

## *Virtuous act, virtuous dispositions*

THOMAS HURKA

Everyday moral thought uses the concepts of virtue and vice at two different levels. At what I will call a global level it applies these concepts to persons or to stable character traits or dispositions. Thus we may say that a person is brave or has a standing trait of generosity or malice. But we also apply these concepts more locally, to specific acts or mental states such as occurrent desires or feelings. Thus we may say that a particular act was brave or that a desire or pleasure felt at a particular moment was malicious. Even when they concern acts, these last judgements are of virtuousness rather than of moral rightness. They therefore turn essentially on a person's motives; while he can act rightly from a bad motive, he cannot act virtuously from a bad motive. But they assess the virtue or vice of particular acts and mental states rather than of persons or traits of character.

These global and local uses of the virtue-concepts are clearly connected, in that we expect virtuous persons to perform and have, and virtuous traits to issue in, particular virtuous acts, desires, and feelings. A philosophical account of virtue should explain this connection, but there are two different ways of doing so. Each takes one of the two uses to be primary and treats the other as derivative, but they disagree about which is the primary use.

A *dispositional* view takes the global use to be primary and identifies virtuous acts, desires, and feelings in part as ones that issue from virtuous

dispositions. Aristotle famously took this view. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he said that for an act to be virtuous it must meet some initial conditions, including about its occurrent motivation, but must also ‘proceed from a firm and unchangeable character’; if it does not, it may be such as a brave or generous person would perform, but is not itself brave or generous (Aristotle 1980: 1105a31–b12). The dispositional view requires that we be able to identify virtuous character traits and persons independently of virtuous acts or feelings; otherwise its account of the latter will be circular. But assuming some such identification, it treats virtuous dispositions as primary and defines virtuous occurrent states derivatively, as ones that proceed from such dispositions.

A contrary *occurrent-state* view takes the local use to be primary and identifies virtuous dispositions as ones to perform virtuous acts and to have virtuous desires and feelings. W. D. Ross took this view. In *The Right and the Good* he held that virtuous action is action from any of three motives: the desire to do one’s duty, the desire to bring into being something good, and the desire to produce some pleasure, or prevent some pain, for another being (Ross 1930: 161–62).<sup>1</sup> Since these desires are occurrent states, Ross applied the virtue-concepts first to such states and then defined virtuous dispositions derivatively, so bravery is a disposition to brave acts, desires, and feelings, and generosity a disposition to generous ones. This view must be able to identify virtuous occurrent states independently of virtuous dispositions, but Ross’s discussion shows one way to do so. The virtuousness of an act depends on the motive or desire it is done from, rather than on its effects or conformity to principles of duty. And the virtuousness of a desire or feeling depends on its appropriateness to the moral value of its object. Thus, desiring or taking pleasure in something good for another person, such as his pleasure, for its own sake is virtuous and in particular generous, while desiring or taking pleasure in an evil such as his pain is malicious.

The dispositional and occurrent-state views agree that virtuous dispositions tend to issue in virtuous acts, desires, and feelings, but they give different explanations of this fact. In consequence they also disagree about some particular cases. Imagine that a person performs an act from what Ross would call a virtuous motive but does not have a stable disposition to act from that motive; imagine, for example, that he promotes another’s pleasure from an occurrent desire for that pleasure for its own sake but does not normally have such desires and therefore now acts out of character. The occurrent-state view implies that his act is virtuous and in

<sup>1</sup> Judith Jarvis Thomson also endorses the occurrent-state view in Harman and Thomson 1996: 144–47 and Thomson 1997: 280; I defend it briefly in Hurka 2001: 42–44.

particular generous; the dispositional view implies that it is not. For this reason, the two views also disagree about how tightly the global and local uses are connected. Both hold that virtuous dispositions tend to issue in virtuous occurrent states, but while the dispositional view also holds that virtuous states necessarily issue from virtuous dispositions, the occurrent-state view rejects that converse claim.

In the contemporary virtue-ethics literature the dispositional view seems overwhelmingly dominant. Many virtue-ethicists give formal definitions of virtue that concern only character traits and not particular acts and feelings; if they discuss the latter, it is at best secondarily (Watson 1990: 455, 459; Hursthouse 1999: 29, 134–36, 157–59, 167). Others emphasize how their view focuses on character rather than on discrete acts considered apart from character (Crisp and Slote 1997: 3). Most explicitly, Julia Annas says the virtues are essentially dispositions to act and therefore connected to judgements about the value of one's life as a whole; on that basis she rejects views like Ross's, which locate virtue initially in occurrent attitudes, as giving an 'idiosyncratic' and 'reduced' picture of virtue (Annas 2005: 534 n. 3). But it seems to me that, whatever philosophers may say, the contemporary common-sense understanding of virtue is clearly the occurrent-state one. When everyday moral thought applies the virtue-concepts, it is primarily to occurrent states considered on their own.

