means through which we standardly communicate. Although one need not be delighted by all aspects of this transformation – is it really an advance to text someone 20 ft away rather than speak face to face? – it is undeniable that few people who have ever lived equal Jobs in the amount of desire-satisfaction for which they are responsible. Yet by all accounts Jobs was an intensely driven man who often was brusquely insensitive to the feelings of those who worked with or under him and who was disloyal within personal relationships.[11] In terms of conventional morality Jobs is borderline despicable (or worse), yet his life is admirable. "Not *altogether* admirable" some will argue, and of course they are right; flawless people don't exist.

As outstanding a success as Jobs is, would he have not been more admirable yet if his "people skills" were more benign? My hunch is that the opposite would have been the case. It is precisely the perfectionism, intensity, monomaniacal attentiveness that explain both his

[11] See Isaacson (2011); Boyle (2015). I admit that my knowledge of Jobs's life is superficial. If it turns out that I have gotten its moral tenor wrong I am prepared to withdraw this example and substitute another. Although Jobs's genius is exceptional, the claim advanced in this section is that the phenomenon of nonmoral qualities countermanding and outweighing moral defects is reasonably common.

mastery of the things he made and misanthropy toward other human beings. Had he been otherwise he very well might have been a more pleasant person to have a beer with and a more dutiful father to his daughter, but he also would have been more ordinary. And although there's nothing wrong with being ordinary, there's nothing scintillating about it either. Reasonable people can differ about the weight to be ascribed to extraordinary accomplishment, or extraordinary ambition coupled with less-than-extraordinary accomplishment, but that these should invariably count for less than conventional moral virtue is an extreme position.[12] Should we have wished for Jobs the life of conventional decency? Should he have wished that for himself? My suspicion is that unless one is already biased toward the proposition that the life of moral virtue is always better than one lacking – some, not all – virtues, the most plausible answer is that moral excellences are fine but nonmoral excellences also are fine, and that in a given case the latter can thoroughly outweigh the moral.

The example should not be read as claiming that possession of ethical virtues is incompatible with possession of non-moral talent. I do not doubt the existence of dazzlingly talented moral exemplars. And even if they are exceedingly rare, even if in fact they do not exist, they can serve as inspirational ideals to those of us who read about them. That does not impugn the proposition that with regard to the particular individual who is Steven Jobs no such combination was in the cards. At no point does he display any conspicuous aptitude for moral excellence. Once he emerged with Steve Wozniak from the fateful garage, the admirable traits he puts on display are distinctly of another variety.

It could reasonably be contended that the probative force of the example is slight. Steve Jobs is a force of nature, so distant in vision and achievement from ordinary human beings that the failure of principles to apply to him is a quirk. Because ethics is *practical* it takes as its object the activity of the vast mass of people, not metaphysically necessary truths that hold across possible worlds. That those individuals half a dozen or more standard deviations from the mean might operate according to different regulative principles of their own special nature has no significant implications concerning the nature of the good life for the other 99.999%. Jobs and those like him[13] are the exceptions that prove the rule.

For all that can be demonstrated by advancing a handful of illustrious names this could be right. However, it leaves open the question of whether less scintillating but nonetheless admirable individuals in the dozens or thousands or hundreds of thousands live better not in spite of but because of deviation from spotless virtue. It is to that question I now turn.

[12] The suggestion that one moral virtue can only properly be traded off for some other moral virtue is reminiscent of Rawls's (1971) prescription that "a basic liberty. .. can be limited only for the sake of liberty itself", p. 204.

