Reconceiving Virtue: A Mengzian Adaptation of Eudaimonic Virtue Ethics in Response to Contemporary Criticisms

Gina Elizabeth Lebkuecher
Loyola University of Chicago Graduate School

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/4089

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

RECONCEIVING VIRTUE:
A MENGZIAN ADAPTATION OF EUDAEMONIC VIRTUE ETHICS IN RESPONSE TO
CONTEMPORARY CRITICISMS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY
GINA ELIZABETH LEBKUECHER
CHICAGO, IL
MAY 2024
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this dissertation was one of the hardest things I have ever done, and I am glad that—contrary to popular imagination—I didn’t have to do it alone. I would like to thank everyone whose support, advice, mentorship, feedback, and friendship made this dissertation possible, starting with my partner, Brannan. Thanks, Bran, for the late nights of listening—both to my anxieties and my ideas—and for your steadfast support. I deeply appreciate your help brainstorming, formatting, and editing; your encouragement to take a break when I needed one (and to keep going when I needed to); and your love and reassurance even when I felt like quitting.

Thanks to my wonderful dissertation committee. Dr. Joe Vukov, I cannot overstate my appreciation for your patience and guidance on this project, and your mentorship not only with this aspect of my research but with my academic career generally. Dr. Richard Kim, thank you for sparking my interest in Mengzi and comparative philosophy. I admire and have learned a lot from not only your research but your thoughtful and patient pedagogy. Dr. Peter Hartman, thank you for your thoughtful and thorough comments, your encouragement, and for pushing me to develop my ideas into interesting, ambitious, and clear arguments. And Dr. Bryan Van Norden, thank you for encouraging me to pursue Chinese philosophy, and for all your mentorship and support for my scholarship. Your kindness and reassurance helped me believe I had something worthwhile to contribute. Drs. Josh Mendelsohn and Jackie Scott, thank you for your invaluable guidance as members of my dissertation proposal committee, and as excellent teaching mentors.

Thanks, too, to my other faculty mentors at Loyola University, Chicago. I would not have succeeded if not for the “village” of support, advice, and cheerleading from my wonderful faculty. I am particularly grateful to Drs. Dimitris Apostolopoulos, Mario Attie-Picker, Andrew Cutrofello, Naomi Fisher, Jennifer Gaffney, Joy Gordon, Hanne Jacobs (now of Tilburg University), Takunda Matose, Freya Möbus, Jennifer
Parks, and Julie Ward. I would also like to thank Loyola University Chicago for providing the funds to complete my research and writing, and for the opportunity to pursue a PhD.

I also want to express a heartfelt thank you to all my graduate colleagues at LUC, especially Abram Capone, Jean Clifford, Robby Duncan, Pippa Friedman, Lillianne John, Claire Lockard, Rene Ramirez, Rebecca Scott, and Kimberly Vargas-Barreta, for your friendship, help, and support both with this project and with grad school generally. The community (and at times, commiseration!) that we LUC grad students shared made the stresses much easier to bear. Special shout-out to Claire for “body doubling” and support during our Zoom writing sessions! Thanks too to my friends Katie Furrow, Leddy Stroud, Shaila Wadhwani, and Jesse Winter, for providing much-needed distractions from my dissertation and for your steadfast encouragement! And thanks to my family—my grandparents Leo “Rip” and Pat (the latter the first PhD in our family and my academic idol), parents Amy and Jeff, and my sisters Tricia and Michelle—for instilling in me and supporting a lifelong love of learning. Miche, thanks especially for listening to all my venting about the research and writing process!

Thanks, too, to my professors and friends from American University and Vanderbilt University, without whom I would never have learned to love philosophy and dreamed I could pursue it. In particular, I want to recognize the profound impact the support and scholarship of Drs. Michael Brodrick, Debra Bergoffen, Lisa Guenther (now of Queens University), Ellen Feder, Asia Ferrin, Julia Fesmire, Kimberly Leighton, Jin Park, Charles Scott, and Andrea Tschemplik had on me. Ellen and Asia, thanks especially for all the help and encouragement to help me prepare for pursuing a PhD! Outside of my committee and faculty mentors at Loyola, American, and Vanderbilt, I am also grateful for the mentorship and support of Dr. Paul D’Ambrosio (East China Normal University) and Dr. Nicolas Bommarito (Simon Fraser University), and of the members of Sihaiweixue, for encouraging and helping me to develop my scholarship of Chinese and comparative philosophy. My sincere and heartfelt gratitude to all the friends, family, peers, and faculty who made this dissertation possible. I am indebted to a wonderful community of support.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

LIST OF TABLES vii

ABSTRACT viii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: THE EUDAIMONIC VIEW OF VIRTUE 1
  1.1 Introduction to Virtue Ethics 1
  1.2 Virtue Ethics Compared to Other Contemporary Ethical Theories 4
  1.3 Motivation and Research Questions 29
  1.4 Virtue Ethics’ Classical Background 37
  1.5 Methodology: The Eudaimonic View of Virtue 52
  1.6 Virtue Ethics’ Core: The Relationship and Implications of the EV’s Core Claims 77
  1.7 Organizational Outline and Chapter Conclusion 86

CHAPTER 2: RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL EUDAIMONIC VIEWS OF VIRTUE 89
  2.1 Introduction: Rational and Emotional Models 89
  2.2 The Rational Model 102
  2.3 The Emotional Model 133
  2.4 Conclusion: Looking Forward to Next Chapters 162

CHAPTER 3: DISABILITY, FEMINIST, AND PSYCHOLOGY CRITIQUES OF THE EUDAIMONIC VIEW OF VIRTUE 164
  3.1 Introduction 164
  3.2 The Moral Luck Objection 169
  3.3 The Disability and Feminist Critiques 176
  3.4 The Psychology Critique 213
  3.5 Conclusion 224

CHAPTER 4: A MENGZIAN EUDAIMONIC VIEW OF VIRTUE 227
  4.1 Introduction 227
  4.2 Mengzi’s Background and Context 229
  4.3 Mengzi’s EV 277
  4.4 Conclusion 317

CHAPTER 5: A MENGZIAN RESPONSE TO THE THREE AVENUES OF CRITIQUE 319
  5.1 Introduction 319
  5.2 The EV-R, EV-E, and EV-M 321
     Table 2. The EV-R, EV-E, and EV-M’s Expansions Compared 325
  5.3 Moral Luck and Constructivism 331
  5.4 The Psychology Critique 359
  5.5 A Contemporary EV-M 373

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND LOOKING FORWARD 378
  6.1 Practical Implications of a Mengzian VE 379
6.2 Summary of Dissertation  381

BIBLIOGRAPHY  383

VITA  416
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. The EV-R and EV-E's Expansions Compared 165
Table 2. The EV-R, EV-E, and EV-M's Expansions Compared 325
ABSTRACT

The primary question my dissertation aims to answer is: how might eudaimonic virtue ethics be reimagined to respond to contemporary criticisms from disability scholars, feminists, and empirical psychology? To answer this, I introduce the Eudaimonic View of Virtue, or EV, and propose a Mengzian adaptation of the EV (EV-M) in response to these criticisms. The EV captures the four core claims to which eudaimonic virtue ethical theories are committed: (i) virtues, in the sense of excellent character traits or dispositions, are the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., aretaicism); (ii) virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., eudaimonism); (iii) virtue or virtuous activity consists in the good performance of human function or fulfilling human nature (i.e., naturalism); and (iv) practical wisdom, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue.

For the EV, reason and emotions are both pivotal parts of virtue. However, there is disagreement among contemporary and historic eudaimonic virtue ethicists about what specific roles reason and emotion play—whether for Aristotle (the founder of the Western eudaimonic virtue ethics tradition) or in virtue ethical theory more broadly. The EV can be divided into (broadly) rational and emotional versions. I critically evaluate contemporary EV-based accounts in light of critiques from disability scholars, feminists, and psychologists, revealing rational versions’ vulnerability to the first two avenues of critique and emotional versions’ susceptibility to the third. In contrast to Aristotelian virtue ethics, which defines human nature through rational activity, Mengzi defines human nature through its potential for moral goodness; moreover, his moral psychology does not contain a rigid rational-emotional divide. This helps the Mengzian version of the EV evade criticisms from feminist and disability perspectives. Additionally, the EV-M’s emphasis on the interdependence of society and individuals—through its focus on rituals and social roles—provides an avenue of response to the psychology critique. The EV-M thus serves as a resilient foundation for an improved EV.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: THE EUDAEMONIC VIEW OF VIRTUE

1.1 Introduction to Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics can be broadly understood as an ethical theory that emphasizes and centers the role of virtues in ethical life, where the virtues are character traits, dispositions, or skills of a virtuous (morally exemplary) person.¹ The virtues, for a virtue ethicist, are both agent-centered and irreducible (though they may be dependent on each other).² To determine whether something is the right thing to do within a virtue ethics framework, we consider the character virtue—like honesty, benevolence, charity, courage, or righteousness—that should guide our understanding of, and response to, the situation. A virtuous person must be charitable, honest, brave, etc., and not because being so will help them meet some other normative standard. Moreover, because character (as opposed to action) is taken to be the starting point for ethical evaluation, moral development and education are strongly emphasized. In this way, virtue ethics is significantly different from other normative ethical theories.

Virtue ethics originated over 2,000 years ago in both Classical Greece and China.³ Today, after a resurgence in the 1950s, it is again a prominent ethical theory. Together with consequentialism and deontology, virtue ethics is considered one of the “three major approaches in normative ethics”—and

---

¹ As we will see later, however, what exactly is a virtue is a matter of some debate.

² In other words, the virtues—whatever one’s list of them may be—cannot be reduced to each other. Some virtue ethicists, like John McDowell and Iris Murdoch, conceive of virtue as a kind of “single cognitive-motivational sensitivity to moral requirements.” (Clarke 2017) However, even these proponents of the so-called “virtue as sensitivity” model acknowledge the existence of different virtues. (McDowell 1979, 332)

³ Some contemporary scholars have also noted that there are virtue ethical strains in some Classical Indian philosophy. See, e.g., Bilimoria’s (2013) “Ethics and Virtue in Classical Indian Thinking,” in the Handbook of Virtue Ethics; Gier’s (2009), “Dharma Morality as Virtue Ethics,” in Indian Ethics; and Gupta’s (2006) “Bhagavad Gītā as Duty and Virtue Ethics: Some Reflections.” However, this is outside the scope of this dissertation.
contemporary virtue ethicists have argued that the theory has significant advantages over the other theories (i.e., consequentialism and deontology) dominant in Western philosophy (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018). While virtue ethicists—both classical and contemporary—vary in what they consider the virtues to be and in how the virtues are cultivated, we can identify some common features of virtue ethical theories. These features include (i) virtue ethics’ agent-centeredness; (ii) the close connection the theory draws between ethical reasoning and agents’ personality, motives, and emotions, leading virtue ethicists to posit a kind of “psychological harmony” for virtuous agents (Stocker 1976); (iii) the theory’s acknowledgment of the importance of emotions and one’s community in moral cultivation or education; and (iv) the theory’s situational responsiveness or casuistry.

Based on these features, proponents of the theory argue that virtue ethics is more intuitively plausible than the dominant theories of Kantian deontology and utilitarianism, that it more accurately captures the way humans develop and reason ethically (that is, it better fits existing empirical evidence about human moral psychology), and that it allows for more accurate and appropriate ethical judgments in real-world situations. Briefly, this is because deontic (act-centered, principle-based) theories like deontology and utilitarianism

---

4 Briefly, I will be using “Western” philosophy to describe the European thought tradition that (ostensibly) traces from Ancient Greece to contemporary continental and Anglo-American philosophy. Some prominent scholars have influentially argued that the notion of the “West” or of “Western” thought—conceived of as a continuous cultural tradition—is a fiction, or at least ought not to be uncritically accepted as describing a tradition that is both continuous and exclusively European (Allais 2020; Hall 2018; Park 2013). Nevertheless, the term “Western philosophy” is useful for distinguishing that tradition that sees itself as stemming from Greek thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, in contrast to the Chinese tradition with which I am comparing it.

5 The need to distinguish between taking virtues as foundational for ethics and discussing the position of virtue within another ethical system has led ethicists to introduce a distinction between virtue ethics and “virtue theory,” the latter of which is “a term which includes accounts of virtue within the other approaches.” (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018). For this reason, I use “virtue ethics” or “virtue ethical theory” to refer to the broad theoretical approach described.

6 That is, virtue ethics is arretaic, focusing on the character behind an act, rather than deontic, focusing on the act itself (whether its consequences or motive).

7 As we will see in §1.5, below, these features can be further tied to four core claims that thinly characterize both classical and contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethical theories—which I label the EV, or eudaimonic view of virtue.
overemphasize the importance of rationally determined rules in ethical decision-making. I discuss this in more
detail in the following section (§1.2).

The leading and oldest type of virtue ethics, which is also the focus of this dissertation, is eudaimonic
(or eudaimonist) virtue ethics (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018; Peters 2013). Eudaimonic virtue ethics holds
that an ethical life is not just good *simpliciter* but also good *for the agent*, that is, virtue contributes to her
*eudaimonia*: well-being, flourishing, or happiness.8 We can consider *eudaimonism* a fifth feature shared by
eudaimonic virtue theories. A related claim of eudaimonic virtue ethical theories, as we will see in §1.5.3, is
that virtues are grounded in human nature or function. Indeed, as we will see in §1.5, eudaimonic virtue
ethics’ features of aretaicism, psychological harmony, emotional and communal moral cultivation, casuistry,
and eudaimonism can be further distilled into eudaimonic virtue ethical theories’ four “core claims” of
aretaicism, eudaimonism, naturalism, and practical wisdom.

This chapter provides a methodological framework for identifying and parsing apart eudaimonic
virtue ethics’ principal features. It also argues that these features are not just defining features of eudaimonic
virtue ethics; in fact, these features confer significant advantages compared to the other contemporary ethical
theories dominant in Western philosophy. Before examining these features in detail, though, it will be helpful
to compare eudaimonic virtue ethics to competing ethical theories. To do this, I will explain in detail each of
the five (arguably) advantageous features of eudaimonic virtue ethics introduced above.9

---

8 The translation of *eudaimonia* has been a subject of difficulty. Popular renditions include happiness, flourishing, and
well-being. Each translation has its own shortcomings. Happiness has been criticized for its subjective connotation, since
*eudaimonia* is taken to be an objective or external measure. Flourishing does have a more objectivist connotation, but its
reference to biology leads to worries that it doesn’t fully capture the uniquely human features. Well-being sounds too
clinical to some. In addition to its abstract noun form, *eudaimonia*, there is also an adjective form, *eudaimon*, e.g., a *eudaimon*
life. As Richard Kraut (2022, §2) explains, “The Greek term ‘eudaimon’ is composed of two parts: ‘eu’ means ‘well’ and
‘daimon’ means ‘divinity’ or ‘spirit’. To be *eudaimon* is therefore to be living in a way that is well-favored by a god. But
Aristotle… regards ‘eudaimon’ as a mere substitute for *eu zên* (‘living well’).” I generally use flourishing and well-being as
the English terms for *eudaimonia* throughout this dissertation. This is because these translations emphasize eudaimonia’s
objectivist connotation of describing a life “going well for” a person, above and beyond her subjective feelings or
psychological state of happiness. However, I also sometimes use happiness as the context requires.

9 I.e., agent-centeredness or aretaicism, psychological harmony, emotional and communal cultivation, casuistry, and
eudaimonism.
1.2 Virtue Ethics Compared to Other Contemporary Ethical Theories

Areataicism

Areataic ethical theories (which include virtue ethics, but also feminist ethics of care) can be contrasted with deontic theories. Such a comparison illuminates key differences between virtue ethics and the other popular normative ethical theories of deontology and utilitarianism. The former (areataic) theories focus on evaluating the ethical worth of agents. The latter (deontic) theories focus on evaluating actions based on concepts like duty and obligation. As Gryz glosses the distinction, deontic claims “serve in the prescriptive function of a moral code. This function consists in providing answers to questions like: What am I (morally) required to do? Answers to such questions usually have the grammatical form of an imperative.” (2011, 493)

By contrast, areataic claims “contain terms used for a moral evaluation of an action (or an actor). Such moral evaluation is not primarily intended to direct actions.” (Gryz 2011, 493) Sidgwick explains this distinction between deontic and areataic approaches as the choice between “either ‘good’ or ‘right’ as a fundamental ethical concept…. The first one [areataic] makes the agent and his motives the focus of moral considerations, the second one [deontic] ties moral value with obligations (or their satisfaction).” (Gryz 2011, 494; Sidgwick 1907) Or, as Alexander and Moore (2021) put it, deontic theories “guide and assess our choices of what we ought to do… in contrast to those that guide and assess what kind of person we are and should be (areataic theories).”

In other words, areataic claims (e.g., that someone is kind, brave, or honest) evaluate a person’s character. Thus, a primary difference between virtue ethics and other contemporary ethical theories lies in the theories’ focus for moral evaluation. Virtue ethics, as an areataic theory, takes agents and their characters as its moral content; deontic theories like utilitarianism and deontology take actions and the rules that dictate them as theirs.

---

10 For more on the distinction between areataic and deontic ethics, see also Sommers and Sommers (1989).

11 Similarly, Frankena distinguishes between “an ethics of duty, principle, or rule” and an ethics of virtue, the latter holding “morality should center on character, dispositions, virtues and vices, rather than on external conduct, rules, and oughts or ought nots… [and] on being a certain kind of person rather than doing certain sorts of things.” (1973, 21–22)
A related distinction is that, because the focus of ethical evaluation for aretaic theories is people and their characters, this evaluative framework can take into account a variety of aspects like an agent’s motivation, her appreciation of possible consequences, her sensitivity to morally relevant features of a situation, and her affective attitude. For example, the benevolent person doesn’t just act in a way that minimizes harm or follows a maxim that furthers others’ ends; she is motivated to act this way due to her character, which makes her enjoy acting benevolently and which includes an appreciation of what benevolence looks like in a particular context. It is not the act of benevolence itself, but the character that underlies it, that is morally praiseworthy. Without this affective content, the action is not virtuous.

So, a first feature of virtue ethics is that it is aretaic. Indeed, the word aretaic comes from the Greek word for virtue (or excellence), *aretē*. As noted, virtue ethical theories evaluate agents and character, and take good character traits—that is, virtues—as the starting point for ethics. Rather than asking herself whether her action follows a certain ethical principle or rule, a virtue ethicist asks what a good person or moral exemplar (*phronimos*) would do or is like, and aims to develop a good character. She aspires to be a morally admirable person, to be just, benevolent, honest, righteous etc., and to not only act according to what virtue requires but to have the right (virtuous) motivation, desires, and moral understanding or sensitivity.

As Begley (2005) explains,

> the paradigm person (excellent character, the person who exemplifies the virtues, excellences or attributes) represents, in virtue ethics, the core concept. In virtue ethics there is no cardinal principle such as duty or utility from which we can derive secondary moral rules. (Begley 2005, 624)

In short, then, aretaic theories make claims about the ethical value of character traits and dispositions, and so far as these theories evaluate or guide action they do so based on the underlying character. As Aristotle says, properly virtuous action must be action done out of a “firm and unchanging state,” i.e., a virtuous character (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a30). Actions are ethically right, for aretaic theories, on the basis of their connection to existing (good) character traits.

---

12 I use the 2019 Terence Irwin translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* ("NE") throughout the dissertation unless otherwise noted.
What exactly is a good character trait? Although this is discussed in more detail in §1.5, it is helpful to briefly sketch a definition here. To say that virtues are morally excellent character traits is to say that they are reliable dispositions to feel, think, notice, and act in morally excellent ways—for example, courageous, just, and temperate ways. As we have seen, aretaicism does not take actions (whether their outcomes or their maxims) alone as their moral content. Rather, not just the way an agent acts but the way she thinks, feels, and perceives her situation is morally relevant.

Virtues thus have motivational, rational, and behavioral components. Briefly, the motivational component of virtue requires that, for a person to be considered virtuous, she must desire to be virtuous or to do the right thing; that is, she must possess the proper attitude and emotions toward virtue. The rational component requires that she knowingly—and correctly—chooses to do the right thing for its own sake. (As we will see, though, what exactly it means to “know” what the right thing to do is varies significantly among both classical and contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethicists.) The behavioral component requires that the virtuous agent does what’s right out of a stable character. That is, virtues are robust, or well entrenched, such that, once possessed, they are generally stable over time and across disparate contexts (Fabiano 2021; Hursthouse 1999; Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018; Merritt 2000; Sorenson 2010; Van Norden 2007).

Moreover, because virtues are character traits, we can say that virtues have explanatory and predictive powers (Alfano 2013b, 236; see also Annas 2011; MacIntyre 2007; Nguyen and Crossan 2022; Sarkissian

---

13 Aristotle (trans. Irwin, 2019) discusses both “character” (aretai êthikai) and “intellectual” (aretai dianoëtiçai) virtues (NE, 1103a3–10, 1103b15–20). As Aristotle distinguishes them, intellectual virtues, like wisdom, comprehension, scientific knowledge, and prudence or practical wisdom (phronesis) are developed “mostly from teaching” and so need “experience and time” (NE, 1103a5, 1103b16). Character, or moral, virtues, like courage, generosity, or temperance, result from habit (ethos), which is why they are called “ethical” virtues. (NE, 1103b16). Another distinction between these two types of virtue is that character virtues are virtues of the non-rational part of the soul and aim, Aristotle argues, at means between excess and deficiency; intellectual virtues are virtues of the rational part of the soul and aim not at a mean but at the truth (NE, 1113b20–1139a20). Character virtues, moreover, are concerned with action and decision (NE, 1139a25), while the intellectual virtues, with the exception of phronesis, are not (NE, 114b10). Phronesis is unique among the intellectual virtues in that it is the intellectual virtue that allows us to deliberate well about human concerns and so is concerned with action; it is thus required for developing the character virtues (NE, 1141b10–25, 1144a30–35). Because I am concerned chiefly with character (or moral) virtues in this dissertation, it should be assumed that I am referring to these when I refer to virtue in an unqualified way.

14 Though, as we will see, “rational” can be understood in broader and narrower ways.
In short, then, virtues are (good) emotional, rational, and motivational attitudes or dispositions that have become a reliable part of an agent’s personality. An action is good, in a virtue ethics framework, iff it results from a virtue.

Deontic theories take the opposite approach: they take evaluation of actions as principal, and only evaluate character, agents, or motivations secondarily, so far as they reflect or promote actions done according to duty or the moral law (or not). Both utilitarianism and deontology are deontic theories. They each have an underlying principle that is used to evaluate the moral worth of actions, and both take individual choices or actions to be ethically primary (i.e., compared to agent or character). From a deontic perspective, ethics should be guided by rationally determined rules or principles, and the right (ethical) choice or action is one in accordance with those rules. We can say, then, that virtues or good character have instrumental moral worth from a deontic point of view, while actions or rules have instrumental value from a virtue ethical one.

A deontic argument against aretaicm holds that virtues or good character have moral worth only insofar as they generate morally good actions (or not). That is, proponents of deontic theories argue that there should be a higher level of moral evaluation that overrides any intrinsic value virtues may have; in other words, these theories have a mononomic understanding of moral value, such that moral evaluation is calculated along one axis (Louden 1984).

---

15 As MacIntyre puts it, “to identify certain actions as manifesting or failing to manifest a virtue or virtues is never only to evaluate; it is also to take the first step towards explaining why those actions rather than some others were performed” (2007, 199). And, as Sreenivasan further explains “we can understand a character trait to be a reliable disposition a person has to behave in certain characteristic ways” (2013, 291). Thus, to say someone possesses a virtue is to say that we can reliably predict they will behave in the relevant manner. For example, to say that a person is courageous is to say that we can reliably predict she will be “intrepid in facing a fine death” and “stand firm against… frightening things” (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, NE, 1115a30–b15). Moreover, a truly courageous act is not merely “in accord with” the virtue of courage but done “out of” her character trait of courage; her courage explains, and indeed causes, her courageous behavior (NE, 1105a25–1105b5, 1115a31). However, as we have seen, virtues not only predict or explain actions but also related affective attitudes, emotions, perceptions, or thoughts.

16 For example, the Greatest Happiness Principle is the basis of Mill’s classical utilitarianism, the Categorical Imperative for Kant’s deontology (Mill 2017, Utilitarianism; Kant, The Groundwork [2012] and Metaphysics of Morals [2017]).

17 Although, virtuous actions—i.e., actively performing the actions that virtue requires, rather than merely possessing the disposition to do so but not acting on it—are also important for the virtuous agent; see, e.g., NE 1098b30–1099a8. In this case, though, it is acting according to the virtues, not the action in isolation, that is valuable, so that the virtues themselves are still ethically primary.
Mill offers such an argument against aretaic theories in his *Utilitarianism*. He writes that,

Utilitarian moralists believe that actions and dispositions are virtuous only because they promote an end other than virtue; and that it is on this basis that we decide what is virtuous… According to the utilitarian ethics the object of virtue is to multiply happiness… They are also aware that a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and that actions which are blamable often proceed from qualities entitled to praise. When this is apparent in any particular case, it modifies their estimation, not certainly of the act, but of the agent. (2017, 934–935)

In other words, Mill is here arguing that virtue or good character is good insofar as it promotes another end, i.e., actions that promote happiness. And, because for his deontic theory the moral worth of an action is primary, he further argues that a morally good action need not be out of a morally good character. Rather, good character is good insofar as it is likely to produce good (happiness-maximizing) actions.

Although Mill and Kant are, of course, radically opposed when it comes to how one evaluates the moral worth of actions, the latter, German philosopher likewise argues that right action needn’t come out of laudable character traits. In Kant’s view, only actions that are done because they conform to the moral law are morally praiseworthy. Thus, for both Mill and Kant virtues may superficially or instrumentally lead to right actions—insofar as they may generate actions that conform to what universal moral principles demands—but these virtues are only valuable, if at all, based on the actions they produce. Again, this is because both Mill and Kant’s theories are deontic and so evaluate the moral worth of actions based on mononomic universal principles.

From a virtue ethical perspective, in contrast, moral guidance in these (and other) ethically fraught situations comes not from determining what the consequences will be or what maxims we are following in acting, but from considering what a virtuous agent would do (or by attending to a cultivated ethical sense borne out of one’s moral education in developing the virtues). And, to consider what a virtuous agent would do we must also consider what the virtues are. As Hursthouse puts it, “virtue ethics aims to provide a non-deontological specification of the virtuous agent via a specification of the virtues.” (1999, 29) So, depending

---

18 In his famous example of the happy and misanthropic philanthropists from the *Groundwork* 4:398 (trans. Gregor and Timmerman, 2012), Kant argues that a philanthropist who helps others out of duty (i.e., conformity with the moral law) has more moral worth than one who helps others because he has “a warm-hearted temperament” or finds “an inner satisfaction in spreading joy.”
on what one takes the virtues to be (and how one takes them to be developed), virtue ethicists can come up with their own action guidance based on these. For example, Aristotle might hold that the virtuous agent would act in this situation in a way that allows her to flourish by developing and practicing virtues in accordance with her rational human nature—which includes her nature as a social and communal animal. So, this would require developing, and acting in accordance with, virtues like justice and liberality or generosity (NE Books I, IV, and V). Note that, in contrast to deontic theories, virtue ethics is not mononomic—it recognizes multiple, irreducible virtues that ought to guide moral agents.

As Begley explains (drawing on Hursthouse 1999), “[v]irtues generate instructions such as ‘be honest’ and each vice generates a prohibition.” (2005, 628) In other words, that virtue ethics takes the virtues (and character in general) to be primary does not mean that it cannot generate an account of absolutely right and wrong actions; rather, right actions are those that a virtuous person would do. So: while virtue ethics can generate moral rules—e.g., be honest, do what justice requires, don’t be cowardly—these rules are always deeply responsive to the performing agent’s character and context. What being honest means, right here and now, is not something that can be determined without taking these kinds of considerations into account. This is necessarily the case due to virtue ethics’ convictions that the theory must be casuistic, and that the virtuous agent must also be practically wise (as we will see below).

And, as we will also see in relation to the “psychological harmony” desideratum, both contemporary virtue ethicists and psychologists have argued that a deontic focus on abstract reasoning or autonomously directed actions is psychologically implausible for humans; in other words, deontic (as opposed to aretaic) theories prescribe an approach to morality that is difficult if not impossible for humans to follow (see, e.g., Annas 1998; Slingerland 2011; Stocker 1976; Williams 1995). So, not only is the action-guidance of deontic theories less straightforward than it seems, the focus on abstract rules and codified ethical theories can be

---

19 I.e., in accordance with specific virtues, which themselves are specified based on an account of human nature or function (in a eudaimonic virtue ethics). But we will discuss this more later!
regarded as a negative feature of these theories. This is because such a focus obscures the reality of humans’ dependency and contingency, and in so doing grounds morality in a false universalism.

A famous criticism of deontic theories was raised by G.E.M. Anscombe, arguably the founder of contemporary virtue ethics. The revival of virtue ethics in contemporary circles is due in large part to Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy,” published in 1958. Anscombe famously argued that “all the best-known writers on ethics in modern times… appear to me to have faults as thinkers on the subject [of moral goodness] which makes it impossible to hope for any direct light on it from them.” (1958, 2) Anscombe’s evaluation led her to reject utilitarianism and deontology. And, although she did not explicitly advocate a return to virtue ethics, according to Anscombe virtue ethics avoids the overly calculating and universalizing approaches of deontological and consequentialist theories and accords more closely to our experience and intuitions about morality. For this reason, contemporary proponents of virtue ethics have taken her 1958 paper as a starting point for the theory’s resurgence. Further, proponents claim that virtue ethics’ grounding in empirical facts about human capacities and needs provides a fruitful normative foundation for ethics.

**Emotional Cultivation, Psychological Harmony, and Communal Moral Education**

Virtue ethics, according to its proponents, captures the way humans reason ethically more accurately than deontic theories do (that is, it better fits existing empirical evidence about human moral psychology and development). In particular, proponents of virtue ethics point to (a) the theory’s emphasis on the important role of emotions, desires, pleasure and pain in shaping our moral development; (b) the theory’s “psychological harmony” (Stocker 1976) in that, contra deontic theories, virtue ethics posits a harmony between an agent’s desires and moral motivation; and, (c) its acknowledgement of the importance of community, family, and in general sociality in shaping both moral development and obligations.

These claims have been developed and defended in various ways, including by both classical and contemporary virtue ethicists as well as psychologists. To explore virtue ethics’ purported psychological plausibility, though, it will first be helpful to see how virtue ethicists and psychologists argue that deontic theories are psychologically implausible.
Owen Flanagan argues that ethics ought to be committed to what he labels the “Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism,” (PMPR) such that the responsible moral theorist must “[m]ake sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal that the character, decision processing, and behavior prescribed are possible, or are perceived to be possible, for creatures like us.” (1993, 32) In short, this principle holds that a moral theory is only worthwhile if it prescribes moral development, character, or action that is possible for human agents to develop or perform. As Kant might put it (at a gloss), “ought implies can” (Kohl 2015). This is an important underlying principle for ethics because an ethical theory that is not possible for “creatures like us” to enact is useless in practice. Virtue ethicists have argued that deontic theories do not meet the PMPR.

For instance, Bernard Williams argues that “modern moral philosophy” (i.e., deontic theories as opposed to virtue ethics) is either too caught up in “unreflectively appealing to administrative ideas of rationality,” or, “in its more Kantian forms… is governed from a community of reason that is too far removed… from social and historical reality and from any concrete sense of a particular ethical life.” (1985, 197) As Julia Annas similarly writes, utilitarianism and deontology, the two most prominent deontic theories, “have been increasingly criticized for unrealistic and abstract approaches to moral questions, and for their inability to give a convincing account of moral character and the role in individuals’ moral thinking of a conception of their life as a whole.” (1998, 37)

20 Relatedly, and more recently, Slingerland has argued that “This so-called ‘virtue ethics’ model of moral self-cultivation differs in important respects from the deontological and utilitarian models that currently dominate modern Western ethical discourse that are based on a disembodied, rationalist model of the self. For instance, in a rule-based deontological approach, we have certain maxims, such as ‘It is wrong to lie.’ When presented with a situation, we can consult our definition of a ‘lie’ to determine whether act X in this given situation was or was not an instance of lying, and then once this is determined we can decide whether it was right or wrong depending on where this particular maxim is located in a hierarchy of maxims — for example, perhaps it is trumped by the maxim that we should strive to preserve life. If we are utilitarians, in any situation we should be able unproblematically to tally up the costs and benefits of proposed courses of action, do the math, and thereby figure out which course of action maximizes whatever good our brand of utilitarianism deems important (happiness, justice, gross national product, etc.). In either case, the entire process of moral reasoning is transparent and under our conscious control, and has nothing to do with the details of our embodiment, or with emotions, implicit skills, or unconscious habits.” (2011, 81)
This focus on abstract reasoning has made deontic theories the subject of criticism not only by virtue ethicists like Williams and Annas but by feminist philosophers, like Anderson, Willett, and Meyers (2021); Benson (2000); Held (2006); Okin (1989); and Walker (2008), who similarly point out that this notion of abstractable or universalizable moral rules obscures natural features of human life, like our dependency on others, and promotes a false, indeed discriminatory, universalism. As Anderson, Willett, and Meyers write:

Modern philosophy in the West championed the individual. Extending into contemporary moral and political thought is the idea that the self is a free, rational chooser and actor—an autonomous agent. Two views of the self dominate this milieu: a Kantian ethical subject and a utilitarian “homo economicus”... Both of these conceptions of the self minimize the personal and ethical import of unchosen circumstances, interpersonal relationships, and biosocial forces. They isolate the individual from its relationships and environment, as well as reinforcing a modern binary that divides the social sphere into autonomous agents and dependents.” (2021, 1)

This critique points out that deontic theories—with their focus on isolatable actions and universal moral rules—are predicated on the understanding of a moral self that is rational and independent, in a specific sense that precludes or denigrates reliance on others and which minimizes the moral impact of one’s community, culture, or social positioning. These theories, it is argued, focus on autonomy or moral agency as deriving from the notion of free, rational, and self-interested individuals, abstracted away from any ‘contingent’ or ‘hypothetical’ features of one’s identity like social position.

In other words, the starting point for moral agency or responsibility within the deontic tradition (including both deontology and utilitarianism) is that of an independent, basically free and autonomous subject. Thus, these ethical theories implicitly take up what feminist theorist Paul Benson calls a “real self” view, in which “persons are responsible when their actions are properly attributable to their ‘real selves,’ this being the case when persons are able to govern their wills on the basis of their valuation systems and to govern their actions on the basis of their wills.” (2000, 78) Against this view, feminist philosophers have argued that it is unrealistic and undesirable to posit the self, including one’s moral and rational development, as independent of social situation and relationships—like one’s gender, race, family, and friends. In short: the understanding of the self and moral agency put forward by deontic theories is not empirically plausible, as it
fails to capture the strong impact an agent’s society, family, emotions, and relationships have on her moral values and development.

Consider that from a deontic perspective good ethical reasoning requires that we set aside our emotions and situated perspective. Kant famously argues in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that morality should be based on categorical imperatives, whose “commanding authority owes nothing to any action-driver involving one’s interests.” (trans. Gregor and Timmerman, 2012, 31) While we are sometimes permitted, in Kant's deontology, to follow our own interests, this is only if following them also accords with the rationally determined categorical imperative.

Though Mill allows for the pursuit of happiness—which Kant dismisses as “hypothetical” or subjective and therefore an unacceptable basis for ethical laws (2012, 20)—the utilitarian thinker argues that “the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent’s own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.” (Mill, trans. Bennett, 2017, 12) Contemporary utilitarian Peter Singer has similarly argued that personal or situational features like emotions and proximity to or particular relationships with others “can make no real difference to our moral obligations,” which should instead be based on principles like “impartiality, universalizability, equality” (1972, 232–233). For both deontology and utilitarianism, then, an agent’s subjective feelings, her personal experiences, and her relationships should not serve as the basis for her ethical decision-making. Indeed, they should be disregarded to the fullest extent possible so that her actions can be guided by rational rules that she dispassionately follows.

**Emotional Cultivation**

Virtue ethics, by contrast, encourages agents to take their affective dispositions and character into account when determining what is ethically required. It does not insist that agents disregard their emotions, psychology, situation, or context to come to an ethical decision using reason alone. For virtue ethicists the emotions—far from being ideally disregarded—are the starting point of ethics. Both Mengzi and Aristotle—two foundational classical eudaimonic virtue ethicists—take emotions, affects, and natural dispositions to

For example, Aristotle (trans. Irwin, 2019) notes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the “mean” that is (in his view) the starting point for virtue is the mean “relative to us,” and that in determining this mean “we must examine what we ourselves drift into easily; for different people have different natural tendencies” (*NE*, 1107a15, 1109b1). He famously argues that temperance—the virtue of moderation with respect to bodily pleasures—looks different in practice for, e.g., sedentary people and elite athletes (*NE*, 1106a34–1106b8). That is, when deciding an appropriate amount to eat, or an appropriate exercise regimen, I must take into account both my natural capacities and my history and goals (e.g., of training). The same goes for determining what virtues like courage call for; if I know I am prone to rashness, or conversely to cowardice, the right response to fearful situations should reflect my emotional tendencies (*NE*, 1109a1–20). In other words, the virtuous agent must consider her psychology and starting dispositions, capacities, or strengths when determining what virtue requires.

As this example shows, Aristotle further holds that our emotions or passions themselves—like fear in the case of courage—are the starting point for developing virtues. As Myles Burnyeat explains it, “Aristotle… emphasizes the importance of beginnings and the gradual development of good habits of feeling,” and for Aristotle “morality comes in a sequence of stages with both cognitive and emotional dimensions.” (1980, 70–71) As we will see in the following chapter, the exact relationship between the “cognitive” and “emotional” aspects of morality has been the subject of some debate for Aristotelians. For now, the important point is that Aristotle regards the emotions and their cultivation as morally important.

Similarly, Mengzi argues that humans’ natural inclinations and emotions are the starting point for virtues, through his famous theory of the *sprouts* (duān, 端; this theory is discussed in more detail later). Mengzi holds that all humans are born with emotions, inclinations, dispositions, or tendencies that must be

---

21 However, as we will see in what follows of this dissertation, these two classical thinkers importantly differ on how the emotions ought to be cultivated to become virtues. I use Irwin’s 2019 translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Van Norden’s 2008 translation of the *Mengzi* throughout the dissertation, unless otherwise noted.
cultivated to become virtues. For example, he holds that humans’ natural tendency to dislike seeing others in pain is the starting point for developing the virtue of compassion, humanity, or benevolence (仁 (Mengzi 2008, 2A6). Aristotle and Mengzi, along with contemporary virtue ethicists, thus take the emotions seriously as providing content for developing morality.

This moral psychology and theory of moral development has the distinct advantage of being more psychologically plausible than deontic ones, since contemporary cognitive science and psychology research shows that humans tend to base ethical evaluations at least in large part on emotional content (Bloom 2013; Bollard 2018; Damasio 1994; De Caro, Vaccarezza, and Niccoli 2018; De Caro and Marraffa 2016; De Sousa 1990; Flanagan 1993; Haidt 1993; Helmuth 2001; Malti et al. 2013; Nadurak 2016; Slingerland 2011; Tappolet and Rossi 2015). Stephen Angle—drawing on Bryan Van Norden—explicitly argues that Mengzi’s moral theory accords with the PMPR. He writes:

Given what Van Norden labels as Mengzi’s “naturalism,” it is very likely that Mengzi (and Van Norden himself, for that matter) would accept Owen Flanagan’s principle of “minimal psychological realism” as a condition of adequacy on any ethical theory (Flanagan 1993). An assessment of Mengzian virtue ethics should take into account what we know about human psychological capabilities. In fact, we can go farther than Flanagan’s minimal constraint and suggest that an ethical theory that resonates strongly with the best current psychological research is a theory that we should take very seriously. (Angle 2009, 300)

Of course, Mengzi’s moral theory (like Aristotle’s) predates modern understandings of the brain and psychology. However, both thinkers—and indeed, proponents of eudaimonic virtue ethics generally—explicitly base their moral theory on what they take to empirically characterize human nature. And, for this reason, they take the emotions—themselves regarded as importantly characterizing human life and human nature—as an essential part of moral development.

As we have seen, this makes virtue ethics more empirically plausible than deontic theories, since contemporary understandings of humans’ psychology and moral development likewise emphasize the important role of emotions. As we will see, this is an advantageous feature of virtue ethics not only because it

---

22 Rosalind Hursthouse, for example, argues that “Aristotle, and thereby the Aristotelians, have an edge over Kant (and, indeed, Hume) with respect to the moral significance of the emotions.” (2001, 119)
is more empirically supported, but also because it allows for a kind of “psychological harmony” for virtuous agents.

**Psychological Harmony**

Michael Stocker (1976) has pointed out that modern deontic ethical theories (i.e., utilitarianism and deontology) focus on duties and obligations at the expense of motivation, and for this reason promote ethical theories that suggest what an agent wants or feels moved to do is irrelevant to the question of what she should do. As Stocker notes, this split between motive and values is required by deontic theories due to their conviction that the moral worth of an action is evaluated based on something external to the agent performing it—whether the act’s conformity to the moral law, or its consequences. Because of this disconnect between motivation and (moral) value, these modern ethical theories sometimes call us to act in ways that diminish our well-being or that run counter to our internal motivations and sentiments.

As Philippa Foot (2002) and Rosalind Hursthouse (2001) have pointed out, a particularly stark example of this psychological disharmony in deontic theories can be found in Kant’s misanthropic philanthropist. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant “contrasts a philanthropist who ‘takes pleasure in spreading happiness around him’ with one who acts out of respect for duty, saying that the actions of the latter but not the former have moral worth.” (Foot 2002, 13, quoting from Kant’s *Groundwork*, 4:398) Kant’s “happy philanthropist”, as Hursthouse (2001, 99) calls him, takes pleasure in doing what’s right. The “misanthropic philanthropist”, contrarily, must fight against his natural inclination in order to do what’s right, motivated “from duty” alone; according to Kant, only the latter’s action has “genuine moral worth.”

While much has been written on this apparently unintuitive example, the essential point here is that, for both utilitarians and deontologists, an action’s moral worth is evaluated based on its accordance with moral rules or duties. And, because the rules are external to the agent’s motivation, it is possible and indeed likely that what is good for the agent would require acting differently than would acting for the good *simpliciter*.

---

23 See Kant, *Groundwork* 4:398 for the full passage. As Hursthouse (2001) notes, another now famous example of this puzzle is framed as asking whether we would prefer to have a friend visit us at a hospital out of duty or out of friendship. This example was originally introduced by Michael Stocker (1976).
And so, reasons and motivation come apart: an ethical agent can easily have good reason to do the right thing, but not be motivated to do it. This, Stocker argues, leads to “either a stunted moral life or disharmony,” as “when we try to act on the theories, try to embody their reasons in our motives… things start going wrong. The personalities of loved ones get passed over for their effects, moral action becomes self-stultifying and self-defeating.” (1976, 466) By contrast, to say that someone is virtuous is to say (at least) that she both is motivated to do the right thing, that she has a positive or approving affective attitude toward doing the right thing (i.e., she desires to do it), and that she will reliably do it. This focus on the virtues, as Stocker has further argued, means that the virtuous person lives a “good life” characterized by “harmony between one’s motives and one’s reasons, values, justification.” (1976, 453) As we’ll see, this psychological harmony is even stronger for eudaimonic virtue ethical theories.

Virtue ethics—in contrast with deontic theories—acknowledges the importance of cultivating a good character and correct emotional attitudes. In fact, the theory makes these, not the actions that result from them, the central focus of ethical evaluation. This focus on the importance of emotional cultivation as part of becoming a good person, and the refusal to make ethics an impersonal rational exercise, have characterized virtue ethics since its classical origin. As Myles Burnyeat notes,

Intellectualism, a one-sided preoccupation with reason and reasoning, is a perennial failing in moral philosophy. The very subject of moral philosophy is sometimes defined or delimited as the study of moral reasoning, thereby excluding the greater part of what is important in the initial—and, I think, continuing—moral development of a person. Aristotle knew intellectualism in the form of Socrates’ doctrine that virtue is knowledge. He reacted by emphasizing the importance of beginnings and the gradual development of good habits of feeling.” (1980, 70)

Joel Kupperman further notes that “There is a line of thought, in both the Nicomachean Ethics and the [Confucian] Analects, that insists that true virtue require deeply internalizing virtuous impulses, so that virtue becomes second nature and a major source of satisfaction in life.” (2009, 245)

This conviction is retained by contemporary virtue ethicists. Julia Annas, for instance, writes that a virtuous person “does not perform virtuous actions impassively and with lack of concern. The virtuous person not only does the right thing for the right reason, she has the right feelings about it.” (2011, 66)

Similarly, Rosalind Hursthouse argues that “[t]he virtues (and vices) are all dispositions not only to act, but to
feel emotions, as reactions as well as impulses to action... [and, for] the person with the virtues, these emotions will be felt on the right occasions, towards the right people or objects, for the right reasons.” (1999, 108) In short, virtue ethics holds that to become a good person an agent must gradually develop not (only) good ethical reasoning in a straightforwardly deliberative sense but also the right emotional attitudes. Only by becoming the kind of person who enjoys doing the right thing—whose motivations and reasons are in harmony—can one become a virtuous person.

Communal Moral Education

One’s social positionality, family, and community are also regarded as important ingredients in moral development for virtue ethicists. We saw above, from Burnyeat, that Aristotle’s theory of moral development is one of “the gradual development of good habits of feeling.” (1980, 70) But how do our emotions, passions, or natural inclinations come to be shaped, cultivated, or trained such that they become virtues? An important part of moral development—for Aristotle as well as for other proponents of the EV—is communal.

Aristotle famously argues in the Nicomachean Ethics (NE) that “the complete good… is not what suffices for a solitary person by himself, living an isolated life, but what suffices also for parents, children, wife, and in general for friends and fellow-citizens, since a human being is a naturally political animal.” (trans. Irwin, 2019, 1097b7–10) In other words, Aristotle’s classical virtue ethics acknowledges that humans are social by nature, and that a flourishing (eudaimon) life is a communal one. Not only is happiness dependent on community—virtue is as well. Aristotle writes, e.g., that “what we do in our dealings with other people makes some of us just others, unjust.” (NE, 1103b15) Aristotle’s particular theory of moral development is through habituation, which is “an ongoing process of learning, which starts in childhood and continues all my life.” (Annas 2015, 3) As Annas goes on to explain, habituation needs experience and the ability to deal with experience in ways that intelligently appreciate what is worthwhile and what is not. This is what I first learn from parents, teachers and the wider culture, and then learn to understand and apply for myself. It is essentially practical: what we learn to do, we learn by doing it. So by the time I worry about whether I am generous enough, I’ve already learnt, by being brought up, to be generous to some degree. I have been habituated by what I have learned from my parents, my school, my surrounding culture. (2015, 3; but note that some other contemporary virtue ethicists might disagree about the degree or type of “intelligent appreciation” that is required—as we will see in Chapter 2)
In particular, Aristotle (trans. Irwin, 2019) emphasizes the important roles of parents, teachers, and government in helping to develop virtue. He writes that “the legislator makes the citizens good by habituating them… Correct habituation distinguishes a good political system from a bad one,” and that “[i]t is difficult… for someone to be trained correctly for virtue from his youth if he has not been brought up under correct laws.” (NE, 1103b1–10, 1179b31–33) And, he further argues that “[i]t is best that the community attends to upbringing, and attends to it correctly. But if the community neglects it, it seems fitting for each individual to promote the virtue of his children and his friends.” (NE, 1180a30)

As Annas, Kristjánsson, and other contemporary Aristotelians have noted, for Aristotle “[p]roper moral education is simply unthinkable outside of well-governed moral communities, offering systematic public education and providing citizens with the basic necessities they need to function well (MacIntyre 1981; Nussbaum 1990).” (Kristjánsson 2014, 58) Similarly, Mengzi emphasizes that moral development depends on a supportive community, including one’s family and government (Mengzi 2008, 1A7, 3A4).

As we saw above, feminist critics of deontic theories have emphasized the importance of taking the moral influence of our families, communities, and friends seriously (Anderson, Willett, and Meyers 2021; Held 2006; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Walker 2008). As Walker argues, “We are neither unfortunate enough to have to go it all alone in trying to find and keep an acceptable and vital moral order in our lives nor lucky enough to have the last word on whether we have succeeded.” (2008, 63)

Empirical research also supports the important role of our communities in moral formation. Michael Tomasello, for example, argues that human morality evolved as humans became more interdependent—as part of “new ecological circumstance that forced early humans into new modes of social interaction and organization”—and that the most successful, or “fit” in an evolutionary sense, humans in this early stage of human development were those who “recognized their interdependencies with others and acted accordingly, a kind of cooperative rationality” (2018, 3) In other words, Tomasello’s research suggests that morality cannot be divorced from humans’ interdependence and sociality. Similarly, Egelen et al. (2018) have pointed out that “prominent authors focusing on moral character education (e.g., Lickona, 1991; Wynne & Ryan, 1993) have
stressed the importance of moral role models” (347). So, virtue ethics’ insistence that persons develop morally as part of a community is a positive feature of the theory insofar as it is a more accurate theory of moral and psychosocial development.

Casuistry

Because of its focus on cultivating the right character traits (including the right affective states), rather than performing the right actions, virtue ethics is also casuistic. That is, rather than providing a principle that prescribes correct action, it suggests that the right action is the one that a virtuous person would take. And, virtue ethical theories note that this action is highly contextual, such that it is hard to determine ahead of time what it will be. Virtue ethics is therefore ill-suited for prescribing actions without reference to the characters involved and the full nuance of a given ethical lemma.

It is for this reason that virtue ethical theories have been criticized as being insufficiently action-guiding. As Kupperman notes, virtue ethics

treats choices as typically embedded in a pattern or path of life rather than presenting them (as both Kant and Mill do) atomistically, without reference to previous or future choices or to agents’ personal goals. Kantian and utilitarian ethics are often regarded as if they offer something like moral software, that (provided that a case at hand can be put in language compatible with the software) will give any component user moral advice. Virtue ethics… does not offer anything like moral software... [Virtue ethics’] longitudinal view sharply separates virtue ethics from much in contemporary philosophical ethics, especially the emphasis on dramatic cases (e.g., the trolley problem) that lend themselves to atomistic consideration. (2009, 250)

This quote highlights both positive and negative features of virtues ethics’ emphasis on context and casuistry. As we have already seen, virtue ethics is regarded by its proponents as more empirically plausible due to its recognition of the importance of both emotions and community in morality. Due to this recognition, virtue ethics does not evaluate actions’ moral worth without taking contextual features (including the acting agent’s character, motivation, psychology, and history) into account. Rather than evaluating an agent on the basis of her action, an action is evaluated on the basis of the performing agent. While virtue ethicists would hold that this makes the theory more accurate, this feature has also been a point of criticism from deontic theorists.

Ikbal Bozkaya writes, the “action-guidance objection states that virtue ethics cannot provide practical content in the form of a prescriptive and codified ethical theory since it is ‘structurally unable’ to do so;
therefore, it cannot guide us about what to do in a specific circumstance.” (2021, 290; see also Begley 2005)

As Bozkaya goes on to explain, this critique is “two-fold,” arguing both that (1) virtue ethics doesn’t provide a codified ethical theory and (2) that it does not provide action-guidance. Another way of thinking about this critique is that it holds virtue ethics to be “circular,” insofar as actions are right if they are what a virtuous agent would do, and an agent is virtuous if she reliably does what virtue calls for (Begley 2005; Hursthouse 1999; Peterson 1992).

Again, virtue ethics is aretaic, taking character traits rather than actions as normatively primary. For this reason, the critique that it is more difficult from a virtue ethics perspective to know what to do in a particular situation seems plausible. A deontologist can give a rule to follow (e.g., only act in such a way that you can will your maxim become universal law), as can a utilitarian (e.g., maximize pleasure and minimize pain) that, a proponent of one of these theories will argue, can tell an agent what she ought to do regardless of her character. A virtue ethicist, in contrast, can only say something like “act as a phronimos (practically wise agent) would,” or “act in a just, charitable, etc. way.” These prescriptions certainly seem harder to follow.

However, advocates of virtue ethics (and of other casuistic and aretaic theories, like care ethics) have replied that the supposed action-guidance of deontic theories is “illusory” (Held 2006, 20). Hursthouse responds to the critique of virtue ethics as insufficiently action-guiding by noting that

utilitarianism must specify what are to count as the best consequences, and deontology what is to count as a correct moral rule, producing a second premise, before any guidance is given. And, similarly, virtue ethics must specify who is to count as a virtuous agent. So far, the three are all in the same position. (1999, 28)

In other words, deontic and aretaic theories must both do further “work” in defining their starting points for moral evaluation to furnish specific moral guidance. Relying on a moral rule or mononomic understanding of moral value does not solve the problem of deciding what the right thing to do is.

In short, this critique points out that utilitarian calculus and reasoning about deontological rules both also admit of different applications and, indeed, seldom provide obvious and straight-forward solutions to complex moral problems. Examples of deontic theories being applied in counter-intuitive ways—for example, consequentialism generating a duty to kill in order to prevent worse harm, or deontology generating
a duty never to lie even to save a life—are rife in introductory ethics classes and the broader philosophy literature. Even if a proponent of deontic theories can reply that it’s the intuition that’s wrong in this case, not the theory, there are also examples of difficulty in the practicality of applying the theories themselves.

For example, Mill argues in *Utilitarianism* that

> According to the utilitarian ethics the object of virtue is to multiply happiness; for any person (except one in a thousand) it is only on exceptional occasions that he has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, i.e. to be a public benefactor; and it is only on these occasions that he is called upon to consider public utility; in every other case he needs to attend only to private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons. (trans. Bennett, 2017, 13)

However, with the advent of globalization, as Iris Marion Young (2004, 2006) has pointed out, each of our actions (and failures-to-act) is inextricably bound up with strangers around the world through complicated political and economic systems. Peter Singer (a utilitarian) has argued, for example, that any instance of not giving money we do not need in order to prevent suffering is morally wrong. He states:

> we ought to give money away, rather than spend it on clothes which we do not need to keep us warm. To do so is not charitable, or generous. Nor is it the kind of act which philosophers and theologians have called ‘supererogatory’—an act which it would be good to do, but not wrong not to do. On the contrary, we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so. (1972, 235)

As this example makes clear, Mill’s claim that “only on exceptional occasions” does an agent’s action have extended consequences is no longer tenable. In fact, everyday decisions like whether to buy a coffee (which I explain in my ethics classes costs about the same as a malaria net that may save lives) or what to eat for breakfast have far-reaching, and difficult to fathom, effects. And, as Young notes, deontologists are not absolved from similar complications.

Drawing on the work of Onora O’Neill (1996), Young points out that, in a deontologist framework in which we have an obligation not to use others as mere means, i.e., not to use them as means to pursue ends to which they do not or cannot consent,

> the scope of an agent’s moral obligation extends to all those whom the agent assumes in conducting his or her activity. Each of us acts according to interests and goals we set within the frame of specific institutions and practices, within which we know others act. Our actions are partly based on the actions of others, insofar as we depend on them to carry out certain tasks, and/or insofar as our general knowledge of what other people are doing enable us to formulate expectations and predictions about events and institutional outcomes that affect us or condition our actions. In today’s world of globalized markets, interdependent states, rapid and dense communication, the scope of the
actors we implicitly assume in many of our actions is often global. The social relations that connect us to others are not restricted to nation–state borders. Our actions are conditioned by and contribute to institutions that affect distant others, and their actions contribute to the operation of institutions that affect us. (2004, 371)

Even if we take an approach to ethics that evaluates the worth of our actions not on their consequences but on their maxims, we must (as Kant notes) include in the evaluation of these maxims the extent to which they respect the autonomy of other agents who are complicit in the action (Kant’s *Groundwork* 2012, 29–35).

And, because of the dubious possibility for genuine consent in the context of unequal and exploitative global labor conditions, the possibility of ascertaining whether we have violated others’ autonomy or humanity is also unclear (to say nothing of the general complication of knowing others’, or even our own, true maxims). Thus, utilitarian and deontological frameworks both run into complications when it comes to providing clear action guidance in a world in which both the consequences of our actions and the universalizability of our maxims are linked in ways beyond our knowledge to moral agents beyond our reach. Moreover, that virtue ethics does not provide a codified theory is seen by its proponents as an advantage of the theory.24 In short, eudaimonic virtue ethicists argue that “top-down” or deontic ethical theories, like deontology and utilitarianism, rely too much on abstract rules (see Annas 2011; McDowell 1979; Wong 2002).

We have already seen that one problem with deontic theories is that they are difficult to put into practice when we attempt to apply their rules to the sticky realities of contemporary global issues, taking into account the complicated ways that agents are bound up in relationships of power and privilege. That’s not the only problem with such an approach, however. Virtue ethicists (and care ethicists) also point out that characteristics of deontic theories are that they tend to hold “that the more abstract the reasoning about a moral problem the better,” and to reject particularity and casuistry in favor of rules that can be applied without reference to contingent, situational features. (Held 2005, 11) Not only are such theories unable to account for the realities of complex ethical issues, the critique goes, they also specifically denigrate as morally

---

24 Indeed, Aristotle—though of course predating deontology and utilitarianism—famously argues in *NE* Book I that “we should not make the same demand for an explanation in all cases” from ethics as we do from sciences like geometry. (trans. Irwin, 2019, 1098a30–b5)
irrelevant or unimportant those supposedly contingent features of one’s identity or situation that would make these problems visible. Besides, as we have seen, virtue ethics can provide action-guidance—including, e.g., prohibitions against cowardly or unjust action and obligations to act in generous or honest ways—through its insistence that right action is that which accords with the virtues and what a virtuous person would do (Begley 2005; Hursthouse 1999).

Another way that virtue ethics can guide action is through encouraging moral learners to “take counsel with exemplars” or “rely on embodied examples for moral guidance.” (Daly 2021, 571) As Daly notes, the impetus to look to, imitate, and learn from those we admire morally accords with contemporary empirical evidence about how humans actually develop (Daly 2021, 571–572; he cites developmental psychology and cognitive neuroscience evidence from Garrels 2006 and Han et al. 2017). The type of moral development and ethical reasoning emphasized by virtue ethics is thus more empirically plausible than reasoning through deontic rules. And, as Daly further notes, emulating moral exemplars is more than just aping their actions. Rather, virtue ethics emphasizes trying to develop the characteristics, or virtues, of those we admire. Doing so includes being appreciative of what those virtues look like in my particular situation, based on my individual psychology, needs, relationships, and context. So, virtue ethics emphasizes a kind of situational responsiveness and sensitivity to our environment that deontic theories do not.

In addition to emulating moral exemplars, virtue ethics can provide moral guidance through encouraging the development of these kinds of sensitivities and, as Annas puts it, “enlarging [one’s] conception of what the virtue in question is” as it applies in disparate situations. (2015, 5) This kind of “enlarging” is done through the processes of emotional and communal moral cultivation referenced above, for example through habituation for Aristotle. Annas writes that “virtue ethics (at least of the neo-Aristotelian type) is developmental. Acquiring the virtues is… an ongoing process of learning.” (2015, 7) As she explains,
other situations where she showed courage. She has developed courage or generosity through learning how to act, and to respond and feel, in other situations, but she now applies the virtue in the new, very different boardroom situation. (2015, 6)

Thus, as this quote suggests, virtue ethics emphasizes that a kind of sensitivity or understanding of one’s context—i.e., casuistry—is an important component of being moral. For this reason, as we’ll see below, virtue ethicists also emphasize that bound up with the virtues is a kind of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) by which the virtuous agent comes to understand or perceive what virtue calls for.

So: another positive feature of virtue ethics is that it captures the commonsense assumption that being a good person includes a kind of appreciation of, or wisdom about, the nuanced way to act as required by the particulars of one’s situation, history, and personality. Virtue ethicists therefore do not see the theory’s casuistry as a weakness, but rather as a strength. Finally, another tool in the virtue ethicist’s toolbox to guide action is through the conviction that virtues contribute to *eudaimonia*, or the flourishing of the virtuous agent.

**Eudaimonism**

Again, for eudaimonic virtue ethics an ethical life is not just good *simpliciter* but also good *for the agent* (Haybron 2010, 29). This view thus supports an especially strong version of the psychological harmony desideratum by positing a harmony between motivation (desire) and value (moral worth or justification) within the virtuous agent such that doing the right thing is always in the virtuous agent’s best interest (at least in the long run). As we’ll see later in this chapter, to achieve *eudaimonia* in the Classical Greek conception means to perform one’s human function, or characteristic human activities, excellently.

Eudaimonism is regarded as a major theoretical benefit by eudaimonic virtue ethics’ proponents due to the robust psychological harmony it posits for virtuous agents. As we saw above, Michael Stocker points out that modern ethical theories like utilitarianism and deontology “deal only with reasons, with values, with what justifies. They fail to examine motives and the motivational structures and constraints of ethical life.”

---

25 See also Ch. 8 in Haybron’s (2010) *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being*, “Well-Being and Virtue,” for a fuller (critical) account of Aristotelian eudaimonism. As Haybron points out, most people today ascribe to a subjectivism about happiness—in my view, the contemporary subjective and pluralistic connotation of happiness is good reason not to use happiness as the translation for eudaimonia.
(1979, 453) As we’ve seen, one problem with deontic theories, then, is that they posit a kind of disharmony between an agent’s desires, motivations, or inclinations and her moral reasoning. Because of this a deontologist or a utilitarian could also easily hold that what is morally justifiable, or even obligatory, need not align with what an agent wants to do or what is good for her.

Virtue ethics not only suggests that our emotions and inclinations provide important moral content—eudaimonistic virtue ethics, in particular, further argues that developing and practicing the virtues benefits the agent. As Annas points out, ancient eudaimonic virtue ethical theories “do not just discuss virtue; for them it is part of a theory the overarching concept in which is happiness [eudaimonia]. Virtue is seen as a means to, or a part of, or as constituting the whole of, happiness (depending on the theory).” (1998, 41) So, not only is the virtuous agent expected to develop and act in accordance with her nature, she also acts in a way that helps her flourish when she acts ethically.

Indeed, Hursthouse and Pettigrove claim that

The distinctive feature of eudaimonist versions of virtue ethics is that they define virtues in terms of their relationship to eudaimonia. A virtue is a trait that contributes to or is a constituent of eudaimonia and we ought to develop virtues, the eudaimonist claims, precisely because they contribute to eudaimonia. (2018, Section 2.1, “Eudaimonist Virtue Ethics”)

However, not all eudaimonic virtue ethicists would agree with this description of the theory. Although it is true, for eudaimonic virtue ethicists, that (i) developing the virtues contributes to eudaimonia, I think the more forceful claim, that (ii) we ought to develop virtues precisely because they contribute to eudaimonia, is doubtful depending on the understanding of eudaimonia endorsed. Should one endorse this second claim, she opens herself up to what has been called the “egoism critique.”

As Toner explains, the egoism critique holds of virtue ethics that it is (or endorses agents who are) self-centered. Eudaimonistic virtue ethics, the kind that models itself on classical and especially Aristotelian understandings of the moral life (such that the primary goal or final end of the agent is the good life of eudaimonia—happiness, well-being, or flourishing—and the virtues are those traits the possession and exercise of which contribute to and indeed largely constitute such a life), is subject to an especially virulent version of this objection—the charge that it is actually egoistic. This charge takes off from the very thing that makes eudaimonistic virtue ethics so attractive to many, the linking, or even identification, of the moral life with happiness or well-being. (2010, 275)
We have said that, for eudaimonists, virtue is both beneficial to the agent (eudaimonia-conducive) and beneficial in general. However, one way to respond to the egoism critique is to point out that we needn’t claim that eudaimonic virtue ethicists privilege the former aspect of virtue over the latter.

While it is true for the eudaimonist that virtuous activity is essential to eudaimonia, and correct moral action will thus contribute to an agent’s life being or becoming eudaimon, I don’t think we must attribute to eudaimonic virtue ethicists the stronger claim that virtues are good or choiceworthy because they benefit the agent. Indeed, because for virtue ethics a virtuous act is not one that merely “accords with” virtue—but rather it must be done “out of” virtue (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1105a30)—it seems that virtue ethics’ holistic, aretaic starting point for moral evaluation would straightforwardly rule out selfishly motivated “virtue” as really virtuous at all. In other words, the virtuous agent benefits from developing the virtues, but does not develop the virtues for this reason.

With this (more charitable) understanding of the connection between eudaimonia and virtue in mind, we can return to thinking of eudaimonism as “the very thing that makes eudaimonistic virtue ethics so attractive to many, the linking, or even identification, of the moral life with happiness or well-being” (Toner 2010, 275). As Toner further explains, while eudaimonia does connotate happiness, it also connotates well-being in an objectivist sense, or perfectionism. As Haybron similarly explains, eudaimonist theories maintain “that well-being consists, non-derivatively, at least partly in perfection: excellence or virtue—or, in the Aristotelian case, excellent or virtuous activity.” (Haybron 2008, 156)

In other words, developing and practicing the virtues benefits the agent in an objective sense—by helping her perfect herself or (as we’ll see in more detail below) perform her human function. Depending on what one regards well-being or perfectionism to consist in, one could argue that the eudaimon life is one that is other-regarding and thus that the eudaimon agent is one who develops virtues that serve others. In this way, eudaimonism can also help to provide action-guidance by tying the development and practice of the virtues to an objectivist, empirically informed understanding of human nature. As Bozkaya writes,

> Although it cannot, and more importantly would not, provide deontic rules or strictly codified principles, eudaimonistic virtue ethics’ essential insight lies in its ethical outlook that considers moral
As Bozkaya here suggests, the connection of right action to developing into an excellent person may not provide concrete action guidance (hence the need for looking for moral exemplars, developing sensitivity to what a situation requires, and employing practical wisdom). But, eudaimonism does provide guidance in helping us to continually work to practice and develop the virtues, so that in each ethical situation we are driven to act as we believe virtue requires. Thus, eudaimonia ties virtue (or morality) to an individual’s wellbeing without suggesting that agents have a selfish motivation for developing the virtues. In this way, eudaimonism is again a positive feature of (eudaimonic) virtue ethics insofar as it helps to explain how it benefits the virtuous agent by means of this “formal” egoism, without falling prey to the assumption that it is motivationally egoist (Toner 2010; see also Annas 2007; Hurka 2001; Snow 2020).

Another advantage of eudaimonism, as Lisa Tessman points out, is that it provides a useful way for conceptualizing the harms of oppression. She argues that from a eudaimonist lens “one might portray oppression as a set of barriers to flourishing and think about political resistance as a way of eradicating these barriers and enabling flourishing.” (2005, 3) In other words, tying well-being in an objectivist sense to moral development provides a strategy for articulating the harms of societal barriers to moral education (which as we’ve seen, requires a supportive community). As we will see in Chapter 3, though, virtue ethics’ insistence that our relationships and situation importantly shape one’s ability to develop morally and to flourish also motivates a powerful objection—that the theory makes morality largely a matter of ‘luck’, such that agents may fail to develop morally or to flourish for reasons outside of their control. Despite this objection, I believe that eudaimonic virtue ethics’ close connection between individual eudaimonia and the good simpliciter is an advantage over deontic theories (which, we have argued, are less empirically and psychologically plausible).

In this section, I have identified several advantages of virtue ethics compared to modern deontic ethical theories. First, virtue ethics’ aretaicism accords more closely with the way contemporary psychology suggests that humans reason ethically, and unlike deontic theories does not suggest that the virtuous agent
should set aside her emotions, social positionality, or interests in order to make the most ethical decision. Second, the theory’s acknowledgement of the importance of emotions, emotional cultivation, and one’s community in moral education also accords more closely with modern science.

Relatedly, because according to virtue ethics the virtuous agent enjoys doing the right thing and has cultivated not only the correct ethical reasoning but also the correct affective attitudes, virtue ethics avoids the “psychological disharmony” implied by deontic theories—according to virtue ethics, the virtuous person need not sacrifice her own happiness or act against her own interest in order to act ethically (Stocker 1976). And, the theory’s situational responsiveness or casuistry allows for more accurate and appropriate ethical judgements in real-world situations while again according more closely with how humans actually reason ethically. Moreover, contemporary virtue ethicists have argued that this acknowledgement of the importance of character and emotion in moral cultivation provides a better grounding for fighting oppression, and that it is more inclusive since—unlike deontic theories—it takes seriously family life and childhood.

A further advantage of some (that is, eudaimonic) virtue ethical theories, which is closely related to the points about emotional cultivation and psychological harmony, is their grounding in human nature and the connected eudaimonism. Eudaimonic virtue ethics, as we have briefly discussed here, holds that cultivating and practicing the virtues contributes to happiness or flourishing in an objectivist sense. As we will see, one further advantage of eudaimonic virtue ethics is its purportedly empirical grounding for ethics. Before we discuss the advantages of eudaimonism in detail, however, we should understand what it means for a virtue ethical theory to be eudaimonic. To do this, it will be helpful to explore the theory’s classical origins.

But first, let’s get clear on the motivation and aims of the dissertation.

1.3 Motivation and Research Questions

Project of the Dissertation

Aristotle is not the only classical eudaimonic virtue ethicist—Mengzi (or Mencius), a Confucian Chinese thinker, provides another version of what I am calling the EV, the Eudaimonic View of virtue. As we will see in more detail below, the EV captures the four core claims to which eudaimonic virtue ethical
theories are committed: (i) virtues, in the sense of excellent character traits or dispositions are the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., aretaicism); (ii) virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., eudaimonism); (iii) virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function or fulfilling human nature (i.e., naturalism); and (iv) practical wisdom or *phronesis*, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue. The EV is thus broad enough to include classical and contemporary virtue ethical theories from multiple traditions, yet also contains falsifiable premises that can be used to check a given theory’s adherence.

Mengzi’s version of the EV, I argue, is more resilient than that of Aristotle and his Western inheritors. Indeed, despite its popularity, virtue ethics has been subject to strong criticisms since its resurgence. The most trenchant have come from disability theorists, feminists, and empirical psychologists. The primary question my dissertation aims to answer is: how might eudaimonic virtue ethics be reimagined to respond to contemporary criticisms from disability scholars, feminists, and empirical psychology? To answer this, my dissertation identifies the core claims of the EV, reveals the relationship between these criticisms and the EV’s core claims, and proposes a Mengzian adaptation of the EV in response to these criticisms.

For the EV, reason and emotions are both pivotal parts of virtue. However, there is disagreement among contemporary and historical virtue ethicists about what specific roles reason and emotion play—whether for Aristotle (the founder of the Western eudaimonic virtue ethics tradition) or in virtue ethical theory more broadly. Thus, as I show in Chapter 2, the EV can be divided into (broadly) rational and emotional versions. I further show that much of the criticism levied at the EV, especially from disability and feminist scholars, has focused on a critique of Aristotelian understandings of human nature and the related function argument—according to which human nature is distinguished primarily by its rationality—as well as his understanding of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). From psychologists, the criticisms generally center on the empirical plausibility of both a universal human nature and robust character traits. In Chapter 3, I critically evaluate contemporary EV-based accounts (the rational EV-R and emotional EV-E) in light of critiques from
disability scholars, feminists, and psychologists, revealing rational versions’ comparative vulnerability to the first two avenues of critique and emotional versions’ susceptibility to the third.

In contrast to Aristotelian virtue ethics, which defines human nature through rational activity (NE, 1097b22–1098a20), we will see that Mengzi defines human nature through its potential for moral goodness; moreover, his moral psychology does not contain a rigid rational-emotional divide. This helps the Mengzian version of the EV evade criticisms from feminist and disability perspectives, which primarily critique the Western EV’s rationalistic conception of human nature. Additionally, the Confucian tradition’s emphasis on the interdependence of society and individuals—through its focus on rituals and social roles—provides an avenue of response to the situationist or empirical psychology critique. I will conclude the dissertation by arguing that Mengzian virtue ethics thus serves as a resilient foundation for an improved EV.

Aims

This dissertation has three key aims. These aims are, first, to provide a description and definition of the Eudaimonic View of virtue, or EV, which identifies the principal commitments of contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics and these claims’ relationships with each other. I do this in §1.5 of this chapter, below. Second, the dissertation aims to critically evaluate contemporary accounts adhering to the EV in light of both their strengths compared to other contemporary ethical theories and recent criticisms from disability theorists, feminist philosophers, and psychologists. As part of this critical evaluation, I show (in Chapter 2) that the EV can be roughly divided into comparatively “rational” and “emotional” versions and that these two strands can be traced through the history of Western philosophy and among contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethicists. In Chapter 3, I show the EV’s vulnerability to the three critical camps, including the disparate vulnerability of the emotional EV (EV-E) and rational EV (EV-R).

The dissertation’s third and final aim is to investigate how a contemporary Mengzian version of the EV can fruitfully respond to these criticisms and thus provide an alternate, more resilient, grounding for contemporary virtue ethics. This is the subject of Chapters 4 and 5. Relatedly, in the conclusion (Chapter 6) I explore some implications and applications to the EV-M, Mengzi’s improved EV. Each of these aims shares a
common goal: understanding, critiquing, expanding upon, and improving the eudaimonic virtue ethical tradition as it has been transmitted from classical virtue ethicists and taken up by contemporary thinkers.

Contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethicists have claimed that the five features discussed above (aretaicism, psychological harmony, emotional and communal moral cultivation, casuistry, and eudaimonism) make the theory superior to other normative theories in several ways. As I will show, each of these advantages of eudaimonic virtue ethics theory can be linked to four central features of the Eudaimonic View. These features are evident in both classical and contemporary takes on eudaimonic virtue ethics.

In fact, I argue that these features—aretaicism, eudaimonism, naturalism, and practical wisdom—form the core of what I call the “Eudaimonic View” (EV) of virtue ethics. While I do not claim that any theory that does not retain all four features must not be considered a eudaimonic virtue ethical theory, the fewer of these features that a theory retains, the less it resembles a eudaimonic virtue ethical theory. It’s an open question whether a theory that lacks a few of these features could properly be described as a eudaimonic virtue ethical one (and I suspect it could not). One advantage of the EV is that it is a “thin” conception of eudaimonic virtue ethics, such that many different eudaimonic virtue ethical theories can be explained and compared with reference to its claims. At the same time, its features are substantive enough to rule out some ethical theories as fitting under the EV framework. The EV’s features, the advantages they bring to the theory, and their relationship to each other are described in detail later in this chapter. And, as we will see, these characteristics have negative as well as positive aspects. But this is getting ahead of ourselves.

The first core feature of eudaimonic virtue ethics—the centering of virtues, understood as character traits, as the starting point for ethics—implies the first three advantages of the theory: its aretaicism, the close connection it draws between ethical reasoning and agents’ personality, motives, and emotions, and its emphasis on the importance of emotional cultivation and communal moral education. The next two core

---

26 Again, these are: its conviction that the virtues, conceived of as character traits, are the starting point for ethics (i.e., aretaicism); the claim that virtue is at least partially constitutive of human flourishing or well-being (eudaimonia); its grounding in human nature or function (naturalism); and the importance assigned to “practical wisdom” (phronesis) in moral judgement.
features—eudaimonism and naturalism—correspond to the eudaimonism advantage, while also providing further support for the psychological harmony desideratum. Finally, the fourth feature, the theory’s emphasis on *phronesis* or practical wisdom, helps to ground its emphasis on situational responsiveness or casuistry.

I hope to show that the core EV is worth retaining, despite strong criticisms of some of the transmitted Aristotelian versions of this view (which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter). I argue that many contemporary neo-Aristotelian or eudaimonic virtue theories, though in some ways successful at responding to these criticisms, in other ways reinforce problematic norms. Although contemporary eudaimonists have improved upon the classically transmitted view in significant ways, I further argue that these contemporary theories could benefit from incorporating a more Mengzian view—one which is similarly modernized and improved from its classical version.

