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Conversation with Julia Annas

1. *Professor Annas, you are very well known in continental Europe, and particularly in Italy, for your works on ancient philosophy, most of which are available in translation and extensively studied. Could you tell us how and why at some point you turned to virtue ethics, and proposed your own original theoretical proposal?*

Firstly, thank you very much for this opportunity to answer your questions. I am very honoured to be given this chance to present some of my positions to the readers of *Teoria*. (I regret that my Italian is not good enough to write in Italian.)

While I was working on *The Morality of Happiness* I became interested in the structure of contemporary ethical theories. That book is a work of scholarship about ancient ethical theories, and I had to work out a methodology for this ambitious task. I was aware of the problems in taking a supposedly timeless stance outside the ancient theories; it seemed to me that much unsatisfactory work about ancient ethics came from thinking that you could do this. This assumption can, and often does, lead to lack of awareness of the substantial assumptions that you are bringing to exploring ancient theories, and this leads to anachronisms. I was worried by the way that, for example, some philosophers unhesitatingly described Aristotle's ethics as egoistic. This imports a distinction between egoism and concern for others which simply didn't fit Aristotle. I wanted to bring an awareness of my own commitments to studying the ancient theories, to stay conscious of the dangers of seeing Aristotle, the Stoics and others in terms of distinctions that come easily to us, but misrepresent the issues important to them.

I was also aware of the problems in contextualizing the ancient ethical theories too deeply in their historical and social circumstances. It's impor-

tant to see ancient philosophers as products of specific societies; it's important, for example, to notice the contrast between Plato's and Aristotle's assumption that the Greek *polis* is the default model for political activity and the way later philosophers have adjusted to the *polis*'s subordination to the Hellenistic kings, and later to Rome. But philosophy demands its own level of comprehension, one that can't be reduced to external social factors. This is particularly true for ethical philosophy, where ethics should improve your life, and what improves your life can't just be a redescription of what you already think to be important; people seeking to improve their lives through ethical philosophy are looking for something that they precisely are *not* getting from their society.

In *Morality of Happiness* I was trying to get away from accounts of ancient ethics which treated Epicurean and Stoic ethics, for example, as stuck in place in Epicurean and Stoic thought as a whole. While it's important to try to understand each philosophy as a whole, it's also crucial to study aspects of it as they relate to the same aspects in other theories. We are used to this with ancient logic and theories of knowledge; *Morality of Happiness* aimed to do this for ancient theories of ethics. I was and remain convinced that we understand ancient ethics best as a series of variations, worked out in ever more systematic detail, on the framework of eudaimonism, the basic idea that we all seek happiness, and that we achieve this best by acquiring and exercising the virtues.

That book focused on ancient theories, and treated contemporary theories in a more general way. I had become interested also in the different ways that philosophers throughout the history of Western ethics had dealt with virtue. I found fascinating variations on the role and nature of virtue in thinkers like Hume, Kant, Mill, Sidgwick and later utilitarians, and Nietzsche, and I have taken a very amateur interest in early Confucianism, where there is debate as to whether it is a form of virtue ethics or not. Life is too short, unfortunately, to follow up all the interesting virtue paths in ethical theories. I would like to study virtue in mediaeval thinkers, in eighteenth century philosophers and many more. Interest in virtue has spread to many areas, such as law and medicine, where again I am interested but lack the time to study them profitably.

One result of discovering the ubiquity of virtue in ethical theories was to realize that the period in anglophone ethical philosophy which I encountered as a student, a particularly barren and tedious one, was historically just an anomalous blip in a long history in which virtue was as important as ethical concepts such as rules, principles and duties. I am fortunate to

have lived in a period of rebirth of anglophone ethical philosophy. Renewed interest in virtue and happiness, which brought about a whole new field of virtue ethics, also rejuvenated other theories. Standard predictable debates between consequentialists and deontologists have been replaced by deeper and more systematic study of these theories. In making a place for virtue they had to reconceive themselves to some extent, and the current discourse of ethical philosophy is much richer for this cross-fertilization, and the more serious study of ethical traditions that has come with it.

