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SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND MORAL VIRTUE

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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By

KATHLEEN A. POORMAN DOUGHERTY
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2000

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND MORAL VIRTUE

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

I have been struck numerous times in my life by people who have some kind of special ability to relate to other people. These people seemed to draw others to them, partly by being particularly effective in their relationships with other people, and partly through their honest and open interest in others. After further thought, it became clear to me that this ability to relate so well to other people was grounded in a particular kind of relationship to themselves. Their appeal was grounded not only in a genuine interest in the well-being of others, but also in their reflective approach to their own lives. They didn't go through life as simple pure-hearted folks; they were thoughtful, careful, reflective people and this was a central aspect of what made them appealing. Nor was their appeal merely aesthetic; this approach to their own lives made them better people. In this way I have always thought of them as moral role models. Part of the motivation for this project is to explain just how this reflective approach to life helps to make one a morally superior person.

A second motivation is connected with Socrates' dictum that the "unexamined life is not worth living." Although there are certainly aspects of Socrates' life that embody this insight, there is also something lacking. Socrates seemed to have a great understanding of human life, and yet was himself often misunderstood. I have always had difficulty reconciling these two aspects of Socrates. One explanation, I think, is that Socrates' understanding of the important things in human life was too narrow. Self-understanding was, to him, central to the moral life, but part of his failure was in

defining such a life too narrowly. Explaining what more is required for a moral life has been another motivating factor.

The final motivation is to meet the recent philosophical and psychological challenges to the claim that self-understanding is morally important. In "The Virtues of Ignorance," Julia Driver argues that there is a special class of virtues that doesn't require self-knowledge, and indeed, requires ignorance. Secondly, in "Positive Illusions and Well-Being," Taylor and Brown have argued from a social psychological perspective that people who are overly optimistic about themselves and their abilities are both better adjusted and get along better with others than people who have an accurate estimate of themselves. These three influences have come together to motivate me to provide a philosophical argument that demonstrates the moral importance of self-knowledge, and the extent to which individuals may be held responsible for self-knowledge.

In Chapter 2, I provide a historical overview of conceptions of self-knowledge and its importance for virtue, focusing on Socrates and Aristotle. I address the Socratic conception of self-knowledge, arguing that Socrates' conception of self-knowledge amounts to knowing what you know and don't know. This conception, however, is too narrow and too intellectual to be truly informative for moral theorizing, because it ignores other important features of the self. Nevertheless, there are important lessons that we can learn from the Socratic dialogues regarding the development of self-knowledge. Through the examples of Socrates' interlocutors, we see demonstrated a variety of the psychological hindrances to self-knowledge. Rather than acknowledging that they could be mistaken about what they know, many of his

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interlocutors protect their self-images by responding arrogantly or defensively. In so doing, they provide us with blueprints for the wrong way to respond to challenges to our self-knowledge. The ideal of the Socratic elenchus demonstrates the appropriate way to respond to such challenges and the importance of continued self-examination.

Aristotle does not explicitly discuss the nature of self-knowledge, but clearly regards it as important for virtue. Self-knowledge, as far as Aristotle is concerned. seems to amount to an understanding of one's character. Aristotle's contribution is in explaining how self-knowledge is an integral component of certain virtues, such as truthfulness and magnanimity, and how self-knowledge can be enhanced through friendship.

In Chapter 3, I present a conception of self-knowledge in which self-knowledge is primarily an understanding of one's character, which consists of enduring moral traits, but also includes an understanding of one's central personality traits and the non-enduring or occurrent features of the self. I argue that self-knowledge of this sort demands a critically reflective attitude toward oneself that is enhanced through interpersonal relationships and life experiences.

Chapter 4 is devoted to explicating an Aristotelian conception of virtue. According to Aristotle, the virtues are habituated states of character that develop over time through the repetition of like activities. On this conception of virtue, the emotions are partly constitutive of the virtues so that virtuous action requires not only acting properly, but feeling properly as well. According to Aristotle, virtue implies practical wisdom, i.e., an understanding of what is important and unimportant in human life, the ability to put this understanding into practice, and the perceptive

abilities to respond appropriately in a given situation. Full-fledged moral virtue, then, includes practical wisdom. After presenting and defending Aristotle's conception of virtue, I distinguish it from other features of the self, such as temperament, habits, and skills.

In Chapter 5, I argue that self-knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for Aristotelian moral virtue. My argument that self-knowledge is necessary for virtue rests on the role of practical wisdom in moral virtue. I argue that there are both conceptual and causal connections between self-knowledge and practical wisdom, and so practical wisdom is impossible without self-knowledge. Because virtue requires practical wisdom and practical wisdom requires self-knowledge, it follows that virtue requires self-knowledge. Having self-knowledge, however, does not guarantee virtue. A person could know that she is vicious and take delight in this fact, or she could have self-knowledge and be too lazy or complacent about her character to have virtue. After presenting my arguments for the relationship between self-knowledge and virtue, I respond to a variety of possible criticisms of this view, including Driver's claim that certain virtues require ignorance and Taylor and Brown's claim that positive illusions can make people better off both morally and psychologically.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the extent to which one should be held responsible for having self-knowledge, applying the general Aristotelian argument for the voluntariness of character to self-knowledge more specifically. In doing so, I compare and contrast the development of self-knowledge with other components of virtue, such as good ends and right feelings. I argue that moral education plays a central role in the development of self-knowledge, because it is especially important for self-knowledge

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that we develop the proper reflective skills early on. Without these skills, the development of self-knowledge is virtually impossible. However, most people's moral education is not so bad as to entirely hinder the development of these skills, and even with the best moral education, self-knowledge can be acquired only through our own good faith efforts. Thus, I conclude that insofar as a bad character is the result of a failure of self-knowledge, one may be held responsible for this bad character as well.

My project thus shows how, contrary to some recent claims, moral virtue does demand self-knowledge, and also shows how and why we are responsible for self-knowledge and thus, at least within limits, for character.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this chapter, I discuss the Socratic and the Aristotelian perspectives on self-knowledge, which provide the historical foundations for my main thesis, namely, that self-knowledge is important for moral virtue. Many of the central ideas in subsequent chapters find their roots in these historical perspectives. Thus in addition to explaining the views of Socrates and Aristotle, I have begun the critical work of determining what is of value in their contributions to the topic, and where their views should be modified. More specifically, I focus here on Socrates' and Aristotle's conceptions of self-knowledge, their theories regarding the development of self-knowledge, and their views on the moral importance of self-knowledge.

I. Socrates

Socrates is perhaps one of the earliest philosophers to have a theory of self-knowledge as important for virtue and a good life, and to tie this conception of self-knowledge to a view of how one acquires it through self-examination. Socrates' view of self-knowledge, namely that it consists in knowing what one knows and doesn't know, is put forth most explicitly in the *Apology*. In addressing the Socratic conception of self-knowledge, I undertake two tasks: 1) I explain the Socratic conception of self-knowledge by showing how the Socratic elenchus is supposed to help the interlocutor acquire self-knowledge; and 2) I argue that, even though the

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Socratic conception of self-knowledge is overly intellectual, the Socratic elenchus sheds

light on some of the psychological hindrances to self-knowledge.

Self-knowledge and the Elenchus

In the *Apology*, Socrates is defending himself against charges that include

corrupting the youth, not believing in the gods of the state, and creating new gods.

Socrates argues that these formal charges are not the real reason he has been brought to

trial; rather, he maintains that there is another set of informal charges to which he must

respond, which include studying things in the sky and below the earth, making the

weaker argument appear the stronger, and teaching this to others. In responding to

these informal charges, Socrates claims that though he is not guilty of these charges, it

is understandable that such charges might be brought against him. In order to explain

how he might be thought to be guilty of these charges he appeals to the fact that the

Delphic oracle reportedly said that no man was wiser than he (20e-21a).[1] Socrates

then explains that upon hearing this he took it upon himself to understand how this

could possibly be true, for he certainly didn't think of himself as a wise man. Socrates

believes it is his way of testing the oracle that has prompted the informal charges

brought against him.

In attempting to understand the oracle's claim, Socrates examines many men to

see if any are wiser than he. What he finds is that many people claim to have

knowledge, but when examined turn out not to be wise. Socrates then tries to show

them that they do not have knowledge, but this only makes them angry with him.

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[1] Plato, *Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997). All parenthetical references in section I refer to the translations in the Cooper edition.

Socrates reports thinking after his first such encounter: "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know" (21d). After this first encounter, Socrates claims that he continued systematically in this manner, examining all those who claimed to have knowledge all the time finding that they were mistaken. From these experiences he concludes that when the god said that no man was wiser than Socrates, he must have meant the following: "This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless" (23b). Even after he understands what the oracle means, Socrates continues his service to the god and describes it in this way: "I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise" (23b).

This then, is Socrates' mission: to show those who claim to have knowledge that they do not in fact possess such knowledge. Socrates tries to accomplish this through the use of his distinctive method, the elenchus. He does this in much the way he describes it in the *Apology*. Socrates encounters his interlocutor and in the course of conversation the interlocutor makes a claim to knowledge, often about some moral matter. Socrates then asks the interlocutor a series of questions about the interlocutor's beliefs. After the interlocutor has replied to these questions, it becomes clear that his answers to these questions are inconsistent with his initial knowledge claim. So, the interlocutor begins the conversation with Socrates by claiming to know P, but then claims to believe Q, R, and S. Yet it turns out that P, Q, R, and S are inconsistent.

Frequently the conversation ends at this point, with no solution to the inconsistency determined.

The *Euthyphro* is a perfect example of a standard encounter with Socrates. Euthyphro and Socrates see one another in the marketplace outside the court. Euthyphro explains that he is there to bring charges of murder against his father, an act he regards as pious. Socrates questions him further about this matter, and Euthyphro claims that those who take his action against his father to be unpious are wrong. He claims to know this because he knows what piety is. At this point, Socrates asks Euthyphro to enlighten him on the nature of piety, and Euthyphro agrees. Then Socrates begins his questioning. Euthyphro tells Socrates that the pious is what the gods love. But in the process of Socrates' questioning, Euthyphro also claims to believe that the gods, like humans, disagree, and that what some gods love the others hate. But Euthyphro can't consistently believe all of these things, for this would imply that some things are both pious and impious. Upon recognizing his error, Euthyphro proposes several other definitions of piety, but no definition he proposes can withstand Socrates' scrutiny, and Euthyphro commits to inconsistent beliefs each time. At the end of the dialogue, Euthyphro realizes his failing and ends the conversation with Socrates before anything has been concluded regarding the nature of piety.

While many possible views about what may properly be concluded from any particular elenctic argument have been put forth, any standard interpretation of the elenchus will be consistent with the claim that, at the very least, Socrates shows his

interlocutor to have inconsistent beliefs.[2] Some scholars argue that Socrates may legitimately conclude more than this from any given elenchus, but none argue that he cannot conclude inconsistency. This is all that Socrates claims to do. From the fact that he has been shown to have inconsistent beliefs, the interlocutor's confidence in his knowledge should be undermined. If Socrates can bring about perplexity in the interlocutor, this is sufficient to show that he doesn't necessarily know what he claims to know.

Socrates does not claim that through the elenchus he imparts his own knowledge to the interlocutor; he does not himself claim to know what piety is, much less claim to show Euthyphro. Nevertheless, there is an important sort of knowledge, or lack thereof, being demonstrated through the elenchus. The elenchus roots out "ignorant ignorance."[3] This ignorant ignorance is not simply lack of knowledge, but the false belief that you know something that you don't. It is ignorance of your own ignorance, and involves a pretense about your understanding of the world. This is what is distinctive about the sort of person that Socrates searches out; he doesn't search out the person who simply doesn't know and recognizes this fact, but the person who claims to know and doesn't in fact know. The aim of the elenchus is to replace this ignorant ignorance with Socratic ignorance, which involves the recognition that one doesn't know certain things, that one is ignorant regarding certain matters.

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[2]See the following for three representative interpretations of the elenchus. Hugh H. Benson, "The Problem of the Elenchus Reconsidered," *Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1987): 67-85; Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Chapter 1; Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983): 27-74.

[3]The term "ignorant ignorance" is from Drengson; however, the same idea is discussed by Schmid, but he refers to this as "complex ignorance." See Alan R. Drengson, "The Virtue of Socratic Ignorance," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1981): 238; W. Thomas Schmid, "Socratic Moderation and Self-Knowledge," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21 (1983): 343.

What makes Socrates wise is that he does not think he knows what he doesn't know, he is aware of his own ignorance (23d). This awareness of their own ignorance is what Socrates hopes to impart to his interlocutors. For this is the Socratic idea of self-knowledge: knowing what one knows and doesn't know. And elenctic examination of one's beliefs is the way one acquires this sort of self-knowledge.

This view of the Socratic conception of self-knowledge is partially supported by the *Charmides*, where Charmides and Critias are discussing with Socrates the nature of *sophrosune*. Although the dialogue ends aporetically, the view stated at 167a5-7 is often accepted as the Socratic view:

> Then only the temperate man will know himself and will be able to examine what he knows and does not know, and in the same way he will be able to inspect other people to see when a man does in fact know what he knows and thinks he knows, and when again he does not know what he thinks he knows, and no one else will be able to do this. And being temperate and temperance and knowing oneself amount to this, to knowing what one knows and does not know.[4]

Much of what is taken to be Socratic about this passage is that it corresponds so well to the view presented in the *Apology*. Moreover, it seems to describe Socrates himself. It describes the temperate person, the person with self-knowledge, as one who knows what he knows and doesn't know and can determine whether others have this knowledge of themselves. Socrates tells us in the *Apology* that this is what makes him wise: he knows what he knows and what he does not know. For example, he knows that one must disobey an unjust order, that an unexamined life is not worth living, that a good man cannot be harmed by death, and that caring for one's soul is the most

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[4]Schmid provides a further discussion of the relationship between the ideas presented in the *Apology* and the *Charmides*.

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important thing. But he knows that he doesn't know certain universal moral truths, such as what virtue is, or what piety is. And it is an awareness of this ignorance that is so important. Consequently, he makes it his mission to determine whether others have this knowledge of what they know and don't know; he seeks out those who lack self-knowledge and tries to make them aware of their failing.

Self-knowledge in the sense of knowing one's own ignorance is important because recognizing that one doesn't have knowledge is the first step in the pursuit of truth.[5] Socrates makes this clear in the slave-boy passage from the *Meno*:

> You realize, Meno, what point he has reached in his recollection. At
> first he did not know what the basic line of the eight-foot square was;
> even now he does not know, but then he thought he knew, and
> answered confidently as if he did know, and he did not think himself at
> a loss, but now he does think himself at a loss, and as he does not
> know, neither does he think he knows. . . . Do you think that before he
> would have tried to find out that which he thought he knew though he
> did not, before he fell into perplexity and realized he did not know and
> longed to know? (84a3-c6)

What we learn from this passage is that only by being shown that he doesn't already have knowledge will the slave-boy have any interest in gaining knowledge. The same is true for Socrates' interlocutors. Only when Euthyphro is shown, through his inability to put forth a definition that is consistent with his other beliefs, that he doesn't know what piety is, or at the very least that he doesn't know that he knows, can he have an interest in trying to gain knowledge about what piety is. It is of central importance that the interlocutor should be perplexed, and thus recognize his own failure to know

[5]The following argument, including the interpretation of the *Meno* passage is from Hugh H. Benson, "A Note on Eristic and the Socratic Elenchus," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (October, 1989): 597-598.

about the matter at hand. Fostering this perplexity is part of the purpose of the elenchus.

Plato provides additional insight into the purpose of the elenchus in the later *Sophist*. Here the Visitor is explaining to Theaetetus how some people attempt to rid others of the belief in their own wisdom.

> They cross-examine someone when he thinks he's saying something
> though he's saying nothing. Then, since his opinions will vary
> inconsistently, these people will easily scrutinize them. They collect
> his opinions together during the discussion, put them side by side, and
> show that they conflict with each other at the same time on the same
> subjects in relation to the same things and in the same respects. The
> people who are being examined see this [the inconsistency], get angry at
> themselves, and become calmer toward others. They lose their inflated
> and rigid beliefs about themselves that way, and no loss is pleasanter to
> hear or has a more lasting effect on them. . . . The people who cleanse
> the soul, my young friend, likewise think the soul, too, won't get any
> advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone shames it
> by refuting it, removes the opinions that interfere with learning, and
> exhibits it cleansed, believing that it knows only those things that it
> does know, and nothing more (230b-d).

Here it becomes clear that this is precisely what Socrates attempts to do. In helping the interlocutor recognize his ignorance, Socrates prepares him for knowledge. Only when the interlocutor has been forced to recognize his own ignorance and to give up on his false beliefs, can he be in a position to benefit from teaching.

From this passage we begin to see that the interlocutor should gain more than just the recognition that he doesn't know from the elenchus; it should also alter his view of himself. A particularly important benefit of the elenchus is that the interlocutor should lose his inflated and rigid beliefs about himself.[6] In other words, the elenchus fights conceit. It forces the interlocutor to have a more realistic picture of

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[6]Benson, 597-598 and Schmid, 343-344.

his ability to understand the world. In a sense, the elenchus should clean the slate free from pretense and false confidence so that learning can really take place. Thus the initial benefits of the elenchus are greatest to those who take themselves to have more knowledge than they actually have, who fail to have a proper perspective regarding their own understanding of the world. However, once this has been recognized, the desire for continued self-examination should follow.

In the *Apology*, Socrates claims not just to examine people's beliefs, but to examine their lives, so he must think that his method of examination should have far-reaching effects (38b). Its purpose is not to be just a one-time demonstration that the interlocutor lacks knowledge. The topics that arise in Socratic examinations are often central to living, so that an examination of one's beliefs will also be an examination of one's life itself. It is of central importance to Euthyphro's life whether he knows what piety is. He is acting confidently in prosecuting his father in light of his belief that he knows, but once he realizes that he doesn't know, the proper action should seem much less clear. Ideally, Euthyphro will leave his encounter with Socrates wanting to further investigate the nature of piety and other equally important matters, so that he can further understand what he does and does not know. To truly gain self-knowledge from the elenchus, Euthyphro must open himself up to learning about himself by continuing his own self-examination. And it is important that he gain Socratic self-knowledge, for it is intimately tied to virtue itself.

This process of examining ourselves and our beliefs must go on throughout our lives. It is in this sense that we must live an examined life. This continual process of self-examination is what Socrates has committed himself to, and he tries to persuade

others of the value of this pursuit. It is this knowledge of the epistemic and moral state of one's own soul that Socrates takes to be most important in a good life, and it is this knowledge he continues to encourage others to seek. When considering whether he would stop philosophizing if asked to do so, Socrates replies that he will not, that he will "go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul" (30a5-b1). What Socrates makes clear to us here is that recognizing our ignorance and knowing about which matters we are wise is one of the most important things in life.

Evaluating the Socratic View

The Socratic conception of self-knowledge is highly focused on knowledge of one's own epistemic states, rather than on understanding of one's character or what one is like more generally. Having an accurate conception of what we know and don't know is an important aspect of understanding ourselves, and it may underlie many other features that are important to know, but it doesn't paint a complete picture of the morally important aspects of self-knowledge. There are numerous aspects of ourselves that would be important to know, including our emotions, our psychological traits and capacities, our motivational structures, our values, and our moral strengths and weaknesses. The lack of attention to these other aspects of self-knowledge is part and parcel of an over-emphasis on reason and the intellectual aspects of human beings.

This emphasis on rationality comes out quite clearly in the failure to consider understanding our own emotions as an important part of self-knowledge, which is tied closely to Socrates' denial that our emotions could ever over-ride our reason or cause

reason to falter. If one takes knowledge to be all-powerful, and knowledge is a purely intellectual affair, then it makes sense to think that the only part of ourselves that we must know is our rational nature. If one assumes that knowing the good is sufficient to make me do it, then there is less reason to consider the emotional side of human beings. However, the belief that reason is sufficient does not accurately describe the way human beings really function. Many contemporary theorists, and even Socrates' immediate followers, have recognized the important role of the emotions in motivating action. Plato departs in important ways from Socrates insofar as he acknowledges that weakness of will is possible, and Aristotle emphasizes the importance of having reason and emotion working in tandem in order to be virtuous. Insofar as our emotions are important motivators and highly influence our actions, the sort of self-knowledge that will be informative for moral theory must include an understanding of our emotions and how they influence our actions.

If we acknowledge that emotions serve an important motivating function, then it becomes clearer why it is important for an individual not only to know her own emotions, but also to be able to reflect on their foundations and their consequences. In order to respond appropriately to those around me, I must know that I am angry, why I am angry, and whether or not it is appropriate for me to be angry. We do not know these sorts of things without reflection. We must engage in the same sort of reflection that Socrates demands regarding our beliefs with respect to our emotions as well.

The intellectualist nature of Socratic self-knowledge prevents Socrates from taking into account cases in which our failures in self-knowledge do not have to do with knowing what we know and don't know, but with other aspects of ourselves.

Socrates is not unaware of the importance of the emotions altogether, for sometimes what prevents his interlocutors from engaging with him in the philosophical pursuit of the examined life is their own emotional barriers. They are angry with him for making them appear fools, rather than angry with themselves for having been conceited. Nevertheless, because of Socrates' other views regarding human behavior, the Socratic conception of self-knowledge does not consider anything beyond the intellectual components of human beings. Although it seems clear that Socrates had a richer sort of self-knowledge than the one he endorses and understood himself well, his philosophical statements of the importance of self-knowledge are not rich enough to promote this richer sort of self-understanding. Knowing what we know and don't know provides only the most basic conception of the sort of self-knowledge required for virtue. While important features of ourselves may be described in terms of knowing what we know and don't know, this doesn't provide a very intuitive understanding of the role of self-knowledge in the moral life. This is where the Socratic conception of self-knowledge as knowing what one knows and doesn't know falls short.

Even if the Socratic conception of self-knowledge suffers from a tendency to be overly intellectual, the Socratic elenchus and its attempt to help the interlocutor gain self-knowledge bring to light interesting issues regarding self-knowledge and its connection to other issues in moral psychology. The elenchus demonstrates the ways in which arrogance is a hindrance to self-knowledge, and shows how we often gain insight into ourselves through enlightening experiences. Both of these points are

brought out most emphatically by the discrepancy between Plato's description of the elenchus in the *Sophist* and what actually happens in the Socratic dialogues.

Plato's description of the elenchus in the *Sophist* tells us that the interlocutor should be angry with himself and calm toward others; he should recognize his own failings in self-knowledge and be critical of his own failures. He should be grateful to Socrates for bringing these failings to his attention and eager to start on the path to greater self-knowledge through additional self-examination. But this is not usually the way it goes.

In many cases, the Socratic elenchus shows interlocutors too arrogant and defensive to recognize the benefits that the elenchus should bring them. Euthyphro doesn't thank Socrates for enlightening him about his own confusion, or for showing him that he has been arrogant in presuming to know that his action is pious and that his critics are wrong. Rather, he leaves hastily saying he has more important things to attend to and must be on his way. He is frustrated with Socrates for confusing him, rather than grateful to Socrates for showing him the error of his ways. Euthyphro's over-confidence and attitude of moral superiority are not easily replaced by critical, realistic self-examination and proper acknowledgement of his own ignorance in the face of such difficult moral matters. Euthyphro's over-simplification of the moral issues at hands, namely, the nature of piety, has made him over-confident in his own wisdom, and consequently he fails to have an accurate picture of himself. He sees himself as wise and pious, when in fact he is ignorant and wrong. But Euthyphro does not admit this to himself as Plato's description of the elenchus would have us believe he should.

In order to respond appropriately to Socrates' examination, Euthyphro must be willing to approach the examination from the proper perspective. One way in which he could be more open to examination is to be already somewhat self-reflective, but it might also be sufficient for him to lack arrogance or conceit. If he were already self-reflective, he might respond calmly toward the examiner and with irritation towards himself. We can imagine that if Socrates were the one being examined, he would not respond with anger if shown to be confused, because he already recognizes the limitations of his own knowledge; he already knows that he doesn't know, and is thus not conceited about his wisdom. The elenchus as Socrates practices it is directed towards those who do not already recognize the benefits of self-examination and this weakness is compounded by their conceit. Therefore, their hostile reaction is understandable and even expected. If the elenchus is to be beneficial to them in the end, they must reflect about their experience later and consider their own folly. Once the arrogance has faded, self-reflection can begin to take place.

Even the most self-reflective person has probably experienced becoming defensive in this manner. And if we have not experienced it ourselves, we have certainly seen it happen to others. We find ourselves in arguments or discussions where we are being shown to be mistaken, or at least our views are being shown to be less coherent than we had thought. If we have been altogether unaware that our views on a particular matter are not as easily justified as we had thought, the immediate inclination is to defend our views at all costs, sometimes appearing bull-headed or simply foolish. Once the immediate humiliation is over, we gain the ability to reflect upon the situation and recognize where we went wrong or how it is that we are in fact

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mistaken. When we are caught off guard like this, it takes distance from the actual situation to be able to think more rationally about it. Our inclination to "save face" prevents us from being able to respond calmly; rather, we become hostile to those who have shown us to be wrong.

Even if we have never had this sort of experience in the public realm, we have likely experienced it in our private lives. Surely many a newlywed has had the experience of arguing over a matter in which it becomes clear that she is quite wrong, though she has not yet developed the willingness or ability to admit her error. Only after the argument is over does she recognize her failing, and hopefully learn from it. The argument may even continue long after the reason for the argument is forgotten. This sort of example is a testament to our unwillingness to admit that we may be mistaken when our self-image is at stake. In these cases the issue in question is often not as important as for Socrates' interlocutors. But when we react in this way when lesser issues are at stake, we can imagine that we might not ourselves respond in the ideal way to such a blatant uncovering of our failings if we were put in the position of Socrates' interlocutors.

The elenchus shows the interlocutor's distress with the recognition that he lacks self-knowledge. It shows how one who has been so self-absorbed and over-confident can be shocked with the realization that his perception of himself has been deeply flawed. For Euthyphro to admit this to himself would require a total over-haul of his interpretation of himself. He doesn't know what piety is, and this over-confidence regarding his knowledge in important moral matters has influenced his own perception of himself. Prior to his encounter with Socrates, Euthyphro thought

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himself wise and pious; now, if he acknowledges the truth to himself, as shown to him by Socrates, Euthyphro must admit that he is both ignorant and conceited. In this way, the Socratic elenchus demonstrates quite well the psychological hindrance that arrogance poses to self-knowledge.

