

Do the virtues make you happy?

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Abstract: We answer the title question with a qualified “No.” We arrive at this answer by spelling out what the proper place of the concept “happiness” is in a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics: (1) Happiness in the sense of personal well-being has only a loose relation to virtue; it doesn’t deserve any prominent place in virtue ethics. (2) Happiness in the sense of flourishing is impossible without virtue, but that doesn’t imply that individual actions should aim at flourishing. (3) Instead, flourishing sets the standard of good practical reasoning; it is hardly ever the proper aim of a practical inference.

This paper begins with a common (mis)interpretation of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, on which it is a form of rational egoism. We then develop our alternative understanding against this foil.

Keywords: neo-Aristotelianism; virtue; deep happiness; practical rationality; virtue egoism.

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1. *Virtue ethics: a caricature*

The following claims are made in the first pages of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

- 1) Happiness is the highest good. (1095a15)
- 2) Every other good is ultimately chosen for the sake of happiness. (1094a18, 1097a36)
- 3) Happiness consists in “activity of the soul in conformity with virtue.” (1098a15)

One way to connect these claims is a position we may call “virtue egoism.”

Virtue Egoism: We ought to do what is virtuous because doing so is conducive to or (partly) constitutive of happiness, and it is rational to do what makes us happy.

As a next step, Aristotle can then be seen as providing the metaphysical background story, which he does by connecting “doing what is virtuous” with “living a life in accordance with human nature.”

Formulated so bluntly, this interpretation of virtue ethics may appear silly. Nevertheless, it summarizes how virtue ethics is often depicted by its critics.¹ Kant (*AA VII*, p.22), e.g., famously says:

The moral egoist limits all purposes to himself; as a eudaemonist, he concentrates the highest motives of his will merely on profit and his own happiness, but not on the concept of duty. [...] All eudaemonists are consequently practical egoists.

The standard and, to our mind, correct response to this criticism is that, according to virtue ethics, we should not act *in order to* be happy. Rather, we should act for those reasons that characteristically motivate a fully virtuous agent; those reasons make our actions right (Swanton 2015; Williams 1995).

This response leaves virtue ethicists with the task of explaining what, if anything, the reasons for which we should act have to do with our own happiness. In this paper, we take up this task and offer a neo-Aristotelian² account of the connection between ‘virtue’, ‘rationality’ and ‘happiness’.

2. *How we proceed*

Our analysis begins with a more detailed look at virtue egoism. While virtue egoism is a caricature of virtue ethics, it is easy to see its attractions. First, virtue egoism gives a straightforward answer to the skeptical question: “Why be moral?” Virtue ethics claims that it is irrational to be immoral – just as Kant, Hobbes, and modern contractualism and contractarianism do. Virtue egoism is an obvious way of spelling out how it is irrational.

Second, it is a non-trivial task for any virtue ethicist to connect ‘virtue’, ‘rationality’ and ‘happiness’. Virtue egoism offers a straightforward account of this connection: Virtues are dispositions to pursue one’s happiness and are hence rational. And while most authors who are commonly regarded as virtue ethicists seem to reject virtue egoism, they do not agree on an alternative.

¹ Nomy Arpaly, e.g., recently argued that it is a problem for virtue ethics (focusing on Hursthouse and Foot) that being virtuous does not make one happy, not even in the sense of “deep happiness” that we wish our children. (“Reason and Virtue”, a talk at the 2018 APA Central Division Meeting in Chicago.) For discussion, see also Annas (2008) and Swanton (2015).

² The authors we have in mind when we talk about “neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics” include Foot (2001); Müller (2004); Thompson (2008); Hursthouse (1999); Annas (2014); Hacker-Wright (2009); Lott (2012). Virtue Ethicists who are not Neo-Aristotelians, such as Christine Swanton (2015), also reject virtue egoism.

Our project in this paper is to provide such an alternative. We proceed by first diagnosing the problem with virtue egoism (Sections 3 and 4). We then develop our alternative against this foil (Sections 5-10). Section 11 concludes.

3. *The virtue-for-happiness inference*

Let's spell out virtue egoism in more detail. Its central idea is that rational actions are actions that contribute to the agent's happiness. The central argument of virtue egoism is this:

Virtue-for-Happiness Inference

- P1 An action is rational just in case it is conducive to the agent's happiness.
 P2 One cannot be happy unless one lives a life in accordance with human nature.
-
- C1 So, any action that is incompatible with living a life in accordance with human nature is not rational.
 P3 Vicious actions are incompatible with living a life in accordance with human nature.
-
- C2 So, vicious actions are not rational.

Many critics – starting with Thrasymachus – have pointed out problems with this inference. Understanding these problems can help us in developing an alternative. We will focus on problems with premises P1 and P2. We take the highly controversial premise P3 for granted in this paper.

