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Review: Intelligent Virtue

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Julia Annas' book, *Intelligent Virtue*, provides the reader a novel account of the nature of virtue, practical reasoning, and flourishing. Throughout the book, Annas presents her account in a gradual manner with each chapter building on the next. Annas periodically presents and argues against potential objections to her view. Suitable for the interested undergraduate non-philosophy major, this book could also serve the curiosities of the most elite professors. While none of the chapters of the book stands well alone, the fluid writing style and helpful examples make the 176-page work an easy read. At the end of each chapter, the reader finds herself happily continuing on to the next.

According to Annas, there are at least two helpful ways to approach the concept of virtue. First, we can better understand virtue if we recognize that its acquisition and exercise is analogous to that of practical skills such as drawing, building, dancing, or playing the piano. This approach to understanding the nature of virtue is dubbed *the skill analogy*. Second, Annas aims to show how virtue "is part of the agent's happiness or flourishing, and that it is plausible to see virtue as actually constituting (wholly or in part) that happiness" (1). These two observations are hardly new; in fact, as Annas implies, they are explicitly made by Aristotle. Nevertheless, Annas' account is novel in that, unlike Aristotle, she carefully lays out how virtue is like a skill as opposed to similar behaviors and she also tailors her account of how virtue can be constitutive of happiness to a wider notion of happiness more compatible with common sense intuitions. In these regards, Annas' work is not only a terrific extension of ancient views, it is also a distinctive and well-developed addition to virtue ethics.

Chapter 2 sketches Annas' account of what virtue is. For Annas, a virtue is a feature of an agent. It is desirable for itself and not merely instrumentally valuable. Virtues are developed dispositions to act in reliable ways that reflect good values. These dispositions are dispositions *to be* a certain way. While it might be the case that virtues are demonstrated or made apparent in actions and expressions of judgments, they are not to be confused with such behaviors. One who has a virtue is developed in such a way that her judgment, decisions, motivations, and behaviors are interconnected. As Annas points out, it would be a category mistake to ask how a person on the way to becoming courageous can judge an action to be brave and *then* conjure up the motivation to perform the act. On her account of virtue, virtues develop out of already existing motives that, if properly educated and cultivated, give rise to proper judgment, understanding, and behavior. This chapter ends with a brief explanation of the difference between virtue as a habit and habit *qua* routine. Virtue and skill differ from habit *qua* routine in that "the practical mastery is at the service of conscious thought, not at odds with it" (14). In addition, "skilled dispositions are not static conditions; they are always developing, being sustained or weakened" (14).

In Chapter 3, Annas describes how acquiring virtue requires a need to learn and a drive to aspire. The student of virtue recognizes that some initial trust in the teacher and the learning context is required; however, the ultimate goal is to be able to exercise one's own independent understanding. In order to explain this aspect of her account, Annas continues developing the skill analogy such that it is made clear that virtue is dynamic. According to Annas, not only does it take time and practice to develop virtue and activity to maintain virtue, it is also the case that the virtuous must always strive for improvement. Annas denies that virtue is a static disposition and sees virtue's dynamism as analogous to that of skill. An artist who either mimics her teacher's methods or plateaus in her development is not a very skilled artist. Likewise, a student of virtue who can only do as her teacher does without comprehending and being able to provide reasons for her behavior is not yet virtuous. In addition, there simply cannot be such a thing as a virtuous person who cannot grow, learn, or adjust.

