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Virtue ethics and social science: a postdisciplinary perspective

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'Virtue ethics and social science: a postdisciplinary perspective'*

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Introduction

In this talk I'd like to suggest how virtue ethics and social science might best learn from each other. I speak as a social scientist who has regularly dabbled in philosophy for illumination of the problems encountered in understanding social phenomena. The topics that have interested me over the years have mainly been to do with inequality – both how it arises and how it is experienced - and with well-being.

In drawing upon philosophy to study these matters, I have been repeatedly struck by the complementary strengths and weaknesses of philosophy and social sciences in their treatment of normativity and ethics and well-being in everyday life. Philosophy and social science need each other, for they have suffered deeply from their estrangement over the last 150 years: the splitting off of normative reasoning from empirical social science has impoverished both philosophy's understanding of how our actions relate to our position in society and social science's understanding of the normative quality of lived experience. In social scientific methodology there has been an attempted expulsion of values and a less noticed expulsion of reason from values, and on the philosophy side a disregard of substantive social scientific knowledge that is not generally found in philosophical writing prior to the emergence of modern disciplines. While philosophy often portrays individuals as self-guiding, rational beings who do things like choose a 'life project', anthropologists and sociologists seem to represent them as beings who have no choice – a representation from which of course they exempt themselves. Social science's fragmentation into disciplines has worsened this situation so that economics, sociology and psychology, etc., regard each other with suspicion and often contempt, when they actually need each other.

Given the disastrous results of the fragmentation of knowledge it's good to be having this dialogue between philosophers, neuroscientists, psychologists and other social scientists.

I got into literature on ethics as a result of my dissatisfaction with social science's treatment of ethical life – life as it's experienced: as good, bad, unjust, cruel, hard, demeaning, depressing, dignified, satisfying, fulfilling, happy, etc. It seemed unable to say why anything mattered to people.

In trying to remedy this I found the work of neo-Aristotelians like Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre, Iris Murdoch and Joseph Dunne particularly

useful. What drew me to these authors was that unlike utilitarians and deontologists they had some appreciation of the social influences that form us as ethical beings, and hence were talking about recognisable human beings. Virtue ethics illuminated the social formation of moral persons and accepted the importance of embodiment. The feminist ethic of care literature also proved helpful, as did related literature on child development. I was also drawn to the work of Adam Smith, written before the fragmentation of social science and philosophy into separate disciplines, for his remarkably nuanced appreciation of the psycho-social influences upon moral sentiments and judgement in the thick of everyday life. Finally, I came across work in psychology and neuroscience which helped make sense of our formation as ethical beings.

The social sciences have difficulties with values, both as objects of study and as regards their methodology. Values in society tend to be represented either as 'merely subjective' (as if they were not about something, and capable of being more or less right about their objects), or as conventional, as arbitrary rules - 'just what folks do round there' - having no distinctively moral or eudaimonic content. Values are widely seen as irrational or arational, and hence, within research, viewed as an obstacle to objectivity and rational argument. Both the conservatives who want to minimise the so-called 'intrusion' of values so as to achieve objectivity, and the radicals who say they don't pretend to be value-free and so can't be objective, share the same mistake of thinking that values and objectivity are necessarily opposed.

There are various inter-related reasons for these views: –

1. A widespread - and quite proper - fear of being ethnocentric;
2. A resistance to naturalistic explanations of good and evil, based on a form of bio-phobic culturalist or sociological imperialism;
3. A reluctance to be 'judgemental', or at least to rush to judgement without first understanding, though certain vices are widely acknowledged and analysed in social science: racism, sexism, and homophobia, for example.
4. A tendency to assume that normativity consists purely in telling people what they should do, ignoring the prior element of evaluation. In effect it's assumed that the is-ought distinction says everything we need to know about values. (Foucault was an influential captive of this mistake.) As I argue in *Why Things Matter to People*, the primary element of normativity (as regards ethical values) is actually evaluative description, typically involving thick ethical terms like 'generous', 'cruel', 'abusive', 'racist', and while these create a 'value-slope' that 'secretes' certain judgements, as Charles Taylor put it, they don't deductively yield oughts – not that that should worry us (Sayer, 2011).
5. A negative view of morality as repressive.

Social science's recognition of normativity, and especially good and evil in life, is highly selective. This is the picture in contemporary British sociology:

Virtues?	**Vices**
non-racist	racist
non-sexist	sexist
non-homophobic	homophobic
non-ageist	ageist
non-ableist	ableist
non-violent	violent
non-exploitative	exploitative

Etc.

In other words, there is a tacitly agreed list of vices which can be referred to in sociological accounts of social life. Moral justifications for the negative judgements are usually limited, and it is rare to see references to 'virtues',[1] indeed the use of such a term would be regarded with suspicion as 'moralising'. By default, in an inversion of a common stance in philosophy, virtue is implicitly simply the absence of these vices. But of course a person who is non-racist, non-sexist etc., could be selfish and callous, provided such vices were indiscriminately triggered and hence indifferent to race, gender, sexuality etc. (I think I've met one or two such people.) It is rare in sociology to see any mention of generosity or compassion or friendliness, or love, except where the latter is seen in a distanced way. The tendency of many to regard such topics as less scientific than things like power or social structures suggests more than a trace of scientism, as does the population of social scientific accounts with the bloodless figures of 'subjects' and 'actors', rational or otherwise. Even those who have discovered the concept of 'affect' find anti-humanist ways of deploying it that treat individuals as 'affect dopes' instead of 'cultural dopes'. As I have argued elsewhere, these tendencies give much contemporary sociology an alienated and alienating character (Sayer, 2005, 2011).