The elenchus also shows how self-knowledge can be gained through enlightening experiences. Part of what is interesting about the aporetic conclusion to many early dialogues is that we don't know whether the interlocutor really comes to these important conclusions regarding himself. We don't know for sure whether Euthyphro leaves his encounter with Socrates willing to continue engaging in reflection or elenctic investigation, or whether he buries his head in the sand and blames Socrates for making him appear a fool, though it seems likely that he does the former.

If the interlocutor has been deceived about himself for some time, it may take an out of the ordinary experience like his encounter with Socrates for him to begin to alter his view. This is likely true for many of us, though our enlightening experiences may take any number of forms. Our inaccurate conceptions of ourselves and our wisdom may go unchallenged for long periods of time until some event occurs that causes us enough psychological distress that it forces us to reassess our conceptions of ourselves. Many teachers have seen this happen with college freshmen who have been the best students in their high school classes only to find themselves thrown in with many other students who have also been the best when they arrive at college. Now rather than consistently out-performing other students, they find themselves being average. Their conception of the world broadens and this creates an enlightening experience that forces them to rethink their conceptions of themselves.

Self-knowledge is often enhanced by these unexpected challenges, even for the most self-aware individuals. That the interlocutor may or may not respond as he should illustrates the fact that when faced with illuminating moments a person may or may not recognize their importance and learn from them. Though not an entirely ideal interlocutor, Laches, for example, expresses a willingness to continue with the investigation, even after admitting his failure and frustration (194a-b). Others, however, fail to grasp the opportunity to more fully understand themselves, as does the interlocutor who blames Socrates rather than examining himself.[7] The elenchus shows us that one factor that may influence whether or not we learn from these experiences is our own defensiveness.

The contrast between what usually happens in the dialogues and the ideal elenchus that Plato describes demonstrates the ways in which some of us respond better to threats to our self-conception than others. Those who respond well may be already on the path to self-knowledge through self-reflectiveness, or simply less confident in their beliefs, or less cocky about themselves. Those who respond poorly do so, in part, because they are mistaken about themselves, but this is compounded by over-confidence. The interlocutor who cannot reflect upon the experience and recognize his failings because of his own over-confident false conception of himself, even after distancing himself from the initial shock of the public humiliation and the startling recognition that he is ignorant, illustrates the ways in which our conceptions of ourselves are reinforcing. Socrates suggests that this is one of the reasons he has been brought to trial—his interlocutors blame him rather than themselves. We may

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[7]It is interesting to note that there are few, if any, good examples of ideal interlocutors.

respond to an experience that challenges our understanding of ourselves by recognizing it as an enlightening experience and learning from it, or we may interpret the experience in a manner consistent with our own conceited view of ourselves and learn nothing from it. We may take advantage of the opportunities for self-reflection or we may shun them at the cost of self-knowledge. By illustrating these aspects of our human psychology, the elenchus sheds light on aspects of our psychology that should inform ethical theorizing about self-knowledge and its moral importance, even if the Socratic conception of self-knowledge is too intellectual to adequately take into account all of the morally relevant features of human beings.

II. Aristotle

The Aristotelian conception of self-knowledge does not have the same intellectual overtones as the Socratic conception. Aristotle does not talk explicitly about his conception of self-knowledge, but an understanding of the need for self-knowledge and some insights into its nature can be gained from his discussions of virtue and friendship. For Aristotle, self-knowledge amounts to understanding one's moral character and accurately assessing one's self-worth in light of one's character. In this section, I address the ways in which one comes to have such self-knowledge on the Aristotelian account. More specifically, 1) I consider two particular Aristotelian virtues, truthfulness and magnanimity, that rely heavily on self-knowledge, and 2) I discuss the importance of friendship in gaining self-knowledge.

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Virtues Associated with Self-knowledge

Two distinct Aristotelian virtues rely heavily on self-knowledge, viz.,

truthfulness and magnanimity. Aristotle's discussion of the virtue of truthfulness

occurs in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127a13-1127b35.[8] His analysis of truthfulness if

as follows. Aristotle tells us that the virtue of truthfulness has to do with how we

present ourselves to others, both in words and in actions. The truthful person

presents himself honestly simply because that is his character, not because something

else is at stake. In fact, because the truthful person is honest about himself when

nothing else is at stake, he is more likely to be truthful when there is something else at

stake, for he will already be in the habit of doing so and will value the truth for its own

sake. The truthful person, however, tends to tell less than the truth rather than more,

that is, he is more likely to down-play his qualities rather than exaggerate them.

Truthfulness is a mean between boastfulness and self-deprecation, but from

Aristotle's claim that the truthful person tends toward self-deprecation, it is clear that

boastfulness is the worse of the two extremes. The boastful person claims to have

qualities that he either doesn't have at all or does not have to the extent that he claims

to. Not all boastful persons are equally bad—the boaster who boasts because he

hopes to receive honor from it is not as blameworthy as the boaster who hopes to

receive money from it. But, regardless of his motives, the boaster is not entirely

truthful and does not present himself as he really is. The self-deprecator, on the other

hand, denies his actual qualities. This makes him less blameworthy than the boaster.

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[8]Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical references in section II are to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985).

Usually, the qualities the self-deprecator claims not to have are those that are taken to be deserving of praise. However, if he so greatly underestimates his qualities that he claims not even to have qualities of lesser importance, then he can appear boastful, and boastfulness at either extreme is bad. It is still better to err slightly on the side of modesty than boastfulness.

This is Aristotle's analysis of the virtue of truthfulness. From his discussion it becomes clear that in order to be truthful about ourselves we need to know ourselves, i.e., our qualities and the worth of these qualities. Yet knowing the truth is not sufficient for the virtue of truthfulness. I may know myself, yet find pleasure in falsehood. I may find that I like the extra interest people take in me if I embellish the truth a bit, or what I would like to be may strike me as much more interesting than what I really am. Alternatively, I could know that I have many good characteristics, but feel embarrassed actually admitting it. I may simply be uncomfortable with the additional attention my good characteristics get me, or I may find that it is much easier to downplay my worth and fade into the woodwork. In any of these cases, I know myself but do not have the virtue of truthfulness, so knowing myself certainly isn't enough for being truthful.

However, it would be difficult to present myself honestly without self-knowledge. If I believe myself to be better or more worthy than I am and I attempt to present myself truthfully to others, the image I present will be boastful. I will present myself as better than I am; I will act as if I have qualities I don't have. This results in boastfulness, even if my intention is to be truthful. Similarly, if I fail to recognize that I have certain good qualities and attempt to be truthful, the image I present will border

on self-deprecating. Even though I am attempting to be truthful, my own failure to recognize my good qualities will make me unable to accurately represent the qualities I have to others. The extent to which I am able to be truthful with others depends upon the extent to which I know my own qualities. If I fail to see the truth about myself, good or bad, I will be unable to present the truth to others. In this way, the virtue of truthfulness is dependent upon self-knowledge, even though knowing myself will not guarantee my being truthful.

The virtue of magnanimity is dependent upon self-knowledge in similar ways. The magnanimous man, Aristotle tells us, "thinks himself worthy of great things and is really worthy of them" (1123b2). The magnanimous man is distinguished both from those who are worthy of great things and fail to know it, and from those who believe themselves to be worthy of great things and are mistaken. Thus, we get from Aristotle a two-part definition of magnanimity: one must both be worthy of great things and know it. It is not enough simply to be worthy of these things, for knowing one's worth is central to magnanimity. In fact, it is in regard to one's understanding of one's own worth that magnanimity may be considered a mean. The related extreme states are vainness and pusillanimity, with the vain person thinking he is worthy of more than he is and the pusillanimous person thinking he is worthy of less than he is. The magnanimous person is a mean only in virtue of the self-understanding that he possesses, for magnanimity is an extreme insofar as the magnanimous person has all the virtues and is deserving of the greatest honors. What makes the magnanimous person worthy of such great honors is his goodness (1123b25). Although magnanimity itself is a virtue, it is rather different from the other virtues. Part of what

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distinguishes the magnanimous person from other virtuous persons is that the magnanimous person possesses all the other virtues to a great degree. Thus Aristotle suggests that magnanimity "looks like a sort of adornment of the virtues" (1124a). So the picture Aristotle paints of the magnanimous man is of a man who possesses great virtue, which makes him worthy of great honor, and has an accurate self-conception of his worth and the honor he deserves.

At first sight, the magnanimous person doesn't sound very pleasant to be around. In fact, the magnanimous person sounds downright conceited, and it is tempting to think this conceitedness comes from his or her self-knowledge. We might describe someone in much the same way that Aristotle describes the magnanimous person when trying to explain why we find him or her unpleasant. We might say, "she's smart and she knows it," or "he's a good athlete and he knows it." But I think that we make two mistakes when we think of the magnanimous person as unpleasant. One mistake stems from confusing knowing that one is good and worthy with vanity respect to one's goodness. Part of what we mean when we say such things is not that it's bad that the person knows she's smart, but that she flaunts her smartness. When we say that she knows she's smart, we mean that she feels a need to let us know that she is smart by, for instance, telling us her GRE scores or her IQ. The people that we find unpleasant are the ones who always seem to be bragging about their latest achievements; we have to hear about how much money they made last year, how their kids got all A's in school, or how many points they scored in yesterday's soccer game. The magnanimous person is secure enough in his own worth that he has no need to brag about it. Moreover, the magnanimous person's claim to honor does not come

from this sort of quality. That someone is smart or a good athlete or has good kids is different from someone's being virtuous, and it is due to his virtue that the magnanimous person is worthy. This is the second mistake that we are tempted to make which stems from confusing the actual characteristics of the magnanimous person that make him worthy, with other traits that we commonly find in people. When we bring to mind people who believe that they deserve great honors, we often think of people who take themselves to be worthy of great honors for the wrong reasons. Being beautiful or talented or intelligent is all well and good, and it is true that we do tend to bestow certain honors on these people, yet according to Aristotle the only thing that makes one truly entitled to the highest honors is virtue. Aristotle points out to us that this mistake is easy to make, for we tend to think that people who have these other qualities are superior in some way and, thus, deserving of honor, but only virtue is truly honorable.

To have a better idea of what the magnanimous person is like, consider a soldier who receives a Purple Heart, and recognizes that this honor was deserved. He knows that his action was good and takes pleasure in receiving the deserved honor. Yet we don't think of him as boastful for knowing that he was deserving. A five star general probably knows that he has served honorably and courageously over a long career and that his honors are deserved, but this wouldn't in itself make him vain. He only becomes vain if he presents himself poorly, which presumably the magnanimous man doesn't do.

To get the fullest understanding of the magnanimous man, we should consider as an example someone who deserves his honor on the basis of his great virtue. But

this is also the aspect of Aristotle's magnanimous man that strikes us as most implausible. We can imagine people who deserve great honors for many kinds of achievements, and many of these are moral achievements, such as service to others in some way, but we don't think of these people as having all the virtues. It strikes us as altogether implausible that such a person exists at all. Even people who are very good have their faults. But the magnanimous man seems virtually free of any moral fault, for he is supposed to have *all* of the virtues *to a great degree*. Everyday experience teaches us that human beings just aren't like this—even the best human beings have faults. Those whom we think are highly virtuous seem always to let us down in some way. We have all been taught to think of the founding fathers as a group of altogether admirable men, but more evidence always surfaces to make it clear that, regardless of the worth of their moral commitments, they all had moral flaws. Jefferson, for example, has gotten much press recently for having a sexual relationship with at least one slave, let alone for holding slaves at all. Moreover, it seems that those who claim to have great virtue let us down even more frequently. The sort of example that comes to mind is of those who are members of the clergy who turn out to lead more sordid lives than we could ever have imagined.

If, however, there are people who possess virtue to the degree that the magnanimous man does, then the standard concerns about whether such a man is appealing may hold little water. Our feelings, I think, are based on assumptions that do not fully fit Aristotle's characterization of the magnanimous man. So it may not be the magnanimous man's self-knowledge that makes him seem such a strange moral exemplar, rather it may be that it strikes us as altogether implausible that anyone

should be so deserving. By including self-knowledge in the definition of magnanimity, Aristotle is able to better explain the difference between the individual who truly is deserving of great honors (if such a person exists), and the individual who simply thinks he is.[9] For example, of the pusillanimous man who is in fact worthy of goods but deprives himself of them, Aristotle says, "Indeed he would seem not to know himself; for if he did, he would aim at the things he is worthy of, since they are goods" (1125a23-24). He makes a similar comment regarding the self-knowledge of the vain man: "Vain people, on the other hand, are foolish and do not know themselves; and they make this obvious" (1125a26). Thus part of what make the magnanimous man so worthy is that he has an accurate conception of his own worth in addition to great virtue.

Friendship and Self-knowledge

Aristotle makes it clear that self-knowledge in the sense of knowing one's own traits and one's worth is important for the virtues of truthfulness and magnanimity, but his discussion of the way in which friendship contributes to self-knowledge is more important and more insightful. Aristotle does not present us with a detailed account of how one develops self-knowledge, but he does indicate that self-knowledge would be impossible without friends.

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[9]Howard Curzer presents an interesting view on Aristotle's conception of magnanimity, and I found his insights helpful here. He finds difficulty with Aristotle's definition of magnanimity and suggests that dropping the requirement of self-knowledge would solve other problems for Aristotle. However, his claims are based in part on his desire to interpret magnanimity as a proper virtue itself. But I take Aristotle to present magnanimity as a crowning achievement, not one that would be necessary for the other virtues. I take it to be the case that one could have all the other virtues and still not have them to the degree that would make one magnanimous. See Howard J. Curzer, "A Great Philosopher's Not So Great Account of Great Virtue: Aristotle's Treatment of 'Greatness of Soul,'" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (December 1990): 517-538.

In considering the nature of the relationship between character friends, Aristotle describes several features of a character friendship that help contribute to self-knowledge. A character friendship, as Aristotle describes it, is a friendship grounded in the good character of the individuals involved; they are friends because of their good characters, rather than out of convenience or pleasure. Thus, Aristotle tells us that observing the actions of excellent friends is like observing our own actions: "The blessed person decides to observe virtuous actions that are his own; and the actions of a virtuous friend are of this sort" (1170a2-3). What Aristotle means by this is not altogether clear, but he clarifies the point later, saying, "The excellent person is related to his friend in the same way as he is related to himself, since his friend is another self" (1170b7). From these passages, it starts to become clear how a character friend may enable us to improve our self-knowledge. If a friend is another self, and we observe the virtuous actions of our friends, then it will be something like viewing our own actions. We may better know what our own actions are like by viewing the actions of a friend, since we are virtue friends partly due to the fact that we are alike in virtue. Of course, one cannot be fully deceived about one's character and gain complete insight through friendships: the individuals in a character friendship are already virtuous, so they must have self-knowledge, at least to some extent. The idea is not that one develops self-knowledge entirely through friendship, but that self-understanding can be enhanced through character friendships.

The *Magna Moralia* sheds additional light on the process involved here:

> If, then, when one looked upon a friend one could see the nature and
> attributes of the friend, . . . such as to be a second self, at least if you
> make a very great friend, as the saying has it, 'Here is another Hercules,

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a dear other self". Since then it is both a most difficult thing, as some of the sages have said, to attain a knowledge of oneself, and also a most pleasant (for to know oneself is pleasant)—now we are not able to see what we are from ourselves (and that we cannot do so is plain from the way in which we blame others without being aware that we do the same things ourselves; and this is the effect of favour or passion, and there are many of us who are blinded by these things so that we judge not aright); as then when we wish to see our own face, we do so by looking in the mirror, in the same way when we wish to know ourselves we can obtain that knowledge by looking at our friend. For the friend is, as we assert, a second self. If, then, it is pleasant to know oneself, and it is not possible to know this without having some one else for a friend, the self-sufficing man will require friendship in order to know himself (1213a10-26).[10]

From this passage, the relationship between self-knowledge and friendship becomes much clearer, though the exact mechanism remains somewhat vague. Several important insights are gained from this passage.

Aristotle points out the difficulty here with having any sort of objective image of ourselves, and shows our frequent inability to see ourselves in the same light in which we see our friends. Our perspective on ourselves is inherently biased, and we often have a better image of ourselves than we do of others. We have tendencies to criticize characteristics in others that we ourselves have without recognizing them. We may, for example, blame an acquaintance for expecting to receive honors that she doesn't deserve, yet ourselves expect more than we really deserve. Or we may say of someone that she has unrealistic expectations for her success in life given her talents, yet fail to recognize that we also over-estimate our own talents. We may blame our friend for being insensitive to the pains of others, while ourselves failing to recognize

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[10]From the St. G. Stock translation in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, Bollingen Series LXXI-2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

the pain of our friend. Aristotle is surely right that we seem to find it much easier to criticize others than to admit to ourselves our own failings. He attributes this inconsistency on our parts to a certain lack of perspective, going so far as to say that it's impossible to directly contemplate ourselves.

The only way we can gain understanding of ourselves, on the Aristotelian account, is in a round-about way. Even though we can't observe ourselves in any very clear way, we can observe our friends. Then we must take what we learn from observing our friends and apply it to ourselves. By observing my friend's actions, I can gain a greater understanding of my own actions by assuming that his actions are an accurate reflection of mine. The friend serves as a mirror because she is relevantly like ourselves. This is a component of Aristotle's definition of character friendship. When two virtuous people are friends because of their characters, they serve as mirrors to each other.

Part of what enables us to gain insight into our friend is our intimate relationship. A character friend is not someone whom we see only occasionally for drinks and dessert, or whom we talk to frequently just because we happen to work together; a character friend is one chosen for his virtue, for who he is, for himself, and having a character friend is like having a second self. Aristotle even thinks that we should live with our friend. This kind of intimacy breeds an altogether different level of understanding. In living together and spending the majority of their time together, people develop much greater understanding of one another. When we live with someone whom we have chosen for who he or she is, with someone we identify with in the way that Aristotle thinks we identify with our character friends, our ability to

gain self-understanding out of the relationship is greatly increased. This is not only because we gain a better understanding of our friend, but also because our friend gains a better understanding of us.

Aristotle's conception of gaining self-knowledge through friendship is that we observe our friend and recognize that we are like him. But something else also happens when we live with our friend; we also begin to understand how our friend views us, and gain insight into ourselves through the perspective of our friend. When we live with, or even just spend a lot of time with, someone, we learn a great deal about her habits, her desires, and her usual responses to situations. Eventually this knowledge is shared with our friend, either intentionally or unintentionally: the advice we give will illustrate these insights, as will any kind of intimate conversation. Our friend will do the same for us. Thus we can gain insights into ourselves both through our observation of our friend and through our friend's observations of us.

An important issue arises with respect to the kind of self-knowledge that can be gained through character friendships. Character friends are assumed to be virtuous, so it becomes unclear what insights, if any, into our weaknesses are gained from observing our virtuous friends. We are told in the *NE* that "The blessed person decides to observe virtuous actions that are his own," but in the *Magna Moralia* the issue is somewhat more open, for Aristotle says "when one looked upon a friend one could see the nature and attributes of the friend" (1120a2, 1213a10). Yet presumably, even in the *MM* the character one will be observing will be virtuous. If the friend turned out not to be virtuous, then there would be reason to think that one had chosen rather badly and that one ought to reconsider the friendship. Insofar as this view is correct,

what sort of self-knowledge can really be gained here? Surely one could learn to more fully understand one's own virtuous character. By reflecting on a friend's actions and recognizing that the friend is another self, we may begin to have a better understanding of what makes us virtuous and how our virtuous character appears to others. From what Aristotle says, this is probably the primary sort of self-knowledge we could gain through character friendship. But we can get an insight into how we might also learn a little more than this.

The presumption is that in a character friendship, we are talking about two perfectly virtuous persons, but the fact of the matter is that these people are rare or non-existent. Aristotle himself admits that the truly virtuous are few, but that many come close. Now the best friendships are those between two perfectly virtuous people, but it is likely that two mostly virtuous people could have a friendship that approximates character friendship. If we imagine cases that approximate virtue friendship without fully achieving it, it is more likely to be the case not that my friend never does anything that is less than virtuous, but that these occasions are few and far between. If we consider friendships that are similar to character friendships we can acknowledge that we will see much in our friend that is good, but also see weaknesses. In seeing these minor failings in our friend, we may be able to begin to see our own failings. In this way, the picture that Aristotle presents may hold greater possibilities for self-knowledge than he acknowledges.

In this chapter I have discussed both the Socratic and the Aristotelian conceptions of self-knowledge and how self-knowledge develops. In the next chapter, I present a conception of self-knowledge that I think is psychologically realistic and

captures our broadest intuitions about what it is morally important to know about ourselves. The development of the kind of self-knowledge that I endorse builds on central ideas presented in this chapter. The Socratic influence is clear in my claim that self-reflection is a necessary component of self-knowledge, and I expand on Aristotle's claim that character friendship helps to promote self-knowledge by arguing that interpersonal relationships more generally contribute to the development of self-knowledge.

CHAPTER 3

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND REFLECTION

Most of us have an intuitive picture of what someone with great self-knowledge is like and how she differs from someone who lacks it in certain important ways. In addition, we seem to think that self-knowledge is desirable either in and of itself or as a means to some other good, and that having more self-knowledge is better than having less. For example, greater self-knowledge may be what many hope to gain from counseling; the hope is that by working through or learning to identify their problems they will understand themselves, and perhaps others, a little better. The general assumption is that, in one way or another, our lives will be improved by knowing ourselves better. But what, exactly, is self-knowledge? This chapter is an attempt to answer this question; that is, to define self-knowledge. In undertaking this task, I do not assume that the definition I propose is uncontroversial or that all will agree that everything I say accurately reflects our intuitions. Nevertheless, it is my purpose here to present a conception of self-knowledge that does a reasonably good job of capturing our more widespread intuitions and provides some insight into the moral importance of self-knowledge.

In the first section, I present a preliminary definition of self-knowledge, addressing the issue of which features of the self are morally important to know. I argue that self-knowledge requires, most centrally, an understanding of one's character and personality traits constitutive, as well as of occurrent features of the self. The second section addresses the role of self-reflection in self-knowledge. I argue that in

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order to have self-knowledge an individual must take a particular stance toward herself, a reflective stance that involves honesty with oneself and an openness to various possibilities of self-interpretation.

I. The Content of Self-knowledge

Self-knowledge involves a general understanding of the overall tone of our actions, motivations, feelings, values, tendencies, and traits. Most of us have at least a minimal degree of self-knowledge, even though we may fail to know ourselves in a variety of ways. We can describe what we are like more or less accurately; we may know, for instance, whether we are patient or impatient, whether we are good at working with others or work better on our own, and whether family or career is more important to us. Although we surely don't know everything about ourselves, we do know some of our important features and may even have an understanding of which features are most important in making us who we are. We can paint a moderately accurate picture of ourselves and our central traits.

It is tempting to think that if I simply know enough facts about myself I have self-knowledge, but being able to say many true things about myself is not sufficient for self-knowledge.[1] It wouldn't even necessarily be the case that I could be said to have self-knowledge if I had more true beliefs than false beliefs about myself, for these beliefs might be about features that are not particularly important in making me who I am. Similarly, failing to know certain sorts of facts wouldn't in itself undermine self-

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[1] D. W. Hamlyn makes this point by distinguishing between self-knowledge and knowledge about ourselves. See his "Self-knowledge" in *Perception, Learning, and the Self* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 243-247.

knowledge. There are lots of things that we could know about ourselves that are not central to who we are, such that a failure to know them wouldn't defeat our claim to self-knowledge. For example, it doesn't much matter whether or not I know my exact height, weight, eye color, favorite flavor of ice cream, or my favorite color; these facts are not central to who I am.

Self-knowledge requires, most basically, an understanding of our character and personality, which include our fundamental desires and goals, our strengths and weaknesses, our traits, our motives, our evaluative beliefs, our emotions, and our intellectual commitments. Character is, at a first approximation, the entirety of one's enduring moral traits and dispositions.[2] We talk in everyday conversation of people's characters or character traits. We describe people as, for example, generous, stingy, kind, gentle, vindictive, egotistical, or honest. In talking about someone's character, we are not simply describing the state of the person at a particular time. When I describe Ann as kind, the claim is not that she behaved kindly once, but that at the very least she regularly behaves kindly, and we expect her to continue behaving kindly. This sort of talk shows that we believe people have certain traits so that their past behavior is a more or less reliable predictor of their future behavior. That an individual has a particular character, however, does not mean that she can never act in a way that is contrary to her character: uncharacteristic action can be precipitated by unusual

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[2]Joel Kupperman and Lester Hunt both give accounts of character that were very useful to me in working through these issues, as was John Kekes' discussion of character and self-knowledge. Lester Hunt, *Character and Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), chapter 1. Joel Kupperman, *Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), chapters 1 and 2. John Kekes, *Moral Wisdom and Good Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), chapter 6.

circumstances. Further, character can change, usually gradually, but sometimes quite quickly.

We evaluate people in lots of ways, for example, *qua* teacher, researcher, or athlete, in terms not only of their relevant skills or talents, but also their character traits. But when we ask what kind of person someone is, we are usually concerned with that person's character. Everyone has a character of some sort, good or bad, virtuous or vicious, or weak or strong, even if that character is not very well defined.[3] Someone with a weak character is someone who is easily led astray, who seems not to have any particular commitments or tendencies, but simply "goes with the flow." This sort of person isn't lacking a character altogether; rather, her character is weak and therefore unreliable and inconsistent.

Not all of an individual's ingrained tendencies or traits are character traits. Character is made up of those traits that can be properly evaluated in moral terms, such as "virtue" and "vice." But personality traits, which may be partly constitutive of character, are also ingrained. The distinction between personality traits and character traits is not always sharp and clear, but one central difference is that personality traits in themselves are morally neutral. They are morally relevant only with regard to how one handles them. For example, lacking a sense of humor in itself is not morally important. But if a person's lack of a sense of humor leads her to respond to certain situations with bitterness, making her miserable and those around her uncomfortable, then it *is* morally important. The lack of humor influences both her relations with

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[3]Kupperman, 14.

others and her own well-being. Similarly, being disorganized in itself is not morally problematic, yet if it leads one to leave others in the lurch, then it is. Personality traits are also morally relevant insofar as they influence how easy or difficult it is to develop certain virtues. Thus, if one tends to pessimism, one may interpret people's actions uncharitably. This, in turn, makes it difficult to develop virtues like generosity or kindness.

