

## A theory of virtue: response to critics

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Published online: 28 January 2010  
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I am grateful to my critics for their thoughtful comments. The format of our discussion obliges me to be selective in responding to them. I begin with issues raised by Rachana Kamtekar about the account of the nature of virtue presented in Part One of my book.<sup>1</sup> The other main subject of discussion will be issues about the reality of virtue addressed in Part Two of the book and discussed by both Kamtekar and John Doris.

### I

I will comment on three issues arising from Part One of the book—rather briefly about (A) the relation of excellences of memory and physical strength to the will; and (B) the nature and reality of malice, as gratuitous favoring of evil; and at greater length about (C) the relation of virtue to accomplishment.

(A) I hold that personal excellences of memory and physical strength are not virtues. The reason I give is that they do not “engage the will,” inasmuch as they do not “involve” any disposition to be for or against something (33; cf. 17). Kamtekar is not satisfied with this reason. She points out that there is psychological evidence that facility in remembering is likely to strengthen one’s motivation to make an effort to remember what one ought to remember, and she suggests that something similar is true of physical strength. I agree with these claims of influence on the will by strengths that we do not normally think of as moral excellences. Must I not agree, then, that they engage the will, and can be counted as virtues? Here I need to make clearer than I may have done in the book that by a trait’s “engaging” the will I mean

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<sup>1</sup> Adams (2006). Parenthetical page references in the text refer to this book.

not just its interacting causally with the will, but its “involving” dispositions of the will in the sense of *essentially entailing* the possession of such dispositions. In that sense I would still say that facility of memory and strength of limbs do not engage the will.

(B) I also still maintain my undoubtedly controversial view about malice—that people sometimes favor, for its own sake, something that is simply bad (41–44). This occurs, for instance, in hatred, including self-hatred. Kamtekar will doubtless not be alone in resisting this claim. To the extent that she is pointing out that I have not said enough to amount to a proof of the psychological reality of malice as I conceive of it, I cannot disagree. But I note an aspect of my view that I think makes it easier to defend. Taking up a phrase of Kamtekar’s, I would not deny that malice can be associated with “pro-attitudes toward some good.” Indeed, I point out that a vindictive attitude that I regard as a form of malice may be “largely inspired by love or loyalty or sympathy for people who have been injured” (42). But a motive that is *inspired* by a good motive does not necessarily *seek* or aim at something good, even if the motive that inspired it does aim at something good. I conceive malice as a type of motive by which “only evil is *sought*” (42, italics added), and I believe that what is sought by vindictive motives is often (though not always) only evil.<sup>2</sup>

(C) I have what I regard as a weightier disagreement with Kamtekar about the relation of virtue to *accomplishment*. What is meant by ‘accomplishment’ here, I take it, is bringing something about by effort, work, or will-power. Rightly, she suggests that I “want to make accomplishment non-essential to virtue,” and notes that I argue “that the work that goes into developing a good character is a different object of admiration from the (also admirable) good character itself (p. 164),” noting further that I propose to “think of virtue as a gift rather than a basis for desert (p. 165).” Kamtekar objects to my positions on these points. I take it she thinks, among other things, that I depart too far here from ordinary conceptions of virtue. She is certainly not alone in believing that virtue can only be an accomplishment, in the indicated sense, of the virtuous person.

There may be legitimate terminological issues here. I believe that my use of the word ‘virtue’ in this respect is not contrary to ordinary usage, but I don’t want to make a major issue of that. I feel somewhat more strongly that my use of the word ‘praise’ is ordinary enough. I believe that saying of something (parental love, for instance) that it is excellent *is* praising it, in a perfectly ordinary sense, whether or not there is any implication of effort or will power in the causal ancestry of what is praised. And praise of your parental love, like praise of your voice or the color of your eyes, is praise of you, whether or not it is praise of accomplishment. But I’m much *more* concerned to insist that our reasons for being interested in virtue are largely reasons for being interested in the value of states of moral character, and are not dependent on the value of efforts to attain such states. Indeed, the value of those efforts seems rather to depend on the value of the states of character, which are after all the *goal* of efforts of moral self-improvement.

