Relational Virtues: Disability and the Pursuit of the Good

Elyse Purcell
State University of New York, Oneonta

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> [Friends] direct young men toward correctness and to the elderly, they give care and help to supplement their failing sensory powers, and to those in their prime they direct toward noble actions (Aristotle 1155a).[1]

I. Disability and Virtue

The pursuit of living a good and moral life has been a longstanding ideal of philosophy, an ideal that dates back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle. This ideal establishes that a good life as a happy and flourishing life is pursued by developing the right motives and the right character. And in order to live this life, it is held that one must strive to become a virtuous person, who desires the good.[2] Finally, one must not pursue the good alone; rather, one should pursue the virtuous life with others, i.e., friends, because they enhance our ability to think and to act (Aristotle 1155a).[3] That is, our sociability enriches our rational nature.

Tragedy and vulnerability within our human condition, however, can play a distinctive role in our pursuit of virtuous living.[4] At the end of Book I in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle discusses tragic circumstances affecting the virtuous person and considers whether virtue is still possible. Aristotle recalls the case of king Priam who has lost everything, and yet, in his actions, remains a figure of nobility. Aristotle suggests, at numerous times in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* that virtue remains whether one's circumstances are fortunate or unfortunate.

Later in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, Aristotle describes the fate of a person who has met tragedy not due to the loss of those whom he loves, but due to his disability—it is the character Philoctetes, in the play by Theodectes.[5] In the myth, Philoctetes was bitten by a snake and as a result, was in inexorable physical pain, but his reasoning resisted being overcome by this pain. Aristotle praises Philoctetes for his continence, that is, his mental mastery over his physical pain (1150b). But, unlike Priam, Philoctetes' strength is not nobility. Thus, for Aristotle, while Philoctetes' bravery and mastery over his struggling emotions are praiseworthy, Philoctetes in this regard does not represent the virtuous person.

Like Aristotle, it has been assumed that only rational persons with able-bodies could be truly virtuous agents. Yet, this assumption has increasingly come under scrutiny: this scrutiny is known as the critique of elitism. The purpose of this essay is to respond to this critique and the complexities involved with disability and to conceive of a new kind of virtue one might call a *relational virtue.*

In order to respond to this critique, I propose that one needs to follow the insights of care ethicists on the importance of relationships and to consider what virtues are necessary for caring for the other's good. This living for the sake of another and caring for another's good require at times a different set of skills and habits than the classical virtues. Moreover, to care for another's good may at times involve a shared agency and collective action, i.e., a relational action, that cannot be performed by the agent herself. This need for shared agency in collective action indicates a need for an account of a relational virtue.

My hope is that the concept of relational virtue strikes one, at least intuitively, as valuable and deserving of more reflection. I elaborate on this kind of virtue below. In the argument that follows, I demonstrate two points: first, that a relational virtue is distinct from the classical sense of virtue as a disposition that is central to the agent's character, and second, that the addition of relational virtues to the classical tradition of virtue ethics is an adequate reply to the critique of elitism. First, I begin with a careful review of the critique of elitism. Afterward, I turn to a more detailed account of what a relational virtue is in order to show that it is in fact a distinct kind of virtue and a defense against the elitist critique. It is my hope that in elaborating what a relational virtue is, this new kind of virtue may be included in other forms of virtue ethics that diverge from the classical tradition.

II. The Critique of Elitism and Some Responses

While the tradition of virtue ethics has several forms, it is best to begin by considering the classical tradition to describe the central features of a virtue before turning to various forms of the critique of elitism. In the classical sense, a virtue is a state or disposition of an individual's character. More specifically, it is not a mindless disposition, but rather it is a disposition to act for reasons guided by the agent's practical reasoning (*phronēsis*). For example, an agent may know he needs

the virtue of courage (*andreia*) if he should stand up for his friend who is being slandered by peers and does so with an undivided affective attitude and the right reasons.

The critique of elitism against classical virtue ethics is motivated by an egalitarian concern: although virtue ethics focuses on what it means to be good rather than what it means to do right, if the classical conception of the virtuous person is an unachievable ideal for most, it serves as a poor moral guide for ethical action. Julia Driver has argued that attaining full virtue that requires a kind of "intellectual development and moral sophistication" is not achievable for the majority of ethical agents (51). A second version of this critique is that since many people lack the central theoretical component necessary for practical reasoning, this apparent lack results in a kind of epistemological privilege. While some agents may be equipped with the reflective abilities to act virtuously, there are many who will "need, more or less blindly, to rely on the judgment of the more wise" (Svensson 149-50). The critique of elitism has led many modern theories of virtue to depart from practical reasoning as an essential part of deliberate decision-making for virtuous action.[6]

Often these theories follow a kind of "Humean" conception of virtue as a disposition that is useful and good for myself and others. Departing from practical reasoning as a moral guide, Michael Slote has argued that care is a primary virtue and can give a better general account for right and wrong action than the classical tradition of virtue ethics. Slote defines care as a "motivational attitude" that is based on our benevolent consideration of humanity (*Morals From Motives* ix, 30). Some philosophers such as DesAutels and Wargh have followed a similar line of reasoning and have argued that care as a virtue can serve as a guide for right action.

