

On What a Virtue Is

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1. Introduction

I will be concerned with two questions about the notion of a virtue. Virtue ethics has become rather popular during the last fifty years or so. This development seems to begin with an essay by Elizabeth Anscombe, who takes the notion of a virtue from Aristotle. My two questions are these. First, I will ask why Anscombe thinks that the concept of a virtue is important in ethics. Second, I will ask what virtues are and how they relate to virtuous actions.

It is commonly assumed that virtues are character traits that cause people to do good things. Michael Slote begins his paper on “Agent Based Virtue Ethics” by saying that virtue ethics is primarily concerned with motives and character traits (“Agent Based Virtue Ethics” 83). In her book *On Virtue Ethics*, Rosalind Hursthouse says that “[a] virtue is a character trait a human being needs ... to flourish or live well” (*On Virtue Ethics* 167), and she goes on to write that virtues are traits that contribute to the survival of an individual, the continuation of the species, and other such things (*On Virtue Ethics* 200-208).¹ Christine Swanton, in her *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, also refers to virtues as “fine inner states” (*Virtue Ethics* 26). She defines a virtue as “a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to” certain things in a certain way (*Virtue Ethics* 19). Given the cottage industry that virtue ethics has become, there are certainly many more examples.²

¹ On p. 227 she draws a distinction between character traits and practices.

² There are also exceptions. Anscombe’s friend and colleague Philippa Foot writes that for her, it is not “dispositions, motives, and other ‘internal’ elements” that matter but rather “what is done” (*Rationality and Goodness* 2, fn. 1).

I will reject this view of what a virtue is. I do not think that the idea of a character trait that causes good actions is of much value in ethics, and I don't think that Anscombe or Aristotle had this in mind. My talk will consist of three parts: (1) a simple story about how Anscombe came to find virtues important, (2) a sketch of an argument that leads from Anscombe's central intuition to the notion of a virtue, and (3) a proof that this notion of a virtue is in fact Aristotle's notion of a virtue.

2. Anscombe on Warfare

My story about Anscombe begins in the year 1939. In this year, the Germans attacked Poland and in response, Britain and France declared war on Germany, followed by Canada. As an undergraduate student at Oxford in her third year, Anscombe wrote a pamphlet with a friend, called *The Justice of the Present War Examined*. In her contribution, she argued that the war against Germany was not a just war. This is a radical view. The war against Hitler is a pretty clear case of a war that had to be fought, and Anscombe was not even a pacifist. In a later paper, she argues that pacifism is fundamentally mistaken and a dangerous doctrine. However, she was strongly opposed to indiscriminate warfare and the use of area bombing because in her view, this amounted to killing the innocent as a means for winning the war.

In *The Justice of the Present War Examined*, she argues that in general, for someone to do the right thing, they must have the right motive for acting, their action must be such as to lead to the right consequences, and nothing must intrinsically belong to it that is wrong. If an action involves the killing of innocent people as a means, she maintains, there is nothing that can make it a good action.

It is important to emphasize "as a means" in this formulation. If bad things happen as an unintended by-product, so that they are not brought about as a means for achieving some result, they need not necessarily render the action bad. Anscombe admits that "[i]f, for example, a military target is being attacked and in the course of the attack civilians are also destroyed, then their

destruction is not wicked, for it is accidental" (*Papers* III 78). However, she claims that the British Government *did* intend to kill innocent people as a means. If this is so, the killing of innocent people is not simply a consequence of what the Government chose to do; it belongs to it and cannot be abstracted from it. This is, at any rate, Anscombe's view.

She took a similar stance towards the events that ended the war. In July 1945, America had successfully tested the atomic bomb, and it was decided that it should be used against Japan if it did not surrender. Japan did not surrender, and in August 1945, President Truman ordered the use of the bomb. His objective in doing so was to end the war as soon as possible and thus save as many lives as possible. In a radio speech from August 9th, Truman says that Hiroshima had been bombed in order "to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians" (*Public Papers* 212). In his *Memoirs*, he explains that as far as he knew, a conventional invasion of Japan would have cost half a million American lives (*Memoirs* I 460). Now these lives would not have been the lives of civilians, and the numbers were probably wrong. In any case, as far as we can make out a possible justification for dropping the atomic bombs on Japan, it consists in two points: First, it killed fewer people than the alternative options, and second, it was intended to lead to world peace.

