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OEDIPUS THE KING: TEMPERAMENT,
CHARACTER, AND VIRTUE

I

RECENT DISCUSSIONS OF ETHICS and literature suggest that there is a relationship between reading (or, better, immersing oneself in) literature (in particular, fiction) and the virtues. Nussbaum goes so far as to claim not only that good literature is conducive to moral sense and sensibility but also that “the well-lived life is a work of literary art.”¹ The character development in most substantial fictional work that aims to engage us through its realism and truth to the human condition suggests that there is such a thing as a quasi-stable character and that an agent’s character plays a significant role in the way not only that the person acts but also in the kinds of thing that happen to him or her. For a certain kind of virtue theorist, the internal harmony of character required for a person to do the right thing in a diverse range of situations involves cultivating exactly those skills required to live well. This thesis amounts to a claim that there is a close, indeed conceptual, relationship between right living and good living and that the type of character which results from cultivating the virtues is a character conducive to getting the best out of the situations that life throws in our way, whereas the vicious character reveals itself by causing strife, harm, and even tragedy.

Gilbert Harman, criticizing virtue ethics on the basis of some key experiments in social psychology which have led to the idea of a “fundamental attribution error,” argues that people do not have enduring character traits of the type required to sustain such a position.² His critique has itself been attacked on the basis that what the experiments show is not the absence of character traits but their ability

to be influenced by the demands of a situation.³ Our objection is against the conception of virtues being attacked and also his sweeping conclusion about human nature and it has two strands. First we argue that phronesis, as the hallmark of a virtuous character, is a mix of skills, abilities, and attitudes honed in such a way as to allow the person to act fittingly in different life situations. Second, character runs true to type in an individual and even runs in families.

We find support for both claims in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. This is, of course, a myth but one that has spoken to human beings across the ages and it recognizes both that different individuals show certain regularities in their modes of relationship and their conduct and that these tendencies are often familial, contributing significantly to the events marking family stories and traditions. Phronesis or practical wisdom is the skill to negotiate the challenges that life produces when fate deals one a hand of this (genetic and genealogical) kind. In the process of making the case we will support the claim that fiction "can significantly contribute to moral understanding by revealing what certain situations amount to" and therefore that it "can bring home to us the force of, for example, moral dilemmas" and indeed *moral concepts*, and we will use the Oedipus story to reflect on the lessons emerging from one version of virtue ethics.⁴

We approach the Oedipus myth through Sophocles' tragedy in which an oracle about patricide and incest plays itself out in the lives of certain characters. The relevance for virtue ethics arises from the ways in which characters in the play react to their predicament and try to cope with the situations they must face. In moral life, individuals need to find strategies to deal with challenges they face both as individuals and as persons-in-relationships-with-others. The reactions portrayed in Oedipus make vivid not only the idea of character traits but also the role of virtue in moderating what we might do in situations that interact with our characters in potentially disastrous ways.

II

Harman's challenge begins with an appeal to the Milgram experiments and the good Samaritan experiment. He argues that human behavior is situationally driven rather than indicative of enduring character traits. He adduces the concept of "fundamental attribution error" to account for our tendency to attribute behavior to sources in the moral agent. In doing so he espouses a thesis central to the

explanatory commitment of social psychology as a discipline. Harman concedes that “innate aspects of temperament” are not his target but rather “virtues and vices like courage, cowardice, honesty, dishonesty, benevolence, malevolence, friendliness, unfriendliness, [and] talkativeness” and uses his credo to challenge the idea that one can actually be (or even aspire to be) virtuous (“MP,” p. 316). Both his debate with virtue ethics and his credo merit philosophical clarification and the insights to be found in great literature are relevant to both projects.

First, we ought to note that the social psychology literature has a prior commitment to its version of the contextual thesis and the “fundamental attribution error” because it is all about environmental explanations for behavioral variance. However it is common in studies of the type cited to publish the level of correlation between variance in the relevant behavioral measures and independent contextual variables. In the Milgram experiment this was not done because the point was not to compare the respective influences of situational and constitutional variables but to document a phenomenon that was puzzling and radical in its implications. In general, however, analyses of variance are inseparable from good research in social psychology and imply that a highly significant correlation coefficient (e.g. 0.5) may only account for half of the variance in the phenomenon of interest to us in understanding the behavior being studied. Given that 0.5 is quite a high correlation in social psychology it is entirely possible that the character or personality of the agent still has significant explanatory power. Thus Harman’s strong claim is not one supported by the data he cites even though it may echo the literature in which it appears.