The features that are most central to character are generally the same for all persons; however, which features are of concern may differ somewhat from person to person based on the way a feature develops or connects with an individual's other characteristics. For example, suppose that Sarah's emotional life is well developed, that she has what Daniel Goleman calls "emotional intelligence."[4] She is emotionally mature and understands her emotions. Suppose, on the other hand, that Andrew's emotional life is a source of constant struggle; his emotions seem to take over his life, and he simply cannot get them under control. To Andrew, then, his emotions are of the utmost concern. Sarah and Andrew show different concern for the role of the emotions in their own lives, yet for both the emotions constitute an important part of their character.

There are some ingrained tendencies that, in themselves, have no moral importance at all, for example, the habit of having exactly one cup of coffee every morning, because one enjoys only one cup. This habit of drinking only one cup of coffee may be the result of a certain rigidity, but if so, it is the rigidity that is morally

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[4]Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).

relevant, not the habit of having exactly one cup of coffee each morning. We have

many features like this that are tangential to character at best. One's appearance, for

example, might be a feature of this sort. It is neither a character trait, nor a personality

trait. However, this does not preclude there being individuals for whom these

seemingly unimportant features are quite central to who they are and, thus, to their

sense of self.

For John Merrick, i.e., The Elephant Man, appearance must have been

influential in forming his sense of self in an unusually strong way. His appearance

influenced the conception that others had of him so greatly that it prevented him from

having anything like normal human experiences until late in his life; the vast majority of

his life was spent being on display as a freak of nature. In order to go out in public, he

contrived a costume of a large cape and mask that would, insofar as it was possible,

conceal his appearance so that he could go about his business. His eventual benefactor,

the physician Frederick Treves, describes his first view of Merrick as follows:

> There stood revealed the most disgusting specimen of humanity that I
> have ever seen. In the course of my profession I had come upon
> lamentable deformities of the face due to injury or disease, as well as
> mutilations and contortions of the body depending upon like causes;
> but no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a
> human being as this lone figure displayed.[5]

When a person has gone through life with most people reacting to one as Treves

reacted to Merrick, his appearance becomes a fundamental aspect of his identity.

Merrick's appearance prevented him from having a normal life of any sort, for even his

mother eventually abandoned him. Only Treves and his associates showed any

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[5]From Frederick Treves' essay "The Elephant Man" as reprinted in *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity,* Ashley Montagu (New York: Outerbridge & Dientsfrey, 1971), 15.

kindness to Merrick, and this only late in his short life. As this example illustrates, characteristics that are usually of little importance can take center stage when their influence is so great that they permeate every aspect of an individual's life, including his sense of self. For these individuals, then, knowing these aspects of themselves will be important for self-knowledge.

Self-knowledge, however, requires more than an ability to describe ourselves accurately. An important part of self-knowledge involves being able to recognize how we manifest certain traits or characteristics and when and why we do so. Self-knowledge requires knowing both our general characteristics and being able to understand how these characteristics manifest themselves in particular circumstances.[6] For this reason, understanding the occurrent features of the self is important. The occurrent features of the self may eventually contribute to one's character, or may be the manifestations of already developed character traits. For example, I may accurately believe that I am impatient simply because I have been told so many times by my mother, and her judgment has always been accurate in the past. But knowing this about myself is not very helpful if I can't also recognize those instances in which I am being impatient. Knowing that I am impatient is of little use if I can't recognize that, in rushing you along even though you are already hurrying, I am behaving impatiently. To alter my behavior I must understand how my impatience manifests itself in particular circumstances. Having self-knowledge is partly a matter of understanding the connections in our lives and being able to see our lives as a unity. It

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[6]John Kekes, *The Examined Life* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1992), 116. Also Hamlyn, 245-246.

requires being able to see how the pieces fit together and how particular traits and behaviors contribute to the whole.

Self-knowledge is not an all-or-nothing affair. It's not the sort of thing that you simply have or don't have. Rather, it comes in degrees. In talking about the person with self-knowledge, I am talking of the person who generally exhibits an understanding of herself. This does not preclude her having minor gaps or occasional failings in her self-understanding; that this happens occasionally doesn't defeat her claim to self-knowledge. We will throughout our lives be faced with unexpected situations that may reveal our ignorance about ourselves, but so long as these failings are not the norm, we need not be thought of as lacking self-knowledge. The individual with complete self-knowledge is certainly rare as is the person who knows nothing about herself. The extent to which we have self-knowledge is the extent to which we are able to build a coherent, accurate picture of ourselves. The ability to do this requires a certain reflectiveness, and it is this idea to which I now turn.

II. The Reflective Stance

Self-knowledge is not something that we gain without actively attending to it: it is not a gift bestowed upon us from God, nor will we wake up one day to find that we have miraculously acquired it. Rather, self-knowledge requires reflection about our lives, our characters, and our engagement with the world. It is impossible to have anything more than a very minimal degree of self-knowledge without taking a reflective stance toward oneself. This is one of the important insights that we gain from Socrates' emphasis on self-knowledge and self-examination. Through the use of the

elenchus, he roots out his interlocutors' failure to adequately reflect on their beliefs and the paths that their lives are taking as a result. Socrates' interlocutors illustrate the dangers associated with the failure to engage in self-reflection; their failures demonstrate the practical importance of the examined life.

Not just any kind of thinking about oneself constitutes reflection. Reflection must be of a certain sort in both content and method for it to be of any help in gaining understanding. Intense, careful investigation into the precise number and location of the gray hairs on my head does not constitute the necessary sort of reflection, but neither does trying to learn more about my character through consulting my astrologist. Reflection must involve rational thought, careful attention to the relevant information at hand, and a willingness to see the truth. Self-reflection of the necessary sort involves a willingness to approach oneself and interpret information about oneself honestly, rather than seeing only what one would like to see. This, of course, is not easy to do. Adequate self-reflection requires that we make the most of our opportunities for greater self-understanding—that we do our best to gain self-knowledge. Most people engage in some sort of self-reflection at least some of the time. Our reflection isn't always of the appropriate sort, or undertaken with a commitment to honesty, but some attempt is made, however feeble, at reflection.

Mersault, in Camus' *The Stranger*, is a good example of the flaws that emerge in someone who engages in no reflection at all. [7] Mersault is so removed from himself, so lacking reflection of any sort about himself, that he seems almost to have no

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[7]The idea for this example comes from Kekes, who calls Mersault "dead to himself," *The Examined Life*, 116.

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emotions. He doesn't even seem to understand what it would mean to have emotions. He is so unreflective about his life and what he does, and so lacking in emotion, that he eventually murders a man for apparently no reason whatsoever. Moreover he can't understand why others are surprised at his inability to say why he did so, and it is well into his own trial before he recognizes that the spectators despise him. He has no self-awareness aside from his awareness of his physical desires. Though the novel is told in the first person, it is clear that the description is skewed due to his lack of reflection. Mersault simply cannot recognize that others don't have the same inner life that he does. During his trial he is surprised at how others describe him; others' responses to him are shocking because his view of himself is so antiseptic that he can hardly recognize himself in what is being said about him. Mersault's complete lack of reflection and alienation from his emotional life are so extreme as to make him appear pathological. In this way he shows not only the importance of reflection, but also how much we take a certain amount of reflection for granted. Even those normal individuals who do not seem to be particularly reflective seldom demonstrate such an extreme lack of self-awareness.

Self-reflection is a process sustained throughout our lives; it is not the sort of thing that is undertaken once, and then no longer needed. It is like physical exercise in that one must continue to do it in order to continue reaping the benefits. We can end up with a false view of ourselves if reflection is not an on-going process. Since our identities are dynamic and constantly being modified, even if only slightly, but on rare occasion quite dramatically, our conception of ourselves cannot be static. Without continual self-reflection, we can become so accustomed to seeing ourselves in a certain

light that we fail to recognize that our conception of ourselves is no longer accurate; if we don't attend to it, we may wake up one day and find that we no longer know ourselves. This is the sort of experience that some women report after spending years focused on caring for their husbands and children with little attention paid to their own needs. They realize that they have been concerned about someone else's well-being for so long that they have not even thought about themselves in years. Once the children are grown and out of the house, these women may experience having to rediscover themselves.

Self-reflection can, of course, be taken to extremes such that one becomes brooding and self-absorbed. An individual can be so concerned with self-reflection that she loses touch with the outside world and her life loses its richness. Self-reflection cannot be a substitute for active engagement with the world. For instance, reflecting about the source of one's depression is useful, but it cannot enable one to overcome the depression without attempts to change one's behavior and outlook on life.

The emphasis on reflection makes it easy to assume that we have a privileged insight into ourselves, and in some ways we do. Usually we are in the best position to know what we feel, what our greatest fears and triumphs are, and what is most important to us. We are the only ones with access to the inner dialogue that occurs throughout our lives; thus, we have more evidence to go on in learning to know ourselves than anybody else. However, there are many psychological obstacles to self-knowledge, such as fear, self-deception, repression, and willful ignorance. It may even be the case that some of these psychological obstacles cannot be overcome, at least not on our own. Self-reflection is not an altogether objective process: our self-

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reflection is often shot through with bias. We seldom view ourselves in a neutral manner, i.e., without evaluating ourselves in some way,[8] yet we cannot be sure that our evaluations are reasonable. For some of us, the tendency is to continually over-estimate ourselves, to have too charitable a view of ourselves, to be more critical of others than we are of ourselves. For others, the tendency is to err in the opposite direction, tending to be our own worst critics, continually underestimating our worth and abilities. Since we are often unable to see our lives from an unbiased perspective, others sometimes see the truth about us long before we see it ourselves.

Imagine a young woman who has devoted much of her life to studying music. Her entire youth has been spent diligently practicing; she has sacrificed many other opportunities in order to further her musical career. But as time goes on it becomes clear to her teachers and parents that she simply doesn't have the talent to be in a major orchestra. Though she has the desire and the drive, the talent simply isn't there. She, however, cannot see this, at least not yet. Initially, it is easy enough for her to find other explanations for her failure to have a successful audition: perhaps she had a bad day, or the committee didn't request those orchestral excerpts that best display her talent, or they were looking for someone with a different musical style. Eventually, however, the explanations run out, and it gets more difficult to maintain the belief that she is talented enough to get into a major orchestra when she is repeatedly cut from auditions early on. The truth about her is obvious to others long before it becomes obvious to her.

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[8]Kekes, *The Examined Life*, 117-120.

How, then, can we know ourselves if our own self-reflection is biased? This is where others can play a role. Our own thoughts and feelings are not the only evidence we have in reflecting on ourselves. Much insight into ourselves can be gained through our interpersonal relationships, which influence our ability for self-reflection in important ways. Adequate self-reflection requires not only becoming aware of the inner workings of our own minds, but also being in tune with others' attitudes and responses towards us, as well as others' insights into our character. The best sort of self-reflection is not an entirely solitary endeavor.

Self-reflection may be improved through our relationships with others in a variety of ways. Day to day interaction with others gives us countless opportunities for insight into ourselves. For example, what might indicate that the comment we made was out of place is someone else's gasp at our statement. We may be able to recognize our own mistake in part because we have seen others make similar mistakes. We can see that our comment has elicited the same sort of response as someone else's social gaffe. Or, recognizing that people tend to shy away at our attempts at making physical contact with them may enable us to recognize that we are being insensitive about others' needs for greater personal space. We can take the evidence we glean through social interaction as part of the information that our self-reflection must take into account. If our reflection is of the appropriate sort, the conclusions we draw about ourselves will be the result not only of our own views about ourselves, but also those of others.

Healthy, intimate relationships hold the potential for even greater insights. Casual acquaintances are likely to have a rather one-sided interpretation of us, for they

have insight into only our public dimensions. They might not know, for example, many of the ways in which our behavior conflicts with our professed desires. Intimates, however, have more evidence about us because of both the wider variety of circumstances in which they see us and the greater degree of openness in the relationships. In intimate relationships we have a greater commitment to each other's well-being, making it more likely that we will strive to be honest with one another, and that any insights provided will be in the spirit of enhancing each other's well-being. We may be unsure of the motives of casual acquaintances, but those with whom we are intimate have already expressed their ongoing concern for our well-being, making their judgments more reliable.

Intimate relationships are often based on a sense of identification and mutual respect between two parties. Taking this to be true of intimate relationships does not require accepting the stronger Aristotelian view that an intimate friend is another virtuous self. We can have intimate friends who are very different from us, with different goals and priorities and even different moral strengths and weaknesses; however, it is unlikely that a generally good person would be friends with a bad person. Intimate relationships are often grounded in common experiences, and intimacy in relationships is maintained through a shared life. With our intimates we discuss many details of our everyday lives, including our desires, beliefs, worries, and dreams. Through conversation, an intimate friend may see things in me long before I can see them in myself. An intimate friend, through observing my behavior and talking with me, may be able to see that I am in love with my new neighbor or the shortcomings of a new love relationship long before I do.

Sometimes the insights of others can surprise us. Thus, for example, I have been surprised by my mother's insights numerous times. Apparently, I remind her very much of herself at my age. I respond to things in much the same way, my commitments are much the same. But, on occasion, I have been surprised to hear her say this and then describe what she was like. She will say, "You remind me so much of myself at your age, I was . . . ." In a roundabout way, my mother simply tells me what I am like, providing me with an insight into myself that I may not have had. Sometimes the insight is one I enjoy and sometimes it is one I would rather not have. It is not necessarily the case that I take everything she says at face value, but often what she says helps me understand myself better by showing me aspects of myself I have failed to see. Her insights into me make my own self-reflection more accurate.

Of course, it is not always the case that others should be believed, for taking the word of our enemies about our character is usually none too wise. In some cases, our enemies may have important insights into us, but their untrustworthiness may lead us to dismiss them even when we shouldn't. They may try to undermine our self-confidence by leading us to believe that we have failed in some way, or they may try to lead us astray by undermining our courage. In order for our interpersonal relationships to contribute to our self-knowledge, it is important to choose trustworthy friends. But, since it is sometimes unclear whose interpretation of us is accurate, self-understanding requires critical self-reflection on others' interpretations. The ability to do this requires a certain amount of self-trust. It is necessary to be open to rival interpretations of ourselves, but if we are careful and critical in our assessment of the evidence, we can trust our own judgment. The individual who never trusts her

own judgment will end up with a self-conception that is entirely defined by the views of others. Relying only on the views of others results in as biased a conception of the self as does ignoring their views. We can be most confident that our self-reflection has led to the truth, or at least a close approximation of the truth, if our considered judgments correspond to those of reliable others who have our best interests in mind.

Ideally, through self-reflection we gain understanding of both our actual and ideal selves. Thus far I have talked predominantly about knowing who one actually is, the character one currently possesses, the values that guide one's life, and the commitments one holds dear. An understanding of one's ideal self and the extent to which one's actual self approximates that ideal is also important for self-knowledge. By ideal self, I mean simply a person's conception of the sort of person he would like to be, including the values he wants to guide his life, and the characteristics and commitments he would like to have. This ideal self isn't a fantasy self; it is a standard that we hold for ourselves of the sort of person that we strive to be. For some, the ideal may be clearly thought out and systematic; for others, it may simply be a vague notion of where they are headed. If my conception of my ideal self is especially rich, there may be several specific characteristics that I am concerned to improve upon; however, if my ideal is less vividly conceived, I may know only that I want to be morally better than I am, even if I am not altogether sure what this would consist in. There may be a greater or lesser correspondence between our conception of our ideal selves and our actual selves: our actual commitments and characteristics may be precisely what we would like them to be, or they may diverge radically from our ideal.

An individual's ideals need not be morally good ideals. In fact, a person could have a perfectly bad ideal; for example, she could make it her ideal to be utterly devious and deceitful, to be the perfect criminal. The conception of the ideal self may be complex. Someone might want to have a variety of characteristics all of which together form an ideal image of herself. She might, for example, want to become the sort of person who takes delight in intellectual pleasures and values intellectually challenging pursuits, is a good parent and spouse, is charitable and patient, as well as gracious and refined. These are not incompatible, they simply reflect different aspects of her life; she may evaluate herself in terms of any of them.[9] How her ideal self is conceived will, nonetheless, influence her self-assessment.

It is, in part, through self-reflection that we can begin to understand our actual self, our ideal self, and the extent to which they correspond. The evaluative aspect of self-reflection involves a comparison of the two; the conception of our ideal provides the framework for evaluating our actual self by determining the standard to which we hold ourselves. For example, it is possible for a person to be too hard on himself because he drastically underestimates the extent to which he actually does approximate his ideal, but the same result could come from having ideals that are wildly unrealistic, ideals that no one could live up to. Similarly, he could have an inflated conception of himself either because he over-estimates the extent to which he approximates his ideal, or because his ideal demands too little of him.

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[9]For a fruitful discussion of the variety of perspectives from which one could engage in self-evaluation see Owen Flanagan, "Identity and Reflection" in *Self Expressions: Mind, Morals, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

The purpose of this chapter has been to make more explicit our intuitive understanding of self-knowledge and the sort of reflection required for it. It is now possible to say more explicitly what this consists in. A paradigm case of an individual with great self-knowledge would be someone who knows her actual self, her ideal self, and understands the extent to which her actual self is an approximation of her ideal self. She has both an accurate conception of what she is really like and also has a realistic ideal that she strives toward. For example, she knows that she is generous and temperate, and understands how these traits manifest themselves in particular circumstances, but also knows that she tends to anger easily and that she is rather gullible. She knows that she would like to become more patient and less inclined to outbursts of anger and that she would like to be less gullible and more able to trust her own judgment. She also understands the extent to which her actual self approximates her ideal self, and accurately assesses how great the distance is to her ideal self. In addition, she continues to engage in evaluative self-reflection so that her conception of herself, both actual and ideal, remains accurate and perceptive.

Nothing I have said here suggests that self-reflection will necessarily lead us to the truth, much less to moral perfection. But the best kind of reflection, viz., reflection that is undertaken with an open mind and a commitment to the truth, to honesty about ourselves, and to rational thinking, holds the greatest possibilities. For most of us, however, reflection is at least one step removed from the ideal, but we must continually strive to engage in the best sort of reflection possible if there is to be any hope of gaining self-knowledge. Self-knowledge and the evaluative self-reflection required for it come in degrees. Probably no one has complete self-knowledge or

engages in perfect self-reflection; it is also seldom the case that one completely lacks

self-knowledge or engages in no self-reflection whatsoever. The more common

occurrence is to have a less than perfect degree of self-knowledge and to engage in less

than perfect self-reflection.

CHAPTER 4

AN ARISTOTELIAN THEORY OF VIRTUE

In this chapter, I explicate and defend a plausible and psychologically realistic conception of virtue, using Aristotle as a starting point. Aristotle provides us with a definition of virtue at *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b15-25, where he tells us that virtue is a state of character that involves characteristically or habitually acting, thinking, and feeling in the right ways at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, and for the right end. Aristotle distinguishes between virtues of character, such as temperance, generosity, and courage, and intellectual virtues, such as practical wisdom, comprehension, and theoretical wisdom. Full moral virtue includes not only the virtues of character, but also the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom (*NE* 1144b30).[1]

There are three features of this general conception of virtue that I wish to consider here: the role of the emotions in virtue, the concept of practical wisdom, and the idea of virtues as character traits. In section I, I argue that, contrary to the widely-held Kantian view, the emotions are central to the virtues of character. In section II, I address the nature of practical wisdom and discuss its importance for moral

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[1] All references in this chapter to Aristotelian text are to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985).

deliberation and full moral virtue. In section III, I argue that virtues are traits of character that are distinct from temperamental traits, habits, and skills.

I. Virtue and the Emotions

A central component of the Aristotelian conception of virtue is the claim that virtue is not only a certain sort of action. Virtues involve dispositions to act in the right sorts of ways as well as dispositions to have the right sorts of feelings and deliberatively aim at the right sorts of ends. It is not enough to act like the virtuous person, i.e., with the same aim, we must also act with the right feelings. This is what distinguishes the virtuous individual from one who is merely continent. The continent person knows the good and generally acts accordingly, but undergoes an internal struggle in doing so. She has trained herself to deliberate and act rightly, but not to feel the right things. In acting rightly, she must fight inclinations or passions that threaten to lead her astray. In contrast, the virtuous person not only deliberates and acts rightly, but also feels rightly. His action flows easily from a good and stable character. Thus, the virtuous person experiences a more unified inner life.

It is tempting to dismiss the notion that the virtuous person is any better than the continent person. There is a nagging intuition that it is enough simply to do the right thing for the right reasons, even if it is a struggle, and to dismiss as suspect the view that the emotions play any role in virtue. Part of our discomfort with making the emotions an important part of the moral life stems from the Kantian tradition. Kant mistrusts the emotions as guides to action, because he thinks that the emotions

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themselves have no moral worth and are beyond our control. Further, he believes that the emotions are unreliable and can also lead us astray.

Consider the following passage from the *Groundwork*:

> To help others where one can is a duty, and besides this there are many spirits of so sympathetic a temper that, without any further motive of vanity or self-interest, they find an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them and can take delight in the contentment of others as their own work. Yet I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, has still not genuinely moral worth. It stands on the same footing as other inclinations—for example, the inclination for honour, which if fortunate enough to hit on something beneficial and right and consequently honourable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem; for its maxim lacks moral content, namely, the performance of such action, not from inclination, but from duty. Suppose then that the mind of this friend of man were overclouded by sorrows of his own which extinguished all sympathy with the fate of others, but that he still had power to help those in distress, though no longer stirred by the need of others because sufficiently occupied with his own, and suppose that, when no longer moved by any inclination, he tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination for the sake of duty alone; then for the first time his action has its genuine moral worth.[2]

Here we find Kant considering two possible scenarios. In each the man in question performs the right action, but in the first case, his motive for action is inclination, and in the second the man acts solely out of duty, which is contrary to his inclinations. Kant here is making the point that it is only motivation from duty that has any moral worth. For Kant, right feelings do not add to moral worth, as they do for Aristotle,

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[2]Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 66.

they simply make it harder to determine whether our motives are good. Kant thinks of the realm of reason as altogether distinct from the realm of the emotions; reason is part of the noumenal world whereas the inclinations are part of the sensible world and, thus, the feelings we feel are independent of our control. The inclinations simply come over us without our doing, although reason allows us to choose whether or not we will act upon our inclinations.

Virtue, for Kant amounts to moral strength or fortitude: "Now the capacity and considered resolve to withstand a strong but unjust opponent is *fortitude* (*fortitudo*) and, with respect to what opposes the moral disposition *within us*, **virtue** (*virtus, fortitude moralis*)."[3] This internal opponent is inclination. Virtue, then, becomes a matter of overpowering our inclinations, rather than a trait involving the right inclinations: "Virtue is the strength of man's maxims in fulfilling his duty. Strength of any kind can be recognized only by the obstacles it can overcome, and in the case of virtue these obstacles are natural inclinations, which can come into conflict with man's moral resolution . . . ."[4] Moral strength is not something that one develops and can then rely upon, for Kant thinks of each individual decision as unaffected by prior decisions. This is contrasted with the Aristotelian view in which virtue is acquired through habituation so that it eventually becomes easier to act virtuously, and

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[3] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 186.
[4] Ibid., 197.

virtuous actions will eventually flow from a strong and stable character. For Kant,

each sin is an original sin, and our actions do not build upon one another so that we can

begin to rely on our character to guide us. Misdeeds are attributable only to the here

and now, for each action is thought of as independent of all the others. It is always

open to us, regardless of our former actions, to act according to reason. He tells us:

> In the search for the rational origin of evil actions, every such action
> must be regarded as though the individual had fallen into it directly
> from a state of innocence. For whatever his previous department may
> have been, whatever natural causes may have been influencing him,
> and whether these causes were to be found within him or outside him,
> his action is yet free and determined by none of these causes; hence it
> can and must always be judged as an *original* use of his will. He
> should have refrained from that action, whatever his temporal
> circumstances and entanglements; for through no cause in the world
> can he cease to be a freely acting being.[5]

Some authors have challenged the standard interpretation of Kant's view of the

emotions, arguing that he leaves a greater role for the emotions than usually

acknowledged.[6] There are passages in which Kant argues that it is in our best interests

to cultivate the right emotions insofar as that is possible, for feeling rightly may make

it easier to act rightly. He says, for example,

> But while it is not in itself a duty to share the sufferings (as well as the
> joys) of others, it is a duty to sympathize actively in their fate; and to
> this end it is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate
> natural (aesthetic . . .) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so
> many means to sympathy based on moral principle and the feeling

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[5]Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated with an introduction and notes by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row; Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 36.

[6]One well-known proponent of such a view is Nancy Sherman. See, for example, "The Place of Emotions in Kantian Morality," in *Identity, Character, and Morality*, ed. Owen Flanagan and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Cambridge: MIT Press, A Bradford Book, 1990), 149-170.

appropriate to them. It is therefore a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sick-rooms or debtors' prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist. For this is still one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone would not accomplish. [7]

However, for Kant the emotions are more like the icing on the cake of a good will rather than an essential aspect of a good will:

> Some qualities are even helpful to this good will itself and can make its task very much easier. They have none the less no inner unconditioned worth, but rather presuppose a good will which sets a limit to the esteem in which they are rightly held and does not permit us to regard them as absolutely good. Moderation in affections and passions, self-control, and sober reflexion are not only good in many respects: they may even seem to constitute part of the inner worth of a person. Yet they are far from being properly described as good without qualification . . . .[8]

Always acting from the moral law is sufficient to be virtuous; this virtue is simply made more appealing (almost in an aesthetic sense) by the proper emotions. For Aristotle, the right emotions are a central part of virtue.

One important consideration for Kant is whether or not we could really act rightly without feeling rightly. Nancy Sherman points out that the action done without the corresponding feeling will have a different tone than the action done with the right feeling.[9] For example, suppose I can see that you need help and know I ought to help you, but am not really inclined to do so. I may be able to go through all the

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[7]Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 250-251.
[8]Kant, *Groundwork*, 61.
[9]Sherman, 150-151.

motions of providing you with the assistance you need, but the nature of my action will not be the same as it would have been had I also felt an emotional desire to help you. Suppose that the assistance in question is a matter of consoling you on the loss of a loved one. If I feel no sympathy for you, then my action is likely to seem artificial or contrived, my words merely "saying the right thing" without actually feeling it. On the other hand, if part of what motivates me to console you is my honest sympathy for you, then my words and actions will be more genuine and thus more caring. Surely there are people who are better at hiding their emotions than others, or those who are better at controlling their feelings, or those who are better at acting even when their feelings are of no assistance. Yet we can often tell when someone truly cares and when someone is trying to be interested simply because she knows that she should; the depth of feeling comes through in action and expression even when no extra attempt is made to convey it.