By Anscombe's standards, this justification is totally unacceptable. Truman basically says that he killed the innocent in order not to kill the innocent; but according to Anscombe, the act of killing innocent people is bad in itself. No consequence or motive can make it good. Therefore, when Truman was chosen to receive an honorary degree at Oxford University in 1956, Anscombe opposed, being convinced that the man to be honored had committed a grave sin.

Her opposition had no influence on the course of events; but if we can believe her daughter, Mary Geach, this in turn had some impact on the subsequent development of philosophy. In 1957, Anscombe published another pamphlet, entitled *Mr. Truman's Degree*, in which she argues that

Truman intentionally killed the innocent as a means to his end (*Papers III* 62-71). She ends with a note on Oxford moral philosophy. Her colleague and friend Philippa Foot had asked her to teach ethics at Somerville College while she went to America, and so Anscombe had to study the main treatments of ethics; but she was rather disappointed by them (cf. *Human Life* xvii). And the main reason for her disappointment was that there was nothing in it that would make clear enough that Truman's decision was wrong.

In *Mr. Truman's Degree*, she claims that Oxford moral philosophy since the first world war is corrupt in that it teaches that "an action can be 'morally good' no matter how objectionable the thing done may be" (*Papers III* 71). Again, she emphasizes that the moral character of an action cannot merely depend on further motives and consequences. There is something about "the thing done" in itself that may already make it good or bad.

Also In 1957, Anscombe was invited to give a radio talk on the question of whether Oxford moral philosophy corrupts youth, which she was apparently expected to affirm; but she answered in the negative, basically saying that the youth already is corrupt and the only fault of Oxford moral philosophy is that it goes along with the corruption. She says, in passing, that it is commonly assumed that if the side effects are thought to be beneficial enough, it is okay to massacre the Japanese (*Human Life* 164). Again, what is missing is the notion of the intrinsic nature of an act. As Anscombe says, with a good deal of sarcasm: "people are surely getting rid of the merely legalistic and unphilosophical notion of the 'nature and quality of an act'" (*Human Life* 165).

3. Modern Moral Philosophy

In the same year, Anscombe published her book, *Intention*. If we can believe Mary Geach, this book was also written in response to the Truman episode (cf. *Human Life* xiv). Anscombe sets out to clarify the relation between intentions and actions. Among other things, she argues that actions are intentional only under certain descriptions, and that there is a system of descriptions of an action, which is also a system of intentions with which the

action is done (cf. §§ 23 and 42). However, *Intention* is not a book about ethics, and it is not immediately obvious how to apply its message to, say, the case of Truman. Presumably, Anscombe is preparing the ground for arguing that one cannot separate actions from the intention with which they are done; so that one cannot simply do something that is plainly bad while still claiming to have good intentions. But her view is not quite that simple.

A year later, in 1958, Anscombe published her influential paper *Modern Moral Philosophy*, in which she coins the term “consequentialism.” Consequentialists evaluate actions merely in terms of their consequences, and in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, Anscombe argues that this leads to the result that every action, however evil it is in itself, can be made good by its consequences. Again, consequentialists lack a notion of the nature of an action. They can imagine scenarios where it is okay to kill innocent civilians. Suppose, for instance, a million lives can be saved by killing one innocent person. Such cases are necessarily far fetched, but Anscombe argues that the sheer possibility of imagining them makes it easier to make terrible choices when the imagined conditions are not actually given (*Papers* III 37).³ This is why it is generally dangerous to evaluate actions merely in terms of their actual consequences. As Geach puts it, consequentialism made Truman drop the bomb (*Human Life* xvii).

If that is so, consequentialism is a terrible doctrine, but according to Anscombe, there is nothing in modern ethics that speaks against it. All modern ethics either *is* consequentialist or leaves room for consequentialism. Therefore, she argues that “it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking” (*Papers* III 26).

But *Intention* was already published at that time, so we must assume that it

³ Cf. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* 87 fn. 23: “A too great readiness to think ‘I can’t do anything but this terrible thing, nothing else is open to me’ is a mark of vice, a flawed character.”

does not contain the required philosophy, or at least not all of it. In *Intention*, Anscombe takes a first step towards an adequate philosophical psychology. It is to show that actions and intentions are linked; so that one cannot simply claim to act from good intentions if what one does is plainly wrong. But Anscombe does not think it is enough to show this. In *Modern Moral Philosophy*, she says that we also need to understand (1) what kind of characteristic a virtue is, and (2) how virtues relate to virtuous actions (*Papers* III 29, 38, 41). This is something she has not dealt with in *Intention*, and at the time of writing *Modern Moral Philosophy*, she admits that no one, including herself, “can do the philosophy involved” (*Papers* III 40). This raises two questions.