The big issue here, however, is about deserving. I imagine that Kamtekar will want to object to something I just said, and claim that the value of states of character

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Stocker (1979, 1981).

on which the value of efforts to attain them depends is not of the same kind as the value characteristic of virtue. Like the value of economic prosperity, on which the rationality of seeking prosperity depends, the value of states of character, considered in abstraction from efforts to attain them, is not, in her opinion, a ground of *deserving*; and I grant that. I take it, however, that Kamtekar thinks that virtue must be a ground of moral desert. In this, again, she is by no means alone; but I disagree.

Deserving is a large and difficult and controversial subject in moral thought. Part of the difficulty has to do with issues of moral luck—that is, of factors outside one's own control in the causal ancestry of a morally assessable fact about oneself. I take it that the present state of scientific theory doesn't give us much reason to believe in complete causal determinism. But that still leaves us with little reason to doubt that there is an enormous amount of (good and bad) moral luck in our lives. Libertarian theories of the will render it controversial how much luck there is in the ancestry of our actions. I think there is a lot of it, but it is much more obvious that there is a lot of moral luck in the ancestry of our traits of character. For however the voluntary control that we have over our actions is to be understood, it is clear that we cannot exercise directly the same kind of voluntary control over traits of character. For that reason I think it is, as I say in my book, "extremely implausible to suppose that any of us could have a virtuous character without a great deal of good luck" (159).

Where does that leave us with regard to deserving? Perhaps roughly where it leaves us with regard to responsibility. I believe that if we are to continue to operate with conceptions of moral responsibility and moral deserving, we need in both cases to conceive of them as compatible with many forms of moral luck. And I think that will involve treating issues of both responsibility and deserving as part of the ethics of social relations—of how we should treat each other in the light of what we know about each other—and not as an essential part of the general theory of excellence of moral characteristics. There is a sense, no doubt, in which anything excellent, whether or not it is due to luck, deserves to be recognized and appreciated as excellent. But I believe that the issues of deserving that occasion most discussion in ethical theory essentially concern loyalties, and assignments of human costs and benefits, among persons. Issues about excellence of one's traits of character, as such, are not of that sort.<sup>3</sup>

There is also a practical advantage in making assessment of excellence of character traits independent of questions of moral luck. For the abundance of moral luck involved in character development does not seriously detract from the good reasons we have to desire excellent traits of moral character for ourselves and others, and to work to foster them so far as we are able. Indeed clear thinking about moral education leads to the conclusion that any successful effort devoted to the moral education of others is a form of (good) moral luck for those it benefits.

<sup>3</sup> I will grant that there is a virtue of *being a responsible person*. In part it is a matter of excellence in taking ownership of various kinds of luck in one's life. But this is a rather particular point, not belonging to the more general part of a theory of virtue.

## II

Moral luck and thinking of virtue more as a gift than as a ground of deserving are among the themes of my response to situationism in Part Three of *A Theory of Virtue*, which is the main subject of John Doris's comments, and a major topic of Rachana Kamtekar's. In discussing it I will concentrate on a few large points.

I want to say first of all that while I stand by the substance of what I said in the book about “modular” and “probabilistic” virtues, I have started to wonder whether, as a matter of emphasis, I went on too long about them. Did I make clear enough that what I said about being modular and probabilistic was meant to apply specifically to a category of traits that I call “direct behavioral dispositions”? By that phrase I mean traits that are defined as dispositions to engage in particular forms of overt behavior. And did I make clear enough the relatively limited value I ascribe to virtues that belong to that category?

Most of what situationists have said about inconsistency of traits of character, and much of what they say about frailty of traits, pertains particularly to direct behavioral dispositions. Methodologically, social psychologists have good reasons for that focus. Because of their behavioral manifestations, such dispositions, so far as they exist, are among the psychological phenomena most accessible to observation and experiment in the social sciences. Unfortunately, their observations and have tended to the conclusion that such dispositions are not very good independent variables—that is, not very useful for prediction. In particular they have found that differences in situations are more strongly predictive of behavior than any but very localized differences in direct behavioral dispositions that are evidenced by the past behavior of human individuals. Hence situationism.