**A Hermeneutical Aside**

In his *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, Bryan Van Norden provides an important discussion of two hermeneutic methodologies which, borrowing from Paul Ricoeur (1970), he labels hermeneutics of “restoration” and “suspicion.” He writes:

When employing a hermeneutic of suspicion, one seeks to understand a text by finding ulterior motives or causes for the composition of the text that are unrelated to any justification for the truth claims made by the text. Such a hermeneutic tries to “unmask” the pretensions of the text to truth and to get at its “real motives.”… In other words, [for those employing a hermeneutic of suspicion] texts lie, and the hermeneutic of suspicion seeks to figure out why they lie. Generally, those who practice a hermeneutic of suspicion hold that authors are not themselves conscious of the true causes or motives that underlie the production of their texts… In contrast, a hermeneutic of restoration is based on the expectation (or “faith” as Ricoeur also calls it) that the text addresses me, because language “is not so much spoken by men as spoken to men.” The text may be mistaken, but it does not “lie.” The task of interpretation is to hear the message. Again, the message sought is only a message as I hear it now in my context, and even then it need not be a univocal message, but it is still a message, whose claim to truth challenges me and my view of the world, whatever that may be. (Van Norden 2007, 4–5)

Van Norden further clarifies the distinction between a hermeneutic of restoration and suspicion as identifying the *justification* and the *cause* of a belief, respectively (2007, 5–6). Those employing a hermeneutic of restoration look for reasons to believe an argument, even if they ultimately find those reasons to be lacking. On the other
hand, those employing a hermeneutic of suspicion seek to find ulterior motives to explain why an author might take up an ultimately unjustifiable—often self-serving and *status quo*-affirming—argument.

In this dissertation, I take a middle way between these two hermeneutics and ultimately apply both methods. Like Van Norden, I endorse a methodological pluralism regarding these hermeneutic approaches, and see the value of reading Classical texts—and their contemporary progeny—with both suspicion and charity. I aim to be charitable to both virtue ethics traditions (Aristotelian and Mengzian) with which I engage, and to identify positive aspects of each. However, I also acknowledge that implicit bias and uncritical acceptance of the Classical philosophers’ cultural norms does, at times, weaken the universal applicability of their philosophies. Acknowledging the bias or injustice that colors classical theories and—I will argue—their more contemporary versions need not entail dismissing these theories offhand. It can, though, help to reveal paths forward that illuminate and combat these problem while retaining the aspects of these theories that have value and relevance to contemporary people and societies.

Relatedly, it is important to note—as Eric Hutton has pointed out—that there are two ways of employing virtue ethics: as an ethical theory, and as an interpretive framework for understanding the ethical views of past thinkers. When philosophers propose excluding Aristotle or including Hume and others as virtue ethicists, they are treating virtue ethics as an interpretive framework and are arguing over its applicability or inapplicability to particular cases. In contrast, when philosophers develop non-Aristotelian and non-Humean forms of virtue ethics, they are not (or not primarily) engaged in acts of textual interpretation, but are rather proposing new ethical theories in their own right. (2015, 334)

I will be using virtue ethics as an interpretive framework insofar as I consider Aristotle and Mengzi as classical virtue ethicists, but I also aim to treat it as a theory—not necessarily as a single unitary ethical theory, but as an ethical approach that can be “thinly” characterized by the four features of the EV I propose. As Hutton goes on to note, these “two activities of textual interpretation and ethical theorizing need not be completely separated.” (2015, 334–335). Since I am concerned with contemporary eudaimonic (or neo-Aristotelian) virtue ethics, those contemporary virtue ethical theories with which I engage have much in common with the classical Aristotelian version.
Moreover, we should be mindful that, as Hutton points out, “showing that a given text can be read as presenting a form of virtue ethics will not amount to showing that this form of virtue ethics is the best or even only form of virtue ethics (or ethical theory generally) with which to interpret the text.” (2015, 341) Therefore, though I do argue that Mengzi can be read as a eudaimonic virtue ethicist, I do not claim that other interpretations of his philosophy—e.g., as a type of “role ethics” (Ames 2011; Neville 2014; Nuyen 2007; Rosemont and Ames 2016) are necessarily wrong or useless. As will be discussed in detail later in this dissertation, there is much to be gained from also considering Mengzi’s important philosophical differences from eudaimonic virtue ethics as it has been commonly understood in the Western tradition.

Nevertheless, I agree with Van Norden and others (Angle 2009; Dahlsgaard, Peterson, Seligman 2005; Ivanhoe 2000, 2013; Liao and Lambert 2011; Mi and Slote 2015; Sarkissian 2010a; Sim 2007; Van Norden 2007, 2013, 2019; Wong 2024; Yearley 1990; Yu 2007) that Confucianism can be properly regarded as a type of virtue ethics. Van Norden (2007), drawing on Nussbaum (1988), argues that we can distinguish between “thick” and “thin” concepts, including cross-cultural and ethical ones like virtue (Van Norden 2007, 16–17). For a given concept, Van Norden writes,

We can give a ‘thin’ description, which has little theoretical content and which can be shared by a broad range of discussants who might disagree significantly over many other matters. One might think of the thin description as simply ‘fixing’ the topic of disagreement between participants in a discussion. In contrast, a ‘thick’ description is the detailed account given by a particular participant in the discussion and framed in terms of the distinctive concepts and commitments of that participant. For example, we might give a thin description of the Sun as ‘the large bright thing in the sky during the day that illuminates the Earth when it is not too cloudy.’ One corresponding thick account (that of Hesiod) would be that the Sun is a god. Yet another thick account (that of Anaxagoras) is that the Sun is a hot stone. One Chinese account (that of the Huainanzi 淮南子) is that the Sun is the quintessence (jīng 精)of the qi 氣 of fire. Our own thick account is that the Sun is a mass of fusing hydrogen and helium. It seems obvious that these are competing accounts of the same thing. Using both thick and thin descriptions allows us to describe how this is so. If we acknowledge the thick accounts but deny that there is any corresponding thin account, then it seems that the accounts we have given do not really disagree since they are talking about different things. (2007, 17)

---

27 As Van Norden notes, the “thick” and “thin” distinction was also applied, influentially and earlier, by Gilbert Ryle (1971), Clifford Geertz (1973), and Bernard Williams (1985).
Following Van Norden and Nussbaum, we can apply this thick/thin concept to the idea of virtue; in this way, we can acknowledge that the Confucian and Aristotelian traditions differ substantially in their thick notions of virtue, while maintaining that both are still types of virtue ethics.\(^{28}\)

I do not aim, here, to suggest that an integration of Mengzian virtue ethics into contemporary virtue ethics discussion will be sufficient to dismiss all the criticisms of this tradition; nor do I contend that my own view is superior to that of other contemporary virtue ethicists working primarily in the Western tradition. Rather, I hope to show that insights gleaned from Mengzi’s virtue ethics offer one alternate method of approaching and responding to these contemporary criticisms. Just as contemporary virtue ethicists have offered several avenues of tweaking virtue ethics to respond to counterpoints, new ethical theories and positions, and advances in science, I aim to address these problems with my own, Mengzi-inspired strategy.

My strategy is useful and innovative for a number of reasons. First, revealing the important ethical insights of Mengzi’s Classical Confucian philosophy is valuable for the sake of broadening and decolonizing our philosophical methods. Second, as we will see in Chapter 2 through 4, Mengzi’s conception of human nature and moral psychology avoids pitfalls that have plagued the Western virtue ethics tradition, insofar as the latter is prefaced on an empirically implausible understanding of the mind or soul as divided into rational and emotional or affective parts. This faulty understanding is a large reason for Western virtue ethics’ vulnerability to contemporary critiques.

---

\(^{28}\) As Van Norden further writes, “We can see how the thick/thin distinction applies to ethics by considering the virtue of humility. A thin description of humility would be that it is the stable disposition to have an appropriate attitude toward one’s own worth as a person, as well as having the feelings and reactions that fit with that attitude. One might argue that anyone who has any attitude toward humility at all (whether they have a specific word for it or not) could share this characterization of what it is about. However, different thinkers will give different thick accounts of what it is to actually have this attitude. For example, Aristotle speaks of the person who is *megalopsychus,* ‘great-souled.’ The great-souled person is very virtuous, and correspondingly has a high opinion of himself; he thinks that he deserves social esteem and the praise of others. In contrast, Christians emphasize a subordination of one’s will to God and a recognition of one’s own ethical frailty and dependence on the transforming Grace of God… Ancient Ruists [Confucians] stress deference: to the sages of antiquity, to tradition, to classical texts, to parents and elders, and to legitimate social superiors (wise teachers, virtuous rulers, etc.)… and thought that genuine humility requires a sort of false consciousness in which one underestimates one’s own worth… Clearly, there is substantial disagreement here. However, I hope it is also clear that Aristotelians, traditional Christians, contemporary Americans, and Ruists can all be said to be concerned with ‘humility’ in the thin sense.” (Van Norden 2007, 19–20)
Third, I argue (in Chapter 5) that the Confucian account of the normative character of social roles and rituals help furnish a tool for thinking through moral agency and development as importantly relational and socially constructed, yet predicted on human nature and flourishing. These features of Mengzi’s EV make it a fruitful resource for addressing complex ethical and social-political problems in more nuanced and responsive way than Western versions. Before we get to these points, though, let’s look at the classical origins and shared features of the Eudaimonic View (EV).

1.4 Virtue Ethics’ Classical Background

Virtue ethics has its origin, in Western philosophy, in Plato and Aristotle and, in East Asia, in Kongzi (Confucius) and Mengzi (Mencius).29 Of these thinkers, Confucius (ca. 551–479 BCE) was the earliest, followed by Plato (ca. 428–348 BCE), Aristotle (ca. 384–322 BCE) and Mengzi (ca. 372–289 BCE) were roughly contemporaneous. The theory is thus thousands of years old, and profoundly influential in classical and medieval thought both in Europe and Asia. Although this dissertation is not primarily a work in the history of philosophy, examining the classical origins of virtue ethics and the theory’s transmission through history can help us trace the origins and development of concepts still important to eudaimonic virtue ethics today. This, in turn, is important for understanding the extent to which contemporary theories can be “tweaked” while retaining the core features that make them count as eudaimonic virtue ethical theories.

Moreover, understanding the classical origin and historical development of virtue ethics will help to highlight the differences between the Greek and East Asian virtue ethics traditions. (More discussion of Mengzi’s historical context can also be found in Chapter 4.) I hope to show in the course of this dissertation that one major difference between these traditions is their moral psychology; in particular, their general

---

29 Kongzi and Mengzi are Romanizations of these thinkers’ names as they would be represented in the modern Pinyin Romanization scheme for Chinese words. The names in parenthesis are Latinizations which were given to Kongzi and Mengzi by Jesuit scholars who introduced their works to Western thinkers. In this paper, I will refer to these thinkers as Confucius and Mengzi. While I believe it is more appropriate to refer to these thinkers by their Chinese names—hence my use of Mengzi rather than Mencius—Confucius is much more familiar to non-Chinese audiences; so, I use Confucius rather than Kongzi. Socrates can also be considered a founder of virtue ethics in the Western tradition, but I do not focus on his theory in this dissertation because he left no written work, and so it is difficult to parse out the views of the historical Socrates (as opposed, for example, to the character of Socrates as depicted in Plato’s work).
understandings of the mind or soul and of human nature, what the virtues are and how they are cultivated, and the extent to which rationality serves as a controlling or guiding force for the emotions.

**Pre-Socratic and Pre-Confucian Proto-Virtue Ethics**

The Classical Greek period during which Aristotle—and his predecessors and primary influences, Socrates and Plato—wrote was characterized by the flourishing of autonomous city-states, including Athens, and spans the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. It was during this time that virtue ethics as we understand it (at least in the West) appeared (Adkins 1960; Kamtekar 2013; MacIntyre 2007; Porter 2013).

However, before the appearance of virtue ethics as a systemized theory virtue (aretē) and the soul (psuchē) already existed as important Greek concepts (Adkins 1960; Cairns 2014; Laks 2018). These foundational ideas of the EV thus predate Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—though in the pre-Socratic period these two important concepts had a markedly different meaning than in Classical Greece (as we will see).

In particular, Homer provides the beginnings of Plato’s—and later Aristotle’s—division of the soul into parts as well as the culturally dominant understanding of virtue to which these later philosophers respond. Heraclitus, in turn, provides the beginnings of understanding souls as better or worse, including the judgment that better souls are those that are more rational. Thus, these two pre-Socratic thinkers provide the basis for later, Classical Greek understandings of the soul and its connection to both rationality and virtue. In particular, we will see in Chapter 2 that a rationalist reading of the EV (the EV-R) takes for granted that the soul is divided into rational and emotional parts, and that the virtuous agent is he whose rational part is in control. Homer and Heraclitus therefore provide the foundational ingredients for a rationalistic reading of the Aristotelian tradition. As we will further see later in the dissertation, the EV-R is vulnerable to powerful critiques due to this inherited rationalism. But this is getting ahead of ourselves! Although the pre-Socratics predate virtue ethics, the notion of virtue (aretē) more broadly underwent significant changes during this time. It is against the background of virtue as understood by the Pre-Socratics that we must understand Socrates’s, Plato’s, and Aristotle’s use and development of the concept.
Classicists, historians, and philosophers have noted that *areté* is perhaps better translated as “excellence” than “virtue,” at least when it comes to Pre-Socratic or “heroic” Greek society (Adkins 1960; Annas 1995, 129-31; 1998, 41; MacIntyre 2007, 122). This is because, as this word was used prior to the Classical Greek period, it does not necessarily suggest a moral (normative) judgment (Adkins 1960; Annas 1998). Rather, as Adkins notes, *areté* and its adjectival form *agathos* “[b]eing the most powerful words of commendation used of a man… imply the possession by anyone to whom they are applied of all the qualities most highly valued at any time by Greek society.” (1960, 31)

As Porter (2013) points out, though, “[b]eginning in Athenian society in about the fifth century BCE, the virtues which developed in the warlike society of archaic Greece were gradually transformed into virtues more appropriate to a settled, urban existence.” (71–72) Annas further argues that by Aristotle’s time *areté* had taken on a ‘moral’ meaning, even though he lacked “word or concept closely corresponding to moral” in the contemporary English sense. (1995, 121; see also Anscombe 1958, 1) Thus, the word that was later

---

30 Broadie and Rowe also maintain the translation of *areté* as excellence in their 2002 translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, because virtue is the more standard translation, and because I agree with Annas (1995, 1998) that *areté* is used by Classical Greek thinkers onward in a normative sense, I translate it as virtue throughout this dissertation.

31 Annas argues that: “if we ask what the point is of distinguishing moral from non-moral reasons, we find… that moral reasons have a special place in our deliberations. Suppose I consider an action in terms of how much it would cost me, how long it would take, and so on. Then I find out that it is cowardly. This is not just another consideration to be taken into account and weighed against the others. If I understand what cowardice is, this reason simply stops the deliberation; this kind of reason does not outweigh, but overrides or in some theories, ‘silences’ the other kinds. Of course I may do it anyway; to understand what morality requires is one thing, to do it another. The point is rather that to consider this fact, of cowardice, as though it were merely another reason like the others, possibly to be outweighed by profit-making, is to misconceive what cowardice is. Moral reasons are special just because of this role they have in our deliberations: they override other kinds of reason just because of the kind of reason that they are. But now we have found similarity rather than difference with ancient virtue ethics. For all ancient theories think exactly the same way about the fact that the action is cowardly: this is a consideration which is not just weighed up against the profit and time expended, but which sweeps them aside; and to think otherwise is to misconstrue what cowardice is… [and, she says.] Aristotle also describes virtuous action in ways which bring it close to other modern characterizations of what is done for a moral reason. The virtuous person does the virtuous action for its own sake, and because it is *kalon*, ‘fine’ or ‘noble’. The *kalon* is the aim of virtue… The virtuous action is thus done for its own sake, without ulterior motive, as is supposed to be true of an action done for a moral reason. And it is done with the *kalon* as its aim, rather than benefit or pleasure, which are the other characteristic human aims. Thus Aristotle recognizes that the virtuous person does the virtuous act for its own sake, and, further, that when she so acts she is motivated in a distinctive way. Once again we seem to have agreement with the demands of modern morality rather than conflict, since moral reasons are commonly taken to have just these features: to act for a moral reason is to do the action for its own sake and not for any further motive, and it also involves a distinct kind of motivation.” (1995, 121–123)
translated as virtue (and used by Classical Greeks in the normative sense this translation implies) was, in Homer’s time, used to identify at least some qualities that later Greeks—not to mention contemporary ethicists—would not think of as ethically praiseworthy, but which were valued in Pre-Socratic Greek culture (Annas 1995, 1998). Similarly, the Classical Chinese word that is most commonly translated as Virtue, De (dé 德), evolved from connotating a charismatic power (that may be good or bad) to connotating the morally admirable power of a moral exemplar by Confucius’s day.

Let’s consider Plato and Aristotle’s virtue ethics next. As we will explore in detail below, both thinkers can be regarded as eudaimonic virtue ethicists. As Parry and Thorsrud explain, “For ancient [Greek] philosophers eudaimonia… means not so much feeling a certain way, or feeling a certain way about how one’s life as a whole is going, but rather carrying out certain activities or functioning in a certain way.” (2014) Although sometimes translated as happiness, eudaimonia is not a subjective state as the modern understanding of happiness connotes. Rather, it is an objective standard and, indeed, both Plato and Aristotle hold that someone can be wrong about whether her life is eudaimon.

In particular (as we’ll see), to achieve eudaimonia means to perform one’s human function, or characteristic human activities, excellently—and this is where virtue comes in. Virtue in this tradition is what allows for the excellent performance of human function, and moral or character virtue (the type of virtue with which this dissertation is concerned) is thus thought of as a disposition or character that allows one to

---

32 It is on this basis that Friedrich Nietzsche argues that we can understand ancient Greek morality as “Plato versus Homer.” (1967, 154)

33 As Van Norden explains, “De, ‘Virtue,’ was originally the almost magical Power of the King that induced others to obey him without the need for the use of military force or other forms of violent coercion.” (2007, 67; see also Yu 2007, 3) However, “the possession of de had come by [Confucius’s] time to be associated with qualities that are recognizably virtues.” (Van Norden 2007, 67; see also Confucius 2013, 12.10; Mengzi 2008, 2A3, 7B10)

34 E.g., Glauccon argues in the Republic that the best life is “to do injustice without paying the penalty,” and that “[t]his is what anyone’s nature naturally pursues as good, but nature is forced by law into the perversion of treating fairness with respect.” (Plato, trans. Hutchinson, 1997, Republic, Book I, 351e–359d) In short, Glauccon would say a life is eudaimon, going well, for someone who lives viciously but is not punished for it. The rest of the book, including the introduction of the tripartite soul discussed below, is designed to counter this argument. Aristotle similarly engages with this idea—that one can be mistaken about the best kind of life—in Book I of the Nicomachean Ethics, in which he argues that most people incorrectly believe happiness, or eudaimonia, to consist in pleasure (trans. Irwin, 2019, 1095b15).
live one’s life, i.e., perform one’s function, well (Frede 2017; Parry and Thorsrud 2014). Although this general understanding was shared by Plato and Aristotle, the thinkers also had some key differences. In particular, we can think of Aristotle as critiquing, systematizing, and expanding on Plato’s virtue ethics.

**Plato**

Plato, like ancient Greek philosophers generally, endorsed eudaimonism in the sense of understanding virtues as dispositions that allow the virtuous agent to achieve *eudaimonia* via performing one’s function well. As we will see, this understanding of *eudaimonia* and its connection to virtue came to characterize Aristotle’s, and later Aristotelians’, virtue ethics as well.35

The claim that virtue contributes to the virtuous agent’s *eudaimonia* is exhibited through the central argument of the *Republic*. In this work, Plato argues that justice “benefits its possessors and… injustice harms them,” and that “just people also live better and are happier than unjust ones.” (trans. Hutchinson, 1997, *Republic*, Book II, 367d; Book I, 352d) That virtues are dispositions that allow the virtuous agent to perform his function well is evident from the question posed in the *Republic* (through the character of Socrates):

“Aren’t the virtues or excellences, the beauty and correctness of each manufactured item, living creature, and action related to nothing but the use for which each is made or naturally adapted?” (Book X, 601d).36 Here, we can see the close connection between happiness or flourishing (*eudaimonia*), virtue, and human nature. Again, this is also an important characteristic of later eudaimonic virtue ethical theories.

One feature of Plato’s view that had profound influence on Aristotle and later virtue ethicists is his moral psychology. In the *Republic*, Plato introduces his famous tripartite division of the soul, likely as a response to the inability for a Socratic intellectualist view of virtue to account for weakness of will.37

---

35 For this reason, determining what human nature is like, and so what the human function is, is an important element of eudaimonic virtue ethical theories. As we will later see, although Mengzi’s Confucian virtue ethics is also eudaimonic, the Chinese thinker’s understanding of human nature and function importantly differs from the Aristotelian tradition.

36 See also *Republic* Book I, 352e–53e.

37 Socrates, Plato’s teacher, put forward an intellectualist view of virtue. (At least, the character of Socrates represented in Plato’s aporetic dialogs puts forward an intellectualist view of virtue; the Socrates in these dialogs are taken to represent the “Socratic” view.) To say that an understanding of virtue is intellectualist means that it identifies virtue with
character of Socrates in this work, understood by most commentators as a mouthpiece for Plato, explains that the soul can be divided into three parts: appetitive, spirited, and rational. The first two parts are not reasoning. As Parry and Thorsrud explain:

By introducing non-rational elements in the soul, the argument in the Republic also introduces the possibility of doing what one holds not to be good, moved, for instance, by appetite… [thus,] virtue comes to have two aspects. The first is to acquire the knowledge which is the basis of virtue; the second is to instill in the appetites and emotions—which cannot grasp the knowledge—a docility so that they react in a compliant way to what reason knows to be the best thing to do. Thus, the non-rational parts of the soul acquire reliable habits on which the moral virtues depend. (2014)

Plato’s view thus introduces the explicit idea of virtues as requiring both knowledge (from the rational part of the soul) and habit (for the non-reasoning parts of the soul). (However, as we have briefly noted and will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, he is also indebted to Homer and Heraclitus in these points.)

Aristotle

Like Plato, Aristotle believed the soul can be divided into rational and non-rational parts and that cultivating and practicing the virtues will contribute to the virtuous agent’s well-being. Aristotle states in the Nicomachean Ethics that human life consists of three parts: the (unreasoning) “life of nutrition and growth,” the “life of sense perception,” which participates “in a sense” in reason, and the “life of action of the part of the soul that has reason.” (NE, 1097a1–1098a5, 1098a1–8)38 Again, as we will see in the following chapter, this knowledge. A consequence of this position is that it eliminates the possibility of ‘true’ or ‘clear-eyed’ incontinence or weakness of will, insofar as it implies “if you know what is good you will do it, and if you do an action, and it is bad, that was because you thought somehow that it was good.” (Parry and Thorsrud 2014)

38 This understanding of human nature is predicated on what sets human life apart from other types of life—only humans can achieve the human good, eudaimonia, because only we are capable of rational action. As Korsgaard explains, however, it is not the fact that our rationality is unique that makes it so important to eudaimonia. Rather, “Aristotle looks for what is unique or peculiar to us not because he values uniqueness for its own sake but because he already supposes that this particular kind of ‘goodness of life’ is distinctive of human beings.” (Korsgaard 2008, 143) In NE X.7 Aristotle also argues that “complete happiness” is activity “in accord with the supreme virtue,” which is study. (1177a10–20). This is because “our supreme element,” the “controlling and better element” of our soul is understanding; so “understanding, most of all, is the human being.” (1178a1–5). This further underscores his view of the rational part of the soul as ruling over, and superior to, the other parts. He also suggests here that one reason to regard rational activity as the best human activity is because it “has a divine element.” (1147b26) Commentators are divided about whether this portion of the NE, which seems to suggest that the best life is one of theoretical study or contemplation, is in tension with the rest of the book (as we will discuss in Chapter 2). Julie Ward’s “Theoria as Practice and Activity” (2018) and Amélie Rorty’s “The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics” (1980) both provide helpful overviews of this debate.
remnant of Classical Greek virtue ethics—that is, the idea that the soul or mind can be divided into rational and non-rational parts, and that the former is superior to the latter—remains in many contemporary virtue ethical theories and has opened up those theories that retain it—i.e., the EV-R—to criticism.

A significant difference between Plato’s and Aristotle’s theories, however, is the two thinkers’ understandings of the origin of the virtues. Aristotle rejects Plato’s theory of the Forms and instead grounds the virtues in human nature by way of his function argument. As Porter puts it, “in contrast to Plato’s emphasis on general transcendental ideals, Aristotle takes the properly human forms of goodness, proper functioning, knowledge, and desire as the touchstones for his analysis.” (2013, 72–73)

This marks a significant development in the virtue ethics tradition—in short, this new, naturalistic grounding for virtue makes discovering what human nature is like foundational for morality. This has distinct advantages, insofar as it provides a grounding for ethics that needn’t posit a supernatural realm of the forms or a “divine lawgiver”—which, recall, was one of the reasons Anscombe (1958) criticized deontic theories, sparking the resurgence of virtue ethical theory. However, this grounding in human nature also causes problems insofar as, depending on what one takes human nature to be, this jointly natural and normative understanding can lead to discrimination against humans who do not meet this normative standard. That is, by tying both ethics and flourishing to the fulfillment of a purportedly universal or empirically discoverable human function, eudaimonic virtue ethics opens itself to the possibility of precluding certain humans from the realm of the ethical ‘by nature.’ As we will see, this is a major avenue of critique of the EV.

Aristotle (trans. Irwin, 2019) continues to argue that humans are set apart from other types of life by having “some sort of life of action of the part of the soul that has reason” (NE 1098a3), so that “the human function [is]... activity and actions of the soul that involve reason, hence the function of an excellent man is to do this well and finely,” i.e., virtuously. (NE 1098a12) In short, rather than grounding the virtues in the Forms, Aristotle grounds them in human function—that is, doing what humans characteristically do—and

---

39 Plato’s (trans. Hutchinson, 1997) theory of the Forms, is referenced especially in the Euthyphro 6d–7a; Phaedo 73a–75a; Sophist 253a–254a; and Republic Book VI, 502d–513e. Aristotle’s function argument is discussed in detail in §1.5 below.
argues that virtues are those states of character that allow us to do this well. But, like his teacher, Aristotle
agrees that the best human life is one that lived according to reason or rational activity. As Yu explains, for
Aristotle, “intellectual virtue is the excellence of exercising reason, while ethical virtue can be understood as
the excellence of obeying reason.” (2007, 325)  

Plato and Aristotle can be seen as founders of the Western eudaimonic virtue ethics tradition. In
addition to centering the virtues and arguing that their cultivation and practice contribute to eudaimonia, their
particular contributions to virtue ethics include their moral psychology—which divides the soul into three
parts, positioning the rational part as the ruler. Finally, while both thinkers regard virtues as allowing humans
to live well, Aristotle’s function argument and rejection of the Forms provides a more clearly empirical or
naturalistic grounding for the virtues (in human nature).

Confucius

Just as Plato and Aristotle can be considered the founders of the Western virtue ethics tradition,
Confucius (Kongzi, 孔子, ca. 551–479 BCE) and Mengzi (Mencius, 孟子, ca. 391–310 BCE) can be considered
the founders of the Eastern virtue ethics tradition. Confucius was a profoundly influential teacher,
philosopher, and political advisor during the Spring and Autumn period of Ancient China. Mengzi was a
Confucian—a follower of Confucius. He reportedly studied under Confucius’s grandson, Zisi (子思), during
the Warring States period. The most influential works representing Confucius’s and Mengzi’s teachings are
the Analects (Lunyu 論語) and (eponymous) Mengzi (孟子), respectively.

Plato’s and Aristotle's context differed importantly from Confucius’s and Mengzi’s, and the virtue
ethical theories these thinkers developed likewise have important differences. Identifying these differences,
and their implications, will play a significant role in this dissertation (especially Chapters 4 and 5).

---

40 Again, ethical (or character) virtues are the focus of this dissertation. However, the intellectual virtue of phronesis is also
important due to its role in developing and practicing the character virtues.
41 As noted above, I use “Confucius” rather than “Kongzi” because this Latinization of the philosophers name is easily
recognizable for philosophers and readers from both Western and Chinese traditions. However, because Mengzi's
Latinized name is less commonly known, I use the standard (pinyin) Romanization of his name.
Nevertheless, these classical virtue ethicists have enough in common that Confucianism has, in recent years, been popularly understood as a kind of virtue ethics. In this dissertation, I adopt this now-common position. However, as David Wong (2020) notes, this view is not universally held; therefore, before exploring Confucianism’s philosophy it’s important to address the question of whether he (and his follower Mengzi) is properly understood as a virtue ethicist.

Confucius is often seen as the founder of a philosophical tradition that actually predated him. Confucius describes himself as one who “transmit[s] rather than innovate[s]” (述而不作, trans. Slingerland, 2013, *Analects* 7.1), and saw himself as carrying on the traditions of the ancient sage-kings as passed down by Ru (Confucian) scholars. Despite this, there are original insights in the *Analects* that served as a starting point for later philosophical theory. Confucius’s thought, and that of thinkers who followed him—who we might more accurately label Confucians—is characterized by “a major focus” on the virtues, in the sense of “qualities or traits that persons could have and that are appropriate objects of aspiration to realize.” (Wong 2020) For example, the virtues of “reciprocity” or “sympathy” (shù, 怒) and “loyalty” (zhōng, 忠) are identified as foundational to Confucius’s thought and to living a worthwhile life in *Analects* 4.15, and

---

42 E.g., the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s* 2018 entry on virtue ethics lists Mencius (Mengzi) and Confucius as virtue ethicists; Bryan Van Norden, a prominent Mengzi scholar and author of the (2019) SEP article on Mencius, describes the Chinese thinker as a virtue ethicist and Confucianism in general as a type of virtue ethics (see also his 2007 *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*); and, a search of the most prominent Asian Philosophy journals (*Philosophy East and West, Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy, Asian Philosophy, Journal of Chinese Philosophy*) reveals dozens of articles from the past 20 years characterizing Confucianism as a type of virtue ethics. However, this is not entirely uncontroversial (as we will see). Here, I offer a brief defense of regarding Confucianism as a type of virtue ethics; this position is defended in more detail in Chapter 4.

43 This tradition, called Ruism (rújiā, 儒家) or “scholarism,” in Chinese “connoted specialists in ritual and music, and later experts in Classical Studies. Ru is routinely translated into English as ‘Confucian.’ Yet ‘Confucian’ is also sometimes used in English to refer to the sage kings of antiquity who were credited with key cultural innovations by the Ru [scholars].” (Csikszentmihalyi 2020)

44 Briefly, sage-kings (賢王, xián wáng) are, in the Confucian tradition, legendary moral exemplars who ruled virtuously.

45 As we will see in Chapter 4, some of these key insights include the power of ritual (li or lĭ, 礼) to contribute to both moral cultivation and proper affective expression; an emphasis on relational responsiveness in determining what is ethically required; and an appreciation of the extent to which a moral agent’s obligations are dependent on her particular roles within a societal, familial, or cultural context.
humanity or benevolence (rén 仁) is treated as a cardinal virtue in Analects 6.7, 6.22, 6.23, and 6.30 (among other passages).46

Mengzi likewise emphasizes the importance of developing virtues like filiality (孝), brotherliness (悌), loyalty (忠), faith or trust (信) (Mengzi, trans. Van Norden, 2008, 1A5); and humanity (仁), righteousness (義), ritual (禮), and wisdom (智) (2A6); see also 1A7, 2A3, 4A27, and 6A6. This makes Confucianism at least prima facie virtue ethics. However, two reasons the “virtue ethics” label is controversial when applied to Confucianism both relate to whether the Confucian notion of virtue accords with a narrower philosophical understanding of virtue common in Western philosophy (Wong 2024).

The first problem is that “there simply is not enough discussion in the Confucian texts, especially in the classical period, that is addressed to the kind of questions these Western [ethical] theories seek to answer,” such as whether virtues conceived of as “qualities or traits of character [have] explanatory priority over right action and promoting good consequences.” (Wong 2024, §2.1) Recall that aretaic (i.e., virtue ethical) theories are distinguished from deontic ones by their focus on character rather than rules or principles. However, this claim holds that it’s impossible to tell from the existing historical evidence that Confucius indeed held virtue to be most important morally. Beyond this problem—that is, beyond the question of whether Confucius regarded virtues as ethically prior to deontic concerns—it’s also possible that Confucius didn’t have, or at least didn’t teach, a comprehensive theory of human nature.47

46 Further evidence for Confucius’s preoccupation with the virtues as the primary locus for ethical evaluation can be found, e.g., in Analects 2.21, 7.6, 7.23, 12:10, and 13.19. All Analects references are to the 2013 Slingerland translation unless otherwise noted.

47 In the Analects, Confucius’s disciple Zigong (子貢) complains “one does not get to hear the Master expounding upon the subjects of human nature or the Way [Dào, 道] of Heaven.” (2013, Analects 5.13) For these reasons, I believe Mengzi’s philosophy—expressed in his eponymous Mengzi—provides a better theoretical foundation for understanding Confucian virtue ethics, just as we look to Plato and Aristotle rather than Socrates in the Western tradition. As we’ll see, Mengzi clearly prioritizes aretaic concerns over deontic ones, and provides a detailed theory of human nature and its relation to virtue. However, it is still important to understand Confucius’s thought as it is an important foundational piece of Mengzi’s. Here, I will briefly defend Confucius as an originator of a virtue ethical theory; a detailed discussion of Mengzi’s Confucian context can be found in Chapter 4.
Despite these difficulties it is clear, at least, that Confucius was interested in virtues and virtue cultivation. He aimed to help his students become “gentleman” (junzi 君子), or morally upright people, by practicing virtuous behavior and developing traits that at least seem to be virtues. As noted above, Confucius emphasized ren (仁), benevolence or humanity, as a central virtue. This is the virtue of “care for others” (Analects 12:22). Not only does Confucius talk admiringly about virtues like benevolence and provide guidance about how to practice them, he also emphasizes the importance of education and training one’s emotional response in order to cultivate the proper ethical dispositions. (Kupperman 2009)

An additional problem with labeling Confucianism a type of virtue ethics is that “[v]irtues might be supposed to be qualities that people have or can have in isolation from others with whom they interact or from their communities, societies, or culture,” in which case traits described in Confucian ethics that focus on one’s behavior in community, like benevolence (rén 仁) or ritual propriety (lǐ 礼) would not count (Wong 2024, §2.1). However, by the second of these two criteria Aristotle’s thought seems also to be excluded from virtue ethics. He argues that humans are social by nature, and many of his virtues (e.g., the virtue of friendship, to which he devotes a full chapter of the Nicomachean Ethics) are impossible to perform in isolation. So, in my view this objection fails to get off the ground. As we will further see in Chapters 4 and 5, though, it is true that Confucian ethics comparatively emphasizes the role of others and our social positionality in virtue. This difference in emphasis provides Mengzi tools to address criticisms levied at eudaimonic virtue ethics that are predicated on understanding virtues as “motivationally self-sufficient” (Merrit 2000).

In short: although there are differences between Confucius’s thought and the Classic Greek virtue ethics, Confucius’s focus on the virtues and virtue cultivation, as well as his work’s important role in shaping Mengzi’s thought—which more closely aligns with Western virtue ethics—is sufficient reason to consider his

---

48 Confucius tells his disciples that it is practiced by, e.g., “treating people on the street as important guests… (12.2), being reticent in speaking (12.3) and rejecting the use of clever speech (1.3), and being respectful where one dwells, reverent where one works, and loyal where one deals with others (13.19)” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). The other central virtues in the Analects are “righteousness (yi 義), ritual propriety (lǐ 礼), wisdom (zhi 智), and trustworthiness (xin 信)” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). Other virtues discussed by Confucius include xiao 孝, filiality; xiu (勲), sympathetic understanding; and zhong 忠, dutifulness or loyalty (Analects 2.7, 2.21, 3.19, 4.15).
work from a virtue ethics perspective. However, because of its relative lack of both systematization and explicit enunciation of a theory of human nature, Mengzi’s philosophy is a more fruitful point of comparison.

Mengzi

Mengzi is one of the most famous philosophers of ancient China and is known as the “Second Sage” (亞聖, yàshèng) of the Confucian tradition, behind only Confucius himself. He argued that “human nature is good” (性善, xìng shàn), and that “sprouts” (duān, 端), or potentials, of virtue exist in every human “heart-mind” (xin, 心). (Mengzi trans. Van Norden, 2008, 6A6) Mengzi’s ethical theory, metaphysical commitments, and moral psychology are all explored in depth in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. For now, the most important feature of Mengzi’s philosophy to understand is that, like Confucius’s, it takes the virtues to be its central concern. Moreover, Mengzi provides a detailed and systematic account of how the virtues ought to be cultivated, of their role in a life well-lived, and of their connection to human nature.

Recall that Plato and Aristotle held two major commitments that characterize eudaimonic virtue ethics: conceiving of virtues as character traits and as the starting point of ethics (i.e., aretaicism), and eudaimonism. That Mengzi’s thought, like Confucius’s, takes virtues as the focus of ethics is clear from his rebuffing of what we might today regard as consequentialist reasons, his moral psychology positioning the beginnings, or “sprouts” of virtues in human nature, and his discussion of virtues as character traits that must be cultivated.49 Mengzi also holds a kind of eudaimonism, in the broad sense of believing that virtue benefits the agent and that human flourishing can be objectively determined.

49 Mengzi provides a list of cardinal virtues: benevolence or humanity (仁), righteousness (義), ritual (propriety) (禮), and wisdom (智) (Mengzi 2008, 6A5). Mengzi’s version of the EV, including his rejection of deontic concerns as more important than aretaic ones, is detailed in Chapter 4. To provide two quick examples of Mengzi’s prioritization of an aretaic over a deontic (consequentialist) framework for ethical evaluation: in Mengzi 1A1 the thinker rebukes king Hui: “Why must Your Majesty speak of ‘profit'? Let there simply be benevolence and righteousness.” In another passage, he remarks that “Life is something I desire; righteousness is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake life and select righteousness.” (Mengzi 6A10) These quotes demonstrate that Mengzi considers virtue to be the most important pursuit in life, more important than “profit”—a reference to the utilitarian-like, benefit-calculation moral philosophy of the Mohists—as well as life itself. Mengzi’s reference to profit (利) as a criticism of Mohism is endorsed, e.g., by Bryan Van Norden (2008, commentary on 1A1; 2007, 301–305)
For Mengzi, each of the virtues is developed from a moral “sprout” or beginning. The sprouts are also sometimes translated as “feelings” or “hearts” of virtue, indicating their emotional (as well as reasoning) character. The sprouts are naturally present in the heart-mind, (xīn, 心), which is a uniquely human organ that is “credited with thinking, 思, understanding, 明, knowing, 知, intention, 志, felt moods and/or emotions, 情, and desire, 欲.” (Wong 2023) Human nature, Mengzi argues, is characterized by possession of these sprouts; one who does not have the sprouts “is not human.” (Mengzi, 2A6) Mengzi’s theory of the sprouts thus grounds the virtues in human nature, just as Aristotle’s function argument does. Yet, the Confucian thinker’s understanding of human nature—as characterized by the conative and emotional sprouts—differs from Aristotle’s description of human nature as rational. As we will see in subsequent chapters, this key difference allows a Mengzian version of the EV to address criticisms of particularly rationalistic understandings of and expansions on Aristotle.

Further, Mengzi conceives of his virtues as character traits. This is clear from the way he describes a junzi, virtuous person or gentleman:

What distinguishes gentlemen [jūnzi, 君子] from others is that they preserve their hearts. Gentlemen preserve their hearts with benevolence and preserve their hearts with propriety. The benevolent love others, and those who have propriety revere others. Those who love others are generally loved by others. Those who revere others are generally revered by others. ‘Here is a person who is harsh to me.’ A gentleman in this situation will invariably examine himself, saying, ‘I must not be benevolent. I must be lacking in propriety. (Mengzi 2008, 4B28)

Note that Mengzi here encourages virtuous people to cultivate their own virtues by “preserving their hearts.” This is because Mengzi believes that protecting and extending one’s nascent moral “sprouts,” (duān, 端) present in the heart-mind (xīn, 心) by nature, is the key to becoming fully virtuous. Although the beginnings

---

50 As I briefly mentioned and will discuss in more detail later, the emotional-rational nature of the sprouts is also an important feature of Mengzi’s philosophy, which helps to avoid criticisms of other, more rationalistic virtue theories.

51 Always a man in the classical Confucian tradition. As D.C. Lau notes, in Classical Confucian texts junzi “denoted either a man of excellence or a man in authority.” (Lau 2003) It is also sometimes translated as “exemplary person” (Wong 2013) However, Mengzi gives an example in 4B33 of women feeling shame (the sprout of righteousness); so it seems that women could, in a charitable interpretation of his view, become virtuous. Mengzi’s response to feminist critiques is discussed in Chapter 4.
of virtues are naturally present in us, their cultivation also includes a type of habituation or continual effort. Thus, for Mengzi, virtues lie at the center of the human psyche but in an undeveloped form.

Although Mengzi does not tie virtue as explicitly to *eudaimonia* as Aristotle does—because *eudaimonia* was not a concept shared by Classical Chinese thinkers as it was by Greek ones—there is ample evidence that the Confucian thinker can be considered a eudaimonist in the sense of tying human flourishing to cultivating virtue and of conceiving of human flourishing as having both subjective and objective elements. First, Mengzi clearly thinks developing the virtues benefits the virtuous agent. Second, some authors have likened the Classical Confucian understanding of the Way, or Dao (dao, 道) to the ancient Greek concept of *eudaimonia* insofar as it is a naturalistic and normative, objectivist grounding for evaluating flourishing. Literally meaning way or path, the Dao refers to the right or proper mode of living. For Confucians, the Dao is given by Heaven (Tiān, 天) and prescribes humans’ role, which they see as including virtuous activity.

In the Confucian tradition, as in the Aristotelian one, individual human flourishing cannot be divorced from the flourishing of one’s community nor from natural capacities (though, of course, the metaphysical commitments of these traditions importantly differ). Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* and Mengzi’s *Dao*

---

52 He states that “fine patterns and righteousness [i.e., virtue] delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths,” and that the sages discovered that all hearts prefer these “in common.” (Mengzi, 6A7) This suggests that for Mengzi there is a universal pleasure in enacting virtue. Elsewhere, Mengzi also compares acting viciously to doing violence to oneself—see, e.g., the metaphor of Ox Mountain, Mengzi, 6A8.

53 For an argument that Mengzi’s *Dao* is roughly equivalent to eudaimonia, see Huff, Benjamin I. (2015, 403–31). For a comparison between the *Dao* and *eudaimonia* in Confucianism more generally, see Yu (2007). I am not arguing in this dissertation that the *Dao* and *eudaimonia* do not have important and interesting differences; I am merely arguing that they are relevantly similar insofar as they both provide an objectivist and (thinly) naturalistic grounding for human flourishing.

54 One further consequence of this understanding of the Dao is that Confucians tied individual virtue to the success of nations, since virtue was thought to be rewarded by Heaven; and, *mutatis mutandis*, good governance regarded as important for allowing individual citizens to flourish. As Mengzi notes, “As for the people, if they lack a constant livelihood, it follows that they will lack a constant heart. No one who lacks a constant heart will avoid dissipation and evil.” (Mengzi, 1A7) This is also the origin of the Classical Chinese concept of the “Mandate of Heaven,” (Tiānmìng, 天命) by which Heaven, or Tiān, expressed its approval or disapproval for rulers through the will of the people (e.g., uprisings or revolutions) or natural disasters.

55 As we’ve seen, one criticism of eudaimonic virtue ethics has been that it is egoistic. Although both Aristotle and Mengzi use an appeal to external goods as a rhetorical tool for suggesting to unvirtuous people that they work to cultivate virtue, they also recognize that any external benefits that come from cultivating virtue (e.g., popularity, honor)
each concern an individual human’s flourishing in terms of both subjective happiness and in an objectivist sense, her flourishing in connection with her community, and a jointly naturalistic and normative foundation as fulfilling one’s role as determined by nature. Hence, it is fair to label Mengzi a eudaimonist—in the bare sense that I have discussed, i.e., in the sense that moral goodness is also good for the agent—despite important differences between the ancient Greek and classical Chinese concepts.

From this brief summary—again, Mengzi’s ethical theory is detailed in Chapter 4—we can see that, like Aristotle, Mengzi endorses a naturalist, universal understanding of human nature and an understanding of human nature as fulfilling human nature. Both the Classical Greek and Chinese traditions emphasize the importance of developing virtues, and understand these virtues as traits or dispositions that both (i) are grounded in human nature and (ii) help humans live well according to humans’ characteristic way of life, including socially. One key difference, however, is how these traditions understand virtue cultivation.

For the Western tradition, especially Aristotle, virtues are seen as states of character that are developed by training the soul to obey or conform with what reason (regarded either strictly as ratiocination or more broadly as a kind of sensitivity) demands. This is because the soul is understood as divided into rational and irrational parts, and our non-rational parts can lead us toward either virtue or vice.\(^56\) For Mengzi, virtues also require cultivation. However, because this tradition does not include a clear division between rationality and emotion (à la Plato and Aristotle’s tripartite soul), it does not present cultivation as a matter of reason controlling or guiding emotion. Moreover, human nature is understood as already tending toward virtue. These differences are explored in greater detail later.

---

\(^{56}\) Aristotle notes, for instance, that virtues arise in us “neither by nature nor contrary to nature.” (NE, 1103a24)
For this project, I am primarily concerned with contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics. As we have seen, however, contemporary virtue ethics is indebted to a tradition of over two thousand years. And, there are both important similarities and differences between the Classical Confucian virtue ethics tradition and the Aristotelian one. Thanks to this long history, as we'll see in Chapter 2, it is possible to trace some trends in contemporary virtue ethics back to Aristotle's ethics and through medieval interpretations of and additions to it. (To provide a brief preview: we will see that Aristotle’s virtue ethics has generally been interpreted and expanded along a spectrum that either emphasizes the role of reason or emotion in virtue cultivation and practice.) While contemporary virtue ethics has altered and improved upon the classical Aristotelian tradition, it also continues to take inspiration from it. This is particularly the case when it comes to Aristotle’s understanding of the *telos* (purpose or goal) of human life as achieving *eudaimonia* through fulfilling our function (which includes cultivating and practicing the virtues).

Despite their differences, contemporary eudaimonic virtue theories as well as the classical theories of Aristotle and Mengzi have in common four core features of eudaimonic virtue ethical theories: (i) agent-centeredness or *aretaicism*; (ii) *eudaimonism*; (iii) the conviction that virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function or fulfilling human nature (i.e., *naturalism*);57 and (iv) a belief that practical wisdom or *phronesis*, i.e., understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue. Because of this, Mengzi and Aristotle can both be considered as putting forth eudaimonic virtue ethical theories according to this thin understanding of eudaimonic virtue ethics: the Eudaimonic View of virtue, or EV. In what follows in this chapter, I detail each of these four features.

1.5 Methodology: The Eudaimonic View of Virtue

The four (core) claims to which the Eudaimonic View (EV) is committed are:

---

57 As Korsgaard notes, it may also apply to other creatures that share the characteristic function which defines human nature (for Aristotle, rationality). (2008, 132) I will also argue that “human nature” need not be understood as a matter of purposive design but must appeal to a species-wide norm to provide an objectivist understanding of human flourishing.
Virtue, in the sense of “an excellent trait of character... a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor... to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways” is the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., aretaicism) (Hursthouse and Pettigrove, 2018);

Virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., eudaimonism);

Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function; doing this is a matter of fulfilling human nature (i.e., naturalism);

Practical wisdom or phronesis, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue.

As we will see below, many contemporary virtue ethicists—including Alfano (2013b), MacIntyre (2007), Peters (2013), Swanton (2015), and Van Norden (2007, 2013, 2019)—endorse definitions of virtue ethics that basically map onto this framework. However, my framework adds to this existing conversation by providing a ‘thin’ yet falsifiable description of eudaimonic virtue ethics which also ties the theory’s core claims to significant advantages over deontic theories (at least, according to its proponents). My framework captures the views of classical virtue ethical theories, like those put forward by Aristotle and Mengzi, in addition to those of contemporary proponents of the EV.

In the course of defining the EV’s core claims, I here show Aristotle’s adherence to these claims as illustration. My aim with the EV is to identify key features of eudaimonic virtue ethical theories that are relatively uncontroversial, helpfully broad yet falsifiable. In this way, we are left with a description of eudaimonic virtue ethics that can be used to compare virtue ethical theories across disparate cultures and time periods, but which also rules out theories that don’t share these four key features. The EV’s four features can thus also be regarded as a “bridge concept,” which “is a relatively broad concept that is selected to facilitate comparison by capturing shared features of more specific and distinctive concepts that appear within different philosophical traditions or theories.” (Huff 2015, 406; see also Stalnaker 2006, Van Norden 2007)

Note this this definition excludes what Aristotle would label the intellectual virtues. In this work, I am primarily interested in the character or moral virtues, and, again, when I refer to virtues (without a modifier) this is what I mean. The intellectual virtues are nevertheless important and are discussed in connection with Claim iv since practical wisdom is, for Aristotle, an intellectual virtue.

And, as we will see in Chapter 2, other contemporary ethicists, moral psychologists, and historians of philosophy who endorse versions of the EV include Paul Bloomfield, Sarah Broadie, J.M. Cooper, Mario De Caro (et al), Dan Haybron, Rosalind Hursthouse, Terence Irwin, Antti Kauppinen, Anthony Kenny, Richard Kraut, Kristján Kristjánsson, Christine Korsgaard, John McDowell, Martha Nussbaum, C.D.C. Reeve, Mauro Rossi and Christine Tappolet, Richard Sorabji, Christopher Taylor, David Wiggins, Bernard Williams and Jiyuan Yu.
As we will see, the EV is useful not only for defining the “core” of eudaimonic virtue ethics in this broad yet falsifiable way. It also helps to illustrate how each of the positive features of eudaimonic virtue ethics, described above, are prefaced on the theory’s most foundational claims. And, defining the EV’s core claims helps us to identify the particular ways in which these claims have been expanded upon or understood by different virtue ethicists. Each of the EV’s four core features is described and justified in detail below.

**Claim i: Aretaicism**

The first of the EV’s claims—that virtues, conceived of as character traits, are the foundation of ethics—is really two claims in one. First, proponents of this view argue that virtues are most properly understood as character traits. Conceiving of virtues in this way further implies claims about virtues’ consistency, stability, and predictive and explanatory power. Second, Claim i holds that virtue (or the virtues, or virtuous activity) is the foundation of ethics. That is, this later aspect of the claim puts forward aretaicism, as well as a plurality of moral values.60

Because virtues are morally desirable character traits, it is useful to understand what is meant by a character trait. For most contemporary virtue ethicists, to say that someone has a character trait of, e.g., honesty, is to say that he has to have some enduring tendency or disposition to have honest thoughts and to act in honest ways. Furthermore, this disposition is, metaphysically speaking, a real property of [his] character.... A person who is honest is disposed to believe, desire, and act honestly, and can be expected (other things being equal) to have those thoughts and to act this way when, for instance, testifying under oath [or in situations relevant to the trait]. (Miller 2018, 6–7)

---

60 It should be noted that contemporary virtue ethics can be divided into roughly three types: eudaimonic virtue ethics, which is the subject of this dissertation; agent-based virtue ethics, and target-centered virtue ethics (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018). Agent-based virtue ethics, of which Michael Slote and Linda Zagzebski are the most influential proponents, derive the normativity of virtue from “the motivational and dispositional qualities of agents.” (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018) This type of virtue ethics is thus aretaic in a strong sense: according to this view, virtuous motives or character are the “final stopping point in a justificatory story.” (Brady 2004, 3) However, other types of virtue ethics are also aretaic in a weaker sense; eudaimonic and target-centered virtue ethical theorists agree with agent-based virtue ethicists that the rightness or wrongness of any ethical act cannot be explained without reference to the agent’s motives and character.
When we conceive of the virtuous (e.g., honest) person as possessing the relevant character trait, we regard his action as resulting from the virtue; and, it is the virtue, not the action, that is the focus of moral evaluation. Taking this standpoint has some intuitive advantages.

As noted in the introduction, proponents of virtues ethics claim the theory is more intuitively plausible than other popular contemporary ethical theories, like consequentialism and deontology. As we saw above, virtue ethicists argue that aretaic theories more accurately capture the way humans develop morally, by emphasizing the important roles of both our emotions and our communities in shaping moral development and obligations.

Moreover, conceiving of virtues as character traits means that only acts that are indicative of a firm and stable disposition count as properly virtuous. This is a significant difference from deontic theories, which hold that moral value starts from the standpoint of actions—with motivations, personality, context, etc. relevant only insofar as they reliably cause moral actions (or not). That said, one feature that characterizes virtuous traits is their connection to action.

As Gopal Sreenivasan explains, for a trait (or virtue) to meet the “reliable behavioral disposition” desideratum of eudaimonic virtue ethics, it “has to be temporally stable and cross-situationally consistent.” (2010, 291–292) In other words, to really have the trait, e.g., of honesty, an agent must have that trait for a long time and must exhibit it in many disparate situations. The honest person can be expected to be honest today and five years from now, and can be expected not only to be honest, e.g., in academic situations, but also in other different but still honesty-relevant situations like her romantic relationships, self-understanding, and business dealings. Eudaimonists have regarded this as an advantage of the theory because it posits a close connection between action and personality, and only holds people morally responsible for actions they endorse. In other words, virtue ethics does regard actions as morally relevant. But, it regards those actions as morally relevant insofar as they provide evidence of the agent’s underlying character.

Aristotle clearly endorses this understanding. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines virtue as “a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean… determined by reason, and by the reason by
which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.” (trans. Irwin, 2019, 1107a1.) Virtue is “concerned with choice” insofar as it is a disposition to choose well with respect to the particular virtue. For instance, an honest person has a disposition to make honest choices. Because the action must “proceed from a firm and unchangeable character,” a genuinely virtuous action can also be said to be done “out of” virtue, not merely “in accord with” virtue. (NE, Book II, 1105a30) In other words, actions that are genuinely representative of an underlying virtuous character are virtuous, not just actions that happen to correspond with what a virtuous person would do. The decision not to lie because it is not convenient, or because one is worried her lie will be discovered, is not really “honest,” in this understanding. Rather, only the decision not to lie because it would be morally wrong or dishonest (i.e., because one has an honest character) counts.

Further, virtue must for Aristotle be a well-entrenched or stable state of character—a virtuous person can be expected to act virtuously in disparate situations and across long periods of time. As Aristotle writes,

The most honourable among the virtues themselves are more enduring than the other virtues, because blessed people devote their lives to them more fully and more continually… the happy [and virtuous] person has the stability we are looking for and keeps the character he has throughout his life. For always, or more than anything else, he will do and study the actions in accord with virtue, and will bear fortunes more finely, in every way in all conditions appropriately.” (NE Book I, Chapter 10, 1100b10–25)

In short, we can define virtue for Aristotle—as for proponents of the EV generally—at least in part as a stable disposition or character that leads the agent to consistently, knowingly, and happily choose virtuous actions. As we have also discussed, the virtuous person doesn’t just act virtuous. She must also have the right emotional and motivational dispositions toward virtue.

Positioning virtues as stable traits of character ensures that a fully virtuous agent feels pleasure from doing the right thing by emphasizing the roles of emotional cultivation or habituation in ethical development. As Aristotle explains it,

moral virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence, we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and be pained by the things that we ought; this is the right education. (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, Nicomachean Ethics, Book II, 1104b10)
As we saw in §1.2 above, this connection between one's emotions and ethical decision-making helps the EV to avoid the psychological disharmony that arguably characterizes deontic theories. The focus on the role of communal moral education, moreover, positions moral development as importantly relational, which accords more closely with empirical evidence about how humans actually develop. Additionally, and relatedly, conceiving of virtues as traits of character ensures that even unreflective virtuous action originates in the virtuous agent, because the automatic response is a product of deliberate habituation. It is only through the existence of a (communally and emotionally) cultivated virtuous character that the *phronimos* is able to feel as she ought. In this way, proponents of the EV hold both that virtuous action is only praiseworthy if done out of virtue and that moral exemplars take pleasure in, and easily enact, virtue.

In short, virtue ethicists reject other normative ethical theories’ attempts to separate the analysis of a good or bad action from its full context. While a consequentialist might judge an action’s moral value by looking at its consequences, and a deontologist by looking at whether the act adheres to certain moral rules, a virtue ethicist would insist on looking not at the action in isolation but also at the agent’s past actions, current situation, and motivation, affect, and character. This accords with the general ethical intuition that people should be held morally responsible for those actions that arise out of their character or that genuinely reflect their personality.

The latter part of Claim i is that virtue (or the virtues, or virtuous activity) is the foundation of ethics. While not all virtue ethicists may hold that virtues are character traits, all virtue ethicists endorse the idea that virtues are the foundation of ethics, moral evaluation, or ethical action. This is necessarily the case for virtue ethicists because to do otherwise would be to appeal to some other standard by which to measure the virtues. This understanding of virtue as primary is both opposed to deontic theories and to a monism of moral value (since the virtues are irreducible).61 The simplest way of understanding the claim that virtues are the

---

61 Many ethicists who are not virtue ethicists have their own theories of virtue. For example, Kant’s “Doctrine of Virtue,” in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, has been the subject of much recent work (see, e.g., Barley 2007; Cureton and Hill 2015). However, virtues in his conception are subordinate to other, universalizing moral laws. As noted in a previous footnote, the need to distinguish between taking virtues as foundational for ethics and discussing the position of virtue
foundation of ethics is to think of virtue ethics as taking a “bottom-up” or “inside-out” approach to ethics, rather than a “top-down” or “outside-in” approach.\(^{62}\) That is, rather than taking a rule or principle as their starting point, virtue ethicists hold that right action must start from an understanding of a situation, the agents involved, and (for eudaimonists) the good life.

Taking virtues as the foundation of ethics means that virtue ethical theories are necessarily more casuistic and situationally responsive than other normative theories, in that virtue ethicists are reluctant to put forward a system by which the right response to a situation can be determined ahead of time. Virtue ethicists—as we have seen above—work up from the facts of a situation and the characters involved, determine what virtue would require, then determine whether an action is right or wrong. So, this feature of virtue ethics also undergirds an advantage of the theory (at least, according to its proponents).

Related to virtue ethics’ *aretaicism* and understanding of character traits as the proper starting point of ethical evaluation is a second advantageous feature, the close connection between ethical action and the agent’s personality in a virtue ethics framework. Ensuring that virtue stems from a stable character emphasizes that a fully virtuous actor gets pleasure from doing the right thing—e.g., a just person enjoys doing what is just—and explains that one’s emotions play an important motivating role in ethical action. However, because this character must be stable, and is built by continuous action and education, it also explains why not everyone takes pleasure in doing the right thing. The agent, including her emotions, must be trained (or habituated) to react correctly in the relevant situations. Thus, this claim is the basis for one of virtue ethics’ major positive features: it ensures that ethics takes into account an agent’s character and...
motivation. However, as we will see in later chapters, this understanding is also what opens up eudaimonic virtue ethics to critiques from contemporary empirical psychology.\(^63\)

**Claim ii: Eudaimonism**

Related to both Claim i, above, and Claim iii, below, is the conviction that virtue benefits the virtuous agent. Again, virtue ethics can take many forms. The Eudaimonic View describes what can broadly be called eudaimonic or eudaimonist theories of virtue. So, proponents of the EV are eudaimonists, and endorse its second claim: that virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being or flourishing (eudaimonia).\(^64\) In other words, being virtuous is both good *simpliciter* and good for the agent; virtuous action is its own reward. As Kristjánsson (2008) notes, eudaimonism is closely connected to Claim i since eudaimonic “virtue ethics… focuses on the cultivation of moral virtues *qua* stable dispositions conducive to human flourishing.” (55)

Eudaimonia, in short, is objective “doing-well” (though it may come along with subjective happiness). However, as we saw above, this view does not entail that I ought to develop the virtues *because* doing so benefits me.\(^65\) For instance, we could avoid critiques of egoism while maintaining eudaimonism by arguing that developing the virtues is necessary for flourishing—but flourishing *in community*, and so includes other-regarding virtues—or that flourishing in an objectivist sense requires developing certain virtues (even if this kind of “perfection” sometimes runs contradictory to short-term or subjective happiness).

In *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*, Daniel Haybron suggests that “Aristotelian theories”—which we may expand to include eudaimonist virtue ethical theories generally—center on three claims. We have already seen

---

\(^63\) In short, the objection is that robust character traits of the type virtue ethicists posit the virtues to be do not exist. Situationists point out that “traditional theorists of virtue accept that having a reliable behavioral disposition is a necessary condition of having a virtue;” this is a problem, they charge, because modern psychology does not support the existence of such reliable behavioral dispositions. (Sreenivasan 2010, 29.) This objection will be considered in Chapter 3.

\(^64\) The eudaimonist view is also sometimes called Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics because Aristotle is its most prominent proponent in the history of Western philosophy.

\(^65\) As Bryan Van Norden further notes, “The virtues and flourishing may be related in several ways. On some views, the notion of flourishing is logically primary, and the virtues are defined as those stable dispositions the exercise of which is necessary for a flourishing life. Alternatively, the virtues could be logically prior to flourishing, and a flourishing life would be defined as a life in which the virtues are exercised. In other words, is something a virtue because it enables you to flourish, or does something count as flourishing because it is the exercise of the virtues?” (2007, 39)
that one feature is “welfare perfectionism… which maintains that well-being consists, non-derivatively, at least
partly in perfection: excellence or virtue—or, in the Aristotelian case, excellent or virtuous activity.” (2008,
156) Second is externalism. “Aristotelian theories are externalist in the… sense [that] they ground well-being in
facts about the species. What benefits a person is what contributes to her functioning in a characteristically—
or fully, essentially, or distinctively—human way.” (2008, 157) Finally, “[t]he third claim, welfare eudaimonism,
maintains that well-being is teleological, consisting in the fulfillment of our natures.” (2008, 157) That is,
human nature is taken to be the source of an objectivist or externalist understanding of the human good.
Each of these features describe eudaimonism, by emphasizing that eudaimonia or flourishing includes not only
a subjective sense of happiness or pleasure-fulfilment for the agent but must capture an objective, empirically
supported understanding of what it means for a human being to do well. Eudaimonia is a perfection of
humans’ natural function (as we will see in more detail in discussing Claim iii of the EV).

A positive feature of eudaimonism—that is, the insistence that cultivating and practicing the virtues
contributes to the agent’s well-being—is that it allows the theory to avoid what Michael Stocker calls, in an
article of the same name, the “schizophrenia of modern ethical theories.” As Stocker (1976) explains, modern
deontic ethical theories (i.e., utilitarianism and deontology) focus on duties and obligations at the expense of
motivation, and for this reason promote ethical theories that suggest what an agent wants or feels moved to
do is irrelevant to the question of what she should do.

By contrast, to say that someone is virtuous, or that she possesses a certain virtuous trait, is to say (at
least) that she both is motivated to do the right thing, and that she will reliably do it. The virtues (or vices)
have a “psychological depth”—to say that a person has the virtue of, say, courage, is not only to say that she
tends to act courageously but also that she desires to do so, and desires it for the right reasons. (Russell 2014,
212 ; Alfano 2013b) A virtuous person is charitable, honest, courageous, etc. not because being so will help
them meet some other normative standard. Rather, the virtues have become stable features of her character,
such that she could not imagine acting otherwise.
This can be regarded as a positive feature of virtue ethics for a number of reasons. First, as discussed above, the view that practicing virtuous (or morally correct) action requires the agent to develop a certain virtuous character helps to account for the role of motivation in evaluating an action’s ethical worth. Second, this focus on the virtues, as Michael Stocker has argued, means that the virtuous person lives a “good life” characterized by “harmony between one’s motives and one’s reasons, values, justification.” (1976, 453) Virtue ethics in general is more psychologically plausible because of its recognition of the importance of emotions in moral development. But, as we discussed above, eudaimonic virtue ethics provides a particularly strong instantiation of the “psychological harmony” desideratum by also connecting one’s motivations, desires, and well-being directly to moral reasoning.66

On a eudaimonist conception of virtue, a truly virtuous agent will choose to develop and practice virtues, e.g., justice, because they are virtuous. However, choosing virtue also benefits the agent by contributing to her eudaimonia. Thus, there is no conflict between serving one’s own good and serving the good. This is not to say that a virtuous person disregards the consequences of her actions, or that the intention motivating an act is not of ethical importance. Rather, virtue ethicists point out that consequences or intentions of a particular action, considered apart from the agent’s history, character etc., are not sufficient to explain and evaluate moral worth. The psychological “harmony” posited by eudaimonic virtue ethics paints a more appealing view of ethics, by holding that virtuous agents enjoy, and benefit from, being good people.67

Again, Claim ii of the EV states that virtue is a constituent of eudaimonia. As explained above, this entails that virtue is good for its possessor. But, as Van Norden (2007) and others have noted, the connection

---

66 The most popular forms of consequentialism and deontology, by contrast, draw their ethical justification from the Greatest Happiness Principle and the Categorical Imperative (respectively). As Stocker notes, this split between motive and values is required by these deontic systems due to their conviction that the moral worth of an action is evaluated based on something external to the agent performing it—whether the act’s conformity to the moral law, or its consequences. Because of this disconnect between motivation and (moral) value, these modern ethical theories sometimes call us to act in ways that diminish our well-being.

67 Although, as discussed above, this does not imply that self-interest motivates the agent. For more discussion of, and responses to, the egoism objection to eudaimonic virtue ethics see D’Souza’s 2018 “The Self-Absorption Objection and Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics”, Hurka’s 2015 “Aristotle on Virtue: Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong,” and Swanton’s 2015 “Two Problems for Virtue Ethics”.
between well-being and virtue can take a number of forms. Aristotle holds a weak version of eudaimonism—that the good life is at least partially constituted by virtue—without holding the stronger, more controversial claims that the virtues are sufficient for happiness or that we should develop the virtues because they benefit us. He writes, “happiness [eudaimonia] is a certain sort of activity of the soul in accord with virtue. Of the other goods, some are necessary conditions of happiness, while others are naturally useful and co-operative as instruments,” and that “human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue.” (trans. Irwin, 2019, *NE*, 1099b25–30, 1098a16) As these quotes show, eudaimonia requires virtue—but virtue is not sufficient for happiness, since Aristotle also notes that there are “other goods” that are required.

Moreover, Aristotle believes that virtues are choice-worthy in themselves as well as good for the agent, writing “honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we should be happy.” (*NE*, 1097b3–5) Again, this shows that Aristotle endorses a weak eudaimonism, such that virtues contribute to the happiness of the virtuous agent but are not developed or pursued for this reason.

As we have already begun to see above, contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethicists have argued that eudaimonism provides a powerful response to the objection that virtue ethics lacks action-guidance. As Bozkaya (2021) (drawing on Annas [2011]) explains, eudaimonism helps to respond to action-guiding objections through its close connection to the emotional and communal theory of moral development that we discussed above. He writes,

virtue is not a character trait like fragility of glass. As Annas argues, it is active, it is not [a] built-in element that produces certain kind of actions when a situation requires it. It is a developmental phenomenon: moral agents develop virtues ‘through selective response to circumstances’. Virtue is strengthened by actualizing it over and over rather than achieved once and for all, and it is weakened by failing to do so. It is not enough to have a fitness program; one has to be actively following the exercises in the list to be fit. Moral education, or the developmental nature of virtue are not only morally relevant features of [the] human condition, but also features that provide historical narrative

---

*68 Again, Aristotle does not hold that virtue is sufficient for eudaimonia. He later points out that “the happy person needs to have goods of the body and external goods added to good activities, and needs fortune also, so that he will not be impeded in these ways.” (*NE*, 1153b15–20)*
Thus, as Bozkaya here argues, the connection of morality to perfecting oneself or contributing to one’s objective flourishing, helps to motivate a “fitness program” in which the moral agent continually acts to develop the virtues. We have already seen that, for virtue ethicists, the right action is the action that a virtuous person or moral exemplar (phronimas) would take (Begley 2005; Hursthouse 1999). The connection between virtue and flourishing that eudaimonism provides helps to further explain this method of moral evaluation.

As Bozkaya further argues (this time drawing on Hursthouse),

Although right action seems to be reduced to the actions of [the] virtuous agent, the virtuous agent only recognizes what is to be done because of the facts about human nature. Appealing to naturalism in this way, Hursthouse points to a conceptual link between eudaimonia and virtue... Defining the account of right action through virtuous agency assumes knowledge of the final end [i.e., eudaimonia], and the capacity to recognize the morally salient features of a situation. Therefore, right action is understood in the activity of the virtuous agent who embodies the reasons of virtues, or simply “gets it right.” (2021, 299–300)

Returning to our description of eudaimonia as predicated on an objectivist, empirical understanding of human nature, humans can work toward eudaimonia by perfecting our natural capacities—that is, by developing the virtues. This requires a lifelong process of moral development, in which we learn from and contribute to the well-being of those around us (since we are by nature social creatures) and cultivate not only our rational capacities but our emotions. In this process of moral development, we aim to emulate the practically wise, virtuous agent by developing a kind of sensitivity to or understanding of what virtue looks like in our particular, embodied context.

What the virtues are, and how we develop and practice them, is ultimately grounded in our human nature—and so developing them helps us to fulfill or perfect our nature, and so also to flourish in an objectivist sense by living the best life possible for our kind of creature. So, another important, and closely related, advantage of eudaimonism is that it positions morality as naturalistic, or as an empirically discoverable feature that characterizes human life. As Roughley explains it (drawing on both Hursthouse and Foot):

Neo-Aristotelians [or eudaimonists] claim that to describe an organism, whether a plant or a non-human or human animal, as flourishing is to measure it against a standard that is specific to the species to which it belongs. To do so is to evaluate it as a more or less good ‘specimen of its species
The key move is then to claim that moral evaluation is, ‘quite seriously’ (Foot 2001: 16), evaluation of the same sort: just as a non-defective animal or plant exemplifies flourishing within the relevant species’ life form, someone who is morally good is someone who exemplifies human flourishing, i.e., the fully developed form of the species. (Roughley 2021, §5.2)

This naturalistic grounding for both flourishing and morality is the EV’s Claim iii. As we’ll see: by emphasizing that performing the virtues is a matter of performing characteristically human functions well, in the sense of living the best human life, eudaimonic virtue ethicists argue that acting ethically also means acting in a way that benefits the agent. The understanding of virtue as fulfilling human nature or function (Claim iii) thus provides the grounding for virtue’s connection to eudaimonia. This grounding of ethics in humans’ nature or characteristic qualities further provides an empirical grounding for virtue. These advantages make eudaimonic virtue ethics appealing to moral realists who wish to establish a firm and objective foundation for ethics without reference to a supernatural source.

**Claim iii: Naturalism**

The third claim of the Eudaimonic View is that virtue consists in doing well or perfecting that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function, and the related idea that what it means to “do well” for someone—e.g., a human—is grounded in human nature.

First, we must say what is meant by ‘human nature.’ As Roughley (2021) notes, Aristotle’s theory of human nature has been extremely influential in Western philosophy, and continues to structure much contemporary discussion. Aristotle’s conception of human nature is teleological in the sense that it describes features that “function as blueprints for something like a fully realised form.” (Roughley 2021, §1.2) To say that human nature is teleological is to claim that humans have a telos: a goal or purpose. As Kim explains—drawing on Foot (2001) and Thompson (2008)—features that are identified as characterizing human nature are not just what is “unique, most common, or statistically normal.” (Kim 2018, 142) Rather, he writes, a creature’s function or telos is determined by:

identifying those characteristic features of a particular species that are necessary for flourishing qua member of its species. For example, ‘Owls see in the dark’ or ‘Male peacocks have colorful tails’ are Aristotelian categoricals because they mark out characteristics that are necessary for owls and male peacocks to achieve those ends that are constitutive of their flourishing, such as self-maintenance and
survival. These are not, however, universally quantifiable statements since an owl could have defective eyes or a disease may have deformed a particular male peacock’s tail. Judgments, therefore, about the goodness or defect pertaining to a particular organism must appeal to facts about the kind of species to which the particular organism belongs. (2018, 142)

From an eudaimonic virtue ethical perspective, then, virtue is grounded in objective facts about a species. In particular, though, the virtues are grounded in an appeal to those species-characteristic functions that allow a member of that species to do well or flourish. A given member of a species (e.g., a human) can be said to be flourishing if she has developed those characteristics, or fulfilled that function, that allows her to perform the activities that ideally characterize that species’ special kind of life. She does poorly if she is unable to develop these characteristics—e.g., because of “deformity”.

In other words, human nature should be thought of as forward-looking, not describing what humans possess from birth but what they will possess in their ideal, healthy, and adult forms. Aristotle’s—and, as we will see, Mengzi’s and many contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethicists’—teleological, or forward-looking, understanding entails seeing human nature as something to be fulfilled:

a human’s ‘nature’, like that of any other being, may be either the features in virtue of which it is disposed to develop to a certain mature form or… the form to which it is disposed to develop. Importantly… It is not only the form to the realisation of which human neonates are disposed; it is also the form that mature members of the species ought to realise (Politics 1253a). (Roughley 2021, §1.2)

Human nature in this sense is both explanatory and normative. Given that human nature is both supposed to describe what humans are disposed to become and what they should become, it stands to reason that from an Aristotelian standpoint being a virtuous or excellent human must mean conforming to this human nature. Although writing in a different tradition, Mengzi, like Aristotle, has a teleological but naturalistic understanding of human nature.69 So, for both classical traditions with which this dissertation is engaging, we

---

69 As A.C. Graham explains, human nature (xing, 性) for Mengzi “seems never to be looking back toward birth, always forward to the maturation of continuing growth.” (1976, 2) That is, to say that something is natural is not to suggest that it is innate or present at birth, but that it will develop if unimpeded. Mengzi’s EV-M, including his naturalism, is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.
can define human nature as having a dual meaning: that which humans are disposed to develop into, and that
dwhich they should develop into.

So eudaimonic virtue ethicists hold, through Claims ii and iii of the EV, that virtue consists in
fulfilling one’s human function or nature, and that virtue is a necessary feature of flourishing (eudaimonia).\(^{70}\) In
short, the argument goes like this: humans have a set nature or function; fulfilling that set nature or function
just is doing “well” for a human (both ethically and for the human). And, this understanding of human nature
is both “essentialist”—insofar as it purports to capture features that essentially characterize human life—and
“objectivist,” in that this understanding of what characterizes human life (and the best human life) is
purportedly based on empirical facts about humans as a species.

So, eudaimonic virtue ethics is naturalistic: to know what virtue is, we must determine the best way to
fulfill human nature, or the best way to live the kind of life humans are disposed to, and ought to, live. To
discover this, we aim to empirically investigate what human nature is like. As Annas notes,

> any ethics based on virtue requires an account of the good life which the virtues enable us to achieve. On this issue of the good life most modern forms of virtue ethics are naturalistic, and often take a form called neo-Aristotelian [or eudaimonism], harking back to the best-known naturalistic theory from antiquity, Aristotle’s. When we are investigating what the good life is, these theories hold, and how living virtuously might achieve it, we are aided by investigating our human nature. This in turn we do by seeing how we humans are a part, though a distinctive part, of the world that the sciences tell us about. (Annas 2005, 11)

We noted previously that eudaimonic virtue ethics is opposed to both deontic theories and to ethical monism.
This is because it is aretaic, and evaluates moral goodness on person’s characters rather than actions, rules, or
meta-value that justifies virtues’ goodness. Relatedly, it is opposed to grounding the virtues in a supernatural
or metaethical source outside of human nature. This is because of virtue’s connection to an objectivist
understanding of human life, capacities, needs, and function.

As Annas goes on to explain, this rejection of a supernatural grounding for virtue is entailed by the
theory’s naturalism. She writes that “Some virtue theories… urge us to find out about our human nature only

\(^{70}\) As Annas points out, “Virtue is seen as a means to, or a part of, or as constituting the whole of, happiness (depending on the theory).” (1998, 41)
to transcend it. Achieving the good life is, on such theories, not a matter of fulfilling our human nature but of striving to achieve a different kind of existence, a divine one.” (2005, 11–12) Although “[t]his is obviously a perfectly possible form for virtue ethics to take,” it is not the kind of virtue ethics we are interested in here. (2005, 12) Rather, we are interested in a virtue ethics that includes the advantageous feature of naturalism, providing an understanding of morality as grounded in discoverable facts about the natural world, and of eudaimonism, providing an understanding of morality as also benefiting virtuous agents (this distinguishes the EV from divine command theory). Eudaimonic virtue ethics, because of its close connection between virtue and objectively doing well from a species-normative perspective, must ground virtue in what human life, here and now, is like. That said—as will be further discussed in Chapter 4—the EV need not deny the existence of a supernatural source for human nature, so long as virtues are grounded in fulfilling humans’ function in a sense that is empirically discoverable, in line with what contemporary science tells us about the natural world, and contributes to our flourishing in this life.

