

# Précis of *The Reward of Virtue*

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My project is squarely within the scope of contemporary virtue ethics, and so I think the best way to start might be to locate my work relative to the currently dominate virtue theory: neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, as represented by Rosalind Hursthouse.

## Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

Hursthouse identifies three theses that characterize Aristotelian virtue ethics:

1. The virtues benefit their possessor...
2. The virtues make their possessor a good human being...
3. The above two features of the virtues are interrelated (Hursthouse 2002, 167).

The first thesis is an observation about the typical effect of the virtues on our lives. Most of us already believe this thesis is true. Basically all parents, ever, want to inculcate the virtues in their children, in large part because they think their kids lives will go better, for them, if they have some virtues. At the very least, no parents think they're *harming* their children by teaching them to be honest, generous, kind, etc.

The second thesis is not an observation about the effect of the virtues. It is, rather, the kernel of the neo-Aristotelian *theory* of the virtues. That is, Hursthouse and others in the

neo-Aristotelian tradition believe that what *makes* a trait of character a virtue is that the trait has the property of making its possessor a good person. Another way to say this: the virtues *just are* those traits of character that make their possessor a good human being. This second thesis is plausible enough on its face, especially when we consider analogies to the virtues of artifacts. The virtues of a knife pretty clearly *just are* those features that make it a good knife: namely, a strong handle and a sharp blade.

The third thesis is the one I first found troubling, and is the reason I started looking for an alternative to neo-Aristotelian virtue theory. Being an excellent coal-mine canary is not good for the canary—excellent canaries die at the drop of a hat. Being an excellent rabbit is not good for the rabbit—excellent rabbits appear to spend their lives in a state of abject terror. Why, then, should it be the case that being an excellent specimen of humanity is good *for me*?

So those are the three theses that characterize neo-Aristotelian virtue theory. One way to think about my project: I'm proposing ditching theses two and three, and turning thesis one into the kernel of a new theory of virtues. That is, there's only one thesis that characterizes my approach to virtue theory, and it is this: **The virtues just are those traits of character that benefit their possessor.**

## Refinements to the thesis

This statement of the thesis won't do as stands, though. For one thing, the word "benefit" is way too vague. It surely isn't the case that the virtues are traits of character that *financially* benefit their possessor. Nor do they have anything to do with medical coverage or retirement funds. When we say that the virtues benefit their possessor, we mean that the virtues make some kind of contribution to their possessor's *well-being*.

What kind of contribution? It cannot be the case that the virtues *constitute* or *are suffi-*

*cient* for well-being. The existence of terrible injustice and terrible luck establish this. Imagine a wonderful man—whatever your definition of wonderful—who is kidnapped, shipped across the ocean, and forced into back-breaking, mind-numbing labor until he finally dies. This is not a good life, no matter how good the character that suffers through it.

For pretty much the same reason, it can't be the case that the virtues are *necessary* for well-being. Vices don't guarantee misery any more than virtues guarantee well-being. So the virtues are neither necessary nor sufficient for well-being.

Instead, I suggest the virtues *reliably promote* well-being, much like adopting a healthy lifestyle reliably promotes physical health.

Consider physical health. Though some degree of good luck is required for me to be physically healthy (I need to be lucky enough to avoid car crashes and lightning strikes), adopting a healthy lifestyle increases the chances that bad luck will affect me less and good luck more. Though I might be predisposed to develop cancer, I can increase the odds that I will develop cancer by taking up smoking and I can decrease those odds by giving up red meat.

The relationship between virtue and well-being is similar. If I am to live a happy life, some amount of good luck is required. I must be born into a decently functional society. If I am born a slave in a cruel society, my prospects for well-being are curtailed or eliminated. But, as in the case of physical health, there are factors internal to me that interact with external factors. If I am born into circumstances that present me with opportunities for rewarding friendships, I can increase the chances that I will have friends by being friendly. And I can minimize those same chances by being mean-spirited.

So, iteration two: **The virtues just are those traits of character that reliably promote the well-being of their possessor.**

This is still less-than-ideal, as it stands. Though “well-being” is closer to the mark than “benefit,” well-being remains an energetically contested concept, both among philoso-

phers and psychologists. There are hedonist and other objective-list theories of well-being. Preference-satisfaction and life-satisfaction theories. Self-determination and self-actualization theories.