[13] It will not be easy to secure any consensus concerning the makeup of the select coterie of those whose extra-moral excellences outweigh a lack of moral virtue. In the philosophical literature Gauguin is perhaps the most common example put forth of someone whose "moral luck" insulates him from the recriminations that would otherwise attach to someone derelict in bourgeois duties to friends and family. See the influential essays by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel in Statman (1993). I don't know enough about Gaugin's inner life to estimate whether his deviations from the norm are better understood as rooted in character or geography. Perhaps if breadfruit trees had been more common in his immediate neighborhood he would have been able to accommodate both his artistic calling and his domestic duties. Individuals I judge to be more appropriate company to Jobs include Vincent van Gogh, George Patton, St. Jerome, Jimi Hendrix, Frieda Kahlo, Malcom X, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Joan of Arc, and the artist formerly known as Prince. It is plausible that for each of them a certain deformation of character constitutes a crucial basis for greatness. Despite temptations to the contrary, I refrain from adding Nietzsche to this conversation.

5 V

Let it be agreed that ethics, whatever else it is, must be practical. Because genuine virtue is so rare, it stands as the exquisite efflorescence of the moral life, not its sturdy underpinnings. The ability to live successfully among others who are trying to do similarly would no doubt be eased in a world of virtuous agents, but that is not our world. Instead that endeavor rests much more profoundly on people's capacity to *monitor and control their vices.* Recognizing their imperfections, they adopt strategies of damage control so as to pursue their ends with minimal collateral misfortunes. Most people who are not moral philosophers believe that their lives can be good from the inside and outside despite their not being paragons of courage, temperance, generosity, wit, liberality and so on. Rather, the most urgent moral task is to avoid fatal tumbles into the snares and delusions that surround them. Excellence is, well, excellent, but good enough is the more important desideratum.

One should, the ancient worthies inform us, pursue sensory enjoyments with moderation. To eat and drink to excess is to miss the mark. Without wishing in any way to dispute this maxim, I note that missing this mark, as with others, admits of degree. A tragically large number of our contemporaries broadly miss it in their consumption of opioids. They are thereby disqualified from performing effective work and enjoying satisfying human relationships. They also drop dead at shockingly young ages.[14] Intemperance for them is literally fatal. Of course there is nothing especially novel about this topical social issue; people have for millennia drunk themselves into oblivion, eaten their way to morbid obesity and gout, injected and smoked at grave cost to health, perished via disease and duels as a consequence of injudicious carnality. The immoderate pursuit of pleasure can prove entirely debilitating. But then again, it might not. Many people who treat themselves to a drink or six awaken the next day with nothing worse than a slightly dry mouth and a head that isn't entirely clear. They have availed themselves of the services of a designated driver to make their way home the night before, and they might go a day or two before their next dip into inebriation. They are perched midway between teetotaler and alcoholic, and although this doesn't amount to temperance neither is it a vice out of control. Of course they could sooner or later descend into more perilous conduct, but despite the warnings of some moralists this is not inevitable.

Would individuals of this sort live better lives if they were truly temperate rather than given to excess? Aristotle would answer in the affirmative, and he may well be correct. It is important to keep in mind, though, that the Aristotelian conception of virtue incorporates not only correct action but also the corresponding correct emotion. If a hard-won abstinence is painful, then it doesn't count as virtue but rather is the lesser quality of moral strength, *enkrasia*. Even from the Aristotelian perspective it may be questioned whether the enkratic individual in fact does better than the person who gives way to temptation. That will depend on how well the consequences of detours from the straight and narrow are managed and how draining the rigors of resistance will be. It is important to keep in mind that although superior activity may be effortless for those who are at the pinnacle of moral excellence, for others moral achievement is not free of cost. Letting loose to excess on a weekend night is for many people an efficient way to release tension that could otherwise infect other parts of one's life. Of course it could also turn out to be sadly inefficient, a step toward the

[14] An unprecedented two year decline in U.S. longevity among middle-aged whites is largely a consequence of opioid intemperance. See Case and Deaton (2015).

person's ruin. It all depends on how well one engages in the art of vice management. Virtue simply doesn't enter as an option for this individual.

