

The virtues and practical reason. Introductory considerations

Gabriele De Anna

Abstract: Current discussions on practical reason often overlook the contribution that virtue ethics can offer to that topic. Virtue ethics might seem unrelated to practical reason, since it ensued from Elizabeth Anscombe's emphasis on the first-personal perspective in the explanation of action and focuses on the character of the agent, rather than on reason. This paper suggests that the focus on character is not incompatible with the acknowledgement of the relevance of practical reason in action, but, quite the contrary, offers a privileged standpoint to understand how reason can operate in practice.

Keywords: practical reason; virtue ethics; character; fallibility; normativity.

1. *Virtue ethics and practical reason*

Virtue ethics does not usually play a prominent role in discussions on practical reason. One needs only to read Wallace's brilliant entry on practical reason in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy to notice that virtue ethics is at most a very minor voice in contemporary debates on that topic (Wallace 2014). Debates on practical reason are usually centred on Kantian and consequentialist positions, and that has certainly to do with the fact that Kantian and consequentialist theories – i.e., theories in the two main contemporary normative traditions other than virtue ethics – grant immediately and obviously central roles to practical reason. To the Kantian, practical reason is the very source of normativity, and to the consequentialist it is the instrument for the maximization of value, i.e. the bridge that links value to human action. By contrast, virtue ethicists might seem to downplay the role of practical reason in action, since they emphasise the character of the agent as the main source of normativity and as the criterion for the evaluation of action. No doubt, many interested in practical reason must have thought that they should look in other directions, if they wanted to find insights and arguments to carry their research forward.

In very recent times, however, attention to virtue ethics from philosophers interested in practical reason has certainly been growing, especially after David Hume – the traditional champion of instrumental conceptions of practical reason – started being seen as a virtue ethicist (Slote 2001). Reflection on Hume’s conceptions of practical reason and of the role of virtues in it brought into focus aspects of more traditional, neo-Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics that are relevant to an understanding of practical reason. Indeed, already in 1957, in *Intention*, her pioneering work in virtue ethics, Elizabeth Anscombe had put the topic of practical reason to the fore.

In Anscombe’s view, in order to understand human action in a strict sense – i.e., an action for which the agent is responsible –, we need to understand intention, and that requires that we give an account of a certain sense of “reason for action” (Anscombe 1957: 10). In order to capture the relevant sense, we need to understand a reason for action as a form of practical knowledge, i.e. knowledge concerning how to make the world, as opposed to theoretical knowledge, i.e. knowledge concerning how the world is. Anscombe follows Aristotle in explaining practical knowledge in terms of practical reasoning, a form of syllogism in which the major premise expresses “something wanted” (*ibid.*: 64). Anscombe clarifies that a premise expresses something wanted not by mentioning a want or a desire, but by mentioning a thing (in the most general sense) as wanted/worth wanting or desired/desirable.

By grounding practical reasoning on a want, Anscombe accounts for the fact that practical reasoning is practical, but she also ties practical reasoning to character. Indeed, in her view, the premise of a practical syllogism expresses a want by characterising some state of affairs as an end that the agent sees as good (desirability-characterization: cf. *ibid.*: 72). However, what states of affairs an agent sees as good depends also on her sensitivity and responsiveness to the situations in which she is embedded, i.e. on her character. Sceptics about the relevance of the virtues for an understanding of practical reason might have the impression that character is thereby back as the only source of normativity in the evaluation of action. Anscombe’s considerations on practical reason might seem to them as a short and useless detour, which leads back to the starting point: practical reason as such does not ground normativity, but simply spells out the implications of character in practical situations. However, this impression would be misled.

The point of practical reasoning is choosing well, and a choice can fail in at least two ways: in misjudging how to best achieve the end or in characterising as worth wanting an end, which is not worth. An agent wants according to her character, but her character can be good or bad and, depending on what she wants in a certain circumstance. In fact, her wants can be worthy or unworthy.

As virtue ethicists have pointed out, a character is virtuous if it leads to choose worthy ends and vicious if it leads to choose unworthy ends. The criterion which distinguishes virtuous from vicious character traits is that “virtues benefit their possessor” (Hursthouse 1999: 127). The wants of a virtuous agent are such that by attaining the respective ends she flourishes as a human being: “to determine what is goodness and what defect of character, disposition, and choice, we must consider what human good is and how human beings live: in other words, what kind of a living thing a human being is” (Foot 2001: 51). This stance is relevant for our understanding of practical reason, and this is not so just in the sense that it claims that human nature can be a criterion for practical reason.

