



Inner Virtue

NICOLAS BOMMARITO

INNER VIRTUE

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For all those with unseen goodness within

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Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Introduction

Take a few seconds to think of the various people you have met in the course of your life. Of these people, pick one that you think deserves to be called a good person. This should not be some pious and preachy self-styled moralist, but a *genuinely good person*. One who inspires in you admiration and respect. The sort of person you bring to mind to combat the sneaking suspicion that humanity is nothing but selfish assholes, allowing you to say to yourself, “Well, not *everyone* is so bad.”

Of course, we think of people like this as behaving in certain ways. They help us up when we fall, give to those in need, and say kind things to others. But we also expect them to have a certain kind of inner life: They won’t experience disgust toward people of a certain race or contempt toward those who are weaker than they are. They will feel grateful for benefits they receive and sadness when confronted with various types of human misery. A good person won’t merely *express* such states outwardly but will *experience* them inwardly—even when unable to express them.

Questions about the morality of action are, of course, interesting and important questions. In many cases a person’s inner life

doesn't matter much at all; I think people should not litter, but in this respect I care very little about the mental life of a stranger in the park, so long as their trash makes it into the garbage can. When I evaluate a *person*, however, it's a different story. It is not enough that my friend simply refrains from *making sexist comments*; it is important to me that he actually *lack a sexist outlook*. What I care about are my friend's inner mental features like his opinions, emotions, and desires.

One way to sharpen the point is to think of Robert Nozick's now infamous experience machine example. In the example, we must choose whether or not to be hooked up to a machine that hyperrealistically simulates any experience we'd like. One of the reasons to choose not to be hooked up to the machine, according to Nozick, is that doing so would destroy one's character. He writes,

we want to *be* a certain way, to be a certain sort of person. Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob. There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has long been in the tank. Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving? It's not merely that it's difficult to tell; there's no way he is.¹

Leaving aside the question of whether or not one should choose to be hooked up to such a machine, it's worth considering what it would do to a person's moral character. According to Nozick, someone in the machine no longer has any character. For him, once in the machine, a jerk and a caring person are exactly the same—characterless blobs.

And yet those who enter the machine *can* still be better or worse in many ways. Some are nonmoral: An unimaginative person will

1. Nozick (1974, 43).

continue to be unimaginative, a clever person will still be clever, and a curious person will remain curious. Others are moral: Those who are jealous, spiteful, or cruel can be that way in the machine too. Those in the machine can still think and feel in ways that reflect poorly on their moral character.² One can feel the same feelings of racial contempt or *schadenfreude* in a simulated reality as in real life. Someone who takes great pleasure in experiencing a racially charged lynching in the machine is worse than someone whose pleasures don't involve such ill will. Seeing those in the machine as mere "blobs" ignores the many ways in which inner states are relevant to moral character.

OVERVIEW

In the broadest sense, the central question of the book is this: How does someone's inner life make them a morally better or worse person? Though my answer to this question will be crawling with the terms "virtue" and "vice," I must first admit that I have intense dislike for those terms and have turned to them as a last resort. For many of us, the very words are weighed down too heavily with baggage from ancient Greece to Christianity to Victorian England. When I talk of a vicious person, I do not mean to include someone who has a stutter or who smokes cigarettes; it has little to do with using swear words or wearing provocative clothing. When I talk of a virtuous person, I do not mean to conjure up images of virile "manly" men, chaste "pure" women, or holier-than-thou Puritans. One need not

2. This can also apply to "actions" performed within the machine. Committing a hyperrealistic, simulated rape reflects poorly on one's character. Julia Driver (2007) makes a similar point when she notes that immoral actions in a dream can reflect badly on one's character.

be Ned Flanders to count as a virtuous person. I use these terms primarily because if you want to write in English about what it means to be a morally good or bad person, those are the terms you're stuck with. It is my hope that a different picture of the "virtuous person" will emerge from my discussion—one that better resembles the people that inspire us and make life worthwhile.