But what if someone is a good actor and always appears sincere regardless of her real feelings? This would still not be sufficient, because how someone feels about an action tells us something about what kind of person she is independent of what she does.[10] Suppose that someone must convey very bad news to you. If she secretly takes delight in witnessing your pain, even though she tries to appear concerned, it is a moral strike against her. The moral expectation is that she actually feel concern; it

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[10]Ibid.

says something about her if she is unable to have such fellow feeling. Even if she

recognizes that she should feel concern and fails to do so, we wonder about her true

nature. Similarly, we wonder about the moral makeup of someone who fails to be

horrified by certain events. If a person isn't mortified by the actions of the Nazis, this

says something about what kind of person she is, even if she wouldn't engage in

similar actions and berates those who would. People who don't respond to the pain of

others with empathy, regardless of their actions, are thought to be lacking morally.

Character becomes virtually one-dimensional if the emotional component is missing,

making people seem more like automatons than human beings.

That it is important to feel rightly and not just to act rightly is demonstrated by

the fact that many of us want the help of another only if the help is given with the

right feeling. We don't want someone to have to force himself to be kind to us. We are

inclined to feel somewhat less pleased about accepting help or sympathy or support if

we learn that it is not accompanied by the proper desires. Michael Stocker's example

of friend visiting in the hospital illustrates this:

> [S]uppose you are in a hospital, recovering from a long illness. You are
> very bored and restless and at loose ends when Smith comes in once
> again. You are now convinced more than ever that he is a fine fellow
> and a real friend—taking so much time to cheer you up, traveling all the
> way across town, and so on. You are so effusive with your praise and
> thanks that he protests that he always tries to do what he thinks is his
> duty, what he thinks will be best. You at first think he is engaging in a
> polite form of self-deprecation, relieving the moral burden. But the
> more you two speak, the more clear it becomes that he was telling the
> literal truth: that it is not essentially because of you that he came to see
> you, not because you are friends, but because he thought it his duty,
> perhaps as a fellow Christian or Communist or whatever, or simply

because he knows of no one more in need of cheering up and no one easier to cheer up.[11]

We want those around us to do things for us because they want to, and because they feel rightly about it, not because they have convinced themselves to. It strikes us as better that our friend help us gladly and willingly than that our friend merely do his duty.

In addition, the emotions themselves can help us determine the right action. Through our emotions, we may recognize that a situation demands action, and the emotions may even inform us about the particular response required. It may be our sympathetic tendencies that lead us to recognize a friend (or even a stranger) in need, and empathy may help us know how to respond to that need. Sometimes our emotions can even lead us in the right direction when we have reasoned badly or learned bad moral principles. We have all experienced situations in which something just "feels" right. We may reason through to one conclusion yet have emotional responses that lead us to another. This latter is what happens to Huck Finn when he chooses to help Jim escape.[12] Even though the principles he has been taught tell him to turn Jim in, his emotions lead him to the right action.

Much of the Kantian concern is with situations in which the emotions lead us to do things that are contrary to reason or duty. Our out-of-control emotions may lead

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[11]Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," in *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987), 42.
[12]Jonathan Bennett, "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn," *Philosophy* 49 (1974): 123-143. Bennett argues that Huck gives up on principles altogether.

us to be too sympathetic to a criminal thus failing to demand justice, or our compassion for a student who has worked hard, though who has not performed up to par, may lead us to give a higher grade than is deserved. Perhaps the even more troubling cases are those in which our desire for vengeance leads us to convict an innocent person because it prevents us from seeing the truth, or our dislike for a particular student leads us to be unduly harsh in grading. But it is important to note that the virtuous person is one in whom reason and the emotions are in harmony.

Some resistance may remain to giving the emotions much moral weight because we think, rightly, that the person who does the right thing even though he does not feel rightly about it has done something praiseworthy. Further, we worry that in saying that the individual who feels rightly is better than the one who struggles we are discounting or underestimating the moral effort of the one who overcomes the struggle. We want to give credit for effort. But in saying that the person who feels rightly is better, we need not discount the effort of the person who has managed to do the right thing. We can acknowledge that it is the right thing, and that that matters. Moreover, we may praise the person's moral strength if he has managed to act contrary to his inclinations. Strength of will is praiseworthy and the person who has it should feel a certain pride. But given the choice, most of us would want not only to have the moral strength to do as we choose, we would also want to feel rightly. In Aristotelian terms, we would choose to be virtuous and not just continent.

A comparison may help make the issue clearer. Consider the case of Mozart and Salieri as presented in the movie *Amadeus*. The story is told through the eyes of Salieri, who is a competent composer. Some of his works remain, and they are fine compositions, but not of the awe-inspiring quality of Mozart's compositions. In the film, Salieri is overcome by vengeful feelings because Mozart has gotten such rave reviews and the status that goes along with them. Moreover, composing seems to come very easily to Mozart. In one scene, Salieri has written a composition in honor of Mozart's arrival at court. Upon arriving, Mozart plays the composition, and then quickly improves upon it, adding flourishes and small changes that bring an otherwise simple little piece to life. Mozart is more inspired, has a more creative mind, and possesses a feeling for what is pleasing in music that Salieri simply lacks. Salieri may in fact work harder at, and be more diligent in, composing than Mozart, but Mozart is still the superior composer.

Any teacher can bring to mind similar examples. One student may work incredibly hard to write a good essay, and another turns in better quality work with seemingly no effort whatsoever. We are proud of the first student's accomplishment, and even praise her hard work, but must still acknowledge that the second student has accomplished more, and has greater potential especially if she chooses to work hard as well. Hard work usually pays off and is often praise-worthy, but is not a substitute for achievement. In the ideal case, the two go together.

What these examples show with relation to the continent person is that effort matters, but effort alone is not everything. We praise the students who work hard, because hard work is important, but in the end we know that hard work without achievement will not be enough for success. We still grade our students based upon the work they have produced. Working hard made Salieri a good composer, but was not enough to make him the best composer. Regardless of whether or not composing comes easily to Mozart, people still flock to concerts to hear his works because he is an outstanding composer. But somehow or another when the subject shifts to character or moral virtue, we want to change our standards. I think this is because we think that in saying one person is better, we are discounting the value of the other person. However, in acknowledging that the person who feels rightly really is the better person, we do not undermine the value of moral strength.

One final concern with the Aristotelian picture may come down to a question of whether our emotions come over us without our control or whether they can be learned. Recent psychological evidence suggests that in fact we can be led to feel rightly.[13] What is most noteworthy is that children can be taught to feel empathy for one another. Some children seem to feel it naturally, but for those who don't intervention is possible. Children who can learn to see things from another's perspective are less likely to be violent or insensitive to the needs of others. They can

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[13]Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).

learn to have better emotional responses to situations. Helping them to develop these skills is sometimes as easy as teaching them to put themselves in the other's position. It helps them to imagine how they would feel in the other person's shoes or as the recipient of their own actions. Imagining their own feelings in that position helps them to gain empathy for others. This shows that at least certain emotions can be cultivated through fairly simple tasks. For adults to train their own emotions may be somewhat more difficult because the groundwork for contrary feelings has already been laid, but these studies indicate that the task can be accomplished.

In this section I have argued for the Aristotelian claim that virtue requires not only acting rightly, but also feeling rightly. I addressed several standard concerns with such a view, namely, that it should be morally sufficient to act rightly for the right reasons, that requiring feeling rightly as part of virtuous action discounts the value of moral fortitude, and that the emotions are not be within our control. I argued that the emotions are important for virtuous action because they help us to identify cases in which virtuous action is required as well as help to guide our actions. Further, I maintained that even though it is better to feel rightly, right action from moral fortitude is still praise-worthy. Finally, I presented psychological evidence for the claim that the emotions can, in fact, be controlled. In the next section I address the importance of practical wisdom for moral virtue.

II. The Importance of Practical Wisdom

Practical wisdom (*phronesis*), on the Aristotelian account, is a fundamental part of virtue. Full moral virtue includes both the virtues of character, such as temperance, generosity, and courage, and the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom. As Aristotle states at 1144b30: "we cannot be fully good without practical wisdom, or practically wise without virtue of character." Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom implies the kind of understanding, both at the general and specific levels, necessary for virtue and helps to explain why the virtue of courage is more than just boldness. In addition, the person with practical wisdom helps us to recognize what virtue requires.

Practical wisdom implies an understanding of human life in general, as well as the ability to respond appropriately in particular situations. It may be easiest to grasp what is meant by practical wisdom with an example. The following story about Sojourner Truth illustrates the sort of understanding and ability to respond to a situation that is thought to be characteristic of the person with practical wisdom:

> After her first few months in Northampton, she went to one of the association's camp meetings, held in a large, tent-dotted field. The services were interrupted when a crowd of noisy young men appeared, clearly intent on disrupting the proceedings and perhaps doing some violence. The leaders of the meeting urged them to leave and finally threatened them with the police. On hearing this, the rowdy men became incensed and shouted that they would burn down the tents and cause other damage. . . .
> Alone, for none of the others would face the mob of young men, Sojourner walked to the top of a small hill on the meeting ground and began to sing. Her deep, melodious voice carried far, and the troublemakers turned and ran toward her as if to pull her down and

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silence her. As they approached, she stopped singing and asked them: "Why do you come about me with clubs and sticks? I am not doing any harm to any one." Disarmed by her tranquillity, they answered that they would not hurt her: "We came to hear you sing. Sing to us, old woman. Talk to us, old woman. Tell us your experience."

Surrounded by the roughnecks, Sojourner spoke to them and answered their questions. She even made them laugh. And they evidently enjoyed her singing, for they threatened bodily harm to anyone who might interrupt her. Finally she stopped and said to them: "Children, I have talked and sung to you, as you asked me; and now I have a request to make of you: will you grant it?" They assured her of their good will, and she asked them to leave in peace after she sang just one more song. True to their word, the men dispersed after hearing her sing, silently and without further trouble.[14]

This brief story illustrates that practical wisdom requires a variety of characteristics, experiences, and skills that come together to make up the kind of intuitive understanding displayed by Sojourner Truth. Practical wisdom doesn't demand intellectualism about life, but rather an understanding that comes through intellectual understanding, as well as through the emotions, and involves the ability to pick out the salient features of a situation. Practical wisdom also requires an understanding of the good human life at a more general level.

Practical wisdom is an understanding of the best way for a human being to live of what is important and unimportant in life, and the means to those ends. [15] For example, practical wisdom may enable me to know that good character is more

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[14]Victoria Ortiz, *Sojourner Truth, A Self-Made Woman* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1974), 52-53.

[15]Explaining what makes a human life good would be well beyond the scope of my discussion here. For my purposes it will be sufficient to rely on widely accepted intuitions regarding what lives are good lives. For example, I will assume that a life of crime is not productive of the best kind of human life, but will not endeavor to explain exactly what would be required for the best kind of life. It is worth noting that I am then not committed to the claim that virtue will necessarily contribute to

important than a good reputation. But practical wisdom is not simply knowledge of these things, it is also the ability to put this knowledge into practice. It is the ability to reason about how to live, and to be motivated to act accordingly. An important part of practical wisdom is having the ability to discern the relevant particulars in any situation, e.g., distinguishing between actions that are right and actions that will serve only to enhance my reputation. If I know that good character is more important than a good reputation, yet choose actions based upon what will further my good reputation, then I do not have practical wisdom.

The person of practical wisdom (the *phronimos*) not only has perceptive abilities and understands the best kind of human life and acts toward gaining it, he also serves as a model for others when they are unsure what virtue requires. When in doubt about how to respond to an unfamiliar situation, we can ask what the *phronimos* would do. This, rather than some rule, apprises us of the virtuous action. It may seem strange that one who didn't know what to do would know what the *phronimos* would do. But role models, both actual and fictitious, serve this purpose. We all have some understanding of which other people, either historical persons or public figures, are virtuous and can imagine how they might handle the situation in question. All of this makes it sound very much like all virtuous people are the same and that virtue and practical wisdom manifest themselves exactly the same way in

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happiness. I do believe that those who are virtuous are more likely to be happy, but this doesn't imply that there is any necessary connection between virtue and happiness.

every individual. This isn't so. Just as there are many possible answers to an essay examination that may deserve the grade "A," there are many sorts of people who can properly be called "virtuous." What the "A" essays have in common is that in each the writer demonstrates a high level of understanding of the material in question. What all virtuous individuals have in common is a high level of understanding of what is good and how to achieve it. However, the virtues may manifest themselves in different ways or take on a different tone depending on a person's temperament, personality, habits, and interests.

In addition, the fact that practical wisdom determines the standard for virtuous action does not imply that in every situation there is only one possible virtuous action that the person with practical wisdom will do. Some situations can be approached in a variety of ways, all of which would be morally acceptable. The way a virtuous person approaches the situation will depend upon the situation itself as well the particular features of the individual's character or personality that influence the situation or the available options. Moreover, there are some situations in which no decision is a good one. It is not necessarily a failure of practical wisdom if one is faced with a situation in which no choice seems a good one. This is simply a fact about the moral life.[16] Any number of examples come to mind. When faced with the decision whether or not to turn off life-support machines for a loved one, either choice may seem wrong, and it

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[16]Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 223-226.

is not clear that every virtuous person would make the same decision or even that for any virtuous person the decision would be obvious or easy. So acting wisely and virtuously does not amount to rigid rule-following.

Defining virtue partly in terms of practical wisdom implies that virtues must be directed at good ends. Through practical wisdom, we gain an understanding of what is important and unimportant in human life and the perceptive abilities to help us live accordingly. We learn this partly through the example set by the *phronimos*. The *phronimos* provides a guide for our actions, and in each case we should be able to determine what the *phronimos* would do, knowing that his actions would be both virtuous and illustrative of what is most important in life. On this account, actions that have bad ends could not be considered virtuous, regardless of the individual's intentions or motivations. Since practical wisdom and virtue go hand in hand, if the action does not display practical wisdom, it also cannot display virtue. So, for example, acting boldly for unjust ends does not amount to courage, for practical wisdom dictates that unjust ends are contrary to what is important in a human life and thus cannot be constitutive of virtue.

This, however, is not the most commonly held position among contemporary virtue theorists. Foot and Trianosky, for example, maintain that virtues can be displayed in bad actions, arguing that it makes sense to talk about such ideas as honor among thieves. Here I examine their claims, and show to what degree my position differs from theirs.

Foot and Trianosky argue that the thief (or according to Trianosky, the Nazi) shows courage in his action, even if it does not function as a virtue in him.[17] On this view, traits such as courage have a certain worth regardless of the setting in which they arise. This does not mean that we should praise the thief for his courage or even encourage its further development, but only that the thief has a trait which is a good trait even if it doesn't function well in him. The courage of the thief has the potential to be good if put to the right ends.[18] Virtues, then, are thought of as potentialities, regardless of whether they really function in the good ways they could. Words like "courage" name human traits in respect of a certain power, like "corrosive" or "explosive."[19] Gunpowder, for example, is an explosive even if it fails to explode once the keg has gotten wet. Its being an explosive is not dependent upon its actually exploding, but is dependent only on its potential to explode.[20] The virtues, on this view, are thought of in much the same way. The virtues are traits that have the potential to produce virtuous actions, but don't necessarily do so in all circumstances.[21] But just as the gunpowder still remains an explosive even if it fails to explode, so courage remains a virtue even if it fails to produce good action.

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[17]Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 14-18.
Gregory W. Trianosky, "Virtue, Action, and the Good Life: Toward a Theory of the Virtues," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 68 (1987): 130-134.
The view is originally attributed to Foot, though Trianosky endorses the view and gives additional explanation of the position that is rather useful.
[18]Trianosky, 132.
[19]Foot, 16.
[20]Trianosky,132-133.
[21]Foot, 16.

Foot suggests two possible interpretations of this analogy.[22] It may be interpreted so as to refer to an individual in whom courage fails to operate as a virtue in some particular circumstance, even though it doesn't usually fail in this particular agent. Consider, for example, a usually courageous man who steals a valuable piece of art under dangerous circumstances. Given this analogy, the proper interpretation of this case is that the man has the virtue of courage even though his courage fails to operate as a virtue in the committing of this robbery, for in other circumstances, his courage may be put to many good uses so that it makes sense to say that he is courageous. The analogy may also be used to refer to someone in whom courage generally fails to act as a virtue: for example, someone may be both wicked and courageous, so that his courage has a systematic connection with bad action. In this second case, the man has a virtue that fails to act as a virtue in him.

The first understanding of this analogy, namely that a person may have a virtue that fails to function as a virtue in particular circumstances, is not particularly problematic for my view. When otherwise virtuous people fail to act virtuously, they simply demonstrate a failure of the virtue in question. This doesn't necessarily undermine their claim to virtue, for the morally perfect are few and far between. Being mostly good is usually enough to allow one to be called 'virtuous.' The action in question just wouldn't be an action that exhibited a virtue, even if the agent performs many actions that do exhibit virtue. Just as wet gunpowder doesn't actualize its

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[22]Ibid., 16-17.

explosive properties when it fails to explode, so the courageous man is not expressing

courage when he steals. At best, his action expresses boldness, which has different

moral qualities in service of bad ends than in service of good ends. Similarly,

gunpowder has different properties once it is wet and no longer explosive than it does

when it is dry.

One particularly horrendous failure might make one wonder about the degree of

virtue possessed by the agent. In the case of a horrendous failure, we may say that the

agent previously demonstrated virtue, but given the horrendous action in question can

no longer be said to possess virtue. We needn't conclude that the agent never

possessed virtue, but only that this virtue may no longer be present. Ray presents an

example designed to illustrate just this point. Prior to his capture by Nazis, "a Polish

judge has been a model citizen and a pillar of justice. But when he finds himself in a

Nazi concentration camp, he tortures fellow prisoners to save his own skin."[23]

Supposing that the judge had previously served conscientiously and out of a true love

of justice, we wouldn't say that he never had the virtue of justice, but only that his

virtue was not strong enough to survive such extreme conditions. Someone who had

the same previous record as the judge and managed to maintain his justice in such

strained conditions would properly be thought to be more just than the judge, but the

fact that the judge failed under extreme circumstances doesn't entirely undermine his

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[23]A. Chadwick Ray, "A Fact About the Virtues," *Thomist* 54, no.3 (1990): 434.

previous claim to virtue. Given the more recent evidence, however, we can no longer

think of him as a just man. As Ray puts it: "To suppose that love of justice never

motivated him (because under severe conditions that love failed) is like supposing that

a man who stopped eating flounder when the price reached ten dollars a pound must

never have liked it at all."[24]

The second interpretation of Foot's analogy, namely, that courage may

systematically fail to act as a virtue in the person in question, yet that it is still a

virtue, directly contradicts my view. I maintain that the Foot/Trianosky interpretation

of this kind of case is mistaken. If courage always fails to act as a virtue in the person,

in what sense can he be said to have the virtue of courage? He may have some morally

neutral desirable trait, like boldness, or confidence, or self-mastery, but it is unclear

how he can be said to have the moral virtue of courage. Virtues are, most generally,

thought to be good traits of character, but it is hard to see how can a trait be considered

good if it is always put to bad ends. What is there, then, that makes the trait good? If

virtues are supposed to be good traits of people, there must be something that makes

these traits good. If the trait is never aimed at good ends, it's hard to understand how

having this trait makes the person who has it any better. A central part of what makes

virtuous people good is that they act virtuously; their virtuous traits are used to aim at

good in the world. If a virtue doesn't have to be connected to good ends in any way, it

seems that there is no standard for its being good. If virtues are unrelated to the ends

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[24]Ibid., 436.

they produce, then it is unclear how they make their possessor good, or how they themselves are good. If virtues must be used for good ends, then this explains both what makes having the virtues a good thing, and also what makes their possessor good.

One of the reasons that we are tempted to say that virtues can be displayed in bad actions is that virtue and practical wisdom are not always fully developed in all areas of human life. What if there are certain circumstances (not particularly extreme circumstances) or areas of life in which an individual regularly fails to demonstrate a virtue, though he often successfully demonstrates the virtue in many other arenas?

Consider the following example:

> Imagine for example a judge who has a well-deserved reputation as a 'hanging judge'. His conception of justice is skewed. His rulings and decisions are systematically biased in favor of the prosecution. (Perhaps he thinks that criminals are too often coddled by the justice system, and that they deserve harsher treatment.) I take it that his distorted sense of justice, his inability or unwillingness to render a fair and objective decision, constitutes a vice.
>   Suppose however that he is also in many respects a very compassionate person. He strongly desires to come to the aid of the defenseless and helpless. (We may imagine that his compassion does not extend to law-breakers. Perhaps he thinks, rather like Locke, that they forfeit their humanity when they attack innocent people, and so deserve no compassion.) When his compassion for the helpless is engaged in the trial of a criminal who victimizes just such people, his rulings become even more biased toward the prosecution than they would otherwise be. His compassionate concern for the innocent and defenseless victims of crime renders him even more unjust than he would be if he cared less.[25]

This example effectively illustrates the possibility I suggested above, namely, that

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[25]Trianosky, 131.

some people have virtues well-developed in certain areas of their life, but not in others.

On my view, the judge lacks not only the virtue of justice, but also the virtue of compassion, at least in the courtroom. From this description it is, however, conceivable that the judge manages to demonstrate the virtue of compassion in a variety of other circumstances. He may regularly come to the aid of the defenseless and helpless, perhaps volunteering through organizations that help those in need. At home with his family, he may be very compassionate. If this is so, what must we say about him? I have maintained that traits are virtues only if they are used for good ends, so in this case the judge would seem to have compassion in certain circumstances, but not in others.

As Neera Badhwar argues, however, this is not surprising.[26] It can be explained by a couple of psychological and philosophical factors. As discussed above, the right emotions are necessary for both virtue and practical wisdom, for they serve both a cognitive and a motivational role. But the emotions, Badhwar points out, may develop in lop-sided ways so that someone who has the right emotions in one domain of life does not necessarily have them in all the others. Hence, one's practical wisdom and one's virtue may also be lop-sided.

> Delta may have the emotional dispositions required for being a wise judge without having the emotional dispositions required for being a wise mother, or Alpha may have the emotional dispositions needed for wisdom in socially threatening situations without having them in the face of grave physical danger. Just as there are no necessary

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[26]Neera K. Badhwar, "The Limited Unity of Virtue," *Nous* 30, no.3 (1996), 312-320.

connections among our judgments about various goods, so there are no necessary connections among our emotional dispositions towards them.[27]

The inconsistent development of such emotions, Badhwar argues, may be due partly to their developmental history.

> It may be that as a child Alpha was encouraged to face up to the sneers of playmates for refusing to join in cruel pranks but was also encouraged to put safety above all else in the face of physical risks. Hence, even if he learns to form a true estimation of the importance of taking certain physical risks, he may grow up unduly afraid of physical danger, while being wholly courageous in the social sphere. Only in a culture where physical and social risks were systematically connected, so that, for instance, the refusal to "go with the crowd" typically required facing physical dangers, would it be impossible to acquire courage in the one sphere without acquiring courage in the other.[28]

Another explanation for the possibility that the virtues may develop differently in different domains, according to Badhwar, is that practical wisdom requires actual contact with the world. Practical wisdom involves being able to interpret and respond to real-world situations, and thus develops through actual experience. Therefore, one can have practical wisdom only in those areas where one has sufficient experience, and few, if any, people have sufficient experience in all realms of life, which the following example illustrates.

> A wise statesman has a deep understanding of people in general, and of the political and cultural needs of a nation. But if he lacks experience with children (as he well may), his general knowledge that children need physical, intellectual, and emotional sustenance, and his genuine desire to provide these, will not suffice to tell him what such

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[27]Badhwar, 314.
[28]Ibid.

care specifically consists in, or how to interpret children's behavior and motives.[29]

These facts about moral and psychological development, and the nature of practical wisdom, both explain how someone can have a virtue in one domain without having it in all domains and imply that no one can have the virtues in all domains of her life. Thus the conclusions from cases in which a person seems to manifest virtue in some situations but not in others shouldn't be that the person sometimes uses his virtue for bad ends, but rather that he does not have the relevant virtue in certain domains of his life.

In this section, I have presented an account of practical wisdom and argued that it serves several important roles in a broadly Aristotelian conception of virtue. First, it guides our understanding of human life, helping us to see what ends are worthy and what is important and unimportant in a good life. Second, it provides the perceptive abilities that enable people to know what a situation demands and the motivation and ability to act accordingly. In addition, the *phronimos* helps us to understand the standard for virtuous action, prohibiting the possibility that virtues can be used for bad ends.

III. Virtue as a State of Character

In the last two sections, I have argued for the importance of the emotions and practical wisdom in moral virtue, but it may still be unclear what sorts of traits count

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[29]Ibid., 15.

as virtues. In this section, the idea of a trait's being a virtue should become clearer.

Virtues, Aristotle tells us, are states or *hexeis*. By saying that virtue is a state,

Aristotle tells us much about what is included in moral virtue. Packed into this claim is

the idea that virtues do not arise at once, rather they are brought about by regular

practice of the right sorts of actions. This right training makes virtues stable

dispositions, which distinguishes them from mere capacities or potentialities.

Moreover, a person's state is not simply a tendency to act in a certain way, but also

includes his desires, feelings, and decisions. Just what it amounts to for virtues to be

thought of as states of character will become clearer when they are distinguished from

temperaments, habits, and skills. Virtues are related in important ways to all of these,

yet are not identical to any of them.

Virtue and Temperament

There is little consensus among psychologists about what temperament

amounts to. Psychologists disagree about which traits are taken to be temperamental,

what exactly temperament consists of, and how temperament is related to other

aspects of human psychology, such as personality.[30] Nevertheless, some

generalizations can be made. When we think of someone's temperament, we usually

think of aspects of the person's psychological make-up that are "natural" or innate, and

that are evident early in life. We tend to view temperament as something that

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[30]See, for example, H. Hill Goldsmith and others, "Roundtable: What Is Temperament? Four Approaches," *Child Development* 58 (1987): 505-529.