While I think sociology is right to examine vices such as sexism I think it needs to consider virtues too. Conversely I think philosophy is right to consider virtues

[1] As Linda Woodhead comments (personal communication), 'Only seeing vices but never talking about virtues allows sociologists to occupy the moral high ground without ever having to justify themselves.'

but wrong to consider vices as of lesser importance, or as just the absence of the good. Evil is active, not merely an absence (Glover, 2001; Vetlesen, 2005). In the fabric of life, virtues and vices tend to be closely interwoven. Ignoring racism, sexism, domination, exploitation, etc., and restricting ourselves to courage, gratitude, compassion, etc., renders philosophy voluntarist, gentile, apolitical and ineffectual, though as we shall see, all the more politically useful for that.

So in their contemporary fragmented, estranged and parochial disciplinary forms, philosophy and social sciences have complementary strengths and weaknesses.

An attempt at synthesis

In trying to overcome these problems I developed what might be termed a qualified ethical naturalist position on normativity. It is not nature *per se* which is good or bad but flourishing and suffering, and the meaning of good and bad ultimately relate to these. There are further qualifications:

(i) Flourishing and suffering are objective states of being which we can (fallibly) identify. Flourishing involves not just the absence of suffering but the pursuit of commitments and development of our capacities;
(ii) Cultures influence bodies and minds, albeit within natural constraints: we have differently-cultivated natures, and therefore can have different forms of flourishing and suffering. I.e. This is an objectivist but pluralist view of well-being;
(iii) Needs, flourishing and suffering are always culturally *interpreted* – *fallibly.* There are many different (mis)conceptions.
(iv) Some goods are substantially culturally constructed (the internal goods of 'practices' in the MacIntyrean sense, for example), and provide their own emergent sources of flourishing.

This is associated with a certain conception of human beings. Briefly:

- we are rational, dependent (i.e. social) animals, psychologically as well as socially dependent on others;
- we are both vulnerable and capable, always passing from receding states of flourishing and suffering into new states of flourishing and suffering, always suspended between things as they are and as they might be;
- we live on the slippery slope of lack, able to climb up it, and indeed often to extend it upwards by developing new forms of flourishing and protection, but we are unable to resist sliding down it except by

continually climbing back up by defending and seeking to improve our situation;
- in virtue of our vulnerability and neediness, and capacity for flourishing, *our relation to the world is one of concern*: we are evaluative beings;
- we are relational beings: our ability to reason and to attain psychological well-being, and our conception of self, are dependent on relations to others;
- our need of care is a universal;
- physiological and psychological variety and difference are normal.
- the development of our brains and minds is at every moment a product of our interaction with our social and physical environment, constrained and enabled by the powers and susceptibilities of each;
- we are cultural beings.

Habitus, practice and virtues

The work of Pierre Bourdieu provides a valuable bridge between social scientific accounts of behaviour and those of virtue ethics, although he himself showed little interest in ethics.

Of all the disciplines, philosophy is most prone to what Bourdieu termed the 'scholastic fallacy' in its interpretations of action (Bourdieu, 2000). The fallacy consists in academics projecting their own contemplative, discursive and analytical relation to the world onto others, overlooking or devaluing the latters' primarily practical relation to the world. It can produce some or all of the following: a reduction of action to a product of reason or discourse, ignoring embodied dispositions, feelings, inclinations, skills, know-how and feel for the game; reducing mental activity to deliberation; representing emotions as opposed to reason, causes as enemies and the body as heteronomy, or as mere carrier of and occasional impediment to the mind.[2] It also often involves keeping an academic cool, avoiding engagement with vulnerability, dependence, emotion, love, care. One of the attractions of virtue ethics for social science is that its emphasis on dispositions makes it less prone to the fallacy than other moral philosophies. But it is still prone to a kind of idealisation resulting from considering virtue in abstraction from the range of contexts in which it is situated.

