Partiality and the Virtues*

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Much of philosophical ethics suffers from being overly impersonal. Utilitarianism, on one strongly advocated interpretation, urges on us a life of rigorous impartiality, enjoining us to push our own children to the back of the queue when there are stronger utility-claimants in line.[1] Even the 'indirect' or 'rule' versions of utility theory seem to allow us our partialities and personal ties only grudgingly: the seal of approval depends on our solemnly demonstrating (if we can) that the general institution of such preferential commitments helps maximize global utility.[2] Consequentialism's chief rival, deontological ethics, also seems to locate morality in a place well apart from our ordinary impulses of partiality. Notwithstanding the scholarship and eloquence of its defenders,[3] Kant's insistence that moral worth is reserved for the austerely motivated act of pure duty, 'uninfluenced by any sensible interest',[4] seems to bleach out the moral worth from much of our lives, conditioned as they are by the ties of partiality, the 'sensible warm motions' of the human heart.

The result of this depersonalizing tendency in what are still the two leading branches of modern ethical theory is that much of the work done by philosophers of ethics has little relation to the way nearly all of us live. This is not to beat the soggy drum of 'relevance', nor has it anything much to do with the question of whether there should be more 'practical' ethics. The point rather, is that many ethical writers, whether working at an abstract level or on concrete problems, are officially subscribing to accounts of rightness and goodness which simply do not impinge on, or make contact with, the partialistic commitments and preferential ties that deeply and pervasively inform their own lives. Such a schism between word and deed generates a problem not merely about the application of philosophical ethics, but about its very coherence; for there is a serious instability in any moral theory which urges on us attitudes that we could not in honesty conceive of incorporating into our ordinary blueprint for daily living. Such theories are always at risk, if nothing else, of violating basic rules about the meaning of normative and deontic language.[5]

Does virtue ethics fare any better?[6] In this paper I shall argue (in Part One) that the ethical

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[1] See P . Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 172.

[2] I have argued elsewhere, first, that such derivative justifications of partiality may not work (because they offer too many hostages to empirical calculations about the most effective means of securing global welfare), and secondly, that in any case the derivative route fails fully to accommodate fundamental intuitions we have about the individual's autonomous right to determine the shape of his or her own life. See J. Cottingham, 'The Ethics of Self-Concern', *Ethics* 101 (1991), pp.798–817 at pp. 803–5. For an interesting account of the most plausible strategy open to the rule-consequentialist, see B. Hooker, 'Rule-consequentialism and Demandingness: a Reply to Carson', *Mind* 100 (1991), pp. 269 –76.

[3] See especially O. O'Neill, 'Kant's Virtues', in R. Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Philosophy of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 5.

[4] 'Man has a higher purpose for which he possesses reason, namely . . . to take into consideration what is good or evil in itself, about which only pure reason, uninfluenced by any sensible interest, can judge.' (*Critique of Practical Reason* [*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft,*1788], Bk I, ch. 2, tr. T. K. Abbott (London: Longmans, 1873), p. 153; cited in M. Klein, 'Morality and Justice in Kant', *Ratio* 3 (1990), pp. 1–20, at p. 8).

[5] See further Cottingham, 'The Ethics of Self-Concern', pp. 800–1.

[6] I am presupposing for the moment (though supporting considerations will emerge in the course of the paper) that virtue ethics offers a vision of the good life which is radically distinct from that put

excellences unfolded in the classical, Aristotelian, conception of the virtuous life presuppose, for the most part, a preexisting network of preferences and partialities. Turning from exposition to evaluation (in Part Two), I shall suggest that the presupposition of such networks is the basis of that rootedness in the real world that gives virtue theory a decisive edge over its competitors; the 'autocentric' perspective, as I shall call it, can be seen as one of the hallmarks that confer worth and authenticity on virtue theory as against its impersonally oriented rivals. I shall also argue that if it is properly formulated, the theory can largely be rescued from the accusation of complacency or bland social conservatism with which it is sometimes charged. Finally, in the third section of the paper, I shall move the focus from Aristotle down to the early modern period. The seventeenth century, here, as in so many other areas of philosophy, is a watershed. On the one hand, we see the ethics of excellence still flourishing; much of ethics is still designed for actual human beings already involved in partialistic structures of personal and social preference. But the traditional classical conception has by this time long been under attack from a quite distinct Christianized vision of ethics, which is, paradoxically, both more abstract and universalist in its scope, and, at the same time, more introverted in its focus. In tracing how some of the resulting tensions surface in the development of Cartesian ethics, I shall suggest that we can come to appreciate how and why virtue ethics suffered that long decline from which it is only just beginning to recover.

1. Aristotelian partiality

The Aristotelian blueprint for ethical excellence implicitly presupposes, from the outset, a world in which people are already deeply involved in civic and personal networks of partiality. The first in Aristotle's long catalogue of virtues (and one of the 'cardinal virtues' in the medieval and renaissance tradition largely inspired by him) is courage; but not, notice, some impartially motivated inner strength — Kantian *fortitudo moralis* or zeal in the performance of impersonally oriented moral duty — but rather a disposition whose merit is determined by its appropriate social directedness. Courage par excellence, is facing danger 'in the right way and at the right time'; further, 'the nature of any given thing is determined by its end'.[7] It follows that in its 'greatest and noblest form', courage is the prerogative of the brave champion, facing death 'when the danger is greatest and most glorious, as is borne out by the honours paid to the fallen in city states and in the courts of monarchs'.[8] One ought not to be brave under compulsion but because it is a fine thing (*kalon*), and hence civic courage (the first and most important in the list of specific kinds of courage) is grounded in a proper sense of shame, a 'desire for something noble, and avoidance of reproach and disgrace'.[9]