Before we proceed, note that our discussion below does not use a strategy that may suggest itself here: a *de dicto* versus *de re* understanding of P1. Understood *de dicto*, P1 says that, in order to act rationally, an agent must identify the action under the description of being conducive to her happiness. Understood *de re*, P1 says that the action must indeed (likely) contribute to her happiness. On the *de dicto* reading, the aim of happiness provides the first major premise of any sound practical inference when fully spelled out. On the *de re* reading, it suffices that the reasoning starts with something that is conducive to the agent's happiness, but the agent need not think of it under that description. Our arguments below apply to both readings.

4. *A dilemma for virtue egoism*

The Virtue-for-Happiness Inference faces a dilemma. There are two possible interpretations of the term "happiness" in P1 and P2, and the inference seems unacceptable on either.

Interpretation 1: Happiness = personal well-being. ⇒ P2 implausible.
Interpretation 2: Happiness = flourishing. ⇒ P1 implausible.

The first horn of the dilemma is the following: ordinarily, we call someone “happy” if she is doing well in the sense that she is not in pain, is not suffering from any material deprivations, is overall feeling satisfied, has a range of meaningful and positive choices in life, etc. Let’s refer to this meaning of “happiness” as “personal well-being.”³

If “happiness” means “personal well-being,” then it is implausible that happiness should generally require living a life in accordance with human nature and, hence, a virtuous life. The amount of vice in the world would be hard to explain if vicious behavior generally reduced personal well-being. As Thrasy-machus already points out to Socrates, often the vicious fare well whereas the virtuous suffer (Plato, *Republic*, book1, 343d).

Contemporary philosophers add further arguments. Lisa Tessman (2005), e.g., argues that the character traits needed to counteract political oppression are character traits that systematically impede the well-being of their bearers. In other words, under conditions of oppression, virtue lowers your personal well-being, and this connection is systematic.⁴ Susan Wolf (1982: 420) goes so far as to claim that a “moral saint” is unhappy by definition, since “this person sacrifices his own interests to the interests of others and feels the sacrifice as such.” Aristotle or Plato would reject Wolf’s conception of the fully virtuous person as utterly selfless. Nevertheless, we seem to have good reason to reject P2 if by “happiness” we mean personal well-being.

Importantly, we get impaled on this first horn of the dilemma even if we presuppose a conception such as Foot’s (2001, Ch. 6) “deep happiness.” We can include items like true friendship, intellectual pursuits or selfless care for one’s children, and we will still find many counterexamples to P2. Thus, it isn’t true that the coward who avoids being tortured for a worthy cause miscalculates her prospects for personal well-being, or that only people with a shallow, egoistic conception of well-being would think so. Anscombe (1981a: 44) already points this out in “Modern Moral Philosophy”:

One man – a philosopher – may say that [...] essentially the flourishing of a man *qua* man consists in his being good [...] [E]ven if, as it must be admitted may happen, he flourishes less, or not at all, in inessentials, by avoiding injustice, his life is spoiled in essentials by not avoiding injustice – so he still needs to perform only just actions. That

³ We put to one side here the question to what extent personal well-being is “subjective” or “objective.”

⁴ Tessman claims that this implies that Aristotelian ethics cannot deal in a satisfactory way with oppression, and she aims to supplement Aristotelian ethics accordingly.

is roughly how Plato and Aristotle talk; but it can be seen that philosophically there is a huge gap [...] which needs to be filled by an account of human nature [...] and above all of human “flourishing.” And it is the last concept that appears the most doubtful. For it is a bit much to swallow that a man in pain and hunger and poor and friendless is “flourishing,” as Aristotle himself admitted. Further, someone might say that one at least needed to stay alive to “flourish.”

Perhaps because of this issue, most neo-Aristotelians do not refer to personal well-being, even in its deep sense, when talking about happiness. Instead, they understand “happiness” or Aristotelian “*eudaimonia*” as living a life in accordance with human nature. We will here reserve “flourishing” for that.

Flourishing in this technical sense sometimes requires actions that undermine the agent’s personal well-being. This comes out in formulations such as Peter Geach’s (1977: 17) famous: “Men need virtues as bees need stings.” The character disposition of courage, e.g., even though necessarily possessed by a fully flourishing human being, might manifest itself in actions that foreseeably lead to the death of this person. Anselm Müller (2016) points out that this potential divergence of flourishing and personal well-being is not special to the human case. Pain, hunger, potentially dangerous rivalry and the like usually detract rather than further an animal’s individual well-being. In many species, however, they are necessary for flourishing.

Reading “happiness” as “flourishing” secures the truth of P2 by turning it into a tautology. It thus blocks critics such as Trasymachus. It also, however, impales us on the second horn of the dilemma. For while it may seem plausible that people generally do and should aim at their own personal well-being, it is far from obvious that people do or should aim at their own “flourishing” in this technical sense. Even if we grant authors such as Foot (2001) that being *immoral* must be understood as being bad *qua* human being with respect to the will,⁵ it remains unclear why we act *irrationally* if we don’t strive to be good specimens of our kind. Neo-Aristotelianism hence owes us an answer to the following question (Lott 2014): Why am I rationally required to care about being a flourishing human being? Otherwise, P1 remains unsupported.

