Aristotle and Kant on Virtue

I. Introduction

In a space that stretches just barely more than two pages, G.E.M. Anscombe manages to characterize and then roundly denounce some of modernity’s finest philosophers. With a brevity that approaches Nietzschean aphorism, Anscombe offers her terse critique of most major modern moral philosophers. Butler, for his part, is deserving of only a sentence. If length is any indication, Hume and Mill seem to fare a bit—but only a bit—better. We find that Hume, though brilliant, is a sophist nonetheless. Mill, presumably ignorant of Wittgenstein, failed to recognize that murder and theft could be described in such a way as to be justified by the principle of utility. Bentham’s view of pleasure, much like Locke’s, was much too superficial.²

Though we may think that, because of her repeated charge of sophistry, Hume is the target of a particularly withering critique, Anscombe does grant that “he is a very profound and great philosopher;” elsewhere, we find Hume described as “brilliant.” Their relationship, we might say, is complicated.

With Kant, however, no such complications seem to be present. Not only is Kant’s notion of a self-legislating law “absurd,” we also find that, without a set of criteria outlining their proper descriptive content, “[h]is rule about universalizable maxims is useless.” While Anscombe manages to find at least something redemptive in Hume’s work—his sophistry did, after all, “open up very deep and important problems”—there is nothing of the sort in her treatment of Kant.³

Bernard Williams, for his part, was not much kinder to Kant. In perhaps one of his gentler moments, Williams grants that “Kantianism is only superficially repulsive—despite appearances, it offers an inducement, solace to a sense of the world’s unfairness.”⁴ Though Kant may be rightly criticized for making morality an issue of cold and insensitive duty, so Williams argues, he did so out of a desire to make the (moral) world a more inhabitable place. “Such a conception,” according to Williams, “has an ultimate form of justice at its heart,” as it makes that supreme realm of value, morality, equally open and accessible to all. Kant’s overly-rationalistic approach is, then, a way of guarding ourselves against our deep rooted vulnerability. That such a conclusion is not a mere figment of Williams’s rhetorical flourish is evidenced by the fact that he considers the reality of moral luck to be a “bitter truth.”⁵

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³ Ibid, 171-2
⁴ Williams, Moral Luck, 21
⁵ Ibid. It may be of interest to note that what Anscombe found absurd, namely, the Kantian idea of self-legislation, Williams finds equally puzzling: “the authority of the Categorical Imperative
Independent of whatever regrets he may have, however, Williams is nonetheless invested in a project that involves a deep and enduring criticism of the modern notion of morality as an overriding class of reasons. Williams takes issue with the notion that moral reasons are somehow categorically different, and, crucially, more important, than other kinds of considerations. The kind of morality that he seeks to leaves us with, then, is “a concept of morality” that is “less important, certainly, than ours is usually taken to be; and that will not be ours, since one thing that is particularly important about ours is how important it is taken to be.”

Williams, much like Anscombe in this regard, observes that what we take to be the notion of morality was conspicuously absent from ancient Greek thought: “this system of ideas basically lacks the concept of morality altogether, in the sense of a class of reasons or demands which are vitally different from other kinds of reason or demand.” Anscombe observes what I take to be the exact same disjunction:

Anyone who has read Aristotle’s *Ethics* and has also read modern moral philosophy must have been struck by the great contrasts between them. The concepts which are prominent among the moderns seem to be lacking, or at any rate buried or far in the background, in Aristotle. Most noticeably, the term ‘moral’ itself, which we have by direct inheritance from Aristotle, just doesn’t seem to fit, in its modern sense, into an account of Aristotelian ethics…If someone professes to be expounding Aristotle and talks in a modern fashion about ‘moral’ such-and-such, he must be very imperceptive if he does not constantly feel like someone whose jaws somehow got out of alignment: the teeth don’t come together in a proper bite.

Because of this chasm that separates the ancient Greeks from modern philosophers, Anscombe concludes that “We cannot, then, look to Aristotle for any elucidation of the modern way of talking about ‘moral’ goodness, obligation, etc.” In what follows I take Anscombe’s advice, and, rather than attempt to compare Aristotelian and Kantian notions of moral worth, see what each has to say concerning virtue. This is, I must admit, a convenient and worthy entrance point to a broader exploration of issues that I take to be at stake between Aristotle and Kant. I will focus on one particular aspect of this debate concerning the nature of virtue. Philippa Foot draws attention to what I wish to discuss:

we both are and are not inclined to think that the harder a man finds it to act virtuously the more virtue he shows if he does act well. For on the one hand great virtue is needed where it is particularly difficult in acting virtuously; yet on the other it could be argued that difficulty in acting virtuously shows that the agent is imperfect in virtue.

is supposed (mysteriously enough) to derive not just from its being (in this sense) categorical, but from its being categorical and self-addressed by the agent as a rational agent.”

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6 Ibid 39
7 Williams, “Philosophy,” in *The Legacy of Greece*, p. 251
8 Anscombe, p.169-70
9 Ibid 170
10 Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 10
Foot is correct here to draw attention that, at least at first glance, both intuitions seem to be right despite being contradictory. For I take it that we are inclined to think that the man who, in the face of great danger and filled with fear, does not flee the scene is more courageous than the man who faces the same challenge without the accompanying fear. To affirm this point is to agree with Kant as traditionally conceived. And yet, on the other hand, we also think that the person who gives joyfully and without hesitation exhibits considerably more charity than the one who gives begrudgingly and with regret. To affirm this is to agree with Aristotle. And so we are left with two intuitively plausible, and indeed appealing, stances that are nonetheless incompatible.

In what follows I provide an account of virtue as both Kant and Aristotle conceived it. Because I will argue that virtue, for both Kant and Aristotle, must be understood as part of a larger theoretical account, it will be necessary to provide a certain amount of relevant background. In reconstructing Kantian and Aristotelian virtue, we will find that the differences in the two accounts are due, not to different takes on shared and common intuitions, but rather to deep disagreements over the nature of reason, conceptions of personal identity, and, importantly, the nature and role of morality. Most of what follows is, then, a historical enterprise. However, along the way, and near the end in particular, I will suggest several reasons why Aristotle’s account is more satisfying. Like the rest of the paper, these reasons are not meant to appeal to intuitions concerning a single moral act, but rather to fundamental issues of what it is to live well as a human being.

To preview, I will start by outlining the Kantian moral project in general, and will then proceed to a treatment of Kantian virtue. Following that, I will do the same for Aristotle. In the final section, I offer two concluding comments. The first, on what I will call “self-reflective endorsement,” is a response to the possible objection that, given Aristotle’s account of habituation and moral formation, virtue is too easy, that it requires very little work on the part on the agent herself. After dealing with that objection, I conclude with a reflection on the proper response of an agent who, as a result of good upbringing and self-reflective endorsement, has attained a virtuous character. That response, in my eyes, is gratitude. Although this is the formal outline of the paper, much of the interesting works get done on what may seem to be tangential comments on the nature of reason and morality. This is not, however, an accident. Though a study of Kantian and Aristotelian virtue is worthy in its own right, it is not essential. What is up for grabs is much more than differing conceptions of virtue; what is at stake, rather, are competing notions of reason and morality, and hence what it means to be human.

II. Kantian Morality

Although our present discussion focuses on virtue, it would nonetheless be inappropriate to start any attempt at understanding Kantian morality with that same category. The reason is simple: for Kant, virtue did not occupy a central role. The fundamental issue for Kantian moral evaluation is, rather, whether one possesses a good will. A good will, we learn, is the only thing that is good.

Foot also notices that charity is a distinct virtue, what she calls a virtue of attachment, because it has to do not only with the act itself but also with the feelings of the act. In the case of charity, then, the motivating emotions are thus not only important, they are essential.
without qualification. Virtue, as we will soon see, is only instrumentally valuable. First, though, what is a good will, and why does Kant think it is so valuable?

Kant begins the first section of the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* with the following declaration: “It is impossible to imagine anything at all in the world, or even beyond it, that can be called good without qualification—except a good will” (*GW* 393). A good will, we learn, is unconditionally good, not because of any intended, expected, or actual effects, but in the mere act of willing itself: “A good will is not good because of its effects or accomplishments, and not because of its adequacy to achieve any proposed end: it is good only by virtue of its willing—that is, it is good in itself” (*GW* 394). Indeed, even if it were to happen that, because of some particularly unfortunate fate or the miserly bequest of a stepmotherly nature, this will were completely powerless to carry out its aims; if with even its utmost effort it still accomplished nothing…even then it would still, like a jewel, glisten in its own right. (*GW* 394)

For Kant, then, the sheer fact that one has a good will itself, independent of any effect, is the basis for the highest kind of value or worth. It is difficult to imagine, we should note, that anything could possibly be further away from Aristotle, who held that virtue must be made manifest in action for it to be meaningful.

To say that a good will is good without qualification is, importantly, different from saying that it is good in itself. For we can think any number of things are good in themselves—certain kinds of pleasure, learning, etc.—but not good without qualification. I may find that playing basketball is good in itself—e.g. apart from any kinds of health benefits—but not good without qualification. That is, there are certain conditions under which playing basketball would not be good, such as when I should be at work or attending to a friend in a hospital. For Kant, however, a good will is good without qualification and so is worthy of choosing in all circumstances, regardless of conditions of possible consequences.  

Jonathan Lear notes that, what matters, from the perspective of Kantian morality, is not the concrete ways and circumstances in which one actually lives one’s life, but whether one has a good will. If one genuinely wills that one should act according to the (self-legislated) moral law, then one has the compensation of knowing that one is a good person regardless of how one actually acts, regardless of the circumstances in which one is forced to act, and regardless of the consequences of one’s acts.

Kant distinguishes the unconditional worth of a good will with other character traits, such as “[i]ntelligence, wit, judgment” and even “courage, decisiveness, and perseverance” because when these traits are not paired with a good will, they not only lose their goodness, they actually become “extremely bad and harmful” (*GW* 394). Here Kant has in mind someone whose virtues can be used for ill. And in those cases, Kant argues that such character traits are indeed are a bad thing. Here we can imagine a courageous Nazi who, in fighting bravely, brings about more

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12 See Hill and Zweig, 25
destruction than a more cowardly soldier. That Kant takes this kind of example to be persuasive is thus indicative of the fact that he rejected the ancient opinion concerning the unity of the virtues. For Aristotle, it would be incoherent to say that a courageous man fought for a wicked cause, for in that case courage would cease to function as courage—it would be something else entirely. But for Kant, not only does courage in this case cease to be good, it actually makes us condemn the criminal all the more harshly; his courage, therefore, has made him morally worse off.

We have still yet to find, however, the defining characteristic of the good will, whose worth Kant is concerned with convincing the reader of. Later on we find that to have a good will is to act out of respect from the moral law, a law that is, we should note, derived purely from a priori reason. For Kant, the moral law is cashed out in terms of the Categorical Imperative, which receives three different formulations in the *Groundwork*. For our purposes here, however, all that concerns us is that the moral law’s essential feature is its universalizability. When an agent is deciding upon her maxim for acting, then, she must remind herself, “I ought never to act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (*GW* 402). To act in conformity with the Categorical Imperative is, moreover, to do one’s duty.