In a way which is perhaps hard fully to appreciate for those influenced by the later Christian tradition of humility and self-denial, Aristotelian courage is linked to *kudos*, the Homeric conception of self-esteem, the desire to display prowess, to win applause, to avoid the ultimate shame of losing face before one's fellows. And this in turn entails that the ethical worth of the relevant virtue is determined not by the demands of welfare maximization (though it may contingently bring such benefits), nor by the austere requirements of

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forward in standard versions of either consequentialist or deontological ethics. What I do not address is the question whether a (suitably qualified) consequentialism might turn out to be at least extensionally equivalent to virtue ethics, in the sense of yielding the same recommendations for how we should set about organizing our lives. Compare Roger Crisp's argument that the life of virtue is one which is, on a certain interpretation, recommended by utilitarianism, in 'Utilitarianism and the Life of Virtue', *Philosophical Quarterly* 167 (1992), pp. 139–60.

[7] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [*c.* 325 BCE] (hereafter '*NE*'), Book III, ch. 7, 1115b17ff.

[8] *NE* Bk III, ch. 6, 1115 30–5.

[9] *NE* Bk III, ch. 6, 1116 28–9.

impersonal duty, but by its role in enhancing the personal prestige of the holder, and by its value within the interconnected networks of honour and mutual respect which bind the citizens of a community. The (later Horatian) maxim *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (whatever our modern reservations may be at the end of a century of global war) puts supreme value on patriotism, civic loyalty, and personal honour; and all these virtues are inescapably partialistic. Value is not determined from the standpoint of an impartial spectator or universal God of all mankind; rather, the acts of courage are what my own honour and reputation requires, and what is demanded by the specific expectations of those to whom I am in honour bound.[10]

Aristotle's second chief virtue, that of inner balance or temperance (*sophrosunē*), is partialistic in an even more direct and self-evident way, being concerned with individual flourishing at the level of those physiologically based desires and appetites that are part of our specific biological inheritance. 'Such pleasures as conduce to health and bodily fitness', says Aristotle, 'the temperate person will try to secure in moderation and in the right way;[11] but notice that the moderation that is central to this, as all the virtues, is not concerned with restrictions derived from any impartial distributive weighting. A preferential, self-oriented weighting is already in operation: the 'right reason' which the temperate person employs is entirely directed to the calculation of what balance of appetites generates, within the individual life, an inner glow of psychic harmony. The individual who has trained the habits of bodily desire, in such a way as to produce a graceful, untroubled and healthy personal life, has already implicitly assigned a heavy priority, in his or her conception of the good life, to his or her own personal flourishing. This is not to repeat the ancient canard that Aristotelian ethics is crassly egotistical; in Aristotle's blueprint for human fulfilment, there is a good measure of genuine concern for others.[12] The point, rather, is about the perspective from which ethics is approached, which turns out to be autocentric, in the sense of being constructed, as it were, from the inside outwards. The opening question for ethics is: how should I — this particular, biologically based creature — live? And the answer — nobly, harmoniously, with rewarding personal relationships, with graceful and well-ordered habits of desire — makes my own life special and precious in a way which (as I have argued elsewhere) impersonalist systems of morality cannot in the end fully and properly accommodate.[13] Thus, in the case of temperance, the harmonious regulation of my appetites is a task that requires a preferential assignment of time and resources to determining the conditions of fulfilment for a particular individual — myself. To see some of the implications of this more clearly, one only has to reflect on how far the life of the Aristotelian *sōphrōn*, or temperate person, will diverge from the life of abstinence and self-denial enjoined by systems of ethics which reject as worldly and even sinful, the operation of the bodily passions.[14]

At a fairly deep level, the virtue theorist accepts, and builds upon, the structural constraints of our human nature. Value is supervenient (in part) on the biological ties and pulls we find within us; it is not determined *ab extra*, from the demands of some higher law, or based on some vision of transcendent blessedness. The point is reinforced by the familiar contrast between Aristotelian harmony and Kantian duty. *Enkrateia*, or self-control, that subordination of appetite to the moral will, which is for Kant the highest expression of a moral nature, is for Aristotle a mere *pis aller*: the very moral struggle which arises when our

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[10] For more on this theme, see John Casey, *Pagan Virtue* (Oxford, l990), p. 52.
[11] *NE* Bk III, ch. 11, 1119a 16–17.
[12] See Cottingham, 'The Ethics of Self-Concern', p. 813.
[13] 'The Ethics of Self-Concern', pp. 802ff. As is made clear in the paper referred to, the 'preciousness' and 'specialness' involved does not imply the megalomaniacal claim that my own life is somehow intrinsically more valuable, from a cosmic perspective, than anyone else's.
[14] *NE* Bk III, ch. 10, esp. 1118a23.

human passions pull against the demands of right action is, to the Aristotelian way of thinking, already a sign that all is not as it should be. Far from earning extra points on the scale of goodness, self-control is a second best virtue, rescuing (but in no sense transfiguring or validating) the life of the individual whose emotional and behavioural habits have not been properly and harmoniously laid down. The cardinal virtue of temperance, in short, is inherently partialistic, firstly in the sense that it presupposes a preferential assignment of value by each individual to the task of determining the conditions for his or her own personal psychic balance; and secondly in the sense that it accords value to lives not in so far as they conform to an abstract and timeless conception of right action, but in so far as they display the natural growth and flowering of creatures whose commitments and goals are already largely determined by specific biological and social ties.[15]

It would be tedious to unravel the way in which this sort of partialism manifests itself throughout the Aristotelian catalogue of virtues. But it should be fairly clear that the excellences of liberality, of magnificence, of magnanimity, of proper ambition, and of social fluency or wittiness, all presuppose an agent who is in no sense either a global utility maximizer or an impartial seeker after Kantian moral worth. The blueprint for civic and individual excellence assigns value in a way which is heavily dependent on a decent upbringing, a tolerably secure position in society, solid endowments of wealth and income, a modicum of health and personal charm — in short, the requirements not just for a worthy (in the inner Kantian sense) life, but for outward success and flourishing.