Second, Harman’s conception of virtue ethics rests on the contested idea that certain key character traits as they are expressed in virtues and vices are conducive to a good life. But we might, for instance, wonder about the virtues of a warrior society as distinct from an academic society or the life of international diplomacy. MacIntyre has famously argued that tradition and virtue are holistically related such that conceptions of virtue are impossible to separate from an understanding of the socio-cultural context in which behavior occurs.⁵

These points tend to blunt Harman’s attack but our substantial argument turns on an appeal to a kind of naturalism found in Foot, Hursthouse, and other contemporary virtue theorists.⁶ These writers explore the holistic link between well-being, phronesis, and virtue. They argue that virtue consists not primarily in demonstrating certain character or personality traits but in acting well according to the

demands of a situation where right action exhibits a finely tuned balance of courage, sensitivity, kindness, generosity, and so on. When explicated in this way, virtue ethics crucially involves the thought that one ought to master the art of playing well the hand that nature has dealt one.

Virtue ethics of this stripe is closely related to what we might call narrative ethics—the reflection on, knowledge about and practice of what is fitting according to the narrative-generated demands of those situations one encounters. Acting appropriately demands a certain *phronesis* or practical wisdom in dealing with the moral challenge that is posed rather than always exhibiting some subset of a favored list of character traits. Thus one might want to advocate a shifting harmony of character traits and the courses of action in which they are shown adapted to the needs of the situation. For instance, being present at the confrontation between two friends recently estranged over a dispute about a mutual lover might require a certain sensitivity and diplomacy rather than courage, forthrightness, and unflinching honesty. Oedipus, a play much admired by Aristotle, and one which takes as read the inherent, even innate features of human temperament, makes vivid this feature of virtue and right action.

III

First, a word of introduction about the play in general. It was probably written and performed at Athens shortly after 430 B.C., when Sophocles was in his late sixties, a hugely popular and successful dramatist regarded as an astute, if traditional tragedian. It is one of three extant tragedies by Sophocles about the life and family of Oedipus, the king of Thebes, who discovered that he had unwittingly killed his father and married his mother. The rest of the tragedy is played out in *Antigone* (BCE, 442/1), which culminates in the suicide of Antigone, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, and *Oedipus at Colonus* (Sophocles' last play, performed posthumously in 401), which deals with the last hours of the blind old wandering Oedipus in a district of Athens (the author's own home district). In the Oedipus plays of Sophocles, which are his most famous and characteristic achievement, we encounter the myth of Oedipus and his family.

The basic story dramatized in *Oedipus the King* is Sophocles' version of a traditional myth, shaped and modified to suit his own purposes while retaining the core motifs and story. Myths were an open-ended, flexible

repertoire of artistic and intellectual blueprints that rang true in the light of concerns of enduring interest to human beings about their lives, their relationships, and the human psyche. A prominent theme in the trilogy is the temperament that Oedipus inherited from his father and transmitted to his offspring.

In Sophocles' own era, the first great tragic dramatist, Aeschylus, also wrote a trilogy about the successive generations of the Labdacids, the doomed royal family of Thebes: *Oedipus* was the second play in the series. Although only one small fragment survives of Aeschylus' *Oedipus* itself, we can form some impression of its content and approach from the extant third play of the trilogy *Seven against Thebes*, which culminates in the deaths of Oedipus' two sons in fratricidal combat in front of the city. Aeschylus' treatment of the myth heavily emphasized supernatural forces, especially the destructive Fury (Spirit of Vengeance) that carries out the Curses invoked by successive members of the family upon each other. Oedipus himself seems to have been both a victim and a perpetrator of such curses and, once again, the play reinforces the idea that intense interactions and a vigorous response to provoking situations was an enduring feature of these characters.

Aeschylus focuses on the supernatural in his discussion of epic events in a story that spans time and individual lifetimes and marginalizes, to some extent, the human responses to those events. By contrast, when Sophocles came to write his version of the Oedipus story about 40 years later than Aeschylus, he wrote a single self-sufficient tragedy (initially not part of a trilogy about the family) and focused on the character and decisions of one man. The play represents the fall of Oedipus who starts as a supremely confident, masterful king, a beloved, caring savior-figure, a man of energy and proven intelligence, and ends as a shunned, polluted, self-blinded outcast, deprived of the most basic freedoms.

