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Toward A More Intuitive Virtue Ethics: A Perspectival View

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Within virtue ethics, neo-Aristotelian accounts make up the dominant view, as this model served as a basis for the revival of the theory in the contemporary normative ethical landscape. These theories provide accounts with a number of agreeable features; however, I shall argue that, by determining the degree to which one has flourished exclusively in terms of the degree to which one has accorded with the virtues, neo-Aristotelian accounts neglect an integral element of how we intuitively would like to judge the extent to which one has flourished. Further, I will argue that this issue gives one reasons to adopt a theory that is able to accommodate such intuitive notions, provided that it retains equal explanatory power regarding the virtues. Finally, I will give a perspectival account of virtue that is able to accommodate these concerns and which should therefore be preferred to the neo-Aristotelian view, as the virtues are preserved yet not defined in terms of flourishing.

Virtue ethics in general contrasts with the two alternative leading ethical theories, consequentialism and deontology, in a number of ways. Where consequentialism is concerned with producing the best overall consequences in every situation, and deontology with requisite duties all humans are obliged to comply with, such as treating each person in the same way you yourself would like to be treated, virtue ethics examines the role the virtues play in an account of how we ought to act and live. Rather than search for a single principle based upon which an ethical judgment can be made, theories of virtue begin the inquiry by examining the type of person we ought to be and derive the virtues from those findings.

A view within virtue ethics may be seen as neo-Aristotelian, generally, if it maintains the definition of a virtue as a trait needed for, or at least important for,
flourishing. This conception of virtue is not the only feature that qualifies a view as neo-Aristotelian, but the close connection between the virtues and flourishing is a salient component. Additionally, on the neo-Aristotelian account, flourishing can be seen as the target of how one ought to live, and a definition of flourishing for Aristotle, upon whom the name is based and from whom many of the central ideas of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics are derived, is rational activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (Reeve 309, Aristotle 1098a15-17). This definition is somewhat circular, as the virtues are defined as those traits that lead to flourishing, and flourishing is defined, in part, as accordance with the virtues. This circularity is a difficulty that is not the primary focus of my criticism, however, a theory capable of eschewing it would be preferred. Surprisingly, specific neo-Aristotelian accounts of flourishing are elusive, as it seems to be a concept that is somewhat taken for granted. These accounts, when found, vary in their exact conception of flourishing, with many preferring Aristotle’s view, and others straying from it to varying degrees.

Philippa Foot gave a view with Aristotelian roots in her work *Natural Goodness*, where vices are deficiencies relative to the human norm, and virtues are “good dispositions of the human will” (Foot 39). Flourishing, for Foot, would be to live in accordance with these good dispositions of the will, such as justice, courage, temperance, and benevolence, in the way an organism such as a human being should standardly be. To not live in general accordance with the virtues, which as she writes are, “…determined by what is needed for development, self-maintenance, and reproduction,” is to be defective in one’s being a human being (Foot 33).
This is contrasted by the view of James D. Wallace, who saw the human function as “…a social life informed by convention,” which involves a different view than Aristotle or Foot. Wallace saw virtues more simply as traits necessary for human beings to live lives suitable to human beings, and suggested that if these traits were lacking in a whole group of people, those people would be unable to live those suitable kinds of lives (Wallace 37). Virtues according to Wallace include items such as courage, conscientiousness, and benevolence, and these traits are “…capacities or tendencies to suit an individual for human life generally” (Wallace 37). That is, the virtues are generally needed amongst all individuals in order for them to achieve a social life informed by convention, which is to perform the human function well and to therefore flourish.

These accounts seem to leave the neo-Aristotelian open to the objection of leaning upon a type of relativism to establish virtues and vices in given societies, as societies may differ in their views on what it is for one to flourish by assuming their own values and traditions are the virtues rather than subscribing to an objective standard. Indeed, even much of Aristotle’s own list of virtues can be seen as taken from his own society’s norms and values (Nussbaum 686). This objection was refuted, however, by Martha Nussbaum, who gave a novel account of a neo-Aristotelian ethics, dubbed “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach.” In her paper, Nussbaum points out Aristotle’s attempt not just to pick out virtues as he thinks of them, but also to establish a “sphere” of human experience to which each virtue is a response. She is attempting to account for, for example, the Greek notion of greatness of soul and the Christian value of humility as both encompassed within the sphere regarding self-worth (Nussbaum 689). Each human being
experiences and encounters attitudes and actions with respect to one’s own worth, and humility and greatness of soul should be seen as rivaling accounts of that same virtue. By placing differing accounts of the same virtue within the relevant sphere, we would have, rather than a type of relativism, a justifiable attempt to find the correct virtue regarding that sphere of human experience. This would mean that rather than merely repeating the traditions of their society, each group searches for what is truly good, and what should truly be strived for.