Annas explains that when evaluating what virtue is and whether one has acted virtuously, we must take into account whether the agent is a teacher of virtue or a learner and how advanced a learner she is. For instance, a good student of virtue would apologize for a transgression. For her, apologizing is the right thing to do. However, apologizing would not be the right thing for a truly virtuous person to do, since a truly virtuous person would not have committed a transgression. Therefore, acting rightly is available to all types of persons and character types, even if the right action is not necessarily a virtuous action. From here, Annas attempts to answer a charge of intellectual elitism and a problem of opportunity and influence. Objectors of an account of intelligent virtue, such as Julia Driver, argue that if virtue ethics demands such intellectualism as understanding of moral reasons, then virtue ethics does not make ethical behavior available to many agents. Similarly, one might object that persons living in environments, cultures, and time periods lacking in moral understanding and proper moral education are also incapable of developing virtue. Annas' response is twofold. First, since Annas identifies the need to understand and the drive to aspire as essential to having an opportunity to develop virtue, qualities she takes to be widespread among human beings, virtue is available to all. Second, as is the case with any skill, some of us might have an easier time developing virtue than others; but it does not follow from this fact that virtue is only possible for those who are naturally situated to acquire it. Some of us will be born with good motivations in healthy societies while others of us have a longer road ahead in developing virtue. Still, Annas contends, virtue is not reserved for a few elite; anyone in any circumstances can learn and exhibit virtue.

At the same time, Annas claims that it might be unreasonable to expect a person in dire circumstances to develop virtue. While it is possible that such a person will become virtuous, Annas recognizes that the development of virtue might be unlikely. For this reason, Annas advises us not to follow Aristotle in saying that only the perfectly virtuous person acts virtuously. An agent can be more or less virtuous depending on context. For example, a Roman slave owner who treats his slaves well is "virtuous by the standards of his society" (45). So, argues Annas, while it is not reasonable to expect slave owners in Ancient Roman times to comprehend the wrongness of their ways, it is open to them to transcend whatever they are told by society is right or permissible by applying the skills of virtue to situations as they develop and learn.

While I find Annas' rationale for these claims compelling, I do worry that a similar objection might rear its head. It is often argued that virtue ethics is a poor theory since the ideal of the virtuous agent is unattainable. Annas claims that future generations will surely judge us harshly concerning whichever mistaken values we now hold. The suggestion is that future generations will always have "hindsight" and a greater intellectual grasp on moral reasons. Coupling this suggestion with the fact that Annas claims it is unreasonable to expect persons in systematically unjust societies to become virtuous, it would appear that it is unreasonable to expect *anyone* to become virtuous. For, has anyone ever, or will anyone ever live in a perfectly just society? I think that Annas would be comfortable with this implication as a problem that all ethical theories face. However, her account could be improved with a more explicit discussion of the two senses of 'virtue' that I take her to be using throughout the book. There is the sense of 'virtue' that is virtue proper, or *virtue qua virtue*, and then there is a more relative sense of 'virtue' (a sense she clarifies as distinct from *relativism* in Chapter 4). For example, Annas' kind Roman slave owner might be virtuous, *for a Roman slave owner*. This relative sense of virtue is, to my mind, a far cry from what most virtue ethicists want in an account of virtue, since the "for a" clause can water down almost all goodness in a person. Just as it is insulting to say that a female athlete runs well *for a girl*, virtue ethicists might find Annas' account disappointing since, by embracing the impossibly high standard and augmenting it with a relative standard, Annas has made everyone and no one virtuous. While I foresee this as a possible disappointment of Annas' account, I do not believe that it is a damning feature of her account. On the contrary, it might just be that our ethical opportunities are disappointing.

In response to worries like the one just mentioned, Annas does offer one meaningful distinction that makes various appearances in just about every chapter: that between the *circumstances of a life* and the *living of a life*. Virtue is not about the circumstances of one's life, but rather how an agent lives. Annas rightly points out that many objections to views like hers stem from confusion regarding this distinction. While it is the case that being raised in a war-torn country constitutes significantly different circumstances than those found by a child raised in a comfortable first-world home with a loving family and ample opportunities for education, the circumstances alone do not constitute, necessitate, or prevent the development of virtue.

