

A theory of virtue: introductory remarks

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What is virtue? A plausible first answer is that virtue is goodness of moral character. The theory of virtue proposed in my book, *A Theory of Virtue* (Adams 2006), belongs to the department of ethical theory that is concerned with the evaluation of character and traits of character, or of relatively persistent moral qualities, or moral states, of persons. I distinguish that from another department of ethics that is concerned with the evaluation of actions or types of action; and I distinguish both of those, as departments of *substantive* ethical theory, from metaethics, which is concerned with the epistemology, semantics, and metaphysics of ethics. Unlike some of the most influential contributors to the discussion of virtue in the last half century or so, I do not believe that we can render metaethical problems more tractable by explicating moral evaluations of actions in terms of virtues. I believe that our ethical evaluations of actions should be taken into account in our ethical evaluations of states and traits, and vice versa, but neither type of evaluation is categorically or systematically prior to the other. The best reason for having a theory of virtue is that traits of character are important objects of ethical evaluation in their own right.

The book deals with three main tasks. Part One develops a framework for the discussion, addressing the question ‘What is virtue?’ My answer, in its briefest form, is that moral virtue, or goodness of character comprehensively considered, is “persisting excellence in being for the good” (14). It is a matter of favoring in excellent ways, in attitude as well as act, things that are in fact good. The particular virtues, such as courage and benevolence, are particular excellent ways of being for and against things, ways whose excellence can be part of the excellence of a more comprehensive virtue. By ‘excellence’ in these contexts I mean an intrinsic, or at any rate not merely instrumental, goodness, or admirableness if you will; but I do not attempt to define the term, and in *A Theory of Virtue* I do not offer a metaethical

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account of it, having attempted that elsewhere. I do devote considerable space to arguing against attempts to define virtue in terms of its benefits.

Ancient and medieval theories of virtue allow virtues to have self-regarding as well as other-regarding manifestations. Modern readers often find that an alien or implausible view, but it is supported by my conception of virtue. Part Two of *A Theory of Virtue* is devoted to the place of self-regarding and other-regarding motives in virtue. I agree that altruism, or other-regarding benevolence, is a major virtue. On my conception of a virtue, the benefits of benevolence to those who are its objects is not enough to make it a virtue; it must also be non-instrumentally excellent. In Part Two, accordingly, I begin by arguing that Nietzsche's critique of altruism is right in assuming that it matters whether altruism is non-instrumentally excellent, but wrong in holding that it is not. Part Two concludes, on the other hand, with an argument that there is also a possible form of self-love that is both virtuous and unselfish.

Part Three, which occupies the second half of the book, addresses the question, 'Are there really any virtues?' This has become a topic of vigorous discussion among philosophers as well as psychologists. The discussion is occasioned by arresting experimental results and theoretical arguments developed by a "situationist" school of social psychologists. Philosophical discussion of situationist ideas was begun by Owen Flanagan and heated up by Gilbert Harman's claim that "there is no empirical support for the existence of character traits." Related views, more carefully qualified, have received book-length treatment in *Lack of Character* by John Doris. Philosophers have responded to this challenge in at least three ways. Some have been prepared to abandon persisting character traits as major objects of ethical evaluation. Others, particularly among virtue theorists inspired by ancient philosophers, have responded that virtue is an ideal state which may well be too rare to leave a statistically significant footprint in social psychologists' experiments, but is nonetheless worth taking as an ideal. My theory of virtue is conceived as a modern view which is not committed to following ancient precedents, though I think Plato and Aristotle have much to contribute to our discussion of virtue. I favor a third response, according to which there are real moral virtues that are not extremely rare, but can be found in a wide variety of actual human lives. Accordingly, I try to develop an empirically realistic conception of virtue and virtues. This seems to me important, especially for the possibility of fostering good moral qualities in oneself and others. Since these issues will be a main topic of the discussion that follows this introduction; and in view of the length and complexity of the analysis and argument, I will not offer further summary at this point.

Reference

Adams, R. M. (2006). *A theory of virtue*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.