In Sophocles' play this fall is shown to be caused by Oedipus' own decisions and rooted in his character. He insists on searching for the truth, asking an extraordinary number of questions, first about the killing of the previous king, Laius (in fact his father), and then about his own parents. He also acts on his findings, sometimes impetuously and always with force and decisiveness. At one level, he is the great detective who ends by discovering that he himself is the criminal, at another a man tragically driven by a need to know the truth even when that knowing precipitates a disaster.

His fall coincides directly with this ironic discovery, as Aristotle

observed in *Poetics* 11. In fact Aristotle (about a century after the play itself) was one of the first to appreciate the outstanding qualities of *Oedipus the King* and to establish this tragedy as the classic example of the literary genre of tragedy. This is no doubt because of its brilliant portrayal of character and the role of virtue (or its lack) in human affairs. For classicists, Aristotle's otherwise perceptive appreciation of this play is incomplete in that he fails to do justice to the supernatural elements in the plot but for those who embrace the form of virtue ethics that espouses a relaxed naturalism this is no more than what one would expect.

Aristotle's "omission" is fitting in the context of the present discussion of character, virtue, and the human response to trying situations because of the evident similarity between the naturalism of Aristotle and the psychological orientation that has led Harman to his skepticism about character and virtue. In order to bring this point out we can ask the question: What role did character and temperament play in the tragedy of Oedipus?

There is no question that the context of action is important in the play, in fact the circumstances are carefully described to allow the full development of the plot and appreciation of the drama. The oracle, and its cultural significance, feature prominently in those events. In Greek culture a person (or a whole community) would consult the god, requesting guidance or reassurance at some moment of crisis. The god's answer typically took the form of a prediction or a command that was ambiguous or mysterious or in some way incomplete. Oracles challenged both the intellect and the character of the supplicant: they had to be interpreted, made sense of, and responded to.⁷ It was all too easy to misunderstand an oracle and you might only come to understand what the god meant when it was too late to make use of your insight. Alternatively, an oracle might, at face value, be unambiguous, yet you might misinterpret it due to some point of ignorance (e.g. about identity, perhaps even your own identity) or you might act badly because of some flaw in your character that is exposed. Oracles and their complex interactions with contexts and human individuals are at the heart of *Oedipus the King*.⁸

We see in this play a remarkable variety of responses to such predictions and the responses shown by a character are not arbitrary but meet two constraints:

- a) the narrative or dramatic constraint arising from the play itself;
- b) the constraint of established myth, history, and our shared understanding of people.

The first is an aesthetic constraint evident in any good fiction. The second is a realistic constraint evident in great literature that deepens our appreciation of human beings and their ways. This realism underpins the fables, stories, legends and anecdotes scattered throughout our folkways that ring true to the human condition. We could say it is a naturalistic constraint in that it reflects our psychological knowledge about human beings—the kind of thing we intuitively deploy when we evaluate any experiment or assessment tool for its validity.

In fact the measurement of validity is a fundamental part of the intuitive assessment of any experiment in the light of our extensive knowledge about human beings and their ways. In the present context it can be usefully related to the actions and reactions that ring true in good literature and “give us a clearer comprehension of a moral situation” (“AMP,” p. 228).

In *Oedipus* we find just such an intuitively valid expose of the interaction between temperament and *phronesis* through a story of momentous dramatic intensity. Firstly, and perhaps most powerfully, Sophocles shows us the instinctive human tendency to avert an unwelcome contingency. Note that this human instinct interacts with an implicit belief in the truth and reliability of oracles. In *Oedipus*’ lineage both aspects are important—his family has power, his father had a piety of sorts, and both he and his father were men of decision and action. When Laius and Jocasta hear the oracle that the child to be born to them would kill his father, they do their utmost to prevent the dreaded event by having the baby put to death. According to Jocasta’s own version, as narrated to Oedipus (in an attempt to reassure him that oracles and prophecies are not worth worrying about), it was Laius, who “pierced his ankles / and by the hands of others cast him forth / upon a pathless hillside” (lines 718–20). This was a single-minded action by a man prone to decisive and deadly measures when required. Later in the play, at the very climax of the revelation about Oedipus’ origins, we find that Jocasta gave the baby to the herdsman “to make away with it . . . through fear / of evil oracles” (lines 1173–77) so that Jocasta was complicit in her husband’s action.