Interest in a variety of ethical theories improved my attempts to understand virtue in a contemporary context. When I wrote *Morality of Happiness* my aim was the scholarly one of locating the basis of ancient ethical thinking and enabling us to understand it without reading our own concerns into it or distancing it too much historically. I hoped that contemporary ethical thinking would benefit from this encounter with ancient thought. If I may quote the last sentences of the book, ‘The primary aim of this book has been to further the historical study of ancient ethical theories. But it is not an accident, I think, that this study may be of direct help in further articulating, and trying to understand, our own moral point of view.’ I didn’t for some time think of attempting to produce a contemporary version of virtue ethics myself, but this became increasingly an aim as I learned more about the way virtue had fared throughout the history of ethics, and became familiar with the arguments put forward for (and against) contemporary virtue ethical theory. Over the last thirty years there has been a huge improvement in the quality of argument about virtue and virtue ethics, from which I have benefitted greatly. From about 2000 I started, in articles and talks and discussions, to work out a view of my own which would show how even today an ethics in which virtue is central is viable, and, further, is an attractive alternative to ethical theories which are also available.

I abandoned my first attempt to write on virtue ethics, for two reasons. I started to write at the beginning of serious interest in virtue ethics, and too much of the book consisted of reactions to objections raised at that period against the whole idea of virtue ethics. As these objections were met, and discussion developed on a higher level, this reactive way of presenting virtue ethics became outdated. I also realized that I was doing what Socrates is always challenging people for doing – writing about the role of virtue in ethical theory without first giving an account of what virtue is. (I prefer the term ‘giving an account’ to ‘giving a definition’ because the latter has a number of misleading aspects.) I started again, to give an account

of virtue itself; this resulted in *Intelligent Virtue*. In that book I developed an account of virtue which is explicitly Aristotelean (or ‘neo-Aristotelian’). The Aristotelian version which I defend owes much to the work of Rosalind Hursthouse, who has pioneered the cause of virtue for many years and whose work has played a major role in the emergence of virtue as a serious topic in ethical philosophy. During the development of discussions of virtue ethics there have also been developments of different versions of virtue. We are now in the situation of having a number of different versions of virtue, and hence of possibilities for virtue ethics. There is a ‘target-centred’ version of virtue, an ‘exemplarist’ version and sophisticated accounts of virtue in Kantian and utilitarian theories. There has been much discussion about virtue ethics as a ‘third way’, an alternative to the traditional duo (in anglophone philosophy) of Kantian or deontological ethics *versus* utilitarian ethics. I am able, fortunately, to see that I made the right decision to work out an account of virtue before dealing with the role virtue can play in ethics.

Another factor which changed the face of anglophone ethical theory has been a surge in interest in happiness, well-being and flourishing. There has been an explosion of popular books claiming to have the secret to living a happy life, and there have also been a number of serious books in philosophy and social psychology. As with virtue, there has been a tendency to look back to Aristotle’s views on the subject, and there has been much debate as to whether his concept of *eudaimonia* should be rendered as *happiness* or *flourishing*, or simply left untranslated on the grounds that we lack an equivalent term. In the numerous books and articles which have been produced (there is now a sub-field of Happiness Studies) a major problem has been lack of consensus as to what happiness is. Some psychologists assume that it is a pleasant feeling or an emotion, while others distinguish the role of pleasure in life from that of broader positive factors which constitute well-being. There is a similar problem among philosophers, some of whom regard happiness as pleasure, while others distinguish between pleasant feelings and happiness as something to be aimed for over a life as a whole (thus both broader and more important than pleasant feelings).

Here those of us working in virtue ethics have the advantage of studying a tradition in which happiness (or flourishing) is the overall aim of one’s life, and quite distinct from pleasant feelings. It has always seemed to me that this approach, not just Aristotle’s but that of ancient ethics generally, is the most helpful and fruitful approach to ethics. It is more sophisticated

than contemporary theories in giving us a way of thinking of our aims and goals which recognizes that our lives are not static; we are always changing and developing in a variety of ways. Unfortunately it is still a minority view in the vast psychological literature, and also among philosophers, many of whom still think of our overall aim in life as something fixed and unchanging.

2. What are the cornerstones of your virtue-ethical approach, and which of your own works do you think are crucial to it?

