

# Three problems for contemporary virtue ethics

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There are three interrelated problems that threaten the overall cogency and acceptability of contemporary virtue ethics as an ethical theory. These problems fall under three categories: (1) practical, (2) theoretical, and (3) epistemic. In the process of articulating these problems, the paper employs and offers cases from medicine and everyday life to bring to the fore significant issues that need to be addressed, most especially contemporary virtue ethics' seeming inability to accommodate some intuitions that we have regarding what right actions consist in. The paper also articulates the view that being virtuous, like being excellent, can be understood in terms of degrees. As stated earlier, the three problems are interrelated, thus, adherents of contemporary virtue ethics need a systematic approach through which these problems might be put to rest.

**Keywords:** contemporary virtue ethics, practical problem, theoretical problem, epistemic problem

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## INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century witnessed the revival of philosophers' interest in the traditional virtues and their overall significance in moral philosophy. This renewed interest in the traditional virtues is made possible (for the most part) by the publication of Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy" in the academic journal *Philosophy* in 1958 where she proposed that moral philosophers should "return to Aristotle's approach" (Rachels 2003: 175). From that moment on, contemporary virtue ethics (henceforth CVE) emerged as a promising *alternative* to the dominant ethical theories (e. g. consequentialist, deontological). Unlike the dominant ethical theories, CVE is more concerned with the individual moral agent. In particular, it is concerned with the *character* of individual moral agents and not with the moral nature of particular actions (e. g. whether act A is right (or wrong) or good (or bad)). For some moral philosophers, such an emphasis on the individual moral agent's character is an attractive feature of CVE and this should come as no surprise. After all, it is a well-known fact that the Greek word *ethos* literally means *character*. The idea that *ethos* and *character* are intimately connected is further confirmed even in contemporary theorizing: "ethos, as an inner strength driving virtue, should be considered as a distinct class of character – a class that when possessed by an individual will provide the inner strength or resources to step up and perform extra-ethical, virtuous action" (Hannah, Avolio 2011: 991).

As an ethical theory, CVE has, for its central theme, the idea that “morality involves producing excellent persons, who act well out of spontaneous goodness and serve as examples to inspire others” (Pojman, Fieser 2012: 147). If morality involves producing excellent persons, then *training* and *habituation* are crucial for the individual moral agent to become virtuous. At this point, one might ask as to what virtue is. *Virtues* may be conceived of as “excellences of character, trained behavioural dispositions that result in habitual acts” (Pojman, Fieser 2012: 147) of moral goodness. On the other hand, *vice* also involves trained behavioural dispositions that result in habitual acts. The difference, however, is that these habitual acts do not produce moral goodness (but its opposite).

In this paper, I will identify some of the difficult problems that affect the overall cogency and acceptability of CVE as an ethical theory. These problems are classified into three groups: (1) *practical*, (2) *theoretical*, and (3) *epistemic*. In the process of articulating these problems, the paper employs and offers cases from medicine and everyday life to bring to the fore significant issues that need to be addressed. At the outset, it is important to note that the three problems are interrelated and each of them needs to be resolved (in a systematic way) if we hope to consider CVE as an acceptable ethical theory. An acceptable ethical theory in this sense is one which possesses at least two salient features: (1) responsiveness to the demands and complexities of contemporary life, and (2) gives justice to the moral intuitions that most of us are willing to accept as correct.

## THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF CONTEMPORARY VIRTUE ETHICS

It is difficult to deny that CVE has its own set of *attractive* features. For adherents of CVE, the virtues are important for the very possibility of *human flourishing* both individually and collectively (a clearly Aristotelian idea). They maintain that “virtues are traits of character that are good for people to have” (Rachels 2003: 182). While an exhaustive list of the virtues is difficult to produce, adherents of CVE believe that it is possible for us to come up with a *general* answer as to why the virtues are important: “They are all qualities needed for successful human living” (Rachels 2003: 183). Consider, for instance, the following virtues: (1) courage, (2) generosity, (3) honesty, and (4) loyalty. What are some of the reasons that we have as to why we value these virtues?