Recent work on what we now call 'moral luck' brings this aspect of virtue ethics into particularly sharp relief. To take the central case of *megalopsychia,* for example, (magnanimity or 'great-souledness'), there seems no escaping the fact that this Aristotelian excellence presupposes a whole network of strongly partialistic ties and commitments, whose operation depends in large part on the contingencies of fortune. Aristotle's noble or 'great-souled' man is born into a high culture, healthy, intelligent, affluent and calmly confident of his entitlement to honour and esteem. From a post-Christian perspective on morality (as John Casey has pointed out) the presumptions behind this paradigm of excellence may seem simply 'odious'.[16] How can we stomach the thought that Pericles, in building the Acropolis, is more to be admired than the poor widow who casts her two mites into the Temple treasury? ('Verily I say unto you that this poor widow hath cast in more than all they, for she of her want hath cast in all that she had').[17]

I shall come back later to some of the issues involved here. But for the moment, two observations: First, and bluntly, those tempted to take the high moral ground against Aristotle

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[15] With respect to the 'biological ties' referred to here, I would go along with Philippa Foot's persuasively argued thesis that a hallmark of virtue theory is the connection it makes between the goodness of an individual and considerations about the way of life of the species of which that individual is a member (see P. Foot, 'Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 15 (1995), pp. 1–14, at pp. 7–9). I am not, however, entirely happy about her suggestion (if I understand it correctly) that the account of individual goodness is derivative (in a fairly strong sense) from such species-related considerations. My own inclination is to say that in the case of human beings (unlike that of other animals whose *telos* is more tightly determined), the role of the individual in working out the blueprint for a worthwhile life is primary rather than derivative. Species-related considerations will, to be sure, operate as powerful constraints on individual life-plans, by imposing inevitable costs on various ways of living; but this will still leave open a wide range of possible patterns of life, so that the working out of the recipe for *eudaimonia* will be very much a matter of (relatively autonomous) individual reasoning. For the notion of biological constraints as imposing 'costs', see Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man* (Sussex, l978), pp. 192ff; see also Cottingham, 'The Ethics of Self-Concern', note 54.

[16] Casey, *Pagan Virtue*, p. 201.

[17] Mark 12: 43–4; Luke 21:4.

must be prepared to undergo a good deal of honest self-examination if their position is even to stand a chance of emerging as a stable one. And the chances are, to say the least, not at all good. For even a minimal level of honesty is enough to reveal to most of us that in the structuring of the great part of our day to day lives we are indeed Aristotelians — Aristotelians *malgré nous*, perhaps, but Aristotelians for all that. We just do seek out friends who are enjoyable to be with, who share our (culturally determined and income dependent) tastes and pursuits; we do pursue excellence in our careers, and the rewards of fulfilment in our personal relationships; we do wish for, for ourselves and our families, lives not just of worthy striving but of growth and flourishing, of efforts crowned, of tangible achievement To say in the face of all this that what we really value is the desperate self-abnegation of the poor woman who sacrifices even the pittance she has for some impersonal cause, cannot, for most of us at least, be any more than an empty flourish — the Wittgensteinian cog that does not mesh with any other part of the machinery, a piece of hollow rhetoric unconnected with the values by which we actually live.[18]

The second point, perhaps more closely linked to the direct concerns of the present paper, requires a fuller appreciation of the pervasive strand of deep partiality that informs the life of Aristotelian excellence. The most vivid example of what is involved arises in the case of that central component in Aristotle's conception of the good life *philia* — love or friendship, a concept that occupies nearly two whole books in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Aristotelian *philos*, as I have stressed elsewhere, is someone special, and this very fact puts a severe limit on the number of genuine *philoi* it is possible to have in a life time. The development of rewarding personal relationships, which is, in virtue theory, the very core of the good life, requires an emphatically preferential assignment of time and resources to a few chosen individuals — one's close friends and family. Of the more impartial and impersonal general love which Plato had advocated, and which Christian theorists were later to expand even more widely in their vision of universal *agapē* for all mankind, the Aristotelian is politely sceptical: better to be a real second cousin twice removed, says Aristotle, than a brother in Plato's sense.[19]

But even without the scepticism (and with our modern vision of a fragile planet of interdependent communities, we have good reason to take seriously the call for a 'widening circle' of moral concern), the fact remains that requirements of restricted, preferential affection command, for most of us, a vastly larger place in the assignment of our priorities in life than could be justified from a more impersonal perspective. The virtue theorist (to come back to my earlier rejection of the charge of crass egoism), can plausibly find a place for the good use of surplus time and resources in works of general charity and benevolence; but that assignment will operate only after the central ingredients of human flourishing are in place; and the securing of those ingredients requires — honest self-examination is again recommended for those who doubt it — the existence of strong and stable networks of unashamed partiality and preference. This autocentric perspective is even more clearly apparent in the Aristotelian virtue of *philautia* — self-concern or self-esteem: so far from being intrinsically suspect (as it is in some versions of the Christian canons of morality), self-concern is, for the Aristotelian, a perfectly proper and legitimate ingredient of the good life, to be condemned only when it slides into *pleonexia* (the vice of excess which involves trying to grab more than one's fair share), or, equally important, when it slips into the vice of

[18] In so far as there is a place, in the life so described, for Kantian-style evaluations of pure moral worth, it may be (as Martha Klein has suggested in a perceptive recent paper) that these function as little more than consolation prizes, rather like (though this is not her simile) the patronising 'A for effort' sometimes awarded to the irredeemable D grade student. See Klein's article cited at note 4, above.

