MORAL VIRTUES

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Abstract: *Although much has been published on virtues in recent years, there is still considerable uncertainty in philosophy (and even more among philosophical laymen) about the concept of a virtue and especially about moral virtues. In this article, I will try to clarify these notions. In particular, I want to answer the question: When are virtues moral virtues? Clearly, not every practical virtue is a moral virtue. Why was the courage of the Nazi soldiers in the second world war not a moral virtue, but yet is presumably one if included among the cardinal virtues? To clarify this question, this article will deal with the concept of a virtue but I will also investigate the notion of virtues being of a moral nature. To this end, I propose and explain (I) a definition of moral virtues and clarify this definition further in section (II), by explaining why I did not include qualities, which others have considered as essential.*

Key words: *virtues, character, personality.*

Several decades ago, G. H. von Wright rightly complained about the disregard which contemporary philosophers showed for the concept of virtue.[1] Even though much more has now been published on this subject (especially because so-called *virtue ethics* has become popular), there is still confusion about the concept of a virtue and especially about *moral* virtues. In this paper I will try to clarify these notions. Today, we speak about virtues (and similarly about vices) in a variety of ways. The concept is sometimes taken very narrowly (for instance, when we talk about a 'virtuous woman', meaning that she does not like getting involved in casual love affairs); it is, however, also taken extremely broadly (e.g., when a car dealer praises the virtues of a new model). Within this range, virtues have been categorized in various ways. It has become usual to distinguish between *intellectual* and *practical* virtues,[2] and among the practical ones between *moral* and *non-moral* virtues. I am dealing here with this latter distinction. Not every practical virtue is a moral virtue. There is, however, considerable uncertainty in philosophy (and even more among philosophical laymen) about the question when a virtue can be said to be a *moral* virtue.[3] For instance, in the second world war, *courage* was a virtue of the Nazi soldiers; but it is also one of the traditional *cardinal virtues*. Why is courage in the first case presumably not a moral virtue (if it is a virtue at all), but yet is one if included among the cardinal virtues? To clarify this question, I will deal in this paper with the concept of a *virtue* but will also investigate the idea of virtues being of a *moral* nature. To this end, I propose and explain (I) a definition of moral virtues and clarify this definition further in section (II), by explaining why I have not included qualities, which others have considered as essential.

I

A moral virtue of S *is a personality trait of* S *which motivates* S *intrinsically to act in a given situation in a way which is in situations of this kind generally morally right*.[4]

In what follows, I will explain the characteristic features of this definition. First, some remarks on its *type*. It is a *precising* definition and is therefore neither merely stipulating a meaning of 'moral virtue' nor simply reporting the meaning this term already has in ordinary English. The definition rather claims to make a very vague everyday notion more precise but in a way that the extension of the defined term nevertheless agrees as far as possible with our everyday concept of a moral virtue. The *form* of the proposed definition is not an equivalence but an implication. This means that the definiens states only a sufficient condition for the definiendum which is therefore only partially defined. The reason for this way of defining is that I am not sure that not also other features can render personality traits moral virtues, which means that I do not claim that the definiens is a necessary condition. In other words, the proposed definition states only a positive criterion for moral virtues; it does, however, not determine when a trait is *not* a moral virtue.

The definition explains the concept of a moral virtue for a subject *S*. The subjects of virtues can be any beings that are able to satisfy the definition. Such beings are in particular persons but not, for instance, newborn infants. Besides, moral virtues are gradual characteristics. For example, a person can have the (putative) virtue of benevolence to a greater or lesser degree, depending on, for example, how strongly she is intrinsically motivated to act in accordance with the definiens.