4. Two Questions

(1) First, why would it be important, given Anscombe’s agenda, to understand what a virtue is? It is clear that her opposition to consequentialism is based on the conception of the nature of an action, as opposed to its mere consequences. But what does this conception have to do with the notion of a virtue? One would think that it is enough to distinguish between the intended and the unintended consequences of an action, as in the traditional doctrine of double effect.⁴ One might think that the nature of an action derives from the intentions with which it is done. But Anscombe already deals with the distinction between intended and unintended consequences in *Intention*. Why is this not enough?

(2) Second, according to Anscombe, the hard question is not how to describe a specific virtue, such as courage or justice, but to understand *what type of characteristic* a virtue is. But this seems easy: A virtue is a character trait that causes a person to act well. So where is the difficulty?

As for the question why virtues are important at all, we should look at how the virtues figure in Anscombe’s sketch of a better ethics. In *Modern Moral*

⁴ Cf. Boyle, *Towards Understanding* 533-6.

Philosophy, she argues that the notion of a *moral obligation* derives its meaning from the idea of a divine lawgiver and is devoid of meaning without it. She concludes that this notion must be given up. A little later, however, she asks whether the notion of a moral “ought” might be saved by “look[ing] for ‘norms’ in human virtues” (*Papers* III 38). She ends up saying that these norms are not *moral* norms, and so cannot justify a *moral* ought; but still there is something normative about them. So it seems as though the virtues are important because they can help introducing the right kind of normativity.

The idea is, roughly, that the notion of a virtuous agent has the same place in our ethical thought as the idea of a healthy living being has in the thought of a doctor. The difference is that whereas a doctor is mainly concerned with the body of a patient and the functioning of its organs, we should be concerned with an agent “from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life” (*Papers* III 38). This idea is like the idea of health in that it provides a standard by which agents can be evaluated as good or bad.

Within this picture, a particular kind of action relates to a kind of agent as an organ relates to the body. Just as one cannot say whether a heart is healthy without in any way considering what kind of organism it belongs to, one cannot tell whether an action is good without considering its context. Anscombe also says that one needs to look at the wider context in order to see the intrinsic nature of an act (*Papers* III 85).⁵ So in outline, her idea seems to be that the virtues can help us see the intrinsic nature of an action, the very thing that she thinks needs to be seen in order to see what is wrong with Truman’s decision.

I am, for my part, not sure how beneficial the notion of the nature of an action is. It might be as harmful as the tendency to judge actions merely in terms of their consequences. It should be handled with care, because it might

⁵ Michael Thompson also emphasizes the importance of this passage in *Life and Action* 53. The following paragraphs are inspired by Thompson.

easily lead to a mistaken idea of perversion.⁶ But I agree with Anscombe that insofar as we need this notion in order to put consequentialism in its place, it is tied to the notion of a virtue. Let me now sketch the argument that leads from one to the other.

5. Sketch of an Argument

Suppose we want to distinguish the nature of a given action from the motives that may lead to it and the consequences that it happens to have. Take the case of Truman signing the order to drop the bomb, with the intention of saving lives. We might try to get at the nature of this action by abstracting from the particular motives and consequences, but there is no guarantee that after doing so there would be anything left that matters. If we take away all of Truman's motives and intentions, there will be no way of distinguishing the descriptions under which his action was an intentional action from descriptions of it as a mere physical movement. If we now try to take away all consequences of this movement, we will find that the boundary between the movement itself and its consequences is rather blurry. After all, producing ink marks on paper is also a consequence of what Truman does. So it is not clear what is left of signing an order if all intentions and consequences are taken away. This does not seem the way to go.

However, upon a little reflection, it becomes clear that when we speak of the nature of an act, we don't usually mean something inside a particular action that would be left over when all motives and consequences are taken away. What we actually mean is that actions are of certain types, so that no further motive or intention can alter this type. Anscombe, for instance, wants to say that Truman's act is a case of killing innocent civilians, no matter what further consequences it has, and no matter what further intentions Truman had.

