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Honesty in Virtue Ethics

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Abstract

I present a discussion of honesty within the framework of Aristotle's parameter doctrine. Chapter 1 is about the parameter of the "right objects" which is primarily where intellectual honesty fits in; it aims to be a somewhat Wittgensteinian account, which argues that forming beliefs and acquiring knowledge are not only of epistemological concern, but also a matter of ethics. Chapter 2 considers communicating the relevant truth in the "right way", which has two sides. On the one hand it involves communicating in such a manner that makes it clear whether one is sharing facts, opinions, or beliefs and on the other hand it involves the right manner of communication. The first aspect involves differentiating between the different types of propositions and acknowledging our fallibility. I also found it interesting to examine the role predictions and intentions play in the way we communicate. In Chapter 3 I examine (honestly) communicating at the "right times" which yields a discussion of why tact *isn't* a virtue. I also discuss Aristotle's doctrine of disjoint spheres and why it makes sense to regard the virtues as overlapping and intertwined. I also consider how communicating age-appropriately relates to honesty. Communicating (honestly) with the right people raises juicy issues in Chapter 4, such as honest agents telling lies, privacy (not everyone has a right to hear the whole truth) and gossip. Chapter 5 looks at the right motives for honesty which also considers the vital role that self-awareness has for an honest agent, issues of engaging with reality, virtual realities and escapism. I end in Chapter 6 with a thorough discussion of moral development and *phronesis* (practical wisdom), which leads on to examining why perfect virtue is (or rather *should be*) painted as an unattainable ideal. Throughout this last chapter I compare the accounts of Howard Curzer and Julia Annas. This final chapter also briefly addresses Aristotle's notion of natural virtue. My discussion aims to be guided by a modification of Aristotle's insight, namely that we should inquire both in order to know what virtue is and in order to become good.

To my wife Griffin and to Oma

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Introduction

I do not intend to write a defence of, or argument for, virtue ethics, rather I intend to write from within the framework of virtue ethics. What I intend to discuss is honesty. Yet I must begin by explaining why virtue ethics has drawn me in, since in doing so I will be able to show why a thorough examination of honesty is so important (and more to the point, why honesty is so important a virtue in the first place). A normative ethical theory should answer two questions: How should I live? and What sort of person should I strive to be? The first question must be answered because the whole point of a normative ethical theory is to provide guidance on how we should act, and after all, our actions are an integral part of our lives. The question of what sort of person I should be appears less intuitively linked to normative ethical theory, since it is not a question that has traditionally been the focus of consequentialist or deontological ethics. And yet it is a question clearly in need of an answer, and what better source of an answer than normative ethics which must, as it is, give an account of how one should live. Regardless of whether the way I live my life determines what sort of person I am or vice versa, the two questions are intrinsically interrelated so it seems clear that they would both draw their answers from the same source.

Now it should seem clear that while deontology and most forms of consequentialism do more or less give an account of how one should live (or at least how one should act¹), neither tend to answer the second question (though there has been some progress in this regard). We can generally surmise that a consequentialist would say we should strive to be the sort of person who promotes the best consequences and that a deontologist would say we should strive to be the sort of person who does their duty and obeys the correct rules. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, addresses this question as central to its theory, and therefore gives a much fuller account of the sort of person one should strive to be, namely a virtuous person. Rosalind Hursthouse describes virtue as

a character trait—that is, a disposition which is well entrenched in its possessor, something that, as we say “goes all the way down”, unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker—but the disposition in question, far from being a single track disposition to do [for example] honest actions, or even honest actions for certain reasons, is multi-track. It is concerned with many other actions as well, with emotions and emotional reactions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations and

¹ One could argue that one's actions form only part of one's life, though an integral part, no doubt. How one ought to feel about these actions (and those of others), and the motivations behind them are other aspects of the way one lives which I would suggest cannot be ignored by normative ethical theory.

sensibilities. To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a certain complex mindset.²

My exploration of the virtue of honesty will consider merely one of many possible examples of virtue, and my approach will be grounded in the wider framework of (neo-Aristotelian) virtue ethics.

My reason for choosing honesty as the focus of my discussion is fairly simple. It seems fair to say that honesty is a universally acknowledged virtue within modern virtue ethics,³ and it appears to me to be a virtue which factors into very many practical situations. I wanted a satisfactory account of honesty before trying to wield stray thoughts about it in discussions of applied ethics. Such an account is, in short, what I hope to have produced here. It is no doubt true that in order to apply any virtue to a practical situation it is good to have a satisfactory account of it first, but I believe honesty in particular is in need of such an account, since it is so multifaceted.

My account of honesty is neo-Aristotelian in two ways. Firstly, it follows in the tradition of contemporary, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and secondly while it uses much of the framework Aristotle provides in his account of the virtues, it differs significantly in that it is an account of *honesty*. Despite honesty being the universally acknowledged virtue that it is (now), honesty is a virtue that Aristotle himself does not directly address. Or according to Howard Curzer, it is a virtue Aristotle neglects entirely, since, as Curzer argues, the brief discussion of ‘truthfulness’ in the *Nicomachean Ethics*⁴ “is not a flawed account of the virtue of honesty, but rather it is a sketchy, but insightful account of the virtue of integrity.”⁵ In the introduction to his chapter on Aristotle’s truthfulness, Curzer gives a brief description of the virtue of honesty that we could have expected from Aristotle:

Honest people tell the truth about the right things, on the right occasions, to the right people, etc. Some people are deficient in truth-telling. They go wrong by telling too many lies, on too many occasions, to too many people, and/or about too many things. Other people are excessively truthful. They go wrong by telling the truth too often, on too many occasions, to too many people, and/or about too many things. Liars are more common and worse than excessively truthful people, so deceitfulness is mistakenly thought to be the only opposite of truthfulness, and the other vice has no name.

² Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Summer 2012, accessed May 25, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

³ “Honesty is on everyone’s list of virtues.” – Howard J. Curzer, *Aristotle and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 195, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199693726.001.0001.

⁴ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Book IV, Chapter 7. (Henceforth I will refer to this simply as *NE*, with the ‘Bekker numbers’ attached.)

⁵ Curzer, *Aristotle and the Virtues*, 196.

Excessive truth-telling is a vice nonetheless, for there are times when silence or even white lies are preferable to the truth. Nice, neat, plausible, Aristotelian.⁶

Of course, as he points out, “Aristotle says nothing like this.”⁷ But it paints rather a neat and brief outline of what I *do* intend to discuss.

The view of honesty that I will present here is twofold. On the one hand we have intellectual honesty which involves things such as being honest with oneself, seeking to ensure that one holds accurate beliefs, and so on. On the other hand we have honesty in communication, of which one aspect is certainly truthfulness. It might even be more accurate to view honesty as something of an umbrella-term under which a number of virtues fall. These might range from the two I will focus on, to integrity (“*being genuine rather than phony*, ... creating an accurate image of oneself in the eyes of others, portraying oneself correctly”⁸), fairness (not cheating), trustworthiness (keeping promises), transparency (which might involve having the sort of character where you really have nothing to hide). These virtues are all to some greater or lesser extent interrelated; they overlap, yet they also seem to be able to stand independently. I would like to limit myself to an examination of honesty (intellectual and in communication), though if aspects of the other virtues mentioned come into play, they will, no doubt, fit in seamlessly.

Although in choosing to focus on honesty I acknowledge that Aristotle’s list of the virtues was incomplete, I nevertheless believe his methodology still holds true for virtues outside of those he himself addressed. It is my intention that by taking one fragment of the answer to the second question above⁹ to be “I should strive to be an honest person”, I will illustrate a method for identifying the other parts of the answer to that question. In other words, I wish to proceed with the tools provided by Aristotle, and apply them to my account of honesty. Perhaps the most significant tool is adapted from what Curzer calls “Aristotle’s parameter doctrine”¹⁰ (Hursthouse calls this the second doctrine of the mean¹¹). Aristotle describes his doctrine by saying that to feel the passions (and to act virtuously)

⁶ Ibid, 195.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 207.

⁹ What sort of person should I strive to be?

¹⁰ Ibid, 43.

¹¹ Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory,” in *Ethics in practice: an anthology*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 50.

at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue.¹²

I hope that by giving an extended example of this in my application of this doctrine to honesty, I will be able to demonstrate its potential usefulness when it comes to working with various other virtues in applied virtue ethics. I present my discussion over six mostly independent chapters.

I will begin Chapter 1 by skipping to the second parameter, since with regard to honesty I believe that the parameter of the “right objects” is primarily where intellectual honesty fits in. After all, before we can go about communicating any facts, opinions or beliefs, we should seek to ensure that these are in fact the right ones, so to speak. My discussion of the right objects with regard to honesty will be something of an exploration of Wittgensteinian epistemology as it relates to honesty. It seems to me that this ought to be covered before addressing honesty in communication. Most importantly, I hope to use this chapter to show that forming beliefs and acquiring knowledge are not only of epistemological concern, but also a matter of ethics.

Next I will consider communicating the relevant truth in the right way, which has two sides. On the one hand it involves communicating in such a manner that makes it clear whether one is sharing facts, opinions, or beliefs and on the other hand it involves the right manner of communication. The first aspect is quite a complex bundle, which involves differentiating between the different types of propositions and acknowledging our fallibility. I also found it interesting to examine the role predictions and intentions play in the way we communicate.

In Chapter 3 I will then consider (honestly) communicating at the right times which brings with it the right places, and that combination yields a discussion of why tact *isn't* a virtue. Nevertheless, considerations of tact have an important place in discussions of the timing of honest communication. I use the opportunity this opens up to discuss Aristotle's doctrine of disjoint spheres and why it makes sense to me to regard the virtues as overlapping and intertwined. I also consider how communicating age-appropriately relates to honesty, with a brief look at the Santa Claus myth.

¹² NE 1106b20-4.

Communicating (honestly) with the right people raises interesting issues in Chapter 4, such as honest agents telling lies, privacy (not everyone has a right to hear the whole truth) and gossip. I use Kant's infamous murderer (or rather the more contemporary Nazi) at the door to illustrate that telling a lie *can* be an honest action. Privacy issues arise from the notion that just because something is true doesn't mean one ought to (be prepared or even feel compelled to) share it with the world. The discussion of gossip considers what truths are yours to share, taking shared prayer requests as an example.

Addressing the right motives and intentions behind an action is certainly not unique to virtue ethics (consider Kant's notion that an action is only done rightly if done from a sense of duty¹³), but the way in which the motives are addressed is rather distinctive indeed. Hursthouse illustrates this using honesty as an example, saying the honest agent:

chooses, where possible to work with honest people, to have honest friends, to bring up her children to be honest. She disapproves of, dislikes, deploras dishonesty, is not amused by certain tales of chicanery, despises or pities those who succeed by dishonest means rather than thinking they have been clever, is unsurprised, or pleased (as appropriate) when honesty triumphs, is shocked or distressed when those near and dear to her do what is dishonest and so on.¹⁴

At the most basic level, considering the motives involved it should quickly become clear that even being technically truthful, while intending to deceive is simply not what we'd describe as honesty. In my discussion of motives I consider Professor Snape's motives for his expansive deception, and the vital role that self-awareness has for an honest agent. I also consider issues of engaging with reality, virtual realities and escapism.

I will end in Chapter 6 with a thorough discussion of moral development and *phronesis* (practical wisdom), which leads on to examining why perfect virtue is (or rather *should be*) painted as an unattainable ideal. Throughout this last chapter I will compare the accounts of Howard Curzer and Julia Annas¹⁵ whose rather different approaches both bring a lot of valuable insights to the discussion, though I mostly favour Annas' more intuitive approach which relies heavily on the analogy of virtue as a practical skill.

This final chapter also briefly addresses Aristotle's notion of natural virtue. It fits in here because with all of these parameters to consider, honesty as a whole seems rather an

¹³ Robert Johnson, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Summer 2014, accessed December 2, 2014, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/kant-moral/>.

¹⁴ Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics".

¹⁵ Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

intellectual virtue (even when it comes to honest communication). It appears to completely ignore the idea of a simple, honest person, one who does not give much thought to their honesty, does not consider the various parameters, but can be described as being intrinsically honest. I believe this can be accounted for by calling on natural virtue, under Aristotle's terminology.

Honesty is often the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of virtues,¹⁶ yet it might easily be one of the most complex when it comes to assessing it theoretically. While it may seem that what honesty revolves around is words, and language, I hope to show that there is more to it. Chapter 5 in particular will argue that what really lies at the heart of honesty is reality itself. The importance of engaging with reality and our commitment to it are what anchor our commitment to live honest lives. Of course, for us as humans, words, whether spoken, written or thought, are the building blocks that have shaped reality, in much the same way that atoms are the building blocks that shape the universe. Clive Barker poignantly expresses the value of words, of language, when he writes:

Think of all that words express: the seductions, threats, demands, entreaties, prayers, curses, omens, proclamations, diagnoses, accusations, insinuations, testaments, judgements, reprieves, betrayals, laws, lies, and liberties. And so on, and on, words without end. Only when the last syllable has been spoken, whether it's a joyous hallelujah or someone complaining about their bowels, only then is it that I think we can reasonably assume the world will have ended.¹⁷

Curzer frequently reminds us of Aristotle's aim in his discussion of ethics: "We are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is but in order to become good."¹⁸ I think this is a valuable reminder which should be brought into any discussion of ethics in general and virtue in particular. I embarked on this journey to explore the complexities of honesty in order to make it more accessible for use in applied virtue ethics. But it would have been foolish for me to ignore the fact that this is and has been a very personal journey at times, where I would hope that the greater understanding I now have of honesty might continue to lead me to become a more honest person.

¹⁶ Thank you to Vanya Kovach for pointing this out.

¹⁷ Clive Barker, *Mister B. Gone* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 19.

¹⁸ *NE* 1103b27-8.

Chapter 1

The Right Objects

If we move away from the idea of honesty as solely being a matter of communication, to consider what it means to be honest in our thinking, we need to consider what we can rightly claim to know. This indicates that there is something more fundamental to honesty than simply telling the truth, which we might call *intellectual* honesty. I would suggest that this more fundamental element indicates that we cannot properly consider honesty as a virtue without a solid epistemological foundation. Hence, I am taking this step back, since most of what we communicate expresses, or at least relies upon, what we purportedly *know*. However, I would like to argue here that most (if not all) of what we supposedly *know*, we actually only *assume*, or at least our *knowledge* is based on underlying *assumptions*. Such propositions (our knowledge, beliefs, or assumptions) are the objects of our honest actions, and as such they fall neatly into the Aristotelian framework of the parameter doctrine. Examining what constitutes a *right* object will be the focus of this chapter. I would therefore like to propose a method for evaluating the truth of an object (a proposition), based primarily on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. My purpose, then, is to present a Wittgensteinian account, built into an Aristotelian framework, which argues that forming the right beliefs, and acquiring the right (i.e. true) knowledge is not just a matter of epistemology, but also a matter of ethics.

Making Assumptions

We make a great many claims to knowledge every day. But at some point down the line each of these claims is based on one or more underlying assumptions. Consider an example: “I am drinking a cup of peppermint tea.” On the face of it I might say that of course I *know* this. After all, I am holding the cup in my hand now, I have tasted the peppermint, I read the label on the box, and smelled the peppermint scent of the teabag. I can see and feel myself bringing the cup to my mouth to take a sip. All of this serves as evidence to support my *knowledge* that I am drinking a cup of peppermint tea.

And yet is it not possible that I am wrong? Most obvious is the fact that peppermint “tea” is not made from the tea plant “*Camellia sinensis*”, making it a so-called herbal

infusion, or tisane, rather than a tea.¹ It might also be possible that the box was mislabelled, and that it is actually something else (perhaps something that smells and tastes similar) or perhaps I have a blocked nose and am not picking up on scents and tastes as I might normally. Or perhaps I am about to wake up only to find that I dreamed that I was drinking a cup of tea. Or I might recount my drinking tea to someone else later, certain that it actually happened, when it was just a very vivid dream.

The assumptions I make when I claim to know that I drank a cup of peppermint tea (I've finished it now) are numerous. I may have assumed that since peppermint is a herb (*Mentha x piperita*) it is implied that I am referring to herbal tea, rather than the actual *tea* plant. Or perhaps I simply assume that the word "tea" includes all drinks made from the infusion of any and all plant matter. I would have assumed that the manufacturers printed the correct information on the label. I assume that I actually know what peppermint smells and tastes like. I assume that I am (or was) awake, and that I am capable of discerning between being awake and vividly dreaming.

I am also making some even more basic assumptions. I assume that the cup in front of me exists, that the teabag, the water, and the sugar exist. In other words, I assume the existence of an external world. And I must certainly assume that I exist bodily (and not merely as a brain in a vat of a mad scientist's lab).

What I may have seen as my *knowledge* that I drank a cup of peppermint tea is in fact based on a great many assumptions, and I could perhaps even say that it was itself an assumption. And yet, drinking that cup of peppermint tea is dependent on my making most of these subconscious assumptions. Whether I know certain things to be true, or whether I assume them, or whether it is knowledge based on a whole host of assumptions, it does not (I could go so far as to say that it *cannot*) change the way I act in practice. Regardless of how much room there is for doubt, how much is based on assumptions, we have to make assumptions in order to act. At some stage we must stop doubting and start trusting.²

We must trust, as Wittgenstein says, or act on assumptions, because if we do not make these assumptions (and trust in them, or treat them as certainties) we essentially freeze, unable

¹ Sarina Jacobson, *Tea* (New York: Penn Publishing Ltd., 2009), 6-8.

² Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright and translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 1969), paragraph 150 (I will continue to use paragraph numbers rather than page numbers as a reference for this work, and henceforth refer to it simply as *OC*).

to act, since there are so many things which are beyond our ability to know indubitably.³ Perhaps while I can *know* beyond a shadow of a doubt (excepting the Cartesian evil demon) that $2+2=4$, I might never be certain of the existence of other minds, for example. Indeed, as Wittgenstein points out, mathematical propositions have “as it were officially, been given the stamp of incontestability”⁴ (and I will later return to the importance of such a communal, or shared, aspect of knowledge). But all of us interact with other people (at least on some occasions), so these interactions themselves imply our assumption that these people have minds of their own; we cannot interact with others *without* making this assumption.

Consider your average day, from when you wake up in the morning till you go back to sleep at night. How many people do you usually encounter and interact with? Now imagine these interactions if you did *not* assume that these people had minds of their own – perhaps you assume they are mindless zombies (though not necessarily of the brain-eating variety), perhaps they are puppets controlled by a supreme puppet master, perhaps they are figments of your imagination (in this case perhaps your imagination acts as the puppet master). How does this change these encounters and interactions? Does your partner still have a preference for coffee or tea? Do children without minds even need an education (if not, why take them to school)? If these other people are figments of *your* imagination, would driving a car not be risk-free? After all, your imagination could direct these figments to always drive safely out of your way. Can you form a loving bond (of friendship or of a romantic/sexual nature) with a person who might just be like a puppet on a string? This last example perhaps illustrates most poignantly why everyday life as we know it is impossible without that most basic of assumptions, that the people around us have minds of their own.

I hope this has made it clear that there are many things (both basic and more complex) that we must assume in order to proceed in our day-to-day existence. The next logical question to proceed to is to consider what it is that we do assume, but also (and perhaps more importantly, for a normative ethicist, at least) what we *should* assume. I would suggest that the answer to both questions centres around the idea that regardless of the actual content of our assumptions, the assumptions we make, which we act on in our everyday lives should be (perhaps they even *must* be) ones that we all share, to a greater or lesser degree. To consider this idea, we should examine the concept of the right objects with regard to honesty.

³ This might change over time.

⁴ *OC*, 655.

Identifying Truth

In order to ensure that we are honest with regard to the right objects, we need to have some understanding of what these objects are and how we can identify which objects are *right*. Objects, when it comes to honesty, are propositions, or a form of linguistic currency.

If we strip down honesty to the basic idea of truth-telling, we are immediately faced by the question of what “truth” is. How are we to identify it, or rather, how do we measure it? If we have a statement “this x is y ”, we need a standard by which to determine whether or not the x in question is indeed y . As part of determining this we must also consider that if person A communicates this statement to person B, there is generally the assumption that both A and B have the same understanding of what x and y are. And this is where things start to get a bit shaky. Assumptions can often be wrong, so if we have one statement which has a different meaning to two different agents, we then need a standard to determine which agent (if either) is right.

So far we need to determine: whether or not x is indeed y ; what x is; and what y is. But on what basis can we come to any conclusions here? Say standard 1 tells us that yes, x is indeed y and A’s understanding of x and y are correct; standard 2 tells us that x is not y , and B’s understanding of x and y are correct (making A incorrect in this matter); standard 3 tells us that A’s understanding of y is correct after all, but their understanding of x is wrong and they were wrong in that x is not y ; and standard 4 says that no, it was B who understood y correctly, but not x , and x is still not y , and so on... the concepts of anything being correct, true, factual, or anything of the like quickly start to lose their meaning.

Let me illustrate this with an example. Alice says to Beth that “homosexuality is unnatural”. Alice understands “homosexuality” to be the conscious choice to have sex with someone of the same sex, whereas Beth understands the term to refer to the (genetically-based) sexual orientation of someone who experiences romantic/sexual attraction only towards members of the same sex/gender. Alice understands “unnatural” to refer to something that goes against the natural order ordained by God, whereas Beth’s concept of it is of something not found in nature.

