

Out-Take from *The Righteous Mind: Virtue Ethics*

*This text was included in Chapter 6 of *The Righteous Mind* until June 2011. As I neared completion of the manuscript, I realized the book was just too long and difficult for a broad audience, and I cut about 10% of the total length of the book. This section got cut. It would have begun on what is now p. 120 of the book, right after the sections on “The Utilitarian Grill” and “The Deontological Diner,” and just before “Getting Back on Track.”*

Buffet Tables of the Ancients

There is a third approach to morality--virtue ethics--and it's the one that has been served all over the world since the beginning of recorded history. Utilitarianism and deontology offer rules that a rational person can use to decide what to *do*, but outside of WEIRD cultures, the focus of moral reflection and education has been far more on character, on what kind of person to *be*.

Before there was philosophy there were myths, folk tales, and epic poems. Mesopotamians told the story of Gilgamesh, the Greeks had Homer, and Indians still listen to the Mahabharata. In all of the world's great civilizations, moral instruction took the form of stories about culture heroes who exemplified certain virtues, but whose failures along the way reflected their weakness on other virtues. When more formal philosophy developed later on, it often included analyses of the virtues extolled in the stories, as well as the virtues of the philosopher's own era. Classical Chinese ethics, for example, emphasized virtue (*de*), and taught that virtue was to be cultivated by young people as a set of habits, character traits, and practical skills to be mastered over many years, not as a set of rules or precepts that could be learned directly and consciously.¹ Virtues were role-specific; each person plays a part in several systems (from family up through nation), and a virtuous person has learned how to play his or her parts well. Chinese philosophers exemplified the "holistic" thinking we saw in the last chapter; they saw the line in relation to the frame; they saw relationships and contexts.

In ancient Greece, despite Plato's idolization of reasoning, ethical inquiry still focused on the virtues, such as the cardinal virtues of courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice. Plato's *Republic* is in part an examination of the kinds of virtues that emerge from different kinds of political systems. And Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is a treatise on the virtues, which he said were acquired as habits.

If any ethical theory can claim to be the natural, normal, default way in which human beings think about morality, it is virtue ethics. The reason for its dominance, I suspect, is that it fits so well with what we now know about moral psychology. First, if the mind is like a rider (conscious controlled processes) on an elephant (unconscious automatic processes), then only virtue ethics addresses the whole mind. Virtues can be defined in many ways, but most approaches treat them as character traits that a person needs in order to live a good, praiseworthy,

¹ (Hansen, 1991)

or admirable life.² Virtues are social skills. To acquire a virtue is to fine-tune your perceptual abilities such that you detect the relevant signals, then feel the right emotions, and then act in the right way.³ To be kind, for example, is to have a keen sensitivity to the needs of other people, to feel compassion when warranted, and then to offer the right type of help, with a full heart. To be courageous involves the ability to detect very different kinds of threats and opportunities, and to respond in a very different sort of way.

Virtue, then, resides mostly in a well-trained elephant, and this is why virtue theories always emphasize the importance of practice, training, and habit. Aristotle and Confucius even hit upon the same metaphor independently: learning to be virtuous is like learning to play a musical instrument.⁴ Both kinds of "virtuosity" require years of practice and studious attention to role models until the ear is educated and the hands move easily, almost on their own. Utilitarianism and deontology, in contrast, are *instruction manuals for riders*. They tell the rider exactly how to compute the correct action, and they counsel him to ignore the inevitable objections of the elephant. Tell the truth, even if it causes you to hurt a friend, say some deontologists.⁵ Spend far less time and money helping your own children so that you can relieve much greater quantities of suffering elsewhere, say some utilitarians.⁶ The food served in these two ethical restaurants might be logically defensible, but many of the dishes taste bad to most people.

A second important feature of virtue ethics is that it is a buffet. Virtues are excellences of character that equip people to play their roles in society. There are many roles and many kinds of interaction, so there are many virtues. A good soldier should not cultivate the virtues of a priest; a good daughter should not cultivate the virtues of a father. And it's not just variety within each culture; each culture has its own buffet table. The virtues on display in a rice-farming culture (which requires extraordinary cooperation) differ from those held out to children in a sheep-herding culture (which requires more masculine toughness to guard one's flocks), which in turn differ from those of an urban trading culture (emphasizing contracts and voluntary exchange). So virtue theories are pluralistic⁷—they can't be reduced to a single master virtue. Culture and psyche make each other up, as Shweder said. Because people live in many different climates, economic orders, and political systems, they end up with diverse sets of moral ideals. The pluralism and messiness of virtue theories has long disturbed the analytic minds of WEIRD thinkers, who would rather find a single fundamental principle from which all others can be derived. Kohlberg, for example, criticized virtue ethics as the study of a "bag of virtues."⁸ He insisted that justice was the master virtue, the one "true taste," we might say.

