

EN MODERNE BROBYGGER MOT ANTIKKENS FILOSOFI

Et intervju med Julia Annas

Av Annette Thygesen



Julia Annas har en lang og innholdsrik akademisk karriere bak seg: hun avla sin doktorgrad i 1972 ved Harvard, har vært professor ved Oxford i en årrekke, og ble nylig utnevnt til Regents Professor ved Universitetet i Arizona. Annas har spesialisert seg på nær sagt alle felt innen gresk og antikk filosofi, innbefattet emner som etikk, psykologi og epistemologi. Annas er medlem av The American Academy of Arts and Science, og hun er grunnlegger samt tidligere redaktør av det årlige tidsskriftet *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*.

Annas har skrevet eller redigert mer enn 13 bøker, deriblant *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford 1993), som er blitt hedret med tittelen "Outstanding Academic Book for 1995" av *Choice*. Hun har i tillegg skrevet mer enn 125 artikler, som samlet dekker nær sagt ethvert område innen klassisk filosofi.

Annas er en svært populær og etterspurt gjesteforeleser, og hun er derfor konstant på reise til universiteter over hele verden. Den 21. og 22. september 2006 gjestet hun Universitetet i Oslo med to foredrag som bar titlene *The Phenomenology of Virtue* og *Stoic Ethics and Stoic Philosophy*. Jeg var så heldig å få møte Julia Annas mens hun var her, til tross for hennes særdeles hektiske timeplan under besøket i Oslo.

The first question is a rather broad one that might be a little difficult to answer on the spot. Considering the fact that you are a philosopher living in so-called "ultra-modern" times, why this deep and lasting interest for ancient philosophy? Has it always been like this?

No, I came to philosophy through studying classical culture. I did a degree at Oxford, in which the first part was studying ancient literature, and the second part was studying ancient history and ancient philosophy. But, for some time, the study of ancient philosophy had been accompanied by the study of contemporary philosophy. So, that is how I went from being a classicist to learning about philosophy, and that got me interested in contemporary philosophy, which was the direction I wanted to go in for some years. Eventually I came back to ancient philosophy simply through finding that those were the topics that continued to interest me, and the themes I found myself coming back to.

Your work is distinguished by an integration of issues from ancient philosophy into philosophical debates of contemporary relevance. What, if at all, is it that classical philosophy can contribute to modern society, and which modern philosophy cannot?

Well, I think I'd like to say two things there. One is that I think it is always useful to study the history of philosophy. And I think I can't say it better than to refer to what Bernard Williams has said on this topic: that it's wrong to think that we should look at philosophers of the past as being members of our conversation, bringing them into conversation with us. Rather, they are the people that we find it difficult to have a conversation with. They say things that are difficult for us to integrate with things we say ourselves. So I think, not just with ancient philosophy, but any history of philosophy, it's a good idea for us to learn about it, and have conversations that challenge the assumptions that we make on our own. There's a value for doing history of philosophy in any case. With ancient philosophy I don't think it's necessarily true that all parts of it are as useful for us. For example is ancient ethics more useful for contemporary ethics than ancient physics is for modern philosophy of physics.

I think you have more or less answered the next question already, which is whether you find parts of ancient philosophy superior to modern philosophy?

Ancient ethical thought has contributed something that actually has been taken more and more up by contemporary ethical thought. Contemporary ethical thought, in the analytical tradition, was very impoverished for a long time, because it had got stuck in the groove of taking there to be two ways one can look at ethics: deontology and consequentialism. That led to narrowing of horizons. Studying ancient theories of virtue and happiness has already had a reinvigorating effect in all areas of contemporary ethics. It has opened up new methods and new areas of interest.

Do you find that there are certain resources, both practical and theoretical, which are simply lost to modern people, when we struggle with questions of how to live a good life in contemporary society?

I think not, really. I think we can learn from the ancient theories, but I'm not sure that there are resources from ancient culture that we are lacking. We have to remember that our society is very, very different from ancient society, so although we can learn from their philosophy we have to start from where we are, and not to be nostalgic about aspects of their lives.

Virtue ethics is both a very old discipline and simultaneously a rather new theoretical field within modern ethics. What are the general advantages of the virtue perspective compared to other available ethical perspectives

today?

Well, one advantage is that by the time you start thinking about virtues, since they are dispositions, you already have them. We do of course already have dispositions to be generous or brave. Virtue ethics has a certain immediacy: we can recognize what's being talked about, so that we can build out from what we already understand. Whereas with other ethical frameworks, we have to have them explained, and then see how to apply them to the way we think about ourselves. Virtue ethics is the way we think about ourselves, so we can start to regiment and organize that rather than importing other perspectives.

Another advantage of virtue ethics is that it has a very direct connection to ethical development and ethical education. One disadvantage of previous approaches has been that they ask questions about ethics and morality from the point of view of adults, as though we always were adults! Asking questions like: how can it be that we could have concern for other people for their own sake? From the virtue ethics perspective you already take into account that parents bring up their children, and educate them and so on. You start from a point of view in which it is not baffling that some people have concern for others. That is not some theoretical difficulty you have to cope with.

I think in both these ways virtue ethics has the advantage of being more rooted in the way we think about things pre-theoretically than other ethical perspectives.

Do you think then that virtue ethics opens up for a more fundamentally positive view on human beings, compared to for example deontology?