In general, we don't find out what type of thing something is by considering

⁶ See, for a critical voice, Simon Blackburn's review of *Human Life*.

it in isolation. The inner nature of a thing is not some kernel inside a thing that could be found when the rest is peeled off. It is something general. We want to say that Truman made the wrong sort of decision, and we can describe this sort of decision by describing, in general, what such decisions are. So in order to get at the nature of an action, we need to describe it as an instance of a more general pattern.

Once we have reached this more general level, however, there is no longer any need to abstract from consequences and motives. The type of action, killing innocent people, has certain types of consequences, namely the death of these people. Otherwise it would not be the type of action it is. So in order to describe a type of action, we need to also describe the type of consequences it has. Likewise, we need to describe the kind of motives from which it is done. Think of a courageous action. An action may involve the same bodily movements and have the same consequences as a courageous action, but not be courageous. In order to describe the kind of thing a courageous action is, we need to describe a type of agent that acts for a type of motives.

All this means that in a way, Anscombe is not at all opposed to describing actions in terms of motives and consequences. This must be done in any case. However, there is a distinction to be drawn between the motives and consequences that happen to be present *in a particular case*, and the motives and consequences that belong to a *type* of action, in a general account of the sort of thing that is done. With this distinction at our disposal, we can make a difference between Truman's actual motives and the actual consequences that his decision had, and the motives and intentions that belong to the sort of thing he did. Truman may claim that he acted from good motives, and we may even suppose, for the sake of argument, that the consequences of his decision were significantly better than in any alternative scenario. None of this would turn what he did into a good *kind* of thing. There are certain motives and consequences that cannot be separated from this kind of action, so that no one can do this sort of thing and still claim to merely intend its good

consequences but not the bad ones.

You might not expect this, but this actually answers my first question: Why the notion of a virtue is important. I have said that in order to get at the nature of an action, one must describe the kind of consequences that this sort of action has, the kind of agent who does it, and the kind of motive from which it is typically done. This description is in fact the very same thing as a description of a virtue. Of course, not all general descriptions of types of actions are descriptions of virtues. Some describe vices, some describe indifferent behavior. But conversely, a description of a virtue is always a description of a kind of agent who does certain kinds of things from certain kinds of motives. When Anscombe says that the virtues are important, this is what she has in mind. She says, basically, that it is important to see that there are types of actions, which go along with types of motives and types of consequences.

I am confident that this is what Anscombe had in mind because it is in agreement with the way in which Aristotle describes the virtues. So it is time to turn from Anscombe to Aristotle.

6. Aristotle's Account of the Virtues

When Aristotle describes a virtue, what he actually describes is a kind of agent. He introduces the virtues by names such as justice, courage, and temperance, and he uses these names in order to distinguish virtues from one another and divide them into subtypes. Justice, courage, and temperance are indeed traits of agents, not agents. But in fact, Aristotle does not talk much about these traits as such when he talks about the virtues. He does not say things like "Courage is a trait that makes a person act in such a manner." When he gives a substantive description of what a virtue amounts to, he does not describe the virtues themselves but the *generic virtuous person*. He does not describe courage as such, he describes the courageous agent. He tells us what the courageous person does, when they do it, how they do it, and what motivates them.

There is a fairly simple reason why Aristotle does this. Courage as such, for instance, is an abstract entity, an idea or form, and as Aristotle and Plato both emphasize, such abstract entities are not subject to change. The abstract notion of courage is, in a sense, an immaterial thing, and hence it cannot literally do anything. But ethics is about what is done, and so it cannot be exclusively concerned with abstract forms such as courage, justice and temperance. It must be concerned with the just, the courageous, and the temperate agent or action.

On the other hand, it must deal with them in a general way. Therefore, in order to do ethics, we need to understand how there can be something that is general but not abstract.⁷ There must be something in between a particular agent and their particular action, say Truman and his decision, and abstract and general notions such as justice, courage, and temperance. There must be such a thing as a just or courageous agent who is not *this* or *that* particular just or courageous agent. This is the courageous agent that Aristotle describes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Let us take a look at some details. When Aristotle describes the virtuous person, he generally uses the generic singular. For instance:

The person who withstands and fears the things one should and for the end one should, and in the way and when one should, and is bold in a similar way, is courageous; ... (EN III 10, 1115b17-19, tr. Rowe)

This is a description of a paradigm case. Aristotle does not describe what courageous people do *on average*; he describes one ideal instance of courage.