"determines" certain aspects of what the person will be like, rather than something that the person determines about herself. We talk, for example, of infants as having particular temperaments long before they have learned or acquired any other traits. Infants may be thought of as content and pleasant or irritable and fussy from a very early stage, well before their parents or their familial environment have had much influence on their behavior or responses to the world. These are the sorts of traits that seem to make up temperament.

Linda Zagzebski addresses several important differences between the natural faculties and the virtues. What she considers the natural faculties probably encompasses a broader range of features than "temperament," yet her points apply insofar as temperament is also taken to be "natural" or "innate." Zagzebski claims that it is important to distinguish between the natural faculties and virtue partly because the virtues are "personal" whereas natural faculties are merely "subpersonal." She takes the personal to include those features that are central to the developed self, whereas the subpersonal includes features that are less central to one's self. This difference, as she describes it, is closely associated with the distinction between those features that we take to be voluntary, and thus praiseworthy or blameworthy, and those we take to be involuntary, and thus exempt from praise or blame. She explains this difference, saying:

> A virtue is a deep quality of a person, closely identified with her
> selfhood, whereas natural faculties are only the raw materials for the
> self. The Aristotelian way to put it is that they are merely

potentialities. Virtues are qualities that deserve praise for their presence and blame for their absence.[31]

We are properly held responsible for our virtues and vices, because we have control over them, but not for those features that are subpersonal, because he have no control over them. Seldom do we think that a child's character is already settled, but we might think that the child's temperament is. Additionally, temperament probably doesn't change, although it is widely accepted by psychologists that temperamental dispositions can be overcome so that temperament's influence on behavior can be weakened. This lends support to the idea that temperamental dispositions are, like other natural faculties, only "raw materials for the self." One has a temperament prior to a fully developed personality, and even more importantly, considerably prior to a fully developed moral character.

Lester Hunt presents an example that nicely illustrates the difference between temperamental dispositions and traits of character:

> A moment's thought will show that there is a difference in kind between being gentle (gentleness being a trait of character) and having a mild disposition (which I take to be temperament). If Mary is a gentle person and finds that she must tell Martha some bad news, she will do so gently, while a mild-tempered person would merely do it blandly: that is, Mary will take care that the news not hurt Martha as much as it could, while if she were mild-tempered she would simply not be as horrified by the news as others would be, and her behavior would show it.[32]

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[31]Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 104.
[32]Lester Hunt, *Character and Culture* (Lanham, MD; Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 6.

Mary will take care to be gentle in giving bad news, even if it has become deeply ingrained and habituated that she will do so. Mary will give thought to the tone of her action and try very carefully to be gentle. And even if this particular act of gentleness comes easily to her, she will have made an effort to be gentle in the past and thus trained herself to do so. Martha will be mild-tempered in giving the news simply because this is natural to her. So, the primary difference between states of character and temperamental dispositions is that states of character are cultivated through choice and are intentional, at least initially.

Virtue and Habit

The distinction between character traits and habits is in some ways much like the distinction between character traits and temperament, for the cultivated and intentional aspects of character traits take center stage again. Habits are tendencies to perform certain sorts of actions under certain circumstances, which are acquired through repetition of those actions. I acquire the habit of biting my fingernails not by doing it once, but by doing it again and again, so that I eventually do it without thinking. Once they develop, habits can be very difficult to break because they become almost second-nature. In some cases, we might not be aware of the habit at all; we may notice it for the first time only when someone else points it out. Of other habits we may be all too well aware, especially of those that we don't like or would like to change.

Traits of character, such as virtues and vices, differ from habits in important

ways. One important difference is that habits are, to use Zagzebski's term,

"subpersonal," whereas virtues and vices are central to the kind of person one is. It

may draw attention to a person if she has particularly unusual habits; we may think of

her as "quirky" or perhaps a little "off," but not as blameworthy. In addition, a change

of habit is easily understandable. Someone who goes out for lunch everyday but one

day appears with a sack lunch might find herself being questioned about the exception

to her usual practice, but just saying she felt like a change would be explanation

enough. If, however, someone acts out of character, a more thorough explanation has

to be given. When a usually thoughtful, generous person is suddenly stingy and

selfish, the explanation given ought to amount to more than that she felt like being

different.

A second difference between habits and virtues is that habits are connected

with one specific sort of action, whereas virtues are not.[33] A virtue is expressed in

certain broadly characterized types of actions. The actions that exhibit a habit will be

homogenous. Having a habit of biting my nails always involves a certain sort of action,

and it is always this one particular action that is in question. Having a habit of being

late is similar in that in each situation in which I am supposed to be some place at a

certain time, I arrive late. Courageous actions don't fit this model. Courageous

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[33]Georg Henrik von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 143.

actions may be of many different sorts, and many different sorts of actions may display my courage. In picking out the actions that exhibit a particular habit and the actions that exhibit a particular virtue, there will be disparity among the actions that exhibit the virtue. They will likely have, at best, some resemblance to one another.

A third difference between habits and virtues is that habits are defined independently of their internal causes. Habits are identified entirely in terms of the behavior. Biting my fingernails is a habit regardless of the reasons I do it or the way I feel when I do it. Regardless of whether I bite my fingernails because I have become accustomed to doing it to avoid snacking or because I do it during times of stress, it remains a habit. The same is not true of virtues. Virtues are defined partly in terms of certain corresponding internal states. Helping you prepare for an exam for a fee and helping you because I am compassionate or generous are not the same sort of action. They are, obviously, both instances of helping you prepare for an exam, but they are not both instances of generous action. Only the latter action is motivated by generosity.

Although virtues are not habits, they are, as noted earlier, habituated. As Von Wright puts it:

> To regard virtues as habits would be to misunderstand the nature of
> virtues completely. One may even go as far as to saying that, if
> virtuous conduct assumes the aspects of habitual performance, this is a
> sign that virtue is absent. But if somebody were to say that the
> acquisition or learning of a virtue is, partly at least, a matter of

habituation, i.e. of getting used to something, then he would probably
be hinting at some important truth.[34]

To say that someone has a particular virtue, say compassion, is not to say that she has

acted compassionately once, but rather to say that she acts compassionately regularly

and habitually. Further, traits of character are like habits in that they are acquired over

time through repeated activity. The classic statement of the idea that virtue is

habituated occurs in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

> A state [of character] arises from [the repetition of] similar activities.
> Hence we must display the right activities, since differences in these
> imply corresponding differences in the states. It is not unimportant,
> then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth;
> rather, it is very important, indeed all-important (1103b20-25).

We become just by the repetition of just actions and unjust by the repetition of unjust

actions, generous by the repetition of generous actions and stingy by the repetition of

stingy actions. Aristotle takes this to be one feature of virtues that makes them like

crafts or skills. Just as we learn to play the violin by playing it, we learn to act

generously by acting generously, though at first we might not do it very well or in

exactly the right way. When we play our scales we take care that we habituate

ourselves in the right ways, for we can learn either well or poorly depending on how

we habituate ourselves. If we take care with each scale, attending to both the

intonation and the tone we get with the bow, then we will learn to play well. If, on the

other hand, we are careless, simply going through the motions and not really taking

care to learn the scales well, this too will show in our playing. Virtues are much the

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[34]Ibid.

same way. If, on each occasion in which I have the opportunity to be generous, I act generously for the right reasons, I will eventually become generous. If, however, I sometimes let it slide, this too I will learn. It is only by training ourselves in the right ways that we can become good violinists or generous people. Bad character traits (or just the lack of good ones) are acquired through habituation just like good ones. So, in order to become generous, I must act generously and do it repetitively until it becomes a part of myself, a character trait.

This might seem to beg the question, for if I can perform generous actions, am I not already generous? Aristotle addresses this apparent problem and explains that the case is not this simple. For Aristotle, there is an important distinction between performing an action that is generous and performing the generous action as the generous person would do it. Part of what must be habituated in learning to be virtuous is the internal component of virtue. I can act generously in the sense that I do the right action for the right reason, but if I struggle to do it, I have not done it as the virtuous person would; rather, I have done it merely as the continent person would. I must habituate myself to do the right actions, but also habituate myself to do them as the virtuous person would do them, that is, with pleasure.

> But [actions are not enough]: we must take as a sign of someone's state his pleasure or pain in consequence of his action. For if someone who abstains from bodily pleasures enjoys the abstinence itself, then he is temperate, but if he is grieved by it, he is intemperate. Again, if he stands firm against terrifying situations and enjoys it, or at least does not find it painful, then he is brave, and if he finds it painful, he is cowardly (1104b1-8).

The internal components of virtue must be habituated just like the external components. It may in some cases be that I must first become continent before I can become virtuous, but this is not always the case. Sometimes both actions and feelings will be habituated at the same time.

Zagzebski argues that it is not an accidental feature of virtues that they are acquired by habituation, for we cannot imagine acquiring them in any other way.[35] She uses Nozick's transformation machine to argue for this claim. The transformation machine will, with the press of a button, transform a person into whatever sort of person he chooses to be, consistent with his staying the same person. But regardless of how good the resulting person seems to be, she argues, we are inclined to deny that the machine has produced virtue, properly so called, in the individual in question.

The most important aspect of the habituated nature of virtue that the transformation machine cannot accomplish: as was discussed in relation to the development of practical wisdom, the kind of habituation necessary for virtue requires real-world experience of situations that demand virtue.[36] An important part of virtue is being able to respond to real-world situations with the right actions, feelings, and motivations. Learning to do this requires practice in the real world. It is only through such practice that the proper habituation can take place; it takes enough experiences building upon one another to form the ability to respond to the wide variety of

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[35]Zagzebski, 117-121.
[36]Zagzebski, 120.

situations that demand virtue in the ways that virtue requires. This real-world contact

simply cannot be achieved through a machine; nothing can substitute for experience.

Virtues are attributable to the agent, rather than to some external force, like the

transformation machine. What the machine has given the agent is not the desire to be a

good person; the individual already had this, for she chose the sort of transformation

she would like to undergo.[37] What the machine accomplishes for her is the effort

involved in actually becoming this sort of person. But the virtuous are those become

that way through their own volition. They take the steps necessary to develop the

trait in question. This is an important distinction between the virtuous person and the

person who merely strives toward virtue. It is central to our general understanding of

virtue that it is something acquired through experience and that the agent is, somehow,

in control of its development or at least takes an active part in its development.[38]

Through habituating herself to virtue, the idea is that the individual has gained a certain

merit due her as a result of her efforts and that in part we are praising her strength or

her moral resolve as well as her good intentions. In the face of what may be great

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[37]It is of course possible to imagine scenarios in which the individual doesn't even want to be a good person. We can imagine the transformation taking place by some sort of drug being given or by some kind of special brain operation or by some genetic tinkering. In these possibilities, then, it looks like the agent doesn't deserve any praise, for she lacks both the right desires and capacity to bring them about. All the praise ought to go to the brain surgeon or the geneticist, etc. These possibilities are suggested by Robert C. Roberts, "Will-Power and the Virtues," in *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character,* ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987), 126-127.

[38]There are mounting concerns regarding the extent to which it does make sense to say that the agent has brought about virtue insofar as moral education seems so important. However, the intuition remains that, at least to a certain degree, some aspects of the individual's character are within her control. This is addressed further is Chapter 6.

obstacles to virtue, she has shown the fortitude for virtue. This fortitude must be due to the agent, not to a machine.

I have argued here that virtues are distinct from habits in that virtues are central to the person one is, whereas habits are only "subpersonal"; virtues are expressed in types of actions which may be of many sorts, whereas habits are expressed in specific sorts of actions; and virtues require particular internal components, whereas habits are defined independently of their internal features. But even though virtues differ from habits in these ways, they are habituated. The discussion of the transformation machine showed that virtue cannot come about by any other means than habituation and demonstrated several features of the habituation of virtue, namely, that the motivation for such habituation must be due to the agent rather than to some external source, and that this habituation must take place through real-world experience. I now turn to a discussion of the relationship between virtues and skills.

Virtues and Skills

The claim that some virtues are skills, which is probably the strongest contender for an alternative to the view that virtues are character traits, is put forth by Robert Roberts in "Will Power and the Virtues." Roberts takes himself to be arguing against two standard assumptions in the virtue-theory literature. The first of these is that all virtues are the same sort of trait; the second is that virtues must be distinct

from skills.[39] Roberts maintains that both of these views are mistaken by arguing that there are (at least) two different sorts of traits that are virtues, namely, the substantive and motivational virtues and the virtues of will power. The substantive and motivational virtues are those that he considers the "psychological embodiment of moral rules."[40] That is, they have real moral content. They include, for example, honesty, compassion, justice, and generosity. These are the sorts of traits that I have been discussing thus far. What makes the virtues of will power different is that they lack any "characteristically ethical patterns of behavior, judgment, or emotion."[41] Roberts claims that the virtues of will power are not in themselves motivating, but are skills that enable us to maintain control over contrary inclinations that would otherwise lead us away from our goals. The virtues of will power are dependent upon their relationship to the motivational virtues for their moral value. He calls them "the capacities by which a person copes with these trials in the interests of the moral and prudential life."[42] As such, they have a predominantly "preservative" function or a "corrective" nature.[43] What is of concern to me here is Roberts' claim that the virtues of will power are skills and his argument for this claim.[44]

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[39]Roberts, 122.
[40]Ibid., 123.
[41]Ibid.
[42]Ibid., 124.
[43]Ibid., 124-125.
[44]It should be noted that Trianosky shares such a view. Trianosky distinguishes between primary actional virtues and enabling virtues that bear much resemblance to Roberts' virtues of will power. See Trianosky, 127-129.

Since the virtues of will power are capacities to manage adverse inclinations, Roberts focuses on the ways that people do this and points out their skill-like features.[45] He addresses both the management of cravings and impulses and the management of emotions. In addressing the management of cravings and impulses, Roberts compares Kierkegaard's images of the gambler who swears to stop gambling here and now for the rest of his life and the gambler who swears to stop gambling just for today. The first of these gamblers has set himself up for failure from the start, whereas the second has set himself up to manage his cravings and impulses a little at a time. He will avoid gambling today, and tomorrow he will make the same vow again. In this way he will be able to develop will power little by little. Roberts suggests that this is what the person who has the virtues of will power does. Children may learn these traits by having parents who set reasonable goals for them, helping to train them to hold out for just a little while at a time.

Roberts' basic point is that gaining the virtues of will power has much to do with "hoaxing our lust" by insisting upon small gains at a time. When this is done repeatedly and conscientiously it may eventually become second-nature. The gambler who has to convince himself each day to not gamble may carry on such a project for the vast majority of his life, but each day the impulse to gamble may get a little weaker and the impulse to resist a little stronger. These same sorts of strategies are involved

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[45]Roberts, 131.
It is noteworthy that Roberts does not deny that these virtues of will power come about through habituation or that they can be learned. This doesn't guarantee that these skill-like capacities are

in many other areas of life. It has been suggested, for example, that a central problem

for procrastinators is that they lack goal-setting skills. They lack the ability to set

small, realistic goals. They expect too much of themselves all at once, so that a project

seems so large that it is unmanageable. They lack the strategic ability to break a

project down into smaller parts and to then hold reasonable expectations about how

much can be accomplished in any given time-frame. Part of learning to overcome

procrastination is learning such strategic skills.[46]

Roberts claims that similar sorts of strategies are used in the management of

emotions. He focuses on those cases in which the emotion in question is unfitting or

unproductive of a good life, such as malicious joy, boredom, fear, anger, hopelessness,

hatred, or envy. He is concerned with explicating those skills involved in "reshaping

the emotion itself."[47] Boredom, fear, anger, hopelessness, hatred, and envy may be

connected with such virtues of will power as patience, courage, or perseverance. What

are the skills and strategies needed for "reshaping the emotion itself?" One is to

express the emotion in an innocuous way. We may, for example, release anger by

punching at a punching bag, going to the batting cages, or taking an extra long run. Just

by releasing the pent-up energy that such emotions may cause can be helpful, but the

action of working out anger may be made more explicit by concentrating on what has

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actually virtues, but does highlight the fact that there are other capacities that share these features that
aren't necessarily virtues. The class of virtues is simply a subset of the class of habituated traits.
[46]See, for example, Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yuen, Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do
About It (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1983).
[47]Roberts, 133.

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made us angry, such as imagining that we are punching someone rather than just a bag. This kind of action can be made ritualistic, but part of the skill involved is knowing which activities will help to decrease our anger and which will simply aggravate it. Another strategy that Roberts proposes as a way of handling emotions is self-talk. We can talk our way through difficult situations with an inner dialogue, for if we say the right things to ourselves, we can change our perspective on the situation at hand. We may also try to convince ourselves to think positively, surround ourselves with positive people, or listen to music that influences our feelings in one way or another.

These forms of self-management are the skill-like features that Roberts takes to partially make up the virtues of will power. Surely it is correct that these are skills that can be learned and that are central for being successful at lots of activities. For example, one needs them to be a better teacher because one will be more committed to the task at hand and more disciplined in carrying through on this commitment. But what is noteworthy about the virtues of will power is that they seem very much like skills and not very much like virtues at all. What Roberts has pointed to, I think, is the importance of certain psychological skills for virtue, but he is mistaken in claiming that these skills are themselves virtues.

Interestingly, Roberts seems to equate all good-making characteristics of people with virtues, but there are many personal characteristics that will make us better people that aren't virtues. There are, for example, personality traits that will make us better persons, and thus seem to have moral relevance, but aren't virtues. Roberts

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himself recognizes how these skills differ from more traditional virtues, pointing out that what distinguishes the virtues of will power from the contentful, motivational virtues is that the former lack any "characteristically ethical patterns of behavior, judgment, or emotion."[48] But I would argue that this is precisely what makes the so-called virtues of will power skills rather than virtues. The virtues are connected, through practical wisdom, with certain characteristically moral ends. Skills can be put to any number of uses, whereas virtues cannot. That skills have no characteristically moral patterns of behavior associated with them makes them morally neutral traits in ways that virtues are not. The skill of being able to control one's emotions may be just as useful for the murderer being questioned by the police as it is for the courageous man over-coming his fear in battle. But what makes the two different is that the former would not be chosen by the *phronimos*, whereas the latter would. Practical wisdom is part of what distinguishes the moral virtues from skills and it is this need for good judgment that, in part, makes the virtues have moral content. Many skills may be helpful, and in fact necessary, in acquiring virtue. The courageous man may need self-control just as much as the murderer does, but the courageous man has a moral understanding that the murderer lacks. This is what gives the courageous man a virtue whereas the murderer has only the skill of self-control. Zagzebski shares this view, arguing that the virtues are what provide the proper motivation whereas moral skills help to make the person efficacious. She helps make clear the distinctions

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[48]Ibid., 123.

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between virtues and skills by listing some sorts of moral skills, thereby illustrating

their distinction from the virtues themselves. For example, she distinguishes between:

the virtue of compassion and the associated skill of knowing what to say to the

bereaved, the virtue of courage and the skill of knowing how to stand up to a

tormentor. [49]

Sarah Broadie makes two related observations regarding the distinction between

virtues and skills that support my claim that virtues are states of character and thus

have actual moral content, whereas skills do not. First, she claims that it "says nothing

against a person's skill if he fails to exercise it in the face of distractions or with

someone begging him not to." [50] If, however, a person failed to exercise his virtue in

such a case, we would be forced to question whether he really possessed virtue. Virtue

must come from a firm state of character. The agent must not be easily put off, or

persuaded to act otherwise. I suggested in section II that extreme circumstances could

cause an otherwise virtuous person to fail to act virtuously. These circumstances,

however, must be extreme. If the least bit of coaxing or argument can keep one from

acting virtuously, then we must deny that one has virtue. With respect to skills,

however, it makes perfect sense for a person to choose to use them only in those cases

where it suits his fancy. This in no way counts against his having such a skill. Second,

Broadie suggests that it "says nothing about the quality of a skill if its possessor

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[49]Zagzebski, 113-114.
[50]Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 89.

voluntarily lets it go or decides to give it up as no longer worth the exercise."[51] Virtue, however, cannot be voluntarily allowed to slide. The virtuous person, who necessarily recognizes the importance of virtue, wouldn't choose to give up his virtue; he might, however, choose to give up certain skills, at least those that he doesn't need to maintain his virtue. For the virtuous person, virtue itself will be a fundamental good, and being a good person will take precedence over any skills he might possess. These observations serve as evidence that virtues are distinct from skills in morally significant ways, even though it must be acknowledged that certain skills are important to the moral life, insofar as they make virtue possible.

What much of this section has shown is that there are many features of persons, including temperamental dispositions, habits, and skills, that are related to virtues or similar to virtues in some way, but are not themselves virtues. Like virtues, these are developed through habituation. It is these skills that many of us struggle with in trying to develop virtue. In fact, I suspect that will power may be one of the most difficult means to virtue to develop. Many people know what sort of person they would like to be, but lack the strength to become that way. Yet the virtues are distinguished from these skills by their moral content. Virtue is not just having the strength of will to do whatever one puts one's mind to, rather it involves having the right desires and feelings and acting accordingly, as practical wisdom demands.

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[51]Ibid.

In this chapter I have presented and defended an Aristotelian conception of virtue. In part I, I argued that virtue requires not only acting rightly, but also feeling rightly, and that the emotions themselves serve a central moral purpose by helping us to perceive those circumstances that demand our response, and helping us to understand how to respond. In part II, I argued for the importance of practical wisdom in moral virtue, claiming that practical wisdom helps us to understand what the virtuous response is in any given situation, and that through the *phronimos* we gain a moral exemplar to help guide our actions. In part III, I argued that virtue is a stable state of character that arises through habituation, and that as such it is distinguished in important ways from temperament, habits, and skills. In the next chapter I address the role of self-knowledge in virtue, arguing that self-knowledge and a certain reflective self-understanding are central to practical wisdom and thus to virtue.

CHAPTER 5

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AS NECESSARY FOR VIRTUE

In the last two chapters, I have 1) presented a conception of self-knowledge as consisting of an understanding of one's character and personality as well as occurrent features of oneself, and 2) defended an Aristotelian conception of virtue where full moral virtue requires both the virtues of character, which require both acting and feeling rightly, and the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom. In this chapter, I address the relationship between self-knowledge and moral virtue. In section I, I argue that virtue requires self-knowledge. My argument rests on the nature of practical wisdom and its centrality to virtue. I argue that practical wisdom is impossible without self-knowledge. In section II, I address the ways in which one could have self-knowledge yet fail to have virtue, underscoring the fact that self-knowledge in no way guarantees virtue. In sections III through V, I respond to a variety of possible objections to my view, including challenges from both the philosophical and the psychological literature.

I. Self-knowledge and Virtue

Moral virtue requires self-knowledge, and the connections between the two are both causal and conceptual. One caveat must be kept in mind here—both self-knowledge and virtue come in degrees, and very few people (if any) have complete self-knowledge or complete virtue. Thus my arguments should be construed as showing that, other things being equal, greater self-knowledge makes greater virtue possible. I think it most useful to start with several examples that effectively illustrate my claim. In each of the following examples, I address a different sort of virtue and

show how self-knowledge is necessary to the attainment of the virtue in question.[1]

These examples demonstrate some of the causal connections between self-knowledge and virtue, showing how self-knowledge may be one of several causal factors that make virtue more likely.

Courage is one of the most widely accepted virtues. Courage may be displayed in a variety of ways: for children it may mean facing up to the bully at school, for teenagers it may mean not giving in to peer pressure to behave a certain way or look a certain way, for adults it may mean standing up for what we know is right in the face of pressure to "just go along with it." For battered women, courage is essential to their having any chance of freeing themselves. These are some of the ways in which people require courage in their daily lives, but in what ways does this sort of courage require self-knowledge? First, it requires knowing whether your fears are reasonable. Are you exaggerating the extent to which you are in danger? Will the consequences of doing the right thing be as horrible as you think? Then it requires understanding the source of your fears. Are you being honest about what you are afraid of? Sometimes before we can face fear we have to know where the fear comes from. It is not so unusual to have a "bad feeling" that can't be explained, but if the source were clear, the right action would be as well. Something like this happened to me in preparing to get married. A couple of weeks before the wedding, I was overcome with fear, and started second-

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[1]In choosing these examples, I tried to address a variety of the virtues. To make the process more systematic, I adopted Ross's classification, in which he assigns each of Aristotle's virtues to one of three groups: virtues having to do with the right attitudes to pleasure, fear, and anger; virtues having to do with the two main pursuits of people in society (wealth and honor); and virtues having to do with social intercourse. From each of these categories I chose the trait that seems most widely accepted as a virtue. I also included a discussion of justice, which Ross leaves in a category of its own. However, it must be noted that no further philosophical point rests on this categorization as far as my thesis is concerned. W.D. Ross, *Aristotle* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co, Meridian Books, 1959), 197.

guessing my decision. What if it didn't work out, what if we couldn't get jobs in the same place, what if we were not meant for each other? But none of these seemed to be the root of the issue. I couldn't imagine being without him, but there was still this nagging concern in the back of my mind. It was several days until I realized that what I was afraid of was losing my relationship with my parents—I was afraid that I would never be able to go home again. Once I realized what the fear was and could voice it openly, it was easy to confront, but courage is hard to have in the face of such unknown fears.

For the social virtues, such as friendliness, self-knowledge is particularly important. It helps us to accurately monitor our social behavior and to interpret and predict how others will respond to us. We've all met people who seem to be social nitwits—always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, inevitably managing to offend someone on any given occasion. Often this lack of social grace is a failure to recognize how one is perceived more than an unwillingness to be polite (though there are those individuals who take pleasure in their rudeness and are quite well aware of it).

Imagine the following scenario. Sarah is a well-meaning young woman who has a desire to be kind and well-liked, but can't seem to make friends. The problem, it turns out, is that she is aggressive and blunt in everyday conversation. She assumes that others are "wimpy" or unwilling to face the facts, and attributes her lack of friends to the dearth of like-minded people in the world. In fact, Sarah is caustic and grossly insensitive in her everyday interactions with others, and colleagues and acquaintances have made every effort to help her see this. Sarah, however, always blames the other person and never considers that she might be the cause of her own social failures. She

fails to carefully consider the evidence presented to her, she continues to blame others, and is altogether unreflective, and thus unknowledgeable, about her social self. Without the willingness to be self-reflective, Sarah will never be friendly—she will always lack this particular social virtue (and perhaps others).

