

CHAPTER 5

VIRTUOUS MOTIVES: RESTRAINT AND SPONTANEITY

5.1 Introduction

Until now we have assumed that the cooperative virtues, most notably trust and fairness, are indeed virtues. However, nothing of the kind has been proven. All I have shown is that these qualities allow us to understand why people, thus disposed, will comply with social norms prescribing cooperation in prisoners' dilemmas as well as in other situations where compliance is not straightforwardly rational. More precisely, I have shown that these qualities are cooperative dispositions, but not that they are cooperative *virtues*.

In this chapter I will try to take away some of the worries that may arise in connection with the claim that trust and fairness indeed are virtues. A full defense of the claim is postponed to later chapters. For now I will show how the cooperative dispositions, as I have described them so far, fit within a general account of the nature of the virtues. I will discuss three different ways to think of virtue. These ways are associated with central figures in the history of philosophy, to wit, Aristotle, Kant, and Hume.

It is not my aim in this chapter to give a precise and complete exposition of their teachings. Instead, I will ask the question whether their respective positions are compatible with the analysis of the cooperative virtues. This means that my presentation of the respective positions of these philosophers is rough and abstracts from many of the nuances and subtleties that make their writings so influential to this date. However, in this work, there is no opportunity to indulge in a detailed comparative and complete discussion of the many aspects of their theories, so brief outlines should suffice for our purpose.

5.2 Aristotle on virtues

The most influential doctrine of the virtues is that of Aristotle. In this section, I will discuss briefly Aristotle's account of the nature of the virtues and show how the virtues of trust and fairness fit into it. It will turn out that there is an important discrepancy between our analysis of the cooperative virtues and what Aristotle has to say about the virtues.

To understand Aristotle's ideas about the virtues, it is necessary to keep in mind his anthropology. Aristotle distinguishes three parts of the soul. The soul of man consists of three parts, a vegetative part, an animal, and a rational part.¹ The vegetative part is concerned with the involuntary movements, e.g., of the bowels, the heart, and the lungs. The animal part is the part that generates the appetites and emotions. These, in turn, prompt man into movement.² The rational part of the soul, finally, is what sets man apart from all other living creatures. This part is concerned with reflection and reasoning. All virtues are connected with a part of the soul. To the rational part belong the so-called intellectual virtues. To the animal part belong the virtues of character, or moral virtues.³

Aristotle defined a moral virtue as

a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is, as the prudent man would determine it.⁴

For Aristotle, not only actions but also the accompanying emotions were important. Good actions are a sign of, or are accompanied by, the right emotion and the right amount of emotion. This seems in accordance with our intuitions with respect to many virtues. For example, the virtue of benevolence implies some genuine concern for the people to whom one is benevolent. This is also reflected in Aristotle's doctrine of the mean which is referred to in his definition of the virtues. A virtue is a mean of some emotion. For example, courage is the right mean between an excess of fear (cowardice) and a lack of fear (recklessness). The courageous man therefore does not conquer or suppress his fears. He has them in the appropriate amount.

¹ One should be reluctant to use the word *soul*, which has a Christian connotation, as a translation of the Greek *psuchè*, which refers to those parts of man that set him apart from all dead things. Therefore the soul are those parts that make it possible for man to be a self-mover.

² Again the issue of proper translation. *Orexis* is the generic term for unreflected, a-rational emotion which for Aristotle is always present in action. It is reason that seeks the right measure, the mean, of this emotion that prompts the action.

³ The Greek term for virtue, *aretè*, literally means *excellence*. For Aristotle, a virtue is the excellent functioning of the different parts of the soul as reflected in action.

⁴ Nicomachean Ethics, II vi-15 (1106b36-1107a2).

Just where the mean is, is determined by the rational part of the soul. The virtue of the rational part of the soul that has bearing on the determination of the proper emotion and the right mean is the disposition for practical judgment (*phronesis*).⁵ The moral virtues are dispositions of the emotional and acting part of the soul: the animal part. In some cases there is no just mean. Aristotle himself gives the example of adultery: there is no fitting occasion for adultery, nor is there a just measure of adulterous behavior.⁶ In such cases the good state of the mind is the absence of the desire for partners other than your own.

From this it follows that the choice of action should be spontaneous. To be virtuous, to have a certain virtue, means that in certain circumstances one immediately responds with the right action and the right motive.⁷ In our terminology: to have a virtue, to be virtuous, implies having the right first-order desire and consequently, the correct, proper first-order reason. If this is absent, the action loses all its moral worth. There is nothing admirable about self-restraint. Aristotle time and again stresses this point:

Again if Self-restraint implies having strong and evil desires, the temperate man cannot be self-restrained, nor the self-restrained man temperate; for the temperate man does not have strong and evil desires.⁸

But whereas the self-restrained man has evil desires [though he conquers them], the temperate man has none; he is so constituted as to take no pleasure in things that are contrary to principle, whereas the self-restrained man does feel pleasure in such things, but does not yield to it.⁹

Compare this doctrine to our analysis of trustworthiness. It does fit Aristotle's definition in many respects. Trustworthiness is a settled disposition. It determines the choice for specific actions and it fits the doctrine of the mean to some extent. For the mean is determined by the mutual expectations of the group or community about trustworthy behavior. For example, in academic circles (at least the ones I am familiar with) it is not to be expected that others do your scientific work for you. It is ridiculous to expect somebody else to actually write this section for me.