He uses the singular even when there is more than one kind of a virtue to be considered. There are, for instance, two main kinds of justice; but Aristotle

⁷ Aristotle speaks of something concrete that consists of matter taken generally: *Metaphysics* Z 10, 1035b27-30.

still does not speak of the just agents in the plural (or dual, for that matter). Rather, he says that “the” just agent is both the law-abiding and the equal-minded person (EN V 2, 1129a33-4).⁸ He is not necessarily both at once, since these are different ways of being just. Still, Aristotle says that “the” just person is both.

The plural, on the other hand, is generally reserved for those who lack a virtue or those who only seem to be virtuous. There are at least two reasons for this asymmetry. First, there are in general many more ways of spoiling a thing than there are ways of making it right. As Aristotle states: Goodness is simple, badness is manifold (EN II 5, 1106b34-5).⁹ Second, the many ways of failing to be good do not add up to one coherent picture, as the many ways of being good do. About excesses in anger, for instance, Aristotle says:

... on the other hand not all of them are there in the same person. That would not be possible in any case; for the bad destroys even itself, and if ever it is full-blown, it ceases to be bearable. (EN IV 11, 1126a11-13, tr. Rowe)

This seems to lead to a picture where there is only one way of being virtuous, but many ways of failing to be so. This is connected to the reservations that I have expressed earlier on. I have said that the idea of the intrinsic nature of an action might lead to a mistaken idea of perversion. In Aristotle, it might seem as though there is ultimately only *one* way of being a good human being, and all deviations from this norm are flawed. Aristotle

⁸ Bywater suggests omitting the definite article, so that Aristotle would say: “both the law-abiding and the fair man are just.” But Aristotle has a good reason for using the article, and he uses it before in a similar way when he says that *the* unjust is spoken of in several ways (EN III 2, 1129a31-3).

⁹ Aristotle is quoting an unknown source here, which expresses a Pythagorean view. Cf. EN I 4, 1096b5-7.

even thinks that since there are male and female forms of many animals, only one of them can be perfect, the other one being a failed attempt at reaching this level of perfection (cf. *De Generatione Animalium* II 3, 737a27-29).

However, I do not think there actually is any reason to take this belief as *essential* to Aristotle's concept of perfection. As we have seen, he has no problem talking of the just person in the singular even though there are several different kinds of justice. In the same way, nothing should keep him from describing a type of animal in the singular, without assuming that there can be only one way for it to be flawless. There may in fact be more than one perfect form.

This is especially important with regard to humans, for which there are many ways of life and standards of goodness. As Anscombe says, "it is one good thing about the West that there are various possible ways of life" (*Papers* III 95). This *seems* difficult to think given Aristotle's use of the singular, but here the appearances are misleading. They seem to have misled Aristotle himself.

That there is potential for a plurality of goodness is important because Aristotle does not simply describe the good human life in the way in which a zoologist would describe a kind of animal. His description is not from the outside, as it were, it is a description of the good human life presented *to* human beings and given *by* one of them. It is not only normative in the sense that it describes standards of goodness; it is normative in that the beings that are subject to it are so by accepting these standards. Human beings would not be the rational and conscious creatures they are if they would not bring themselves, as Michael Thompson might put it, under the form of humanity. To be human is to apply some notion of what it is to be human, that is, what it is to be a good human being, to oneself.¹⁰ Therefore, Aristotle describes the virtues not only as a zoologist would describe the behavior of an animal, but

¹⁰ Aristotle says this by saying that virtues are never natural; they are acquired: EN II 1, 1103a14-26; and that the virtuous must know that she acts from virtue: EN II 3, 1105a31.

also in the way in which the author of a cookbook would describe how to prepare a certain kind of dish.¹¹ A description of a virtue is always also a description of what a person *should* be. This means that if there were only one way of being virtuous, those who deviate from it would have to be blamed for failing to bring themselves under the right form. But again, there are in fact many different forms of humanity that one can bring oneself under, and I do not think it is up to a moral philosopher to prescribe *one* standard of goodness for all human beings alike.

That Aristotle's account of "the" virtuous person is at once a description and a recommendation has a further consequence. It does not usually make sense to put a recommendation in the third person; yet Aristotle uses the *third person* throughout. It would seem that he had better used the second person, or at least the first person plural.