This example was chosen because deviations from a standard of temperance are perhaps the most prominent species of opportunities for vice management. That is because pleasures of doing and overdoing are ubiquitous. Food and drink are with us every day. Chemicals that stimulate or depress the brain are common in the natural environment as well as synthesized in vast quantities by ambitious entrepreneurs. And of course there is sex. That pleasures are uniquely potent movers for better or worse is known by all ethicists ancient or modern. Other occasions for virtue or vice are of similar quality if lesser quantity. It is a great excellence to behave well when confronting that which is fearful, but most of the time for most people nothing terribly ominous crosses their path. Loyalty is an integral component of valuable human relationships but most of the people with whom one has dealings are owed basic civility, not loyalty. Compassion exhibited toward those in distress is laudable, but with some luck distress will be infrequently experienced in one's usual environment.[15] Beneficence is what used to be known as an *imperfect duty*, not required at all times and on all occasions but discretionary as the agent sees fit. And so on. It would be useful to apply the template of vice control sketched above to the full catalog of moral excellences (assuming that we can avail ourselves of some non-question-begging procedure for producing that catalog), but even in the absence of that fuller appraisal it seems indicated to conjecture that vice management is crucial in all these domains.

Or all but one. Of the classical virtues, *justice* fits this analysis least well. That is because justice uniquely addresses itself to *moral minima*, not maxima. It is strictly impermissible to steal, even to steal a little bit. And although one who does not steal is acting justly, only under very unusual circumstances does this call for moral congratulations or anything other than the most superficial regard. That is not to deny that circumstances can be such that ordinary moral agents will find it exceedingly difficult to hew to the straight and narrow,[16] but this sort of exceptional case should not be allowed to disguise the desultory nature of quotidian justice. Respect for rights of person and property are owed to everyone, but almost always the debt is small. While other virtues are laudatory, justice is merely obligatory. It is a floor, while other virtues are ceilings. That is why the model of vice management does not fit justice very well. Resolutely controlling oneself so as to steal only a little from people who won't miss it all that much isn't merely to fall short of moral excellence, it is to place oneself below moral acceptability.

A large literature has accumulated in recent years concerning the distinction between *ideal* and *nonideal* moral theory.[17] Because much of this discussion is responsive to Rawls its focus has been on justice, but the distinction between ideal and nonideal applies elsewhere in moral theory. If there is such a thing as a virtue ethics it resides within the realm of the ideal. Virtue is off the table for those born to unfortunate circumstances, those who have not been well-brought-up, and those whose excellence of character has not regularly been reinforced and thus

[15] Some moralists demand that geographically far-off distress be actively sought and then tended to, even at considerable cost to the agent. See, for example Singer (2015). Whether or not such a policy is uniquely admirable can be debated, but it is beyond doubt that its fruits are enjoyed by others rather than the agent herself.

[16] Again Adam Smith is to the point: "[T]here may frequently be a considerable degree of virtue in those actions which fall short of the most perfect propriety; because they may still approach nearer to perfection than could well be expected upon occasions in which it was so extremely difficult to attain it," p. 25.

[17] See Simmons (2010); Valentini (2012); Hamlin and Stemplowska (2012); Stemplowska and Swift (2012); Robeyns (2008); Schmidtz (2011).

preserved through association with appropriate companions.[18] Is it a person's fault that she has not developed a virtuous character? Very possibly not, but that is irrelevant as to whether the maxims of full virtue apply to her. Can she as a mature adult become aware of her moral deficiencies and then work effectively to eliminate them? That's not impossible, but neither should it be assumed that in all cases – or even in many – the project of self-reform, even if undertaken with the utmost conscientiousness, will be more than partially successful. For those people not at the pinnacle, some alternative to the precepts of ideal theory are needed to guide them in successfully steering their lives.

