

COMMENTARY TO “EXTENDED VIRTUE AND FUTURE ETHICS”

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An’s “Extended Virtue and Future Ethics” is aimed at elaborating an ‘extended virtue’ view of virtues, while attempting to distinguish this elaborated view from that articulated by Howell (2016). In this latter aim, it suffers some unclarities. The following commentary seeks to identify one such unclarity and suggest an alternative approach to framing the response to Howell.

The extended virtue thesis (EV) championed by Howell (2016) is aimed at a constitutive question about virtues — what are virtues *made of*, so to speak. This can be a difficult framing to keep in view, given it is sometimes nearly indistinguishable from a question like “what makes for the attribution of virtues” or “by what criteria is an action judged to be virtuous.” At times, despite awareness of this issue, An’s piece commits such an equivocation between moral judgments of behaviour (attributions of virtue) and the constitution of virtues. Of course, for some eliminativists about virtue, there is no such distinction between these. Nonetheless, by keeping this distinction in view, we can hope to come to grips with some of the central disputes with Howell taken up by An.

To get to the heart of it, Howell seems to think of a given virtue V as constituted not merely of mental states and dispositions of a person (a thesis he calls *skindividualism* — where virtue is constituted of that within the boundaries of a person’s skin), but of some function of both the internal disposition of the person (P) and the conditions in which the person finds themselves (C). so $V = f(P, C)$. Thus, if a particular $V_x = f(P, C_x)$ and a person finds themselves in a situation with conditions $C_y \neq C_x$, then virtue V_x is unconstituted — it does not exist. Put another way, the person under condition C_y has had that

virtue V_x , that part of their character, cleaved away by having C_x removed or replaced. Now, it is not perfectly clear how to apply such a claim: how is C to be circumscribed? Are there relevant and irrelevant conditions? How much relative ‘weight’ is carried between P and C in the establishment of a virtue? These unclarities in Howell’s EV appear to be a major motivator of An’s piece.

However, An’s project could benefit from a clearer framing of the particular unclarities she wishes to resolve and the specific claims on which she differs from Howell. For instance, An’s approach to making sense of the EV view is to appeal to continuity in decision-making (across contexts) and to consider other aspects (dynamic, reactionary) of a person’s mental states. She states that these are important elements to a notion of virtue but struggles to substantiate why, beyond appeals to intuition. The issue of continuity will be taken up in a moment, but the emphasis on active agent engagement bears comment here. In An’s framing, it is not quite clear what role deliberation and active engagement is supposed to play in the constitutive question about virtue. Neither proponents of skindividualism nor EV deny that moral behaviours can be the result of contextual deliberation and reaction to the specifics of a circumstance. For skindividualists/mentalists, the view of virtue is something like that in Figure 1.

The internal disposition of the person constitutes their virtue, informs their deliberation and reasoning *with respect to the specific circumstance*. The internal disposition (virtue) is the processor through which virtuous action is produced, but its “inputs” will of course be varied, and the conditions of those inputs will impinge on what actions are taken. It is the ‘processor’

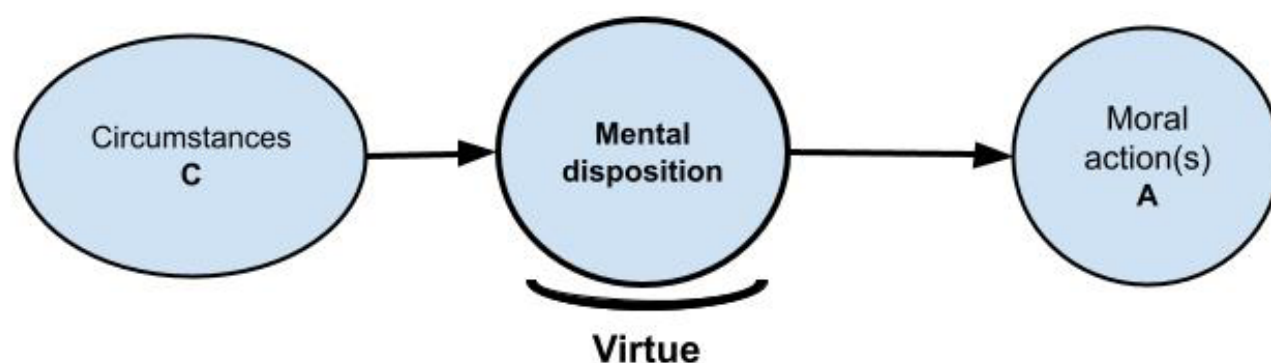


Fig. 1: Mentalism about virtues allows that mental disposition informs on deliberation about actions A in light of C.