[19] Cf. Plato, *Republic* [*c.* 375 BCE], 462; Aristotle, *Politics* [*c.* 330 BCE],1262a.

deficiency which allows an undue degree of self-abasement and self-sacrifice.[20]

In large part, then, the virtue theorist's vision of the good for humankind is one in which individuals are securely established in a graceful life of health, honour, mutual self-respect and personal commitment. It is the life wished on the young couple in Shakespeare's *Tempest*: Honour riches, marriage blessing/ long continuance and increasing/ . . . Spring come to you at the farthest/ at the very end of harvest.[21] These are not mere externals, the contingent blessings without which a moral life can still retain the inner lustre of righteousness (Kant); rather they are the very stuff of the good life for humankind, not just in the sense of prerequisites for virtue (though some of them are that), but in the sense of constituting an ideal pattern for the flowering of our human nature. The ethic of the virtue theorist is an ethic for particular individuals, in a particular social setting, whose lives are informed from the outset by an autocentrically determined network of preferential commitments.

2. The ethical credentials of virtue theory.

It is now time to address the complaint that a partialistic ethic, constructed on the premises so far outlined, simply fails to meet central intuitions we have about how moral evaluation ought to operate. I have already indicated that an extreme charge of rank egoism will not stick; further, that the critics of virtue theory's partialistic orientation may find it hard, when examining their own lives, to articulate a rival theory that amounts to anything more than a an exercise in pious self-delusion or outright hypocrisy. But for all that, doubts may remain. It is hard to read much of what Aristotle says about the virtue of *megaloprepeia* or magnificence, for example, without catching a whiff of aristocratic complacency. Those who have this virtue deserve praise, Aristotle tells us, for their lavish expenditure on armaments or civic banquets; 'such expenditure befits those who have appropriate resources, acquired either by themselves or from ancestors or connections, and persons of noble birth or great reputation or other such qualities are well placed to exercise *megaloprepeia*, because expenditure of this kind involves grandeur and distinction.'[22] Although he makes it clear that the magnificent man is not just a vulgar show-off (this would be a lapse into the vice of excess), to the egalitarian modern ear there is nonetheless a harsh ring to Aristotle's whole-hearted endorsement of the claims of the fortunate few.

Perhaps we could stomach his attitude better if it were restricted to a rather special kind of high civic virtue; but in the remainder of his list of excellences there is much that strikes a similarly discordant note. The *megalopsycho*s, or great-souled man, who merits the crown of virtue because his accomplishments and deserts are the greatest,[23] also appears to be one of fortune's favourites. Although Aristotle is careful to insist that good luck is not sufficient for the possession of this virtue, it nonetheless helps a great deal: 'people of high birth or great power or wealth are felt to deserve honour because they are in a position of superiority, and anything that is superior to something good is held in great honour.'[24] A certain bland complacency of outlook also seems to infect the account of many of the other, less public virtues: the exercise of proper ambition, the development of the social graces like *eutrapelia* or wittiness, the securing of the benefits of *philia*, all seem to presuppose political and social

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[20] For these themes, see 'The Ethics of Self-Concern', pp. 810ff. For the contrast between the *philautos* and the *pleonectēs*, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 9, ch. 8.

[21] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* [*c.* 1611], Act 4, scene 1; some of these lines are cited in Casey, *Pagan Virtue,* p. 78.

[22] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk IV, ch. 2, 1122b29ff.

[23] Cf. Book IV, Ch. 3, esp. 1124a1ff

[24] Book IV, Ch 3: 1124a23. Aristotle adds that 'in truth only the good man ought to be honoured, but the possessor of both goodness and these other advantages is felt to deserve additional honour'.

arrangements which exclude a very large number of people from the attainment of true *eudaimonia.* Because Aristotle frequently insists that the virtues are interlinked, it would be unfair to lumber him with promoting the ethics of the bourgeois dinner table; the possession of virtues like patience, truthfulness and modesty rescues Aristotle's virtuous man from the charge of being a blinkered port-quaffer on the high table of life.[25] Nevertheless, it seems no accident that Aristotle seems to have acquiesced, without many qualms, in social arrangements which allowed few if any opportunities for women, for slaves, for foreigners, to participate in the life of virtue at its highest level.[26]

I think there is some defence for the virtue theorist against this type of worry, but that it is best to acknowledge that it can only be a limited one. A certain meritocratic, or at least achievement-oriented conception of value is built into the very foundations of the theory — it is, after all, a theory of excellence in the strict etymological sense of that in respect of which a person stands out (Latin, *excellere*) above the crowd of lesser achievers; the etymological link is preserved, in a different way, in Greek as well, where the very word for virtue, *aretē*), has comparative, or rather superlative associations — being connected with the term *aristos* 'best'.[27] The stakes are high, the contribution of fortune considerable, and not all will be capable, whether for reasons of birth or background, or because of the blows of chance, to succeed. I do not want here to rehearse the debates, familiar from the recent literature, about moral luck, or about the extent to which Aristotelian virtue may still offer some hope that even those stricken with the misfortunes of Priam may salvage something from the wreckage.[28] For on any reading of Aristotle, it remains unavoidable, surely, that the achievement of true *eudaimonia*, in its fullest form, is simply, and sadly, beyond the power of the autonomous will to achieve unaided.