That the use of the third person is problematic can also be seen in the book on justice (EN V). There are several forms of justice, but all of them involve a relation of one agent to others. (a) Justice in its most general sense is virtue in general, insofar as it is exhibited towards others; (b) justice in a more particular sense concerns the distribution of goods among several people. So in any case, justice involves more than one person, so that it does not seem possible to stick to the singular. Aristotle's solution to this problem is to shift his emphasis from the just person towards just actions and just institutions. Here he can use the singular again, for an action or institution may be one even if it involves many participants.

My own view is that we should rather abandon the third person perspective here. Just actions do not merely affect other people, they are directed at them, and this gets lost in a third person perspective. Try being honest to your cat; this is not the same as being honest to your partner to the extent that the relation between you and your cat is not a relation between persons. Justice should be thought of as something between *me* and *you*; that is, it should be described by using the first and second person. I cannot really go into this

¹¹ Cf. Hennig, *Tugenden und Absichten* 177.

here, and it may well be that we are still unable to “do the philosophy involved.”¹² The only thing I want you to take home here is that in order to describe the virtue of justice, one must abandon the level of individual agents. In addition to a general description of the agent, we need a general description of the people towards which they act. In order to describe the just person, one must describe a just community of agents, again in a generic way. This is a version of Plato’s agenda in the *Republic*: In order to say what justice is, one must ultimately describe the just state.

This brings us back to the second question raised above: Why it would be difficult to see *what type of characteristic* a virtue is. It should be obvious by now that a thing that can only be described by describing a kind of community of agents can hardly be the same as an inner state of a singular agent. Justice, the virtue, cannot be an inner state, a disposition, a character trait or any other kind of feature of a single person. In retrospect, we must admit that this is also true for the other virtues. They are not inner states of agents that make them act in certain ways. Aristotle never describes a virtue in this way, and he is well advised not to do so. This is a significant result. For as I have said in the beginning, the view that I am here radically opposing is rather common among contemporary virtue ethicists.

7. Re-reading Aristotle

The reason why it has seemed to so many people as if virtues are inner states of agents is that Aristotle himself may easily seem to say that virtues are dispositions that cause agents to act in certain ways. Just look at Rackham’s translation of Aristotle’s formal definition of what a virtue is:

Virtue then is a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the

¹² Michael Thompson is working on it.

mean relative to us etc. (EN II 6, 1106b36-1107a2, tr. Rackham)¹³

So virtue is, after all, a disposition that determines an action, and this seems to mean that it *leads* to a certain kind of action. I don't think that the English word "disposition" is a particularly good translation of the word that Aristotle uses (ἔξις). I prefer "habit." But more importantly, there is nothing about it *determining* a choice in the Greek. Aristotle says that a virtue is a habit *of* choice (ἔξις προαιρετική). This phrase may be understood in the sense in which one says, for instance, that someone is in a habit of forgetting things. What a habit is *of* is not a thing that is caused by it, but rather the kind of action that it *consists* in. A habit, in contrast to a disposition, is something habitually done, not something that causes something to be done. So Aristotle does not define the virtues as dispositions that cause certain kinds of behavior; rather, he defines them as habits that *consist* in certain kinds of behavior. Anyway, here is my own translation of the passage:

Virtue then is a habit of choosing, which is in the middle relative to us etc.

Still, there seems to be evidence against this reading earlier on in Aristotle. Consider, again, Rackham's translation:

Virtue in a man will be the disposition which renders him a good man and also which will cause him to perform his function well. (EN II 5,

¹³ Ἔστιν ἄρα ἡ ἀρετὴ ἔξις προαιρετική, ἐν μεσότητι οὖσα τῇ πρὸς ἡμᾶς etc. Rowe translates: "Excellence, then, is a disposition issuing in decisions, depending on intermediacy of the kind relative to us" etc.

1106a22-24, tr. Rackham)¹⁴

But again, the phrase that Rackham translates as “which will cause him” looks very different in the Greek. Aristotle calls virtue a habit *from which* (ἀφ’ ἧς) a man is good and *from which* he does a good job. And this phrase in this context, far from having a causal sense, actually explains what the relation really is between a virtue and the acts that belong to it. For it is the same phrase that Aristotle uses in the *Categories* (ch. 1) in order to describe the conceptual relation between a property word, such as “redness,” and the corresponding adjective, “red.” He calls it *paronymy*. He says that for instance, a literate person is called literate *from* literacy (ἀπὸ τῆς γραμματικῆς), and a courageous person is called courageous *from* courage (ἀπὸ τῆς ἀνδρείας, 1a14-15). This simply means that the courageous person derives their name from the name of the virtue, courage; in something like the way in which the name Bukowski is derived, I take it, from the name Buków (there are several villages in Poland with that name). So here is my own translation of the passage:

The virtue of a human will be the habit from which a human comes to be [called] good and from which they [are said to] perform their characteristic work in a good way.