We note, therefore, the father’s brutality and the irony of Jocasta’s action in terms of the love for Oedipus and the relationship that later

formed. Both Oedipus and her father find love with the same woman. Jocasta unwittingly finds her perfect partner (one that we are told every woman yearns for). For our present purposes it is important that both parents were involved in an action intended to foil the oracle by having the new-born baby put to death although they stopped short of carrying out the deed personally with their own hands (no doubt to mitigate their blood-guilt). Their action showed that they were believers (skeptics or agnostics would have ignored the oracle) but their response was not just acceptance, it was action and decision despite the voice of conscience that may have warned them against the offence to piety they committed by (effectively) murdering their own child. It is interesting that their response to the oracle involves an evil that can only be justified consequentially; a type of response to evil or tragedy that neglects significant features of human moral psychology.⁹

The same goes for Oedipus' response to the related oracle he describes to Jocasta in his great autobiographical narrative (lines 771–833). A drunken man at a dinner in Corinth accuses Oedipus of being a bastard and his parents fail to reassure his doubts, so he goes to Delphi without informing them. The oracle ignores Oedipus' own question (presumably along the lines of "who are my real parents?") and proclaims that he is fated to marry his own mother and kill his father. Oedipus' response is to flee Corinth to prevent this terrible oracle from coming true. This very understandable reaction does not seem to have counted as any kind of gross impiety (an ancient Greek was not expected to just acquiesce in the fulfillment of such an oracle). But Oedipus' instinct to run away is based on the double assumption that Polybus and Merope in Corinth are after all his real parents, and that the Delphic oracle is to be believed. Oedipus flees because he is appalled, just as Laius and Jocasta must have been; in both cases the reaction was based on their piety and belief in oracles. Also in both cases, action was taken that led, in the context of the events that it brought about, to a culmination in tragedy. But decisive action is not the only aspect of Oedipus' reaction to events that threaten him or counter his will.

The second aspect of Oedipus' reaction is represented in his angry and threatening response to the prophecies of Teiresias (300–461). The chorus tells us that the blind prophet shares in the knowledge of the god Apollo (284–85). As the representative of truth, (356, 369); he speaks in riddling, enigmatic language, which infuriates Oedipus (e.g., 438–89). Oedipus is no simpleton, after all he solved the riddle of the

sphinx, but he dislikes the evasive, ambiguous, truths of prophecy and oracles. Teiresias is, in this respect, just like the oracle at Delphi and Jocasta tries, on this basis, to reassure Oedipus that it is not worth worrying about the allegedly prophetic words, by mentioning the apparently unfulfilled oracle to Laius and herself (707–25). Jocasta, perhaps because of the loss that she has suffered—of her first-born son—at the behest of an oracle, believes that prophets and oracles are equally untrustworthy. As we shall see, the play itself shows that she is wrong and that the tragedy that she most feared, or perhaps that haunts her, has come upon her. But even to say these things is to speak about facets of Jocasta's personality that have enduring effects on her in ways that ring true to our shared understanding of people and, in Nussbaum's words, "our sense of life."

IV

The prophet Teiresias uses language of an oracular kind, just as unhelpful and disturbing as the Delphic oracle had been to Oedipus in his youth (lines 787–93) but now we see a new side to Oedipus, one more consistent with his known character and family history. We could conjecture that his flight as a younger man occurred when he was emotionally off-balance, contemplating the fact that he seems destined to commit unthinkable acts. In response to Teiresias' initial reticence and then downright accusations, Oedipus becomes angry and threatening and, when we hear the tale of the crossroads and Oedipus' meeting with Laius his father, we sense that this side to him was there all the time, waiting only to be called forth by suitable circumstances. There is a tendency in his lineage, to brook no opposition, and we wonder whether the station in life has formed the family traits or only created a niche in which those traits could express themselves. In either case much accumulated wisdom about human beings and their ways comes into sharp focus before our eyes as the myth is cast into vivid dramatic form.

