

# Getting the Wrong Idea about Virtue: Robert Johnson's "Virtue and Right"

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## I. Three Types of Virtue Ethic

In "Virtue and Right"<sup>1</sup> Robert Johnson argues that the virtue ethics of Rosalind Hursthouse, Michael Slote, Christine Swanton, and Aristotle each suffers from a simply stated flaw: they cannot account for the morality of self-improving behavior.<sup>2</sup> These theories depict right action through descriptions of virtue, and the virtuous don't self-improve. They don't ask for advice, they don't worry about their self-esteem, and they don't engage in the gimmicks that help us with self-control. As a result, virtue ethics fails to acknowledge an entire category of right action. Johnson leaves virtue ethicists with two options. They can either stick to talk of virtue, giving up on right action; or they can supplement their accounts with the right-making features detailed in "standard normative theories." (828)

But a more fundamental problem, which Johnson surely recognizes, would not be remedied. On Johnson's description, virtue is a wholly misleading ideal. His basic argument has this structure: (1) self-improving actions are morally excellent, (2) the virtuous are not self-improving, therefore (3) we can neither define nor construe right action through virtue. When it comes to the viability of a virtue-based approach to ethics, the plausibility of the moral psychology suggested by (2) is a larger (and prior) obstacle than the claim in (3). Why posit an ideal of moral perfection? Doesn't this fly in the face of what is demonstrably true about our psychologies?

Confusion concerning the manner in which virtue functions as an ideal explains the recent rash of criticism directed at virtue ethics. Johnson, like situationist critics of virtue, assumes that virtue ethicists generate their ethical recommendations by idealizing

our psychology. But this is to get matters backwards. Virtue ethics *tests* its recommendations against an idealized psychology. This is an additional check on what is recommended.<sup>3</sup> The source of a virtue ethic's recommendations is its account of moral development. If a contemporary virtue ethic does not make this clear, it should. Johnson's criticisms show us why.

Until recent variants emerged, virtue ethics had been associated with robust accounts of moral development. Perhaps overly confident that enough in line with what they mean has already been said, contemporary virtue ethicists tend to give description of this process short shrift.<sup>4</sup> Yet their accounts would be rendered wholly immune to Johnson's complaints if virtue were defined in reference to the process by which we morally develop. Aristotle's theory does this. So does the contemporary ethicist Lawrence Becker's.<sup>5</sup> These virtue ethics can be described as "traditional" or "practical rationality" based. (Future references to "practical rationality" will be to the version in these accounts.)

When virtue is merely defined in reference to a general value scheme, one that virtuous choices track, the resulting theory is rendered *nearly* immune to Johnson's complaints. Swanton has an account like this, and we will refer to it as "value responsive."<sup>6</sup>

Johnson's worries only apply to accounts such as Hursthouse's and Slotes's, which regard virtuous psychology itself to be more explanatorily basic than any value scheme. Swanton distinguishes between her theory and those of Hursthouse and Slote by referring to theirs as, respectively, "ideal agent" and "ideal motivation" accounts. For our purposes, we can refer to the theories of Hursthouse and Slote as "exemplar" based. The

structure of these theories obscures what is necessary to warding off Johnson's complaints: a criterion for rightness that spans expert and novice behavior alike.

So Johnson's complaints do not demonstrate that virtue ethics cannot account for right action. They do highlight the advantages of emphasizing what *explains* virtue (be it practical rationality or a scheme of value). To do this is to make it easy to recognize that self-improving behavior is a species of virtuous behavior. The need to (with such awkwardness!) imagine actually virtuous people in literal detail (what would she be doing here?) is eliminated. An explanatory connection between virtue and vice is provided. And in the best cases, emphasizing what explains virtue means that the ethic can advertise (rather than obscure) the mundane, realistic, and practical process of becoming more virtuous.

## **II. Three Impossible Interpretations of "Emulating the Virtuous"**

According to Johnson:

(i) The virtuous do not have information relevant to self-improvement.

(ii) The virtuous do not have the ability to communicate information relevant to self-improvement.

(iii) Self-improving behavior shares no features in common with virtuous behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Let's consider how Johnson arrived at his premises. Put most generally, the process of becoming virtuous is a matter of emulating the virtuous. Yet, on its own, this general formulation can be deeply misleading. What it means "to merely do what the virtuous do" is not at all obvious. Johnson, for example, gamely considers three different

ways of emulating the virtuous, yet never touches upon the traditional Aristotelian interpretation or the one available to Swanton.<sup>8</sup>

The first way in which we might emulate the virtuous, considers Johnson --the way that might seem most obvious-- would be to merely do what they do in the sense of imitating their activity. This, Johnson writes, is a non-starter because the behavior of the already virtuous is nothing like the behavior necessary to self-improvement. As we've mentioned, the virtuous are not envisioned engaging in typical self-improving behavior such as asking for advice or using gimmicks to help with self-control. So their behavior will not model (all of) the necessary activity. But Johnson also considers that the virtuous are motivated differently than novices will be. This means that novices cannot act like the virtuous do even in times when self-improvement is not the issue. The virtuous are already motivated properly, by, for example, "universal benevolence" or "caring." (831) To tell a novice to be so motivated is rather like telling them to just "be expert." As anyone who has been asked "Why can't you be more like your brother?" can attest: this type of instruction is demoralizing, not helpful in the least.

