VIRTUE, EMOTION AND SELF-INTEREST

A CONVERSATION WITH JULIA ANNAS

By Ole Martin Moen

Julia Annas is a leading scholar in both Ancient philosophy and virtue ethics. She earned her Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1972 and is now Regents Professor of Philosophy at University of Arizona. From August to October 2009, Annas was a visiting professor at University of Oslo's Centre for Advanced Studies. Filosofisk supplement met with her to discuss virtue ethics.

What, in your view, is virtue ethics?

Virtue ethics has turned out to be a broader category than some people expected when it started about 15 years ago. On a broad account, you can define a virtue ethical theory as any ethical theory in which virtue plays a central role. Such a broad account, obviously, leaves open a large number of possibilities. It can be said, for example, that consequentialists have a consequentialist virtue ethic, and within their framework, virtues are understood roughly as dispositions which systematically produce good results. Importantly, however, in consequentialist terms virtues need not be linked to a person's reasons for choosing her actions. An argument for this view is found in Julia Driver's *Uneasy Virtue*. Also, there is a pluralistic virtue ethics, as is argued for by Christine Swanton in *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*. One interesting version of pluralistic virtue ethics is *Nietzschean* virtue ethics.

Nietzsche has recently been interpreted in a virtue ethical direction, and on this view, virtues are understood as dispositions which respond to different aspects of the world. Importantly, however, in Nietzschean terms virtues need not be linked to or contribute to an agent's flourishing. Most mainstream accounts of virtue ethics, however, are in a broad sense Aristotelian, in that they deal not only with one concept, virtue, but also with the concept of flourishing, or happiness.

Wherein lies the distinctive value of the virtue approach to ethics?

In its being a third basic structure that an ethical theory can take, alongside deontology and consequentialism. Admittedly, some consequentialists – like those just mentioned – argue that virtue should be understood merely as a concept in their theory, and as such, they maintain that virtue ethics does not constitute a third and separate alternative. They say: Well, maybe we didn't pay enough attention to virtues in the past, but now we do. I think, however, that there has been enough development to argue that virtue ethics indeed constitutes a third approach. It has certainly found its way into the textbooks.

Narrowing in on your own specific virtue ethical theory: What does it take, on your account, for a character trait to qualify as a virtue?

That certainly is a complex question. Let's start answering it by examining a trait that is a virtue, like courage, and one that isn't, like industriousness. Industriousness is certainly a good trait to have, but I don't think that that alone makes it a virtue. So, what differences can we point to between what is a virtue and what is not? One difference is that a trait that is not a virtue can be exercised either virtuously or viciously. You can be industrious both in a good cause and in a bad cause, and this is a sign that industriousness is not a virtue. There is also a deeper point, however. This might need some further backing up than what I can provide here, but the kind of practical reasoning you build up when you develop a virtue is of a different kind than the practical reasoning you build up when you develop a trait that is not a virtue. Developing a virtue requires developing some grasp of value, of what is worthwhile, so that the more virtuous you become, the more you develop an understanding in the way you live your life of what is valuable and what is a worthwhile way to live. This is one reason why, according to many theories which I think are correct, the virtues all develop holistically over your life as a whole, so that you don't develop one, say courage, in isolation from others. Industriousness, though, can be developed on its own – which is one reason why you can be industrious either viciously or virtuously. I also think that we intuitively recognize a difference between virtues like courage and other traits like industriousness, however much we want to develop the latter kind.

Would a distinguishing characteristic be that while virtues are concerned with morality, non-virtues are not?

I tend to avoid using the term "morality". Over the years, I've found that the terms "morality" and "moral" do tend, as people often use them, to presuppose certain assumptions that virtue ethicists don't necessarily share, for example the idea that the moral concerns only a certain area of our lives. Many assume that morality concerns only how we treat others, and on this view, reasons you have to be concerned with your own interests cannot be moral. If you operate with the term "moral" in a virtue ethical context, therefore, virtue ethics will seem problematic right from the start, since virtue ethics in an important sense is self-concerned. After all: *whose* virtues do you develop? I don't develop your virtues. You have to develop them.

If you use the term "moral" in describing virtue ethics, therefore, the project will look dodgy. As such, I think it is probably better for virtue ethicists not to use the term.

