



## Done “For Their Own Sakes”: Human Practices as Virtuous Activities

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> – Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> January 2020.

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There are good reasons to think that virtuous activity is non-instrumentally related to human flourishing. On this view, practicing the virtues is constitutive of human happiness. This aligns with Aristotle's claim that the human good is "activity of the soul exhibiting virtue"<sup>1</sup> and his further claim that for acts to be virtuous they must, among other things, be chosen "for their own sakes."<sup>2</sup> However, there are some difficulties understanding just what it would mean to choose virtuous actions for their own sake. For example, would a soldier who is fighting to defend his family or country be choosing his courageous action "for its own sake"? Proposals from Bernard Williams and Rosalind Hursthouse attempting to make sense of Aristotle's phrase are helpful, but ultimately inadequate. I give a better account by showing that virtuous actions can always also be re-described in terms of meaningful human practices which are undertaken as ends in themselves. In these, one's engagement in the activity is itself part of what is valued. This means that to understand the role of virtues in the flourishing life requires giving rich description to these practices.

### **Non-Instrumental Virtue**

But first, why think that virtuous activity is done for its own sake? Perhaps what makes virtuous acts valuable is that they enable certain other kinds of human goods to be achieved. In one of her early essays, Philippa Foot defends the view that the virtues are valued because they tend to profit the person who possesses them. Thus, justice and other virtues are not like pleasure or interest, two things which clearly are sought for their own sake. If someone were to ask, "Why

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1098a16-18. Hereafter referred to as *NE*.

<sup>2</sup> *NE*, 1105a31-32.

do what is pleasant or interesting?” there is not much we could say to such a person. Humans just do want these things. Foot takes it as obvious that, in contrast, the question “Why be just?” calls for a further answer. A convincing reply will show that justice is “necessarily connected” to human wants, needs, and desires.<sup>3</sup>

The result is that, as Foot puts it, “A great deal hangs on the question of whether justice is or is not a good to the just man.”<sup>4</sup> If injustice is more profitable than justice, then the moralists “are perpetrating a fraud” and we lack adequate reasons to be just.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, if we were to find out that some presumptive virtue was not beneficial, the right thing to say would be that it was not a virtue after all.<sup>6</sup> Foot thinks that plausible accounts of how traditional virtues like justice are beneficial can be given. For starters, one’s social relationships are bound to be affected by acts of injustice towards others, and there is no guarantee that secret acts of injustice would not one day come to light. People need these relationships and hence they need justice. Foot acknowledges that individual acts of justice may, because of contingent circumstances, not be beneficial to the agent. Occasionally justice may even require an agent to face a disaster like death. But justice as a whole pays. An agent could not “have it both ways”, enjoying the benefits of a just disposition while also being prepared to be unjust when momentarily advantageous.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the man facing death for the sake of justice, like anyone else, has “good reason to be” just.<sup>8</sup>

D. Z. Phillips responds to this view by arguing that it does not adequately account for the value humans place on the virtues nor the overridingness we associate with moral considerations. On Foot’s view, the virtues are instrumentalized. As a result, the above explanation as to why

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<sup>3</sup> Philippa Foot, ‘Moral Beliefs’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series 59 (1958-59): 101.

<sup>4</sup> Foot, ‘Moral Beliefs’, 101.

<sup>5</sup> Foot, ‘Moral Beliefs’, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Foot, ‘Moral Beliefs’, 102.

<sup>7</sup> Foot, ‘Moral Beliefs’, 104.

<sup>8</sup> Foot, ‘Moral Beliefs’, 104.

one always has a reason to be virtuous is inadequate. She said that although an individual virtuous action may not be to one's benefit, the virtues on the whole are and, since one cannot simply "turn off" a given virtue when convenient, one always has reason to be virtuous. The problem with Foot's approach is that one's ongoing practice of a virtue is now, to quote Phillips, "carried on independently of the initial reason for its adoption, namely, the likelihood of profit."<sup>9</sup> Being virtuous in unprofitable situations now appears to be without rationale. Unless a reason for acting justly can be given in terms of the intrinsic value of justice, those reasons will always be subject to defeat. What is more, Foot fails to capture the experience of someone who is virtuous. For the just person, "death for the sake of justice is not a disaster."<sup>10</sup> The true tragedy would have been to be found wanting in virtue.<sup>11</sup> The virtuous value virtuous activity itself.