2. *Focusing on character*

The added value of thinking about character in the study of practical reason is that by focusing on character we can understand how thinking processes are actually carried out by humans. Practical reason is reason put in practice and practice is the engagement of actual agents, not an abstract process. However, when agents engage in practice, they bring all their volitional and cognitive capacities to bear on their actions: (human) practical reason can only exist in an entanglement with other volitional and cognitive capacities. Hence, by focusing on character, virtue ethicists have brought the discussion on practical reason to the natural terrain where practical reason belongs.

The customary complaint of virtue ethicists against traditional approaches is that consequentialists and deontologists have too an abstract conception of practical reason. Foot writes, for example:

Kant was perfectly right in saying that moral goodness was goodness of the will; the idea of practical rationality is throughout a concept of this kind. He seems to have gone wrong, however, in thinking that an abstract idea of practical reason applicable to rational beings as such could take us all the way to anything like our own moral code. For the evaluation of human action depends also on essential features of specifically human life (Foot: 14).

As we shall see in the next section, a closer reading of Kant and consequentialist classical philosophers could deny the ground of this objection to Kant. Kant’s-empirical anthropology deals with the implementation of practical reason in human nature. However, deontologists and consequentialists of the mid Twentieth century did have a rather abstract conception of practical reason and it was certainly thanks to the rise of virtue ethics that the relevance of human nature for practical reasoning was brought back to the centre of debates.

A main difference between virtue ethics and other normative approaches to practical reason, however, seems to be that other approaches see human nature only as limiting the scope of application of practical reason, whereas virtue ethics sees human nature as a source of normativity as well. From that point of view, character not only constrains which among the demands of practical reason apply to a certain agent, but it also determines what the demands of practical reason are. The question, then, is how reflection on human character, e.g. on the actual articulation of a person's cognitive and volitional capacities, can shed light on practical reason, including its normative significance. I would like to suggest that the best way to understand this point is to focus on human *practical fallibility*. Above, I have recalled Anscombe's contention that if we want to understand what human action is we have to recognise that it is a doing guided by a certain kind of reasons and that reasons of the relevant kind are furnished by scenarios in which the agent can recognise some good to be done. In my view, some aspects of our experience suggest that humans are fallible in the pursue of the good (Audi 2001: 230-233): as Ovid famously said, *video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*, i.e. I see the best and most honest things, but then I do the worst.

Examples of failure are actions that we humans normally think to be wrong no matter what the agent might desire, like the gratuitous killing of an innocent, or torturing someone. Examples include also cases where a sense of guilt is felt by someone after doing some (bad) action. The fact that we can fail in acting implies that we have normative constraints (Dancy 2000: 103). A normative constraint is a reason that an agent acknowledges even if it tells against her pro-attitudes. The existence of normative constraints is a feature of our experience that hardly fits in the above explanation of human action. People who act wrongly act for reasons, and they see what they do as in some ways good (Vogler 2003). Indeed, I have claimed that reasons explain actions and that the reasons that explain an action are seen by the agent as indicating some good to be realised, i.e. they are seen as justificatory reasons by her. That only means, however, that those reasons seem good to the agent, not that *they are really so*.

Our experience of the possibility of failing in action suggests that reasons that explain an action might not really justify it. One may not do what one has (justificatory) reasons to do, or do what one has (justificatory) reasons not to do. However, how can failure in agency occur? Agency might fail since it is limited in many different ways. Firstly, there are epistemic limitations. There could be relevant facts that an agent cannot access while deciding what to do. Secondly, our practical engagement involves a network of cognitive and volitional capacities and the interaction between these faculties offers several occasions for failure. Thirdly, often we must choose among different courses of action and our choices can be wrong. Fourthly, we are free to act against our

best judgments, even if our tendency to rationalize our bad deeds suggests that thus acting violates and forces our nature in important ways. Character, i.e. the set of an agent's habits that shape her cognitive and volitional capacities, might play a role in all these hindrances to good action. Our habits might enable or hinder reliable rational deliberative processes, and they shape the structures of our attitudes in ways that are conducive to recognizing and following reasons for action that might be good or bad.

There are two possible sources of failure in all above cases: failures can depend on cognitive limitations or on limitations in the adequacy of subjective responses. On the one hand, an agent could lack access to some subsiding facts that are relevant for a certain action. On the other hand, error can originate from how the agent responds to the situation (Audi 2001: 149-150): even if she has all the relevant information, the agent can judge that she has reasons that she really has not, or she can fail to acknowledge reasons that she has. The problem in this case is that she responds in an inadequate manner to the facts.