Since no plausible solution has been offered for the problems with either interpretation (and supposing that no third interpretation of “happiness” is viable), our opponent wants to conclude that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics should be rejected. In the remainder of this paper, we spell out why this would be premature.

⁵ Foot adopts this view in *Natural Goodness* after rejecting her earlier view that morality is a system of hypothetical imperatives.

5. *Outline of a counterproposal*

Our suggestion is to reject the Virtue-for-Happiness Inference and, thus, to avoid the whole dilemma. In the current and the following section, we outline our counterproposal. Sections 7 to 10 offer more details and address some objections.

A clarification before we start: We primarily think of virtues as dispositions to reason practically in certain ways and not others. For the purposes of this paper, we shall ignore additional aspects of virtues, such as perceptual sensibilities or dispositions to feel certain emotions.⁶

So what is wrong with the Virtue-for-Happiness Inference? Its fundamental mistake is, we think, that neither “I want to be personally well” nor “I want to be a flourishing human being” can be the major premise of a practical inference, except in very special cases.⁷ While there is a sense in which virtue aims at flourishing, this aim-directedness is not of the intentional kind. It is somewhere between natural teleology and what Anselm Müller (1991) calls “mental teleology.” It is essentially conscious in that reasoning must be done with a view to reasoning correctly, and in that sense, the teleology in question is mental. However, the reasoning subject need not have any conception of the connection between human flourishing and correct practical reasoning, and in that sense, the teleology is natural.⁸

What, then, is the proper place for “happiness” in an account of practical reasoning? We submit that happiness in the sense of “personal well-being” only plays a very indirect role here (see Section 9). Happiness in the sense of “flourishing,” however, is central. It provides a norm for the evaluation of practical inferences. Take the class of all possible practical inferences that any subject could make in any given circumstances. In order to divide these into good and bad inferences, we shall need the concept of flourishing (see Foot 2001; Müller 2004). In the remainder of this paper, we will spell out this idea in more detail.

The capacity to reason practically is part of human nature, just like memory or sight. Human nature constitutes the norm for evaluating such capacities. It does so in two senses: First, a flourishing human being shows a certain level of performance with respect to each vital human capacity, and that is the level of

⁶ This view of virtues is in line with Aristotle’s claims that virtues are dispositions to choose well (*EN* 1106b36) and that choice (*prohairesis*) is the result of practical deliberation (*EN* 1113a4).

⁷ An example of such a special case is: “It’s my free day today. Let’s see – *what would make me happy?* I know, I will...”

⁸ This is not just a problem for the *de dicto* reading of the Virtue-for-Happiness Inference. For, against the *de re* reading, it is also false that what makes something an adequate major premise in a good practical inference is that it identifies something that would contribute to the agent’s personal well-being or flourishing.

performance that is necessary for counting as a non-defective capacity of the respective kind. Thus, a human being with a non-defective memory would remember at least so-and-so many pictures presented to her in an experiment after five minutes. Similarly, a practically rational human being would take this-or-that event, social relation etc. as a (*prima facie*) reason to ϕ . Second, each individual exercise of these capacities is subject to the human norm. Good acts of remembering in a human being, e.g., are acts that could be the acts of a non-defective human memory. Similarly, good practical inferences are those that could be drawn by a practically rational person, i.e., a person with a non-defective capacity for practical reasoning.

If we accept this parallel between the capacity for practical reasoning and other species-specific capacities, then the link between flourishing and practical reasoning is as follows:

- 1) Flourishing determines what generally constitutes a reason to do what. But flourishing is (usually) not itself the reason to do anything.
- 2) How personal well-being is connected with flourishing (and hence with virtue) remains to be determined.

Let's look at the much-discussed example of promising to see how our account works and why it constitutes a rejection of the Virtue-for-Happiness Inference. Many neo-Aristotelians have argued that promising is a social practice and that this practice serves an important function in human life. According to Anscombe (1981b: 18), its function is to bind others to do certain things, even if these others don't feel affection for us and if we command no authority over them. Since human nature and living conditions are such that we constantly depend, for our flourishing, on others doing certain things, this function is very important. Important goods cannot, or not as easily, be attained without a practice of promising. That means that flourishing human beings must have a disposition to reason practically in accordance with the practice of promising that is prevalent in their culture.