Despite the differences explained, conceptions of flourishing for neo-Aristotelians are generally those tied closely to Aristotle, as each of these theories maintain an element shared with Aristotle’s own account: flourishing’s strong connection with the virtues and the human function. As they can be seen as similar enough to Aristotle’s own theory to warrant treating them as variations on his theme, the general account of flourishing tied closely to Aristotle, and in that sense tied closely to virtue, will be used for the inquiry at hand.

The close connection between virtue and *eudaimonia*, the Greek term used by Aristotle best translated as flourishing, is an appealing one, and allows the neo-Aristotelian to make a number of claims regarding the virtues and their role in flourishing. This connection tends to imply both that the virtues, because they lead to flourishing, are necessarily good for their possessor, and also, that accordance with the virtues makes a human being good *qua* human being. These two claims are intertwined, as the virtues allow a human being to flourish, and in this way are good for them in becoming a good human being (Hursthouse 167, 2001).
Aristotle’s account of flourishing, rational activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, does on its face seem to suggest that perfect accordance with the virtues is required to reach a state of flourishing, as it expresses nothing to indicate that one without a certain virtue may be seen as flourishing, or if there exist degrees to which one may flourish. Whether this is an accurate interpretation of Aristotle’s view or not, the neo-Aristotelian need not hold a perfectionistic view if they allow for determining how one has flourished by the degree to which they accord with the virtues rather than regarding only those in perfect accordance with the virtues as having flourished. On this interpretation, one may accord with the virtues to different degrees, and may thereby flourish to greater or lesser extents as well. On this understanding of flourishing, then, one may be seen as flourishing to a greater degree given a greater accordance with the virtues, and to a lesser degree given a lesser accordance, allowing for a more charitable reading than an all-or-nothing perfectionistic understanding of flourishing on the (historical) Aristotelian account.

The accounts suggested by the neo-Aristotelians presented earlier maintain the Aristotelian notion of flourishing as typically-human activity performed in accordance with virtue, and further maintain a general definition of virtue as a trait needed to flourish. It follows from this, if they choose to avoid a perfectionistic account, that the neo-Aristotelian must hold that the degree to which an agent has flourished is determined by the degree to which that agent accords with the virtues. Those in greater accordance with, or with greater possession of, the virtues are deemed as flourishing to a greater extent, while those in lesser accordance flourish to a lesser extent.
So, while I do not believe the neo-Aristotelian view entails the claim that agents who are not in perfect accordance with the virtues are not virtuous or flourishing at all, it seems as though a neo-Aristotelian is committed to the claim that an agent in greater accordance with the virtues flourishes to a greater degree. That is, if we are to accept that neo-Aristotelians allow for some degree of vice in flourishing, since a perfectionist reading of the neo-Aristotelian view would be uncharitable, then the degree to which an agent is flourishing, on their account, would be determined by the degree to which an agent accords with the virtues, as the virtues are those traits that contribute to flourishing, and flourishing is a human type of life with the virtues.

This view of flourishing, one that is constituted solely by virtue, maintains that some may be flourishing to a greater extent than others, and allows for some imperfection in agents, but also goes against basic intuitions we have about what it is to flourish and how to determine the degree to which one has flourished. Take the example of an arrogant scientist. This scientist, from the very beginning of his life, wanted to cure cancer as he saw it to be one of the greatest afflictions plaguing the world, and had the great amount of talent and potential required to do so. For one to believe oneself able to cure cancer would surely involve a self-confidence needed to drive one there, and this scientist did have such self-confidence, in fact he had it to a fault. The arrogant scientist’s father, from a very young age, one young enough that we could not fault such a child for believing his father, engrained in him a false sense of superiority that stuck with him for his life. Many times even a person’s own family, which he or she cannot usually choose, will show itself to be a demand the world has placed on them. Although the scientist had far too high an opinion of himself regardless of his talent, he also had a great deal of
virtue. His drive to cure cancer was one of benevolence, as he really did want to do it for the good of other people, not simply to make a name for himself, and patients most often saw him as caring rather than cold or reserved. Further, while a few of his personal relationships were stunted by his arrogance, most everyone was able to overlook this attribute, as they saw it as outweighed by both his more agreeable traits as well as the demands in the nature of his work.