Fortunately, answers to the aforementioned question are not difficult to seek. James Rachels (2003: 182) explains that in general, it is a good thing to have courage since life is full of dangers. A person who lacks courage will therefore not be able to cope up with difficulties that are part and parcel of existence. Generosity is desirable, too. It is a familiar fact that some people will inevitably be worse off than others and they will need help. Also, our relationships with other people in the community can go wrong in numerous ways if, for example, we cannot expect people to be honest. In addition, beings like us value friendship, and loyalty is essential to sustain such bonds. In general, we can therefore say that without the virtues, individual and communal life would be difficult.

Earlier, we said that CVE is more concerned with the character of individual moral agents and not so much with the moral nature of particular actions. This remark, however, should not be taken to mean that CVE has nothing to say about what a *right action* consists in. Consider Rosalind Hursthouse’s biconditional: “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i. e. acting in character) do in the circumstances” (Hursthouse 1999: 28). Another important feature of CVE is the importance that it places on the individual moral agent’s possession of the correct *motives*. Adherents of CVE maintain that “it is important

not only to do the right thing but also to have the proper dispositions, motivations, and emotions in being good and doing right” (Pojman, Fieser 2012: 147). The idea, simply put, is that ethical theories “that emphasize only right action will never provide a completely satisfactory account of the moral life” (Rachels 2003: 186). In the following section, we will now consider some of the difficult problems that affect the overall cogency and acceptability of CVE as an ethical theory.

### SOME PROBLEMS FOR CONTEMPORARY VIRTUE ETHICS

As stated earlier, the problems that affect the overall cogency and acceptability of CVE as an ethical theory may be classified into three groups: (1) practical, (2) theoretical, and (3) epistemic. Let us begin with (1). This is what Pojman and Fieser (2012: 158) calls the *practical problem* and what Julia Driver (2006: 113) calls the *application problem*. In my estimation, the practical problem (henceforth PP) is the least serious of the three. As is well-known, one of the reasons why moral philosophers engage in moral inquiry is to be able to provide a set of *principles* that can help an individual’s decisions and actions in the face of life’s difficult (and oftentimes conflicting) moral choices. To have a deeper appreciation of PP and the difficulty that it presents to CVE, consider the case of stem cell research involving the use of early human embryos.

We have witnessed extraordinary advances in the medical sciences. These advances include, for instance, the completion of the human genome sequence and the successful derivation of the human embryonic stem cell. The human embryonic stem cell is a “self-renewing cell line that gives rise to all cells and tissues of the body” (Okarma 2001: 3). Such a breakthrough changes the landscape of medicine in many ways: “The potential for these cells is to allow permanent repair of failing organs by injecting healthy functional cells developed from them, an approach called regenerative medicine” (Okarma 2001: 3). More recent studies, for instance, show that neural progenitor cells derived from human embryonic stem cells has a huge potential for cell therapy for patients with Parkinson’s Disease (Ambasudhan et al. 2014). In addition, human embryonic stem cells are also instrumental in cell therapy for age-related macular degeneration (Carr et al. 2013).

Given the huge potential of stem cells in addressing many diseases that plague mankind, it is understandable that some people are passionately pushing for conducting stem cell research on early human embryos. Some thinkers, for instance, argue that “it is permissible to conduct stem cell research on early human embryos, because in the first 14 days human embryos are neither sentient nor in possession of those capacities necessary for sentient beings to qualify as persons” (Bortolotti, Harris 2005: 68).

The issue on the morality of stem cell research on early human embryos is just an example of an ethical issue that emerges as a result of the rapid development of human knowledge (e. g. in science and biomedicine) and technology. As mentioned earlier, CVE tells us to act in such a way that it is similar to how a virtuous person would act, but given our current predicament, this advice is simply not helpful. We might ask, for instance, what a virtuous person would do given the circumstances (e. g. when she is asked to decide on the issue of the permissibility of stem cell research on early human embryos). As an additional example for our current purposes, consider, for instance, the ethical issues surrounding *aesthetic surgery* as pointed out by Giovanni Maio (2007) which when left unaddressed may cast doubt on the very status of aesthetic surgery itself as medicine. Maio (2007: 189) cautions that *if* aesthetic surgery will only understand itself as part of a market that focuses on making profits (as consumerist

ideology dictates), a part “that serves only vanity, youthfulness and personal success”, then it might lose sight of the real values – values which are anchored on the real need of patients. Just like the case concerning the use of early human embryos in stem cell research, one might still be unable to determine for herself what the virtuous stance is in the case of surgery for purely aesthetic reasons. For critics of CVE, the foregoing cases demonstrate CVE’s seeming inapplicability to moral dilemmas that individual moral agents face in real life.