Here maybe it is best for the virtue theorist simply to bite the bullet and admit the result (perhaps not all that surprising upon reflection) that the achievement of Aristotelian ethical excellence, like other forms of human excellence — technical, intellectual, social, political, artistic — will be contingent on more than mere inner worth. Indeed, I would suggest that it is a central feature of the conception of ethics put forward by virtue theory that ethical appraisal is seen as continuous with, and of the same fundamental type as, other kinds of human appraisal.[29] For those who find it monstrous that the unfairness inherent in all these other forms of human endeavour should infuse even the ethical sphere, there can be no ultimately satisfying answer. But is this really a problem for virtue theory, or is it not rather its opponents who are pursuing an *ignis fatuus*? For notice that even the Kantian manoeuvre of shrinking the domain of the moral, to that within the scope of the autonomous will of the rational agent, still does not guarantee complete immunity to luck, since what Bernard

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[25] For the three virtues mentioned, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk II, ch. 7. It should be added, however, that the virtue of truthfulness seems to be defined in a fairly autocentric way by Aristotle, being concerned largely with giving an appropriate estimate of one's own attainments (the vice of excess is 'boastfulness'). Modesty is characterised as not strictly a virtue, though it is brought under Aristotle's general triadic pattern, being an intermediate disposition (between shyness and shamelessness) which is 'deserving of praise'.

[26] Cf. Book VII, Ch. 11.

[27] Both terms seem have been used originally in connection with prowess or pre-eminence on the battle field (the same root being present in the name of Ares, the god of war).

[28] See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ch. 11. See also the discussion of Priam in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk I, ch. 10.

[29] The idea that 'good' is a systematically ambiguous term, or at any rate that 'moral' goodness is a concept whose operation obeys wholly different rules from those which govern other attributions of goodness, has always struck me as one of the more outlandish aspects of much twentieth-century work on ethics; I believe (though there is no space to argue the point here) that it is a notable virtue of virtue theory that it implicitly rejects the notion of a special 'language of morals'.

Williams and Thomas Nagel have called 'constitutive luck' will inevitably play a part in determining the degree of inner moral fortitude each of us possesses.[30] The upshot is that if complete immunity from all contingency is sought in the domain of the moral, it seems that this could be provided (though I have no space to argue the point here) only by invoking some transcendent authority who has the power to make all things good, to redeem even the most blighted life by responding to the mere fact of our humanity. Such a move, in its most extreme form (and it is not clear that even the morality of the gospels goes this far) carries a great price: the removal of ethics from the sphere of what we can intelligibly understand as appraisal.

These considerations aside, there remains one important respect in which virtue theory can perfectly well defend itself against the cruder charge canvassed above, that of a blinkered and complacent social conservatism. Although the Aristotelian virtues presuppose a partialist and particularistic conception of how life should be lived, there is nothing in the theory that inherently restricts the good life to one particular small group. Aristotelian ethics is the pursuit of to *anthropinon agathon* — the good for humankind — and the resulting blueprint is perfectly capable of being generalised to cover a wide variety of historical and social settings. To say that the good life involves striving for excellence does indeed suppose (as noted above) that not all will succeed equally well; but this is quite different from the arbitrary exclusion of entire classes of human beings from the chance even to embark on the quest for excellence. Aristotelian *eudaimonia* represents the maximal flourishing of our specially human capacities for personal growth and interpersonal commitment, and in this sense it is an ideal applicable to all human beings who are capable of entering into the relevant personal and social relationships.[31] The fact that Aristotle, for reasons we now see to be inadequate, acquiesced in economic and social conditions that restricted full membership of the ethical realm to a privileged minority is no reason to tar all virtue theorists with the same brush. One striking reason for the early success of Christianity over its pagan rivals seems to have been precisely its universalist insistence that the kingdom of heaven was, as St Paul put it, open to all — 'gentile or Jew, bond or free'.[32] Interpreted transcendentally, in a way which attempts to put ethics wholly beyond the reach of contingency, this seems to generate (as I suggested a moment ago) an unstable conception of morality; but a secular analogue of the Pauline maxim — one which urges us to promote global conditions in which as many people as possible can enjoy the opportunity to strive for excellence and develop their human capacities to the full — this is one which the virtue theorist can readily take on board.

Let me end this section with a brief word about justice. If what I have been saying about the partialism inherent in classical virtue theory is correct, then justice emerges as very much the odd man out in the catalogue of cardinal virtues. Crude Polemarchan justice — helping one's friends and harming one's enemies — might fit in easily enough, but justice as fairness and equity seems by its very nature impartialistic.[33] Moreover, its place in the overall

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[30] Cf. T. Nagel 'Moral Luck' in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l979), pp. 24ff., and B. Williams 'Moral Luck' in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l981), pp. 20ff.

[31] Compare Aristotle's own comment at *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk I, ch. 9: 'Fulfilment (*eudaimonia*) should be something widely available (*polykoinon*); for by dint of some learning and diligence it is capable of being achieved by all for whom the road to excellence is not closed by incapacity' (1099b18).