Johnson next considers that the virtuous are not to serve as models of the exact behavior we are to engage in, but as advice-givers, ones capable of catering their advice to the situations and psychologies that novices are in and have. But Johnson notes that this involves a set of rather *ad hoc* expectations: the virtuous would have to be both capable of and interested in this type of counseling.<sup>9</sup> Why assume this, he wonders? Ultimately Johnson rejects this interpretation for formal reasons. As Johnson explains, the *advice* given by the virtuous cannot be granted the same moral authority as the *behavior* of the virtuous. We may be able to trust that what they do is good, but how can

we be assured that they would be good teachers? (The worry is the inverse of the old “those who can’t do, teach.”) Johnson writes, “There is no reason at all to suppose that the virtuous would have anything helpful to say about how to deal with one’s failing, other than useless general platitudes. Good people need not be therapists or rabbis.” (827)

Johnson’s final offer of an interpretation is that we recognize the entire lives of the virtuous to be our model (and not just their particular behaviors.) This would give us the opportunity to study “stories about the development of [a virtuous person’s] courage, honesty and so forth.” (828) There are two problems with the idea, according to Johnson. There is little chance of developing a theory of right with such an indeterminate and variable standard as the “entire life” of a good person. And we would need a criterion to sort through the behaviors of the developing good person that were admirable, and the inevitable missteps that were not.

### **III. “Emulating the Virtuous”: Acting in Accordance with Right Value**

The solution to each of the problems Johnson raises (that novices do not know how to imitate the virtuous; that the virtuous are not counselors; that we need a standard for good advice) is already recognized in accounts like Aristotle’s and Swanton’s: novices emulate the virtuous in making choices in accordance with the right value scheme. Novices do have a means of imitating the virtuous. The behaviors required of each might differ (the novice might need to struggle with self-control) but this is compatible with each responding to right value. Putting it the way we have makes it clear that *the means* to acting in accordance with value are not the primary evaluands.

“Keeping track of one’s progress toward becoming a better person, trying to change one’s

thinking about one's situation and the consequences of one's actions, enhancing one's self-esteem" -- the intention seems earnest in each of these examples, and when you intend to match your behavior to the right value scheme, you are doing what is required by virtue.

(817) You are coming, in these assorted ways, closer to it.

The second difficulty Johnson presents is the expectation that the virtuous serve as our personal counselors. But we do not expect this of experts about value, and not our personal foibles and situations. The virtuous would not, on this understanding of virtue, even be expected to explain what it is like to have their psychology (which would be another *ad hoc* requirement on virtue.) If called upon for it, those with virtue would only be expected to communicate information about the values (and status, benefit, and bonds) that explain virtue. There are no obstacles to imagining that the virtuous would be able to communicate about the *value* they respond to. This value, after all, is merely a feature of the world. It can hardly be regarded as opaque in the way that the virtuous's psychology can be. Experts on value would be well-equipped to deliver lectures on ethics; they might task us to read their books (think of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.) They could teach us about value without having to tell us what we, at any moment, should do.<sup>10</sup> But this is only if we were in a position to seek the advice of the virtuous at all. In an account where virtue is explained by how it tracks value, it is not as if actually virtuous people are necessary to our coming to understand morality. Even if we had a virtuous person right before us, virtue would be better explained by the right account of value than it would be by the unanalyzed behavior of a model person.<sup>11</sup>

And in response to the third problem Johnson raises: a "practical rationality" or "value responsive" account of virtue includes a standard for good advice. This standard is

the value scheme that (also) explains virtue. A “value responsive” approach, like Swanton’s, informs us that right choices track value properly, gives us some description of this value, and in this respect does not differ from any “standard normative theory” at all. There is no greater difficulty involved in novices learning about right action in an account like Swanton’s than there is in any more “standard normative theory”. (828)

Johnson’s objections to Swanton’s account show that her account has been mistaken for that of an “exemplar” based one.