One of Bourdieu's key concepts, and one with Aristotelian affinities, is that of the 'habitus'. This is the set of dispositions that individuals acquire through repeated

[2] As Benton comments, a 'combined dread and contempt for bodily existence and function is barely disguised in much philosophical dualism (Benton, 1993, p.44). These are all tendencies associated with the dominance of left-brain ways of engaging with the world over right brain ones (McGilchrist, 2010).

practice and experience, particularly in early life – their 'formative years' – according to their habitat or position in the social field.[3] An individual's dispositions are adjusted to the particular experiences, environments and social relations that they are most exposed to, so they develop 'a feel for the game', whereas in unfamiliar situations they lack this. For example, a child whose parents belong to 'the chattering classes' becomes accustomed to listening to and joining discussions of current affairs, to adopting the standpoint of those who have some power over others and can expect to be listened to, and hence for whom it is worth discussing politics. They thus become articulate and find the transition to school and university relatively smooth, and tend to develop a sense of entitlement and ease – a product of their secure economic position and status. By contrast, a child of a low income family is likely to acquire dispositions which are adjusted to having little power and status and to surviving in a difficult environment. They are likely to be more streetwise and tough than their middle-class counterparts, but to be less articulate and to have lower expectations that reflect the likelihood that they will get jobs in which they will have to follow rather than give orders, and have little scope for discretion and judgement.[4] The habitus is not only classed but gendered, as a consequence of repeated involvement in gendered practices. In these ways, the structure of the social field in which people predominantly operate, especially in early life, structures their dispositions and outlooks, and in turn, their actions, deriving from these dispositions, tend to reproduce that same field. While the habitus can change, it takes time and repeated practice to change the dispositions that constitute it. Some may be upwardly mobile, yet it is common for those who are to feel out of place and that they don't belong, even though the evidence of their success and competence is clear; this is an effect of the hysteresis of the habitus.

Bourdieu saw actions in everyday life as mostly semi-conscious, done partly on automatic, and as involving a skilled feel for the game. Many critics have considered his account of practice as too deterministic, but arguably they overlook the generative, creative power of embodied dispositions. They are *intelligent*, capable of improvising and responding creatively to a certain degree of variation, indeed this capacity marks out the expert from the novice. No two games of tennis, or two social situations, are the same. The equivalent point has been made in philosophical writing on practical reason (e.g. Dunne, 1993) and in studies of learning practical skills (Benner, 1994). The powers of the expert musician or footballer or socially skilled actor derives from their practical sense

[3] Actually, the acquisition of dispositions and skills is not uniformly responsive to repetition. Some unique events may be traumatic, producing effects that last a lifetime; some skills, like bike-riding, are not forgotten once learned; others, like playing a musical instrument at an advanced level need regular practice even to maintain a given standard. Possibly, different virtues and vices may be differently dependent on repetition, too.

[4] These are generalisations, of course, and there are many exceptions, but this is what social researchers have found (Lareau, A. 2003; Reay, D. 1998; 2002).

and acquired dispositions, not from an ability to give a superior account of what they can do. Without this practical sense, we would be virtually helpless. Too much self-consciousness and self-analysis can disrupt our ability to act successfully.[5] Significantly, when we are in a social situation where we lack a practical feel for the game, and are awkward and inept, not knowing what to say or do, we 'feel stupid'.

However, perhaps as a result of his fondness for 'bending the stick' (going to the other extreme) to correct for the scholastic fallacy, Bourdieu underplayed the extent to which the acquisition of these dispositions at least in later years is reflexively mediated by individuals, and influenced by discourse and education, including moral stories and imagery. People don't just accommodate to familiar situations through a process of osmosis but with some degree of monitoring and moral evaluation, so that certain behaviours and situations are seen as fair or unfair, dignified or undignified, and so on. The habituated individual still suffers or flourishes in a host of ways, and is to varying degrees aware of this. Yet much of this ongoing evaluation is semi-conscious, part of what Iris Murdoch called "the work of the attention", building up "structures of value around us" . . . [so that] "at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over." (Murdoch, 1970, p. 36). Habituation to others' behaviour and to the patterns of familiar practices doesn't necessarily neutralise these sentiments and evaluative judgements; repeated disrespectful and inconsiderate behaviour can rankle permanently, producing social suffering, in the form of festering resentment, low self-esteem, stress and shame, or active resistance – though as Bourdieu reminds us, resistance is painful; it should not be idealised.

For Bourdieu, the embodied dispositions that we acquire that make up the habitus reflect our particular position within the social 'field' in relation to other individuals, groups and institutions. As philosophy so often ignores, and to its cost, the field in modern societies is unequal, so the range of dispositions people within it acquire are strikingly different, with a roughly hierarchical scatter of positions of dominance and subordination. It produces corresponding dispositions of condescension and deference, superiority and inferiority, entitlement and 'knowing-your-place', pride and shame, and ease and insecurity that colour so much of our experience. These dispositions are conspicuously absent from most philosophical discussions, where societies are seemingly aggregates of individuals structured only by families and schools and sometimes markets, with class, gender and race safely out of sight.

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[5] McGilchrist argues that self-consciousness arises when the left hemisphere of the brain attempts to interpret what the right is doing in its own analytical terms (McGilchrist, 2010). As Wittgenstein repeatedly argued, our know-how and ability to go on inevitably elude philosophical analysis.

Curiously, although Bourdieu was a remarkably perceptive observer of these dispositions, he largely ignored their emotional and ethical character, and therefore tended to represent what he called the competitions and struggles of the social field in rather Hobbesian and instrumental terms, rather than as also struggles over how we should live (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus the dominant classes' social and cultural capital[6], as well as their economic capital, provides them with competitive advantages. But there are not only struggles for such advantages, but over what is or should be valued – *which* goods, behaviour, lifestyles, practices are good, and who has the authority to say which are good? The competitions and struggles of the social field are also the result striving to achieve the intrinsic value of goods for their own sake, not just for advantages over others (Sayer, 2005).