Suppose, now, that the scientist did indeed cure cancer, as he himself generated a vaccine that, once taken, prevented any person from contracting it, and killed all active cancer cells in the bodies that already contained them. The scientist, rather than patenting his vaccine, much in the ilk of Jonas Salk, even released it for free as he wanted to help the most amount of people possible while placing the least amount of burden on them. Suppose further that the scientist’s arrogance was a necessary condition of his accomplishing this feat, as the path was filled with naysayers and obstacles, and he could not possibly have found the cure without being as arrogant as he was.

As his arrogance was a necessary condition of reaching his goal, the scientist he would have been if not for this vice would not have realized his dream. This modest scientist, given the great deal of talent and potential he held, would likely have been able to make a certain amount of progress in science, have moderate success in his field, but he would not have been able to cure cancer or thereby fulfill his intellectual potential. In lacking the vice of arrogance, the modest scientist was unable to dismiss the cynics who cast doubt on his ability to cure cancer, and in this way lacked the surplus of self-confidence required to believe himself capable of achieving a feat many deemed impossible. This modesty manifested itself in the scientist’s unwillingness to petition
aggressively for additional funding for his lab, as well as in tempering many other drives required to achieve his life goal. The question of who flourished to a greater degree, the arrogant scientist or the modest one, should now be examined.

I believe it is widely accepted by all that arrogance is certainly a vice, as it stands in contrast to modesty, or whichever other virtue-term one wants to use, and that it is not an admirable trait. On the neo-Aristotelian view, then, the life of the arrogant scientist is one that has not flourished as fully as the one the scientist would have had were he to have become modest at some point in his life, regardless of the fact that he would not have realized his potential in doing so. For the neo-Aristotelian, the virtues are those traits needed for flourishing, and flourishing is a human type of life with the virtues, so to be in greater accordance with or in accordance with a greater number of virtues is presumably to be flourishing more fully, and this entails that the modest, more mediocre scientist would have flourished more fully than the arrogant one, and also represents a greater example of how we ought to live.

In ranking the degrees to which the two scientists flourished, I believe the view shared by most, the intuitive view, is that the arrogant scientist flourished to a greater extent, in all, than the modest one. This is due to the fact that, in reaching his potential by completing his life goal, the arrogant scientist seems to have satisfied more than just one requirement of a flourishing life, that is, he remained in sufficient accordance with the virtues while also completing his virtuous life goal. This ranking, one adjudging the arrogant scientist to have flourished to a greater extent than the modest one, is not the outcome on the neo-Aristotelian view, as subjective notions such as fulfilling one’s potential or realizing one’s dreams cannot factor into determining the degree to which
one has flourished, given the tight connection between virtue and flourishing maintained by the view.

The intuition to rank the arrogant scientist above the modest one regarding the degree to which each flourished, however, remains just that: an intuition. The neo-Aristotelian may reject the notion and have no sympathy for the view that subjectivity, for example reaching one’s goals or fulfilling one’s potential, seems to have some place in the account of the extent to which we flourish, although I see this as a difficult dismissal to make. A common sense approach to determining who flourished to a greater extent would seemingly rule in favor of the arrogant scientist, even when the virtues are taken into account, and this suggests a problem with the tight neo-Aristotelian connection between flourishing and virtues, as it produces the opposite result.

By determining the degree to which one has flourished using exclusively the degree to which one has accorded with the virtues, neo-Aristotelians produce judgments that do not align with intuitions we have about how we ought to live that are derived from common sense, as they omit a significant portion of how we judge flourishing lives to be, this being subjective flourishing. This type of flourishing may be seen as achieving one’s goals, fulfilling one’s potential, or developing fully in a way satisfactory to oneself. For the neo-Aristotelian, it matters not whether an agent realizes any of these standards; so long as they are in general accordance with the virtues, the degree to which they are determines the degree to which they flourish, so long as they are engaged in rational activity, for Aristotle, or whichever other variation on this requirement a specific neo-Aristotelian position supports. Neo-Aristotelians omit the requirement of fulfilling one’s
potential or achieving one’s goals to any degree, and this dynamic yields results that
tuition suggests we should reject.