It will usually be a mistake, however, to appeal to this "reason" for having the practice in order to justify any individual move within the practice. It means to confuse justification *within* and *of* the practice of promising.⁹ Suppose, *AA* promised *BB* to help her move on Saturday at 2 PM. *AA*'s promise is a good reason for him to help her. Absent opposing reasons, it is a conclusive reason. *AA* would be drawing a sound practical inference in reasoning as follows: "I promised *BB* to help her move on Saturday at 2 PM." – "It's Saturday, and it's already 1:30." – "I better get going." It would be superfluous (and perhaps "one thought

⁹ The *locus classicus* for this point is Rawls (1955).

too many”) to add “The practice of promising is an important contributor to human flourishing, so I should support it,” in the way in which one might, e.g., support the organization Oxfam. The same goes for additions such as “I have voluntarily profited from the practice of promising in the past; now it’s only fair to do my share and contribute,” which is what Rawls (1992, ch. 52) seems to suggest we must add, or “I cannot consistently want the maxim of breaking one’s promises to become a universal law” or “Good human beings keep their promises, and I want to be a good human being.”¹⁰ And it would be incorrect to regard any of these superfluous further premises as giving the ultimate, the real reason why *AA* must help. The reason why *AA* must help is a single empirical fact, namely that *AA* has given a promise, which, within the social fabric of the practice, constitutes a way of (*prima facie*) obliging himself to do as announced.

The distinction between the justification of an individual inference versus of the inference pattern that it instantiates is particularly easy to see for examples such as promising, i.e., for obligations incurred within social practices. But the same holds for obligations incurred outside of such practices: “*BB* helped me move last year” is also a *prima facie* reason for *AA* to help *BB* today, as would be “*BB* is new in town, and she doesn’t know anybody else” or “*BB* is my sister.”

We can summarize this as follows: Virtue ethicists should appeal to flourishing in order to explain why a certain fact *R*, e.g. the fact that someone promised or is in need, generally constitutes a good reason for a human being to ϕ . But any individual human being deliberating about whether to ϕ in a concrete situation (whether to keep promise *P*, e.g.) would usually make a mistake by appealing to human flourishing. Rather, to act well, the reason for which the individual acts must be the fact *R* (supposing that this is the only good reason available). Flourishing justifies practical inference patterns; it does not (usually) serve as a premise in individual inferences.

6. *Flourishing as a background motive*

Rationality makes human flourishing unlike flourishing in other species.¹¹ Rationality introduces two important complications. First, since humans are the only animal species with practical reason, there is no other species for which their nature sets the standards of good practical reasoning. In other words, the ethically relevant aspect of flourishing is found only in humans. Second, practical rationality does not consist merely in moving from certain con-

¹⁰ For a detailed elaboration of these points see Nieswandt (2018).

¹¹ Aristotle says that “happiness” does not apply to non-human animals (*EE* 1217a). And Foot (2001: 51) says that the human good is *sui generis*.

siderations to certain actions. Rather, this movement must amount to drawing a practical inference; that is why *phronesis* is required to turn natural virtues into genuine virtues (*NE* 1144b). This implies that the reasoning agent must have some conception of the inference, its goodness, and the place of such inferences in her life. Aristotle (*EE* 1214b) endorses a very strong requirement of this kind when he says:

[W]e must enjoin every one that has the power to live according to his own choice to set up for himself some object for the good life to aim at (whether honour or reputation or wealth or culture), with reference to which he will then do all his acts, since not to have one's life organized in view of some end is a mark of much folly.¹²

One could read this passage as saying that every practical inference (when fully spelled out) must start with a major premise that gives the agent's conception of a good life, i.e., her conception of flourishing. As elaborated in the previous section, we think that this view would be incorrect. We read Aristotle as saying that it is an important aspect of human rationality that we can review our conduct *in light of* an overarching conception of the good life. But the capacity for practical inference requires only a very dim and implicit conception of a good life. Moreover, being practically rational is itself a crucial part of any adequate conception of a good life. Requirements that make rationality turn on the adequacy of the agent's explicit conception of a good life therefore risk being circular. So what role can a conception of the good life have in one's practical reasoning?

Müller draws a distinction between foreground and background reasons that is helpful here. “[Y]our reason for treating something as a reason for ϕ -ing is not itself a reason you have for ϕ -ing. It might be called a background reason relative to your ϕ -ing” (Müller 2011: 253). In playing a leisure card game, e.g., the typical foreground reason for a particular move is to win. The background reason may be to have an entertaining evening. In this case, having an entertaining evening is a reason to treat the fact that playing this card is conducive to your winning as a reason to play the card. Having an entertaining evening is not, however, itself the reason to play this card. You typically cannot justify playing a certain card by pointing out that it is entertaining to play that card. For your action to be rational, your reason for playing a particular card will often have to be a very particular objective within the game, such as ensuring that the opponent doesn't have any more cards of a particular kind. At the same time, the background reason of having an entertaining evening may make an overly competitive style of play inappropriate. Thus, the background

¹² Foot (2001: 16) expresses a related idea when she says that “a human being can and should understand that, and why, there is reason for, say, keeping a promise or behaving fairly.”

reason gives one's actions within the game an overall direction and structure without being the justification for any of these actions.

We think that the motive of living a good life is often a background motive in this sense. An adequate grasp of the background reason of living a good life will often allow the agent to grasp why a given practical inference is good, namely because treating these premises as reasons for that conclusion is part of practical rationality and, hence, part of a good human life, i.e., of flourishing.