Standard 1 is conservative religious orthodoxy, based in Alice’s interpretation of her sacred text and that of her religious leader, according to which Alice’s understanding of

“homosexuality” and “unnatural” are correct, and that based on that the statement “homosexuality is unnatural” is correct. Standard 2 is a school of thought supported by various psychologists, according to which Beth’s understanding of both terms is correct, and that genes are the building blocks of all that is natural, making the statement “homosexuality is unnatural” incorrect. Standard 3 is liberal religious teaching, this time based on a different religious leader’s interpretation of Alice’s sacred text, stating that homosexuality is just the way God made some people, so these people must be part of the natural order ordained by God, making the statement “homosexuality is unnatural” incorrect. Standard 4 is another school of thought supported by various other psychologists, which makes Beth’s understanding of “unnatural” correct, but according to which homosexuality is a learned behaviour which can be observed in most other animals, making the statement “homosexuality is unnatural” incorrect.

Here is a table to simplify the point I would like to make:

Statement: <i>“Homosexuality is unnatural”</i>	Standard 1 Conservative God	Standard 2 “Nature” ⁵ Psychologists	Standard 3 Liberal God	Standard 4 “Nurture” Psychologists
Alice’s understanding of “homosexuality”	CORRECT	WRONG	WRONG	WRONG
Beth’s understanding of “homosexuality”	WRONG	CORRECT	WRONG	WRONG
Alice’s understanding of “unnatural”	CORRECT	WRONG	CORRECT	WRONG
Beth’s understanding of “unnatural”	WRONG	CORRECT	WRONG	CORRECT
“Homosexuality is unnatural”	CORRECT	WRONG	WRONG	WRONG

Looking at this table, we could say that Alice’s statement that “homosexuality is unnatural” is both true and false. Or that, based on the four standards considered here (there could no doubt be many more), her statement is 35% true and 65% false. Or more vaguely, that the truth of

⁵ By “nature” and “nurture” I refer to the debate regarding whether a certain behaviour is hereditary or learned due to the influence of one’s environment.

this statement depends on your perspective. Then again, talking about the truth of a statement in such a vague or indecisive way is not very useful from a practical point of view.

I hope two things have become clear by now. Firstly, without an established standard by which to determine what is “true” and what is not, it can be practically impossible to get a usable grasp on these objects. This should illustrate what it is that we are up against: a cacophony of objects with a distinct lack of a common standard for unanimously identifying the ‘right’ ones. Secondly, any standard we may wish to use would need to apply to everyone, ensuring that we are all on the same page. After all, if Alice and Beth each rely on different standards on which to base their concepts they can use the same words but talk past each other, unable to engage in any effective form of communication.

If we assume (as I believe we must) that truth is objective,⁶ so that what I find to be true must also be true for you, there may yet be hope for effective communication between individuals. If, on the other hand, truth were relative to each individual, then Beth’s understanding of homosexuality would be right *for Beth*, while Alice’s understanding of homosexuality would be just as true *for Alice*. From this it follows that Beth’s truth would be largely irrelevant to Alice and *vice versa*.

The Hinge Propositions

So allowing that we must assume truth to be objective, and having established that we must make assumptions in order to function in our everyday lives, it should be clear that many of the ‘truths’ we hold up as objective, are in fact assumptions that we all (have to) share. At this point I would like to introduce Wittgenstein’s concept of a hinge proposition.⁷ As he says: “the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.”⁸ I would suggest, however, that there are two degrees of such hinge propositions: global and local. If we take ‘hinge proposition’ to refer to a proposition which must be accepted as true (whether consciously or subconsciously) in order for individuals to go about their lives (so the sort of belief on which other beliefs are, in turn, based) then I propose using ‘global hinge

⁶ While this might be a contentious assumption, I think it is beyond the scope of this discussion to put forth an argument for this.

⁷ Cf. *OC*, 341, 343, 655.

⁸ *Ibid*, 341.

proposition’ to refer to such propositions which must be accepted as true globally, by every individual. A ‘local hinge proposition’, on the other hand, is a proposition which is (but need not be) accepted as true by some (but not all) individuals, and used by them as a basis on which to build other knowledge, or as a lens through which to view the rest of the world, so to speak. These local hinge propositions are generally defined by the communities in which they are formed, be they cultural, linguistic, religious, or some other form of community.

So the global hinge propositions are those we *all* (each and every one of us) must, and in most cases do, share. These will include the staples, the bread and butter of our so-called ‘knowledge base’: that I (or in your case, you) exist, in the way that I appear to do so; that other people exist and have minds of their own; that the physical world exists (more or less in the way perceived by our senses);⁹ and (no doubt more controversially) that the most reliable means for us to learn more about the world we (appear to)¹⁰ live in must be based on those experiences we have in common: our common ground.¹¹

Local hinge propositions are those assumptions you must make to operate within a specific community of people. Unlike global hinge propositions you will not need these to function in day-to-day life, unless you are part of such a specific community. This is what makes them local. But they are still hinge propositions in their own right; they do not depend on any other assumption or piece of ‘knowledge’, beyond any related global hinge propositions. An example of a local hinge proposition might be that “cup” refers to things like this ceramic vessel I am holding in my hand, and likewise “herbal tea” refers to the current contents of said vessel. These propositions must be accepted as true by those of us who communicate using the English language. However, for those who don't speak a word of English (those who aren't part of an English-speaking community) the truth of these propositions is more or less irrelevant, as it doesn't affect their lives. Conversely, “Tasse” could refer to things like the ceramic vessel I am holding in my hand, and “Kräutertee” to its current contents, but these local hinge propositions are mostly irrelevant to those who don't rely on the German language to communicate – they are local to German-speaking communities. Propositions like these, that state the meaning of particular words or phrases, might also be said to rely on global hinge propositions about our own existence, the existence of other minds, and also a global hinge proposition that corresponds directly to these local

⁹ I will henceforth take it as read that I mean we assume that the world exists more or less as we perceive it.

¹⁰ I will henceforth also take the “(appear to)” as read.

¹¹ I do not necessarily consider this list to be exhaustive.

ones (a higher-order hinge proposition, so to speak), namely that certain units of linguistic currency have an assigned meaning, determined by the language they are a part of.

Now on to my claim that those experiences we have in common are the most reliable means for us to learn more about the world we live in. I have established that one of our global hinge propositions must be that other people around us, with minds of their own, exist. It seems to me that in order for such an assumption to carry any weight, we must also assume that we have some degree of shared experience with those around us. If you and I were in a meadow with flowers, a pond, trees nearby and clouds in the sky, then you must also have the experience of perceiving these things around you, assuming that your senses are not in some way impaired. Without such a shared experience we have no basis for communication (whether verbal, written, or gesture-based). If dipping your feet in the pond doesn't feel *wet* to you like it does to me, if to you the flowers in the meadow do not have a distinctly different appearance to the grass, if you do not experience the tree trunk to be solid in the way that I do, I might as well not assume your existence in the first place.

If you and I are both standing in front of a wall, we can both see it and feel it, you naturally believe that this wall exists and is right in front of us. However, imagine that for some reason or another I am convinced that it doesn't exist and proceed to try to walk through it to get to the other side. One would hope that my uncomfortable discovery that walls can be rather solid indeed will convince me of the existence of this particular wall, an experience we now have in common (though fortunately you experienced this discovery only as an observer).

As a further example, if I experience the world as round, for example in my experience of travelling (by land and ship) around the world and coming full circle, and if an astronaut perceives the world to be round based on their experience of orbiting around the planet in their space shuttle, and my friend, a fellow traveller, perceives the world to be round based on their many flights around the world and yet you believe the world to be flat based on something you read in a book, or a dream you had, or on what might appear to be a good hunch, it seems reasonable to say that you would be wrong. If you travelled around the world as I had, orbited around the planet as the astronaut did, or flew around the world like my friend, the common ground provided by such experiences would enable you to perceive things in the way that the astronaut, my friend, and I all have. On the other hand, if the astronaut, my friend, or I read a book or had a vivid dream like you did, or had a very good hunch about

something, we might interpret those differently. Even if it was the same book, the same dream, and the same hunch; I might see the book as a marvellous work of science fiction, my dream as a funny anecdote I can share with my friends, and my hunch that the world is flat as a sign that I have had too much to drink or not enough sleep.

Though I believe it is necessary, accepting the common ground standard, so to speak, as one of our (global) hinge propositions should not be taken lightly. The necessity, as illustrated above, is drawn from the existence of other minds (one of our core global hinge propositions). This common ground standard brings with it ideas of norms, and in particular a norm which treats the evidence of our shared (empirical) experience very seriously. As we can see, our global hinge propositions are those which ground empirical enquiry, dedication to the evidence, testability, and the scientific method. They are the hinges supporting the reliability of the scientific method as a means for learning more about the external world, and for assessing our current ‘knowledge’ about it. After all, the scientific method rests on the basis of shared experience and by extension the ability for all experiments to be reproduced by others with the same results. If we accept the common ground standard as a global hinge proposition (or even if we simply see it as a belief which follows from the global hinge propositions that there exist other minds and an external world), it would appear to require us to base our beliefs, and what we accept as knowledge, on the best scientific evidence available to us (with the understanding that this will change as new evidence emerges).

This naturally raises questions regarding potentially conflicting global and local hinge propositions. If we consider the global hinge proposition of the common ground standard (that the most reliable means for us to learn more about the world we live in must be based on those experiences we have in common), in contrast with what we might call a local hinge proposition of Young Earth creationists (mostly in the form of a religious community), we begin to see the conflict. My proposed solution to this conflict is that both a global hinge proposition and any further belief that is supported by it essentially ‘trump’ any local hinge propositions that come into conflict with it. My reasoning for this is fairly straightforward. A global hinge proposition is one which we must *all* assume to be true (whether consciously or subconsciously) in order to go about our day-to-day lives. Local hinge propositions are merely those that allow us to operate within certain communities. If there were a local hinge proposition that came into conflict with the global hinge proposition that other people around us exist with minds of their own (though admittedly I cannot think of an example), in such a way that it would not be logically possible for both propositions to be true at the same time,

then we must surely insist that the local hinge proposition (whatever it might be) must be false. In addition, if we have a proposition which is supported by one of our global hinge propositions, so that if the global hinge proposition is true this new proposition cannot coherently be doubted and must be accepted as true, it must also follow that any local hinge proposition which comes into conflict with this new proposition must be accepted as false.

To return to the example of the Young Earth creationist: if it could be demonstrated that the reliability of radiometric dating as a method of estimating the age of certain materials was supported by the assumptions of the existence of the physical world and the common ground standard, then the local hinge proposition which claims that the Earth is no more than 10,000 years old would have to be deemed false (considering that radiometric dating has shown the Earth to be over four billion years old¹²).¹³

Hinge Propositions and the Right Objects

Having laid out the two tiers of hinge propositions let me return to the original question of what I mean when I talk about the right *objects*. The common ground standard, in conjunction with the other global hinge propositions (and in a sense also the local hinge propositions), lays the foundations for a standard by which we can identify, or measure, the truth of an object (i.e. a proposition). This standard could be said to operate on both the global and the local levels. Given an object of the sort “this x is y ”, the global hinge propositions will provide the background against which we can grasp the concepts of x and y ; whilst the local hinge propositions will provide a way for us to intelligibly engage with the linguistic terms used. Once the terms have been identified, both linguistically, and on the more global level, we can then use the relevant global hinge propositions, as well as other empirical evidence (turning on the hinges of those global hinge propositions), in determining the truth of the statement as a whole.

Take for example the statement “this unicorn eats snozzcubers”. We take the English language-specific local hinge proposition that “unicorn” refers to magical horse-like

¹² “Age of the Earth,” *USGS (U.S. Geological Survey)*, accessed September 9, 2013, <http://pubs.usgs.gov/gip/geotime/age.html>.

¹³ I do not presume to know enough about radiometric dating to be able to claim that the reliability of this method in estimating the age of certain materials is in fact supported by those two assumptions.

creatures with a single, pointed (usually spiralling) horn on its forehead, another local hinge proposition that “eat” refers to the consumption of food, and yet another local hinge proposition that “snozzcumber” refers to an “icky-poo vegetable” described in Roald Dahl’s novel *The BFG*, said to taste like “frogskins” and “rotten fish”.¹⁴ We can then look to the global hinge propositions that the physical world around us exists and to the common ground standard (and the evidence of our individual and shared perception, which is based on those global hinge propositions¹⁵), and based on those we can (with a reasonable degree of certainty) assert that neither unicorns nor snozzcubers exist. Taking both of these assessments (local and global) into account, regarding the individual elements of the statement “this unicorn eats snozzcubers”, we can quite reasonably claim that whichever one “this” refers to, that unicorn does not in fact eat snozzcubers, since in order to eat, it must exist, and in order for snozzcubers to *be eaten*, they must exist too.

Were we to alter the statement slightly to say that “in a piece of fan-fiction, a unicorn eats snozzcubers”, the truth of the statement would be quite different, since it no longer appears to (try to) describe things in the world around us, but rather it is describing an event in fiction. So assuming that such a piece of fan-fiction did indeed exist, we could presumably accept this second statement as true.

So far this may all appear rather theoretical. If I stop and think about a statement, I could (in theory) consider what my basic assumptions are that I must make in order to live my day-to-day life. I could then consider what local hinge propositions I have, in order to engage with day-to-day life as part of my various (linguistic, religious, and/or cultural) communities. I could use these considerations to determine whether the statement is true or false. However, practically speaking, I will not be able to pause to consider all of my assumptions and the knowledge I have built on those assumptions every time I encounter a statement.

It pays to note here that for most of us, the assumptions that make up our (global and local) hinge propositions are subconscious. I indicated earlier that there is a lot of truth to the idea that we have to make assumptions in order to act; that at some stage we must stop doubting and start trusting.¹⁶ However, this presupposes that we have been engaged in doubting, as philosophers are professionally inclined to do. But I think in a lot of cases it would be more appropriate to say that an agent must *stop* trusting in what they take to be their

¹⁴ See Roald Dahl, *The BFG*, (London: Puffin Books, 1984), 48.

¹⁵ Thanks to John Bishop for pointing this out.

¹⁶ *OC*, 150.

knowledge, and *start* doubting it; calling their most basic assumptions into question. Once we have questioned our most basic assumptions, and figured out which ones we need as a foundation for everything else we might claim to know or believe, then, and only then, can we lay aside our doubts and trust in those assumptions.

Developing Honesty with a View to Perfection

I said above that most of us make subconscious assumptions, rather than actively thinking them through and casting our beliefs into doubt before we settle on what it is that we *must* accept as true. If this is indeed the case, what does that mean for honesty? I am extremely hesitant to say that one condition of honesty is that one must have actively thought through one's hinge propositions, since that would leave us with only several philosophers and perhaps a handful of laypeople as even potential candidates for honesty (ignoring for now any other possible conditions of honesty). Surely there are people we would tend to call honest who have not carefully called their knowledge and beliefs into question, identified their global and local hinge propositions, and who now trust in these as the foundations on which to build further knowledge!

To explain my insistence that such an agent would not be what I might call *perfectly* honest, we need to go back to the roots of virtue. Virtues are character traits, and as such not something some people are born with and others are not; they are not genetic like physical traits (such as eye colour) tend to be. Virtue is learned, and in the case of a virtue like honesty, we may as children often be told to be honest, not to be dishonest, we may be taught to value the truth, and to accept the beliefs and assumptions shared by those around us (especially our parents, teachers, other family members, and religious leaders). Assuming those around us share the 'right' assumptions, if I rely on those same assumptions, I may inadvertently display honesty with regard to the right objects. However, virtue is a disposition; it is not a case of imitating the right people by mere chance. Relying on a set of assumptions is not the same as carefully considering what assumptions need to be made and from there identifying which ones I will adopt as my hinge propositions. An agent who relies on the right set of hinge propositions may *act* honestly, performing actions we would describe as honest. However, the truly honest agent, the agent with a truly, or perfectly, honest disposition, is the agent who has carefully reflected on the core foundations of their knowledge and beliefs, has identified their

necessary hinge propositions and then taken these foundations, and the knowledge that grows on it, and uses these to assess the truth of their beliefs as well as the legitimacy of our linguistic currency; the objects of our communication.

Julia Annas, in her book *Intelligent Virtue*, presents us with a “developmental account of virtue”¹⁷ which accounts for “different ways of being virtuous, ranging from the beginner to the truly virtuous”.¹⁸ She provides an illustration of the development of virtue, which can be easily applied to the sort of honesty I am discussing. She says that “[w]e are not satisfied to have subrational habits of acting which solidify into routine; we need to go beyond mimicking the people we learn from, and to find out why they act as they do.”¹⁹ An agent who has acquired their (no doubt subconscious) assumptions about the world from the people around them as part of their upbringing, may at some stage become dissatisfied with unquestioningly accepting the beliefs of others as true. In their journey towards becoming more honest, they will begin to question the beliefs they hold, and in doing so either discard them and form new beliefs, or retain them by making them their own, rather than merely a belief that was passed on to them. They may question the beliefs on the surface, without delving deeper into the assumptions that ground those beliefs, or they may gradually dig deeper to explore those very foundations. And from becoming aware that you hold beliefs that are not your own, but merely mimicking those of others; to questioning those surface beliefs; to becoming aware of the assumptions that ground those beliefs; to questioning those; to identifying assumptions that are necessary and claiming those and the knowledge that flows from them as your own; every step along that road is a step closer to having the perfect disposition of being honest with regard to the right objects. And as Annas says “there is no confusion in saying that ordinary people are kind or brave [or in this case honest], as long as we are aware of the stage of development we are talking about”.²⁰ (I will return to Annas’ account of moral development to discuss it in greater depth in Chapter 6.)

Yet it still sounds dreadfully elitist to claim that while anyone can become honest (moving up that developmental ladder), only those who actually consider the most basic of assumptions (the aforementioned philosophers and perhaps a handful of laypeople) can have a shot at becoming *perfectly* honest. Of course, this is the sort of conclusion I would like to avoid, so it appears that the best solution would be to bring in the notion of virtues particular

¹⁷ Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 65.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

to certain roles.²¹ When we talk about parents being responsible, we generally have in mind some idea of looking after their children so that they have all of their basic needs met (as well as possible), they are lovingly cared for, educated, and so on. But to say that the virtue of responsibility requires that one meet the basic needs of one's children, care for them, and educate them is absurd, since it leaves out entirely the fact that a lot of people don't have children at all. So virtues will vary depending on one's situation and one's role (of which one individual might have several). I think this concept should be able to fit into this discussion well. Carefully examining one's foundational assumptions to ensure that one holds the correct ones is simply part of being a philosopher,²² so *for a philosopher* (or even for anyone in the sort of role where one tends to engage with such questions) to be *perfectly* honest, it seems a reasonable requirement that they examine their most basic assumptions to ensure that they hold the right ones as their hinge propositions (both global and local). However, for the average layperson it seems an entirely sufficient requirement (even for perfect honesty) that they have carefully examined most²³ *local* hinge propositions to ensure they hold the right ones. This is in keeping with my intuition that global hinge propositions are those which all of us really need in order to function in our day-to-day lives.

There is one final point which bears mentioning. It might appear that requiring the truly honest average layperson to have assessed their local hinge propositions must surely involve them engaging with their global hinge propositions to some degree. And if doing so subconsciously counts as engaging with them, then yes, I would say that is indeed the case. But in order to assess unscientific beliefs which are, or rely on, local hinge propositions (such as young earth creationism, holocaust denialism, or beliefs about the supposed dangers of vaccinations) one need not first carefully consider whether or not one accepts the norms that stem from the common ground standard. I would assert that as a global hinge proposition, the common ground standard is (out of necessity) accepted by every sane individual, even if only subconsciously (*is*, not *ought to be*). We all recognise facts as being based on the communal (and replicated) empirical experience of humanity, and accept that our bodies are made up of countless tiny atoms or that all of the planets in our solar system exist, even though we haven't seen either the tiny atoms or each of the planets. In practice we already accept the

²¹ Cf. Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 44.

²² In most cases, at least, though one would assume that thought processes such as these would be part of a philosophical education, even if the individual philosopher winds up specialising in an area of philosophy that doesn't really engage with such questions.

²³ I say "most", since it seems rather unnecessary to thoroughly examine a lot of the linguistic assumptions we make in order to communicate with one another.

norms which treat the evidence of our shared (empirical) experience very seriously (science). The conflict between accepting that and rejecting some of the conclusions reached via those norms can be apparent even to the untrained eye. There is, for example, plain inconsistency between accepting the doctor's suggested advice to treat your child's newly diagnosed diabetes, whilst rejecting their strong recommendation to have your child vaccinated for measles. On this particular point, it pays to emphasise that while truth claims are only proper if consistent with our best scientific evidence, there would certainly be no failure in honesty simply for holding a belief that is contrary to current scientific evidence. Rather there may be a failure in honesty when an agent holds a belief that is contrary to the evidence *reasonably available to them* (which ought to rule out wilful ignorance).

Chapter 2

The Right Way

Having considered what it means to be honest in one's thinking, I now need to examine how one can communicate these honest thoughts in the right way. By this I mean two things, and I will discuss each in turn. Firstly, I will look at how we can communicate in such a way that it is clear whether we are communicating facts, opinions, or beliefs (which will involve sorting out how we can classify these based on the model of hinge propositions presented in the previous chapter). Secondly, I will examine the right manner of communication, discussing how tone of voice and methods of communication fit into that.