The self-concerned element in virtue ethics is sometimes used as a general charge against it. Thomas Hurka, for example, has critically described virtue ethics as "foundationally egoistic", and some virtue ethicists, most prominently Rosalind Hursthouse, have granted him this. In On Virtue Ethics, *Hursthouse admits that the ideal of virtue ethics can properly be described as "enlightened self-interest". What is your view on that?*

On Virtue Ethics is certainly an excellent book, but I myself, more defensively, stay clear of the term "enlightened self-interest", because I think it gives away more than virtue ethics should give away. You are right, though, that the charge of egoism is a serious charge, and it is often considered as being weighty. Part of the reason for that, I think, is the assumption about morality that I just mentioned: That there is something dodgy about caring for one's own virtues and one's own life when one should care for others and their lives. I believe that Hurka himself has given the clearest statement of this objection. He grants virtue ethicists the important point that in being virtuous, one aims at the virtue itself, and one does not necessarily have one's own interests in the corner of one's eye when doing so. Hurka holds, however, that in spite of this, virtue ethicists are bound to accept the view that fundamentally, one's own interests have a higher priority than the virtues – and this is what he calls "foundational egoism".

Now, I myself don't think that virtue ethics is a foundationalist theory, and as such I don't like the word "foundation", but I think the objection remains even if we phrase it in other terms. To approach a solution, I think we must start by asking: What sort of concern for yourself does virtue ethics recommend? Is it a concern where you think of your own interests as opposed to the interests of others, or is it a concern for you becoming a virtuous person? In my view, you aim at becoming a virtuous person, and this cuts across the egoistic versus non-egoistic debate. Therefore, I think it's wrong to say that virtue ethics is egoistic. Your concern with yourself is non-egoistic because you aim at becoming a virtuous person, you aim at becoming a virtuous person in order to have the virtues, and having the virtues consists – among other

things – in helping other people.

So, on your view, we should be virtuous for the sake of having the virtues, not for the sake of being happy?

In the context of virtue ethics, I think one needs to be careful with the expression "for the sake of". You want to be a virtuous person, and if you're an Aristotelian, you believe that this will lead to flourishing, but I really don't think that reintroduces egoism through the back door. This point depends, however, on what you think flourishing is. If you think flourishing is happiness – like in *having a good time* – then your theory will certainly look egoistic. But it would be daft to consider that an argument for being virtuous. After all: Who thinks that being virtuous is the best means to having a good time?

I think we must take seriously that in virtue ethics, the term flourishing is not given substantive content prior to one's aiming at it virtuously. In other words: Before you start out at being virtuous, you don't have a substantive notion of the kind of flourishing you want to achieve, and accordingly, being virtuous is not done as a means to an already given end. Rather, you begin with a vague idea of what flourishing is and what a good life is, and then you discover – by means of being virtuous – what flourishing more substantially consists in. Now, some people won't like the fact that you have to become virtuous before you can see that being virtuous is the right way to flourish. A vicious person, for example, will not agree. But I think that's alright, since that's how the world is. We don't all agree on what flourishing is.

To press this issue just a little further: What, as you see it, gives rise to the need for a separation between the virtuous and the vicious? Or in other words: Why *should one choose to be virtuous, as opposed to choosing something else?*

It can sound puzzling in the abstract, "why I should choose to be virtuous rather than vicious?", but a crucial point about virtue ethics is that it always starts from where you are. So you think about your life as it is (and it makes a difference how much experience you've had, and how well you've learnt from it) and ask yourself whether you would have a better life living the life you have courageously and honestly, or in a cowardly and dishonest way. And you see at once that you're not at a loss waiting for some theory to tell you which way to go; you have

lots of reasons to live your life virtuously. As such, I don't think such a question comes out of the blue, and as such, I don't think that it requires a purely theoretical answer. The only thing I think one can say is that our experience tells us that being virtuous is a good policy, and it seems intuitively mistaken to consider whether we might just as well be vicious as virtuous. Our background assumption is that being virtuous is a good thing, and Rosalind [Hursthouse] has put this in a wonderful way: When we bring up our children, we bring them up so that they will have the virtues. Now, why do we do that? We don't seem to do it merely so that later our children will be nice to us. We think that *they* will live better lives if they are, say, courageous rather than cowardly. Similarly, you don't bring up your child to be sneaky and dishonest. You think that that's not a good way to be, and the reason for that is not exhausted by your fear that the child will later cheat you. As such, you already start with the idea that being virtuous is a good thing. This might not take you the whole way, but I think that's where we have to start.

Like most virtue ethicists, you have stressed that whether or not you are truly virtuous depends upon what emotional dispositions you have. If you grudgingly give away your money, for example, you are not truly generous; to be truly generous, you need to act on the right, rather than the wrong, emotional inclination or disposition. To talk about "right" and "wrong" emotions, however, seems not to be entirely unproblematic. Would you say that we choose their emotions and, as such, that we can be held responsible for how we feel?