7. *How this proposal connects virtue and rationality*

The main selling point of virtue egoism is that if it worked, it would answer a certain kind of moral skeptic. Even a purely self-interested agent would have reason to be virtuous. The view we are advocating doesn't offer any similarly straightforward response. We will hence outline how we see the connection between virtue and rationality (in this section) and the connection of both to personal well-being (Section 9).

The skeptic addressed here demands a proof that rationality requires of us to be moral, i.e. a proof that it is impossible to act immorally and also be fully rational. A response to this kind of skeptic must establish a close tie between morality and rationality.¹³ Consequently, we shouldn't allow the moral skeptic to leave her conception of practical rationality unexamined. This is the lesson that Foot (2001, Ch. 4) learned from Warren Quinn, and we agree. In particular, we are within our rights to put forward a conception of practical rationality that explains good practical reasoning by appeal to human nature.

A rational action, on the suggested view, is the conclusion of a sound practical inference. A sound practical inference is one that applies a valid inference pattern to a fitting content. A pattern of practical reasoning is valid, we submit, just in case a virtuous agent has a disposition to manifest that pattern. To possess a certain virtue, say courage, is to be disposed to draw sound practical inferences in a certain domain – here: actions potentially dangerous to oneself.¹⁴ And a courageous action is one that a courageous person would be disposed to carry out; i.e., it is that action in which the practical inference of such a person would characteristically conclude. So if an action is morally bad, it cannot be

¹³ For opposition to this project from an Anscombian perspective see Vogler (2002). As will become clear in due course, we think, *pace* Vogler, that practical reasoning is not always calculative. Vogler underestimates the importance of backward-looking reasons, we worry, and she overlooks the role of flourishing in fixing the standard of practical reasoning.

¹⁴ We ignore an important complication here: Courage is not a disposition to draw certain practical inferences but rather a disposition not to be deterred from drawing (any) independently good practical inferences.

the conclusion of a sound practical inference. And since it is irrational to perform actions that cannot be the conclusion of a sound practical inference, it is impossible to perform a morally bad action while also being fully rational.¹⁵

We are presupposing the unity of the virtues here: A fully rational agent is one who draws only sound practical inferences. She can be defined as someone who is disposed to draw sound practical inferences in every domain, to apply only valid inference patterns and only to fitting contents. This requires that the demands of different domains cannot truly conflict (although it will often be necessary to balance them against each other).¹⁶

Human nature determines, on the most general level, what inference patterns are valid for human beings. An individual inference is valid if someone with a non-defective capacity of practical reason could make it. A non-defective capacity of practical reason is one that a fully flourishing human could have. And what shape this capacity can take in a fully flourishing human depends on the constitutive and instrumental role that this capacity plays in a good human life. We already discussed the example of promising above. Other examples of such inference patterns are those we could summarize under headings such as “gratitude” or “fairness.” What it will mean, e.g., to show gratitude or to be fair will differ considerably in different situations, societies, social structures, historical epochs and environmental conditions. However, that such patterns of practical reasoning are reliably manifested by humans plays an important role in a good human life. It is “necessary” in the sense that some evils could not be avoided and some goods not attained (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1015a22–23) without such dispositions for practical reasoning. In the limiting case, such a good may be nothing more than practical rationality itself.

In defining rational actions as the conclusions of sound practical inferences, we are putting to one side a number of hotly debated issues, such as actions done for no particular reason (Setiya 2014), rational actions that are omissions (Müller 2004) and rational actions that are quasi-automatic (Markovits 2012). While these issues are important, we regard them as general issues in action theory and metaethics rather than as issues for any particular moral theory.¹⁷

¹⁵ For more details, see Nieswandt and Hlobil (2018).

¹⁶ On this view, “truly tragic dilemmas” (Hursthouse 1999, Ch. 3) are situations where no sound practical inference is available.

¹⁷ For instance, it is sometimes claimed that virtue ethics has a particular problem accommodating automatic doings, given the central role that virtue ethics assigns to habits (Pollard 2003; Snow, 2006). If “we want our virtuous actions to become effortless and habitual – a kind of ‘second nature’” (Snow 2006: 545), citing McDowell 1998), then how can they be the results of practical inferences? This argument, we submit, applies to any ethical theory that evaluates actions by the agent’s reasons. Most human actions contain subconscious, automated components; hence the question how these components relate to the action under its morally relevant description (Anscombe 2000, secs. 23–26)

8. *Skeptical objections*

The skeptic can accept this account and still disagree with us about what morality requires if she disagrees with us about the material content of flourishing. We submit, however, that it constitutes considerable progress to reduce the disagreement to a disagreement about which substantive account of human flourishing is correct. Nevertheless, the skeptic may still dig in her heels at a couple of structural points. We shall briefly discuss two such points.

First, the skeptic may hold that the view suggested above would be a satisfying response only if we could give an independently justified account of human flourishing from which we can derive under what conditions a capacity for practical reason is defective. This would mean to derive moral claims from non-moral ones – e.g., in the way that evolutionary ethics attempts to do. We do not have such an account, and we actually think that no such deduction is possible. Many parts of our preferred account of human flourishing are based on antecedent moral convictions. In other words, the explanatory relation between flourishing and morality is, to some extent, circular.