No doubt more could be said. My goal here is not to decisively prove, but simply to make plausible the claim that virtuous actions are chosen "for their own sake", thus motivating further reflection on that phrase. Combined with the view that virtues are meant to enable human flourishing and their value comes from their relationship to it, we will probably say that the exercise of the virtues is constitutive of human flourishing. We value virtuous actions, but not because they benefit us or make us happy in ways separate from such activity. Rather, acting virtuously itself constitutes human well-being, at least partially. I should note that Foot herself, in her later work, moves closer to this position. In *Natural Goodness*, she acknowledges that virtue and happiness are "conceptually inseparable"<sup>12</sup> even though she is not prepared to identify a life of virtue with happiness.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> D. Z. Phillips, 'Does It Pay to Be Good?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series 65 (1964-65): 50.

<sup>10</sup> Phillips, 'Does It Pay to Be Good?', 50.

<sup>11</sup> Phillips, 'Does It Pay to Be Good?', 50-51.

<sup>12</sup> Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94.

<sup>13</sup> Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 97.

### Aristotle and the Virtues

The foregoing reflections support Aristotle's way of talking about the virtues. For him, happiness is something that is always chosen for its own sake<sup>14</sup> and hence the "chief good."<sup>15</sup> After arguing that the good is connected to the function of a thing, he concludes that the "human good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting virtue."<sup>16</sup> Since happiness is the human good, the human good is virtuous activity, and happiness is chosen for its own sake, it follows that human beings choose to act virtuously for its own sake. Aristotle endorses this conclusion when discussing the criteria for an action to be virtuous. One requirement is that such actions must be chosen "for their own sakes."<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere Aristotle will write that "virtuous actions are noble and done for the sake of the noble."<sup>18</sup> We can conclude, then, that virtuous actions, to be virtuous, must be chosen for their own intrinsic nobility and goodness, rather than for something extrinsic to the action itself.

Or can we? Virtuous actions are done because they are good in themselves, but at the same time the goodness of these actions is not unconnected to the good these actions at least attempt to bring about in the world. We give generously precisely because the money or items we give will provide some benefit to the person who receives our generosity. True, there is a difference between this and giving because it will win fame for one's self. But it is not immediately obvious just how to characterize this difference. Even more difficult are cases related to the virtue of courage. Is someone fighting in a just war in order to defend one's family

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<sup>14</sup> *NE*, 1097b5-7.

<sup>15</sup> *NE*, 1097b22.

<sup>16</sup> *NE*, 1098a16-17.

<sup>17</sup> *NE*, 1105a31-32.

<sup>18</sup> *NE*, 1120a23-24.

or country acting courageously? The answer should be yes. In contrast, it is fighting just for the sake of fighting that seems the more unvirtuous. Even if we characterize courage as something like “seeking what is good in spite of danger,” it is foolish to seek something *because* it involves danger.<sup>19</sup> So how, exactly, are courageous actions sought for their own sake?

These reflections should not necessarily lead us to reconsider the principle that virtuous actions are chosen because they are good in themselves. Clearly, certain reasons for acting, such as the pursuit of money or fame, do not capture the motivations of a virtuous person. Someone motivated primarily by these considerations would not reliably act the way a virtuous person would. Instead, the virtuous agent recognizes certain features, common to virtuous actions, as worthy of choice and acts on the basis of those considerations rather than others. What the preceding questions show, however, is that there is a puzzle understanding just what features of an action the virtuous choose and in just what sense this means virtuous actions are done “for their own sake.” The solution is not immediately obvious and needs to be thought through.

### **The Williams/Hursthouse Proposal**

Bernard Williams considers the following way of understanding Aristotle’s phrase: “A V[irtuous] person chooses V acts qua V acts.”<sup>20</sup> This, Williams thinks is obviously false if given a *de dicto* reading. It is rare that someone chooses, for example, courageous or modest actions under the description “courageous” or “modest”. One does not normally choose to face fear just to learn to overcome fear, but because something else good is at stake. If read *de re*, however,

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<sup>19</sup> See Rosalind Hursthouse, ‘The Virtuous Agent’s Reasons: a reply to Bernard Williams’, in *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, ed. Robert Heinaman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Williams, ‘Acting as the Virtuous Person Acts’, in *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, ed. Robert Heinaman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 16.