Giving a full account or defense of any one of these theories of well-being is a book-length project of its own. However, arm-chair philosophizing and psychological research together paint a fairly consistent picture of what sorts of things we need to do if we are to live our lives well from our own point of view: we do well in our lives when we do well in the *projects* and *relationships* that are of *special importance* to us.

Success in projects and relationships about which I care little is little satisfying. If I find myself a sought-after theater director, while at the same time loathing everything about the theater, my life is not going well. Similarly, if I am failing at projects and relationships that are important to me, my life is not going well. If I love and value my spouse and yet my marriage is crumbling, my life is not going well. In short: if I'm not doing well in the projects and relationships that matter to me, then I'm not doing well, full-stop.

Conversely, if the projects and relationships that are important to me are going well, there is little that could block the judgment that I am doing well, full-stop. If I'm very poor, but my poverty doesn't inhibit my projects or stress my relationships, I'm doing well in the face of adversity. If I have a chronic disease, but do well in my relationships and projects despite, I'm doing well in the face of adversity. The upshot: for the purposes of normative ethical theory—even normative ethical theory that appeals to the concept of well-being—we don't need to agree on a *theory* of well-being. We have, in relationships and projects, a good, non-controversial *proxy* for well-being.

So, plugging in that non-controversial proxy, we get iteration three: **the virtues just are those traits of character that reliably promote success in the relationships and projects that are specially important to their possessor.**

This is almost right, but it still won't do, as it stands, because we often make mistakes

in judging what is important to us. Consider how commonly students change their major after discovering they aren't actually interested in what they thought they were interested in. Or how commonly people pursue romantic relationships with people who are a poor fit for them. In these situations—when we've got a project or a relationship that's a poor fit for us—we'd do better for ourselves, better by our own lights, better on our own terms, if we had some *other* project or relationship.

So, iteration four: **the virtues just are those traits of character that reliably promote success in the relationships and projects that are (or ought to be, for her own sake) specially important to their possessor.**

This is the theory of the virtues I defend. My dissertation is basically an argument that if you look at what traits of character do this—if you look at what traits reliably promote healthy relationships and satisfying projects—you'll find a set of character traits that overlaps the traditional slate of virtues. If you want healthy relationships and rewarding projects, you should be kind, honest, courageous, and so on. You'll do much better, that way, than you will if you are cruel, dishonest, and cowardly. I call this account of the virtues "character egoism," because the basic idea is that what makes a character trait a virtue is that that trait makes your life go better for you.

OK. When we go about classifying character traits according to this character-egoist principle, if we allow our attention to be fixed by a single facet of a character trait, we might mislead ourselves about that trait. If we look only at the financial success ruthlessness brings an aspiring corporate executive, we might think her ruthlessness *benefits* her (and is therefore an egoistic virtue). If we look only at the difficulty kindness gives a schoolteacher in disciplining her students, we might think her kindness harms her (and is therefore an egoistic vice). These judgments would be mistakes. Before we can make a judgment about the moral valence of any given character trait, we must first sort out the tangle of costs and benefits that flow from that trait. Let's walk through an easy example: perseverance.

## Perseverance

Perseverance is the disposition to pursue the goals we have set for ourselves even in the face of obstacles. I'm not aware of Aristotle discussing perseverance, but it's in Hume's catalog of virtues (EPM 6.21; SBN 243). Is it also in a character-egoist catalog of virtues?

Benefits: Most projects worth pursuing are intrinsically challenging. If you want to learn to play an instrument, you'll have to endure a period of buzzes and squeaks. If you want to take up gardening, you'll have to endure killing winds and aphid invasions. If you want to take up hiking, you'll have to endure hunger or exhaustion on the trail. If we lack perseverance—if we tend to abandon projects when we meet frustrations like these—we are unlikely to succeed in any of the larger projects we care about. Whatever particular projects might be the ones for us, perseverance promotes success in all of them. That's a whopping benefit.

Costs: Does perseverance cause collateral damage to our ability to enjoy relationships? *Obsession* or *monomania* could. But obsession is not what we mean by “perseverance.” It isn't clear how such a trait could harm any class of relationships, or any class of projects.