[32] Cf. Colossians 3:11

[33] This point may well also underlie the wide gap which, on the conventional reading of Kant, separates his theory of justice from his account of the virtues. Although Onora O'Neill has persuasively argued that a correct reading of the *Tugendlehre* undermines the supposed strong

blueprint for individual flourishing remains obscure; and it is no accident, surely, that Aristotle's triadic account of virtues, each flanked by a vice of excess and of deficiency, hopelessly breaks down when we come to Book Five of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the case of justice there simply is no regular pattern of action and desire with respect to the distribution of goods which, when excessively or deficiently exercised, yields the desired pattern of flanking vices.[34]

Add to this the following important point: that failures in liberality, say, or the development of friendships, generate immediate and tangible costs in the *eudaimonia* of the individuals concerned; but it is perfectly possible to conceive (we have examples today very near home) of an affluent community of privileged practitioners of virtue, enjoying rich and rewarding relationships, developing their human capacities to the full, yet blandly negligent of the extent to which their agreeable lives depend on hogging the planet's scarce resources. One might try to argue that such blindness to the demands of justice in the wider world might eventually spill over and sour the fruits of private and civic virtue; but that would be an unpromising route to take: the virtuous patricians of the Roman empire flourished perfectly well for three hundred years without any striking setbacks of this kind. Indeed, the model of partialistic virtue, untroubled by wider concerns of equity, was still alive and well in Montaigne's time:

> Man in his highest estate is one of that small number of excellent and select men who, having been endowed with fine and particular natural ability, have further strengthened and sharpened it by care, study and art, and raised it to the highest pitch of wisdom. They have fashioned their soul to all directions and angles, supported it with all the outside assistance that was fit for it, and enriched and adorned it with all they could borrow, for its advantage, from the inside and outside of the world; it is in them that the utmost height of human nature is to be found.[35]

Even if we could demonstrate to such Montaignesque gentlemen that prudence in preserving their estates required a wider concern for justice (the 'You want to be able to walk home from the opera without being mugged' argument), this would still make the demands of justice altogether too secondary and derivative to accord with our strong intuitions about its place on the ethical map. I said a moment ago that the universal demand to extend to all the widest opportunities for human flourishing was one the virtue theorist could 'readily take on board'. This remains true; but it has to be said that the driving force for such equitable extension of resources must come from some other source than the autocentric perspective from which virtue theory is constructed.[36]

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antithesis between Kantian justice and Kantian virtue, the contrast which she examines between the types of duty requiring, respectively, 'external' and 'internal' legislation nonetheless generates (as O'Neill herself makes clear) a fairly striking contrast between the demands of *jus* and the demands of *ethica*. See further O'Neill, 'Kant's Virtues'.

[34] See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk V, ch. 5: 1122b30ff. Cf. H. Kelsen, 'Aristotle's Doctrine of Justice' in J. J. Walsh and H. L. Shapiro (eds), *Aristotle's Ethics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, l967).

[35] Michel de Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond* [1580]; quoted in J. B. Schneewind (ed.) *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* (Cambridge, l990), Vol I, p. 39.

[36] Compare J. Griffin, *Well-Being* (Oxford, l986), 63-4. It is worth noting that earlier concepts of justice were by no means always so universalist as that we are accustomed to today. Aquinas gives as the first species of justice *pietas,* dutiful respect, which is perhaps the most partialistic virtue one could think of. Compare Casey, *Pagan Virtue*, pp. 194ff.

3. The autocentric perspective.

In the brief final section of this paper, I want to move us down to the early modern era, in order to glimpse some of the pressures which shaped the way in which virtue theory is perceived today. We have already seen how the central vision of the virtue theorists was vividly alive in the thinking of renaissance writers like Montaigne. And it is perhaps not surprising to see that vision strongly present in the ethics of René Descartes, whose thought, despite the familiar accolade of 'father of modern philosophy', was still pervasively structured by the presuppositions of (Aristotelian inspired) renaissance scholasticism. The question which dominated the thoughts of the young Descartes in his night of troubled dreams on 10 November 1619, was Ausonius' old question *Quod vitae sectabor iter?* — 'What road in life shall I follow?'[37] The question is a strikingly autocentric one. To begin with, the very fact that it is framed directly in the first person (like so many fundamental Cartesian questions) makes us initially predisposed to see it as generating a search not for some impersonally defined good, but for the key to fulfilment for an individual life. Closer inspection confirms this impression, for the fundamental question is not one about right conduct, or about devising some decision procedure for particular acts, but about the individual's choice of an entire pattern of life — about the discovery of a complete personal pathway. This calls to mind the Aristotelian dictum that *eudaimonia* is something predicated of a *teleios bios* — the complete life of a single individual.[38] For Descartes, as for Aristotle, moral philosophy is about the construction of an individual life-plan: 'not to have one's life planned with a view to some end is a sign of great folly', says Aristotle;[39] Descartes speaks of moral philosophy as the crowning project of a rationally planned programme (*un dessein*) for the acquisition of knowledge and the conduct of life.[40] (There are, incidentally, many other points of contact: to take but one notable example, the Aristotelian insistence that virtue is a matter of permanent dispositions of character is echoed in Descartes's thesis that 'what we commonly call "virtues" are ingrained habits or dispositions (*habitudes*) in the soul'.)[41]

In Descartes's conception of the good life, developed in his last work, the *Passions of the Soul* (1649) the traditional catalogue of cardinal virtues is boiled down to just one, which he calls *la générosité.* This is the crowning virtue — the 'key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions'.[42] The translation of the French term is a difficult matter. The English transliteration 'generosity' is almost unavoidable, and is not entirely misleading (it would have been perfectly natural, even in seventeenth-century French, to apply the term *générosité* to acts which we should nowadays call acts of

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[37] Recorded by Descartes in an early notebook some of whose contents have survived; see AT X 216: CSM I 4. In this paper the following standard abbreviations are used to refer to editions of Descartes: AT: C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.), *Œuvres de Descartes* (revised edn., 12 vols. Paris: Vrin, l964-76); CSM: J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of* Descartes (2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l985); CSMK: Volume three of the preceding, by the same translators and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l991).

[38] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk I, ch. 7: 1098a18. See also Bk I, ch. 10. Compare Bernard Williams's apt comment on the Ausonian line recalled by Descartes: 'it is important that the word is *iter*, not *via*: there is a journey to be made' ('Descartes and Historiography', in J. Cottingham (ed.), *Reason, Will and Sensation: studies in Cartesian metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 220.)