Williams thinks the “V acts qua V acts” formulation is just about right. The virtuous agent understands the features of the situation which would make a certain course of action virtuous and then acts in consideration of those features.<sup>21</sup> This leads Williams to say that, in general, “A V act is an act done for X reasons” where “X reasons” are understood to be reasons related to the virtue in question.<sup>22</sup> This obviously leaves work to be done in determining whether a reason counts as an X reason, but we can do so well enough by reflecting on the nature of the virtue in question. What counts as an X reason is not likely to be any more controversial than debates about when actions are virtuous in general. This framework allows us to say that reasons like wanting to help others materially are generosity-regarding reasons whereas those like wanting one’s name to appear on a list of benefactors are not.

Williams does not think his solution works for the special cases of courage and temperance, though. There are no (or very few) reasons that are properly described as courage- or temperance-related. When someone acts courageously or temperately, one is typically acting to achieve some good which can be understood without reference to courage or temperance itself. It may fall under one of the other virtues, but perhaps not. What these virtues allow humans to do is overcome fear or the immediate pull of desire in order to do what is right. Williams concludes that these virtues depart from Aristotle’s structure. Courageous or temperate actions are not characteristically “done for their own sake.”<sup>23</sup>

Rosalind Hursthouse, commentating on Williams’ essay, endorses ““The V agent chooses what is V for X reasons”” as a way of understanding what it means to do a virtuous action for its own sake. She thinks, however, that courage and temperance can be done for their own sake

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<sup>21</sup> Williams, ‘Acting as the Virtuous Person Acts’, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, ‘Acting as the Virtuous Person Acts’, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, ‘Acting as the Virtuous Person Acts’, 18-19.

under this framework. Hursthouse simply takes a rather expansive view of what counts as X reasons. ““They’ll suffer if I don’t get to them””, ““One can’t give into tyrants””, ““I’m driving””, or ““You need it more than I do”” are all fine examples of courage or temperance related reasons.<sup>24</sup> But she thinks that Williams was right to notice that there is something special about these two virtues. The other virtues can be nicely distinguished with reference to what a successful agent has done through his action. For example, generous actions have this in common – when successful they will have “benefited another materially.”<sup>25</sup> When such an outcome is targeted, we can easily say that the action is done for the sake of that virtue. In contrast, courage and temperance regard not so much characteristic kinds of goods but aiming at various sorts of good in characteristic kinds of circumstance. Being courageous or temperate is about pursuing a good actually “worth pursuing” in face of “danger or temptation.”<sup>26</sup> When a worthy good is sought in this way it is done for X reasons, and thus falls under the rubric of done “for its own sake.”<sup>27</sup>

There is a lot that Williams and Hursthouse get right. Attention to the reasons on which one is acting is crucially important to determining whether an action is virtuous, since the virtuous will act on the right sorts of reasons. At the same time, acting “for the sake of virtue” does not require that one explicitly or self-consciously have the virtue in mind. This last point is important. Of the two accounts, I favor Hursthouse’s because she maintains that all the virtues share the same structure and hence can be done ‘for their own sakes’, which is something I wish to say. But the difference between the two may just come down to terminology and adjudicating between them will not serve my purposes.

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<sup>24</sup> Hursthouse, ‘The Virtuous Agent’s Reasons’, 25.

<sup>25</sup> Hursthouse, ‘The Virtuous Agent’s Reasons’, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Hursthouse, ‘The Virtuous Agent’s Reasons’, 29-30.

<sup>27</sup> Hursthouse, ‘The Virtuous Agent’s Reasons’, 30.



### **Limitations of the Williams/Hursthouse Account**

Despite yielding these important insights into the nature of virtuous action, the “V person acts for X reasons” account is ultimately incomplete. The Williams/Hursthouse view does not say enough about the nature of X reasons to capture Aristotle’s insight that certain *activities* are valued in themselves, which underlies his claim that virtue is done “for its own sake.” A better account of that phrase can be given. I propose we think of virtues as always exercised in the context of human practices, activities which are characteristically chosen for their own sake. Reinforcing the need for my alternative account, I will then show that the Williams/Hursthouse view is compatible with a conception of agency antithetical to Aristotle’s, which struggles to even make sense of doing something for its own sake. I am not concerned to show that Williams and Hursthouse are incorrect *per se*. Their analysis may very well capture all and only the instances of what Aristotle would consider acting virtuously “for its own sake.” But as a way of coming to *understand* what Aristotle means by that phrase, their view is insufficient.