The claim that virtue consists in doing well that which characterizes human life is often supported by what has been known as the “function argument.” Aristotle’s version of the function argument is likely the most familiar for those trained in the Western philosophical tradition. Aristotle’s version of the argument goes as follows: 71

(i) For all things, goodness is properly understood as performing its function well.
(ii) Thus, human good can be determined by ascertaining humans’ function.
(iii) Human function is “activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason.” (NE, 1098a7)
(iv) Therefore, human good is the good (or excellent) performance of “activity and actions of the soul that involve reason.” (NE, 1098a15)

Aristotle adds that “every function [ergon] is completed well by being completed in accord with the virtue proper to that kind of thing. And so the human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue.” (NE, 1098a15–20) So, virtue turns out to be “a quality that makes you good at performing your function,” and virtues for Aristotle are “qualities that make us good at rational activity.” (Korsgaard 2008, 133)

71 All from Aristotle (trans. Irwin, 2019) NE Book I.
Eudaimonism (Claim ii) both implies and is implied by Claim iii. By emphasizing that performing the virtues is a matter of performing characteristically human functions well, in the sense of living the best human life, eudaimonic virtue ethicists argue that acting ethically also means acting in a way that benefits the agent; the function argument thus provides the grounding for virtue’s connection to eudaimonia.\(^2\) Note that in this view, any \(x\) is good if it performs its function well. So, the function argument provides the normative basis not only for humans but for life in general (though different living things will have different functions). This grounding of ethics in humans’ nature or characteristic qualities further provides an empirical grounding for virtue. As Annas points out,

> What is so helpful for ethics from this kind of biological naturalism is that we find that the normativity of our ethical discourse is not something which emerges mysteriously with humans and can only be projected back, in an anthropomorphic way, onto trees and their roots. Rather, we find normativity in the realm of living things, plants and animals, already. (2005, 13)

Similarly, Kim has argued that “some version of the Empirical Science Assumption”— i.e., that human function or nature is empirically discoverable—“is necessary for maintaining one of the central ideas of Aristotelian naturalism: that the criteria for moral goodness and defect is given its objective foundation in facts about human nature.” (2018, 141; here, he is critically responding to Lott 2012) A significant advantage of eudaimonic virtue ethics over other normative theories, then, is that it posits a fully naturalistic or empirical grounding for morality. That is, the theory suggests that it is possible to discover what morality requires through studying the scientific or natural world.

This further allows for an “accessibility desideratum,” insofar as this naturalistic grounding of virtue implies that virtue is accessible or discoverable. This is not necessarily the case for moral theories that are not grounded in what humans or human life is actually like. That is, just as it was argued earlier that that deontological rules or utilitarian calculus do not meet the “Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism,”

\(^2\) Julia Peters similarly explains that: “the notion of virtue is tied to that of human flourishing, in both its subjective and its objective meaning. Thus neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists tend to be sympathetic to ethical naturalism and consider it one of the strengths of their theories that they seek to ground morality in human nature by associating moral excellence with human flourishing understood as natural human perfection. Regarding the subjective connotation of flourishing, they tend to share the ambition of demonstrating that the virtues benefit their possessor and enable him to flourish in the sense of leading a happy life.” (2013, 1)
(PMPR) (Flanagan 1993), virtue ethicists could also argue that the deontic theories do not meet a “Principle of Minimal Accessibility” insofar as nothing about their theories suggests that their moral rules or principles are attainable to creatures like us given our particular nature or embeddedness in a natural world.

While of course these theories do purport to be possible to enact, as we have seen they often require going against human nature (i.e., by suggesting we disregard our emotional natures or social situatedness). This denies the PMPR. What’s more, because the good is determined not with reference to the natural world but to some supposedly universal, abstract rational principle(s), coming to understand and enact what these rules require may be beyond humans’ natural capacities.

These advantages make eudaimonic virtue ethics appealing to moral realists who wish to establish a firm and objective foundation for ethics without reference to a supernatural source. Virtue can be identified by considering the agent’s function. It is thus objectivist—neither virtue, nor the eudaimonia of which virtue is a constitutive part, is based merely on the subjective experience of the agent. Rather, both virtue and eudaimonia are measured based on the extent to which the agent fulfills her function. In short, eudaimonist virtue ethicists hold that (a) there is a universal, objective human good (eudaimonia); (b) this good is determined by discovering what is characteristically human; and (c) one seeks the good by developing character traits (virtues) grounded in human nature that allow one to perform one’s human function well.

Only by appealing to human nature can such a universal characteristic or function be determined, because appealing outside of human nature would require appealing to some larger justification of the “good” to explain why humans do what we do. That is, an ethical theory which provides a non-human-nature grounding for determining human virtue would have to posit some other grounding, e.g., a strongly teleological or supernatural one. Rather than using the function argument to provide an empirical grounding for morality, these theories would simply push the grounding back a step, such that another moral grounding

---

73 One consequence of this is that an agent can be mistaken about what contributes to her eudaimonia. Another is that, depending on the characteristic(s) a theory posits as describing a fully and properly human life, some humans who relevantly deviate from the norm may not be capable of achieving eudaimonia. Finally, any understanding of function in this view must be forward-looking or aspirational, in the sense that it describes not just what humans automatically do from birth but how we best “lead our specific form of life.” (Korsgaard 2008, 144)
is required to explain why humans should fulfill their function. These ethical frameworks have much of interest to discuss, but they remain outside the scope of this project because they are departures from the EV. And, these alternate groundings do not share the EV’s strength of empirically grounding morality by looking at human lives, capacities, and needs.

We have shown that, for proponents of the EV, virtues (and character traits in general) are the object of moral praise or blame; virtues contribute to flourishing; and flourishing is a matter of fulfilling our species’ characteristic function or form of life. But how are we to determine what one’s species-function is? As Kim (2018), Annas (2005), and Peters (2013) have argued, it is through scientific observation about (in this case human) nature and lives. By identifying humans’ capacities, needs, characteristics, and typical ways of life, the EV holds, we can determine the characteristics we must develop, based on our capacities, needs, and environment, to do well what it is that humans can do.

Eudaimonic virtue ethics can take a strong or a weak form. The strong form, as we saw above, claims that virtues are worth developing because they contribute to eudaimonia. The weak form agrees that developing virtues contributes to eudaimonia, but it isn’t committed to the claim that this is why we should develop virtues. I have argued that only the weaker claim—that virtue is part of human flourishing—is necessary for a view to count as sufficiently eudaimonic for the core EV. Similarly, humans’ function (ergon) and telos can be understood in stronger or weaker ways.

Like eudaimonia, ergon, or function, is difficult to translate and has different connotations in Ancient Greek than it does in contemporary English. As Christine Korsgaard explains, “function or ergon has a wider range of meanings than just ‘purpose.’ It can be used to mean work or workings or product or characteristic

---

74 Hursthouse and Pettigrove claim for instance that “we ought to develop virtues, the eudaimonist claims, precisely because they contribute to eudaimonia.” (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018) The strong form of eudaimonism, as we saw above, has been criticized as “egoistic,” since in this form of virtue ethics performing good acts is ultimately justified because it contributes to the agent’s eudaimonia (Hurka 2015, 14–15). In other words, critics claim, virtue ethics posits an ethical system in which doing the right thing is always good for me, which they see as an unacceptable selfish foundation. It is important to keep these distinctions between the weak and stronger forms of eudaimonia because many critics of virtue ethics (those who argue it is egoistic) seem to assume the stronger form.
activity.” (Korsgaard 2008, 134–35) But how do we know what our human function is, and how is this related to human nature? As Christine Korsgaard further explains,

when Aristotle says that the function of a human being is the activity of the rational part of the soul, he does not mean simply that reasoning is the purpose of a human being. Nor does he mean merely that it is a characteristic activity of human beings, if we understand that to mean only that it is an activity which, as it happens, picks out the species uniquely. He means rather that rational activity is how we human beings do what we do, and in particular, how we lead our specific form of life. (2008, 144)

Because this understanding of function aims to capture the “how a thing does what it does” of human life, it seems that the function argument must appeal to human nature, even if that nature is not seen as designed for a purpose. (Korsgaard 2008, 138) This is a consequence of combining the function argument and the objectivist understanding of eudaimonia.

For reasons that will become apparent, I believe it is crucial that Aristotle’s assertion about humans’ particular function—that “the human function is... activity and actions of the soul that involve reason”—be separated from the more basic claim that discovering humans’ function is the path to discovering virtue. In other words, the function argument should be taken as the argument that virtue is what allows us to do well that which is characteristically human, irrespective of what “characteristically human” turns out to be. That (barer) claim is part of the EV, as I am describing it.

In the weaker sense, a function can be regarded as ‘how a thing does what it does,’ which requires that the thing (in this case, a human) does something, and that it can do it well or poorly. This could not be the case if the function were automatic. Just as we might say that humans naturally have language—despite the fact that language must be learned, and some humans can, due to external barriers, fail to learn it—we can appeal to human nature to argue that humans naturally are, or have the potential to be, virtuous. This can be distinguished from other aspects of human nature which do not need to be cultivated or developed, like

---

75 That is, the latter half of this claim; that “the function of an excellent man is to do this [characteristic human function] well and finely.” (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1098a13–15) As we will see, what characterizes human nature will be a crucial point of difference between Aristotle and Mengzi.
breathing or aging. Moreover, this reflects the common classical position that human nature should be
determined by appealing to features that humans do not share with non-human animals.76

Claim iv: Practical Wisdom

Practical wisdom (phronesis—also sometimes translated as prudence) is bound up with virtue for the
eudaimonic virtue ethicist insofar as it is necessary to guide virtuous action or to fully recognize what virtue
requires. Because virtue ethics is casuistic, it places emphasis on the ability to discover what response is called
for in a given situation. That is, a virtuous person must be able to recognize what is required in order to
respond virtuously without reference to a guiding principle.

Virtue ethics' casuistry thus requires the postulation of some kind of practical reasoning (of which
practical wisdom is the virtue) because it cannot otherwise explain how an agent would come to decide what
is ethically required in a given (fraught or difficult) situation. As Rosalind Hursthouse notes,

It is generally recognized that practical wisdom comes into play in the correct resolving of difficult
dilemmas... In the favoured case, the agent is faced with a resolvable dilemma, one in which good
reasons conflict, recommending different and incompatible actions, and it is not obvious, to those
who lack phronesis [practical wisdom], that one of the actions, not the other, is the right thing to do in
the situation. Typically, those with only natural virtue will make a mistake, whereas the phronimos
[practically wise person] knows which is the right thing to do and acts accordingly. (2021, 289)77

Although proponents of the EV vary widely on their understandings of what, exactly, practical wisdom is,
and the role it plays in guiding virtue (as we'll see in the following chapter), they all must endorse some
version of practical wisdom in the wide sense of the ability “to understand what is truly worthwhile, truly
important, and thereby truly advantageous in life, [to] know, in short, how to live well.” (Hursthouse and
Pettigrove 2018, §1.2) This includes knowing how to act in accordance with virtue, because virtue is a
constituent part of the good life.

76 Hence, Aristotle argues that we should “set aside” those aspects of nature which are shared with animals (NE, 10987a)
and Mengzi argues that the nature of humans is not characterized by “life” (which Zhu Xi explains “refers to that by
means of which humans and animals have awareness and move”) nor is it the same as other animals. (Mengzi, trans. Van
Norden, 2008, 6A3, plus Zhu Xi's commentary, 144) I am indebted to Richard Kim for the language analogy.

77 However, because practical wisdom is rare (in the Aristotelian conception, being possessed only by agents who are
fully virtuous), it is likely not the case that practical wisdom is required to determine the correct moral response to “easy”
moral dilemmas. (Hursthouse 2021, 289)
Because virtue ethics refuses to evaluate actions in isolation based on universalizable rules, practical wisdom is necessary for the virtuous agent to determine what a given ethical situation requires or calls for.

Practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, is what allows the *phronimos*, moral exemplar or virtuous agent, to correctly act as virtue requires. Again, this is because eudaimonic virtue ethicists endorse a theory of moral development and practice that is situationally responsive and idiosyncratically dependent on each agent’s history, personality, capacities, needs, and context. Practical wisdom can be regarded as the virtue the possession of which allows for the perfection of practical reason—whatever practical reason is regarded to be, which as we’ll see varies—and so for developing into a virtuous and flourishing agent and for acting with full virtue.78

As Hursthouse explains, practical wisdom has been understood in two primary ways, which she calls the “generalist” and “perceptual” models. She writes:

we might expect Aristotle to answer the question ‘What special knowledge does the Aristotelian *phronimos* have that we lack, that enables him to avoid the mistakes in action to which we are all no doubt prone? What does he know that we lesser mortals don’t know that enables him to hit the mean in action?’ That way of putting it suggests that the answer would be of the form ‘He knows that such and such,’ and then, thinking in terms of the aspirations of modern ethical theory, we might well assume that what he knows is a system of what we would call ‘moral principles’. Pursuing this line of thought, some commentators arrive at the idea that knowledge of, say, *eudaimonia* the good life or how one should live or *eupraxia* acting well is propositional knowledge that *eudaimonia/eupraxia* is doing ..., where, ideally, the dots are filled in with a system of what we would call ‘moral principles’. Call this the generalist model… Answering that question in a rather limited way, what we may call 'the perceptual model' takes the special knowledge the phronimos has to be (akin to) a perceptual capacity to see correctly what he is to do or what acting well is in a particular situation. This may share with the generalist model the idea that the *phronimos* has an especially superior conception of the universal *eudaimonia/eupraxia* which he puts into practice when he makes his choice to do such-and-such here and now, but if so, denies that there is anything more to his superior conception than his capacity to get things right. (2021, 286–287)

These different understandings of the character of practical wisdom, as we will see in the following chapter, underlie two broad trends of interpretation within the Aristotelian tradition. What Hursthouse labels the

---

78 Aristotle distinguished between “natural” and “full” virtue in NE VI.13, stating “natural virtue is related to full virtue. For each of us seems to possess his type of character to some extent by nature… But still we look for some further condition to be full goodness, and we expect these features to belong to us in another way. For the natural states belong to children and to beasts as well as to adults, but without understanding they are evidently harmful… But if someone acquires understanding, he improves in his actions, and the state he now has, though still similar to the natural condition, will be fully virtue. And so, just as, in the part of the soul that has belief, there are two sorts of conditions, cleverness and prudence, so also there are two in the part that has character, natural virtue and full virtue. And of these full virtue cannot be acquired without prudence.” (1144b1–20)
“generalist” account, which suggests that practical wisdom is a kind of proposition knowledge, characterizes comparatively rationalistic readings of Aristotle. The “perceptual” model, on the other hand, is held by eudaimonists who comparatively emphasize the role of emotions in virtue development and practice.

In other words, for rationalistic strands of the Aristotelian tradition, practical wisdom is the virtue of practical reason, where practical reason is a kind of deliberation, calculation, or syllogistic reasoning. (Aristotle, *NE* VI, 1140a25–28; 1141b8–15) For more emotional strands, it is a kind of perceptual capacity or sensitivity to motivating moral facts of a given situation. For Mengzi, I will argue, practical reason is a kind of emotional-rational “resonance” or sympathetic recognition which allows us to recognize analogical similarities between situations and is cultivated through the processes of reflection and extension.79 But this is getting ahead of ourselves!

The important point to note for now is that this ability to determine and act on what is morally required—and to determine this through a grasp of the relationship between one’s particular situation, virtue, and *eudaimonia*—can differ for different strains of virtue ethics. Whatever it may look like, practical wisdom is necessary for developing and practicing virtue in an EV conception. Rejecting the role of practical wisdom in ethical development and action would be to reject the theory’s aretaicism and casuistry, and so to reject its purportedly greater psychological and empirical plausibility compared to deontic theories.

A positive feature of practical wisdom is that it helps to explain why humans generally believe both that doing the right thing requires effort, and that truly good people do the right thing not begrudgingly but happily (see Foot 2002 for an influential discussion of these intuitions). According to a eudaimonic virtue ethics framework, it is possible for a person to perform a seemingly virtuous action, but fail to be virtuous because they perform it begrudgingly. This observation highlights the motivational component of virtue; the idea that the virtuous person not only acts in certain virtuous ways, but is motivated to act virtuously and takes pleasure in these kinds of actions. How do good people develop this kind of motivational attitude?

---

79 For this understanding of Mengzian extension and reflection I am heavily indebted to the work of Phillip J. Ivanhoe, Emily McRae, Bryan Van Norden, and David B. Wong. I discuss this understanding in more detail in Chapter 4.
Aristotle brings out this aspect of virtue by asking us to consider the difference between genuine virtue and mere continence (*enkrateia*) (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019; Kristjánsson 2013). The continent person does the right thing but does so against their preferences—they act virtuously because they recognize the right thing to do, yet do not enjoy doing it. The virtuous person, by contrast, does the right thing, and in doing so, acts according to her preferences. Moreover, she has these preferences for the right reasons; as Aristotle (trans. Irwin, 2019) puts it, she must decide on the virtuous actions “for themselves” (*NE*, 1105a30). The crucial point: the continent person is not virtuous, because she lacks the proper motivational orientation towards virtuous action.80

By contrast, the virtuous person prefers virtuous action, and this is part of what makes her virtuous. Philipa Foot gives an example of the difference between continence and virtue in the case of charity. She notes that charity is:

> a virtue of attachment as well as action, and the sympathy that makes it easier to act with charity is part of the virtue. The man who acts charitably out of a sense of duty is not to be undervalued, but it is the other [who enjoys charitable action] who most shows virtue and therefore to the other that most moral worth is attributed. (2002, 11–12).

That is, someone fails to exhibit the true (or “full”; *NE* 1144b1–20) virtue of charity if he gives to charity because he knows he should but does not take pleasure in helping others. This is likewise true for other

---

80 Might a merely continent person be mistaken, not in her emotional orientation or appetites, but in her understanding of whether an action is good? Aristotle (2019) argues that “in [both] the continent and the incontinent person we praise their reason and the part of the soul that has reason, because it exhorts them correctly and toward whatever is best; but they evidently also have in them some other part that is by nature something apart from reason, clashing and struggling with reason… in the continent person [this non-rational part of the soul] obeys reason; and in the temperate and brave [i.e., virtuous] person it presumably listens still better to reason, since there it agrees with reason in everything.” (*NE*, 1102b15–30) Thus, for Aristotle, it seems that the continent person has the correct understanding of the good in a universal sense, but lacks a properly cultivated motivational attitude. In agreement with this point, we acknowledge that this motivational component may not be straightforwardly a matter of emotional orientation but also a matter of a misperception of the best way to achieve the (correctly determined) end of her action. For this reason, the motivational component of virtue should be understood as including emotions and appetites but also a recognition or perception of the properly motivating end, i.e., as conative as well as affective. Relatedly, the continent person does not possess *phronesis* (prudence or practical wisdom), an important rational component. See below for a more thorough discussion of *phronesis*’s role in virtue. See also McDowell (1979, 1980, 1998) for further discussion of *phronesis* as a kind of moral perception. Continence is, of course, still preferable to incontinence (*akrasia*). A virtuous person does what virtue requires happily, or with the correct motivational attitude. A continent person recognizes what virtue requires and does it begrudgingly, because what she determines by reason and what her appetites lead her toward differ. That is, though she lacks the proper affect, the continent person can still rationally determine what virtue requires. Finally, an incontinent person recognizes what virtue requires, but acts otherwise—i.e., in accordance with desires or appetites she knows are base (Aristotle 2019, 1145b10–20).
virtues: the truly just, brave, etc. person not only acts in a just or courageous way, but also is eager to do so. In the case of courage, this needn’t mean that the courageous person doesn’t feel fear, or relishes risking their life; rather, it means that they feel fear appropriately or to the right extent, such that they are able to overcome it when the situation merits it.

Thomas Douglas makes a similar point—noteing that one’s character affects the “effort limit,” “the maximal level of effort that the agent would have been prepared to expend in order to perform a similarly morally desirable action had greater effort been required” (2014b, 329). He argues that, while a virtuous person may expend less effort to perform a virtuous act, because the act is easier due to her character—and because the virtuous person would be willing to expend high effort—the ease with which she performs a virtuous act is morally praiseworthy. As we noted from Hursthouse above, “the phronimos has an especially superior conception of the universal eudaimonia or eupraxia which he puts into practice when he makes his choice to do such-and-such here and now.” (2021, 187) The practically wise (virtuous) agent recognizes how to act correctly in a given situation, i.e., as virtue requires, by grasping the connection her actions have to her own and her community’s flourishing.

Practical wisdom—for Aristotle as well as for all proponents of the EV—is an essential component of achieving full virtue. Aristotle states that “the man of practical wisdom is one who will act (for he is a man concerned with the individual facts) and who has the other virtues,” and that, for a virtuous action or choice, “the choice will not be right without practical wisdom any more than without virtue; for the one [virtue] determines the end and the other [practical wisdom] makes us do the things that lead to the end.” (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, NE, Book VII, 1146b9; Book VI, 1145a) And, like other proponents of the EV, Aristotle recognizes that practical wisdom is necessary in order to give virtue ethics its action-guiding character, by providing the means by which a virtuous person determines actions that will contribute to the good (trans. Irwin, 2019, NE Book VI, 1144a5–10, 2244b10–15, 1144b30–1145a10). However, Aristotle’s description of practical wisdom is also, as Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, “notably elliptical, and in need of paraphrase and
interpretation.” (2007, 162) For this reason, Aristotle’s account allows for these differing “rational” and “emotional” interpretations (which are treated in detail in Chapter 2).

Regardless of the way proponents of the EV conceive of practical wisdom, its inclusion in the theory is beneficial in a number of ways. First, as we have seen, it helps to provide virtue ethics’ action-guidance by explaining how virtuous agents come to develop the casuistic reasoning or sensitivity that helps to guide their development and action. It also helps to explain what these virtuous agents are like, by positing a theory of moral development through which *phronimoi* come to embody or internalize their understanding of virtue in accordance with an overall picture of virtue as connected to human nature and eudaimonia. In this way it also provides a characterization of virtuous agents that accords with our commonsense understanding of good people as easily and happily doing what’s right, yet of doing the right thing as also requiring effort. Like other features of the EV, then, Claim iv—the claim that practical wisdom is required for full virtue—positions eudaimonic virtue ethics as more intuitively plausible than deontic theories.

1.6 Virtue Ethics’ Core: The Relationship and Implications of the EV’s Core Claims

I have identified four primary tenets of contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics: (i) aretaicism; (ii) eudaimonism; (iii) naturalism; and (iv) practical wisdom. Together, I called these the Eudaimonic View of virtue (EV). How are these related to the five advantages of virtue ethics that were detailed in §1.2 above? Recall that these features were aretaicism, psychological harmony, emotional and communal cultivation, casuistry, and eudaimonism. Aretaicism is, in effect, Claim i—this claim also includes an understanding of virtue as emotionally and community cultivated through its empirically supported understanding of character traits. Psychological harmony and emotional cultivation are both entailed by Claim iii, insofar as both of these features are a product of virtue ethics’ conviction that virtue—and morality generally—is grounded in human nature, and thus must be both psychologically plausible and possible to cultivate; virtue ethics’ casuistry is Claim iv, differently stated—that is, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is regarded by virtue ethicists as required for...

---

81 Sarah Broadie similarly laments that this topic is “rough terrain for commentators, being densely thicketed with controversy.” (1991, 179)
virtue because the theory denies codification of ethical rules in favor of a recognition of the importance of
casuistry and situational responsiveness. And, as we saw, practical wisdom understood as grasping the
connection between eudaimonia and virtue further helps to explain our intuition that good people want to do
the right thing but that doing the right thing also requires effort. Finally, eudaimonism is the EV’s Claim ii.
So, each of virtue ethics’ five advantages are directly related to the EV’s four core claims.

Mine is not the first attempt to define characteristic features of eudaimonic virtue ethics. To provide
a few examples: Mark Alfano (2013b), in his “Identifying and Defending the Hard Core of Virtue Ethics,”
aims to define the “hard core” of virtue ethics; in his *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) devotes a
chapter to discovering the “Nature of the Virtues”; Bryan Van Norden (2007) provides a ‘thin’
characterization of virtue ethics in his *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, which he
takes to characterize both Western virtue ethics and Confucian theories; Christine Swanton (2013) provides
her own “Definition of Virtue Ethics” in an essay of the same name; and virtue ethics overviews and
introductions, like Hursthouse and Pettigrove’s (2018) “Virtue Ethics” (in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of
Philosophy*), and Peters’ (2013) *Aristotelian Ethics in Contemporary Perspective*, also offer their own definitions and
characteristics of the theory. In this section, I summarize each of these accounts and use them to further
make the case for my own list of four features.

**Alternative Conceptions of Eudaimonic Virtue Ethics’ Core**

**Alfano.** As Alfano points out, (eudaimonic) virtue ethics as a theory makes “substantive empirical
assumptions about human motivation and action.” (2013b, 234) As we have remarked, this is due to the
theory’s insistence that the virtues are grounded in human nature. Drawing from philosophy of science,
Alfano notes that an adequate theory must have a “conjunction of claims that [it] must defend at all costs,”

---

82 This is far from an exhaustive list, but represents a sampling of approaches. Alfano (2013b) identifies the “hard core”
by taking a scientific approach, aiming to address the situationist critique and discover what falsifiable hypotheses the
theory contains. MacIntyre (1997) takes a historical approach, and aims to find a common conception among historical
(2013), and Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2018) all synthesize influential contemporary virtue ethical accounts to provide a
broad introduction to virtue ethics generally, one which is palatable to today’s self-described virtue ethicists.
such that the “theory is not falsified until its hard core can no longer be protected by new auxiliary hypotheses, or until such hypotheses grow so ad hoc that researchers abandon it and seek an alternative.” (2013b, 235–236) This seems basically right to me. If I am to defend eudaimonic virtue ethics against its criticisms, I must first identify which features are essential to the theory. Anything outside of those features may be altered to respond to criticisms, but these core features must remain if the theory is to be properly considered a type of virtue ethics.

Moreover, losing these key features would not only make the modified theory no longer a eudaimonic virtue ethical one, it would also mean that this new theory would lose the advantages (discussed in detail above) associated with these features. In this chapter, one of my aims has thus been to identify a “hard core” of virtue ethics, in the same vein as Alfano. However, my “core” (the EV) is more modest than Alfano’s, in that I claim only (a) that these features are primary or core in the sense that one departs further from a standard type of eudaimonic virtue ethics with the loss of each feature; and (b) that the loss of each feature also entails the loss of a significant “pro” of virtue ethics. While my EV is more modest than Alfano’s hard core, it is also more ambitious than the bare lists of characteristic features typically provided by anthologies and introductions to virtue ethics in that it aims not only to provide a descriptive account of typical features, but also to argue that they are advantageous. As we have seen, my EV is both normative and descriptive. Descriptive in that it aims to capture a “core” of eudaimonic theories, but normative insofar as it is tied directly to the advantages of eudaimonic virtue ethics as empirically and psychologically plausible.

Alfano (2013b) posits nine features of virtue ethics’ hard core: acquirability, stability, consistency, access, normativity, real saints, explanatory power, predictive power, and egalitarianism. He explains that these are the claims, respectively, that (1) it is possible for non-virtuous people ”to acquire some of the virtues”; (2) the virtues are stable in the sense that they persist over time; (3) the virtues are consistent in the sense that they are activated in relevantly similar contexts; (4) it is “possible to determine what the virtues are”; (5) the virtues are normatively weighted, in the sense that it is good to have them; (6) saints, or moral exemplar, exist in the human population; if someone has a virtue, it will (7) “sometimes help explain her
behavior”; and (8) help predict her behavior; and (9) “[a]lmost anyone can reliably act in accordance with virtue.” (Alfano 2013b, 242)

Although Alfano’s (2013b) core is helpful, it builds in some aspects that some Classical virtue ethicists may not have endorsed. For example, his first, sixth, and ninth claims, about the acquirability of some virtues by non-virtuous people, the existence of moral exemplars, and the possibility of acting according to virtue, suggest that virtue is more common than Aristotle seemed to think. Indeed, Aristotle specifically states that it is “hard work to be excellent,” and that living well or developing the virtues “is rare, praiseworthy, and fine.” (NE 1109a24–31) He even suggests that some people—“natural slaves”—are precluded from achieving the virtues by nature (Aristotle, trans. Jowett, 1999, Politics, 1254b17–24, 1260a12, 1260b3–4; Curzer 2012). Alfano’s first claim further denies the unity of the virtues, which not only Aristotle but many contemporary virtue ethicists endorse (Annas 2012; NE 1144b30–1145a5; Stohr 2015).

Although I have argued that the EV’s naturalism provides it an advantage over deontic theories because it suggests that morality is discoverable or accessible due to its grounding in the natural world, this should not be taken to mean that all versions of the EV hold that virtues are acquirable by everyone. And, because Alfano does not include any reference to how the virtues are acquired, or their connection to human nature, his “hard core” would seemingly describe divine command theories as well as eudaimonic (empirical or naturalistic) virtue ethical theories. So, his description—though helpful—is not sufficient for our purposes.

**MacIntyre.** Alasdair MacIntyre is interested, in “Nature of the Virtues,” in identifying a “single core conception” of virtue despite the apparent disparity even within historical Western virtue ethical traditions (to say nothing of non-Western and contemporary virtue ethics). (MacIntyre 1997, 118) He argues that such a core conception can be identified by investigating “three stages in the logical development of the concept [of virtue]: a background account of what I shall call a practice... an account of the narrative order of a single human life, and... an account of what constitutes a moral tradition.” (MacIntyre 1997, 124)

MacIntyre further argues that the background account of a practice is necessary for distinguishing between “external” and “internal” goods; it is characteristic of internal goods, he says, that “their achievement
is a good from the whole community who participate in the practice.” (1997, 124) And he defines practice, moreover, as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (1997, 124–25)

This description of virtue as a kind of “practice” provides a clear and helpful description of the intimate connection between virtue and community flourishing. If we further think of virtues as excellences or perfections of characteristic human functions or activities, and these functions as grounded in or connected to what it means to do well based on an objectivist and naturalistic understanding of humans’ characteristics, needs, or capacities, we can find in MacIntyre evidence to support the EV’s Claims i, ii, and iii.

Based on this background account, virtue ethical theories can, MacIntyre says, form “a first, even if partial and tentative definition of a virtue: A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.” (1997, 128; original emphasis) This account is helpful insofar as it provides a description of how the virtues are acquired and developed, which Alfano’s did not. An interesting feature of MacIntyre’s description is that it also emphasizes the social/relational features of virtue formation, thus corresponding with the positive feature of virtue ethics—in providing a psychologically and empirically plausible account of communal moral development—discussed in §1.2 above.

So, we can think of MacIntyre’s account as supporting and expanding on my own EV. It is not sufficient to provide a description of a core of virtue ethics, though; as MacIntyre himself says, his “preliminary account of the virtues in terms of practices captures much, but very far from all, of what the Aristotelian tradition taught about the virtues.” (1997, 140) His is “a partial and first account” of the virtues because it “locat[es] their point and function” within the context of practices rather than within the context of the good of a whole human life (i.e., *eudaimonia*). (1997, 138) We have noted that MacIntyre’s description of
virtues as practices is helpful for grounding *eudaimonia*, but this is only with the EV’s additional insight that virtues are connected to human nature and flourishing.

**Van Norden.** Bryan Van Norden’s thin characterization of (eudaimonic) virtue ethics includes four elements:

(1) an account of what a “flourishing” human life is like, (2) an account of what virtues contribute to leading such a life, (3) an account of how one acquires those virtues, and (4) a philosophical anthropology that explains what humans are like, such that they can acquire those virtues so as to flourish in that kind of life. (2007, 21)

The first element is eudaimonism, and an explanation of the same. Features 2 and 3, I think, are clear; they suggest that eudaimonic virtue ethics must explain how the virtues connect to flourishing and how they are developed. What Van Norden (2007) calls “philosophical anthropology” is essentially one’s understanding of human nature. As he notes, “A philosopher’s account of ethical cultivation and her philosophical anthropology are typically closely related because how one becomes ethical depends very much on what the capacities, traits, and dispositions of humans are.” (2007, 43) In short, these features map onto my EV Claims i, ii, and iii. So, one thing that Van Norden’s description lacks compared to the EV is the emphasis on practical wisdom. That said, this description could of course account for the role of practical wisdom in describing how the virtues are acquired or connected to flourishing. So, Van Norden’s account is similar to my own, aside from this point of emphasis.

For this dissertation, theories will only count as ascribing to the EV if they do hold that practical wisdom is required for virtue—again, understood as the ability “to understand what is truly worthwhile, truly important, and thereby truly advantageous in life, [to] know, in short, how to live well.” (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018) This is important for grounding the EV’s advantageous features of explaining both casuistry and the conception of virtuous agents as both easily virtuous and yet of virtue as difficult to acquire.

---

83 He again identifies these same four features, worded slightly differently, in his 2013 “Toward a Synthesis of Confucianism and Aristotelianism”, as “first, a conception of what a flourishing human life is like; second, a view of which virtues contribute to leading such a life; third, an account of what human nature is like, such that humans can have those virtues and flourish in that kind of life; and fourth, a theory of how, given what human nature is like, humans can cultivate the virtues so as to lead a flourishing life” (Van Norden 2013, 6).
Swanton. In her (2013) “The Definition of Virtue Ethics,” Christine Swanton argues that a virtue ethical theory will have the following four features:

(a) Traits are directly evaluated according to their point or function as virtues of character in the life of a good human being. That point or function is determined by their targets or aims. Some virtues are dispositions targeted at the well-being of the agent, but by no means all. Others are targeted at environmental good, the social fabric, the good of others, the raising of children, the preservation and appreciation of valued aesthetic and cultural objects, productivity, and so on. What makes a trait a virtue is determined directly by its target(s), and it is not a necessary condition of a trait being a virtue that it at least partially constitute or contribute to the flourishing (eudaimonia) of the agent....

(b) Acts are directly evaluated (as right) in terms of their hitting the targets of virtues.

(c) Conformity of acts to virtue rules for action such as “Be kind” is directly ascertained in terms of correct application of virtue concepts to acts...

(d) The sphere (domain of concern) of a virtue is directly evaluated as being the proper sphere of a virtue of character by reference to the point or function of that virtue in the life of a good human being. For example, on Hume’s view, the point of the virtue of justice is respect for the rules of justice (essentially those that pertain to property), as opposed to general utility or personal good, even though the rules themselves are evaluable in terms of long-term consequences for human good. But that does not imply that the sphere of the personal virtue of justice is consequences for the good of humans, either collectively or individually. (Swanton 2013, 332–333)

Her Claim (a) is, essentially, my Claim ii, eudaimonism, but with the important difference that (since she is aiming to provide a broader definition of virtue ethics, which includes non-eudaimonic theories) the “target” of virtue need not be connected to individual well-being. Her characterization thus includes virtue ethical theories that the EV does not, including sentimentalist virtue ethics (à la David Hume 1740, 1748, 1751 and Michael Slote 2010, 2017) and agent-centered or exemplarist virtue ethics (à la Linda Zagzebski 2010).

That said, as we’ll see, depending on how one defines individual flourishing some of the “targets” Swanton noes as non-eudaimonic could be conceived as under the umbrella of eudaimonism if individual flourishing is defined as connected to or dependent on, e.g. “environmental good, the social fabric, the good of others, the raising of children, the preservation and appreciation of valued aesthetic and cultural objects” (Swanton 2013, 332). Claims (b) and (c) are aspects of aretaicism, my Claim i; and Claim (d) is Claim iii, naturalism. Like Van Norden’s description above, Swanton’s characterization also does not include the necessity of practical wisdom.
Hursthouse and Pettigrove. Hursthouse and Pettigrove argue that virtue ethics “may, initially, be identified as the one that emphasizes the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to the approach that emphasizes duties or rules (deontology) or that emphasizes the consequences of actions (consequentialism).” (2018, para. 1) They further write that, for the virtue ethicist, virtue is “an excellent trait of character... a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor… to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways,” and that “the concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels as she should.” (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018) And, they also argue that virtue requires phronesis, or practical wisdom. So, their description includes Claims i and iv of the EV.

Like Swanton (2013), though, Hursthouse and Pettigrove are aiming to provide a broad description of virtue ethics, beyond describing eudaimonic virtue ethics alone. For this reason, their (bare) definition does not include a reference to eudaimonia (Claim ii). However, they also provide a description of eudaimonic virtue ethics as theories that define “virtues in terms of their relationship to eudaimonia. A virtue is a trait that contributes to or is a constituent of eudaimonia and we ought to develop virtues, the eudaimonist claims, precisely because they contribute to eudaimonia.” (2018, §2.1) However, as we’ve noted above, this description is problematic because it assumes a strong eudaimonism, while only a weaker eudaimonism (that defines the virtues as contributing to flourishing but does not argue that they are worth pursuing for this reason) is required by my EV. Moreover, Hursthouse and Pettigrove do not explicitly tie eudaimonia to human nature, and so do not provide a version of the EV’s Claim iii (naturalism).

Peters. Peters is focused on “neo-Aristotelian”—or eudaimonic—virtue ethical theories, and identifies several “central tenets” of these theories:

(i) “that the notion of virtue is tied to that of human flourishing, in both its subjective and its objective meaning;”
(ii) that “neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists tend to be sympathetic to ethical naturalism and consider it one of the strengths of their theories that they seek to ground morality in human nature by associating moral excellence with human flourishing understood as natural human perfection;”
(iii) that “the notion of virtue, and the associated conception of acting virtuously or acting ‘from’ virtue, play a crucial if not fundamental role in moral philosophy;” and
they understand the virtues as morally excellent character traits that manifest themselves in their possessor's actions and comprise two essential elements, harmoniously united: habit on the one hand, practical reason on the other.” (2013, 1–2)

These claims roughly correspond to the EV’s Claim ii (eudaimonism), Claim iii (naturalism), and Claim i (for both Peters’ (iii) and (iv), respectively). And, Peters’ (iv) also includes the EV’s Claim iv (practical wisdom).

So, her description is the closest of those we’ve considered to the EV, and contains all four claims. However, it also goes beyond the EV by requiring not only practical wisdom but habituation as a necessary feature of virtue. Although habituation is an important part of Aristotle’s theory of moral development (as we have seen), it does not seem to me to be a required component of moral development for a theory to be considered an instantiation of the EV. As we’ll see in later chapters, Mengzi’s theory of moral development focuses not on habituation but on rituals and roles; nevertheless, I argue that he holds the EV’s core claims.

Relationships of the EV’s Claims

The primary features in my EV are, as we have seen: (i) that virtues (conceived of as excellent traits of character) are the foundation of ethics (aretaicism); (ii) that virtue contributes to the virtuous agent’s flourishing (eudaimonism); (iii) that virtue consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or of fulfilling human nature (naturalism); and (iv) that practical wisdom is required for achieving full virtue. The first claim seems to correspond to Alfano’s (2013b) claims that the virtues are stable and consistent, and implies his claims that the virtues will help explain and predict the virtuous agents’ behavior. It also matches Hursthouse and Pettigrove’s (2018) and Peters’ (2013) descriptions of virtues as excellent character traits.

Claims ii—the virtues’ grounding in human nature—is shared between my view, MacIntyre’s, Van Norden’s, and Peters’, with some differences in emphasis. My third claim (eudaimonism) is also echoed by Peters (2013), who like me—and unlike the other theorists just reviewed—aims to provide a definition of eudaimonic virtue ethical theory in particular. Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2018) and Peters (2013) also reference the important role of rationality or wisdom in practicing the virtues, in line with my claim (iv).

Taken together, the four core claims of the Eudaimonic View (EV) present the barest commitments to which contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethical theories adhere. Both classical and contemporary
proponents of the EV agree that virtues, conceived of as character traits, are the foundation of ethical action as well as an important component of eudaimonia (Claims i and ii); they recognize that practical wisdom is required to determine what is ethically called for in a situation (Claim iv); and they endorse a naturalist, universal understanding of human nature and a (weakly) teleological understanding of human nature as fulfilling human function (Claim iii).

I have argued that this EV not only presents a thin yet falsifiable description of eudaimonic virtue ethics’ core, but that it also helps to explain and ground the theory’s advantageous features of aretaicism, emotional cultivation, psychological harmony, communal moral education, casuistry, and eudaimonism. Thus, even if some eudaimonic virtue ethical theories may be captured by alternative descriptions of virtue ethics’ core—such as those offered by Alfano (2013b), MacIntyre (1997), Van Norden (2007), Swanton (2013), Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2018), and Peters (2013)—they miss out on at least some of these advantages as they lose these features.

Understanding the shared commitments of the EV helps show the extent to which contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethical theory is vulnerable to criticism by revealing which criticisms get to the heart of this view, and which attack elaborations of it. For example, we have seen that some characterizations of virtue ethics’ core, unlike the EV, posit a particular kind of connection between virtue and rationality. But my EV allows for a very thin account of rationality’s role in virtue, such that practical wisdom can be regarded as a kind of sensitivity or resonance. This will be important for understanding the competing interpretations of Aristotle’s eudaimonic virtue ethics within the Western tradition, as well as for positioning Mengzi’s theory in relation to the EV.

1.7 Organizational Outline and Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics offers certain advantages over other normative ethical theories. I have shown that one way of conceptualizing these improvements, which are also core tenets of contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics, is to identify what I call the
“Eudaimonic View” (EV) of virtue. The principal tenets of the EV—(i) aretaicism, (ii) eudaimonism, (iii) naturalism, and (iv) practical wisdom—are part of eudaimonic virtue ethics’ strengths.

Chapter 2

This chapter aims to develop two alternative frameworks through which Aristotle’s philosophy, and Aristotle’s interpreters throughout the Western tradition, can be understood: on one hand, as taking up an ethical account that emphasizes the role of reason in virtue, and, on the other, one that emphasizes the role of the emotions. Both frameworks acknowledge that reason and emotion each play a role in constituting virtue, and in its development and practice; the difference lies in what the relationship between reason and emotion looks like. I identify the versions of the EV’s central four claims that the rational and emotional readings respectively hold. In so doing, I also identify contemporary Aristotle scholars and virtue ethicists who hold relatively rational or emotional readings of each claim. I furthermore point to some other implications of holding each of these views—which I label the EV-R and EV-E, respectively.

Chapter 3

Despite contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics’ strengths, the theory has faced some influential criticisms. The strongest criticisms have been those by disability theorists, feminist philosophers, and empirical psychologists. Because these avenues of critique target characteristics that are central components of the Eudaimonic View, it’s difficult to see how contemporary theories can address them while retaining the advantages of the primary features already discussed. However, I show in this chapter that the rationalist (EV-R) and emotionist (EV-E) readings of the EV are also differently vulnerable to these criticisms.

Chapter 4

Having argued that contemporary camps of eudaimonic virtue ethics are differently vulnerable to the criticisms introduced in Chapter 3 based on their adherence to the rationalist or emotionist virtue ethics traditions traced in Chapter 2, Chapter 4 introduces an alternative way to respond to these critiques—by drawing on insights from Mengzi. This chapter introduces Mengzi’s classical theory, argues that it is an instantiation of the core EV, and compares it to the EV-R and EV-E. I argue in this chapter that Mengzi’s
philosophy is similar to Aristotle’s, but with important differences in the thinkers’ understandings of human nature and practical reasoning. The differences between these two classical groundings can also highlight an alternate grounding which contemporary virtue ethics can incorporate to face the criticisms discussed.

Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, I build off of the Mengzian EV (EV-M) introduced in Chapter 4 by arguing that this alternate grounding can, with modernizing tweaks, provide a fruitful resource for responding to the criticisms from Chapter 3. This chapter also includes a development of a contemporary version of Mengzi’s view.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 concludes with a summary of the dissertation, and explores implications and points for further research.
CHAPTER 2
RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL EUDAIMONIC VIEWS OF VIRTUE

2.1 Introduction: Rational and Emotional Models

This chapter aims to elucidate two alternative frameworks through which Aristotle’s philosophy, and Aristotle’s interpreters throughout the Western tradition, can be understood: on the one hand, as taking up an ethical account that emphasizes the role of reason in virtue, and, on the other, one that emphasizes the role of the emotions. Both frameworks acknowledge that reason and emotion each play a role in virtue; the difference lies in what exactly the relationship between reason and emotion looks like.

Here, I identify the versions of the EV’s central four claims (laid out in Chapter 1) that the rational and emotional readings respectively hold.1 First, I lay out paradigmatic versions of these claims—which I label the EV-R and EV-E, respectively—explore their points of difference, and point to the implications of each reading. I then identify historical and contemporary Aristotle scholars and eudaimonic virtue ethicists who hold relatively rational or emotional readings of each claim.

Why These Paradigms?

It’s clear that, for Aristotle—as well as for the Aristotelian or eudaimonic virtue ethics tradition broadly—reason and emotions are both important parts of virtue. Kraut (2022, para. 1) notes that Aristotle “regards the ethical virtues (justice, courage, temperance and so on) as complex rational, emotional and social skills”; Burnyeat (1980, 70–71) argues that for Aristotle “morality comes in a sequence of stages with both cognitive and emotional dimensions”; and Stohr (2015, 275) claims that “[f]or Aristotle, the exercise of virtue

---

1 As a reminder, the four claims of the EV are that: (i) virtues, in the sense of excellent character traits or dispositions are the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., aretaicism); (ii) virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., eudaimonism); (iii) virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function or fulfilling human nature (i.e., naturalism); and (iv) practical wisdom, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue.
is a complex skill, involving both appropriate emotional attunement (the job of the moral virtues) and correct judgment honed through experience (the job of practical wisdom).”

It was noted in Chapter 1 that the EV’s, including Aristotle’s, emphasis on the importance of emotion in moral development and practice can be regarded as a positive feature of eudaimonic virtue ethics—one which makes it more empirically plausible than deontic theories. As Kamtekar further notes,

Aristotle’s definition of virtue refers to both the intellectual and nonintellectual dispositions in which virtue consists. First, virtue is “concerned with choice,” which means that it is a disposition with respect to our desires on the one hand and reasoning on the other, for our choices are deliberate desires, desires made determinate by reasoning about how to realize some end (\textit{NE} iii.3, 1113a2–12; cf. vi.2, 1139a21–3). So according to Aristotle virtue is a disposition not only of the rational or intellectual faculty but also of the emotional and desiderative one. (2013, 35)

Aristotle’s understanding of virtue is thus importantly predicated on his moral psychology. Aristotle believes that the soul can be divided, as Kamtekar (2013) explains, into rational and nonrational parts (or faculties); both parts play a role in developing virtues.\(^3\) Although not all contemporary proponents of the EV will accept this division, Western proponents of the EV are heavily indebted to Aristotle (and for this reason, eudaimonic virtue ethics is sometimes known as neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics). (Annas 2015; Hutton 2015; Peters 2013; Roughley 2021) As we will see, this Aristotelian moral psychology has played an important role in the development of the Western EV—especially more rationalistic versions.

There is disagreement among both contemporary and historical philosophers about what specific roles these two parts of the soul play—whether for Aristotle or in virtue ethical theory more broadly.\(^4\) For example, Stohr’s definition above emphasizes that virtue requires “appropriate emotional attunement,” while

---


\(^3\) As we will see, the nonrational part can be further divided into a strictly nonrational part and a part that is rational in a sense, in that it “listens” to reason (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, \textit{NE}, 1103a2–3). Aristotle’s tripartite division of the soul is deeply influenced by Plato’s. In addition to emotions, other nonrational faculties include appearance or imagination (\textit{phantasia}), perception (\textit{aesthēsis}), and (non-rational) desire (\textit{orexis}, which includes appetite [\textit{epithumia}] and spirit [\textit{thumos}], as opposed to rational desire \textit{boulēsis}) (see \textit{NE} 1098a2, 1111b18, 1139a20, 1145b3, 1147b5, 1149a9–10, 1149a25–40, 1150b20, 1170a16). However, a detailed discussion of these faculties is outside the scope of this dissertation.

\(^4\) As we will see, there is also disagreement about Aristotle’s conception of human nature and function (\textit{ergon}), practical wisdom (\textit{phronesis}), and \textit{eudaimonia} based on which reading of Aristotle one endorses. (Rorty 1980; Burnyeat 1980)
Kamtekar emphasizes that desires are “made determinate by reasoning.” So—although again all proponents of the EV will hold that virtues are both rational and emotional—these descriptions seem to place the motivational starting point in different faculties or parts of the soul, and thus imply different degrees of emphasis on the roles of emotion vs. reason. Haybron (2008, 2010) notes a similar division—between what he calls “rationalist” and “sentimentalist” views—in contemporary attitudes toward well-being (or flourishing, *eudaimonia*). He defines rationalism, rather loosely and colloquially, as views that focus their attentions on high-level, analytic, or ‘rational’ processes in the views of human welfare, particularly agents’ considered or reflective judgments, as opposed to mere feelings, inclinations, or intuitive or instinctual reactions. Sentimentalists, by contrast, assign greater significance to the latter sorts of states. (2010, 14)

Haybron places himself on the “sentimentalist” side, and Jonathan Haidt—a fellow contemporary psychologist of well-being—on the rational side.

Similarly, Bernard Williams (1973), David Carr (2023), Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2000), Rosalind Hursthouse (2021) and Kuangfei Xie (2015) have noted divisions between more rational and sentimentalist or emotional understandings of virtue—whether throughout the Western virtue ethics tradition

5 As we will see, particularly subject to debate between these relatively rational and emotional readings are: (a) the role and character of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), since for Aristotle it is an intellectual virtue but necessary for the moral virtues, and is described in somewhat contradictory and opaque ways (see *NE* 1107a1, 1138b18–34, 1140a25–28, 1140b11–20, 1141a8–23, 1141b8–1142a30, 1142b33, 1144a18–29, 1144a31–36, 1144b14–1145a2, 1145a5–6, 1145a30, 1152a10–14, 1178a16–19); (b) whether emotion or reason identify the end of, or provides the motivation for, virtuous action (see *NE*, 1142b20, 1145a5–7, 1151a15–19; Broadie 1991 68–71; Kraut 2022, §7; Nussbaum 2001, 2; Sorabji 1974, 120; Yu 1998, 150, 325); and (c) what precisely it means to say that human nature is characterized by rationality or rational activity (see *NE* 1143a35–1143b10, 1144a9–25, 1168b34–1169a4, 1177b33, 1178a1–7, 1178b15–25; Aristotle *Politics* 1253a1–20, *De Anima* iii 5; Broadie 1991, 35–36; Korsgaard 2008, 141–145; Kristjánsson 2013, 431–432; Shields 2020). We have seen from Chapter I that practical wisdom is required for full virtue (Claim iv of the EV). But, as we’ll see, rationalists (proponents of the EV-R) and emotionists (proponents of the EV-E) will hold that practical reason is either akin to the skill of an expert, a process of deliberation or decision, or analogical reasoning, on the one hand, or akin to a perceptual capacity or sensitivity, on the other. Similarly, rationalists will hold that reason identifies the end of virtuous action, while emotionists will hold that emotions do; and rationalists will define human nature (Claim iii of the EV) as strictly or properly rational while emotionists will take a broader understanding of rational activity or “activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason” (*NE* 1098a7).

6 Note, however, that Haybron does not consider himself an Aristotelian and has substantive disagreements with (what he sees as) the Aristotelian/eudaimonic view of happiness, flourishing, or well-being.

7 Haybron describes himself as taking up a “more sentimentalist, less rationalistic, approach to human well-being than one usually finds in the philosophical literature… emphasizing the affective (‘sentimental’) dimensions of human flourishing, notably moods and emotions, according them greater significance than most views do.” (2010, 14) As Haybron notes, Haidt famously uses the metaphor of an “elephant and rider” to represent the role of emotion and reason in moral development, respectively (Haybron 2010, 16; Haidt 2006).
or among contemporary virtue theorists (as well as among moral philosophers more broadly). This debate between the relative roles of emotions vs. reason in virtue is thus a major feature of both the eudaimonic virtue ethics tradition and contemporary EV literature. And, these conflicting (rational vs. emotional) accounts are both plausible, since Aristotle himself seems to provide an incomplete or contradictory account of the role of reason in virtue. 8

As we shall see, what I am calling “rational” and “emotional” readings of Aristotle, or of the EV, can be distinguished based on the versions of the EV’s four key features they endorse. That is, both “rationalists” (proponents of the rational view, or EV-R) and “emotionists” (proponents of the emotional reading, or EV-E) will endorse the EV’s four features, but their particular understandings of these features will differ. Because these features, as we saw last chapter, are importantly bound up together, we will see that holding, e.g., a rationalist (or as Hursthouse [2006] calls it, “generalist”) understanding of practical wisdom will also imply a rationalist understanding of virtue, eudaimonia, and human nature.

As I will show, rationalists hold that virtue or virtuous action consists (at least in large part) of rational control of emotion; that a eudaimon life is characterized by rationality or rational activity understood strictly as ratiocination or contemplation; that human nature is fundamentally rational, or that rationality (again understood strictly) is what makes people people; and that practical wisdom is the perfection of a rational process. In short, these thinkers either read Aristotle as putting forward a view in which virtue is more rational than emotional or hold that such a view is a correct understanding of virtue.

8 For example, we could think of the conflict between his claim in NE 1105b2 that “knowledge is of little or no importance” for virtuous action and his claim in 1144b26–28 that “virtue is not only a characteristic which is guided by right reason, but also a characteristic which is united with right reason” (trans. Irwin, 2019). As this apparent tension suggests, much of this difficulty can also be understood as hinging on what “reason” is, and how it relates to knowledge. We also noted, in Chapter 1, that much of this discussion around the role of reason or knowledge in virtue can be connected to how one understands practical wisdom, which as Hursthouse (2006) pointed out has been understood along a spectrum of “generalist” accounts—which hold that practical wisdom is akin to propositional knowledge of how one’s actions accord with eudaimonia—and “perceptual” accounts—which hold that practical wisdom is akin to a perceptual capacity or sensitivity (Hursthouse 2006, 286–287). Other seeming points of conflict or which allow for differing interpretations in Aristotle’s account, as we will see below, are “inclusive” versus “dominant” readings of Aristotle’s account of eudaimonia (Taylor 2010); whether Aristotle’s moral psychology of the akratic and enkratic agents (in NE Books VI and VII) is supposed to be generalizable to moral agents as whole; and whether intellectual virtues are more choiceworthy than ‘moral’ or ‘character’ ones.
By contrast, emotionists hold that virtue or virtuous action consists (at least in large part) of attending to emotions, sentiments, or passions, which have normative content; that *eudaimonia* is characterized by a rich emotional and relational life; that human nature is fundamentally characterized by the possession of emotional instincts or sensitivities that can be developed into virtues, or that human nature is rational in a broad, inclusive sense that includes emotions that are responsive to reasons; and that practical wisdom is akin to a perfection of a natural sensitivity. In short, these thinkers either read Aristotle as putting forward a view in which virtue is more emotional than rational, or hold that such a view is a correct understanding of virtue.

This is not to say that every contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethicist, or every historical commentator on or interpreter of Aristotle, can be cleanly labeled a rationalist or emotionist, nor is it to say that most proponents of the EV endorse all four claims of either the EV-R or the EV-E. Rather, it is helpful to think of the rational/emotional division as a spectrum. For example, someone may endorse all four of the EV-R’s claims, but do so weakly or tentatively. Or, a given thinker may strongly endorse rational views of Claims i and ii of the EV (taking virtue to consist, at least in large part, of rationally controlling or directing emotional impulses or appetites, and human flourishing to be a life of rational contemplation) while endorsing an emotional view of Claim iii (taking human nature to be characterized by the possession of proto-moral emotional instincts or sensitivities). That said, as we have noted, many of the claims of the EV-R and EV-E are related or interconnected.

Although this division between the two identified readings is sometimes muddled in practice, it is useful for understanding the historical baggage that contemporary virtue ethicists endorse through their (relatively rational or emotional) understanding of particular claims of the EV. In particular, determining where on this emotional/rational spectrum a thinker falls can help determine their relative vulnerability to prominent criticisms—from disability scholars, feminist philosophers, and empirical psychologists—that
target particularly emotional or rational features of the EV. These criticisms, and their relationship to the rational and emotional versions of the EV, will be discussed in detail in the following chapter (Chapter 3).⁹

In short: I argue that, depending on which side of the disagreement philosophers have fallen for each of the four claims of the EV, they can be understood as ascribing more closely to these rational or emotional readings of on expansions on Aristotle—and thus, to a rational or emotional version of the EV.¹⁰ To illuminate this, it will be helpful to here consider paradigmatic versions of each view.

The Key Features of the EV-R and EV-E

We saw that the EV’s four features are:

(i) Virtue, in the sense of “an excellent trait of character… a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor… to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways” is the foundation of ethics or ethical action (Hursthouse and Pettigrove, 2018, para. 1.);
(ii) Virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing;
(iii) Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function; doing this is a matter of fulfilling human nature;
(iv) Practical wisdom or phronesis, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue.

We may call these features aretaicism, eudaimonism, naturalism, and practical wisdom for short. Both rationalists and emotionists endorse these four claims, which, as we saw in the last chapter, also undergird eudaimonic virtue ethics’ strengths of aretaicism, emphasis on emotional cultivation and communal

⁹ I argue in Chapter 3 that the EV-R is more vulnerable to critiques from feminist and disability scholars. This is because the EV-R’s comparatively narrow, rationalistic conception of human nature, virtue, and flourishing, are prima facie more exclusionary toward groups that have historically been regarded as less rational—including not only people with intellectual or developmental disabilities but also other people with disabilities, women, and people of color—than the EV-E’s versions. On the other hand, the EV-E’s deemphasis of reason’s role in virtue in favor of a “sensitivity” view implies that features of one’s situation will have more impact on the emotionist’s moral agent than the rationalist’s. Thus, the EV-E is less able to respond to critiques from contemporary psychology which argue (1) that seemingly morally irrelevant features—like what an apparent authority figure is telling you to do, whether you are in a hurry, or what smells or how much light is present in a room—can drastically affect one’s actions in a morally ambiguous or difficult situation and (2) that empirical evidence suggests virtues are not consistent cross-culturally.

¹⁰ It is unimportant, for now, to discover who (if anyone) endorses all four tenets of the rationalistic EV-R or the emotional EV-E, which are explained in detail below. As we will see, though, different interpretations of, and expansions on, Aristotle’s virtue ethics have historically fallen closer to one view or the other. And, as noted above, falling closer to one side of the spectrum affects a given theory’s vulnerability to the critiques that will be introduced in Chapter 3.
education, casuistry, and eudaimonism. Due to these advantages, proponents of the EV have argued that it puts forth a more empirically and psychologically plausible theory of moral development and evaluation than deontic theories do. The EV-R (rationalist) and EV-E (emotionist) readings of the EV expand or specify each of the EV’s four core claims in particular ways.

**The EV-R, Simplified.** Imagine a virtue ethical theory that endorses the four features of the EV. It’s eudaimonic, grounds its ethics in human nature or function, and accord a pivotal role to practical reason in ethical decision-making. Imagine, too, that this virtue ethical theory endorses a particularly rationalistic understanding of virtue, human nature, flourishing, and practical wisdom. It adopts a moral psychology in which the mind can be divided into emotional and rational parts, and holds that the rational part of the mind or soul ought, for the virtuous agent, to control and direct the emotional part. Perhaps the virtuous agent, for these “rational” virtue ethicists, even attempts to disregard her emotions or to limit their influence on her actions—Star Trek fans might think of Vulcans.

This theory, relatedly, holds that human nature is best understood as rational—as opposed to emotional—and that it is humans’ ability to reason—understood in a strict sense as ratiocination, deliberation, or logical reasoning—that gives us our special moral worth. Perhaps humans’ rationality is associated with the divine (as for the Stoics and Aquinas), or is thought to characterize the soul as opposed to the body (as for Plato). And, the virtuous agent is, in this rational view, fundamentally rational in the sense

---

11 To review, Claim i implies the first three “pros” of the theory: its aretaicism, the close connection it draws between ethical reasoning and agents’ personality, motives, and emotions, and its emphasis on the importance of emotional cultivation and communal moral education. Claims ii and iii provide further support for the psychological harmony desideratum and support the theory’s empirical plausibility by suggesting that ethics is grounded in discoverable features of the natural world. Claim iv helps to ground its emphasis on situational responsiveness or casuistry and to explain the intuition that moral exemplars happily do what’s right but that doing the right thing requires effort.

12 Regarding the Stoics’ claims to this effect, see, e.g., Seneca’s *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, Letter 124; MacIntyre (2007); Osborne (2022); Porter (2006). Regarding Aquinas’s, see, e.g., Bejczy (2007); Clanton and Martin (2019); Culbreath (2017); Osborne (2022); Thomas (2016) (*Summa Theologica*, I–II). Finally, regarding Plato’s, see, e.g., his *Republic* and *Phaedo*; Cairns (2014); Kamtekar (2013); Nussbaum (2001). These views—that rationality is associated with the divine, or the soul rather than the body—are often held together; that is, rationality for many “rationalist” philosophers is associated both with the divine and with an incorporeal soul. According to some readings of Aristotle (e.g., by Wiggins [1980, 1987] and Kenny [1966]), as we will see, Aristotle’s philosophy can be seen as containing the building blocks for dualism. For example, Aristotle expresses the view that theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) is divine, and is superior to moral or character virtues because it is associated with the soul and not the body, in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X (NE, 1177a10–25;
of using their reason—the better part of their nature—to control, direct, or correct other features of their psychology or physiology that might lead them toward vice. Relatedly, this theory’s vision of the endaimon life will be one spent in contemplation since this is the fulfillment of humans’ most essential nature.

The EV-R holds the following claims (I have bolded the additions):

(i-R) Virtue is the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., aretaicism); virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of rationally controlling or directing emotional impulses or appetites.

(ii-R) Virtue is at least partially constitutive of or a necessary condition of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., eudaimonism); moreover, a flourishing life is characterized by rational activity, understood strictly as ratiocination or contemplation.

(iii-R) Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human or fulfilling human nature; human nature is fundamentally characterized by reason or rational activity.

(iv-R) Practical wisdom is required for achieving full virtue; practical wisdom can be understood more specifically as the perfection of a (strictly) rational process.

Call these aretaicism-R, eudaimonism-R, naturalism-R, and practical wisdom-R. Since one of virtue ethics’ strengths compared to deontic theories is its focus on the emotions as important ingredients for moral cultivation, it’s important to note that even the “rationalist” EV is less rationalist than theories like deontology and utilitarianism.

The rationalist EV (EV-R) is also less rationalistic than Socratic or Stoic views, which are strongly intellectualist—i.e., they identify virtue with knowledge. And, relatedly, another important difference from these two views is that “[f]or Aristotle, virtue is necessary but not sufficient [for eudaimonia]—what is also needed are external goods which are a matter of luck. For Plato and the Stoics, virtue is both necessary and sufficient for eudaimonia (Annas 1993).” (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018, §2.1)
As we saw briefly in Chapter 1, Socrates, Plato’s teacher, put forward an intellectualist view of virtue. Socrates, Kamtekar explains, “tries to define virtues like courage \[andraea\] or temperance on the assumption that, since they always benefit their possessor, the virtues must be some kind of knowledge.” (2013, 31)\(^\text{13}\) Stoicism is also a strongly intellectualist theory, and can be considered a type of virtue ethics insofar as its followers believed the virtues (\[aretē\]) were the highest good (Baltzy 2019).\(^\text{14}\) However, it was not casuistic or eudaimonistic in the way Aristotle’s virtue ethics was.\(^\text{15}\)

As Alasdair MacIntyre explains,

> On the Stoic view, unlike the Aristotelian, \[aretē\] is essentially a singular expression and its possession by an individual an all or nothing matter… [and,] Since virtue requires right judgment, the good man is, on the Stoic view, also the wise man. But he is not necessarily successful or effective in his actions. To do what is right need not necessarily produce pleasure or happiness… None of these [or other “worldly” goods] are genuine goods; they are goods only conditionally upon their ministering to right action by an agent with a rightly formed will. Only such a will is unconditionally good. Hence Stoicism abandoned any notion of a \[telos\]. The standard to which a rightly acting will must conform is that of the law which is embodied in nature itself. Virtue [for the Stoics] is thus conformity to cosmic

---

\(^\text{13}\) Kamtekar evidences this argument through taking for granted the conventional assumption that the character of Socrates in the Plato’s early, aporetic dialogs is roughly representative of the historical Socrates (see also Parry and Thorsrud 2014). In the \[Protagoras\] and \[Euthydemus\], Kamtekar notes, “Socrates argues directly that wisdom uniquely enables us to live well, or to be happy.” (Kamtekar 2013, 32). As Kamtekar further notes, a supporting argument for the assumption that virtues are a kind of knowledge is given by (the character of) Socrates in the \[Meno\]; Socrates there argues that “without knowledge, courage would be recklessness, a quality of the soul that brings harm rather than benefit” (88b).” (2013, 31) A consequence of this intellectualist position is that it eliminates the possibility of true incontinence or weakness of will, insofar as it implies “if you know what is good you will do it, and if you do an action, and it is bad, that was because you thought somehow that it was good.” (Parry and Thorsrud 2014, para. 5) As we will see, Aristotle rejects this strong intellectualism in large part because it cannot account for weakness of will.

\(^\text{14}\) Stoicism is a Greek philosophical movement that was founded during the Classical period but began to gain particular prominence and influence during the Hellenistic period. Although Stoicism flourished during the fourth and third centuries BCE, there currently remains “not… a single complete work by any of the first three heads of the Stoic school: the ‘founder,’ Zeno of Citium in Cyprus (344–262 BCE), Cleanthes (d. 232 BCE) or Chrysippus (d. ca. 206 BCE)” (Baltzly 2019, §1). Major figures from later in the Hellenistic period and the Roman Imperial and Late Antiquity periods whose work we still have access to include Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE), Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE), Epictetus (55–135 CE), and Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE). Stoics “agree that possession of what is genuinely good secures a person’s happiness [and that] the only things that are good are the characteristic excellences or virtues of human beings (or of human minds): prudence or justice, courage[,] and moderation [or temperance], and other related qualities.” (Baltzly, 2019, §5) In the Stoic conception, “the virtues are closely linked to the agent’s intention to act in accordance with right reason in every aspect of life.” (Porter 2013, 73)

\(^\text{15}\) Consider Seneca’s description of the Stoic view: “Those who rate pleasure as the supreme ideal hold that the Good is a matter of the senses; but we Stoics maintain that it is a matter of the understanding, and we assign it to the mind… Reason… is surely the governing element in such a matter as this; as reason has made the decision concerning the happy life, and concerning virtue and honour also, so she has made the decision with regard to good and evil… the Good is non-existent in a child, for the child also has no reason; the child will reach the Good only when he reaches reason. There are animals without reason, there are animals not yet endowed with reason, and there are animals who possess reason, but only incompletely; in none of these does the Good exist, for it is reason that brings the Good in its company.” (\[Moral Letters to Lucilius\], trans. Richard M. Gummere, 1925, Letter 124, 2–9)
law both in internal disposition and external act. The law is one and the same for all rational beings; it has nothing to do with local particularity or circumstance. (2007, 168–69)

As this quote demonstrates, virtue in the Stoic view is not tied to individual flourishing or eudaimonia, nor responsive to individual circumstance. Stoic and Socratic ethics can thus be contrasted with Aristotle’s (and, indeed, with the EV in general) in three important ways. First, in that these intellectualist theories promoted detachment from the passions; second, by the coming apart of virtue and flourishing; and third, by their identification of the moral (or character) virtues with knowledge.

The EV-E, Simplified. Imagine a second virtue ethical theory that likewise endorses the four features of the EV. It is eudaimonic, grounds its ethics in human nature or function, and accords an important role to practical wisdom (or phronesis) in ethical decision-making. Imagine, though, that this virtue ethical theory endorsed a particularly emotional understanding of virtue, human nature, the well-lived life, and practical wisdom. Rather than holding that the virtuous agent uses their reason to control or direct their emotions, this view holds that our emotions have important normative content, and that attending to the emotions can help direct us toward moral truth and the good life. Emotion and reason are not seen as opposed, nor rationality as primary or more characteristic of human nature (or the soul/mind) than emotion. Rather than the virtuous agent using her reason to control or direct her emotions, she reflects on or attends to the way emotions like love, anger, or shame can help her to ascertain what is ethically required.

Moreover, and relatedly, this view sees phronesis not as akin to the wisdom of a technically skilled artisan or as rational calculation or syllogistic reasoning, but rather as a kind of cultivated moral sense or perception. Relatedly, though it is rational in a broad sense, phronesis in this view is seen as an undifferentiated aspect of the affective dispositions of a virtuous agent. One might think of 18th Century Romantics, with their emphasis on emotions and aesthetic experience—in a reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment—as a normatively and epistemologically valuable source of experience. If Mr. Spock the logical Vulcan science officer is the paradigmatic representative of a rationalist, then perhaps humanistic Dr. Leonard “Bones” McCoy is an emotionist.

The EV-E holds that (again, I have bolded expansions on the core EV):
(i-E) Virtue is the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., *aretaicism*); *virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of attending to our emotions or sentiments and recognizing their normative content.*

(ii-E) Virtue is at least partially constitutive of or a necessary condition of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., *eudaimonism*); a flourishing life is characterized by not just (strictly) rational activity but also by a rich emotional and relational life.

(iii-E) Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human or fulfilling human nature; human nature is characterized at least in large part by the possession of emotional instincts or sensitivities that can be developed into virtue(s).

(iv-E) Practical wisdom is required for achieving full virtue; *practical wisdom can be understood more specifically as the perfection of a sensitivity.*

Call these *aretaicism-E, eudaimonism-E, naturalism-E, and practical wisdom-E.* Though the emotional EV (EV-E) is less rationalistic than the EV-R, it includes an acknowledgement that rationality, at least in a thin or inclusive conception, is necessary for virtue in the form of practical wisdom (that is, it endorses Claim iv of the EV). This distinguishes it from a strong sentimentalist view *à la* David Hume or Michael Slote.

For Hume, the passions or sentiments (i.e., feelings, emotions, desires, or impulses) drive or motivate all intentional actions and are the source of the virtues (Cohon 2018). Moreover, not only should reason not direct the passions; it *cannot do so for Hume.* So, this does not accord with the EV—which takes both reason and emotion as important components of virtue. Contemporary sentimentalist Michael Slote likewise explicitly distances himself from the Aristotelian tradition, arguing that

Aristotle may have regarded a high degree of intelligence and intellectual skillfulness as necessary to ethical virtue, but we nowadays (more democratically and like Kant) hold that such intelligence and skill isn’t necessary to moral decency or goodness. We think, rather, that moral goodness and decency are more a matter of the heart and that, therefore, the capacity for being moral isn’t widely denied to people because they aren’t smart or intellectually agile enough.” (2010, 154, note 14)

Thus, a strongly sentimentalist view—in which intelligence, wisdom, or reason has *no role in motivating or directing the virtues—is also not an instantiation of the EV.*

---

16 Virtue, for Hume, is “not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv’d by reason” (T3.1.1.27, quoted in Cohon 2018, §5). Rather, virtues are traits we approve of, whether “natural” or “artificial,” while vices are those that merit approbation (Cohon 2018, §7). Natural virtues are those “traits of which we approve naturally (without any social contrivance), such as beneficence, clemency, and moderation,” while “artificial virtues, “(justice with respect to property, allegiance to government, and dispositions to obey the laws of nations and the rules of modesty and good manners)… are inventions contrived solely for the interest of society.” (Cohon 2018, §7) The moral sentiments that motivate us to express approval or disapproval of traits “are produced by sympathy with those affected by a trait or action. Such sympathetically-acquired feelings are distinct from our self-interested responses.” (Cohon 2018, §8)
The EV-R and EV-E, unlike strongly intellectualist or sentimentalist theories, both generally agree with Aristotle's moral psychology, function argument, and eudaimonism. So we can think of virtue ethics as divisible along a spectrum, ranging from a strongly intellectualist, non-eudaimonic view (represented by Socrates and the Stoics); through the EV-R, a relatively rationalistic yet eudaimonic view that holds that reason should control or direct the emotions; to the EV-E, a relatively sentimentalist yet eudaimonic view that holds that emotions are rationally responsive and should be cultivated, but not directed or trained by a separable rational force; and finally to a strongly sentimentalist view (represented by Hume) in which emotions alone, without input from reason, are the source of the virtues. Note that since both the EV-R and EV-E are eudaimonic virtue ethical theories, they are also roughly “neo-Aristotelian”; as we said, both the rationalist and emotionist readings can plausibly be born out through interpreting and expanding on Aristotle.

Implications of The Rational and Emotional Readings

I have now illustrated paradigmatic versions of the rational and emotional readings and their (relatively) rational and emotional versions of each of the EV’s four constituent claims. Below, I will discuss contemporary versions of the EV-R and EV-E as well as readings of Aristotle with reference to these claims. Before we do that, though, let’s look at the implications of holding each of these readings.

Rationalists see virtue as akin to the skill of a technical expert or to deliberation. They emphasize the importance of the *phronimos*’s ability to “give an account” of, or articulate his reasons for, action. This is because reason, for the rationalists, must deliberate to grasp what is ethically required, and direct the emotion to the proper ends accordingly. Emotionists, contrarily, see virtue as akin to a perception. They emphasize that the *phronimos* acts immediately, by intuition or instinct, as the situation calls for; and, they think of virtue not as reason-directed emotion but as situation- or reason-responsive (i.e., broadly rational) emotion.

Rationalists see the *eudaimon* life as one of solitary study or contemplation. This is because they regard humans’ rationality, or intellectual part of the soul, as our most characteristic feature. Intellectual virtues and activities are regarded as more important and valuable than practical ones. Emotionists hold that a *eudaimon* life is a social one, one in which community with other and character (moral) virtues play an indispensable role. They hold that human nature is characterized by our contingency just as much as it is by our rationality,
and that rather than grasping for a contemplative life or a life like that of the divine we should aim for the best life possible for us—as emotional as well as rational creatures.

Finally, *phronesis* for the rationalist is a virtue (or perfection of a faculty) of reasoning, problem solving, syllogistic reasoning, decision-making, etc.—in short, ratiocination—that takes as its content practical matters. Rationalists hold that practical wisdom is the means by which the intellectual part of the soul directs the appetitive part to respond appropriately. The practically wise agent has emotions that are perfectly obedient to the dictates of reason. Emotionists believe *phronesis* to be inseparable from the appetitive/emotional dispositions that are virtues, and that virtues are rational in a broad sense insofar as they respond to reasons. However, the reasons to which virtue responds—i.e., that someone is hurt—need not be articulable as they are immediately grasped as motivating a moral response.

As noted above, it is helpful to think of the EV-R and EV-E as ends of a spectrum, and to keep in mind that some philosophers may endorse elements of both or fall somewhere in the middle. In fact, it’s unlikely that even the contemporary virtue ethicists cited in this chapter endorse these ‘model’ or ‘simplified’ versions of the rational and emotional views in their entirety. However, keeping these diametrically opposed theories in mind can help illuminate the trends in how Aristotle’s virtue ethics has been interpreted historically, and how different interpretations have fallen closer to the “rational” or “emotional” side of the spectrum. In particular, this framework is helpful for identifying contemporary virtue ethical theories’ vulnerabilities and implications.

For example, two of the critical camps that will be explored in the following chapter (Chapter 3)—the disability critique and the feminist critique—are critical of the EV in large part because of its emphasis on the importance of practical wisdom and other intellectual virtues as defining aspects of human nature. Both these critical camps would argue that a eudaimonic virtue ethical theory that accords high importance to reason—whether in the process of virtue cultivation and practice, or in characterizing human nature—problematically leaves out certain humans. Such a “rationalistic” view of virtue and human nature (a) seems to preclude people with certain intellectual disabilities from full personhood, or at least from attaining *eudaimonia* and virtue; and, (b) is based on understandings of human nature and virtuous conduct influenced by the
patriarchal culture and contexts that position men and masculine traits as paradigmatic, natural examples of human flourishing. So, it seems that those thinkers who endorse a more rationalist reading of the EV will be better targets for these criticisms.