Notwithstanding these qualifications, people's evaluations of others and their actions tend to be influenced by their relative position in the social field; they are typically saturated with assumptions about gender and affected by relations of condescension and deference, resentment, envy and guilt, feelings of superiority and inferiority associated with class inequalities. As Adam Smith famously noted, moral sentiments towards others can be distorted by the inequalities of the social field: "This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or at least to neglect persons of poor and mean condition . . . is . . . the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments." (Smith, 1759, I.iii.2.III, 1984, p.61).

While, as Bourdieu demonstrated in his *Distinction*, individual aesthetic tastes are patterned in ways which roughly correspond to their place in the social field, we might, like Smith, expect moral sentiments to be less so, precisely because they concern relations to others, whether of our own group or outside. Moral sentiments also have an inherent generalising tendency; what is good or right, is so for others, not just us. There are some dispositions which relate strongly to our position in the social field, such as the gendered and classed dispositions to acquiesce and serve, or to command and be expected to be served, or to reflect and deliberate as opposed to 'just getting on with it', or the yearning to be recognised as respectable by members of dominant classes. But there are also dispositions and sentiments such as benevolence or resentment of injustice,

[6] Social capital refers to connections and networks that give agents advantages vis-à-vis others, while cultural capital derives from possession of and involvement in the practice and enjoyment of cultural goods that are highly valued within the social field through association with dominant classes. Cultural capital is partly embodied – involving a certain disposition towards the goods in question, so that, for example, the relation of the bourgeois to opera might be one of entitled ease, and of the petit-bourgeois anxiety to be accepted as knowledgeable of and comfortably familiar with it. As such, the latter risks being found out by trying too hard, appearing pretentious, and lacking an effortless ownership of the art form that characterises the dominant classes' relation to the most prestigious goods. Cultural capital is not just a matter of knowing about or liking particular valued cultural goods, but of one's whole relation to them.

which are common across the social field, even if the contexts in which they are elicited for individuals differ. Despite the common 'corruption' of our moral sentiments by relations of inequality, it is possible for the prejudiced, faced with behaviour which does not correspond to their prejudice, to register such exceptions.

My argument is that the habitus includes virtues and vices, which in turn are associated with moral and immoral sentiments. The concept of habitus is a place filler for processes of habituation and development of practical knowledge which presuppose neuroplasticity, and involve psychology as well as sociology. Rather than jealously guarding their own empires, neuroscience and the various social sciences need to work together. As a naturalistic philosophy, virtue ethics needs to consider, as an empirical question, how virtues and vices form, and it needs to be open to the messiness and imperfection that psychological and psychoanalytic research tends to reveal about such matters (see Christian Miller's paper for this conference).

Our position within the social field influences our character. Insofar as we are shaped by our circumstances, moral luck affects not only the consequences of our actions but our characters. This might be termed *constitutive* moral luck (Griswold, 1999, p.241). As Martha Nussbaum puts it, 'much that I did not make goes towards making me whatever I shall be praised or blamed for being' (Nussbaum 1986, p.5). Or as it was put in bible: 'What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (1 Corinthians 4.7). That's a little exaggerated for we do have some responsibility for our character – we are 'part causes' of it as Aristotle said - but the individualising tendencies of lay explanations of behaviour and evaluations of character in western culture, which probably derive from the premium attached to freedom and autonomy, mean that both constitutive moral luck and social context are commonly overlooked, therefore typically producing flawed moral judgements. *The privileged person who imagines that if she had been born into a disadvantaged position in society she would have fought her way upwards, fails to realise that she would have been a different person if she had had such a start in life.* We should also beware of a kind of romantic myth, sometimes found on the Left, that poverty and shared hardship beget virtues of solidarity and kindness – the salt-of-the-earth romance.[7] They may do sometimes, but as Nussbaum comments: "If we understand that injustice can strike its roots into the personality itself, producing rage and resentment and the roots of bad character, we have even deeper incentives to commit ourselves to giving each child the material and social support that human dignity requires.' (Nussbaum, 2001, p.414)." Poverty and stigma are not ennobling, and it is they rather than the

[7] There are no doubt situations where this does happen, probably depending on the presence of a particularly strong solidaristic and caring ethos.

consequent problems of character that need correcting. The poor need income and jobs, not 'resilience' or 'character'.

Cultural narratives

We learn and often think of virtues and vices through narratives of heroic and nefarious acts and that make up our cultural history. And the notion of 'character' has its own 'psycho-history', as Duffell calls it, which provides particular models of what good men and women are supposed to be like (Duffell, 2014). In the British context, despite developments such as multiculturalism and the rise of feminism, the preceding elite, imperial, patriarchal model of character keeps coming out of the woodwork. And of course, such models tend to figure in ideas of national identity that idealise the past and the present and project the bad onto others, within or outside, who lack this 'character'. Just as national identity is always contested, as the arguments about the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony showed, so too are these thicker understandings of virtue and good character. Philosophy may analyse virtues such as courage in abstraction from these cultural associations, but it does not follow that they function and are understood in this supposedly neutral way in practice. Unless it addresses such matters, philosophy may find itself being used as a Trojan horse for neo-conservative troops.