Imagine that, walking down the street, you see someone kick a dog from an evident desire to hurt the dog just for the pleasure of doing so. Do you say, 'That was a vicious act' or 'That was a vicious act on condition that it issued from a stable disposition to give similar kicks in similar circumstances'? Surely you say the former. Or imagine that your companion stops to give \$20 to a homeless person, apparently from concern for that person for her own sake. Do you say, 'That was generous of you' or 'That was generous of you on condition that it issued from a stable disposition to act from similar motives in similar circumstances'? Again surely you say the former. Since your judgement is of virtuousness, it turns on your companion's motives rather than on any external features of her act. If you learn that she was acting only to impress you or some bystanders, you may grant that she acted rightly but will withdraw your attribution of generosity.<sup>2</sup> But that attribution concerns only her current motives, apart from any connection to longer-lasting traits. Or imagine that a military committee is considering whether to give a soldier a medal

<sup>2</sup> Some virtue-terms such as 'just' have a different use that is independent of the agent's motives. Thus we may say that a storekeeper who gives accurate change performs a just act even if he does so only to avoid losing customers; here 'just' indicates a ground of rightness rather than anything connected to motivation. But other virtue-terms have no such use. To call an act brave, generous, or kind is always to say something about the agent's motives.

for bravery. Would they say, 'We know he threw himself on a grenade despite knowing it would cost him his life and in order to save the lives of his comrades. But we cannot give him a medal for bravery because we do not know whether his act issued from a stable disposition or was, on the contrary, out of character'? They would say no such thing, and they would be obnoxious if they did.

A defender of the dispositional view may reply that these points are not decisive. Everyday thought can locate virtue primarily in character traits but think that in each of the three examples the act described is sufficient evidence for a trait. If this were so, however, everyday thought would recognize the relevance of facts about a person's behaviour at other times to the question whether his current act is virtuous, and it does not. It is even happy to call out-of-character acts virtuous. If the companion who now shows concern for the homeless person has never done so before, you may say, 'That was uncharacteristically generous of you'; if you do, you will not contradict yourself.

If the issue between the dispositional and occurrent-state views concerned only the use of 'virtue' and related terms, it would not be of great philosophical significance. But it is usually connected to a moral issue. However exactly it is understood, the concept of virtue is that of a state that is somehow desirable; let us assume it is the concept of a state that is good in itself. Then when philosophers disagree about the primary application of the term 'virtue' it is usually because they disagree about what in this area is primarily good: the one side says it is dispositions, the other says it is occurrent states apart from dispositions. We need to address this issue, but should first note some slightly different views each terminological claim can express.

For an extreme dispositional view, consider the neo-Aristotelian formula that identifies the virtues as those traits a person needs in order to flourish or live well. Read literally, this formula says that what contributes to a person's flourishing is only his virtuous traits as traits; though having them will lead him to act virtuously, his virtuous acts are mere side-effects of what has value but have no worth in themselves. Aristotle's own view was less extreme. While defining virtue initially as a disposition, he recognized that it can be possessed by someone 'who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive'; on that basis he held that the prime contributor to flourishing is the active exercise of virtue, found in occurrent virtuous acts, desires, and feelings (Aristotle 1980: 1095b32–33, 1098b32–1099a6). But since he counted these states as virtuous only when they issue from a virtuous disposition, he continued to give priority to dispositions as, if not the prime bearers of value, then necessary conditions for what are. A dispositional view can even define the virtues as dispositions to act from the motives deemed virtuous by Ross, such as a desire for

another's pleasure for its own sake. But by calling acts virtuous only when they issue from a stable trait, it still places evaluative priority on dispositions as at least necessary conditions for what is primarily good.

In contrast, by applying the term 'virtue' to acts and feelings regardless of their connection to stable traits, the occurrent-state view finds the primary value in these states considered on their own. This is of course consistent with finding various kinds of value in virtuous dispositions. Most obviously, such dispositions can have great instrumental value, since they tend to produce individual virtuous acts and feelings and, through them, further benefits such as pleasures for other people. Virtuous dispositions can even be the prime source of virtuous acts or the most reliable means of producing them, so moral education should make their development its central goal. In addition, the occurrent-state view can hold that virtuous dispositions have some intrinsic value as dispositions. Ross took this line, saying the state of mind of a habitually unselfish person is intrinsically better than that of a habitually selfish one even when neither is exercising his disposition (Ross 1939: 291–92). But this intrinsic value will typically be less than that of the occurrent virtuous states the dispositions issue in, and the view will continue to emphasize such states by making their value independent of any connection to longer-lasting traits.

I have said that everyday moral thought accepts the occurrent-state rather than the dispositional view of virtue. Given the moral claims usually implicit in the two views, I think it is right to do so. The question is whether an act performed from a given occurrent motive, such as a desire for another's pleasure for its own sake, is less good in itself if it does not issue from a stable disposition. I see no reason to believe this.