#### **IV. Swanton’s “Value Responsive” Account**

Swanton’s approach was designed in light of complaints that virtue ethics is incapable of offering accounts of right action. Swanton shifts the criteria for right action so that *some* of the expectations have to do with the agent (the right internal aim must be had, and many modes of response might be required: the right emotions, for example) and so that *some* of the expectations have to do with good results. A further innovation is to specify what would count as a virtuous act rather than what counts as a virtuous person.<sup>12</sup>

This involves setting the “targets” of virtue outside of proper motivation, so that, for example, we can recognize a kind act or a tactful gesture apart from any long-term information about the agent. (Perhaps it is really out of character for him, but that was a very nice thing to do.) Swanton’s proposal is unlike any “exemplar” based approach because she not only denies that right action can be discerned only from the perspective of a virtuous psychology, she denies that there is even such a psychology. As she describes it, virtue is no stable state of character but merely a “threshold” that can be met.

The individual virtues are dispositions to respond to “items in the field of the virtue” in an excellent or good enough way.<sup>13</sup> Proper responses are as available to the novice as to the person who has virtuous traits. Virtuous traits can actually get in the way of an act’s being overall virtuous, according to Swanton. One may be kind to a fault, for example. Rather than there being nothing to explain what virtuous and novice behavior have in common: Swanton assesses whether the novice has engaged in the behavior that is the “target” (as she puts it) of a particular virtue in the same way she assesses whether the virtuous have.

The first of Johnson’s objections is that any posited virtue of self-improvement might be understood as having its own targets, ones that would compete with those of regular virtue. This would create ambiguity in an account of right action. One need only point to the description of self-improving behavior in an account like Swanton’s to respond to this objection. For Swanton, self-improvement is behavior that is responsive to the values to which virtue responds. As various as these “values” are on Swanton’s account, referencing them, and not the psychology of the virtuous, ensures that, as various as the right behaviors of each might be, there is a shared criterion of rightness for novice and pro alike.

Johnson’s second objection is that Swanton’s account is vulnerable to a regress. It is for this reason Johnson rejects Swanton’s approach definitively. Johnson writes that Swanton cannot account for self-improvement because (equating Aristotelian virtue ethics with her own) “on the Aristotelian theory of how the traits get on the list of virtues, the target of any virtue does not include the acquisition of those self-same virtues, self-control, or the improvement of one’s moral perception.” That virtue ethics cannot account

for self-improving action is not merely an omission to be redressed, suggests Johnson, because to add a virtue of self-betterment to an existing list of virtues would then require another virtue, one “whose aim is to acquire the virtue of self-improvement, a virtue the lack of which would, moreover, in turn make it right to acquire it, and so on.” (833)

Of course, we can now see that on Swanton’s account it is not right to acquire a virtue, but right to do virtuous acts. There is no risk of the circularity Johnson describes, and he has missed his target. But more interesting still is that, to the *exact* contrary of what Johnson suggests, in the Aristotelian account of virtue the “target” of the virtue of practical rationality *is* the acquisition of virtues, self-control, and the improvement of one’s moral perception. Johnson, invoking Aristotle to criticize Swanton, has also confused Aristotle’s “practical rationality” based account with an “exemplar” based one. This keeps him from realizing that the following rejoinders are part of Aristotle’s, and for that matter, any “practical rationality” based, approach to virtue.

(~i) The virtuous have information that is relevant to self-improvement.

(~ii) The virtuous have the ability to, indeed are experts at, communicating this information.

(~iii) The features of self-improving behavior that render it self-improving are features that it shares in common with virtue.

These points can be missed if Aristotle’s argument is represented in the way it is in Johnson’s article. Here is the representation:

1. “Virtues are states of character arising in the novice “neither by nor against nature.””
2. A state results from similar activities.

3. “We become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a25-b21. (818)<sup>14</sup>

This summary is so misleading because it suggests that Aristotle left the following issues mysteriously unaccounted for: What exactly makes up this state of character? How does it come about? (Taken out of its context—that they arise “neither by nor against nature” offers no clarity at all.) How can we become enough like the virtuous so that we can do virtuous actions, and become like them?

The latter is the “puzzle” that is the focus of Johnson’s article, of course.(819)  
The puzzle is generated only because Johnson limits Aristotle’s “argument” to the above summary, analogizes the virtuous person to “a native speaker of a language” (a terrible analogy), and ignores the role of practical rationality in Aristotle’s account.

## **V. “Emulating the Virtuous” Through Practical Rationality**

Because of its centrality, one cannot fail to account for the role of practical rationality in even the briefest description of Aristotelian virtue. Becoming good is a matter of having fully developed practical rationality, and, in order to become good, we need to develop our practical rationality. Unlike much to do with Aristotle’s ethics, this is not a matter of interpretational controversy.<sup>15</sup> (This is not like the cases where Aristotle has offered too much explanation --giving us two accounts of pleasure and two descriptions of our final end.) Until practical rationality is included in Aristotle’s account, there is no explaining what it is that the virtuous understand about “why” they act as they do. (Yet that they understand “why” is a feature of Aristotle’s definition of virtue that Johnson includes in his own description.<sup>16</sup>) Acting in accordance with the proper

understanding of value might become second nature for the virtuous, becoming automatic in a way it could not for the novice, but this not require or imply that the understanding of “why” ever leaves or that it was not necessary in the first place.