If CVE is to count as an acceptable ethical theory, then it should be able to address PP and what it entails. Let me expound on what PP upon closer examination entails, but first, let us provide a possible response from the adherents of CVE on the issue of the permissibility of stem cell research on early human embryos. Adherents of CVE might reasonably maintain that in such situations, there is in fact a course of action that the virtuous person would characteristically do. For instance, it is certainly not inconsistent for a virtuous person, say A, not to endorse the use of early human embryos in stem cell research on the grounds that early human embryos are potential persons. This is referred to as Aristotle’s *potentiality principle*. As Lynn Morgan states: “In its contemporary philosophical iterations, the potentiality principle proposes that embryos and fetuses should not be killed because they possess all the attributes that they will have as full persons later in life” (Morgan 2013: S16).

The foregoing response of the adherents of CVE, however, is problematic for several reasons. First of all, it is also certainly possible for another virtuous person, say B, to endorse the use of early human embryos in stem cell research. As to how this is possible, it is important for us to clarify the underlying *assumption* behind person A’s justification for not endorsing the use of early human embryos in stem cell research. The underlying assumption is that early human embryos are human, that they are, to use Raymond Devettere’s (2009: 373) words, “one of us.” The crucial point which must be underscored is this: Person A’s justification is based on a *prior determination* as to whether early human embryos count as human beings or not. But this prior determination is not something that CVE itself as an ethical theory can possibly determine (or decide upon). To make this point explicit, we can say that the question of the moral status of the early human embryo may not be a kind of question that CVE is well-equipped to answer. If the foregoing point is correct (or at the very least, plausible), then if person B does not believe that early human embryos count as human, then it is possible for her to endorse their use in stem cell research without sacrificing her being virtuous. After all, virtue also requires her to be *consistent* with what she believes to be the case and what she (in practice or in real life) endorses.

The second problem for CVE is the theoretical problem (henceforth TP). As a problem for CVE, TP focuses on two things: (1) the problems associated with the CVE’s schema for right actions, and (2) whether or not the CVE’s schema for right actions can make room for what may be called *degrees of being virtuous*. Let us begin with (1) above. Earlier, we said that adherents of CVE also have something to say about what right actions consist in. Recall Hursthouse’s biconditional: “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i. e. acting in character) do in the circumstances” (Hursthouse 1999: 28). Given that this is a biconditional, the most that can be said about it is that it is true just in case its constituent parts have the same truth-values. On the face of it, critics of CVE might complain about the *triviality* of such a schema for right actions. This appears to be the case since the biconditional above is far from being informative and action-guiding. At the end of the day, people might still be asking themselves, “Okay, so an action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstances. But, what should

I do about using early human embryos in stem cell research? Should I perform surgery on an adolescent patient for purely aesthetic (or cosmetic) purposes?” Earlier, we were able to show that it is possible for two persons, A and B, to respond *differently* on the issue of using early human embryos for stem cell research despite the fact that they are both virtuous. In relation to Hursthouse’s biconditional, the following points should at least be clear. Person A and person B did *two* different things (i. e. A disapproves (or is against) and B approves (or is in favour) of using early human embryos for stem cell research). The problem, however, is whether or not we are willing to accept that they are both *right* despite the fact that their choices are not consistent with each other.

As mentioned earlier, the second problem for CVE under TP is whether or not CVE’s schema for right actions can make room for what may be called *degrees of being virtuous*. This problem needs to be mentioned because it seems intuitively correct that being virtuous is not a plain black or white matter and that we can, and with good reasons, maintain that it can admit of degrees, comparable to how the concept of *justification*, for instance, can admit of degrees. To further this point, let me provide another example: *problem solving*. In particular, what I have in mind is problem solving in symbolic logic. Suppose two persons are given the task of proving that a certain argument, say A, is valid. Suppose further that our goal is to determine if they were able to construct the correct proof for A. After the allotted time, both persons were able to finish their proofs for A. Upon checking their proofs, we found out that their proofs (for A) are both correct. There is, however, one small difference: the *length* of their proofs for A (i. e. one is shorter than the other).