To leave the notion of subjective flourishing out of an account of how we ought to
live our lives is to omit a central part of how we understand and judge lives to be on the
whole, and it is further to neglect considerations of the potentials and aptitudes one may
have that we intuitively like to weigh in our determinations. The desire for this type of
flourishing is not only an intuitive concept but also one that we greatly value and are
motivated by, and in this way a lack of it in theories of value or flourishing presents a
legitimate concern. This would give an agent reason to prefer a theory that is able to
maintain certain values implied by our intuitive notions.

Here, I mean to distinguish between two different senses of flourishing, and
eventually combine the two to suggest a richer account of flourishing that is able to
comply with intuition. Subjective flourishing, as stated, should be seen as influenced by
motives that one has, including life goals or fulfilling one’s potential, which vary greatly
from person to person. Each person is shaped by the world in a different way such that
each has different goals, and in turn, accompanying motives to reach those goals, so
subjective flourishing will be different for each person. Objective flourishing, conversely,
should be seen as accordance with a set of values that one holds which stand true
independent of one’s own motives. There should thus be at least two features to objective
flourishing: holding (and fulfilling) the objectively correct values, and maintaining a
harmony between one’s motives and those values.

Some will be understandably wary of allowing for subjectivity in search of an
objective right, as this authorization often leads to a number of problems. The primary
worry when allowing subjective factors into an objective account is the risk of relativism, according to which each and every set of systems is equally acceptable, as approval of every system precludes one’s ability to compare any two or dismiss any one as wrong. Another worry subjectivity presents is that, if it is valued without constraint, it would lead us to claims that seem counter-intuitive, such as saying both those who achieve their own evil goals as well as those who achieve decent goals through evil means have flourished, as we want to say only those who achieve their decent goals by decent means have flourished.

In order to avoid these difficulties, the subjective motives a person may have must be contained within, or be constrained by, an objective set of values. That is, although it is every person’s goal to reach their potential or realize their dreams, how we ought to live must be in accordance with some objective rightness, and in this way a relativist view, one in which each set of systems or lives is equally acceptable, is avoided. These subjective motives, although they must be constrained by objective values, represent a seemingly integral part of how we determine success and the degree to which others and we ourselves have flourished throughout our lives, and thereby seem to constitute an important aspect of flourishing that is neglected in the neo-Aristotelian doctrine.

The conception of objective flourishing that I will endorse, and which is heavily inspired by Christine Swanton in her pluralistic take on virtue ethics, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, is generally as follows: To flourish is to do so both in the subjective sense, that is, fulfill one’s potential, complete one’s important goals, or realize one’s aspirations to a fairly high degree, as well as the objective sense, by responding to the demands of the world in a virtuous or virtuous enough way. These “demands of the world”
are many, and affect our lives in a myriad of ways. Each feature of flourishing, objective and subjective, is a necessary condition of realizing it, though they are not jointly sufficient. They are not jointly sufficient because of issues such as a lack of pleasure or self-satisfaction diminishing the significance of both reaching one’s potential and responding to the demands of the world in a virtuous enough way in their leading to flourishing. That is, if one were to fulfill one’s potential while consistently responding to the demands of the world in a virtuous enough way but harbored a deep depression or lack of self-satisfaction, one would not be flourishing on my account, but would have two of the necessary conditions of flourishing. As a full account of necessary and sufficient conditions for this conception of flourishing is a task much larger than the length or scope of this paper will allow, I will not produce one.