Another critical camp—the psychology critique—is critical of the EV’s aretaicism. One aspect of this argument is the “situationist” critique, which holds that seemingly morally irrelevant features—like what an apparent authority figure is telling you to do, or whether you are in a hurry—can drastically affect one’s actions in a morally ambiguous or difficult situation. Because the EV-E regards virtue as responsiveness to situational features and downplays the role of decision, it seems less able to answer this critical point. The EV-R and EV-E’s comparative vulnerabilities to these critiques are discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Next, let’s look at the rational and emotional models in more detail, including discovering what they have looked like in practice and which historical and contemporary proponents of the EV have endorsed them.

2.2 The Rational Model

We have already seen a simplified, paradigmatic version of the EV-R above. Now, let us look at its claims in more detail, including identifying classical and contemporary proponents of each claim.

Claim i-R

Claim i-R (aretaicism-R) posits that virtue has to do with rational control of emotions, passions, or appetites. This is not to say that rationalists will dismiss the role of emotions in a good human life or in moral reasoning entirely, of course. As we saw in Chapter 1, one of virtue ethics’ major positive features is the relative emphasis on the importance of emotions compared to other dominant moral theories like deontology and utilitarianism (which is seen as making virtue ethics more psychologically plausible than deontic theories). However, a proponent of Claim i-R will comparatively emphasize the importance of reason over emotion, in that emotions are seen as providing at best neutral and at worst bad material for reason to work with. The virtuous agent, of course, has properly cultivated emotions—but, for a rationalist, this is taken to mean that the emotions are fully under the control or sway of reason.

---

17 Again, keep in mind that proponents of i-R—as for other claims associated with the “rational” view—can either hold that Aristotle held this view or that such a view is correct.
In short, proponents of Claim i-R will hold that the virtuous agent—whether in their own theory or in Aristotle’s—uses reason to master or control their emotions. Richard Kraut seems to hold such a view, writing:

Aristotle’s agreement with Socrates is only partial, because he insists on the power of the emotions to rival, weaken or bypass reason. Emotion challenges reason in all three of these ways. In both the akatic [weak-willed or incontinent] and the enkratic [strong-willed or continent], it competes with reason for control over action; even when reason wins, it faces the difficult task of having to struggle with an internal rival. Second, in the akatic, it temporarily robs reason of its full acuity, thus handicapping it as a competitor. It is not merely a rival force, in these cases; it is a force that keeps reason from fully exercising its power. And third, passion can make someone impetuous; here its victory over reason is so powerful that the latter does not even enter into the arena of conscious reflection until it is too late to influence action.” (2022, §7)

Here, Kraut discusses the ways emotions can lead akatic (weak-willed) and enkratic (strong-willed) agents away from virtue. Note, too, that here Kraut is distinguishing (his rationalist reading of) Aristotle’s view from Socrates’s. Socrates—as we saw briefly above—famously held that virtue is knowledge; for that reason, he believed that any agent who knew the right thing to do would necessarily do it. That is, he adopts what today would be called a strong motivational internalist view.18

As Kraut (2022) notes, Aristotle took issue with this Socratic position. Aristotle argued that it is possible to judge something as morally required (or virtuous) and yet not be motivated to do it. This is the impetus for Aristotle’s discussion of akrasia (incontinence or weakness of will) and enkrateia (continence or strength of will) in Nicomachean Ethics Books VI and VII. And, this is one of the features that distinguishes the EV-R from strongly intellectualist theories of virtue (like Socrates’s).

Aristotle claims that akrasia—that is, knowingly doing other than what is good—is possible because “a man behaves incontinently [akratically] under the influence (in a sense) of reason and an opinion, and of one not contrary in itself, but only incidentally—for the appetite is contrary, not the opinion—to correct reason.”(Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, Nicomachean Ethics, Book VII, 1147a35–1147b5) In other words, such an

---

18 Motivational internalism is the view that “necessarily, if a person judges that she morally ought to φ, then she is… motivated to φ” (Bjorklund et al. 2012, 125). The contrasting view, motivational externalism, holds that it is possible to judge that one ought to φ without being motivated to φ. Strong motivation internalism further holds that if one judges that she morally ought to φ, she is necessarily moved to φ. This view denies the possibility of moral weakness of will (akrasia), suggesting that any agent who fails to act morally must be mistaken about the moral facts of the situation.
agent’s opinion is correct—e.g., that φ is ethically required—but their appetite is wrong, because they do not desire to φ. As noted previously, Aristotle divides the soul into three parts (or faculties): the rational, appetitive, and nutritive parts. The appetitive (or emotional) part, he says, is rational in a sense (NE, 1102b13–14). Aristotle (2019) argues that

in [both] the continent [enkratic] and the incontinent [akratic] person we praise their reason and the part of the soul that has reason, because it exhorts them correctly and toward whatever is best; but they evidently also have in them some other part that is by nature something apart from reason, clashing and struggling with reason… in the continent person [this non-rational, or only partly rational, part of the soul] obeys reason; and in the temperate and brave [i.e., virtuous] person it presumably listens still better to reason, since there it agrees with reason in everything. (NE, 1102b15–30)

Thus, for Aristotle, both the akratic and enkratic person rationally understand what is morally required. Despite this, the akratic is still not motivated to do the right thing, and does otherwise. The enkratic does the right thing, but still lacks the properly cultivated motivational or emotional attitude, so does it unhappily. Enkrateia is thus preferable to akrasia, but still fails to meet the bar of full virtue. This is because, as Aristotle explains, the virtuous agent experiences no conflict between the rational and appetitive or emotional parts of his soul. The appetitive part “agrees with reason in everything” for the fully virtuous agent, such that they not only know they should do the right (e.g., brave or temperate) thing, but are also happy to do so.

---

19 These parts are divided based on their functions; Aristotle leaves it open whether or not they are physically separable (NE, 1102a12–30).

20 Put differently: an enkratic (continent) person recognizes the action that virtue requires and does it begrudgingly, because what she determines by reason and what her appetites lead her to differ. An akratic (incontinent) person recognizes what virtue requires, but acts otherwise—i.e., in accordance with desires or appetites she knows are base (Aristotle 2019, NE, 1145b10–20).

21 This is not to say that the brave agent, for example, doesn’t feel fear, or relishes risking their life; rather, it means that they feel fear appropriately or to the right extent, such that they are able to overcome it when the situation merits it.

22 As noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, Plato’s theory of the tripartite soul, developed in detail in the Republic (441b-c), holds that the soul (psuchē) can be divided into three parts: appetitive (eros), spirited (thumos), and rational (logos). It is interesting to note that Aristotle’s (arguably) rationalistic reading of the soul (psuchē)—as divided into parts, with the rational part properly controlling the others—is indebted not only to Plato but also to Homer. Cairns (2014) points out that despite the relatively thin use of the concept psuchē in Homer’s time, aspects of Homer’s psychology and understanding of the soul were profoundly influential on Plato’s development of the tripartite soul. Cairns notes that the Ψυχή [psuchē] in Homer retains identifying features of the person of whom it is a shade or image when it is Hades following death; this is evidenced in particular by Odysseus’s conversation with Achilles, or Achilles’s shade, in Hades (2014, 9–10). Cairns further argues that, though Homer doesn’t conclude that the psuchē is likewise the seat of the identity or personality in a living person, Plato picks up on Homer’s identification of the psuchē with a person’s
On a rational reading of virtue, then, an agent’s reason identifies, and directs her to act in accordance with, what is morally required.

As Sorabji defines it, for example, “virtue of character is regarded as a disposition to desire the mean which is found and dictated by deliberative skill, while practical wisdom is a disposition to use one’s deliberative skill in order to find the mean and dictate it” (1974, 120). So, in this reading reason (or the intellectual part of the soul) sets the end or goal for virtue, and also instructs the emotional (not-purely-rational, or appetitive, part of the soul) of the means to reach it. The role of the emotional or appetitive part of the soul seems merely to correctly desire (in accordance with the dictates of reason).

The *akratic*, *enkrateic*, and fully virtuous agent all identify what is morally required—i.e., the mean—correctly. The *akratic* person, though, doesn’t want to do the right thing. Her appetites, emotions, or desires lead her to act otherwise than she knows is right, and her reason is insufficient to overcome these desires. The *enkrateic* person likewise has emotions or desires that pull him to do otherwise than he knows, rationally, is personality. Because the poet describes the soul as existing as a recognizable shade in Hades, he suggests that the soul can be separated from the body and that the soul contains that which makes a person themself. Thus, Homer’s account “facilitates dualist accounts of the living human person in ontological and psychological terms” (Cairns 2014, 10). In short: Plato rejects Homer’s understanding of the *psuchē* as a thin concept akin to a life-force, in favor of a more robust understanding of *psuchē* that contains the basis of one’s personality and consists of multiple parts. This more robust understanding is indebted to Homer’s description of the *psuchē* after death. Cairns (2014) similarly traces the etymological evolution of Θυμός (*thūmós*) from Homer to Plato. In Homer, Cairns argues, *thūmós* is “the general psychic force under whose head anger and other emotions belong.” (2014, 10) Moreover, for Homer *thūmós* “is also a creature that must be tamed or restrained, or an opponent to which one can yield. The Θυμός [thūmós], too, is said very frequently to urge on or issue orders, and it can be presented as a partner in dialogue.” (10–11) Plato, Cairns argues, takes up the personifying metaphorical sense of *thūmós* in Homer as a “metaphorical ‘part’ of the person” that represents one of (for Plato) “three distinct kinds of motivation”, “an interrelated set of motivations” “by which we get angry” (2014, 17, 16, 10). For Homer, in contrast, *thūmós* is a distinct “mental organ” from *psuchē* (Cairns 2014, 11). *Psuchē’s* “role in the psychology of the living individual is at best implicit and in general minimal,” for the pre-Socratic poet (Cairns 2014, 4). Plato thus develops a more substantive understanding of *psuchē* as, to use Adkin’s words, the “core or carrier of the personality” and the *thūmós* as one of three parts of the *psuchē* (Adkins 1960, 62; Cairns 2014, 10) As Cairns (2014) explains in more detail, “Plato’s conception of Θυμός [thūmós] as one of the three elements of the tripartite soul is clearly and explicitly indebted to Homer.” In that model’s first outing in *Republic* 4 (441b-c), the distinction between ‘that which makes calculations better and worse’ and ‘that which rages without reason’ is drawn with reference to Odysseus’ celebrated rebuke to his heart at *Odyssey* 20. 17–24... Odysseus’ rebuke to his dog-like heart is then adduced as one of the proofs that this truly is a third element of the soul, a distinct category like that of the Auxiliaries in the state. The currency, in the ordinary Greek of Plato’s own day, of Θυμός [thūmós] as a form of anger is one reason why Plato chooses to develop this aspect of Homeric psychology.” (14, 16) In Aristotle’s moral psychology, the spirited (*thūmós*) part of the soul is subsumed within the appetitive (non-rational desiring) part of the soul (trans. Irwin 2019, 370). Similarly, Kraut notes that “Plato holds that either the spirited part (which houses anger, as well as other emotions) or the appetitive part (which houses the desire for physical pleasures) can disrupt the dictates of reason and result in action contrary to reason. The same threefold division of the soul can be seen in Aristotle’s approach to this topic.” (2018, §7)
morally correct; but he is able to overcome his appetites and do what he knows to be right (albeit begrudgingly). The virtuous agent, finally, does not even desire to do otherwise than their reason tells them they should because their appetites or emotions have been cultivated such that they obey reason in everything. So, even in this rational reading of virtue the emotions or appetitive part of the soul plays a role in virtue, insofar as one must have the properly cultivated emotions or attitude to achieve full virtue.

Of course, Kraut would not deny that for the fully virtuous agent, the emotions are not an obstacle to virtue. For the person of virtue, the emotional or appetitive part of the soul has come to fully conform with, or listen to, reason’s direction (NE, 1102b30).

However, on the basis of this discussion of *akrasia* and *enkratieia* Kraut further argues that “[when] reason remains unimpaired and unclouded, its dictates will carry us all the way to action, so long as we are able to act.” (2022, §7). Similarly, Jiyuan Yu argues that for Aristotle “intellectual virtue is the excellence of exercising reason, while ethical virtue can be understood as the excellence of obeying reason” (1998, 325). These readings thus suggest that emotions play no—or very little—role in guiding the virtuous agent’s action; when they do play a role, it is either to “distort” reason or, in the best case, to go along with what reason commands.24

It is noteworthy that rational readings of the EV’s Claim i often depend heavily on Aristotle’s discussion of *akrasia* in *Nicomachean Ethics* Books VI and VII. This is controversial because, as proponents of a more emotional reading have noted, it’s unclear whether Aristotle’s description of the rational and emotional parts of the soul in these chapters is supposed to describe their relationship generally or only in the

---

23 Similarly, Martha Nussbaum has argued that “However much human beings resemble lower forms of life, we are unlike, we want to insist, in one crucial respect. We have reason… If it is true that a lot about us is messy, needy, uncontrolled… it is also true that there is something about us that is pure and purely active… this rational element in us can rule and guide the rest, thereby saving the whole person from living at the mercy of luck.” (2001, 2) Nussbaum’s position and Kauppinen’s (2022a) critical response will be further discussed in relation to Claim i-E, below.

24 As Kraut further explains this with reference to the rational versus appetitive parts’ roles in motivating virtuous action, “When feeling conflicts with reason, what occurs is better described as a fight between feeling-allied-with-limited-reasoning and full-fledged reason. Part of us—reason—can remove itself from the distorting influence of feeling and consider all relevant factors, positive and negative. But another part of us—feeling or emotion—has a more limited field of reasoning—and sometimes it does not even make use of it.” (2022, §7). That is, Kraut (and Yu) hold the view that, for Aristotle, the virtuous agent is the person who privileges their reason over their emotions.
akratic or ekratic agent.25 We have seen that for Aristotle akrasia results when the agent misidentifies an object as good (due to having the wrong appetite), but correctly reasons how to achieve the perceived good (NE, 1102b15–30, 1147a35–1147b5). Proponents of Claim i-R will hold that virtue, then, requires the rational control or direction of these incorrect appetites, so that they can be made to listen to and obey the rational part (NE, 1102b30).

Another passage from Aristotle that seems to support and explain this rationalist reading can be found in NE Book III, Ch. 12 (describing the virtue of temperance). Here, Aristotle says that

the things that need to be tempered are those that desire shameful things and tend to grow large. Appetites and children are most like this; for children also live by appetite, and desire for the pleasant is found more in them than in anyone else. If, then, the child or the appetite part [of the soul] is not obedient and subordinate to its rulers, it will go far astray. For when someone lacks understanding, his desire for the pleasant is insatiable and seeks indiscriminate satisfaction. This is why appetites must be moderate and few, and never contrary to reason. This is the condition we call obedient and temperate. And just as the child’s life must follow the instructions of his guide, so too the appetitive part must follow reason. (trans. Irwin, 2019, NE, 1119b1–15)

As this passage explains—at least in the case of temperance—virtue amounts to “tempering” and “subordinating” emotions that are likely to lead us astray.26 In another passage, Aristotle states that “the part of the soul that has reason is distinguished from the non-rational part…. it is possible for those parts to be just to each other, as it is for ruler and ruled.” (NE 1138b6–10)

An additional avenue that proponents of Claim i-R have to support their (comparatively rational) reading is in the important role of choice or decision (prohairesis) in virtue for Aristotle. Again, Richard Sorabji provides a defense of Claim i-R. He argues that,

25 Sarah Broadie, for instance, notes that the moral psychology discussed in Aristotle’s analysis of akrasia and enkrateia is the psychology of an imperfect agent, and that Aristotle elsewhere argues that “in a virtuous soul the nonrational part ‘speaks, on all matters, with the same voice as reason’ (1102b28)” (1991, 65). She continues to argue that for this reason it “is open for someone to object that any argument for psychic complexity [i.e., a strict division between rational and irrational parts of the soul] based on the phenomena of continence and incontinence falls short of proving anything more than that imperfect souls of conflicted people are complex.” (1991, 65)

26 As Yu puts it, “[t]he formation of habit… amounts to the training of the part of the soul that has desires and feelings, and that does not have reason but can listen to reason…” (2007, 98) In contrast, as we’ll see below, emotionist proponents of Claim i-E will argue that this understanding of emotions as “obeying”, “listening to,” or being “subordinate” to or “ruled” by reason (NE 1102b15–30, 1119b1–15, 1138b10) runs the risk of reintroducing the “psychological disharmony” (Stocker 1976) for which deontic theories were criticized, since it suggests that even in virtuous agents there is a conflict between rationally determined moral motivations and natural impulses or emotions.
In order to be just, or otherwise virtuous, it is not enough to do what a just man would do. One must \textit{prohaereisthai} (choose) to do the just act. This is the clear opinion of \textit{NE} II.4 1105a3i; VI. 12 1144a:9. It implies that every virtuous act involves exercising \textit{prohaeresis} (choice). What is \textit{prohaeresis}? The chapters of \textit{NE} devoted to it (III. 2–3) make it out to be a very intellectual thing. It is a matter of desiring to do what deliberation has shown to be conducive to our goal (111b26–30, 1112a30–1113a12; repeated VI.2 11394)... [the] important thing for our purposes is that choice remains in all these contexts connected with rationality. Whether the virtuous man is choosing a \textit{means} to being courageous, or an \textit{instance} of courageous conduct, or a \textit{way} of bestowing his wealth, the choice involved is still a rational thing. (1974, 107–110)

Thus, Sorabji argues that for an action to be fully virtuous it must be the result of choice (\textit{prohaeresis}). This much seems clear from Aristotle’s own description of virtue, as Sorabji notes (\textit{NE}, 11071a1). However, the extent to which choice is rational is debatable. Here, Sorabji suggests that it is closely connected to rational deliberation. As we will see below, this is also closely tied to one’s reading of \textit{phronesis} and its role in virtue’s makeup, development, and practice.

Similarly, in Terence Irwin’s translation Aristotle defines \textit{prohairesis} as “deliberative desire to do an action that is up to us.” (Aristotle, 2019, \textit{NE}, 1113a12)27 Aristotle also states that it is not shared with non-rational animals (1111b13), that it is not appetitive but contrary to appetite (1111b15), and that it is “not about ends, but about means to ends” (1112b13). As Irwin understands Aristotle’s conception of this reasoning process, the desiring (appetitive) part seems to follow, or accord with, the deliberation; he states that “when we have judged that it is right as a result of deliberation, we desire to do it in accord with our wish” (\textit{NE}, 1113a13).28

Again similarly, Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the role of choice (\textit{prohairesis}), conceived of as an ability “to deliberate and choose, to make a plan in which ends are ranked, to decide actively what is to have value and how much,” (2001, 2) and Yu argues that “[h]e who is equipped with virtue not only chooses an action for its own sake, but also chooses it with a view to the overall end.” (2007, 150) While all proponents

\textsuperscript{27} “Deliberative desire,” here, is \textit{boulêsis}, also translated as wish or rational desire (as opposed to non-rational desire).

\textsuperscript{28} A few lines earlier he similarly states that “What we deliberate about is the same as what we decide to do, except that by the time we decide to do it, it is definite; for what we decide to do is what we have judged to be right as a result of deliberation. For each of us stops inquiring how to act as soon as he traces the principle to himself, and within himself to the guiding part; for this is the part that decides.” (2019, \textit{NE}, 1113a3–8) Wish is a rational desire (\textit{boulêsis}).
of EV will argue that virtue is chosen—in the sense that it is voluntary, and arises from the agent—and that virtue is based at least in part by reference to *eutaimonia*, these rationalistic versions of the EV thus emphasize that the kind of choice that is part of virtue is rational deliberation.29

Rosalind Hursthouse represents another contemporary advocate of i-R. She writes in “Kant and Aristotle” that “the virtuous Aristotelian agent doesn’t act from inclination… but from reason,” and claims that “in so far as Aristotle has a notion of ‘motivation’, the continent and the fully virtuous agent have the same motivation—they both act from reason (*logoi*) in the form of ‘choice’ (*probairesis*).”30 (2001, 10, 1) So, in this understanding it is reason that sets the end, or provides the motivation for, virtue.

As Hursthouse, Irwin, Sorabji, Nussbaum, and Yu understand it, then, an action is only virtuous if it is the result of rational deliberation. As with the discussion of Kraut’s (2022) view above, these thinkers thus suggest that reason sets the end of ethical action, and desires, passions, or emotions are only involved insofar as they listen to reason (or not). In these rationalist readings, Aristotle’s discussion of *akrasia* and *enkratieia* describes the basic process of moral reasoning for any agent; where the virtuous agent differs from their *akratic* and *enkratic* counterparts is in their emotions’ complete obeyance of reason.

Other rational readings of Claim i emphasize the importance of being able to “give an account” of why an action is virtuous, and liken virtue to a skill.31 As Antti Kauppinen puts it,

---

29 Yu further argues that choice (*probairesis*) “has two elements: wish and deliberation” and that “[d]eliberation must always be about some envisaged goal that is within one’s reach. It takes time (*NE*, 2242b2–5), involves a search (*zetesis*, *NE*, 1112b20–23), and is a temporal process in which alternatives are envisaged and weighed. Roughly put, there are two main patterns of deliberative process in Aristotle: (1) universal-particular reasoning; and (2) means-end reasoning.” (2007, 154) So, while Yu acknowledges the emotional component of choice in that it includes a wish (*boulesis*), he also holds that choice is deliberative, and in particular is deliberative in specific, syllogistic ways.

30 However, we might think of Hursthouse as only holding a *weakly* rationalistic view of Claim i, since she elsewhere acknowledges that “the feeling of certain emotions on certain occasions has intrinsic moral value.” (2001, 108) But, she goes on to clarify that a given emotion “has intrinsic moral value in so far as the emotional response had the right, i.e. correct, rational content” and “the claim that full virtue involves feeling emotions correctly makes it clear that this would not be possible (in general) without the influence of reason.” (2001, 109)

31 Matt Stichter notes that the thesis that virtues are (or are like) skills can take “weak, moderate, and strong” forms (2017, 2). The weak version, advocated by Linda Zagrebski, “says that while virtues are not themselves skills, they are associated with skills that provide the knowledge of how best to accomplish the goals of virtue.” (Stichter 2017, 2) “The moderate form, endorsed by Aristotle,” he continues, “claims that there are structural similarities between virtue and skill, such that we can gain insight into how virtues are developed by looking at how skills are acquired.” (Stichter 2017,
Bernie’s honesty [to choose an example of a virtue] involves, first, the ability or skill to tell when telling the truth is the right thing to do. This skill requires a grasp of the point of telling the truth and, according to many, the ability to articulate reasons why something is the right thing to do (Annas 2011: 19). As people like Alison Hills (2016) point out, it involves understanding why one should tell the truth rather than just knowing what one should do. Having to account for our choices by giving reasons forces us to reflect and go beyond what we learn from the behaviour of others around us with respect to, say, truth telling (Annas 2011: 54). (Kauppinen 2022b, 5)

Here, Kauppinen (2022b) includes Annas and Hills as examples of contemporary virtue ethicists who hold an understanding of virtue that includes being able to give an account or explain the reasons for acting.32 Annas argues that with “skills of any complexity, what is conveyed from the expert to the learner will require the giving of reasons… since [the learner] will be dealing with a variety of different situations and will need to adapt what she has learnt to these.” (2011, 19)

Recall from Chapter 1 that virtue ethics’ casuistry is regarded by its proponents as a major positive feature; from the (rationalistic) “virtue as skill” view, it is the ability to explain, articulate, or give an account of why a given action is virtuous that allows for casuistry. That is, from a “virtue as skill” perspective, the need for articulation or giving an account is because “explanation allows the learner to go ahead in different situations and context, rather than simply repeat the exact same thing that was done” (Annas 2011, 19).

Similarly, Hills argues that

If you understand why p, you believe that p, for instance, that lying is typically wrong. And you also have a view as to why p, that is, the explanation or reason why p (that q is why p, or p because q), for instance, that lying is typically wrong because it is not a way of treating people respectfully… Understanding why p, though, requires more than the correct belief that p because q. It requires a grasp of the reason why p, or more precisely, a grasp of the relationship between p and q.”

[Moreover…] According to my account, understanding why and explanation are very closely connected: if you understand why p, you can normally give an explanation of why p in your own words (2016, 663–664)

2). Finally, “on the strong form, the claim is that virtues should be conceptualized as a type of skill;” Stichter names Julia Annas as representative of this view (Stichter 2017, 2). Stichter further notes that while the “articulation requirement”—i.e., the requirement that for something to count as a skill/virtue one must be able to provide an account of why one should do a given action, or “articulate… theoretical principles supporting their practice”—while commonly endorsed by proponents of a “skill as virtue” view, is also not uncontroversial or essential to the latter view (2017, 5). For example, Ernest Sosa (2007) is a proponent of a skill as virtue view but denies the articulation requirement (as Stichter notes).

32 Similarly, many virtue ethicists from before, during, and after Aristotle’s time emphasized the importance of being about to “give an account,” i.e., rationally explain, what one was doing and why as a prerequisite for virtue. Plato’s Socrates makes such claims in the Euthyphro (trans. Hutchinson, 1997, 5d; 6d–7a) and Laches (190c), among other places.
In short, these thinkers (Annas 2011, Hills 2016) argue, explanation and articulation distinguish skills (including virtues) from mere rote habits or imitations, because this feature is what allows the virtuous agent or the expert to grasp the connection between, e.g., an honest act and its moral justification; this in turn allows the phronimos to determine for herself what is required in disparate situations or contexts.\textsuperscript{33, 34}

As Kauppinen’s (2022b) explanation above implies, understandings of this “skill” type are relatively rationalistic. In particular, the understanding of virtue on a “virtue as skill” reading suggests that moral knowledge or understanding is a type of understanding—i.e., it is structurally similar to the intellectual virtues Aristotle identifies (\textit{sophia, episteme, nous, phronesis,} and \textit{techne}). Phronesis, often regarded as the excellence of practical reasoning or \textit{prohairesis} (decision/choice), is what connects the aim toward a perceived good with the particular action to be taken. In particular, advocates of this view will also argue that “the practical reasoning \textit{[phronesis]} of the virtuous person is analogous… to the practical reasoning of someone who is exercising a practical skill” (Annas 2011, 3). This point will be further discussed in relation to Claim iv-R.

In addition to drawing evidence from Aristotle’s discussion of \textit{akrasia}, as we have seen, these rationalistic readings of Claim i also often seem to hold in common a rational reading of \textit{prohairesis} or choice as rational deliberation. As we will see later, proponents of the EV-E deny that the fully virtuous agent is one who acts according to reason’s command alone. That is, a more emotional reading of the EV will hold that the role of emotion or appetite in virtue is more than just ‘going along’ with what reason demands (or not).

\textsuperscript{33} See also Stichter, “Virtue as Skill” (2017, in \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Virtue}), Yu “Mirrors of Virtue,” especially Chapter 4, “Habitation and Ritualization” (2007).

\textsuperscript{34} Paul Bloomfield is another advocate of understanding virtue as a kind of skill. He writes in “Virtue Epistemology and the Epistemology of Virtue” (2000) that “The ancient Greeks almost universally accepted the thesis that virtues are skills. Skills have an underlying intellectual structure (logos), and having a particular skill entails understanding the relevant logos, possessing a general ability to diagnose and solve problems (\textit{phronesis}), as well as having appropriate experience... Thinking of virtues as skills yields a viable virtue epistemology in which moral knowledge is a species of a general kind of knowledge that is not philosophically suspect.” (23) Bloomfield argues that “in ancient Greece there was an overwhelming consensus that the virtues are skills; so overwhelming, in fact, that there was only a lone dissenter: Aristotle.” (23) You will notice here that, although Bloomfield himself endorses the “virtue as skill” view, he believes Aristotle did not. Again, note that proponents of Claim i-R, like other rationalistic readings of the EV’s claims, needn’t believe that they are following Aristotle. We have seen that Hursthouse, Irwin, Kraut, Nussbaum, Sorabji and Yu are all proponents of Claim i-R who hold that they are following Aristotle. Annas, Bloomfield, and Hills, in contrast, take up the virtue as skill understanding without arguing that Aristotle endorsed it. Similarly, while Kauppinen argues that the understanding of virtue as a skill is “broadly Aristotelian” and that virtue is a “multitrack disposition” that \textit{includes} skill, he takes Annas and Hills to represent the “virtue as skill” view more explicitly than Aristotle does. (2022b, 2)
Moreover, proponents of the EV-E will deny the rational reading of *prohairesis*, as well as both the necessity of articulation and the close similarity between *phronesis* and other types (e.g., theoretical or technical) of understanding, skills, or knowledge that proponents of the EV-R rely on.

Another related and historically tied, but not foundational, version of i-R has been the traditional association of rational control of emotions or appetites with masculinity. As we will see in Chapter 3, some feminist critics of Aristotle have argued that Aristotle himself regarded women as naturally less rational than men. The most explicit evidence for this is found in the *Politics*, in which he argues that “the female has [the deliberative or rational part of the soul], but without full authority” (trans. Jowett, 1999, *Politics*, 1260a12). However, like much of Aristotle’s work, the broader import and exact meaning of this claim has been disputed. Whether Aristotle himself believed that women/females were less rational than men/males, it is clear that throughout Western philosophical history—including in some philosophers who took up Aristotle’s virtue ethics—this has been a common trend. Additionally, empirical evidence shows that the association of rationality with masculinity and emotionality with femininity continues to be extremely influential today.

Interestingly, some proponents of the EV-R have argued that these discussions in the *Politics* provide important support for their rationalist reading of Aristotle. For example, consider Sorabji’s claim that:

35 Relatedly, in this work Aristotle also argues that “the soul rules the body with a despotical rule, whereas the intellect rules the appetites with a constitutional and royal rule. And it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same holds good of animals in relation to men; for tame animals have a better nature than wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by man; for then they are preserved. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.” (*Politics*, Book I, Part V) Here, we can see that Aristotle is making a direct connection between women’s supposed lesser rational capacity and their social-political inferiority.

36 See, e.g., Connell 2019, esp. Chapter 1, “Feminism, Sexism, and Aristotle”.

37 See, e.g., Lloyd, “The Man of Reason” (1979), “Reason, Gender, and morality in the History of Philosophy” (1983). Although Lloyd targets especially Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers like Descartes, Rousseau, and Spinoza, she also calls out Plato, Aristotle, Philo, Augustine, and Aquinas. Although Lloyd’s work was groundbreaking and influential, some aspects of it have also been criticized, e.g., by Connell (2019). For more contemporary discussions of the association between men and rationality and women with emotions in the history of philosophy, see Rooney 1995 and Witt et al. 2023.

38 See, e.g., McRae et al. (2008), Pavco-Giaccia et al. (2019).
And these inferior kinds of virtue are possessed by people who lack practical wisdom. For slaves are incapable of deliberating (I.5 1254b22), women can deliberate, but their deliberations fail to control their passions, in children the power to deliberate is immature (I.13 1260a12–14), and subjects have only true opinion; it is the rulers alone who have practical wisdom (III.4 1277b25). *Rhetoric* II.12 agrees that virtue may exist without practical wisdom, for it speaks as if people who are still young may have virtue, even though they have been trained merely by convention (*nomos* 1389a35). These claims do not actually contradict the *Nicomachean Ethics* but only extend its teaching. For it is explicitly said that the virtue in question is of a distinct and inferior kind. Only the ruler’s virtue is perfect (*telea* 1.13 1260a17). There are two kinds (*eidē* III.4 1277b19) of moral virtue, one which a man manifests in ruling, the other in being ruled. (1974, 123)

Here, Sorabji musters evidence from Aristotle’s discussion of the incomplete/inferior virtue of women and slaves in the *Politics* to argue that the character (moral) virtues cannot exist in their complete form without *phronesis*. In short, Sorabji argues that a less-than-fully-rational life, like that of a woman or a slave (for Aristotle), cannot be a *eudaimon* or virtuous one. Each of these points will be discussed in more detail below, in the sections on *eudaimonia* and *phronesis*. Moreover, that some people (women) can deliberate but fail to control their passions supports a moral psychology in which deliberation and emotion can be cleanly divided.

I am not here suggesting that the view that virtue consists in rational control of one’s appetites is sexist, nor that proponents of Claim i-R will necessarily also endorse the claim that women are less rational (and/or more emotional) than men. I am merely noting that, historically, the view that reason and emotion should be sharply separated, and that reason should be privileged over emotion, at some point came to be tied to the idea that women are more emotional, less rational, more tied to their bodies, etc., and that on this basis they are less moral. Thus, an endorsement of Claim i-R will come to be connected to the feminist critiques of virtue ethics discussed in the following chapter.

**Claim ii-R**

Because *eudaimonia* depends on virtue, in a rational conception of the EV the good life will be one that accords an important place to rationality. So, while virtue’s role in constituting *eudaimonia* may be the same for all versions of the EV, we may add for Claim ii-R (eudaimonism-R) the related claim that the

---

39 As we will see below, Sorabji takes up a rationalistic reading of *phronesis* as ratiocination, and, relatedly, argues that a *eudaimon* life is one of rational contemplation or study. This ties in with Aristotle’s arguments in *NE* Book X that “anyone at all, even a slave, no less than the best person, might enjoy bodily pleasures; but no one would allow that a slave shares in happiness, if one does not also allow that the slave shares in the sort of life that is needed for happiness.” (*NE*, 11775–10).
eudaimon life is one of rational activity defined narrowly as contemplation, philosophizing, ratiocination, study, or the like. For example, the best life for humans may be one in which emotions are rationally controlled, or a life spent in contemplation—as in (some readings of) Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* or the *Protrepticus*.

Christopher Taylor notes that Aristotle scholars have been divided on the question of whether Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* is “inclusive” or “dominant” (2010, 42). An “inclusive” reading, put forward, e.g., by Ackrill 1974—and, as we'll see, many Aristotle scholars since—holds that Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* is “a conception of the supreme good as a life in which the best possible combination of specific goods is achieved” (Taylor 2010, 42). The “dominant” reading of *eudaimonia*, in contrast, sees Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* “as the conception of a life devoted as far as possible to the pursuit of a single specific good.” (2010, 42).

Taylor offers an example of these two strains’ different interpretations, and their differing implications, in relation to Aristotle’s understanding of reason’s role in *eudaimonia*.

Humans are a kind of animals, specifically rational animals. Hence a distinctively human life is a life of rational activity, and a good [eudaimon] human life is one in which rational activity is well employed. But what counts as employing rational activity well? Here a number of complications arise. The first complication arises from Aristotle’s view… that the rational element in the human personality is twofold, consisting first in the intellect, which is rational per se, and secondarily in the appetites, which are not rational per se (since wanting is not as such an exercise of the intellect), but which are derivatively rational in that, unlike the desires of non-rational animals, they are responsive to reason. Hence the notion of employing rationality well is not a simple one, but must find room for the good employment of the intellect on the one hand and of the rationally responsive appetites on the other. (2010, 42)

The different notions of *eudaimonia* endorsed by the rational and emotional readings of Aristotle thus come down to this difference in understanding what “rational activity” means. In short, as Taylor explains, this

---

40 This view is put forward, e.g., by Kenny 1966. Moreover, as we'll see, Richard Kraut and Dan Haybron seem to hold this dominant reading. Similar accounts of this dominant vs. inclusive readings can be found in Terence Irwin’s “Introduction” to his translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (xxix–xxx) and Sarah Broadie’s *Ethics With Aristotle* (1993, 34–41). Both Irwin and Broadie argue against the dominant reading in favor of the inclusive one. So, it is noteworthy here that while Irwin supported Claim i-R, he does not endorse a rationalist reading of Claim ii.
could be taken (in a strict sense) to describe activity of the part of the soul that is rational \emph{per se}, or (in a broader sense) to describe activity of the parts of the soul that can listen to or participate in reason as well.\footnote{As noted in the above discussion of Claim i-R, it is on the basis of this distinction between (properly) rational and not (fully) rational parts of the soul that proponents of the EV-R hold that virtue requires rational control or domination of the emotions.}

As was discussed in detail in Chapter 1, Claims ii (eudaimonism) and iii (naturalism) of the EV are necessarily intertwined as, for proponents of the EV, human well-being of flourishing is achieved by performing one’s function well. Taylor goes on to note that

Partisans of the inclusive interpretation \cite{Taylor} of Aristotle’s \emph{eudaimonia} interpret it as ‘in accordance with the best, i.e. the most complete,’ understanding the reference to be to the exercise of rationality considered comprehensively as including both the activity of the pure intellect and that of the rationally responsive appetites \cite{NE}. Those who favor the dominant view interpret it as ‘in accordance with the best (sc. the best among those just mentioned), i.e. that which most has the character of a final end,’ understanding the reference to be exclusively to the excellent employment of the theoretical intellect, which is described in Book 10 (1177b1–15) as the only human activity employed for its own sake alone. \cite{Taylor, NE}

In other words, the “inclusive” reading of \emph{eudaimonia} interprets the \emph{eudaimon} life as one of rational activity of both “the pure intellect” and the “rationally responsive appetites.” It would thus be a life characterized by social activity and practicing the moral (or character) virtues, as well as practicing the intellectual virtues.

The dominant reading, by contrast, positions a \emph{eudaimon} life as characterized by practicing the intellectual virtues. In this dominant—or strictly rational—reading, practicing the moral virtues is useful only instrumentally (because they are necessary to achieve a life of solitary contemplation) and a life “in accord with the other kind of virtue, i.e., the kind concerned with action [that is, moral or character virtues] is happiest in a secondary way.” \cite{NE} In short, then, the inclusive and dominant readings of \emph{eudaimonia} are predicated on inclusive and dominant readings of rational activity, respectively. Proponents of the inclusive view will believe that for Aristotle “rational activity”—human function—will include activity of the “rationally responsive appetites” as well as the intellect \cite{Taylor, NE}. Proponents of the dominant view
will hold that it refers only to the activity of the intellect or *nous*. And, because *eudaimonia* depends on fulfilling human function well, *mutatis mutandis*, their notions of the *eudaimon* life will differ.42

Likewise, because the virtues in the EV are identified as those qualities that allow one to perform her human function well (*NE*, 1098a7–15; see also Chapter 1), ideas about the character, cultivation, and relative importance of the virtues will also differ. In particular, since the moral virtues are for Aristotle located in the appetitive or desiderative part of the soul (*NE*, 1002b15–1103a8), in the dominant view the intellectual virtues—virtues of the properly rational part of the soul, i.e., the intellectual virtues discussed in *NE* Book VI: *sophia, episteme, nous, phronesis, and techne*—would seem to be more important to human function and *eudaimonia* than the “moral” or character virtues.

Much of the debate between the rational and emotional readings of *eudaimonia* also centers around the role of Book X in relation to the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.43 This is because it is in Book X that Aristotle famously argues that “the human function is especially realized by the pure intellectual activity of study—the contemplation of scientific and philosophical truths apart from any attempt to apply them to practice.” (trans. Irwin 2019, xxix) Much of the evidence in favor of the dominant reading is found in this part of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, e.g., in Aristotle’s claim in this chapter that *sophia* (theoretical wisdom) is

---

42 However, it is also important to note that some scholars—most notably Christine Korsgaard (1986) and Thomas Tuozzo (1995)—have problematized Taylor’s inclusive/dominant paradigm. In short, Korsgaard argues that although for Aristotle “Contemplation is the only thing of unconditional, intrinsic worth… (*NE* I 177b 1). Nonetheless, moral actions are not merely instrumental goods. They are conditioned ends: given the conditions of human life, such actions are good, and worthy of choice as ends; but what makes it worthwhile to live a human life in the first place is the unconditioned good of contemplation.” (Tuozzo 1995, 296; Korsgaard 1986) Tuozzo argues that Aristotle endorses a “four-fold theory of the good […] which has resources that the intrinsic / instrumental dichotomy does not have […] Moreover[,] the Aristotelian theory depends on a causal theory fundamentally at odds with the Humean theory of causation that underlies the intrinsic / instrumental dichotomy.” (1995) Despite these thoughtful criticisms, as Tuozzo notes, the inclusive reading “of *eudaimonia* as the sum of intrinsically good things” has “been adopted by most Aristotelian scholars currently writing in English.” (1995, 296, note 8). He notes J. Ackrill as a prominent proponent of this reading, and R. Kraut and C.D.C. Reeve as notable exceptions. In short, Tuozzo—in agreement with my analysis in this chapter—positions Ackrill’s conception of *eudaimonia* as emotionist and Kraut’s and Reeve’s as rationalist. Because this dissertation is interested in the way the Aristotelian/eudaimonic virtue ethics tradition has been historically interpreted, and is adopted by contemporary virtue ethicists, it is more important for our purposes to get a firm understanding of influential trends in Aristotelianism rather than in understanding Aristotle’s own view on this.

43 Also of note in Book X is Aristotle’s connection between the inferiority of character virtues (in comparison with intellectual virtues) with the fact that “virtues of character in some aspects seems to arise from the body, and in many aspects seems to be adapted to feelings.” (*NE*, 1178a15)
“divine” “because the theoretical intellect is the aspect of human nature which most closely approaches divine nature, and its excellent exercise the nearest humans can come to living the divine life” (NE 1177b33; Taylor 2010, 45), and that

If happiness is activity in accord with virtue, it is reasonable for it to be in accord with the supreme virtue, which will be the virtue of the best thing. The best is understanding, or whatever else seems to be the natural ruler and leader… Hence complete happiness will be its activity in accord with the proper virtue; and it has been said that this activity is an activity of study \( \text{theoria} \). (NE, 1177a10–20)

Thus, the rational reading is supported by what Aristotle says in Book X about a contemplative life as the best life.\(^4\) However, as Irwin (and others) notes, while one might argue (with the “dominant” readers, i.e., the rationalists) that Aristotle identifies study with happiness, others argue that the conception of happiness Aristotle puts forward in Book X is an “alternative” conception of happiness that is incompatible with the conception he puts forward elsewhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, or that “study \( \text{theoria} \) is the best component of happiness, but not the whole of happiness” (trans. Irwin, 2019, xxx). The “inclusive” reading will be discussed in more detail in the discussion of the emotionist take on Claim ii.

As Taylor notes, Anthony Kenny is one proponent of the dominant, rationalist view. In his 1966 address to the Aristotelian Society, he argued that Aristotle believed “that the pursuit of happiness must be the pursuit of a single dominant aim,” and that he further “seeks to show that happiness is identical with philosophic contemplation [alone].” (100, 99)\(^5\) Richard Kraut similarly argues that on his reading of Aristotle “perfect happiness consists solely in contemplation \( \text{theoria} \)” (1991, 198). Haybron (2008, 48) puts forward a similar reading. On this dominant reading, *eudaimonia* is a life of contemplation or study \( \text{theoria} \). Some implications of this view, as we have noted, are that the moral or character virtues are merely instrumentally valuable. Moreover, this reading of *eudaimonia* makes Aristotle’s theory much more vulnerable to “moral luck” critiques—in short, the critique that a *eudaimon* life is only available to people of privilege, and thus is not

\(^4\) Indeed, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X Chapters 6–8 all argue that study or contemplation \( \text{theoria} \) is the best life, claiming, e.g., it is most pleasant (1177a20–25), most self-sufficient (1177a25–11b25), and god-like (1178a10–25).

\(^5\) Note, however, that Kenny did not agree with (what he took to be) Aristotle’s dominant view of happiness.
attainable by many moral agents through no fault of their own. (In particular, this is what Marilyn Friedman [2009] calls the “welfare” moral luck critique; this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.)

Another implication of Claim ii-R is revealed in its connection to Claim iii-R—regarding human nature or function. For example, C.D.C. Reeve presents what he takes to be “a demonstration of the proposition that every human being aims at study,” which he claims follows from Aristotle’s “ethical first principle,” i.e., eudaimonism:

Primary eudaimonia is study [theoria].
Every nous [mind or intellect] aims at primary eudaimonia.
Every nous aims at study.

Every nous aims at study.
Every human being is most of all its nous.
Every human being aims most of all at study.

As this representation of (Reeve’s reading of) Aristotle’s argument shows, on this kind of rationalistic conception (a) eudaimonia is study or theoria; and (b) humans are “most of all” their nous: intellect or mind. Thus, nous most accurately characterizes human nature. This leads us to Claim iii-R.

Claim iii-R

Claim iii-R (naturalism-R) holds that it is humans’ rationality, ability to reason, or rational activity (logos) that best or most accurately characterizes their nature. In particular, rationalists also define rationality in a strict way—as ratiocination, theoretical study, contemplation, deliberation, the ability to grasp and articulate reasons, etc. As we will see, this can be contrasted with an “emotionist” understanding of human nature, which does not deny that humans are rational by nature but which understands rationality in a very broad way, and which further holds that human nature is also characterized in large part by the possession of emotional instincts or sensitivities that can be developed into virtue(s) and by humans’ dependency.46

46 While both the EV-E and EV-R regard humans to be social by nature (in line with Aristotle), as we’ve seen a dominant or strictly rational reading of eudaimonia seems to suggest that the best life is as “self-sufficient” as possible (spent in solitary contemplation), and that social virtues, like friendship, are only derivatively or instrumentally valuable.
Proponents of the rationalist view often also hold that intellectual virtues—that is, virtues of the intellectual, or rational per se, part of the soul—are superior to moral or character virtues, and/or that the *nous*, humans’ intellect, mind, or soul, is superior to, more rational than, and separate from the body. Again, this claim is closely connected to aretaicism-R and eudaimonism-R, since both the *eudaimon* life and virtue depend on human nature and function. One version of naturalism-R is, arguably, put forward by Aristotle himself in his famous “function argument” (NE Book I, Chapter 7).

Aristotle states, “just as the good, i.e., doing well… for whatever has a function and characteristic action, seems to depend on its function, the same seems to be true for a human being, if a human being has some function,” and, “every function is completed well by being completed in accord with the virtue proper to that kind of thing.” (NE, 1097b25; 1098a15–20). So, if humans have a function (and Aristotle argues that they do), virtue will be what allows us to perform that function well. This will also be simply doing well *qua* being human; living well or flourishing. Aristotle further argues that “the life of nutrition and growth,” as well as the “life of sense perception,” are part of human nature but that, because they are shared by “the horse, the ox, and every animal,” they should not be appealed to in order to determine the human good. (Aristotle, NE, 1097a1–1098a5) Instead, he says, we should look to those parts of human nature which set us apart from animals and characterize our particular way of life. This, he says, is “some sort of life of action of the part of the soul that has reason.” (Aristotle, NE, 1098a1–8)

The argument, in short, goes as follows:

1) For all things, goodness is properly understood as performing its function well.
2) Thus, human good can be determined by ascertaining humans’ function.
3) Human function is “activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason.” (Aristotle, NE 1098a7)
4) Therefore, human good is the good (or excellent) performance of “activity and actions of the soul that involve reason.” (Aristotle, NE 1098a15)

---

47 This aspect of the function argument is uncontroversial, and broadly endorsed by all proponents of the EV. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 1, this feature of the EV also undergirds its advantageous naturalism, such that morality is purported to be based on an empirical understanding of human nature, capacities, needs, and lives.
Taylor’s (2010) division between inclusive and dominant reading of \textit{eudaimonia} depends on how one reads premise three of this argument—that is, what one takes Aristotle to be saying “activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason” is.

What exactly is meant by “reason,” “rationality,” or “rational activity” (\textit{logos})? And what is its connection to \textit{nous}, intellect or mind? This is a point of disagreement between rational and emotional readings. As we have noted, rationalist/dominant readings will focus on the activity of the intellectual part of the soul as “rational activity”, while emotionist/inclusive readings will include the appetites as well (since this part of the soul is said to be rational in a sense; \textit{NE} 1102b13–14). While rationalistic virtue theories do, of course, acknowledge that humans also have emotions, they might hold that, because these features are shared with animals, they are not features of human nature \textit{per se}, or that they are less valuable or characteristic features of human life. Aristotle himself suggests this in Book X, arguing that “other animals have no share in happiness \textit{[eudaimonia]}, being completely deprived of the activity of study \textit{[theoria].}” (\textit{NE}, 1178b25) As we have seen, rational readings in which intellectual virtues are regarded as superior to character virtues are also offered by Jiyuan Yu (1998) and Sorabji (1974).\footnote{They argue that for Aristotle “intellectual virtue is the excellence of exercising reason, while ethical virtue can be understood as the excellence of obeying reason” (Yu 1998, 325) and that “virtue of character is regarded as a disposition to desire the mean which is found and dictated by deliberative skill, while practical wisdom is a disposition to use one’s deliberative skill in order to find the mean and dictate it” (Sorabji 1974, 120), respectively.} And, as we have seen from the examples of rationalist readings shown, proponents of this view tend to see emotions as obstacles to be overcome or controlled.\footnote{As we can see, another way the rationalist reading grounds its understanding of the EV has historically been through ascribing to a moral psychology in the soul or mind can be divided into “rational” or “intellectual” and non-rational parts. This division predates Aristotle, going back at least to his teacher Plato’s “tripartite soul.” And, it can be used to justify a particular understanding of \textit{phronesis} as a process through which the intellect controls or directs the emotions.}

Terence Irwin notes that "\textit{Logos} [reason] is cognate with \textit{legein} (‘say’); it is what is said, or the thought expressed in what is said. It is often translated ‘discussion’, ‘conversation’, ‘speech’.” (2019, 394). This understanding of \textit{logos} seems relatively uncontroversial, one with which Aristotle scholars and proponents of the EV would broadly agree. However, the particular connection between \textit{logos} in the sense of speech or to
say, and in the sense of rationality or reason, is contested.\textsuperscript{50} Nous, often translated the intellect or mind, is “the part of the soul by which it knows and understands” (Aristotle, trans. Shields, 2016, \textit{De Anima} iii 4, 429a9–10; iii 3, 428a5; iii 9, 432b26; iii 12, 434b3); it is the “intellectual” or “rational” part of the soul, the part that only humans have—in addition to the “nutritive” and “perceptive” parts (see also Shields 2020).

As with the other claims we have been discussing in this chapter, Aristotle’s own understanding of the soul or mind is controversial and not easily understood.\textsuperscript{51} Aristotle, as Shields notes, further divides nous into the “practical” and “theoretical” intellect or mind (Shields 2020, §7). Practical nous grasps particulars (NE, 1143a25–30) and “things achievable by action” (NE, 1143a35), while theoretical nous “is confined to true rational thought and understanding not resting on further justification” (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 400; NE, 1143a35–1143b10; see also \textit{Apo} 100b5–17). \textit{Phronesis} is a virtue of the practical part of the intellectual soul, while \textit{sophia} is a virtue of the theoretical part. One might, with Aristotle, define the rational part of the soul most properly as that which possesses “calculation [\textit{logismoi}] and thought [\textit{dianoia}]” (\textit{De Anima} II.3, 415a1–7). If one further holds that only the activity of the (properly) rational part of the soul counts as rational activity (i.e., the dominant view) she would further hold that these—calculation and thought—are the activities that characterize human nature or function \textit{per se}.

Regardless of whether one holds, with the rationalists, that rational activity is activity of the rational \textit{per se} part of the soul or, with emotionists, that rational activity also includes the activity of the appetitive or desiderative part of the soul, what is undeniable is that Aristotle seems to hold the intellectual virtues in higher regard than the moral or character ones. Taylor (2010) demonstrates that, for Aristotle,

\textit{sophia} [theoretical wisdom, or excellence of the theoretical intellect] has higher intrinsic value than \textit{phronesis}… [And,] The claim of \textit{sophia} to higher intrinsic value and its implications for Aristotle’s view of the best life for humans is spelled out in Book 10: ultimately \textit{sophia} is the best excellence attainable

\textsuperscript{50} As we have seen, proponents of the “virtue as skill” view will hold that this etymological connection implies that for one to have a virtue she must be able to “give an account” or explain why a given action is virtuous (Annas 2011, Hills 2016). As Ben Bradley understands it, to be rational (for him and, he argues, for Aristotle) is to be “responsive to reasons: to be able to contemplate reasons for or against doing or believing something and for one’s behavior and beliefs to be guided by the grasping of such reasons.” (2015, 51) This, then, is also a rational reading. But, as we will see below, on a less rationalist, more emotionist reading this etymological origin could also provide evidence for the importance of community with others as a necessary part of a happy life.

\textsuperscript{51} As Shields points out, Aristotle’s “primary investigation of mind occurs in two chapters of \textit{De Anima…” neither of which admits of easy or uncontroversial exposition.” (Shields 2020, §7. Mind)
by humans because the theoretical intellect is the aspect of human nature which most closely approaches divine nature, and its excellent exercise the nearest humans can come to living the divine life, i.e. to ‘assimilate to the divine as far as possible’ (1177b33). (Taylor, “Aristotle,” in the Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics, 45)

It is therefore clear that *sophia* is the most “divine” virtue. On this basis, some have argued that its practice is not only the best life for humans but, indeed, the feature that identifies humans *qua* humans. In that case, not only would *nous* be that which characterizes humans, but in particular theoretical *nous*.

As briefly noted above, Aristotle identifies five intellectual virtues in *NE* Book VI: *sophia*, *episteme*, *nous*, *phronesis*, and *techne*. Phronesis is, of course, closely related to the moral virtues and indeed required for them (trans. Irwin, 2019, *NE*, 1107a1, 1138b18–34, 1144b14–1145a2, 1178a16–19). So, it’s a bit of a special case. The other four intellectual virtues are squarely seated in the intellectual part of the soul and concern its function. Of these, Aristotle—as Taylor notes—identifies *sophia* (wisdom or theoretical wisdom) as the “understanding about the things that are by nature most honorable” (trans. Irwin, 2019, *NE* 1141b5); as he puts it in Book X (alluded to by Taylor above), “the activity of understanding [*nous*], it seems, is superior in excellence because it is the activity of study [*theoria*], aims at no end apart from itself, and has its own proper pleasure” (1177b20) and “activity in accord with wisdom is the pleasantest of the activities in accord with virtue,” as well as the most “self-sufficient” (1177a20–30).

Since Aristotle elsewhere stated that the human good (happiness) is “complete and self-sufficient” and that “all think the happy life is pleasant and weave pleasure into happiness,” this is further evidence that happiness or the best human good is identical with *theoria* (1097b20; 1152b15). As Broadie (1991) further notes, proponents of the dominant reading combine this claim—that *sophia* is the best excellence attainable by humans, and its practice in study (*theoria*) the best activity—with Aristotle’s statement in *NE* Book I that “if there are more than one excellence, [the good will be] in conformity with the best and most final” to argue that the human good consists of theoretical wisdom, study, or contemplation. (Broadie 1991, 39; *NE*, 1098a17–18) Moreover, proponents of the dominant view argue that Aristotle’s early claim that human good

---

52 *Sophia* is often translated as wisdom or theoretical wisdom; *episteme* as scientific knowledge; *nous* as comprehension or understanding (in addition to intellect or mind, as noted above); *phronesis* as prudence or practical wisdom; and *techne* as technical or craft knowledge.
consists of “activity and actions of the soul that involve reason” is by Aristotle’s own admission a “sketch” to be filled out later (NE, 1097b20–25). The identification of sophia as the highest human good in Book X is then seen as completing the definition. This therefore suggests that Aristotle’s discussion of “activity of the soul in accord with reason” ultimately refers to the activity of the rational per se part of the soul exclusively.

The take-away? Those who endorse naturalism-R in the form of the dominant reading of human function are vulnerable, as were those who endorsed the dominant reading of eudaimonia discussed in reference to eudaimonism-R above, to the critiques that moral virtues are merely instrumentally valuable, and that one’s ability to achieve a eudaimon life by fulfilling her human function is deeply dependent on moral luck. Moreover, the association of humanity or personhood—that is, what makes a person a person—with the divine and the intellect at the exclusion of the physical world, body, and emotions seems to imply a proto-dualism. As Broadie further points out, Aristotle argues that

‘The appetitive and in general the desiring element in a sense shares in reason, insofar as it listens to and obeys it; this is the sense in which we speak of paying heed to one’s father or one’s friends, not that in which we speak of ‘the rational’ in mathematics’ (1102b30–33). But [Broadie says] this allusion to respect for paternal authority quickly ceases to be metaphor. Aristotle points to the actual exercise of authority in family or community as providing further evidence that there exists a part of the soul capable of listening to reason: ‘That the non-rational element is in some sense persuaded by reason is indicated also by the giving of advice and by all reproof and exhortation’ (1102b33–1103a1). The reference to every sort of reproof etc. cancels any suggestion that he has in mind only self-admonition, self-reproach and the rest. He is squarely considering paradigm cases where the parties are distinct individuals. (Broadie 1991, 63)

These passages thus suggest that Aristotle thinks, or at least argues in some places, that the intellectual and appetitive/desiderative parts of the soul are separable.

As we have seen, rationalistic readings of Claim ii (eudaimonism), like Reeve’s (1992), are often predicated on a similarly rationalistic reading of Claim iii (naturalism). Reeve claims, e.g., that by drawing on Aristotle’s work in the Posterior Analytics and Generation of Animals to supplement the NE’s function argument, we can see that for Aristotle not only is it the case that the parts of the body are for the sake of the complex action of the body as a whole, but [also] that the body as a whole is for the sake of the psyche and psychic activity… [moreover,] within the psyche itself…. Practical activity is for the sake of study. Now study is matterless: ‘bodily activity is in no way associated with the activity of nous’ (GA 736b28–29). Hence study really is over and above all the bodily parts of a human being and their functions. If the human function is the function of nous
[which Reeve believes it is], therefore, the human function, too, is over and above the function of all the bodily parts. (Reeve, 1992, 125).

Here, as we can see, Reeve is connecting his reading of *eudaimonia* as identical with study (*theoria*) with his understanding of human function as best understood as the “function of *nous*.” And, as discussed above, this is connected to the idea that the *nous* and its contents are immaterial.

David Wiggins also holds a rationalistic understanding of human nature; at least, in his understanding of Aristotle. He draws from Aristotle’s function argument, as well as the Classical Greek philosopher’s metaphysical works, to argue that Aristotle believes the soul (*psyche*) to be the part of the human that is a person proper. Wiggins, as Ackrill notes, argues that “the only logically hygienic way of sorting out Aristotle's analogy’ [of the relationship between body and soul as that between matter and form] is to take ‘[living] body: soul’ as equivalent to ‘flesh and bones: person’.” (Ackrill 1972, 119; quoting from Wiggins 1967, 48). In other words, Wiggins argues that for Aristotle the body refers to “flesh and bones” but the soul refers to that which makes a person a person. As Ackrill puts it, Wiggins thinks that Aristotle “actually identifies *psyche* with man (or person)” (1972, 121).

As Wiggins himself puts it,

If we wish to state the doctrine that matter is to form as body is to soul, and to take this idea seriously, then we must have a way of saying what matter is the matter in which the soul is realized…

Now this specification is fairly easy to achieve for the merely illustrative example which Aristotle introduces a little later in the discussion, the matter of which an axe is made and the axe. The axe is an artifact whose actuality is defined by the requirement that it should be capable of cutting in a certain way [i.e., its function] and it is realized in (or made out) of that matter. The matter is iron. But when we come to a particular animal or human the situation is slightly different. Of course we can specify the matter as ‘this flesh and bones’. But in this case there is competition for possession of the matter. For ‘human body’ is a perfectly good sortal or substance-word, and unfortunately it is already in occupation of this flesh and bones. And the principle of individuation for human body is not quite the same as that for a person. A blunted axe is still an axe, and a decomposing human body is still a human body. Yet if *psyche* is the *ousia* [essence or substance], f, of x then it would seem that x must be an f… But then the living body is a soul. If a natural living body is a certain complex of matter and

---

53 Again, recall that a thinker can be said to hold, e.g., Claim iii-R if either a) that is how he reads Aristotle or b) that is the view he holds himself to be true. Wiggins believes that that Claim iii-R correctly capture Aristotle’s understanding of human nature and function. However, as we will see in our discussion of EV-E below, Wiggins believes that Aristotle is incorrect on this point (and himself holds an emotional version of the EV).

54 Although Ackrill acknowledges that Wiggins notes that Aristotle himself may not have endorsed this claim (Ackrill 1972, 119; Wiggins 1967), Wiggins argues that it is the only reading of Aristotle that makes sense.
form then surely that form is the form of that natural living body. And that form is psūchē or person. (Wiggins 1967, 47–48)

Here, Wiggins argues that for Aristotle the soul (psūchē) is the ousia, essence or substance of a person; further, he argues, that means that a given person is identical to his soul.

Wiggins draws here from Aristotle’s definition of psūchē in De Anima 412 as “the substance [ousia], substance in the sense of being the form [eidos], of a [living] body.” Aristotle also argues in De Anima iii 5 that there exists a part of nous that he calls “the active mind or active intellect (nous poiëtikos).” (Shields 2020, “The Active Mind of De Anima iii 5”, supplement to “Aristotle’s Psychology”). He further claims that this part of the mind is “‘separate and unaffected and unmixed, being in its essence actuality’ (… D.A iii 5, 430a17–18) and then also as ‘deathless and everlasting’ (… D.A iii 5, 430a23).” (Shields 2020, “The Active Mind of De Anima iii 5”, supplement to “Aristotle’s Psychology”). This chapter is taken by the rationalist EV tradition to provide evidence of soul-body hylomorphism—i.e., the idea that the soul provides the “form” for humans while body is (mere) matter; this interpretation was also an important part of Christian developments in eudaimonic virtue ethics. (Shields 2020)

Additional evidence for the rationalist reading of Claim iii can be found in NE Book X, in which Aristotle says that the theoretical intellect is the “supreme element” and that “this supreme element seems to be the person, if the controlling and better element is the person.” (trans. Irwin, 2019, 1178a1–5) As Wiggins notes, this reading suggests that “we are not identical with our bodies”; again, then, this reading of Aristotle is a proto-dualist one. (Wiggins 1967, 57)

Similarly, Nussbaum claims that

---

55 As Shields points out, “Controversy surrounds almost every aspect of De Anima iii 5, not least because in it Aristotle characterizes the active mind—a topic mentioned nowhere else in his entire corpus” in this way, despite elsewhere in the same work characterizing “the mind (nous) as but one faculty (dunamis) of the soul (psuchē), and he had contended that the soul as a whole is not separable from the body (D.A ii 1, 413a3–5).” (Shields 2020, “The Active Mind of De Anima iii 5”, supplement to “Aristotle's Psychology”).

56 Falcon (2023) also explicitly endorses a hylomorphic reading of Aristotle and draws a connection between his hylomorphism and his view on sex/gender. She writes, “Aristotle is committed to a hylomorphic explanation of animal generation. His considered view is that the father supplies the form whereas the mother provides the relevant matter.” (“Aristotle on Causality”)
a central preoccupation of ancient Greek thought about the human good [was a] raw sense of the passivity of human beings and their humanity in the world of nature, and a response of both horror and anger at that passivity, lived side by side with and nourished the belief that reason’s activity could make safe, and thereby save, our human lives — indeed, must save them, if they were to be humanly worth living. (2001, 2–3)\(^57\)

Moreover, the emotions, passions, or appetites are importantly bound up with the contingent:

> For our bodily and sensuous nature, our passions, our sexuality, all serve as powerful links to the world of risk and mutability. The activities associated with the bodily desires not only exemplify mutability and instability in their own internal structure; they also lead us and bind us to the world of perishable objects and, in this way, to the risk of loss and the danger of conflict. (2001, 7)

She argues that the question of how humans achieve a good life that acknowledges their “contingency”, i.e., their corporality and their emotions, but which aspires to “rational self-sufficiency” dominated Greek thought. (Nussbaum 2001, 3)

In short, this moral psychology opens the door to the (widely criticized) later Western tradition’s emphasis on reason/rationality as the grounding for ethics, and emotions as, at best, permissible and, at worst, likely to lead one toward vice. Thus, one further implication of the rational reading of Claim iii is that human nature is rational and not emotional—or, at least, that the better part of human nature is the rational one. These are, of course, ideas that virtue ethicists have themselves criticized about Enlightenment-area deontic ethical theories like utilitarianism and deontology.

As we have already begun to see, one way rationalist versions of the EV have historically justified their priority of reason over emotion has been to associate rationality with the soul ( psyche or ψύχη), intellect or mind (nous), and the divine; and the emotions or passions with the body (Aristotle NE, 1177b33, 1178a1–5, 1178a15, GA, 736b28–29; DA iii 5, 430a17–18, 430a23; Reeve 1992, 125; Shields 2020; Wiggins 1967, 57). Relatedly, as we’ve seen, the body and emotions were regarded as contingent, while the soul or mind came to be regarded as divine, immaterial, and permanent. As noted, proponents of the dominant view hold that “rational activity” is more properly understood as activity of the rational part of the soul (and, sometimes, of

\(^{57}\) As she goes on to note, though, “on the other side of this pursuit of self-sufficiency, complicating and constraining the effort to banish contingency from human life, was always a vivid sense of the special beauty of the contingent and the mutable, that love for the riskiness and openness of empirical humanity.” (2001, 3)
the theoretical *nous* in particular). Moreover, as we have seen, proponents of Claim iii-R also often hold that this rational part of the soul is the part that makes people *people*, and thus paves the way for denigration of the body (and emotions, which are seen as belonging to it).

**Claim iv-R**

What is the role of *phronesis* in cultivating or developing the virtues, and in making decisions with respect to what is ethically required? And to what extent does *phronesis* resemble Aristotle’s other intellectual virtues? What emotional content, if any, does it have? Depending on how they answer these questions, contemporary proponents of the EV and historical commentators on or interpreters of Aristotle may have very different understandings. Claim iv-R (practical wisdom-R) specifies that practical reason or its perfection, *practical wisdom* (*phronesis*), is itself a strictly rational process.

Different philosophers have interpreted Aristotle’s conception of *phronesis* along the rational/emotional spectrum. In particular, proponents of Claim iv-R (like Haybron, Irwin, Sorabji, Taylor, and Yu) have generally held that *phronesis* is best understood as the perfection of rational choice or as a kind of syllogistic reasoning, and in general as similar to theoretical wisdom or expertise. In contrast (as we’ll see later in this chapter), proponents of Claim iv-E hold *phronesis* to be less rationalistic, or as sharing fewer similarities with the other intellectual virtues Aristotle identifies.

Aristotle’s views, Haybron argues,

are far more rationalistic than hedonism [is], a point that is most apparent in Aristotle’s account of well-being as living according to reason, with reason firmly in charge. Sentiment counts, but only in a secondary role. And so, for the *phronimos* or person of wisdom, nothing could benefit the agent against her considered judgment. If something were to benefit a person against her considered judgment—if this is possible for an Aristotelian—it would represent a serious problem, an abdication by reason of its proper role in guiding human life. (2010, 15)

As we can see from Haybron’s characterization of this (rationalistic) view, the understanding of *phronesis* as essentially rational is closely connected to similarly rationalistic understandings of Claim ii and iii. This is because proponents of the EV-R will hold, broadly, that *eudaimonia* is characterized by rational activity and that human nature is best characterized by this ability to perform rational activity. And, again, rational activity
is seen to include only those activities of the rational *per se* part of the soul, and thus to be activities like contemplation, study, deliberation, judgment, or syllogistic reasoning.

According to Terence Irwin’s (2019) translation of and commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is, for Aristotle, an intellectual virtue that “allows a man to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself… about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general.” (Aristotle 2019, *NE*, 1140a25–28) In a rational reading of *phronesis* its function is *probairies*, or decision (also sometimes translated as choice); more precisely, *phronesis* is the perfection of practical reason, which includes (as Sarah Broadie puts it) both *probairies* and “the process of deliberation or reflection by which a rational choice [*probairies*] is formed.” (Broadie 1991, 179)58 This reading of *phronesis* thus closely connects to the rationalistic reading of *probairies* discussed with reference to Claim i-R, above.

In rational readings of Aristotle like Haybron’s, Irwin’s, and Broadie’s, the desiring (appetitive) part of the soul seems to follow, or accord with, deliberation when it comes to determining a course of action. As with the other claims of the EV-R, proponents of this claim can find ample support for their position in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Irwin’s Aristotle states that “the unqualifiedly good deliberator is the one whose aim accords with rational calculation in pursuit of the best good that is achievable in action for a human being” (NE, 1141b8–15).59 Broadie further argues that *phronesis* is the faculty of deliberation and decision: that by which we can consider what to do as distinct from acting on impulse. One has reasons for a decision, and can justify and explain the action to others by communicating the reasons. This is evidently ‘rational’ activity by contrast with the mere having of feelings, reacting to stimuli, being carried away by impulse. (1991, 68)

58 Further, she notes, “to Aristotle these are conceptually inseparable.” (Broadie 1991, 179)

59 This requirement that the end is “attainable by action” also distinguishes practical wisdom from theoretical wisdom. We can divide the rational part of the soul into “two parts that have reason: with one we study beings whose principles do not admit of being otherwise than they are, and with the other we study beings whose principles admit of being otherwise… [the first is] the scientific part, and the other the rationally calculating part; for deliberating is the same as rationally calculating, and no one deliberates about what cannot be otherwise.” (NE, 1138b35 –1139a10)
Note that one major feature of rational readings of Claim iv, and indeed of the EV-R in general, emphasizes that *phronesis* is a rational faculty that ensures virtue is not a reaction or response but a considered choice.\(^{60}\)

This feature will be contested by proponents of the EV-E, who contrarily hold that virtue is, indeed, akin to a reaction or immediate, emotional response (e.g., to injustice).

Recall that, according to Irwin’s translation, Aristotle defines *prohairesis* as “deliberative desire to do an action that is up to us.” (NE, 1113a12). Similarly, we noted that Rosalind Hursthouse argues “in so far as Aristotle has a notion of ‘motivation’, the continent and the fully virtuous agent have the same motivation—they both act from reason (*logos*) in the form of ‘choice’ (*prohairesis*).” (2001, 1) These rationalistic readings of *prohairesis* were shown to support a rationalistic reading of virtue (Claim i-R) in general, since they suggest that the virtuous agent acts on the basis of rational choice *rather than* emotions. Since Claim iv is about the role of *phronesis* in virtue, proponents of Claim i-R will, typically, also endorse Claim iv-R. If virtue is a matter of choosing well—i.e., in response to the demands of calculative reason—then *phronesis*, as the intellectual virtue that allows an agent to choose well, will essentially be a calculative reasoning process.

Christopher Taylor is another contemporary philosopher who takes this rational reading of Aristotle. In his description of Aristotle’s moral psychology, he argues that

Since [for Aristotle] rationality belongs essentially to the intellect, and derivatively to the appetites, the types of excellence [in rational activity that make up virtue] are the excellence of the intellect and the excellence of rationally responsive appetite. These types of excellence interpenetrate through the practical function of the intellect. The intellect is employed not merely in speculative thought, but in the direction of conduct, and it performs its practical role by shaping and directing the appetites. And the appetites are excellently shaped insofar as they respond appropriately to the directions of practical reason. (2010, 44)

Note that Taylor is building on the rational/dominant reading of the intellectual virtues as the excellence of rational activity *proper*, in order to further argue that practical wisdom (*phronesis*), an intellectual virtue,

---

\(^{60}\) Recall that *nous* can be divided, for Aristotle, into theoretical and practical parts. *Phronesis* is in the practical part and deals with particulars or what we would today call empirical knowledge. So, while (paradigmatic) proponents of the EV-R will hold that theoretical reasoning is superior to practical reasoning—Claim iii-R—they will also hold that *phronesis* is the virtue of practical reasoning. Some may therefore hold that it, as opposed to the virtues or faculties of the “strictly” rational (i.e., theoretical) part of the intellectual soul, which are “more narrowly rational [and] ratiocinative,” “shows kinship with what has been termed the nonrational but reason-responsive part”, i.e., the appetitive or desiring part of the soul. (Broadie 1991, 68). However, this reading of *phronesis* as less rational than the intellectual virtues does not mean that *phronesis* does not admit of a (still) comparatively rational reading for proponents of the EV-R.
contributes to the moral virtues by making sure they “respond appropriately” to the direction of the intellect.

A similarly rational reading of Aristotle also seems to be offered by J.M. Cooper (1986).

Because for eudaimonic virtue ethicists (like Aristotle) the best “for man” is identical to the best simpliciter, practical wisdom is understood as the ability to correctly reason through which actions one should take in order to further one’s aim of achieving the good. This reading thus depends not only on an endorsement of Claim i-R—that virtue consists, at least in large part, of rationally controlling or directing emotional impulses or appetites—but also on Claims iii-R, that human nature is characterized by rational activity (logos) understood strictly as activity of the rational part of the soul (nous), and ii-R (eudaimonism-R).

Paul Bloomfield likewise offers a rational reading of *phronesis*. Although (as noted in the discussion of Claim i-R, above) Bloomfield disagrees with Aristotle in that the Greek philosopher, in Bloomfield’s view, does not hold virtues to be skills (*NE, 1140a*), he argues that Aristotle is mistaken on this account and that *phronesis* actually functions the same in the virtuous agents’ practice of virtue as it does in the expert’s practice of a skill. Bloomfield writes:

> the rules or principles of a *logos* are central to a skill, and we can perhaps best further our understanding of the importance of *logoi* to virtues as well to skills, by considering *phronesis*, often translated as ‘practical rationality’. While it is rarely noted, *phronesis* has two parts: diagnosis and problem solving, the former preceding the latter… *Phronesis* itself is not a skill, for it has no *logos* of its own. Rather, it is embodied within the *logos* of each skill. Being an expert in practical rationality is being an expert in solving problems that comes with a general understanding of how things (bodies, machines, psychologies, nature) are organized, and how they work. *Phronimoi* [practically wise people] have a general understanding of the principles of mechanics and the tendencies of nature … there are similarities in the intellectual processes involved in becoming an expert in a subject matter; there are rules to follow if one’s goal is to master a field. There are also similarities in the ways that experts think when practicing their skills. The same epistemic processes are used by experts in different skills in the analysis of the domains of their respective fields. Practical rationality, *phronesis*, figures in them all. The same epistemic processes, those constituting *phronesis*, are used by the morally virtuous in determining the proper course of action in moral situations. (2000, 27–28)

The practically wise (and therefore morally good, because one cannot be practically wise without possessing all the virtues [*NE, 1144b30, 1145a1*]) person has the same expertise as an expert (e.g., a builder) but in the area of the moral or character virtues. As Bloomfield puts it, the *phronimos* knows “the rules to follow.”

---

61 As Stainton explains, Cooper argues that for Aristotle “the rational part of the soul is not part of the actuality of the body but constitutes, not just a part of the soul, but a separate soul entity. It is this distinct soul, or soul part, that makes a human being what he or she is” (Stainton 2001, 453).
Similarly, Julia Annas argues that “exercising a virtue involves practical reasoning of a kind that can illuminatingly be compared to the kind of reasoning we find in someone exercising a practical skill” (2011, 1). And, as we have seen, one important point of similarity between practical reasoning and the reasoning of a skilled expert is that both can be “explained” or articulated (2011, 19). Annas further argues that while virtue is a disposition, in her view it is “a disposition to act which involves understanding what you do, self-directedness, and drive to improve.” (2011, 27) In this view, phronesis is the reasoning process that provides the understanding part of virtue.62

In these rational readings of phronesis and its role in ethical decision-making, a remnant of a rationalistic supposition of classical Greek virtue ethics—that is, the idea that the soul or mind can be divided into rational and non-rational parts, and that the former should rule the latter—can again be seen. Phronesis is an intellectual virtue (again, proponents of this view can point to Aristotle to support this point [NE, 1103a1–10]) that directs virtue. Thus, while (moral) virtues are dispositions located in the appetitive part of the soul, they are given action-guidance by the (fully) rational part. Moreover, this action-guidance, phronesis—the “diagnosis and problem solving” part of virtue—is the same faculty in moral and other decision-making (Bloomfield 2000, 27). In short, phronesis resembles other reasoning processes and is best regarded as strictly rational. We have already seen that this moral psychology can be regarded as a kind of proto-dualism or indication of mind-body hylomorphism. Another, related version of Claim iv-R is one which holds that phronesis is best understood as a type of syllogistic reasoning. To provide a prominent example: in Aquinas’s (trans. Williams 2016) reading of Aristotle phronesis allows us to make a syllogism in which the minor premise is the particular situation, desire or act (i.e., the empirical facts), the major (or universal) premise is an aim toward the good, and the conclusion is action.63

---

62 Similarly, Sorabji argues that “though moral virtue is a disposition, it is one directed by practical wisdom.” (1974, 119)

63 Applying the practical syllogism model, an incontinent man (e.g., a glutton) might reason like this: (i) This cake is sweet. (ii) Everything sweet should be tasted. (iii) I eat the cake. In this case the relationship between the particular and universal premises is correctly reasoned (i.e., it is a valid argument), but the universal premise is incorrect (the argument is not sound). This is because the glutton has not properly habituated his appetites such that he desires sweets in moderation (as the temperate man would). Thus, practical wisdom is involved in, but not sufficient for, virtue. (Aristotle,
To sum up: proponents of Claim iv-R hold that *phronesis* is not a special moral faculty. Instead, they hold that it is a virtue (or perfection of a faculty) of reasoning, problem solving, syllogistic reasoning, decision-making, etc. that takes as its content practical, normative matters. And, the virtues are virtues insofar as they follow *phronesis’s*, and thus the intellect’s (*nous*) direction.