For these reasons, it is misleading to associate the virtuous with “the native speaker” of a language. The native speaker “can just hear what does or doesn’t fit grammatically” and “likewise a virtuous agent can just perceive what does or doesn’t fit morally, at least so far as her own actions go.” You may want to hear a native speaker pronounce words, but a native speaker should not be asked for advice on how to learn the language as “she will have little idea how to best learn her language.” This is, Johnson writes, like the virtuous who may *perceive* that you ought to change your character, but “there is no reason to think that either (virtuous person or native speaker) will have much to *say* about what to do beyond that.” (823-824, italics mine)

The student of ancient ethics will be confounded by Johnson’s unpacking of the analogy to the native speaker. The emphasis in the ancient ethicists generally is on how *incoherent* the explanations of those *without virtue* are. (Even Plato’s “philosopher kings”, having seen the forms, return to the “cave” because they are the ones capable of teaching (ordinary) people virtue.) Even in the case of a “value responsive” approach to virtue, it would, as we have mentioned, be strange to regard the virtuous themselves as being incapable of explaining the value scheme to which they have successfully committed themselves. The assumption that the virtuous’s knowledge of right and wrong does not bring with it the benefits of other types of knowledge, in terms of aiding communication and contributing to a coherent account is particularly unmotivated when it comes to Aristotle’s theory. On the ancient accounts, the virtuous are not mere role

models; they are the ones who have *knowledge of the accurate account of right and wrong*.<sup>17</sup> Yet Johnson depicts Aristotle as having offered no further explanation of virtue and no further explanation of moral reasoning than that “the virtuous, *simply in virtue of their virtues*” know what they are to do. (823)<sup>18</sup>

Aristotle does not use the speaker of a foreign language but Pericles as an example of someone with practical rationality. Allow me to underscore the contrast: a public speaker like Pericles. Aristotle explains that with practical rationality, one is “able to deliberate well about what is good and beneficial to himself, not in some special context, e.g. about what is conducive to health or physical strength, but about what is conducive to living well in general.” (1140a25-28) We are certainly not inspired by this description (nor thought of Pericles himself) to think that what is recognized by the virtuous (the “good” for one’s self and for “men in general”) has no understandable measure.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Aristotle is clear about there being criteria, other than virtue, for virtue: virtue is the “state in accordance with the right account” as well as “the state that implies the presence of the right account.” As Aristotle explains, we ascertain the right account with practical rationality, the “true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man.”<sup>20</sup> Note that what is understood are mere, explicable, “things.” Stephen Everson’s gloss on these lines is that in order to have practical rationality (*phronesis*) “one must have true beliefs about what is valuable and worth doing --and these are not beliefs which are about or grounded in the motivational state of the agent.”<sup>21</sup> Where is the circularity that comes from describing morality with only “virtue concepts”? Where is the “puzzle” here?

The only way to decide that Aristotle's virtuous, in being honest, have done nothing "over and above simply 'deciding to tell the truth from now on'" (818) is to replace Aristotle's own account of moral reasoning with this alternative. And this alternative mistakes a description of virtue (virtuous choices become rather automatic), for there having been no process to explain becoming virtuous in the first place.<sup>22</sup> To interpret Aristotle correctly, we only need to take seriously what he tells us: virtue is a state we get into by *choosing in accordance with a value scheme* and virtue is characterized by consistently making these choices correctly. Self-improving behavior is behavior done in accordance with this value scheme; vice behavior that is not. When we morally improve we are abiding by the proper value scheme (in full awareness of our doing so or not). When we are acting out of vice, we are acting against the proper value scheme (knowingly being the worse way to do this.)<sup>23</sup>

A "practical rationality" based approach will also give us an account of how we ascertain right value. It specifies the components of the actual process we are involved in when we morally improve in particular and typical ways. This is in contrast to the more typical method of suggesting that we are merely responding to the "demands of the world" when we engage in the reasoning that gets us to figure out that we have to stop gossiping, that we have to dump a certain boyfriend, that we have to start volunteering to tutor grade school kids.<sup>24</sup> In order to satisfy those skeptical about any process underlying the development of virtue at all, we need to describe "practical rationality" based approaches to virtue seems necessary, but if we were interested in the most complete explanation of moral behavior available, we would want to look to traditional virtue ethics as well.

## **VI. Self-Improvement through Practical Rationality**

We are half way to dissolving the contrast Johnson makes between “realistic” strategies of self-improvement and “simply doing what is characteristic of the (virtuous) person” (817) if we disassociate Aristotle from the moral psychology Johnson attributes to him. To finish this off, we need to explain that the psychological expectations that do underlie a “practical rationality” based approach are neither strange nor unrealistic.<sup>25</sup> We hope that in demonstrating this, we dispel damaging misconceptions about the traditional role of practical rationality in virtue.