For me the main cornerstone is the idea that the ‘entry-point for ethical reflection’ arises when each of us asks the question, how my life is going, and whether I could live it better. This is far closer to our everyday lived experience than approaches which would have us start from difficult and puzzling ethical problems. When I ask myself how I have lived my life and whether I am satisfied with this, I am almost certain (unless I am both extremely egoistic and extremely unreflective) to feel that I am lacking and feel an aspiration to do better. This is where we turn to self-help books, or, if we are more reflective, to philosophy of the kind Aristotle and other ancient philosophers offered, ethical philosophy which does not just teach you about virtue, but enables you, by coming to understand it and put it into practice, to start on becoming virtuous. For otherwise, Aristotle says, there would be no point to it. I find it very gratifying that there is considerable movement within anglophone philosophy towards this idea, recognizing the limited appeal and usefulness of purely academic ethical philosophy. Given this, I think it is important to work on virtue and becoming virtuous, as a proposed way for you to live your life better, and on happiness as the way in which this can become your overall aim in a way that makes sense of your everyday aims – a good job, a family, security and so on.

Virtue is the harder of the two to give an account of, but we can begin from the less controversial. Virtue is just the virtues, and the virtues are, at first, recognized as traits in our society and culture – where else could we learn them? But we are not stuck with keeping these traits unchanged, so an ethics of virtue is not in its nature conservative, as some object. As our virtues develop, we become reflective and critical about the way we learnt to be virtuous, and what we learned that the virtues are, and so it is no surprise that what we take as, for example, the virtue of modesty has rather different content from what our grandparents thought. Eventually we can reflect in the same way on the content of virtues in other cultures, so that virtue is well suited to cross-cultural exchange and discussion.

A virtue is a matter of character, a disposition or trait which has to be acquired over a period of time and through experience. An ethics of virtue thus has to take education and training into account from the start, rather than producing a theory which works for adults and then assuming that there will be some process by which we can get from here, where we are, to there, where the theory is accepted. The education that we get from our upbringing as children is important, but it does not end, leaving us finished; as adults we take over our own education, and keep aiming to improve ourselves for our entire life. For this reason among others, an ethics of virtue does not aim to produce a finished set of principles, or rules, or aims, leaving it to us merely to try to follow them. We are always refining our ways of being virtuous – brave, generous, modest and so on – because our lives are always progressing, and facing new circumstances. Being brave or generous is not a static condition that can be reached and then left untouched.

A virtue is built up through experience, but not by any chance experience; it is a disposition whose growth is structured in the way that the growth of a practical skill is structured. We learn to play a musical instrument not by sounding it at random, but by learning from a teacher, who imparts the strategies for playing the instrument and gives us a model to follow. We learn to do what the teacher does, at first just because the teacher does it, and then because we come to understand why is behind the teacher's actions; we get *why* she does this and not that, and acquire the ability to play in a way going beyond what following a model has taught us. This point, labelled 'the skill analogy', is an important to an ethics in which virtue is central. We learn to be virtuous as we learn to build, or to play an instrument; it is a practical achievement before we get to theoretical complexity. It is this everyday aspect which can lead to the underestimation of the resources of virtue ethics.

So far this can sound rather too intellectual, so it needs to be stressed, firstly that virtue is like a *practical* skill, not a detached academic exercise, and secondly that as we learn what to do, we not only get better at understanding what it is that we do, and thus better at getting it right, we do it more readily, with less felt obstruction; our emotive side functions in better harmony with the cognitive side, and we come to feel at ease acting in this way, and even come to enjoy it. In virtue ethics, the virtues are not constant correctives to our ethically unreliable desires, but the structures that focus our desires, wishes and aims towards the good.

This direction to the good is central to virtues, and distinguishes them

from other traits which can be trained towards the good or towards other aims, and thus allow of being exercised viciously as well as virtuously. Tidiness, cleanliness and diligence count as virtues in some theories, but in a theory of Aristotelian virtue they are just traits which virtue can direct well (or not). It is because it is essential to virtues to be directed towards the good that progress in becoming brave, generous, kind and so on leads to an integration of the virtues, since they all aim at the good in their own ways (unlike the vices, which have no tendency to integration). What is the good at which virtues aim? In an Aristotelian theory this will be happiness (or flourishing), living a human life well. It is significant, though, that this conception of virtue also allows for other versions of the good – a Platonic good unattainable in this life, for example.