An account that requires only those responses to the world that are virtuous enough exposes itself to the question of exactly which responses qualify as virtuous enough and which do not. If the arrogant scientist, for example, is seemingly “allowed” to maintain the vice of arrogance while still being deemed virtuous enough and flourishing overall in light of his responses being, in all, generally virtuous, then a distinction must be made between different kinds of vices and what type of response they constitute. I do not, however, wish to lay out an exact formula regarding whether someone’s responses were virtuous enough “in all,” but rather, I will apply a reasonable person standard in which a reasonable person would judge a person’s overall actions and dispositions virtuous enough. In order to speak to this, I will present one specific proposal about what a reasonable person would judge to be virtuous enough or not.
Here, I will introduce a distinction between different kinds of vices in order to give an account of some responses to the world I will deem not virtuous enough. Vices may be called intentionally pernicious if they constitute a trait that is deliberately harmful to another human being, that is, a disposition to purposefully or knowingly harm another person, for one’s own gain or otherwise. Other vices, by contrast, may be called non-intentionally pernicious if they are a trait or disposition that may have harmful effects when instantiated, but these effects are either unknown to or unintentionally produced by the agent instantiating them. Intentionally pernicious vices, those that aim to purposefully harm other people, constitute at least part of the class of responses that are not virtuous enough. There would not, then, be grounds to assert that, given my view of flourishing, the same scientist whose goal it is to cure cancer may still be seen as virtuous enough if he were to brutally kill a number of human test subjects to find the cure, as this would manifest an intentionally pernicious vice. Further, while non-intentionally pernicious vices will often be seen as venial, or at least will not preclude flourishing given the overall virtue of the agent, they are still not encouraged.

If the partial account of flourishing I have presented is correct, then it becomes unclear what the definition of a virtue is. It cannot just be a trait needed, or important for, flourishing, as it was on the neo-Aristotelian account, because this definition produces outcomes that regard as virtues traits we know to be vices. For example, as the arrogant scientist’s flourishing was aided by his arrogance, on my account of flourishing, the definition of virtue as a trait that leads to flourishing would regard arrogance as a virtue, and this is clearly false. Further, the neo-Aristotelian conceptions of virtue and
flourishing would still form a circle, as each is defined in terms of the other, so an account able to avoid this trouble would be preferred.

As we have seen, the neo-Aristotelian view of flourishing, by determining the degree to which one has flourished exclusively in terms of the extent to which one has accorded with the virtues, conflicts with how we intuitively want to determine people to have flourished. By omitting subjective flourishing and the motives we have, a neo-Aristotelian view becomes unattractive to one who desires to maintain the notions of flourishing we derive from common sense. In this way, we have a seemingly strong theoretical reason to abandon the neo-Aristotelian view, and to instead substitute one that can forgo the overly rigid and tight connection between flourishing and virtue, which could accommodate common sense views about flourishing, while still maintaining a connection between the two. An account of virtue that is not dependent upon flourishing by definition could provide such an alternative.

If virtue cannot, or at least should not, be defined as a trait needed for flourishing, as I have argued, then a different conception of virtue must be presented that is able to account for what the neo-Aristotelian view could not. I believe a perspectival account of virtue would be able to account for such issues, but to present one I must first frame it in terms of how it is to be understood via Swanton and Nietzsche.

In her *Pluralistic View*, Swanton, in discussing how we ought to act and the ways in which virtue relates to action, takes a view from Christine Korsgaard, who suggests that ethics and the study of how we ought to live, “…takes its start from a plight” (Swanton 250). This plight is a difficulty that Swanton frames in terms of Nietzsche, who saw objectivity as only “…a less limited response to the world” (Swanton 250). That is,
in responding to the demands of the world, it isn’t the case that anyone can be objective in the general sense of the term, as people are only able to understand and be influenced by things through the lens of their own perception. As Nietzsche writes, “Perspectival seeing is the only kind of seeing there is, perspectival ‘knowing’ the only kind of ‘knowing’” (Nietzsche 98, 2008). Even in this very statement Nietzsche qualifies his use of knowing by placing it in quotations, as knowing, just like seeing, is only in the eye of the beholder. He goes on to say, generally, that the more perspectives or eyes with which we can see a given situation or demand, the more complete conception we can have in general. All of this, if it is to be accepted, creates a large problem for determining how we ought to live, as every person is seemingly limited in his or her perspective, and in that way, is limited to that perspective.

This Nietzschean view of the world, however, also gives a backdrop for an ethical theory that may encompass such constraints. If ethics truly does begin with the plight of each individual having a perspective of the world that is limited, even the most admirable or virtuous of us, then the response to such a plight must be to expand the limit to which our perspective can know.