“Practical rationality” is not the same as any generic notion of “moral wisdom”. “Puzzles” are manufactured when contemporary virtue ethicists borrow Aristotle’s “we need practical rationality to attain virtue” and then replacing a reference to a process with a reference to something that has been attained. Furthermore, “practical rationality” is not simply “practical intelligence”: the ability to calculate probabilities, etc. Research on the limits of our cognition does not constitute evidence against virtue.<sup>26</sup>

And of course, Aristotle’s account of “practical rationality” is frequently brought up in response to situationist criticisms of virtue ethics, but with an attached explanation of it. This means that all too often it comes across as nothing but a mysterious place holder (perhaps one whose main function is to ward off quick criticisms of virtue.) A simple explanation ought to remove any such associations.

Let’s begin by depicting someone who has not yet taken on the project of developing virtue. (The reader is invited to check for signs of realism.) This person might do lots to help others (to use an example of Johnson’s) while rather unaware that their

behavior falls under this category. And certainly this person has deep commitments to particular people, and helping these people is something this person is also deeply committed to. But this person has also, certainly, heard a host of ideas about helping behavior. She has probably memorized the equation good people help others. But she might notice people who help a lot get taken advantage of, have ulterior motives, and so on. She might, of course, at the same time have helpful people held up as heroes. Perhaps she has had opportunities to see such heroes in action, and has been duly affected by the experience. Our typical situation, says a “practical rationality” based account, is one where we are engaged in projects and have commitments we have not analyzed and that we can also articulate a lot of unsorted, and perhaps even contradictory, norms about behavior.

A “practical rationality” based approach to virtue recommends that we take the time to analyze both a. what we are doing and b. whether what we are doing matches norms to which we ought to be committed. This is a time-consuming project, to say the least. One would have to be acutely conscious of taking it on. Think of the effort involved in properly assessing whether we are, in fact, a good friend (let alone a generally helpful person.) Data concerning our psychological tendencies (is our behavior surprisingly susceptible to changes in situations?) would certainly be useful. It is also a process we would benefit from doing along with others, but they would hardly need to be experts in morality or anything else. If they merely point out our shortcomings, or laugh at our phony self-assertions, this might still prove to be invaluable help.

The process depends on a great deal of trial and error. We might experiment with helping others more or less. We might try to identify with different notions of a helpful

person. Norms will be assessed against our behavior (“I tried not helping others, and it didn’t work out.”) and our behavior assessed against our norms (“I help my kids with homework on occasion, but I guess I could do more. A good parent would...”) The process of attempting to find a match among these will result, says a “practical rationality” based approach, in some revision of our behaviors and the norms to which we are consciously committed.

So this is what happens when we decide to help others by volunteering as a tutor. We’ve matched the norm “help others in need” with some behavior that fits it. A mismatch would have nagged at us (I really think we should help other people, by tutoring children for example. But I don’t think I should have to do this.) A match, if made, strengthens our understanding of what we are doing and why. A demonstration of this can be found in our own personal moral dilemmas. (Or my own, for that matter. Currently I am angry with my in-laws, yet I believe it is foolish for people to get angry at in-laws.) This type of confusion is typical of us, and it leaves us at a loss as to what to do. Another way to make this description familiar is to think of times when we do the right thing without a thought. Let’s say you run after a person who has dropped his wallet, without a thought. A “practical rationality” based approach predicts that this behavior was supported by norms so well-endorsed by you as to be identifiable, easy to speak and to explain. (Why did you return my wallet? Well, it was yours. You need it.) And this is everyday evidence for the boldest suggestion in a “practical rationality” based virtue ethic: understanding of what we are doing contributes to good behavior.<sup>27</sup>

Those who expected something more controversial to be required by virtue might be disappointed by how basic this description is. But once again, this would be to confuse

the result of *completing* this process with the process itself. And, of course, something special is supposed to *emerge* from this process being successfully engaged in again and again. As we analyze and revise more beliefs and behavior, these will be affected, but, says a virtue ethic, our psychology is also altered. (We can see this on a small scale if we shoplifted as teenagers yet could not possibly as adults.) To the degree the result of engaging in this process is a new psychological state, this psychological state --realized or not -- is part of the justification and completion of a theory, one that recommends we go about analyzing our behavior as we've just described.