² see Appiah (2008), p. 36, who cites Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.

³ See (Churchland, 1998); (Haidt & Joseph, 2004).

⁴ (Hansen, 1991) for Confucius; Nichomachean Ethics for Aristotle.

⁵ Kant, most famously, said it was not permissible to lie even to save someone's life, although later deontologists have found ways to avoid this particular conclusion (e.g., Korsgaard, xx)

⁶ (Singer, 1979)

⁷ This is true whether we're speaking descriptively (about how things *actually* work), or normatively (about how things *ought* to work).

⁸ (Kohlberg, 1968).

A third important feature of virtue ethics is that it can be served up just as well in a secular context as in a religious one. Medieval Catholic virtues were explicitly tied to the teachings of the Bible, and modern Christians ask themselves "What would Jesus do?" But in ancient Greece, as in ancient China, virtue theories thrived without any theological connection. Virtues were seen to be a part of human nature and human potential. They were usually thought to be good for their bearer, as well as for society. Virtue ethics was therefore well positioned to survive the European enlightenment, a time when the Bible, God's will, and tradition all became insufficient as justifications for laws, institutions, and social practices.

Nowadays secular people tend to see the Enlightenment as a battle between two mortal enemies: On one side is science, with its principle weapon, reason. On the other, religion, with its ancient shield of superstition. Science attacks, religion reacts. Reason defeats superstition, light replaces darkness. But when David Hume was alive, he was fighting a three way battle. Enlightenment thinkers were united in rejecting revelation as the source of moral knowledge, but they were divided as to whether morality *transcended* human nature--that is, it emerged from the very nature of rationality and could therefore be deduced by reasoning, as Plato believed--or whether morality was a *part* of human nature, like language or taste, which had to be studied by observation.⁹ Given Hume's concerns about the limits of reasoning, philosophers who ignored the natural world in their quest to ground morality in rationality were no better than theologians who ignored the natural world in their quest to ground morality in divinity. Both were transcendentalists.¹⁰

Hume's work on morality was the quintessential enlightenment project: an exploration of an area previously owned by religion, using the methods and attitudes of the new natural sciences. His first great work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, had this subtitle: *Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*. Hume believed that "moral science" had to begin with careful inquiry into what humans are really like. He rejected attempts to deduce morality by logic as vehemently as he rejected attempts to ground morality in scripture. And when he examined human nature, in history, political affairs, and among his fellow philosophers, he observed the moral psychology that I have presented in this book. He saw that "sentiment" (intuition¹¹) is the driving force of our moral lives (chapter 3), whereas reasoning is biased and impotent, fit primarily to be a servant of the passions (chapter 4). He also saw a diversity of virtues, and he rejected attempts by some of his contemporaries to reduce all of morality to a single virtue (particularly "beneficence"),¹² or do to away with virtues and replace them with moral laws.

⁹ The word I want to use here is "empiricism," but that word has two meanings, and I've already used it in chapter 1 as a contrast to nativism. I reject empiricism in that sense, which suggests a blank slate, but embrace it as the method by which scientists gain knowledge through empirical methods.

¹⁰ E. O. Wilson pointed this out in ch. 11 of *Consilience*. Like Hume, he embraced naturalism/empiricism, rather than transcendentalism. I do too.

¹¹ Hume noted that some passions and sentiments are so calm that they are sometimes mistaken for reason. This is why I think the word "intuition" is the best modern rendering of Hume's "sentiments."

¹² Hume distinguished between the "natural virtues", which are... xx, and the "artificial virtues", which are... ??

Because he thought that morality was based in a variety of sentiments, which give us pleasure when we encounter virtue and displeasure when we encounter vice, Hume often relied upon sensory analogies, and particularly the taste analogy:

*Morality is nothing in the abstract Nature of Things, but is entirely relative to the Sentiment or mental Taste of each particular Being; in the same Manner as the Distinctions of sweet and bitter, hot and cold, arise from the particular feeling of each Sense or Organ. Moral Perceptions therefore, ought not to be class'd with the Operations of the Understanding, but with the Tastes or Sentiments.*¹³

Moral judgment is a kind of perception, and moral science should therefore begin with a careful study of the moral taste receptors. You can't possibly deduce the variety and structure of the five taste receptors by pure reasoning, or by studying scripture. There's nothing transcendental about them. You've got to examine tongues.

Hume got it right. When he died in 1776, he had laid a superb foundation for "moral science," one that has (in my view) been largely vindicated by modern research. You would think, then, that in the decades after his death, the moral sciences progressed rapidly. But you would be wrong. In the decades after Hume's death the rationalists claimed victory over religion and took the moral sciences off on a 200 year tangent.

Getting Back on Track

[Text continues as on p. 120...]

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¹³ (Hume, 1975/1777), Hume is here building on an argument from an earlier "moral sense" theorist, Frances Hutcheson.