Generosity involves the willingness and desire to share one's resources with others. These resources are often thought to be primarily financial (Aristotle limits the discussion of this virtue to money), but one could also be generous with time or even with oneself by being a good listener or by being willing to share of one's self through intimate discussion. In determining what to give and how much to give, knowledge of one's own needs, honesty in distinguishing one's needs from one's desires, and a clear recognition of the personal impact of any particular gift is central. Suppose that Peter, for example, takes great pleasure in giving his family and friends expensive and elaborate gifts for birthdays and holidays. However, he cannot afford to do so. It stretches his resources beyond their limits, sometimes resulting in an inability to meet his immediate needs—he is unable to pay medical bills or the utilities. The problem here may be partly poor money management, but his unwillingness to admit that he is not in a position to purchase such elaborate gifts contributes, too. He fails to acknowledge that doing so sacrifices his own well-being. In part, his image of his own self-worth depends upon being perceived by others as having sufficient resources. He is not generous in this case—his unwillingness to see the situation for what it is makes him prodigal at best.

This example shows someone who tends toward giving too much rather than giving too little, even though the latter may be the more common problem. Giving too

little may be rooted in plain old selfishness, much of which involves finding one's own needs and desires disproportionally more important than those of others, but it may also involve confusing one's desires with needs, or a failure to acknowledge that one's desires are unreasonable. On the whole, generosity is the disposition at the mean between wanting things for oneself and wanting to give to others. Honesty with oneself is central to this capacity.

Justice also requires self-knowledge. Parents with more than one child bear a special responsibility for treating them each justly. This does not mean that the rules must always be the same, or that each child must always receive exactly the same things. Just as the children are different, so is what justice demands with regard to their treatment. However, the burden is upon the parents to be sure that differential treatment is just and not a matter of personal preference or bias. Suppose, for example, that a mother loves her daughter more than her son, but has not admitted this to herself. This difference in the love the mother feels for her two children will likely manifest itself in the way she treats them; she will be more charitable toward her daughter, more generous toward her, or she may be less hasty with punishment or criticism. These biases will prevent her from treating her children justly regardless of her intentions. Only if she admits this bias to herself can she hope to be just toward her children. In this way a failure of self-knowledge leads to a failure to be just.

Each of these examples illustrates a case in which lack of self-knowledge is a causal factor leading to a lack of virtue. But what is needed is an explanation of the more general conceptual connections between self-knowledge and virtue. Practical wisdom, I maintain, provides the conceptual connection. Self-knowledge is necessary

for practical wisdom, and practical wisdom is necessary for virtue. Hence, self-knowledge is necessary for virtue. As I discussed in the last chapter, practical wisdom has several components: an understanding of what is important and unimportant in human life, the best way to achieve to achieve one's chosen ends, the ability to perceive the morally salient features of a given situation, and the ability to put this understanding into action effectively.

The first component of practical wisdom is an understanding of what is important and unimportant in life, both for human beings generally and for the particular individual in question. But one cannot have such understanding without self-knowledge. One can have a general understanding of human life at an intellectual level without self-knowledge. One can understand what is important and unimportant in human lives, and even be able to give others advice about achieving it, but be unable to put such understanding into practice in one's own life. Aristotle suggests that such people have "comprehension," but not practical wisdom. Comprehension requires only understanding, whereas practical wisdom also requires the ability to put this understanding into practice. It is putting this understanding into practice that requires self-knowledge. This involves understanding not only what is important and unimportant in human life, but also how one's own personality, values, talents, and abilities dictate what is important for the individual in question.

Without knowing these sorts of things, it will be impossible to make the right choices regarding career paths, friendships, or intimate relationships. One's personality may dictate one's choice of a mate, whereas talents and abilities will likely play a significant role in career choices. Without adequate knowledge of such features,

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it would be impossible to make basic decisions regarding the practical matters of living. Consider the following example presented by Daniel Goleman of a patient suffering from a brain tumor.[2] The tumor was removed surgically, but after the surgery his decision-making skills were almost completely wiped out. Though prior to the surgery he was a successful corporate lawyer, after the surgery he could no longer hold a job, maintain relationships, or manage his finances. He could no longer make the simplest of decisions, for now he functioned more as an elaborate computer than as a human being. He had no preferences for anything one way or another, and had no basis for making a decision. He couldn't even decide between two times for a doctor's appointment. This is an extreme and unusual case, but makes clear how hard it is to make life decisions without any knowledge of one's feelings, preferences, values, or commitments, let alone one's talents, abilities, or personality traits.

Understanding my values and commitments is crucial for knowing what is important in my life. It is not sufficient to know what I would like my values to be, for in many cases this may be very different from what my values really are. But if I would like my values to be different from what they are, then it will be important first to be honest with myself about what I actually value now, and to then reconsider whether this is what is likely to contribute to my living a life consistent with those things that are important to me. If I say that I value one thing, but consistently choose another, there may several explanations for this. It may be that I lack the strength of character to act according to my own values, or it may be that I am deceived about my values. If it is the latter, my actions will seldom accord with what I believe my values

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[2]Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam Books: New York, 1995), 52-53.

to be. This dissonance will likely interfere with my prospects for a coherent, satisfying life.

Suppose, for example, that I believe myself to value true friendship over social climbing, yet I choose friends who are well-connected rather than friends who have good characters or whom I find interesting. Or perhaps deep down I understand that true friendship is more important, yet I find social climbing more immediately satisfying. I then choose my friends for their social connections rather than for who they are. Yet I am surprised when they lose interest in me because I don't wear the right clothes or associate with the "right" people. If I continue to do this without admitting the problem to myself, I am unlikely to ever choose as friends individuals who will be true friends to me. If I could admit to myself that my actions don't correspond to the values I purport to have, then I could either reconsider what my values really are or reconsider how I must go about living up to those values. Somehow I must bring my conception of what is important in my life into accord with my actions and actual commitments. A conception of practical wisdom as requiring an understanding of what is important in human life and how to live such a life brings into focus the need for honesty with ourselves about our values, our commitments, and our deeper beliefs about how to live.

Self-knowledge is even more important for the perceptive abilities required for practical wisdom and the capacity to act on them. Here the ramifications for virtue are the most concrete, for these perceptive abilities are required for all of the virtues insofar as the virtues all require practical wisdom. Each situation requires a judgment about the appropriate action. We must be able to pick out the morally relevant

features of the situation and act accordingly. This is always a matter of interpretation. Being confident that we have interpreted a situation correctly requires that we are sure of our own capacities—that no personal trait or tendency has led us to read things wrong. We've all met people who cannot be rational about certain subjects. They may be unreasonably defensive or critical with respect to certain subjects, or react badly in certain types of situations. Reading a situation accurately demands putting all the pieces together, and we ourselves are always a central influence in any situation. A particularly critical and defensive person, for example, will tend to respond in an unduly harsh manner to anything taken to be a personal affront or criticism, and will be inclined to jump to conclusions about the motives of other people. What is meant by another to be a helpful suggestion may be interpreted as hostile criticism. A less defensive person might have found precisely the same situation to be quite friendly and unintimidating, but the critical and defensive person assumes that, like he, others are inclined to be critical and that defensiveness is the appropriate response. If the defensive person cannot recognize the ways in which he himself makes the situation hostile, then he will be unable to accurately assess the particulars of the situation at hand.

Knowledge of our emotions is important because it is often through our emotions that we perceive what a situation requires of us. We don't just intellectually understand that someone who is suffering from the death of a loved one needs comforting, we understand in part because we empathize with her pain. We remember the difficulty of being in a similar situation and understand that she is probably feeling similar pain. We reach out to our friend out of sympathy, and not, or at least not

entirely, out of an intellectual understanding of her suffering. For most of us, knowledge of our emotions comes naturally. We may not always be able to put into words exactly how we feel or always be able to exactly distinguish one emotion from another. Fear and anger may, for example, tend to blur together. But we do grasp that the feeling is negative, and we know how it feels from the inside even if we can't accurately express it.

However, never being able to verbally express one's emotions has serious negative consequences. In fact, people who lack the verbal ability to express their emotions may seem to have no emotions at all, though this may be more the result of being unable to express them than of not feeling them. These people suffer from what psychiatrists call alexithymia, which is characterized by an inability to describe feelings, either their own or others, and a "sharply limited emotional vocabulary."[3] In addition, they are often unable to distinguish between emotional and bodily sensations; they may be aware of the physical symptoms that accompany certain emotions, such as the sweaty palms and butterflies in the stomach that accompany anxiety, but be unaware that what they feel is an emotion. Some of these patients even go to the doctor hoping to receive medical treatment for what is actually emotional distress, because they cannot distinguish between the two. Certainly alexithymic individuals depart greatly from the norm, and most people are much more aware of their emotions than this, yet these individuals demonstrate the importance of understanding our

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[3]This characterization of alexithymia is from Goleman, 50-51.

emotions, and the role that the ability to express our emotions verbally plays in that understanding.

As far as practical wisdom and virtue are concerned, however, it is not enough to know what we do feel, we must also know whether it is what we *should* be feeling. Accurate perception regarding a given situation demands that I not only know what I feel, but also that my feelings are legitimate. Suppose, for example, that I am absolutely furious with my friend for a rather minor offense. Perhaps she is late in meeting me for lunch. Yet rather than express the anger I feel, I restrain myself and pretend to accept her apology, putting on a good face for the duration of our lunch, even though I think that my anger is justified. Thus my action fails to be virtuous. Further, if I typically feel excessive anger, thinking it is justified, then I fail to acquire the virtue. In these ways, knowing my own emotions will be necessary for virtue: I must understand what emotions I am feeling, whether or not these emotions are an appropriate response to the situation at hand, and whether my emotions in general are a reliable source of information on which to act.

Perceiving the situation properly is important for practical wisdom, but practical wisdom also requires that one be able to act on this perception and respond properly to the situation. Knowledge of our moral and psychological tendencies is crucial for our ability to respond properly in any given situation. At 1109b1-7 Aristotle points out that "we must examine what we ourselves drift into easily" and that we must begin to know our own tendencies so that we can aim for the opposite

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extreme.[4] This is true for all the virtues. If one over-indulges in physical pleasures, it will be important to know this so one can aim for being more insensible, hoping in the process to become temperate. If one knows one is stingy with money, one can aim for the opposite extreme, hoping to achieve generosity. If one tends to be cowardly, one must know this and aim for rashness, hoping to achieve courage. Only by knowing our tendencies can we know where to aim. If we know from experience that we tend to hit the mark, then our task is easier.

Knowing our motives is also important in being able to respond properly to a variety of situations. Virtue is not simply about doing particular actions; it involves doing them in the right ways, and with the right reasons. That is, it must be done as the virtuous person would do it. The young woman who is naturally kind and generous is not truly acting virtuously when she helps her friend if she doesn't also understand why her action is what the virtuous person would do. Nor is her action virtuous if she has a naturally egoistic disposition and helps her friend only with the hope of getting something in return, for then it is not chosen because it is virtuous. The claim that virtuous action must be done with the knowledge that it is virtuous and that it must be chosen because it is virtuous requires that the person acting know her reasons for acting and have some understanding of the nature of her action. Her motives cannot be hidden from herself, she must understand that her action is virtuous, and she must know she chooses this action because it is virtuous. If she has an ulterior motive for helping her friend that she has not admitted to herself, her action would not be fully virtuous. Only if she is truly acting for the sake of virtue and knows this can her

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[4]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985).

action be virtuous. In saying that she must know that her action is virtuous, I am not suggesting that she must always be able to say exactly why this particular action is a virtuous action, for that would require too much verbal sophistication. She may simply have some kind of intuitive or emotional understanding. But if she has no understanding at all of what makes something virtuous, that is problematic. The most important constraint here is that she not be deluded about why she acts. She cannot, for example, believe herself to be generous if she is acting only for her own benefit. In some limited way, she must recognize that the action is a good action and do it for that reason.[5]

Being able to act on my understanding of a situation requires a certain understanding of people, which is difficult to have without an understanding of myself. We are all familiar with people, whether in real life or only in fiction, who seem to have the right cognitive and emotional responses to situations, and have good intentions, yet fail miserably when they try to act on these intentions. The image is usually of someone who is completely socially incompetent. He sort of fumbles around and manages to make a mess of every situation, always saying or doing the wrong thing. (John Candy got cast frequently in these sorts of roles.) Such social incompetence may be attributed to a wide variety of causes, all acting hand in hand, but one aspect of this inability to put understanding into action is a failure of self-understanding and a resulting failure to understand others.

Suppose, for example, that my friend is grieving over the loss of a parent.

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[5] Of all the constraints on virtuous action, Aristotle considers the claim that one must know that one acts virtuously to be the weakest. See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1105a25-1105b5.

Compassion, along with my empathy for her, dictates that I ought to console her as best I can. Recognizing that this is a situation where compassion is called for as well as knowing that as a close friend I ought to be able to do so is not the same as actually being able to do so. Being able to put my desires into action requires a special understanding on my part. It involves knowing how to do or say the right things in the right ways so that my actions have the desired effect of consoling my friend. Part of the way I know how to behave is to understand what I would want from a friend in the same situation. Even if I haven't had altogether the same experience of losing a parent, if I know myself well I ought to be able to imagine how I would feel and what might console me. This is sometimes the best guide to action—trying to do what I would hope someone else would do for me. But this requires that I have some understanding of how I might respond in a similar situation. This, of course, will not be a foolproof guide to action, for I will also have to read my friend's response to see if my action is having the desired effect, but it is the best starting point that I have.

What this example shows is the importance of being able to generalize from our own experiences to those of others. Part of learning to function well socially, and thus put virtuous desires into action, is learning how to put ourselves in another's place. In order to do this, we must first have an understanding of how we ourselves would respond. If I cannot place myself within the realm of another's experience, I will have a hard time knowing how to respond at all. This requires a certain degree of imagination, for no two people have all the same life experiences. But knowing myself well will enable me to be better at this. I may not have had the same experience, but I can draw on other similar experiences, or experiences that made me feel the same way.

An athletic father with an uncoordinated child may not understand what it is like to be the last picked for every team, but he should be able to understand the insecurity that it would foster. The father probably had his own weaknesses that could have fostered the same feelings. Perhaps he was tone deaf so that in music class he had to mouth the words rather than singing out loud for fear of embarrassment, or perhaps he was a slow reader so that having to read out loud in class was difficult. Whatever his experience, he should be able to imagine how his son feels now. This will guide him in helping his son through this difficulty.

Learning to put oneself in another's place is one part of being able to put proper intentions into action, but it is also important to be able to read others' responses well and modify one's actions accordingly. As discussed in Chapter 3, we can learn a lot about ourselves through our interactions with others. Reflection on this sort of information is crucial to the ability to put our intentions into action. The information we gain about ourselves through interaction also helps us to better respond to others. There are hundreds of verbal and non-verbal cues to read which will help us learn to be more effective in action. At the same time that we learn about ourselves through interaction, we are also learning how to respond to others. Those who do not learn about themselves through social interaction are the same people who have difficulty putting virtue into action because they fail to relate to others. A failure to understand oneself often results in a failure to relate to others as well. This may be the result of an inability to read social cues or of an unwillingness to reevaluate one's own self-image, but regardless of the cause the result is a failure of practical wisdom and thus a failure in virtue.

II. Self-knowledge but Not Virtue

Thus far, I have argued that virtue requires self-knowledge; however, there are a variety of ways in which one could have self-knowledge but not virtue. The most obvious of these is that one could know that one is vicious and take delight in this fact. A person could know a lot about her traits, her emotions, and her character, yet make it her goal to be the perfect criminal. This wouldn't require having delusions about how good she is, for she wants to be, and knows that she is, bad. Suppose that she seems good in lots of ways—generous with friends and family, willing to stand up for all kinds of social causes—but interested in carrying off the perfect crime. In fact, her apparent virtue in other areas of her life is all part of the scheme. By appearing to be the perfect citizen, it is all the easier for her crime to go unsolved. She has no delusions about what this says about her, but the thrill of being able to commit the perfect murder is more important to her than being virtuous. She's not deluded about how good she is or blind to her motives. She has a realistic image of herself, and could describe herself to a "T" if asked to do so. Her decision about her life has not been made in haste, she has reflected carefully on what she is like, honing her talents and abilities all with an eye toward making herself just what she wants to be. She just has vicious ends; thus, she has self-knowledge, but not virtue.

The much more common, but perhaps just as troublesome, sort of case is one in which the person has self-knowledge, but is too lazy, complacent, or apathetic to have virtue. Most people have probably said or heard someone else say, "that's just the way I am." The comment is usually meant to imply that the situation is not going to change, because the speaker won't change it. Imagine, for example, a man who is

aggressive, difficult, and over-bearing. He is a generally unpleasant man, but doesn't pretend to be otherwise. He knows what he is like and he is well aware of what others think of him, yet he is satisfied with himself the way he is. Moreover, it just doesn't seem worthwhile to him to try to change; he can't see any good reason for doing so. To his mind, the problem lies with those around him, and not himself. He's not bothered by the way he is, and he figures that those around him will learn to live with him. He's not a moral monster by any means—we can certainly think of much worse people—but virtue is only a pipe-dream for him, even if he does have self-knowledge. Lots of people, like this man, have unpleasant or harmful traits that they have no desire to change, which are mostly the result of apathy or laziness, rather than an inability to change.

One could also refuse to change bad traits out of a misguided conception of authenticity. It would be possible to hold the view that being fully and completely who we are, and accepting ourselves that way, is more important than trying to make ourselves into certain sorts of persons. Living a life could be thought to be more about self-discovery than self-creation, so the thought is that our energy should be focused on discovering who we are, rather than creating who we are. Some people, for example, take this view regarding the emotions.[6] They do not think of any emotions as good or bad or productive or unproductive. They are simply accepting of their emotions, experiencing their emotions as they come over them without any attempt to

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[6]Goleman, 48.

evaluate them or change them. One could carry this kind of view over to other features of one's character or personality, leading to the view described above.

But one wouldn't have to accept oneself as one is in order to be unmotivated to change, for being self-critical and motivated to change do not necessarily go hand in hand either. One could recognize personal flaws and desire to change them, but lack sufficient motivation for change. In fact, I suspect that many people are this way about some features of themselves. They would like to be more efficient, more patient, or procrastinate less, but don't get around to doing anything about it. This may be because they lack the time and energy or because they don't know how to bring about such change. But sometimes it is due to plain old laziness.

These sorts of cases bring to mind questions regarding the proper attitude to hold toward oneself in the face of self-knowledge. We could know ourselves, but have any variety of responses to such knowledge: we could respond to ourselves with hatred or self-loathing, with self-love, or just about anything in between. But what is the proper relationship to ourselves? Much attention has been given recently to issues of self-respect and self-esteem, at the expense, some argue, of adequate self-criticism. So what's the right balance? Answering this question is in itself a complete project, perhaps better left to psychologists, but a few words can be said here, and my arguments thus far commit me to certain views.

I have already argued that honesty with ourselves is important—thus what the right relationship is to ourselves will depend greatly upon what sort of persons we are. If someone is a moral monster, then self-loathing is exactly the right response for him to have toward himself, especially if this self-loathing leads him to bring about changes

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in himself. Likewise, if there were morally perfect people, then self-love would surely be the right response. But even the morally perfect person would probably need to maintain something of a critical eye toward himself in order to maintain his virtue. Most people who are conscientious about becoming a particular sort of person and make virtue their aim fall somewhere in the middle. They are neither moral monsters nor are they morally perfect. They have flaws, and may or may not be aware of them. For one who is making his way toward virtue, critical self-respect is the reasonable response to himself. He must acknowledge that he has flaws, and he must take them seriously enough to try to improve upon them. But he also cannot wallow in self-pity or self-hatred over his flaws, for this leads to an inability to actively cultivate virtue. He must think of himself as important and deserving of respect but cannot become so preoccupied with himself that he fails to interact with the world around him.

The important point here is to note the difference between the self-knowledgeable person who simply accepts all her flaws, and the self-knowledgeable person who knows which flaws to accept and which must be changed. It is necessary to accept some of our flaws if we are not to lose self-respect, since we cannot remove all flaws, but it is the judgment regarding which flaws are acceptable that is important. The extent to which our flaws prevent us from becoming virtuous will also depend upon the ways in which we act given our knowledge. Knowing my flaws may make me better able to compensate for them, even if I cannot change them. Self-knowledge and self-respect can, and for many people should, go hand in hand.

III. Possible Philosophical Objections

Thus far, I have argued that moral virtue requires self-knowledge, but that self-knowledge does not guarantee virtue. There are, however, a variety of likely objections to such a view. In this section I address several of these objections: 1) the view makes virtue too intellectual, 2) the view fails to take into account those who are naturally good, and 3) the view fails to take into account the possibility of unreflective goodness.

The first objection is that making virtue dependent upon self-knowledge leaves virtue accessible to only a small number of people by making it too intellectual. This criticism is not as troubling as it may seem. The intellectual capacity my view requires is no more than the average person is capable of. I do not deny that virtue is demanding intellectually, but that is a feature of morality in general more than of my particular version of it. Those who have higher intellectual capabilities have greater capacities for understanding the potential subtleties of moral matters, and we do have lower expectations for those whose cognitive abilities are impaired in some way. We might, for example, expect a person who is mentally handicapped to learn to understand the difference between right and wrong in central areas of his life without understanding the subtleties of morality or the reasons why certain things are right or wrong.

It would be a mistake to think of my view as requiring a certain educated kind of intelligence, like that required for succeeding in college. A particular educational background is not required for practical reflectiveness, nor is a more than average IQ. In fact, intelligence in theoretical matters does not guarantee reflectiveness. Highly

intelligent and well-educated people can be unreflective when it comes to everyday living. It is not necessarily that they are incapable of such practical reflection; perhaps they just don't see the importance of it, because they are caught up in their own intellectual endeavors.

On the other hand, there are many people who are quite reflective and knowledgeable about themselves and their lives, yet lack formal education or the sort of intellectual training that goes along with it. Sojourner Truth is just this sort of person.[7] She was reflective both about the life she led and the moral commitments she held, speaking regularly in support of rights for blacks and women. She had the insight and courage to be the first woman to win a custody battle for a child that had been taken from her during slavery, and fought public challenges to her character. She even chose to call herself "Sojourner Truth" in order to have a name that more fully fit her character and her purpose. Yet she did all of this while remaining illiterate and uneducated. This lack of education or cultivated intelligence did not keep her from being reflective about herself or the life she chose to lead, for upon being freed from slavery, she never again followed someone else's plan for her or her life.

A second possible criticism of my view is that it discounts those who are naturally good, and thus have no need for reflection. Someone who is naturally disposed to be kind and caring and gentle may seem to have little need for reflection, either regarding herself or her principles. In fact, it may seem that she hardly needs any principles whatsoever, because she manages to do and say the right things almost

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[7]The following information about Sojourner Truth is from Victoria Ortiz, *Sojourner Truth, A Self-Made Woman* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1974).

without thinking. She acts on her compassionate and empathetic nature and thus manages to do the right things. The temptation is to say that this kind of person is good enough and has no need for reflection to make her better. Reflection wouldn't change any of her actions—she would continue to do all the same things and the tenor of her actions would not be altered. What motivation is there for such a person to engage in the kind of reflection that my view calls for if she is naturally good?

There is very good reason for the naturally (temperamentally) good person to engage in critical self-reflection, not because she needs to change her character, but because it needs to be firmly grounded. Reflection helps to ground such a character by making firm and resolute her values, which in turn may make her more committed to them . In many everyday situations, the naturally good individual will respond well, because she has good ends. Certainly, she will seem appealing; this natural goodness draws us towards a person. However, it is in unusual or stressful circumstances that such a character will break down. The naturally good person whose character is not grounded in reflection will have a harder time maintaining such a character when the going gets tough. Such characters are more fragile than a firmly grounded character. The Milgram experiments, for example, demonstrate a great deal about how easy it is to be led astray under unusual situations. Stressful or unusual situations can prevent the best people from knowing how to react, but those with more firmly grounded characters have a better chance of reacting well to such situations. The naturally good person may have the best foundation on which to ground a strong and virtuous character, but it does have to be grounded. And this can be done with the sort of

reflection that my view endorses. So, I do not suggest that the naturally good character is not worthwhile, but that it can be strengthened through on-going reflection.

A third possible criticism of my view is that it discounts the possibility of unreflective habituated goodness. This criticism parallels the "unreflectively good" criticism addressed above. I take the difference to be this: I have assumed that the naturally good person is unreflective, but one could be unreflective and have the right end without being naturally good. One could, for example, think, feel, and act rightly because one has been raised well. But this training could be so demanding that the child gives no thought to why something is right or wrong, but merely follows the parents' rules. In fact, the child could be taught not to question authority, but to simply obey it. An example of this sort of upbringing might be one in which the parents have strong religious beliefs and take the Bible to hold the key to moral understanding. They teach their child to accept the Bible as the word of God, and to live according to God's commandments and Jesus' example. They are forceful and rigid with regard to their own beliefs and the expectations they maintain for their child, yet believe that, like Jesus, they are to forgive those who believe or do otherwise. The child, then, would learn to be confident in his moral assessments, for he would not question the authority of his parents or of God, and this confidence may carry over into adulthood. If, aside from their failure to encourage reflection, the parents encourage the right thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, the child (and the future adult) may seem, for all practical purposes, to be virtuous. And the child may never give a second thought to morality, for he will never feel a need to do so. So he may be good, even if unreflectively so.

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On one hand, it looks like the sort of individual described above is a good person, because he has the right thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. He has been taught well; however, his character is not as firmly grounded as it would be with proper reflection. His values, commitments, and beliefs are not based on his own reflection, but are accepted simply on the authority of others. He can get along in life a long time with this sort of character. Challenges to his beliefs can be easily dismissed as wrong-headed, and the need to respond to such challenges may be minimal, especially if he can give what seem to him to be adequate, independent reasons for his views. But the dangers in a character like this are two-fold. First, the individual is dogmatic and inflexible. This would be a natural response to challenges that may be difficult for him to make sense of or address. A dogmatic person is less likely to perceive subtle differences in individual cases or identify mitigating circumstances. Second, the individual is unlikely to be able to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate moral authority. Without having engaged in moral reflection over any matter, an individual is likely unable to do so when necessary. Being able to know when to stand up against authority is a very important part of being virtuous—this is one of the few things that Socrates claimed to know.[8] He claimed it to be important to obey authority, but also demonstrated his willingness to disobey orders if the authority (or the order) was illegitimate. We also expect military men and women to make such distinctions, expecting them to disobey illegitimate orders. This presupposes their ability to think reflectively and necessitates a character grounded in reflection.