Differentiating Between Facts and Beliefs

So, how then do we go from having the right object to deciding whether it is a fact, an opinion or a belief (or something else entirely)? I would suggest that they are all on a spectrum of objects we could hold to be true on the basis of varying degrees of authority. Facts, must be on the more indubitable end of the spectrum, but considering that we are basing all of our purported knowledge on a collection of assumptions, it seems fair to say that I must use the term 'fact' fairly loosely here. A fact cannot be something set in stone, which we know beyond a shadow of a doubt to be true, since if it were, it would be as mystical and hard to find as a unicorn. But thinking back to our global hinge propositions, and those propositions supported by them, we might say that those are in fact the pieces of linguistic currency which we term 'facts'. They are, after all, on the one hand, the propositions which we *must* assume to be true, and on the other, those which are supported by the first lot in such a way that (provided we accept the global hinge propositions) they cannot coherently be doubted.

It appears difficult to distinguish between beliefs and opinions, though clearly both lie on the other end of the spectrum to facts, since they lack the solid foundation of the global hinge propositions which I attribute to facts. But since the distinction between opinions and beliefs is not as central to my thesis as the distinction between those two on the one hand and facts on the other, I will put it aside and treat them as being two variations of the same sort of (non-factual) object, while acknowledging that there may be (perhaps important) differences.

For simplicity's sake I will henceforth refer to this sort of object only as "belief", taking that to also cover opinions.

Facts seem to inhabit a fairly narrow section of the spectrum of objects we could hold to be true, while beliefs span the length of the spectrum from those objects which we must admit do not quite meet the standard of being facts, to those objects with so little basis we might prefer to call them fantasy. So for the time being I might say that beliefs cover all those propositions which we would not call facts. Since I have mapped facts fairly neatly onto global hinge propositions and their offspring, would it make sense to say that beliefs more or less correspond to local hinge propositions and *their* offspring? Perhaps. Less so, since if we take a global hinge proposition to be true, such as "certain units of linguistic currency have an assigned meaning, determined by the language they are a part of", we may have to recognise that any language-specific local hinge proposition which is supported by that, would, according to my above definition be a fact, rather than a belief. But if we consider religious or political beliefs these would surely be the relevant local hinge propositions.

I might then put forward the notion that beliefs are those local hinge propositions and their offspring which are not necessarily supported by facts. For example, I would propose that the proposition that 'there exists a being which created the Earth 6000 years ago' would be a belief, since I can think of no facts (by my definition) that support it (and potentially one or two which might contradict it). If I was right in thinking that this belief contradicts a fact, I might question if it would still be right to call it a belief, or would it be more accurate to call it a fabrication, for example. I would say that this question would misjudge the relationship between facts and beliefs. A belief is not a proposition which is 1) not a fact, but 2) not false. So if it were false, it would be more appropriate to call it a false/fabricated belief rather than a fabrication *as opposed to* a belief. However, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, if an agent held a belief which was false, according to the facts they were (able to be) aware of, they would not be honest (with regard to the relevant objects) in doing so.

So if we have an agent who now has an object, which we can deem to be the *right* one, and they are clear as to what sort of object it is, how do they go about communicating it in the right way (in the first sense)? On the face of it this is really very simple: they must ensure that they communicate it in such a way that it is clear what sort of object it is that they are communicating. If the object (a belief, in this case) is x , it can be as simple as saying "I believe x " as opposed to "I know x " or " x is true". The manner in which this is done will

certainly vary according to audience; if you are speaking to a fellow member of a tight-knit group of similarly believing friends, you might relax your standards of how clearly you express the form of the object you are communicating. If you are discussing y which is a belief you both share, both being aware that it is a belief, it would be silly to constantly have to refer to “my belief that y ”.

When it comes to facts, it gets a little trickier though. While there may (theoretically) be a fact of the sort that is definitely beyond a shadow of a doubt, I think that for any person to ever be in possession of such certainty is unrealistic. So when we communicate facts we do so with the implication that of course we cannot be absolutely certain that this object is true, but we must, and we do, nevertheless act as though it is. And since each of us operates with this implication in place, whether we are aware of it or not, I would say there is nothing dishonest about that.

Having established what a fact is, I must find a way to use that definition to figure out if a given object is a fact. I have thus far been reluctant to decidedly give a firm example of a fact, other than the very basic global hinge propositions. This is primarily because finding such an example can be remarkably difficult. While in theory it may be fairly easy to differentiate between fact and not-fact, in practice this is not necessarily the case. If I take the proposition “paracetamol is fairly effective in treating mild headache pain” it may at first seem that based on the research this would appear to be true. The common ground hinge proposition especially would support scientific research of the sort used to test medication, and if I were to read about paracetamol online I would no doubt be able to find out at least some of the results of the testing done on this particular medication, which would (considering it is freely available specifically as a pain medication) be sure to tell me just how effective it is in relieving pain from headaches. But my having read these research results would not be strong enough grounds for me to be able to conclusively say that it is a fact that “paracetamol is fairly effective in treating mild headache pain”. For me to have strong enough grounds to know this for a fact, I would need to be the one conducting the research and setting the research parameters, but if the effectiveness is measured by the patient’s self-reported improvement in pain levels, I would need to have experienced the patients’ pain for myself to be sure that their reports are accurate. I would also need to be sure that the medication the patients are taking is the correct formula for paracetamol, and that the control group are taking an acceptable placebo. Since I have not done any of those things (and I certainly cannot

experience the patients' pain), the basis on which I take this proposition to be true is largely by believing what others have said.

So it seems more accurate to say that rather than facts being one static point on the spectrum of objects we could hold to be true, they, like beliefs, take up a bit of a range too. On the far end are the global hinge propositions, followed by those mythical propositions that can be known beyond the shadow of a doubt. Next in line we have the propositions which we can know without having to rely on claims made by others. For example, take an agent who has prepared a batch of paracetamol themselves, along with a suitable placebo, and conducted a blind test on themselves. If this agent then says "paracetamol is fairly effective in treating mild headache pain *for me*", that could be a fact of this sort (provided the statement corresponds with the agent's findings). But then we have this funny sort of fact which relies on our believing the claims of others.

Perhaps this last sort comes rather close to the category of beliefs, since we may find that they make the most sense when they rely on some form of local hinge proposition that tells us that "*x* are the sorts of people one ought to believe with regard to subject *y*". For example, "doctors are the sorts of people one ought to believe with regard to medical issues". More often than not those *x* sorts of people will in turn have their own local hinge propositions determining what their reliable sources of information tend to be. Doctors, for example, might say that "medical journals *a*, *b*, and *c* are the sorts of sources one ought to believe with regard to medical developments" and "government approved medications are those one ought to consider effective and safe to prescribe for patients".

Communicating with Fallibility in Mind

It seems to me that the basis of communicating in the right way in the first sense would have to be a shared assumption of our own and others' fallibility. We have no guarantee that what any of us says is true. I do not, however, regard this as a hinge proposition, at least not one of the same species as those we have so far encountered. If it were a hinge proposition, it would have to be global, but one of the things that I believe has become apparent in my examination of global hinge propositions is that they are not learned, as such. We may gradually acquire them as we grow up (certainly, they are not propositions which an *infant* would, even subconsciously, assume to be true!) but nobody *teaches* us that

other minds exist, or that the physical world exists much as we perceive it. In a philosophy class we may be encouraged to question these assumptions, but we are never specifically taught to make these assumptions. We gradually, subconsciously (for the most part) just *do*. But a child growing up will (unless it is taught otherwise) assume that adults know what they are talking about and that what they say is true. Even some adults, if they have not been taught otherwise, will believe without question what some people in certain roles of authority say. Perhaps then, it must be the role of an honest parent to instil the assumption of universal fallibility in their children. And it is the role of an honest agent to try to be aware of their listener's familiarity with this shared assumption, and if they believe their listener may not be familiar enough with it, to remind them that what they say might be wrong.

A doctor meeting a new patient for the first time ought to remind them that while their diagnosis is x and their recommended treatment is y , other doctors might think otherwise, so they should feel free to get a second opinion, or they might direct them to a website with further information, to ensure their patient is as informed about their options as possible when making a medical decision. Any adult communicating with a child needs to be aware that many children are not prone to questioning what adults say (especially those they know and trust, and those in positions of authority, such as parents, teachers, and religious leaders). If I tell my niece that Marc Chagall was the greatest artist that ever lived, she may not realise that others might disagree, and be quite upset, or at least surprised, when she discovers that someone else she respects (say, her teacher) thinks that actually, Michelangelo was by far a greater artist. Or I might tell my nephew that the earth is flat, not taking into account that at age four, he is unlikely to pick up on the fact that (despite the serious look on my face) I am joking, and he might get rather confused when his parents tell him that no, his aunt is silly and according to a variety of evidence, we can be extremely certain that the earth is actually (more or less) spherical.

In short, when communicating with someone, regardless of the object, the honest agent would take into consideration the standards of evidence on which you base your belief that the object is true and your audience and their readiness to believe you (and also their awareness of your fallibility), which includes considering whether or not you will be seen as an authority on the matter. In some circumstances you may need to be very explicit about your fallibility, by saying things like "this is just my personal opinion" (implying that others may, and do, disagree), "I read this somewhere online" (implying that you are unsure as to the reliability of your source), "my professional recommendation would be..., but you may wish

to get a second opinion”, “you might disagree, but I believe...”, “I am certainly no expert on this matter, but...”. In other circumstances you may rightly judge your listener aware enough of your fallibility and the context of your object that these sorts of things are implied. For example, a doctor communicating with a patient they have been treating for many years, a patient who has seen a number of other doctors and specialists about the same condition and is aware that this doctor’s opinion is one of several, and that the treatment they recommend is one of many options, can state their medical opinion plainly without needing to preface it with any of the caveats above. The same would hold for long-standing friends, who know each other well enough that they are very much aware of each other’s faults and fallibility.

Predictions and Intentions

Two (related) aspects of honesty I have thus far neglected, but which perhaps fit most neatly with the way in which one communicates (though they certainly also involve the objects), are those of beliefs or knowledge regarding the future, and intentions and promises. I will begin with beliefs about the future. I call them very explicitly beliefs, rather than facts, since surely one of our global hinge propositions must be that “nothing about the future can be known for certain”. In fact, it might be wise to use that proposition as a disclaimer of sorts which I would hope we all keep in mind (at least tucked away at the back of our minds) when talking about the future; that way anyone communicating a predictive proposition will not need to preface it with “we cannot be certain about this, of course, however...” in order to be communicating in the right *way*.

When it comes to the future it is a guessing game to us all. However that is not necessarily to say that my guess is as good as yours. I might guess that tomorrow will be sunny with a nice breeze (because I want it to be), but a meteorologist might guess that tomorrow we will see heavy rain easing to a few showers in the afternoon. Or I might guess that in two years’ time I will be very much alive, based on my belief that my large mole is just a curious birthmark. My doctor, on the other hand, might guess that in two years’ time I could well be dead, based on their assessment of my malignant mole and my refusal to have it treated.

Clearly we require some way of assessing the believability (for want of a better word) of propositions about the future. Just as we will always form beliefs about the world around

us, as we perceive it, we will also always form beliefs about what is going to, or is likely to, happen in the future. I would suggest that such a way of assessing our beliefs about the future ought to be based around a global hinge proposition that “guesses and beliefs about the future must be based on our most reliable predictors”. Those predictors will likely turn out to be those same sources that we consider most reliable to tell us about the world in its current state. Doctors who can tell me what disease I have now will also be able to tell me what is likely to happen to me if that disease develops further untreated, or how it might develop differently using different methods of treatment. Meteorologists who can tell us about the weather as it currently is and the weather patterns that have developed in the past will be able to make predictions about how the weather will likely develop in future.

The hinge proposition that lies at the core of our ability to make predictions (with varying degrees of accuracy) is the common ground hinge proposition. Various doctors over the years have found (and recorded their findings) that if a patient has symptoms x and y , they are likely to have disease z , which led to outcome 1 if untreated, but if treated with medication a it led to outcome 2 or if treated with surgery b it led to outcome 3 . The conclusion is that since these findings are common to most, if not all, doctors who have encountered symptoms x and y , it is likely the same outcomes can be expected in the future. Likewise, since we have all observed the sun rising (scientifically incorrect, I know, but colloquially accurate) in the east since time immemorial, we have concluded that it will do so again tomorrow morning (if it did not, we would probably conclude that something was very, very wrong). To apply this idea to a more everyday example: you might ask me if my sister will attend class tomorrow. Past experience has shown that she always attends class unless she is very unwell. Since she has the flu, which has left her with no voice, a fever and awful aches and pains (and past experience also tells me that she will take more than a day to recover from that), I can confidently respond that she will not attend class tomorrow. Since the key to the web of hinge propositions is that we hold them in common (all of us assuming that we all make those same basic assumptions), I would suggest that my confident response would also be honest in the way I told you.

There is still one more interesting sort of prediction which should be addressed, namely those which are not based on past experience. The most obvious example is found in predictions about an afterlife. These do not fit into the same model as other predictions since the only common ground we share on this matter is that we all die. We do not all tend to return to the world of the living afterwards to deliver a report on the conditions of the

afterlife. Predictive propositions about a hypothetical afterlife can be easily taken care of when classified as *local* hinge propositions. We do not all share these propositions and even the people who do share them differ about the ones that specify the *details* of the afterlife.

Turning now to intentions, I propose that a hinge proposition required for communicating intentions (and particularly for communicating those honestly) is that “saying one will do something carries the implication that one intends to do it, circumstances permitting”.¹ What I mean by intention here is nicely defined by Anscombe’s phrase: “a mind to make something the case”². It seems that she must surely be right then in saying that if one intends x , an utterance to the contrary would be a lie³.

Leaving aside for now the matter of what I communicate, and considering the intention as only that which is in one’s mind; if I intend to do x , and say so, but circumstances beyond my control prevent me from doing x , there seems to be nothing dishonest about this. Of course if this intention had been in some way important I may feel regret about my inability to do x , and had I communicated my intention to you it would only be right for me to express my regret to you also.

If I intend to do x and I change my mind, and do not do x after all, it becomes clear that intentions are rather different objects than facts or beliefs. Even that object which is only in my mind (whether it is communicated or not), if it is a fact or a belief it will be true or false. The same holds true for a predictive proposition, even when it is only in my mind. Expressions of intention, on the other hand, are a different species of proposition in this regard. If I do not communicate it, an intention has no truth value. If I intend to make a cup of tea, but change my mind and make a hot chocolate instead, my intention to make a cup of tea has not thereby been falsified, rather it has simply ceased to exist.

Now to consider those intentions that I release from the confines of my mind by communicating them to someone, intentions not thwarted by circumstances beyond my control, but rather by the fact that I changed my mind. In order to say that such a change of mind can be honest, we would need to be communicating on the basis of a hinge proposition which says something to the effect that “it is permissible to change one’s mind about what one said one would do”.

¹ I suggest that such a hinge proposition would be global, even though it is language-related, since I cannot imagine any form of language that would *not* incorporate such an assumption.

² G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), 4.

³ *Ibid.*

But this is where it gets tricky. Talking about such a change of mind broadly makes the assumption that they are all equal. But my expressing the intention to make a cup of tea, and my expressing the intention to donate my kidney to you, should you ever need it (assuming it is a match), are two completely different things. So if I change my mind about the cup of tea (in this weather, a glass of orange juice might be nicer), carries much less weight than if I decide not to donate my kidney to you after all, even if you really do need it now, and it is a match. So if we pose the general question of whether changing one's mind about an expressed intention can ever be honest, I would have to put forth that ever irritating response of: it depends. It depends on how much weight my expressed intention carried; how important it was to me, how important it was to you. It depends on the way I expressed it; if it was in a light-hearted, perhaps even joking manner, or if I practically made a solemn vow. It depends on whether or not I inform you that my intentions have changed, and if so, how I inform you. It depends on whether I take those I expressed my intention to into consideration when I change my mind. And it certainly depends on some of these factors more than on others.

There is another aspect to changing one's mind about an expressed intention that ties in here. If I tell you that I will do x , and then change my mind and do something different instead, I have essentially caused you to have a false belief (assuming you believed what I told you). Causing someone to hold a false belief appears on the face of it to be the very basis of dishonesty. As strange as it might seem, I do suggest that this would be taking the idea too far. The best way to illustrate what I mean is to look at it practically. Throughout our day-to-day lives we all express various intentions; it is a basic part of our way of communication. Now one would think that the best way to rectify dishonest communication would be to clearly communicate to those affected that what was previously stated was wrong, and to provide the truth of the matter. So, if I cause you to hold a false belief, I should remedy that by alerting you to this fact as soon as I become aware of it, and providing you with the relevant truth. Fairly straightforward. But imagine if every time I changed my mind about an intention I had expressed to you, no matter how trivial, I came back and corrected what I had previously said.

If I tell my flatmate that I am going to the supermarket to buy myself some lollies, and ask if she would like anything, but then I change my mind and buy chocolate instead because it happens to be cheaper, I would need to go back to her and tell her that I did not buy lollies as intended, but bought chocolate instead (even though I know she doesn't care). If I call my

colleague on my way to work and tell her that I will be stopping to get a coffee, and ask if she would like one too, but she doesn't because she is home sick, I would need to then call her back to let her know I changed my mind and got a hot chocolate instead of a coffee. If I finish a phone call with my sister by telling her that I am going to have a nap now, but end up getting distracted and reading for an hour, I need to let her know that I didn't end up having a nap after all.

It should be pretty clear now that it isn't dishonest for me to read for an hour instead of having a nap, despite me saying I would have a nap, even if I fail to alert whoever I told. If my sister later asks me if I slept well, I can just tell her I got distracted by a book. While she may, for example, reprimand me for being careless about my health, if I had a migraine, or for being irresponsible if I have a night shift that I need to be awake and alert for, she would not reprimand me for being dishonest. Correcting myself every time I change my mind about an expressed intention, no matter how trivial, simply to set the record straight and *be honest*, would be tedious, irritating (both for me and those on the receiving end of my corrections), and frankly silly. As such, it would not reflect the spirit of what we mean by being honest at all.

But what if the context is not trivial? Or at least less trivial. What if my expressed intention affects you in some way? Say you need broccoli and mushrooms to make dinner tonight, and I tell you I will stop at the supermarket on my way home and pick them up, but change my mind and go to the library for a few hours and get home well past dinner time with no vegetables for you. It seems right to say here that I ought to have let you know that I changed my mind so you could have made other arrangements (or asked me to please go to the supermarket and not to the library).

Since intentions are changeable objects, if I communicate them, I may be communicating the right object *at that point in time*, even though it may change later. To communicate such an object in the right way, we first need to have (and share) the underlying assumption that intentions can and do change (frequently!). If our expressed intentions do then change, we need to communicate that change in intention *if appropriate in that situation* (depending on things like how trivial or important the intention was). If my expressed intention has changed, that does not make my expressing that intention retroactively a failure in honesty. I would, however, not be communicating in an honest way if I did not update you on the change in intention *if the situation called for me to do so*.

Manners of Communication

I will now turn to communicating in an honest manner. Let me first clarify what I will and won't address here. I have already touched on communication with children, and an important consideration for that is certainly the way (or manner) in which we communicate with them. However, I will leave a more thorough discussion of children to the chapter on communicating at the *right time*, considering especially the various developmental stages of children and what is age-appropriate. What I will cover here are tone of voice and forms of communication.

With a tone of voice which is not appropriate to the object you are communicating, it is easy to mislead your audience about the truth of that object. If I say something in a joking tone of voice, it may well sound as though what I had communicated was false, when in fact, it was not. That does not, however, mean that any and all communication using a sarcastic tone must be lacking in honesty. I would say that for the most part it is on the audience to be able to pick up on sarcasm. Since this is a learned ability, parents (and others who interact closely with children) may be responsible for helping their children to learn this ability. And when communicating with children (and some adults too, for that matter) we all have a responsibility to try to be aware of their ability to pick up on sarcasm if we feel it must be used at all.

With regard to methods of communication, I would like to think that most of us share the moral intuition that it is just plain *wrong* to break off a relationship of many years via text message, or (if at all avoidable) to allow someone to learn of their partner's death via the news or social media. Just like we say 'there is a time and a place for everything', there is also a right and a wrong means of communication for certain things. And I think this comes down to treating the relevant object of communication with the proper respect. If someone has passed away, that news should not be treated lightly when communicating it to those close to the deceased. That could well be a case where you might say you have something to tell them that can't even be said over the phone. If the next-of-kin of the deceased is someone you are close to, you may wish to be there in person so you can offer them comfort. There may also be cases of good, or happy, news that can only be shared in person. Perhaps you and your partner have been trying to have (or adopt) a baby and you find out you are (or your partner is) pregnant, or that the adoption has been approved. While it would not exactly be *wrong* to

communicate such news via text message or email, it would in most instances seem more appropriate to share it in person, or at the very least verbally (over the phone). Often, if we have exciting news to share, it seems to be part of the excitement to see another's reaction when we share the news.

Another classic case of using the wrong method of communication is that of the angry email. A general rule tends to be to not say in an email that which you wouldn't want to say to the recipient in person. It is possible that an exception to this might be for a person who is greatly lacking in confidence and would be simply too shy or too scared to say something in person, but email gives them the distance they need, to essentially hide behind. While such a case might not be lacking in honesty, we may find it to be lacking in courage. The problem with email (as with other written forms of communication) is that tone of voice can only be conveyed with great difficulty, if at all, and of course facial expressions cannot be seen (as with phone calls), though perhaps emoticons are an attempt to compensate for the lack of direct facial expressions. Because of these deficiencies, for want of a better word, emails are very easy to misunderstand, which suggests to me that some things simply ought not to be said in an email, and that even those things that are said in an email, should be said with caution, and the sender must be mindful of how things are worded. Conversely, the recipient of an email should be wary of responding too hastily, and be aware of the potential for misunderstanding, which might involve seeking clarification before responding, in some instances.