For Kant, then, doing one’s duty means acting in accord with the Categorical Imperative, whose definitive test is whether one can will that one’s maxim for acting become universal law. The moral law is binding because the respect that we humans, as rational creatures, inevitably feel for the dictates of universal a priori reason. Thus, when an agent fulfills her duty, she acts in accord with the moral law which is derived from a priori reason and thereby deserves and commands respect. To act in such a way is, moreover, to possess a good will, and hence to have a worth that...

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14 On this point I think that Kant fails to recognize that precisely the opposite case is also true, that lacking certain virtues or character traits, a good will can indeed lead to disastrous outcomes, such as the case of a well-meaning philanthropist who, ignorant of economics, ends up hurting the very people she was attempting to help. Hill and Zweig mention this possibility in an introduction to their translation of the *Groundwork* and reply that, given our status as finite creatures who will never achieve perfect knowledge, there is always a possibility that our well-intended actions will end up causing harm. The kind of harm that such a person would cause, however, would be “unintended harm, justified harm, and regrettable harms” (27). They go on to claim that the relevant difference is thus not that a good will never causes harm, but that we see certain resources (e.g. intelligence, courage, power), yet not a good will, instrumentally. I still think, however, that if Kant sees his proof that these resources can lead to bad consequences as evidence that they are only conditionally valuable, then a similar proof showing that a good will can lead to undesirable consequences ought to achieve the same outcome. A good will may indeed be the only thing that is unconditionally valuable, but if Kant’s argument against, say, courage, is taken to be conclusive, then he must go about proving his claim concerning the worth of a good will in a different fashion. That is, why, if both courage and a good will can lead to bad consequences, is one categorically different than the other? It has been suggested to me that Kant is merely trying to show that the idea of an unconditionally good will is already present in our common moral intuitions. Kant may very well be trying to do this, though I think it takes a considerably charitable reading to reach such a conclusion. And, moreover, even if this were the case, we may wonder if such an intuition is as widespread as Kant may have imagined.
is above all others, namely, moral worth. “[T]he necessity that I act out of pure respect for the practical law is what constitutes duty. To duty every other motive must give way, because it is the condition of a will good in itself, whose worth transcends all else” (GW 403).

That we respect the moral law is the foundation for Kant’s entire moral structure. Indeed, for Kant, respect for the moral law is the only proper moral motivation. This is true even when it comes to respect for other persons: “All respect for a person is properly only respect for the moral law” (G 14). We might go a ways toward making Kant seem less cold if we note that for him the capacity for morality is a result of rational agency, and so respect for the law is essentially respect for other’s rational will. (We might object to equating one’s self with one’s rational will, but this is another matter.) Nonetheless, Kant is clear on this point: “All respect for a person is actually only respect for the law” (GW 402).

It is, moreover, just this respect for the law that serves as a standard which we ought to try to live up to. We are not to look to other older, wiser figures in our lives for moral guidance. We ought, rather, to look to the moral law to provide our guide for action, for the model to which we must conform:

As for the power of examples (good or bad) that can be held up to the propensity for imitation or warning, what others give us can establish no maxim of virtue. For a maxim of virtue consists precisely in the subjective autonomy of each man’s practical reason and so implies that the law itself, not the conduct of other men, must serve as our incentive…So it is not comparison with any other man whatsoever (with man as he is), but with the Idea (of humanity), with man as he ought to be, and so comparison with the law, that must serve as the constant standard of a teacher’s comparison. (MM 480)

To the extent that Kant allows us to use the example of another person as a paradigm of virtue, then, that person must remain a myth. It is the moral law alone that is worthy of our attempts at imitation.

A feeling of respect for the moral law is essential to Kant’s theory. And yet, it seems that prima facie this sense of respect is what we would call a feeling or inclination. Kant thinks that, as rational agents, we necessarily respect the moral law.15 This necessary respect for the law manifests itself in humans as conscience. “[E]very man,” Kant thought, “has a conscience within originally” that “speaks involuntarily and unavoidably” (MM 401).16 I have serious doubts, however, whether this is universally true. It seems, rather, that in order to have a proper respect for the moral law, one must have been properly raised. This will be important to remember, for we will find a much different view of moral epistemology in Aristotle. We can briefly observe how this notion of universal respect for the moral law fits in with what I will call Kant’s democratic moral epistemology.

Kant thought that knowledge of the moral law was equally accessible to all people. This comes across abundantly clear throughout the Groundwork. Though we should be careful not to

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15 For Kant, we necessarily respect the law because we recognize it as self-given. Both Anscombe and Williams note the peculiarity of self-legislation.

16 In fairness to Kant, he also holds that the cultivation of one’s conscience is a duty. (See MM 400-401)
exaggerate, I think it is no stretch to say that, for Kant, even the dullest of people can have knowledge of the moral law. I could be “[i]nexperienced in the ways of the world and incapable of anticipating all its actual events,” and yet still come to moral knowledge merely by asking “Can you will that your maxim become a universal law?” (GW, 403). This is because, for Kant, morality is known through the simple exercise of a priori, practical reason:

common human reason…knows very well how to distinguish what is good or evil, consistent or inconsistent with duty, in all cases that present themselves. Without attempting to teach it anything new, one merely has to make reason attend…to its own principle. Therefore neither science nor philosophy is needed in order for us to know what one has to do to be honest and good, and even to be wise and virtuous (GW 404).

For Kant, then, human beings all have equal access to moral knowledge. This is because morality is known through the exercise of a priori reason, which, along with autonomy, Kant takes to be the central feature of humanity. “Cognizance of what every man is obligated to do, and hence also to know,” therefore, “would be attainable by everyone, even the most ordinary human being” (GW 404). Moral knowledge thus takes no special training: “the common understanding has…as good a chance of hitting the mark as any philosopher has” (GW 404). Because morality is founded upon reason, it is thus accessible by that very same faculty: “From what has been said, it is clear that all moral concepts have their seat and origin in reason completely a priori, and this is just as true of the most ordinary human intellect as of the most highly theoretical” (GW 411). For Kant, then, we are capable of knowing the moral law qua rational agents. There is no privileged position from which some can contemplate duty, while others are left blind. We all, it seems, have a God’s eye view. This should, I think, expunge any doubts that one may have concerning what I have called Kant’s democratic moral epistemology.

Christine Korsgaard, for her part, seems to express just such doubt: “Kant thinks that in order to be receptive to moral reasons we must cultivate the virtues, and cultivating the virtue is a matter of adopting certain obligatory ends.” Not only do I disagree with Korsgaard that Kant thinks of virtue as a necessary precondition to be receptive to moral reasons, but as we will soon see, I also take issue with her conception of Kantian virtue as the adoption of obligatory ends.

Rather than granting to Kant what I have called the democratic moral epistemology thesis, Korsgaard has argued that one must be properly formed and habituated in order to be receptive to the kinds of claims that Kant thinks are constitutive of morality. “A person with a good character,” for Korsgaard’s Kant, “will be…one who responds to the available reasons in an appropriate way, one whose motivational structure is organized for rational receptivity, so that reasons motivate in accord with their proper force and necessity.” And it is thus for this reason that Korsgaard thinks that “some theories centered on the idea of practical reason are best thought of as establishing ideals of character.”

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18 Christine Korsgaard, “Skepticism about practical reason,” p. 18
Despite Korsgaard, I do not think that Kant could get on board with such a reading. The reasons for rejecting Korsgaard are, I think, central to Kant’s entire moral project. For if morality is founded upon, and thus accessible through, pure reason, then it is crucial that all rational beings, qua rational beings, are able to come to a rather full knowledge of the moral law. The Categorical Imperative is, after all, categorical: “law carries with it the concept of necessity, an unconditional and objective and therefore universally valid necessity; and commandments are laws that must be obeyed, even against inclination” (GW 416). Kant thus makes it exceedingly clear that the moral law is universally binding on rational agents qua rational agents, not qua properly conditioned rational agents. If this were not so, moreover, I do not know how Kant could maintain his account of freedom: if moral knowledge is not open to all, then to those who are unfortunate enough to remain in ignorance freedom is only superficial. It would be a cruel irony, finally, if the supreme value, that is, moral value, was closed off to some as a result of improper habitation.

Korsgaard’s reading strikes at Kant’s egalitarianism in a further sense. Kant famously held that all human beings were possessed of a value that was of incomparable worth: dignity. This dignity was, for Kant, founded upon a person’s rational nature. And it is this very rational nature, which provides the grounds for (almost) universal human dignity, which gives us the capacity to come to knowledge of the moral law. On Korsgaard’s reading, however, it is doubtful at best if Kant could maintain such a position on dignity. The democratic moral epistemology thesis is, therefore, central to core Kantian positions on reason, freedom and autonomy, and human dignity. A rejection of the thesis would thus require a substantial reworking of the Kantian moral system to such an extent that one might wonder if it could remain Kantian in any substantial sense.

An essential point can be drawn from the acceptance of the democratic moral epistemology thesis: for Kant, morals reasons can be addressed to any rational agent with at least two expectations. The first is that they will be capable of understanding moral claims. There is no necessary amount of moral formation or habituation that needs to first predispose the agent in a certain way. They are receptive, or are at least capable of being receptive, to moral reasons as a rational agent. If they fail to seem to be receptive, it is because of a willful denial of their rational nature; their incomprehension is a result of their own freely chosen sin. The second conclusion to be drawn is that, when confronted with a moral claim, the agent is capable of acting upon it. All agents have freedom of will, and if the moral law requires something, i.e. is a duty, then that person is capable of carrying it out.

Kant contrasts acting from a respect for the moral law, that is, acting from duty, with acting from mere inclination. Kant’s conception of inclinations seems to be that they are a bubbling cauldron of feeling and emotion that we have very little or no control over. They may come and go without our permission; they are not to be depended on. To act from inclination is, therefore, morally worthless. That is because Kant takes it that we are just as likely to be inclined to act in accord with the moral law as we are to violate its dictates. “Human beings feel within themselves a powerful counterweight opposed to all the commandments of duty” (GW 405). Even if our inclinations were better trained, however, Kant would nonetheless reject their moral worth. That is because, for Kant, inclination is fleeting and contingent. Inclinations and emotions are not sufficiently rich or stable, nor malleable, enough to be counted on as a reliable guide to action.
Even those inclinations which dispose us toward duty, therefore, are morally worthless. As Jonathan Lear observes,

Kant severed the tie between morality and the pursuit of happiness because, he argued, morality cannot be binding on an agent in virtue of desires he just happens to have. The agent might have lacked those desires, and, Kant argued, it is intolerable that an agent should be bound to morality by so contingent a thread. Morality should bind an agent solely insofar as he is rational; thus morality, for Kant, should be constituted by the formal laws of rationality alone.\(^\text{19}\)

It is with this framework in mind, then, that Kant argues that it is only actions that are performed \textit{out of duty}, as opposed to merely \textit{in accord with duty}, that have any moral worth. One of the examples that Kant uses here is the duty that all humans have to preserve their own life. Though people may act to preserve their own life, so long as they do so out of inclination and not out of duty, \textit{it has no moral worth}. Kant notes that such people protect their lives \textit{in conformity with duty}, but not \textit{out of duty}. If, by contrast, disappointments and hopeless misery have entirely taken away someone’s taste for life; if that wretched person, strong in soul and more angered at fate than fainthearted or cast down, longs for death and still preserves life without loving—not out of inclination or fear but out of duty—then indeed that person’s maxim has moral worth. (\textit{GW} 398)\(^\text{20}\)

What, then, for Kant, is the moral status of inclination? Is Kant here saying that acts that are \textit{in accord with}, yet not \textit{out of}, duty have no real moral worth, or merely that we can only be sure of their worth once all inclination has been taken away? Take, for example, a witness in a courtroom. In order to testify, the witness must make an oath to tell the truth with the condition that failure to do so is punishable by law. Assuming that the witness is a generally honest person, we could say their reasons for telling the truth are \textit{over-determined}. That is, there are two sufficient reasons for the witness not to lie: it is both illegal and immoral. Take away either of those factors and the outcome would be the same. In such cases where one’s reasons for acting are over-determined, it is sensible enough to claim speculative ignorance as to the ultimate motive.