When Teiresias states, in clear reference to the cause of the devastating plague, "you are the land's pollution" (353), Oedipus is no longer questioning and rational, instead "his blood is up" and his response fiery: "How shamelessly you started up this taunt! / How do you think you will escape?" A few lines later, Teiresias is even more explicit: "I say you are the murderer of the king / whose murderer you seek" (362–63). And in turn Oedipus is yet more threatening: "Not twice you shall / say

calumnies like this and stay unpunished." Teiresias' third accusation (this time, in effect, accusing Oedipus of incest), again provokes Oedipus to lash out with angry threats but, undeterred, Teiresias makes further inflammatory predictions. The first is directly aimed at Oedipus: "A deadly footed, double striking curse, / from father and mother both, shall drive you forth / out of this land, with darkness on your eyes, / that now have such straight vision . . . / Misery shall grind no man as it will you" (418–27). Oedipus' reaction is again impulsive: "Is it endurable that I should hear / such words from him? Out of my house at once!" (429–31). Teiresias' second prediction makes explicit reference to the murderer of Laius, who "is here." The prophetic words allude to the imminent discovery and revelation of Oedipus' true identity, incestuous marriage, and fathering of children. They also presage his self-blinding and tragic fall in status, and indeed (beyond the action of this play) his painful wanderings in exile. The prophet underscores the oracular riddling nature of his words: "Go within, reckon that out, and if you find me / mistaken, say I have no skill in prophecy." With those words, the scene ends and, by a masterstroke of dramatic art, Oedipus himself is rendered totally speechless and can do absolutely nothing. When we next see him on stage (532 ff), Oedipus is consumed with anger against his brother-in-law Creon, whom he accuses of a plot to usurp the throne in conjunction with the prophet. His attitude is aggressive and oppositional and his passions easily stirred yet again evincing his tempestuous nature, the very nature that contributed to the much earlier fatal events at the crossroads when he killed Laius his father, from whom he inherited (and with whom he shared) that trait.

The third kind of reaction shown in the play is a total contrast to Oedipus' reaction to Teiresias. We have alluded to Jocasta's skepticism about oracles and prophecies (707 ff) and concluded that she must have changed her beliefs since she and Laius exposed the baby Oedipus in response to the oracle's prediction. This may be, in part, because the psychological trauma of having exposed her son has deeply embittered her against oracles and all such phenomena (857–58, 945–48, 951–52). Indeed she is not just skeptical but hostile to predictions of the future and the very concept of divine foreknowledge. It is telling, in view of the current discussion, that her most explicit and, as it were, theoretical statement of her position comes just after Oedipus himself exultantly proclaims his own disbelief in the Delphic oracle, following the news of king Polybus' death (964–72), and (ironically) just before the same

messenger's well-meaning but fateful intervention in that Oedipus is portrayed as sharing certain tendencies with his mother.

In reply to Oedipus' residual fears about incest with his mother, Jocasta asks: "Why should man fear since chance is all in all / for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing? / Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly" (977–79). She goes on to say that many men have had dreams of such incest. Her conclusion is that "he to whom such things are nothing bears / his life most easily." So her attitude is skeptical (rather than atheistic: she still prays to the god Apollo in 918 ff), a point of view that would have been shared by a minority of Greek intellectuals when the play was first performed (e.g. the historian Thucydides, contemporary philosophers like the sophists and the atomist Democritus, and probably the tragedian Euripides). But by the end of the next scene, that is, the messenger-scene (925–1086), Jocasta is the first to realize that the oracle has after all been fulfilled when the messenger's kindly, well-meaning intervention reveals that her baby was saved from death and is in fact Oedipus, the man with whom she has had four children, and the probable killer of her former husband, King Laius, at the fateful cross-roads near Delphi (726–833). No wonder she leaves the stage in silence and "wild grief," having failed to stop Oedipus from inquiring any further (1056–76). She goes out to commit suicide, her world fallen in ruins around her and her skepticism about oracles bitterly discredited.

Another character important in the Oedipus narrative is Creon, a man for whom piety and order are cardinal features of a life well lived. He forms, once Oedipus and Jocasta have been devastated by the results of their own actions, a point of relative stability in the emotional catastrophe that has fallen on the Labdacids. In contrast to Oedipus' characteristic mode of reaction, Creon, a rational, prudent, unemotional man, says "Do not seek to be master in everything, / for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life" (1522–23). The words highlight the contrast: Creon is conventional and tries to do the right thing but lacks the warm-hearted, passionate temperament, and the noble capacity to suffer and endure the worst typical of the Sophoclean tragic hero. Creon will dutifully obey the oracle's commands, but his own destiny is not at issue so that, in that respect, he is more fortunate than Oedipus, the true tragic figure, the character for whom we feel pity and fear, and whose fate is of concern to the gods. And in Sophocles' play, it is Oedipus rather than Creon, the man of duty, who emerges as the more sympathetic character despite his

violent actions and their aftermath. Thus we cannot take from the play a portrait of virtue painted in pastel colors and a morality of duty where passion is repudiated. Virtue theory and Oedipus have a more complex and subtle relationship.