Attachment theory

Early attachments to primary care-givers are crucial for our subsequent psychological character and well-being. The infant's pursuit of attachment "helps the immature brain use the mature functions of the parent's brain to organise it's own processes" (Siegel, 1999 p.67). *How* the baby's brain becomes organised depends on the way the primary care-givers interact with it: neglect or over-protection or anxiety or violence can produce lasting problems which affect the child's ability to function socially in later life (Winnicott, 1964; Bowlby, 1969; Benjamin, 1988; Cassidy and Shriver, 1999). As MacIntyre points out, this includes the capacity to function as an independent reasoner (MacIntyre, 1999). Although the influence of good attachments is particularly important in early life it continues to matter throughout childhood and into later life. Social science and virtue ethics need to take note of this.[8]

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[8] One of the absurd consequences of the fragmentation of social science into rival disciplines is that sociology, the discipline most centrally identified with socialisation, takes virtually no interest in the most important period of socialisation - infant development - this being deemed a matter for psychology, a discipline viewed with suspicion of reductionism – 'psychologism' - by sociology.

We depend on others for our sense of self, but not just as 'interlocutors' as Charles Taylor has it: "one cannot be a self on one's own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages and self-understanding . . ." (Taylor, 1989, p.36). This is true but it is very much a scholastic view reflecting the academic habitus and social position, for our sense of self also depends on our pre-linguistic and subsequent experience of being held, loved, played with, celebrated, rather than ignored, disliked, hurt, shamed, etc.[9] Talking about babies and these basic needs doesn't fit comfortably with the masculine academic habitus and our professional gravitas, but if we are interested in human flourishing we have to take them seriously.

The ethic of care

Regardless of whether one considers it a part of virtue ethics or not, the ethic of care literature is unquestionably relevant to understanding virtues and the moral quality of everyday life (Tronto, 1989; 1994; Held, 2006; Kittay, 1999; Sevenhuijsen, 1994; Lynch et al, 2009). Our need of care is a universal – but for it, none of us would be here. It should be central to ethics, not marginal. As rational dependent animals, our dependence on others is physiological, psychological and social. We need to counter the tendency to see vulnerability and dependence on others as failings instead of as a part of the human condition that we need to acknowledge and accept if we want to be at peace with ourselves and each other. This means removing the masculinist blinkers of so much ethical theory – evident in the usual lists of virtues, and in liberal philosophy's emphasis on autonomy - and valuing care, particularly the work of caring *for* (as opposed to just caring *about*) others. The disposition to care for others is a virtue, and one which supports other virtues.

A central claim of the ethic of care is that in its strongest form care involves not just individual acts or even repeated acts of kindness and looking after, but the nurturing of the particular *relationship* between carer and cared-for. In so doing it acknowledges something that much liberal ethical theory ignores, that as attachment theory shows, relationships to significant others – particularly parents and siblings – are constitutive of who individuals are and vital for their sense of self. This nurturing of self-and-other is irreducible to either self-interest or altruism: it doesn't always involve self-sacrifice (Held, 2006). Maintenance or development of such relationships are crucial to flourishing. And good care of this kind involves knowing something about the specificities of the individual being cared for; what her biography and special commitments, likes and dislikes

[9] I am grateful to Linda Woodhead for this point.

are, so she feels recognised and valued as a particular person, not just as another patient.

The partiality of this kind of care does not of course fit comfortably with the valuation of impartiality so important to theories of justice, but some way of reconciling them has to be found, both in theory and practice, since it is hardly ethical to deny children unconditional love, and lasting attachments. It's a recipe for ill-being. One way of reconciling them has been suggested by Richard Norman:

> "It is because we have specific commitments to specific individuals and groups that we can then go on to recognize the claim of all human beings . . . It is because we first form ties with parents, siblings and friends that we are subsequently able to extend our sympathies to other human beings with whom we are less closely connected." (Norman, quoted in Goodin, 1985, p.4).

And it takes not merely an intellectual sense of duty and generalisability but empathy to achieve the shift to valuing justice for others.[10] In valuing the nurturing of relationships, and of being-with others, care ethics has a radically different perspective from that of the liberal adult male to whom so much ethical theory is addressed - the individual who has the requisite virtues and does the right thing towards others, but keeps a respectful distance from them, and for whom the constitutive and sometimes intimate relationships of love, care and close friendship are marginal, or private and beyond theorising, or at best theorised in the restrained, formal manner of the academic habitus. It doesn't fit easily with the latter's habituation to reason, dispassionate reflection, valuation of individual achievement and scepticism; the scholastic fallacy makes care difficult to comprehend.

The ethic of care literature also recognizes the impossibility of the liberal assumption that all social relations can be freely chosen:

> "There is every reason to react with alarm to the prospect of a world filled with self-actualizing persons pulling their own strings, capable of guiltlessly saying "no" to anyone about anything, and freely choosing when to begin and end all their relationships. It is hard to see how, in such a world, children could be raised, the sick or disturbed could be cared for, or people could know each other through their lives and grow old together." (Scheman, 1983, cited in Kittay, 1999, p.49).