Particularly clear examples of this are patterns of practical reasoning that are constitutive rather than merely productive of a good human life. Take the following pattern (which modifies an example by Diamond 1978): “My mother just died in my house. So I shall see to it that she will get a proper funeral, and I will not toss her body in the dumpster.” It is far from obvious that funeral practices are instrumentally necessary for any independently specifiable aspect of human flourishing. (That is why Anscombe (2008: 187) uses the virtue of respecting such practices as an example of a “mystical” or “super-utilitarian” virtue.) According to our view, the reason why a non-defective capacity for practical reason requires a disposition to make inferences like the funeral inference under appropriate circumstances is that having funeral practices, which includes reasoning practically in accordance with the rules of such practices, is part of human flourishing. Our belief that funeral practices are part of human flourishing, however, is justified by our belief about the morally correct treatment of human bodies; we start from the certainty that it is immoral to

always arises. Virtue ethics, we believe, is actually less vulnerable here than other theories. First, Aristotle defines a virtue as a “habit” (*hexis*) to deliberate well (see fn. 7). He would reject the equation of “effortless and habitual” actions with actions that are automatic rather than by choice. Second, most virtue ethicists subscribe to Anscombe’s theory of action rather than to a causalist theory (such as Davidson’s). The automaticity challenge, however, only poses itself within a causalist paradigm. We need to presuppose that intentions are “rationalizing” causes preceding the doing (Pollard 2003: 412-413; see also Fridland 2015: 4337-4338), in order for it to be problematic that automated doings, by definition, do not have a preceding intention.

toss the body of one's dead mother into a dumpster. Thus, we don't have any antecedently justified and sufficiently complete account of human flourishing with which we then justify all our moral convictions.

Our response to the skeptical objection that one already needs to buy into a system of morality to some extent in order to find individual moral prescriptions rational hence is that we agree but hold that this is not problematic. Working out our best moral theory is a matter of bringing our judgments about morality and human flourishing into reflective equilibrium, in light of philosophical arguments and empirical knowledge about humans. If the skeptic demands more than that, she has unreasonable expectations. After all, our epistemic predicament here does not seem very different from biology, logic, linguistics and many other disciplines. Foundational skepticism is possible in all these areas, but a skepticism that is a problem for everyone is not a problem for ethics in particular.¹⁸

A second skeptical objection says that even if our account works, it can at best give agents theoretical knowledge that such-and-such practical inferences are good. But practical philosophy, some argue, must itself be an exercise of practical reason and, hence, must issue in the kind of knowledge or understanding that produces action (see, e.g., Frey 2018). The kind of recognition of the goodness of a practical inference that ethics should produce must manifest itself primarily in the drawing of the conclusion, not in a merely verbal assent to the proposition that the inference is good.

We reply that the premise of this objection is mistaken. Foot (2001: 63-64) is right when she says that our job as philosophers working on ethics is to give theoretical reasons for claims about practical reasons. The correct ethical theory may occasionally help us when we have to make difficult decisions, but in general it is not the job of ethics to make us better people. That was the job of our parents during our upbringing and is now (to some extent) the job of our friends, partners, governments, etc.

9. *What becomes of personal well-being?*

We have argued that the proper role of flourishing in virtue ethics is that of a standard that determines which practical inferences are good. In what sense, if any, is personal well-being involved in flourishing?

¹⁸ The opponent may say that there is something special about ethics, namely that these kinds of normative properties are spooky, queer or weird and, hence, metaphysically suspect. Here is not the place to discuss ethical anti-realism. Suffice it to say that, although we don't endorse such a reduction, our view is actually compatible with a reductive naturalist account of (most) normative properties. This can be done by combining it with, e.g., the accounts of Silverstein (2016) and Hanser (2005).

By and large, inference patterns of which it is true that the disposition to manifest them is a virtue – such as gratitude or fairness – make human life better, and that will often include the life of the agent herself. This relation, however, does not hold for every individual case. That is just as true for virtues as for any other aspect of flourishing. Health, e.g., tends to increase personal well-being; but in times of war, when the healthy have to fight, that may not be the case.

A creature who found most important aspects of its own flourishing repulsive would probably not fare well. In general, it seems to make evolutionary sense that flourishing tends to go along with individual well-being, at least if no particular challenge arises and if the environment is close enough to that in which evolution took place. Under many conditions, human beings indeed enjoy helping others, even strangers; they feel better if conditions are fair for everyone, and they are happy to return favors, etc. Therefore, living a virtuous life tends to increase one's own well-being. As Trasymachus points out, however, this correlation is far from perfect. A good human being might in certain respects and perhaps even overall be likelier to be personally well, but, first, this is not guaranteed; second, there are situations and whole societies in which the opposite is true (as Tessman points out), and, third, as we labored to show, being personally well is not the proper reason to act well (or rather: not the reason that would usually result in an action that could count as good).