I will not be engaged in many of the projects commonly associated with virtue talk. Virtue ethics is often dominated by lists, but I will not attempt to provide a complete list of virtues or even a list of cardinal virtues. My aim is to give an account of the role inner states play in making one a good person. My answer will not involve appealing to a list of morally good traits, but rather explaining what the items on such lists of morally good traits have in common.

Nor will I attempt to ground *all* of morality in the notions of virtue and vice; I will not attempt to derive other moral concepts like rights, well-being, blame, or obligation from virtue concepts.³ I take virtue to be just *one part* of moral theory, though a rich and distinctive one. Questions about what makes a morally good person are important, but answering them does not provide the key to all other moral questions.

Because of recent work in the Aristotelian tradition, talk of virtues is strongly associated with a metaethical view that identifies goodness with natural human functioning.⁴ Though I will call things good and bad, I will not rely on any particular account of the metaphysical nature of moral goodness or badness nor on any particular

3. Some theorists, such as Driver (1996, 111), draw a distinction between virtue *ethics* and virtue *theory*: The project of virtue ethics is to develop a theory of all of morality founded exclusively on virtues and vices, while the project of virtue theory is to provide an explanation of virtues and vices—the what, why, and when of being a good person. This work will be in the realm of virtue theory rather than virtue ethics.

4. See Philippa Foot (2001) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) for a defense of this kind of view.

semantics of the associated terms—this is a work in virtue theory, not in metaethical theory. Though I use a person’s rights and well-being as paradigmatic cases of moral goods, my account of virtue does not depend on this. If you think there are clearer cases of moral goods, feel free to substitute in your favorite alternative.

Much discussion in virtue ethics, also inspired by Aristotle, is about what it means to live a flourishing human life. I will not assume that moral virtue is sufficient for the good life nor will notions of flourishing or the good life feature prominently in my discussion. I am concerned with the decidedly more narrow question of what it is to be a *morally* good person. Being a morally good person is compatible with being a better or worse person in many other respects.⁵

To talk of someone’s character is to talk about what they are like, what sort of person they are. To talk of someone’s *moral* character is to talk about what kind of person they are from the moral point of view. This is only a part of their overall character, one side of who they are, albeit a very important one. There are aspects of one’s character, their sense of humor or their introversion, which are not part of their moral character. Having a sense of humor or being introverted does not make someone a morally better or worse person, even though those are important aspects of who they are. Again, my focus is on one’s moral character, what kind of person someone is, *morally speaking*.

Virtue theory is, at its heart, about evaluating people. We talk about virtues and vices primarily as a way of making moral assessments of ourselves and others.⁶ To say that generosity and kindness

5. Susan Wolf (1982) points out how moral virtue and living well more generally can be at odds by highlighting cases where those who are extremely moral often give up projects, pleasures, and relationships with nonmoral value.

6. This characterization is at odds with others, such as John Doris (2005) and Annette Baier (2008), who take virtues and vices to be primarily about predicting or explaining actions. We

are moral virtues is to say that these reflect well on a person's moral character. Virtues are traits that make a good person good; vices are traits that make a bad person bad. To say of a particular state or action that it is virtuous is to say that one is a (at least slightly) better person for it. An act of generosity is virtuous because doing so makes one a better person. Having a kind thought is virtuous because one is at least a slightly better person for having it.

This book has two main aims. The first is to establish a class of inner virtues and vices—states relevant to moral character that are independent of overt, voluntary action. It's not merely what we *do* that makes us virtuous or vicious but what happens to us on the inside; pleasure, emotion, and attention are all relevant to our moral character, even when confined to our inner lives. The second is to offer a substantive, unifying explanation of *how* these various inner states are virtuous or vicious; to explain what these diverse states all have in common that connects them to our moral character.