The virtue ethicist can respond that this is no more than a modest theoretical inconvenience. For those who are not themselves virtuous the maxim under which they should place themselves is to act to the extent they are capable as the virtuous person would. Lacking temperance one should nonetheless act as temperately as is within one's power. A timid person should buck himself up to emulate the courageous person. This isn't to pull oneself up by the moral bootstraps but it is to do the best one can with what one has. The chasm between ideal and nonideal theory is thereby elided; one for whom *Be virtuous* is a bridge too far will instead be subject to the imperative *Do as the virtuous person would.*

Unfortunately, this strategy fails. It sometimes will be good advice for the morally mediocre to emulate virtue but sometimes it will be disastrous. Forcing oneself to abstain from less than virtuous conduct carries costs, and if they are substantial enough then an alternative is indicated. There are innumerable particular strategems that can rationally be pursued, all of which have been characterized here as vice management. There is a danger that in affixing this one term to many cases they will all be supposed to be variations on a common theme. In one sense they are: doing well but less-than-virtuously. There is no reason to suppose, however, that there is only one or a small number of ways to do so. To the contrary, examination of history and literature reveal a multitude of ways in which people attempt to cope with difficulties external but also internal. Most people aren't as adept as Ulysses in using the most advanced technology of his day for binding himself to the mast, but the simple soul who counts to 10 or bites his tongue before responding to a perceived slight is also a practitioner of vice management. Not having the first drink so as not to eventually have the tenth is also a management technique, as is arranging in advance for a designated driver. A technique that works reasonably well for one person may be completely inappropriate for someone else. Living well seems relatively uncomplicated within the ideal theory of virtue ethics because the indicated course is unique, the odd tie at the top excepted. But for human beings who still struggle to do the best they can, tradeoffs are multiple and inescapable.

Before philosophers turned their attention to ideal vs. nonideal theory, economists elucidated a *theory of second best*.[19] Essentially, this is the theory of how to achieve the most one can once one parameter of optimization has been breached. Not surprisingly, it turns out that what would otherwise be recommended no longer is. To the best of my knowledge, no similar accomplishment can be credited to philosophers' theory of second best morality: nonideal theory. This absence is not to the credit of moral philosophy. Insofar as normative ethics insistently focuses on the pinnacle it fails to speak to the condition of those who do not and

[18] Readers of *Nicomachean Ethics* are often surprised by the disproportionate attention – two books – extended to *friendship*. Even if friends are needed for living a good life, it isn't altogether clear why their function is specifically *ethical*. One hypothesis that makes sense is that friends of a suitably moral standing are all-but-necessary for maintenance of excellent character.

[19] The founding document is Lipsey and Lancaster (1956).

cannot rise to that level but who are up some way from the base and do not wish to descend. For these individuals vice and its management weigh more heavily than do edifying depictions of virtue. This is a lacuna in virtue ethics, but it also constitutes a flaw in competing moral theories.

Insofar as both consequentialism and Kantian deontology also present themselves in the ideal theory mode they too fail to address the needs of those who are unable or unwilling to act so as to produce the greatest available balance of good over bad for all affected parties or to act dutifully for the sake of duty regardless of where the chips may fall. My contention here, and it must remain no more than that on this occasion, is that the feebleness of the scope of virtue ethics can be made good only by its incorporation of what might, in the absence of a better term, be called *vice ethics*.[20] Contemporary moral theory has done a less good job in developing this than have some philosophers of previous generations.[21] Also useful in this regard are volumes on etiquette. It is a mistake to suppose that these contain only dicta prescribing forms of empty rituals. Rather, the ultimate telos of rules of etiquette is to assist individuals in not giving undue offense to each other even if one's own character is less than stellar. Etiquette takes as its object outward performance rather than inward motive, and although this means that the exercise of good manners is less than edifying, insofar as it assists individuals in not bumping into each other too hard and too often it has its uses – uses in the domain of nonideal/s best.

In one respect the analysis presented in this section is an equal opportunity critique of all ideal moral theories, not only virtue ethics. But in another respect virtue ethics is more vulnerable than its competitors. Utilitarianism and Kantian deontology speak to the choice situations of all individuals. Whether one is morally superior or mediocre, the imperative to act so as to produce the most good applies, regardless of the individual's incentive to comply. However, the imperatives of virtue simply lack applicability to non-pinnacle types: that is, applicability to the vast preponderance of us.