[39] *Eudemian Ethics* [*c.* 330 BCE], Bk I, ch. 2: 1214b 10.

[40] *Principles of Philosophy*, Preface to French Edition (1647), AT IXB 1: CSM I 188. For the application of the Cartesian plan (*dessein*) to moral philosophy, see the introduction by G. Rodis-Lewis in S. Voss (ed. and trans.), *René Descartes: The Passions of the Soul*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, l989), p. xxii.

[41] *Passions of the Soul* [1649], art. 161: AT XI 454: CSM I 388.

[42] Ibid.

generosity); but for Descartes the term had powerful resonances which are largely absent in our modern usage. As a fluent Latinist, Descartes was of course acutely aware of the connotations of the cognate Latin adjective *generosus*, of which the primary meaning is 'noble' or 'well born' (being derived from the Latin noun *genus*, whose basic meaning is 'race' or 'family'). By a simple shift, *generosus* then came to mean 'noble-minded' or 'magnanimous' (and was used by some Latin writers to indicate the possession of Aristotle's overarching virtue of 'great-souledness'). Descartes himself compares his own notion of generosity to the scholastic concept of magnanimity in article 161 of the *Passions*.

At first sight, then, the Cartesian virtue of *générosité* or nobility of spirit, plugs straight into the aristocratic or excellence-centred presuppositions of traditional virtue theory. The connection Descartes makes is that the virtue of noble-mindedness, as traditionally conceived, implied a certain dignity and legitimate self-esteem, and this will precisely be true of the person of *générosité* it 'causes a person's self-esteem to be as high as it legitimately may be'.[43] But on closer inspection, a decisive shift from the *aretē* tradition can be discerned. Descartes's moral education, at the hands of the Jesuits at La Flèche, had been dominated by the presuppositions not just of pagan humanism (though these did play a large role) but also, inevitably, of Christian morality. And what this meant, above all, was a commitment to the central notion of the kingdom of heaven as open to all. *Le chemin au ciel*, Descartes writes in the Discourse, *n'est pas moins ouvert au plus ignorants qu'au plus doctes;* the road to heaven does not depend on the vicissitudes of birth or education.[44] There is, incidentally, a strong epistemic analogue of this universalism in the Cartesian account of knowledge. Good sense, the innate natural light of reason, is equally present in all men, and as Descartes explains in his dramatic dialogue the *Search for Truth*, the untutored Polyander ('Everyman') has as good, if not a better, chance of achieving enlightenment than Epistemon ('Mr. Knowledgeable'), whose inner intuitions are clouded by the sophistications of technical philosophy.[45] In the ethical sphere, this comes out as an insistence that the good life, like the achievement of reliable knowledge, should in principle be available to all who set about the task of achieving it in the right way.

Now clearly *générosité* in the traditional genetic sense of 'nobility' depends very largely on accidents of birth and natural endowment. 'It is easy to believe,' Descartes observes, 'that the souls which God puts into our bodies are not equally noble and strong'; and while 'good upbringing is of great help in correcting defects of birth', this too, will presumably depend largely on factors outside the agent's control.[46] But Descartes's Christianized understanding of ethics leads him to construe the crowning virtue of *générosité* in a radically different way from Aristotelian nobility — as a virtue whose achievement must at all costs be immune to the vicissitudes of fortune, and (in a striking anticipation of Kant) will depend on inner rectitude alone. *True* generosity, Descartes proclaims (and the epithet should warn us that some spectacular high redefinition is going on) is a matter not of outward achievement but of the inner exercise of our will. 'Nothing truly belongs to us but the freedom to dispose our volitions, and we ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than for using this freedom well or badly'.[47] We now have a striking turn around; for the calm self-esteem of the Aristotelian *megalopsychos* is retained, but not as the satisfaction of one whose outward achievements match his natural endowments and civic status, but rather as the '*feeling within ourselves* that we have a firm and constant resolution to use our freedom well, that is, never

[43] *Passions of the Soul*, art. 153: AT XI 445-6: CSM I 384.
[44] *Discourse on the Method* [1637], Part I: AT VI 8: CSM I 114.
[45] *Search for Truth*, AT X 500-503: CSM II 402-3. See also the opening of the *Discourse on the Method*, AT VI 1: CSM I 111.
[46] *Passions of the Soul*, art 161: AT XI 453: CSM I 388
[47] *Passions of the Soul*, art 153: AT XI 446: CSM I 384.

to lack the will to undertake and carry out what we judge to be best'.[48] True *générosité,* then, involves, like its pagan original, justified self-esteem, but, quite unlike the pagan model, it is self-esteem for the resolute and well-directed use of free will, which is (allegedly) within the power of all. The Cartesian ethical sphere, in contrast to the Aristotelian, is a sphere which is largely sealed off from the effects of moral luck. Those possessed of *générosité* says Descartes,

> will not consider themselves much inferior to those who have greater wealth or honour, or even to those who have more intelligence, knowledge or beauty, or generally to those who surpass them in some other perfections; but equally they will not have much more esteem for themselves than for those they surpass. For all these things seem to them to be very unimportant by contrast with *the virtuous will for which they alone esteem themselves*, and which they suppose also to be present, or at least capable of being present, in every other person.[49]

In a few brief sentences, the decisive transition has been made from the aretaic ethics of excellence and achievement, to the universalist morality of the kingdom of ends.