If we adopt Hursthouse’s biconditional and apply it to the current example, we can ask ourselves the following question: “When is a proof right (or correct)?” Suppose we say that a proof is right (or correct) if and only if it is what an excellent logician would characteristically (i. e. acting in character) do in the circumstances. Would the foregoing schema be acceptable for us? To answer this question, several points are in order. First, while we can be confident that our excellent logician would (with a very high degree of probability) be able to construct a correct proof for A, we do not have an answer to an important question: “What makes any proof a correct proof and not otherwise?” Second, in constructing a formal proof of validity, it is not uncommon for us to be able to achieve the goal by using different steps. Hence, some proofs may be longer or shorter depending on a number of factors like the following (Take note that the following list is not meant to be exhaustive.): (1) the complexity of the argument in question, (2) the number of logical connectives (or truth-functional operators) and the number of inference and equivalence rules in the logical system that we use, and (3) the factors that concern the person herself who is constructing the proof (e. g. her mastery of the different rules of the logical system). In our example, both persons’ proofs for A are correct. The only difference is that one person’s proof is shorter than the other. Using Hursthouse’s biconditional, it would appear that they are both excellent logicians. (Again, their proofs are both correct.) And we may all happily agree with this claim. This comes with a *caveat* (and this is our third point): CVE’s schema, in the form of Hursthouse’s biconditional, does not capture something important about the excellence exhibited by our logicians: While their proofs are both correct, most of us will most likely choose the *shorter proof* (or the simpler proof) as the *better proof* in the event that we are asked to choose between them (e. g. if we are in a situation where these logicians are being evaluated as to who will receive a prestigious award). In this scenario, what *guides* our choice is the virtue of *simplicity* – a theoretical virtue not only in this case but also in theory choice between scientific theories. The import

of the foregoing points is that *excellence* can be understood in terms of *degrees*. If the analogy is at least reasonable, we can say that being virtuous can also be understood this way and this is something that is not reflected in the CVE's schema for right actions in the form of Hursthouse's biconditional. Before discussing the third problem for CVE, allow me to address a potential source of misunderstanding concerning the analogy (i. e. problem solving (or proving) in symbolic logic) above. First, it is important to note that the analogy does not mean to say that the correctness of a logical proof is judged by ethical standards or by a logician's moral virtue. The analogy has a very *modest* point: It only *suggests* that the concept of *excellence* (just like the concept of *character*) cannot be isolated from *the virtues*. This at least provides us with a *preliminary* reason for taking the idea seriously (i. e. that being virtuous, to the extent that such a state requires being excellent, can also be understood in terms of degrees). Second, analogies, by their very nature, are not meant to be mathematically certain. Third, the analogy works by pointing out something important that adherents of CVE should at least be able to explain: "What makes any proof a correct proof and not otherwise?" In the case of CVE's schema for right actions an analogous question might be asked: "What makes any action right and not otherwise?" With these points said, if the foregoing analogy can at least invite other philosophers to think (or rethink) about the possibility (or plausibility) of looking at the virtues in the way suggested earlier, then the analogy would have achieved its intended goal (i. e. to *broaden* the way by which we conceive of and understand what being virtuous consists in).

The third problem for CVE is the epistemic problem (henceforth EP). Earlier, we mentioned that for adherents of CVE, morality involves producing excellent persons who can inspire others. We also mentioned that if morality involves producing excellent persons, then training and habituation are crucial for the individual moral agent to become virtuous. At this point, an important question may be asked: "Given the importance of having role models that we can follow, how do we know who is truly virtuous?" This is a problem since it is possible for someone to merely pretend to be virtuous. Marianne Talbot (2012: 36) writes:

A dishonest person, for example, will want us to trust him. This gives him reason to tell the truth most of the time. But he will hold himself ready to lie to us when it will benefit him. How can we distinguish such a person from a person who really is honest?