The second kind of failure is problematic, since one might wonder why we should talk about failure in this connection at all. The notion of good that explains action is agent-relative: a good is such in the eyes of the agent. How can what we do when we fail in our responses be wrong? Since our experience of normativity suggests that we can be mistaken in our way of responding, however, an explanation is ought. Whatever the solution to this question might be, this line of thinking suggests that an agent – from her first personal point of view and regardless of “external” considerations about human nature – can always doubt whether her response to a situation might be wrong, even if no cognitive failure occurs. This implies that the desirability characterisation of an end of action depends on the character of the agent, but the character is also subject to constraints concerning what proper justificatory reasons for action in the situation are. The possibility of our experience of this kind of non-epistemic fallibility in action shows that character shapes the agent's deployment of reason in practice and, at the same time, it is normatively grounded on other rational criteria (De Anna 2018; 2019). Hence, by focusing on character and on the constraints that operate when we evaluate virtues and vices from our first-personal perspective, we can investigate the operations of reason in practice. Reflection on character highlights the relation between the virtues and practical reason in both directions: by reflection on the virtues, we can understand the normative grounds which are constitutive of practical reason; by considering how reason can be employed in practice, we can distinguish virtues from vicious traits of character.

3. *Understanding practical reasoning*

The above considerations suggest that the virtues, their role in action and the evaluative language that they ground might be a promising observation point to bring forward our understating of practical reason. A conference on this topic was held on the 22nd and 23rd November 2018 at the University of Udine (Italy) and was entitled Human Dignity: The Virtues and Practical Reason.¹ Talks were extensively discussed at the conference and later versions of them were subsequently exchanged and commented by participants in the following months. The original essays published in this focus are the final results of that common work of research.

Three main areas of debate are dealt with in the following essays. The first area concerns the modes in which practical reasoning is embedded in the context of a particular action, both within the individual agent and in the community of the agent. The second area of debate concerns the relevance of the virtues for transcendental approaches to practical reason. The last area relates to the relevance of considerations about human nature for practical reason in the assessment of character traits as virtues and vices.

The first essay is by Anselm Müller, a former pupil and collaborator of Elizabeth Anscombe. The essay deals with how practical reason is entangled with emotions in action. The author has already offered pioneering contributions to the study of emotions in German, and this is one of the first treatments of that topic that he publishes in English. He lays down the backbones of a comprehensive theory of emotions, by proposing a taxonomy which highlights the great diversity of various kinds of emotions in respect to their relations to reason. The essay investigates the modes in which practical reason is embedded in the character of the agent in action, but it also offers a significant contribution to the understanding of the relation between rationality and emotions in general. The essay by Matteo Negro deals with the relation between individual choices and the social practices that need to underpin the exercise of cognitive and volitional capacities by agents. By considering that relation, the essay shows that some versions of consequentialism are committed to an account of normativity which gives full recognition to the virtues as a source of normativity for the individual agent.

Erica Holberg addresses the importance of the virtues for transcendental conceptions of practical reason. According to her interpretation, Kant is

¹ The conference was supported by the Research Project “La dignità umana colloqui attraverso i millenni/Human Dignity: Debates Through the Millennia” (PRID 2017), coordinated by Professor Marina Brolo, Department of Legal Sciences, University of Udine.

committed to a form of ethical naturalism, since in his view the finitude of human agents is a crucial variable that practical reason needs to consider while legislating. On the other hand, he takes human finitude to depend on the particularised character of the agent. Gustav Melichar proposes an interpretation of Hegel's account of practical reason as an attempt to reconcile Aristotle with Kant. Following Aristotle, Hegel would see human nature as a criterion for virtue, but like Kant and unlike Aristotle, he would identify the entelechy of human nature with reason. Julia Peters offers an account of practical reason from a constructivist standpoint, and she shows that from that point of view it makes sense to think of an agent as committed to a principle only on the background of the moral character of the agent. This suggests that also the constructivist is committed to take character as a source of normativity.

The role of human nature as a criterion for practical reason is discussed by Tommaso Allodi. He defends neo-Aristotelian naturalism from the objection that human nature is normatively irrelevant, on the basis of a transcendental, non – empirical account of human nature proposed by Michael Thompson and John Hacker-Wright. Against their claims, however, Allodi contends that their solution can only be supported on the basis of a substantial metaphysical premise. Katharina Nieswandt and Ulf Hlobil discuss the role of happiness (considered as substantial well-being, not just as a psychological state) in virtue ethics. In their view, although happiness sets the standards for good practical reasoning and is a precondition of virtue, it does not figure in the processes of practical reasoning and hence plays no role in virtue ethics.

I have been arguing that considerations about character can play a crucial role in our understanding of practical reason. It is my hope that the essay in this collection will contribute to sharpening our understanding of the relation between the virtues and practical reason.

Gabriele De Anna

gabriele.de-anna@uni-bamberg.de

Otto-Friedrich Universität Bamberg and Università di Udine

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