Each instance of communication is different, and there will be a suitable method of communication for each, be it verbally face-to-face, over the phone, using body language, via email, in a traditional letter, in a published book, through social media, or text message. Each method of communication carries some potential for miscommunication, which all parties should be aware of and take into account. To choose the right form of communication for each occasion, and to use that method appropriately in that situation requires practice and experience. An agent committed to honesty is one who is committed to gaining that necessary experience and doing so with as much consideration for others as possible.

Chapter 3

The Right Time

I have explored the right objects of the honest agents, and the right way to communicate these objects. I now move on to what it means for an honest agent to communicate an object at the right time. To me this needs to be considered in two ways. First I will consider communicating an object at the right time and, for good measure, in the right place; in other words at the right point on the time/space continuum. This brings with it a detour into issues of tact, and honesty as a virtue working in conjunction with other virtues. Secondly, I will consider communicating an object at the right time in the life of the hearer; essentially communicating age-appropriately. This has important implications for honesty as a virtue particular to the roles of both parents and teachers.

Tact

One of the definitions the Oxford English Dictionary Online provides for tact is: “the faculty of saying or doing the right thing at the right time”.¹ A guest at a wedding might truly love their date (someone who may have been their partner for some time now), and the guest’s desire to marry their partner might be a very true desire indeed. However expressing this love and desire to wed their partner by proposing to them at their friend’s wedding would be extremely tactless. They would be communicating the right object, in perhaps the perfect way (very romantically and in person) but in very much the wrong place and at the wrong time; they would be stealing the limelight from the couple getting married.

It may appear odd to bring up tact in a discussion of honesty. Surely someone who lacks tact in their communication is tactless, not lacking honesty! I would also like to digress briefly to put aside any possible notion of tact as a virtue. There has been some debate on whether or not tact should be considered a virtue, or rather whether it is a ‘social’ virtue, as opposed to a moral one. It seems to me that Christine Swanton is rather in favour of

¹ When discussing ‘the right time’ in this context, I will take that, for the most part to refer to both the right time *and* the right place.

abandoning the distinction between moral and social virtues entirely, seeing all virtues as moral in some sense.² In this I would agree with her. As she says:

Why are issues of tact not seen as moral? Lack of tact can hurt, harm relationships, destroy diplomacy, be expressive of hostility. ‘Excessive’ tact can be expressive of cowardice, but need not be. It too harms relationships through a failure to confront problems, to disclose concerns, to communicate. If anything is part of the domain of the moral, it is the quality of relationships.³

Any virtue that has something to do with interacting with others could in some sense be seen as a social virtue. But just because there is social interaction involved, does not make it any less relevant to the sphere of morality (indeed this would, in one way or another, remove most virtues from the sphere of morality). Therefore, when I refer to a virtue, I do so with a blatant disregard for any imagined distinction between, and separation of, the social and the moral spheres. A virtue, to me, is a moral virtue, regardless of any social aspects.

So while tact is certainly in the sphere of social interaction, it is nonetheless morally relevant. However, I consider it something of a social skill, rather than a virtue. Simply put, tact is simply a term we give to appropriate social interaction (doing/saying the right thing at the right time), which *tends to* come from weaving together and acting from the virtues appropriate to the situation at hand, which in turn is guided by *phronesis*. And there’s the catch: it is merely a tendency; because what defines tact above all are the societal norms of the time, place and culture of the social situation. If the society in which the given social interaction is taking place happens to be a more or less virtuous society (a society whose norms are guided by the virtues, such as justice, honesty, compassion, love, kindness, etc.) then the virtuous tendency of tact will generally win out. If, however, the society’s norms are not what we would call virtuous, tact can show its ugly face.

This certainly depends on some important assumptions. It rests on a rejection of any form of ethical subjectivity or ethical cultural relativism. I view ethical truths as being true objectively. As a virtue ethicist, I regard a life of *eudaimonia* as the proper end for each individual to aim for, with the virtues being very much a necessary element of this life. An objectively *good* society must then be one which promotes the flourishing of its members, and therefore one which has its societal norms shaped by the virtues.

² Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 70-4.

³ *Ibid.*, 72.

So a character trait such as honesty, or kindness, should be (objectively) seen as a virtue (and therefore a *good thing*, ethically speaking), regardless in what time, place, or culture; and what it means to have such a virtue, and to exercise it, also remains the same. However, while tact is a sign of good manners, polite behaviour, and appropriate social interaction, regardless of time, place, or culture; what it means to have good manners, to be polite, or what is seen as appropriate social interaction, will vary greatly from one society to another. So if morally abhorrent practices happen to be part of those social norms, then being tactful might have you standing by silently, or being complicit in morally abhorrent actions. If you are in a culture where slavery is acceptable and widely practiced, it might be tactless to interfere if a slave-owner is beating their slave (which, legally, they might be well within their rights to do). But it would be cruel, irresponsible, cowardly, and just despicable in general not to step in and put a stop to it in whatever way possible. In the same way it may be tactless to interfere with parents wanting to have their daughter circumcised, or to speak up when someone tells a sexist, racist, or homophobic joke. But the virtuous agent would know better than to let tact stand in the way of doing the right thing in cases such as these. Calling tact a virtue when a tactful action can be so blatantly *wrong*, goes strongly against the intuition that a virtuous action would never be the wrong thing to do.

Before these examples are dismissed as clear cases of *excessive* tact, I would like to insist that these examples actually epitomise tact. Tact, unlike the character virtues, is not an excellence of character; it is an excellence of *behaviour*. Tact isn't so much doing/saying the *right* thing at the right times, but rather the polite or socially acceptable thing. This is made particularly clear when you consider that in order to be tactful you don't need to have the right motives or emotions to go with the actions. You can put on a socially acceptable mask, play your part in the theatre of life, saying all the expected and appropriate things when called for, while not letting any of that touch you inside. And that right there is the difference between a skill and a virtue.⁴

So what is the relevance of tact to honesty in general, and being honest at the right time in particular? An obvious link is that tact is largely about saying or doing the right thing at the right time,⁵ and since honesty is about communication, communicating the right thing

⁴ See Annas' analogy of practical skills and virtue (which I discuss in greater depth in Chapter 6) where she picks up on this very point. Annas, 66.

⁵ If by 'right' we mean virtuous, or morally right, then obviously this is not true (I've just rejected this very idea in the preceding paragraph). Rather, I think this idiom is using 'right' to refer to the socially appropriate/expected thing to do.

(or object) at the right time is a vital part of that. As the saying goes: there is a time and a place for everything (including communicating true objects). But I would also like to use this opportunity to discuss the idea that honesty is not a standalone virtue. It should be straightforward to see that an action we call (virtuously) tactful, for example, would not *only* be honest *or* kind *or* compassionate. It would involve several virtues interacting with each other, guided by *phronesis*. A woman who refrains from telling her partner (who does not want children) that she is pregnant when he is already in a drunken rage is acting responsibly and courageously (as opposed to being rash), while at the same time not lacking in honesty by withholding this information at that point in time. In refraining from telling your friend about your recent diagnosis with a dreadful illness at their engagement party you are being kind by not putting a dampener on the mood at your friend's party, while not lacking in honesty.

Simply calling a tactful action honest and leaving it at that is counterintuitive, since tact showcases an important aspect of the parameter of communicating the object *at the right time (and place)*: it's less about actively being honest, and more about not lacking in honesty. The two preceding examples show actions which are not the sorts of actions one immediately thinks of when considering what an honest action would be, yet they are precisely the sorts of actions which would be characteristic of an honest agent. And they are also the sorts of actions which show that there must be more than one virtue at work.

Disjoint Spheres and Unified Virtues

Clearly being virtuously tactful is something that involves multiple virtues, not just honesty. A truly virtuous agent who acts tactfully will not only be honest in their communication, they will be responsible, compassionate, and kind as well as having *phronesis*. Yet this sort of view is quite contrary to Aristotle's. In his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Curzer gives an excellent account of Aristotle's doctrine of disjoint spheres,⁶ which I nevertheless find distinctly flawed (Aristotle's doctrine, not Curzer's account of it, specifically). According to Curzer's interpretation of Aristotle, life is essentially subdivided into various spheres, such as the battlefield, sensual pleasures (food, drink, and sex), and matters of money. Each of these spheres has a virtue assigned to it (courage, temperance, and liberality, respectively), and these spheres (and their virtues) don't really overlap. Of course, I have diverged from this schema simply by including honesty in

⁶ Curzer, 21-33.

my list of virtues. While the way Aristotle handles honesty is interesting, I don't think it works with our contemporary use of the virtue and vice terms. Curzer summarises Aristotle's position nicely:

Aristotle thinks that what motivates people to be honest about this or that is their stance toward this or that rather than their stance toward truth. Some ethicists (e.g. Socrates at *Laches* 191d) maintain that people can exhibit courage in the face of all sorts of risks, but Aristotle limits courage to physical risks, and considers the right response to the risk of poverty to be an expression of liberality, the right response to the risk of dishonor to be an expression of good temper, and so on. Similarly, while many consider honesty to be a virtue that cuts across all spheres, Aristotle distributes it among the various virtues. He specifies that honesty about agreements is a matter of justice rather than truthfulness (1127a32–b1). Extrapolating, I suggest that honesty about situations of physical risk is required by courage; honesty about sensual pleasure is required by temperance; and so on.⁷

While I certainly agree “that honesty about situations of physical risk is required by courage” I don't see how that means one's actions (or thoughts) in such a case can't also be deemed as being honest (well, in calling it “*honesty* about situations of physical risk” Curzer is acknowledging that honesty is involved, while dismissing honesty as a virtue in its own right). Likewise, gently pointing out to a friend that she is becoming rather intoxicated, and then encouraging her to drink some water or have something to eat would be a characteristically temperate *and* kind *and* honest action. It also seems odd for Curzer to point out in *this* context that honesty about agreements is (to Aristotle) a matter of justice rather than “truthfulness”, since he later develops a well thought-out account of how Aristotle's “truthfulness” would more accurately be described as our modern *integrity* (which doesn't seem directly relevant here).

While I appreciate the way Curzer works our contemporary understanding of honesty to fit around Aristotle's doctrine of disjoint spheres, my underlying problem with this doctrine remains. I fail to see the sense in dividing our lives into these separate little boxes when in reality the various areas of our lives constantly intermingle. A soldier, who drinks himself into a rage the night before a battle, lying to his sergeant about having consumed any alcohol, could be demonstrating a failure of several virtues. He is clearly intemperate, though he may

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

also have given in to the temptation of the alcohol because of his fear of the battle ahead, showing a lack of courage; his lack of honesty is obvious. Of course, had he been kind enough to share his liquid courage, so to speak, with his fellow soldiers, he likely wouldn't have had enough to get so drunk in the first place.

I think that when it comes down to it, countless examples and counterexamples could be given in support of both Aristotle's position and my own without either necessarily winning the upper hand. However, it seems to me that our contemporary use of virtue and vice terms simply doesn't tend to segregate them into such starkly distinct spheres. In fact, considering the way we tend to talk about such character traits, the truly disjoint nature of Aristotle's virtues seems quite artificial. Annas summarises this point well when she says that "[l]ife is not compartmentalized, and so learning to deal with the mixed situations that confront us is not a matter of getting ever better at extracting and then confronting the claims of different virtues."⁸ Then again, a true Aristotelian might say that perhaps we have just acquired *too many* virtue and vice terms, especially considering how much overlap there seems to be. Consider, for example, virtues such as generosity, charity, kindness, benevolence, and compassion on the one hand, and honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, and fairness on the other. And maybe there is some truth to this suggestion, since it might well be difficult to give as thorough an account of each of those virtues as I hope to give of honesty, without repeating oneself too much. Then again, perhaps such a thorough account of each virtue would be overkill, since the intention here is primarily to provide a template of how we might consider each virtue, while taking into account that some of them just blend into each other a bit.

At the end of the first chapter I considered Annas' idea of the development of virtue, which I will return to again in Chapter 6. For now I just want to briefly point out the way in which such an account of moral development appears to rely on intertwined virtues. In this case, perfect honesty would lie at the end of this developmental journey, as an ideal to strive towards (though not an ideal we might realistically be able to achieve). Imagine the perfectly virtuous agent as a beaver building its dam. Their dam is perfect virtue; perfect honesty is only one branch, or stick, in this dam. In order for the beaver to have a complete, structurally sound dam, all of their sticks and branches will need to fit together. Other sticks will be virtues such as kindness, compassion, courage, integrity, generosity, and so on. As imperfect

⁸ Annas, 87.

agents, while we may be in the process of building our dams, some sticks might be harder to incorporate than others, some sticks might be brittle or even a bit fractured, and others we might still be looking for. The sticks and branches that are perfectly suited for our dam are our perfect virtues; the brittle, fractured, or missing ones are those virtues we are still working on. *Phronesis*, will be the bark, mud, grass, leaves, etc., that the beaver uses to solidify the structure of the dam. It seems to me that truly perfect honesty can only be achieved when it is part of the completely perfect dam. Honesty requires the other virtues and *phronesis* to enable the agent to flourish fully.

Age-appropriate Communication

Another interesting idea regarding the right time for honesty is the idea of being age-appropriate when considering the timing of communicating certain objects. It will also be interesting to explore whether the degree to which an object ought to be ‘right’ might change depending on the age and maturity of the listener.

Basic issues around communicating age-appropriately arise when communicating somewhat (or very) adult ideas to young children. When a young child asks where babies come from, the right object for that point in this child’s life probably won’t be a complete biological explanation consisting of all of the details of the human reproductive process (and all the variations this might include, such as IVF, sperm or egg donation and surrogacy). Depending on the age, maturity, and level of understanding of that particular child at that particular point in that child’s development, it may well be more appropriate to describe how babies grow in their mummy’s tummy and when they’re big enough, they come out, or to present them with the version that fits with where babies come from in their particular family (which will presumably be different in a family with same-sex parents than in a family with a mother and a father, for example).

Communicating an object in an age-appropriate manner need not be taken as communicating an object which is in some sense wrong or not perfectly in line with the truth. What I am advocating here is not putting off truthfully answering (or answering at all) young children’s questions about adult topics until we deem them ‘ready’, or at least old enough, to handle the facts. Essentially what I am saying is that it is absolutely in line with honesty to answer a child’s questions in a simplified manner (depending on age and maturity), while

perhaps maintaining an ongoing conversation as the child grows older and can understand more complex answers and more detail can be added to the previously simple answers.

Consider also the complexities involved in age-appropriate academic learning. The history of the Treaty of Waitangi is a prime example, since this is something every child in New Zealand encounters at school, usually more than once. Teaching students about such a complex piece of history, involving a lot of socio-political, ethical, linguistic and philosophical issues as well as the historical figures and events must understandably be a gradual process. So of course it is not dishonest to present younger children with a simplified version of events, and gradually adding to that as they mature. As an 18-year-old undergraduate philosophy student I may have been old and mature enough to understand concepts of sovereignty and rights as they relate to the Treaty of Waitangi, but certainly not as a 12-year-old intermediate school student. That doesn't mean my Social Studies teacher at intermediate school was lacking in honesty when she restricted the discussions to aspects of the topic our class of mostly 12-year-olds would be able to understand. Part of honesty as a virtue particular to the role of a teacher is that it requires teachers to identify how much detail and complexity to teach their students about a particular topic considering their level of intellectual and academic development. Honesty in teachers when considered like this could be either helped or impeded (or both) by things such as structured curriculums which often assume that students in similar age groups will be at similar levels of intellectual development and maturity, though they might also allow for some variation.

But this concept is not limited to communication with children. An elderly person who grew up before the age of computers, has never had to engage with computers and feels very confused by and alienated from all of this fancy new technology might need similarly age- (or experience-) appropriate explanations. Keeping explanations simple and vague, without being patronising, tends to be a fairly good rule of thumb. For example, when someone asks if a video you told them about is on a DVD or VHS (or makes the assumption that it is), rather than explaining the wonders and advantages of the USB stick, simply saying that "there's a new gadget for that now" might be sufficient.⁹

Coming back to communication with children, another aspect of both age-appropriate *and* tactful honesty is the process of teaching one's children about both. In the first chapter I touched briefly on virtues particular to certain roles in life; this is relevant here in that there is

⁹ Thank you to Rosalind Hursthouse for solving this one for me.

more to being an honest *parent* than there is to just being an honest agent in general. For a parent to be honest, they must not only be honest in the way that any other agent would be, but they must engage in the activity of *parenting* in a way that is characteristically honest. Part of this must surely be to instil the virtue of honesty in one's children. While this applies to all of the five parameters of honesty, it can be very clearly illustrated here. While on a shopping trip, a child might encounter a person who looks "different" in some way from other people they have encountered thus far (perhaps due to skin colour, injury, disability, piercings or tattoos, body size, or something else). In asking why this person looks the way they do the child may well be honestly communicating their curiosity, but likely not in the right place/time and probably not in the right way (for example, if the question is asked loudly enough for the other person to hear them). A parent might use such an opportunity to explain to their child that while there is nothing wrong with asking question, some kinds of blatant curiosity about the people around you might be considered rude, so it would be good for the child to try to remember their questions for later, to ask them at a more appropriate time.

The Santa Claus Myth

One interesting example to explore when considering parental honesty is that of the Santa Claus myth. While there isn't necessarily a definitive answer as to whether or not a virtuous parent should continue the tradition of having their young children believe in the fictional Santa Claus (since I think it depends on the individual circumstances), I personally lean towards the side of not portraying the myth as reality. It seems to me that even though young children may at times have difficulty in differentiating fact from fiction, an honest parent would take it upon themselves to help the child become more confident in making this distinction, rather than actively encouraging the child's belief in a myth (fun as that myth might be). And while, on the face of it, it may appear unkind for a parent to withhold from their child such a quintessential part of childhood innocence and fun (not to mention the havoc such a child could wreak on their friends' experiences of Santa!), I would also suggest that they would be doing their child a kindness by instilling in them a love for truth. This can include exploring the origins of the Santa Claus story with the child by reading up on the history of St Nicholas and the Dutch stories of Sinterklaas. And being honest about the existence of the contemporary Santa Claus must certainly not mean that the traditions surrounding the myth can't be continued (such as hanging up stockings and singing "Rudolph,

the Red-Nosed Reindeer”). My suggestion here is that the right time for a parent to teach their child to value truth and to learn to distinguish between fact and fiction is as early as possible. As those who don’t believe in the biblical stories know, celebrating customs and traditions based on (in their view) fictional stories can still be a lot of fun, and needn’t ruin the experience in the slightest.

Being honest at the right time involves consideration of both tact and communicating in an age-appropriate manner. For agents in roles such as parent or teacher, this can bring even more importance to communicating age-appropriately with their children or students. And it is always important to keep in mind that honesty is rarely, if ever, the only virtue relevant to a given situation. The honest agent should also strive to be kind, responsible, just, generous, courageous, and so on.

Chapter 4

The Right People

I have so far considered the right objects of an honest action, the right way to communicate these objects and the right times to do so. This brings us to the right people. Immanuel Kant discussed whether certain people can have (or lack) a *right* to the truth. I would like to consider more simply what it means to communicate the right object to the right person (and to avoid communicating it to the wrong person). While the terminology of rights could technically be brought into a discussion such as this (and legitimately so), I don't believe it is necessary to do so. In fact, I think a discussion of the right recipients of true objects is simpler and more straightforward without bringing rights into the mix. I will begin by discussing the classic case of the Nazi at the door, asking about the whereabouts of a Jewish family hidden in your home. This case presents the age-old difficulty of lying for the greater good. It also presents an opportunity to discuss apparently conflicting virtues. I will then move on to discuss issues of privacy and gossip.

The Honest Lie

I would like to begin by addressing Immanuel Kant's famous example of the murderer at the door (which in post-World War II times turned into the Nazi at the door).¹ A case such as this might be considered a classic case of a clash of the virtues: a case in which the honest action is at odds with practically every other relevant virtue. However, I see it as a perfect example to illustrate the lack of conflict. The question I would like to address in regards to this is this: if there were a Nazi officer at the door of a truly honest agent who is harbouring a Jewish family in their home, and if this officer asked this agent if there are any Jews in the house, how should they respond? What would (or should) be the characteristically honest response to such a loaded question? My original instinct was to question why one would need to answer such a question at all. Why not just dismiss the question and slam the door (perhaps a simpler response for the simpler case of the murderer)? However communication need not be verbal and such an action could provide enough of an answer in the eyes of the officer,

¹ Immanuel Kant, "On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy," in *Practical Philosophy*, trans./ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 611.

thereby putting the lives of the Jewish family in great danger. So what should the honest agent do?

Lie! And it had better be a damn convincing lie at that! Okay, let me back up a bit. It probably seems rather counterintuitive to call a *lie* an honest action and a characteristically honest action at that. Yet clearly the right thing to do in this case is to blatantly lie to this officer; in fact to say whatever it takes to make him leave. If the perfectly virtuous agent is one who would do the right thing in all cases, acting characteristically virtuously, if one of their virtues must necessarily be honesty (and matters of truth and falsehood fall squarely, though not solely, in the realm of honesty), if telling a lie is the right thing to do, then clearly, lying must be what the honest agent would characteristically do here. Certainly such a lie is also charitable, just, kind, benevolent, responsible, wise, courageous (just to name a few of the relevant virtues). As we saw when considering what it means to be honest at the right times, a large part of it was identifying examples of actions of which we would not intuitively say they are honest actions, yet they were still actions characteristic of an honest agent, and thereby certainly not lacking in honesty. That is more or less what is going on here.