V

The killing of Laius is foretold and even potentiated by the oracle but it is brought about by Oedipus' own headstrong temperament and readiness to take offense. He is brave, has a strong sense of right and wrong, and is a man of action, all elements of virtue in the traditional sense but here they can hardly be said to lead to eudaimonea. Indeed Sophocles trades on the irony of Oedipus' character in Oedipus' own proclamation about the killer of Laius.

"Since I am now the holder of his office,
and have his bed and wife that once was his,
and had his line not been unfortunate
we would have common children—(fortune leaped
upon his head)—because of all these things,
I fight in his defence as for my father,
and I shall try all means to take the murderer
of Laius the son of Labdacus . . ."

(259–66)

Oedipus killed Laius as a result of a complex mixture of righteous anger and impulse. He was ordered to make way for the king's party and roughly forced from the road, and then Laius, the king, struck him on the head with the driver's goad. Oedipus would not tolerate that treatment from anyone and his assailant "paid with interest for his temerity." Interest indeed in that he killed Laius and all but one of his accompanying party. Ironically the survivor of this group is also the herdsman whose kindly temperament results in the infant Oedipus' life being spared (1052–53; 1110–85).

Many of the events in the Oedipus story follow from Laius' and Jocasta's decision to act to prevent the oracle from coming to pass by killing their son. The play proves how misdirected their efforts were and leaves us to consider whether agents holding both virtue and piety somewhat closer to their hearts would not have acted in this way but would have "found unthinkable" an evil action to try and control their own destiny in this violent way.

We are left with grave misgivings about Laius and Jocasta killing their child to avoid the imagined tragic events. One wonders that any normal parents could take such a cold-blooded course of action in relation to their own infant. But this type of reflection leads us to look beyond the action to focus instead on the moral character of those committing infanticide. Such an action, we could say, is committed with malice aforethought by very few even if committed by others with less deliberation (as a result of provocation, impulse or violent temper). In any event it betrays a lack of the balance or moderation that conduces to virtue by equipping the agent to act well in the face of events that must be negotiated with skill, sensitivity, and wisdom (or *phronesis*).

VI

Often we regard ethics as an analytic or reflective adjunct to making good decisions about courses of action and their outcomes but Williams, among others has remarked that there is more to ethics than that. Sometimes ethics is a matter of knowing how to bear oneself in the face of something one can do nothing about. If, for instance, Laius and Jocasta had decided that they would conduct themselves as good parents rather than committing violence to try and avert the envisaged wrong, then the story would not have gone as it did. It may have gone better or worse for those involved (although the latter is hard to imagine) but the same moral evils would not have eventuated. The very character traits and features of temperament and disposition that led Laius, Oedipus, and Jocasta to act as they did are a feature of the Labdacid lineage and show up in Antigone, Polyneices and Eteocles. We are repeatedly and insistently shown how these dispositions need to be moderated by *phronesis*, that harmony within the character and right balance of action and restraint that causes one to act in a way that is fitting in the situation that has arisen.

Imagine that one is told that one day one will have to face an enemy who will desire only to cause one harm and distress but whose identity is unknown. One option is to adopt the attitude of universal suspicion and defensiveness towards others—to put oneself on a “war footing” with all and take on the paranoia and guardedness involved in that stance towards the world and others. A very different option is to resolve to live one’s life well, to live with courage and calm in the face of the uncertain future, and to treat others with generosity and trust despite maintaining a degree of prudent vigilance about dangers that

might appear on the horizon. Such a bearing looks like an intrinsic part of any virtuous response. No particular action is consequent upon this attitude but one's ethical response in such terms might focus on the way one approached one's fellows and their doings rather than just the decisions that one made and the actions to be taken in respect of others.