Is it merely this epistemological claim—that, in cases of over-determination, we can never be sure if a person has a good will—that Kant is making? Or is he claiming something stronger, namely, that an agent expresses more moral worth in overcoming inclinations that are contrary to duty? In the latter case Kant is claiming that no act that is not done solely out of duty has any moral worth, while in the former case he is merely claiming that we can’t know if the over-determined act has moral worth. And so, which is it: does Kant argue that only acts done solely

\(^{19}\) Jonathan Lear, \textit{Aristotle: the desire to understand} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), p. 153-4

\(^{20}\) There is one place where Kant seems to suggest that we have a modicum of control over our inclinations, and that they are responsive to some training. In a discussion on love and beneficence, Kant notes that it cannot be a duty to love someone because “Love is a matter of feeling,” and thus out of our control. Nonetheless, if one “practices [beneficence] often and succeeds in realizing his beneficent intention, he eventually comes actually to love the person he has helped.” (\textit{MM} 402)
out of duty (that is, not over-determined) have moral worth, or merely that, in cases of over-determination, we cannot know?

There is good evidence for the epistemological claim, that Kant is arguing that we can never truly know our motives for action. Kant argues that if even after “the most searching self-examination comes up with nothing but duty as the moral reason that could have been strong enough to move us to this or that good action,” we can nonetheless still not be certain that “some secret impulse of self-love, disguising itself as that Idea of duty” (GW 407). Kant goes on to claim that “we can never, even with the most rigorous self-examination, completely uncover our hidden motivations” (GW 407).

This interpretation is bolstered by evidence outside of the Groundwork, especially in the Metaphysics of Morals. Take, for example, the following excerpts:

For a man cannot see into the depths of his own heart so as to be quite certain, in even a single action, of the purity of his moral intention and the sincerity of his disposition…[For] how many people who have lived long and guiltless lives may not be merely fortunate in having escaped so many temptations? In the case of any deed it remains hidden from the agent himself how much pure content there has been in his disposition. (MM 392)

And again:

The depths of the human heart are unfathomable. Who knows himself well enough to say, when he feels the incentive to fulfill his duty, whether it proceeds from the representation of the law or whether there are not many other sensible impulses contributing to it that look to one’s advantage…and that, in other circumstances, could just as well serve vice? (MM 447)

Earlier in the Metaphysics, while discussing the duty to know oneself, Kant remarks on the difficulty of trying to “penetrate into the depths (the abyss) of one’s heart.” He goes on to describe the process of trying to gain self-understanding as a “descent into the hell of self-knowledge” (MM 441). Such reflections are presumably so torturous, at least in part, because one can never achieve perfect self-knowledge. That is, there is an ineliminable degree of uncertainty and doubt when it comes to understanding oneself and one’s motives. We can never know for certain, then, if we performed an action—an action that is, remember, in accord with duty—out of duty or self-interest.

There is thus considerable evidence to think that, when Kant argued that an act acquired moral worth only after all inclinations were stripped away, he was primarily making an epistemological claim: it is only in those cases that we can know.

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21 An Augustinian and Lutheran account of sin, self-knowledge, and selfishness seems to be lurking not far in the background of this account.
And yet, we can observe that, in the *Groundwork*, he does not say that it is only then that we can *know* whether the act was done from duty, but rather that it is only then that the act was actually performed out of respect for the moral law. Hill and Zweig note that, while a good will can act as a “filter” or a “backup” for cases in which we lack the appropriate inclination, it nonetheless seems that “our acts are not ‘morally worthy’ unless our good will is at work, so to speak, as our direct motive.” This is, moreover, supported by the *Groundwork*, in which Kant gives multiple examples of over-determined action. In those cases, it is only once the extra motive—whether it is happiness, or inclination, or pleasure—is stripped, leaving only duty, that Kant says that an act has moral worth. In order for an act to have moral worth, then, duty must be the sole motivator.

This seems to leave a couple interpretive routes open. The first way to read these *Groundwork* passages gives us an insight to Kantian psychology. This reading argues that, whenever an inclination is present, then it is the agent’s motive for action. Inclination, we could say, is the thing doing all the work, despite the co-existence of the good will. In cases of over-determination, then, respect for the law is not doing anything at all. A second interpretive route is this: in order to acquire moral worth, an act must be performed *solely out of duty*. If this second option is correct, then even if duty is doing work, so to speak, the act is still morally worthless because inclination was making a contribution as well.

Unfortunately, Kant never makes the relevant distinctions. It seems that at the very least he is making the epistemological claim that we cannot know if a person truly acts out of duty when they are also so inclined to act. What matters for our purposes here though, is the value claim, and on that the matter remains unclear. For it seems that Kant did not imagine the kind of scenario in which a person who is inclined to act in accord with duty also consciously affirms that the reason for their action is not inclination but respect for the moral law. Though I am tempted to say that Kant argued that only in cases in which one is completely devoid of any inclination does one’s act have any moral worth, it seems only fair to attribute such a drastic thesis to Kant if we are sure that he held it. Absent such certainty, we ought to remain agnostic.

This agnosticism is well founded. For although I disagree with them on this point, Hill and Zweig note that if we ever “did successfully dispel our inclinations to wrong, we would still be morally good persons as long as we had a good will and so were ready to resist any such inclinations that might develop.” On this view all that matters is the mere possession of a good will and so as long as one has that then one’s inclinations are irrelevant. It seems to me that this is an overly charitable reading of the *Groundwork* passage, but I admit that it saves Kant from absurd objections that he would otherwise be vulnerable to. Absent certainty, we should be hesitant to saddle Kant with such a thesis.

Regardless of what Kant’s true position in the *Groundwork* is, at the least the following seems clear. A good will is the only thing that is unconditionally good. Inclinations, regardless of if they make us more or less likely to carry out our duty, are morally worthless, not only because

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22 Hill and Zweig 28
23 Hill and Zweig 32
24 Among these is Schiller’s objection that on Kant’s theory we ought to put ourselves in tempting situations in order to show our moral worth in overcoming the temptations.
they are unreliable, but also because they do not directly concern the will. In order to have a good will, one must act out of respect for the moral law, which is derived solely from a priori reason, and is thus accessible to even the most ordinary of people. Reason demands that whatever we decided our action-guiding maxim to be, we must be willing for it to become universal law. The only actions that have moral worth, therefore, are those that require the exercise of a good will, and are hence performed out of a respect for the universal, rational, moral law. To act in such a way is to act out of duty. Within this framework, it is unclear whether inclinations that are contrary to duty are morally neutral, or if they actually possess a counter-intuitive moral worth since they provide one with the occasion to exercise her good will. It is important to keep this in mind, as we will find a similar position regarding inclination emerge from Kant’s discussion of virtue. It is to that subject that we now turn.

III. Kantian Virtue
If I am right in arguing that the notions of respect, rationality, and duty are central in Kantian moral theory, then in order to be coherent, any account of virtue must make essential reference to those concepts. And this is precisely what we find.

Thomas Hill rightly begins his discussion of virtue by noting that, for Kant, “A good will is the essential feature of a morally good person.” We would do well to keep this point in mind, as any discussion of Kantian virtue that (mistakenly) tries to give virtue a central place is bound to go wrong. The question that we must ask, then, is this: what is virtue’s relationship to a good will? The answer, we find, is that while a good will is unconditionally valuable, it is the strength of a good will that counts as virtue. And so, as Hill notes, though “A good will is a fundamental commitment to doing what is right,” a good will can nonetheless be weak. “A virtuous person,” however, “has a will that is both good and strong.”

The distinction between a good and a virtuous (i.e. both good and strong) will is an important one. For just because a person has a good will—i.e. has made a commitment to govern her life according to the three formulations of the categorical imperative—does not mean that she will always act in such a way. A person with a good will can, after all, be tempted to do wrong, and can indeed fail to do wrong. This is explained by weakness of will. Hill is, once again, quite useful on this point. Noting that Kant did not think that humans could be fiendishly evil (in the sense of willing evil for evil’s sake), Hill distinguishes between four different kinds of wills: depraved, impure, weak, and strong. “Moral depravity,” Hill observes, “is the systematic subordination of morality to self-love in one’s fundamental, life-governing maxim.” The depraved person consistently chooses self-interest over morality. “Impurity,” on the other hand, “consists in having an unstable, ultimately incoherent mixture of conflicting elements in one’s basic maxim.” The impure person thus refuses to commit herself to either self-love or morality.

25 The condition of autonomy or freedom makes this so. Inclinations may make us more likely to do one thing than another, but they can never guarantee it, according to Kant.
27 Ibid 140
28 Hill makes the observation that the incoherence of such a position stems from Kant’s understanding of what makes something a moral requirement. For Kant, a moral duty takes the
The morally weak person is fundamentally different than the morally depraved or impure person since they have a good will but lack virtue. The morally weak person, then, has made a fundamental commitment to morality and duty, but their actions do not always follow suit. A weak person with a good will thus knows what the right thing to do is, and has a genuine and settled desire to do so, but, in certain cases, fails to do so. The case of the morally weak person is especially important for our purposes here, as it highlights the role that virtue plays in Kant. It is important to remember that, for Kant, weakness of will is not some kind of disability that makes one unable to perform their duty. All of us, even those who are morally depraved, are capable of doing our duty. This is so is not a contingent fact for Kant, but is rather essential. For it were otherwise then we would not have autonomy of the will, as Kant so conceived it.29 (Ought does, after all, imply can.) The difference between a good yet weak will, on the one hand, and a good, strong will on the other, is that the virtuous person does not have the occasional lapses of duty that the weak person has.30

Kant puts this issue thus:

It is also correct to say that man is under obligation to [acquire] virtue (as moral strength). For while the capacity (facultas) to overcome all opposing sensible impulses can and must simply be presupposed in man on account of his freedom, yet this capacity as strength (robur) is something he must acquire; and the way to acquire it is to enhance the moral incentive (the thought of the law), both by contemplating the dignity of the pure rational law in us (contemplatione) and by practicing virtue (exercitio). (MM 397)

Perhaps an example might make this a bit clearer. Imagine that a family is going on a vacation and is planning to depart early in the morning. After reflecting on when they want to arrive at their destination and thinking about the costs and benefits of leaving early, the family makes a collective decision to leave early. And, moreover, they promise to one another that they will do so. The father and mother, accustomed to waking up early for work, arise the next morning without difficulty. Their teenage children, however, who have been sleeping late all summer, form of a maxim that goes something like this: I will do X, regardless of how it affects my interests. The impure person is thus incoherent because their maxim would be something along the lines of, “I will do what is morally required, regardless of how it affects my interests but only if it does not too much damage my interests.” (Hill, 143) Note that this position is only incoherent because of the unconditional nature of Kantian morality and that without the “regardless of how it affects my interests…” there would be no contradiction.