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[8]In the *Apology*, Socrates relates three times in which he did or would disobey an order, presumably because the order (or those giving it) were illegitimate. See *Apology* 29c-d and 32b-d.

In this section, I have responded to three possible objections to my view. The first objection addressed the intellectual component of my view. The second and third of these objections were directed at the reflective component of self-knowledge, and I have argued that even though unreflective people are not necessarily bad or immoral people, the sort of reflection required for self-knowledge is important for having the best and strongest sort of moral character. I now turn to an objection raised by Julia Driver.

IV. The Driver Objection

In her article, "The Virtues of Ignorance," Julia Driver argues that the claim that virtue requires knowledge is mistaken.[9] She claims that there is a special class of virtues, the "virtues of ignorance," which require for their possession that an agent be ignorant of himself in certain ways. If correct, this would mean that there are certain virtues that agents couldn't possess if they possessed self-knowledge. And this would undermine my thesis that virtue requires self-knowledge. In this section, I present her argument for the virtues of ignorance, showing why her claims do not undermine my view.

Modesty is Driver's paradigm case of a virtue of ignorance, though she suggests that the class of such virtues might be large (blind charity and a refusal to hold a grudge are other contenders). She presents an "underestimation" account of modesty, which requires that to be modest one must underestimate one's self-worth, and thus genuinely lack self-knowledge. In taking such a view of modesty, Driver

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[9]Julia Driver. "The Virtues of Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 3 (July 1989): 373-384.

rejects two other possible accounts of modesty. The first is a behaviorist account of modesty, which requires only that the modest person exhibit modest behavior. Modest behavior, on Driver's view, is an important part of modesty, but not sufficient for modesty. The second account she rejects is an understatement account of modesty, which requires only that one understate one's worth, not that one lack knowledge of it. This, she thinks, amounts to only "false modesty," not the genuine sort of modesty with which she is concerned.

On Driver's view, both internal and external features characterize modesty; it is an "attitude of ignorance that leads to patterns of modest behavior."[10] Moreover, one must be regularly inclined to such an attitude—"modesty can be characterized as a dogmatic disposition to underestimation of self-worth."[11] The modest person, then, acts modestly without knowing it, since he doesn't know that he is underestimating himself. Others could know that he is modest, but he cannot know himself that he is modest. Knowing this would undermine the virtue, making it at best false modesty. This, Driver argues, is what explains the oddity of someone's saying, "I am modest."[12] Other standard virtues, like generosity, differ from the virtues of ignorance in that there is not this asymmetry between what the agent can know about himself, and what others can know about him. There is nothing odd about someone's honestly knowing and saying, "I am generous."

Another important feature of the virtues of ignorance is that they are involuntary. A person cannot choose to be modest if he understands his own self-

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[10]Ibid., 377.
[11]Ibid., 378.
[12]Ibid., 379-380.

worth. Moreover, he doesn't have a choice about being ignorant. Because these virtues require ignorance, they cannot be voluntarily cultivated. Thus, it is likely that only those who are naturally inclined to them are capable of attaining them. It is unlikely, and even practically problematic, for someone to decide to cultivate a dogmatic inclination to underestimate himself. Driver acknowledges that self-deception may be the only possible route to modesty if one does not come to it naturally. A person would have to regularly and consistently tell himself falsehoods with regard to his own self-worth to have any chance of becoming modest. Even then, Driver suggests that if modesty has to be cultivated like this it might not be a virtue. So it is possible that only those who come to them naturally could have the virtues of ignorance.[13]

Driver's claims regarding the virtues of ignorance, and more specifically, the virtue of modesty, amount to the following: 1) modesty requires being ignorant of some important feature of yourself, 2) it is impossible for the agent who possesses the virtue of modesty to know she possesses it, 3) an agent can only possess the virtue of modesty if she is naturally predisposed to it or, perhaps, acquires it through self-deception. If Driver is correct that modesty, as she has described it, is really a virtue, then it is false that virtue requires self-knowledge. However, Driver's account of modesty is not the most plausible account.

A more plausible account of modesty, the "nonoverestimation" account, is presented by Flanagan. He claims that "the modest person may well have a perfectly accurate sense of her accomplishments and worth but she does not overestimate

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[13]Ibid., 382-383.

them."[14] Flanagan acknowledges that behavior is also an important component of modesty. Thus, on such a view, accurate self-assessment is not enough to be modest. One could very well accurately assess one's self-worth and be a braggart. But one could also accurately assess one's self-worth and be modest. The accurate assessment is not the only important criteria: the way in which one thinks of oneself with respect to and presents oneself to others also matters. A person could, for example, accurately believe himself to be a good musician, but recognize that many other people are also good musicians, and so think that this doesn't make him a particularly outstanding human being. Similarly, he could think that being a good musician is not any more important than being a good athlete, or being charitable, or having any other number of good traits, so that he accurately assesses himself, but takes a wider perspective on the world. What distinguishes the modest person from the immodest person is his ability to put his self-worth in perspective with the worth of other human beings and behave accordingly.

The idea of modesty as accurately assessing one's accomplishments, but not overestimating them, is preferable to Driver's underestimation account for several reasons. First, the nonoverestimation account avoids the consequence that the modest person cannot know he is modest, because as Flanagan argues, the fastest runner in the world could both recognize his accomplishments and know that he is modest.[15] Being the fastest runner in the world is a hard fact to deny, so he would have no reason to be deluded about this accomplishment, but he could also know that he is modest because

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[14]Owen Flanagan, "Virtue and Ignorance" in *Self Expressions: Mind, Morals, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 176.
[15]Ibid.

sports commentators are always commenting on his modesty. His modesty may be the result of assessing his accomplishments as less important than others are inclined to: he may think that being the fastest runner in the world is largely due to luck, or just not that important in the big scheme of things. But regardless of the reason for his assessment, as long as he assesses himself accurately and knows it, there is no reason he must be deceived about his own modesty. The nonoverestimation account requires merely that one not overestimate one's worth. Insofar as the fastest runner in the world accomplishes this, he can be modest and know that he is.

Second, as Flanagan points out, the nonoverestimation account allows that one can work at becoming modest without any self-deception.[16] Driver's account is problematic with respect to the possibility of working at becoming modest, because it requires either that one cultivate the vice of self-deception in order to have the virtue of modesty, or that one can only have the virtue of modesty if one comes by it naturally. Either of these options is bad. The nonoverestimation account avoids both of these problems by requiring simply that one make a concerted effort to understand one's own worth vis-à-vis that of others. One must learn to be careful to keep one's accomplishments and worth in perspective, and to learn to weigh them accurately with respect to the accomplishments and worth of others. This, rather than requiring self-deception, would require cultivating self-knowledge.

A final strength of the nonoverestimation account not considered by Flanagan is that the nonoverestimation account allows that one can be modest and still maintain

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[16]Ibid., 177.

contact with reality. It is a failure of Driver's account that modesty requires being deluded about reality, because successful action requires being in touch with reality. Promoting delusion of any sort as a desirable trait will result in human beings who are out of touch with the world in which they live, and thus their own and others' needs and well-being. People who are deluded about themselves, even if this involves underestimating themselves, must also then be deluded about others. On Driver's view, one would not only need to underestimate one's own worth, but this would require that one view others as more worthy than they are. Endorsing such delusion about the relationships between people makes having other virtues difficult. It would, for example, be hard to know what justice demands, if one is mistaken about the relative worth of people. Thus, it might be true that having modesty would make it more difficult to have other virtues that require accurate assessments of the world. In this way, the nonoverestimation account is superior, for it does not require any such delusions, and in fact, requires accurate contact with reality, which will make having the other virtues more likely as well.

In this section, I have argued that Driver's account of modesty as "a dogmatic disposition to underestimate self-worth" does not undermine my claim that self-knowledge is required for virtue, because there is an alternative account of modesty that does not have the same negative consequences as Driver's account. On this alternative account the virtue of modesty requires accurately assessing oneself. As such, the virtue of modesty is not inconsistent with self-knowledge, but highlights its importance.

V. The Taylor and Brown Objection

The most potentially damaging criticism of my view comes not from another philosopher, but from the psychological literature. In their well-known article, "Illusion and Well-Being," Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown argue that most people suffer from positive illusions, and that these positive illusions may actually increase psychological well-being and social functioning.[17] If Taylor and Brown are correct on both accounts, this wouldn't directly undermine my thesis, but it would make my thesis considerably less plausible in two ways. First, it would seem unreasonable to endorse self-knowledge as a moral good if it is virtually impossible to achieve, for then the moral theory I am proposing would be accessible to few, if any, people. Second, it would be a considerable weakness of my theory if it undermined the possibility for happiness. I have not claimed that there is any necessary connection between virtue and happiness; nevertheless, a theory of virtue that is inconsistent with psychological well-being and happiness is highly suspect. In this section, I address the Taylor and Brown thesis, briefly explaining their claims and showing why their conclusions need not make my theory any less plausible.

It has been a long-held assumption that accurate contact with reality is a crucial component of mental health. Such well-known psychologists as Maslow, Allport, Fromm, Jahoda, and Jourand and Landsman have held this "traditional view."[18] For example, it is an important characteristic of Maslow's self-actualized individuals that they "find it possible to accept themselves and their own nature without chagrin or

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[17]Shelley E. Taylor and Jonathon D. Brown, "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health" *Psychological Bulletin* 103, no. 2 (1998): 193-210.
[18]The term "traditional view" is from Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and*

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complaint"; in addition, Jourard and Landsman have claimed that the "ability to perceive reality as it 'really is'" is one of two preconditions for developing a healthy personality.[19] Taylor and Brown did a review of the data presented in numerous psychological studies, and on the basis of this review, they argue that the traditional view does not hold up to the data as well as it is thought to. In fact, they argue that psychologically healthy people regularly fail to have contact with reality in a variety of ways, and that the requirement of contact with reality ought to be dropped.

Taylor and Brown's review of the data suggests that most people experience "positive illusions" in a variety of ways: they have unrealistically positive views of themselves, they overestimate the degree to which they control situations of chance, and they are unrealistically optimistic about their futures. The following is a brief summary of their findings in favor of the claim that people do in fact experience such positive illusions.

Unrealistically positive views of the self[20]

1. Normal subjects judge positive traits to be overwhelmingly more characteristic of self than negative attributes.

2. Subjects judge their poor abilities to be common, but their favored abilities as rare and distinctive.

3. People are inclined to appraise themselves and their close associates in far more positive and less negative terms than they appraise most other people.

Psychological Realism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 318.

[19]A. H. Maslow, "Self-Actualizing People: A Study of Psychological Health" *Personality*, Symposium No. 1: 11-34; S.M. Jourard and T. Landsman, *Healthy Personality: An Approach From the Viewpoint of Humanistic Psychology*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980); quoted in Taylor and Brown, 193-194.

[20]195-196. The findings listed here are paraphrased from Taylor and Brown, though I have tried to be faithful to their terminology whenever possible.

4. People give others less credit for success and more blame for failure than they ascribe to themselves.

5. Subjects' self-ratings are regularly more positive than the ratings of objective observers.

What this data shows is that people are not equally attentive to the negative and positive aspects of themselves. Most people have a perception of the self that is heavily weighted toward the positive aspects, and have a distinct tendency to view themselves as better than others. In fact, most subjects rate themselves as better than the average person in a variety of ways, and it is, of course, impossible for *most* subjects to be better than average. There is, however, one group that tends to evaluate themselves more accurately. Depressed individuals seem to perform better on such tests than others: they rate themselves in a more even-handed manner, they assess credit more accurately, and display greater congruence between self-attribution and other-attribution.

Illusions of control[21]

1. People act as if they have control in situations that are determined by chance, such as gambling situations.

2. People infer that they have greater control if they personally throw dice than if someone else does it for them.

3. When people expect to produce a certain outcome and the outcome occurs, they overestimate the extent to which they exerted control over the situation.

This data shows that people generally believe themselves to have

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[21]Ibid., 196.

control over situations that are driven purely by chance. It makes no

difference, for example, who throws the dice, for it is not a matter of skill how

the dice land on the table, but only a matter of chance. Again, however,

depressed people are an exception. They are more accurate in assessing the

degree of their control in the world than are those who are not depressed.

Unrealistic Optimism[22]

1. People believe that the present is better than the past, and the future will be better than the present.

2. College students report more than four times as many positive possibilities for their future than negative.

3. People believe they are more likely than their peers to experience positive events (e.g., liking their first job, having a gifted child), and less likely than their peers to experience negative events (e.g., being a crime victim, becoming ill or depressed).

4. Subjects' predictions of what will occur correspond closely to what they would like to see happen.

5. Adults and children overestimate how well they will perform on future tasks.

Such optimism is illusory, Taylor and Brown argue, not because good

things don't happen, but because people take themselves to be more likely than

others to have positive futures or to experience positive events. People tend to

have warm feelings about the future for many people, but consider their own

prospects in an even more positive light. However, not everybody's future can

be more positive than that of their peers. And yet again, depressed people and

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[22]Ibid., 196-197.

those with low self-esteem are the note-worthy exceptions, entertaining more balanced conceptions of their futures.

These positive illusions, Taylor and Brown argue, contribute to people's subjective feeling of happiness or well-being, their capacity for social bonding, and their capacity for creative, productive work. People who see themselves in a positive light, have feelings of control, and exhibit optimism about their futures are more likely to report that they are currently happy than are people who lack these perceptions. Much of the evidence is highly correlational, but some positive causal information has been gained by causing subjects to attribute success or failure to themselves and then assessing their mood. Those who attributed success to themselves (and failure to the task at hand) reported more positive mood, and those who attributed failure to themselves (and success to the task) reported more negative moods. This provides some evidence for the claim that positive illusions contribute to happiness.[23]

Taylor and Brown support the connection between positive illusions and the capacity for social bonding with the following claims.[24] High self-evaluations in children are correlated with actual and perceived popularity among peers. In addition, people with unrealistically high self-esteem and optimism about the future were better able to cope with loneliness in the first year of college than were others. Illusions also help with social functioning indirectly via their ability to create a positive mood, for people in a good mood are more likely to get along with, and provide assistance to, others than are those in a bad mood.

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[23]Ibid., 198.
[24]Ibid.

Positive illusions help contribute to the capacity for creative and productive work by improving intellectual functioning, as well as contributing to motivation and persistence.[25] Taylor and Brown admit that the evidence linking positive illusions to improved intellectual functioning is sparse, and that it is unknown whether there is any direct link. Their suggestion that there is a possible connection relies on the fact that memory tends to be organized in such a way that people better recall information related to themselves. In addition, positive illusions may affect intellectual functioning by improving mood, for positive mood can contribute to the ability to recall information and can facilitate the use of efficient problem-solving strategies. But there is also evidence that positive mood contributes to the tendency to use simple strategies that are poorly suited to complex decision-making processes.[26]

The evidence for the connection between positive illusions and increased motivation and persistence is more persuasive. Positive self-conceptions are associated with working longer and harder on tasks, which in turn is associated with better performance.[27] People with high self-esteem also evaluate their work more positively, which leads to greater motivation. High expectations of success are also associated with stronger motivation and better performance.

Giving the kinds of evidence presented here, Taylor and Brown conclude that people's positive illusions about themselves, the extent to which they have control, and their prospects for the future contribute significantly to mental health and a subjectively satisfying life:

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[25]Ibid.
[26]Ibid., 199.
[27]Ibid.

The individual who responds to negative, ambiguous, or unsupportive feedback with a positive sense of self, a belief in personal efficacy, and an optimistic sense of the future will, we maintain, be happier, more caring, and more productive than the individual who perceives this same information accurately and integrates it into his or her view of the self, the world, and the future.[28]

Moreover, they suggest that in light of their findings such a capacity should be encouraged: "the capacity to develop and maintain positive illusions may be thought of as a valuable human resource to be nurtured and promoted, rather than an error-prone processing system to be corrected."[29]

If true, the Taylor and Brown thesis has the potential to render my thesis quite implausible. However, there are a variety of reasons to be skeptical of their claims. There are two aspects of their claim to consider: 1) the evidence for positive illusions, and 2) the extent to which these illusions contribute to well-being. In spite of the preponderance of data that Taylor and Brown present, it remains unclear that the evidence for optimism and its benefits is as strong as they suggest. I will address each component of these positive illusions in turn: unrealistically positive views of self, illusions of control, and unrealistic optimism.

The claim that most people have unrealistically positive views of the self is grounded predominantly in studies that rely on subjects' self-reporting of traits. A possible problem with such studies is their ecological validity, that is, whether or not the results found in the experimental setting correspond to people's behavior in real-life situations.[30] Insofar as these studies required people to report on their own traits,

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[28]Ibid., 205.
[29]Ibid.
[30]David A. Jopling, "'Take Away the Life-Lie . . .': Positive Illusions and Creative Self-Deception" *Philosophical Psychology* 9, no. 4 (1996): 532-533. Jopling discusses in more detail a variety of

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the strongest factor counting against ecological validity is that experimental settings are not conducive to the subtlety in questioning that is possible in real-life situations. Usually, when people attribute traits to themselves, they do so in very context-specific settings. They describe certain features with respect to specific areas of their lives. If in intimate conversation, you asked someone to describe herself, she might describe what she is like as a mother, or a friend, or as a student, but what she says might be qualified in certain ways. She may say that she is usually patient, but quickly loses her temper when she becomes stressed. Experimental conditions, out of necessity, cannot incorporate all the subtleties of real-life settings. Since Taylor and Brown's article is a review article, that is, it incorporates data from many different studies, it is difficult to know to what extent each of these studies, and thus the composite data, is ecologically valid. Thus, such findings cannot be assumed to simply and easily apply to real-life situations without further evidence of their ecological validity.

Their findings with respect to illusions of control and unrealistic optimism are much less troubling. That people over-estimate the extent to which they control situations of chance, such as gambling situations, is not surprising. Many people don't always reason very well, and don't quite comprehend what it means for something to be a game of chance. This doesn't say much about their self-understanding, *per se*, but does speak to their objective reasoning abilities. Many people make mistakes in reasoning that result in their making unrealistic about themselves. But if they understood how to reason well about these kinds of

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problems with ecological validity in studies of this sort.

situations, they might not make the same kinds of mistakes about themselves. That people make such mistakes does make them somewhat deluded about the control they have over the world, but is understandable, even if it is recognized to be irrational. One may, for example, prefer to be the one throwing the die, so that no one else is to blame if it is "a bad throw," even though that in itself is a matter of chance. This implies that people are poor reasoners in certain kinds of situations, rather than necessarily deluded about themselves.

Taylor and Brown also report that subjects were unrealistically optimistic about their futures. In one study they report, the subjects were all college students. In that case, these students may, in fact, have more positive futures than the average person. Just the fact that they are in college greatly increases their chances of having a variety of good things happen to them, such as liking their first job, earning a good salary, or having a gifted child. For these students, being optimistic about the future may be realistic. This optimism can also be explained in another way, which Taylor and Brown acknowledge: when people are asked about the future, they tend to report how they would like their future to be, rather than what they really think it will be like. That is, what they report are hopes, not beliefs. That people report what they would like the future to hold, rather than what is statistically likely may mean that they don't always behave in a perfectly rational manner, but doesn't imply that they lack self-understanding.

But even if people do suffer from positive illusions, are these illusions really necessary for mental health? What about the fact that depressed people seem not to suffer the same illusions? Does this imply that being realistic makes one depressed?

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Colvin and Block provide evidence showing that Taylor and Brown's claim that such

positive illusions contribute to mental health is questionable at best.[31] According to

Colvin and Block, there simply is not sufficient data to make such a judgment, and

there is certainly data that suggests the contrary. They consider each of the studies

that Taylor and Brown cite, claiming that the studies do not show the strong

correlation that Taylor and Brown suggest. One study shows, for example, that not

only do psychologically healthy people tend to overestimate themselves, but so do

people who suffer from psychological disorders other than depression. This would

indicate that the important relationship holds not between positive illusions and

mental health, but between positive illusions and a lack of depression.[32] But, even

more importantly, it has been shown that there are psychologically healthy people

who do not suffer from positive illusions:

> Compton (1992) identified a group of subjects manifesting, conjointly,
> high self-esteem and an absence of positive illusions and found such
> individuals to be not depressed, not maladjusted, not neurotic, not
> personality disordered, and not psychotic relative to individuals of low
> self-esteem. When compared with individuals manifesting high self-
> esteem and also positive illusions, the self-regarding, nonillusional
> individuals were higher on self-criticism and personality integration and
> lower on psychotocism (see also Block & Thomas, 1955). These latter
> two studies suggest that exaggerated self-esteem does not necessarily
> correlate with or foster psychological adjustment. Furthermore, they
> suggest that realistic positive self-esteem can exist and that such self-
> esteem might serve as an indicator of a multifaceted psychological
> adjustment.[33]

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[31]C. Randall Colvin and Jack Block, "Do Positive Illusions Foster Mental Health? An Examination of the Taylor and Brown Formulation" *Psychological Bulletin* 116, no. 1 (1994): 3-20.
[32]Colvin and Block, 7-8.
[33]Ibid., 9. The references within the quoted passage are to the following articles.
W. C. Compton, "Are Positive Illusions Necessary for Self-esteem: A Research Note," *Personality and Individual Differences* 13 (1992): 1343-1344.
J. Block and H. Thomas, "Is Satisfaction with Self a Measure of Adjustment?" *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 51 (1955): 254-259.

This would indicate that there is no strong connection between positive

illusions and mental health, and thus no good reason to endorse positive illusions as a

means to mental health. But the question remains whether positive illusions have any

of the other beneficial consequences that Taylor and Brown suggest. I focus here on

their claim that positive illusions promote happiness, arguing that they provide

insufficient evidence for their claim. Moreover, I argue that positive illusions can

result in a variety of other very negative consequences for social functioning not

considered by Taylor and Brown.

One beneficial consequence Taylor and Brown endorse is that positive illusions

contribute to happiness. This is, however, too strong a claim for the evidence. Many

people report being happy most of the time, and even that they believe themselves to

be happier than the average person, but this shows no causal connection between

positive illusions and happiness. The only attempts to show such a connection have

measured merely "positive affect" or someone's current mood, not happiness. In the

one relevant study, there were two groups of subjects who each attempted a particular

task.[34] Each group was led to believe that they had failed at the task, but one group

was encouraged to attribute this failure to a problem with the task itself, whereas the

other group was encouraged to attribute their failure to themselves. Subjects' moods

were then measured. The subjects who were led to attribute failure to the task

reported more positive moods than those who were led to attribute the failure to

themselves. This, Taylor and Brown have claimed, shows that positive illusions

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[34]Taylor and Brown, 198.

contribute to positive mood. It is no surprise that those who felt that the failure was

not their own doing reported better moods, for we all like to feel successful, but it is

unclear that this shows anything about happiness or even whether the subjects tend

towards positive illusions. The subjects haven't assessed their own success or

failure—they have merely come to whatever conclusion the experimenters have

encouraged. More importantly, good mood and happiness are not the same thing. On

our most common understanding, happiness involves a general feeling of subjective

well-being. Being in a temporary good mood simply cannot approximate a sense of

over-all well-being. Thus the evidence that positive illusions contribute to happiness

is weak at best.

The more serious problem with Taylor and Brown's thesis is that positive

illusions are not the panacea that they make them out to be, for being deceived in the

ways they suggest has serious negative consequences for social functioning. David

Jopling suggests that positive illusions inhibit "responsiveness to the real."[35] He

claims that even though from a first-person perspective it may seem better to be

illusioned, our ability to respond to others, and thus to have a full and complete life, is

inhibited by being out of touch with reality. Part of our ability to respond properly to

the world and the situations presented to us depends upon our ability to see the

relevant features of the situation and recognize how to respond to it. The greater our

illusions, the greater are the limits on our ability to interpret situations and understand

others. He suggests that "as more aspects of the self are closed off from view, there

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[35]Jopling, 535-536.

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comes the risk of a corresponding stunting of emotional and moral growth." This supports my claims for the importance of self-knowledge in practical wisdom.

This claim that those who suffer positive illusions will suffer poor social functioning need not be accepted on purely philosophical grounds, for there is recent psychological evidence to support the claim. It has long been thought that people who are prone to violence are so because they suffer from a lack of self-esteem. Current data suggests something very different. Bushman and Baumeister recently published studies showing that, in fact, it is an inflated sense of self-esteem that may lead to violence.[36] In other words, those whose self-worth is not grounded in reality are more prone to aggression than others. Through an extensive questionnaire (more than 500 questions), they divided subjects into those whose self-concept was grounded in reality and those who showed signs of narcissism. Subjects were then asked to write an essay and given feedback on the essay. The feedback was either positive (e.g., "great essay") or quite negative (e.g., "the worst essay I've ever read"). After receiving this feedback, subjects were given the opportunity to act out aggressively toward the person giving the feedback. Subjects who showed narcissistic tendencies were considerably more likely to be aggressive and to lash out at the source of the criticism than were those whose self-esteem was better grounded. Bushman and Baumeister have even suggested that certain children guilty of school shootings fit their paradigm

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[36]Brad J. Bushman and Roy F. Baumeister, "Threatened Egotism, Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and Direct and Displaced Aggression: Does Self-Love or Self-Hate Lead to Violence?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, no. 1 (1998): 219-229.

quite well, and maintain that high self-esteem should not be thought to be a good in itself if it is not grounded in actual accomplishments.[37]

Bushman and Baumeister's research illustrates that positive illusions may make us feel better, but may in the long run be damaging to our social functioning. Most people will eventually be faced with a situation in which their positive illusions will be shattered. Joan Didion reports just this sort of experience:

> I had not been elected to Phi Beta Kappa. This failure could scarcely have been more predictable or less ambiguous (I simply did not have the grades), but I was unnerved by it; I had somehow thought myself a kind of academic Raskolnikov, curiously exempt from the cause-effect relationships which hampered others. Although even the humorless nineteen-year-old that I was must have recognized that the situation lacked real tragic stature, the day that I did not make Phi Beta Kappa nonetheless marked the end of something, and innocence may well be the word for it. I lost the conviction that lights would always turn green for me, the pleasant certainty that those rather passive virtues which had won me approval as a child automatically guaranteed me not only Phi Beta Kappa keys but happiness, honor, and the love of a good man; lost a certain touching faith in the totem of good manners, clean hair, and proven competence on the Stanford-Binet scale. To such doubtful amulets had my self-respect been pinned, and I faced myself that day with the nonplused apprehension of someone who has come across a vampire and has no crucifix at hand.[38]

Presumably, Didion's experience was not such a horrible reality-check that she was unable to recover, for in retrospect she sees the truth quite clearly for what it is. Nevertheless, at the time the experience was certainly painful. At one time or another, everyone is likely to be forced to face the truth, and if an individual's illusions are not too strong, this will be temporarily painful, but she can usually come out better for it. If, however, these illusions are so strong that the person is unable to revise her

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[37]Sharon Begley, "You're OK, I'm Terrific: 'Self-Esteem' Backfires," *Newsweek*, 13 July 1998, 69.
[38]Joan Didion. "On Self-Respect," in *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*, ed. Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 550.

conception of herself in the face of evidence to the contrary, then real trouble is likely to surface. This is just what Bushman and Baumeister have demonstrated. This would indicate that an attitude towards ourselves of openness to revision is preferable to hiding our heads in the sand as Taylor and Brown suggest.