Although Kant's murderer example, and this one of the Nazi at the door, highlight the terrible consequences of telling the truth in such cases, it might also be considered relevant that the person I lie to might not 'deserve' the truth so to speak. I might use the sister of a friend to illustrate this: recently a close friend (I'll call him Bob) was in hospital to have surgery to remove a mostly benign tumour. Since he had to stay in hospital for some time after the surgery, Bob's sister (Ellen) insisted on arranging a visiting roster for him to make sure he didn't get lonely. I was happy to help and put my name down, along with several other friends. Ellen's ex-girlfriend (whom Bob's been close friends with since long before she even met Ellen) offered to stay with him occasionally, when someone else needed some time off. To this day Ellen doesn't know that her ex visited Bob in hospital – when the ex was there Bob and I simply lied and said that another friend was (or even that I was), and our other friends went along with the lie. Because of Ellen's controlling attitude towards Bob, it could have been rather problematic if she had known, since she would be quite capable of ranting at and berating Bob, regardless of how unwell he was. The only reasonable solution was to lie. In a sense you could say that Ellen wasn't really deserving of the truth.

This is where the parameter of the right *people* comes in. Just because the *true* object is that there are Jews in the house, doesn't mean that it is the *right object* to communicate to

this particular *person*. This is very much and very clearly the *wrong* person, and the honest agent is nothing if not skilled at determining what objects to share with which people. Imagine the honest agent as the host of a dinner party with a great many guests who all have different dietary requirements. An excellent host will be very skilled at serving the right food to the right guests. They'll serve the lactose intolerant guest only dairy-free dishes, they'll serve the guest with coeliac disease only gluten free dishes, and they'll keep the meat dishes away from the vegetarian and vegan guests. Unfortunately in a case like ours it wasn't enough that they kept some dishes from the people for whom those dishes would have been the wrong ones. In a case like this we essentially have a party crasher who is threatening to spoil the party for everyone (perhaps rather violently). The excellent host, however, will use their great wisdom (and their knowledge of the party crasher's severe peanut allergy) and graciously serve them a dish with a delicious peanut satay sauce.² While the result isn't pretty, presumably the host has an epi-pen handy and can arrange for the violent party crasher to be removed to a nearby hospital.

Just as the party host in this example wasn't displaying a severe lack of hosting skills in serving the peanut satay dish to the violent party crasher, so too was the honest agent not displaying a severe lack of honesty in lying to the Nazi officer. Consider another example of deliberate deception also involving a party host. This time you are planning a surprise birthday party for your best friend. As part of the charade you have to make plans with your friend for the evening of the party, so you tell them you'll pick them up from work that afternoon, go out for a drink, and then take them out to enjoy a movie they've been looking forward to. On your (supposed) way to the movie, you say that you need to stop by at home, giving some silly excuse (perhaps you left their present in the kitchen, or forgot your glasses) and have them come with you into the house, so you can continue telling your story about your boring weekend. Once you reach the house the deception is immediately cleared up by all the guests yelling "surprise!!" and throwing balloons at your friend. Clearly you've been lying to your friend since you made the fake plans, and all through the afternoon/evening, but it was for a good cause. Planning the party (knowing, as you did, that they love pleasant surprises) was a kind and generous thing to do. It might appear that kindness and generosity clash with honesty in this instance, but I don't see why this would be the case. An agent who stated the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth at all times to every person they

² This is merely an example, and I am by no means advocating serving people with food allergies or other strict dietary requirements food which they can't eat!

encountered would likely be something of a disaster on two legs! Acting in such a way wouldn't be honest, it would be taking truth-telling to an almost perverse extreme and there is simply nothing virtuous about that.

Before I proceed on to privacy, I want to backtrack to examine more closely the idea of a lie as an honest action. As I pointed out, it is clearly the *right* action in these circumstances, and matters of truth-telling and falsehoods fall into the realm of honesty (which is a fairly universally-accepted virtue). This idea is best illustrated by flipping the example on its head. Imagine the Nazi officer comes knocking at my door, and believing that one ought to tell the truth, I tell him that yes, there are indeed Jews hiding in my attic. Now clearly this is a case of my being dreadfully irresponsible, foolish, unjust, unkind, possibly also cowardly, and so on. But aside from that, my immediate intuition is that I would also be displaying a gross failure in honesty.³ Most apparent in this situation is also the clear lack of wisdom. I hope I have clearly established by now that there is more to honesty than simply telling the truth and not lying. If that were all there were to it, then clearly lying to the Nazi would not be honest, and telling them the truth would be, and that would be the end of it. Perhaps the biggest difference between simple truth-telling and being (an) honest (person) is that the latter is made much more nuanced when you factor in the importance of *phronesis*. An agent's practical wisdom grows alongside their honesty (as it does alongside each of their virtues, as they develop). So presenting the Nazi officer with the truth isn't just an honest mistake caused by a failure in/lack of *wisdom*.⁴ Rather, since honesty goes hand-in-hand with practical wisdom, it is a failure on both counts. I will develop this idea further in Chapter 6, but the essence of it is that honesty is shaped and informed by *phronesis*. To say that an action is honest is to say that it is also equally wise or reasonable. An action lacking in honesty also lacks wisdom. If an agent culpably believes the wrong propositions (if they have the wrong *object* of honesty) this is a failure both of honesty and of *phronesis*. A virtuous action is always a wise action, but it is also made virtuous (and wise) on the basis of the relevant virtue(s). Hence lying to the Nazi officer is not merely wise because of the kindness, courage, justice, compassion and responsibility involved; it is also wise because of the honesty involved. The lie to the officer is not merely *not lacking in honesty*; it is very much an *honest* action: an action made right precisely because of the honesty of the agent.

³ Many thanks to John Bishop for posing the question that brought me to this realisation.

⁴ Or a lack/failure in one's reasoning ability – but more on that in Chapter 6.

T.D.J. Chappell's paper "The Snakish Cunning of the Saints': A Dialogue on Lying, Deception and Equivocation"⁵ beautifully illustrates how there really isn't a moral difference at all between an outright lie and intentional deception. Of course, I'll admit that it may seem more counterintuitive to us to call an outright lie an honest action, as opposed to intentional deception (provided it's for a good cause), such as by sidestepping the Nazi officer's query in such a way as to make him think you've misplaced your memory and believing him to be your nephew, invite him in for coffee and cakes.⁶ However, this being the case, I'd say that here, at least, our intuition has gone awry. It seems that if an outright lie gets rid of the Nazi officer just as effectively as the old Austrian woman's intentional deception (whilst keeping the Jewish family safely hidden in both instances), neither action would be more or less honest than the other. To maintain otherwise flies in the face of the most basic premise of my project here: to construct a nuanced and useful account of honesty as a neo-Aristotelian virtue, thereby drawing it out of the useless dichotomy of honesty and *dishonesty* which paints honesty as merely being a matter of telling the truth and refraining from lying.

With this in mind, I want to pause briefly to clarify that I certainly don't think that honesty is (or should be) completely divorced from the concept of truth-telling. Quite the contrary, I wish to maintain that the virtue of honesty is centred on issues of truth (particularly, though not solely) as they relate to communication. In most cases honest actions should involve telling the truth, and refraining from deception. However, I think it is very important to recognise that there are cases where this tendency will not hold. There are cases where the honest agent will recognise that some form of deception is necessary, or that the truth has no place in a particular instance of communication. There could be a variety of reasons involved, from an agent's inability to communicate the truth in the right way, or it being the wrong time to communicate something, or perhaps this is just not the right person to receive this particular truth (often, it might be a combination). But such a lapse in communicating the truth, whatever form it may take, will always stem from the right motives. The honest agent holds both the ideal of the truth and effective communication in high regard, and will therefore not deviate from the truth lightly, just as no-one kind will hurt anyone else unless it's necessitated by the situation.⁷

⁵ T.D.J. Chappell, "The Snakish Cunning of the Saints': A Dialogue on Lying, Deception and Equivocation," *New Blackfriars* 75, no. 879 (1994): 109-120.

⁶ See Hursthouse's account of a story told by Anscombe: "Discussing Dilemmas," *Christian Bioethics* 14, no. 2 (2008): 142-3.

⁷ Thanks to Rosalind Hursthouse for pointing this out.

Privacy

Once again we come upon something which initially might seem slightly odd in a discussion of honesty: privacy. Simply put, the point I would like to make is that everyday life is not a courtroom, and even the perfectly honest agent is not required to act as though they were under oath. Within the parameter of the right people, it seems easiest to focus on who the wrong people might be. Nosy neighbours or relatives, notorious gossips, and journalists for trashy magazines might all fall into the category of being the wrong people. Essentially it boils down to an issue of privacy. If I barely know you, but out of curiosity ask why you had a doctor's appointment this morning, a polite "I'd rather not say" is a perfectly honest, and proper, response. I didn't really have any business asking in the first place. Just because someone is honest, does not mean that they're faced with a requirement to bare all, or that they have nothing to hide.

This could even get political. When debates start up about some of the ludicrous laws that have popped up here and there, allowing the government to spy on its people, a saying that's often trotted out is that "those who have nothing to hide have nothing to fear". This is utter nonsense, since even the most upstanding and honest citizen you could find will have something (they want) to hide. The implication in the saying is that they're not doing anything wrong or against the law. And that might very well be so, but that doesn't mean that they don't have things they would prefer to keep private, away from the prying eyes of some government official. Illnesses, various family difficulties, any number of sexual kinks, or preferences in pornography are all things which may well be entirely above board (legally and morally speaking), but which an individual may nevertheless wish to keep private. If a government official were to stop me on the street to ask about my medical history or sexual preferences it would not only be acceptable, but even expected, for me to respond with some level of outrage to make it clear that I have no desire to share such personal information. Why should an honest agent respond any differently if the question is posed by the potential of a silent ear or watchful eye monitoring their communication?

If the honest response to (even the possibility of) such silent questions ought to be an outraged "mind your own business!" it would seem to follow that such a response ought to be active, rather than an indignant resignation in facing what may appear to be the inevitable increase of such watchful eyes. A timely example would be of Facebook, which has

introduced features to its smartphone application which allow it to read users' text messages⁸ and even use the phone's microphone to listen to users' surroundings.⁹ While such features may be intended to be completely harmless, being put in place for the sake of making the application more user-friendly, they can easily be seen as a distinct invasion of privacy. Of course, this is a private company, and as such we are under no obligation to use their services if we don't like the conditions under which they're provided. An appropriately outraged response to such a silent question would be for the agent to remove the application from their phone, or perhaps even to delete their entire Facebook account, a response certainly called for by some.¹⁰ And yet, to continue with this example, responding like this might be easier said than done. Services such as Facebook are used by so many individuals, groups, organisations and companies that for some people it can be extremely limiting to opt out, to the point that it could affect their professional lives.

Such an active response could be both more and less difficult when the silent questions stem from government organisations. On the one hand, the democratic process provides honest agents with a variety of possible responses, such as voting for parties and candidates that favour the protection of privacy, writing to or meeting with sitting members of parliament to express their concerns, taking part in protests, making submissions on proposed bills, or collecting signatures to initiate a referendum. On the other hand, it tends to be practically impossible to 'opt out' of society in such a way as to avoid the laws and policies guiding and allowing the silent questions of the government. And such concerns are very real, not merely the stuff of dystopian novels, or the paranoia of conspiracy theorists. A 2013 report to the Prime Minister by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission pointed out that "the right to privacy ... is not found in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990" and the "failure to include [this right] ... weakens the domestic protections of [the] right to privacy."¹¹

⁸ Alex Wilhelm, "Facebook Reading Android Users' Texts? Well, Hold On," *TechCrunch*, accessed July 2, 2014, <http://techcrunch.com/2014/01/28/facebook-reading-android-users-texts-well-hold-on/>.

⁹ Casey Johnston, "Passive listening will soon be a feature for Facebook app during status updates," *Ars Technica*, accessed July 2, 2014, <http://arstechnica.com/business/2014/05/passive-listen-will-soon-be-enabled-for-facebook-app-during-status-updates/>.

¹⁰ For example, see Matthias, "DELETE YOUR FACEBOOK," *YouTube*, accessed June 10, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfnKmPQdapw>.

¹¹ "Report to the Prime Minister: Government Communications Security Bureau and Related Legislation Amendment Bill; Telecommunications (Interception Capability and Security) Bill, and Associated Wider Issues Relating to Surveillance and the Human Rights of People in New Zealand," *Human Rights Commission*, accessed July 3, 2014, <http://www.hrc.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/09072013-Human-Rights-Commission-Report-to-the-Prime-Minister-re-GCSB-and-TICS-Bills-FINAL.pdf>, 3.

One important point to keep in mind with these sorts of issues of privacy is the notion of choice. I started off by mentioning that even perfectly upstanding citizens might well have things they wish to keep private. The key might be that this centres very much on them *wishing* these things to be kept private. If I'm quite happy to share personal matters such as family dramas, illnesses, or sexual kinks with anyone who cares to listen then that would be entirely up to me. Going back to the example of Facebook, there would be nothing wrong with me maintaining an account and using their app if I don't mind my text messages possibly being read, or my smartphone's microphone being used as a listening device. Then again, even if I didn't object to sharing all of this myself, it seems appropriate for an honest agent to stand by those who would prefer more privacy and to share their outrage at having that taken from them. And in reality, my text messages aren't a one-sided dialogue that I have with myself, but rather there are messages to and from other people involved, who may not be so keen to bare all for Facebook. Likewise, I won't always (or even often) be the only person in the vicinity of my phone's microphone, making it not just possible, but likely, that other people would inadvertently become subject to my portable listening device. No doubt, it's for the very same reason that laws governing surveillance (or the interception of communication) take note of the potential impact on third parties.¹² This feeds into one of the major difficulties around gossip: the idea of sharing information that wasn't yours to share.

Gossip

Earlier on I mentioned in passing nosy neighbours or relatives, and notorious gossips as examples of the wrong people to communicate with. This feeds into the last topic I want to cover under the right people parameter of honesty, namely gossip. I mostly want to look at the question of whether *you're* the right person to share this (presumably juicy) titbit and the necessity of the communication.

The agent who shares things that aren't theirs to share may be very well-meaning, but nevertheless a dreadful gossip; the objects may well be true, but a lot of the other parameters may be thrown out of whack. I might be very excited about my friend's pregnancy and (perhaps with the assumption that she's already told everyone about it) talk about it with everyone that crosses my path (perhaps even her parents). Now maybe she just hadn't had a chance to tell people yet, or she was holding off for some reason or another, but without her

¹² See, for example, the Government Communications Security Bureau Act 2003, s 24.

letting me know that she's made the news public it simply *isn't my place* to spread that particular joy.

Perhaps the parameter of the right person should be amended to acting honestly *with regard to* the right people, so taking the right people into consideration. In many cases this is as simple and straightforward as considering whether or not *you* are the right person to be communicating this particular object. Or it might expand into considering whether or not you are the right person to be communicating that object at this time, or to this particular other person. Sometimes what's wrong with a particular instance of communication is simply (or primarily) the person who initiated the communication.

While I will be returning to the agent's good intentions, or them being well-meaning in sharing what they do, in the next chapter when we consider the right motives, I would like to suggest here that sometimes an action will be a failure of honesty regardless of intentions. Of course there may be plenty of reasons why you want to communicate *x*, or even see it as necessary that you do so, but if *x* is not yours to communicate, then those reasons cease to be relevant. I suppose this introduces a sense of ownership when it comes to some objects of honesty, and perhaps rightly so. Some objects are in the public domain, so to speak, things such as the weather and the weather forecasts. Other objects are publicly available, though perhaps with some restrictions, for example political or military goings-on which are widely reported on, though with a few details omitted (for security reasons perhaps). And some objects are the equivalent of private property; unless I choose to share them with you, they are none of your business, and unless I give you leave to do so, they are not yours to share with others.¹³ This last sort of object is what I would like to focus on.

We've all encountered some form of gossip, of people sharing things about other people which they probably ought not to be talking about. One excellent example of such gossip occurs in prayer groups and networks. These might consist in the first instance of a group of (presumably) well-meaning people who gather to pray to their deity together, each of them bringing one or more matters to be addressed in prayer. These may be personal things relating to the person's own health for example, or they may be public matters, such as a well-documented war in some part of the world, or matters that are personal, but not to them

¹³ There would certainly be more than just these three types of objects, one other being those which are publicly available in the media, or just somewhere online, but shouldn't be, such as details about some celebrity which were leaked to the press, or anything 'leaked' somewhere, really. This would no doubt be an interesting one to explore, to consider whether it's inappropriate, or even displaying a failure of honesty, to be discussing such leaked objects – objects one has no claim to, as such.

(perhaps a friend's health issue, or a family member's struggle with some form of 'sin'). Such matters may be things told to them in confidence, or things that have been passed on to them through the grapevine. This is a classic example of the misconception that if done 'for a good cause', essentially, it's perfectly acceptable to share someone else's news, struggles, or other private matters.

Let's say Alice firmly and genuinely believes that the best (or perhaps even the only) way to truly help the people around her is by appealing to her deity through prayer. Alice believes her deity is much more likely/willing to help if the appeal is made about something specific (e.g. Beth's surgery tomorrow morning) rather than something vague or general (e.g. to keep my/Alice's friends in good health) and the deity is even more likely/willing to intervene the more prayers they receive about that particular issue. Given Alice's belief, would it not be reasonable for her to tell everyone she knows (who shares her faith) about Beth's surgery in the morning, with a request that they pray that it will go smoothly? I am assuming here that Alice believes the friends and acquaintances she approaches about the prayer request to be trustworthy enough to not pass on the news about Beth's surgery except as a prayer request to other equally trustworthy believers.

To say that Alice is wrong in sharing this specific request is to make one of two fairly strong statements (or perhaps both). I could be saying that Alice's belief is certainly false (which may affect the honesty of her action with regard to the object, if we can say she ought to know that her belief is false). Otherwise I would be saying that honesty requires Alice to keep the news of Beth's surgery to herself even if that means she can't help her in any way. The latter position suggests that either it would not be kind of Alice to 'help' in such circumstances, or (if I were to allow for conflicting virtues) that honesty trumps kindness in this case. I find it useful to consider what this example would look like if the potential consequences were completely different, both to ensure that I'm not biased by my own beliefs (or lack thereof), and to ensure I'm not falling into a utilitarian trap.

Would sharing Beth's news with an awful lot of people be acceptable if the success of Beth's surgery might depend on it? And if so, would that be the fall into the utilitarian trap? Well, if the success of Beth's surgery were to depend on Alice telling an awful lot of people about it, of course she should! In the same way, if Emma, a formerly devout Jehovah's Witness, had sworn her friend Bob to secrecy about having let go of her faith until she felt ready to tell their other friends and she has a medical emergency requiring a blood

transfusion, where the doctor treating her is a friend who is still unaware of her change of beliefs, Bob certainly ought to tell the doctor that Emma won't mind a blood transfusion. However if Beth's surgery didn't depend on Alice sharing the news with an awful lot of people in order to increase the number of people praying for her, but rather it was only Alice's peace of mind that depended on that, then Alice should certainly hold her tongue and keep her prayers strictly between God and herself. So perhaps rather than seeing a potential utilitarian trap, I need to acknowledge that yes, consequences matter, but not in the same way in which they do to a utilitarian. Breaking a confidence out of necessity, as Bob does with Emma, is not a failure of honesty. Breaking a confidence out of a misguided view of necessity, which is based on a false belief, would be a failure not only of honesty, but also of *phronesis*. So I suppose in a case like Alice's I simply need to bite the bullet and say that I would view her belief as false, and would suggest she revisits her hinge propositions to ensure she has a solid basis for her beliefs.

Admittedly, it can be difficult to draw a line, when some objects seem to belong to more than one person. Say one of your parents had been diagnosed with a dreadful illness, which they were undergoing treatment for, creating a very difficult and stressful time not just for them, but for the whole family. It's your parent who's ill, not you, so in a way it's *their* object, and if they didn't want their co-workers, or neighbours, or others to hear about their illness, then that would seem to be up to them to decide. However, in another sense it's also *your* object. You're going through a lot of stress and emotional upheaval while supporting your parent and the rest of your family through this difficult time. So it might seem that if you wanted to talk to someone about it that should be up to you to decide. In cases like these, everyone concerned would need to be particularly sensitive to the needs and wishes of the others involved. I don't think there can be any hard-and-fast rules such as not sharing with a person who's on someone else's "don't share list". If one of the neighbours is your closest friend and they want to be able to support you through this difficult time, it's possible you may be able to share with them (against your parent's wishes), with their assurance that they won't say a word to anyone else and will pretend not to know a thing themselves. On the other hand, it's possible that this neighbour (wonderful best friend though they may otherwise be) has a terrible track record of not being able to keep anything to themselves, which would not make them an ideal person to share sensitive information with.

What about other, less sensitive, matters? Suppose a parent is talking to someone about their two grown children, for example, just sharing some details about what their

children are up to, and how they've been; innocent, everyday chitchat. These are objects that to a certain degree might belong to each of their children, but could one not argue that in some way, surely, simply by reason of them being one's children, the objects also belong to the parent. I mean, if one of these grown children were a very private person who didn't want anyone to be told anything at all about them, unless it were absolutely necessary, it would seem quite unreasonable to expect the parent to respond to a query about this child with "well, I'm not at liberty to say", or "you'd have to ask them yourself, I'm afraid". The same idea could be said to apply to friends to some degree. If you were to ask me what a mutual friend of ours has been up to, I should expect to be able to give you some sort of actual answer (provided that I know), even though it would be mostly the friend's objects I would be sharing.