In virtue ethics of an Aristotelian kind practical reasoning is central, and this operates over the person's life in an undivided way; it is not split between what is called *moral* reasoning and what is called *prudential* reasoning, reasoning about one's own concerns and aims as opposed to those of others. The notion of the moral does not fit virtue ethics well, mainly because there are so many different accounts of it, some of which conflict, and also because in most understandings moral is opposed to concern with one's own interests and desires, an opposition which makes no sense in a virtue ethics framework.

Intelligent Virtue focussed on developing an Aristotelean conception of virtue and its relation to happiness, and so laid the basis for a eudaimonist virtue ethics. I hope, in a book which I am writing, drawing on some articles, to strengthen my account of eudaimonist virtue ethics, and to follow up issues which arise for any theory of ethics. I hope to develop further my account of right action in virtue ethics, and to relate it to duty and obligation, and also to make clearer the way in which virtue makes *demands* on us, and does not merely provide us with ideals to aspire towards. I am also working on an account of vice, a surprisingly neglected topic in discussions of virtue, but needed to give us a complete theory. It has been claimed that accounts of vice in a virtue ethics framework are too weak to account for evil, and so examination of the difficult concept of evil is also needed. I also argue that in virtue ethics there is no need for supererogation, which is what accounts for heroic actions in theories which begin from classifying actions as required or forbidden. This shows the need for a convincing account of heroism as distinct from an ordinary level of virtue (a task I have begun on). Other issues arise – one advantage of working in virtue ethics is that there are many ways in which theories of ethics can

develop while keeping virtue central. This is something which we can learn by looking at the wide variety of theories in the ancient tradition, all of which make virtue and happiness basic.

3. *What are in your view the main challenges virtue ethics has to face these days?*

Until fairly recently, virtue ethics was thought to face a serious challenge from some findings in social psychology, where experiments showed that actions can be explained by appeal to features of the situation rather than dispositional features of the person. This point was extended to claim that we are mistaken in thinking that virtues explain our actions, since as dispositional features of the person they fail to explain actions; it is features of the situation which seem to be doing the explanatory work. Debate has made clear that the experiments were taken by psychologists to refine, rather than to undermine, the explanatory force of character traits; and also that philosophers who used them to attack the claims of virtue ethics had an inadequate account of virtue. A virtue is not a disposition to perform, always or regularly, actions of a certain type; it is a disposition to act rightly in accordance with whatever virtue is required, in whatever situations present themselves. The ‘situationism’ debate did a great deal to clear this issue up.

Virtue ethics has also had to face charges that it is egoistic; this comes from the mistaken view that the virtuous person is seeking to improve a state of herself, not others, and also from the mistaken view that when virtue is sought as a constituent of happiness this gives virtue a merely instrumental value for the achievement of happiness, thought of in yet another mistake as a pleasant state of the person. Virtue ethics has also been charged with failing to provide a ‘theory of action’, an account of what makes right actions *right* actions. With these objections, discussion and debate has over the past decade clarified the issues and made it obvious that virtue ethics can readily meet these objections, and, in so doing, display some of its attractive, though often misunderstood, features.

The main challenges faced by virtue ethics today are, I think, three. One is to provide a meta-ethics for virtue ethics. Aristotle’s naturalistic background for ethics is obviously not available to us, and Aristotelian versions of naturalism that have been offered have been found controversial. A problem here is that the tradition of contemporary metaethics developed in a period when virtue ethics had disappeared from discussion among philosophers, so that there are problems in adjusting current

methodologies to virtue ethics. (I have explored one issue here, that of thick concepts, very briefly.) The other main challenge is to strengthen the claim that virtue ethics is not just a theory of aspiration, but is as demanding on us as Kantian and utilitarian theories are. Even people sympathetic to virtue ethics sometimes feel that virtue must somehow make a weaker demand than a rule or principle does. Allied to this, though distinct from it, is the challenge of relating virtue ethics to the concept of *morality*. This is a concept which is understood in a number of different ways in different theories, and it is controversial whether we (in anglophone philosophy, at least) have a robust pre-theoretical conception of it. This makes it especially difficult to relate virtue and eudaimonism to contemporary uses of morality. I hope, at any rate, that this is not an unworkable task!