29 Note that, on this account of freedom, one must be capable of choosing whether or not to do a certain act in that very moment. A different, perhaps Aristotelian account, could grant that one is free even if one could not do otherwise in the moment so long as the state that caused that moment was freely chosen. We find something similar to this in Aristotle when he argues that “the person who is [now] unjust or intemperate was originally free not to acquire this character, so that he has it willingly, though once he has acquired the character, he is no longer free not have it [now]” (1114a20-22). These differing accounts of freedom no doubt affect how one views moral formation and habituation.

30 Elsewhere Hill seems to collapse these four kinds of wills into three kinds by treating a depraved and impure will as part of the same category. See Thomas Hill, “Two conceptions of virtue” Theory and Research in Education 11(2) 167–186 (2013).
meet the morning’s demands with intense difficulty.

We can observe a couple aspects about this example. First, note that all people involved have the ability to wake up early. This ability parallels Kantian freedom—no matter how difficult fulfilling our duty is, we are all capable of doing so. In this example, the parents are virtuous—that is, they not only have a commitment to performing their duty, but they also have acquired a strength of will that virtually ensures that they will do so. The children, on the other hand, though still capable of waking up early along with their parents, would face considerably more difficult challenges in doing so.

For Kant, then, virtue is the strength of a good will; it is the force that one uses to fulfill one’s duty, and it is often needed to overcome inclinations that are contrary to duty. “Virtue is the strength of man’s maxims in fulfilling his duty. Strength of any kind can be recognized only by the obstacles it can overcome, and in the cases of virtue these obstacles are natural inclinations, which can come into conflict with man’s moral resolution” (MM 394). This point may remind us of our previous discussion of whether inclinations that are contrary to duty are morally neutral or, ironically, morally valuable. Our earlier suspicions are here confirmed; for if virtue is good, and the exercise of virtue is enhanced by inclinations contrary to duty, then it seems as if those contrary inclinations acquire an odd kind of moral worth. At the very least, they seem to offer the possibility for the exercise of heroic virtue.

It will be crucial to keep this in mind later on, for nothing could be further from Aristotle’s account of virtue. For Aristotle, virtue is manifest most clearly when one’s desires and inclinations dispose one toward virtue. Difficulty in performing the proper action is, for Aristotle, a reminder that one is not yet fully virtuous. For Kant, however, virtue is most fully manifested when, in the face of strong, opposing inclinations, one fulfills one’s duty anyway. Aristotelian virtue, then, is a way to organize and direct inclinations, while Kantian virtue is a means of overcoming inclination.

Kantian virtue is only valuable, therefore, because it assists a person in fulfilling her reason-derived duties. What is of ultimate importance is still, however, whether or not one has a good will. Virtue, then, is only instrumentally valuable. Courage, kindness, wisdom, and all the rest of the virtues are not inherently valuable or worthwhile; rather, they derive their value as a result of their tendency to help us carry out our duties. Thus Hill observes, “These traits are only conditionally good. Insofar as they enable morally good people to be more effective, they are traits that we have moral reason to cultivate but they are not intrinsically good or morally worthy traits. All these traits may be instrumental, but are not essential, to moral virtue.” To the extent that one can, then, one ought to develop the virtues, but only because doing so tends to lead one to have a good will, to fulfill one’s duty. The Kantian position is, therefore, that virtue has only instrumental, not intrinsic, value. A “lack of virtue,” we find, “can indeed coexist with the best will.” (MM 408)

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31 Kant, along with Aristotle, holds that virtue takes time and practice to develop, though Kant nonetheless wants to keep a sharp distinction between habit and virtue. It would be a challenge, therefore, for a Kantian to develop an account of the (non-habitual) formation of virtue.

32 Hill, “Two conceptions of virtue,” p. 170
We find this same conclusion in the *Groundwork*. In the midst of his argument for the unconditional value of a good will, Kant observes:

> Some qualities [i.e. virtue], even though they are helpful to this good will and can make its task very much easier, nevertheless have no intrinsic unconditional worth. Rather, they presuppose a good will which puts limits on the esteem in which they are rightly held and forbids us to regard them as absolutely good. (*GW* 394)

Whatever virtue’s worth may be, therefore, it is ultimately predicated on the possession of a good will.

A final point of consideration is that, for Kant, virtue is only (instrumentally) valuable because we are *natural*, as opposed to *holy*, creatures. The difference between natural and holy creatures has important implications for the discussion of moral worth. For Kant, natural creatures are (1) moral beings that are (2) capable of being tempted. Holy beings, on the other hand, are (1) moral beings that are (2) incapable of being tempted. Kant seems to equate the second condition—whether or not one is capable of being tempted—with freedom of will. This clarifies an earlier point, where I noted that, for Kant, it seems as if inclinations that ran contrary to duty could actually be morally valuable. Now, however, we can see that it was not the contrary inclinations that were valuable, per se, but rather the thing to which they point, namely, freedom of the will. The confusion stems from the fact that Kant takes, perhaps not incorrectly, having freedom of the will with also being tempted. Kant even goes so far as to say that it is better to have freedom with temptation than an un-free yet perfect obedience to the moral law: “Virtue so shines as an ideal that it seems, by human standards, to eclipse holiness itself, which is never tempted to break the law.” Kant then goes on to approvingly quote Haller: “Man with all his faults; Is better than a host of angels without will” (*MM* 397).33

In the above selections, Kant seems to suggest that holy beings are without will, but in other places he seems to argue just the opposite. The confusion may be a result of mere semantics, and the issue becomes clearer when we realize that if we were holy beings, who only inhabited the intelligible world, we *would* always follow the moral law, but since we also inhabit the sensible world, we *ought* to follow it. The moral ‘ought’ is only activated once there is a possibility of defect. This comes for us because we inhabit the intelligible and the sensible worlds. For Kant, then, with embodiment comes temptation34:

> [I]f I were only a member of the that [intelligible] world, all my actions would always accord with autonomy of the will. But since I intuit myself at the same time as a member of the world of sense, my actions ought to accord…The moral ought is, therefore, a necessary would insofar as he is a member of the intelligible world, and is thought by him as an ought only insofar as he regards himself as being at the same time a member of the world of sense” (*GW* 454-455).

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33 This line of reasoning is similar to the strategy often adopted in the “free will theodicy.” There the argument goes that it was better for God to create beings who were free and thus capable of sin and evil, than perfect, un-free creatures who were incapable of evil.

34 There is a long tradition of thinking that if only humans could be freed of their bodies, they would be able to achieve perfection. Plato and the Gnostics are perhaps the two most famous examples.
Such a position is, again, drastically at odds with an Aristotelian account of virtue. For Kant, the need for virtue, that is, the need for a strong will, arises because we are tempted as a result of our life in the sensible world. For Aristotle, however, it is (at least partly) the sensible world that allows us to develop habits that are conducive to virtue. This emphasis on the physicality of virtue receives renewed attention in neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue, like the one we find in MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, which emphasize the centrality of practices in the development of virtue.  

It is worth pointing out two presuppositions that provide the foundation for such a view. The first is, as I already hinted at, that the pure exercise of will is the only thing under our control. This leaves out, among other things, values and emotions. Kant contrasts feelings and inclinations with the will. For Kant, then, the “will is not a sentiment or feeling, but an intentional stance we take toward what we perceive as our options for acting” while feelings, on the other hand, “incline us to act in various ways.” Inclinations are just that, things that incline us toward action. They do not, however, determine our action. Though they may make it more likely that we act one way as opposed to another, it is crucial to Kant’s account that we always have the autonomy to govern our action by freely chosen maxims. For Kant, then, the will is determinative, and the self is thus defined as a rational will.

The second reason is that only those things which are under our direct control can be of moral worth. That Kant was incapable of imagining an alternative to this position is evidenced by the fact that he took his point that inclinations cannot have moral worth because they are fleeting to be convincing. This is perhaps the point of deepest potential disagreement between Kant and Aristotle. For Kant, it seemed clear that morality had to be completely under our control. This is, I think, closely connected to the overwhelming importance that Kant gave to the moral life. This explains why he thought it was better to be (morally) worthy of happiness than to actually be happy. The importance of morality and the degree to which morality must be under our control thus go hand in hand: if morality is the most important thing in life, then it makes sense that we would want it to be completely under our control. To admit otherwise would be to admit that the direction and value of our lives lies to a considerable extent outside of our control. Such a thesis is obviously a bit unsettling. The phrase “moral luck” is thus a contradiction in Kantian terms.

But holding that moral worth is exclusively tied to the will leads to what Bernard Williams has called an “uncomfortable dilemma.” Williams rhetorically asks: “is it certain that one who

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36 Hill and Zweig, 23

37 The debate concerning the extent to which we have control over our own morality is one of the main disagreements between Aristotle and the Stoics. Closely related to this question is the degree of vulnerability that is characteristic of our life as a whole. While the Stoics held that we have complete control over our morality, thus extinguishing vulnerability from life, Aristotle held to a more moderate thesis concerning moral luck, hence allowing for a bit of vulnerability. It is no accident that to change an answer to one of those questions is necessarily to change one’s position on the other. It is perhaps on this point that Kant’s debt to the Stoics is made most clear.
receives good treatment from another appreciates it, thinks the better of the giver, if he knows it to be the result of the application of principle, rather than the product of an emotional response?” The answer that we expect is quick to follow: “He may have needed, not the benefits of universal law, but some human gesture.” Some may retort, Williams notes, that though this may be true, it nonetheless has nothing to do with morality. This response brings Williams to his uncomfortable dilemma:

Well, this may be said, and Kant indeed said it, but it leads to an uncomfortable dilemma. Either the recipient ought to prefer the ministrations of the moral man to the human gesture, which seems a mildly insane requirement; or, alternatively, if it be admitted that it is perfectly proper and rational of the recipient to have the preference he has, the value of moral men becomes an open question, and we can reasonably entertain the proposal that we should not seek to produce moral men, or very many of them, but rather those, whatever their inconsistencies, who makes the human gesture. While there is something in that conclusion, there cannot be anything in it for Kant.38

Williams’s discussion leaves us with two options, neither of which are open to Kant. The first is to admit that morality is open to a degree of luck; that is, that moral worth is at least partially based on factors that are outside of our control. This position is in direct contradiction to the Kantian thought “that moral worth must be separated from any natural advantage whatsoever” and thus must “be located outside the empirically conditioned self.” Williams comments that Kant’s project “is in this respect a shattering failure” since “no human characteristic which is relevant to degrees of moral esteem can escape being an empirical characteristic, subject to empirical conditions, psychological history and individual variation.”39 To admit that all morally relevant factors are socially and personally conditioned is to admit that our moral worth is not completely under our control; that, while we can indeed do much to morally improve ourselves, there is, through no fault of our own, a limit to such improvement.