The presence of such a disposition will typically lead a person to act virtuously on many other occasions, making his life as a whole much better than if such acts were only occasional. The disposition may also have, as Ross held, some value in itself. But if we are to assess the moral claims of the dispositional and occurrent-state views we must abstract from these facts. We must imagine two acts with the same occurrent motive, say, the same desire for another's pleasure for its own sake, with the same motivational force, but where one desire issues from a stable trait of character and the other does not. Then, ignoring any values in other states associated with the two acts, we must ask whether the first act is in itself better, or more deserving of praise, than the second. I see no reason whatever to believe this. An act of helping another from genuine concern for his welfare is no less admirable if it happens to be out of character, and self-sacrifice in battle not an iota less deserving of a medal.

A defender of the dispositional view may reject the above scenario, where an in-character and an out-of-character act have the same occurrent motivation, as unrealistic. Someone who, say, helps a homeless person

when he has not done so before is likely to be moved by some trivial feature of the situation, such as the particular expression on the person's face, or be to be acting on a whim that would not issue in action given even a moderately strong contrary impulse. Either way his desire will not have the depth or motivational force needed for it to have significant value. But if he acts from a stable disposition his desire will have those features, and it is this connection between stability and depth that makes character traits the prime locus for the value of virtue (Hursthouse 1999: 134–36, 157–59).<sup>3</sup>

There are two answers to this objection. First, while the connection it posits between stability and depth of motivation often obtains, it does not do so always. Someone can be stably disposed to act from a motive that is quite weak, so long as the only motives that ever oppose it are weaker. And an out-of-character act can be both focused on what is morally central and motivationally powerful; a soldier who has previously been timorous can now want to save his comrades just because they are his comrades, and can care deeply enough about doing so that he sacrifices his life. Second, even granting the connection, the objection gives no support to the dispositional view. It treats the existence of a disposition only as evidence for properties of depth and strength that belong to occurrent states as occurrent; it is at the time he acts that, for example, the soldier's desire to save his comrades is stronger than his desire to save himself. The objection therefore concedes that the primary intrinsic values are found in occurrent states and abandons any intrinsic concern for traits of character.<sup>4</sup>

The dispositional view was Aristotle's, and it is also common among contemporary virtue-ethicists. These two points are connected, since much contemporary virtue ethics is strongly influenced by Aristotle. But while it is often valuable to study classical philosophical texts, in this case too much attention to ancient philosophy can blind one to what I think are obvious facts about the everyday understanding of virtue. Common-sense morality certainly makes global judgements about virtue. It can say that a given person is brave or has the standing trait of generosity. But it treats those judgements as derivative from local judgements about the virtuousness of particular acts, desires, and feelings, and takes those states' virtuousness to be independent of any tie to dispositions. Moreover, it is right to do so: an act of helping another from a desire for his welfare is no less admirable when out of character than when dispositionally based.

<sup>3</sup> Similar points are made, though not in aid of the dispositional view, in Arpaly 2003: 94–97.

<sup>4</sup> Of course one can define 'depth' of motivation so it requires persistence through time; Hursthouse sometimes seems to do this. But then the objection's defence of the dispositional view begs the question, using a concept of 'depth' that no one moved by the examples I have appealed to will think reflects any value.

I will close with a final comment. There has been much discussion recently of the philosophical implications of situationist social psychology, which denies that most people have stable traits of character and says that much of their behaviour is influenced by trivial-seeming features of their situations. Philosophers impressed by situationism have said it challenges both folk psychology, which explains actions by reference to stable dispositions, and the part of common-sense morality that is focused on virtue and vice. Of these challenges, the one to common-sense morality would have considerable force if that morality took the dispositional view of virtue. If it were a necessary condition for virtuous action that it issue from a stable trait of character, and few people had such traits, then common sense would be wrong to apply the virtue terms to most of the acts people perform. (Virtuous action could still be a moral ideal, just one that few people ever achieve.) But the challenge has no force if, as I have argued, common-sense morality accepts the occurrent-state view of virtue. Then if most people will help another from concern for her happiness in situation *A* but not in trivially different situation *B*, situation *A* causally encourages their acting generously while situation *B* does not. Knowing this fact will be important practically. If we want to promote generous action, we should place people in situations of type *A* rather than of type *B*. But the situationist fact will have no effect on the concept of virtuous action, which is just that of action from an occurrent virtuous desire no matter what that desire's causes are. Some writers on situationism have recognized this point, saying the theory poses no challenge to a morality of virtue focused on particular acts and feelings rather than on traits of character (Harman 1999: 327–28; Doris 2002: 116–17). But they have not connected this point to common-sense morality, which they have tended to assume accepts the dispositional view and therefore is open to situationist challenge. Perhaps they have been overly influenced by neo-Aristotelian writing about virtue; perhaps they have assumed that if common sense takes dispositions to be central to the psychological explanation of particular acts, it must also take them to be central to their evaluation. But there is no reason to expect this last connection, and common-sense morality in fact accepts the occurrent-state view. It is therefore not in the least threatened by situationist social psychology, but can happily take it on board.<sup>5</sup>

*University of Toronto*  
*Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1A1*  
*tom.hurka@utoronto.ca*

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