This problem is *epistemic* and it highlights the view that we need a set of *criteria* (i. e. conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient) for us to be able to *know* which individuals are truly virtuous so that we can follow the example of those and only those who are truly virtuous. In the absence of such a set of criteria, how then can individuals choose their appropriate role models? As one may have anticipated, CVE seems unable to provide us with such a set of criteria. This is partly due to CVE's inability to provide a *substantial* answer to what a right action consists in. Let me expound on this point. If CVE's criteria for a right action is itself problematic, how then can an individual guard herself against people who are merely pretending to be virtuous? Take note that viewed only from the *outside* (i. e. from the observer's point of view alone), the act of a virtuous man and a man pretending to be virtuous appear to be the one and the same. While adherents of CVE might counter by pointing out that the individual moral agent's *motives* count, one cannot help but think that such a response seems inadequate. In the absence of a set of criteria for knowing which individuals are (truly) virtuous, the (*ad hoc*) strategy of appealing to the individual moral agent's motives only makes the problem more difficult for CVE. Finally, EP also presents adherents of CVE with a closely related problem. Let us assume that a certain person, say C, is truly virtuous and another person, say D, follows (or imitates) her examples. From this example, it can be said that D's actions, as imitations of C's actions

are also right. After all, C, as we granted earlier is a person who is truly virtuous. Even in this case, adherents of CVE will still find themselves in a predicament: If D merely imitated C, why should D be credited at all for the right actions that she made? This is a problem for adherents of CVE for it conflicts with our ordinary notions of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in the realm of (human) actions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Let me end this paper with a few remarks on CVE and the three problems (e. g. PP, TP, EP) that have been articulated so far so as to avoid possible misunderstandings. Let me state for the record that the general aim of the paper is not to demolish or discredit CVE but rather to identify certain obstacles that must be overcome if it is to count as an acceptable ethical theory. This I hope has been made clear in Section 2 (The Attractiveness of Contemporary Virtue Ethics) of the paper. As have been shown in the foregoing discussions, PP poses a serious problem for CVE due to the latter's inability to provide a set of principles that can help guide an individual's decisions and actions in the face of difficult (and oftentimes conflicting) moral choices. In discussing the case of using early human embryos in stem cell research, it has been shown that: (1) the question of the moral status of the early human embryo may not be a kind of question that CVE is well-equipped to answer, and (2) it is possible for two virtuous persons to endorse conflicting views on the issue. As a problem for CVE, TP questions: (1) CVE's schema for right action, and (2) whether or not CVE's schema for right actions can make room for what may be called degrees of being virtuous. The final problem, EP, inquires whether CVE can provide a set of criteria for knowing who among various individuals in the community we can emulate. It also provides another related problem (i. e. the problem of imitating virtuous person's actions and whether or not it sits well with our ordinary notions of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness). In the final analysis, it can be said that these three problems are interrelated. Thus, what is needed from adherents of CVE is a systematic approach through which these problems might be put to rest. Indeed, the idea that the virtues are necessary for human flourishing both individually and collectively is an attractive one but the attractiveness of such an idea alone would never be enough for philosophical reasons.

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## Trys problemos, išskylančios šiuolaikinei dorybių etikai

### *Santrauka*

Egzistuoja trys tarpusavyje susijusios problemos, kurios kelia grėsmę visuotiniam šiuolaikinės dorybių etikos kaip etinės teorijos įtikimumui ir priimtinumui. Jas galima suskirstyti į tris kategorijas: praktinę, teorinę ir episteminę. Straipsnyje naudojami ir siūlomi pavyzdžiai iš medicinos srities ir kasdienio gyvenimo tam, kad į pirmą vietą būtų iškelti svarbūs šiuolaikinės dorybių etikos dalykai. Ypač aktualus tampa tariamas tokios etikos negebėjimas sutalpinti kelių intuicijų, numatančių, kas yra teisingi poelgiai. Taip pat artikuliuojamas požiūris, kad buvimas doram, kaip ir buvimas labai geram, gali turėti laipsnius. Šiuolaikinės dorybių etikos šalininkams reikia sisteminio požiūrio, kurio pagalba minėtos trys problemos galėtų būti įveiktos.

**Raktažodžiai:** šiuolaikinė dorybių etika, praktinė problema, teorinė problema, episteminė problema