The second option that Williams leaves us with is whether or not we should make morality the highest of values. If we would rather a friend to visit us in the hospital out of genuine concern and sympathy rather than duty, and deny that such emotions have moral worth, then Williams rightly brings into question whether or not we should place such a high emphasis on moral worth, as opposed to other kinds.

Though Williams doesn’t notice that his two proposals are related, I think that there is an intimate connection. We do not have to choose, for instance, between embracing his first or second proposal. Indeed, I think that the affirmation of the first rather naturally leads to an embrace of the second. For if we admit that morality is subject to factors outside of our control, then we are more likely to admit that it is not of necessarily supreme value; we will be more likely to open ourselves to other kinds of value. I mentioned this point earlier while discussing Kant and the value of morality, but it is worth bringing up again for the connection is an important one. It is thus no coincident that those who hold that morality or virtue is of supreme importance, like the Stoics or Kant, are likely to also hold that morality or virtue is almost

39 Ibid 228
completely under our control. Others, however, who deny that we have complete control over our moral lives, also tend to question if morality is indeed of supreme importance. For to embrace the absolute value of morality while simultaneously asserting that we are subject to a considerable degree of moral luck is to make our lives seem unduly contingent.\(^{40}\)

For Aristotle, however, the issue of moral luck is a bit more complicated. I do not here have the space to devote an entire study to the subject of luck, moral or otherwise, but it is worth noting that luck is present for Aristotle in at least two ways. The first kind of luck is what I will call “eudaimonistic,” and it deals with one’s prospect to live a happy, blessed life. It is a rather uncontroversial reading of Aristotle to admit that there are factors outside of one’s control that contribute to happiness: a certain amount of external resources are needed. And so, Aristotle observes,

> happiness evidently also needs external goods to be added, as we said, since we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources….Further, deprivation of certain [externals]—for instance, good birth, good children, beauty—mars our blessedness. For we do not altogether have the character of happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born…and we have it even less, presumably, if our children or friends are totally bad. (1098a)

Though he does want to guard against luck completely determining our fate (“it would be seriously inappropriate to entrust what is greatest and finest to fortune” 1099b), Aristotle nonetheless makes it clear that certain factors that are necessary for eudaimonia are out of our control. “Some maintain, on the contrary, that we are happy when we are broken on the wheel, or fall into terrible misfortunes, provided that we are good” but these people, Aristotle retorts, “whether they mean to or not…are talking nonsense” (1153b). That he thinks that happiness “requires…a complete life” (1100a) is further evidence that eudaimonia is, to a certain extent, outside of our control.

The second, more controversial, kind of luck is moral. Aristotle’s position on moral luck comes from his emphasis on the necessity of a good upbringing; that is, Aristotle is forced to admit a certain degree of moral luck because he realizes that a considerable amount our character comes as a result of habituation, much of which takes place while we are young and incapable of any meaningful degree of rational moral agency. Because the habits that we repeat while we are young have a formative effect on our character, “we need to have been brought up in fine habits

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\(^{40}\) One might ask, in response, what is of ultimate importance? This question is especially pressing given that, if questions of morality are subject to luck, then certainly so are other candidates for value, such as happiness and personal relationships. A response to this challenge would be necessarily complex, but I think it would have to touch on several factors. The first is that the realization of our limits can serve as an occasion for humility and self-acceptance. A second possible response would be to introduce other sources of value. Susan Wolf admirably does this in her recent work, Meaning In Life and Why It Matters, in which she offers three considerations of value: morality, happiness, and meaning. It seems to me, however, that no matter what we acknowledge as ultimately valuable, it will be subject to a considerable degree of luck. In contesting the notion that morality is of supreme importance, I see Wolf and Williams to be engaged in a similar project. For earlier examples of this line of thought, see, among others, Wolf’s articles “Moral Saints” and “Morality and Partiality.”
if we are to be adequate students of fine and just things” (1095b). In addition to habituation as a child, we may be subject to a certain degree of luck because of the kinds of relationships that are open to us. That is to because, for Aristotle, a necessary condition for the development and exercise of virtue is friendship. One could not become, or for that matter remain, virtuous if surrounded by the wicked. 41

This is not, moreover, merely a comment on the effects that those around us have on us, though it is most certainly that as well. For Aristotle, the issue goes deeper; it is connected with practical reasoning. Because self-knowledge is a necessary aspect of practical ethical reasoning—reasoning that, in most cases, aims at the mean—and because friendship is necessary for self-knowledge, then friendship is necessary for practical moral reasoning. One cannot determine the availability of good friends—the kinds that are devoted to a shared life of the pursuit of virtue—and as a result of this, ethics is, to a considerable degree, a matter of luck.

As Aristotle often observes, moreover, the good that we seek is human good, not the good for the gods or for animals, and so we must ask what it is to be human. A partial answer to that question is that we are embodied, social, and rational creatures, and as such, we are at our core vulnerable. Right after Aristotle introduces self-sufficiency as a worthy ideal, he goes on to offer a qualification that is directed at the Stoics:

What we count as self-sufficient is not what suffices for a solitary person by himself, living an isolated life, but what suffices also for parents, children, wife, and, in general, for friends and fellow citizens, since a human being is naturally political animal” (1097b).

IV. Aristotelian Virtue

Much like with Kant, it would be inappropriate to begin discussion of Aristotle’s ethics with an investigation of virtue. Aristotle’s main concern, unlike modern philosophers, was how ethics fit into a broader conception of a good life. It may be useful here to take a step back from Aristotle and borrow an example from Plato to illustrate the point. As J.O. Urmson observes, when Plato

41 There are obvious political implications that come a result of this account of moral luck. What is unclear, however, is the content of the implications. Martha Nussbaum is convinced, for example, that her semi-Aristotelian account of capabilities and vulnerability is best expressed in a system of political liberalism. Alasdair MacIntyre, needless to say, disagrees on this point. I take it that where they differ is on the point of the role of government in making citizens virtuous. Whereas Nussbaum emphasizes that, for Aristotle, virtue is only praiseworthy if it is freely chosen, MacIntyre observes the effects that particular communities have on the formation of individual characters. Nussbaum is, moreover, quicker to point out the plurality of goodness, which no doubt influences her reluctance concerning whether or not a government ought to endorse a particular view of the good life. This disagreement is, I think, not peripheral but actually draws out a deep tension in Aristotle between choice and habituation. This is especially important because a considerable degree of the most impactful (moral) formation occurs for us at a young age, that is, before we are capable of meaningful choice. I take up this issue at the end of the paper and argue that the solution to the problem is found in the virtue of gratitude and in the act of choosing oneself.
is challenged why we ought to be moral, he does not attempt to show that moral reasons are somehow categorically different than other kinds of reasons. Plato does not, that is, argue that moral considerations are overriding and more important than other considerations like, say, happiness or meaning. Rather,

He never questions that the rational man will aim at the most worthwhile life, happiness, fulfillment. His strategy is quite different; his aim is to show that being just, being righteous, is an indispensable element in the good life, that Callicles and Thrasymachus [i.e. the moral skeptics] are wrong, not for seeking the most rewarding life, but for failing to recognize what it is.\textsuperscript{42}

The strategy of the ancient Greeks is, then, not to show that morality is the first of a series of hierarchical values and that, once one fulfills its obligations, one can go on seeking other kinds of value (as if morality is the first consideration in a lexical order), but rather that the life of virtue is the surest, and perhaps only, way to achieve true happiness.

Aristotle, I think, accepts this conclusion. This is why, in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Aristotle begins, not with a discussion of morality, but rather a consideration of what it means to be happy. After considering the opinions of the many and the wise, and subjecting each of them to rational scrutiny, Aristotle concludes that the goal or \textit{telos} of human action is \textit{eudaimonia}, which is often translated as happiness. In order to truly know what that conclusion entails, however, Aristotle must first establish what he takes to be the uniquely human function, our \textit{ergon}, the fulfillment of which leads to \textit{eudaimonia}. What he concludes is that in order to be happy, we must fulfill our uniquely human function. We learn later that this \textit{ergon} is the rational exercise of the soul in accordance with virtue. This may lead one to wonder that if, for Aristotle, like Kant, virtue is only instrumentally valuable. We will return to this question later.

The general idea is that because \textit{eudaimonia}, and not virtue, has theoretical priority in Aristotle’s account, whatever we end up saying about virtue must line up with our beliefs concerning \textit{eudaimonia}. And perhaps the most relevant fact about \textit{eudaimonia} is that it is pleasurable, and hence desirable. That is why, before we even get to Aristotle’s account of the relationship between reason and desire, we know that the exercise of virtue must be pleasant because of how it must relate to \textit{eudaimonia}. This is the first and most important reason why, for Aristotle, the exercise of virtue must be pleasant: virtue is part of the good life, and as such must be pleasurable.

I take it that this is the deepest reason for why Aristotle held that virtuous actions will be pleasing to the virtuous person, though it is often overlooked in discussions in the literature. This is probably because the second point, that we are about to come to, seems, on the surface, to be more directly relevant. That is, discussions of the differences between Aristotle and Kant all too frequently jump to their differing views of the relationship between virtue, reason, and inclination. And this is indeed important. What is foundational, however, is the nature of morality itself. As I quoted Williams’s observation earlier, the ancient Greeks did not have an equivalent to the category that we call “morality.” They were, rather, more concerned with what it took to live a good life; that is, one that would allow the one who lived it to achieve \textit{eudaimonia}.

Now we are capable of answering our earlier worry that virtue is only instrumentally valuable. One may think that virtue receives its legitimacy from happiness, that virtue only has value insofar as it leads to happiness. If this were so, then virtue would be only instrumentally valuable. This is not, however, the case. This worry is misplaced because, for Aristotle, virtue is a constitutive part of happiness. That is, virtue is not a means which we employ in order to achieve happiness, but virtuous activity is part of what happiness consists in. Virtue, we might say, does not stand in an external relation to happiness, for part of what it means to be happy is to be virtuous. Eudaimonia cannot, therefore, be properly defined without the inclusion of virtue. And this is precisely what we find in Aristotle’s clearest formulation of happiness: “the human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue” (1098a16-17). The idea is this: virtue must be pleasant because virtue is a constitutive part of eudaimonia, and eudaimonia is, by nature, pleasant. So, for virtue to be included, it must be pleasant.