### **Practices as Activities Done For Their Own Sakes**

Talk of “X reasons” hardly captures the Aristotelian insight that happiness is constituted by a certain kind of *activity*, rather than the achievement of a certain kind of outcome.<sup>28</sup> Obviously, the two are closely connected, since often an activity cannot be characterized independently of the aims it has. But the doing itself, in many cases, is a significant part of what is valued. It is

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<sup>28</sup> See the previous discussion of *NE*, 1098a16-17.

good not just that one's neighbors have their material needs met, but also that one personally has a hand in ensuring this is so. One finds value not just in the existence of a live symphony performance, but also in bringing it about by playing in the orchestra. One values not just the safety of a city, but also doing one's part, if necessary, to keep it safe. In each case there is a good which can only be realized by the agent's undertaking the activity in question and is actually constituted by the activity. If we can find a better way to articulate what is going on in these cases, we can elucidate how virtuous activity can be chosen "for its own sake" in a way that talk of "X reasons" does not.

Alasdair MacIntyre provides us the resources to do just that. He discusses the way in which human life is full of complex, co-operative forms of activity, which he calls practices. His stock examples are playing a sport such as football or a strategic game like chess. Chess involves the exercise of certain kinds of human capacities through analyzing positions, strategically planning moves, anticipating opponent behavior, etc. Achieving a degree of excellence in these things in ways specific to chess is what he calls the "internal goods" of the practice. They can only be recognized and then attained in and through playing chess. Thus, chess play, in these respects, is intrinsically valuable.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to internal goods are external goods, which might be acquired as a result of engaging in practices but are extrinsic to the activity. Characteristic external goods are money or fame (or, in the case of a child playing chess, candy). They could be a reward for doing something well but could also be gotten through other means. A child motivated only by candy has every incentive to cheat at chess if he can get away with it, but once he comes to recognize the internal goods will not, since cheating would necessarily thwart their attainment.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187-89.

<sup>30</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188.

What has this to do with virtue? In the first approximation, MacIntyre thinks virtues are those traits of character which allow one to attain the goods internal to practices.<sup>31</sup> We might need temperance or liberality, for example, to avoid being tempted by fame or fortune which might distract us from true excellence in a practice. Sustaining a family life and “politics in the Aristotelian sense” are also practices,<sup>32</sup> and so courage might be needed to persist in these activities. There is more that could be said, since practices themselves must be ordered within a human life, which may require certain other virtues and may itself be considered a practice of sorts.<sup>33</sup>

MacIntyre gives us a picture on which the virtues enable success in activities which are, in turn, valued for their own sake. But it is not as though acting virtuously is one thing, and then engaging in a practice is some second thing which follows that. Building on MacIntyre, I observe that the activities of virtue are always and at the same time the activities of a practice. Consider that “Acting justly (or courageously or temperately)” is never the only and rarely the most obvious way to describe what someone is doing. We would be more likely to say, as in the case of someone acting justly, that he was “protecting the life of someone wrongly accused” or “returning what was borrowed.” And these activities are understood in the context of something like the human practice of living in community.<sup>34</sup> He was being a good citizen or family member or whatever. Since these kinds of activities are valued for their own sake (i.e. because of the goods internal to them), it follows that virtuous activity, too, is done for its own sake, just not necessarily under that description.

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<sup>31</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191.

<sup>32</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188.

<sup>33</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 201-3. See Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 49 for the suggestion that living a good life as a whole is a “dialectical activity”, a concept close enough to that of a “practice.”

<sup>34</sup> See G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 3-4, for a discussion of how virtue and other highly evaluative descriptions can come under other non-moral descriptions.