On my account, virtues are *personality traits*. Following Aristotle, most philosophers define virtues as *character traits*.[5] They do so, in order to distinguish them from things that are similar to virtues, but nevertheless differ significantly from them, such as *habits*, *abilities*, *skills, talents*, and a person's *temperament* (e.g., being phlegmatic or melancholic).[6] In addition, virtues are also said to be different from *personality traits* because they are dispositions to act in a specific way and are therefore *motivational* characteristics; and they are considered to be more controlled by our will than personality traits.[7] Someone can, the proponents of this view say, behave as if he was honest, but not as if he was intelligent and therefore virtues must be distinguished from personality traits.[8] For the following reasons, however, I prefer to conceptualise virtues as *personality traits*: To begin with, the notion of character traits is *unclear*, which leads to quite different views about what belongs to the character and what does not. Some philosophers include features that others would prefer to have excluded.[9] Besides, character traits have often been defined in a way that makes them indistinguishable from personality traits, which renders any difference as merely verbal.[10] In addition, it seems that there is no clear demarcation between traits of character and personality traits[11] because the latter ones are also dispositions and many of these are motivational (being an introvert, for instance, implies being motivated to behave in social situations in specific ways).[12] Furthermore, personality traits are not completely independent of our will (introverts can easily behave as if they liked social activities). Moreover, if we conceptualise virtues as personality traits, we can rely on the results of research in psychology, where the concept of character plays only a small role, the concept of personality traits, however, an important one. This means that defining moral virtues as motivational personality traits has the advantage of preserving all essential features of virtues and avoids at least some of the disadvantages of the concept of character.

By 'personality trait' I mean, in short, a relatively broad and fairly stable disposition to act in a given situation in a specific way. For example, the personality trait *introversion* is, among other things, a quite stable disposition to avoid activities with others. There is not the space here to go into the details of the concept of a disposition, but a few remarks can be made. Dispositions are not directly observable tendencies to react in a given situation in a certain way. Psychologists have investigated three groups of such reactions, namely *cognitive* reactions (for example, our beliefs in something), *affective* reactions (i.e. emotions towards something) and *conative* reactions (that is, tendencies to behave in a certain way). For example, if a person has the virtue of justice, she will show this *cognitively* by pondering, for instance, on the problem of a fairer world economy, *conatively* by being motivated to spend time and money for campaigning for fairer trade conditions and *affectively* by her anger when she learns about unfair trade barriers. Only these manifest reactions are conscious and observable at least introspectively, not the dispositions themselves.[13]

Moral virtues are personality traits that motivate us *in specific situations* to act in a certain way. Virtues are related to specific circumstances in our lives.[14] If an honest person finds a wallet, her (putative) virtue of honesty will motivate her to behave in a certain way. In the described situation, she may, for instance, try to return the wallet to its owner. This person can also be courageous, but her presumed virtue of courage will not be manifested *in this situation*. It seems, however, hardly possible to demarcate these situations from each other precisely. Honesty plays an important role in many areas of our lives and in many of these situations also other virtues, e.g. justice, manifest themselves. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that it is always a specific situation in which persons are motivated by their dispositional personality traits to act in certain ways.

Virtues *motivate intrinsically*. If a benevolent person learns that an acquaintance of hers has run into a difficult situation, she will be motivated to help him (at least under normal conditions, not, for instance, if she suffers temporarily from severe depression). However, this person's motivation will be *intrinsic*. She is not only motivated to help because she believes, for example, that helping in this case will promote one of her self-regarding aims; that is, she is not only *extrinsically* motivated. If this person can truly be said to be benevolent, it must be the other's difficult situation *as such* which causes her motivation to help.[15] It is obvious that a person is not benevolent if she offers help only as a putative means for something she wants for herself. An honest person is in specific situations intrinsically motivated to act in a certain way, a friendly person is not friendly only as a means to an end and similarly, a benevolent person is intrinsically motivated to act benevolently (which, of course, means different things in different situations). However, intrinsic motivations that are based on virtues are *conditional*. As personality traits, virtues are dispositions that lead *in specific situations* to a manifest intrinsic motivation to act in a certain way. The motivation depends on the conditions set by these situations. In addition, this motivation also varies in *strength*. Some philosophers take the view that something can only count as a virtue if it strongly motivates one to a certain behaviour.[16] It seems to me, however, quite arbitrary to determine exactly *how strong* the motivational force of a virtue must be. In addition, it is obvious that people are more or less courageous, just, benevolent, etc. and that their

virtues motivate them therefore more or less. The very benevolent person will be strongly motivated to help others; the motivation of the less benevolent man will be weaker. But there is no clear-cut strength of motivation that virtues must not fall short of.