Since virtue is eudaimonistic, therefore, its exercise must be pleasurable. And for the exercise of virtue to be pleasant, we must be inclined to act virtuously, since acting against our inclinations is difficult and painful. Thus, in order to be virtuous, we must be able to shape, form, and train our inclinations to bend toward virtue. Inclination and desire must, on this account, be malleable. This leads us to the second reason for why virtue must be pleasant, for it comes as a result of Aristotle’s account of desire and reason.

Though incontinence has received more philosophical attention than continence, and rightly so, it is the latter that concerns us here. Aristotle compares the continent person with the virtuous, especially as it pertains to inclination and pleasure. The continent person, like the virtuous, knows what the correct action to perform is, but, unlike the virtuous person, either isn’t inclined to perform it, or doesn’t receive pleasure from it once performed. What makes the continent person different from the incontinent, however, is that the continent performs the correct action. The incontinent, despite knowing the good action, fails to do so.43

The continent person, then, “seems to be the same as one who abides by his rational calculation” (1145a11-12). They are the ones who, after finding out the proper and virtuous action (which Aristotle takes to be at least a partly rational process), bring that conclusion to fruition in action. Aristotle puts this in terms of a practical syllogism: “someone knows that dry things benefit every human being, and that he himself is a human being,” and so, as long as one knows that $x$ is a dry thing, then he ought to eat $x$. Note, then, what he must know: what kind of being he is (a human being), and what kind of things he would benefit from. But he also must have some practical knowledge about the world; he must know what kinds of things are dry things. And he does, finally, act on the correct conclusion of that practical syllogism.

43 This is why incontinence is a philosophical problem, while continence is not. There is no puzzle in the case of someone knowing what they ought to do and then doing it. What seems to need explanation, however, is when one knows the proper action and yet fails to do it: “the incontinent person is like a city that votes for all the right decrees and has excellent laws, but does not apply them” (1152a20-21).
If the continent person has correct knowledge concerning the good and also enacts that knowledge, then why is he not the paradigm of virtue? Because he does not desire or enjoy the good to the proper degree. Though he understands what the correct action is, and then does it, he does not get the right pleasure from it. Thus, what Kant takes to be the shining example of virtue—the heroic exercise of the will to overcome contrary inclinations—Aristotle sees as evidence that one is not yet fully virtuous. If hesitation or difficulty accompanies one’s proper action, then it is not the overcoming of these desires that is virtuous; it is their redirection. This is why Jonathan Lear rightly observes that, for Aristotle, virtue is about the proper ordering of desire: “The task of ethical education, though, is not to get us to perform noble acts even though our desires pull us toward bad things [though that is indeed admirable], but rather to reorganize our desires so that we get pleasure from doing noble acts and pain from doing bad ones.”

At this point I need to add a caveat. It can be easy in all of this to act as if the continent person is somehow bad. This, however, is far from the truth. Indeed, continence is probably the best that most of us can hope for. For if Aristotle is right in placing so much emphasis on being properly brought up, then it is likely that only those who were fortunate enough to have a virtuous childhood will ever be able to become fully virtuous. Virtue is, for Aristotle, a rather high bar to reach, and we will see why in a moment. For the time, however, we should realize that continence is indeed praiseworthy. The overcoming of inclinations that are contrary to virtue is a difficult and commendable achievement. It is not, however, the highest good for humans. That, we will now see, is to be found in a life of fully virtuous action.

Aristotle first introduces the idea that the life of virtue is pleasant on the heels of his defense of eudaimonia as the telos of human life. There he argues that each type of person finds pleasure in whatever he is called a lover of; a horse, for instance, pleases the horse-lover, a spectacle the lover of spectacles. Similarly, what is just pleases the lover of justice, and in general what accords with virtue pleases the lover of virtue (1099a11, emphasis added).

He goes on to state that the virtuous life does not need pleasure to be added onto it; “rather, it has its pleasure within itself” (1099a16-17). “[S]omeone who does not enjoy fine actions,” therefore, “is not good; for no one would call a person just, for instance, if he did not enjoy doing just actions, or generous if he did not enjoy generous actions, and similarly for the other virtues” (1099a17-20). For Aristotle, then, the virtuous person enjoys virtuous action. This is, indeed, the mark of virtue.

As I mentioned earlier, Aristotle has two chief reasons for linking pleasure and virtue. One reason is because of the relationship between ethics and eudaimonia. Because the Greeks did not have our modern moral category, their notions of ethics were inseparably bound up with what it meant to live a good life. As we saw with Plato, the Greek response to a moral skeptic was not to show that there were certain moral reasons that could override all other reasons. It was, rather, to show that the only way that one could really live a happy life was to live ethically. For Aristotle, then, there was not a necessary dichotomy between happiness and morality; indeed, the only way that one could achieve happiness is by living ethically.

44 Lear 168
The second reason has to do with Aristotle’s conception of desire. As Jonathan Lear rightly observes, “Desires in Aristotle’s world are sufficiently rich to be shaped, organized, and impregnated with reason.”\textsuperscript{45} Because desire is, for Aristotle, capable of being formed and changed through reason, then it follows that one’s desires can be properly seen as reflecting a scheme of values. And if this is so, then it is also true that to desire, and hence enjoy, virtuous action, is a sign that one values virtue. This is, needless to say, why Aristotle argues that the enjoyment of virtue is a mark thereof.

Desire, inclination, and emotion are thus objects of ethical scrutiny because we can exercise some agency over them. They are not, as we found in Kant, uncontrollable elements that need to be overcome. Inclination is rather a malleable set of dispositions that reveal something about our scheme of values.\textsuperscript{46} As Bernard Williams observes: “when considerations which show the emotion to be inappropriate fail to displace it, this is not because it is an emotion but because it is an irrational emotion.”\textsuperscript{47}

We have found, then, that Aristotle and Kant’s disagreement over the moral worth of inclination and pleasure is much deeper than it may have first appeared. The dissension is not a mere divergence of intuitions, but rather results from a deep disagreement over foundational considerations of moral psychology and reason. Evidence that such a disagreement is indeed foundational can be found by the way it works itself in Aristotle’s account of habituation and moral formation, to which we now turn.

V. Aristotle on Moral Formation

For Aristotle, the way that we become virtuous is by continually performing virtuous action\textsuperscript{48} over and over again. Aristotle tellingly illustrates the process of becoming virtuous by the parallel example of how one becomes a craftsman:

- For we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions (1103a32-35).

Notice that there is a kind of circularity in this account, though it is of a beneficial and intuitive, not fatal, nature. “For abstaining from pleasure makes us temperate, and once we have become temperate we are must capable of abstaining from pleasures” (1104a32-34). It is by performing virtuous acts that we acquire virtue, but it is only once we are virtuous that we can truly perform virtuous acts. The way that the circularity is broken, I think, is by attending to Aristotle’s example of learning a craft. For in learning a craft we must first be under the guidance of an expert, a person who knows the craft. It is only after training under their watchful eye and learning from their example that we are able to do the craft for ourselves. Here it may be useful

\textsuperscript{45} Lear, 165
\textsuperscript{46} For more on emotions as judgments of value, see Martha Nussbaum’s \textit{Therapy of Desire} and \textit{Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions}.
\textsuperscript{47} Bernard Williams, \textit{Problems of the Self}, p. 224
\textsuperscript{48} In giving action, and not intention, primacy, Aristotelian virtue differs from the kind we find in Hume and Smith.
to remind ourselves of Kant’s radically different account, which denied any role to following the example of other humans.

It is thus only after the habitual repetition of virtuous action that we can truly become virtuous. Aristotle thinks that the patterns of behavior and emotion that we develop as children stick with us throughout our lives, and it is thus of supreme importance on this account that we receive proper training while we are young and still malleable. How, though, are we taught what is good as children? For Aristotle, we must be trained to be virtuous through pleasure and pain, which he takes to be primary motivators of human action. This is why “when we educate children, we steer them by pleasure and pain” (1172a21-22). This kind of training is not, we should note, a rational process. Rather, in using pleasure and pain as pedagogical tools, we are exerting different kinds of non-rational pressures on children to teach them to become good. We may punish them by taking away certain privileges, express our disapproval or disappointment, or deprive them of certain social or personal pleasures in order to teach them that whatever they did was unacceptable. We might, on the other hand, reward them by granting certain privileges, extending benefits and incentives to good behavior, or otherwise express approval and gratitude for the children’s good behavior. These external, non-rational pressures eventually become internalized and form into one’s conscience. The conscience, then, is not some faculty that we have as a result of our rational natures, but rather because of our social natures. It is, we might, the voice of our parents, community, or government internalized and made our own.

The important point to note here is that we are initially habituated through the use of pleasure and pain, and that these patterns of response to our behavior become internalized and largely persist through the rest of our lives. “For pleasure and pain extend through the whole of our lives, and are of great importance for virtue and the happy life, since people decide on pleasant things, and avoid painful things” (1172a23-25). Because Aristotle thinks that human behavior is largely motivated by pleasure and pain, regardless of age or virtue, it is important that we are habituated in the right way so as to ensure that what we find pleasurable is also a reliable guide to what is virtuous.

Correct habituation, via non-rational pleasures and pains, is thus essential to the process of moral formation that is necessary in order to become virtuous. It is, however, important for an even deeper reason: Aristotle takes virtue to be a necessary prerequisite for correct reasoning. That is, for Aristotle one must first possess a virtuous character before she is capable of properly carrying on rational deliberation. “Arguments and teaching surely do not prevail on everyone,” Aristotle claims,

but the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits for enjoying and hating finely, like ground that is to nourish seed. Hence we must already in some way have a character suitable for virtue (1179b25-30).

Aristotle repeatedly states that his lectures will be of no use to people who have not had the proper upbringing. This is crucial, for Aristotle does not separate one’s character from one’s rationality. The reasoning process is thus not stepping back and taking a view from nowhere, so to speak, but rather taking a very particular point of view, namely that of the wise. And because of what we know of the wise, we can now conclude that reason is not detached from one’s social formation, but is rather the result of it. For Aristotle, then, character and reason are intimately
connected. Indeed, we might even say that a virtuous character is a necessary prerequisite for correct reasoning. Moral claims are not, therefore, knowable to all rational agents qua rational agents, as they are for Kant. We cannot expect, therefore, all rational agents to both be able to understand moral claims and to be able to put them into action. Indeed, for Aristotle, we cannot reasonably hold either of these expectations. Thus for Aristotle, as for Hume, in order to be virtuous we must first have a non-rational desire to be moral. This desire is a result of our social nature, which not only forms our pleasures and pains, but also gives rise to a desire to participate in community, which naturally enough leads to the development of certain ethical norms.

It is this non-rational side of morality that Philippa Foot draws attention to in her paper, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives.” Though Foot is here using explicitly Kantian language, her project is thoroughly anti-Kantian in spirit, in that it aims to undermine the notion that morality gives us overriding reasons for action, regardless of an agent’s desires, that can be derived through the exercise of pure reason. Foot claims that there is no magic power in the moral ‘ought.’ In order for moral claims to be meaningful, then, an agent must have the proper subjective motivational structure already in place. That is, the agent must already care about morality. If they do not, then there is no amount of rational argumentation that will be able to convince them otherwise. We may exercise all kinds of non-rational pressures—social, financial, legal, etc.—in order to get the agent to value morality, but that is the most we can do. Note here that the role of habituation is amplified; for if it is important for an agent to be properly motivated, then good formation is essential. If morality were derived from reason, on the other hand, and if moral reasons therefore had rational force, then formation would be less important, for so long as an agent remains rational, then moral claims continue to carry weight.