Trasymachus' point holds not only for a simplistic notion of personal well-being as desire-satisfaction, but also for personal well-being in Foot's sense of "deep happiness." Flourishing does tend to promote a life that we would wish for, e.g., for our children or loved ones. But even if many of us generally hope that our children will become virtuous, many of us also hope that they will not become so virtuous as to prevent them from pursuing a lucrative career or as to move them to take great personal risks for worthy political aims. The correlation between flourishing and personal well-being is not so immediate that the latter could serve as the link that makes virtuousness rational.

10. *Human nature: metaphysical, not epistemic*

We have argued that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics need not assume that agents should care about being a good specimen of their species, i.e., about their own flourishing. Some authors who are neo-Aristotelians or sympathetic to the view (e.g. Haase 2018; Frey 2018; Lott 2014) worry that this claim may be in tension with the nature of practical reason. This last section is devoted to this worry.

It is widely held that practical reason allows us to step back from our inclinations and impulses and to ask: “Are these inclinations and impulses *reasons* to do what they are inclinations or impulses to do?” Practical reason thus looks for rational reasons for acting in particular ways, and in order to act on such reasons, it must recognize them as reasons. Practical reason ultimately must, some hold, not only scrutinize particular reasons for particular actions but also the basis of the authority of such reasons. Acting on reasons whose basis we cannot recognize as authoritative for us must be a defective manifestation of practical reason. As McDowell (1998: 172) puts it:

Reason does not just open our eyes to our nature, as members of the animal species we belong to; it also enables and even obliges us to step back from it, in a way that puts its bearing on our practical problems into question.

Now, according to our account, if R is a good reason to ϕ , then this is because the practical inference from the premise that R to ϕ -ing is a good practical inference. Such an inference is good (if it is) because having a disposition to draw it is part of a non-defective capacity for practical reasoning. Therefore, a capacity for practical reasoning that is necessary to live a life in accordance with human nature, i.e. to flourish, includes such a disposition. In this way, human nature is the basis of R being a reason to ϕ .

According to McDowell and others, practical reason hence requires that we scrutinize the authority of human nature. That, in turn, seems to put us back with the question: Why should I be a good human being? After all, if there is no reason for me to be a good human being, then it seems that I cannot recognize reason R as authoritative for me. And, hence, I cannot rationally ϕ for the reason that R . Micah Lott (2014: 770) has put this challenge as follows:

[I]f moral judgments embody the requirements of our human nature, then the authority of morality is derived from something given to reason from outside – i.e. from our human nature. Thus it is not reason that is ultimately determining what counts as acting well, but our human nature. And why, the challenge asks, should we suppose that our nature, a product of evolution, should have rational authority over us, once we ask for reasons about how to live and act?¹⁹

¹⁹ The response Lott offers says that the conception of human nature from which we are supposed to step back already includes normative claims about how humans ought to behave. We think that this is correct, but we cannot see how it is a solution. Whether the thing from which we step back has normative content doesn't seem to matter. If someone holds that there is a special text that serves as the basis of ethical obligations – say, the Koran – and we object that practical reason demands that we step back from this text and scrutinize its authority, then saying that the text contains normative claims about what humans ought to do does not help us establish that it has authority.

Perhaps surprisingly, we doubt that there is any genuine problem here. What has authority over what we ought to do are the reasons for which we ought to do certain things and not others. That human nature is ethically important is a consequence of the fact that human nature determines what is a reason for what, for humans. If every year the rules of practical rationality were determined by the movements of a groundhog on a particular day, then those movements would have the authority that, in fact, human nature possesses. But there wouldn't be any mystery about this, other than the mystery of why the rules of rationality are determined in that way. The latter 'mystery', however, isn't a mystery in the case of human nature. Setting the standard for human activities and capacities is what human nature does across the board: regarding bodily fitness, memory, perception... and practical rationality.

Philosophers like Lott and McDowell will, no doubt, find this response unsatisfying. They may ask: But why should I accept the rules of practical rationality issued by human nature? This question can be read, as it were, in a theoretical and in a practical way. Read theoretically, the question asks for reasons to believe that the standards of defectiveness of the human capacity for practical reasoning are set by human nature. Here the answer is, again, that human nature does that across the board; we would need some special reason to think that practical reasoning is different in this respect.

Read practically, the question asks for a practical reason to instantiate certain patterns of practical reasoning, namely those underwritten by human nature. Here the first answer is that instantiating such patterns is usually not something that we do, or even can do, intentionally. We can try to train ourselves to instantiate certain patterns of practical inference and, perhaps, some day a clever neuroscientist will come up with a pill that makes us possess certain dispositions for practical reasoning. Whether we should go in for such a training or whether we should take the pill are first-order ethical questions. Hence, they must be answered by figuring out whether there are good practical inferences that support such actions. And, as always, we will hold that the standards of practical reasoning will be set by human nature. In other words, in the practical mode of thought, stepping back never allows you to step outside whatever is the correct standard of practical rationality. To think that this poses a problem is a confusion.