Direct behavioral dispositions have undoubtedly played an important part in both ordinary and philosophical thinking about virtue. It is therefore worthwhile in a theory of virtue to take account of the fact that the situationist psychological findings do not deny all explanatory power to such dispositions. In my discussion of modular and probabilistic virtues I have tried to show what can reasonably be made of that concession in a theory of virtue.

But I would agree that what can be made of it is much too little to form the core of a satisfying conception of moral virtue and moral virtues. The modular and probabilistic dispositions, of themselves, apart from something deeper, are too superficial to ground much excellence of character. Fortunately, situationist psychological findings leave something deeper for a theory of virtue to work with. In particular, situationist psychologists generally grant that, as Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett put it in their admirable clear and thoughtful textbook of situationist psychology, “enduring motivational concerns and cognitive schemes” provide “a more powerful conception of individual differences.”<sup>4</sup> These are factors that lie *behind* behavior.

In my book I point out that “a theory of virtue will have more explanatory power to the extent that the excellent qualities it identifies as virtues are found among these factors that lie behind behavior, rather than in direct behavioral dispositions” (131).

<sup>4</sup> Ross and Nisbett (1991), p. 20; quoted in Adams (2006), p. 131.

I argue that the most important virtues are to be found among such underlying psychological factors. I do not think this is particularly revisionary in relation to historic treatments of virtue in moral philosophy. Practical wisdom, benevolence and conscientiousness figure as central virtues in many accounts of virtue, but none of them is a direct behavioral disposition. They are motivational and/or cognitive qualities or states that interact with other psychological factors to produce quite diverse behavioral manifestations in different situations. Even courage is not a direct behavioral disposition. It is not simply boldness, for how boldly a courageous person will act in a particular situation depends on how she sees the situation as related to her central aims, values, and commitments.

Doris speaks of my emphasis on such deeper-lying motivational and cognitive states as yielding “a ‘softer’ behavioral requirement for virtue attributions.” For psychology’s cognitive access to the deeper-lying states and their complex interactions, being primarily indirect, by way of observation of overt behavior, generally enables us only to confirm or disconfirm to some degree, and not to verify or falsify conclusively, the presence or absence, and strength or weakness, of such underlying states. That is true. It is an impediment to some kinds of psychological research on virtue understood as I propose. More disturbingly for moral philosophy, it may lead us to wonder how much any of us really know about the most relevant psychological states. Caution is certainly warranted, but with caution I believe concepts of virtues such as wisdom, benevolence, and courage can still be used fruitfully in interpretation of human behavior.

Some situationist psychological results have been used to argue that benevolence is generally only a weak motive. I think that is much too sweeping a conclusion. It is based on experiments in which a substantial majority of subjects are observed to behave in ways intuitively contrary to benevolence, in situations in which they have only trivial reasons for such behavior—that is, reasons that seem intuitively not to be *morally* weighty. But if what is at issue is the strength or weakness of motives of benevolence, what is relevant is not the *moral* weight of countervailing motives, but their *motivational* strength. And in company with some social psychologists, I think that what the experiments principally show is the often underestimated strength of a motive that competes with benevolence in the situations of the experiments. That motive is the desire to be in tune with one’s social setting, and especially with those who appear to be authorities or social leaders. One might call it a conformist motive. There is plenty of reason to believe that this motive powerfully affects all of us in various ways. That is understandable, and not entirely regrettable, given our human need to cooperate with each other. Without an innate impulse to social attunement, would we ever even manage to learn a language? Necessary as it may be, however, the motive is also morally dangerous. In many of the most horrendous evils perpetrated by human beings, most of the perpetrators are following a crowd to do evil. And conformist motives are capable of prevailing even against virtuous motives that are strong enough to govern behavior in most contexts. We have moral reason to be on our guard against conformist motives, and I fear it is less likely that our guarding against them will be neurotic (as Kamtekar, rightly no doubt, suggests that such carefulness could be) than that it will fail at important junctures.