From the perspective of a "practical rationality" based approach, "exemplar" based approaches need to turn their emphasis on its head: a virtue ethic must focus its theoretical attention on the components of our moral development. The benefits from this are manifold, and evidenced by the case Johnson (inadvertently) lays out against understanding virtue otherwise. All sorts of misgiving about virtue come from a focus on "exemplars." Critics other than Johnson, no doubt confounded by the methodological assumptions that underlie the use of "exemplars", have had to provide virtue with evidentiary standards of their own. In cases these are oddly tangential to the accounts of virtue they are supposed to supplement.<sup>28</sup> But until contemporary virtue ethicists begin, as Becker has, to give us descriptions of moral development, the efforts critics have had to take can be understood. What else can you do when arguing against a view that is not yet completed? These efforts will not be necessary once virtue theorists respond to the theoretical demands that currently apply to virtue theory. Johnson's concerns delimitate these, making the contours of such demands clear.

## VII. Common Sense on Self-Improvement

One final objection of Johnson's cannot be resolved by describing a "practical rationality" based virtue ethic. Johnson argues that, as a matter of common sense, self-improving behavior ought to be regarded as morally excellent as any fully virtuous behavior. We deny this, and point out that there are good reasons for avoiding the equation. This is to conclude with a challenge to premise (1) of Johnson's argument (self-improving behaviors are morally excellent).

Regarding self-improvement as "second best" (or as Swanton puts it, "not fully excellent") is necessary to making sense of moral improvement as a phenomenon. What is the reason we admire a child's efforts in becoming a better person? It is because there is value in becoming such a person. Johnson suggests that virtue ethics introduces an impassible disconnect between moral novice and expert behavior. But, instead, it introduces the rationale for the move from one to the other.

This is not to deny that self-improving behavior is "right." Our brief account of how practical rationality works allows us to recognize that the standard of rightness in a "practical rationality" based account lets us regard self-improving actions as right, even if they are not classified in the same way as those done by the fully virtuous. Such an approach can also meet Johnson's requirement that self-regarding behavior be regarded as the "best" a person can do, as a "practical rationality" based approach has no difficulty in assessing such a thing from the condition a person is currently in.

In contrast, "standard normative theory" offers a one-dimensional assessment of action: right or not. Though assessments along one dimension might give the appearance of offering a straightforward and unambiguous account of right and wrong, they are not

likely to be used in practical contexts. A multidimensional approach is what we use outside of philosophy classrooms. Particularly useful in these real world contexts is an evaluative yardstick like practical rationality. It works along two salient dimensions: it measures particular behavior and actions, and it measures character at various points of development. Let us conclude by suggesting that common sense would not be unhappy with this classificatory scheme.

Johnson suggests that it is not controversial that there is something “truly excellent in a moral respect about the reformations of (a) liar.” (825) And we can recognize some potential benefits of regarding such reformations in this way. These might include that we are appreciating effort. It is so hard not to lie, for example, for those habituated to it. Another advantage may have to do with acknowledging the benefits that come from such reform. Real damage can be done to others if some people are not encouraged to stop acting badly. But consider the struggles a more predatory person might have in controlling himself. The public is decidedly unsympathetic to such struggles. (Think of what we say when we learn of them. Maybe someone offers a reluctant “Well... good for him” but usually this is followed by something that sounds more like a threat--- “He better not...”) Should the public be more appreciative? Is the public failing to recognize the benefit that comes from such struggles with self-control? These are the wrong questions to ask. For even if the answers are yes, the solution is not got by having the public invoke fewer moral distinctions than they already do.

Standardly, people make moral judgments with multiple criteria at play. Teachers reward effort, but not in the way they reward their gifted students. We are very proud of our wayward friends who manage to hold down a job, we encourage them, but we are

hardly admiring in the way we are of those friends who do really great things at work. When non-ethicists make these evaluations they never need to fail to recall that the person was lazy (or whatever it was) in the first place. Yet as such, evaluations of these behaviors are frequent, robust, and --if you wait around for the full story-- unambiguous. An account of practical rationality helps to explain why, at any point in a person's struggles with life, evaluations can be made of how well she is doing relative to what she had to work with. Because practical rationality is a process that works on the commitments and norms we are focusing on, it explains that moral improvement happens in situations specific and complex enough to fit descriptions like these: she is currently re-evaluating that norm, let's see if she changes her behavior accordingly.