⁵ This is one of the most discussed ethical concepts that modern moral philosophy owes to Aristotle, second only to the notion of virtue. Practical judgment appears in many diverse works in ethics. Hence the concept has many connotations, not all of them commensurable. See for example, Arendt (1958), Habermas (1983), MacIntyre (1981), and Rawls (1971). They all discuss and employ the notion in a different manner.

⁶ Nicomachean Ethics, II vi-18 (1107a9-15).

⁷ "If excellences are concerned with actions and emotions, and every emotion and action involves liking or dislike, for this reason excellence will be concerned with one's likes and dislikes." Nicomachean Ethics, II iii-3 (1104b13-16). The translation of this passage is in Urmson (1988, 26).

⁸ Nicomachean Ethics, VII ii-6 (1146a10-12).

⁹ Nicomachean Ethics, VII x-6 (1152a1-3).

Even if I strongly believe somebody will and believing this I dedicate my time to playing guitar, trustworthiness does not require my colleagues to do the writing for me. I would be expecting too much. On the other hand, I can and do expect some of my colleagues to take an interest in my work and discuss it with me. It is, given the academic setting, appropriate to expect help from others in this sense. Trustworthiness requires helping one's colleagues in this way.

However, what our analysis denies is that to be trustworthy implies having the right set of first-order reasons for action. Trustworthiness is essentially a dispositional second-order reason. To be trustworthy involves the possibility of a sacrifice of interest, it is a constraint on one's potentially contrary desires. One could be trustworthy when one has, on the whole, a preference for the trustworthy action. That is, there may be cases of overdetermination. For example, a trustworthy agent may find herself in a situation where compliance with the norm is in her interests anyway. In that case it is hard to determine whether the compliant agent acts on her cooperative virtuousness or does so because of considerations of rationality. However, one does not cease to be trustworthy when one exercises self-restraint. This goes against the grain of Aristotle's doctrine of the virtues, which stipulates that virtuous behavior is, among other things, spontaneous, unrestrained behavior.

I postpone the discussion of this discrepancy between the analysis of the cooperative virtues and Aristotle's doctrine of the virtues until later this chapter, when we have inspected the positions of Kant and Hume.

5.3 Kant on virtues

Many would be surprised by the idea that Kant is presented as having a doctrine on the virtues. And even though he is the author of *The Metaphysics of Virtue*, most would not consider the archetypical representative of deontology as a person who has to say something on the nature of the virtues.¹⁰ Kant's work on ethics can be seen as a consistent attempt at bringing the nature of moral motivation to a philosophical understanding. In doing so, he addressed many of the issues that are the focus of modern discussions about the nature of the virtues. I will show that the discrepancy between the cooperative virtues and the theory of the virtues that was encountered in the previous chapter, does not emerge in Kant's theory. To this end, we need to take a look at Kant's theory of moral motivation in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* and demonstrate how the virtues fit in.

Kant starts the *Groundwork* with a strong claim:

¹⁰ Kant (1995).

It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be take as good without qualification, except a *good will*. [Emphasis in the original].¹¹

For Kant the sole characteristic of a morally good person is that she is guided by a good will. In other words, the motivation with which she acts determines whether she acts morally and nothing else. Kant denies that this moral motive could be located in qualities such as courage, practical judgment, wit, or indeed in any appetite or desire. His argument for this is that these qualities can be used for base and evil enterprises. Thus a courageous criminal could be tempted to venture more daring crimes than if he were a coward. Kant clearly assumes that this eliminates the worth of a thief's courage completely. This assumption may be intuitively compelling to some, but it is not universally shared.¹²

More important than this is that Kant, in his denunciation of courage, judgment, etc., seems to deny that the virtues, such as courage, wit, etc., have any moral worth. Thus it seems we have grounds for constructing a fundamental divide between Kant and the virtue ethicists. However, this is a mistake. The idea Kant is expressing here is, in a different terminology, a central point in Aristotle's writings, to wit, the unity of the virtues. The basic idea of this doctrine is that the virtues presuppose each other. Let me illustrate this with the example of courage. Suppose a person A risks her own life to save that of another person. Clearly, this person is brave. Another person, B, climbs in a high tree and thereby risks her life in order to impress her lover. This person is not brave but foolish and reckless. B lacks the virtue of judgment (*phronesis*). Yet another person, C, is a career criminal. In order to pull off an elaborate theft, she risks her own life. C is not courageous, though she clearly is cold blooded. C lacks the virtue of justice. Like B, C is not courageous precisely because she lacks another virtue. This is corroborated by the fact that one will tend to admire A's rescue. However, it is foolish to expect that B's and C's actions will be met with approval.¹³ Therefore, the virtue of courage presupposes all other virtues, e.g., judgment and justice.

This is the same intuition Kant expresses when he claims that courage is not unconditionally good. Courage is a good thing if and only if something else is present. Kant refers to this "something else" with the term *good will*.

Intelligence, wit, judgment, and any other *talents* of the mind we may care to name, or courage, resolution, and constancy of purpose, as qualities of *temperament*, are without doubt good and desirable in many respects; but they

¹¹ The translation employed is that of H. J. Paton. See Kant (1948, 59).

¹² See also the remarks by Foot (1978, 14-15).

¹³ Should B's lover find B's recklessness admirable, one would be inclined to think her as foolish as B. Of course, it can be the case that B's lover is impressed in spite of the foolishness of B's gesture. Her positive attitude towards B then is attached to something other than B's reckless behavior, for example, B's eagerness to impress her.

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0639-5>

Instrumental Rationality and Moral Philosophy

An Essay on the Virtues of Cooperation

Verbeek, B.

2002, XII, 292 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0639-5