**The Rational Model (EV-R) Summed Up**

As we have seen, Aristotle scholars—e.g., Paul Bloomfield, Sarah Broadie, J.M. Cooper, Rosalind Hurthousoe, Terence Irwin, Anthony Kenny, Richard Kraut, C.D.C. Reeve, Richard Sorabj, Christopher Taylor, David Wiggins, and Jiuyan Yu—debate how Aristotle himself understood the EV’s claims; however, these scholars all endorse at least some of the EV-R’s claims, meaning they hold either that Aristotle himself held a rationalist view of the EV or that if he didn’t, he was mistaken not to. Additionally, we have seen that contemporary ethicists argue not only about whether Aristotle himself understood these claims rationally but whether we should do the same. For example, Dan Haybron argues against Jonathan Haidt’s contemporary rationalism, while Julia Annas, Ben Bradley, Alison Hills, Rosalind Hurthouse, and Martha Nussbaum all argue that at least some elements of the EV-R offer correct understandings of virtue.

Each of these thinkers has argued for a rationalistic reading of Aristotle for at least some of the EV’s four claims. As we have seen, support for aretaicism-R and practical wisdom-R can be found in Aristotle’s discussion of the role of choice, defined as deliberation, in virtue and *phronesis*; allusions to reason “ruling” or “subordinating” non-rational parts of the soul, which in turn “listen” or “obey”; tripartite moral psychology, including his discussion of the moral psychology of the *akratic* versus *enkratic* agent; conception of virtue as requiring the virtuous agent to be able to “given an account,” and analogies to virtue as a skill. Support for eudaimonism-R and naturalism-R can be found in “dominant” readings of *eudaimonia*, the *NE* Book X.

---

*NE*, 1147a35–1147b5) Practical wisdom, as the excellence of practical reasoning or decision, is what connects the aim toward the perceived good with the particular action to be taken. So, Aquinas’s reading of *phronesis* is also a rationalistic one. In short, Aquinas’s notion of practical wisdom seems to (a) be the perfection of a kind of deliberation, and (b) involve a type of syllogistic reasoning. As Aquinas explains, “the act in which the will tends toward something that is proposed to it as something good is materially an act of will but formally an act of reason, because it is reason that directs the act toward an end.” (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae Q13. All *Summa* translations are taken from Thomas Williams’s 2016 *Aquinas: The Treatise on Happiness and The Treatise on Human Acts*.)
arguments that contemplation or study (theoria) is the best life and that intellectual virtues are divine; and evidence from the Generation of Animals and De Anima that Aristotle believes the soul (psychē) to be the part of the human that is a person proper (motivating proto-dualism/hylomorphism).

I have, further, tried to show the ways in which the rationalistic readings of Claims i–iv are connected. Keep in mind, though, that the division between the EV-R and the EV-E can be regarded as a spectrum. Some of the thinkers we have discussed in this chapter are more rationalist, some less. The rationalist reading (EV-R) as I have presented it—i.e., as a paradigmatically rationalistic version of the EV, such that the rational readings of all four claims are adopted—provides a metric by which to evaluate contemporary versions of the EV.

Such (comparatively) rationalistic readings of Aristotle—and of the respective roles of reason and emotion in moral decision-making and virtue, and in characterizing human nature and eudaimonia—are, as we have begun to see, also present as a background assumption in many contemporary virtue ethical theories. As we will see in the Chapter 3, rationalistic versions of the EV (EV-R) are open to criticisms from feminist and disability scholars. In the following sections of this chapter, we will identify the emotional versions of the EV’s four claims and contrast them with the rational readings just discussed. Like its rationalist counterpart, the emotionist strand can be found in both contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethical theories and in historical interpretations of Aristotle, and is plausibly borne out by the Nicomachean Ethics.

2.3 The Emotional Model

We have already seen a simplified, paradigmatic version of the EV-E above. Now, let us look at its claims in more detail, including identifying classical and contemporary proponents of each claim.64

64 This theory’s emotionist version of the EV’s four features, EV-E, again, are: (i-E) Virtue is the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., aretētism); virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of attending to our emotions or sentiments and recognizing their normative content. (ii-E) Virtue is at least partially constitutive of or a necessary condition of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., endaimonism); a eudaimon life is characterized by not just (strictly) rational activity but also by a rich emotional and relational life. (iii-E) Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human or fulfilling human nature (i.e., naturalism); human nature is characterized at least in large part by the possession of emotional instincts or sensitivities that can be developed into virtue(s). (iv-E) Practical wisdom is required for achieving full virtue; practical wisdom can be understood more specifically as the perfection of a sensitivity, or as a means to obtain ends set by emotions.
The view that “our emotions and desires play a leading role in the anatomy of morality” has been called moral sentimentalism. (Kauppinen 2022a, para. 1) Along with this view, as I will show, typically comes the idea that—contra rationalists—virtue need not require the ability to articulate reasons, nor that it is a kind of understanding similar to that of a skilled technical expert. Moreover, as we will see, many moral sentimentalists are also motivational internalists.65

As Kauppinen (2022a) notes, moral sentimentalism comes in many forms.66 As discussed above, David Hume is likely the best example of a proponent of sentimentalism in the Western virtue ethics tradition. Rachel Cohon explains,

Hume famously sets himself in opposition to most moral philosophers, ancient and modern, who talk of the combat of passion and reason, and who urge human beings to regulate their actions by reason and to grant it dominion over their contrary passions. He claims to prove that ‘reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will,” and that reason alone “can never oppose passion in the direction of the will” (T 413). (Cohon 2018, §3)

Thus, for Hume (as we saw in §2.1 above), the passions or sentiments motivate all intentional actions and are the source of the virtues (Cohon 2018). Virtue, in Hume’s view, is “not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv’d by reason” (T3.1.1.27, quoted in Cohon 2018, §5). Rather, virtues are traits we

---

65 Recall that, as noted above, motivational internalism is the view that “necessarily, if a person judges that she morally ought to φ, then she is… motivated to φ” (Bjorklund et al. 2012, 125). The contrasting view, motivational externalism, holds that it is possible to judge that one ought to φ without being motivated to φ.

66 In this view, for example, the fully virtuous agent may possess a perfectly cultivated moral sensitivity, which allows her to recognize how her emotions are a response to moral facts. This, in effect, describes the “virtue as sensitivity” view, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Or, she may have discovered and developed her own natural or God-given inclination toward virtue by looking past distorting social or cultural influences. Historically, these kind of sentimentalist (or emotionist) approaches have been associated with religious traditions like Christianity and Buddhism, which “place great normative emphasis on mercy, compassion, kindness, and love.” (Frazer and Slote 2015, 197) (Note, however, that on the other hand other religious traditions have leaned more toward rationalism, insofar as they emphasize mind-body dualism or hylomorphism.) As Kauppinen puts it, “Some believe moral thoughts are fundamentally sentimental, others that moral facts are related to our sentimental responses, or that emotions are the primary source of moral knowledge. Some believe all these things.” (2022a, para. 1) This also means that moral sentimentalists can be cognitivists or non-cognitivists, and that they thus vary in what role, if any, they think reason plays in emotion. Additionally, as Michael Frazer and Michael Slote note, one may endorse “Metaethical sentimentalism [which] emphasizes the role of affect in the proper psychology of moral judgment, [or] normative sentimentalism [which] emphasizes the centrality of warm emotions to the phenomena of which these judgments properly approve. Neither form of sentimentalism necessarily implies a commitment to virtue ethics, but both have an elective affinity with it.” (2015)
approve of, whether “natural” or “artificial,” while vices are those that merit approbation (Cohon 2018, §7).

The moral sentiments that motivate us to express approval or disapproval of traits “are produced by sympathy with those affected by a trait or action. Such sympathetically-acquired feelings are distinct from our self-interested responses.” (Cohon 2018, §8)

Hume’s sentimentalist theory, while interesting and clearly similar to an emotional EV, is not itself a version of the EV (as we saw above, because proponents of the EV hold virtue to be both rational and emotional). Nonetheless, the impact of his moral psychology on the development of the EV-E cannot be overstated. The emotionist view (EV-E) that I am developing here is not identical to sentimentalism, but it shares the major feature of ascribing to the emotions normative content and an important role in moral development and decision-making. The EV-E is first and foremost a version of the EV, so will share its four principal features. Again, an important point to keep in mind is that even comparatively emotional readings of Aristotle or the EV will not dismiss the role of reason in virtue and moral cultivation entirely. And, as we saw above, proponents of the EV-R will likewise not deny that properly cultivated emotions, desires, and attitudes are required for full virtue.

On this basis, might one argue that the EV-R and EV-E are not logically opposed? Couldn’t one hold, for example, that virtuous action requires both rationally controlling or directing emotional impulses and attending to them and recognizing their normative content? Couldn’t one hold that human nature is characterized both by rational activity (strictly, i.e., contemplation, ratiocination, or calculation) and emotional instincts/sensitivities? Or that phronesis is both a rational process and akin to a sensitivity? While some readings of the EV’s claims represent differences of emphasis rather than logically incompatible positions—and, again, the rational and emotional sides should be considered a spectrum—there are also some aspects that are irreconcilable between the EV-R and EV-E. This is because the EV-R can be thought of as more restrictive in its understanding of reason/rationality and human nature; it specifically excludes or denigrates the

67 Natural virtues, for Hume, are those “traits of which we approve naturally (without any social contrivance), such as beneficence, clemency, and moderation,” while “artificial virtues, “(justice with respect to property, allegiance to government, and dispositions to obey the laws of nations and the rules of modesty and good manners)… are inventions contrived solely for the interest of society.” (Cohon 2018, §7)
role of emotions, appetites, or desires in contributing to virtue development and practice, or to the good life—except, as we have seen, when they are regarded as an obstacle or neutral material for reason to mold.

While proponents of the EV-R will acknowledge that emotions and appetites are necessary features of human life, and that neither human nature nor virtue can be understood without including them, they will not hold that the emotions are helpful or enriching features of human life—rather, they are perhaps better understood as regrettable, but unavoidable or instrumentally necessary, parts of a contingent, material, dependent human life. Recall for instance the points discussed in the description of EV-R above that reason can “lead us all the way to [virtuous] action” (Kraut 2002, §7); that “ethical virtue can be understood as the excellence of obeying reason” (Yu 1998, 325); or that a eudaimon life refers “exclusively to the excellent employment of the theoretical intellect” (Taylor 2010, 42–43). These claims suggest that emotions, appetites, or desires do not provide anything essential for cultivating virtue or achieving eudaimonia, except perhaps as is required by the unfortunate need for humans to live in community until they become as self-sufficient as possible.

As was shown in Chapter 1, the EV requires its proponents to hold that practical wisdom (phronesis) is required for virtue, as well as that virtue consists in fulfilling human nature. The EV-E includes these features, but differs from the EV-R in the extent to which human nature and practical wisdom are understood as rational in contrast to emotional—i.e., that humanity is rational to a larger extent than emotional, or that humans’ best features are rational and not emotional. In short, the EV-E holds that rationality is not superior to emotion in the realm of ethical cultivation and decision-making nor in constituting the best human life. What’s more, it holds that reason and emotion are not clearly distinguishable at all, at least for the virtuous or practically wise person. Based on these differences, proponents of the EV-R and EV-E will also differ, e.g., on what they take rational activity to be; the extent to which phronesis resembles theoretical reason or ratiocination; the role and character of prohairesis (choice); and the moral psychology of virtuous agents. With this in mind, let’s get clearer on the four tenets of the EV-E.
Claim i-E

Claim i-E (aretaicism-E) holds that virtue has to do in large part with attending to our emotions or sentiments. This includes the implicit claim that emotions or sentiments have important moral content; that is, they are normatively valuable, not bad or neutral. One prominent version of this claim is what is called a “virtue as sensitivity” view (Clarke 2017). In this view, virtue is akin to a cultivated moral sensitivity, and emotions are responses to motivating moral facts. Relatedly, some proponents of Claim i-E hold that moral judgments are merely statements of approbation, based on one’s emotional reactions, or judgments about whether one’s appetitive reactions are appropriate. These latter two views are sentimentalist ones.

As Frazer and Slote note, sentimentalist ethical theories can be subdivided into “classical” and “neo-”sentimentalist theories. In classical sentimentalist theories, like Hume’s, “ethical judgments are understood as ‘moral sentiments,’ as emotionally-laden, though idealized or ‘corrected,’ feelings of approbation or disapprobation.” (2015, 13) In “neo-sentimentalist” theories, or “rational sentimentalism,” moral judgments are seen as “judgments about the appropriateness or rationality of certain affective reactions to the object of evaluation.” (2015, 13) For the purposes of this dissertation, I consider both “classical” and “neo-”sentimentalism to be “emotional” (but not necessarily EV-E) readings, insofar as they recognize the important normative content of the emotions or sentiments.68

Neo-sentimentalism may be taken to resemble the view, in Claim i-R, that virtues consist of rationally controlled or directed emotions, passions, or appetites. However, note the important difference that in this sentimentalist (or emotionist) view the judgement that something is good, virtuous, morally required, etc. is not a result of reason coming in to correct the emotions (which may be neutral or bad) but rather the emotions themselves being habituated. In short, in this view the sentiments are seen as conative, purposeful, or directed toward approval, disapproval, or recognition of moral value.

We can identify within sentimentalist ethical theories a subset of sentimentalist virtue ethical theories. These thinkers argue, in short, that “virtue consists in having and acting on warm motivating sentiments like

---

68 As Frazer and Slote further note, neither of these metaethical positions is necessarily virtue ethical; “appropriate anger or guilt can as easily be directed to rule-breaking or to acts that harm as to bad moral character.” (2015, 13)
benevolence, gratitude, compassion, and love of one’s own children (or on sentiments that derive indirectly from these motives).” (Frazer and Slote 2015, 1). In other words, these theories hold both (a) the metaethical commitment that emotions have important normative content, i.e., contribute importantly to correct moral decision-making, and (b) normative commitments that (at least some, particular) sentiments (like compassion or empathy) are virtues. Finally, within this subset of (broadly) sentimentalist virtue ethics there are what I am calling “emotionist” versions of the EV: sentimentalist—in the broad sense of holding that sentiments have normative or conative content that can helpfully contribute to moral decision-making—but nonetheless eudaimonic, virtue ethical theories. The aforementioned “virtue as sensitivity” view is also an emotionist one in my reading.

Again, both the EV-R and the EV-E hold that reason and emotion are jointly involved in the cultivation of virtue; their difference is the relative importance accorded to each. As we have already discussed, proponents of the EV-R will tend to hold that the virtuous agent is the person who uses their rationality to direct their action; emotions are at best neutral and at worst obstacles to virtue. But, because the emotions or appetites can at least “listen to” or “obey” reason, the virtuous agent is able to control or direct them such that they obey reason in “everything” (NE, 1102b15–1103a5). Thus, in the rationalist view the role of emotions in virtue is to accord with what reason demands. We also noted that proponents of Claim i-R tend to hold that virtue is akin to skill, and that virtue requires the ability to “give an account” or to articulately convey “reasons why what is done is done” (Annas 2011, 20).

In contrast, proponents of the EV-E will hold that emotions, sentiments, desires, intuitions, or attitudes—in short, Aristotle’s appetitive part of the soul—have important normative content. They thus have a different anatomy of virtue. Emotion plays a larger role in virtue than simply providing content for the reason to direct, shape, or control. It is the emotions, not reason, that motivate or direct an agent toward the good. Many of the roles that rationalists ascribe to rationality (e.g., a rationalistic conception of phronesis, or to the intellectual part of the soul) will be ascribed to emotions or appetite for emotionists. One common feature of emotionist variations of Claim i, then, is that emotions or sentiments play an integral role in moral motivation, such that without them an agent could not develop complete virtue.
Much of the debate around the respective roles of reason (or the intellectual part of the soul) and emotions (or the appetitive/desiderative part of the soul) in virtue, at least for proponents of the EV who regard themselves as Aristotelians, can be illuminated by examining Aristotle’s own, sometimes inconsistent description of these two parts of the soul. Recall, first, that Aristotle argues that the appetitive part of the soul is rational “in a sense” and that it “listens” to reason (NE, 1102b13–14, 1102b30–33). As Broadie notes, Aristotle himself fail[s] to distinguish between the two distinctions or, if one prefers, the two relations: (1) that of prescriber to respondent, and (2) that of ratiocination to evaluation within the prescriber…. On the one hand, the famous division of virtues, along with the corresponding division of soul into intellect (or mind) and character, seems intended to correspond to the distinction between reason and desire. Here, then, Aristotle seems to be reading towards the Humean contrast of reason and sentiment and, through this, towards the correlative contrast of judgments of fact with judgments of value. On the other hand (as Hume clearly saw), from the point of view reason-as-an-authority-figure, i.e., reason as represented by an evaluative prescription, no more deserves the title ‘reason’ than does the lowly respondent which, when good, is represented by the equally evaluative acceptance of that prescription. (Broadie 1991, 69)

In short: Broadie explains that Aristotle seems to shift between different, and incompatible, understandings of reason’s role in moral or character virtue. On the one hand, Aristotle suggests that reason “prescribes”, and the emotions or appetites merely “respond”. This is, in effect, the rationalist reading of Claim i. Reason identifies (or evaluates) what is required for virtuous action and directs the appetitive part of the soul to respond accordingly. On the other hand, though, Aristotle also suggests in places that reason cannot provide motivation or make value judgments (and, with Hume, that only affect can).

As Broadie (1991) continues to explain (in sum), this latter understanding implies that reason (in the form of phronesis) merely helps the emotions or desires in ascertaining the correct means to get the end that they have already identified. But this latter reading contradicts his earlier description of the appetitive part of the soul as listening to reason as one would “to a father.” (NE, 1102b30–33, 1103a1–3) Reason does not, in this latter formulation, have authority over the emotions. Rather, it provides merely instrumental means-end reasoning; the evaluative component is part of the desiderative, not (strictly) rational, part of the soul (NE, 1145a5–7; see also NE, 1151a15–19). (Broadie 1991, 69–71)
Emotionists will tend to hold either this view of reason—i.e., that it helps the desiderative part of the soul determine the means to its desired end—or a broader conception of reason in which its evaluative part goes beyond a ratiocinative or means-end understanding of reason. In this second, broader view “reason”—at least in the context of practical reason and its constitutive role in virtue—includes not only rationality strictly speaking but also appropriate or cultivated values, desires, and emotions. Often, for the emotionist, this is because emotions grasp or provide the motivational content of virtue; this is the position of a proponent of the “virtue as sensitivity” view.

Some emotionist theories are taken by their proponents to be founded in Aristotle. John McDowell’s is one prominent example. McDowell (and, as we will see, Wiggins and Williams) holds the “sensitivity view” version of Claim i-E noted above, conceiving of virtue as a sensitivity to morally motivating features of the world. In this view, as Bridget Clarke explains, “virtue appears not as willpower, but as a sensitivity to moral requirements” (2017, 36). This sensitivity ensures both that “the virtuous agent discerns what is called for, case by case, and that she is appropriately moved by what she discerns.” (2017, 36).

McDowell’s most famous contribution to virtue ethics is his elucidation of this sensitivity view of virtue and the related secondary quality analogy. As McDowell explains,

A secondary quality is a property the ascription of which to an object is not adequately understood except as true, if it is true, in virtue of an object’s disposition to present a certain sort of perceptual appearance... an object’s being red is understood as something that obtains in virtue of the object’s being such as (in certain circumstances) to look precisely, red (1998, 133–34).

So, to say something is “red” is to say that, in ideal conditions, it appears red to humans. It is true that something is red (it is an objective fact of the world), but its redness can also not be understood without reference to human perception of it. Similarly, “[t]he idea of value experience involves taking admiration, say, to represent its object as having a property that (although there in the object) is essentially subjective” (McDowell 1998, 142).

---

69 David Wiggins, as we’ll see below, endorses a similar position.
As McDowell further explains, on this view values “are not brutally there—not there independently of our sensibility—any more than colours are: though, as with colours, this does not prevent us from supposing that they are there independently of any particular apparent experience of them” (1998, 146). Moreover, because these qualities can only be understood with reference to an observer, they are eudaimonic (in a specific sense). Just as “red” can only be understood with reference to human visual capacities, virtues (in this view) can only be understood with reference to human nature and flourishing. Thus, to say that something is morally good is to make a judgment that is objectively true (i.e., moral realism) but also dependent on an understanding of “good” in the sense of good for humans.  

As Kristján Kristjánsson (2010) further explains McDowell:

According to McDowell’s interpretation, someone who has been properly raised in the Aristotelian way has been habituated into seeing the appropriate actions or emotions as worthwhile in the specific way that is expressed by bringing them under the rubric of the concepts of eudaimonia and the noble or virtuous. Rather than furnishing us with a universal blueprint from which virtuous (re)actions can be systematically worked out, in this contrasting picture there is nothing for the virtuous person’s grasp of the content of the universal to be ‘except a capacity to read the details of the situation in the light of a way of valuing [...] into which proper upbringing has habituated one’.

Thus: in this McDowellian, emotionist view of virtue the virtuous agent, contra the rationalist picture, has no need of syllogistic, ratiocinatic, or means-end reasoning to work out how particular actions or emotions fit into what reason has determined. Rather, the virtuous agent has a kind of cultivated moral sense such that she simply feels or perceives the right thing to do.

This moral sense, and the emotions it provokes or activates, are sufficient to motivate virtuous action. Emotions themselves come to be properly habituated, and the morally correct actions of the phronimos are basically “subrational” (to use Julia Annas’s critical characterization) insofar as there is no expectation that she be able to articulate the reasons behind her virtuous action (Annas 2011, 25).

---

70 The connection between this and Aristotle is especially clear when one considers his discussion in NE Book I, Chapter 7 of the multiple senses of “good,” “excellence,” or “virtue” (agathos) that precedes his function argument. He argues there that the “good” is relative to the aim or end of a given craft, action, etc., but that in general the “good” for a given F is whatever allows it to do its function well. This understanding of virtues as akin to secondary qualities—insofar as it provides, as P.J. Ivanhoe puts it, a “middle way” between moral subjectivism and realism (2011, 277; see also Lebkuecher 2024)—is common among proponents of the EV-E.
Bernard Williams is another prominent proponent of this view.71 His famous criticism of the “one thought too many”—the need, in some moral theories, to provide generalizable justification for, e.g., saving one’s drowning wife—reflects the emotionist position that virtue should be a matter of simply perceiving, feeling, or grasping the right thing to do in a particular situation (Williams 1981). David Wiggins (1980, 1987) approvingly offers a similar emotionist theory of virtue, arguing that we can find a “Sensible Subjectivism” in the middle ground between objectivism and subjectivism.72

One closely related feature of the EV-E—that indeed may be entailed by the understanding of Claim i-E in which virtue is regarded as a sensitivity—thus seems to be motivational internalism. Because the emotionist version of the EV holds virtue to be, at least in large part, a product, discovery, or approbation of our natural emotions or impulses, it follows that something about virtue is in itself motivating (i.e., desirable). Contemporary ethicists have also made this point about “sentimentalists” (see, e.g., D’Arms and Jacobson 2000). Note that this is the exact opposite of the rational version of Claim i as put forward by Kraut.

Again, Kraut argued “When reason remains unimpaired and unclouded, its dictates will carry us all the way to action, so long as we are able to act.” (2022, §7). Conversely, McDowell, Wiggins, and Williams all

---

71 As Connie Rosati notes, “On Williams’ view, in order to be motivated, an individual must have some motivating attitude in her current ‘motivational set.’ Roughly speaking, then, if a consideration does not motivate a person given her current desires or motivational set, it cannot be a reason for her to act” (2016, §2).

72 However, Wiggins emphasizes that moral qualities are also importantly relational or intersubjective in their foundation. Using the analogy of finding something amusing, Wiggins writes “Amusement for instance is a reaction we have to characterize by reference to its proper object, via something perceived as funny (or incongruous or comical or whatever). There is no object-independent and property-independent, ‘purely phenomenological’ or ‘purely introspective’ account of amusement. And equally there is no saying what exactly the funny is without reference to laughter or amusement or kindred reactions… one person can improve another’s grasp of the concept of the funny; and one person can improve another’s focus or discrimination of what is funny. Furthermore, the process can be a collaborative one, without either of the participants to a dialogue counting as the absolutely better judge.” (1987, 195–196) Wiggins thus suggests that we can think of moral values as broadly intersubjective—that is, grounded not in individual attitudes but collective agreement about what attitude or moral response a fact evokes, such that “x is only really φ if it is such as to evoke and make appropriate the response A among those who are sensitive to φ-ness” (1987, 205). Briefly, moral objectivism or moral realism is the view that moral claims “purport to report facts and are true if they get the facts right” (Sayre-McCord 2023). One attractive feature of moral realism is that it accords with most peoples’ intuition that when we say something is ethically right or wrong we are making a judgment that could be true or false. Moral subjectivism or moral relativism, a type of moral anti-realism, holds that “a metaethical thesis that the truth or justification of moral judgments is not absolute, but relative to the moral standard of some person or group of persons.” (Gowans, 2021). One attractive feature of moral subjectivism is that it accords with most peoples’ experience of widespread moral disagreement. As noted above, McDowell’s view has also been described as holding a middle ground between these two metaethical commitments (Ivanhoe 2011; Lebkuecher 2024).
here argue—like Kraut, from a supposedly Aristotelian grounding—that reason alone cannot motivate action, but rather only desires can. These readings of Claim i of the EV are thus incompatible. Again, this feature is related to Claim i-E’s (areticism-E) assertion that virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of attending to our emotions or sentiments and that human nature is characterized by the possession of emotional instincts or sensitivities that have normative content and can be developed into virtue(s).

Against this point a rationalist might argue that the emotionist picture makes virtue too ‘easy,’ that it does not leave any room for phronesis—or reasoning at all—in virtue cultivation and practice, or that a “sensitivity” or “approbation” view of virtue cannot satisfactorily account for moral disagreement.73 In short, critics of Claim i-E will hold that the view of virtue as a sensitivity to motivating features means that moral agents are either virtuous or deceived. That is, the sensitivity account posits a basically Socratic understanding of virtue as knowledge, but just takes it to be “knowledge” in a perceptional or non-rational sense.74 It is thus vulnerable to the problems that Aristotle’s discussion of akrasia (weakness of will) was meant to address. And, these critics can further argue that an “approbation” view makes moral disagreement a matter of conflicting attitudes rather than judgments (Stevenson 1944; Tersman 2022).

On the other hand, an emotionist could argue that Claim i-R is “over-intellectual,” insofar as a rationalist account of virtue as reason-directed “makes the virtuous person sound, unrealistically, as though they were busily thinking about reasons.” (Annas 2011, 28). And, proponents of the EV-E can further claim, the rationalists’ picture—with its emphasis on explaining or giving an account of why one acts virtuously—fails to capture the immediate, intuitive response that we would expect the phronimos to have in a morally fraught situation (again, this is Williams’s 1981 critique).

It was noted in the discussion of Claim i-R above that rational readings of virtue often rely on Aristotle’s discussion of akrasia in NE Books VI and VII. In this discussion, Aristotle suggests that reason and emotion are opposed, and that akratic and enkratieic agents both go wrong insofar as their emotions lead

73 Julia Annas (2011) and Philip J. Ivanhoe (2011) are two prominent examples of critics who argue this point.

74 As we will see in the following chapter, this same feature makes the EV-E vulnerable to criticism from psychologists.
them away from virtue and their reason leads them toward it. Drawing on this discussion, proponents of the EV-R argue that virtue is essentially rational, and that emotions can either hinder the development and practice of virtue or, at best, obey reason.

However, as we have noted, it is unclear whether this discussion of the moral psychology of the akratic and enkrateic agents is meant to also explain the moral psychology of virtuous agents (Broadie, 1991, 63–65). Emotionists and rationalists will endorse different moral psychologies, with rationalists taking the moral psychology described in the akrasia discussion to be generalizable. Emotionists, in contrast, will either downplay the role of reason in virtue or endorse a moral psychology in which (practical) reason is not cleanly distinguishable from an agents’ emotions and desires.

Some evidence against the rationalist reading is found in Book VI, in which Aristotle argues that “the incontinent or base person will use rational calculation to reach what he proposes to see, and so will have deliberated correctly, but will have got himself a great evil.” (NE, 1142b20) This suggests that reason is functioning correctly in cases in which agents are vicious or incontinent; it thus cannot be sufficient for discovering what is morally required in Aristotle’s view.75 In short, a rationalist reading of Claim i—in which virtue is a matter of reason directing otherwise neutral or negative emotions—and an emotionist one—in which virtue is a matter of attending to or cultivating morally-directed emotions—are both plausibly supported by Aristotle’s own work.

As discussed previously, Frazer and Slote (2015) distinguish between classical, or strict, sentimentalism and neo-, or rational, sentimentalism. Claim i-E, from an Aristotelian, “neo-sentimentalist” or “rational sentimentalism” perspective, might looks something like this:

Virtue is the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., aretaicism); virtue or virtuous action consists of attending to our emotions or sentiments and recognizing their normative content; this process of

---

75 Further evidence for this reading can also be found in Aristotle’s emphasis on the role of pleasure, pain, and the passions as providing the initial material for virtue. See, e.g., Aristotle’s claim that “moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education.” (NE Book II, 1104b5–15)
attending to emotions includes recognizing their conative (or broadly rational) character, and determining whether the emotional reactions are correctly directed.

This view still emphasizes that rationality is a feature of virtue but takes a broad understanding of rationality such that (cultivated or appropriate) emotions themselves are “rational.” It also acknowledges, though, that rationality in some more robust sense is required in ensuring that the emotions are cultivated correctly, or are appropriate responses to a given ethical lemma. Again, this relates to the debate about whether or how the appetitive part of the soul, which is rational “in a sense,” itself has some rational component (as opposed to being rational only insofar as it can listen to reason) \((NE, 1103a2–3)\).

All emotionist readings will hold that the appetitive part of the soul has some rational component. “Neo-” or “rational” sentimentalist/emotionist theories may hold that emotions can be considered rational insofar as they are conative, i.e., motivationally or normatively directed, but may still hold that reason is required to help judge whether that direction is appropriate in a given casuistic context. More “classical” sentimentalist theories will hold that the cultivated emotions themselves are sufficient for virtue, without requiring any input from a separable “rationality.”

As Frazer and Slote note, Michael Slote is “the only present-day proponent of [strictly or classical] sentimentalist virtue ethics” (2015, 203); he holds that actions are morally permissible “if and only if they don’t exhibit or reflect a lack of empathic concern for others.” (2015, 10) The thinkers just discussed—i.e., McDowell, Wiggins, and Williams—ground their ethics in Aristotelianism. Slote, in contrast, explicitly distances himself from the Aristotelian tradition and instead positions Hume as his theory’s progenitor. As Slote explains in his \textit{Moral Sentimentalism}, on his view

empathic caringness is sufficient for someone to count as a morally decent person, but empathicness vis-à-vis other people’s ideas and points of view, while sufficient for objectivity, isn’t sufficient to guarantee that someone is intellectually rational… this seems fairly commonsensical. Aristotle may have regarded a high degree of intelligence and intellectual skillfulness as necessary to ethical virtue, but we nowadays (more democratically and like Kant) hold that such intelligence and skill isn’t necessary to moral decency or goodness. We think, rather, that moral goodness and decency are more a matter of the heart and that, therefore, the capacity for being moral isn’t widely denied to people because they aren’t smart or intellectually agile enough. (2010, 154, note 14)

This view is similar to those “neo-” or “rational” sentimentalist views just discussed, but goes further in denying the necessity of rationality to ethical action. As we’ll see in Chapter 3, one appealing feature of these
views (as Slote alludes to here) is that they are less vulnerable to critiques from philosophers of disability that the EV’s reliance on human nature and virtue as rational excludes the possibility of moral agents with certain intellectual disabilities. However, one problem with this view is that it’s unclear whether it counts as a version of the EV at all—which, as we have defined it, includes the claim that *phronesis* is required for virtue. This difficulty will be discussed in relation to Claim iv-E (practical wisdom-E), below.

As noted above, proponents of Claim i-E will hold not only that desires, emotions, or affects motivate action, but also that certain emotions are normatively good. Emotionists argue that even apparently “bad” or “negative” emotions have important normative content.76 One representative case of an emotion or attitude on which the emotional and rational readings are deeply divided is anger. Martha Nussbaum argues that “anger is always normatively problematic, whether in the personal or in the public realm.” (2016, 5) She takes herself to be following Aristotle in this view, as well as Socrates, Plato, and the Greek and Roman Stoics—among others (2016, 5 and 14).77 In contrast, emotionist views hold that “negative emotions like anger are not “normatively problematic” but rather provide important motivation for virtuous action. Writing critically of rationalist views of Aristotle, Kristjánsson argues that

> it is typically assumed that Aristotle, like his modern counterparts, advises us to rid ourselves of negative emotions (Goleman 1995). However, as I interpret Aristotle, he seems to have subscribed to the view that there are no morally expendable emotions – emotions which could ideally, from a moral standpoint, be eradicated from human life. (Kristjánsson 2007, 11)

---

76 See Kristjánsson, “On the Very Idea of ‘Negative Emotions’,” 2003, for a discussion of the confused and contradictory ways this term has been applied in psychology and philosophy literature. In short, my interest here is in emotions that are regarded as *normatively* negative, i.e., morally unjustifiable.

77 She also claims that “eighteenth century philosophers Joseph Butler and Adam Smith,” as well as the Buddhist and Hindu traditions broadly, likewise regard anger as “destructive” (2016, 14–15) In contrast, Nussbaum notes Strawson (1968), Hieronymi (2001), Lazarus (1991) and R.J. Wallace (1994) as holding that anger—and “reactive attitudes” generally—is importantly connected to morality, including helping to inform judgments about moral responsibility and justice. (Nussbaum 2019, 14–15; 267–68, Notes 1, 2, 7, 8, and 10)
And, as Kristjánsson elsewhere points out, the claim that “there is no such thing as a negative emotion” can be justified not only on Aristotelian grounds but also “defended along… the lines of contemporary virtue ethics.” (Kristjánsson 2003, 362, 361).

To sum up: Claim i of the EV states that virtues are the foundation of ethics or ethical action. We have seen that Claim i-E (aretaicism-E) holds that emotions have important normative content. For this reason, emotionists will further hold that virtue requires or consists in attending to our emotions or sentiments, recognizing this normative content, and cultivating or developing them. In particular, they may hold either that emotions identify or produce the motivational content that drives an agent toward virtue, with reason providing merely the means-end reasoning about how best to achieve the ends virtue identifies. Or, they may hold that it is nonsensical to separate reason and emotion when it comes to virtue development and practice, but take “reason” in a much broader sense than rationalists do. For instance, they may understand reason (insofar as it has a role in virtue or morality) as a kind of sensitivity, or as approbation of emotions as appropriate (or not). In either case, reason is seen as part of conative emotions or attitudes. Thus, a major difference between Claim i-R and Claim i-E is that the latter denies that reason is ‘calling the shots.’ Moreover, and relatedly, emotions are seen as normatively directed toward virtue or the good—not as neutral or negative—and virtues are generally thought of as cultivated or habituated emotions.

Claim ii-E

Claim ii—that virtue is at least partially constitutive of or a necessary condition of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., eudaimonism)—is again unchanged at its core. However, just as with the EV-R, eudaimonia depends on virtue. So, in an emotional conception of the EV the good life will be one that accords an important place to the emotions. Thus, we may add for Claim ii-E (eudaimonism-E) the related claim that the eudaimon life is characterized by not just rational activity but also by a rich emotional and relational life. As noted in the discussion of Claim ii-R above, proponents of the rational reading hold that the eudaimon life

---

78 Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, Thomas Hurka, Michelle Mason, and Michael Stocker are a few examples of contemporary philosophers who argue, with Kristjánsson, that there are no negative emotions. (Ben-Ze’ev 2000, 2002; Kauppinen 2022b; Mason 2003; Stocker 1976)
consists in rational activity understood strictly as activity of the (fully) rational part of the soul. Although—like all proponents of the EV—they recognize that humans are social animals, they therefore regard intellectual exercise (not practicing the ‘moral’ or ‘character’ virtues) to be the best life. Proponents of Claim ii-E, in contrast, will hold a much less restrictive understanding of ‘rational activity.’

As noted in the description of the rational reading, Aristotle scholars have been divided on the question of whether Aristotle’s conception of eudaimonia is “inclusive” or “dominant” (Taylor 2010, 42). To review, an “inclusive” reading holds that Aristotle’s conception of eudaimonia is “a conception of the supreme good as a life in which the best possible combination of specific goods is achieved” (2010, 42). Proponents of the EV-E endorse the inclusive reading, since they reject the view that the best life consists of contemplative activity or “the excellent employment of the theoretical intellect.” (2010, 43) Again, evidence for this reading of eudaimonia seems to be present in Aristotle’s own work.

Taylor notes that J.L. Ackrill puts forward such an inclusive reading. In his Aristotle the Philosopher, Ackrill argues, in response to the Aristotelian claim noted above that the best life is “a life of excellent activity in accordance with reason” that “[s]ince reason operates in both the practical sphere and in the purely theoretical, one form of human activity that displays reason—as well as excellence of character—is good action; and one possible ‘best life’ would be a life of action, displaying practical wisdom and moral virtue.” (1981, 136) Sarah Broadie also endorses an inclusive reading, arguing in her Ethics with Aristotle that at no stage of the Ethics should phrases such as ‘the best of the excellences’ be taken to single out their referent to the exclusion of familiar and obvious practical virtues such as justice and generosity… Aristotle has argued that human happiness, the central good of a happy human life, is rational practical excellent activity; and he has let it be understood that the excellence in question covers the qualities which we ordinarily take to be human virtues. (1991, 40–41)

As evidence for this point, she points to NE 1098a3–4, where Aristotle argues that human life is a “practical life of the part of the soul that has reason”; NE 1097b11—that the human function is “a certain kind of life… [of] activity and actions of the soul that involve reason”; 1169b18—that “it is also strange to make the blessed person solitary… since human being is a political animal that tends by nature to live together with others. This will also be true, then, of the happy person; for he has the natural goods, and clearly it is better to spend his days with decent friends.” Broadie (1991) argues that this shows Aristotle did not conceive of theoria
or solitary contemplation as the best kind of human life. Rather, she claims, he regarded active practice of the moral or character virtues in community as an essential part of a truly happy (eudaimon) life.79

The apparent tension between Book X’s claim that the best life is one of contemplative activity and the claims throughout other parts of the Nicomachean Ethics (and in Aristotle’s other works) that humans are naturally social/political creatures is well-known and much-discussed in the literature (Ackrill 1974, 1981; Broadie 1991; Irwin 2019; Kenny 1966; Korsgaard 2013; McDowell 1980, 1995; Taylor 2010; Wiggins 1995). This tension also exists between the Nicomachean and Eudemian Ethics.80 Thus, both ii-R and ii-E can draw on Aristotle’s own work to justify their understandings of the eudaimon life and the extent to which it consists of rational activity in a strict sense.

In addition to emphasizing the role of the character/moral virtues (and thus of the affective part of the soul) in flourishing, proponents of a more inclusive reading of eudaimonia also emphasize Aristotle’s arguments that humans are social (or “political”) creatures (NE, 1169b18; Politics I.2, 1253a10–12; III.6, 1278b3–5). Again, this inclusive reading of eudaimonia takes it to consist of rational activity broadly. The Greek word for rationality, logos, can also be translated as speech. As we saw above, proponents of Claim ii-R use this to provide evidence for their reading of virtue as requiring the ability to “give an account.” However, on a less rationalist, more emotionist and inclusive reading, it could also provide evidence for the importance of community with others as a necessary part of a happy life. Additionally, as noted above, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of friendship and community.

79 As Terence Irwin similarly explains, there are some difficulties with the dominant reading of eudaimonia in light of the rest of the Nicomachean Ethics. He writes that “(1) It is difficult see how the purely instrumental status that seems to be ascribed to virtues of character in [Book X, Chapters] 6–8 is compatible with Aristotle’s repeated claims in the rest of the NE that virtues and virtuous actions are to be chosen for their own sake. (2) It is difficult to see how the virtues of character are even the best instrumental means to happiness. Even if some virtuous actions are instrumental means to study, the motives demanded of the virtuous person do not seem useful for those who aim at study. (“Introduction” to Irwin’s translation of the Nicomachean Ethics, xxx)”

80 As Inwood and Woolf (2013) note, two major differences between these two works are: the “contributions of theoretical and practical reason in the happy life,” and the “nature of friendship,” as “the Nicomachean version shows greater interest in the political side of friendship” while “the Eudemian Ethics is noticeably more other-oriented and considerate of the friend’s interests and feelings.” (Aristotle, trans. Inwood and Woolf, 2013, Eudemian Ethics, xix, xxi)
There are also contemporary proponents of the EV who, though broadly Aristotelian, argue for Claim ii-E for reasons other than Aristotle’s supposed endorsement of an inclusive reading of *eudaimonia*. John McDowell offers a helpful, contemporary example of an emotional reading of this claim. As Ivanhoe notes, one of the “most important Aristotelian elements of McDowell’s view” is that it relies “on an account of human nature and its flourishing”; i.e., it is eudaimonic (2011, 277). However, McDowell’s eudaimonism bears little resemblance to the rationalists’ discussed above.

McDowell puts forward a “specific conception of *eudaimonia*, [one that sees] the relevant reasons for acting, on occasions when they coexist with considerations that on their own would be reasons for acting otherwise, as, not overriding, but silencing those other considerations” (1980, 370). Virtues, then, benefit the agent insofar as they help her perceive the properly motivating moral qualities, and “silence” other features that may lead her to act in a less excellent way. McDowell’s view is an emotionist one because it argues that an agent’s perception of, and ensuing beliefs about, morality inherently motivate her action. Thus, there is no need for reason (conceived of as separable from perception or feeling) to provide motivation, nor a judgment about the appropriateness of the motivating emotions. (However, as we’ve seen, this doesn’t mean that rationality in a broad sense, integrated into our perceptual or sensitive faculties, is absent.)

Likewise, Kauppinen (2022b), Haybron (2008), and Rossi and Tappolet (2016) argue for a contemporary version of Claim ii-E. Haybron, as we saw above, regards himself as having a “sentimentalist” view of *eudaimonia* but holds Aristotle to have a dominant (i.e., rationalistic) one (2010, 14–15, 48). In particular, Haybron puts forward an argument for eudaimonism in which “human flourishing [*eudaimonia*] depends substantially on the verdicts of our emotional natures, to a significant extent independently of what we think about our lives. There is a large part of well-being, in short, that hinges on matters of sentiment, needing no stamp of approval from reason.” (2010, 195) In short: Haybron endorses Claim ii-E. Kauppinen also endorses an “sentimentalist” account, writing:

As I’ve made clear, my account of happiness owes much to Dan Haybron’s emotional-condition view in spite of my rejection of some of its main tenets. In recent years, Mauro Rossi and Christine Tappolet (2016; forthcoming) have also developed an affectivist view of happiness in a different direction from Haybron and have used their account to defend a noncontingent causal connection between virtue and happiness. As we'll soon see, it's fair to describe their account of happiness as a
form of sentimentalism. … Like me, and unlike Haybron, Rossi and Tappolet want to include all occurrent, valence-bearing affective states as constituents of happiness, including pleasures and pains. Drawing on Haybron, they then argue that intensity and centrality of an affective state are both relevant to its contribution to happiness. (Kauppinen 2022b, 29–30)

In Kauppinen’s reading, Rossi and Tappolet further argue that “happiness constituting affective states are ‘phenomenal evaluations’ that represent their objects as having evaluative properties”; their view thus has much in common with McDowell’s, and seems to rely on a sensitivity view of happiness. (2022b, 30) Rossi and Tappolet also endorse a sensitivity view of virtue, holding that “a virtue just consists in disposition to experience fitting emotions, which further disposes one to act and judge correctly (2006: 116)” (as quoted in Kauppinen, 2022b, 33). Thus, there is a clear connection between a sensitivity view of virtue (as in Claim i-E) and in a sensitivity view of happiness or flourishing (Claim ii-E).

Kauppinen’s own view of happiness (eudaimonia or well-being) is that it is “having more positive feelings and fewer negative feelings—about what I most care about.” (Kauppinen 2022b, 34). Thus, while he disagrees with some aspects of Rossi and Tappolet’s (2016) account, his view is still broadly sentimentalist or emotionist. He further argues that “virtue and virtuous activity are likely to be relatively conducive to happiness in comparison to nonvirtue, though this noncontingent tendency is still subject to luck” (Kauppinen 2022b, 34). So, he also endorses an emotionist view of eudaimonism, again in a broad sense. That is, he holds that the (character or moral) virtues are—if not necessary for—at least conducive to happiness, and that virtues are conative and affective dispositions (i.e., emotions) (Kauppinen 2022b, 5).

These contemporary proponents of the EV-E—e.g., Haybron, Kauppinen, and Rossi and Tappolet—are, again, broadly Aristotelian (i.e., Aristotelian enough to count as proponents of the EV) but draw on contemporary psychology as the primary evidence for their claims. They also define both virtues and flourishing in a way that emphasizes the role of feelings or affect and tend to endorse a sensitivity view akin to McDowell’s. We have also seen that some, more explicitly Aristotelian, contemporary proponents of Claim ii-E—like Ackrill and Broadie—argue explicitly for an “inclusive” reading of eudaimonia, and emphasize the

---

81 However, Kauppinen (2022b) also raises some objections to this “fitting happiness” view of eudaimonia. He also notes that Shelly Kagan (2009) and Fred Feldman (2004) hold views similar to Rossi and Tappolet.
importance of “contingent” factors, including not only appetites and emotions but also relationships and life in community, as important to eudaimonia. They therefore would reject eudaimonism-R, which suggests that “perfect happiness consists solely in contemplation” (Kraut 1991, 198).

Claim iii-E

Again, because for proponents of the EV the eudaimon life is the one that fulfills her human nature or function, Claim iii of the EV is tied up with Claim ii. Claim iii-E (naturalism-E) holds that virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human or fulfilling human nature, and that human nature is characterized at least in large part by the possession of emotional instincts or sensitivities that can be developed into virtue(s). A related idea for proponents of this claim is that the “contingent” features of our nature, including not only our emotions and appetites but also our relationships of dependency with others, are just as important or characteristic as our rational ones. Again, it is clear that for Aristotle human function is rational activity (logos). But, as previously noted, Aristotelians are divided on what counts as “rational activity.” Emotionists will take it very broadly.

This division between rationalist and emotionist views can be further complicated by distinguishing between “soft” and “hard” rational and emotional (or sentimentalist) takes, as Kristjánsson does. He argues that “Aristotle’s moral realism can be specified as soft or sentimental rationalism, in contradistinction to hard rationalism and to hard and soft sentimentalism,” and explains that: “Soft rationalists differ from their hard counterparts by assuming a constitutive role for proper, reason-infused emotions in the good life… and by emphasising the general salience of our emotional system for our development towards and our tracking of moral truths.” (2013, 431–432) Although Kristjánsson describes this view as soft rationalism, some soft rationalist views could count as what I am calling emotionist views. This is dependent on what one means by “reason-infused emotions”.

Again, all proponents of the EV will hold that rationality and emotion are both part of virtue. The crucial point of difference between the EV-R and EV-E is the relative importance of each. As we saw in Claim i-E above, we can regard emotions, in Aristotle’s view, either as “listening” to reason in the essence of obeying reason’s command (i.e., Claim i-R) or as having a rational component. Similarly, we noted that “neo-
sentimentalist” theories hold that moral judgments are “judgments about the appropriateness or rationality of certain affective reactions to the object of evaluation” (Frazer and Slote 2015, 13) and that emotionist views of the EV can hold that emotions must be trained or cultivated to be appropriate.

Thus, a view that “reason-infused emotions” (Kristjánsson 2013, 431) are necessary for virtue or eudaimonia could be emotionist, if this is taken to mean that emotions themselves have a (broadly) rational component—i.e., can be correct or incorrect, appropriate or not, depending on the situation or on the agent’s moral cultivation (or lack thereof). However, this claim would be a rationalist one if it held that reason comes in (from the properly rational part of the soul) to guide, direct, or mitigate emotions.

Recall that proponents of Claim iii-R sometimes hold that humans’ nature is most properly understood in connection with the soul (psyche) or mind (nous), and not the bodily emotions or appetites. Claim iii-R (naturalism-R) holds that it is humans’ rationality, defined strictly—as ratiocination, theoretical study, contemplation, deliberation, the ability to grasp and articulate reasons, etc.—that best characterizes human nature. And, proponents of this view hold that the intellectual part of the soul is superior to and (at least conceptually) separate from the body. However, as was noted in the discussion of Claim iii-R above, even determining what Aristotle himself thought on this subject is difficult. Take, for instance, the following passage from NE Book I, Chapter 13:

> clearly the virtue we must study is human virtue; for the good we were seeking was human good and the happiness human happiness. By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and happiness also we call an activity of soul. But if this is so, clearly the student of… must study the soul, and must study it with these objects in view… Some things are said about [the soul], adequately enough, even in the discussions outside our school, and we must use these; e.g. that one element in the soul is irrational and one has a rational principle. Whether these are separated as the parts of the body or of anything divisible are, or are distinct by definition but by nature inseparable, like convex and concave in the circumference of a circle, does not affect the present question. (trans. Irwin, 2019, 1102a12–30)

While rationalist interpreters of Aristotle may seize upon the separation of the soul into irrational and rational parts here, an emotionist could point out that Aristotle seems to express doubt about whether these parts may be “by nature inseparable.” And, as with the rationalists, emotionists can likewise point to evidence for their position from Aristotle’s other works.

In the Politics, Aristotle famously argues that
the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. […] The proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature.” (trans. Jowett, 1253a1–20)

In Aristotle’s view, then, humans are social (political) animals, who must live in community. This seems to run counter to rationalists’ claims that the best human life is one spent in solitary contemplation, and that the moral/character virtues are valuable only insofar as they help an agent reach this self-sufficient life of *theoria*.

Advocates of Claim iii-E, *contra* rationalist readings of this claim, can emphasize Aristotle’s focus on studying human nature—as it is, in the world—and argue that, while Aristotle may indeed hold the (properly) rational part of the soul and its virtues to be “divine”, he is interested in discovering what it is for humans to flourish as they are (not as they would be without contingency) (*NE*, 1177b33). For example, one proponent of Claim iii-E who takes herself to be agreeing with Aristotle on her inclusive, emotionist reading of human nature is Sarah Broadie, who we above identified as similarly taking an inclusive reading of Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*.

Although Broadie (1991) argues that Aristotle himself had a strict (dominant, hard, or rationalistic) understanding of rational activity—as we have seen in the discussion of EV-R, above—she disagrees with Aristotle on this point, and further argues that Aristotle’s treatment of both human nature and *eudaimonia* lend themselves to a more inclusive reading of rationality. Broadie writes that

> The downside [of positioning rationality as humans’ most important characteristic] is that it throws into the background aspects of human nature not capable of standing up for themselves in logical argument, since that is not their way. Besides being rational, we are spiritual beings, responsive to beauty, imaginatively creative, capable of humor, pride and compassion, and of who knows what else that must be ethically relevant, as well as being uniquely ours as far as we know. Some of these sides of human nature are largely unexplored in Aristotle’s philosophy. But we should not draw conclusions from this without also bearing in mind that reason to him is not (as for instance to Hume) a narrowly calculative or demonstrative faculty. It includes the capacity for language (*Politics*, 82 Aristotle explicitly distinguishes the nature and lives of humans from those of Gods, emphasizing their contingency, in, e.g., *NE* 1100b9, 1101a21, 1141a34, 1178b33. Christine Korsgaard, on this basis, argues that “Aristotle’s version [of the function argument] seeks the function not of the soul, but of the human being, and identifies it as ‘an active life of the element that has a rational principle,’ ‘activity of the soul in accordance with, or not without, a rational principle,’ and ‘activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle’ (*NE* 1.71098a5–15). We need not identify the activity that involves a rational principle, and is supposedly constitutive of happiness, as deliberation itself.” (2008, 145) In other words, she argues that Aristotle’s concept of *eudaimonia* must be that of the best possible life for humans (not merely for their best, most rational part) and that for this reason it must embrace a conception of rational activity that includes the appetitive part.

82
Thus, as Broadie argues above, we should not define human nature narrowly based on a conception of rationality that is primarily syllogistic, logical, or ratiocinatic; despite Aristotle himself seemingly offering this definition in places (e.g., NE, 1178b15–25; 1143a35–1143b10; 1144a9–25). She goes on to argue that, despite Aristotle’s (in her view) mistake in identifying “the self with mind or intelligence” in several places (e.g., NE, 1168b34–1169a4; 1178a2–7), human nature is best understood as practical—for both Broadie and Aristotle—and that for this reason it must include aspects of living in community and acting with and for others (Broadie 1991, 35; 36). Thus, human nature must be defined not only as rational but as emotional, desiring, and relational.

Another comparatively emotional reading of reason’s role in human nature and virtue from an explicitly Aristotelian perspective is Christine Korsgaard’s. She argues that what Aristotle means by “rational activity is how we human beings do what we do, and in particular, how we lead our specific form of life.” (2008, 141). She thus endorses a very broad definition of rationality—again, one in which rational activity is any activity that helps us to live our particularly human form of life well—and concludes “that Aristotle must mean that our other activities—engaging in politics, science, philosophy, athletics and crafts, consorting with our lovers and friends, eating and drinking and carousing, performing noble actions, or whatever it might be—count as ‘activities of soul implying a rational principle’ insofar as they result from choice.” (2008, 145)

We noted above that choice (prohairesis) is an important element of virtue for all proponents of the EV, because virtuous action is done voluntarily and arises out of the acting agent (NE 1105a30, 1107a1, 1097b3–5). However, we also noted that “choice” is regarded different by rationalists and emotionists. Rationalists defined choice, e.g., as “a very intellectual thing[,] a matter of desiring to do what deliberation has shown to be conducive to our goal” (Sorabji 1974, 107) or an ability “to deliberate and choose, to make a plan in which ends are ranked, to decide actively what is to have value and how much,” (Nussbaum 2001, 2) However, as Korsgaard’s description here indicates, an emotionist, broader understanding of choice can include less strictly rational (yet still voluntary) actions, like engaging in pleasant social or emotional activities.
As with all of the EV’s claims, advocates of Claim iii-E may base their argument either on their interpretation of Aristotle or on other evidence, so long as they endorse the EV’s basic claims (i.e., eudaimonic virtue ethics). Like Haybron, Kauppinen, and Rossi and Tappolet—whose arguments for Claim ii-E we discussed above—Kristjánsson bases his broadly Aristotelian theory on evidence from contemporary psychology. He notes that

In sharp contrast to the old ideal that reason should rule and passions be suppressed, most contemporary emotion theories convey the message that emotional disengagement is tantamount to moral impoverishment, and that the human character is essentially ‘a disposition to be affected in one set of ways or another’ (Roberts 2003: 2). Thus moral education becomes largely a process of sensitization to proper feelings. (Kristjánsson 2007)

In this view, then, human nature is best understood as emotional (in addition to, and more so than, rational). Many proponents of Claim iii-E will, like Kristjánsson, emphasize that strictly/overly rationalistic accounts of human nature are not supported by current empirical science about human nature or moral reasoning.83

**Claim iv-E**

We have already seen that proponents of the EV-E tend to conceive of virtue as primarily emotional. They also acknowledge the importance of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) in virtue, and for this reason regard virtues as broadly rational (as well as emotional), but not rationalistic in the sense that intellectual virtues are. Proponents of the EV-E thus deny the rational reading of *probainesis* (choice) described in Claim iv-R above, as well as the close similarity between *phronesis* and other types (e.g., theoretical or technical) of understanding that proponents of the EV-R rely on. Rather, Claim iv-E (practical wisdom-E) claims that practical wisdom (*phronesis*) can be understood as the perfection of a sensitivity, or as a means to obtain ends set by emotions.

Claim iv-E is endorsed, in the former sense, by contemporary virtue ethicists who hold a “sensitivity account” of virtue. Proponents of this view, as noted in relation to Claim i-E, include John McDowell and David Wiggins. As discussed above, McDowell holds that that the virtues are not really independent but

---

83 For example, De Caro, Vacarezza, and Niccoli argue that contemporary cognitive science suggests we should conceive of wisdom as “affectively engaged,” and take “an integrative view of emotions and reasons… as working synergistically” (De Caro, Vacarezza, and Niccoli 2018, 290–291; see also De Caro & Marraffa, 2016). As we’ll see later, Damasio (1994), Haidt (1993), and Slingerland (2011) provide additional support that naturalism-E is more plausible.
rather “a single complex sensitivity,” “an ability to recognize requirements which situations impose on one's behaviour.” (1979, 332)

The closest to a definition McDowell gives of phronesis is: “the habit of responding to situations as phronesis requires.’ And that leaves what response a particular situation calls for from the phronimos still needing to be determined by situation-specific discernment.” (2007, 341). Thus, the most important feature of phronesis is its ability to perceive the moral requirements of a given ethical situation. As Erik Rietveld explains, McDowell holds, in short, that “the phronimos gets things right thanks to a ‘reliable sensitivity’ to the demands of the specific situation (Thornton 2004, 92; McDowell, 1998; Dreyfus 2005, 54).” (Rietveld 2010, 190)

Relatedly, McDowell argues that “the practical rationality of the phronimos is displayed in what he does even if he does not decide to do that as a result of reasoning. So, the structure of what Aristotle offers as an account of deliberation should be relevant more widely than where action issues from reasoning.” (McDowell 2007, 341). Thus, although McDowell takes himself to be following Aristotle, he conceives of practical wisdom (his own and Aristotle's) in a broad way, rather than as akin to deliberation as the rationalists do. He agrees with Aristotle that phronesis—and virtue—must be rational in a sense, but points out that “‘logos’ can accept many different interpretations. Aristotle explains the ‘perception’ of the phronimos partly in terms of a comparison with theoretical intuition, which immediately grasps indefinables (things of which there is no logos).” (McDowell 2007, 342)

Similarly, Wiggins argues that “the thing we should look for” in a conception of practical reasoning is precisely what Aristotle provides—namely, a conceptual framework which we can apply to particular cases, which articulates the reciprocal relations of an agent’s concerns and his perception of how things objectively are in the world; a schema of description which relates the ideal the agent tries to make real to the form which the world impresses, both by way of opportunity and by way of limitation, upon that ideal (Wiggins 1980, 48)

In short, both McDowell and Wiggins emphasize that virtue and phronesis are rational, but argue that—for both them and for Aristotle—this rationality in not distinct from affective perception. 84 In this emotionist, virtue-as-sensitivity understanding of phronesis, one’s immediate, emotional-intuitive response to an ethical

84 McDowell explains in “What Myth?” (2007) that his account of phronesis is influenced by Wiggins’s.
situation contains a kind of (broadly construed) rationality insofar as it grasps certain features of the situation as ethically relevant or motivating. It is not the case, as rationalists claim, that reason comes in from another part of the soul to direct the emotions, or that phronesis, as a cleanly separable intellectual virtue, provides the rational (deliberative) capacity that identifies, and directs the appetitive part of the soul toward, an end.

Wiggins argues that the conception of deliberation (prohairesis) put forward by some rationalists—as means-end reasoning—is a plausible, but incorrect, reading of Aristotle’s description of it in NE Book III. For example, in Irwin’s rationalistic translation, Aristotle says in NE 1112b35–113a5 that “Deliberation [prohairesis] is about the actions [a human being] can do, and actions are for the sake of other things; for we deliberate about means to an end, not about the end. Nor do we deliberate about particulars… for these are questions of perception.” However, Wiggins points out that Aristotle frequently asserts that “unlike boulesis (wish), choice and deliberation are not of the end but of what is towards the end (pros to telos). See 1111b26, 1112b11–12, 1112b34–35, 1113a14–15, 1113b34.” (Wiggins 1980, 32)

Rather, Wiggins argues, what is towards the end could be taken to include both that which is a means to an end and “something whose existence counts in itself as the partial or total realization of the end.” (Wiggins 1980, 32). This latter type of “what is towards the end” need not be logically necessary nor sufficient; thus, it defies a syllogistic reasoning conception of prohairesis (Wiggins 1980, 32). Wiggins’ notion of phronesis, like the rationalists’, emphasizes the importance of decision in phronesis. However, because it takes “decision” as referring not only to a strict, ratiocinatic type of syllogistic reasoning but also to a recognition of worthwhile ends and the normative qualities of “the form which the world impresses”, it falls closer to the emotional side of the EV spectrum (though perhaps not as close as McDowell). (Wiggins 1980, 48)

Hubert Dreyfus argues for a similar version—one he calls a “phenomenological” and “nonconceptual” one—of the virtue-as-sensitivity view. (Dreyfus 2005, 58) In this view, the ethical mastery

---

85 Wiggins further criticizes those “who feel they must seek more than this”—that is, those who try to read Aristotle as having or supporting a “scientific theory of rationality” as trying to make Aristotle’s philosophy more deontic, and less casuistic, than Wiggins takes it to be (Wiggins 1980, 48–49). This is similar to Williams’ famous “integrity objection” against utilitarianism, in which he argues that “practical deliberation is in every case first-personal,” such that deontic, impersonal reasoning about values is impossible. (Williams 1985, 68; see also Chappell and Smyth 2018)
of the *phronimos* “requires a rich perceptual repertoire—the ability to respond to subtle differences in the appearance of perhaps hundreds of thousands of situations—but it requires no conceptual repertoire at all,” such that most situations “solicit an immediate intuitive response” (Dreyfus 2005, 58, 57). In some cases, deliberative reason may come in to help the agent better understand the particular requirements of a given situation. Even in these cases, though, “[t]his type of deliberation yields no reasons. It is useful precisely because it clears the way for an immediate intuitive response.” (Dreyfus 2005, 58). Thus, Dreyfus endorses both the view of *phronesis* as (perceptual) sensitivity and the view that deliberative reason—insofar as it has any role in moral reasoning—is merely instrumental.

In my own account of the emotionist reading of Claim iv, McDowell’s, Wiggins’s, and Dreyfus’s understandings of *phronesis* all count as versions of Claim iv-E. This is because, as Chris Rietveld points out, “although Dreyfus and McDowell disagree about the role rationality plays in unreflective action, they share a particular interpretation of Aristotle’s ideas of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and… they both emphasize the importance of the individual’s sensitivity to the demands of the specific situation.” (2010, 184) In short, all these thinkers agree that *phronesis*’s important role is a perceptual, not strictly deliberative one. Moreover, and relatedly, they hold that *phronesis* is best conceived of as an integrated, inseparable part of one’s affective and conative dispositions. It is not, for these thinkers, a separate intellectual virtue which affective dispositions “listen to” or “obey” (*NE*, 1102b15–30)

---

86 Dreyfus has argued that McDowell’s conception of *phronesis* as both perceptual and yet “conceptual ‘all the way out’” is still too rationalistic (Dreyfus 2005, 47, quoting from McDowell 1994, 6). However, Dreyfus later admitted—in response to McDowell’s reply in “What Myth” (2007)—that his understanding of McDowell’s *phronesis* was initially mistaken (“Response to McDowell, 2007”.

87 Dreyfus argues that Martin Heidegger also takes this phenomenological reading of *phronesis* as perception, and notes that according to Heidegger Aristotle himself also believed that “the *phronimos*’s actions are not in the space of reasons at all. [Rather…] ‘In *phronesis*] there is accomplished something like a pure perceiving, one that no longer falls within the domain of logos.’” (Dreyfus 2005, 51, quoting from Heidegger 1997, 112) Contemporary empirical evidence seems to support Dreyfus’s, and the EV-E’s, point that moral reasoning is not deliberative but affective in most cases. Slingerland notes that “Jonathan Haidt et al. (1993) found that when people are presented with verbal scenarios, their affective reactions to them were better predictors of their moral judgments than their claims about harmful consequences, and that people who have a strong negative affective reaction to a scenario often have to struggle to provide a rational justification… Haidt sums up a vast body of literature suggesting that conscious moral reasoning ‘is usually a post hoc construction, generated after a judgment has been reached’ (Haidt 2001, 814).” (Slingerland, 2011, 90)
One consequence of sensitivity accounts like McDowell’s, Wiggins’s, and Dreyfus’s, though, is that, because virtue is conceived of as a sensitivity to necessarily motivating objective moral facts, it suggests that once a moral quality is perceived correctly an agent will always make the correct moral judgment. In this view, it is impossible to (really) understand what is morally required and not be motivated to do it. This is because the virtuous agent develops “a virtuous person’s distinctive way of seeing situations,” such that she sees “something as a reason for acting which silences all others” (McDowell 1970, 346, 345). The motivation or justification for doing the right thing is such that reasons to act otherwise than what virtue calls for do not even register to her.

This seems to run counter to our ordinary experience of ethical reasoning, in which we often experience a conflict between our moral judgement (what we believe we should do) and our motivation (what we want to do). In other words, it reintroduces the problem with intellectualist theories that Aristotle’s discussion of *akrasia* was meant to address. A proponent of this sensitive view of practical wisdom (practical wisdom-E) could perhaps answer this worry by arguing that “the weak-willed or indifferent agent does not, however much she herself might think otherwise, possess the same perception, or conception of the facts, as the virtuous agent” (Clarke 2018, §11). That is, the weak-willed agent does not genuinely perceive the moral facts of the situation.88 While this response is initially helpful, it becomes unsatisfying when considered in a cross-cultural context, and, as we will see, with responding to contemporary critiques of virtue ethics from the perspective of empirical psychology.89

I have argued that rationalistic versions of the EV are those in which reason is seen as more characteristic of human nature or *eudaimonia* than emotions are, or a larger constituent of virtue. Conceptions

---

88 As McDowell explains it, we may say that her perception “is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do other,” insofar as she does not recognize the correct features of the situation as the motivating ones (McDowell 1979, 334). So, while non-virtuous agents may think they know the right thing to do and are just unmotivated to do it, they are actually misperceiving the situation.

89 In brief, as I have argued elsewhere (Lebkuecher 2024), the sensitivity account can only explain cultural differences in what are regarded as virtues by suggesting that (at least) one of the cultures that disagrees obscures peoples’ perception of, or access to, moral truth. As Ivanhoe puts it, the explanation for cultural disagreement about moral qualities is thus that “some cultures… do not pay attention to moral qualities that they are fully capable of perceiving” (Ivanhoe 2011, 279). What’s more, we will see in Chapter 4, this understanding of virtue makes the EV-E more vulnerable to the psychology critique.
of virtue in which emotions or appetites have their own rational or conative qualities, or are “responsive to reasons” in a broad sense, but have their own positive normative content or direction, fall under my EV-E. When it comes to *phronesis*, this distinction between rationalists and emotionists seems to shake out over this question: whether *phronesis* is a deliberative capacity, or a generalized but only broadly “rational” capacity that is akin to a responsiveness to morally motivated “reasons”.

**The Emotional Model (EV-E) Summed Up**

As we have noted, the EV-E shares some similarities with “sentimentalist” theories, like that of David Hume. Both the EV-E and sentimentalism hold that morality ought not be conceived of as a “combat of passion and reason,” and are critical of those who think of ethics as a matter of rationally controlling one’s affects, emotions, or appetites. (Cohon 2018, §3) Rather, proponents of the EV-E see emotions as conative, purposeful, or directed toward approval, disapproval, or recognition of moral value (Claims i-E and iv-E).

Moreover, and relatedly, these theories hold that moral motivation can be (and is) grasped by affective response (i.e., Aristotle’s appetitive part of the soul). Along with this view comes motivational internalism, and, typically, the idea that virtue and *phronesis* are (a) undifferentiable and (b) akin to perceptual capacity or sensitivity. Additionally—and again relatedly—emotionists hold that virtue need not require the ability to articulate reasons, or a kind of understanding similar to that of a skilled technical expert. When it comes to human nature and flourishing (Claims ii and iii), emotionists emphasize human nature as emotional and relational rather than (merely or most properly) theoretically rational and self-sufficient.

As we have further seen, some prominent Aristotle scholars—e.g., Sarah Broadie, Christine Korsgaard, John McDowell, David Wiggins, and Bernard Williams—argue that Aristotle understood the EV’s claims emotionally, and that we should do the same. Additionally, contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethicists and moral psychologists like Mario De Caro et al., Dan Haybron, Kristján Kristjánsson, Antti Kauppinen, and Mauro Rossi and Christine Tappolet have argued (whether they regard themselves as writing in the
Aristotelian tradition or not) that the EV-E provides a better eudaimonic theory than the EV-R does and is more empirically plausible.90

I have tried to show the ways in which the emotionist readings of Claims i-iv are connected, and pointed to some ways in which they are incompatible with, or at least hard to reconcile with, the EV-R’s versions of these claims. Again, the division between the EV-R and the EV-E can be regarded as a spectrum, and even among the emotionists some may be more or less emotionist or rationalistic. Such (comparatively) emotionist readings of Aristotle—and of the respective roles of reason and emotion in moral decision-making and virtue, as well as in characterizing human nature and eudaimonia—are, as we have started to see, also present as a background assumption in many contemporary virtue ethical theories.

As have further seen in this chapter, the rational and emotional readings of Aristotle solidified into distinct camps gradually, and elements of both the EV-R and EV-E can be seen throughout the history of the Western virtue ethics tradition. We have noted, for example, that we can see beginnings of rationalist trends in the pre-Socratic and Classical Greek periods.91

2.4 Conclusion: Looking Forward to Next Chapters

I have here developed two paradigmatic versions of these “rational” and “emotional” readings of the EV, discussed the implications of holding each position, and shared some rational and emotional readings or developments of Aristotle’s philosophy from historical and contemporary Aristotle scholars and virtue ethicists. I have also briefly indicated some implications of endorsing each view. In the following chapter (Chapter 3), I will develop three “critical camps” and evaluate their criticisms of the EV in light of the rational and emotional versions of the view just discussed.

90 Keep in mind, though, that as with the proponents of the EV-R we identified this doesn’t mean they will ascribe to all of the EV-E’s claims; one can be on the emotional side of the spectrum by holding only some of the claims or by holding all the claims weakly.

91 As we saw in Chapter 1, although it was during the Classical Greek period (fifth and fourth centuries BCE) that virtue ethics as we understand it appeared (Adkins 1960; Kamtekar 2013; MacIntyre 2007; Porter 2013), before the appearance of virtue ethics as a systemized theory virtue (aretē) and the soul (psuchē) already existed as important Greek concepts (Adkins 1960; Cairns 2014; Laks 2018). It was argued in that chapter that Homer provides the beginnings of Plato’s—and later Aristotle’s—division of the soul into parts as well as the culturally dominant understanding of virtue to which these later philosophers respond, while Heraclitus provides the beginnings of understanding souls as better or worse, including the judgment that better souls are those that are more rational.
I argue in Chapter 3 that the strongest criticisms of the EV have been those by disability theorists, feminist philosophers, and empirical psychologists. These criticisms have largely focused on virtue ethics’ notions of human nature, character traits, eudaimonism, and practical reasoning. Because these characteristics are all central components of the Eudaimonic View, it’s difficult to see how contemporary theories can address them while retaining the advantages of the primary features discussed in Chapter 1. However, because the EV-R and EV-E hold different views about the nature of these key ideas, they will also be disparately vulnerable to the critiques.
CHAPTER 3

DISABILITY, FEMINIST, AND PSYCHOLOGY CRITIQUES OF THE EUDAIMONIC VIEW OF VIRTUE

3.1 Introduction

Despite their advantages, contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethical theories have been, and continue to be, vulnerable to forceful criticisms. In fact, three of the strongest trends of critique—from the lens of philosophy of disability, feminist philosophy, and empirical psychology—directly attack features of the prevailing eudaimonic virtue ethics view (the EV) that we have already shown in Chapter 1 to be part of its appeal. In what follows, I describe these criticisms and demonstrate which features of the EV they target. In short: I show that each of these criticisms is directed at one or more of the four key features of the EV.¹ What’s more, all four of the EV’s features are criticized by at least one of these critiques. Thus, the critiques target feature of the EV that are important to, if not necessary constituents of, eudaimonic virtue ethics; and, which are also the source of many of eudaimonic virtue ethics’ advantages.

I then show how these disability-, feminist-, and psychology-inspired critiques attack particular instantiations of features of the EV that themselves stem from certain transmitted readings of the Aristotelian tradition—that is, from the EV-R or the EV-E, which were discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter 2). In demonstrating this, I hope to argue that contemporary versions of the EV are variably vulnerable to these critiques based on the extent to which they adhere to one of these two transmitted, Aristotle-inspired views.

¹ To review, the four core features of the EV, which were identified in Chapter 1, are: (i) virtue, in the sense of an excellent, well-entrenched trait of character, “to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways” is the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., aretaicism); (ii) virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., eudaimonism); (iii) virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function, and is a matter of fulfilling human nature (i.e., naturalism); and (iv) practical wisdom, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue.
In particular, I argue in this chapter that the EV-R is more vulnerable to critiques from disability theorists and feminists due to its narrower, more ratiocinatic understanding of human nature, virtue, flourishing, and *phronesis*. I also argue that the EV-E is more vulnerable to the psychologist critique, because its “sensitivity” understanding of virtue and *phronesis* provides little avenue for responding to situationist critiques about how morally irrelevant features of our environment may influence action, nor can it easily explain cross-cultural variation in virtue. Despite these disparate vulnerabilities, both versions of the EV are threatened by all three avenues of criticism. In this chapter I also sketch some potential responses to these critiques from a contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics perspective and consider replies to these objections from the perspective of the avenues of criticism. First, let’s look at an overview of the critiques.

### Overview of the Critiques and the Features of the EV They Target

Recall that the EV-R and EV-E’s expansions on the EV’s core claims of aretaicism, eudaimonism, naturalism, and practical wisdom were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>EV-R</th>
<th>EV-E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i-R) virtue</td>
<td>virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of</td>
<td>virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i-E)</td>
<td>rationally controlling or directing emotional impulses or appetites</td>
<td>attending to our emotions or sentiments and recognizing their normative content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii-R) flourishing</td>
<td>flourishing is characterized by rational activity, understood</td>
<td>flourishing is characterized by not just (strictly) rational activity but also by a rich emotional and relational life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii-E)</td>
<td>strictly as ratiocination or contemplation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii-R) human nature</td>
<td>human nature is fundamentally characterized by reason or rational activity.</td>
<td>human nature is characterized at least in large part by the possession of emotional instincts or sensitivities that can be developed into virtue(s).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iv-R) practical wisdom</td>
<td>practical wisdom can be understood as the perfection of a (strictly) rational process.</td>
<td>practical wisdom can be understood as the perfection of a sensitivity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We noted that we can call these claims aretaicism-R, eudaimonism-R, naturalism-R, practical wisdom-R, and aretaicism-E, eudaimonism-E, naturalism-E, and practical wisdom-E, respectively. As further noted in Chapter 2, it is helpful to think of the EV-R and EV-E as ends of a spectrum of eudaimonic virtue ethical.

---

2 As we will see in later chapters, drawing on resources from Classical Confucian virtue ethics, especially that of Mengzi, can help address these critiques. But that is getting ahead of ourselves!
theories. And, as we saw, both these theories are instantiations of the EV and thus committed to its four features. As a consequence of these shared commitments, both theories also acknowledge that moral development and evaluation must be both rational and emotion—though, as we have seen, they have different understandings of what is meant by reason and emotion, and the relative importance of each. It is also helpful to keep in mind that some philosophers may endorse elements of both the EV-E and the EV-R.

The disability, or ableism, critique attacks the eudaimonic view’s reliance on rationality as an important part of human nature (Claim iii, naturalism). Briefly, ableism is discrimination or bias against people with disabilities. The disability critique alleges that this bias is a built-in feature of the EV. In short, this critique points out that Aristotle—and further, critics claim, the Aristotelian tradition—emphasizes the importance of practical and theoretical wisdom (phronesis and sophia, respectively) and other intellectual virtues, as well as rational activity (logos), as not only important but indeed defining aspects of human nature.