The final message of Chapter 3 is that certain objections to virtue ethics rest on two mistaken conceptions: a misconception of what an ethical account should offer by way of action guidance and an underestimation of what kind of guidance virtue ethics in particular offers. For Annas, expecting an ethical account to offer hard and set rules of what to do is indicative of a failure to see the difference between a learner and a moral expert. Learners must be told what to do since they do not yet understand reasons for doing the right thing. Experts know what to do in a situation since they already comprehend moral reasons for the right behavior. Annas' astute observation reminds me of a conversation I once had with a student who desired a word bank for the term identification section of an exam. She proclaimed that she is a visual learner and must see the words to recall them. I told her that an exam does not judge how one learns but whether one has learned. We all may learn in different ways, but the state of knowing (if one truly does know) ought to be the same. Rules are tools for learning. Being courageous, or honest, or kind are states of understanding how to behave once one has sufficiently learned how to be virtuous. Second, Annas points out that Hursthouse's *v-rules* (rules that convey sentiments like "be honest" instead of deontic rules that offer commands like "don't lie") are no less instructive than rules provided by other ethical theories. In fact, such rules often convey which actions are right or wrong but give little or no instruction of how to go about doing the right thing. The right thing, Annas argues, can be done in many different ways, some of which are morally inferior to others. By instructing us to "be honest," the virtue ethicist is not only telling us to be a certain way, but to value truth and to convey it correctly and in appropriate ways given the particular situation at hand.

Chapter 4 involves a detailed discussion of how Annas' account, while sensitive to a learning context and culture, is *not* a relativist account. Indeed, Annas implies throughout that objective moral values exist. However, she simultaneously acknowledges that we learn about such values through cultures and contexts that might be different from others and that it might be unreasonable to expect one to fully transcend the mores of their group. First, Annas points out that the drive to aspire prevents *conservativism*; learning how to think for oneself

inevitably involves questioning the values and practices of one's society. Second, Annas argues that we identify ourselves as members of groups and subcultures, and when these clash, it is brought to our attention that we must reason through which standard is better. Annas also notes that while different cultures teach the virtues differently, it is sensible to say that all cultures have values reflective of the virtues. That is to say, all cultures have some notion of generosity, courage, wisdom, and the like. Finally, Annas explains that: "Being truly (or perfectly) virtuous is indeed an ideal which none of us can exemplify. But it does not follow that none of us are brave, loyal, or generous" (65). Annas closes this chapter with a brief explanation of how we can accurately make claims about one's virtue if those claims are reflective of the developmental stage that the agent is in and if those claims take into account the degree of influence the agent's society's imperfections and injustices have over individuals' judgment.

Chapter 5 continues to address how we are able to identify a person as virtuous even if that person is not perfectly virtuous. Annas' suggestion is that we note how or whether an agent enjoys acting virtuously, for the distinguishing mark between the virtuous person and the enkratic person is how the person feels about doing the right thing. Annas relies on Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's studies of how people find experiences to be enjoyable to show that the virtuous agent truly enjoys behaving rightly whereas persons of lesser character typically do not. For Annas, the virtuous person enjoys virtuous action because of a commitment to the right values and not just coincidentally.

In Chapter 6, Annas presents her view of the unity of the virtues, the claim that "the fully successful exercise of one virtue depends upon other aspects of the person's character" (83). Any given virtue such as character must be developed and practiced in every aspect of our lives. One can be courageous in battle or in telling the truth where hardships are sure to follow. In the latter example, courage and honesty are "clustered," and it is the fact that we can find virtues necessarily clustering together in this way that Annas maintains that there is a unity of virtue. The unity is found in the fact that during moral development, we are not simply developing characteristics, but rather we develop our character, which can be expressed in different ways under different circumstances and these expressions are identified in kind as the various virtues. Our moral education might be compartmentalized in that we focus on what makes an act generous while learning generosity. However, it would be absurd for us to consider a person to be virtuous who reliably behaves generously but is systematically unkind and quick to anger. This agent's flaws should give us pause as to how much understanding he really has of generosity, and we should wonder whether that person simply mimics well the generous agent. Practical intelligence, the key to virtue for Annas, is not compartmentalized to kinds of situations or acts. Practical intelligence views a situation as a whole and takes all aspects into consideration when issuing virtuous responses.