A further virtue of the ethic of care literature is that it *situates the work of care within the fields of power that produce its typically gendered form*, in which the

[10] Nussbaum's latest book, *Political Emotions*, also supports this point (Nussbaum, 2014).

carer is likely to be disempowered by disproportionate care responsibilities, and experience feelings of frustration, anger and guilt. (Philosophy depoliticises when it abstracts from such contexts.) It also recognizes the way in which this disempowering is often concealed by the patriarchal idealisation of the carer as 'an angel'. In so doing care ethics challenges the way care is gendered as women's work and defends the standpoint, needs and well-being of the carer as well as the cared-for. This willingness to confront vices as well as virtues and indeed to acknowledge how closely they can be associated in the flow of everyday life under conditions of inequality is refreshing, and a good example for a renewed virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics needs to take on board the ethic of care, and the socio-psychology of attachment. It needs to go beyond normative reflection on what virtues are or should be and token recognition of the importance of education in their acquisition. Virtue can never be just a matter of reason and repetition - the province of the frontal cortex and left hemisphere - but involves emotions, the right hemisphere and the lower brain and the rest of the body.

Other influences, psycho-social and neurological

Antonio Damasio, a neuroscientist, studied individuals who had lost their emotional responses through brain damage; while they retained the ability to do specific tasks rationally, including intelligence tests, they could not set priorities among different goals, were indifferent to their own wellbeing, and could not sustain relationships or act ethically as they had previously done (Damasio, 1994). One might say they retained their cleverness but lost their wisdom or capacity for practical reason about ends. This suggests, as Nussbaum contends, that emotions can provide a form of intelligence about the world. According to Damasio, neurological evidence suggests that emotions are 'in the loop of high reason', involving the same parts of the brain (p.xxiii), rather than a form of base interference in our powers of reason. Modernism's tendency to view emotions as irrational, to assume that values and ends are beyond the scope of reason, and to reduce rationality to instrumental reason, ironically treats the pathologies analyzed by Damasio as the norm. (See also Hyemin Han's paper for the conference.)

In addition to the contribution of attachment theory, psychological research has shown that ethical and unethical behaviour are influenced by mood: people are more likely to help others if they have just enjoyed a pleasant experience, and less so if they have had a bad one (Appiah, 2008). We may disapprove of such moral weakness, but we need to understand this relationship, not dismiss it. After all, we know that when we organise a meeting, particularly for strangers, that providing coffee, nibbles and social space makes it more likely that people will treat each other well. Making others feel comfortable and valued is a mundane but undervalued virtue. Reason tells us it shouldn't matter, but a naturalistic acceptance of our fragile social nature tells us that sometimes it is

wiser to take care of it, and indeed pretending such dispositions of insecurity don't exist can lead to repressive and self-repressive behaviours. Rather than see such affective 'frailties' as something we, as rational beings, should overcome, perhaps through being made of 'sterner stuff', we should take notice of them, and if appropriate, work with them rather than against them.

Because we are vulnerable, social animals, as well as rational beings, our feelings and behaviour are influenced not only by what we think is right but by social approval and disapproval. Martha Nussbaum has provided valuable analyses of the moral emotion of shame and its importance in the details of social life, but her analysis is an overly cognitive, and undersocialized one (Nussbaum 2001; 2004). Considered in abstraction from the inequalities of the social field, in which the dominated are viewed as inferior, it might seem that shame is always an episodic phenomenon, prompted by failures to behave in ways that the individual believes are right, or to achieve what she thinks she should be capable of. Nussbaum acknowledges that the real or imagined disapproval of others is a component of shame, but she excludes the possibility of feeling shame even where we are condemned and despised by others for actions which we believe are *right*. Nussbaum is probably correct for cases of people in a secure and equal or superior position relative to those who judge them, but as Cheshire Calhoun argues it is different for those in lowly, unvalued positions, particularly where the contempt comes from people they have to associate with regularly such as family or workmates or bosses (Calhoun, 2003). Not surprisingly, shame as an endemic state has figured prominently in analyses of social abjection (Charlesworth, 2000; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 2004; Walker, 2014).

The moral emotions that darken or lighten so much of our experience affect and are affected by our bodies, depressing or strengthening our immune systems, and our affective moods influence our judgements and behaviours. However much we may want behaviour to be the product of reason, in practice even our ability to reason is affected by these interactions of mind and body. Depression is not conducive to making good judgements, whereas moderate confidence facilitates intelligence, problem solving and coping. Particularly if we wish to judge others, we need to acknowledge all these social and subconscious influences on people, rather than just try them in the court of reason, ignoring our own relatively privileged standpoint and the fact that we are not free from these influences, good or bad, either.[11] We need a psychological as well as a sociological imagination.