For example, as we saw in Chapter 2, depending on their reading of Aristotle a proponent of EV could hold that only “the excellent employment of the theoretical intellect, which is described in Book 10 (1177b1–15)” is a eudaimon life, or that only those who can practice “the process of deliberation or reflection by which a rational choice [prohairesis] is formed” are able to develop virtue (Taylor 2010, 42–43; Broadie 1991, 179). This seems to preclude people with certain intellectual disabilities from full personhood, or at least from attaining eudaimonia (flourishing, happiness, or well-being) and developing the virtues. What’s more, this apparent exclusion of people with disabilities seems to be not an accidental but an intentional feature, at least of some rationalistic readings of the EV—including (these critics argue) Aristotle’s own.

Because this critique targets both practical wisdom and the idea that rationality is an essential part of human nature, it attacks (at least some versions of) Claims iii (naturalism) and iv (practical wisdom). This is a problem because, as we saw in Chapter 1, these features are important advantages of the EV according to its proponents. Claim iii, that virtue is a matter of fulfilling human nature or function, provides an understanding of human nature that is forward-looking, in a way that is both explanatory and normative. It thus provides the empirical grounding for virtue ethics, and a moral obligation for societies to promote individuals’ flourishing. Claim iv, that practical wisdom is required for virtue, is regarded as a positive feature because it both allows
for the theory’s casuistry, and explains how moral exemplars differ from ordinary moral agents. And, as we have already begun to see, this avenue of critique is particularly forceful against rationalistic readings (the EV-R).

The feminist critique likewise attacks Claim iii, naturalism, by problematizing empirically studying human societies as a way to determine the good. In short, the feminist critique claims, eudaimonic virtue ethicists’ understandings of human nature are always suspect insofar as they are situated in a context which privileges some (often masculine, or otherwise associated with a dominant group) traits as most properly human. This critique raises questions about whether an empirical grounding for the virtues is possible without replicating existing biases about which human lives, or which features of human life, are most valuable. It also points out the rationality is a characteristic that has historically been associated with (white) men, while emotions and dependency have been associated with women (and BIPOC). Thus, insofar as the EV-R presents a conception of human nature that has historically been used to denigrate and discriminate against those positioned as less rational, it is especially vulnerable to feminist criticism.

Although the disability and feminist critiques attack the EV from different directions, I argue that we can regard them both as stemming from a constructivist moral luck critique. In short, both disability theorists and feminists draw on notions of the self as (at least in part) socially constructed in order to argue that the purportedly naturalistic or empirical basis for flourishing and the virtues in human nature is actually based on certain culturally-influenced, discriminatory notions of what the best human life is like.

In this sense, both these avenues of critique also problematize eudaimonism (Claim ii of the EV). By problematizing the foundation of virtue in human nature, these critiques attack eudaimonism insofar as *eudaimonia* is supposed to be based on a teleological view of human nature which, according to these critics, may be false, or insofar as *eudaimonia* is supposed to require virtues which may not be available to women.

---

3 Because Claim iii (naturalism) and Claim ii (eudaimonism) are closely connected, the disability critique is also a problem for Claim ii (as we will see).

4 As noted in Chapter 1, eudaimonist theories hold that the good *simpliciter* and the good *for the agent* are one and the same. However, one could argue that the idea that virtue is tied to individual flourishing at all is “based on a dubious
people with intellectual disabilities, and other discriminated-against groups. Although this critique is at least implicit from both disability and feminist lenses, it has been most forcefully argued by feminist critics.

The third critique, from psychologists, attacks Claim i (aretaicism). This critique can be subdivided into three related arguments. First, it charges that character traits of the type virtues are meant to be may not exist; or at least, that they may not exist cross-culturally as universal features of human nature. Second, it argues that an agent’s situation—that is, their context or environment—has a greater impact on their actions than character traits do. Finally, and relatedly, it argues that even if character traits exist, if they may be silenced or overridden by other, seemingly morally irrelevant, features of the situation it seems that they are unlikely to guide action. These latter two arguments have also been known as the situationist critique.

In short, these critics contend, the large extent to which seemingly insignificant features of an agent’s environment, including one’s cultural context, can sway their action suggests that robust, universal action-guiding character traits may not exist. Because proponents of the EV-E emphasize that human nature is relational and endorse an understanding of phronesis as sensitive—an integrated, inseparable part of one’s affective and conative dispositions—rather than deliberative, it leaves less room to argue that virtuous agents can correct for the dangers of situationism.

This is because such an understanding takes for granted that “moral qualities are highly context-dependent” and conceives of “virtues as dispositions, which function as forms of perception that are able to assess, in non-codifiable ways, how we should respond to moral features of the world.” (Ivanhoe 2011, 276–277) For example, as we’ve seen, McDowell argues that “the practical rationality of the phronimos is displayed in what he does even if he does not decide to do that as a result of reasoning,” and that “Aristotle explains the ‘perception’ of the phronimos partly in terms of a comparison with theoretical intuition, which immediately grasps indefinables (things of which there is no logos).” (McDowell 2007, 341–342) This conception of practical wisdom and virtue is, prima facie, more immediately and less consciously or deliberatively responsive
to one’s situation or environment. Thus, the EV-E seems to be more vulnerable than the EV-R to this psychology critique.

To summarize: each of the four major features of the EV are at risk from these three critiques. Claim i is targeted by the psychology (or situationist) critique. The disability (or ableism) critique and the feminist critique both target Claims ii and iii (with the former most explicitly attacked by feminists), and the disability critique further problematizes Claim iv. These three criticisms thus challenge the EV framework that, I have argued, characterizes a thin conception of eudaimonic virtue ethics as a whole. However, given the distinction between the EV-R and EV-E laid out in Chapter 2, it may also be the case that some versions of the EV are more vulnerable than others—since, as we’ve seen, rationalists and emotionists endorse very different versions of each of these central claims. I have already sketched the EV-E and EV-R’s relative vulnerabilities to these three avenues of critique. To get clear on why and to what extent these rationalist and emotionist versions are disparately vulnerable, though, we must look at these criticisms (and their relationship to the specific claims of the EV-R and EV-E) in more detail. Let’s start with the disability and feminist avenues of critique—and, in particular, their shared grounding in the moral luck objection.

3.2 The Moral Luck Objection

Moral luck is, in effect, the idea that circumstances outside of one’s control can affect one’s moral character, responsibility or blameworthiness for actions, or ability to achieve eudaimonia (Card 1996; Friedman 2009; Nagel 1979; Tessman 2005; Williams 1976).

As Thomas Nagel defines it, “[w]here a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck.” (Nagel 1979, 204). He goes on to point out that “The erosion of moral judgment emerges… as a natural consequence of the ordinary idea of moral assessment, when it is applied in view of a more complete and precise account of the facts.” (Nagel 1979, 2–3) In other words, Nagel takes moral luck to problematize moral judgment or theorizing in general. Thus, moral luck is not just a problem for virtue ethics.

---

5 This influential essay was written in response to a 1976 essay of the same name by Bernard Williams; the latter originated the term.
Rather, it is a description of a counterintuitive notion that results from ordinary ways of thinking about moral judgment.

As Claudia Card further explains, “[moral] luck indicates a certain absence of justice in who we are and what we can do.” (1996, 22) This is because, in our usual moral intuition, “people cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control” (Nagel 1979, 203). On reflection, however, it quickly becomes apparent that a great deal of our actions—and even our capacity to form moral characters—are due to factors beyond our control.

A classic example of one type of moral luck6 surrounds two people who both forget to get the brakes on their cars checked and experience brake failure. If only one of these failures result in the death of, e.g., a child who runs in front of the car, our intuition is to hold the person whose failure results in a death morally blameworthy of that death, while not holding the other person blameworthy of an equally immoral act (Nelkin 2023).7 On the one hand, it is clear that both people committed the same action (neglecting to get their brakes checked) if we restrict our judgment to factors within their control. On the other hand, it is clear that the death of a child is morally worse than, for example, a minor fender-bender. So, it seems that there is some degree of luck—in the sense that we may judge a person, or her actions, motivations, or character, as morally better or worse due to circumstances that she could not control.8

---

6 I.e., “incident” moral luck.

7 This is loosely based on Williams’ similar example of an inattentive lorry driver (1976 “Moral Luck,” reprinted in Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers [1973], 28–29). Williams also gives the (fictionalized) example of Paul Gauguin as another illustration of moral luck. Gauguin famously left his family in France to live in Tahiti and pursue his art. He writes, “Let us take first an outline example of the creative artist who turns away from definite and pressing human claims on him in order to live a life in which, as he supposes, he can pursue his art. Without feeling that we are limited by any historical facts, let us call him Gauguin. [This fictionalized Gauguin] is concerned about [the claims of others, such as his family] and what is involved in their being neglected (we may suppose this to be grim), [but] he nevertheless, in the face of that, opts for the other life… which will enable him really to be a painter.” (1976 “Moral Luck,” reprinted in Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers [1973], 22–23) Williams argues that moral luck enters into the evaluation or justification of this Gauguin’s choice, in that the justification can only be provided retroactively on the basis of whether his painting career is successful (assuming one takes his successful painting career to provide normative value).

8 This particular type of moral luck, called “incident” moral luck (Card 1996; Friedman 2009; Williams 1976), describes the way an action’s moral praise- or blameworthiness may be affected by contingency. However, as we will see, other—constitutive and welfare—types of moral luck may present even more of a problem for virtue ethics.
Although moral luck is a problem for moral judgment or evaluation—and thus moral theory—generally, it is a particular problem for eudaimonic virtue ethics. This is due to the close connection between happiness and moral goodness posited by eudaimonic virtue ethics, as well as the theory’s acknowledgment of the important role of education and community in moral development (which were noted in Chapter 1 as positively regarded features of the EV).

While the negligent driver example above seemingly presents a problem for deontic as well as (or even more so than) aretaic theories, these two eudaimonic and developmental features open the EV to moral luck-based criticism in other areas. In short, this is because in the framework of the EV one’s ability to become virtuous and happy is heavily dependent on the circumstances of one’s birth and upbringing (in addition to one’s ability to act as virtue requires similarly being contingent).9

The tension between the commonsense judgment that one should only be held blameworthy for what is within their control and the fact-of-the-matter that sometimes our actions, decisions, motivations, values, and characters are shaped by features that are not within our control is apparent even in the earliest days of virtue ethics. Aristotle affirms the intuition that it is problematic to morally judge someone for actions outside their control (or, to put it a bit differently, actions that do not originate in the agent or which they are forced to take).10 He states that “Praise and blame attach to voluntary actions, i.e., actions done (1) not by

---

9 As we saw in Chapter 2, for example, Aristotle argues in the Politics that “inferior kinds of virtue are possessed by people who lack practical wisdom” like natural slaves and women. (1254b22, as cited by Sorabji 1974, 123) Even if they disagree with Aristotle on this point, contemporary virtue ethicists tend to agree with Aristotle’s points in NE 1099a25–1099b10, 1099a30–b5, 1103b1–5, 1103b20–30, 1155a10–20, 1161a30–b10, and 1177a5–10 (cited in the body of the text below) that eudaimonia needs external goods like good parents and friends, health, and wealth. Again, as we’ve seen, the EV’s acknowledgement of the communal aspect of moral development is seen as an advantage insofar as it makes the theory more empirically and psychologically plausible; however, this also opens it to the moral luck critique.

10 Aristotle defines the “counter-voluntary” as “what comes about by force or because of ignorance; and what comes about by force seems to be that of which the origin is external, i.e., such that the person acting, or the person having something done to him, contributes nothing.” (trans. Rowe and Broadie, 2002, NE, 1109b25–1110a5) The correlative definition of voluntary is given as “that of which the origin is in oneself, when one knows the particular factors that constitute the location of action” (2002, NE, 1111a20–25). These definitions are thus broadly compatible with determinism/a compatibilist (rather than libertarian) understanding of freedom and volition. However, as we see in Aristotle’s additional insistence that voluntary actions must be “chosen,” and the caveat that fully voluntary action must be action which the agent knowingly does, it seems that the agent must at least believe that his action is due to his own will. Even if one endorses a compatibilist understanding of free will, the intuition that one should only be held praise- or blame-worthy for actions one wills to do (even if that will could not have been otherwise) remains.
force and (2) with knowledge of the circumstances.” (trans. Irwin, 2019, NE, 1109b30). It thus seems clear that, for Aristotle, moral responsibility is appropriately assigned to actions that agents choose to perform. This also implies that the locus of control residing within the agent is the reason the agent is held responsible.

However, Aristotle also acknowledges in NE Book I that

happiness evidently also needs external goods… for we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources. For first of all, in many actions we use friends, wealth, and political power just as we use instruments. Further, deprivation of certain externals—for instance, good birth, good children, beauty—mars our blessedness. For we do not altogether have the character of happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born, solitary, or childless; and we have it even less, presumably, if our children or friends are totally bad, or were good but have died. As we have said, therefore, happiness would seem to need this sort of prosperity added also. (1099a25–1099b10)

So, for Aristotle, moral praise and blame should only be applied to actions within one’s control; on the other hand, there are some “fine” (i.e., virtuous) actions that we cannot do without external goods. So, at least in some cases, an agent cannot choose the correct action through no fault of her own.

This represents a problem, or at least a difficulty, for Aristotle’s (and Aristotelian) theory: it seems that within an EV framework one may be morally blameworthy (e.g., for failing to perform a ‘fine’ action) despite not being free to act otherwise. And, not only are virtuous actions subject to moral luck, achieving both a virtuous character and eudaimonia also require at least some external goods, i.e., depend on factors outside one’s control.

The development of one’s character is clearly to some extent outside of an agent’s control. As we noted in Chapter 1, Aristotle’s theory of moral development emphasizes the importance of habituation,

---

11 As we have seen, Aristotle also says of virtuous acts in NE Book II that the agent “must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.” (2002, 1105a30)

Contemporary ethicists, like John Harris, similarly emphasize the important role of choice or control in (appropriate) moral judgment. He writes that “[w]ithout the freedom to fall, good cannot be a choice; and freedom disappears and along with it virtue. There is no virtue in doing what you must.” (Harris 2011, 104) Harris’s criticism is premised on an understanding of freedom as the ability to do otherwise. Note that this is not exactly the same as Aristotle’s notion of moral responsibility, which in his view adheres to actions done without force and with knowledge; this latter description could include some actions that we were not free not to do (see previous footnote).

12 An example Aristotle (trans. Rowe and Broadie, 2002) gives is magnanimity or munificence—the virtue of being generous with large sums (NE, 1107b15; 1122a20–1123a33). As he notes, “a poor person could not be munificent [or magnanimous], since he does not have the resources from which to spend large amounts in a suitable way.” (2002, NE 1122b25) See also Nelkin 2023, Nussbaum 2001 for more discussion of moral luck in Aristotle.
education, and good role models in the early stages of virtue cultivation. As Myles Burnyeat puts it, for Aristotle “[y]ou need a good upbringing not simply in order that you may have someone around to tell you what is noble and just… you need it also to be guided in your conduct so that by doing the things you are told are noble and just you will discover that what you have been told is true.” (1980, 74) Without these contingent features of a supportive environment, one cannot develop virtues. The question of moral luck thus arises not only in regard to evaluating actions but also in relation to evaluating characters.

This second kind of moral luck has been called constitutive moral luck. As Card (1996) notes,

Incident luck enters into the way particular actions turn out. Constitutive luck enters into the development of character. For either we may be liable to praise or blame. But Williams finds that incident and constitutive luck problematize morality in two different ways. Incident luck undermines the idea that we can always determine before we act which of our choices are justifiable. Constitutive luck undermines the assumption of equality regarding our capacities for moral agency.” (Card 1996, 23)

Incident moral luck applies to the evaluation of actions (like in our negligent driver example above), and so does not seem to be a particular problem for virtue ethics. However, constitutive moral luck problematizes not only the evaluation of actions but also our very ability to act ethically.13

As Card points out, then, this kind of moral luck problematizes not only whether we can act virtuously in certain circumstances but whether the chance to become virtuous may even be open to us. And this chance may be dependent on what contemporary readers will recognize as unjust or discriminatory social conditions. If one is not raised in an environment with good parents and friends (NE, 1155a10–20), a virtuous ruler or government (NE, 1103b1–5), enough money (NE, 1099a30–b5), and political freedom and power (e.g., as a citizen rather than a slave; NE, 1161a30–b10, 1177a5–10), one does not have equal capacity to develop the virtues. In short, this is because our character traits come about through habituation and

13 That is, while we may not be sure whether an action is justifiable or not until after its performance with incident moral luck, we may not even have the option of acting in an ethically correct way due to the contingencies of constitutive moral luck. And, constitutive moral luck is a particular problem for virtue ethics given its comparative emphasis on the role of education and emotional cultivation in developing a good moral character. Some deontic ethicists also emphasize the importance of moral education (e.g., J.S. Mill). However, because their theories rely on an understanding of morality as predicated on following universal moral laws—rather than on developing a particular kind of character or particular traits—the kind and degree of moral education required importantly differs.
education, which themselves depend on the role models we find in, and the guidance we receive from, our families, friends, or communities (or not).\textsuperscript{14}

So, when it comes to developing virtuous characters, as Aristotle (trans. Rowe and Broadie, 2002) says, “it does not make a small difference whether people are habituated to behave in one way or in another way from childhood on, but… all the difference in the world.” (\textit{NE} 1103b20–30). Yet, from a virtue ethics perspective, one’s character is the primary focus of moral judgment, praise, and blame.\textsuperscript{15} So, the critique that one should not morally judge someone based on factors they cannot control, combined with virtue ethics’ conviction that one’s character is formed at least in part on the basis of these factors, seems to present a significant problem for the theory.

We have also seen above that for Aristotle \textit{eudaimonia} depends on certain “external goods” like beauty and wealth (\textit{NE}, 1099a25–1099b10). While contemporary virtue ethicists may disagree with Aristotle about what external goods are required for \textit{eudaimonia}, they still agree that some external goods are required (MacIntyre 2016; Nussbaum 2001; Tessman 2005). On this basis many virtue ethicists argue that societies have a moral obligation to provide certain basic goods or rights—e.g., education, healthcare, opportunities for civic participation and work—so that citizens have the opportunity to flourish (Altman 2020; MacIntyre 2016; Nussbaum 2009).

Marilynn Friedman further distinguishes not only between “incident,” and “constituent” (or constitutive), but also “welfare” types of moral luck. She defines these as circumstances beyond one’s control

\textsuperscript{14} This is because before we develop \textit{phronesis} (practical wisdom) for ourselves, we must first imitate others in order to habituate the right response to ethical situations. As Brynmor Browne notes, one way to insist that an agent has complete control over his actions (and so, to eliminate contingency in moral evaluation) is to only hold him morally praise- or blame-worthy from those actions that are a result of his “will.” However, “What an agent wills arises, in part, out of his situation and his character, over which he must, at the very least, have less than complete control. Nor can one separate the agent who wills from his character; his will must be independent of his character to be luck-free but must be intimately connected to a person if it is to be his will.” (Browne 1992, 347) As we have already noted, virtue ethicists (including Aristotle) emphasize that one’s character formation is dependent on external factors, like parents, education, and community. So, it is impossible—especially from an ethical perspective, like virtue ethics, that emphasizes the central role of character in moral evaluation—for one to have complete control over her actions while, at the same time, suggesting that her actions arise out of her character.

\textsuperscript{15} As we have seen, for virtue ethicists “action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character” for it to have moral value (due to the theory’s aretaicism). (\textit{NE}, 1105a30)
shaping “the nature of one’s actions,” “one’s character,” or one’s “degree of well-being in one’s life overall,” respectively (2009, 30). Welfare moral luck results when “one could lack virtue, perhaps even possess vice, yet still live well” (2009, 30). Because eudaimonic virtue ethics posits a necessary connection between being virtuous and flourishing, this kind of moral luck is a unique problem for the EV.16

Such a coming apart of virtue and flourishing (eudaimonia) ought to be impossible from a eudaimonic virtue ethics perspective. As we will see in more detail below, however, Friedman (2009) and Tessman (2005) have respectively argued that in oppressive societies, welfare moral luck results insofar as oppressors who lack virtuous characters may nonetheless be able to flourish, while the oppressed may develop “burdened virtues,” or “character traits that are praiseworthy… but that forfeit their bearer’s well-being.” (Tessman 2005, 5) In other words, these critiques argue that virtue and eudaimonia can come undone, such that an agent may flourish more easily (or with more difficulty) due to contingencies that are unrelated to—or even counter to—their possession of a good moral character. If welfare moral luck exists, it thus seems to pose a problem for Claim ii of the EV—that virtue is necessary for eudaimonia. And, as with the constitutive moral luck critique, bad moral luck seems to particularly affect people who are members of discriminated-against groups.

As we have begun to see, the crux of the moral luck critique as it applies to the EV is that, if moral luck exists, an agent may not only be unable to act virtuously or to develop a virtuous character, but may also be unable to achieve a eudaimon life, through no fault of her own. Or, conversely, an agent may with less difficulty or effort than others be more easily able to achieve virtue, do the right thing, or be happy. Thus, the problem of moral luck—though a problem for theorizing morality generally—is especially problematic for virtue ethics because it problematizes it through three different avenues, i.e., by suggesting that the possibilities of virtuous action, developing virtuous character, and achieving eudaimonia all depend on aspects

16 However, welfare moral luck would also seem to apply to any teleological or “just world” understanding that is threatened by “bad things happening to good people or good things happening to bad people.” (Friedman 2009, 30)
outside of a moral agent’s control. As we shall see, both the disability and feminist critiques can be understood as building off of the moral luck objection.

3.3 The Disability and Feminist Critiques

The disability and feminist critiques both build off of the moral luck critique and attack the same general features of the EV. They also each add nuance and force to the critique by arguing that aspects of our social identities or roles (e.g., our disability status and gender) are socially and culturally constructed. For this reason, it is useful to consider these two critical avenues of critique together.

Again, because the disability critique targets both practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and the idea that rationality is an essential part of human nature, it attacks (at least some versions of) Claims iii and iv of the EV. Recall that these are the claims that virtue consists in the good performance of human function, which itself is a matter of fulfilling human nature, and that practical wisdom is required for full virtue, respectively.

As noted in previous chapters, Claim iii states that “virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function; doing this is a matter of fulfilling human nature.” Because the EV is meant to be grounded in an empirically discoverable or naturalistic understanding of human nature, this includes the claim that human nature or function should be determined by appealing to a species-wide norm. That is—as we noted in Chapter 1, proponents of the EV

---

17 One approach virtue ethicists (and moral theorists generally) have taken to tackling the problem of moral luck is to acknowledge it exists but to deny that it is a problem at all (Browne 1992; Card 1996; Nelkin 2023; Nussbaum 2001; Williams 1993). Williams and Nussbaum argue, for instance, that eudaimonic virtue ethics can acknowledge the existence of moral luck because its focus is on the good life, not (merely) the moral one, ‘ethics’ in this conception “does not even attempt to make a sharp distinction between moral value and other types of value” and so the problem of luck or contingency is regarded as a fact of life. (Nussbaum 2001, 5) A related avenue of response can come from denying that one must have control over one’s actions—in the libertarian sense of being able to do otherwise—to be responsible for them. Claudia Card argues, for example, that “[r]esponsible agency does not necessarily dissolve with an appreciation of our interconnections with the environments that produce and sustain us.” (1996, 48) However, both these responses have in common that they argue moral luck is just a fact of life, like other types of luck or contingency. As we’ll see below, critics from the disability and feminist camps hold that identities are socially constructed, and so that the features of marginalized people’s lives that make them morally unlucky are actually the product of social structures.

18 As we saw in Chapter 1, this is both (a) regarded by proponents of the EV as a positive feature, since it makes the theory more empirically and psychologically plausible and (b) a feature that distinguishes virtue ethics from divine command theory, the latter of which may hold that the human norm is God-given. Van Norden (2007) has pointed out that an understanding of human nature as normative—i.e., that a “good” person is one who accords with human nature—can be understood in three broad ways. One can understand a claim that humans have a particular function or
hold that virtues are character traits or dispositions that support an objective and empirically discoverable human flourishing. The virtues are thus discoverable by investigating humans’ characteristic form of life, by looking at the lives members of our species live (and which lives can be regarded as flourishing or good).

The disability critique holds that ableism—discrimination or bias against people with disabilities—is a built-in feature of the EV due to the theory’s reliance on these two claims (of naturalism and practical wisdom). If this is true, it is a good reason to reject the EV—or, at least, versions of the EV that are, in fact, ableist. This is because ableism is a moral wrong for the same reason other oppressive or discriminatory attitudes are wrong—in short (as we will see), because discrimination causes avoidable harms toward members of discriminated-against groups through no fault of their own.

The feminist critique similarly attacks Claim iii. Like the disability critique, it attacks the EV as discriminatory, and further problematizes the notion that empirically studying human societies is a useful way to determine the good. Feminist scholars have noted that, historically, understandings of what constitutes nature that they can and ought to fulfill as a claim, first, “about all members of the species *homo sapiens*”; second, as “a claim about a large subset of the members of a human species that is defined in terms of its members having some kind of proper cultivation”; or, third, “a ‘generic claim’ about humans… about what ‘normal’ human beings are like… [e.g.,] a human who has neither congenital abnormalities nor has been subject to extremely negative environmental influences.” (Van Norden 2007, 220–221) These three ways of thinking about the function argument seem to problematize my claim that human nature or function must be empirically determined in the sense of appealing to a species-wide norm (which seems only to apply to the first of Van Norden’s three ways of thinking of it). However, note that the second two “pass the buck,” so to speak, in that these understandings rely on some other normative grounding to justify or explain their understanding of nature. That is, they either must include a normative judgement about what “proper cultivation” is, or about what types of people count as “normal.” That said, we also noted in Chapter 1 that proponents of the EV can also profess a “thin” naturalism, one which does not deny the possibility of a supernatural or divine source but only insofar as humans’ nature and function are not separable from the natural world, such that and virtue still represents an empirically discoverable human nature that that accounts for our needs and capacities in this world (rather than holding, for example, that our “best” or “true” nature is one that cannot be fully realized in this world).

19 The comparative vulnerability of the EV-E and EV-R to this critique will be discussed in a following subsection.

20 Here, I am using “discrimination,” as with Alton (2020) to refer to “acts, practices, or policies that impose a relative disadvantage on persons based on their membership in a salient social group” and thus “necessarily involves an inequality with respect to persons in the comparison class” (Alton 2020, §1.1). We can further add that we are interested here in discrimination on “the basis of traits that are… not under the control of the individual possessing them” (Alton 2020, “Discrimination,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §4.1), and that in addition to practices, acts, and policies I would like to include perceptions of or attitudes toward persons. Thus, discrimination in this definition would not include ‘discrimination’ against, say, felons or Republicans. This definition of discrimination, as we’ll see below, is thus normative insofar as the discriminated-against’s moral agency or status—or at least, others perception of them—is affected by factors that are not under their control, i.e., is susceptible to moral luck.
human nature, and virtuous conduct, are problematically influenced by the writers’ culture and context.²¹ In particular, feminist critics note that traditional virtue theories are sexist or patriarchal.

Moreover, some feminist philosophers are critical of appeals to human nature altogether (e.g., Antony 2000; Stohr 2015). The feminist critique can thus be divided into a weaker version—which problematizes appeals to human nature as a grounding for the virtues based on the claim that the purportedly “human” nature is inaccurate, biased, or discriminatory—and a stronger version, which argues that appeals to human nature are a problematic grounding for ethics altogether. This latter, stronger version also attacks Claim ii—eudaimonism—because it problematizes the idea that virtue and flourishing are necessarily connected. In either case, these arguments are premised on a moral luck-inspired argument that the EV is discriminatory, and therefore morally unacceptable. But why, exactly, is discrimination wrong?

The Wrongs of Discriminatory Attitudes

First, discriminatory attitudes, like ableism and sexism, are fundamentally unjust in that they result in “acts, practices, or policies that impose a relative disadvantage on persons based on their membership in a salient social group” and thus “necessarily involves an inequality with respect to persons in the comparison class” (Altman 2020, §1.1). Discriminatory attitudes are therefore wrong insofar as they furnish actions or principles that cause harm.

Moreover, discrimination can be regarded as wrong insofar as it results from a morally blameworthy motivation or a morally suspect maxim. From a deontological perspective, for instance, one might argue that discrimination is wrong because it denies “the equal moral status of persons.” (Altman 2020, §4.1; see also Eidelson 2015) Relatedly, one might argue that “discrimination is wrong because the discriminator treats persons on the basis of traits that are… not under the control of the individual possessing them” (Altman

²¹ For arguments that Western virtue ethics’ origin in Aristotle and Ancient Greek culture was predicated on sexist assumptions, see, e.g., Antony, 1998, 2000; Horowitz 1976; Keuls 1993; Lange 1993; Leunissen 2010, 2017; Lloyd 1979, 1983, 1984; Morsink 1979; Okin 1979 [reprinted 2013]; Spelman 2003; Witt et al. 2023. For similar charges of sexism against medieval virtue ethicists and Aristotelians, see Horowitz 1976. For similar criticisms of Classical and/or Neo-Confucians, see Kim 2015; Koh 2008; Lee 2012; Li 1994, 2000; Pang-White 2016; Park 2000; Shin 1999. However, as we will see in Chapter 5, there is good reason to believe that the Classical Chinese tradition was less explicitly sexist than the Ancient Greek one.
An important point to note is that, in the definition of discrimination we are using, this discrimination is based on a feature or characteristic that is not a result of the discriminated-against agent’s choice. This criticism thus parallels that of the moral luck objection, insofar as moral agency and responsibility are problematized for those that are discriminated against.

Further, virtue ethicists have offered their own descriptions of the wrongs of discrimination. First, discriminatory attitudes are vicious insofar as they “opposed to the virtues of benevolence and justice,” and for this reason also harm the discriminatory agent (discriminator) from a eudaimonic virtue ethics perspective (Garcia 1996, 9; see also Garcia 1997, 1999, 2018; Shelby 2002). And, discriminatory attitudes are not only morally but also epistemically vicious, insofar as they represent cognitive distortions or culpable ignorance, or diminish the discriminatory agents’ capacity to develop epistemic virtues (Cotter 2006; Dotson 2011; Flew 1990; Fricker 2007; Medina 2012; Whitt 2016).22

As Altman (2020) and Tessman (2005) (among others) have argued, eudaimonic virtue ethics can also provide an account of the wrongness of structural discrimination (or oppression), without reference to discriminators’ or oppressors’ motivation or character. Altman explains:

Two related wrongs belonging to structural discrimination can be distinguished. First is the wrong that consists of society’s major institutions imposing, without adequate justification, relative disadvantages on persons belonging to certain salient social groups. Accordingly, it is wrong for society’s basic rules to deny to women or to racial or religious minorities opportunities for personal freedom, development, and flourishing equal to those that men or racial and religious majorities enjoy. Second is the wrong of placing the members of a salient social group in a position of vulnerability to exploitation and domination as a result of the denial of equal opportunities and the imposition of other kinds of relative disadvantage. (2020, §4.2)

As this quote demonstrates, the harms of discrimination—imposing relative disadvantage and vulnerability to exploitation—are wrong even if they are unintentional or structural (as opposed to the results of individual

22 Further, as Kristie Dotson has argued, “the harms of epistemic violence are hardly ever confined to epistemic matters” (2011, 239) In some cases, epistemic violence can even contribute to serious bodily harm or death. José Medina provides one stark example of this through his examination of epistemically disadvantaged detainees in county jail. In one case, Matthew McCain, a detainee in a jail in Durham, North Carolina, died from a preventable medical emergency when guards ignored other detainees’ calls for help. (Medina 2019, lecture titled “Capital Vices, Institutional Failures, and Epistemic Neglect in a County Jail”). Epistemic violences linked to bodily harm have also been identified in the health care system—i.e., medical professionals have been shown to dismiss or downplay women and black patients’ reports of pain—and in multiple areas of the criminal justice and education systems. See Glock and Karbach 2015; Gvozdanović and Maes 2018; Lane et al. 2012; Van Den Bergh et al. 2010; Washington Post 2019, 2021.
bad actors). So, while discriminatory attitudes are harmful to oppressors because they deny them the opportunity to flourish insofar as they are morally and epistemically vicious, discriminatory systems—e.g., the carceral system—are also harmful aside from any intent (or lack thereof) to be discriminatory.

From a eudaimonist perspective, discrimination is also wrong because it denies opportunities to flourish. People who are members of marginalized or discriminated-against groups are less able to flourish by virtue of their social positioning, which itself is a matter of moral luck. Again, this denial of opportunity to flourish (e.g., to participate fully in society or to perform other important aspects of human life) needn’t be intentional but can result from oppressive social structures.

As Tessman has pointed out, in a eudaimonist framework “one might portray oppression as a set of barriers to flourishing.” (2005, 3) Thus, she continues, we can “think about political resistance as a way of eradicating these barriers and enabling flourishing.” (2005, 3) In short, eudaimonism furnishes a moral obligation to combat oppressive or discriminatory social structures, in favor of a world in which everyone is provided with equal opportunity to flourish.

This is also the position Nussbaum takes in her 2009 The Capabilities of People with Cognitive Disabilities. In short, Nussbaum argues that people with disabilities, including cognitive disabilities, have the moral right to equal participation in civil society, i.e., to practice their capacity to flourish as citizens. To ensure this equal capacity for flourishing, she argues, we must not only remove barriers to participation but “must also go further, providing people with disabilities truly equal access to education, even when that is costly and involves considerable change in current methods of instruction.” (2009, 350)

In short, because eudaimonic virtue ethics takes eudaimonia as its starting point, one may argue that a society has a moral obligation to provide an environment in which its citizens can flourish. 23 And, as Alex

---

23 We may note here that eudaimonic theories are therefore predicated on a “positive” conception of rights and freedoms (Berlin 1976, Carter 2022). As Carter explains, “It is useful to think of the difference between the two concepts in terms of the difference between factors that are external and factors that are internal to the agent. While theorists of negative freedom are primarily interested in the degree to which individuals or groups suffer interference from external bodies, theorists of positive freedom are more attentive to the internal factors affecting the degree to which individuals or groups act autonomously” or, we might add, the degree to which they can fulfill their human function and therefore flourish. (Carter 2022, §1)
Barber has argued, “wellbeing is enhanced—often at least, and perhaps even typically—through participation in collective endeavour.” (2023, 277) There is therefore a moral obligation to facilitate social or political inclusion as an aspect of flourishing. Because disability scholars and feminists believe discrimination is a built-in feature of the EV, the EV is morally suspect from its own eudaimonic perspective.

Note that peoples’ capacity to flourish can also be threatened insofar as they come to embody diminished forms of self or are discounted as credible knowers, or as full moral agents—or, in Nussbaum’s argument, if they are not provided with the positive materials or resources that allow for flourishing—even if there are not overt violences committed against them. People who are subject to structural oppression or discrimination may, for example, come to adopt habits, attitudes, or dispositions that reflect stereotypical or biased expectations about their agency, credibility, or moral value and which therefore present barriers.

Feminists, philosophers of race, disability theorists, and critical phenomenologists have argued that members of oppressed groups can thus face diminished capacity for flourishing due to structural discrimination that influences their expression and actions (e.g., Alcoff 2006; Belle [Gines] 2010; Beauvoir 1949, 1964 [reprinted 2006]; Calderón-Almendros and Calderón-Almendros 2016; Daly 2018; Gerschick 2000; Taylor and Butler 2010; Young 1980). Sunaura Taylor, a disability activist with limited use of her limbs, notes for instance that “I could go into a coffee shop and actually pick up the cup with my mouth and carry it to my table, but then that—that becomes almost more difficult because of the—just the normalizing standards of our movements, and the discomfort that that causes when I do things with body parts that aren’t necessarily what we assume that they’re for.” (2010, 14:23)

24 For instance, in her “Throwing Like a Girl” Iris Marion Young argues that “Women in sexist society are physically handicapped. Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences which move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections.” (1980, 152) In short, Young is here arguing that the oppressive cultural conditions under which girls live—which, e.g., encourage them to take up less space and to move in constrained, delicate, or graceful ways—come to shape their bodily comportment, which in turn affects the sense of self. As their bodily movements and expressions are limited, so are the possibilities they regard as open to them. Similarly, Linda Martin Alcoff argues that “[t]here is a visual registry operating in social relations that is socially constructed, historically evolving, and culturally variegated but nonetheless powerfully determinant over individual experience. And for that reason, it also powerfully mediates body image and the postural model of the body.” (2006, 194)
In relating the experiences of her Deaf family in the hearing public, another woman noted that “our signs were small and timid, and our faces were almost immobile” compared with easy and comfortable signing at home (Scully 2008, 72). In both these examples, uncomfortable and self-conscious bodily habits seem to result from self-awareness of nonconformity, rather than bodily difference (or impairment) itself. As we will see below, feminist and disability advocates emphasize that identities are constructed or shaped by individuals’ social context. If this is the case, and members of marginalized groups’ identities are shaped in a way that negatively affects the way they move in the world or regard their bodily power, then this diminished sense of agency is another wrong of discrimination.

There are thus a number of justifications for why discrimination, including against people with disabilities, is wrong from any ethical perspective. From a eudaimonic virtue ethics perspective in particular, we may argue that discriminatory attitudes are wrong insofar as they are both epistemically and morally vicious and, relatedly, detract from the flourishing of the holder of such attitudes, and that they produce harms that prevent the flourishing of those discriminated against. As we have seen, discrimination can prevent flourishing by manufacturing active harms against members of oppressed or discriminated-against groups, by failing to provide the positive conditions for their flourishing, or by producing conditions in which members of these groups come to themselves embody diminished forms of self or agency. We have also seen how both ableism and sexism are examples of (morally wrong) discrimination, because discriminatory or oppressive social structures prevent people with disabilities and women from having the opportunities to flourish that their peers do, through no fault of their own.

Again, the disability critique holds that ableism—a type of discrimination—is a feature of the EV. Relatedly, the feminist critique holds that sexism is built in. They thus both attack the EV along a moral luck dimension, by pointing out that it prevents members of marginalized groups from flourishing and full moral agency through no fault of their own. And, as we have already begun to see, these critiques further hold that this discrimination is based not only on features beyond the agents’ control (i.e., are instances of bad moral luck) but also a result of particular social, cultural, and historical features. To understand more clearly why we can regard ableist and sexist bias as built-in to the EV from these critics’ perspectives, we must first
understand what it means to say that these biases are a result of these social/cultural features. As we will see, both the disability and feminist critiques hold that these discriminated-against identities are *socially constructed*.

**Constructivist Models of Disability and Gender**

We have already seen that the constitutive and welfare moral luck critiques—which problematize an agent’s moral responsibility for her character and the connection between virtue and flourishing, respectively—seem to be a particular problem for members of marginalized groups within the framework of the EV. This is because they may be denied opportunities to develop virtuous characters or to access the external goods required for *eudaimonia* by virtue of their social identities. As we have further seen above, discrimination is a moral wrong on any moral framework; so, insofar as members of these groups are discriminated against, eudaimonic ethical theories motivate a moral obligation to combat this. Critics from the disability and feminist camps further point out that these marginalized identities are not natural or precultural but, rather, socially constructed. Thus, these identity categories—which preclude some people from virtue and a *eudaimon* life—are not accidental features of life but human-created.

In contemporary disability studies and philosophy of disability, we can identify three models of thinking about disability: the medical, social, and cultural models. In short, the first (medical) model is “realist” or “naturalist”; it regards disability (or chronic illness) as a natural, precultural feature of an individual body/mind. The latter two models are constructivist—that is, they regard disability as at least in part socially constructed. This realism/naturalism vs. constructivism framework characterizes not only contemporary debates about disability but also about other socially salient identities, such as gender and race.\(^{25}\) In the medical model, impairment is a problem with an individual’s embodiment, which results in them being

---

disabled because they are less able than others to perform actions that are required for living well.\textsuperscript{26} There is no meaningful difference between an impairment and a disability; both, in this model, describe a failing of an individual’s body/mind. Disability activists and philosophers of disability have convincingly criticized the “medical model” and its naturalism of disability in favor of constructivist models.

Again, we can understand the medical model as “realist” or “naturalist,” as opposed to “constructivist.” Medicalization (or the medical model) locates disease/disability within the body/mind and establishes clinical definitions of illness and abnormality. Or, as Jackie Leach Scully puts it, medicalization is a way of conceptualizing disability in which “the bad thing of disability—whatever it is that makes being disabled undesirable—is connected in a linear fashion to a clinically identifiable abnormality.” (Scully 2008, 19) For example, from a medical model lens if one were to ask “What keeps Sarah from flourishing, e.g., from participating in the important human activity of political engagement?” one might answer, “She is blind,” (so, she can’t read the ballots). Or, “She has Down syndrome,” (so, she can’t easily understand the candidates’ positions).

Against this medical model of disability, some philosophers of disability have proposed the (strong) social model of disability. This model regards disability as “a phenomenon generated by social organizations that discriminate against some embodiments.” (Scully 2008, 25)\textsuperscript{27} Others have put forward the cultural model, which can also be regarded as a soft or weaker social model (e.g., Eyler 2010; Snyder and Mitchell 2006). This model recognizes that features of the world are disabling but does not go as far as the (strong) social model in asserting that disability is completely socially conditioned. It is thus a midpoint between the medical and social models.

\textsuperscript{26} In common use (in bioethics as well as the medical community), “impairment” is whatever bodily or mental feature prevents a person from performing certain actions easily and well. These features or variations are unusual but present within a population, and impede a common or everyday action. Inability to fly, for instance, is not an impairment because the ability to fly is not present within the human population.

\textsuperscript{27} This model, as she further notes, is predicated on poststructuralism or postmodernism, “understanding the self as constructed in the course of social interactions that inscribe identities on bodies… [and] recognize that the biological body never presents to us \textit{as is}, in a presocial, unmedicated form.” (Scully 2008, 6)
Whether one accepts the (strong) social model or the cultural model, these constructivist accounts argue that disability is at least in part constructed by features of one’s environment. From these constructivist lenses, one might answer the same question about Sarah’s political engagement by pointing out that her difficulty flourishing in this regard is a result not (only) of her impairment. So, one could answer regarding her inability to participate in political life that: “There are no braille ballots” (so, she is prevented from engaging not by her blindness but by the lack of accommodations for blind voters), or “Sarah did not have access to easy-to-read information about the candidates, or to an adequate and appropriate civic education.”

Similarly, feminists have argued that gender is socially constructed. Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* that “every concrete human being is always uniquely situated… man is not a natural species: he is a historical idea. Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming… the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects.” (1949, 4, 64) As Beauvoir goes on to argue, because our bodies are imbued with signification by the world around us, we cannot think about how we relate to the world through our bodies without first understanding the mutually constituting relationship between the world (including culture and society) and the embodied subject. Beauvoir also writes that “the singularities that make [subjects] different derive their importance from the meaning applied to them.” (1949, 763)

As with the cultural model of disability, this notion of gender as socially constructed doesn’t necessarily claim that our physical bodies have no bearing on the opportunities we have (or not) for moving through the world. However, it does argue that it is our culture that gives physical difference the moral, social, and political import that it has.

Again, it is clear that discrimination is wrong; from an EV perspective, we may argue that this is because it prevents those who are discriminated against from flourishing. These constructivist (disability studies and feminist) perspectives point out that the conditions that prevent marginalized groups like people with disabilities and women—and, again, we could add BIPOC, LGBTQIA people, and others—from

---

28 As Iris Marion Young further explains, in this view women’s situation is characterized by femininity, “a set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves.” (1980, 140)
flourishing are conditions at least in part produced historically, by human agents. For both the disability and feminist critics, then, agents and identities are constructed by their contexts. And, again, for people with disabilities and women (as well as other marginalized groups), the contexts or situations that contribute to their identity formation are limiting. But how does this add force to the moral luck objection to the EV?

The argument goes, in short, like this. It is morally wrong to prevent individuals from flourishing for reasons that are beyond their control. But people who are members of marginalized groups, like people with disabilities or women, are less able to flourish than other are due to their social positioning. This is clearly a moral bad, whether one accepts naturalist or constructivist understandings of dis/ability and gender.

However, on a naturalist understanding this relative inability to flourish may just be an unfortunate but unavoidable instance of bad moral luck for those who are born with certain embodiments. On a constructivist reading, conversely, one may point out that the barriers to flourishing that women and people with disabilities (as well as other members of marginalized groups) face are not natural or inevitable, but rather produced by human social structures. Thus, these barriers are not only unfortunate but unjust. And, they were created by humans and so can be undone by them.

Because proponents of the EV do not believe that everything humans are capable of map onto virtues, they must determine the parts of human nature that are most properly human, or which characterize a well-lived human life (Claims ii and iii). As we have seen, this is done by identifying what are purportedly the characteristic functions of a member of the human species, those traits which allow a human to flourish in her particular form of life (Foot 2001; Kim 2018; Roughley 2021). That is, the human telos is identified by reference to an objectivist understanding of how humans ought to live or what it looks like for a human to “do well.” As Kim further explains,

on this picture, even the evaluation of goodness and defect in plants or non-human animals requires us to draw upon an interpretive understanding of the nature or characteristic life-form that the

---

29 I am using “dis/ability” as a shorthand way to refer to ability or disability status. I.e., both one’s status as “disabled” or “able-bodied” are socially constructed identities.

30 For instance, Aristotle and Mengzi expressly reject the idea that eating, sleeping, sex and other elements of human life which are shared with animals are good grounds for discovering an ideal human life.
organism instantiates; goodness and defect in living things can only be determined in light of the larger context of the sort of life that is characteristic of things of that kind.” (Kim 2018, 142)

Again, this naturalist grounding for virtue is seen by proponents of the EV as a positive feature, since it provides a basis for moral evaluation that is firmly rooted in empirically discoverable, objective facts about human nature. However, as this quote further suggests, this empirical and objective basis still requires evaluation or interpretation, in order to determine which types of life are instantiations of the species’ “characteristic life-form” and which are “defective.”

As feminist philosophers have pointed out, “appeals to nature have been used historically, and continue to be used, to rationalize and justify the perpetuation of oppressive gender roles”—and, we might add, the denigration of people with disabilities and BIPOC (Antony 2000, 8). This is because, despite eudaimonic virtue ethics’ supposedly empirical grounding, those features that are identified as capturing human flourishing or as characterizing human nature are susceptible to preexisting (culturally laden) notions of human goodness. Just as scholars from the disability and feminist avenues of critique have argued that identity categories like dis/ability and gender are socially constructed, the EV’s notions of human nature, flourishing, and virtue are shaped by socio-cultural and historical norms.

These notions, rather than being founded on empirical facts about human nature, are perversely used to ground an understanding of human nature that reflects the existing zeitgeist, or the cultural values and norms in which the virtue ethics traditions are embedded. And, because virtues are purported a necessary precursor of eudaimonia, if a life of virtue is out of reach, so is happiness.

31 E.g., as Virginia Held has argued, “virtue theory has characteristically seen the virtues as incorporated in various traditions or traditional communities... [v]irtually all are patriarchal.” (2006, 19) As we will see in subsequent chapters, there is ample evidence that both Aristotle’s and Mengzi’s communities—i.e., the traditional basis for both Eastern and Western virtue ethics—were indeed patriarchal, and there is likewise good evidence that this influenced their virtue ethics. To provide a quick example, one of Aristotle’s virtues, commonly translated as “bravery” or “courage” in contemporary virtue ethics (Andreia, ανδρεια), literally meant “manliness”—as seen by its etymological connection to andrós (ανδρός), man. For Mengzi, we may think of junzi (君子), his word for a morally upright or admirable person, which literally means a gentleman or nobleman. For Aristotle, at least, many feminist theorists have claimed that “Aristotle attempted to use his biological views on female nature to justify the political position of men.” (Connell 2016, 25). As Maryanne Cline Horowitz has pointed out, for instance, Aristotle argued that females are “mutilated males,” that they contribute material but not form to embryos, and that female births are the result of slowness and coldness in the womb, causing deformity. (Horowitz 1976, 185 2055) See also Aristotle (trans. Peck, 1947), GA IV 6, 775a15–16 and GA IV 6, 775a 18–23. Connell has pointed out that Eva Cantarella, Luce Irigaray, Lynda Lange, and
While the moral luck objection may argue that a disadvantage of the EV is that it allows for some human agents to be precluded from flourishing or from forming virtuous characters through no fault of their own—again, problematizing moral agency—this constructivist take adds that these agents may be excluded not by chance but due to discriminatory social forces. It is not an accident that eudaimonia is outside of the reach of some people. Rather, this critique argues that the EV’s essentialist understanding of human nature is predicated on its positioning of men (and non-disabled people) as representative of humanity as a whole (Stohr 2015, 275–276). As Susan Moller Okin puts it,

‘The virtues’, in predominant conceptions from Homer to Alasdair MacIntyre and beyond, have often been presented as human virtues. But what have actually been emphasized and regarded as unqualifiedly virtuous are often qualities of character and abilities regarded as admirable only in free men of some social standing. (1996, 211–212)

As Stohr further explains, feminist critics have raised “concerns about the extent to which eudaimonistic neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is inextricably wrapped up with dubious forms of essentialism, or at least an overly directive understanding of what human virtue and flourishing are.” (2015, 276) This is dubious insofar as it assumes a naturalistic, pre-cultural understanding of human nature as the basis for discovering the virtues and the good human life. But, as these feminist and disability advocates have argued, what has been regarded as natural is actually at least in part socially constructed.33

Giulia Sissa (to name a few) have similarly argued that Aristotle’s biology attempted to justify his views that men are more rational (and therefore moral) than women.

32 See also Korsgaard for her similar discussion of critiques of eudaimonic virtue ethics as “based on a dubious teleological principle or an illegitimate piece of teleological reasoning.” (Korsgaard, 2008, 133). She does not herself endorse this view, but takes Peter Glassen (“A Fallacy in Aristotle’s Argument about the Good,”) W. F. R. Hardie (Aristotle’s Ethical Theory), Thomas Nagel (“Aristotle on Eudaimonia”), and Robert Nozick (Philosophical Explanations) to argue versions of this critique. Against this “dubious teleology” critique, Korsgaard distinguishes between two senses of function, writing that a thing’s function can be identified, first, with “its purpose, with what it is for or simply what it does;” and, second, with “the way a thing functions or how it works, to its function-ing. If we use ‘function’ in this [latter] sense—‘how a thing does what it does’—it will diverge from ‘purpose,’ which is simply ‘what it does.’” 2008, 138) This second sense of function, she believes, is the more charitable understanding in the case of the function argument. This allows us to describe something as having a function, and describe what its function is, without it necessarily having a purpose. Nevertheless, because this latter (in Korsgaard’s view, more defensible) understanding of function still contains the “what it does” element, it still relies on some understanding of function as fulfilling a thing’s nature; it simply removes the implication of design or purposiveness (allowing for this nature to be a product of evolution, for instance). And, it still requires a kind of essentialism about human nature that (feminist and disability scholars can charge) is false insofar as it presents as natural and essential characteristics of human nature that are actually culturally-laden.

This critique can be divided into stronger and weaker forms. First, an anti-essentialist or strongly constructivist critique argues that there is no essential human nature. This is the view taken up by, e.g., Antony (2000) and Conly (2001). This critique would deny the eudaimonic virtue ethics project altogether, since it would reject the possibility of a normative grounding in (in this view, nonexistent) human nature. Relatedly, this stronger critique would endorse the strongest version of the social model of disability—such that disability is a product of disabling social structures alone—and a similar understanding of sex/gender as solely socially constructed.

Second, a weaker version of this critique would not deny that there is an essential human nature—and so, would not deny the possibility of eudaimonic virtue ethics as a whole—but would be critical of existing virtue ethical theories insofar as they are predicated on understandings of human nature that take constructed features of human life as natural. So, they would criticize notions of virtue or flourishing that are out of reach of members of marginalized groups or which seem to be predicated on an understanding of certain types of people (e.g., free, able-bodied men) as representative of the human norm.

Relatedly, this weaker critique would not necessarily endorse a strong social constructivist understanding of disability or gender—because, if they did, it would suggest that features of one’s embodiment like impairment or biological sex (whatever one takes this to mean)34 are either also socially constructed or have no bearing on one’s life course—but would note that the signification given to these features of one’s embodiment is socially constructed, such that the difference in opportunity to flourish that goes along with these embodiments is a product of human society.

The main thrust of this argument, then, is that we should be wary of virtue ethical theories (and the EV in particular) because the virtues—and the notions of human nature and flourishing—they put forward are drawn from the societies in which the theorists are embedded. Because the societies in which classical

---

34 I am not here suggesting that there is such a simple thing as “biological sex” that is cleanly distinguishable from gender or gendered expectations. As Judith Butler (1986, among others), has powerfully argued, even what we take to be biologically natural or pre-cultural sexual characteristics are also shaped in significant ways by our culture, society, and situation. For example, we might think of the fact that intersex people are often surgically altered as children in order to conform to the supposed sex/gender binary.
virtue theorists were writing were fundamentally unjust, traits that were considered virtues within these unjust systems may not be virtues, full stop.\textsuperscript{35} And traits that may be virtues in a patriarchal world may be vices in a post-patriarchal one; similar charges hold relevant to other unjust systems of domination. What’s more, the unjust and discriminatory understandings of virtue, human nature, and flourishing might not just preclude people with disabilities and women, but may contribute to the construction of their identities as definitionally abnormal and thus morally inferior.

I am interested in this dissertation in rehabilitating virtue ethics such that it can address these prominent critiques from philosophers of disability and sex/gender. I believe that virtue ethics is worth saving, and that its grounding of virtue in human nature or function has positive advantages over anti-essentialism. As noted in Chapter 1, one of the key advantages of the theory is that it can provide an empirically supported, objectivist grounding for morality.

Existentialist morality, by contrast, is rooted entirely in subjectivity. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it in \textit{The Ethics of Ambiguity},

\begin{quote}
Is this kind of ethics [i.e., existentialist ethics] individualistic or not? Yes, if one means by that that it accords to the individual an absolute value and that it recognizes in him alone the power of laying the foundations of his own existence… But it is not solipsistic, since the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others. He justifies his existence by a movement which, like freedom, springs from his heart but which leads outside of him. This individualism does not lead to the anarchy of personal whim. Man is free; but he finds his law in his very freedom. First, he must assume his freedom and not flee it by a constructive movement: one does not exist without doing something; and also by a negative movement which rejects oppression for oneself and others. In construction, as in rejection, it is a matter of reconquering freedom on the contingent facticity of existence, that is, of taking the given, which, at the start, is \textit{there} without any reason, as something willed by man. (trans. Frechtman, 1964 [2006], 156)
\end{quote}

There is much to be admired about existentialist morality. However, as this quote indicates, it depends on taking the “given” as “willed,” of denying the contingency or vulnerability that is part of human nature in favor of supposing an absolute freedom of will. This is contrary to the purported empirical, objectivist

\textsuperscript{35} For example, in Aristotle’s war-torn society heroism in the face of death on the battlefield was considered the paragon example of courage. (\textit{NE} Book III, Chapter 6, esp. 1115b33–36) However, today many might argue that facing death in battle is not an example of courage, because war, in their view, is unjust and virtues cannot be used for vicious ends. Another example is his description of the magnanimous person as someone who walks slowly and speaks in a deep voice—characteristics which today would not be considered signs of virtue. (\textit{NE}, 1125a13)
grounding of virtue ethics in facts about human nature and flourishing. If the virtue ethics project is worth saving, then, we must reject existentalist (anti-essentialist, strongly constructivist) morality and understandings of the self. However, the weaker version of the constructivist critiques from feminists and philosophers of disability is still salient.

Although this second, weaker version of the critique does not problematize the view that human virtue and flourishing ought to be grounded in human nature and function per se, it does problematize the grounding in apparently natural or empirical understandings of human nature. That is, these constructivist understandings of dis/ability and gender suggest that the purportedly natural or empirical grounding for the virtues is not precultural or unbiased.

In fact, prominent feminist philosophers and Aristotle scholars (Horowitz 1976; Lange 1993; Leunissen 2010, 2017; Okin 1979 [reprinted 2013]; Spelman 2003; Witt et al. 2023) have argued that Aristotle's biology—including his function account—is, at best, a necessary yet flawed precondition of his moral theory and, at worst, an intentional invention used to justify the political oppression of women. This criticism can be seen as building off of the constructivist understandings of dis/ability and gender elucidated above, in that it points to one example of how a purported natural, non-normative understanding of human nature—i.e., grounded in Aristotle’s biology—is constructed in a way that entrenches discriminatory attitudes toward some human embodiments. Let’s look at this objection in more detail.

We have noted that, for Aristotle and Aristotelians, the virtues are based on humans’ nature and function (Claim iii of the EV). This is regarded as a major advantage of the EV because it provides a means by which to empirically discover a grounding for ethics.\(^{36}\) However, it seems that for Aristotle humans’ (and other animals’) functions are not straightforwardly based on discernable biological features. In the *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle explains:

> what is not haphazard but rather for the sake of something is in fact present most of all in the works of nature; the end for the sake of which each animal has been constituted or comes to be takes the place of the good... Since every instrument is for the sake of something, and each of the parts of the body is for the sake of something, and what they are for the sake of is a certain action, it is apparent that the entire body too has been constituted for the sake of a certain complete action. For sawing is

\(^{36}\) For more details of this claim, including its positive features, see Chapter 1, §1.6.3.
not for the sake of the saw, but the saw for sawing; for sawing is a certain use. So the body too is in a way for the sake of the soul, and the parts are for the sake of the functions in relation to which each of them has naturally developed. (trans. Lennox, 2001, On the Parts of Animals 645a15–65b20)

In short, according to Aristotle, each animal species exists for the sake of something. That is, it exists for the sake of the activities of the soul.

The function argument thus appeals to a teleological or forward-looking theory of (e.g., human) nature in order to identify virtue with the good performance of characteristic (e.g., human) activity; and, in turn, with objective (e.g., human) flourishing. So, for proponents of the EV, there has been an endorsement of two related ideas: that virtue is a matter of good human functioning (Claim iii); and that virtue in this sense is not only good simpliciter but also good for the agent who practices it (Claim ii) because of this connection with the species’ objective telos. For Aristotle, moreover, an animal can be considered “deformed” (pepērōmenos or anapēros) if its body is made up in such way that it prevents it from performing the activities of its soul that are its telos.37

So far, so good. Virtue is a matter of performing one’s species function well; if one can’t perform this function well, one can’t flourish and so is “deformed.” Moreover, the EV specifies what the human function is. As Korsgaard (2008) notes, for Plato and Aristotle, “[their] versions of the [function] argument seem to depend on a connection between being a good person and having a good or happy life, and their aim is to connect both of these in turn to rationality.”38 This is because humans’ telos (function, or the for-the-sake-of-which humans act) is rational activity; it is what our species does, and so by doing this well we will be happy.

---

37 An aside is warranted here to discuss telos (τέλος). Aristotle uses telos to mean the fourth and final cause of a given thing, that “for the sake of which” it exists (Falcon, 2023). As Falcon notes, “the final cause enters in the explanation of the formation of the parts of an organism like an animal as something that is good either for the existence or the flourishing of the animal. In the first case, something is good for the animal because the animal cannot survive without it; in the second case, something is good for the animal because the animal is better off with it. This helps us to understand why in introducing the concept of end (telos) that is relevant to the study of natural processes Aristotle insists on its goodness: ‘not everything that is last claims to be an end (telos), but only that which is best’ (Phys. II 8, 194 a 32–33).” (Falcon 2023, §4). Thus, a creature’s telos is the explanation or cause for those things that allow it to live its life well. Discussions of a thing’s telos and teleology thus bridge the gap between descriptive and normative.

38 As we have seen, for classical Western virtue ethicists—i.e., Plato and Aristotle, founders of the Western virtue ethical tradition—human nature is best understood through its unique capacity to be rational, and virtue is best understood as “the good and noble performance of” rational activity. (Aristotle, NE, 1098a12.) (Korsgaard 2008, 129-30)
As Aristotle himself puts it, “every function [ergon] is completed well by being completed in accord with the virtue proper to that kind of thing. And so the human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue.” (Aristotle, NE, 1098a15-20) So, as Korsgaard explains, virtue turns out to be “a quality that makes you good at performing your function,” and virtues for Aristotle are “qualities that make us good at rational activity.”(2008, 133) Again, the idea is that virtues are virtues because they help humans perform our characteristic activities (rational ones, whatever we take rational to mean) well, and in this way help us flourish. This provides a purported empirical, objective grounding for morality in observations about what humans are like, what we need, how we live, and so on.

However, this connection, and this identification of the human function, is suspect if the telos is not really a matter of empirically discoverable or natural facts about humans. The constructivist feminist and disability critiques attack this teleological assumption (and thus Claim iii, naturalism). In particular, feminist philosophers have argued that Aristotle’s biological and metaphysical works indicate that his understanding of human nature was influenced by preexisting notions of women’s (and other marginalized people’s) social/political status and ethical and rational capacities—not the other way around.

Aristotle seems to have (at least) two different kinds of deformity in mind when he speaks of animals (or people) as being deformed, i.e., as being abnormal or inferior compared to the ideal type. For the first type, as Charlotte Witt explains,

an individual animal might be deformed as a result of an accident during gestation, a congenital deformation, or some mutilation (such as castration) later in life, but in this case the meaning of deformity seems to be clear. An individual is deformed relative to the functional parts and the life activities that individuals of that kind naturally and regularly achieve. Deformed individuals are exceptions to the rule. (2012, 2)

This seems to be the kind of “deformity” that people with disabilities have, for Aristotle. It is also in line with what we might expect Aristotle to think of deformity as—that is, it is a deviation from the species-wide norm,
one which makes the individual less able to fulfill the characteristic activities of the species. If a human, for example, is unable to participate, or to participate fully, in characteristic human activity, they are deformed.39

However, Aristotle does not take a species’ function to be simply a matter of what most members of the species do, though his understanding of natural teleology would seem to suggest he would. The second type of deformity he discusses is not one that is a deviation from the species type. In fact, he speaks of whole species, or large portions of species (females) as being naturally deformed. Lobsters, he claims, have “one claw …because they are in the kind that has claws; while they have this part randomly distributed because they are deformed, and do not use it to do what claws are naturally for, but for the sake of locomotion.” (Aristotle, On the Parts of Animals, 684a32–648a1) Likewise, the mole is deformed insofar as it “has eyes, yet not in the full sense. The fact is that it cannot see, and it has no eyes which can be detected externally; but if the skin is removed we find it has the place for the eyes … which suggests that the eyes get stunted in the process of formation.” (Historia Animalium, 491b30–492a1) And, for any species, “the female is as it were a deformed male; and the menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition; i.e., it lacks one constituent, and one only, the principle of Soul.” (Generation of Animals, 737a27–8.)40

Each of these examples of the second type of deformity is puzzling, because they seem to pose a problem for Aristotle’s natural teleology. In short, they raise the question: to what extent can an animal’s “function” be determined by their biological makeup, if it is possible for some animals (including, apparently, all female animals) to be deformed “by nature”? Again, if we take deformity to be a condition that prevents

39 Note here that Aristotle’s account of deformity closely resembles the “medical model” that disability advocates and philosophers of disability have criticized for “naturalizing” disability rather than recognizing its social construction. As Merriam points out, “the biostatistical theory of disease (BST) presented and defended at length by Christopher Boorse,” and which was foundational for the medical model, defined human health as “the absence of disease; [whereas] disease is only statistically species-subnormal biological part-function.” (2010, 134) As Merriam goes on to argue, “both Aristotle’s theory of flourishing and Boorse’s theory of health use a species standard as their common metric. As a result neither can properly distinguish between disease and disability, between conditions that inhibit flourishing and ones that imply different criteria for flourishing.” (2010, 134–35)

40 Much has been written on this one infamous line from the Generation of Animals (trans. Peck, 1947), with some thinkers arguing that the “as it were” shows that Aristotle did not regard women as really inferior by nature (see, e.g., Nolan 1995). However, Aristotle similarly argues in the Politics that “although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female, just as the elder and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature” (1259b1–4), and that “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.” (1254a32–b16).
an animal from performing the activity of its soul, and we take for granted Aristotle’s belief that certain
humans—females and natural slaves—are naturally less capable of performing the human soul’s activity well,
then it isn’t a leap to say that they are naturally deformed.

But, if this is so, the question of where the species’ *telos* comes from arises. How can we say, for
instance, that a human’s *telos* is rational activity, if most humans cannot perform this activity well (according
to Aristotle)? This does not meet a desideratum of contemporary ethical theories, that virtue (or moral
goodness) be at least *prima facie* attainable for most people. Moreover, it leads one to question what a species’
telos is supposed to be based upon, if it is not characteristic activity in the sense of activity that most members
of the species perform—especially since the EV is meant to be grounded in empirically discoverable natural
facts. Again, while some—e.g., Van Norden (2007)—have pointed out that the idea of human function or
nature may be based on a generic claim about what a normal human life is like rather than a straightforwardly
empirical claim about what most or all humans are like, this kind of generic claim itself calls for normative
justification because, as feminists and disability scholars have pointed out, “normal” is a socially constructed
and value-laden idea.

The answer given by constructivists (i.e., feminists and disability scholars) is that this *telos* is based not
on what humans actually do, but on a culturally laden expectation about the model man (or other animal).
That is, abnormality or deformity is defined against this model man, rather than the model man being an
empirically supported example of what a species does. If a mole’s blindness is taken, for example, as a
deformity despite it not preventing any of its characteristic life activities, then it seems that Aristotle’s notion
of deformity is based on his notion of what a mole should be rather than any empirical/biological evidence
about what actually constitutes doing well for a mole. As Merriam explains the problem in the context of disability,

Aristotle’s view of disability was predicated on his understanding of biology, the vast majority of
which we now understand to be false. In particular, his conception of species essentialism—the idea
that there is an eternal fundamental nature that constitutes the species—was overthrown by the
advent of Darwinian evolution. Rather than there being a single core essence of human being that sets
the gold standard by which all individual humans are to be measured, the species *homo sapiens*, like all
other biological species, is dynamic, in flux. Accordingly, there is no single, absolute, metaphysical,
archetypal human being by which the rest of us are to be measured. This revelation was a key step in
the long process of discarding the understanding of disability as a purely biological concept and
shifting towards a perspective that sees disability as socially constructed. The Darwinian revolution
caused some theoretical difficulties for Aristotelian ethics because of the fact that Aristotle’s conception of virtue was dependent on his misinformed biology. Without an objective and absolute understanding of what it means to flourish as a human being, how can modern virtue ethicists provide a stable metaethical foundation for virtue? (2010, 134)

Here Merriam, like Antony (2000), takes a strongly constructivist, anti-essentialist view of human nature. He argues that there is no objective standard for human flourishing, and thus problematizes the project of eudaimonic virtue ethics as a whole. However, we can also take his point here as a weaker criticism, more akin to the cultural view than the strong social constructivist one.

And, whether Aristotle’s biological theory was intentionally designed to justify the oppression of women or not, it is clear that the oppression and lower moral status of women in his cultural context was regarded as “natural” and was naturalized through accounts like this. As with the disability critique, the feminist critique is thus predicated, at least in part, on the moral luck objection. These constructivist critiques complicate—and make more forceful—the moral luck objection insofar as they suggest the “luck” or “contingency” that prevents women and people with disabilities from flourishing—and, relatedly, from being regarded as having full moral agency and equal moral status—is a feature of societal bias, oppression, and discrimination. These contemporary arguments—i.e., that the social groups whose membership is identified as a normatively-laded difference are formed at least in part by social structures—adds a further critical layer to the moral luck objection. This is because it not only points out that members of marginalized groups are denied moral goods on the basis of features over which they have no control, but that these features are moreover products of others’ actions.

41 Feminist critics of Aristotle have also noted that, for Homer, virtue (aretē) is generally used to mean excellence in the sense of manliness or warlike prowess (Adkins 1960; Finley 1954; Kamtekar 2013; MacIntyre 2007, 121–123; Okin 1996; Yu 2007, 28–29), and that Homer’s notion of virtue—which provided the background for Socrates’s, Plato’s, and Aristotle’s—already explicitly presents virtue as accessible for men and not women (Iliad 11.384; see also Jones 2007, 118). Despite shifting understandings of virtue in response to evolving social organization and roles, remnants of the Homeric understandings of aretē can be seen in the fact that “manliness” or masculine courage (andreia, ἀνδρεία) is a virtue lauded by Plato (see the Laches) and Aristotle. Although andreia is also sometimes translated as courage or bravery, its etymological connection to andrōs (ἀνδρός) and anēr (ἀνήρ), man, indicates its close association with masculinity. Moreover, that andreia is masculine courage in particular is even more apparent in Politics Book I, Chapter XIII. Here, Aristotle states explicitly that women cannot have andreia (properly speaking). There, he writes that “the temperance of a man and of a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and of a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying.” See also Deslauriers (2002).
Although Michel Foucault first identified the shift to medicalization and an idealized healthy “norm”—that is, the origin of the medical model—as occurring in the 18th and 19th centuries, some of his critiques can thus also be applied to eudaimonic virtue ethical theories, including ancient ones. Like proponents of the medical model, eudaimonic virtue ethicists define flourishing on the basis of a “model man” (in this case, the *phronimos*) and conceive of human nature as normative. And, Aristotle’s ableism—that is, prejudice against people with disabilities—is infamous; for instance, he advocated for killing babies born with “deformities.” Similarly, as we have seen, he regarded women as naturally inferior to men.

If the “model man”—the “man of virtue”—is a model that is constructed in opposition to those outside the norm, then their nonconformance is not just a result of poor luck but a necessity for the existence of the model at all. If it’s the case that the man of virtue is definitionally not disabled or a woman, i.e., because the human function that one must perfect to become him is out of reach of people with disabilities and women, then the moral luck critique seems a lot more damning.

It was noted above (in the discussion of the moral luck objection) that one tact virtue ethicists have taken against the objection is to argue that moral luck does exist, but that this is not a problem because contingency is a fact of life. However, we have now seen that—according to constructivist theories of disability and gender—one’s disability status and gender are not “facts of life” in the sense of them being pre-cultural or natural. Rather, they are facts of our particular time and place, the product of historical

---

42 In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault argues that we can identify a profound shift in the medical community’s understanding of illness and disability in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Because of epidemic outbreaks in Europe, committees were created to oversee and standardize medical education. The introduction of medicine as a state-run institution for the sick from the “natural locus of disease” within the family to the “artificial locus” of the hospital, which “create[s] for the sick a differentiated, distinct space” (1994, 17; 19). As it was further institutionalized and standardized, he argues, medical knowledge changed from “a body of techniques for curing ills” into “a knowledge of healthy man, that is, a study of non-sick man and a definition of the model man” (1993, 34). An example of this “medicalized” and “normalized” approach in current American culture is the attitude toward weight and diet. Rather than considering anyone who is not sick healthy, only those who conform to a particular bodily norm are considered healthy—and this norm is influenced by cultural values and expectations, for example that thinness is ideal.

43 In *Politics VII.XVI*, he suggests that it be made illegal to raise children with disabilities, writing: “As to the exposure and rearing of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live.” Plato seems to share similar attitudes toward people with disabilities, writing in the Republic that Asclepius, the god of medicine, “didn’t think that he should treat someone who couldn’t live a normal life since that person would be of no profit either to himself or to the city” and that doing so would only “make their life a prolonged misery and enable them to produces offspring in all probability like themselves.” (trans. Hutchinson, 1997, Book III, 407e)
conditions (and we can, of course, say the same of race). They could have been, and still can be, other than they are. So: the moral luck critique can no longer be dismissed with a glib “life isn’t fair”; rather, a constructivist take on the critique requires the response to be something like, “life isn’t fair, because we have made it unfair.” And this certainly suggests a moral imperative to fix the mess we created.

The critiques from the feminist and disability perspectives can therefore be taken together as a broad critique of classical virtue ethics’ traditionalism and privileging of rationality. First, they are specifications of the moral luck objection that point out that the EV excludes women and people with (certain, especially intellectual) disabilities from *eudaimonia* and virtue. If we regard one’s disability status and sex/gender as a biological ‘given’ outside of one’s control, and these features are also taken to affect my rationality—and so, my ability to fulfill my human function by developing the virtues and flourishing—it is straightforwardly unjust that these non-normative features outside of my control make me morally worse.

Thus, claims ii and iii—eudaimonism and naturalism—are both problematized, insofar as the empirical grounding for both virtue and flourishing is one that positions some humans as incapable of achieving them. And, since *phronesis* is required for full virtue, if it is also defined in such a way as to be outside the reach of some humans through no fault of their own, Claim iv is similarly vulnerable to a disability- and feminist-flavored moral luck critique.

Further, these critiques raise questions about whether an empirical grounding for the virtues is possible without replicating existing biases about which human lives, or features of human life, are most valuable. For this second avenue of critique, both disability scholars and feminists point to the way marginalized identities are socially constructed in such way as to build in these barriers to flourishing and full moral agency/social political equality. In this understanding, dis/ability status and sex/gender are not regarded as biological ‘givens’ but as historically, socially and culturally created; if these features of my identity impact my moral agency and ability to flourish, it is because of unjust, discriminatory features of my society.

This offers an even more forceful critique of Claim iii since it suggests that it may not be possible to ground morality in an empirically discoverable human nature without inviting in the moral luck critique. To
avoid these critiques, a contemporary version of the EV would need to ground Claim iii in some empirically supported, nondiscriminatory, and universal feature(s) of human nature—if such features exist.

**The EV-R and EV-E’s Vulnerability to the Feminist and Disability Critiques**

Again, contemporary proponents of the EV will be disparately vulnerable to the disability and feminist critiques based on what understanding of human nature, *eudaimonia*, and practical wisdom they rely on. Although Aristotle has been criticized for his explicitly ableist and sexist views, of interest to us here is whether ableism or sexism are crucial features of the contemporary ethical theories that have taken inspiration from his. In particular, we want to determine whether these prejudices are “baked in” to the EV framework itself, or perhaps only particular versions of the EV.

Recall Haybron’s description of rationalists as “focus[ing] their attentions on high-level, analytic, or ‘rational’ processes in the views of human welfare, particularly agents’ considered or reflective judgments, as opposed to mere feelings, inclinations, or intuitive or instinctual reactions” (2010, 14). Although, as noted above, people with intellectual disabilities often have some capacities that can be considered broadly rational, the EV-R’s focus on a narrow conception of reason—as ratiocination, deliberation, or contemplation—and its constative role in human nature and flourishing clearly sets the bar such that fewer humans would be considered rational than under the EV-E.

As we have seen, aretaicism-R holds that that virtue has to do with rational control of emotions, passions, or appetites; relatedly, practical wisdom-R holds that the kind of practical wisdom required for full virtue an ability “to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself… about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general.” (Aristotle 2019, *NE*, 1140a25–28) These descriptions suggest that someone who is not readily able to rationally deliberate—e.g., someone with a cognitive or intellectual

---

44 We noted, e.g., that Aristotle argued that “the female has [the deliberative or rational part of the soul], but without full authority” (*Politics*, 1260a12). See Clifton (2018), Weir (2011), and Purcell (2013) for a few contemporary critiques of Aristotle’s ableism. As I will briefly argue in this section, Aristotle’s ableism is indeed a central component of his ethical theory; moreover, as we will see, ableist undercurrents can be found in neo-Aristotelian versions of the EV.
disability that affects decision-making, like philosopher Eva Feder Kittay’s daughter Sesha\textsuperscript{45}—could not develop the virtues. And, since eudaimonism-R holds that the human good consists of theoretical wisdom, study, or contemplation. (Broadie 1991, 39; NE, 1098a17–18), she would likewise be unable to live a flourishing or \textit{eudaimon} life. And, because the history of Western philosophy is dominated by the implicit (and sometimes explicit!) assumption that women are less rational than men, the EV-R is also vulnerable to a broader feminist insofar as it relies on historically and normatively laden understandings of rationality.

In contrast, because aretaicism-E holds that virtue is akin to a cultivated moral sensitivity, and emotions are responses to motivating moral facts, and practical wisdom-E that practical wisdom is an “ability to respond to subtle differences… but it requires no conceptual repertoire at all” (Dreyfus 2005, 58), more human agents are \textit{prima facie} able to develop virtues, even if they lack a fully developed cognitive capacity. Similarly, since eudaimonism-E takes a broad view of rational activity such that it includes, e.g., “consorting with our lovers and friends, eating and drinking and carousing,” an emotionist might recognize Sesha as able to live a flourishing life. (Korsgaard 2008, 145)

Thus, the EV-R is more vulnerable to the disability critique insofar as its understanding of human nature and flourishing leaves out more people (i.e., is more discriminatory). Similarly, since the EV-R’s understanding of human nature is more substantive, it seems to have more potential for bias or discrimination built in generally. However, insofar as both naturalism-R and naturalism-E rely on understandings of human nature as rational, the worry remains that the EV-E, though less exclusionary, may still leave out some human agents.