In life, taking an evaluative snap shot of a person's behavior, and then ranking it as "best" or not, does not come naturally to people. We can see this when a case study involving people's behavior is presented to a class. The students inevitably invent narrative back stories concerning the people involved (only to be told by professors to "focus on the case as it is given.") The study of standard normative theory encourages the taking of "snap shots" when we are analyzing behavior -- and in an advanced ethics class naïve questions about the persons involved in a "case" are hardly voiced at all. But why don't philosophers, when analyzing actions, consider the whole person along with any specific behavior? Is there no describable process that underlies moral choices? Is the complexity too much? Is it too distracting? (If so, from what?) Are we just without the needed resources? The public's resources are not so limited. And neither are virtue ethics's.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Johnson, "Virtue and Right," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 810–834. Henceforth, references in the text to this article will be indicated by a page number in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup>Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Christine Swanton, "A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action," *Ethics* 112 (2001):32-52. Swanton's book is also now out, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>This is not -- as Johnson supposes it to be -- a *limitation* on the resources that can be used in determining right and wrong. Johnson writes that virtue ethicists "must rely as little as possible on views about right conduct when theorizing about the well-lived life and its virtues. Only then can they claim to have constructed a theory of right action out of the materials given in a conception of virtuous character alone." (815)

<sup>4</sup>With the exception of Lawrence Becker, contemporary virtue ethicists leave the traditional role of practical rationality out of their modernized accounts. This, as we'll argue, unduly shortens their explanations of virtue.

<sup>5</sup>Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)

<sup>6</sup>We are using some leeway in doing this, as Swanton would surely prefer the unwieldy "demands of the world responsive". (Swanton does not think that virtue reacts to only "value" (but also to status, benefit, and bonds) and she certainly does not think values need to be ranked by an agent, as a traditional account has it.) Nonetheless, for her, what is explanatorily basic are the "values" (or "demands of the world") that, if recognized, provoke a variety of admirable responses (she doesn't regard virtue as having some sort of regular and cohesive structure.)

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<sup>7</sup> This “argument” of Aristotle’s spans only pages 28-29 of the Oxford World’s Classic edition’s 276 page text. Johnson is only knocking down a straw man when, following this depiction of Aristotle’s “argument” he asks, “Just how plausible is it that as a general rule it is by performing the actions characteristic of the virtuous that we become virtuous ourselves?” and answers: “Not very.” (819)

<sup>8</sup> Johnson’s footnote on page 820 is revealing of how seriously he attempts to integrate Aristotle’s own account into his take on “emulating the virtuous.” But it also reveals the deep confusion about Aristotle’s proposal that I explain in this response.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson writes that “from the fact that the virtuous know how to behave in any given circumstance, it just doesn’t follow that they are in a position to tell the less virtuous how to behave.” (823)

<sup>10</sup> Johnson does not deny that the virtuous, as he understands them, would be good general counselors. He just doubts that this would be useful to the novice. He is, of course, looking for a sort of help that I suggest we do not need from the virtuous.

<sup>11</sup> I do not mean to side with Johnson in denying that exemplars can be practically effective. As one example, the device of wearing “W.W.J.D?” bracelets seems to be practically effective for Christians. Contra Johnson, this supports the idea that the imagined behavior of the morally perfect is helpful to novices. But a “value responsive” or “practical rationality” virtue theorist could argue (as I would) that imagining such behavior is helpful only because it calls attention to the right value scheme. Those who glance at their “W.W. J.D?” bracelets in a shopping mall are being reminded of the values their role model adheres to. They are not being reminded of what he did in

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shopping malls. His imagined behavior in one is constructed through a person's understanding of a Christian value scheme.

<sup>12</sup> In her account Swanton blends consideration of virtue with more "standard" criteria for right action. Though it goes unrecognized, this is to take one of the two remedial "options" that Johnson encourages virtue ethicists to take. I think this is not noticed because Swanton's account is confused for an "exemplar" based one. The objections to which Swanton's account does not respond: Swanton is not going to regard self-improvement as morally obligatory, as Johnson would like, and she may not be able to suggest that the virtuous will be good counselors, which Johnson regards as necessary. Swanton, Christine, "A Virtue Theoretical Account of Right Action," *Ethics*, October 2001.

<sup>13</sup> The partially internal nature of some of the "targets" are not problematic since these, as we mentioned, are not the exclusive province of the virtuous.

<sup>14</sup> T.H. Irwin translates this passage as reading that we are "completed through habit" and his gloss is that "Aristotle assumes that by having the virtues we are 'completed' (or 'perfected') and that therefore any condition that fails to complete us cannot count as a virtue of character." This, of course, makes the claims of Aristotle's that Johnson represents far more substantial, as the issue of the standard of virtue is now included. "Theory and Common Sense in Ancient Greek Philosophy", *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*, ed. Crisp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 39-40.