Particular forms of social organisation encourage or discourage particular virtues and vices. People in more unequal societies tend to have less empathy for

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[11] With the rise of 'poverty porn' on television (such as *'The Jerry Springer Show'*, *'Benefits Street'*, *'We Pay Your Benefits'*, '*From Ladettes to Ladies*', etc.) we have seen the trial of the abject in the court of unreason and the theatre of cruelty.

those at the bottom than in more equal ones, and where particular societies are becoming more unequal, social attitudes show decreasing concern about inequality.[12] Much has been written on how neoliberal economies encourage selfishness and lack of interest in the public good, and how audits and performance related pay weaken professional ethics (Brennan and Pettit, 2004; Pink, 2011). And are we to suppose that we can be thrusting, competitive workers or rapacious rentiers by day, and caring, public-spirited people in our spare time? It is important to take seriously *both* the conservative defences of craft and professional autonomy and the pursuit of the internal goods of their practices, *and* the dangers of professional complacence, producer-power and self-indulgence at the expense of the public. We need further research on how actually-existing forms of social organisation support or weaken virtues and vices.

An example

Nick Duffell is a psychotherapist who specialises in the pathologies of parental deprivation consequent upon boarding school education, and who himself had such an education. His latest book, *Wounded Leaders*, examines the pathologies he has experienced and encountered professionally. Denied the daily reminders and security of unconditional parental love, boarding school pupils tend to develop self-protective personas that conceal vulnerability and doubt so as to avoid bullying and ridicule. They tend to develop a 'strategic survival personality' in which instrumentalism and the pursuit of self-interest are the norm, and mistakes must always be hidden or denied. They fear and deny their own vulnerability, and tend to project it onto others, as something to be detected and taken advantage of. At the same time, the pupils enjoy exceptional facilities, as well as their inherited cultural capital, and hence develop a habitus characterised by a sense of entitlement and superiority. For those who can survive the experience, it makes for success in the careerist world of politics, through instrumental treatment of others, unwillingness to admit mistakes or weaknesses or acknowledge doubt, and a tendency to use attack as the best form of defence. This upbringing tends to produce emotional illiteracy and avoidance of intimacy, and various other pathologies, including 'splitting' – the repression of feelings that they are not able to tolerate and projection of them onto others – hence the projection of vulnerability onto others, particularly women. Duffell gives many examples of these traits among current and recent UK politicians.

[12] Orton, M. and Rowlingson, K. (2007) Public attitudes to inequality,York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Horton, L. and Bamfield, T. (2009) Understanding attitudes to tackling economic inequality,York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Pahl, R., Rose, D. and Spencer, L. (2007) 'Inequality and quiescence', Institute for Social and Economic Research Working Paper, 22; Osberg, L. and Smeeding,T. (2005) 'Social values for equality and preferences for state intervention in the USA and Europe', Russell Sage Foundation.

The boarding school case brings together much of what I am arguing – the importance of attachment and care in early life, the effect of position in social field of inequality on the development of the habitus, virtues and vices and character. To make sense of it one has to understand the formative influences of both the interpersonal relations of family and school and of the individuals' position within the unequal social field.

Education, and political (mis-)uses of virtue ethics and 'character'

Who could be against virtue and character? They are undeniably important, though we need to discuss what the list of virtues should be and what kind of character is being recommended. The voluntarist nature of many accounts on character and virtues in philosophy and the abstraction of most discussions of them from the inequalities of the social field, and the injuries of deprivation and stigma they generate, makes it ideal for policies which turn political problems into moral ones by individualizing them and ignoring social structures and mechanisms. The poor apparently don't need money, they just need 'resilience' and maybe 'aspiration', 'grit' and 'character'.

The Victorian period in Britain was one of considerable concern with 'character'. As Stefan Collini has shown, the Victorian view of character was both gendered and classed (Collini, 1985).[13] There was an emphasis on 'manliness', epitomised in Rudyard Kipling's emotionally crippled model of masculinity in his poem 'If'. While Collini points out that liberal Victorian values were critical of unearned privilege and income (unlike some right wing advocates of character training today who ignore such concerns – not surprisingly because they are often beneficiaries of such income), it was unmistakably a class project, with public school educated members of the elite requiring the special 'character' to provide the self-discipline deemed necessary for going out to the colonies and for leading the forces ('keeping their heads while all around them others were losing theirs' . . .) And it was also driven by a fear of the working classes: character training was needed for the lower orders. In the following decades, the specific psycho-history of this was reflected in popular narratives that became part of the education of the state-schooled majority, and it has been regularly lampooned in much satire from the 1960s onwards, from *Beyond the Fringe*, to Harry Enfield.

In view of the latter it is somewhat surprising that the conservative take on character should be re-emerging, but then other things have been changing that have empowered and emboldened the elite: the widening of inequalities, and the extraordinary increase in wealth of the rich, largely through the extension of

[13] Actually, while Collini provides plenty of evidence of the gendered nature of 'character' he fails to comment on it as such.

sources of unearned, rentier income (Sayer, 2014), and the success of the austerity movement and the neoliberal transfer of responsibility for bank failures, poverty and job shortages onto individuals who have no influence over such things.