For Swanton, every problem or demand placed on us by the world has constraints with which we must manage, and while these demands may vary from the extreme to the mundane, the virtues are invariably related to each solution (Swanton 250). The aim of how we ought to respond, for Swanton, “…is to get things right by acting in an overall virtuous way in integrating constraints on solutions to problems” (Swanton 253). Despite our being limited in perspective, then, our aim should be to understand and consider certain constraints placed upon us, to integrate these constraints with possible solutions,
and decide upon the most appropriate action given that integration. So, when faced with a problem, such as trying to absolve an innocent friend from some blame, one ought to consider solutions to the problem, such as giving evidence absolving that friend, as well as the constraints on those solutions, such as a promise made earlier to not reveal that evidence for whatever reason, and one must decide upon the best action given the integration and holistic understanding of each of these components. This provides an account of objectively correct action while allowing for the Nietzschean view of our limited perspective, as it could accept that while our perception of the world may be limited, integrating and understanding other perspectives and constraints in a virtuous way can still be an objective standard for how we ought to act. An action may be seen as objectively right, then, even if we as agents of that action have a necessarily less than objective scope of the world.

Having said all of this, I would like to draw upon Swanton, and Nietzsche, in formulating a conception of virtue that encompasses all that I have argued for to this point. If ethics truly does begin with a plight, a view Korsgaard has argued for and one I have adopted, then an ethics should be grounded in that plight. That is, the objective of how we ought to live must exist within this plight from beginning to end, as our own imperfection is related directly to it, and for this point I will argue.

If Nietzsche’s claims about objectivity are true, as I believe they are, then for one person to have an absolute, objective view of the world is impossible, or at least realistically so. This is because the perspective of each person varies, regardless of how minimally or greatly, and it is at least practically impossible for one to be able to incorporate all people’s perspectives into one’s own, or to have an outlook without any
perspective at all. This, as I have claimed earlier, is not necessarily to say that actions or dispositions may not be objectively right or wrong, but rather, it is to say that we will always have different approximations of an objectively correct disposition given our various perspectives. This, I believe, is the plight in which our quest as imperfect agents for an objective standard is grounded.

To say that ethics is grounded in a plight is also to say that it will forever be so grounded, which is something I accept. We, as agents of good and bad, right and wrong, will never be capable of shedding or casting off those perspectives from which we see and understand, and this is just to see us as the imperfect, finite beings that we are. The search to this point for the objective standard which may be a guide for how humans ought to live has been fruitful but inconclusive, and I believe this to be the case because of the exact perspectives I am discussing. Nietzsche speaks to this, as he writes, “…it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir” (Nietzsche 13, 1989). From utilitarianism to deontology, from Mill to Kant, seemingly every great normative ethical theory has sprung from the finite perspective of one, and been adopted by those similarly finite perspectives of others. The demands of the world and our responses to them have shaped our perspectives as a whole in a way that allows us to see what is objectively right differently from one another, necessarily stunting our ability to find one such objective standard.

With all of this being said, I believe a conception of virtue can be presented that incorporates such perspectives in search of how we ought to live, and it is as follows: A virtue is a disposition to recognize and internalize a greater perspective of the world,
which will usually consist of those perspectives held by others. That is, a virtue is a trait indicative of one’s attempt to attain a less limited view of the world, which includes internalization of other people’s perspectives. By attempting to broaden the scope we have of the world and the perspectives in it by acknowledging and internalizing these views, we move away from our own subjective perspective toward a greater objective perspective, regardless of whether or not complete objectivity may be obtained, as a greater internalized scope of the world is a more objective view of it.

One can take this view and confirm seemingly all the traits widely regarded as virtues, including the “cardinal” virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance, as they each fulfill the definition. Wisdom is the disposition to internalize perspectives held by others through the means of education, and to further broaden those perspectives of others by giving that knowledge to them. Justice is the disposition to internalize perspectives held by others and to conclude that each individual should be treated in a way that is equal to all others. Temperance is the disposition to internalize perspectives held by others and to conclude oneself to be one equal of many, making excess unjustified, although this is the most contentious. Courage is the disposition to internalize those perspectives of others who are in danger of harm and to stand up to or protect them from that danger, while having a great enough perspective to determine one’s ability to effectively help and to distinguish between the dangerous and those in danger. Each of these, among almost all other virtues I can think of, are maintained within this theory of virtue, although talk of the final one, courage, prompts me to make an important point.