Such a case serves to illustrate the Aristotelian insight that wellbeing or *eudaimonia*—human good—is an activity in accordance with virtue; where virtues are dispositions underpinning (right) choices and is trained or developed by experience. J. Mackie is among those who are, like Harman, somewhat dismissive of the usefulness of such an approach: "As guidance about the good life, what precisely one ought to do, or even by what standard one should try to decide what one ought to do, this is too circular to be very helpful."¹⁰ However his dismissal seems a bit swift and perhaps we ought to move away from decisions and actions as the heart of ethics and recognize, with ethicists such as Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, Martha Nussbaum, and Bernard Williams, that the integrity of our life narratives and the nature of one's character as a member of a society or community are both important aspects of morality. Indeed, Hursthouse argues that virtue ethics is uniquely placed to serve the needs of moral thinking in the diverse situations facing humankind, "because virtue ethics, putting the virtuous agent at the center of the theory, can appeal to the very fact . . . that persons of good moral character are often the first to recognize that they do not know what ought to be done" ("AVT," p. 62).

This is definitely not a kind of nihilism (as encountered in some postmodern writing about ethics) and Hursthouse comments on the role of virtue ethics in real life problems.

I have granted that in at least two senses that is true—it cannot resolve every dilemma into the right and the wrong, and it cannot render difficult matters of delicate judgement easy and obvious to the adolescent—but claimed in both cases that this is to its credit. If the complaint has now been tracked down to the point that virtue ethics can answer questions about real moral issue only by appealing to premises about what is truly good, worth while, serious, and so on what can I say about this? ("AVT," pp. 73–74)

She goes on to say that a strength of virtue theory is that it contributes to our understanding of what is good, worth while and of moral import.

That strength is also affirmed by May writing on applied ethics.¹¹ If those things deal with “what in social and personal life counts as something,” and with what Williams calls “truthfulness to self and society,”¹² then we might expect that the result would not be a set of tidy maxims that give unambiguous moral guidance for every situation. It is equally unlikely that there is some configuration of invariant character traits that is adequate to meet the demands of every moral situation.

It is far more realistic to believe, with Aristotle, that a set of dispositions, features of one’s character and beliefs, and life skills will allow one to come to a sound and sensitive (even wise) view of a situation so that one knows how to conduct oneself. The requisite knowledge would be expected to have a marked situational or narrative sensitivity such that real issues might be solved differently by different people in different circumstances but the ethical constancy underlying their reactions will spring from the requirements of eudaimonia (or living well and harmoniously with one’s fellow human beings) and phronesis as they arise in the situation at hand. Williams remarks that the virtuous agent understands “that the dispositions that give him his ethical view of the world” develop his potential as a rational and social being and should inform any general “theory of humanity and its place in the world” (*ELP*, p. 52). The person with eudaimonia and, a well-developed moral character would, according to virtue theory, make good moral decisions relativized to what should be done in the situation in question. This is not, however, a circular criterion of goodness because that person’s conduct is, on every occasion, subject to a reflective test: “Is what I have done in accordance with my best self?” or, alternatively, “Is what I have done what X, who is wise and good, would have done in my circumstances?” This is a stern test indeed albeit flexible in the face of the varying demands of widely varying moral challenges. Among other things, it plausibly involves striking a right balance between one’s various character traits and it is quite evidently, what Oedipus and his father conspicuously failed to do.

The Oedipus myth reminds us that moral challenges cannot always be neatly captured in terms amenable to rules and general maxims or even simplistically conceived “virtues.” And these narratives live for us because they resonate with real life in a way that counts in favor of the kind of virtue ethics being recommended.

We have sketched a response to virtue skepticism which has two thrusts:

- (i) Oedipus is human, all too human, so that character, temperament and disposition form a significant factor in the way he reacts to situations.
- (ii) Virtue requires phronesis—the skill to act fittingly in diverse situations and forms a personality that allows an agent to respond well to diverse situations and create an admirable life story among the sometimes cruel contingencies of life.

This modest conclusion is convergent with the psychological claim that both the study of personality and also the study of social contexts or situations must be combined to give us explanations that can do justice to the complexity of human behaviour.¹³ Unfortunately a philosophical enthusiasm that uncritically embraces social reductionism does not have the subtlety to recognize the interest and explanatory power that might reside in the orientation towards character implicit in virtue ethics.

Approaching virtue in the way we have suggested prompts questions such as “How should one bear oneself in the face of a future clouded by dire predictions?” and “How should I act when threats and dangers seem to lie in wait for me.” “How should I respond to success?” The mark of virtue is to make the best of what life has to offer within the constraints imposed by nature and mortality and therefore behavior in which virtue plays a significant role may also be significantly influenced by the context within which it occurs.

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