Must a motive or other trait be so strong as to prevail against *all* such temptations if it is to be excellent enough to be celebrated as a virtue? I think not. We are not gods. I believe we have reason to admire, and to try to foster in ourselves and others, moral qualities that enable us to live well, ethically speaking, in most situations which we are likely to face, even if they are not proof against all temptations.

The moral dangers attending our powerful impulses toward social attunement or conformity may be thought a ground of objection to what Doris (in oral discussion) has called the “sociality” of my view of virtue, which he rightly regards as a point of agreement between us. He sees this sociality in my view that some virtues, some morally admirable aspects of character, are constituted in part by social affiliations and social roles. My view of virtue is indeed social in that way—though I do not hold that all virtues are concerned with social relations, and do not deny that virtue once acquired (no doubt in a social context) can remain, and be manifested, in the solitary life of a hermit or a Robinson Crusoe. While Doris applauds the sociality he sees in my view, he has reservations regarding the talk of *character*. Specifically, he argues that “socially sustained dispositions... may dissipate, cloudlike, if the social sustenance runs dry.”

Now I grant that we should not be too confident of any given individual’s character holding up splendidly under a transformation of social environment that is sufficiently radical and sufficiently malign. But traits constituted by social affiliations and social roles are not moods that come and go in sympathy with the passions of a crowd. We internalize affiliations and roles that we care about. They can become part of what defines for us our moral identity. They help shape our thinking and feeling when we are alone, as well as when we are with other people. And while social roles and affiliations can generate conformist pressures, or reinforce them, there are somewhat non-conformist as well as conformist roles; and conformity to demands and expectations of a social role can push against other, possibly less benign, conformist pressures in a situation.

I think it is something misleading in discussions of situationsim—and this is something I did not say in the book but want to say now—I think it is misleading that situations and the social on the one hand, and character and the personal on the other hand, get opposed as alternatives. I think they could more accurately be viewed as complementary. Not only do social roles enter into individual character. Social situations, as social, are largely constituted by the people who are in them, and relevant characteristics that people bring to the situation contribute to making it the situation that it is.

Let me put some flesh on the bones of these points about sociality with the help of an example. Claus von Stauffenberg, the central figure in the July 20, 1944, plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, has been much remembered recently, due in part to a recent movie about him. I have great admiration for Stauffenberg. Not that I admire everything about him. I agree with his own judgment that he went along with the Nazis far too long. And I don’t believe that the political ideals that inspired his heroic resistance were wholly such as we should admire. But he manifested extraordinary virtues in the last months of his life. In an appalling context that demoralized to some extent most who worked in it, he did not conform. He did not let the Nazi leadership define what alternatives for action could be taken seriously.

He could see a path that held at least a slight hope of leading toward a future for his country significantly better, in moral as well as other respects, than the future toward which it was headed under Nazism. And his patriotism inspired him to follow that path with an energy, tenacity, and resoluteness more or less unique among the rather many German military officers who recognized at least implicitly what needed to be done.

In order to do that, did Stauffenberg have to step out of his social roles? On the contrary, it is quite clear that he was enacting his role of professional German military officer, and defending its honor, as he conceived of it. To be sure, if the role contributed to defining him, he also contributed to defining the role. But that is not bizarre. It is plausible to expect that those who contribute most to defining a social role will commonly be found among those who most deeply internalize it.

And while Stauffenberg was certainly stepping way out of line, he did not do it without social support. There were respected relatives and friends who urged him to take up the task of eliminating Hitler; and he eventually got hundreds more involved in the project. But we should not overlook the part that his character played in generating and sustaining that support. By all accounts his resolution and his charisma were crucial to keeping the conspiracy alive. I think we can reasonably assume that when he was in the room or on the phone, the way he inhabited his military role was a major determinant of the social situation for other conspirators—in particular, that it helped enable them to see, as things they could think seriously of doing, alternatives that the Nazis had generally managed to keep them from seriously regarding as eligible for choice. That illustrates an important way in which moral character, expressed in moral leadership, can contribute to structuring a social situation.

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