It may be suggested, given the definition of virtue presented, that the internalization of a bad perspective of another, for example one full of hatred and bigotry,
would entail harboring that perspective and having those related dispositions become a part of one’s own perspective, but this isn’t necessarily the case. If one has developed a large enough view of the world and the perspectives of others, he or she would internalize such a perspective filled with unjustified hatred and, possibly, reject it, pity it, or combat it in his or her own actions, among many other possible reactions depending on the circumstances, as different existing perspectives will give rise to different responses. Conversely, someone with an even less complete perspective of the world than the one promoting bigotry, such as a young child, may internalize this perspective and accept it, as they lack the means to recognize its unjustified intolerance, and then possibly overcome it by being introduced to a larger perspective later in life. This suggests that a perspective rejecting bigotry is less limited than one that accepts it, as the acceptance of what is a more limited view of the world narrows the accepting perspective, this due to the bigoted perspective neglecting and omitting the perspective of those one is bigoted against.

This conception of virtue seems to also help explain how the world is progressing and why we value and disvalue those people in the world that we do. The United States, for example, has gone from slavery to segregation to equal rights, from patriarchy to women’s suffrage to equal rights, and is currently making progress in equality for same-sex couples. We applaud those at the forefront of these issues because of their greater internalization of others’ perspectives, while we label as misguided those who are opposed because of their overly narrow one. While we may never know a true objective standard for how we ought to live, we can still strive toward objectivity, and as imperfect beings in an imperfect world, this is what we ought to do.
It seems clear now how a preliminary account of how we ought to live can be formed, given the conception of virtue just outlined and the definition of flourishing discussed earlier. If to flourish, as argued for, is to fulfill one’s potential or realize one’s aspirations to a fairly high degree or a way satisfactory to oneself while responding to the demands of the world in a virtuous or virtuous enough way, and virtue consists of a disposition to recognize and internalize a greater perspective of the world, then the life we ought to live is to flourish, which is, in part, to be in accordance with virtue. This view has a number of favorable features, the most salient of which lies in its agreement with commonsense characteristics we want in our ethical theory, as it is able to maintain that the arrogant scientist, in fulfilling his potential while meeting the demands of the world in a virtuous enough way, flourished to a greater degree than the modest scientist, as the latter scientist, despite living in complete accordance with the virtues, did not fulfill a subjective component of flourishing, a necessary condition of flourishing on my account, to as high of a degree. Given that the standard for objective flourishing includes virtuous enough responses to the demands of the world on my account, the modest scientist’s slightly greater accordance with the virtues matters little, and is overshadowed by the significantly greater extent to which the arrogant scientist flourished in the subjective sense when determining which of the two flourished to a greater degree. While this is seemingly a clear case, others may not be, and neither my definitions of flourishing and virtue nor common sense will provide a complete guide for determining any life to have flourished to a greater degree than another. However, my definitions offer a superior account to neo-Aristotelianism, the view that implies the arrogant scientist to have unquestionably flourished to a lesser degree than the modest one regardless of how much
the former does or does not achieve. Despite my account being incomplete, then, it yields a more agreeable answer in the case of the arrogant scientist, and provides a superior, if incomplete, answer in other cases.

Further, this account is able to separate the tight connection between virtue and flourishing proposed by neo-Aristotelians, as it defines virtue not in terms of flourishing, but rather, in terms of a separate aspect of life, namely, our perspectives. Additionally, the account maintains the same virtues and vices as the neo-Aristotelian view, giving it equal explanatory power, while providing theoretical reasons to adopt it, as it is able to account for intuitive notions of determining the degree to which an agent has flourished, something the neo-Aristotelian view is incapable of, as shown.

I conclude that by determining the degree to which one has flourished using the degree to which one has accorded with the virtues as the single criterion, neo-Aristotelians omit an integral element of how we intuitively judge lives to be flourishing, and in this way give one theoretical reasons to adopt a theory that can accommodate such a view. Here, I have given at least a partial account of flourishing that is able to accommodate the intuitive ranking of good lives desired, as well as a preliminary account of virtue that seems to maintain as virtues those traits that we intuitively believe to be virtues, including those on the neo-Aristotelian account, while avoiding the claim that arrogance, as it led to greater flourishing in the case of the arrogant scientist, qualifies as a virtue. Further, the view provided is able to avoid the interdefinability rooted in the Aristotelian conceptions of flourishing and virtue, representing an additional reason to prefer it. The proposals argued for, however, remain far from complete, and leave room to be developed and corrected in the future.
Bibliography