This is where a piece of wisdom from my mother might come in handy. When I was young, my mother used to say that we must be careful with what we say. She said we should always run our words through three sieves before we speak them, in order to ask ourselves three questions about what we wanted to say: 1) Is it true? 2) Is it kind? 3) Is it necessary? I very much hope to have covered the first question by now (particularly in the first chapter), but what I am most interested in at this point is the idea of necessity. This has certainly come up in the discussion of the right time (and place), but it seems to me it must certainly also involve the right people.

Suppose I had a friend who had told me, in strictest confidence, that they were HIV positive, and I had sworn to never tell a soul. Now imagine my friend and I were in a car accident, and they were rushed off to hospital unconscious and in need of surgery. I would, out of necessity, need to confide in the medical staff treating them, to alert them to their HIV status. Now suppose I ran into my friend Bob in town, and he asks me how a few of our mutual friends have been (whom I've seen more recently than he has) and what they've been up to. If every single one of these friends considered themselves to be a very private person who didn't want anyone to be told anything at all about them, unless it were absolutely necessary, and besides this group of friends I didn't really have anything much in common with Bob, that would leave us without an awful lot to talk about.

I would imagine that it would be acceptable to say that some, very general things about people are acceptable and appropriate conversation fodder (regardless how private the person concerned is), due to the necessity of maintaining social niceties. For example, I might

tell Bob that Carl has been stuck in bed with a nasty cold, Debbie is finally getting over her morning sickness (of course, I would be certain first that she has definitely told Bob that she's pregnant), Erik is feeling anxious about his upcoming exams and Fleur has been really busy with work lately. These would all be perfectly innocent (and non-gossipy) things to talk about for each of these friends. After all, I already know that Bob knows about Debbie's pregnancy and the morning sickness (and that she's been looking forward to that easing up), and about Erik's upcoming exams, and that Fleur's work schedule can be rather demanding at times. And the common cold is called 'common' for a reason – everyone gets it, and it's not the sort of thing that one keeps a secret (surely not even someone as private as Carl).

To finish off, it bears reminding that while a gossip who only deals in *true* objects may not be considered *dishonest* as such, that isn't really the point here. After all, I am trying to drag honesty out of the false dichotomy with dishonesty. An honest agent is like a skilled alchemist, brewing the right potion to suit each situation; ensuring that the right potions find themselves into the hands of the intended recipient is second nature to them. Such an agent will be able to recognise those rare occasions on which an outright lie is appropriate; they will value and protect their own privacy, and that of others, and they will refuse to participate in any form of gossip, no matter how true.

Chapter 5

The Right Motive

Motives and emotions are, I think, still not taken quite seriously enough in normative ethics. Consequentialists need not find room for them, it seems, and deontologists can either also ignore them or take Kant's stance of the motive for a right action only being *right* if it's based on a sense of duty,¹ which is wrong on so many levels. Since these theories' focus is action, rather than character, this should hardly be surprising. And of course this is a topic which has been covered thoroughly by virtue ethicists elsewhere.² The reason I bring it up is because honesty illustrates so beautifully the necessity of a coherent account of, and place for, motives and emotions within a normative ethical theory.

The Motives of Honest Agents

There is an obvious difference between someone being honest (and thorough, and so forth) in their scientific research because they care about the integrity of their research, doing so is part of what defines them as a scientist and because it's *the right thing to do*, and someone who does so because they *have to*, they know it's right, and besides, it would probably be more trouble in the end if they weren't honest. The first scientist is a much more obvious embodiment of honesty, in their motives, than the second. The second seems more like what Aristotle calls continent. They do the right thing, knowing that it's the right thing to do, but their heart isn't really in it, and it takes a fair bit of motivation to get them there. The truly honest agent doesn't need to be motivated to act honestly; it comes naturally to them (in the sense that it's become second nature for them).

Likewise, there's a clear difference between the teenager who scratched their parents' car, lied about it, and felt guilty in the knowledge that they should have been honest about what happened, and the teenager who in the same situation also lies but does so quite naturally, utterly oblivious that they really ought to have been honest with their parents. The former is what Aristotle calls incontinent; the latter is a case of vice. The incontinent agent knows what the right action would be, wants to do the right thing (Curzer goes so far as to say

¹ Johnson, "Kant's Moral Philosophy."

² To name but one example, see Part II (Chapters 4-7) of Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

they “choose” the right thing³), but doesn’t quite manage to get over the final hurdle of actually bringing themselves to *do* the right thing. The vicious⁴ agent, on the other hand, essentially thinks they’re doing the right thing; they think they know what the right thing is, want to do that supposedly right thing, and then go ahead and do it. In a case of straight up vice it would make no sense for the agent to feel guilt or remorse simply because of their utter lack of awareness that they had done wrong. While they might well be aware that *others* will believe them to have done wrong, since they disagree, there would still be no reason for them to feel guilty.

An interesting example of how motives can shape the way we interpret actions is the character of Severus Snape in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. After appearing throughout all seven novels to be one of Harry’s three greatest enemies, it turns out at the very end that it was all a façade, put on for many years. In actual fact Snape was constantly working to protect Harry, which he insisted must be kept secret (especially from Harry himself).⁵ Rowling never explains precisely why Snape wants this kept secret, but it is very clear throughout the series that be it through words, actions, body language, and so forth, Snape communicates the exact opposite of “I’m trying to protect you from Lord Voldemort” to Harry (and others, for that matter). Let’s imagine that Snape’s motives for acting like this towards Harry were that he was protecting him for Harry’s mother’s sake, but resents doing so because Harry is very much his father’s (Snape’s arch-rival’s) son, so he just gets a kick out of screwing with Harry’s mind and being a terrorising and nasty teacher; sort of along the lines of “I have my own, unrelated reasons for protecting this brat, but that doesn’t mean I have to like him, much less act like I do”. Those would not be the motives of a virtuous (honest) Snape. That sounds vicious (in most senses of the word). Alternatively, if Snape’s motives were that he’s protecting the boy out of a sense of duty and remorse (to ensure Harry’s mother’s death hadn’t been in vain, when she died to protect him), but he felt ashamed at having to admit to the weakness of being in love (especially with someone looked down on by his peers) and therefore wanted to keep the whole thing secret, that would also speak to not very virtuous motives on Snape’s part. On the other hand, if Snape realised that he could best lead his double-life, spying on Lord Voldemort to better protect Harry, if his true feelings about Harry’s mother and his purpose in watching over Harry were secret, that

³ Curzer, 80-1.

⁴ Not necessarily in the sense of cruel, dangerous, depraved, violent, etc. Just in the sense of being the opposite of virtuous.

⁵ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 545.

could perhaps be described as Snape regrettably living a lie in unfortunate (but necessary) circumstances. And that, I think, would be a situation where he might be described as truly having the right motives, with regard to honesty.⁶

What this most charitable interpretation of Snape's motives brings us to is by now a familiar scenario; virtuous character in very adverse circumstances won't always manifest itself in the usual way. We see this very clearly in cases like the one in the previous chapter where the honest agent needs to lie about harbouring Jews, and we can also add the example of the nineteenth century coal-hauling women Hursthouse describes in her article on *Virtue Theory and Abortion*.⁷ In the case of such women who live rather miserable lives, feeling utterly exhausted by their strenuous labour, Hursthouse says having an abortion "does not manifest any lack of serious respect for human life or a shallow attitude to motherhood."⁸ Similarly Snape's living a lie in his very unfortunate, difficult, and complicated (and at times very dangerous) role as double-agent does not demonstrate a lack of respect for the truth or a disregard for Harry's feelings. Rather, I think the key thing to keep in mind is that (assuming Snape really is an honest agent), were his circumstances other than they are, he would not have acted as he did. With regard to the coal-hauling women, Hursthouse points out that the way they might (understandably) view their unexpected pregnancies in those particular situations "show[s] that something is terribly amiss in the conditions of their lives, which make it so hard to recognize pregnancy and childbearing as the good they can be."⁹ Likewise, there is something dreadfully wrong in Rowling's fictional universe (the evil personified by Voldemort).

As we've seen, honesty crops up in all sorts of areas of life, even, and perhaps most interestingly, outside of instances of communication. In the first chapter I looked at what right, or true, objects might be, but now I would like to consider the honest agent's pursuit of such objects, particularly with regard to their motives. Pursuit of honesty-related objects (whether true or not)¹⁰ is something we all engage in, in a great variety of ways and situations. Journalists in search of a story to report, academics engaging in research, scientists doing experiments, gossips gossiping and gleaning new titbits, spies gathering intelligence, students cramming for exams, statisticians conducting a census, detectives investigating a

⁶ Then again, my suspicion is that it may be the second interpretation of his motives which is the most accurate, especially since Albus Dumbledore questions him wanting to hide the best of himself.

⁷ Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20, no. 3 (1991): 239-40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Henceforth referred to simply as "objects".

crime scene, security specialists analysing metadata... the list could go on indefinitely. What I'm interested in here are the motives people do, or might, have for their various pursuits of objects, and how we might identify the right sorts of motives.

Truth, Biases, and Reality

Straight off, the most obvious factor should be that such a pursuit of objects should be motivated by a desire for *true* objects. Of course that doesn't mean that an honest agent might not also have a desire for interesting, useful, new, or otherwise appealing objects, but the truth of the object should probably be the most significant driving factor.¹¹ Another important factor would be what the agent hopes or intends to do with the object, once discovered. Compare the journalist in search of a (true) lead in order to use it to destroy someone's reputation to their colleague engaged in a similar search wanting to use their (true) lead to further public awareness and understanding of upcoming law changes. Contrast one student furiously cramming a semester's worth of material the night before the exam, not caring that they'll forget most of it immediately afterwards, to another who studiously engages with the material throughout the semester, trying not just to absorb, but also to understand it so that it will stay with them long after the semester has ended. Security specialists collecting and analysing metadata for the purposes of identifying targets to kill¹² have severely flawed motives, whereas their colleagues who are seeking child pornography in order to apprehend those (adults) involved would seem to be motivated by more of an honest sense of justice.

Essentially what these examples showcase is the interaction between honesty and various other virtues. An agent who seeks true objects for vicious purposes is missing a key element not just of the other relevant virtue(s), but also of honesty. Consider also a common flaw in human reasoning called confirmation bias. We have a tendency to believe something much more easily if it confirms what we already believe, whereas if we encounter something that contradicts our already held beliefs we tend to have a much higher standard of evidence, and be much less willing to believe it. It seems to me that the honest agent should be reasonably aware of their own likely and motivated biases in order to be able to make a

¹¹ Unless, of course, the purpose is for the creation of or engaging with a fictional reality, but more on that below.

¹² As the former director of the American NSA and CIA claimed "We kill people based on metadata." ("Former CIA director: 'We kill people based on metadata'," *RT*, accessed September 18, 2014. <http://rt.com/usa/158460-cia-director-metadata-kill-people/>.)

conscious effort to consider new information on its own merits, and not be overly swayed by any pre-existing biases. This ties in closely with what I argued in Chapter 1, since our biases, much like our hinge propositions, are something deeply ingrained, which can (and do) shape our thinking and our reasoning, quite often subconsciously. Consider this example: if I were a professional athlete and heard that my arch-rival had been taking performance enhancing drugs, it might be said to be rather... advantageous... to me if that were true. Of course, I already had a sneaking suspicion that they were a cheating scoundrel and if these allegations were true, then my previous world record would remain undefeated. Clearly, I would (perhaps even understandably) rather like this to be true. And my confirmation bias predisposes me to believe something like this, so if it weren't true, it would just be a very human mistake, and I can't be faulted for passing on (or even just believing) such sensational news, right? Not really.

If I were truly honest, one would think that I would be well aware that my great dislike and distrust of my arch-rival leaves me inclined to think and believe the worst of them, so that when I learn something new about them, I would check myself to make sure that I'm not accepting something as true (or rejecting it as false) on the basis of my bias. That might even involve running something past someone who's a bit more neutral; not in the sense of passing on a potentially juicy titbit, but rather to check with someone you trust when you feel you can't trust your own judgement enough. And I think honesty in a case like this may call for the ability to recognise whether or not you can trust your own judgement in a given case.

This doesn't just hold true for cases like this, rather, we find biases hidden in most, if not all, of our beliefs. If I believe in God then I am much more likely to (uncritically) accept any evidence that I encounter which supports my belief – likewise if I'm an atheist. In cases like these I might be hard pressed to find someone neutral enough to give me another perspective. I may need to learn to treat my more controversial or less widely supported beliefs extra critically, and engage with them with an awareness of my relevant hinge propositions and of my natural biases. A bias in and of itself is not a bad thing, nor does it indicate a failure in honesty. Biases are very naturally human, and no matter how virtuous we are, we all have them. What matters is that we are aware of our biases and that we try to form our beliefs based on a critical examination of the information we (reasonably) have available to us. Forming beliefs in such a way indicates the right motives with regard to honesty, since the motive would be a desire for the truth, or a desire to form true beliefs. Alternatively, forming beliefs based on biases, either with a blatant disregard for those biases, or when one

really ought to have known better than to ignore (or fail to examine) one's biases, indicates the wrong motives with regard to honesty. Such belief formation might suggest a desire (whether blatant or underlying) to believe the best/worst in someone no matter what, an irrational clinging on to beliefs, or a clear case of wishful thinking.

Another sort of bias that seems worth mentioning is that of the (broadly termed) pessimist and the optimist. The former might have a tendency to expect and believe the worst of any situation, while the latter might hope for and expect the best. In and of themselves, there need not be anything wrong with either stance. But as with any bias, they require awareness and the right amount of caution to ensure they don't lean too far on either side. A mild pessimist might expect the worst but be pleasantly surprised and relieved when things turn out better than expected. A cynic, on the other hand, is likely to interpret things in a negative light, and be strongly inclined to reject anything good they come across (surely there must be more to it... reality just isn't that good...). An optimist might hope for the best and use this hope as motivation, and be pleased when things turn out well, but graciously accept when things don't. However, if one is rather naïve, one might expect that things in life tend to go well overall, but be unable to accept or deal with the fact that sometimes they just don't.

An agent with honest motives is one who wishes to engage with and understand reality as it is,¹³ not as they wish it to be, or have convinced themselves that it must be. And this, I think, is the crux of what it means to be honest with regard to one's motives. It's the awareness around one's reasoning and beliefs/belief formation. It's a sense of the importance of being in touch with reality, really knowing yourself, including your beliefs, hinge propositions, biases, tendencies, and so on. A wonderful example of people who don't sufficiently engage with reality is found in the report that 94% of university faculty members "rate[d] themselves as above-average teachers".¹⁴ Simply from a statistical point of view, 94% of professors *can't* be above-average. Some will *be* average, and some will be *below* average. And that doesn't even depend on how you define being a good teacher (though that definition may well matter for how the professors ranked themselves). Likewise with the 25%

¹³ This is taking for granted the truth of our basic global hinge propositions, most especially that reality is in fact as we perceive it to be.

¹⁴ K. Patricia Cross, "Not *Can*, but *Will* College Teaching be Improved?" *New Directions for Higher Education* 1977, no. 17 (1977): 9-10.

of students who thought they were in the top 1% in terms of ability to get along with others.¹⁵ It's just not possible!

The professors and students in these examples are displaying a distinct failure to be in touch with reality, and (the majority of them, no doubt) are certainly overestimating themselves. Now, there's nothing wrong with a good dose of self-confidence, but these examples go way beyond that. Let me illustrate with another example. In Germany, when a child finishes primary school, they/their parents generally choose one of three types of school¹⁶ for them to complete their secondary education at, which can take from five to nine years. The *Hauptschule*, the shortest of the three, is designed to prepare young people for the workforce, apprenticeships, or basic public service; the *Realschule* takes six years and prepares students for higher level public service or vocational training; lastly, the *Gymnasium*¹⁷ takes eight to nine years and aims towards the final examination called the *Abitur*, which qualifies a student for university study. The choice of school is based on the student's grades in primary school, though it is possible to transfer to a different type of school at a later stage if the grades are high enough. While the system no doubt has its flaws, it forces parents (and students) to face up to and acknowledge the truth of the child's academic capabilities. At the end of primary school, it forces the child and their parents to take a serious (and honest) look at themselves/their child and evaluate where they're at in the grand scheme of intelligence, academic skills, and future aspirations. There is a recognition of the fact that of course not everyone can go on to be a nuclear physicist, a surgeon, a teacher, or a philosopher. We need our share of plumbers, various technicians, cleaners, skilled labourers in general, delivery drivers, factory workers, bureaucrats, and so on. So there's a sense of realism in there.

I think this illustrates my point nicely. The most common form of self-deception involves someone believing something they want to be true,¹⁸ hence why I'm focussing so strongly on self-awareness. If you're aware of what you want and the expectations you have, you must surely be much better equipped to engage with reality honestly. In our society where being good at book-learning is considered a wonderful thing, no doubt many a parent would

¹⁵ College Board, *Student descriptive questionnaire*, (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1976-7), reported in Thomas Gilovich, *How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life*, (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 77.

¹⁶ There is also a fourth, mixed/comprehensive type available, but I'll keep it simpler with just these three types for this example.

¹⁷ Which is not at all sport related, though sport, or P.E. can, no doubt, be taken as a subject.

¹⁸ Alfred R. Mele, *Princeton Monographs in Philosophy: Self-Deception Unmasked*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 94.

want (to believe) their child to be capable of getting the required grades to move into a school which aims at a university entrance qualification. The parent who is aware of this desire (and even the societal influence that's probably driving the desire) would hopefully be better able to see that their child's fairly average grades don't mean that their child is a failure, only that perhaps an academic future isn't what would suit them best (and that's okay). Or to translate the example into a more Kiwi context: the rugby-mad parents who find out their child hasn't made the school rugby team might be better off considering where the child's talents and/or interests lie outside of rugby, rather than insisting the coach is a biased dolt who doesn't like their child. Perhaps their child prefers football, or water polo, or perhaps they can't stand sports at all and they're secretly relieved by the decision, hoping they can focus on the school play now.

Having honest motivation might go hand in hand with courage, with humility, and with integrity. It involves being yourself (even with yourself), being real, accepting yourself for who you are, being brave enough to accept the truth, and being humble enough to recognise your shortcomings, or your limits. The honesty part here is a staunch and stalwart desire for the truth, regardless of what it is. For what can the courageous agent be brave about without the truth? How can the humble agent show humility, without the truth? The truth lies at the heart of our human experience. We need to stand up and face it. Integrity, according to Curzer, involves being truthful about oneself;¹⁹ I would say that being honest involves the desire to do so: the desire for the truth for its own sake, for the sake of yourself, and one might say, for the sake of reality. To me, honest desires speak of a desire to be in touch with and to engage with reality. The truth revolves around that which is real, which shows that honesty and reality are essentially intertwined with one another. The honest agent is one who lives for reality, for whom engaging with and being in touch with reality is as easy as breathing.

Other Realities

This is all well and good, until you start thinking further about what may lie beyond the traditional scope of reality. What about fiction or virtual reality? Surely I can't be suggesting that becoming immersed in the worlds of Jane Eyre, Mary Poppins, or Katniss Everdeen could involve being out of touch with reality in any way. Or that going on epic

¹⁹ Curzer, Chapter 10, 195-219.

quests with an Orc Warlock might be problematic for an honest agent because it involves engaging with the *virtual* reality of a role-playing game (whether table top/pen and paper or on a computer/console). For me there are three issues at play here. Firstly, there's the extent to (and the way in) which what I'll refer to as "other" realities²⁰ can be considered real. Secondly, there's the extent to which one engages with such other realities. Thirdly, there's the level of (self-)awareness involved in such engagement.

I'll start by turning briefly back to Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. At the end of a rather dreamlike experience, Harry asks Albus Dumbledore "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?" to which Dumbledore responds "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"²¹ I find this rather an astute insight into the relationship we often have with stories. I'm sure much has been, and could still be, said on this topic alone, but I would like to point out just a few things. Fictional stories come in all sorts of forms (or different media), such as books, film, television, theatre, and games. The one thing they all share is that at the end of the day, they're happening inside our (individual and collective) heads. And in that sense they're *not* real. If reality is the physical universe we perceive and interact with daily, then no, Jane Eyre, Mary Poppins, Katniss Everdeen, Harry Potter and the Orc Warlock all don't exist – not in reality. But if we think of reality as encompassing the human experience more generally, then surely our (very, very human) imaginations and stories must become part of that picture. I grew up with a great many fictional characters shaping both my world and who I've become just as much as the physical people around me did. It seems to me that there's a sense of reality in that. Our engagement with, and invention of, these stories is what makes them real. Perhaps it is this sense of reality that Rowling/Dumbledore had in mind in the passage above.

I'll turn now to a common stereotype of gamers as young men²² practically living in their parents' basement, spending most of their waking hours in-game and having no life to speak of in the so-called "real world". This stereotypical gamer likely has all of his friends in-game, interacting only virtually, takes care of his most basic needs as required, and in the most extreme cases doesn't work, just living off his parents or the state. This stereotype is probably an excellent example of engaging with other realities to the greatest extent possible.

²⁰ When I mean our actual reality in the physical world, I'll stick with calling it plain old 'reality'.

²¹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 579.

²² Incidentally, 48% of gamers are female and "women over the age of 18 represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (36 percent) than boys age 18 or younger (17 percent)." See "Industry Facts," *The Entertainment Software Association*, accessed December 7, 2014, <http://www.theesa.com/about-esa/industry-facts/>.