The philosophical importance of Descartes's theory of *générosité* lies in the fact that his ideas here, as in so many other areas of his philosophy, form a kind of bridge between the ancient and modern worlds. His thinking is sufficiently rooted in the robust naturalism of traditional virtue theory for him to acknowledge, in many places, the importance of good upbringing and above all training and habituation for the development of a worthwhile human life.[50] But the primacy which his account gives to the autonomous power of the will, as the only true basis for moral appraisal, clearly looks forward to a conception of ethics in which the ultimate bearer of moral worth is excellence of a peculiarly interior and spiritual kind.

Where does all this leave the issues of partiality and self-preference? There is no simple answer to this, but I will conclude with some rather schematic observations on the results of the Cartesian inward turn. First, though, a short summary of some of the salient features of virtue theory which I hope have emerged, directly or indirectly, in this paper:

> (1) The dominant feature of virtue theory is, I have been suggesting, its autocentric orientation, in the sense which should by now be clear (though I shall return to it briefly in a moment); in addition to this, virtue theory is
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> (2) characteristically 'aretaic', or excellence-centred;[51]

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[48] Ibid. (emphasis supplied).

[49] *Passions of the Soul*, art. 154: AT XI 446–7; CSM I 384 (emphasis supplied). For further discussion of Descartes's account of the virtue of *générosité* (in a rather different context). see C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 8.

[50] *Passions of the Soul,* art. 50: AT XI 368–70; CSM I 348.

[51] A possible worry is that there may be a tension between the first and second features referred to here: may not the requirements of excellence be in conflict with the partialities and preferences which characterise the autocentric perspective? Thus, talk of 'networks of partiality' may seem to license nepotism, of which the outcome is often counter-aretaic: the best candidate does not get the job. (I am grateful to Ingmar Persson for raising this point in discussion.) The Aristotelian may reply to this that *philia* involves more than just arbitrarily favouring someone because you like them, or are related to them. True *philia* involves a reciprocal relationship of justified self-esteem, where the *philoi* are valued both for their own sake and for the genuine excellences of character they possess. See *NE* 1156

(3) thirdly (and closely connected with the second point), it presupposes the existence of a strong continuum between ethical and other types of human appraisal (and rejects the notion of an insulated*, sui-generis* domain of 'moral' goodness);

(4) fourthly, it construes the 'unit of appraisal' not as the particular action or class of actions (whether deontologically or consequentially assessed) but as the complete life of an individual;

(5) fifthly, it tends to resist the post-Kantian notion (prefigured in Descartes) of the supremacy and autonomy of the will in ethics, accepting instead that the possibilities for individual *eudaimonia* are constrained (though not uniquely determined) by the inescapable social and biological context of our human existence.

The autocentricity which I have been stressing as a principal hallmark of traditional virtue theory gives us a strong point of contact between Aristotelian and Cartesian ethics: each of us must construct the blueprint for fulfilment from the inside outwards, by using our reason to reflect on the best pattern for a worthwhile life. But in Descartes, the turn inwards involves (for reasons which go beyond this paper) a much more dramatic introversion, a bizarre narrowing of focus to the single point of pure consciousness. The dualistic splitting off of the mind or soul from the prison house of the body means that the subject of ethical deliberation turns out to be not an *anthropos*, a biological creature of flesh and blood, but rather a pure *res cogitans* (an immaterial thinking substance). The danger inherent in this narrowed conception of the self is that ethical excellence will be exiled from its sphere of operation. Instead of being robustly rooted in the biological and social networks that define our human lives, instead of realistically embracing the partialities that and commitments that provide the context in which real humans grow and flourish, the ethical project becomes an austere and abstract affair — that of the exercise of pure good will towards what reason directs. But on the other hand, as the passages just cited from Descartes make clear, this turn inwards offers a spectacular prize: a universal and egalitarian vision of goodness which promises to rescue value from the dominance of fortune. And the attractions of this model (illusory or not, as the case may be), have exercised such a powerful pull on our moral imagination, that traditional virtue theory, in the centuries following Descartes, has progressively lost its power to command our allegiance.

Three problems emerge from this, which seem to define the predicament in which modern ethics finds itself. The first is the need to get back to an ethics which is rooted in the realities of the human condition; signs of this need appear even in Descartes, who notwithstanding his official dualism, gradually came to see almost in spite of himself, that ethics requires for its development an account of the human being as a 'substantial union of mind and body', embracing the entire network of physiological and emotional constraints which determine our real lives.[52] The second problem is the puzzle of moral luck — the need to face the fact that

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6–32. For the ethical status of various types of partiality, see J. Cottingham, 'Ethics and Impartiality' *Philosophical Studies* 43 (1983), pp. 83–9, and 'Partiality, Favouritism and Morality', *Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1986), pp. 357–73.

[52] See *Passions of the Soul*, passim, esp. articles 31–6, 45–50, 147, and 211. For the 'substantial union', see Descartes's letters to Elizabeth of 21 May 1643 (AT III 665; CSMK 218) and 28 June 1643 (AT III 691; CSMK 227). See also J. Cottingham, *Descartes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 127–33 and pp. 152–6, and 'Cartesian Trialism', *Mind,* XCIV No. 374 (April 1985), pp. 218-30. Reprinted in J. Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)..

the partialistically rooted and worldly values of aretaic ethics must necessarily offer hostages to fortune, and hence deny the powerful pull of our Christian inheritance calling for universal salvation (or some secular analogue thereof). And the third problem is that of justice, the need to respond to the demands of fairness and equity which appear to go way beyond what can be generated from the autocentric perspective of ethical eudaimonism. The prospects for success in any of these areas are not easy to assess. But the revival of virtue theory has already achieved the valuable result of placing all three issues firmly on the ethical agenda.[53]

[53] I am most grateful to Harley Cahen and Roger Crisp for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.