My purpose in this chapter has been to argue that self-knowledge is integral to moral virtue. I argued that self-knowledge is an indispensable component of practical wisdom, showing that it is virtually impossible to make the kinds of judgments demanded by practical wisdom without self-knowledge, by addressing each of three components of practical wisdom. I then illustrated the fact that the relationship between virtue and self-knowledge is not a two-way street, by showing the variety of ways in which one could have self-knowledge but not virtue. Sections III-V of this chapter were devoted to responding to a variety of criticisms of my view. In section III, I addressed three possible philosophical criticisms, including the possibility that my view makes morality too intellectual, that my view fails to acknowledge the possibility of natural goodness, and that my view fails to account for unreflective goodness. In section IV, I argued against Julia Driver's claim that there is a class of virtues that requires ignorance of oneself. Finally, in section V, I argued against Taylor and Brown's claims that people generally suffer positive illusions, and more importantly, that these illusions are beneficial. In the next chapter, I turn to a discussion of responsibility for self-knowledge.

CHAPTER 6

RESPONSIBILITY FOR SELF-KNOWLEDGE

AND MORAL EDUCATION

In this chapter I argue that, within limits, we are responsible for acquiring self-knowledge. In presenting my arguments, I compare and contrast responsibility for self-knowledge with responsibility for other conditions or components of virtue. In the process of these comparisons, the ways in which we are responsible for self-knowledge become clearer as do the limits on such responsibility.

In the first section, I present an Aristotelian argument for responsibility for character in general, for it provides the foundation for my conception of responsibility for self-knowledge. In the second section, I show how the same kind of general argument applies more specifically to responsibility for self-knowledge, comparing and contrasting the development of, and our responsibility for, self-knowledge with other components of character, such as good ends, right action, and right emotions. In the third section, I acknowledge that our image of ourselves can be difficult to change once it is developed, but that this need not undermine responsibility for self-knowledge. In the final section, I summarize the project thus far, and conclude that explaining the importance of responsibility for self-knowledge helps to explain certain aspects of responsibility for character.

I. Aristotle on Responsibility for Character

In Chapter 4, I discussed Aristotle's conception of the acquisition of virtue, according to which virtues are habituated traits of character that develop through the repetition of like actions, so that one becomes generous by repeatedly performing generous actions and temperate by repeatedly performing temperate actions. Only when one characteristically and habitually acts virtuously can one be properly called "virtuous."

On the Aristotelian account, character is partly voluntary because it is the product of many voluntary actions. An individual might make a conscientious effort to develop a character of a certain sort; she may make virtue (or vice) her end, and in each situation conscientiously act so that she will eventually develop a virtuous (or vicious) character. But no such conscientious effort or commitment is necessary for one's character to be considered partly voluntary. It is sufficient that each action that contributes to one's character be voluntary, even if there is no plan or method in place for developing a certain sort of character. Insofar as each individual action is voluntary, the character that results will be partly voluntary as well, and thus we are properly considered responsible for our characters.

Suppose, for example, that I postpone working on my paper today so that I can clean my house; then tomorrow I postpone working on my paper so that I can help a friend move; and the next day I decide to postpone working on my paper because I am exhausted and decide that I deserve a break. I may also rather frequently think that it is okay to postpone work that needs to be done "just this once." In fact, I may even say that I do not want to become a procrastinator and mean it, yet believe that I have

good reason to postpone my work "just this once." Although these actions are

contrary to the desire not to be a procrastinator, because they are procrastinating

actions, a procrastinator is what I will likely become if I allow myself to continue in

this manner. This illustrates Aristotle's claim that character is not voluntary in the

same way that actions are voluntary:

> Actions and states, however, are not voluntary in the same way. For
> we are in control of the actions from the origin to the end, when we
> know the particulars. With states, however, we are in control of the
> origin, but do not know, any more than with sickness, what the
> cumulative effect of particular actions will be; none the less, since it
> was up to us to exercise a capacity either this way or another way,
> states are voluntary (1114b30-1115a3).[1]

Even though Aristotle says that the gradual progress of our characters is not

obvious, he doesn't think that we can be totally unaware of where our actions will

lead:

> [Only] a totally insensible person would not know that each type of
> activity is the source of the corresponding state; hence if someone does
> what he knows will make him unjust, he is willingly unjust. Moreover,
> it is unreasonable for someone doing injustice not to wish to be just, or
> for someone doing intemperate actions not to wish to be intemperate
> (1114a10-15).

I would be a thoroughly senseless person not to recognize that consistently

procrastinating will make me a procrastinator. Therefore, I am responsible for having

become a procrastinator.

But if it is supposed to be obvious where our actions will lead, why do we still

tend to act in ways that will make us vicious or incontinent? One possibility is that we

simply choose to dismiss the warning signs. This happens with all kinds of bad habits.

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[1] All parenthetical references in this chapter are to Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985).

Many people who want to lose weight, for example, still continue to overeat. They may realize in the midst of overeating precisely what they are doing, be well aware that if they continue to overeat they will be overweight, and claim to want to lose weight. They may even know that they have gained several pounds in the last month. Perhaps they think it won't matter if they overeat just this once, without acknowledging that they are constantly making excuses for themselves, or maybe they think they can change their behavior tomorrow rather than today. But the important point is that, at some level, they do understand that overeating leads to being overweight, and they make their decision to overeat regardless of this fact. Their choice to overeat in this situation is a choice made voluntarily.

The same sort of analysis applies to character traits as to weight loss. It should be no more surprising that the person who always responds to situations with too much anger will become irascible than that the person who overeats will become overweight. People may choose to ignore what they know, or fail to consciously acknowledge what they should know, but their individual actions are no less voluntary, making the resulting character partly voluntary as well.

However, character is voluntary only up to a point, because it is not entirely in our own control. Much of the groundwork for our character has been laid at a young age, long before the age of full responsibility. Thus the kind of moral education one receives can reduce one's responsibility for one's character. A good upbringing teaches us to find pleasure and displeasure in the right things, to take pleasure in virtuous actions and displeasure in vicious actions. The importance of a good upbringing lies in the fact that if these things are not learned early on, they are more

difficult to learn later. If a child is not brought up well he will have difficulty choosing the right ends and actions, and will eventually have difficulty developing a good character. He will choose the wrong sorts of actions, therefore learning to feel pleasure in the wrong things, and developing a bad character. In part, the child learns what it is to be virtuous by modeling himself after other good people, but if he has no good example to follow, then it is harder to become virtuous.

Having a good moral education is not entirely a matter of having good parents. Good parents help, of course, and having good parents who take their job of teaching morality seriously is probably enough. The role of parents is particularly important, because they have the most intimate, powerful relationship with the child; however, many other sources may influence the child as well, hopefully reinforcing the good example that parents have set, but potentially counteracting a bad example set by parents or working against the parents' good example. If a child does not have good parents, it doesn't follow that the child cannot have a good moral education. While children learn a lot about values at home, they also learn about them through friends, neighbors, teachers, ministers, stories, television, music, etc. Teachers at school inculcate values when they demand certain classroom conduct. Children visit the homes of their friends where they see different examples of family interaction and may conform to different expectations of how to relate to other people. Stories, television, and music enable them to have an even broader range of experiences, if only vicariously.

But moral education isn't merely a matter of having been taught things by other people, it is also a matter of coming to our own moral understanding. In Chapter

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5, I argued that coming to one's own moral understanding is central to moral virtue and this lack is partly what makes the "naturally good" person less than virtuous. As I argued there, regardless of whether or not what we have been taught is right, there comes a point at which we must determine for ourselves what is good. We must make the moral knowledge our own. Virtue requires more than that we behave in the right ways; in order to be virtuous, our actions must flow from understanding. Having good parents or other role models can certainly give one an edge with respect to developing moral understanding.

If an individual's early moral education has been bad, then gaining the right understanding is much more difficult; it requires the recognition that what one has been taught is wrong. The individual must recognize that others do not share the views that she has been taught or that what she has been taught does not seem to correspond well to her own experiences. This may start happening when she reaches the age that her family no longer constitutes her primary experience of the world. For example, a person who grows up with racist parents may eventually come to see how misguided her upbringing has been when she learns something different in school or from her friends. It may not be until high school or college that she develops the ability to be more fully reflective about her inherited views, or when there are greater and more open challenges to the views she has been taught. She will be exposed to different values, but must be able to weigh them and make the proper choices.

As the child matures, she develops the ability to think reflectively about these experiences and to start to think in terms of the sort of person she would like to be. It is this sort of understanding that comes harder to those with bad early moral

educations, but it can still be gained. Some people may have virtually no chance to develop a good character because their upbringing has been so horrific—perhaps filled with terrible physical and emotional abuse—that it is nearly impossible to overcome it. There are, of course, people who manage to survive terrible childhoods and even to thrive in their adult lives, but they are probably few and far between. Many others do not have the psychological or emotional resources to do so. In these extreme cases, bad moral education seems to remove all responsibility for developing a good character. In short, the important role of moral education in character development gives us all different degrees of advantage and disadvantage, making it hard to claim that all people are equally responsible for their characters.

II.   Responsibility for Self-knowledge

In this section I apply the general Aristotelian understanding of responsibility for character presented in section I to self-knowledge more specifically. In the process of doing so, I address the importance of moral education in the development of self-knowledge, and contrast the development of and our responsibility for self-knowledge with other components of character, such as good ends, right action, and right feeling.

As discussed in Chapter 3, self-knowledge develops in a variety of ways, but predominantly through critical self-reflection, interpersonal relationships, and enlightening life experiences. It is not the kind of thing that occurs naturally or comes to one all at once—the development of self-knowledge takes time. Some aspects of self-knowledge come to us very early. Even young children know some things about themselves—their likes and dislikes, some of the things that make them happy or unhappy, and some of their talents and strengths. Their understanding of themselves

continues to grow and develop over time with further experience. It is only through ongoing life experience and continued self-reflection that self-knowledge can develop, and it is a process that is never complete. There is almost always more to learn about ourselves, even if our lives have been an ongoing process of critical self-reflection.

Some insights into ourselves arise suddenly, when the mind is in the proper state. This was illustrated by Socrates' interlocutors. Those who were unable to revise their own views of themselves couldn't learn from what should have been an enlightening situation. The ideal interlocutors were in a state of mind that enabled them to revise their own opinions of themselves. Even these enlightening experiences require that we be prepared to accept what they teach us, and it may take time to process and fully grasp just what it is that we have learned about ourselves. Lots of important life decisions seem to be made all at once, in a flurry of understanding, but in reality, we have been preparing for them for some time. Sometimes enlightening experiences are truly surprises, in others, the catalyst is finally there to prompt us to grasp the insight that has been gradually creeping up on us.

For example, when I first started college, I thought that I would become a professional dancer. I had already had years of training, spent my summers away from home at a professional school, and firmly committed myself to dancing. I auditioned for and was accepted by a good college ballet program, and enrolled without a second thought. What more could I want, after preparing for this for years? Unfortunately, my year there was not particularly satisfying, though this didn't register with me at first. I felt out of place; I just didn't seem to belong. So late in the spring semester I auditioned for other programs, and began the preparations for the usual

summer at some professional school, figuring that another school would suit me better. It was only during the summer when I made a phone call to arrange an audition that I realized that I no longer wanted to dance—what I realized was that I never wanted to wear another pair of pink tights as long as I lived. This seemed like a sudden realization, but in retrospect I could see that this possibility had been in the back of my mind for some time. I just didn't want to admit it to myself. Some enlightening experiences may truly provide new and unusual insights, but others, like mine, are just the culmination of many partially conscious and unspoken understandings. So even though self-knowledge may seem to occur in spurts or moments of insight, it is only time that can allow self-knowledge to develop fully.

Most of the components of good character must be developed over time, though the particular patterns of development may differ significantly. Learning to have good ends may take place relatively quickly, for learning, in principle, what is right and wrong may be simply a matter of following certain learned guidelines. Parents can teach children the general principle that lying is wrong or that it is good to be generous toward others. But putting such knowledge into practice and developing the skills necessary to interpret the situation at hand and respond appropriately requires considerably more "hands on" experience which is slow to develop. It takes time to grasp the distinctions between the ways in which we "choose our words carefully" in social situations from lying more generally, or to understand when it is legitimate to withhold information from others. Likewise, it takes time to learn the ways in which it is appropriate to be generous to others—what sorts of things may be given and in what amount. Being taught the content of morality is not sufficient for

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good character, certain skills necessary for applying this understanding must eventually develop as well, and these skills take more practice to develop. Similarly, learning what we should feel may come much more quickly than actually feeling it. Children may know early on that certain situations shouldn't make them angry, but not yet have the emotional skills to control their feelings in the right sorts of ways or to foster more productive feelings. The development of these aspects of character, then, is not just a matter of learning bits of information, but of then developing the skills necessary to put such knowledge into practice. This is partly what makes good character a matter of practice and habituation.

With respect to good ends and right feelings, much of the content can be taught before the skills are learned, but with respect to self-knowledge, the skills are central to the possession of the knowledge itself. Parents and other role models may teach children the skills necessary for the development of self-knowledge in much the same way that therapists help people come to further self-understanding. Therapists get their patients to open up about themselves, their ideas, and their perspectives, and then encourage them to answer a variety of questions that require probing further into the matter at hand. Therapists might ask the patient how something makes her feel, why she responded the way she did, whether her response demonstrates anything to her, or how the situation seems to her in retrospect. By asking such pointed questions, the therapist fosters critical self-reflection. He helps the patient gain self-knowledge by helping her develop the necessary skills, but doesn't just tell her what she is like. There are certainly many situations in which therapists know their patients better than their patients know themselves. Some things are much easier to see from the outside.

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Even so, therapists don't usually just come out and tell the patient facts about herself, for believing the facts on the therapist's authority is not the same as the patient's coming to believe them via her own understanding. Her self-understanding can better be fostered by coming to such conclusions herself, rather than being provided with a "blueprint" of her inner life. In fact, if the therapist tried to provide her with such a blueprint, she may not believe him, and even if she did, it would not amount to self-understanding. She must come to self-understanding through her own means.

Therapists are specially trained to guide this kind of personal investigation, but others can do much the same thing. Parents may have the same kinds of conversations to prod their children to develop such reflective ability. Intimate conversations with friends or mentors help us come to better self-understanding by probing further into our life experiences and expectations. Teachers may encourage reflection in helping children learn to develop the social skills that will carry them throughout life. For example, when a situation on the playground goes awry, the teacher may encourage one child to consider how he might have hurt the other's feelings and how he could avoid doing so in the future. What is significant in all these relationships is that although there is a certain kind of teaching going on, the most important thing being taught is the ability to be reflective, which is a prerequisite for self-knowledge.

In certain kinds of relationships it may be possible to teach self-knowledge independent of the skills required for it, if only to a limited degree. There are certainly facts about ourselves that other people teach us. Moral educators may teach us, rightly or wrongly, implicitly or explicitly, what we are like in terms of personality, character, or intelligence. In fact, educators often claim that children live up to their

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expectations of them, either positively or negatively. If the teachers act as though the children are intellectually weak, the children begin to believe it about themselves. If the educators treat the children as if they have unlimited potential, the children learn to think of themselves in this way as well.[2] But such "knowledge" comes not just from teachers. Children regularly hear themselves described as outgoing, selfish, caring, good, patient, stubborn, etc., by their parents, family members, and friends. The same is true for adults, but the assessment is usually less direct. For adults, the information often comes through reading others' verbal and nonverbal reactions to us.

But others cannot simply provide us with enough information to truly understand ourselves, we must be taught the skills necessary to develop it on our own, which is even more important than teaching self-knowledge itself. Without these skills, it would be virtually impossible to develop full understanding of ourselves. In fact, the skills necessary for the development of self-knowledge are crucial for being able to filter out the accurate from the inaccurate information that others tell us. Sometimes others purport to have insights that they don't really have, make hasty judgments that should not be taken too much to heart, or even have ulterior motives for fostering in us a certain image of ourselves. Critical self-reflection is required to know what information we should accept and what must be rejected, or to what degree we should believe what someone else tells us.

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[2]See Robert Sternberg's *Successful Intelligence* for an analysis of the ways in which schools inculcate (often wrongly) children's own attitudes toward their intellectual abilities.
Robert J. Sternberg, *Successful Intelligence: How Practical and Creative Intelligence Determine Success in Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

Because the development of self-knowledge is so dependent upon particular reflective skills, a great burden falls upon the individual. Even though others may tell her many things about herself, she must undertake the critical reflection necessary to develop self-knowledge. Others can show her what kinds of questions to ask herself in particular situations, and throughout her life there may always be someone willing to do so (a friend, a lover, a mentor, a spouse), but eventually she must learn to do this on her own. This is learned only through practice, which no one can do for her. After a conversation with an intimate friend in which she has begun to gain insight into herself, she must continue the reflection on her own to fully benefit. Someone else can demonstrate the skills for her, but she must discipline herself to learn them. The reflective skills required for self-knowledge can be nurtured and partially taught, but mastering them is an individual endeavor. The best moral education cannot make up for an individual's failure to demand reflection of herself. In this way, self-knowledge and the necessary reflective attitude must come from the individual herself; no one else can do it for her.

It is also true for other components of character that the kinds of skills necessary must be developed through individual effort. The individual must take it upon himself to habituate the right actions once he knows what they are and train himself to feel the right emotions. However, for other components of character, some things can be known and understood before the skills for using them are fully in place. We can know what is right or wrong before we have the skills to put this knowledge into action, or we can know that we experience the wrong emotions before we have the skills to foster the right ones. With respect to self-knowledge, the skill of critical

self-reflection is much more fundamental, so that the individual's own efforts are important at a more preliminary stage. This makes self-knowledge a component of character for which a great burden falls to the individual herself.

Nevertheless, moral education is important with respect to self-knowledge. The best moral education cannot replace individual effort, but a bad moral education can leave an individual in an especially difficult position with respect to self-knowledge. If someone has such a bad moral education that he has had no opportunity whatsoever to develop the reflective skills that are required for self-knowledge, gaining such skills will be difficult. However, it is unlikely that very many moral educations are this terrible. Usually it is just certain aspects of a moral education that are bad—many people have some negative influences, but very few have only negative influences. Where parents fail, teachers and friends may succeed, or vice versa. Just as one may have to learn through observation what values and reactions are considered appropriate and in this way learn what is right and wrong, one usually has ample opportunity to recognize the importance of self-reflection.

Everyday life experiences should prompt reflection even in spite of a partly bad moral education. A child may, for example, hear himself described in a particular way and immediately know that the description doesn't fit. This could prompt him to wonder how someone else could be so mistaken about him or what habits or features of himself might have led someone to such a conclusion. Enough experiences like this may eventually cause him to engage in further reflection. It is easy to dismiss one person's assessments, but if it becomes clear that the same view is shared by many others, then the claim is harder to dismiss. This is what happens through social

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interaction. In everyday social interaction we are exposed to a multitude of reactions and responses to ourselves. If we are able to take in this information and consider it carefully, the opportunities for greater self-understanding are virtually limitless; however, if we become so set in our interpretation of ourselves and our environment that we cannot be persuaded otherwise, then self-knowledge and the requisite reflective skills may always elude us.

To summarize, moral education plays an important role in the development of self-knowledge, because it contributes not only to knowledge of self, but also provides the skills necessary for us to gain further self-knowledge. A good moral education is no guarantee that one will develop self-knowledge, for we must take it upon ourselves to learn reflective skills and habituate them. A bad moral education doesn't make one doomed to a life lacking self-understanding, but makes it much more difficult to develop the skills necessary for self-knowledge. Fortunately, however, very few people have entirely bad moral educations. Usually along the way there have been numerous opportunities for reflective skills to be encouraged—if not at home, then at school, or church, or from other friends. It doesn't necessarily take very many people encouraging reflection to provide the kind of example that can allow a person to undertake the necessary steps on her own. In this way, the extent to which someone should be held responsible for self-knowledge is partially dependent upon the kind of moral education he received. With a good moral education, there is no excuse for failing to be reflective and have self-knowledge, but a bad moral education also does not guarantee failure. Most moral educations fall somewhere in the middle, so

likewise does the extent to which most people can be held responsible for self-knowledge.

III. Revising Self-Conceptions

In section II, I addressed the role of moral education in assessing responsibility for self-knowledge. In this section, I consider what the possibility of revising our self-conceptions says about responsibility for self-knowledge. Over time, we form a certain conception of what we are like, what makes us who we are, what others think of us, and how we influence others. Changing these self-conceptions, especially in light of evidence that our self-conceptions are wildly mistaken, can be difficult at best, and traumatic at worst. Highly reflective people undergo minor revisions in their self-conception all the time. They respond to experience by continuing to learn more about themselves with an open, reflective attitude that enables them to take in evidence, weigh it carefully, and revise their self-conceptions accordingly.

But what about those who haven't been reflective and for whom an overhaul of their self-conception is necessary? Is this even possible? When I talk here of people who lack self-knowledge or the requisite reflective attitude, I'm not necessarily talking about people who are completely dead to themselves, like Camus' character Mersault. It's a rare person who needs a complete overhaul of her self-conception. Most people who lack self-knowledge need to revise only certain aspects of their self-conceptions. Euthyphro, for example, may have a lot to learn about himself, but a complete overhaul of himself isn't necessary. However, just the realization that he may not be as virtuous as he previously thought, especially if his moral "knowledge" has been a

matter of pride for him and central to his self-conception, may prove a challenge in itself.

If a person hasn't learned to be reflective, and thus lacks self-knowledge, it probably takes some rather startling circumstance or experience to bring about the recognition that her life is not what she thought it was or that she is not the kind of person that she thought she was. Reflectiveness then comes at great personal challenge. But it is questionable how much one can learn to be reflective and thus gain self-knowledge if these skills haven't been developed over a lifetime.

Just as people who presumably could change their characters fail to do so, either because they don't care enough, or because they lack the will power, or because they are too lazy, people who can change their self-conceptions and come to have self-knowledge often don't. Rather than taking enlightening experiences and using them as motivation to become more reflective, many people who lack self-knowledge tend to rationalize such experiences. They come up with another explanation for why the event occurred rather than that they are mistaken about themselves and must revise their self-conceptions, and possibly also their characters. For example, rather than taking their encounters with Socrates as opportunities to gain self-knowledge, some interlocutors may have blamed Socrates for tricking them or attempting to make them look like fools. But we've probably all seen similar things happen to people we know. Many students who do poorly in a course blame the instructor, whether for not teaching well, for not making the material exciting enough, or for grading unfairly. Rather than considering the possibility that they did poorly because they failed to work hard enough or, at any rate, didn't learn the material well enough, the student looks for

an external source to blame for his failure. In this way, he can rationalize his poor performance without having to revise his self-conception. This kind of rationalization happens in many circumstances, and most people are probably guilty of it at one time or another. But the fact that people often don't alter their self-conceptions doesn't mean that it is not possible.

If one hasn't learned the reflective skills necessary for self-knowledge, it may be very hard to change one's self-conception later in life. Doing so may take a particularly unusual experience to prompt such a revision. But this does not make one any less responsible for failing to have developed such skills and the resulting self-knowledge in the first place. It does, however, influence the extent to which we can hold the person responsible for coming to such knowledge at a later stage in life. That may be too dependent upon life circumstances—without an enlightening experience to prompt the reflection, the individual would see no reason to revise his conception of himself.

Even if it is very hard for him to now alter his self-conception, it is still legitimate to continue to hold him responsible for his failure of self-knowledge. Provided that he had a reasonably good moral education, it was open to him to approach his life and himself more reflectively and to be open to alternative perspectives. Though such reflectiveness can be encouraged by others, no one can do it for him. Self-knowledge is something he must accomplish on his own, thus if he has failed to do so he may be held responsible for his lack of self-knowledge even if it is now hard to develop. Moreover, if his bad character is due to a lack of self-knowledge, then he may also be held responsible for his bad character as well.

IV. Conclusions

Throughout this project, I have focused on the nature of self-knowledge, its development, and its role in virtuous character. I have argued that self-knowledge amounts to knowing one's character, one's personality, and the occurrent features of one's self. Developing this kind of self-knowledge requires a critically reflective attitude toward oneself and a willingness to continually revise one's self-conception in light of contrary evidence. Self-knowledge of this sort is crucial for moral virtue insofar as one cannot acquire practical wisdom without it, and practical wisdom is necessary for virtue.

In this final chapter, I have argued that self-knowledge is a component of virtue for which the individual may be held responsible, at least within certain limitations. Moral education plays a particularly important role in the development of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge isn't the kind of thing that can be taught or learned without the requisite reflective skills, so that having these skills fostered through a reasonably good moral education is fundamental to the development of self-knowledge. Nevertheless, these skills cannot be taught entirely by someone else. Once the foundations have been laid, the individual must take it upon herself to foster these skills and be open and reflective so that she can develop self-knowledge. In this way, the final burden for the development of self-knowledge falls upon the individual herself. From this, I conclude that if a person's bad character is due to a lack of self-knowledge, we can also say that the person is responsible for her bad character. Thus the focus on self-knowledge explains not just what a good character amounts to, but also helps to explain certain aspects of the responsibility for character.

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