In a case like this, the gamer has put aside reality altogether, coming back down to earth, so to speak, only to take care of their most basic needs to keep their real body going, so they can continue on in-game. But there are millions of people who play computer games²³ and considering that human societies continue to function, I might hazard a guess that the average gamer doesn't fit this extreme stereotype.²⁴ It seems likely that a lot of gamers engage with their virtual realities in a way that's similar to how others (or they themselves at other times) engage with a sports match (whether playing or watching), a table top game (such as Chess, or Bridge), a creative pursuit (such as painting), an outing (to a museum, or a concert), or reading their morning paper. Like these other things, gaming (whether it's a role-playing, action, strategy, simulation, or puzzle game, whether it's single-player, multiplayer, or even a massively multiplayer online game, whether it's very involved or just a bit of casual gaming) *can* be just a more or less innocent hobby. Just like with these other hobbies, the important thing for gaming (or watching television or reading) is to maintain a healthy balance with the other aspects of our lives.

Before I move on, however, I'd like to pause to examine one of the possible reasons for the sort of disengagement with reality often exemplified by gamers. The other realities engaged with can be something of an escape from real life. It's an opportunity for the gamer to put aside the stresses, anxieties, and problems of their everyday lives and to lose themselves in a realm where they can be someone else, live the adventures of another and do things they never could in reality. It's the same with bibliophiles who become deeply engrossed in the fictional realms that spring from the pages of their beloved books. Other realities offer jaded adults the opportunity to relive a rosy childhood (or perhaps to live a childhood much more perfect than the one they experienced), or scared and bullied teens might live out heroic destinies as wizards, knights, spaceship captains and the like. Or perhaps someone feeling stuck in a loveless marriage might find an escape in the (virtual) arms of a beloved romance hero/ine. I don't think that escapism like this needs to be a bad thing in and of itself. It seems that it might be a useful coping mechanism for someone trapped or stressed by circumstances which can't be changed (at least not at that point in time), much like other forms of escapism which can rely on all sorts of other hobbies or pastimes (e.g. exercise). The

²³ *World of Warcraft* alone, one of the biggest video games of all time, has had more than 100 million unique player accounts created since it launched in 2004. See Blizzard Entertainment, "World of Warcraft: Azeroth by the Numbers," *World of Warcraft*, accessed October 29, 2014, <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/blog/12346804/world-of-warcraft-azeroth-by-the-numbers-1-28-2014>.

²⁴ Well, this is not so much a guess, but an assessment based on the available research – see the ESA's "Industry Facts" referred to above (footnote 22).

danger lies both in failing to maintain a healthy balance with everyday life (as mentioned above), and in losing awareness of the fictional nature of the other reality (which is up next). Perhaps another danger lies in an inability or a refusal to honestly assess the circumstances the agent wants to escape from; they need to consider whether the situation *really* can't be addressed (in real life) and either way, whether there are other things they could do, besides or in addition to escaping, in order to better deal with their circumstances.

Lastly, gamers, bibliophiles and film buffs will all have some level of awareness of their engagement with their other (fictional) realities. This awareness, I think, is once again key to honesty. There's the basic level of awareness that the other realities are fictional. Whether they're set in a fantasy or science fiction universe, or in our own world (perhaps a fictional retelling of a true story, or just real world fiction), it's a reality that's different from our physical reality. We know that Bruce Wayne (aka Batman) or Cersei Lannister aren't real in the same sense that Bill Gates or Queen Victoria are real. When I'm reading a novel, or watching a film, I know that the events depicted haven't actually happened as described, and when I become deeply immersed in it I'm still aware that I'm lying curled up in bed reading a book (or sitting in a movie theatre watching a film) and not flying on a broomstick above a Quidditch pitch (as in *Harry Potter*), or fighting for my life in a dystopian future (as in *The Hunger Games*). The same applies to gaming; I might talk about having killed a dragon or 'healing' my in-game companions, but I still know I haven't actually (in the factual, physical world) done those things. I know there are no such creatures as dragons, and I'm no medical professional capable of healing anyone. But that doesn't change the *virtual* reality that I (as my alter ego the Blood Elf Paladin) heal my *virtual* companions (though behind the pixels there are real people whom I might even hear over a voice-chat service) and help them defeat mighty *virtual* dragons.

I do maintain that the honest agent lives for reality and easily and gladly engages with and stays in touch with reality. But I think that our other/fictional/virtual realities can't and shouldn't be entirely excluded from that. I would suggest that our disposition for telling, retelling and engaging with stories is a valuable and vital part of our humanity. As such I think these stories deserve Dumbledore's recognition of being real, even if they exist only in our minds (and on pages, table tops, and/or screens). If we engage with these other realities in a way that is healthy and balanced with our physical lives and if we don't become deluded but maintain a reasonable awareness that these really are *other* realities, I see no reason why an honest agent would not easily and gladly (and honestly) engage with such realities.

As with the other virtues, honesty requires one to not just act rightly, but to do so for the right reasons. I looked at some examples of what such reasons might be in the case of honesty, but also proposed that when it comes to motivations, there appears to be a lot of interaction between honesty and the other virtues. It seems clear that we can't claim that there is one, and only one motivation behind each honesty-related action. Every situation is different, and always telling the truth in every instance of communication, simply *because it's the truth and one ought to tell it* seems morally immature. It's a much too simplistic way of looking at things, when in reality there's a whole lot of complexity involved. Of course there should be recognisable themes in the motivations behind the actions of truly honest agents. There will be an underlying commitment to reality and to the truth and on the basis of these, to open and good communication.

Chapter 6

Virtue Ethics, Moral Development, and *Phronesis*

In each of the preceding five chapters I have considered one of the five parameters of the virtue of honesty. Now I want to take a step back and look at virtue ethics in general (though with honesty still lurking in the backdrop). I particularly want to consider *phronesis*¹ and the path of moral development. I intend to use Aristotle's account more or less as a springboard from which to launch my own ideas and in doing so I will make extensive use once again of Curzer's exposition of Aristotle's views. I will bring in a valuable point of contrast in the form of Annas' account of moral development, to compare it with Curzer's and learn from the differences, since Curzer's account² differs from Annas' entirely in almost every respect.

Virtue ethics is messy. Of course there isn't one absolute account of virtue ethics that all virtue ethicists agree on, but beyond that, I can't imagine there could ever be one perfect account of virtue ethics (put forward by *anyone*) that plugs all the gaps and makes every little piece of it fit together perfectly. And that's okay. A theory can have holes and even if some things don't quite add up, it can still work. The important thing, which we see time and again with virtue ethics, is that even when a particular (usually Aristotelian) doctrine *doesn't* work in every case, it still provides us with important insights for thinking about the virtues, character, right action, or a whole host of other things. A classic example of a holey, but valuable, doctrine is the doctrine of the mean. Courage is a perfect fit for it and illustrates beautifully that the virtue sits in between two vices: cowardice and rashness. But with honesty? No matter how hard we try, finding an excess and a deficiency for honesty won't work.³ *However*, that doesn't mean that the doctrine of the mean is irrelevant for honesty. It gives us a valuable insight for how we conceive of virtues generally, and even honesty in particular: it removes the restrictive virtue/vice dichotomy. Through each of the previous chapters I've tried to illustrate that a failure in honesty can mean a whole host of things that have nothing to do with our everyday conception of "dishonesty".

¹ I will use *phronesis* interchangeably with 'practical wisdom'.

² It's worth mentioning that for the most part the account that Curzer sets out isn't *his* account, per se, but rather his (charitable) interpretation of Aristotle's account (he does, however, bring in his own view on Aristotle's account now and then); for brevity's sake, I will continue to refer to it as Curzer's account rather than Curzer's interpretation of Aristotle's account.

³ Even when we try to go with one of Aristotle's vices-that-we-don't-have-a-name-for-but-can-sort-of-imagine.

Another example worth considering is the parameter doctrine. When I first encountered it in Curzer⁴ I latched onto it, seeing great potential in the idea of structuring a discussion of individual virtues around the five parameters. It wasn't until much later down the track that I read further only to find that Curzer rejects the parameter of the right people.⁵ In context, it even seemed to make sense to reject it; it seems rather counterintuitive to talk about being *courageous* with regard to the right people. And yet, I kept that parameter; it seemed entirely inappropriate to *not* talk about being *honest* with regard to the right people! The people we interact with are central to honesty, after all. So it seems that here again, the doctrine itself has a lot to offer even if it doesn't work quite the same way for each of the virtues; in fact, it makes perfect sense to say that the actual parameters vary from one virtue to another, as Aristotle himself allows.

I'll start my exploration of practical wisdom and moral development with a brief analogy to illustrate my view. Consider a Lego collector. A perfect Lego collector might have every single Lego set ever produced, in perfect condition. A rather good Lego collector might have a perfect and complete selection of Lego City and Castle sets, but have no Star Wars sets at all, and their collection of sets from other ranges might be in various stages of (in)completeness. But that doesn't mean they're not a Lego collector, or that their collection of, say, Duplo sets doesn't count because it's not complete and perfect. A fairly ordinary Lego collector might have at least a handful of sets from almost every range (perhaps they're missing Friends and Architecture completely), more from some ranges than others. Again, we can still quite validly call them a Lego collector, and given a few years' time, their collection will no doubt have grown (as tends to be the way with collectors of any stripe). I would suggest that it's much the same with virtuous agents. Each virtue is essentially a collection of Lego sets from one particular range. Any given agent will have each range's Lego sets collected in varying stages of completion, and some they may be missing entirely. When we are children it is up to our parents and other adults who take part in our upbringing to teach us where to get the Lego sets (especially the hard-to-find ones), what sets we are missing from the various ranges, how to avoid stepping on our Lego bricks, how best to organise, and even play with, our Lego, so it stays in pristine condition and we don't lose any pieces. These are the first steps in our moral development.

⁴ Curzer, 42-5.

⁵ Ibid, 45-7.

I see *phronesis* developing in much the same way as the individual virtues, except that an important aspect of *phronesis* is the way it ties the character virtues together. We can build our Lego sets according to the instructions they come with, but it's often much more fun to use bricks and other pieces we have from various sets and create things from our own imagination. Doing that, we can end up combining sets from the Lego City or Castle ranges, Star Wars, Harry Potter or Super Heroes sets, and even the Duplo bricks can be used with regular Lego.

The three areas I want to examine in detail are: the path of moral development generally, *phronesis* itself, and perfect virtue as an unattainable ideal. While I will discuss each issue individually, there'll be some crossover because they're all interrelated. I will provide a brief summary of what Curzer and Annas have to say about each topic and consider how they compare and what I agree or disagree with and why.

Moral Development

Curzer presents us with six distinct stages of moral development, in order: the many, the generous-minded (or as we might say 'morally-minded'), the incontinent, the continent, the naturally virtuous and the properly virtuous.⁶ These can be described as rungs on a ladder heading towards true, perfect, or (as Curzer calls it) proper virtue. In addition to this, he describes the various categories of what he calls "Aristotle's losers": those who are incorrigible and cannot become virtuous⁷ (unfortunately it would be beyond the scope of this project to engage with those categories). On Curzer's account there are five components of virtue and each step up the ladder involves the agent acquiring one of these components.

The five components of virtue in the order of their acquisition are: (1) the desire to perform virtuous acts for their own sakes *qua* virtuous, that is, the commitment to lead the life of virtue, (2) the knowledge of which acts are virtuous in which situations (i.e. the ability to identify virtuous acts), (3) the habits of virtuous action, (4) the habits of virtuous passion, and (5) the knowledge of why virtuous acts are virtuous (i.e. the knowledge of the happy life).⁸

It's worth pointing out that an agent might be at various stages with various virtues, since on this account they needn't develop at the same rate; they might even be incorrigible with

⁶ For an overview see Curzer, 13, and for more detail see his Chapters 15 and 16.

⁷ Overview on Curzer 13-4, and more detail in his Chapter 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 352.

regard to some virtues, and on the upwards ladder with others. The properly virtuous, however, have *all* of the virtues fully developed along with *phronesis* (so anyone who is incorrigible with regard to at least one virtue has no hope of ever making it to proper virtue with any of the other virtues).

Curzer provides a thorough account of how, on Aristotle's view, an agent acquires each component of virtue, thereby proceeding from one step on the developmental ladder to the next. The many are simply all those who have the potential to progress morally. They take their first step on the ladder in coming to "desire to perform virtuous acts for their own sakes *qua* virtuous" by being forced to get into the habit of performing those virtuous acts by threat of (or actual) punishment. It's easy to see how that might be the case for children or teenagers when they get punished at school or by parents if they do/say something cruel or get drunk or take drugs. It would create habits of being kind (or at least polite) and temperate. There are examples of this for adults too, with (often legal) punishments for failing to be honest in all sorts of contexts, such as on a witness stand, in tax returns, or on welfare applications. Taking this step puts the agent among the ranks of the generous-minded, those committed to leading a life of virtue.

In order to progress in turn, the generous-minded must learn to identify virtuous acts. To achieve this, negative reinforcement is still the way to go, though this time it's the "pain of vicarious, retrospective, and prospective shame"⁹ that does the trick. Feeling such shame after failing to act virtuously, when contemplating an intended vicious action, or when observing vicious acts in books, movies or on TV will help the agent to learn which actions are virtuous. Then again, since it's based on such negative reinforcement it must be a case of learning by elimination, since what this shame really shows you is which acts *aren't* virtuous.

Having acquired the knowledge of which actions are virtuous, the agent is now incontinent; they know how they ought to act, they're even committed to acting virtuously, but they just can't seem to do it. To move further up the ladder towards continence, the incontinent agent needs to get into the habit of acting virtuously. And very simply they do this by *not* acting virtuously and then feeling terrible about it. To avoid feeling such remorse, they begin to act virtuously, thereby gradually becoming continent.

The continent agent is committed to the virtuous life, can identify virtuous actions, and habitually acts virtuously, but they need to develop the right "passions". They need the

⁹ Curzer, abstract of Chapter 15 provided with the online edition.

right feelings and motivations to go with their virtuous actions. This is where Curzer's account gets a bit funny.

Aristotle proposes that people can be trained to feel the right passions by listening to the right music. The process is a sort of habituation. The music produces ersatz emotions, passions that "hardly fall short of the actual affections." [*Politics* 1340a12-25] The music stirs the soul. By repeatedly experiencing good imitations of virtuous passions, people develop the habit of feeling virtuous passions.¹⁰

It seems though that Aristotle is not referring just to music, however, but also to the stage, to tragedy, which ought to put the music in context, thereby training the continent agent to feel the right passions in the right contexts. I'm not quite certain how this would translate into a contemporary context, however. Would the modern continent agent need to go to the theatre, the opera, rock concerts, musicals, movies... even watch TV (provided there's music involved, of course)? Nevertheless, the continent agent, having had their passions musically trained would then graduate to become naturally virtuous.

Natural virtue, in Curzer is not what it might instinctively sound like. It's not the sort of virtue that comes naturally to some (lucky) people. Rather, a naturally virtuous agent is nearly at the top of the ladder of moral development (having reached this point just like everyone else); all they're missing now is *phronesis*: the knowledge of why virtuous acts are virtuous. This knowledge is rather a complex thing for Curzer because it includes knowledge of the happy life (*eudaimonia*). He says that "[t]o know that a character trait is a virtue, one must know what all of the other virtues are. One must know that each is conducive to the happy life by knowing how each promotes and preserves both itself and all of the other virtues."¹¹ So knowing why a temperate act is temperate includes the knowledge of why a courageous act is courageous; it all fits together. The way the naturally virtuous acquire this knowledge is through teaching. They must be "properly taught about which character traits are conducive to happiness"¹² in order to acquire this final component of virtue and reach the top of the ladder. They will then be properly virtuous.

Annas' account of moral development is largely built around an analogy which shows how developing a virtuous character is much like developing a practical skill such as playing the piano or playing tennis.¹³ It's not as rigidly structured as Curzer's account is, but there are many more interesting differences and even some similarities. While Aristotle claims that an

¹⁰ Ibid., 346.

¹¹ Ibid., 303.

¹² Ibid., 352.

¹³ Annas, particularly Chapter 3, 16-51.

agent must already have developed virtuous habits before they are ready to be taught,¹⁴ Annas describes teaching as part of habituation, saying that “[w]e encounter habituation first through our education, both in school and in the family.”¹⁵ Curzer himself, while not suggesting that teaching is part of habituation, does say it makes more sense to recognise that they “proceed simultaneously, supporting and enhancing each other”¹⁶.

Annas’ skill analogy is used to show that moral development involves both “the *need to learn* and the *drive to aspire*.”¹⁷ The need to learn is easily understood as learning what to do and how to do it. That forms the basis of acquiring both a skill and a virtue. It’s similar to Curzer’s incontinent and continent agents; the former knows what to do, and the latter also knows how to (habitually) do it. The drive to aspire, on the other hand, involves seeking and developing an understanding of why things are done the way they are and a desire to improve on what’s been taught, so that it doesn’t become a mindless, routine repetition of what the teacher demonstrated. This sort of understanding and improvement will allow the student to adapt to different situations and apply what they’ve learned even in unfamiliar territory.¹⁸ Someone learning to cook will certainly need to be able to follow the basic instructions of a recipe or their instructor. However, they’ll also need to learn why certain ingredients go well together, why certain herbs or spices enhance flavour in that particular way, or why certain ingredients make for healthier alternatives to the traditional ones. With that understanding, the student chef will be able to experiment with appropriate ingredients to improve their skill further and develop their own flair in the kitchen.

On Annas’ account moral development starts young, since “[b]y the time we think about virtues, we all have some (and some vices ...). For we have all been brought up, and that is where we have learned to be virtuous (or not, or not very).”¹⁹ Part of developing our virtues is acting virtuously, and getting into the habit of doing so; but beyond that, we need to learn to not just go through the motions of what we’ve been taught virtuous actions look like, but that we make these virtues our own,²⁰ developing the maturity, reasoning, and experience to do the virtuous actions *as the virtuous agent does*.²¹

¹⁴ NE 1179b23-31 and Curzer, 304.

¹⁵ Annas, 12.

¹⁶ Curzer, 365.

¹⁷ Annas, 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 17-9.

¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁰ There’s a wonderful verb for this in German: *aneignen*. While it can be translated as ‘to appropriate (something)’, it doesn’t have all of the negative connotations that come with appropriation. *Aneignen* has a very

One point where Curzer expresses disagreement with his interpretation of Aristotle is the focus on negative reinforcement alone. Curzer believes that positive reinforcement for moral progress must surely be part of the picture,²² which is a thought that Annas certainly shares. Talking about generosity she says: “Sharing seems painful at first to the child who wants to play with *his* toys; after experience of various sorts of sharing he comes to find the rewarding nature of sharing toys and not regarding them as exclusively *his*.”²³ But the rewarding experience of becoming virtuous is something which can’t be taught. The virtuous actions can be taught, and the agent (be it an adult or a child) can be helped to understand why the actions are virtuous, but going from *acting* virtuously to *being* virtuous, and finding enjoyment in that, is something that the agent needs to discover for themselves.²⁴

This brings us back to Aristotle’s five components of virtue (in Curzer), and particularly the order he places them in. One difficulty is the way he has constructed his fifth component, intertwining too tightly three strands of knowledge: what makes virtuous actions virtuous, what the happy life is, and which character traits are virtuous. He has also kept knowledge of which actions are virtuous separate, claiming this is something the agent learns before acquiring the other bundle of knowledge. Curzer himself realises that this is problematic, since we can find examples of people who understand the theory of why virtuous actions are virtuous without having acquired virtuous habits.²⁵ I think the separation of knowledge creates substantial difficulties for Aristotle, on Curzer’s account, since when we figure out that a particular action is virtuous, we don’t normally realise that it is simply *virtuous*, but we realise that it is honest, kind, courageous, or responsible. Yet obviously, if we learn that a particular virtuous action is honest, we must be aware that honesty is a virtue. Quite frankly, the claim that to know that one character trait is a virtue we must know what all the other virtues are is ridiculous. Quite aside from the fact that it’s immensely unlikely for virtue ethicists to all agree on which character traits are virtues and which aren’t,²⁶ I can

snug feel, in a way, like you’re making something your own in the sense of taking it as a second skin; so the agent comes to inhabit the virtue as though it were a second skin.

²¹ See Annas, 40.

²² Curzer, 364.

²³ Annas, 81.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Curzer, 365.

²⁶ Certainly there are some that everyone would agree on, but even some of the most basic are disputed – honesty being a glaring example (since it’s missing from Aristotle’s list).

hardly imagine anyone claiming to have compiled the complete definitive list of *all* of the virtues.²⁷

If we untangle Curzer's fifth component of virtue then I would suggest that we take a few strands of it as the *first* component that an agent develops when starting along the path of moral development. I see it as simply a case of wanting to know what you're getting yourself into when you start along the path towards virtue. It seems deeply engrained in small children to ask "why?" about everything they encounter. Children want to understand the world around them, and that includes trying to understand the way they (are taught to) interact with others. So a simple "if you share your toys with your sister then you can play together, which will be much more fun" can be a small pointer in the right direction towards understanding why virtuous actions are virtuous. Of course, as Annas points out, the child won't really understand how enjoyable virtuous activity can be until they experience it for themselves.²⁸

Getting a taste for the understanding of why virtuous actions are virtuous is also important for adults embarking on the path towards virtue. An agent who takes a holiday for the first time in a long while, and uses the opportunity to take a break from gaming might get a taste for how good and refreshing it can feel to really engage with (non-virtual) reality. Someone else getting a phone call from an estranged family member who needs their help and support might be able to experience the emotional reward that can come from showing loyalty and compassion. The other important thing for both children and adults starting on the path towards virtue is an idea of what (some of) the virtues are. The virtue and vice terms are part of our everyday vocabulary. Being exhorted to be honest, kind, or generous, or praised for doing such an action often introduces an agent to the virtues – there must come a point for all of us where we know what at least some of the virtues are – and this seems to be one important aspect of getting to the point where an agent makes what Curzer calls the "the commitment to lead the life of virtue". The other is getting a glimpse or even a small taste of what the happy life might be and why virtuous action is virtuous.