<sup>15</sup> The following authors disagree on other fundamentals of Aristotelian ethical theory, but not on this point. Julia Annas discusses practical rationality and the intellectual component of virtue in a systematic way in *The Morality of Happiness*, (Oxford: Oxford

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University Press, 1993) p. 47-134. Sarah Broadie has a chapter titled “Practical Rationality” that lays out the many elements of Aristotelian psychology listed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. (*Ethics with Aristotle*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.) There is Myles Burnyeat’s “Aristotle on Learning to be Good”, reprinted in the same text, p. 205-230. (Originally in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1980.) Burnyeat writes that “Aristotle is not simply giving us a bland reminder that virtue takes practice. Rather, practice has cognitive powers, in that it is the way we learn what is noble or just.” p.210. John Cooper refers to Burnyeat’s article in his own discussion of Aristotelian virtue in “Reason, Virtue, Moral Value”, *Reason and Emotion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) p. 253-280. (First printed in *Rationality in Greek Thought*, ed. Michael Frede and Gisela Striker, 81-114. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.)) Further examples are Nancy Sherman’s “The Habituation of Character”, *Aristotle’s Ethics: Critical Essays*, ed. Nancy Sherman, (Rowan and Littlefield, 1999) Sherman refers to the same text that Johnson’s refers to but writes, “To say that we become just by doing just actions is to abbreviate a whole series of steps.” She then goes on to discuss these steps, p.247.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson writes, “Virtue does not, at least for Aristotle, consist of possessing the traits of taking the lesser evil, acting contrary to natural tendencies, and avoiding the pleasant” (the behavior we may have to take in order to become good.) And this is true. This is not what virtue consists in. But the description that follows, if the promise is that it explains what virtue consists in, is explanatorily bereft. He writes, “The virtuous take pleasure in doing what is best, from a settled disposition that is as if it were second nature.” (819) Once again, this is true, but not, in this context, at all helpful.

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<sup>17</sup> This is why virtue is analogized to a skill in Aristotle, and described as a skill by other ancient ethicists.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Broadie's concern about how even Aristotelian interpreters depict Aristotelian moral reasoning is helpful here. She suggests that there is "no encouragement from examples in the texts" to "depict the good Aristotelian agent as aiming to do something called "acting courageously", "acting generously", etc. Footnote 67, *Ethics with Aristotle*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 264. In the main body of her discussion she writes that having such principles can only be a "surrogate" for practical rationality, p. 249.

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps any confusion is attributable to Aristotle not offering an explicit list of values, or specifying what the right rule consists in other than what developed practical rationality determines. But this is only what makes virtue ethics unique, and not reasons to suggest that it invokes no standard. Cooper is helpful here as he lists and discusses the types of value involved in Aristotelian virtue, *Reason and Value*, p. 264-279.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144b25-28.

<sup>21</sup> *Companions to Ancient Thought 4: Ethics*, ed. Stephen Everson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.13.

<sup>22</sup> A convert to healthy eating may come to pass on dessert without giving it a thought, but this does not preclude there being an explanation (and a lot of effort besides) behind this person having developed her tastes in this fashion.

<sup>23</sup> In art a man who makes a mistake voluntarily is preferable to one who makes it involuntarily; but in practical wisdom, as in every virtue or excellence, such a man is less desirable. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b22-24.

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<sup>24</sup> The benefits of leaving the traditional role of practical rationality out of a modernized account of virtue have surely been obvious: it is something in addition to explain, contemporary readers have to be ‘sold’ on the possibility of it, and perhaps virtue can be described without it. But there are costs to not borrowing the structure of ancient virtue theory. Being unable to respond (in full) to Johnson’s criticisms may lead contemporary virtue ethicists to recognize just how high these costs are. See my “Who’s Afraid of a Final End?” for further explanation.

<sup>25</sup> There are good reasons not to explain practical rationality in reference Aristotle’s own locutions. For one, “practical rationality” based approaches to ethics do not need to be Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian. For two, referencing ancient accounts of practical rationality contributes to the impression that the notion is outdated and not worth preserving. And three, perhaps unconsciously, we foreshorten our explanations of how practical rationality works when we do not describe it in simple and modern terms.

<sup>26</sup> John Sabini and Maury Silver, in a footnote, (59), equate the practical rationality required by virtue with “practical intelligence.” The latter of which we already have data on. “Lack of Character? Situationism Critiqued”, *Ethics* 115 [2005]: 535-562.)

<sup>27</sup> Audiences have objected to this idea by suggesting that someone like Adolph Hitler might have acted perfectly consistently. This strikes me as beyond implausible, since, for example, he benefited from humanity yet aimed to destroy it. A “practical rationality” based virtue ethicist would, however, have to respond to the suggestion with a thorough account of what constitutes consistency (or as I am calling it in this response: a “match”) between norms and behavior. I do this in “Who’s Afraid of a Final End?”.

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<sup>28</sup> As an example, John Doris takes virtue to exhibit itself in behavior that is individuated, outside of the population norm. I hope we have made the problem with this clear: unless researchers will be checking for differences in motivation, a virtuous person may be doing just what others typically do (in terms of outward behavior) in the vast majority of occasions. There are also far too many instances where virtue is expected to motivate good behavior, and virtue is considered to be a trait that unfailingly leads to a certain kind of behavior. Critics then look for whatever they take a “trait” to be, rather than for the process involved in practical rationality. John Doris, *Lack of Character* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 18.