Foot’s account is thus more radical than Aristotle’s. For Aristotle merely argues that not everyone can properly engage in moral reasoning. He is still capable, however, of privileging the reasoning of the wise. He is, we might say, still committed to an objective moral truth, it’s just that not everyone can know it. For Foot, however, morality is only binding given a set of prior commitments and desires, without which morality is incapable of any force. In Foot’s defense, however, those prior commitments—such as life in community, love, friendship, social engagement, etc.—are nearly universal.

For Aristotle, therefore, only those who have had a good upbringing, i.e. the virtuous, are able to find pleasure in the right kinds of activities. “That is why we need to have had the appropriate upbringing—right from early youth, as Plato says—to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for this is the correct education” (1104b11-12). Our account of the particularity of reason may have led us to worry that truth would no longer be objective, but here we find that the wise can serve as an objective standard of virtue and rationality, for pleasure is not good qua pleasure, but only insofar as it is directed at the right kinds of things:

To those who cite the disgraceful pleasures [to show that pleasure is not a good], we must reply that these [sources of disgraceful pleasures] are not pleasant. For things are healthy or sweet or bitter to sick people, we should not suppose that they are also healthy, or sweet, or bitter, except to them, or that things appearing white to people with eye disease are white, except to them. Similarly, if things are pleasant to people in bad condition, we should not suppose that they are pleasant, except to these people (1173b22-25).
Aristotle’s analogy with health here is telling, for just as the unhealthy person is not to be trusted as a standard of correct judgment with regards to matters of the body, neither is the vicious person to be trusted when it comes to matters that concern virtue. The examples of health are indicative for the further reason that in the same way that health is the norm because it is helps us fulfill our *ergon*, so too is virtue the norm insofar as when we are virtuous we are acting in accord with the human *ergon*.

Kant, on the other hand, thought that any rationally reflective person is capable of discovering moral truths. Such a process need not make any fundamental reference to a community: the individual is capable of carrying it out on his or her own. For Aristotle, however, the process of moral reasoning is necessarily communal. His *endoxic* method, which started from widely accepted beliefs, of both the wise and the many, and then subjected them to rational inquiry, presupposes the prior existence of a moral community. That Aristotle saw practical reasoning, as well as the development and sustaining of virtue, as tied up with friendship is further evidence that, for Aristotle, the practice of moral reasoning and the cultivation of virtue, is necessarily a political and social enterprise. Because the habits of one’s youth—largely determined by family, community, and society, significantly predispose one toward or away from virtue, then one’s character cannot be the product of a solitary individual’s will. Aristotle’s account of moral formation, through habituation, is thus intimately linked to his account of community.

And I take it that in making morality so radically socially dependent most modern philosophers have taken Aristotle to make a grave mistake. Modernity has characterized morality such that any relatively rational person must be capable of moral knowledge and must have the ability to be moral. We thus want to take morality out of the realm of community and into the realm of the individual, for only in doing this can we assure that, regardless of one’s upbringing, one has the chance to be moral. I think that there are several motivating reasons for this development. One, already present in ancient Greece, is the desire to be free from vulnerability. But a particularly modern reason for the development, I think, is an increase in pluralism. In modern societies, which are made up of people from a multitude of backgrounds, we find it necessary to be able to come to some sort of moral agreement that does not presuppose a common background. That is, to be able to find a neutral moral framework in which claims can be judged by a universal standard of rationality. I take it that this is one of the goals of modern philosophy.

In all of this, however, Aristotle hastens to say that we do not choose virtue for its pleasure. Regardless of if virtue brought us pleasure, it would be good and choice worthy regardless. “[T]here are many things,” Aristotle observes, that we would be eager for even if they brought no pleasure—for instance seeing, remembering, knowing, having the virtues. Even if pleasures necessarily follow on them, that does not matter; for we would choose them even if no pleasure resulted from them (1174a5-9).

Virtue is thus not choice worthy *because* it gives us pleasure, though Aristotle’s universe is ordered such that pleasure does in fact always attend the actions of the truly virtuous person. The virtuous person, for Aristotle unlike for Kant, is rewarded with pleasure and happiness in this lifetime.
For Aristotle, then, much of the work that is part of becoming virtuous happens before one is even capable of rational choice; that is, because habituation is central to training in virtue and since the most important stages of training occur when one is a child, it seems as if the virtuous person is not responsible for their character. If one owes one’s virtue to forces that are largely, if not entirely, outside of one’s control, then praise and blame are rendered useless as moral categories. For Aristotle held that virtuous character is the result of doing virtuous actions many times over: “we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions,” and so on (11031b1-2). “To sum it up in a single account,” Aristotle observes that, “a state [of character] results from [the repetition of] similar activities” (11031b21-22).

“It is not unimportant,” Aristotle goes on to argue, “to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth. On the contrary it is very important, indeed all-important” (1103b23-25). This is presumably because the kinds of habits that we form in our youth, or perhaps more accurately, that our parents and culture form in us while we are young, are not easily changed. Once we have become accustomed to a settled pattern of life it is indeed extremely difficult to change that way of living. “Pleasure,” which Aristotle sees as partially forming the basis for virtue, “grows up with us from infancy on. That is why it is hard to rub out this feeling that is dyed into our lives” (1105a3-4). We can all think of people, for example, whose upbringing has so marred them that it seems that they are incapable of acting in any consistently moral manner. And though we may not want to concede that all hope is lost for such a person, it is nonetheless clear that one’s upbringing significantly predisposes one toward virtue, vice, or, most likely, somewhere in between. The point here is that much of one’s character is formed to a not trivial extent before one can exercise any real degree of rational agency.

VI. Self-Reflective Endorsement and Gratitude

Throughout my reconstruction of Aristotelian and Kantian virtue, I have offered considerations in favor of the Aristotelian approach. Perhaps the most important reasons for the superiority of the Aristotelian account so far have been that Aristotle tells a more satisfactory story concerning the nature and role of emotion and desire, in addition to embracing a more realistic—though also perhaps more unsettling—account of moral luck. In this section, I will offer a final consideration in favor of Aristotle. What follows is meant to address the worry that we began with, that there seems to be something intuitively plausible in Kant’s account. That something, I think, is that morality is somehow tied to effort. Though our conclusions on moral luck reduced the force of such an intuition, it nonetheless retains some of its appeal. In this final section, then, I aim to produce an Aristotelian counter-weight. That is, I seek to show why the achievement of Aristotelian virtue is hard work after all. This is especially important to show in light of our conclusions concerning moral luck and habituation, in which, it seemed, one becomes virtuous because of fortune and upbringing, not effort. The argument will not serve to reverse the earlier findings on moral luck. Indeed, the present argument presupposes those very conclusions. It is to that issue that we now turn.

What is of importance for our purposes here is the extent to which character is formed in one’s childhood and thus the extent to which moral praise and blame are appropriate. This is what Kant gets right: that morality is somehow tied to effort; being good is supposed to be hard work. If,
however, Aristotle thought that much of one’s character is formed before one is capable of exercising any rational agency, then how could my argument be right? In what follows I propose two answers. The first is that, if a person’s character is the result of a virtuous upbringing, one does not become truly virtuous until one has reflectively affirmed one’s character. And, moreover, one must continue to go on to affirm virtue through their actions for the rest of one’s life. I take it that in arguing this I am making a recognizably Aristotelian point. My second answer, however, may seem at first to not be in accord with Aristotle’s thought. It is this: the virtue of gratitude. In the case that one’s character has been well formed by others, then that person has the opportunity to develop a virtue that is not open to all: the virtue of gratitude. The proper response to a good upbringing is thus sufficient thankfulness and gratitude, without which one would be lacking.

Let us start first with the process of conscious affirmation, or what Jonathan Lear calls “self-reflective endorsement.” The problem arises because habituation, especially of the kind that Aristotle recommends, that is, of children, often causes a person to become virtuous, or least to do virtuous actions, before they can provide reasons for acting. “The ethical virtues,” can thus “arise in an agent relatively unconsciously.” This, however, is a problem for several reasons. The first is that merely acting in accord with virtue does not make a person virtuous. One must choose virtue because it is good in order to be truly virtuous. Any kind of unconscious action would, moreover, surely be problematic for Aristotle given his emphasis on the role of self-knowledge in practical reasoning. It is, finally, a problem for my argument because it means that a person can become virtuous without any kind of real effort. Self-reflective endorsement is one way that I propose to solve these problems.

First, though, what is self-reflective endorsement? Self-reflective endorsement is made up of two necessary components: self-knowledge and knowledge of the good life, or eudaimonia. The only way that one can actually engage in a process of self-reflective endorsement is if one has each of these pieces. This is so because self-reflective endorsement is an act of comparing oneself, as one actually is, to oneself as one ought to be. Or, to put it in less Kantian terms, to compare one’s life with the life that is characterized by eudaimonia; that is, to compare oneself with the virtuous person. A person can only affirm her character to the extent that eudaimonia is a settled and consistent feature of her life. In those cases, then, “[i]n acquiring self-understanding,” the virtuous person “achieve[s] a legitimation.” In short, self-reflective endorsement is the process of affirming one’s character to the extent that one is virtuous.

This process of legitimation through reflective self-endorsement is, according to Lear, what the Nicomachean Ethics is all about. We have already seen that Aristotle did not think that listening to a lecture or reading a book could make a person virtuous. It is, rather, by habitually performing virtuous actions that one becomes virtuous. This is why he did not expect his lectures to be of any use to those who lacked the proper upbringing. If their purpose wasn’t to convince people to be moral, however, then what was it? The answer is that they were aimed at securing the virtue of those who were, to a considerable degree, already virtuous. Lear observes that “it is

49 See Lear, p. 186-191
50 Lear 186
51 Ibid, 186
the aim of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to help the virtuous person make the transition from merely having a good character to consciously understanding and accepting his character.”⁵² That is, Aristotle delivered the Ethics to deepen the knowledge of those who already habitually performed virtuous actions, so that they might come to a reflective endorsement of their own character, and hence achieve true virtue. In this sense, then, the *Nicomachean Ethics* can actually be seen as a manifestation of Aristotle’s own virtue, as it could represent his personal journey of reflective endorsement.

We might worry, however, that the process of self-reflective endorsement is just a way to provide legitimacy to one’s parochial values. Wouldn’t we just end up affirming whatever our character is, regardless of its rightness? To guard against such dangers, Lear proposes two conditions for legitimate self-reflective endorsement. The first is that one must affirm one’s character “for a reason.” Lear notes that, for Aristotle, such reasons will be based in a conception of human flourishing. One’s character must thus contribute to human well-being. What if, however, one has a twisted notion of well-being? This brings us to the second condition: “the reflection must be accurate and sensitive to the truth.”⁵³ And so, in the process of endorsing one’s character, one must do so for reasons, grounded in human flourishing, that are sensitive to truth claims.