Virtues motivate intrinsically to act *in a certain way* but not to specific actions. This can easily be made clear by the example already considered. If an honest person finds a wallet, depending on the situation, she can be motivated to very different actions (returning it to its owner; handing it in at the lost property office; taking it home and calling the owner, and so forth). What action she will be motivated to take, depends on the circumstances. Apart from extraordinary situations, she will, however, be inclined to act *in a way* which can properly be called *honest*. People who are courageous, just, temperate, etc. are in specific situations motivated to actions that we call (under these circumstances) courageous, just, temperate, etc., although *what* they do may be quite different. In my opinion, it is not possible to determine how a virtue intrinsically motivates more precisely.[17]

Virtues motivate to act in a way that in a specific situation is *generally morally right*. It is this property that renders them as being *moral* virtues.[18] 'Morally right', however, is an ambiguous term. We must at least distinguish between *subjectively* and *objectively* right actions.[19] Roughly, a person acts *objectively* morally right in a specific situation if she does what she in fact should have done, according to a normative ethical point of view. She acts *subjectively* morally right if she does what she (justifiably) believes to be objectively right in the given situation.[20] Thus, according to utilitarianism, a person acts objectively right if she does what has the best consequences and acts subjectively right if she does what she believes to have these consequences. Virtues motivate to *objectively* right actions. That is, they intrinsically motivate to actions that are in a specific situation objectively morally right (not only believed to be so). A benevolent person is in certain circumstances motivated to help and benevolence is a moral virtue if help under these circumstances is *generally* morally right.

There is, however, the obvious objection that at least one virtue consists in the disposition to do what one *believes* to be objectively morally right (and is thus a disposition to do what is *subjectively* morally right), namely the so-called *moral conscientiousness* (or sense of duty) which many regard as the basic moral virtue or at least as a very fundamental one.[21] But it seems clear to me that this trait is also a virtue because persons who do what they *believe* to be morally right do in most cases what is *in fact* morally right (or is at least approximately so). Even moral conscientiousness would not be regarded as a moral virtue if it constantly led to actions that are objectively morally wrong. This can be seen if we imagine a world in which people always act morally wrong if they do what they believe to be morally right. Presupposing a version of utilitarianism, these persons would always fail to promote happiness if they do what they believe is maximizing it. I think it is obvious that in this world conscientiousness would *not* be seen as a moral *virtue*.

Thus, personality traits are only virtues if they motivate us to actions that are *in general* objectively morally right. Justice, politeness, benevolence, and so forth, are moral virtues because they have this property. Clearly, however, they do not *always* lead us to objectively right actions. A simple example (which presupposes utilitarianism) can illustrate this. A benevolent person *X* intends

to help *Y* by offering some money but does in fact offend him because *Y* sees financial assistance as a humiliation, which *X* did not know. *X* did what she thought to be morally right but her benevolence led her to an objectively wrong action. This problem is well known from virtue ethics where it is regarded as an objection to this kind of ethical theory. Even though we have to agree that thoroughly virtuous persons can sometimes be led by their virtues to act wrongly, it is clear that their virtues in general *do* lead to right actions. As argued, otherwise they would not be seen as virtues. Of course, 'in general' is extremely vague. However, it seems to me not possible to describe more precisely *how often* a personality trait must lead to right actions so that it can properly be called a virtue. Some people will apply stricter criteria, others will be more lenient.[22]

II

Having explained my definition of moral virtues, I will now deal with a variety of other traits. Some of them have been considered by other authors to be so important that they have been included in their definitions, while others were considered as *not* essential for moral virtues.

(a) Many philosophers share the view that virtues are *motivational* traits but not everyone agrees with this analysis. For example, Roberts (1987) denies that all virtues are motivational. He distinguishes two kinds of virtues and claims that only one of them is motivational. The so-called 'virtues of will power' do *not* motivate to any action. Examples of these virtues are courage, self-control and patience. According to Roberts, we can act *from* honesty (which is also for Roberts a motivational virtue) but not *from* patience. Like all the other non-motivational virtues, he insists that patience is a *skill* which enables us to avoid wrong actions rather than a trait that motivates us to do something.[23]

I do not deny that some virtues resemble skills but this does not mean that they are not the motivational factors as described above. Also courage, self-control and patience are dispositions that motivate people to act under certain circumstances in a specific way. For example, in situations where we feel disturbed by others, self-control can prevent us from being rude or offensive. In these situations, it leads to an inclination against rudeness and is thus a motive *against* it. Analogous reasoning can show that all so-called 'virtues of will power' do have a motivational force. All of them can evoke in specific circumstances a manifest motivation *for* a certain behaviour or *against* it.