Anthony Seldon, Headmaster of Wellington (public) School and co-founder of the neoliberal Institute of Economic Affairs, recommends the practice known at Eton as "'oiling', which is learning how to win friends and influence others, and how to clamber over them to get what you want. It's a mixture of ambition, self-confidence and bloody-mindedness . . . " Seldon acknowledges that this will "nauseate many on the left" (and many others, surely?) and that for many the obsession with character is a "rightwing obsession, redolent of empire and all that is wrong with the class system."[14] (I couldn't have put it better myself.) But he is not discouraged in his desire to make a virtue out of a vice, arguing that oiling and the like are necessary for surviving in our Hobbesian world, so the 93% who go to state schools better get over their moral scruples and get used to it, and also acquire the arch confidence that he admires in the public schooled habitus. Though it sounds like self-parody of upper class overconfidence and the arrogance of ignorance, this was not an April 1st article. He was serious.

Education is a prime site in the politicization of character. Dan Wright (paper for this conference) refers to the calls for 'character, resilience and grit' from the Secretary and Shadow Secretary of State for Education. I'm not against discussing virtues and character in schools, but particularly if it amounts to those who have benefitted from an inherited position of advantage telling disadvantaged children to be more virtuous it is unlikely to produce a favourable response. As Nussbaum argues in her defence of the humanities, literature is an excellent medium for thinking about virtue (Nussbaum, 2012), and childrens' characters can be influenced by the ethos of the school and by examples set across the curriculum. But insofar as virtue and character are the subjects of explicit discussion, I suggest

- It should include discussions of vices, such as racism, sexism, instrumental treatment of others, bullying, and persecution for difference. In light of the growth of depression and self-harm among British teenagers it's important to foster empathy and acceptance of difference as virtues, and counteract sexism.[15] The macho nature of the right wing version of 'character' is of course inimical to such virtues. It would be

[14] http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/02/public-schools-toby-young

[15] Some of the work being done by teachers in the school featured in the *Educating the East End* series on television recently was excellent in this regard (Channel 4, 2014).

good to get children, especially boys, to read and discuss some writing on feminism.[16]

- It should encourage a sympathetic sociological imagination that is sensitive to the differences in circumstances in which people grow up, according to their fortunes in the lottery of birth in a highly unequal society, and an awareness of the inherited and hence undeserved advantages and disadvantages that go with this and the profound effect this has on them. (See also Sandra Cooke and Peter Alcock's paper, this conference).
- Since studies of public awareness of inequality show that people radically underestimate how unequal their societies are, children need to be told the truth about this.[17] Children need to know that more equal societies tend to allow greater flourishing than more unequal ones, and that national surveys show that the most unequal societies are the worst for child well-being, including the UK. On the former they could discuss some of the findings of Wilkinson and Pickett's influential book, *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), and on the latter the UNICEF reports of 2003 and 2007.[18]
- They need to discuss the corruption of moral sentiments and double standards in relation to inequalities that Smith highlighted, and how to counter them; for example, they could discuss how double standards are typically applied to boys and girls behaviour, or the behaviour of criminal bankers compared to rioters. They might discuss the ethics of making the poor pay for the crisis cooked up by the rich in The City and Wall Street, and of following this up with lessons in virtue for the poor.
- They need to talk about the fairness of the social institutions which largely determine their position in society and shape their habitus. Ideally, it would be good for them to learn about the political economy of economic inequalities, so they could counter individualistic, meritocratic ideologies, but I know that's not going to happen in the current UK political context.

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[16] Laura Bates' 'Everyday Sexism' (2014, Simon and Shuster) would be a good starting place, followed up by something a bit more analytical.

[17] For example, Orton, M. and Rowlingson, K. (2007) Public attitudes to inequality,York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Horton, L. and Bamfield, T. (2009) Understanding attitudes to tackling economic inequality,York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Pahl, R., Rose, D. and Spencer, L. (2007) 'Inequality and quiescence', Institute for Social and Economic Research Working Paper, 22; Osberg, L. and Smeeding,T. (2005) 'Social values for equality and preferences for state intervention in the USA and Europe', Russell Sage Foundation; Norton, M.I. & Ariely, D. 2011 'Building a better America – wealth quintile at a time. Perspectives on Psychological Science. 6(1) 9–12.

[18] UNICEF (2007) 'An overview of child well-being in rich countries', http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf; UNICEF (2013) 'Report Card 11: Child well-being in rich countries', http://www.unicef- irc.org/publications/pdf/rc11_eng.pdf.

Conclusions

Each discipline actively encourages reductionism, whether philosophical, sociological, psychological, biological or whatever, rewarding those disciples who expand their disciplines' empires further than hitherto. Our understanding of ethical life has been hindered by this failed experiment in the organisation of learning. We need a postdisciplinary approach. But we should also take seriously the way in which virtues and vices are encouraged or discouraged not merely by repetition and reflection, but by the experiences people have, and treatments they receive, according to their position in our highly unequal societies. Finally, we need to be aware of the political agendas of those who call for character education, and the questionable nature of their conception of virtues.

I realize I have discussed these issues in far too rushed a manner, but I hope to have provided some provocations on what virtue ethics and social science can contribute to each other, and to society at large.

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