The most radical departure from practical reasoning allows for virtue even though no reflection occurs at all. In a way, one may be virtuous by mere ignorance or accident. It is in this way that the *ideal* of classical virtue ethics is beyond one's grasp. The majority of individuals will probably never attain the necessary emotional, intellectual and psychological development required of the virtuous person (Annas). According to Driver, "[v]irtue must be accessible—to those who are not wise but kind; to those who had the misfortune to grow up in repressive environments that warped their understanding, yet who are capable of showing the appropriate compassionate responses to human suffering" (54). Similarly, Svensson clarifies the core issue of this concern: "[a]ssuming that ought implies can, it seems as if the ideal of full virtue must be normatively irrelevant, except possibly in relation to a few intellectually well developed and morally sophisticated persons" (134). For all of these departures, the role of practical reasoning has been significantly diminished or has been deemed unnecessary for a virtuous life.

III. Relational Virtues

It is necessary to draw a distinction first between the virtues of traditional virtue ethics and what I deem the relational virtues. The ethical and intellectual virtues would be considered agential virtues in so far as one becomes courageous by habitually practicing courageous acts or one perfects one's art (*techne*) by instruction and repetition. The relational virtues, by contrast, are of a different kind or sort than the traditional agential virtues: that is, they are virtues of relation that require a shared agency between two agents. Similar to an agential virtue, a relational virtue is a state or disposition of a person that is a disposition to act with another in certain ways and not others, and to act for reasons that aim at a higher value. By drawing insights from care ethics,[7] I elaborate the three central components of relational virtues, which make them distinct from agential virtues.

First, relational virtues do not aim at the good life for oneself. Instead, they aim at caring for the good of the other. A relational virtue guides the agent in living for the sake of another and at times may require sacrificing one's own lesser goods for the other's higher good. The enactment of relational virtues is most present in our personal relationships with others. According to Lawrence Blum, a personal relationship may involve deep concern, involvement, commitment, care, love, intimacy and other virtues, sentiments and qualities (512). Blum argues that these traits point to the quality of a relationship: a loving relationship in which the lovers are intimate and committed to each other differs from a relationship in which the lovers do very little more than "go through the motions" (Ibid). In the first case, what Blum calls the quality sense of relationships, one directs care, intimacy, commitment and involvement to the other person. One cares for the other's sake and for the other's good. This is different from just being lonely and wanting a companion to share the night with. Moreover, building these kinds of quality relationships require time.

The best personal relationships and friendships involve caring for the other's sake. Yet, more is involved in this friendship than two people loving one another for their morally excellent traits of character (Blum 514-515). This definition seems to miss the target at which a friendship aims. Blum argues that this definition of friendship is too narrow for two reasons: (i) "when I love someone for her own sake, I love a totality that typically involves a good deal more than her morally good traits of character," and (ii) excellent qualities of character are only one of the sources for why I find my friend appealing (515).[8] The basis for sustaining a long-lasting friendship is caring for the other's sake without either friend necessarily being morally excellent.

Second, while agential virtues guide one to conceive of one's life as a whole, relational virtues guide one to conceive of another's life as a whole. A personal relationship sustained by obligation rather than love or care is a deficient

relationship. While obligation is a part of a personal relationship, it does not encompass all of the qualities of a personal relationship. A parent who only takes care of his child out of obligation is a poor father. Likewise, a daughter who only dutifully cares for her mother in an assisted living facility rather than lovingly cares is missing an important aspect of personal relationships. According to Blum, "moral requirements are integral to personal relationships, but it is best if they are infrequently adverted to directly" (Ibid). One also has the obligation of beneficence in relationships and friendships, prompted by care and love, toward one's friends and families. The moral requirement in relationships does not function solely as a direct source of action but as a reminder of legitimate expectations that might elicit an attentiveness to the friend and the friendship that evoke caring motives (Ibid).

Finally, to care for another's good and to conceive of another's life as a whole, often involve shared agency and collective actions, that cannot be performed by the agent on their own. While all virtues are developed in communities, the relational virtues are cultivated from the initiation of another individual. Moreover, the relational virtues are cultivated in reciprocal practices and are often enacted with another as a shared practice. For example, in a virtuous friendship, each party must trust one another and be loyal to one another. The virtues of trust and loyalty must be enacted together; if only one friend is loyal and trusting, the friendship is imbalanced or one-sided. To return to the earlier example of a friend calling upon the agential virtue of courage to stand up for his friend, he is also morally bound to defend his friend because of loyalty. The virtue of loyalty is a relational virtue because it requires another; one cannot be loyal to an object. A friend is morally bound because of loyalty to stand up for his friend when he is unjustly attacked. The trust that obtains between good friends rests in part on a recognition that the friend accepts the moral requirements to come through for his friend should he lack the direct inclination to do so (Ibid). Finally, if a friend should have a moment of weakness, one must forgive one's friend. The virtue of forgiveness requires a relationship and is enacted when one party has been wronged. Relational virtues, such as trust, loyalty, beneficence and forgiveness, require another to be practiced. It is in this sense that they are virtues of relation, dependent upon our relationships in our moral communities.