(b) Virtues are not only motivational, according to many authors; they must motivate *to a certain extent*.[24] Indeed, we do not consider a person benevolent if she is only sometimes or only to a negligible degree inclined to intercede on behalf of others. Once again, however, it seems to me impossible to decide precisely *to what extent* a personality trait must be developed so that it can be called a virtue; and even if it is developed enough, a person can still have this virtue to a greater or lesser degree. Not all courageous persons are equally courageous. Besides, there are differences among the virtues. We may concede honesty to a person if she is not dishonest, but we would not consider her courageous just because she is not a coward. For these reasons, it seems to me inappropriate to include the motivational strength of personality traits in the definition of

virtues.

(c) According to some philosophers, it is an essential quality of virtues to be *variable*.[25] In fact, we seem to presuppose that virtues and vices are not completely unchangeable traits. If a person cannot help acting in a certain way, we do not count the traits that underlie her compulsion among the virtues or vices. If a woman suffers from kleptomania, this will be regretted but not blamed. Nevertheless, I have not included this property in my definition because I do not think that there are completely unchangeable personality traits (or character traits). To my psychological knowledge, there are only traits that can be changed more or less easily and that are variable to a greater or lesser extent.[26] To include this feature in my definition was therefore not necessary.

(d) Many philosophers think that the reason for the variability of virtues is the fact that they are *acquired*. Virtues, they hold, are acquired and therefore alterable; personality traits, on the other hand, are congenital and therefore not alterable; thus, virtues are not personality traits, but acquired character traits.[27] However, recent psychological and biological evidence shows that the dichotomy between congenital and acquired is untenable.[28] According to these studies, personality traits are partly determined by genetic factors, the other part, however, depends on upbringing, education, and so forth, and is thus acquired. I do therefore not negate that virtues are acquired. However, I take the view that they have a genetic basis and that they develop under this genetic influence. It would thus be misleading to include the feature of being acquired in the definition. Indeed, all virtues are acquired, but their acquisition is partly determined by genetic factors.

(e) Finally, I would like to point to a consequence of my definition that might cast doubt on its adequacy. If virtues are dispositions to morally right actions, then they are *relative* to theories or views about what is morally right. A trait that is a virtue for a utilitarian may not be considered as such by a Catholic theologian because they will have different views about what is morally right. Piety, for instance, will be considered a virtue by the theologian, but probably not by the utilitarian. However, this consequence is not an argument against my account but rather one *for* it, because it explains partly the well-known fact that people regard different traits as virtues. Obviously, people hold different normative ethical views. Therefore, they *see* different actions as morally right or wrong and thus they will *consider* different personality traits as virtues or vices. Jeremy Bentham, for instance, regarded dispositions as virtuous if they tended to augment happiness.[29] Others will disagree with this account because they have another view of what is morally right. Whether or not a trait is *really* a virtue can only be known if we know whether or not an action is *really* morally right. Therefore, as long as we have to content ourselves with rival normative ethical theories, we cannot entirely exclude this relativism.