Other passages will have to be re-translated accordingly. There is of course a sense in which one may say that literacy *makes* a person able to read and write. This is the sense in which Aristotle says that the goodness of an eye makes it perform its function well (σπουδαῖον ποιεῖ, EN II 5, 1106a17-8). But

¹⁴ ... ἡ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀρετὴ εἶη ἣν ἡ ἕξις ἀφ’ ἧς ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος γίνεται καὶ ἀφ’ ἧς εὖ τὸ ἑαυτοῦ ἔργον ἀποδώσει. Rowe: “excellence of a human being too will be the disposition whereby he becomes a good human being and from which he will perform his own function well.”

this is not a case of efficient causation. Literacy makes a person able to read and write in the same way in which redness makes a ball red. It is the property that consists in someone's being able to read and write. By the same token, when Aristotle says that an agent performs well from virtue, all he is saying is that the virtuous agent is a paronym of the virtue in question: their name derives from the name of the virtue.

8. Conclusion

All this means that virtues are unusual characteristics in two ways. First, they are characteristics of a person that cannot be described by merely describing this person in isolation. They consist in what the person does in certain contexts and in relation to other agents, hence their description involves a description of these circumstances. Second, the description of a virtue is not the description of what any actual agent is doing, but the description of a generic and ideal agent. The virtues belong to what happens if all goes well. They are part of the functioning or characteristic behavior of a good human being, and as Heidegger says, the functioning of a thing is not one of its properties in the ordinary sense.¹⁵ Things have their functions even if they do not or cannot perform them.

This is, to return to Anscombe, what we need to understand in order to be able to distinguish between the nature and the mere consequences of an action. Mere consequences are consequences that do not belong to the type but arise only by accident. They must be distinguished from the consequences that belong to the kind of thing done. Let me now answer the

¹⁵ Heidegger's translation of Aristotle's ἔργον is "Bewandtnis," and about the latter he writes: "Indeed, they are not properties at all, if the ontological structure designated by the term 'property' is that of some definite character which it is possible for Things to possess" (*Being and Time* §18, 84; tr. Macquarrie & Robinson). Heidegger's idea is basically that functional concepts serve to identify things *a priori*, not to describe their actual features.

questions raised in the beginning.

The first question was: Why does Anscombe think that virtues are important? The answer is that in order to draw a distinction between the nature of an act and its actual consequences, it is important to understand what type of characteristic a virtue is. It is important to understand what it means to describe types of agents and their actions.

The second question was: What are virtues? I have said that to describe a virtue is to describe a kind of agent with certain kinds of motives in a certain context. A description of a virtue is part of the description of the good human life in one of its possible forms. This description is, already in Aristotle, both a general description of what good humans do and a recommendation on how to act in certain circumstances. It is not a factual description of anything, let alone of an inner state of a particular agent.¹⁶

So how do virtues relate to actions? The answer is that virtuous agents and their actions are paronyms of virtues. This does not mean that the virtue causes the agent to act and behave in certain ways; it means that the agent, her actions, and her behavior are of a certain kind, so that they fall under the concept of a virtue. As a slogan: Virtues do not explain *why* an agent is acting well, they explain *what* agents do when they are acting well.¹⁷

¹⁶ This is a conceptual point about what type of characteristic virtues are. Nothing is implied about what individual virtues are. The difference between Aristotle's original understanding of what virtues are and, e.g., Swanton's need not lead to a substantial difference in ethical views on what, e.g., courage is. Still, the conceptual point is important because it shows what *status* the distinction between virtuous actions and other kinds of behavior has. For instance, it cannot simply be dismissed for reasons such as put forward by John Doris in *Lack of Character*.

¹⁷ I have benefitted from comments on earlier versions of this paper made by Thomas Nisters, Michael Thompson, Ingvar Johansson, and Jennifer Frey.

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