that is constitutive of virtue and internal to the person, but that internal disposition responds and reacts to the variety of specific contexts. Meanwhile, EV does not deny that reasons play a role in moral decision-making and in reacting to the specifics of a circumstance—this is a major motivator for its conception. So both views are compatible with An’s emphasis on deliberation and reasoning about moral choices. The critical issue, perhaps what An is pointing to, is that whereas mentalism posits that the internal configurations constituting virtue informs moral deliberation, by contrast under EV it is less clear how to differentiate moral reasoning from any other form of deliberation (or immoral deliberation nor kneejerk reaction, for that matter).

I suggest that the issues taken up by An be more tightly framed around one key question for EV. That is, under the EV view of virtues, is it possible (and if so, how) to distinguish between virtue-annihilating conditions and conditions ineffective or irrelevant to the constitution of virtue? Further questions arise from here, and it is difficult at times to tell which An is trying to answer: could the necessary conditions C constituting V be in place, but be overrun (or ignored or denied) by further competing conditions?² Can EV sustain a notion of a person betraying their virtue? Can a person possess a virtue and yet not be compelled or determined to make a particular choice or action (not act virtuously)? One interpretation of EV of course is a kind of virtue determinism: when the conditions are such that the person chooses action A where A is non-virtuous, it is *because* the person’s virtue

was annihilated by the conditions.

This does fly in the face of both our regular intuitions about what virtues are, and the norms of virtue *attribution*, however. This seems to be one of the hurdles An is identifying and attempting to address in her piece. Howell (2016) takes a first pass at this problem and, like An, appeals to this idea of dependability and continuity to individuate virtue. He suggests that sustainedness or reliability is a key feature of virtue that can help distinguish what among Ps and Cs are necessary and sufficient for a given V. Through the analogy of the solar-powered traffic light, Howell attempts to highlight the co-constitution of virtue through internal disposition and external conditions. In another example, Howell uses the compassion of Tony Soprano, a property Tony only demonstrates around his wife, but which is not reliably demonstrated by Tony otherwise. Barring the presence of his wife, Tony is apt to murder. Likewise, a solar-powered traffic light with no battery to store power (so that it can still work during the night or cloudy days) is a poor light. A good solar traffic light needs a battery, a compassionate Tony Soprano needs a disposition that provides for compassion in the absence of (the “sunlight” of) his wife’s presence. The goodness of the light and the compassion of Tony are virtues only insofar as they can withstand some perturbations to C — that they are at least somewhat reliable and predictive of future behaviour. So, for a virtue V to be constituted, it supervenes on some combination of P and C, where V is tolerant of some range of perturbations to C. It seems that here is where An means to emphasize the role of deliberation (the role of P).

One reasonable inference to make from Howell's example is that P must adapt to make up for the perturbations in C, such that V is sustained, reliable, and/or predictive of future behaviour. This is likely what drives An's emphasis on active agent engagement. If changes to C are not quite a killswitch for virtues, then it implies that the mental dispositions of the person must adapt. It seems that An's suggestion is to construe adaptations in P (necessary for the sustained continuity of V) as the mental work and engagement involved in deliberating and reacting in light of perturbations to C. A clearer framing of this argument would be beneficial. If I am right about An's motivation here, the emphasis on active engagement, reasoning, and deliberation is an attempt to support and elaborate upon the 'continuity/reliability' criterion of virtue.

Many open questions remain, however. These extend beyond the scope of An's project, yet nonetheless complicate it. For instance, how reliable must Tony's compassion be for it to be a virtue of Tony's? When Tony is around his wife, is compassion constituted? Or does Tony's internal disposition (P) preclude the constitution of compassion even if he appears to act compassionately with his wife? What frequency of reliability is constitutive of virtue? Meanwhile, how much does V rely on P and how much does V rely on C? Making this determination seems to be the key for any version of EV. If situationists think C entirely determines virtue, and mentalists think P entirely determines virtue, the EV picture of virtues may have to specify a robustly sustained dynamical relationship between P, C and V so as to avoid reduction to either mentalism or situationism.

ENDNOTES

1. And such that $f(P, C_x) \neq f(P, C_y)$. It is possible that the same function taking different values could have the same result (e.g. multiply by zero) — but this consideration raises a further issue — how should conditions be circumscribed for relevance/irrelevance to the constitution of virtue? This is something An touches on in her piece.
2. And do competing conditions annihilate V? Always? Sometimes? If not always, when?