We also saw (briefly) in Chapter 2 that the rational view of virtue came to be associated with antifeminist positions (Lloyd 1979, 1983, 1984; Rooney 1994, Witt et al. 2023). This is because, as feminist philosophers have pointed out, the history of Western philosophy is dominated by the implicit (and

\textsuperscript{45} As Kittay explains, “My daughter, a sparkling young woman, with a lovely disposition[,] is very significantly incapacitated, incapable of uttering speech, of reading or writing, of walking without assistance, or, in fact, doing anything for herself without assistance. She has mild cerebral palsy, severe intellectual disability, and seizure disorders. Although her cognitive functioning appears limited, she loves music, bathing, good food, people, attention, and love. (Some of the finest things life has to offer.) She is fully dependent and while at the age of 40 she (like us all) is still capable of growth and development, it is quite certain that her total dependence will not alter much.” (2011, 51–52)
sometimes explicit) assumption that women are less rational than men. This is, if not a critique of rationality per se, at least a worrying feature of rationality as it has been understood. Given the close (historical and enduring) connection of rationality and masculinity, an understanding of rationality that is not weighed down by unacceptably gendered connotations may be difficult to identify within the Aristotelian tradition.

As Witt et al. put it, “feminist philosophers have argued that the philosophical tradition is conceptually flawed because of the way that its fundamental norms like reason and objectivity are gendered male.” (2023) Rooney (1991, 1994) offers perhaps the most comprehensive summary of feminist critiques of this gendered notion of reason in the Western tradition. She notes that women (or “the feminine”) have been physically, literally, and metaphorically excluded from the excellence of reason as that has been traditionally conceived. The “physical” exclusion operated in the prohibition or discouragement of women from the academy, from the halls of government, law, and commerce, realms which were typically seen to maintain the development and exercise of reason. The “metaphorical” exclusion involves the persistent use of gender imagery, and sometimes race imagery, to “explicate” the relationship between “male” reason and “feminine” unreason (Rooney 1991). The “literal” exclusion, on the other hand, refers to philosophers’ frequent claims that women and people of “inferior” races are (in some literal sense) less rational… Our concern here is not just with the intellectual and discursive climate such exclusions have created for women and for men from traditionally less privileged groups, but also with the impact they might have had on our philosophical conceptualizations of reason and rationality.” (Rooney 1994, 4–5)

It is, of course, obvious, that, from Aristotle’s time until very recently (and in some parts of the world still today), women have been excluded from places in which reason was meant to be developed. As Rooney notes, though, it is also likely that this physical exclusion both influenced and was influenced by more metaphorical exclusion. Are we to believe that women were excluded, e.g., from the polis, where philosophy was practiced, but that the conception of reason philosophers came up with there was not impacted by this exclusion?

These feminist critiques of reason do not, as Rooney points out, imply that we should laud unreason or give up on argumentation. Rather, they point out that attempts to define reason in a way that excludes or denigrates emotion, instinct, intuition, vulnerability, or context have historically also excluded women. It

---

46 As prominent philosophers of race and decolonial theories (e.g., Emmanuel Eze [2002], Franz Fanon [2008], David Theo Goldberg [1993], Charles Mills [2017, 2022], Aníbal Quijano [1991, 2000a, 2000b], and Sylvia Wynter [1995]) to provide a very short list) have noted, rationality has also been historically associated with whiteness.
seems implausible that these exclusionary notions of reason—which either explicitly or metaphorically distinguished themselves against the feminine—were not based in part on patriarchal or misogynistic views. The EV-E, with its emphasis on (practical) reason as akin to a sensitivity and its relative emphasis on the normative value of emotions insofar as its understanding of reason is not constructed in opposition to these other features of human life.

The feminist critique of appealing to human nature can also be formulated in a stronger way, one which does more than note that classical virtue ethicists were sexist, that their societies were patriarchal, or that rationality has historically been associated with the masculine. As we have seen: this stronger critique raises questions about whether an empirical grounding for the virtues is possible without replicating existing biases about which human lives, or features of human life, are most valuable. This stronger critique attacks Claim iii more forcefully, by suggesting that determining a shared, objective human “function” or list of virtues may be impossible. That is: because the actions and lives which constitute good human functioning are determined by reference to the way that humans already live, any account of *eudaimonia* may replicate injustices or normative assumptions of the society in which it is developed.

**Objections and Replies**

There are a number of responses that proponents of the EV could levy in response to these critiques from disability scholars and feminists. It is perhaps most helpful to divide these responses into those that attack moral luck and constructivist critiques generally, those that respond to disability critiques in particular, and those that respond to feminist critiques in particular. Let’s start with particulars, then get more general.

**Objection:** A first, perhaps obvious, rebuttal to (at least part of) the feminist criticism is that—whatever the historical tradition may have told us—women are *not* less rational than men, and that just because rationality has been associated with men does not mean that is a poor choice for grounding human nature generally. In short, this rebuttal can claim that criticisms of the association of rationality with masculinity is not a critique of rationality itself as a grounding.

Or, similarly, one might respond that even if the traditions in which classical theories of virtue were formed were patriarchal, and that for this reason their lists of virtues should be rejected, this does not mean
that all eudaimonic virtue ethical theories should be rejected.\footnote{Another related, but in my view less forceful, response is to deny that the virtues or conceptions of human nature put forward by classical virtue ethicists were conditioned by their society or preexisting values. One might point, e.g., to Aristotle’s acknowledgement in \textit{NE} II.7 that many virtues are “nameless” as evidence of this.} As Karen Stohr points out, recent eudaimonist virtue ethical theories have attempted to ground their theories in “a broadly described, but universal understanding of human flourishing… that applies regardless of gender [in order] to develop a plausible form of ethical naturalism.” (2015, 280; she references Hursthouse 1999, Foot 2003, and Nussbaum 2000, 2011 as examples).

\textbf{Reply:} It’s true, of course, that women (and BIPOC, etc.) were \textit{mistakenly} regarded as less rational. But even if we now recognize that these groups are not in fact rationally deficient (and again, as was noted in Chapter 2, empirical evidence suggests that not everyone today does recognize this!), one could argue that the close association of rationality with moral worth yields an understanding of morality that is prone to producing discriminatory or oppressive systems. For instance, one could argue that the (perceived) lack of rational intelligibility of indigenous cultures, languages, and values was successfully used as evidence for their supposed moral inferiority.\footnote{Sylvia Wynter (1995), for example, has argued that indigenous spaces (including not only the Americas but also Africa, the Islamic world, and in general non-Christian cultures were to Europeans spaces of “transgressive chaos that awaited outside the mode of rationality of the behavioral norms and therefore of ‘subjective understanding’ of the feudal-Christian order.” (1995, 21) She writes that Spanish colonizers “set out to interpret the [Aristotelian] natural slave formula within a more Christian framework… The \textit{Indios} [indigenous Americans], [Spanish theologian] Vitoria argued, while potentially as rational as the Spaniards, nevertheless could enjoy the use of their reason only \textit{potentially}, as in the case of children. As ‘nature’s children’ to the Spaniards’ ‘nature’s adults,’ the new system of symbolic representation ran, they were a people who… had to be kept under the wardship or tutelage of the Spaniards, just as children were kept under that of their parents.” (35) As Eze (2002) further points out, “European Enlightenment thinkers retained this classical [Greek] ideal of reason along with its categorical function for discriminating between, in their terms, the civilized and the savage. In fact, Enlightenment's declaration of itself as ‘the Age of Reason’ is predicated precisely upon the assumption that reason could only come about as a result of the maturity in a white Europe: those geographically inhabiting the spaces outside Europe, or deemed to be of non-white racial origin, were considered rationally inferior or savage.” (283) Thus, racism predicated on a supposed rational inferiority or unintelligibility of non-white races can be traced back to Classical Greek understandings of human nature as rational—and of some humans as more rational than others. Thanks to Bryan Van Norden for pushing me to develop this point.} And, of course, basing moral value on rational capacity will always leave out some people (e.g., people with certain intellectual or cognitive disabilities, infants, people in comas).

\textbf{Objection:} An advocate of the EV-E might argue that the problematically exclusionary understandings of rationality, virtue, and flourishing that feminists and disability scholars justly criticize are
holdovers that continue to taint the EV-R, but not the EV-E. For example, we saw in Chapter 2 that some proponents of the EV-E (e.g., John McDowell) think of virtue more as an undifferentiated, unified moral sense. In this case, the critique that specific lists of virtues tend to reflect patriarchal, ableist norms fails to take purchase. And, proponents of this view specifically deny that the virtuous agent needs to be able to articulate the reasons behind his actions (McDowell 2007, 341; Wiggins 1980, 32, 48–49; Williams 1985, 68). Additionally, and relatedly, the EV-E’s broader understandings of which features of human life constitute human nature and flourishing can include more people than the EV-R’s.

**Reply:** On the one hand, it does seem that the EV-E is significantly less vulnerable to the disability critique due to this broader, less restrictive understanding of *phronesis*, human nature, and *eudaimonia*. As we have seen above, though, a stronger version of the constructivist avenue of critique challenges essentialist foundations for human nature and virtue at all. Can the EV-E respond to this challenge?

Louise Antony has pointed out that many feminists “are suspicious of any appeal to the notion of ‘human nature’” due to their constructivist understandings of the self. (2000, 8) As was noted above, for an essentialist understanding of human nature to be acceptable to constructivist critics, it would need to be demonstrably precultural or pre-historical; many (post-modernist inspired, strong) constructivists are suspicious that such a definition of human nature is possible. If one were to endorse a strongly constructivist view, one could not also accept the EV because Claim iii, that virtue is a matter of fulfilling human nature or function, would be based on a faulty assumption (that there is such a thing as human nature or function).

However, there may be room for accepting a broad understanding of human nature and the claim that human identities/agents are socially constructed. For example, as we saw in Chapter 2, some proponents of the EV-E—like McDowell, Wiggins, and Williams—hold that moral value is both objective and relationally constituted. A proponent of the EV who wished to also hold that aspects of one’s identity, e.g., as disabled or a woman, are socially constructed could hold that there are some broad, shared features of human nature (e.g., relationships of care or dependence) but that the way these features manifest differs based on one’s context, roles, relationships, etc. As we will see in more detail in Chapter 5, this is a position that feminist ethicists and contemporary Confucian scholars have endorsed.
Objection: Sophia M. Connell (2016) has argued that some feminist criticisms of Aristotle are predicated on an overly simplistic or mistaken understanding of his biology.49 We noted above that Aristotle’s biology has been seen by feminist critics as founded on his preexisting conviction that women are politically and morally inferior. It thus provides a compelling example of how a purported biological or natural basis for virtue and flourishing can in fact be a discriminatory constructivist one. However, Sophia M. Connell argues that Aristotle did not regard women as incapable of practical reasoning and points out that it is impossible to ascribe prejudicial intentions to Aristotle when he never explicitly espoused them (2016, 48). So, she argues, there is little reason to suspect that his biology or metaphysics were intended to shore up sexist political/ethical views.

Reply: It is not necessary to show that Aristotle was intentionally (or even consciously) prejudiced against women to argue that the prejudice of his context influenced his science, including his understanding of human nature. Connell agrees on this point, noting that “even if he did not fully intend to be sexist… there is some fault we can recognize in imbibing a problematic status quo without questioning it.” (2016, 49) As we have seen, the harms of discrimination need not be intentional. Even if his biological theory about the sexes had no relation to his political and ethical views, the following would still be true: one, that Aristotle believes women to be naturally politically/ethically inferior to men (Politics, 1254b3–15; 1260a4–14, Eudemian Ethics, 1237a1–5); and two, that this is likely the result of prejudice (conscious or not). So, the larger criticism—that supposedly empirical understandings of human nature are susceptible to influence from prejudice—stands.50

Objection: Some might argue that ableism, at least against people with intellectual disabilities, importantly differs from other kinds of discrimination. For example, one might argue that the reason discrimination is wrong is because it denies moral agency and self-determination, but that because people

---

49 (And its connection to his political and ethical views.) See Connell, Sophia M. Aristotle on Female Animals: A Study of the Generation of Animals, esp. Chapter 1, “Feminism, Sexism, and Aristotle”.

50 Moreover, even if women were capable of practical reason in Aristotle’s view (as Connell suggests), she does acknowledge that the fact that for Aristotle “practical reasoning is required for self-determining action and rests mainly in the ability to properly deliberate” means that “[people lacking practical reasoning] would not be able to make their own choices—thus would not be self-determining agents (or autonomous in modern parlance).” (2016, 31)
with certain intellectual disabilities have less rational capacity, they should not be expected to have the same
degree of agency and self-determination, nor the same moral status, as non-disabled people. However, this
response is unsatisfactory for two reasons.

**Reply:** First, as Elizabeth Anderson (2005) and Eva Feder Kittay (2009) have compellingly argued, it
is absurd to base moral rights on capacity alone (rational or otherwise). Yet, prominent animal rights
advocates (e.g., Peter Singer, Jeff McMahan) have argued that it is (most) humans’ rational capacity that gives
us our special moral status. On this basis, they have claimed that due to intellectually disabled people’s
diminished rational capacity, “the moral status of this group should be demoted below that of all other
human beings (at least those beyond the stage of infancy), and that the appropriate comparison group is
nonhuman animals.” (Kittay 2009, 607)\(^{51}\)

The purpose for this argument is to motivate an “Argument from Marginal Cases” (AMC), which
these animal rights advocates use to argue that because, in their view, some people with diminished rational
capacity have reasoning abilities more comparable to some non-human animals than to other humans,
comparably intelligent non-human animals should be granted moral status equal to people with these kinds of
disabilities. Anderson writes,

> To see what is wrong with this way of thinking, consider the following case. There is some evidence
> that chimps and parrots can be taught a language, at least up to the linguistic level of a toddler. Let us
> suppose that this is so. There are some human beings whose potential for language development is
> limited to the level of the average toddler, and hence no greater than the potential for language
> possessed by chimps and parrots. It is evident that any human, even with such limited linguistic
> capacities, has a moral right to be taught a language. If the AMC is right in deriving moral rights from
> individual capacities, then chimps and parrots also have a moral right to be taught a language. The
> conclusion is absurd. (2005, 281)

Just because someone can do something, doesn’t mean they have the moral right to have their capacity to do
it developed. And, conversely, just because someone’s capacity to do something is limited doesn’t mean they
do not have a right to have it developed as much as possible. Our moral intuitions tell us that humans
(including those who have limited capacity) do have a moral right to learn a language, while non-human

\(^{51}\) See also McMahan 1996; Singer 1996.
animals do not. This is the case for a simple reason: humans have a right, and indeed a need, to live in community with others.

As Anderson cashes out this difference,

[it] is no disadvantage to chimps or parrots that their potentials for language are so limited. For the characteristic species life of chimps and parrots does not require sophisticated linguistic communication. It is a grave disadvantage to a human being for its language capacities to be similarly limited, for the species life of humans does require language.” (2005, 281)

On this basis, one could argue that an appeal to human nature can ground the equal moral status of people with intellectual disabilities insofar as human nature is social/relational. It is this aspect of human nature and function—the capacity and necessity of living with others, not rationality—that grounds our moral obligations to people and their status as moral agents.

Second, the idea of people as independent and autonomous, self-determined moral agents is a fiction. For this reason, focusing on autonomy or self-determination as a requisite for dignity, equal moral status, and non-discriminatory treatment is unrealistic not only for people with disabilities but for everyone. As we have seen, both feminist philosophers and philosophers of disability argue that the self is at least in part socially constructed. An implication of this constructivist understanding of the self is that the rationalist understandings, e.g., of *eudaimonia* as characterized by solitary contemplation (Kenny 1996; Kraut 1991; Reeve 1992), and of intellectual activity like study as superior to practical activity because of its self-sufficiency (*NE*, 1177a25–11b25), as based on a faulty understanding of humans as capable of complete autonomy or independence. Drawing from feminist relational notions of the self, Eva Feder Kittay points out that “[d]ependence may in various ways be socially constructed, and unjust and oppressive institutions and practices create many sorts of dependence that are unnecessary and stultifying. But if dependency is constructed, independence is still more constructed.” (2011, 57)

Moreover, and relatedly, as Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) has argued, the close association of rationality with self-sufficiency or autonomy also leads many people to regard those with physical disabilities as less moral than those without. MacIntyre writes,

*The Times* of London reported… that one person in three believes that those in wheelchairs are less intelligent. And more generally it is too often the case that the weight that we give to a particular
consideration in a piece of uttered reasoning is partly determined by who utter it in what kind of voice and with what kind of facial expression… We discover, that is, in our encounters with the disabled hitherto unrecognized sources of error in our own practical reasoning. And, insofar as these derived from the hitherto dominant norms of our social environment, we will have to transform that environment as well as ourselves, if we are to be freed from such errors in our shared deliberative reasoning. (MacIntyre 1999, 137)

As Scully similarly notes, terms like “stand on one’s own two feet,” or to be an “upstanding” or “upright” person, likewise privilege those capable of standing as more autonomous or more ethical than people who, for example, use a wheelchair (2008, 92, 100).

In short, then, the association of rationality with morality by means of autonomy or self-determination as a grounding for moral worth, (i) is an ethically untenable grounding because the fact that one has a capacity does not entail a right to develop it; (ii) is based on an incorrect assumption that humans even can be autonomous; and (iii) leads to a focus on autonomy as morally praiseworthy, thus implying not only people with intellectual disabilities but also other people in particularly apparent positions of vulnerability, like those with physical disabilities, are regarded as less moral.

**Objection:** Some feminists, like Louise M. Antony and Martha Nussbaum, have argued against postmodern/socially constructivist feminist arguments. Antony argues that “many feminists see the whole idea of fixed ‘natures’ as threatening—insisting, sometimes to the point of absurdity, on the malleability and contingency of all human characteristics.” (Antony 2000, 9) This is a problem, she argues, because whether humans have a nature is an empirical, not philosophical, question. Clinging too closely to the idea that there is “nothing about us that is, in any sense, ‘true by nature’” is simply empirically implausible—as she points out, “there’s a great deal about us that falls into this category, and it would be a sad thing indeed if feminism required us to deny it.” (2000, 10) To claim that there is no human nature would not only preclude rationality as a defining characteristic but also care, language, family relationships, art, imagination, or other important parts of human life that seem to characterize us in particular.

In short, strongly socially constructivist understanding of the self and human nature seem to require their proponents to deny science, or to deny the very possibility of scientifically discovering what makes us *us*. As we saw in Chapter 1, this is a further problem because the EV’s vaunted empirical grounding is a major
positive feature. So, it seems that we must either dismiss the constructivist critiques of the EV or dismiss the EV—that is, we must choose between an empirical normative grounding for human nature, or a postmodern, feminist and strongly social constructivist denial that biology is destiny. Since there is empirical evidence that there are at least some features that we can ascribe to humans “by nature,” we should reject constructivist notions of the self.

**Reply:** Arguments that dis/ability and gender are socially constructed need not imply that there is no essential human nature. That is, feminist and disability critics of the EV need not show that humans have no nature in order to show that some understandings of human nature—including, in their view, the one the EV endorses—are incorrect and discriminatory. Rather, these critiques reveal that supposedly empirical or natural bases for understanding human flourishing or function have historically been susceptible to the biases of the unjust societies in which these empirical theories are developed. It may even be true that contemporary attempts to ascertain what human nature is like are still suspect, and that they will remain suspect so long as society is structured in oppressive or discriminatory ways. But the difficulty of humans (at least right now) discovering such an essential nature does not mean that nature doesn’t exist and doesn’t have normative weight. As Kim (2018) points out, we can distinguish between

‘first nature’—those features that belong to human beings as such, and ‘second nature’—those characteristics that human beings develop through habituation and culture. Although [Kim does] not accept a sharp line that divides first and second nature, this distinction helps clarify the concept of ‘human nature’ under discussion. For sometimes any pattern of widespread human activity is taken as exemplifying human nature, for instance, waging wars or writing poetry. But, such activities are the manifestations of our developed second nature, rather than first nature. First nature, rather, equips human beings with certain fundamental drives and tendencies, providing us with the psychological and physiological basis for further development through learning and habituation (thereby forging a second nature). Any satisfying account of naturalism must demonstrate how, from the initial conditions set by our basic, first nature, we can come to possess a reflective second nature that enables us to live according to our conception of what is valuable and good. (145)

With this understanding in mind, a satisfactory version of the EV’s naturalism claim would have to focus on humans’ “first nature,” and if it were able to distinguish this from “second nature” characteristics that have

---

52 Antony goes on to argue that “there is no incompatibility between feminism and nativism [the position that humans have an essential nature], properly understood.” (2010, 11) However, she does claim that human nature cannot do the “normative work” of generating ethical claims or obligations.
been developed under discriminatory social structures. This version of the EV could accept that many features of our lives—including our identities, values, and even our embodiments—are socially constructed, while still holding that there is some essential human nature there to be constructed. However, it seems that the understanding of the EV we have discussed so far—which includes the claim that human nature is characterized by rational activity—is vulnerable to critiques that it has focused on “second nature” characteristics that are discriminatory.

Many feminists and disability scholars endorse a middle path between strong social constructivism and biological essentialism. For example, Eyler (2010) and Scully (2008) both note that contemporary philosophers of disability are likely to endorse a cultural, or weak social, model of disability rather than a strong social model. This weaker constructivist model recognizes that features of the world are disabling but does not go as far as the (strong) social model in asserting that disability is completely socially conditioned. Thus, this weaker constructivist critique avoids the critiques the strong social models face as empirically implausible while still problematizing the particular understandings of human nature and function that virtue ethics has inherited.

Objection: Some attempts have been made to “rehabilitate” eudaimonic virtue ethics to provide a grounding for ethical arguments that support full, equal rights and opportunities for people with disabilities despite also holding that (some) people with disabilities do not meet the species-norm definition of flourishing (Merriam 2010; see also Nussbaum 2006, 2009; Robb 2018). For example, some contemporary virtue ethicists have argued that we have a moral obligation to ensure all humans can flourish to the extent that they are capable; the fact that some people (e.g., people with certain intellectual disabilities) cannot be full moral agents does not entail that they are not owed moral consideration.

Martha Nussbaum argues, for instance, that “One job of a society that wants to promote the most important human capabilities is to support the development of internal capabilities—through education, resources to enhance physical and emotional health, support for family care and love, a system of education, and much more.” (Nussbaum 2009, 21) In this view, the ethical imperative to promote human flourishing generated positive obligations to support the development of those characteristics or capacities that are
required for flourishing to the greatest extent possible, even if not all humans are able to flourish to the fullest extent.

Garret Merriam approaches this problem differently: by suggesting that we adopt a more individualized notion of living well or *eudaimonia*, where “living well” is not determined by a simple species-standard, but rather based on a considered application of phronesis (‘practical wisdom’) to those circumstances that make up an individual’s life and context, such that “[w]hen assessing those circumstances we must take into account the biological facts of the individual, as well as the cognitive, psychological, social and esoteric factors that come together to compose their life.” (Merriam 2010, 136)

**Reply:** However, each of these attempts is unsatisfactory. While Merriam’s approach has merits in the same way existentialist ethics does, it also faces the same problems. In short, it runs contrary to eudaimonic virtue ethics’ empirical, objectivist grounding for flourishing. It is individualistic to an extent that the idea of a human nature or essence is problematized.

Nussbaum’s tact is, perhaps, the most promising. It reminds one of Altman’s (2020) and Tessman’s (2005) points that discrimination can be regarded as a moral wrong because it provides barriers to flourishing for members of discriminated against groups—with the difference that in this view, the focus is on a positive obligation to promote flourishing, rather than a negative obligation not to obstruct it, in that in this case the barriers that people with (certain) disabilities face are not regarded as wholly socially constructed. In short, rehabilitation attempts like Nussbaum’s could be taken to say, “it’s unfortunate that some humans are incapable of accessing some human goods. Although they cannot lead fully flourishing lives in the way other humans do, we still have a moral obligation to ensure all humans can flourish to the extent that they are capable; the fact that they cannot be full moral agents does not entail that they are not owed moral consideration, including a recognition of their right to flourish (insofar as they can).”

Although such an appeal provides one avenue by which a proponent of the EV could support the rights of people with disabilities while still denying their capacity to flourish or be full moral agents, it is not clear *why* we have a moral obligation to people with disabilities in this view, or at least one above what we owe to non-rational animals. This is because this view still maintains that their natures differ fundamentally from
that of other, properly human, agents.\footnote{This is because \textit{eudaimonia} is purportedly grounded on empirical facts about humans’ nature and capacities. Nussbaum appeals to the “intuitive idea of a life with human dignity,” which seems to suggest a metaethical grounding outside of ethical naturalism. (2009, 335.)} That is, such an appeal cannot be based, as the EV is otherwise, on a morality grounded in human nature or function—at least, not if we take a particularly rationalistic understanding which seems to preclude some people with intellectual disabilities from fulfilling this human function and which identifies the ultimate aim of human life to be rational contemplation.

One response to this could be that part of human nature/function is that humans are social animals, and so it is a virtue to care for members of their community. This seems to furnish an obligation to care for people with disabilities despite their apparent inability to flourish. However, this reply does not seem open to proponents of the EV-R who endorse a “dominant” reading of \textit{eudaimonia} (Taylor 2010; Chapter 2 of this dissertation). Recall that in this view the character virtues are only instrumentally valuable insofar as they make the best human life, consisting of “the excellent employment of the theoretical intellect,” possible. (Taylor 2010, 43) In this dominant reading (which is implicit in Claim \textit{ii-R}), supporting the flourishing of people with disabilities could only be motivated insofar as it helps others (without disabilities) achieve happiness in the form of contemplation. Moreover, and relatedly, even if a less rationalist understanding of the EV could motivate an obligation to care for people with disabilities insofar as it is virtuous to promote the flourishing of members of one’s community and therefore contributes to the virtuous agent’s flourishing, it does not address the further problem that people with disabilities are not considered capable of flourishing or of developing full moral agency if they cannot fulfill the “human” function.

Again, both the feminist and disability critiques can be seen as building on the moral luck critique. This is because they point out that the EV is discriminatory, in that it defines a model man/life that definitionally excludes some people. As we have seen, this critique is especially forceful against the EV-R given its comparatively narrow, rationalistic conception of human nature, virtue, and flourishing. These critiques also go further than simply pointing out that people with disabilities and women are less able (if at all) to flourish according to the EV. Because contemporary philosophers of disability and gender point out
that social identities like disability status or gender are in part constructed by discriminatory or oppressive social structures, this critique further alleges that the diminished moral agency and possibility for flourishing that members of these marginalized groups have are products of historical and cultural—i.e., human-made—societies. They are not precultural, natural, or necessary—despite the EV’s purported empirical grounding.

### 3.4 The Psychology Critique

A further avenue of critique of the EV has come from the realm of empirical psychology. Rather than targeting the *morality* of the EV’s grounding, as the feminist and disability critiques did, this critique questions its *empirical plausibility*. And, while the previous criticisms aimed at Claims ii, iii and iv, this one aims at Claim i (aretaicism): the foundation of ethical action on virtues, conceived of as stable traits of character. The major claim from this camp is that virtues, thought of as stable and robust character traits, do not exist, or that if they do, they do not reliably guide or predict action.

Although this criticism has often been referred to as the “situationist” critique, I here refer to it as the psychology critique because critics in this camp not only charge that virtues situational features are more likely to influence action than character traits are, but also that character traits of the type virtues are meant to be may not exist. In other words, we can distinguish between critiques that suggest character traits do not exist, and critiques that argue that good character traits (virtues) are not sufficient to ensure ethical action.54 These critics thus draw support not only from empirical evidence about the role of situational factors on action-guidance but also about moral development. What’s more, I am concerned in this section not only with empirical evidence about the impact of situational features but also about cross-cultural variation.

Contemporary psychologists point out that “traditional theorists of virtue accept that having a reliable behavioral disposition is a necessary condition of having a virtue” (Sreenivasan 2013, 292). This is clear from Aristotle’s definition. He states that

---

54 As Kristjánsson similarly notes, the psychology critique can take a weaker or stronger form. He writes: “The results of [contemporary psychology] experiments [that have been taken to challenge the EV], then, are deemed *at least* sufficient to shake our previously imperturbable confidence in the existence of consistent cross-situational dispositions, and to call for ‘a certain redirection of our ethical attention’; *at most* even sufficient to eliminate the very idea of character, and to damn the entire fields of virtue ethics and character education.” (Kristjánsson, 2008, 59)
For actions in accord with the virtues to be done temperately or justly it does not suffice that they themselves have the right quality. Rather, the agent must also be in the right state when he does them. First, he must know that he is doing them; secondly, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, thirdly, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, 1105a30).

In other words: virtues like justice are virtues because they are “firm and unchanging” states or dispositions that produce or predict virtuous (e.g., just) action.

As Maria Merrit has further noted, Aristotle’s understanding of virtues as character traits seems to include a strong ideal of “motivational self-sufficiency of character,” such that it “calls for the possession of the motivational structure of virtue to be, in maturity and under normal circumstances, independent of factors outside oneself, such as particular social relationships and settings.” (Merrit 2000, 374.) As evidence of this she points to Aristotle’s claims that the acts of the truly virtuous person must “proceed from a firm and unchangeable character” (NE, 1105a30), and that the happy person has the stability we are looking for and keeps the character he has throughout his life. For always, or more than anything, he will do and study the actions in accord with virtue, and will bear fortunes most finely, in every way and in all conditions appropriately, since he is truly ‘good, for-square, and blameless’. (NE 2019, 1100b16–23; quoted [in a different translation] in Merrit 2000, 375–76)

We might also look to Aristotle’s (trans. Irwin, 2019) claims that the virtuous and happy person should be self-sufficient as far as possible (see esp. NE, 1169b3–8, 1177a27-b1), that “no human achievement has the stability of activities that express virtue, since these seem to be more enduring even than our knowledge of the sciences,” (NE, 1100b12–14) that “no blessed person could ever become miserable, since he will never do hateful and base actions. For a truly good and prudent person… will bear strokes of fortune suitably, and from his resources at any time will do the finest actions.” (NE, 110b34–1101a5)

Contemporary proponents of the EV likewise argue that virtues are robust, or well entrenched, such that, once possessed, they are generally stable over time and across disparate contexts (Fabiano 2021; Hursthouse 1999; Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018; Merritt 2000; Sorenson 2010). Relatedly, as we saw in Chapter 1, because virtues are reliable behavioral dispositions, virtues have (i) explanatory and (ii) predictive powers (Alfano 2013b, 236; see also Annas 2011; MacIntyre 2007; Nguyen and Crossan 2022; Sarkissian 2017; Sreenivasan 2013). That is, to say that someone has a virtue, e.g., of courage, is to say that we can
reliably predict that they will act courageous in disparate situations in which courage is called for; moreover, they will act in this way because they are courageous.

This reliance on an understanding of virtues as reliable dispositions with explanatory and predictive power is a problem, critics in this camp charge, because contemporary psychology does not support the existence of such reliable behavioral dispositions (Doris 1998, 2008; Kamtekar 2004; Merritt 2000; Sarkissian 2017; Spino 2020; Sreenivasan 2013). Recall that for the EV, positioning virtue as a stable trait of character (Claim i) ensures that a fully virtuous actor feels pleasure from doing the right thing by emphasizing the roles of emotional cultivation or habituation in ethical development. This is an important feature grounding the “psychological harmony” desideratum, which is regarded by proponents of the EV as one of its strongest advantages against deontic theories, because its only through the existence of a cultivated or developed virtuous character that the phronimos is able to feel as she ought.

Additionally, conceiving of virtues as traits of character ensures that even unreflective virtuous action originates in the virtuous agent, because the automatic response is a product of deliberate habituation. This self-origination criterion bolsters the theory against the incident moral luck critique (but not against the constitutive or welfare moral luck critiques if formation of character traits is susceptible to moral luck as the disability and feminist critiques claim). In this way, proponents of the EV hold both that virtuous action is only praiseworthy if done out of virtue and that moral exemplars take pleasure in, and easily enact, virtue.

As Gopal Sreenivasan explains, for a trait to meet the “reliable behavioral disposition” desideratum of eudaimonic virtue ethics, it “has to be reliable along both of the dimensions situationists distinguish. In other words, a person’s reliable disposition to behave (say) compassionately has to be temporally stable and cross-situationally consistent.” (Sreenivasan 2013, 291–292) There is some empirical evidence of dispositions with temporal stability—that is, persistence over time.55 However, those dispositions which are likely to exist

55 Of these, the dispositions which are best supported by empirical evidence are the so-called Big Five personality traits. The Big Five personality traits are Neuroticism or Emotional Instability, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness versus Antagonism, and Conscientiousness. These traits “recur across cultures, are strongly heritable, can be assessed by self-reports or the ratings of knowledgeable informants, and characterize individuals for long periods during adulthood.” (Costa and. McCrae 2012, 93) See also Fabiano (2021), “Virtue Theory for Moral Enhancement,” *American Journal of Bioethics: Neurology.*
are either too broad to be meaningfully mapped onto traits of character akin to virtues—as is the case for the Big Five traits—or do not demonstrate significant cross-situational validity. For a trait to be cross-situationally valid, someone who possesses that trait (e.g., honesty) should exhibit it in different, but relevantly similar, situations.

As Sreenivasan (2013) goes on to note, one influential study which seems to demonstrate that character traits akin to virtues do not have cross-situational validity is Hartshorne and May’s (1927) study of honesty in children. The study found that children who were honest in one situation (e.g., choosing not to copy from an answer key during a test) were only slightly more likely than the other children to act honestly in a different honesty-relevant case (e.g., not pocketing money left unattended). Thus, situationists argue, there is evidence to suggest that traits akin to virtues do not exist, at least in the cross-situational way we would like them to. Moreover, and relatedly, there is some evidence to suggest that the same virtues do not exist cross-culturally. This is the problem for the EV because virtues are purported to be based on universal, objective, and empirically discoverable facts about human nature and flourishing.

Yet broad cultural differences between “tight” and “loose” cultures, and between “collectivist” and “individualist” ones, have been well-documented in scientific literature and proposed to have significant effects on moral norms.56 And, there is also strong evidence of cross-cultural variability with regard to specific virtues. For example, cultural attitudes toward filiality, or respect and care for parents, vary significantly (see Dai and Dimond 1998; Li, Singh, and Keerthigha 2021; Sung 1994; Zhang 2020), as do

---

56 As Michele Gelfand et al. (2011) explain, tight cultures “have many strong norms and a low tolerance of deviant behavior,” while loose cultures “have weak social norms and a high tolerance of deviant behavior” (1100). Examples of tight cultures include Japan, Germany, and Singapore. Examples of loose cultures include Brazil and the United States (Gelfand et al. 2011, Gelfand 2018). See also: Chan 1996; Gelfand et al. 2021; Pan, Nau, and Gelfand 2020; Jamshed, Stewart, and Overstreet 2022. Collectivism is defined as “a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives” (Triandis 1995: 2, Hamamura 2012: 3). Individualism, in contrast, is “is a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and contracts they establish with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analysis of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others” (Triandis 1995: 2, Hamamura 2012: 3). Regarding differences in collectivist and individualist cultures, see also: Nisbett and Masuda 2003; Nisbett 2003; Nisbett et al. 2001; Ueda and Komiya 2012; Wang et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2022.
normativity evaluations along the “honesty-humility dimension” of the HEXACO personality model (Aghababaei et al. 2016; Jabbari et al. 2019; Shahidi et al. 2023; Sahragard 2003; Tong et al. 2016). These cultural differences suggest what one comes to regard as virtuous is also importantly socially or culturally conditioned.

A related critique is that—even if character traits or virtues do exist and have some bearing on an agent’s behavior, they have less bearing than features of one’s circumstances or situation do. This is the “situationist” critique. That is, even if character traits exist, they may be silenced or overridden by other, seemingly morally irrelevant, features of the situation. That is, critics from this camp can argue that even if reliable character traits akin to virtues exist, if they are not consistent and robust they are not reliable guides for action. And if they’re not reliable guides for action, they cannot reliably produce (or even predict) morally relevant behaviors. This makes them inferior to deontic theories when it comes “down to it”, that is, “down to” doing the right thing in a given situation.

Critics from the situationist camp point to findings from empirical psychology that seem to demonstrate that apparently morally irrelevant features of one’s situation have a significant impact on her actions. Two experiments often cited in this literature include the Milgram Obedience study (1963) and the Darley and Batson Good Samaritan study (1973). In the Milgram study, a large majority of participants administered what they believed to be painful and dangerous shocks to another person at the behest of an actor in a lab coat. In the Good Samaritan study, subjects who were in a hurry were significantly less likely to stop and help a person who appeared to be in distress.

57 As Shahidi et al. (2023) note, “humility has been found to be encouraged more in eastern cultures (Tong, Tan, Chor, & Koh, 2016)[ and] has been defined as synonymous with ‘modesty’ and ‘humbleness’, as a quality of having a modest or low view of one’s importance (Sahragard, 2003)” (453). The importance of humility as a virtue is also highly correlated with religiosity (Aghababaei et al. 2016; Shahidi et al. 2023).

58 This critique is also related to the larger charge from psychologists that “Far too many moral philosophers have been content to invent the psychology or anthropology on which their theories depend, advancing or disputing empirical claims with little concern for empirical evidence.” That is, virtue ethics, with its grounding in claims about human nature, capacities, and flourishing, should conform to available empirical evidence about these areas. (Doris and Stich 2007, 1)

Additional, contemporary examples show, e.g., that “subjects primed by either words indicating a power differential or activation of career goals, can lead to increased dismissiveness or disrespect (Chartrand and Barge, 1996); “[p]riming done with movies with revenge themes increased subjects’ punishment of a competitor in a game (Geen and Stonner, 1973); “pleasing smells (e.g., fresh bread or coffee) had a significant effect on helping behavior” (Baron 1997); that “slightly lower light levels in a room (not enough to significantly interfere with vision) increased cheating behavior,” as did wearing sunglasses (Zhong et al. 2010); and that “subjects in cleanly scented rooms gave significantly more money to charity than those in neutral smelling rooms (Liljenquist et al., 2010).”

These examples pose a problem for virtue ethicists because they suggest that seemingly morally irrelevant features—like what an apparent authority figure is telling you to do, whether you are in a hurry, or what smells or how much light is present in a room—can drastically affect one’s actions in a morally ambiguous or difficult situation. Even if the virtues were shown to exist as stable traits of character, the significant effects of situational factors and culture in these studies may be taken to suggest that virtuous traits or dispositions could be overridden by seemingly morally insignificant factors. Given this critique, one may wonder whether virtuous character traits, even if they do exist, are worth developing—since they seemingly do not serve as reliable guides for action.

The EV-R and EV-E’s Vulnerability to the Psychology Critique

We noted in the previous chapter that the EV-R and EV-E emphasize different aspects of virtue and phronesis. The EV-R posits that virtue is largely a matter of rationally controlling the emotions, passions, or appetites (aretaicism-R). To this end, rationalists emphasize that the virtuous agent must be able to “give an account” of, or explain the reasons behind, a given action or moral judgment. As we saw in Chapter 2, rationalists who endorse a “virtue as skill” understanding (e.g., Annas 2011, Bloomfield 2000, Hills 2016) argue that the ability to articulate underlying reasons distinguish skills (including virtues) from mere rote habits or imitations, and allow the virtuous agent to grasp the connection between, e.g., an honest act and its

60 These examples are listed by Spino 2020.
moral justification; this in turn allows the *phronimos* to determine for herself what is required in disparate situations or contexts.

And, relatedly, rationalists hold practical wisdom-R, that *phronesis* is (the perfection of) a skill that allows the agent to “deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself… about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general.” (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, NE, Book VI, 1140a25–28) For proponents of this view, *phronesis* is a rational faculty that ensures virtue is not a reaction or response but a considered choice.

The EV-E, in contrast, is committed to the view that virtues are akin to sensitivities or cultivated sentiments (aretaicism-E). For the emotionist, sentiments (appetites or emotions) are seen as conative, purposeful, or directed toward approval, disapproval, or recognition of moral value. As we have seen, William’s criticism of the “one thought too many” reflects the emotionist position that virtue should be a matter of simply perceiving, feeling, or grasping the right thing to do in a particular situation (Williams 1981). And, again relatedly, Claim iv-E (practical wisdom-E) claims that practical wisdom (*phronesis*) can be understood as the perfection of a sensitivity, or as a means to obtain ends set by emotions.

The EV-E thus deemphasizes the role of reason and the understanding of virtuous conduct as the result of choice or decision, in favor of emphasizing the moral content of sentiments and the automatic response a virtuous agent has to ethically charged scenarios. And, as we saw in Chapter 2, proponents of the EV-E can argue that their understanding of virtue and practical wisdom as akin to a sensitivity, perceptual capacity, or feeling is supported by empirical evidence about how human in fact respond to normatively laden situations (see, e.g., Barsalou 1999, Damasio 1994; Haidt 2001, Haidt et al. 1993, Slingerland 2011).

These differences were regarded as points in favor of the EV-E with respect to the moral luck objection, but the opposite is true for the psychology critique. As Spino (2020) reminds us,

The virtuous agent is at times [i.e., by proponents of the EV-E] described as being more sensitive to noticing the demands of particular situations via a well-developed perception. McDowell (1979, 332-334) describes this perception as a certain kind of detection of situational features. He goes on to make the stronger claim that a non-virtuous agent couldn’t even have the same kind of perceptions as that of the virtuous agent. Swanton (2001, 19) notes that virtue is, in part, a disposition to acknowledge those items relevant to virtue, which can include perception. So for some accounts of
virtue, perception itself, distinct from any deep interpretation, constitutes an important part of virtue possession (see also Wiggins 1975 and DesAutels 2012).

The perceptual, or sensitivity, view of virtue seems, then, to explicitly define virtue as responsiveness to situational features. The *phronimos*, for the emotionist, is particularly attentive to the world around her. However, matters of perception and attention are particularly strong targets for the psychology critique. For example, Baron (1997) suggests that a good mood, brought on by a pleasant smell, makes subjects more attentive and willing to help someone who dropped something from a bag (see also Spino 2020).

As Slingerland (2011) notes, then, emotional decision-making that is predicated on instinctual, emotional, or perceptual reactions may lead us wrong in some cases. This suggests that reason—in the strict, deliberative sense it is understood by proponents of the EV-R—may be required to “correct” mistaken emotional or perceptual responses in some cases. And, as Slingerland (2011) points outs, empirical evidence suggests there are at least some cases in which “top-down control, based on rational beliefs, can override affective reactions.” (91) The situationist critique therefore could be taken to suggest that the more rationalistic aretaicism-R and practical wisdom-R are better able to combat these kinds of pre-rational mistakes in ethical reasoning.

What’s more, because proponents of the EV-E hold (as we saw in Chapter 2) that “the weak-willed or indifferent agent does not, however much she herself might think otherwise, possess the same perception, or conception of the facts, as the virtuous agent” (Clarke 2018: §11), the explanation for viciousness is that the non-virtuous person’s moral perception is “unfocused,” insofar as she does not recognize the correct features of the situation as the motivating ones (McDowell 1979, 334). That is, while non-virtuous agents may *think* they know the right thing to do, they are misperceiving the situation. This explanation for viciousness becomes unsatisfying when considered in a cross-cultural context—in short, the EV-E’s practical wisdom-R can only explain cultural differences regarding virtue by suggesting that (at least) one of the cultures that differs obscures peoples’ perception of, or access to, moral truth.

While both versions of the EV are vulnerable to contemporary psychologists’ claims that virtues may not exist, may not be universal features of human nature, or may not be sufficiently action-guiding, the EV-E
thus seems less able to answer these critical points. Not only do emotionists emphasize that virtue is a matter of perception, sensitivity, or attention, they also explicitly deny that the \textit{phronimos} must be able to explain their actions, or indeed that their actions need be the result of (an analytic, syllogistic, or articulable kind of) reasoning at all (McDowell 1998; Rietveld 2010). If the \textit{phronimos} acts virtuously insofar as she is properly attentive to the demands of a given situation, then without a strongly mitigating role of reason it seems, \textit{prima facie}, that the features of that situation will have more impact on the emotionist’s moral agent than the rationalist’s. However, the EV-R does not escape this criticism entirely. As Spino (2020) notes, some studies suggest that seemingly irrelevant situational features can also affect deliberation (e.g., about whether to cheat or give to charity).

\textbf{Objections and Replies}

Again, proponents of the EV have offered some objections to this psychology critique. Let’s consider their objections to this avenue of critique and some possible replies from the psychology critique camp.

\textbf{Objection:} One response to these psychology critiques has been to argue that virtues are character traits, but that needn’t mean that they aren’t responsive to situational contexts. We have seen (in Chapter 1) that the EV’s casuistry is regarded by its proponents as a major strength. Proponents of the EV argue that the importance of \textit{phronesis} is due exactly to the importance of particulars in making moral judgments. While a situation may seem the same to an outside observer, the apparent lack of cross-situationally robust and predictive character traits may actually be relevantly different situations due to the particulars of the situation, the agent’s background, etc.

This objection might lead a proponent of the EV to advocate for a slight modification or clarification of the \textit{aretaic} focus of virtue ethics. That is, one might suggest an understanding of each virtue as a character trait but not one that need include a strong ideal of “motivational self-sufficiency of character” that Merritt (2000, 374) suggested characterizes Aristotle’s view. We have already noted that, for virtue ethicists, character and moral development are highly dependent on one’s community, education, family upbringing, etc. So it
doesn’t seem required, from an EV perspective, that these communally formed virtues later lose their responsiveness to situational factors.

**Reply:** Although it seems trivial to agree that the virtuous person ought to change his behavior as the situation requires, the situational features that situationists point to as influencing behavior are not features that *seem* to be morally relevant. As Spino points out, the “behavioral inconsistency the situationist is interested in is one where across situations with features that call for the trait-relevant behavior, that differ only with respect to *trait-irrelevant* situational features,” where a “*trait-irrelevant feature*” “is both minor and morally irrelevant with respect to whatever the trait-relevant behavior happens to be.” (2020, 76) Situational features like smell, lighting, whether one is in a hurry, etc. certainly do not seem like features that a *phronimos* would use to guide her action.

However, a proponent of the EV could further insist that, depending on the particulars of the agent’s background and personality, relationship to other involved agents, etc., these seemingly irrelevant features do gain moral import. For example, perhaps pleasing smells *should* have an effect on helping or charitable behavior, because even this small situational difference changes the relationship of the (helpful or charitable) agent to those she is helping or giving—whether we non-perfect moral agents can recognize the significance or not. While this response may be initially helpful, though, it seems to open the critique up to more of the moral luck objection in that it emphasizes the role features outside of the agent’s control have on her action.

**Objection:** Another response from eudaimonic virtue ethicists could be simply to point out that virtues are rare. This tact acknowledges that findings from psychologists show that people in general lack cross-situationally and longitudinally robust, behavior predicting traits like the kind virtues are meant to be. But this may simply be because people in general tend not to be virtuous. Similarly, while it may be true that most people’s behaviors, judgments, or even moral perception are problematically influenced by morally irrelevant situational features, the *phronimos* may not make such mistakes.

**Reply:** Kristján Kristjánsson (2008) labels this response the “bullet-biting objection.” As Kristjánsson notes, this objection is also anticipated by John Doris in his initial identification of the situationist critique. Doris writes,
The fact that many people failed morally in the observed situations tells us little about the adequacy of Aristotelian descriptive psychology, since such disappointing demographics are exactly what the virtue theorist would expect. Indeed, a virtue-based approach can explain the situationist data: it is precisely because so few people are truly virtuous that we see the results that we do. (Doris 1998, 511; quoted in Kristjánsson 2008, 66)

As Kristjánsson further notes, Aristotle himself also argues that most people are not virtuous (Kristjánsson 2008, 66; Aristotle, NE, 1150a15; 1152a25).

With this view—that virtue is rare—in mind, the virtue ethicist’s responses looks like so:

far from pointing to the poverty of character building, the results underscore the need for sustained and intense education of that sort. This objection is felicitously referred to ‘bullet-biting’. Not only does it embrace with ease the allegedly embarrassing facts thrown at it, it positively relishes the data from the experiments – which tend to show that 20–30% of people actually possess robustly virtuous traits—as (happily) indicating a bigger minority than could have been expected. (Kristjánsson 2008, 66; see also Sabini and Silver 2005)

This response is somewhat helpful. As both Kristjánsson (2008) and Sabini and Silver (2005) point out, such a response can help to motivate arguments for the importance of moral education and other social supports to better allow people to develop good characters, while also underscoring the essential role of practical wisdom (phronesis) in virtue development and practice.

However, the idea that robust, action-guiding moral virtues are so uncommonly found in the general population that there is no, or very little, empirical evidence of them suggests that virtue is vanishingly rare. Although this may be in line with what Aristotle himself sometimes suggests, contemporary virtue ethicists do not generally hold Aristotle’s (as we’ve noted, exclusionary) views about who is capable of developing virtue. In fact, the view that virtue is exceedingly rare seems to run counter to the EV’s purported foundation in a naturalistic account of what humans do and need. If virtue is a matter of cultivating or training existing features of human nature, why should it be so inaccessible for most of the human population?

That virtues are part of human nature, and so are at least potentially attainable by humans—what I called in Chapter 1 the “accessibility” desideratum of the EV—is one of the theory’s most desirable features. If virtues are not accessible to most moral agents, this seems to problematize moral responsibility. After all, if an agent cannot learn what is right and wrong, or cannot develop the virtues, how could they be blameworthy
for failing to do so? In short, if virtue is vanishingly rare such that almost no humans are virtuous, this suggests such widespread bad moral luck that moral responsibility seems to be a faulty concept.

**Objection:** Another response to the situationist critique from a proponent of the EV could be that there is some empirical evidence that does support the existence of global, robust, and action-guiding character traits, or at least that—counter situationists’ claims—the empirical data doesn’t rule their existence out. As noted above, the Big Five personality traits have been put forward as candidates for temporally and situationally stable character traits (see, e.g., Fabiano 2021). Arjoon (2008); de Bruin, Zaal, and Jeurissen (2023); Jayawickreme et al. (2014); Magundayao (2013); and Sreenivasan (2002) have also argued that the situationist critique is not supported by more contemporary empirical research.

**Reply:** According to the existing empirical evidence, those global dispositions that are likely to exist are either too broad to be meaningfully mapped onto traits of character akin to virtues—as is the case for the Big Five traits—or do not demonstrate significant cross-situational validity. For a trait to be cross-situationally valid, someone who possesses that trait (e.g., honesty) should exhibit it in different, but relevantly similar, situations.

As we have seen, the psychology critique targets Claim i: the foundation of ethical action on virtues, conceived of as stable traits of character. It does so by arguing that empirical evidence from contemporary psychology does not support the existence of global, cross-situationally, cross-culturally, and cross-temporally consistent, behavior-predicting traits. Because aretaicism is a central feature of all versions of the EV, both the EV-R and EV-E are vulnerable to this critique. However, the EV-E is especially vulnerable due to its emphasis on virtue as a sensitivity, and its deemphasis on the controlling or correcting role of phronesis.

3.5 Conclusion

We saw in Chapter 2 that the EV can be divided into two broad categories—the rationalist EV-R and the emotionist EV-E. In this chapter, I have argued that the EV has been subjected to three strong avenues of critique: from philosophers of disability, feminists, and psychologists. I have further argued that the EV-R is particularly vulnerable to critiques from disability scholars and feminists, and the EV-E is particularly vulnerable to those from psychologists.
To summarize my arguments in this chapter, the disability and feminist critiques are particularly damning against those versions of the EV that are more rationalist because these critiques argue that the EV is discriminatory insofar as it defines a model man or life (i.e., the phronimos or eudaimonia) in a way that excludes some people. Given the EV-R’s comparatively narrow, rationalistic conception of human nature, virtue, and flourishing, it is prima facie more exclusionary than the EV-E. And, because contemporary philosophers of disability and gender point out that social identities like disability status or gender are in part constructed by discriminatory or oppressive social structures, this critique further alleges that the diminished moral agency and possibility for flourishing that members of these marginalized groups have are products of historical and cultural—i.e., human-made—societies. They are not precultural, natural, or necessary—despite the EV’s purported empirical grounding.

On the other hand, more emotionist versions of the EV—while less vulnerable to the feminist and disability critiques—are more vulnerable to criticisms from empirical psychology. This is because, as we have seen, the EV-E is committed to the view that virtues are akin to sensitivities or cultivated sentiments and claims that practical wisdom (phronesis) can be understood as the perfection of a sensitivity. This reading thus deemphasizes the role of reason and the understanding of virtuous conduct as the result of choice or decision. Without a strongly mitigating role of reason it seems, prima facie, that the features of one’s situation or culture will have more impact on the emotionist’s moral agent than the rationalist’s.

As we have seen, there are some promising avenues by which a contemporary proponent of the EV could respond to these critiques. For example, one might take a less rationalistic understanding of human nature—such that people with intellectual disabilities were included. One might try to discover an essential characteristic of human nature that maintains the EV’s objectivist, empirical grounding for morality, but which is not predicated on a discriminatory or culturally constructed understanding of flourishing. And, one might emphasize the importance of attuning to one’s situation, and cultivating an environment that is supportive of virtuous action, as a part of virtue.

While these would go a long way toward addressing the critiques outlined in this chapter, though, it’s unclear to what degree one can make these changes while maintaining the EV’s classical grounding (in
Aristotle) and the positive features associated with its four central claims. In the following chapter, I argue that Confucian philosopher Mengzi (Mencius, 孟子), can provide a fruitful alternative grounding for the EV. Both Aristotle and Mengzi endorse a naturalist, universal understanding of human nature and a (weakly) teleological understanding of human flourishing as fulfilling human function. Both agree that virtue is the foundation of ethical action as well as an important component of well-being, and both discuss something akin to practical reasoning or wisdom when considering how one performs virtuous action. In short, both uphold the EV.

They differ, however, in that for Aristotle—as we have seen—human nature is defined by rational action while, for Mengzi, human nature is defined by the potential for moral goodness. Additionally, Mengzi’s reflection and extension offer a less rationalistic version of practical wisdom. Finally, his emphasis on the importance of relationships and roles, and the related importance of ritual, can more readily answer empirical criticisms about the influence of situation on ethical action. These differences are what make Mengzi promising as a grounding for contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics.
CHAPTER 4
A MENGZIAN EUDAIMONIC VIEW OF VIRTUE

4.1 Introduction

We have seen that contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics theories can be understood as leaning either emotional or rational, and that this division can be seen both in the historical development of Western eudaimonic virtue ethics and among contemporary proponents of the EV (Chapter 2). As we will see in this and the following chapter, Mengzi’s version of the EV importantly differs from both the rational and emotional versions of the EV, while retaining the theory’s four core commitments. Due to these differences, as we’ll see in Chapter 5, a contemporary Mengzian EV (the EV-M) can offer a promising avenue of response to the criticisms from Chapter 3.

In this chapter, I first introduce Mengzi’s Confucian background and context, before exploring the innovative developments of his own classical theory. I explore the specific versions of the EV’s claim that Mengzi endorses, as well as the differences between Mengzi’s EV-M and the previously explored EV-R and EV-E, in Sections 4.3 and 4.4 of this chapter. This will provide the foundation for showing, in Chapter 5, how Mengzi’s alternate grounding for the EV can, with modernizing tweaks, provide a fruitful resource for responding to the criticisms from Chapter 3. As we’ll see, while classical Mengzian virtue ethics, like the Aristotelian EV, is vulnerable to criticisms from a contemporary perspective, the differences between these two classical groundings, their metaphysical assumptions, and their historical development can highlight an alternate grounding that contemporary virtue ethics can incorporate to face these criticisms from feminists, disability theorists, and psychologists.

1 To quickly review: I argued in Chapter 2 that rationalists hold that virtue or virtuous action consists (at least in large part) of rational control of emotion; that a eudaimon life is characterized by rationality or rational activity understood strictly as ratiocination or contemplation; that human nature is fundamentally rational, or that rationality (again understood strictly) is what makes people people; and that practical wisdom is the perfection of a rational process. In contrast, emotionists hold that virtue or virtuous action consists (at least in large part) of attending to emotions, sentiments, or passions, which have normative content; that a eudaimon life is characterized by not just (strictly) rational activity but also by a rich emotional and relational life; that human nature is fundamentally characterized by the possession of emotional instincts or sensitivities that can be developed into virtues; and that practical wisdom is either a perfection of a sensitivity, or is a mere means to obtain ends set by emotions. I have also argued that these differing “emotional” (EV-E) and “rational” (EV-R) versions of the EV are differently vulnerable to the critical camps introduced in Chapter 3.

2 I explore the specific versions of the EV’s claim that Mengzi endorses, as well as the differences between Mengzi’s EV-M and the previously explored EV-R and EV-E, in Sections 4.3 and 4.4 of this chapter. This will provide the foundation for showing, in Chapter 5, how Mengzi’s alternate grounding for the EV can, with modernizing tweaks, provide a fruitful resource for responding to the criticisms from Chapter 3. As we’ll see, while classical Mengzian virtue ethics, like the Aristotelian EV, is vulnerable to criticisms from a contemporary perspective, the differences between these two classical groundings, their metaphysical assumptions, and their historical development can highlight an alternate grounding that contemporary virtue ethics can incorporate to face these criticisms from feminists, disability theorists, and psychologists.
compare it both to the thought of his contemporary rivals and to Aristotle’s. In this way, I highlight Mengzi’s
metaphysical and moral commitments—which position him both as a proponent of the EV and yet as putting
forward a version of the EV that has substantial differences from both the EV-R and the EV-E.

In particular, I argue in this chapter that Mengzi’s philosophy is similar to the Aristotelian tradition,
but with important differences in the thinkers’ understandings of human nature and practical reasoning. As
we will see, these differences are predicated on Mengzi’s comparatively relational understanding of persons
and virtues, as well as his conviction that human nature is good (xing shan, 性善; Mengzi, trans. Van Norden,
2008, 6A2, 6A6). These differences between Mengzi’s version of the EV (the EV-M) and the versions we
have seen so far (the EV-E and EV-R) are a consequence of Mengzi’s Confucian commitments, as well as of
his innovative arguments about human nature and moral cultivation.

Despite these differences, Mengzi’s philosophy includes the four features that make it a version of
the EV. Thus, it has core similarities to both Aristotle’s classical virtue ethics and contemporary eudaimonic
virtue ethical theories in this tradition. These similarities allow for a fruitful comparison of Mengzian and
Aristotelian virtue ethics while acknowledging those differences that make Mengzi’s theory a helpful resource
for reimagining eudaimonic virtue ethics in response to Chapter 3’s critiques.

As we’ll see, the EV-M’s four claims are:

(i-M) Virtues, in the sense of excellent character traits or dispositions are the foundation of ethics or ethical
action; virtues are relationally responsive, and are further both rational and emotional—these
are not separable aspects of human psychology.

(ii-M) Virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing; flourishing is characterized
by a rich rational (in a thin sense), ethical, emotional, and relational life.

(iii-M) Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good
performance of human function or fulfilling human nature; human nature is characterized by
potential for (moral) goodness in the form of the sprouts.

(iv-M) Practical wisdom, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue;
practical wisdom can be understood more specifically as the perfection of an emotional-rational
process of extending and reflecting on the sprouts.

I have bolded Mengzi’s additions. Call these aretaicism-M, eudaimonism-M, naturalism-M, and practical
wisdom-M. Next, let us get an understanding of Mengzi’s background and context. This will be useful for
understanding his theory—both its novel insights and its grounding in the Classical Confucian philosophy of his day.

### 4.2 Mengzi’s Background and Context

Mengzi was a Confucian, a follower of Confucius (孔子, kǒng zǐ). He reportedly studied under Confucius’s grandson, Zisi (子思, zīsī). As we noted in Chapter 1, Confucius can be seen as the founder of Classical Chinese virtue ethics. However, this is not an uncontroversial claim. Two reasons one might disagree with this claim are the beliefs (1) that Confucius did not see himself as a founder of any tradition, but as explicating and preserving a tradition that predated him; and (2) that Confucianism is not a type of virtue ethics but its own distinct ethical theory.

Let’s look at (1) first. Confucius himself claimed “to transmit rather than innovate” (2013, *Analects* 7.1), and saw himself as elucidating the Dao (道, Way) of previous sage-kings. Confucius—and followers like Mengzi and Xunzi—venerated the wisdom of the ancient Zhou sage kings, who were upheld as moral exemplars. These Classical Confucians believed that these ancient sages had discovered the proper Way and codified it through ritual (禮, lǐ) (Csikszentmihalyi 2020; Ivanhoe 2007; Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005; Sarkissian 2023; Van Norden 2007; Yu 2007). They therefore advocated for returning to the Zhou rituals—i.e., religious and cultural practices—which they believed would allow people to develop into virtuous citizens and for society to flourish. This was especially true of Confucius. As Csikszentmihalyi notes,

The *Records of Ritual* [Liji 禮記, or *Book of Rites*, describing the traditions of the Zhou and considered a Confucian classic], the *Analects*, and numerous Han collections portray Confucius as being deeply concerned with the proper performance of ritual and music. In such works, the description of the attitudes and affect of the performer became the foundation of a ritual psychology in which proper

---

3 As was noted in Chapter 1, I use “Confucius” rather than “Kongzi” because this Latinization of the philosopher’s name is easily recognizable for philosophers and readers from both Western and Chinese traditions.

4 Because Confucianism can be seen as predating Confucius (as Confucius himself believed), Confucianism is known as rujia (儒家), “Scholarism,” in Chinese. Csikszentmihalyi writes, “The Chinese term Ru (儒) predates Confucius, and connotes specialists in ritual and music, and later experts in Classical Studies. Ru is routinely translated into English as ‘Confucian’. Yet ‘Confucian’ is also sometimes used in English to refer to the sage kings of antiquity who were credited with key cultural innovations by the Ru.” (2020, Para. 1) Despite this translational issue, I use the term “Confucianism” because it is more familiar to Western audiences and because, despite Confucius’s assertion that he was not an innovator, his “Way” came to characterize a particular ethical theory that was defended and expanded upon by followers—like Mengzi and Xunzi—who saw themselves as following Confucius’s teachings (Ivanhoe 2007).
performance was key to reforming desires and beginning to develop moral dispositions. Confucius sought to preserve the Zhou ritual system, and theorized about how ritual and music inculcated social roles, limited desires and transformed character. [...] It was in large part this adherence to Zhou period cultural forms, or to what Confucius reconstructed them to be, that has led many in the modern period to label him a traditionalist. (2020, §3) 5

So, we can understand Confucius’s claim that he transmits but does not create to mean that he advocated not for a new moral theory but for a return to the rituals of the Zhou sages, which he believed would mean a return to social harmony due to the rituals’ power of moral cultivation.

As we will see in more detail in the following pages, though, underlying Confucius’s traditionalism is the belief that rituals are central to proper moral development. Thus, not merely the performance but also the underlying motivations and affects of the rituals were important. Despite his purported traditionalism, this aspect of Confucius’s thought actually represents a significant innovation in moral theory. 6 As Angle (2009), Huff (2015), Ivanhoe (2002) and Van Norden (2007, 2019)—among others—have further argued, Classical Confucian Mengzi provides a comprehensive moral theory, as well as a theory of human nature, that he sees as explicating and building on Confucius’s. So, Confucianism is properly regarded as an innovative ethical theory even if Confucius is not taken to be its founder.

Before getting into (2), the question of whether Confucianism is properly regarded as a kind of virtue ethics, it is helpful to identify the Confucian tradition’s major features. Van Norden explains,

we clearly find in the Analects [the principal record of Confucius’s thought] expressions of all the major themes that would be characteristic of Confucianism for the next two and a half millennia. In particular, the Confucius of the Analects emphasizes the importance of (1) revivalistic traditionalism; (2) rule through Virtue rather than brute force; (3) ritual as a model for ethical behavior; (4) the family; and (5) ethical cultivation.” (2019, §1)

Ivanhoe also offers a similar and instructive account of Confucianism’s major features, which he regards as including (a) the importance of family roles; (b) the importance of fulfilling societal roles, seen as analogous

---

5 As Csikszentmihalyi (2020) further notes, “Confucius insists on adherence to the letter of the rites [in most cases], as when his disciple, Zi Gong 子貢, sought to substitute another animal for a sheep in a seasonal sacrifice, saying ‘though you care about the sheep, I care about the ritual’ (2020, §3, quoting from Analects 3.17).

6 See Csikszentmihalyi (2020). Arguably, other innovations of Confucius’s moral theory were the idea that de (德, Virtue or charismatic virtue) could be cultivated (Ivanhoe 2000, xiii; Yu 2007, 31; 232), and the shift in meaning for ren (仁) from “the aristocracy of bloodlines, meaning something like the strong and handsome appearance of an aristocrat… to] the concept… of a moral excellence that anyone has the potential to achieve.” (Wong 2024, §2.1).
to but never superseding one's family roles; and (c) the importance of both following the rites, \( lî \) (禮), and having the correct “affective attitude” while following them. (Ivanhoe 2002, 2) Although Ivanhoe’s description does not specifically mention the cultivation or performance of virtue, as we will see, following the rites and fulfilling one’s roles were aspects of virtue development and practice.

The features recognized by Van Norden and Ivanhoe share some commonalities with eudaimonic virtue ethics (as we have defined it via the EV), but also some points of difference. In this chapter, I do not intend to show that Confucianism holds identical commitments to Western virtue ethical theories. Rather, I hope only to show that a thin conception of virtue ethics—i.e., the EV—can accurately capture the main tenets of Mengzi’s moral philosophy in particular.\(^7\) This is a necessary starting point for considering Mengzi’s theory to be a type of eudaimonic virtue ethics, and thus to meaningfully compare it to eudaimonic virtue ethical theories in the Western tradition. To do this, it is helpful to consider what contemporary philosophers have identified as distinguishing features of Confucius’s ethics, in order to compare it both to Western virtue ethics and Mengzi’s later development of Confucian philosophy.\(^8\)

Feature (1) that Van Norden identifies of Confucius’s thought, “revivalistic traditionalism,” is a consequence of Confucius’s view that he is merely transmitting rather than creating (Analects 7.1). As we have seen, Confucius tried to preserve the Zhou ritual system and persuade others to follow the ancient versions of the rites as closely as they could (see Csikszentmihalyi 2020, Analects 3.17). To provide an example, Analects 15:11 goes as follows:

---

\(^7\) As discussed in Chapter 1, the EV provides a “thin” conception of eudaimonic virtue ethics, such that despite substantial “thick” differences, e.g., in different ethical theories’ conceptions of what the virtues are or how to cultivate them, virtue ethical theories from different cultures, time periods, and metaphysical backgrounds can be fruitfully compared (cf. Van Norden 2007, 15–23).

\(^8\) In this dissertation, I am chiefly interested in the moral theory of Confucius and Mengzi (and to a lesser extent, Xunzi). I have called these thinkers “Classical” Confucians, as their works are representative of the thought of Confucians during the Classical Chinese Spring and Autumn (ca. 770 to 480s BCE) and Warring States (ca. 480s to 221 BCE) periods. Although I often refer to the shared convictions of Classical Confucians, it should be noted (as we will see below) that there are significant differences in the thought of these three thinkers. After the Classical period, there have also been influential thinkers in what is known as the “Neo-Confucian” tradition. However, I believe (with Van Norden [2007]) that the philosophy espoused by this tradition differed significantly from that of Classical Confucians. So, it is helpful to keep in mind that even when I gloss “Confucians” as holding x view I have in mind Confucius and Mengzi (and to a lesser extent Xunzi), not these later thinkers.
Yan Yuan asked about running a state. The Master said, ‘Follow the calendar of the Xia, travel in the carriages of the Shang, and clothe yourself in the ceremonial caps of the Zhou. As for music, listen only to the Shao and Wu. Prohibit the tunes of Zheng, and keep glib people at a distance—for the tunes of Zheng are licentious, and glib people are dangerous.’ (2013)

As Eno further remarks in his comments on his own translation of this passage, “The Xia, Yin (Shang), and Zhou are the three early dynasties,” which Confucius regarded as periods of utopian government (Analects 2015, comments on 15.11 [84]; see also Van Norden 2007, 66). Zheng, in contrast, was a strong state during Confucius’s Spring and Autumn period. In this passage Confucius advocates a return to the cultural practices of ancient states who, he believed, had lived under a utopian government and whose leaders had perfected the rites (禮, lĭ).

Generally, Confucius regarded the cultural, social, and religious practices of his own Spring and Autumn period as inferior to those of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou. In particular, he argued that “The virtue of the Zhou… can be said to represent ultimate Virtue” (Analects 2013, 8.20). He believed that, in order to enact virtuous government and improve the lives of the people, the traditions of the previous states should be revived. Again, this traditionalism was motivated by the conviction that rites and cultural practices (together ritual, lĭ [禮, lĭ] had moral force. As we will see, the focus on ritual continued to characterize Mengzi’s moral theory, though Mengzi was much less traditionalist than Confucius.

Classical Confucianism’s traditionalism can be regarded as a problematic feature of the theory when it comes to universalizing it across disparate cultures or applying it in contemporary contexts. Confucius’s conviction that the ancient Chinese (and in particular, Zhou) sage-kings had perfected the rites to best support human moral development seems empirically implausible and culturally chauvinistic. Reading

9 Music (Analects 3.25, 7.14, 8.8, 13.3, 16.2, 16.5, 17.8); modes of dress (Analects 10.6, 17.18, 20.2); how one expresses herself, addresses, or interacts with others (Analects 7.9, 9.3, 9.10, 10.8, 10.10, 10.12, 10.15, 10.22); and funerary and mourning practices (Analects 4.20, 7.9, 14.40, 17.2, 19.17) were all held to importantly shape one’s moral development.

10 A related feature of the Classical Chinese philosophical tradition—not just of Confucianism—is that many arguments include reference to past precedent, mythical moral exemplars, or canonical texts such as the Shijing (詩經, Book of Odes or Classic of Poetry) and Liji (禮記, Book of Rites or Record of Ritual) to support their points. This does not mean that classical Chinese philosophy boils down to fallacious appeals to authority; rather, arguments were developed to flesh out, analyze, and expand upon elusive but culturally important documents, or to argue for interpreting these documents or the actions of historical figures in particular ways. Chinese philosophers of that period viewed these as thoughtful starting points for
charitably and with a “hermeneutic of restoration” (Ricoeur 1970; Van Norden 2007), though, we can also point out that the “revivalist” part of Confucius’s traditionalism—read in concert with Confucius’s belief that rituals both ought to evolve with changes in cultural context (*Analects* 9.3) and are important for their underlying affective motivation and impact (*Analects* 2.3, 3.4, 8.2, 17.21, 19.14)—can provide a way of thinking about traditionalism that also encourages a skepticism toward, and willingness to revise, traditions that are no longer suited to one’s present context. Below, we will explore the moral psychology underlying Classical Confucians’ emphasis on ritual in more detail.

Features (2) and (5) of the features Van Norden takes to characterize Confucianism—(2) “rule through Virtue rather than brute force [and (5) an emphasis on] ethical cultivation”—have much in common with Western virtue ethics, insofar as they emphasize the power and importance of virtue (and of cultivating it) (Van Norden 2019, §1). Moreover, feature (2), “rule through Virtue rather than brute force,” highlights the communal, relational aspect of virtue by emphasizing its importance in social-political context. Both the Confucian and Aristotelian traditions include an appreciation for the role of one’s community in virtue development and practice.11

However, as we will see below, the Chinese De (dé 德, often translated “Virtue” or “charismatic virtue”) is not synonymous with the Greek aretē (virtue); and, in general, Confucian conceptions of virtue are comparatively relationally responsive compared to their Greek cousins. Features (3) and (4), which emphasize ritual and the family (and we might add, not only family but also other social and political roles; see Ivanhoe 2002), are also points of difference between Classical Chinese and Greek ethics. Each of these is discussed in debate, as indications of their interlocutors’ gentlemanly education, and as a shared cultural touchstone. One might compare this to the frequent reference to Homer by Aristotle and Plato. In short, this aspect of traditionalism served as a starting point for debate by basing one’s arguments off of a figure or document that interlocutors all agreed on the moral authority of. Again, this makes the philosophy appear difficult to apply in contemporary and cross-cultural discussions.

---

11 It was noted, in Chapter 1, that this emphasis on moral cultivation—including its emotional and relational or communal aspects—is regarded by eudaimonic virtue ethicists to be a major advantage of the theory.
more detail below. In this discussion, I also refute our second worry above—that is, that Confucianism should not be regarded as a type of virtues ethics but as a distinct type of ethics.

**Classical Confucian Metaphysics**

As noted in Chapter 1, a major difference between the Classical Greek and Chinese traditions is their underlying metaphysics and moral psychology. In particular, major differences lie in their conceptions of the natural (and supernatural) world and of human nature; their general understandings of the mind or soul, and of what the virtues are and how they are cultivated; the extent to which rationality serves as a controlling or guiding force for the emotions; and the extent to which flourishing and virtue are relational as opposed to individual. Related to these differing metaphysical commitments and theories of moral development, as we saw from Van Norden (2019) and Ivanhoe (2002) above, Confucianism also emphasizes some ethical concepts that were not so important for the Classical Greeks—namely, charismatic virtue (德, dé), ritual (禮, lǐ), and family and social roles. As we will see in §4.3, on the basis of these differences Mengzi’s understandings of virtue (Claim i), flourishing (Claim ii), human nature (Claim iii), and practical wisdom (Claim iv) will importantly differ from conceptions found in the Western eudaimonic virtue ethics tradition. And, as we’ll see in Chapter 5, these differences will allow us to navigate some of the difficulties that the EV has faced (as discussed in Chapter 3). But this is getting ahead of ourselves!

It was noted in Chapter 1 that Confucianism has recently been regarded by prominent philosophers and Sinologists as a type of virtue ethics. However, (as briefly noted above and in Chapter 1) this

---

12 Please refer to Chapter 1, §1.4, for a detailed discussion of virtue ethics' classical Greek and Chinese origins.

13 In Chapter 1, §1.4, it was noted that Confucianism is characterized by “a major focus” on the virtues, in the sense of “qualities or traits that persons could have and that are appropriate objects of aspiration to realize.” (Wong 2020) The general consensus of those who advocate understanding Confucianism as a type of virtue ethics is that Confucianism is relevantly similar to Western virtue ethics (at least) because of its central concern for cultivating virtues (Angle 2009; Dahlsgaard, Peterson, Seligman 2005; Ivanhoe 2000, 2013; Liao and Lambert 2011; Mi and Slote 2015; Sarkissian 2010; Sim 2007, 2017; Van Norden 2007, 2013, 2016; Wong 2024; Yearley 1990; Yu 2007). Primary evidence for Classical Confucianism’s preoccupation with the virtues as the primary locus for ethical evaluation can be found, e.g., in Analects 2.21, 4.15, 7.6, 7.23, 12:10, and 13.19; and in Mengzi 1A5, 1A7, 2A3, 4A27, and 6A6 (among others). Note, however, that some advocates for Confucianism as a type of virtue ethics are skeptical about Confucius as a virtue ethicist. As we will discuss in more detail later in this section, Mengzi’s work is sometimes regarded as a better starting point for Confucianism as an explicit and developed moral theory (see, e.g., Ivanhoe 2013).
identification of Confucianism as a type of virtue ethics is not entirely uncontroversial. As Eric Hutton (2015) summarizes the debate, critics of applying the label of virtue ethics to Confucianism—who include Ames (2011), Chen (2012, 2014), Neville (2014), Nuyen (2007), and Rosemont and Ames (2016)—have argued, e.g., that the label of “virtue ethics” is not adequately attentive to the metaphysical commitments of Confucians; that it implies a focus on individuality and rationality that is not present in Confucian thought; or that it problematically focuses on universal human nature rather than the centrality of the individual, particular person as the “bearer of ethical-moral values and thoughts, the embodiment of social relations, the maker of courses, and the actor of actions” (Chen 2012, 52).

In short, these criticisms hold that Confucian ethics has certain characteristic features, commitments, or conceptions of the self and/or of the origin of virtues that substantially differ from Western virtue ethics. As Van Norden (2007) points out, the major thrust of these criticisms is that assimilating Confucianism to virtue ethics flattens or simplifies the latter (see also Hutton 2015, Wong 2024). This is a particular worry given academic philosophy’s historic ethnocentrism and underappreciation of non-Anglo-European schools of thought. We can agree that, for a theory to be properly considered virtue ethics, it must do more than take the virtues as central. However, that doesn’t mean that all virtue theories must have the features that these critics claim preclude Confucianism from consideration as a virtue ethics.