Notes

[1] See von Wright (1963, 136-54).
[2] In essence, this distinction goes back to Aristotle's distinction between *ethical* and *dianoetical* virtues (EN 1102a5, 1138aff). Apart from this categorization, it has become usual to distinguish from these *philosophical* virtues the so-called *Christian* virtues (faith, hope and love). However, there are also other classifications, for instance, between *natural* and *artificial* virtues (see Bollnow, 1962; Hume, 1964; 1984 or Nowell-Smith, 1957) or the distinction between *'first order virtues'* and *'second order virtues'* (see e.g. Frankena 1981; Rorty, 1988).
[3] This can be seen, for instance, in Foot (1997), von Hildebrand (1954), Simon (1986) or von Wright (1963) who write about virtues but do not explain when a virtue is of a *moral* nature. But it is also shown by the disagreement among philosophers. For example, Mackie (1981, 143) sees courage as a *non-moral virtue*, for Bennet (1995, 2), however, it can be a *moral* character trait.
[4] This definition is on virtues. It must be emphasised, however, that it cannot easily be applied to moral *vices* because some are *contraries* of moral virtues, others are their *contradictions*, and there may be vices, which must be defined in a completely different way.
Many authors, following Aristotle's well-known account in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, emphasise that virtues are connected not only with actions but also with emotions (cf. Blum, 1980; Bollnow, 1962; Nussbaum, 1988; Roberts, 1987 and Spiecker, 1994). My definition does not rule this out. I am, however, of the opinion that this connection does not hold for all virtues and that it is thus not an essential characteristic. Therefore, it should not be included in the definition. The same is true for Foot's (1997) claim that virtues contribute to the well-being to those who have them. This may often be the case, but it is not a defining characteristic.
[5] Compare, for instance, Blum (1980), Brandt (1959; 1988; 1992), Hume (1964; 1984), Kant (1961), Nowell-Smith (1957), Roberts (1987), Simon (1986), Slote (1983) or von Wright (1963).
[6] See, for instance, von Hildebrand (1954, 12) or Kant (1961, 393).
[7] See e.g. Brandt (1988, 76), Frankena (1981, 79) or Nowell-Smith (1957, 217). Von Wright (1963) denies that virtues are dispositions. However, by 'dispositions' he means 'latent traits which, under specific circumstances manifest themselves in characteristic signs' (p. 142). For instance, allergies are dispositions because they manifest themselves if a person comes into contact with specific stimuli. The reason for von Wright's denial to see virtues as dispositions seems therefore his very narrow concept of a disposition. Some authors prefer the term 'inclination' to 'disposition', e.g. Stelzenberger (1965) who defines 'virtue' as a lasting inclination (*habitus operativus*) to what is morally good (p. 61); a similar view is defended by McInerny (1997, 91).
[8] Compare Brandt (1959, 467).
[9] For instance, Louden (1992, 31) counts 'perceptual skills' among the character traits, which, however, others do not regard as part of our character.
[10] See, for example, Blum (1980, 204-7) and Broad (1971).
[11] Brandt (1988, 68), for instance, classifies *sulkiness* as a personality trait and *benevolence* as a character trait (although we can well speak about a sulky character and a benevolent personality) and Taylor (1988) regards envy and jealousy as *character traits*, they are, however, in psychology treated as *personality traits* (see e.g. Izard, 1991).
[12] See to this e.g. McAdams (1995) and Pervin (2000).
[13] The notion of a personality trait will become clearer below when I explain further characteristics of the given definition.
[14] McInerny (1997) puts this thought as follows: 'A coward is disposed to act in a certain way in circumstances that threaten; the brave man is disposed to act in the opposite way in the same circumstances' (p. 91).
[15] This view is also defended e.g. by Blackburn (1998), Brandt (1988), Hartmann (1926), MacIntyre (1987) and owell-Smith (1957).
[16] See, for instance, Brandt (1988).
[17] This seems to be also the view of a number of other authors; see, e.g. Brandt (1988), McInerny (1997), Nussbaum (1988) or von Wright (1963).
[18] A similar view has been defended by Rawls (1993) who stresses that virtues are inclinations to act in accordance to moral principles (compare pp. 219, 475), Brandt (1988) and Frankena (1981). Some stress that moral virtues prompt us to morally *good* actions (see Stelzenberger, 1965, 81) but this way of talking is based on the neglect of the distinction (at least terminologically) between *morally right* and *morally good* actions, which is basic in ethical theory.
[19] Actions can also be "formally" right or wrong (see to this concept Broad, 1985, 144 and Frankena, 1980, 54). Even though also this concept is of some relevance for the notion of a virtue, I will not deal with it in this article.
[20] Compare to this distinction, for example, Broad (1985, 144) or Frankena (1980, 59-62). A somewhat different view of subjectively and objectively right actions has been held by Gibbard (1990, 45) and Hospers (1970, 217-20).
[21] See, for instance, Kant (1961) or Ross (1930).
[22] The reader is invited to test this definition by applying it to other traits that are widely regarded as moral virtues. Here are some of them: friendliness, compassion, generosity, cooperativeness, tactfulness, loyalty, moderation, and tolerance.
[23] According to Roberts (1987), the virtues of will power are 'needed to keep us on the path of virtue and our higher self-interest' (p. 125) but they are not motivational factors.
[24] Compare, for example, Brandt (1988, 77) or Nowell-Smith (1957, 217).
[25] See, e.g. Nowell-Smith (1957, 262-7) who makes the additional claim that virtues must be open to change by the

methods of reward and punishment.
[26] Also *intelligence* and *kleptomania* which are not changeable traits according to Nowell-Smith, *are* modifiable.
[27] See Frankena (1981, 79), MacIntyre (1987, 256-68) or McInerny (1997, 91). This view goes back to Aristotle's thesis that virtues are acquired habits (see EN 1105b25ff).
[28] According to McAdams (1995, 373), research on twins has shown that personality traits are from 40 to 50 percent determined by genetic factors. See to this also John and Gosling (2000, 142-3).
[29] See Bentham (1960/1789, 246).

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