Perseverance, then, has the huge benefit of opening up access to the set of challenging projects that are most likely to be rewarding, and it has no obvious costs. Perseverance is properly classified a virtue. A character-egoist virtue.

I think similar stories can be told for all the familiar virtues. In fact, I think it turns out to be pretty uncontroversial to claim that traits like self-respect, kindness, courage, and temperance clearly promote, on balance, success in relationships and projects.

There are, however, two traditional virtues that are usually thought to be irreducibly other-directed: honesty and justice. Any plausible theory of the virtues must be able to account for why these two character traits are virtues. That's the concern of the final third of my dissertation. I'd like to close this précis with a few words about how character egoism

can account for honesty.

## Honesty

Honesty is the disposition to be honest.

Costs: The *prima facie* case that honesty benefits *others*—not its possessor—is strong: in situations in which we are tempted to lie, it’s almost always because we believe things will go better for us if we do. We *sacrifice* something when we are honest. When we admit we’ve been given too much change at the register, we sacrifice windfall money. When we own up to a mistake we could have passed off on someone else, we sacrifice prestige and comfort.

Benefits: Does honesty come with benefits that outweigh those costs? Benefits that justify its classification as an egoistic virtue?

There are certainly social benefits that follow on a *reputation* for honesty. My business endeavors will go better if my colleagues believe I’m honest. My romantic relationships will go better if my partner believes I’m honest. If *genuine* honesty were the only way to secure a reputation for honesty, there would be a straightforwardly egoistic case for honesty as a virtue.

But genuine honesty is obviously not the only way to achieve a reputation for honesty. Really consistent and effective dishonesty will accomplish the same thing. So this is the real question: why is *genuine* honesty—as opposed to *apparent* honesty—a virtue? Does *genuine* honesty promote success in relationships and projects in a way that *apparent* honesty cannot?

I think it does. I think the virtue of honesty is a necessary condition of the ability to trust other people, and the ability to trust other people is, in turn, a necessary condition of close friendships (or other close forms of relationship). My argument for this runs via some of Hume’s claims about human psychology—claims I think are totally right. But without getting into any of those details, I think it’s easy to see the basic idea.

Imagine a very good liar—someone who exploits those around him, and is so good at it that he’s never been caught. We might wonder if someone like this, who spends his time making chumps of others, might begin to worry that other people are likewise making chumps of him.

This sort of character—the man with the secret vice who is constantly suspicious of the same vice in others—is familiar enough in history and literature (and we’ve all probably met someone like this, too). A good literary example is Iago, the villain of *Othello*. Iago is on the short-list of the most treacherous, dishonest characters Shakespeare wrote, and yet he’s so effective in his knavery that the other characters in the play refer to him, un-ironically, as “Honest Iago.”

There’s an interesting moment at 1.3.379. Iago addresses the audience to explain why he hates Othello. His main reason is that he suspects Othello is sleeping with his wife, Emilia. It isn’t true, of course. But what makes this moment interesting is that Iago has *absolutely no evidence whatsoever* of infidelity on the part of his wife. Othello at least has circumstantial evidence that Desdemona is cheating on him. Iago has not the slightest hint of any kind that Emilia is cheating on him.

It’s hard to know how to read Iago’s mistrust of his wife without appealing to his own constant treacheries. That is, it is *because* he’s constantly cheating on her, while *appearing* to be faithful to her, that Iago begins to count Emilia’s *apparent* faithfulness to him as evidence of her infidelity. Because of his dishonesty, Iago has lost the ability to trust Emilia.

E.M. Forster wrote that “One must be fond of people and trust them if one is not to make a mess of life” (Forster 1976, 82). I think that’s absolutely true. We must be able to trust others if we are live a good life. My claim is that the best way to preserve one’s ability to trust others is to cultivate the virtue of honesty.

Honesty comes with direct costs and opportunity costs. But it comes with a whopping benefit: it allows us to have the kind of close, trusting relationships that make life good. I



think the benefits easily outweigh the costs, and so I can give an account of real, genuine honesty as an egoistic virtue.

I'm bad at endings, so I think I'll just stop.

## References

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