Admittedly, one can have background reasons to treat certain considerations as reasons (see § 6 above). But treating something as a reason in light of such background reasons does not consist in adding these background reasons as further premises to one's inference. The fact that we can have background reasons does not even mean that we can treat something as a reason intentionally or that we can reason practically at will. Hence, the question "Why reason practically in this way?" – understood as a practical question – does not get a grip on us.

A key feature of the account presented here is that higher-order deliberation, about the norms, will usually not be necessary in acting. The grounds on which someone holds that a certain pattern of practical reasoning is good usually don't matter for the ethical quality of the person's conduct. Whether I think that I should keep my promises for the reason that I promised because of some divine command or because of something having to do with human nature does not usually matter for the ethical quality of my acts. I usually act well if I do as promised for the reason that I promised, and I act badly if the fact that I promised is not a reason for me (even *pro tanto*) to do as I promised. In both cases, I will say, e.g., "I am mowing your lawn because I promised to do so." That gives voice to a good practical inference, and that is all that is needed for acting well. Thus, the results of the allegedly necessary act of stepping back are usually irrelevant.²⁰

So far, we have addressed the worry that is the topic of this subsection, as it were, in a metaphysical mode. We want to end by pointing out that we have already set to one side a perhaps tempting epistemological way of pressing a similar point. Someone may ask: But why should I think that it is part of practical reason to ϕ on the basis of R ? Sometimes such questions can be answered by pointing out that the disposition to make the practical inference from R to ϕ -ing plays an important role in human life, i.e., that it is an Aristotelian necessity (Anscombe 1981d). But, as already intimated above for the funeral example, sometimes such an answer may not be informative because making the inference from R to ϕ -ing may be a basic part of a good human life that doesn't derive its importance from being conducive to any other part of a good human life. This is not a problem for the view we outlined because it is no part of that view that we must be able to find out what the good inferences are by starting from knowledge about the good human life. Sometimes the only epistemic reason we have for holding that to ϕ on the basis of R is part of a good human life is that we are certain that, given the circumstances, it would be immoral not to ϕ on the basis of R . Put in traditional terminology, the *ratio essendi* of the goodness of a practical inference need not coincide with the *ratio cognoscendi* of our knowledge of this goodness. The moral skeptic may doubt the *ratio cognoscendi*; but our aim in this subsection is not to refute the moral skeptic.²¹

²⁰ Perhaps everyone must see a point or "Witz" – to use Wittgenstein's word – that unifies the virtues, on pain of not being able to apply the rules of practical rationality to new cases and on pain of not being able to sustain a stable disposition to act well. What we say in the text is not in conflict with this idea. We doubt, however, that any particular conception of the point or "Witz" of the virtues is necessary for acting well, at least in the majority of cases.

²¹ We suspect that some knowledge about which practical inferences are good or about morality may (in some sense) be epistemically basic, and its acquisition may be impossible without the right upbringing. The kind of "knowledge" at issue is the ability to take certain practical inferences (but not others) to be good by making them. We think the situation here is similar to the situation with

11. *Conclusion*

To answer the title question, we distinguished two senses of happiness, viz. personal well-being and flourishing. We argued that the proper role of personal well-being in virtue ethics is very limited, even on a “deep” understanding of well-being. For reasons that have to do with motivation and evolution, virtuousness tends to overlap with personal well-being, but this correlation is far from perfect. E.g., human beings tend to enjoy altruistic behavior; they prefer to be honest; they wish to be bold. As with other species characteristics, however, this is just a tendency. In many individual situations as well as in certain systemic conditions, these traits lower the agent’s personal well-being.

Happiness understood as flourishing, on the other hand, plays an important role in virtue ethics. It determines what are valid patterns of practical reasoning, which in turn determines the standards of acting well. If it is part of a flourishing human life to show gratitude in appropriate situations, e.g., then an inference pattern that starts from something another person did for you and concludes in an expression of how much you value this can be valid.

Importantly, this does not require that we aim at flourishing in our individual actions, i.e., that this aim must be the first premise of any sound practical inference. The view we outline thus avoids the objection why one should care about being a good human being. Human flourishing rarely is the aim of an individual virtuous action; it is the criterion by which we decide what practical inference patterns are valid and hence what types of actions can be rational.

Our answer to the title question thus is a qualified “No.” Philosophers from Epicurus to Kant have found this answer intolerable (and Kant famously appeals to God to ensure that happiness is ultimately proportional to merit). It would certainly be more pleasant for everyone if they were right and we were wrong. But until more convincing arguments are on offer, all we can say is this: A very vicious agent who is personally well in a deep sense is probably a rare thing. A fully virtuous agent who is miserable, however, is entirely possible.

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respect to our “knowledge” that *modus ponens* is a good theoretical inference. (Notice that when logicians question the validity of *modus ponens* this is almost always on the basis of considerations of reflective equilibrium: they want to preserve other principles, such as an unrestricted T-schema. Perhaps McGee’s counterexamples are an exception here, but the general point holds.)

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