Another problem here is that the bundle of knowledge in the fifth component of virtue is supposed to be taught, as opposed to learning through habituation.²⁹ While some of it certainly is (and should be) taught in ethics classes, or simply by parents and other more

²⁷ That's a slight exaggeration. I can certainly imagine someone doing so, but it would be awfully presumptuous and not much use if no one acknowledges and accepts it as The Definitive List of Virtues they claim it to be.

²⁸ Annas, 81.

²⁹ And habituation in Curzer's book does very explicitly *not* refer to guided habituation; it seems to include nothing resembling teaching. See Curzer, 322.

experienced and (one would hope) more virtuous agents, part of it is learned through reflection and reasoning which comes as part of the moral development process. With regard to the happy life Annas says a virtuous agent will have “thoughts about happiness as she develops in virtue, and these will make her conception of happiness increasingly determinate as her character develops.”³⁰ This makes a lot of sense. It seems counterintuitive to say that a vicious agent has a good understanding of what’s involved in human flourishing and happiness (in a eudaemonist sense). It seems similarly counterintuitive to say that a child has a good understanding of human flourishing and happiness. In the child’s case that could simply be put down to a lack of life experience, but the vicious adult has plenty of life experience, so clearly there’s more to it. I think what both lack is clearly a certain kind of life experience, in fact precisely what Annas points to in the passage above; neither the child nor the vicious adult have developed in virtue.

If we agree with Hursthouse when she says that “[a] virtue is a character trait a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well”,³¹ then it seems to follow that a vicious agent couldn’t have a good understanding of *eudaimonia*. To illustrate, consider someone who has very racist views regarding Māori, taking no interest in the history of tangata whenua, treating Māori with contempt, and dismissing Māori customs and Te Reo Māori as primitive nonsense and so on. It seems ludicrous to even suggest that such a person has a good understanding of Māori culture. Now consider someone living somewhere in, say, Europe, completely removed from Māori culture, having never encountered it (except at most by seeing the All Blacks do a haka on TV). How could someone in such a removed position possibly be said to understand Māori culture? To even begin to understand a culture, you need to immerse yourself in its language, customs, foods, history, music, community. Someone who stands in direct opposition to it, or someone who has essentially no association with it cannot be said to understand a culture. Similarly, a vicious agent (who stands in direct opposition to virtue, and thereby to *eudaimonia*), or a young child who is only just beginning their first steps on the path of moral development cannot be said to understand human flourishing and happiness.

Curzer’s second and third components of virtue (the knowledge of which acts are virtuous and the habits of virtuous action) seem to me to be unnecessarily separated. Acting virtuously becomes a habit (or as Annas would say, it develops as a skill) through practice.

³⁰ Annas, 162.

³¹ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 167.

But I would add that knowledge of which acts are virtuous is largely also a matter of practice. In part it's trial and error and in part it's instruction or advice from someone more virtuous, with more experience. A piano student needs to spend an awful lot of time practicing to get better at playing, and as their skill improves so does their ear. They can soon hear when something sounds off, when they hit the wrong note. A young person learning to be honest needs to practice honesty. This might involve following the old (deontological) rules of "tell the truth" and "don't lie".³² But sometimes they'll encounter situations where they hit the wrong note, so to speak. They'll realise that *that* wasn't the appropriate truth to tell in that situation; *that* wasn't the right person to share that particular truth with; *that* was an inappropriate (and false) assumption to make. In becoming aware of these mistakes they'll be learning which actions are honest, and at the same time, when they avoid the mistakes, they'll be developing honest habits.

I would suggest that Curzer's fourth component of virtue actually develops last and perhaps with the greatest difficulty. I think on some level we all empathise with those who stand up to the bully at school, while wanting nothing more than to run and hide, or who save the second piece of chocolate cake for tomorrow while wanting it so, so badly, or who buy their friend a lovely birthday gift which they know will be appreciated but sadly think of the new game that will now have to wait a few weeks before they can afford it. Being virtuous is a wonderful goal, but continence is just so... *understandable!* Becoming virtuous is hard work, and I think in a lot of cases we take that into account and show a certain amount of admiration for those who even manage to get as far as continence. Having said that, I find the suggestion that in order to progress from continence to virtue one must listen to the right *music*, simply absurd (and let's not forget the tragedy!). I realise that music can interact powerfully with the emotions, and that it can simulate or induce feelings of anger, arousal, depression, happiness... even religious frenzy, but how that (even when put into particular contexts in ancient Greek tragedy – or some modern equivalent) is supposed to train someone to act virtuously with the right feelings and motives I simply don't understand. When engaged with certain media (be it a film, book, game, theatre, or something else) or even when observing others living their lives, we can learn what sorts of emotions and motives a virtuous agent will/ought to have in various situations. However, firstly, whether such contexts together with appropriate music *could* train us to develop these right emotions/motives

³² This isn't to discount what Hursthouse terms the "v-rules", merely to say that as a child I was more often told to tell the truth or not to lie than to be honest or not to be dishonest.

ourselves seems to be an empirical matter than would be interesting for a psychologist to research, but beyond expressing how implausible I find the notion, it's simply beyond the scope of this project. Secondly, it seems rather intuitive to say that development of the right emotions and motives follows fairly naturally from developing the habits of virtuous action. When you've developed your courage enough you'll start standing up to bullies because it's the courageous thing to do and their bullying is cowardly, and you're being reasonable about this and not undertaking undue risk (you're not being rash and risking getting stabbed to death over a stolen lunch which can easily be replaced). When your temperance is well-developed enough you'll put that piece of chocolate cake away for tomorrow when you know you'll enjoy it much more than now that you've eaten your fill, and after all, it's the temperate thing to do.

Phronesis

I've largely already covered what Curzer presents as *phronesis*, though it is worth noting that he restricts his remarks about it to what Aristotle says in two particular passages and their vicinity³³ since Aristotle uses *phronesis* to "mean different things in different places."³⁴ To recap, though, in Curzer's account *phronesis* refers to his fifth component of virtue: "the knowledge of why virtuous acts are virtuous (i.e. the knowledge of the happy life)" and the knowledge of what all of the virtues are.³⁵

Annas' account is rather different. In her discussion of the unity of the virtues³⁶ she talks about proper virtue (all of the virtues, united by *phronesis*³⁷), saying that:

Obviously here Aristotle is talking about *excellence* in practical intelligence; you don't acquire all the virtues just by beginning to think intelligently about your character traits, for clearly that's not enough to develop even one. The point here is that practical intelligence develops over your character as a whole, in a holistic way.³⁸

The interesting point here seems to be that you *can* have practical intelligence without having all of the character virtues. It's really a case of getting rid of the idea that *phronesis* is something you either have or don't. *Phronesis*, like the character virtues, is much like a skill

³³ *NE* 1144b4-17 and 1144b31-1145a2

³⁴ Curzer, 300, footnote 11.

³⁵ Curzer spends all of Chapter 14 laying out an argument for this interpretation of *phronesis*, 293-317.

³⁶ Annas, Chapter 6.

³⁷ Annas translate this as practical intelligence.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

that must be developed. Annas is certainly right in saying that you don't acquire all the virtues simply by starting to think about the/your virtues intelligently, but that is the place to start. If you start thinking about honesty intelligently you'll slowly start to trace the connections between honesty, kindness, compassion, justice, and courage. In a sense it's like spinning several different coloured threads, or virtues, which you eventually stop and think about rationally and see that they can be woven together into a beautiful tapestry. As you begin to weave you may realise that you're missing certain colours, and you'll need to go back and do more spinning, and eventually... you'll end up like an octopus spinning many different colours of thread at once while also improving your weaving skill (*phronesis*) as you work on your tapestry.

With Annas, there's a constant emphasis on the *development*, the *acquisition*, the *journey*. Annas' quote above almost jumped out to prod me, saying that of *course* you don't either have *phronesis* or you don't – it's not that simple. It's a process; it's called moral *development* for a reason. At some point you *begin* to “think intelligently about your character traits”. That in itself doesn't give you *phronesis*, but it gives you the beginning. If your character traits are the ball of wool and the knitting needles, *phronesis* could be said to be the knowledge and ability to knit a pair of socks. When you first begin to think about your character traits intelligently, you've begun by knitting the first row.

The problem I see with Curzer's account is that it paints *phronesis* as simply a piece of knowledge which must be learned (via teaching, not habituation). It seems to me that practical wisdom is much, much more... well, practical than that. Perhaps we can be assisted in avoiding such a misunderstanding by looking at the words we use, in English, for *phronesis*: practical wisdom, intelligence or reasoning ability. Wisdom seems to be something one either has or doesn't have. We don't usually talk about varying degrees of wisdom; someone is either wise, or they're not; we wouldn't describe them as a little bit wise, fairly wise, or somewhat wise. Intelligence is also perhaps not the best descriptor in this case. While it's certainly not the same as wisdom, and can be said to be had in varying degrees, those degrees are never really on the lower end. A person might be said to be rather intelligent, quite intelligent, very intelligent, but not really a little intelligent. Someone's reasoning ability, on the other hand, is not an attribute, but a skill. A skill will be developed over time and through use, so it makes perfect sense to say that someone's reasoning is poor, good, improving, impressive, or excellent. This is reminiscent of what Philippa Foot describes as wisdom when she says that “[s]ome people are wise without being at all clever or well informed: they make

good decisions and they know, as we say, ‘what’s what’.”³⁹ The sort of wisdom Foot describes is just like what I’ve called reasoning ability in that it’s a skill that’s developed; no one’s born with the ability to make good decisions and knowing ‘what’s what’ comes from experience, it’s not something you learn in an ethics class.

Consider now Curzer’s suggestion that *phronesis* is the knowledge of why virtuous acts are virtuous, of what the happy life is, and of what each of the virtues is, in the light of our new understanding of *phronesis* as excellence in practical *reasoning*. It just doesn’t make sense. Developing your *phronesis*, your practical reasoning as the skill it is, however, makes an awful lot of sense. It’s really no different from improving your skill in mathematics, which is a form of theoretical reasoning. You’re taught the basics, but more and more you’re left to your own devices and trusted to figure out problems on your own, though knowing there’s help to turn to should you need it. You learn to solve equations, you memorise your times tables, knowing they’ll come in handy at some point, and with each new thing you learn, you bring with you the reasoning skills you’ve already developed, ready to apply them to this whole new set of problems. With each new problem you arrive at, you consider how you’ve solved other problems in the past, and you take what you’ve learned by applying that same reasoning again and adapting it as called for.

A point Annas makes about the unity of the virtues is also pertinent here. On Curzer’s account the virtues seem to develop independently of one another, and only become unified (by/with *phronesis*) at the last stage of moral development when the agent becomes properly virtuous.⁴⁰ For Annas, however, the virtues are also developmentally unified. While Curzer admits that the progress (or lack thereof) with regard to one virtue might assist (or hinder) the progress of another,⁴¹ he also says that an agent might be naturally virtuous with regard to one virtue, and *vicious* with regard to another.⁴² The difficulty lies with Curzer’s doctrine of disjoint spheres, on which an action can be courageous, temperate, or liberal, but never all at once. As I discussed in Chapter 3, to me, this doctrine seems extremely counterintuitive. Surely standing up to a bully picking on an unpopular kid at school can clearly be courageous, kind, *and* just (and honest too, if you’re telling the bully that it’s not ok to bully people). It should seem clear, however, that while it may make sense to say that the virtues develop

³⁹ Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2002), 6. doi: 10.1093/0199252866.001.0001.

⁴⁰ Curzer, 357-9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 359-60.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 358.

independently of one another if they are isolated like this, it doesn't work on an account such as Annas' or mine where the virtues interact freely.

While it is clear that virtues develop at different rates, it seems silly to suggest that you could have an honest agent who wasn't at least a little bit kind, or just. It's much like developing a muscle. You exercise your muscle and it gets stronger, and more toned. But that muscle (your biceps, say) does not exist in isolation, nor is it exercised and strengthened in isolation. As you exercise your biceps, you are also exercising your deltoid and your triceps. As you move your body, a variety of muscles are used, not only those you are specifically working to strengthen. If you think of each of these muscles as a virtue which you use, exercise, and develop, the muscle which holds them all together, by feeding them oxygen via the bloodstream, is the heart. The heart, of course, can be compared to our capacity for practical reasoning. As you start to think rationally about how you exercise and develop your virtues, you are pumping oxygenated blood not just to the one you're currently (consciously) working on, but to all of them. If you think rationally about what the honest thing to do is in a given situation, some of the options might very clearly affect not just honesty but kindness or courage or some other virtue. So part of growing in honesty will be to consider the options and perhaps realise that no, this one might *seem* honest, but it would be terribly unkind, so there must be another option. And even if you do something which is fairly honest, rather kind, but a bit cowardly, you've given it some thought, and in future you'll be able to learn from this experience and include it in your reasoning.

One final thought from Annas on practical reasoning and its role in our development towards proper virtue: "proper virtue requires that our natural dispositions be formed and guided by practical intelligence, which functions holistically over the person's life, integrating lessons from the mixed and complex situations that we are standardly faced with, and developing a unified disposition to think, act, and feel, one which gets things right in action, thought, and feeling."⁴³

Perfect Virtue as an Unattainable Ideal

In a way Curzer's category of the properly virtuous is a lot like what I call perfect virtue – except that on his account this stage is actually realistically attainable for some

⁴³ Annas, 89.

(however few),⁴⁴ whereas my conception of perfect virtue is that of an unattainable ideal that we ought to continually strive for. This idea of perfect virtue follows Annas' account, on which "being *fully* virtuous does seem to be an ideal that we aspire towards but can never achieve."⁴⁵ Of course, another striking difference between my (and Annas') account and Curzer's is that while we agree that perfect (or proper) virtue requires possession or full development of all of the virtue in addition to *phronesis*, we disagree on the nature of *phronesis* in this context. But the nature of *phronesis* aside, I'd now like to consider why it not only makes sense, but seems necessary to set perfect virtue on an unattainable pedestal. The reasons for this are twofold.

Firstly, what is it about humans that makes it impossible for *us* to achieve perfect virtue? It's no secret to anyone that humans aren't perfect. In fact, when discussing stories, and taking note of the shortcomings and flaws of a character we tend to say it makes them more *human*. It seems that being flawed is an integral part of our understanding of what it is to be human. While we may be able to think of several people we hold up as paragons of virtue, it shouldn't surprise us to find that even they have (or had) their shortcomings. A classic example is Mother Theresa of Calcutta. Despite being declared a saint by the Catholic Church, she has been heavily criticised, among other things for lacking compassion for the poor she famously worked with in Calcutta, India.⁴⁶ It seems then that there is something about us as humans that implies an inability to attain perfection; why this is the case is hard to say, but it seems clear that factors external to our *individual* humanity contribute.

Annas explains how the unjust societies we find ourselves in can and do form part of the reason why it's impossible to attain perfect virtue. She concludes that "[a]t best we can be virtuous in a less than full way, one marred not only by our own deficiencies but by the point that the structures of our societies preclude us from being fully virtuous."⁴⁷ Whether our societies are unjust due to their being built on slavery,⁴⁸ or because they are built on other inherent and unchallenged inequalities (be those based on race, sex, religion, class, or something else), those injustices will limit the way we can exercise our virtues, and the extent to which those virtues can develop. A company CEO (male or female) might be striving for

⁴⁴ Curzer, 358.

⁴⁵ Annas, 64.

⁴⁶ See for example Krishna Dutta, "Saint of the gutters with friends in high places," *Times Higher Education*, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/176802.article> and "Mother Teresa: anything but a saint..." *Université de Montréal*, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.nouvelles.umontreal.ca/udem-news/news/20130301-mother-teresa-anything-but-a-saint.html>.

⁴⁷ Annas, 64.

⁴⁸ This is an example Annas explores at length in Chapter 4, 58-65.

justice, particularly with regard to gender equality and the problem of the continuing pay gap between men and women performing the same job. From their position they can work to ensure that within their company that pay gap is closed. But in order to do so, they first had to work their way up to the position of CEO, and in doing so likely benefiting or suffering (as the case may be) from that very pay gap. In order to work to close that pay gap, they have to run their business, which will interact, work and make deals with other companies, some of which may still have that pay gap very much in evidence. Purposely avoiding, and essentially boycotting companies and organisations that haven't closed the pay gap may make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to continue running the business. Under the circumstances of a society which hasn't eliminated that gender-based pay gap (a society like ours, in other words) there's only so much a virtuous agent can do.

Another example, which relates back to honesty and the related privacy issues, is that of the terms and conditions for using various services online, such as Gmail, Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. In order to use these services you need to register, or sign up with them, providing varying amounts of personal and contact information and you need to agree to their terms and conditions and their privacy policy (which are freely available to be read). When I sign up to services online I no longer read the terms and conditions or the privacy policy, thereby doing the online equivalent of signing a document I haven't read. Why? Well, in order to participate in certain (at times important) aspects of society I have no choice but to use these services whether I like them or not, so I blindly agree to terms I know I might find objectionable if I took the time to read them. In some jobs, for example, it's become a requirement to be well versed in and perhaps even an active user of various social media services, so if I wanted to stay away from social media services I would have to restrict myself in an already very competitive job market. Annas' says that "[w]e are unwilling to criticize the contexts and institutions within which we learned the virtues, because we are unwilling to be pulled away from those contexts in the way that would be required."⁴⁹ If we couple this insight with the external, societal difficulties with achieving perfect virtue, we get a glimpse into why it is that for us, as humans, perfect virtue cannot be reached.

What is it about virtue itself that makes it unattainable? If you consider the standards that have been set in our definitions of virtue, it should quickly become clear why it's unattainable. Since continence is acting virtuously but without the right emotions and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 57.

motives, clearly it's not enough to just *do* the right/virtuous things (which can be hard enough at times as it is). The distinction Curzer draws between natural and proper virtue is twofold; firstly, there's the addition of his version of *phronesis*, which I've discussed above and set aside, secondly, however, there's the matter of proper virtue requiring the agent to have fully developed *all* of the virtues (to the same – proper/perfect – level of development). This second part is important to hold onto. Annas points out the key difference between natural and proper virtue, as she sees it, saying natural virtues are “the character tendencies that we have before learning about virtue and vice.”⁵⁰ This serves to explain those people we encounter who we want to call honest, kind, or courageous, for example, who act in line with those virtues, and even have the right emotions or motives in doing so, but there's no practical reasoning behind their actions. They don't think about what they do, so much as just instinctually do something kind for someone else, and that act of kindness comes from the heart, and it never would have occurred to them to do otherwise, or they tell the truth about kicking the ball through the window, not grudgingly, but because it never occurred to them to lie. Acting and feeling in line with certain virtues comes naturally to some (very lucky) people, but to develop those character traits towards proper virtue requires rationally engaging with them, in other words, using practical reasoning. So when talking about proper, or perfect virtue, what I mean is virtue which has been fully developed, honed by practical reasoning, and interwoven with all of the other equally fully developed virtues. So the problem seems to be that the bar is set too high to reach.

This standard of virtue which is now clearly set out of reach on purpose brings us back to Annas' skill analogy. She says:

The need to improve never in fact entirely disappears, but the implication is simply that mastery of a skill is incompatible with its being mere routine; experts in a skill need to maintain it as a skill and not mere routine. Expert pianists, golfers, and climbers face this issue: if they don't use the skill they lose it, though they may retain mastery of technical matters required to exercise the skill. Experts thus face the same issues as learners, though in a modified form, since they have more resources of self-directed activity to draw on.⁵¹

I think even if someone were to be so courageous one couldn't possibly imagine their courage improving, it would be deeply problematic to essentially say ‘Stop, that's it, congratulations, you've reached the top, here's your medal, you can go home and relax now’. When athletes win gold medals and set world records, the others don't just give up because someone else

⁵⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁵¹ Ibid., 18.

reached the top, nor do they use that record as a bar to aim *towards*. That record becomes the bar to *beat*; it's the standard that pushes an athlete to train harder and to improve. Of course that's not to say that virtue's a competition, but like athletes, we, as moral agents, must constantly strive to improve. After all, *eudaimonia* isn't the life of having reached the top in all the virtues! It's the life of virtuous *activity*. Having perfect virtue as an unattainable ideal shouldn't be seen as a cause for frustration (and certainly not as a reason to give up altogether). It's a challenge, beckoning all of us to work towards it. After all, Sir Edmund Hillary didn't stop when he reached the summit of Mt Everest. He continued to climb (and reach) the peaks of other mountains and made it to both the North and the South Poles.

Conclusion

I said at the start of this project that honesty is in need of a thorough discussion (in part) because it is so multifaceted. I couldn't have foreseen then what an understatement that would turn out to be. Honesty touches on everything from holding true beliefs to choosing the right method of communication, from being tactful to telling necessary lies, from protecting one's privacy to engaging with reality and being self-aware. But crucially, even these examples here don't pertain only to honesty. They call for responsibility, courage, justice, kindness, and integrity. We've seen how thoroughly interwoven the virtues are and how important it is to engage rationally with them as we develop *phronesis*.

I hope to have provided at the very least a stimulating discussion of five parameters of honesty. Throughout this project I have learned that discussing ethics in general, but perhaps the virtues in particular, shouldn't be merely an abstract academic exercise. Choosing to engage in discussion of the virtues (both as a reader and in formulating one's own views) is in itself a deliberate step on the ladder of moral development. After all, to modify Aristotle's words slightly, we could say that "[w]e are inquiring not *only* in order to know what virtue is but *also* in order to become good."⁵²

⁵² NE 1103b27-8.

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