A proponent of virtue ethics might at this point lodge two objections. First, it might be urged that it is hard to see how an ethic of vice management can be fully grounded without the notion of virtue, which has the merit of suggesting an ethical paradigm and hence an ideal to inspire adequate motivation. This is reminiscent of Plato's argument that we are unable to conceive that which is imperfectly φ unless we possess the concept of that which is unqualifiedly φ. This is controversial as an epistemological thesis and dismissible as an understanding of practice. For example, I may understand that my first serve is execrable and aim reasonably to improve it by keeping my toss more regular without possessing in any degree a theory of what constitutes an ideal serve. *Better and worse* are cognizable independently of a perception of the *best*. Second, virtue ethics proponent may swallow the preceding argument whole but declare that vice management is itself a virtue ethics, albeit of virtues that fall short of those traditionally extolled. So understood, vice management can be useful and "virtuous" at certain lower levels of moral development. I am not inclined to take strong exception to this revisionary account because it is more semantic than substantive. Virtue has traditionally been understood as excellence; to transform it into widely varying matters of

[20] See Thomas Hurka (2001), especially Chapter 8, "Against Virtue Ethics"; Lomasky (1999)

[21] As those who have attended to previous footnotes will surmise, I believe that Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is one classical source that merits more attention. Overshadowed in the philosophical canon by Hume's *Treatise*, Smith is especially good at emphasizing strategies non-pinnacle individuals can adopt to make themselves more lovely in the eyes of others and also to themselves insofar as they adopt the stance of the Impartial Spectator.

degree is at the very least misleading.[22] It also is to obscure the central dictum of the theory of vice management that for most people most of the time, the pressing moral problem is to avoid the worst rather than grasp at the best.

6 VI

It is not unreasonable to ask at this point why a theory that is strictly impossible nonetheless enjoys a surge of popularity within the community of moral philosophers. Properly the answer should be sought from its enthusiasts although, of course, they will reject the charge of impossibility. Nonetheless, and in full recognition that this speculation is as much in the realm of the psychological as the philosophical, I suggest four potential explanations, any one or all of which might enjoy some cogency.

First, these theorists have come to believe that focus on case-by-case action choices is inadequate, that morality resides at least as much in the province of character. Because Aristotle, the premier theorist of character in the western tradition, phrases his analysis in the language of virtue, his latter-day disciples do so as well. The modeling is understandable but neglectful of the vast differences between the environment for which he prescribes and our own. Would-be contemporary Aristotelians could avoid that neglect by inventing a more appropriate lexicon – for example, *vice management* – to replace virtue talk but have heretofore failed to do so. Why have they not?

That may be because, second, invocation of virtue is edifying. It directs its gaze at those who are most truly lovely. We are drawn to their example, and because we share with them species membership if little more, we allow ourselves to fancy that we can be like them, at least at our finest moments, at least in our daydreams. This is usually a harmless affectation, like the hopeful duffer imaginatively channeling Tiger Woods as she goes to strike a golf ball. Few people will allow themselves the delusion that they themselves possess the moral mastery that will allow them to act on the same strategies that the virtuous person deploys. Theorists, however, are not so modest in their aspirations, or rather in the aspirations they commend to others.

Third, laxity of language can lead to attaching the term ‘virtue’ to positive traits of character that fall short of excellence. As Adam Smith observes (see preceding Smith footnotes), in this way due attention to the importance of character takes on a misleading categorization as virtue theory. If, by “virtue” is meant through dint of self-control achieving anything above the standard of the most abysmal vice, then “virtue ethics” becomes coterminus with vice ethics. The semantic war has been won but the connection to moral excellence has been irretrievably forfeited.

Fourth, that philosophers find themselves uncomfortable with the long reign of consequentialism and deontology is healthy. That these theories afford inadequate attention to character is a mark against them. Another is that they situate themselves too exclusively in the realm of the ideal. Virtue ethics responds appropriately to the first of these concerns but not to the second. More even than its competitors, it is disinclined to redirect its attention from what takes place on the pinnacle. That is why it is strictly impossible – unlike, as I believe I may have mentioned previously, an ethic of vice management.