I propose, then, that when Aristotle says virtuous actions are done “for their own sake,” this can be best understood by recognizing that human practices are done for their own sake and require the virtues to be done successfully. This appropriates Williams’ insight, that virtuous activity is sought by the virtuous person *de re* although not usually *de dicto*. But my account goes further than Williams or Hursthouse by making it clear just how the activity itself is being sought in these cases, rather than just a certain set of outcomes which might motivate the virtuous person. This, in turn, helps us to better understand how virtuous action could be non-instrumentally part of human flourishing. It is utterly unsurprising that engagement in meaningful kinds of human activity, including friendship or belonging to a community are constitutive elements of human well-being and happiness. Better understanding the content of human flourishing would seem to involve, then, giving rich description to human practices and the way in which they are ordered in a human life as a whole.

As a case study, consider how my view allow us to say that even courageous actions are done for their own sake. Take a dangerous military operation aimed at “bringing the supplies” to a place. At first glance, the putatively courageous action appears to be only instrumentally valuable, since the supplies are going to be used for some further end. But on my account, we can see how even this action is intrinsically valuable. Participation in the operation can be part of a practice of communal life or of making and sustaining a city. When done under such an aspect, it is aimed at the internal goods of living as a member of a community rather than at merely material goods. Because the action has these ends, which are attained by the very performance of the military procedure, the courageous action is done “for its own sake.”

### **The World-Making Conception of Agency**

I hope it is clear by now that relating virtuous actions to human practices allows us to understand the phrase “for their own sake” better than the Williams/Hursthouse approach. The inadequacy of their view is confirmed upon the recognition that it is compatible with what Talbot Brewer calls the “world-making conception of agency.”<sup>35</sup> On this conception, action is aimed at bringing about a desired state of affairs and practical reasoning is determining which actions will best do so given one’s particular circumstances.<sup>36</sup> This picture of action is strikingly close to the way Hursthouse describes the classification of virtues in terms of “X reasons.” She says we can ask, when a virtuous agent succeeds, “what will she, typically, have *done*?”<sup>37</sup> Then we can categorize actions into the different virtues accordingly. The generous will have “benefited another materially” and the amiable will have “contributed to the pleasure of others.”<sup>38</sup> That an action will have such a result is what gives the agent reason to act.

If such a classification of the virtues is what “a V act is done for X reasons” amounts to, then that formulation is evidently compatible with the world-making conception of agency. As such, it is at odds with Aristotle and can do little to explain in what way the action itself is being chosen “for its own sake”. While it is possible for actions to be chosen for their own sake on the world-making conception, these are “limiting cases.”<sup>39</sup> Such actions would have to be “motivated by the desire or intention to bring it about that they occur”, making even them a kind of “production.”<sup>40</sup> In general, the world-making conception cannot capture the experience we have of deciding to take up a MacIntyrian practice (or what Brewer calls instead a “dialectical

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<sup>35</sup> Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 12, 70.

<sup>37</sup> Hursthouse, ‘The Virtuous Agent’s Reasons’, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Hursthouse, ‘The Virtuous Agent’s Reasons’, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 12.

activity”). When engaged with a dialectical activity, like singing the blues, a musician does not simply start with an idea of how she wants the song to go and then tries to bring it about, as on the production model. Rather, there is a process of searching for the right interpretation of the composer’s work, trying to get it right. The art shapes her and her activity is a response to goodness of the song. The activity is then valued not just for the outcomes it produces, but because it is in itself a way of being or standing in relationship to what is valuable.<sup>41</sup>

Insofar as it fails to make sense of the experience of dialectical activities or practices, the world-making conception of agency is unable to account for the value Aristotle places on activity itself. So long as the Williams/Hursthouse formula is compatible with the world-making conception, it must, then, fail to adequately capture Aristotle’s phrase “for its own sake.” The point is not that Williams or Hursthouse incorrectly identify when an action is “done for its own sake”. The point is that neither of them helps us to understand what that phrase means.

### **Conclusion**

This leads us to seek, then, a more informative account of “for their own sake.” I have proposed such an account. Some activities, namely human practices, have intrinsically valuable features. These activities require the virtues for their successful completion. Choosing the action for those intrinsic features will then be to choose a virtuous action for its own sake, albeit not necessarily under the description “virtuous action.” Therefore, understanding the role of virtues in the flourishing life requires a closer look at the significance of practices or dialectical activities.

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<sup>41</sup> Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 47-48.

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