IV. A Response to the Critique of Elitism

The critique of elitism, which is animated by egalitarianism, has attacked the classical conception of virtue ethics as an unachievable ideal and serves as an impractical guide for moral action. The critique argues first, that this elitism is grounded in the necessity of practical reasoning for virtuous action, and second, that people with cognitive disabilities may never be able to achieve the virtuous ideal due to their bodily impairments.

The critique of elitism, however, misses its mark because relational virtues are

not guided by practical reason. Relational virtues can supplement the classical agential virtues of courage, temperance and generosity that are guided by practical reason because they aim at a different ethical value. Instead, relational virtues such as trust, loyalty and beneficence aim at the ethical value of care. Since caring for another's sake is accessible to most individuals, even those with cognitive disabilities, relational virtues are not susceptible to anti-egalitarianism.[9]

Furthermore, relational virtues are concerned with another's life as a whole and exercise shared agency through collective action and practice. To conceive of another's life is not as an extension of my own, but as a life lived by another, which one hopes is noble and good. One's caregivers, whether parents, relatives, teachers, neighbors, coaches, or others, preserve one's life when one is vulnerable, foster one's growth to maturity and prepare one to be a virtuous citizen in one's community.[10] To care for another's moral development and good life is accessible to most and a regular part of our human communities. To refigure Aristotle, then, it is our caregivers who help us to think and to act.

V. Relational Virtues and the Community

This essay began with two classical tragic figures: king Priam of Troy and Philoctetes abandoned on the isle of Lemnos, which I believe express the two opposing conceptions of vulnerability within the human condition. In the case of Priam, he was made destitute by war and lost his son Hektor in battle. He could no longer flourish due to his pitiable circumstances, but his enactment of virtue was still possible. As Aristotle argues, Priam let nobility shine through in such difficult times. For Philoctetes, by contrast, we are given a different conception of vulnerability. A vulnerability that does not allow for nobility. For Aristotle, it is Philoctetes' strength of mind (of reason) which equips him with the ability to endure his bodily suffering.

The story of Philoctetes, however, captures a forgotten facet of human living: its very fragility. In his abandonment and pain, Philoctetes remained humble and candid, even when Odysseus morally failed as a friend and deceived him. Our humility and honesty enable us to recognize our interdependent relations with others. Thus, it is our interdependent relations that make virtue and happiness in our pursuit of the good for ourselves and with others possible.

Notes

1. All translations in this essay are my own. *kai neois de pros to anamartēton kai presbyterois pros therapeian kai to elleipon tēs praxeōs di astheneian boētheia, tois t' en akmē pros tas kalas praxeis.*

2. Many philosophers such as Julia Annas, Rosalind Hursthouse, Alasdair MacIntyre, Susan Meyer, and Daniel Russell retain the idea of the moral exemplar for the virtuous agent.

3. *Kai gar noēsai kai praxai dunatōteroi.*

4. Though perhaps his ultimate position might not be as clear as one might hope, see chapter 2 of Russell. Further, to be clear, for the Stoics, virtue could be affected by neither of these circumstances (Nussbaum).

5. Theodectes was a tragic poet (380 B.C.E.—34-B.C. E.) from Phaselis. He was a close friend of Aristotle, and only fragments of his *Philoctetes* remain today.

6. Another position that departs from practical reasoning as a guide for right action holds that one may be virtuous, not by reflection, but as a result of being positively influenced by others. This position has been taken up by certain philosophers calling themselves "Situationists," who draw their support from behavioral studies in social psychology. From those studies, these philosophers have concluded that there are no such things as *global traits* in people's personalities. Because there are no such things as global traits, they conclude, then that there is no such thing as *character.* As a result, one becomes virtuous by placing oneself in situations that prompt virtuous action. Philosophers who hold to various versions of this position include John Doris, Gilbert Harman, and Maria Merritt.

7. Care ethics provides a supplemental framework for those with cognitive and affective impairments to be virtuous. The significance of the ethics of care, according to Virginia Held, is that it "recognizes the *moral* value and importance of relations of family and friendship and the need for *moral* guidance in these domains to understand how existing relations should often be changed and new ones developed" (12). Similarly, Alison Jagger argues that care ethics valorizes traits such as "interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace, and life."

8. Blum draws a distinction that when one loves someone, that does not mean "one loves everything about this person."

9. See Eva Kittay's accounts of her daughter Sesha, Hilde Lindeman's account of caring for those with dementia, and Hannah Young et al.'s account of adolescents with profound cognitive impairments for examples of this accessibility.

10. See Sarah Ruddick's account of mothering and Nel Nodding's accounts of caregiving for examples of moral actions and character initiated by a caregiver.

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