[22] Review fn 3, above, in which Adam Smith is cited as distinguishing virtue in its strict sense from mere propriety.

7 VII

Among the hundreds of channels on my television service is one called NFL RedZone. It affords sports fans the pleasure of viewing every single touchdown-scoring play from the week's games. This is where to tune so as to access the peak moments of every contest. It is not, however, the site to which one is well-advised to direct a novice who wishes to develop an understanding of the practice of football. That is because RedZone's truncations distort the nature of the game. Not all football plays are glamorous, not all afford instant gratification. Someone who comes to understand football will be made aware that modest advances and resolute defenses are essential to achieve decent results. Virtue ethics is the RedZone channel of moral philosophy. It declines to attend to pragmatic strategies of ordinary human life, thereby rendering itself applicable only to elites. Others need to tune in elsewhere.[23]

References

Anscombe GEM (1958) Modern moral philosophy. Philosophy 33:1–19
Badhwar N (1996) The limited Unity of virtue. Nous 30:306–329
Boyle D, (2015) producer, Steve Jobs (movie). Universal Studio
Case A, Deaton A (2015) Rising morbidity and mortality in midlife among white non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st century. PNAS 112(December 8):15078–15083
Chappell T (2014) Knowing what to do: imagination, virtue, and Platonism in ethics New York, Oxford
Doris J (2002) Lack of character: personality and moral behavior. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
Driver J (2001) Uneasy virtue. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
Foot P (1978) Virtues and vices. Blackwell, Oxford
Foot P (2001) Natural goodness. Clarendon Press, Oxford
Gilbert Harman G (1999) Moral philosophy meets social psychology: virtue ethics and the fundamental attribution error. Proc Aristot Soc 99:315–331
Hamlin A, Stemplowska Z (2012) Theory, ideal theory and the theory of ideals. Political Studies Review 10(1):48–62
Hursthouse R (1999) On virtue ethics. Oxford University Press, Oxford
Isaacson W (2011) *Steve Jobs*. Simon & Schuster, New York
Lipsey R, Lancaster K (1956) The general theory of second best. Rev Econ Stud 24(1):11–32
Lomasky L (1999) Civil enough: toward a Liberal theory of vice (and virtue). In: Fullinwider R (ed) Civil society, democracy, and civic renewal. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham Maryland, pp 273–294
Rawls J (1971) A theory of justice. Harvard University Press
Robeyns I (2008) Ideal theory in theory and practice. Soc Theory Pract 34(3):341–362
Schmidtz D (2011) Nonideal theory: what it is and what it needs to be. Ethics 121(4):772–796
Simmons AJ (2010) Ideal and nonideal theory. Philos Public Aff 38(1):5–36
Singer P (2015) The most good you can do: how effective altruism is changing ideas about living ethically. Yale University Press, New Haven
Smith A (1982) The theory of moral sentiments. Liberty Fund, Indianapolis
Statman D (ed) (1993) Moral luck. SUNY Press, Albany
Stemplowska Z and Swift A (2012) Ideal and nonideal theory in Oxford handbook of political philosophy, ed. Estlund D. Oxford University Press

[23] Talbot Brewer graciously allowed me to audit his graduate seminar on virtue ethics in which my skeptical hunches were both challenged and sharpened. Among the other participants I am particularly indebted to conversation with William Hasselberger. Neera Badhwar and James Cargile commented on previous drafts of this paper and Jeffrey Carroll helped guide me through some shoals of ideal theory. Two anonymous referees for this journal put the arguments through their paces thereby nudging me to tighten them up. Decades previously my teacher Joel Kupperman planted ideas that germinated slowly. Remaining errors are attributable to my deficiencies with regard to managing the vice of stubbornness.

Swanton C (2003) Virtue ethics: a pluralistic view. Oxford University Press, Oxford
Thomas Hurka T (2001) Virtue, vice, and value. Oxford University Press, Oxford
Valentini L (2012) Ideal vs. non-ideal theory: a conceptual map. Philos Compass 7(9):654–664