Yes, I think so. Now, that's often taken to be a very hard saying. Against it, one could appeal to a case where someone is brought up badly – say, in a prejudiced household – and say that even though this person might come to reject the ideas he was brought up with, he cannot get over the feelings of revulsion towards whatever objects he was brought up to have prejudice against. If so: Can we blame him? Now, I grant that there can be cases where people cannot control their emotions. That, however, does not imply that emotions are entirely outside of our control and that there is nothing we can do. It should be said, however, that how you view this depends on what you think an emotion is. I think emotions aren't just given drives that we can't do anything about. I think emotions are responsive to reasons. As such, I think it is up to us to work on our emotive reactions and to form them, even as

adults, and as such, I think that we can be held responsible for doing our actions in the right spirit.

You've said that virtue ethics is a fertile topic for philosophical research, and that there's enough material in virtue ethics "to keep the pot boiling for years". What specific areas do you have in mind?

One thing that is certainly interesting is how virtue ethical approaches are spreading to different areas of so-called *applied ethics*. In some sense, of course, virtue ethics has always been in that area, but not as deeply as it is now, when it has an increasing impact on how applied ethics is conceived. Take, for example, medical ethics. If you take a virtue ethical approach to that, you need to ask yourself what the virtues of a good medical doctor or a good nurse are. That, moreover, is really a difficult and really an applied question. You need to know a lot of concrete facts. You need to know what doctors do and then work out from there what it means for them to do it well. To point to another applied topic, Rosalind [Hursthouse] has written an interesting article on *environmental* virtue ethics. I think that until recently, people have assumed that virtue ethics is too anthropocentric to be amendable to environmental issues. After all, virtue ethics is about *our* virtues, and many environmental ethicists believe that we're the problem, not the solution, to the challenges they deal with. As such, they don't see how *us* having good or bad dispositions could matter. I find Hursthouse's approach interesting, however. If we have messed up the environment, our attitudes towards it need to be scrutinized, and Hursthouse is surely right that it's not enough for us to act differently – we need to develop a virtuous attitude towards the environment. She explores whether an environmental virtue ethics can manage with the ordinary virtues or whether it will require a new and environmentally focussed virtue. I think virtue ethical research of this kind is highly interesting, and it seems to have quite a lot of impact.

What projects are you yourself presently working on?

I just finished drafting a book on the idea that the practical reasoning involved in developing a virtue is the same as the practical expertise we get when we obtain a practical skill. This, the skill analogy, was very clearly grasped by Ancient ethicists, but it got neglected because most ethical theorists could

not see how practical skills like being an athlete or a builder could be relevant for morality. That seemed too mundane and too ordinary to be interesting. People, however, worry a lot about what the structure of ethical thought is, and I think that looking at practical expertise as a model for developing and exercising virtue can be very helpful. A skill analogy certainly doesn't give you everything you need in order to understand virtue ethics, but it gives you quite a lot, and I think it illustrates, once more, how virtue ethics provides a genuinely new alternative to the current theories of deontology and consequentialism.

Parallel with this, I'm working on the issue of virtue and law in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*. Even though Plato is concerned with virtuous persons in virtuous communities in both works, there is an important difference between them, since in the *Laws*, every part of human life is regulated by law. The question is: Isn't such a policy giving up on virtue altogether? Plato doesn't think so, and I'm exploring why that is.

I, therefore, certainly find virtue ethics very fruitful and very useful. How about you? Do you find it useful in your work?

Me? *Well, yes, I think you can say so, but I'm afraid that I find it useful and interesting for reasons that you might classify as the wrong ones. In a Rand-like sense, I think that the egoistic aspect of virtue ethics, rather than constituting an argument against it, indeed makes it more appealing. I find that it gives new life to the virtues to see them not as duties of any kind, but as means towards – and as constituent parts of – one's own happiness and one's own flourishing.*

Well, focusing on one's own life – whether one is a Randian or not – is important. In my view, however, virtue ethics cuts across the egoism/altruism distinction by holding that being a good person towards other people involves being a good person from your own point of view. It certainly involves an element of prudence to be a source of good to other people, and importantly, virtue ethicists don't say "You should send to the third world everything you have, except what you need to stay alive". A lot of people think they should send all their money to the third world, yet they *know* they're not going to do that, and the end result, then, is just a lot of unfocused guilt. I think that virtue ethics is a more helpful approach, since each of us starts from the question, "How can I live my life better?", and this is a question that we can all see the force of, and get down to answering in our actual lives.