Chapter 7 aims to distinguish virtue from other dispositions such as punctuality or wittiness. Virtue is admirable for itself and not merely for the consequences it yields. If a characteristic is valued only instrumentally, says Annas, it cannot be a virtue. In addition, Annas expands on a point alluded to in the previous chapter: virtue entails a commitment to goodness. The final sections of this chapter include a brief survey of the ways in which a virtuous agent might be committed to goodness, such as monism about goods, pluralism, and naturalism. Annas claims that her account is compatible with each option mentioned.

Chapters 8 and 9 argue that virtue is constitutive of happiness and flourishing while chapter 10 is a conclusion recapitulating basic lines of argument throughout the book culminating in a suggestion of how the empirical study of practical skills and philosophically informed research in psychology are likely to support Annas' overall account. In Chapter 8, Annas first explains how her account is eudaimonistic. For Annas, an account is eudaimonistic when happiness is a central feature of the account (and not necessarily a foundational feature). Annas' account recognizes that, whenever we act for reasons, we are not merely acting in a linear way such that we have a goal and we act so that we attain that goal. Instead, our reasons for acting often take into account the ways in which we can structure our actions towards a vague notion of an overall life-goal. Ethics, for Annas, is a matter of recognizing that we are already living certain kind of life, deciding whether it is *the* kind of life best fit for us, and finding effective ways to live that kind of life well. This is not to say that there is only one kind of life conducive to individual flourishing. On the contrary, each person's particular strengths and interests should inform which life is best for the individual. Of course, there are unacceptable ways of living; it is not possible for a serial killer to live virtuously and flourish since this way of life has no commitment to any objectively good value. Still, while the overall aim of a person's life is left somewhat indeterminate, and though we may have a vague notion of what that final goal is, we get clearer on it as we continue to live for the sake of our final end.

In case the reader is not convinced by Annas' description, she then considers views of happiness that are alternative to eudaimonistic accounts. Annas successfully points out serious objections to hedonism, desire-satisfaction, and life satisfaction accounts of human happiness. While her objections are many, there are a few

that span all types and are particularly convincing. Annas argues that happiness must be *active*. On all three alternative accounts of happiness, a happy state is static. If one were to live a life of pleasure, desire-satisfaction, or even life-satisfaction, it would be possible to lose sight of the purpose to living once certain aims were met. The active nature of happiness demands that happiness be something we enjoy and constantly work towards maintaining. In addition to the critique of an accounts activity, Annas also criticizes the alternatives' commitment to subjectivity. Pleasure can be artificially induced, trivial desires are easy to fulfill, and one could think that one is happy when the actual state of affairs is incompatible with one's standards for happiness. Eudaimonism avoids these problems, and Annas contends that it is the best description of what happiness is and how we might live happily.

In Chapter 9, Annas addresses the question of whether virtue is constitutive or necessary for happiness. At first blush, the reader might be disappointed in this chapter, for in her introduction, Annas promises to "show how a virtue ethical theory with this conception of virtue enables us to see how virtue is constitutive (wholly or in part) of the agent's flourishing" (3). However, early on in Chapter 9 Annas states, "I am not in this work arguing that virtue is necessary (or sufficient) for a happy life. More modestly here, I am showing how, given the present accounts of virtue and of happiness, these issues arise naturally as issues of philosophical argument from the ways we think about our lives" (147). I imagine that the original aim of the book was meant to be more assertive about this claim and Annas tempered her ambitions as the difficulties of proving this conclusion became apparent. The connection between virtue and happiness has been a chestnut of philosophy for millennia. So it is not surprising that the matter remains controversial at the end of this book. And, to her credit, Annas does deliver more than just how these issues arise naturally. So, as Aristotle would say, her solution fits cleanly on the mean. Annas points out that the life of virtue is an active life, and we saw in the previous chapter that happiness too must be active. The fact that Annas' account of virtue and flourishing both show their objects as dynamic, it makes sense that virtue and happiness could compliment one another. This is not a knockdown argument for the connection between virtue and happiness. However, it is an interesting way to motivate the belief that there is such a connection, which is more than most accounts of virtue and happiness have managed to do in the past. In this regard, Annas' project is a success, and *Intelligent Virtue* is, indeed, a good smart read.

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