In one sense, yes, because virtue ethics involves the view that for us to be virtuous is part of human development. It's a view of human nature that says we can develop to be virtuous as part of some kind of natural, human development. Deontology tends to have a more pessimistic view, seeing human nature as something that always needs to be overcome. And again, consequentialists are always forced to the conclusion that the way we are living is thoroughly inadequate and thoroughly unsatisfactory, and nowhere near what we actually ought to be doing. There's always a big distance between the way we ought to be and the way we actually are.

Another thing that has been interesting to many people is that virtue ethics has become very widespread in America in the field of applied ethics. This surprises many people, because it has been a continued objection that virtue ethics is vague. It doesn't tell you what to do, so how

could it help in applied ethics? And yet I've noticed, although I myself don't teach applied ethics, that more and more of the textbooks on applied ethics have sections on virtue ethics, and there are more and more of virtue ethics books. I think the reason for that is that virtue ethics apply to the situation you are already in. There's a sense in which it comes tailor-made for areas of professional ethics. Because in the area of any profession it will be fairly determinate what your roles are and what's expected of you. For example, one of my former students teaches engineering ethics. It's fairly determinate what engineers do, and what sorts of problems there are. Therefore it's fairly determinate what the forms are that certain ethical issues will come up in. One can sensibly ask: what are the virtues of a good engineer? Virtue ethics makes that problem manageable and tractable right from the start. What are the virtues of a good doctor or a good nurse? Whereas consequentialism and deontological approaches simply ask the same questions or pose the same problems, whether you are an engineer, a doctor or a nurse and so on. Virtue ethics seems to apply right away within certain areas of life, and that's one reason I think it's become more and more common in applied ethics.

What do you think then are the drawbacks or disadvantages of virtue ethics?

Well, I'm not sure I would want to talk about drawbacks, because virtue ethics as a field is growing and there are many different kinds of virtue ethics. I think that's a good thing. I suppose I can see some limitations of virtue ethics. It doesn't have much to say about how ethics is connected to politics, and that's an area that might be developed. But it's certainly true that the virtue ethics perspective that we get from the ancient theories doesn't have much to say about human rights, for example, and that work needs to be done. And it's not clear how it can be done.

Since virtue ethics, old or new, is not *one* thing, could you describe *your* position within this growing theoretical field?

My position is a form of eudaimonism. I think virtues are dispositions such that to have them is to achieve flourishing, which is the ancient notion of eudaimonia. If you translate this as happiness, it at once sounds peculiar and people misunderstand you.

It's safer to talk in term of flourishing. The virtues are the dispositions, which, if we have them, we'll just have a flourishing life. Of course, you at once have to say: what about people who have these dispositions, and live with disasters? There's a lot that can be said about that, but also

there's a lot to be said about how a virtue ethics of that sort can give the same guidance about how we should live and what we ought to do. Those are the issues I work on.

As a female philosopher, you work and breathe in a traditionally male-dominated environment. Do you have any specific experiences you would like to share in that connection, anything positive or negative? Basically, I'm asking whether you think it's harder for a woman to be "in the business".

I haven't found it to be harder, but my experience is, I think, not typical of that of younger women philosophers. I'm old enough to say that when I went to school in England in my teens, it was all girls-school. Girls and boys-schools were separate at that point. I was taught among girls and had women teachers, and when I went to Oxford there were still separate women colleges. Again I had woman teachers, and it was never odd for me to have them. I'd always had them. I didn't have predominantly male teachers or predominantly men in my environment until graduate school. Also, in the field of ancient philosophy - and I don't know what the reasons are - there has always been a fair number of women. So I've never felt that I'm the only one around. There have always been women I've known, worked with and read, and there have always been prominent women in the field. So I don't feel I've had the experience that many women do have in philosophy, feeling they are the only woman, and that they don't have any women teachers. It's good for women to have women teachers and women role models, but I can't say I have suffered in a way that I think a lot of women younger than me do. It's rather strange in that way. People expect older women to have had a worse time, and I had actually a rather better time!

Do you think that the philosopher - and perhaps especially the one who is involved with ethics - should try to "live as she preaches"? That is, should she try to integrate her teachings into her personal life? Or do you think it's better to embrace a more detached, analytical approach?

Well, I hope I live as I preach, although I don't know if I would represent what I do as "preaching"! Any teacher is discredited if you find that they're being dishonest, mean to people or giving them unfair grades. We expect any teacher to have the virtues that can be expected of a teacher.

Considering your knowledge of many ancient philosophers, what do you think of the philosopher's role in today's society? Should she in general be more visible?

You can't be visible unless there's a role for you to be visible in, and in many societies, and certainly in the United States, philosophers are not visible in the public culture. In some ways there is not much chance to be visible. With many philosophers the best way you can be visible is through your teaching, and the kind of example you give there. Anybody's teaching and research will become thin if you don't take an interest in contemporary society, and if you just read Aristotle and what other people have been saying about Aristotle. This is our business to take an interest in contemporary society and problems. I think there is a danger in thinking that as a philosopher I have something worth saying about contemporary issues just by being a philosopher. You have to be careful that you

really do know what you are talking about and have something to say. It's appropriate for people in medical ethics to be visible and say things about issues in medical ethics and so on. I'm not sure that it's appropriate for somebody in ethics to be engaged in political life in any particular way, unless there's some particular expertise that is being called upon.

Is there anything you would like to add, for example about your current work?

My current work is divided, as often is the case. I'm writing a book on virtue ethics, where I'm simply trying to set up what I think virtues are and how they relate to flourishing. I'm also working on ancient philosophy - on stoic ethics, and on Plato and virtues in *The Laws*. So I'm still working on virtues both historically and non-historically.

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