Susan Wolf provides a helpful example in her paper “Asymmetrical Freedom,” albeit in an admittedly different context. Wolf imagines two generous men, each of whom has the virtue of generosity as a result of their relationship with their mothers. As a child, the first man became generous in order to earn his mother’s approval, and if it were not for this, he would not have developed the trait.

We can imagine further that once this man’s character had been developed, he would never subject it to question or change. His character would remain unthinkingly rigid, carried over from a childhood over which he had no control. As he developed a tendency to be generous, let us say, he developed other tendencies—a tendency to brush his teeth twice a day, a tendency to avoid the company of Jews. The explanation for why he developed any of these traits is more or less the same as the explanation for why he has developed any other...These tendencies are all, for him, merely habits which he has never thought about breaking.⁵⁴

The second man, though also generous for the same reasons, develops a bit differently over time. He too develops his generosity in order to please his mother, but “his reasons for developing a generous nature need not be his reasons for retaining it when he grows more mature.” He may, for instance, “notice...that his generous acts provide him an independent pleasure,” allow for healthier friendships, and fit “in well with his ideas of how one ought to live.”⁵⁵ What Wolf here rightly observes is that moral development is a process: there is an initial stage of becoming moral, and then a latter stage of affirming or critiquing one’s character. This latter stage, I take it,

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⁵² Ibid, 187
⁵³ Ibid, 190
⁵⁵ Ibid, 158; italics added. Though the process of moral formation is not the point Wolf is trying to make, the one that she outlines seems to me to be deeply Aristotelian.
is something roughly similar to what Lear calls self-reflective endorsement. Notice as well that the reflective process ought to lead one to abandon immoral tendencies that one inherited from one’s upbringing. Imagine, for example, that the man in Wolf’s first example decided to scrutinize his life and values. The self-reflective enterprise, in order to be meaningful, must result in his conscious and reasoned affirmation of his generosity, as well as a conscious and reasoned rejection of his anti-Semitism.

Though I don’t have space to pursue the point fully, I want to pause here to mention how unique, and, I should say, insightful, such a framework of moral development truly is. If what I have argued above is correct, then Aristotle lays out at least a two-step process that is necessary to become truly virtuous. The first step is habituation, much of which happens before one is old enough to have any real degree of moral agency or rationality. The second step is that of self-reflective endorsement. What I take to be so unique and insightful about Aristotle’s scheme is that the second step is not possible without the first. This is true in both a superficial and deep way. The superficial sense is, obviously enough, that one could not self-reflectively endorse one’s character if one were not already virtuous. The sense in which it is deep is that the kinds of reasons that one provides in the process of self-reflective endorsement would hold no weight, so to speak, if one were not already virtuous. That is, one must already have a certain disposition in order for moral claims to be appropriately persuasive. This is why Aristotle repeatedly states that his lectures are only for those who are already virtuous. In this sense, then, the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a kind of resource guide for the already well-habituated—though not yet-virtuous—that is, for those who are going through, or are about to go through, the self-reflective process. For it is only those people who will have the necessary kind of training that opens them up to be receptive to moral reasoning. We should observe once more how different this scheme of justification is from Kant’s. For Kant, all rational beings have the same capacity to engage in moral reasoning, regardless of character. The wicked come to the same conclusions as the wise. For Aristotle, however, only those who have been well trained can properly engage in the process of moral reasoning.

We have still yet to learn, however, why self-reflective endorsement is supposedly so difficult. The answer is that, for Aristotle, coming to an adequate level of self-understanding is no easy task. Indeed, for Aristotle, achieving self-knowledge is a commendable achievement in part because of its difficulty. It is difficult because it takes long-term involvement in a community of friends. Participation in such a community is hard work. Self-understanding does not come cheap. Self-reflective endorsement is difficult, finally, because it relies on a fairly in-depth understanding of human flourishing. Such an understanding presumably takes quite a bit of study and reflection. Studying the *Nicomachean Ethics* is presumably one good way to begin such a journey.

This brings us to our final point. Whereas our comments on the nature of self-reflective endorsement were a way to respond to the charge that one whose virtuous character is largely the

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56 Thus, in order to fully and properly investigate moral formation, we must also get clear on the nature of the relationship between reason and morality, the role of community, and the nature of moral agency. That all this is necessary in order to understand Aristotle’s stance on the issue is, I think, proof of its central role in his theory.
result of upbringing is not worthy of any moral praise, what follows is a final thought on the appropriate response of a person well raised. And the appropriate response is gratitude.

If what I have argued so far is correct, that one’s virtuous character can indeed be the result of a process of moral education that, to a considerable degree, one had little to do with, then virtue ought to be viewed as a gift. On this point I am indebted to Robert Adams, who rightly draws out the implications of moral luck. Adams notes that moral luck is active on a number levels. First, and perhaps most importantly, we owe a significant portion of our character to our upbringing. This may, and should, include our parents, but it is not limited to them. We are formed by any number of factors, including friends and family, culture, teachers, our education, and so on. In addition to these influences, our virtue is also at least partially dependent on circumstances that are worked out on a larger stage: the functioning of the global economy and international politics do, in an indirect way, shape the extent to which virtue is available to us, whether by creating circumstances in which the development of virtue is nearly impossible (e.g. dire poverty and famine) or extremely difficult (e.g. under a tyrannical regime). In cases like these, the development and exercise of virtue is stunted because of factors that are outside of a single individual’s control. And, as we have already seen, the preservation of virtue, of which friends and external resources are a necessary part, is also subject to luck. The “deep and pervasive involvement of moral luck in the acquisition and persistence of virtue” leads Adams to rightly conclude that “it is inappropriate and misleading to think of virtue primarily as an individual achievement.”

If virtue is not, however, an individual achievement, then what is it? Following Adams, I want to suggest that virtue is rightly seen as a gift. That virtue is properly seen as a gift is intimately linked to a rather strong thesis of moral luck. It rests upon the rightness of the argument that we cannot properly take credit for much of our own character; it recognizes that outside forces outside have shaped our character and that we remain dependent on some of those very same forces for the maintenance of our virtue. If all of this is true, and I think that it is, then the proper response to a virtuous character is gratitude. Adams makes the connection explicit: “if it is right to think of virtue as a gift, then it should also be right to grateful for it.”

To say that virtue is largely a gift, however, is not to say that it does not take effort. For as we have seen in the case of self-reflective endorsement, the proper reception of virtue may indeed be hard work. What we find here, then, is that it may actually be quite difficult to accept the gift of virtue. Indeed, it seems that only those who are already virtuous would be capable of doing the kind of work that is necessary to accept the gift of virtue. What we have in the case of virtue as gift, then, is a rather counter-intuitive model of what we normally associate with the idea of work and gift. In our case, what we find is not that gift and work are radically opposed to one another, but rather that they go hand in hand. Adams observes that virtue “is not a gift received without

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58 Ibid,168
effort, as many of the best gifts are not; but effort would not have been enough. And it is to be treasured no less for being a gift than for having involved some effort.”

At first glance it may seem as if the virtue of gratitude is only available to those who have been raised well. The person who had a terrible upbringing, and for whom virtue may be now out of reach, seems to have little reason to be thankful for much. Indeed, if we grant that the person who was lucky enough to have a good upbringing ought to be thankful, then it seems that the one who had a poor upbringing ought to be upset and bitter, or that they at least have the right to be. Adams offers an interesting suggestion on this point, however. To the one who complains about unequal luck with regards to virtue, Adams suggests the following response:

You’re welcome to join us in being for the good. There’s plenty of good to be for, and plenty of excellence to admire, enjoy, and support. No way of apportioning excellence among individuals who participate in it in those ways is as important as whether it’s there for us, including you, and whether you’re for it.

For Adams, then, what matters is not so much who is virtuous, but rather that there is goodness in the form of virtue. This is, no doubt, in large part due to his metaphysical theism and Platonism. It is also connected to Adams’s idea that virtue is a way of excellently being for the good. Nonetheless, I don’t think that such a response is dependent on those kinds of commitments. Indeed, I think that such a response is precisely what virtue calls for, since it is a way of inviting others to participate in the kind of life that is characterized by virtue; the kind of life is that is eudaimonia. “It is good”, as Adams says, “to appreciate what is excellent,” whether one is the owner of that excellence or not. The proper response to goodness, then, is “to be glad of its presence in the world.” These, Adams argues, are the “appropriate responses to another person’s virtue.”

Such a response is characteristic of humility, as it focuses more “on the excellence of what we are doing and have done than on the excellence of my part in it.” Adams is right to make the link between gratitude and humility as he observes that, insofar as one is humble, “one will want to participate in excellence that transcends one’s own or extends beyond one’s own.” This is partly why Adams advocates that the virtuous invite the morally unlucky into their community so that they can appreciate the excellence that goes beyond the individual. It is questionable how satisfying such an invitation is, however, since the recognition of virtue as excellence and the desire to partake in it seem to already be part of what it means to be virtuous. Ironically, then,

59 Ibid, 165. There may seem to some obvious theological connections to be made in this discussion, particularly with regards to the traditional Protestant dichotomy between works and grace. Adams, a Christian, notes that a similar idea is the religious belief that some “personal quality is the more to be treasured for being a gift of God’s grace” (169). There is, however, and as Adams rightly grants, a non-theological point to be made as well. It is this point that I have tried to make in the above section.
60 Ibid, 166
61 Ibid, 168
62 Ibid, 169
63 Though this line of argument has obvious theological parallels to the notion of worship, it is not dependent on any theological context for its merit.
perhaps the only ones fit to respond to such an invitation would be the only ones who don’t need it. Whether or not we are willing to stomach such a bitter truth will, I suppose, go a long way in determining whether we are Aristotelians or Kantians.

Gratitude and humility are connected in a further way. Though it may be obvious, it is so important as to warrant mentioning. Being grateful for one’s virtue necessarily entails humility since it is a recognition that one would have been incapable of producing oneself on one’s own. That is, the virtuous person’s character was not a product of her own effort. Realizing that one needed help in order to become virtuous is a humble recognition, not in the sense of undervaluing oneself, but in the sense of exercising right judgment. Indeed, I am doubtful that one would ever be able to fully develop the virtue of gratitude if they had not already developed, to some degree, the virtue of humility.

In closing it may be worth mentioning that the virtues of gratitude and humility may be seen as thoroughly anti-Aristotelian. Nonetheless, I take it that we have arrived at them as a result of an Aristotelian line of reasoning that emphasizes the role of habituation and community in the development and maintenance of virtue. It is an open question, then, whether on this point we have managed to be more Aristotelian than Aristotle.

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64 Formulating a response to such a predicament is a deep challenge to virtue theory, as it connects to the issue of what to do with those people who were unlucky enough to have a poor upbringing. For unless the unlucky are just morally stranded, there must some convincing theoretical account of how people who presumably lack not just virtue but also the desire for virtue can be convinced to begin the difficult process of character formation. This is especially challenging given Lear’s comments on the nature of justification that we find in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, namely that it is not meant to convince the skeptic but to reassure the already virtuous.