The essence of my answer is this: To be a good person is to care about moral goods. The most essential feature of a virtuous person is that moral goods like justice and the well-being of others matter to them—they care about such things.⁷ Particular states (and actions too, though I will not focus on them) are virtuous by *manifesting* this care—by instantiating it in a particular way.

may use virtue talk in the task of making predictions, but that is at best a useful byproduct. If I want to *explain* why Jane returned the book, I'm willing to bet that action theorists have a better explanation than virtue ethicists.

7. My account is part of a more general family of accounts of virtue that link it with some positive orientation to moral goods. Thomas Hurka (2001) sees it as “loving the goods and hating evils,” Robert Adams (2006) as “being for the good,” and Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder (2014) as a special kind of intrinsic desire for the good. These accounts have also included discussions of inner states but have not focused on them. I don't mean to claim here that well-being and justice are the *only* moral goods; I just take them to be paradigmatic ones.

It is often natural to talk of particular virtues, to say that Mary is a generous person or that Michael is humble. I will take talk of virtues in general, things like gratitude or humility, to be derivative from particular virtuous states. These are complexes or patterns of states that have similar objects and similar domains—temperance involves a pattern of responses to consumables, patience involves responses to setbacks, and so on. In the case of inner virtues, these are patterns of inner states, mental and emotional responses to moral goods. To put it briefly: A virtuous person is someone who cares about moral goods, and a virtuous state is one that manifests such concern.

Things are a little more complicated in the case of vice. There are two ways to be a vicious person: One can lack concern for some moral goods, or one can care about things that are morally bad. Someone can be unjust by being indifferent to justice *or* by delighting in injustice.⁸ Particular states are vicious by manifesting either indifference, a *lack* of concern for moral goods, or a positive, malicious concern for things that are morally bad.

Of course, many of these notions will require further unpacking—especially what it means to *care* about something and what it means for a state to *manifest* this care. Details aside, the essential point is what makes someone a morally good person is that morality *matters* to them in a deep way. Their actions and various aspects of their mental life are virtuous by embodying this concern. First, it will be important to clarify what inner virtues and vices are and why they are important.

8. Some, for example Julia Annas (2011, 102) and Gabriele Taylor (2006, 4–5), deny the existence of the latter type of vice. No one, they claim, *aims* to be vicious. It is not central to my account, but this strikes me as too naïve; many people have the positive aim of becoming less temperate (many college freshmen) or less honest (a budding con artist), often under that description. Aside from such examples, there are many sadistic and cruel people who are vicious even if they do not *aim* to be sadistic and cruel.

INNER VIRTUE AND ITS RELEVANCE

Inner virtues and vices are states relevant to moral character that do not require overt action. Overt action is what we normally think of when we think of actions; they are observable, voluntary bodily behaviors like eating lunch, reading a book, or playing a ukulele. These will contrast with covert actions—internal, mental actions like intentional attending, imagining, contemplating, or deliberating.

Covert actions are distinct from other involuntary mental phenomena, such as emotions or pleasures. Such states are not things we *do*, but things that happen to us. Many of the states I will focus on are not doings at all; feeling jealousy, pleasure, or anger is not something we *do*, though we may do things to encourage or avoid such feelings.

Many states blur the line between voluntary and involuntary. Consider things like breathing or blinking. Most of the time these are automatic events, though if we choose, we can intentionally decide to take deep breaths or blink rapidly. Similarly, sometimes thinking, remembering, or attending is an action, something that I *do*. Other times, however, it is something that *happens to me*. I can try to remember who sat next to me in algebra class or decide to think about my bank account balance. However, the memory of a classmate can also pop into my head, and thoughts about my financial situation can force themselves upon me. Though my discussion will focus on involuntary inner states, much of what I claim will also apply to covert, inner action.

Voluntary or not, what these inner states have in common is that they need not be displayed externally in our overt behavior. Even though they may be commonly associated with overt actions, they