As noted in Chapter 1, “in order to avoid having the classification of some Chinese view as ‘virtue ethics’ be an empty claim, those deploying the classification must specify exactly what they take the content of virtue ethics to be” (Hutton 2015, 342). I have attempted to do this with the EV established in Chapter 1. To review, the EV’s core claims—which I take to characterize eudaimonic virtue ethics in a thin sense—include the commitments to (i) aretaicism; (ii) eudaimonism; (iii) naturalism; and (iv) practical wisdom. None of the points of criticism from Ames (2011), Chen (2012, 2014), Neville (2014), Nuyen (2007), or Rosemont and Ames (2016)

---

14 As Hutton (2015) similarly argues, many of these critiques are prefaced on a particular understanding of virtue ethics as having certain features that Confucianism does not, e.g., a preoccupation with individuality, autonomy, or rationality as characterizing personhood (Ames 2011, Nuyen 2007, Rosemont and Ames 2016).
rules out Confucianism as a type of virtue ethics, at least as conceived of according to the EV.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, showing that Confucianism differs from some prominent Western virtue ethical theories does not amount to showing that it is not a type of virtue ethics; it may instead be regarded as evidence for a wide variety of eudaimonic virtue ethical theories or approaches.

Even if we disagree with them, it is instructive to bear in mind the criticisms of considering Confucianism a type of virtue ethics. Some influential criticisms and points of difficulty include the lack of a Classical Chinese term that directly translates to virtue, as understood in the Western tradition; the metaphysical grounding of virtue in *Tian* and *Dao*, metaphysical concepts that arguably preclude a naturalistic grounding for virtue in human nature and flourishing; Confucianism’s focus on traditionalism and ritual; and the tradition’s relative deemphasis on personhood as autonomous, individual, and rational—in favor of a focus on social roles. While these criticisms do not, in my view, provide a convincing case that Confucianism is not a type of virtue ethics, they do highlight some edifying differences between the Confucian and Western virtue ethics traditions.

**Virtue, De, and Moral Exemplars**

The first difficulty in classifying Confucianism as a type of virtue ethics lies in the fact that there is no word for *virtue* in Classical Chinese that precisely maps onto Aristotle’s *aretê*. As Van Norden (2007) explains,

> There is a term, ‘dé 德,’ standardly translated as ‘Virtue.’ But (as the capital letter at the beginning of the word suggests) we are not dealing here with a notion that is quite the same as either the English “virtue” or the Classical Greek ‘aretē.; *De* is a sort of ‘ethical force’ that a person has, which can have a transformative effect on others. (Van Norden, 2007, 21)

\textsuperscript{15} As noted above, Rosemont and Ames (2016) and Nuyen (2007) argue that Western virtue ethics regards individuality, autonomy, or rationality as characterizing personhood; Chen that it “focuses on virtues that are cultivated in a person, [while in] Confucian ethics, cultivation of virtue is not the purpose itself, but serves cultivation of personhood or the person”; and Neville that it is focused on subjective self-cultivation and “the attempt to establish normative ethics from the side of the subject alone,” rather than, for Confucians, “transforming habits of discernment and action to be ever more in accord with Heaven and its mandates.” (Chen 2012, 59; Neville 2014, 448–449 [as quoted by Hutton 2015, 338]) None of the features that these critiques pick up on as importantly differentiating their understanding of virtue ethics from Confucianism is included within an understanding of virtue ethics as captured by the EV. Nonetheless, these critiques do reveal some fruitful differences between the Western virtue ethics and Confucian traditions, and will be discussed in detail in the following pages.
De shares with the English *virtue* and the Greek *aretē* that—at least for Confucians in the Classical period—it connotates an ethically admirable character.¹⁶ Thus, for both Confucius and Mengzi, the person of Virtue (*de*) is someone to emulate and admire. *De* did not indicate possession or perfection of one virtue (of many), but rather was used to connotate a broader, encompassing ethical character that included the possession of particular virtues like loyalty, trustworthiness, and humanity (or benevolence, *ren* 仁).

The person with *de* may be compared to Aristotle’s *phronimos*, as someone who possesses all the virtues.¹⁷ Those with *de*—i.e., moral exemplars—were referred to as sages (聖, shèng or 聖人, shèngrén) or

---

¹⁶ For example, as Confucius explains in the *Analects*, “Make it your guiding principle to be dutiful and trustworthy, and always move in the direction of what is right. This is what it means to accumulate Virtue [de]” (2013, 12.10). Similarly, Mengzi holds that “one who is well supplied with Virtue cannot be disordered by an evil era,” (7B10) and that “One who uses Virtue to put benevolence into effect is a [true or worthy] King.” (2A3) As was noted in Chapter 1 (§1.4), both *aretē* and *de* originally denoted power—including power that both Aristotle and Confucius, as well as contemporary readers, would consider to be morally bad or neutral. Yu (2007) writes that “The term *aretē* is related to the Greek god of war, *Arēs*. In Lidell-Scott’s *Lexicon*, *aretē* means the following: ‘goodness, excellence, of any kind, esp[ecially] of manly qualities, manhood, valour, prowess.’ It is from the sense of manhood that *aretē* is translated in Latin as *virtus* (vir means ‘man’ in Latin)… In Homer, what makes a man good (*agathos*) includes both character traits (such as bravery and intelligence) and bodily/external goods (such as good birth, honor, physical strength, wealth, power).” (Yu 2007, 28–29) However, as Adkins (1960), Annas (1995, 1998), MacIntyre (2007), and Porter (2013), among others, have noted, by Aristotle’s time *aretē* was used more narrowly to identify morally admirable features; more akin to the understanding of *virtue* contemporary English readers have. Similarly, *de* “appeared in ancient oracle bone inscriptions, referring to the psychic power (the Chinese character of *de* [德] has a ‘heart’ [or heart-mind, 心] as one of its elements of composition) that an individual possesses to influence and attract other people and even the surrounding environment. The term, widely used in pre-Confucian texts, can be taken in a formal sense to refer to any inherent power to influence others (even if the power is immoral or amoral), but mainly refers to the beneficent power that a ruler holds that enables him to command his people without appealing to physical force, and especially to the bounty a ruler bestows upon his people.” (Yu 2007, 3) As Van Norden further explains, “the possession of *de* had come by [Confucius’s] time to be associated with qualities that are recognizably virtues.” (2007, 67) Thus, both *aretē* and *de* evolved from pre-Classical meanings that included both moral and amoral qualities that granted the possessor power, to normatively loaded meanings that conveyed moral goodness and admirability.

¹⁷ According to some scholars, *de* in the sense of an encompassing or unified possession of all the virtues is, for Confucius, equivalent to *ren* (Yu 2007, 32). Ren, (rén, 仁), often translated benevolence or humaneness, is one of Mengzi’s four cardinal virtues but seems to be used to connotate virtue in a more general sense in parts of the *Analects*. As Shun notes, “in the *Analects*, ‘jen’ [ren] is used both more narrowly to refer to one desirable quality among others, and more broadly to refer to an all-encompassing ethical ideal which includes all the desirable qualities. That ‘jen’ [ren] is used in both ways is seen from the fact that *jen* [ren] is both listed as one desirable quality among others, such as wisdom and courage (9.29, 14.28), and described as something that includes other desirable qualities such as courage” (1993, 457). See also McLeod 2012, 521 (note 3); Van Norden 2007, 125; Yu 1998, 323–347; Sim 2007, 25 (note 7); and Slingerland 2013 (the glossary to his translation of the *Analects*), 238 for contemporary scholars who argue that *ren* connotates all-encompassing or comprehensive virtuosity in the *Analects*. Here, I have focused on *de* rather than *ren* to avoid confusion, since later Confucians do not always use *ren* in the encompassing way that Confucius does.
having *de* was also regarded as having a kind of power or natural attraction, such that those who had *de* were inevitably admired as leaders and role models. Because *de* was considered to give its possessor the power to attract and influence others, sages were also often great rulers, as with the sage-kings (frequent examples of moral exemplars for Confucius and other Classical Confucians) Yao (堯), Shun (舜), Yu (禹), Wen (文), and Wu (武). As a passage from the *Analects* states, “One who rules through the power of Virtue [*de*] is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the… lesser stars” (2013, 2.1).

Like Confucius, Mengzi held that the person who had *de* was both morally praiseworthy and had a special kind of charismatic power, as well as that *de* included the possession of other virtues. He tells King Xuan of Qi that, by cultivating and practicing specific virtues, he would develop the Virtue (*de*) of a true King and attract subjects who were eager to serve him. In response to King Xuan’s question, “What must one’s Virtue [*de*] be like so that one can become King?” Mengzi answers,

One cares for the people and becomes King. This is something no one can stop… Suppose Your Majesty were to bestow benevolence in governing. This would cause all those under Heaven who serve to want to take their place in Your Majesty’s court, all those who plow to want to plow in Your Majesty’s uncultivated fields, all traveling merchants and shopkeepers to want to place their goods in Your Majesty’s markets, all those who travel to wish to use Your Majesty’s roads. All those under Heaven who wish to complain of their rulers would all desire to report to Your Majesty. If it were like this, who could stop it? (Mengzi 2008, 1A7.3–19)

This example both illustrates Mengzi’s belief that a ruler’s Virtue (*de*) would attract others to his kingdom, and that the way to cultivate *de* is through cultivating and enacting virtues, like benevolence (仁, rén).

---

18 Sages were typically legendary and politically powerful paragons of virtue and were considered more admirable than junzi. While later Confucians considered Confucius and Mengzi to be sages, both figures denied being in the same class as the sage-kings during their lifetimes (*Analects* 9.6; Mengzi 2A2).

19 Similar passages from the *Analects* that highlight the power of *De* include 9:14: “The Master expressed a desire to dwell among the… Barbarian tribes. Someone asked him, ‘How could you bear their uncouthness?’ The Master replied, ‘If a gentleman [junzi] were to dwell among them, what uncouthness would there be?’”; and 12.19: “The Virtue [de] of a gentleman [junzi] is like the wind, and the Virtue of a petty person is like the grass—when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend.” (2013). As these examples demonstrate, *de* was meant to describe a character that is not only admirable, but exudes a charismatic power through which the virtuous agent could influence others toward virtue.

20 Other examples illustrating the power of *De* in the Mengzi include 2A1, 2A3, 3A4, 6A6, 6A17, and 7A9. A further interesting point from this passage, which we will explore more below, is that King here (with a capital ‘K’) is used
The notion of *de* (德, dé)—Virtue or charismatic virtue—does differ from Aristotle’s *aretē* insofar as the former connotes not only a morally admiral character but also a charismatic power to attract others and influence them toward virtue. However, it is relevantly similar to virtue in the Western virtue ethics context in that possessing *de* also means possessing and practicing specific, incommensurable virtues like benevolence. The power of *de* to influence others is closely connected to its bestowal on worthy people by Heaven (Tiān, 天). The concept of *de*, then, not only includes cultivating one’s virtues but also is predicated by the Classical Confucian metaphysical commitment that Heaven sets these virtues. Indeed, as Yu points out,

*de* is the manifestation of *dao*. *De* is the power of the *dao*. *Dao-de* is a shared conceptual framework among early Chinese philosophers. The relation among Heaven [Tiān, 天], way (*dao* [dào, 道]), and virtue (*de*) can be described as follows. Heaven has its way; everything in the world has its own way as well. Yet each thing’s virtue is the manifestation of Heaven’s way in that particular thing and becomes that thing’s way… Each thing’s well-being depends on whether it develops its own potential virtue or way, that is, whether it exists or acts in accordance with the way of Heaven. If everything follows its imparted or natural way, the way prevails throughout the whole world and makes the world a harmonious and integrated organism. (2007, 31–32)

As Yu explains, then, those with *de* were moral exemplars who cultivated their virtue in accordance with their human nature. However, that nature—and the virtues themselves—are moreover an instantiation of the human *Dao*, a telos or proper Way that is set by Heaven and which is related to the flourishing not only of humans but of the universe as a whole. To understand this connection more clearly, let’s take a look at the Classical Confucian concepts of *Tian* (Heaven), *Dao* (Way), and *xing* ([human] nature).

**Tian, Dao, and Xing**

Classical Confucians held the metaphysical commitment that Heaven (Tiān, 天) assigns a Way (dào, 道), discoverable because of our Heaven-granted human nature (xing, 性). As Ivanhoe points out,

important early Confucians [including Confucius and Mengzi] ground their ethical claims by appealing to the authority of *tian* 天, ‘Heaven,’ insisting that Heaven endows human beings with a distinctively ethical nature and at times acts in the world. (2007, 211)

Literally meaning Way or path, the *Dao* refers to the right or proper mode of living (Bockover 2010; Graham 2002; Ivanhoe 2007; Van Norden 2007; Wong 2023, 2024; Yu 2007). For Confucians, the *Dao* is given by

---

normatively. For Mengzi, as we will see, a *true* King (as opposed to a king in name only, lowercase ‘k’) is one who possesses Virtue (*de*) and who thus enacts the moral responsibilities of his role.

As we saw from Yu (2007) above, Heaven (天) was a formative concept in Chinese philosophy generally during Mengzi’s time. Literally meaning “sky,” Heaven, as Yu explains,

was conceived mainly in two ways: one was as an incomprehensible and unpredictable force, similar to fate. In this sense, Heaven is morally indifferent and is the cause of all the events that are beyond human control and comprehension... The other sense is as the ultimate guarantor of moral value and world order. These two ideas exist side by side for many ancient Chinese philosophers (including Confucius in the Analects). (2007, 26–28; see also Ivanhoe 2007, 213)

Generally speaking, Classical Chinese philosophers thus thought of Heaven—to varying degrees—as a natural and impersonal, and yet normative, force. For Confucians, Heaven is spoken of as providing a normative standard toward which humans should aspire.

Analects 3.12, for instance, suggests that Confucius saw his teachings as according with the will of Heaven by helping people to rediscover the Dao (see also Analects 7.23, 9.5, 14.35). Similarly, Mengzi repeats from The Odes (詩經) the conviction that “Heaven gives birth to the teeming people. If there is a thing, there is a norm. This is the constant people cleave to. They are fond of this beautiful Virtue.” (trans. Van Norden, 2008, Mengzi, 6A6.8; quoting from the Odes, Mao n. 260) According to Mengzi, Heaven makes Virtue attractive so humans will fulfill their Dao through cultivating and practicing virtues. The Dao can thus be thought of as playing the same role in human life as eudaimonia, in that through fulfilling one’s function according to her human nature, one achieves both virtue and flourishing (Huff 2015; Wong 2024; Yu 2007).

As Ivanhoe explains, Mozi leaned toward an understanding of Heaven as “a very active agent in the human realm, employing ghosts and spirits in order to ensure strict justice throughout the world.” (2007, 213) Mohists also argued that their philosophy of “impartial care” was justified because it reflected the impartial, universal (as opposed to particular) viewpoint of Heaven. For Confucian philosopher Xunzi, on the other hand, “Heaven is described as the impersonal processes of nature. In the teachings of Kongzi 孔子 [or Confucius] (551–479 BCE) and Mengzi (391–310 BCE), we find positions somewhere in between these extremes, where Heaven is an impersonal yet concerned agent and a force for human good.” (Ivanhoe 2007, 213) Daoists, like Zhuangzi, emphasize the inscrutable and unexplainable aspects of Heaven. As noted in Chapter 1, ‘naturalistic’ can have thicker and thinner meanings. My EV doesn’t preclude theories that believe in the supernatural from still holding Claim iii (naturalism) in a thin sense. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
These examples support Yu’s (2007) description of the connection between Heaven, the \textit{Dao}, and Virtue. Heaven sets or provides a standard—the \textit{Dao}—which represents the proper Way of the universe. Within the greater \textit{Dao}, there is a specific human \textit{Dao}. This \textit{Dao} is set by Heaven as part of human nature, such that we humans can follow the \textit{Dao} in order to flourish according to our natures and develop \textit{de}. Confucians’ particular understanding of Heaven and the \textit{Dao} provided an important basis for their other philosophical commitments. Moreover, these concepts were also closely tied to Classical Confucian understandings of human nature (\textit{xìng}, 性), which was also regarded as set by Heaven.\footnote{A more detailed treatment of \textit{xìng} will be given in §4.3, below; for now, the important point is that human nature is determined by Heaven, and that the human \textit{Dao} consists in flourishing according to this nature.}

Note that this Classical Confucian metaphysical commitment—that the virtues and human nature are set by Heaven—is a significant difference from more explicitly or thickly “naturalistic” contemporary virtue theoretical groundings for virtue.\footnote{I thank Bryan Van Norden for illuminating this point.} We might think of a “naturalistic” grounding for virtue—which, recall, is a major advantageous aspect of the EV’s Claim iii—in two senses. First, we might think of it in the sense of according with modern science, including the theory of evolution. In this sense, to argue the virtues have a natural grounding is to argue that morality has no supernatural source (i.e., no need to posit a “divine lawgiver” as the source of moral value [Anscombe 1958]). Rather, the connection between virtues and human nature suggests, in this view, that something about the way that humans have evolved necessitates developing virtues, e.g., because they facilitate living in community.\footnote{Contemporary proponents of the EV who take up this “thickly” naturalistic understanding include Bloomfield (2023), Foot (2001), Hursthouse (1999), McDowell (1980, 1996), Nussbaum (1988), and Thompson (1995).}

It was argued in Chapter 1 that one feature that distinguishes eudaimonic virtue ethics from divine command theory is that that, because the EV is meant to be grounded in an empirically discoverable or naturalistic understanding of human nature, the virtues are characteristics that allow humans to flourish in accordance with their nature. This understanding of the tight connection between virtues, human nature, and flourishing entails that what makes virtues \textit{good} is determined not by the fact that some supernatural entity
(like God or Tian) declares them good but by this connection to human flourishing in this world, replete with an appreciation for humans’ particular needs and capacities. The EV’s “naturalism” in this sense is regarded as a positive feature by the view’s proponents because it makes the theory more empirically and psychologically plausible than deontic or divine theories. By grounding the virtues in human nature in this way, the EV takes the virtues as central rather than relying on some other normative grounding to justify their understanding of nature or the normative value of virtues.

That said, distinguishing between divine command theory and the EV does not mean that the EV’s empirical grounding rules out the possibility of a divine creator or a metaphysical entity that plays some role in ordering the universe or appointing human nature. “Naturalistic” can also be taken, in a thinner or weaker sense, not to rule out a supernatural—in the sense of beyond human understanding—grounding for virtue, but instead to claim that the virtues are grounded in an objective and empirically determinable human nature without further claiming that human nature is the product of ‘natural’ in a strict sense, i.e., evolutionary, forces alone. That is, one could argue that the virtues are grounded in human nature without further arguing that this precludes the possibility of God or Heaven as playing a role in creating or appointing human nature.

Such an understanding would still differ from divine command theory by holding that the virtues are good because they contribute to human flourishing. In this sense, human nature could be regarded as “God-given,” but human nature is still in this view not separable from the natural world, and humans are still taken to possess a shared, empirically discoverable nature. Moreover, virtues are regarded as serving us in this (human, contingent, mortal) world and as taking account for or responding to our needs and capacities in this world. This may be contrasted, for example, with a view that our “best” or “true” nature is one that cannot be fully realized in this world, or that (at least some) virtues are morally good qualities that do not contribute to flourishing. In the history of both the Greek and Chinese virtue ethicist traditions, a “naturalist” (in this thin sense) understanding of the virtues as grounded in human nature, and their moral value as intimately
connected to the flourishing of their possessors, was often held simultaneously with the belief that there is a supernatural or metaphysical will or Way.25

It was noted earlier that one criticism of considering Confucianism to be a type of virtue ethics, from Neville, was that doing so has “the unfortunate effect of importing into Confucianism the Western distinction between human subjectivity where value lies and the objective world that is conceived to be value-neutral.” (2014, 448) He argues that

The normative transformations of the self were never, for the Confucians, merely a matter of perfecting the self but of accommodating the self to what is important, transforming habits of discernment and action to be ever more in accord with Heaven and its mandates. For the classic Confucians, though their focus was on the improvement of the self, on developing a cadre of excellent people who could lead others, and on institutionalizing rituals that make for high civilization, understanding and engaging the metaphysical basis of value and order was essential. They always conceived the human to be set within the social which in turn is set within the cosmic in which all things lie under Heaven: big-time metaphysics. Translating Confucianism into virtue ethics runs the risk of sheering off the metaphysical dimension and reducing Confucianism to the ethics of subjectivity. (Neville 2014, 448–449)

As I have noted above, one presupposition of this critique is that virtue ethics is necessarily characterized by this focus on subjectivity and self-perfection as the foundation for ethics, which I do not think is indeed a necessary feature of eudaimonic virtue ethical theories. As we have seen, the EV does require a focus on virtue cultivation and a connection between the virtues and both human nature and flourishing. However, that does not preclude an understanding of virtue, human nature, and flourishing as “set within the social.” Moreover, though, I think this argument runs the risk of misrepresenting Confucian metaphysics by making Heaven out to be more “supernatural” than Classical Confucians believed it to be, as well as making the natural world of the Western virtue ethics tradition less value-laden.

As Ivanhoe writes, even in pre-Confucian (e.g., Shang Dynasty, 1766–1122 BCE) understandings “various entities were thought to be of a ’higher’ order, they were never conceived of as supernatural in the sense of existing in a realm distinct from and independent of the world in which we live. Rather, they were viewed as more powerful and ethereal members of the ordinary world.” (2007, 212) This was especially true

25 For example, Aristotle argues for the existence of an “Unmoved Mover” in, e.g., Physica Chapter 8 and Metaphysics Book Chapter 12. And, as we have seen, he alludes to the “divine” in NE Book X to argue for the higher value of intellectual virtues (see also Olson 2013).
of Heaven by the time of Confucius. Although “Kongzi [Confucius] believed that Heaven has a plan for human beings—their proper end is a just, peaceful, harmonious, and flourishing society,” Heaven’s plan (the Dao) and its power did not “exist… independently of the Natural order.” (Ivanhoe 2007, 213, 211) Rather, what humans naturally are like and their needs are essential components of the human Dao.

As Ivanhoe further notes, “Kongzi believed that virtue was the only way to the best kind of life and the most satisfying community because such lives were in part constituted by virtue.” (2007, 214) This view—which, as we have already noted, closely resembles Aristotelian eudaimonism—was held in concert with the view that Heaven sets the human Dao. There is no contradiction, for Classical Confucians, in holding both that cultivating virtue is a matter of fulfilling one’s human function or flourishing in a sense determined by human nature (including human capacities, needs, etc.) and that cultivating virtue also follows the Dao set by Heaven. Thus, one could endorse an understanding of virtue as “naturalistic” in the thin sense just discussed, insofar as the virtues are determined by human nature and a matter of fulfilling one’s human function or perfecting her natural capacities, while also believing in Heaven and the Dao.

Because the human Dao was a particular instantiation of the Heavenly Dao, cultivating one’s individual de to serve the Dao also benefited other humans and the world. And, mutatis mutandis, Heaven benefited humans who served its Dao. Early (pre-Classical) Chinese philosophers and Classical Confucians developed theories about how best to serve the Dao of Heaven and believed that Heaven directly impacted the human world. However, Confucius and his followers developed an understanding of Heaven that was less active and involved in human affairs than, e.g., the Shang and Eastern Zhou thinkers believed it to be.26 This Confucian understanding of Heaven suggests that Heaven provides a kind of telos toward virtue, but that this telos is nonetheless a feature of the natural world insofar as it is directed towards the human good as dictated by the kind of creatures humans are.

---

26 As Ivanhoe explains, “In the teachings of Kongzi 孔子 [or Confucius] (551–479 BCE) and Mengzi (391–310 BCE), we find positions… where Heaven is an impersonal yet concerned agent and a force for human good.” (2007, 213)
As we have seen, Confucians also held that sage-kings like Yao (堯) and Shun (舜) discovered the rituals and human roles that would allow humans to follow the Way. In short, the idea is that particular actions, behaviors, and affects need to be cultivated for humans to shape, direct, or properly express their natural capacities and to flourish as social creatures. Rituals or \( li \) (禮, lĭ) played an important role in helping humans to develop in line with Heaven’s Dao.

**Ritual and Rectifying Names**

As we noted above, Confucianism’s traditionalism is closely connected to its emphasis on the moral importance of rituals or rites. Moreover, we noted that Classical Confucians regarded the proper practice of ritual as an important part of developing Virtue (德) and serving the Dao of Heaven, and that they believed the ancient Zhou sage-kings had discovered the proper rites for this purpose. Because “The virtue of the Zhou can be said to represent ultimate Virtue” in the Confucian understanding, the Zhou \( li \) is that which best serves to cultivate virtue (Confucius 2013, 8.20). So, \( li \) plays a very important role in the Confucian process of moral development. As Sarkissian explains the concept of \( li \) or ritual,

> The \( li \) comprised religious rites (ancestor worship) and formal ceremonies (weddings, funerals), as well as the manners and customs, the strictures and prerogatives, the protocols and functions of each social, political and familial station. The \( li \) would indicate, for example, appropriate dress for ceremonial occasions, as well as appropriate conduct for a father or a son. (2010, 2)

Van Norden defines ritual as “learned human activity that is regarded as sacred” (2007, 102), while Li describes it as a kind of “cultural grammar,” “encompass[ing] all established ethical, social, and political norms of human behavior, including both formal rules and less serious patterns of everyday behavior.” (2007, 317, 318) So, ritual can be thought of as those social, religious, and etiquette norms, customs, rules, and

---

27 Ritual, as we’ll see in more detail below, is thus importantly similar to Aristotelian habituation, just as Dao is similar to eudaimonia. While this point of similarity provides more evidence that Mengzi’s Confucian philosophy can be considered a kind of virtue ethics, ritual also importantly differs from the Aristotelian tradition’s methods of moral cultivation.

28 As Yu puts it, “the rites of the Zhou have de because they are endowed with the dao of Heaven. Hence, to return to [Zhou] \( li \) amounts to returning to de or dao.” (2007, 33)

29 Or, as Yu puts it, “In short, \( li \) is the entire body of socially acknowledged behavior patterns, customs, institutions, and lifestyles.” (2007, 97)
practices that help to order, enforce, and display one’s place within society, as well as the virtue concerning
the proper performance of and attitude toward these norms and customs.

One instructive example of the transformative role of ritual can be found in *Analects* 17.21. In this
passage, one of Confucius’s disciples, Zai Wo (宰我),

asked about the three-year mourning period, saying ‘Surely one year is long enough. If the
gentleman [junzi] refrains from practicing ritual [li] for three years, the rites will surely fall into ruin; if
he refrains from music for three years, this will surely be disastrous for music. After the lapse of a
year the old grain has been used up, while the new grain has ripened, and the four different types of
tinder have all been drilled in order to rekindle the fire. One year is surely long enough.

The Master asked, ‘Would you feel comfortable then eating your sweet rice and wearing your
brocade gowns?’

‘I would.’

The Master replied, ‘Well, if you would feel comfortable doing so, then by all means you
should do it. When the gentleman is in mourning, he gets no pleasure from eating sweet foods, finds
no joy in listening to music, and feels no comfort in his place of dwelling. This is why he gives up
these things. But if you would feel comfortable doing them, then by all means you should!’

After Zai Wo left, the Master remarked, ‘This shows how lacking in Goodness [or
[virtuousness, ren) this Zai Wo is! A child is completely dependent upon the care of his parent
for the first three years of his life—this is why the three-year morning period is the common practice
throughout the world. Did Zai Wo not receive three years of care from his parents?’ (2013)

Mourning was a very important, ritualized, and ordered social custom in Classical Chinese culture. The
Confucian custom was for sons to undergo a period of mourning of three years (or twenty-seven months)
after the death of their parents. This period was meant to reflect the length of time a child is fully dependent
on their parents (i.e., before being weaned), as is reflected in Confucius’s response above (see also Ames
2011, 97). During this period, mourners were expected to dress plainly, eat bland foods, and in general
eschew pleasures. In the passage above, Confucius suggests that a junzi would not want to pursue such
pleasures during this time, as the mourning ritual reflects a proper affective response to the death of a parent.

That Zai Wo is unwilling to undergo this ritualized mourning process reflects that he is not virtuous
(presumably, not filial) and so is unable to appreciate the significance of the ritual; so, the three-year
mourning period would not serve his moral development. Thus, Confucius tells Zai Wo that he can shorten
the mourning period to one year. *Analects* 3.4 adds (in instructing another disciple), “In funeral ritual it would

---

30 Although I elsewhere translate 仁 as benevolence (i.e., one of Mengzi’s four virtues), this term is often used in the
*Analects* to denote virtue more holistically (see Footnote 17 in this chapter).
be better to be guided by one’s grief than simply to attend to the ritual stipulations.” (2015, trans. Eno) Again, this suggests that—while the rituals were perfected by the Zhou and other sage-kings—the important aspect of ritual is its emotional or psychological effects, whether to help practitioners develop the proper affective attitudes or to display them in socially prescribed and recognized ways.

In contemporary American culture, we might think of rituals like wearing black to a funeral, receiving a diploma at graduation, rites of adulthood like bar and bat mitzvahs or quinceañeras, and matters of etiquette like offering a handshake on meeting someone or saying thank you for a gift. Each of these rituals serves to display (and, indeed, to shape) affective attitudes toward others in a culturally significant way. For example, wearing black at a funeral is intended to signify grief, while shaking hands signifies respect. Though these norms are in a sense arbitrary—e.g., another culture may signify respect with a bow rather than a handshake—their meaning comes from a shared cultural “grammar,” as Li (2007) puts it, a shared recognition of the rules’ purpose and symbolism within a shared cultural context (or “language”). Moreover, rituals not only convey attitudes like respect, they help shape them. One might think of a parent teaching a young child rules of etiquette (“What do we say when someone gives us a present?”); by performing rituals, like saying “thank you,” children learn to cultivate attitudes like gratitude and to display them in culturally meaningful and appropriate ways.

We have already seen that Confucius and his followers believed themselves to be transmitting the Way as discovered by the ancient sage kings. The rituals of the Zhou sage-kings, for Confucius, were important because they were the perfect means for moral cultivation, discovered by the sage-kings due to their De. Confucius and his followers therefore believed that following the rituals laid out by the Zhou kings was essential for following the Way (and so, for cultivating virtue and for society to flourish). As Li (2007) notes, “Early Confucians apparently thought that only the li of their society and time (the Zhou li) was li, and other societies were without li and therefore were barbarians.” (Li 2007, 318) However, as we have noted, it is not the material or motions of the rituals but their motivation and affective power that were regarded as important by the Classical Confucians. So, reading charitably and with a hermeneutic of restoration, we can apply the concept of ritual cross-culturally. As Li continues,
These Confucians were wrong about li just as linguists in the nineteenth century West were wrong about grammar. Different cultures have different forms of li. Understanding other peoples’ li is necessary for one to understand their culture; learning another culture’s li is a necessary condition for acting appropriately in that culture. (2007, 318)

Understanding the role of ritual, including its connection to Confucius’s conviction that the Zhou period represented the pinnacle of culture and morality, is important for contextualizing Confucius’s moral theory—including his traditionalism. A more charitable and contemporary reading of Confucianism can make use of the tradition’s insights about the moral import of ritual without holding the further belief that Zhou period rituals were the (only) correct ones.

Again, despite his traditionalism, Confucius’s notion of ritual was innovative insofar as he offered an explanation for why the rites of the Zhou kings ought to be performed. Csikszentmihalyi writes:

Where Confucius clearly innovated was in his rationale for performing the rites and music… Early discussions of ritual in the Zhou classics often explained ritual in terms of a do ut des [quid pro quo] view of making offerings to receive benefits. By contrast, early discussions between Confucius and his disciples described benefits of ritual performance that went beyond the propitiation of spirits, rewards from the ancestors, or the maintenance of the social or cosmic order. Instead of emphasizing goods that were external to the performer, these works stressed the value of the associated interior psychological states of the practitioner. In Analects 3.26, Confucius condemns the performance of ritual without reverence (jing 敬). He also condemns views of ritual that focus only on the offerings, or views of music that focus only on the instruments (17.11)… This emphasis on the importance of an attitude of reverence became the salient distinction between performing ritual in a rote manner, and performing it in the proper affective state… the affective state behind the action is arguably more important than the action’s consequences. (2020, §3)

We noted above that Classical Chinese philosophy generally regarded Heaven as part of the natural world, in the sense that it both impacted, and was impacted by, human affairs. Hence, as Csikszentmihalyi explains above, ritual was originally seen as a way to curry Heaven’s favor—for example, in the context of religious rites like sacrifice.31 However, as he goes on to point out, Confucians believed that rituals were important not only for pleasing Heaven or increasing the likelihood of certain desired outcomes but also for their

---

31 As Van Norden notes, “Ritual (li)” originally referred to formal ceremonies, such as burnt offerings of food and wine to the spirits of one’s ancestors. However, its meaning gradually expanded over time to include etiquette (e.g., the proper way to greet or say farewell to a guest) and ethics in general.” (Van Norden 2019, “Mencius” (in SEP), §1) In Mengzi 1A7, for example, we have an example of sacrificing an ox to anoint a bell. See also Yu (2007, 96–97).
performers’ moral development (see also Sarkissian 2010, 2023). In other words, ritual for Confucians was more than just adherence to traditionalism; it was an important aspect of ethical cultivation.

For both Confucius and later (Classical) Confucians, including Mengzi, the power of ritual to shape moral development and the importance of the proper affective attitude toward ritual performance are fundamental aspects of morality. Moreover, although Confucius believed that the Zhou kings had perfected the rituals, he clearly believed that it was the power of the rituals to shape or display emotions, rather than following them ‘to the letter’ that was ethically salient. For example, Analects 9.3 states:

The Master said, ‘A ceremonial cap made of linen is prescribed by the rites [\(\text{li}\)], but these days people use silk. This is frugal, and I follow the majority. To bow before ascending the stairs is what is prescribed by the rites, but these days people bow after ascending. This is arrogant and—though it goes against the majority—I continue to bow before ascending.’ (2013)

What is the difference between following \(\text{li}\) to the letter in one case and not in the other? As Eno remarks, “[t]his passage is often cited as expressing the view that the \(\text{li}\) are not frozen and may evolve with the times, but only when underlying principles are understood and followed.” (Commentary on 9.3 [40], in his 2015 translation of the Analects.) In other words, Confucius argues in this chapter that the moral significance of the ritual is preserved in the first case (wearing the ceremonial cap, regardless of what material it is made of) but not in the latter. In the case of the latter, bowing after ascending is “arrogant” because it places the visitor at the same level as the person who is being visited, while bowing before ascending—thus placing oneself lower relative to the person one is visiting—is more respectful (Analects 2015, 9.3, [40]). This emphasis on the affect is also clear from Analects 2.7; in this passage, Confucius remarks that real filiality is more than just “being able to provide one’s parents with nourishment”; it must be accompanied by “respect” (2013). Again, it is not the action of ritual but the underlying motivation and affect it expresses or cultivates that is important; this is further evidence that Confucius was concerned with virtue development (as opposed to deontic concerns).

We might compare ritual’s role for Confucians to Aristotelian habituation (\(\text{ethismo}\)). Jiyuan Yu convincingly argues that “[t]he role of \(\text{ethos}\) [habit] in Aristotle corresponds to that of the social rites [\(\text{li}\)] in

---

32 As noted in a previous footnote, I am focused here on Confucianism during the Classical (Spring and Autumn and Warring States) periods. The attitude of Neo-Confucians toward ritual is outside the scope of this dissertation.
Confucius. Both habituation and ritualization involve the inculcation or internalization of social values as the source of virtue, and both involve a process of emotional training.” (2007, 96) As Yu argues, for Confucius:

The observance of social rites [\( \text{li} \)] is a process of ritualization in which one is shaped and transformed by learning and internalizing the values that social rites embody. One learns by following the guidance of one’s parents and other guardians, emulating models and heroes, and studying the books that record social rites…The agent internalizes social rites through accumulative learning and repeated practice. (2007, 97)

So, performing the rites helps us to develop morally by habituating the proper affective and motivational attitudes. Just as one teaches a child to say “please” and “thank you” by modeling the behavior and having them repeat it until it becomes natural, so other rituals are first practiced and then embodied.

This has clear parallels with Aristotle’s account of habituation. As the Greek philosopher argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II:

What we do in our dealings with other people makes us just, some unjust, and what we do in terrifying situations, and the habits of fear or confidence that we acquire, make some of us brave and others cowardly…. To sum it up in a single account: a state of character results from the repetition of similar actions. That is why we must perform the right actions, since differences in these imply corresponding differences in the states. It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth. On the contrary, it is very important, indeed all-important. (trans. Irwin, 2019, 1103b8–25; see also 1103a34–b1)

Moreover, in several places in the *Mengzi* Mengzi refers to the actions of past “worthies” as examples from whom we can learn.33 In 4A2 for example, Mengzi states that “the sages are the ultimate for human roles. If one desires to be a ruler, fathom the Way of a ruler. If one desires to be a minister, fathom the Way of a minister. In both cases, one should simply model oneself on [Sage-Kings] Yao and Shun.”

So, for Mengzi and Aristotle as well as Confucius, to become virtuous we must first emulate moral exemplars and repeat actions that they tell us are correct in order to inculcate the underlying affects. And, for both Aristotle and Confucius, habits can be bad or good. This is why the proper performance of ritual is important; by practicing the wrong behaviors, we also inculcate the wrong attitudes. However, as we will see, Mengzi believes that humans have incipient tendencies toward good, which rituals in his view help to express

33 See, e.g., *Mengzi* 1B4, 1B5, 1B14, 2A1, 3A4, 3B4, 4A2, 4B28, 4B29, 4B31, and 5A6 (among others).
and extend. So, good habits or rituals for Mengzi are those that express these natural inclinations or emotions in ways that contribute to flourishing.

As we noted in Chapter 2, most contemporary Aristotelians believe that ethical development proceeds in stages for Aristotle, such that one first must form unreflexive or rote habits and then develop full virtue by coming to understand the reason for one’s actions, such that virtuous responses come naturally (Annas 2011; Burnyeat 1980; Hills 2016; Yu 2007).34 We also noted in the previous chapter that Aristotle’s moral psychology emphasizes not only the importance of habituation, but also of education and good role models in the early stages of virtue cultivation.35 As Yu’s (2007) analysis of ritual makes clear, this is also true for Classical Confucians. Those with virtue serve as examples to others, and by the power of their de and ritual guide them toward virtue. For example, Analects 8.2 tells us:

The Master said, ‘If you are respectful but lack ritual [li] you will become exasperating; if you are careful but lack ritual you will become timid; if you are courageous but lack ritual you will become unruly; and if you are upright but lack ritual you will become inflexible.

If a gentleman [junzi] is kind to his relatives, the common people will be inspired toward goodness [ren]; if he does not neglect his old acquaintances, the people will honor their obligations to others. (2013)

As this passage shows, for Confucians both the examples of junzi and the transformative power of ritual are required to guide people toward virtue. Both the Classical Greek and Chinese traditions therefore regard virtues as both practiced and formed in community.

For both Aristotle and Confucius, moral cultivation requires guidance from peers and from those who came before us (Aristotle, NE 1142a9–11, 1161a10, 1161a15–17, 1162a4, 1179b32–33, 1180a29–31, 1180b4–5, 1180b29; Confucius, Analects 2.3, 7.22, 11.17, 12.11, 12.17, 13.19, 16.4, 16.5). Virtues cannot be

34 Of course, proponents of the EV-R and EV-E will disagree about what it means to “understand the reason for one’s actions”; those thinkers just cited are on the rationalist end of the spectrum, and so tend to believe that the phronimos can give an account of why an action is just, honest, etc. On the other hand, more emotionist readings would suggest that the phronimos “sees” or “feels” the right thing to do once his emotions are properly habituated.

35 See, e.g., Burnyeat (1980), who argues that for Aristotle “[y]ou need a good upbringing not simply in order that you may have someone around to tell you what is noble and just… you need it also to be guided in your conduct so that by doing the things you are told are noble and just you will discover that what you have been told is true.” (74) As Yu similarly argues, “Habitation is so crucial at the beginning stage of moral education because children cannot engage in rational reflection in a very extensive way… [so] the guidance of the parents and other guardians is essential for a child.” (2007, 99)
perfected in isolation. Ritual, like habituation, has a social and relational character. Moreover, ritual (li) is not only a means of moral cultivation that requires the guidance, education, examples, or correction of others; it also cannot be performed without others. Here, it is again instructive to take up Li’s (2007) analogy between li and grammar. He writes,

we can compare these characteristics [of li], as described in the Analects, to grammar. First, grammar is by its nature a public property. As Wittgenstein indicated, a private language with its linguistic rules in principle inaccessible to the public is impossible. There is no such thing as private grammar. Li is also essentially a public phenomenon. As Tu Weiming has pointed out, ‘the problem of li does not even occur when one has absolutely nothing to relate to’ (Tu 1979c, p. 21). Li presupposes both a community and people in relationships. Participating in ritual activities is necessarily a public affair (in the sense that it involves more than one person), as it is the act of relating to others in society. (318)

So, we might think of ritual both as a method of moral cultivation and its perfection as a virtue that is akin to Aristotle’s social virtues (like friendship or justice) in that they can only be perfected and practiced in community. Beyond the Aristotelian picture, though, this Classical Confucian method of moral cultivation emphasizes the importance of one’s friends, family, and community not only in moral cultivation but in self-formation more broadly. Yu points out that, just as “Aristotelian habituation presupposes the thesis that human beings are by nature political animals... Confucian ritualization is based on the belief that the self is relational.” (2009, 96) As we will see below, while both the Greek and Chinese traditions thus recognized the social character of virtue cultivation and performance, Confucians’ comparative emphasis on relationality is an important distinguishing feature.

Ritual was an important ingredient in moral self-cultivation, and also varied based on the performer’s social and family roles. For this reason, one’s social roles were regarded as importantly furnishing one’s moral obligations—to such an extent that, to be regarded as a “true” member of social role x (e.g., a son, king, or minister) meant that one fulfilled the rituals and other social obligations that were ascribed to that role. If people fulfill the duties of their roles, they follow the Dao and so contribute to the flourishing of themselves and their communities; conversely, failing to uphold the rites and responsibilities of one’s station leads oneself and one’s community to suffer. Consider Analects 12.11:

Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about governing. Confucius responded, ‘Let the lord be a true lord, the ministers true ministers, the fathers true fathers, and the sons true sons.’ The Duke replied, ‘Well
Certainly if the lord is not a true lord, the minsters not true minsters, the fathers not true fathers, and the sons not true sons, even if there is sufficient gran, will I ever get to eat it?” (Confucius 2013)

Here Confucius, like Mengzi (as we’ll see), holds that a description of a role can hold normative weight. A true King or minister is one who recognizes the moral qualities that supervene on this role and enacts his duties accordingly.36 These points are related to the Classical Confucian idea of rectifying or correcting names (正名, zhèngmíng), or “bringing language and the world into accordance with one another” (Van Norden 2007, 82).37

The moral and social-political significance of the rectification of names is famously explained by Confucius to his disciple Zilu in Analects 13.3:

Zilu asked, ‘If the Duke of Wei were to employ you to serve in the government of his state, what would be your first priority?’

The Master answered, ‘It would, of course, be the rectification of names (zhengming 正名) […] If names are not rectified, speech will not accord with reality; when speech does not accord with reality, things will not be successfully accomplished. When things are not successfully accomplished, ritual practice [lì] and music will fail to flourish; when ritual and music fail to flourish, punishments and penalties will miss the mark. And when punishments and penalties miss the mark, the common people will be at a loss as to what to do with themselves. This is why the gentleman [junzi] only applies names that can be properly spoken and assures that what he says can be properly put into action. The gentleman simply guards against arbitrariness in his speech.’ (Confucius 2013, 13.3)

36 See also Mengzi 1B8, in which Mengzi argues that tyrant Zhou was not a true ruler (2008). Although the Classical Confucians, including Mengzi, recognized five basic (or “constant”) social relations (五伦, wǔ lún), the general idea that there are some natural, universal human roles and that these produce moral obligations does not entail accepting that the Confucians’ roles were the correct ones. I thank an anonymous reviewer of my forthcoming paper “Mengzian Sensitivity to Social Roles” in Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy for encouraging me to clarify this point. One might wonder why people must be instructed, as the commoners during Shun’s time did, on human roles and their related moral obligations if understanding the moral force of one’s roles and relationships is merely a matter of moral perception. However, to this, Mengzi can simply reply that the environment during Shun’s time was poor, such that the natural development of the sprouts was unsupported (Mengzi 6A7, 6A8; Kim 2018).

37 As Van Norden continues to explain, “This can be done in two complementary ways: reforming naming practices so that the language used is appropriate for the reality described, and reforming reality so that it corresponds to the language that applies to it.” (2007, 82–83) As D’Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller point out—drawing on Makeham’s (1994) work—“determining how to achieve congruence between names and referents was of prime importance for many ancient Chinese philosophers… Some… found this congruence by insisting on the natural correspondence between names and their referents, while others… were concerned with achieving and/or maintaining proper congruence through various means of an ‘appropriate application of names’ or zhengming 正名, to use the most famous formulation of this approach as it occurs in Confucius’ Analects (Lunyu 论语) 13.3… while the desirability of congruent names was generally agreed upon, there was considerable disagreement about its philosophical foundations, ethical functions, and sociopolitical implications.” (2018, 2)
As this quote demonstrates, Confucians believed that rectifying names—that is, making sure that names correspond with their referents—was a morally important exercise, and that ensuring this “congruence” between names and reality would lead to social harmony (D’Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller 2018; Hui-Chieh 2003). Although zhengming does not exclusively refer to correcting names in accordance with social roles, rituals, and responsibilities—in Analects 6.25 Confucius seems to bemoan incongruence between naming and reality in relation to musical instruments—this social, relational aspect was especially salient for Confucius and Mengzi (D’Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller 2018).

For Confucians, the rectification of names was largely regarded as a matter of ensuring that those occupying certain social or familial positions uphold the responsibilities of those positions, thus acting as a “true” or “proper” x. Mengzi (trans. Van Norden 2008) discusses this concept further in 3A4.8:

The sage Shun [a legendary emperor upheld as a moral exemplar] … appointed Xie to be Minister of Instruction, and instruct [the common people] about human roles: between father and children there is affection; between ruler and ministers there is righteousness; between husband and wife there is distinction; between elder and younger there is precedence; and between friends there is faithfulness. The Distinguished Sovereign advised, ‘Work them, draw them, straighten them, rectify them, help them, make them practice, assist them, make them get it themselves, and thus benefit them.’

Here, Mengzi points out that sage King Shun saw the importance of rectifying people’s roles, so that each person properly understood and enacted the moral obligations their roles came with. As we can see, each social role is connected to the performance of certain morally good affective attitudes or virtues, like righteousness and faithfulness. Elsewhere, Mengzi makes this connection between one’s role and moral obligations or associated virtues even clearer. He states,

Among babes in arms there are none that do not know to love their parents. When they grow older, there are none that do not know to revere their elder brothers. Treating one’s parents as parents is benevolence. Revering one’s elders is righteousness. There is nothing else to do but extend these to the world. (2008, 7A15)

As this passage suggests, social and familial roles naturally generate relationships that are properly characterized by particular virtues. By nature (in accordance with the human Dao), children are disposed to be loving and filial to their elder family members. Understanding this, and acting accordingly, one fulfills the duties of her role and develops and practices the associated virtues. Tyrant Zhou, to provide a contrasting
example, had an incorrect understanding of what it means to be a king (including the responsibilities a ruler has toward his people), which is why he is not a true king but a “mere fellow” (*Mengzi* 1B8).

Together with his claim that treating one’s parents as parents is benevolence (*Mengzi* 7A15) and Confucius’ insistence that true filiality includes respect (*Analects* 2.7), it seems clear that rectifying names is at least in part a matter of illuminating the proper moral qualities each role or relationship produces, and the corresponding obligations (including ritual ones). As we will see, this importantly relational aspect of virtue development and practice is a key distinguishing feature of Mengzi’s Confucian EV; one which allows a reimagined Mengzian eudaimonic virtue ethics to avoid situationist critiques of a more individualized, self-sufficient conception of virtues (cf. Merrit 2000, Sim 2017).

D’Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller further explain the tight connection between the rectification of names and social roles:

According to most philosophers in ancient China sociopolitical order would go along with congruent names, while incongruity between names and actualities would indicate sociopolitical disorder. Particularly in Confucian writings… names are therefore commonly associated with social roles, ranks, and offices within the family or the state (for example, “father” or “ruler,” as in the famous statement in *Analects* 12.11…). Correspondingly, ‘actualities’ or ‘forms’ would indicate the actual quality or performance of someone enacting a certain role, having a particular rank, or serving in a specific office… The paradigmatic expectation expressed or implied in many Confucian texts, such as the *Analects* or the *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子), was that social order depended on the actual virtuosity of those reputedly virtuous, and on having people in social rank and office whose performance and character was actually in accordance with the exalted names of such ranks and offices. (2018, 3)

As we have seen above, social harmony was expected to result from following the *Dao* (and thus abiding with the will of Heaven). Humans in particular follow their *dao* by developing the virtues (which, for Mengzi, are set by Heaven in insipient form as part of our human nature). For this reason, we can connect following one’s human nature in a linear fashion to (a) developing the virtues, and relatedly (b) performing the proper duties of one’s role, which leads to (c) a resultant harmonious social order (in which Kings act as Kings, ministers as ministers, and so on such that society as a whole, as well as its individual members, flourishes).

In calling for the rectification of names, then, Confucians were advocating both “reforming things to accord with their ideal names and reforming names to accord with their ideal uses,” e.g., ethically transforming kings so that they are ‘worthy of the name,’ and reforming the name ‘King’ so that it was only
used in this jointly normative and descriptive way (Van Norden 2007, 84). Thus, as we will see in more detail below, the proper performance of ritual is closely connected to Confucians’ understanding of the self as relational, and of the important constitutive function of one’s relationships and (social, political, and familial) roles in forming one’s self. In Chapter 5, we will further see that the close connection between human nature, flourishing, ritual, roles, and the rectification of names can generate a liberatory EV-M response to the critiques from Chapter 3.

**Personhood, Partiality, and Roles**

As we have seen above, one central aspect of the rectification of names, for Confucians, was correcting names given to occupants of social and familial roles (like father, minister, or King). Recall that Confucians saw the human *dao* as set by Heaven. In addition to Heaven providing the *telos* for human nature, it relatedly was believed to set the proper social order. This is why, as D’Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller (2018) note above, Confucians believed that a harmonious society would result if humans fulfilled the duties of their (Heaven-set) roles. Heaven rewarded virtuous, *true* Kings with its mandate, and struck down tyrants who called themselves king but did not care for the people (*Mengzi* 1A7, 1B8).

As we have further noted above, this metaphysical justification for where human nature, and the virtues, comes from differs importantly from contemporary, strongly naturalistic eudaimonic Western virtue ethical theories. Nevertheless, as we will see in more detail in §4.3 below, because the virtues are seen as a development, cultivation, or perfection of aspects of human nature which allow us to flourish—including as social creatures—this understanding of virtue and its origin is relevantly similar to Aristotle’s. For this reason and others, as we will see, Mengzi’s Confucian ethics can be considered an instantiation of the EV. Mengzi’s commitment to the EV’s core commitments allows his theory to serve as a helpful avenue for expanding upon and improving Western versions of the EV. But for now, let’s consider another notable difference between Confucianism and Greek virtue ethics—namely, the relative emphasis on the self as relational as compared to individual, respectively.

Recently, arguments that roles and relationships were importantly constitutive of the self for Classical Confucians have been gaining popularity (Ames 2011; D’Ambrosio 2024; Hu 2023; Lai 2018; Li 1994, 2014;
Sarkissian 2010, 2017; Xu 2018). We have already seen that two important aspects of moral cultivation for Classical Confucians, ritual and rectifying names, are importantly relational and social. One’s ritual expectations are determined by one’s social position or role, and one’s virtuosity is at least in part determined by how well one fulfills the duties of that role. Contemporary commentators have further argued that moral agency, virtue, and even persons are similarly relationally determined for Confucians. As Hu explains, in the most radical version of a “Confucian Role Ethics” (CRE) conception “neither I nor my moral agency can exist independently of these relationships and roles.” (2023, 49)

Some proponents of this strong version of CRE have argued that Confucianism should be considered a distinct type of ethical theory—role ethics—rather than a type of virtue ethics. The crucial difference, these thinkers claim, is that (the Western tradition of) virtue ethics focuses on moral self-development rather than relational or social moral development (the latter characterizing Confucian thought). As Ames argues in his *Confucian Role Ethics*,

In what way does a person become consummately human? This was the perennial Confucian question asked explicitly in all of the *Four Books* [identified by Neo-Confucian Zhuxi (朱熹) as the canonical Confucian texts]: in the *Great Learning*, in the *Analects of Confucius*, in the *Mencius* [or Mengzi], and again in the *Zhongyong* [or *Doctrine of the Mean*]. And the answer from the time of Confucius was a moral, aesthetic, and ultimately religious one. One becomes human by cultivating those thick, intrinsic relations that constitute one’s initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of one’s life force within family, community, and cosmos. ‘Cultivate your person’ (*xiushen* 修身), the signature exhortation of the Confucian canons, is the ground of the Confucian project of becoming consummate as a person (*ren*): It is to cultivate one’s conduct assiduously as it is expressed through those family, community, and cosmic roles and relations that one lives. In this Confucian tradition, we need each other. Becoming consummate in our conduct (*ren*) is something that we do, and that we either do together, or not at all. (2011, 87)

As Ames paints the picture, moral and personal development was, for Classical Confucians, a matter of cultivating relationships and fulfilling one’s role obligations. He further claims that “the Confucian… notion of “person” [as]… relationally constituted ‘human becomings’ [should be distinguished] from an essentialist understanding of discrete human beings... that had its beginnings in classical Greece” (2011, 88) In short, Ames argues that the focus on personhood and agency as constituted by relationships and social or familial roles distinguishes Confucianism from the comparatively individualistic conception of moral agency and virtue for the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition.
Nuyen likewise argues that “Confucian ethics is best understood as neither a virtue ethics nor a rule-based ethics but as an ethics in which virtues and rules derive from an understanding of the self as constituted by the roles that are determined by the relationships in which a person stands.” (2007, 315) Like Ames, the major difference Nuyen points to between virtue ethics and Confucian ethics is that 

In the case of virtue ethics, virtues are seen as the character traits that enable an autonomous and independent agent to live well, traits that an agent can choose to cultivate. Thus, in traditional moral theories, to arrive at the rules that one ought to follow, or the virtues that one ought to cultivate, the agent must see himself or herself purely as a rational, autonomous, and independent self… (Nuyen, 2007, 316)

In my view, Ames and Nuyen are correct that virtues are, for Confucians, importantly predicated on the agent’s roles and relationships. However, I disagree that virtue ethics is necessarily characterized by an understanding of agents as autonomous (though certainly some versions of the EV are vulnerable to this charge).

Similar conceptions of the self as relational have been put forward by feminist philosophers (e.g., Benson 2000; Brison 2002; Walker 2008). Like Ames and Nuyen, feminist philosophers who have put forward these relational accounts of the self share a desire to distinguish themselves from what they see as the problematically rationalistic and autonomous understandings of personhood that have characterized the Western philosophical tradition (see Benson 2000). In these feminist thinkers’ relational accounts, the self is a kind of narrative or nexus of relationships which is constituted by, and plays a role in constituting, a community of shared understanding. As Margaret Urban Walker puts it, this means that moral accounts “even if individuating, cannot be private or idiosyncratic.” (Walker 2008, 63) In other words, the self viewed as relational is neither the sole source of her own moral values nor the arbiter of their legitimacy.

These contemporary feminist accounts of the self as relational share much with the Classical Confucians’ understanding. In both the feminist and Confucian conception, moral values and practices are recognized as historically, culturally, and socially influenced (without going so far as claiming they are fully socially constructed). Rituals, as we have seen, are meant to shape or express natural, objective features of human nature such as our inclination to grieve loved ones or respect our parents; at the same time, they are responsive to changing contexts and circumstances. Both these contemporary feminist and Classical
Confucian thinkers hold that one’s moral obligations depend on one’s relationships. For Confucians, moreover, these obligations are codified through the ritual obligations that are associated with certain roles.

As Nuyen explains,

> For Confucians, social relationships are characterized by social positions or roles, and social positions are defined in terms of obligations. To each role is attached a set of obligations, and to be in a role is to be under a set of obligations. Which obligations go with which role is determined by more or less explicit social expectations. For the key social roles, it is encoded in the rites, li. To be in a social relationship, then, is to stand under certain obligations. What one ought to do and how one ought to behave in a certain relationship are all set out in li, or in social expectations. Thus, li describes both the factual and the ethical. (2007, 317)

Proponents of a strongly relational, CRE reading of Confucianism argue that other aspects of what we may consider virtuous or vicious, moral and immoral are similarly relationally and contextually responsive. Evidence for the exceptionally relational and particularistic approach to morality that arguably characterizes Confucianism can be found in *Analects* 13.18:

> The Lord of She instructed Confucius, saying, ‘There is an upright [直, zhí] man in my district. His father stole a sheep, and he testified against him.’
> Confucius said, ‘The upright men in my district are different. Fathers cover up for their sons and sons cover up for their fathers. Uprightness lies therein.’

Uprightness (直, zhí, literally “straightness”) is used in the *Analects* to mean moral correctness (*Analects* 2.19, 6.19, 15.7; Raphals 2014). So, this passage suggests that honesty is not a virtue that ought to be practiced in all cases, and that one’s relational obligations (e.g., to protect one’s parent) can override other moral duties.

Moreover, as D’Ambrosio points out,

> lying, pretense, and other forms of falsity are not discussed in terms of being inherently problematic here or in other places in the *Analects*. In fact, there are numerous cases where different forms of “covering up” or pretending are mentioned. Yet in none of them is the falsity itself abstracted from its circumstances and discussed. Rather, the issues are always understood in a broad context. Intent is important, but so is the outcome, and so are feelings, relationships, reason, the cultural context, the particulars of the situation, and many other (contingent) aspects. The *Analects* demands that people take all these factors under consideration when reflecting on what they should do, or when thinking about what is good or not good as a model for action (D’Ambrosio 2023, 5).

Note, however, that honesty can still be considered a virtue for Confucius. As Sim (2017) points out, honesty is presented as a virtue in *Analects* 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 2.22, 17.18. So it seems that honesty is a virtue, but it oughtn’t override other ethical considerations. This could be taken to suggest a tension between virtues, considered as reliably action-guiding, and role-based casuistic considerations. This is one reason there has been contemporary debate about whether Confucianism ought to be regarded as a “virtue ethic” or a “role ethic.” I argue that Confucianism (or at least the EV-M) ought to be considered a virtue ethic, but that virtues are in this view essentially relationally and situationally responsive.
In short, this passage shows that a virtue’s correct performance (or, to be less specific, what is morally called for in a given situation) is extremely dependent on the particular context of the situation, including one’s relationships or roles.

We have already seen that, for Mengzi, enacting benevolence and righteousness is a matter of correctly fulfilling the duties of one’s role (Mengzi 7A15). Similarly, D’Ambrosio is here arguing, a sensitivity toward or recognition of the moral force of one’s relationship, e.g., to his father, explains and motivates a particular course of action that may from a more individualized conception of virtue or morality seem untenable (e.g., covering up a crime).

A similar emphasis on particularism, especially with regard to relationships and roles, can also be seen in feminist ethics. Li Chenyang has argued, for example, that both feminist care ethicists and Confucians reject impartiality and universalizable moral roles in favor of attending to our obligations to those with whom we have close relationships. He notes that “for the Confucian and the one-caring, parents and others who are closely related certainly have a stronger pull. Accordingly, although we should care for everyone in the world if possible, we do need to start with those closest to us” (1994, 81).

However, as Nuyen points out, one can accept that moral obligations are dependent on one’s roles and relationships without holding that Confucians did not think of persons as individualizable moral agents:

In all the Confucian classics, the stress is always on the development of the individual, on the process of individual learning (to become a gentleman, junzi, and ultimately a sage [sheng]). The teachings in the Confucian classics make use of exemplary individuals with distinct and unique characteristics, individuals who are the driving force of the moral society, not anonymous beings lost in the “social network” or a “cog in the machine,” as some would have it. (2007, 317)

We saw above that moral exemplars, like the sage-kings, were considered to have the charismatic power (de) to influence others with their virtue. Moreover, as we will see in detail in §4.3., both Confucius and Mengzi identify particular virtues that are described as robust character traits belonging to particular moral exemplars. So, we can recognize that persons and morality are importantly relational without further holding that individual moral agents, with individual characters or possessing individualizable virtues, do not exist. Rather, the virtuous person is one who is importantly responsive to the nuanced and ever-changing obligations of her particular role or relationships in context. Applied to virtues or character traits like honesty, then, on this
reading they are not “motivationally self-sufficient,” individualized traits of character but “highly individualized… situation-specific personal dispositions, which are potentially alterable with changes in important social relationships and settings.” (Merritt 2000, 374)

So, one can endorse the view that persons and morality were importantly social and relational for Classical Confucians while still holding that Confucians endorsed developing traits that are recognizably virtues. That is, the comparative focus on the significant role our friends, family, culture, and context play in constituting us as persons and in our moral development in the Confucian tradition need not be regarded as a reason to dismiss it as a virtue ethical theory. On this issue I agree with Wong, who notes that one can employ virtue language with the appropriate qualifiers and at the same time acknowledge much of what the critics claim as insights of Confucian ethics: e.g., that the process of realizing the virtues characteristically takes place in relationship to others—those to whom one has responsibilities as a son or daughter or mother or father, for example—and that it can be part of one’s very identity to be a particular person’s son or daughter, mother or father. It is part of the Confucian vision of a life befitting human beings that it is a life of relationships marked by mutual care and respect, that one achieves fullest personhood that way. One achieves this in a manner that is particular to one’s circumstances, including the particular others with whom one most interacts. None of this is inconsistent with virtue characterizations in the broad sense. (2024, §2.1; see also Sim 2017, 69–75)

The Confucian tradition’s emphasis on relational responsiveness, and on the extent to which a moral agent’s obligations are dependent on her particular roles within a societal, familial, or cultural context, does represent a marked difference from a conception of virtue ethics founded on a presupposition that virtues are robust and individual in a specific sense that holds they are not responsive to particularistic or relational concerns. But this is not a sense that virtues need to be understood as.

Although the contextual and relational aspect of virtue is comparatively less emphasized in the Western virtue ethics tradition, Aristotle does note that virtue is heavily dependent on the agent’s particular situation and capacities. Aristotle writes that virtue lies in a “mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason” and that in determining this mean “we must examine what we ourselves drift into easily; for different people have different natural tendencies” (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, NE, 1107a15, 1109b1). As Sim points out, he also recognizes that at least one virtue, friendship, varies based on the nature of the relevant relationships (2017, 73; Aristotle NE, Book VIII). Similarly, As Jotterand and Levin point out, in a eudaimonic framework “determinations of what is fitting in the way of feelings and actions ‘depend upon
particular circumstances, the decision resting with our [moral] sense’ (NE, 1109b22–23), they cannot be reached in advance of one’s being in a given situation” (2019, 70).

It is true that the Aristotelian tradition, as Ames (2011), Merritt (2000), Nuyen (2007), and others have noted, has sometimes problematically emphasized autonomy, rationality, and self-sufficiency as important aspects of virtue and flourishing. However, as we saw in Chapter 2, some contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethical thinkers within the broader Aristotelian tradition have also emphasized the theory’s social and relational aspects (e.g., Broadie 1991, Korsgaard 2008). It is not definitionally impossible for a version of the EV, as we have defined it, to endorse an understanding of personhood, moral agency and virtue that is profoundly relationally and situationally responsive.

The Confucian tradition’s relational understanding of moral persons and of virtues, then, can be considered as an expansion on the casuistry and particularism that characterizes virtue theory more generally, and as an alternative way on conceptualizing virtues in which they are still regarded as dispositions or traits of character, but ones that are relational and situational. This relational aspect of virtue and moral agency, as we will see in Chapter 5, makes Confucianism better able to address the psychology critique of Western virtue ethics. But this is again getting ahead of ourselves! For now, let’s review the characteristics that have been identified as characterizing Mengzi’s Classical Confucian tradition.

We have seen that de can be fruitfully compared to aretē in that both evolved from expressions of non-moral admiration of power but came—by the Classical periods of both Aristotle and Confucius—to describe a particularly moral goodness.39 And, although de was taken to be a holistic term for virtuosity or

---

39 One might object to characterizing Aristotle’s “character” virtues as moral (keep in mind that it is with these, and not intellectual virtues, that this dissertation is concerned). As we saw in Chapter 1 (§1.4) from Adkins, aretē and its adjectival form agathos initially “imply the possession by anyone to whom they are applied of all the qualities most highly valued at any time by Greek society.” (1960, 31) And, Anscombe (1958) notes, “the term ‘moral’ itself, which we have by direct inheritance from Aristotle, just doesn’t seem to fit, in its modern sense, into an account of Aristotelian ethics,” insofar as it connotates praise- and blameworthiness or obligation (1). Rather, as we have seen, virtue for Aristotle is a characteristic or disposition that contributes to flourishing based on an objectivist understanding of human nature. However, as we further saw in Chapter 1, “[b]eginning in Athenian society in about the fifth century BCE, the virtues which developed in the warlike society of archaic Greece were gradually transformed into virtues more appropriate to a settled, urban existence.” (Porter 2013, 71–72) Along with this shift, I have argued, came a focus on virtue as morally good, insofar it serves the individual as a member of a community, and so is other-regarding due to the understanding of humans as necessarily and naturally social (NE, 1097b7–10, 1103b15, 1169b18, 1180a30; Politics 1253a10–12; 1278b3–5;
moral admirability, we have argued that those with *de* also possessed particular virtues. Moreover, and relatedly, both the Aristotelian *phronimos* and the Confucian sages (*sheng* and *junzi*) were regarded as possessing perfections of particular virtues and were held up as moral exemplars, who those striving to be virtuous should emulate. We have also seen that the Confucian *dao* can be instructively likened to the Greek *eudaimonia* insofar as it provides a naturalistic yet normative *telos* for human agents. Finally, we have compared ritual (*li*) to habituation (*hexis*) insofar as both provide ways of shaping and directing human emotions and inclinations toward virtue.

Despite these points of comparison—which lend credence to our claim that Classical Confucianism\(^{40}\) can be regarded as type of eudaimonic virtue ethics—we have also identified interesting points of departure. Most notably, Confucianism’s metaphysical emphasis on ritual (as opposed to habituation), on the importance of fulfilling one’s and societal roles, and on personhood, virtue, and flourishing as relational all represent important differences between Classical Chinese and Greek ethics. As we shall see, these points continued to characterize Mengzi’s moral philosophy. That said, Mengzi also introduced important new ideas to Confucianism—especially regarding his theories regarding human nature and moral cultivation.\(^{41}\) Next, let us consider Mengzi’s philosophical rivals and historical context. This is important, as we will see, for revealing Mengzi’s innovations.

---

\(^{40}\) At least that of Mengzi, and likely of Confucius as well. Again, keep in mind that these two thinkers are my primary focus (and, to a lesser, comparative extent, Xunzi). So, even when I refer to “Confucianism,” I am really thinking about the Classical Confucianism of Mengzi and Confucius in particular.

\(^{41}\) Why focus on Mengzi rather than Confucius? One reason is that Confucius’s thought is relatively difficult to systematize; there is comparatively little explicit argumentation in the *Analects* (*Analects* 5.13, Angle 2009; Ivanhoe 2009), and little evidence that other works traditionally attributed to Confucius accurately represent his views (Van Norden 2007). As we will see in the following pages, Mengzi’s philosophy is more systematic and explicitly argued, largely because he saw himself as defending Confucian philosophy against arguments and criticisms from his contemporaries. Finally, Mengzi also introduced important metaphysical and moral innovations to the Confucian tradition.
Although Mengzi endorsed the metaphysical commitments that characterize Confucianism—namely, the interrelated concepts of de, dao, and tian that provided the (thinly) naturalistic yet normative grounding for virtue as flourishing; the focus on ritual (li) and rectifying names as important methods of moral cultivation that reflects virtue’s social and relational character; and an understanding of both the person and morality as likewise importantly relational and particularistic—he also introduced a unique understanding of human nature and moral cultivation in response to his contemporary philosophical rivals. In particular, Mengzi’s most important contribution was his notion of the sprouts (duān, 端), present in the heart-mind (xīn, 心) and fundamentally characterizing human nature as good.

Mengzi’s Philosophical Rivals

Mengzi, sometimes known in the West as Mencius (his Latinized name), was born around 372 BCE during the Warring States period of ancient China. Within the Confucian tradition, Mengzi is sometimes known as the “Second Sage” (亞聖, yàshèng), behind only Confucius himself, due to his important contribution to the resurgence of Confucianism’s popularity (likely in response, as we will see, to the competing philosophies of Yangism and Mohism).42

Briefly, Mengzi saw his two biggest competitors in Yang Zhu (楊朱, yángzhū) and Mozi (墨子, mòzǐ). Yang Zhu was born around 440 BCE, and Mozi (given name Mò Dì) was born around 470 BCE. These thinkers thus lived about a generation after Confucius (Kongzi) and at roughly the same time as Socrates. Perhaps because of the turmoil that characterized the Warring States Period (c. 475–221 BCE) during which these thinkers lived, schools of philosophy developed, flourished, and competed to make sense of the chaotic world around them and to find practical solutions for its problems.43 Another prominent critic of Mengzi is

42 Although arguing the historical point that Mengzi developed his philosophy in direct response to these thinkers would be difficult given the paucity of explicit historical evidence (thanks to Richard Kim for noting this point), A.C. Graham (2002) and Bryan Van Norden (2007, 2008) have argued that there is good circumstantial evidence for this claim. In particular, as we’ll see below, Mengzi explicitly bemoans the popularity of these rival ethical theories (in Mengzi 2008, 3B9). This demonstrates, at least, that he was familiar with their ideas and saw a need to combat them.

43 As a result of this context, the philosophy of this period focused on questions surrounding human nature, moral self-cultivation, and how to govern. Because philosophy flourished during this time, the Warring States period and the latter
later Classical Confucian Xunzi (荀子, xúnzǐ; given name Xún Kuàng), born roughly 310 BCE. Each of these figures provides a useful point of comparison for revealing Mengzi’s innovative developments of the Confucian tradition.44

Yang Zhu is presented in the Mengzi as promoting a type of ethical egoism; Mozi’s school, Mohism, can be thought of as a type of consequentialism.45 Mengzi laments that the doctrines of Yang Zhu and Mozi fill the world. If a doctrine does not lean toward Yang Zhu, then it leans toward Mozi. Yang Zhu is ‘for oneself.’ This is not to have a ruler. Mozi is ‘impartial caring.’ This is not to have a father. (Mengzi 2008, 3B9.9)

Briefly, Mohists (followers of Mozi) advocated “universal love” or “impartial care” (jiān ài, 兼愛), arguing that we should treat other states, cities, and families as we do our own (Mozi, trans. Johnston, 2013, 90). Mohists argued that it is possible to do this because human nature is malleable. Yang Zhu (whose school is Yangism) argued that human nature is selfish. Xunzi, though a Confucian like Mengzi, had a radically opposed understanding of human nature—he regarded it as bad (è, 惡) while Mengzi saw it as good (shàn, 善).

Much of Mengzi’s philosophical innovations can be seen as attempts to defend Confucianism against competing Yangist and Mohist understandings of human nature and moral obligation. And, though Mengzi preceded Xunzi, Xunzi’s philosophy similarly offers a fruitful point of contrast to Mengzi’s that helps to illuminate the earlier thinker’s innovations. Let’s consider Yang Zhu’s philosophy first.

44 Another prominent critic of Mengzi was the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (莊子, zhuāngzǐ; given name Zhuāng Zhōu), born roughly 369 BCE. In his eponymous book, Zhuangzi bemoans “As I see things, the sprouts of ren and righteousness, the paths of what is so and what is not, are all hopelessly confused. How could I know the distinctions between them?” (Zhuangzi 2019, Chapter 2.17: “Nie Que and Wang Nē: going beyond species understanding” [trans. Robert Eno]). This reference to the “sprouts of ren [benevolence] and righteousness” is, almost certainly, an allusion to Mengzi—as we’ll see, Mengzi introduces a theory of human nature characterized by proto-mortal “sprouts” (duān, 端) which can be developed into virtues, including ren and righteousness. However, Zhuangzi’s criticism—while extremely interesting—is outside of the scope of this dissertation. This is because Zhuangzi was generally critical of ethical theorizing and was suspicious of humans’ ability to know, much less act according to, the Dao.

45 Here, as throughout the dissertation, I am following Bryan Van Norden’s (2007, 2011) insightful interpretation of these traditions. See Fraser (2015) and Wong (2021) for similar analyses.
Yang Zhu

Yang Zhu, like the Confucians (and Classical Chinese philosophers generally), believed that human nature was given by Heaven (Tiān, 天) and that to follow human nature was thus to abide by the will of Heaven. However, Yang Zhu argued that human nature is selfish; thus, he seems to reveal a point of tension within the Confucian tradition. If human nature is indeed selfish, then Confucians seemingly must either argue that human nature is not given by Heaven, or that to abide by one’s Heaven-given nature is immoral.

There are no extant writings from Yang Zhu. However, Mengzi glosses his philosophy as “for oneself” (为我) and claims that “This is not to have a ruler.” (Mengzi 2008, 3B9.9) Similarly, the Huainanzi (淮南子, huáinán zi)—which records a series of philosophical debates in the court of the kingdom of Huainan, circa first century BCE—reports “Keeping one’s nature intact, protecting one’s genuineness, and not letting the body be tied by other things—these Yangzi advocated but Mengzi condemned.” (Van Norden’s 2007 translation, modified from Graham’s Disputers of the Tao, 54; quoted in Van Norden 2007, 200).

We may take this to mean that Yangism, at least as Mengzi understood it, argued for a kind of egoism (though, whether this was psychological egoism, moral egoism, or both is unclear). Regardless of which position he endorsed, as Van Norden points out, Yang Zhu “made the notion of ‘human nature’ (rén xìng 人性) central to philosophical discussions, and he used it to present an intellectually powerful challenge to both Ruism [Confucianism] and Mohism.” (2007, 69) In short, Yangism provides the troubling problem for Confucians of suggesting that human nature—again, understood as endowed by Heaven—leads or ought to lead one to watch out for herself rather than to serve her community.

As compellingly argued by A.C. Graham (2002), Mengzi combats Yang Zhu’s understanding of human nature as self-serving by arguing that humans have a Heaven-given potential for goodness—through

---

46 As Van Norden points out, there is also “some reason to believe that he never wrote any work.” (2007, 200) However, Yangist ideas are referenced in other historical Chinese texts, including the Huainanzi (淮南子, huáinán zi) or “Writings of the Huainan Masters,” recorded c. 139 BCE; Lüshi Chunqiu (吕氏春秋, lǚshì chūnqiū) or “Mister Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annuals,” recorded c. 239 BCE; and, of course, the Mengzi (Van Norden 2007, 200).

47 That is, it’s unclear whether Yang Zhu believed human nature is in fact selfish, or if it ought to be.
his claim that the source of the virtues are innate “sprouts” (duān, 端) present in each of our “heart-minds” (xīn, 心). It is in this sense—that each human has the potential for goodness by nature that needs only be realized through individual effort, given a suitable environment—that Mengzi argues that “human nature is good” (xìng shàn, 性善).

As Graham explains, when Mengzi writes xìng (性), he is not thinking of human nature as made up of static or essential qualities; rather, he “seems never to be looking back toward birth, always forward to the maturation of continuing growth”. (2002, 2) This is in line with the general Classical Chinese understanding of xìng, which, despite etymological ties to shēng (生), “life”, refers “not to life in general or particular lives but to the course of life proper to man, in particular to health and longevity”. (2002, 3) Human nature in Mengzi’s understanding is both factual and normative; it is in fact what comes naturally to humans; however, it ‘comes naturally’ only in good conditions. These good conditions include a nurturing family and social environment.

Mengzi’s historical context, which necessitates reacting against this prevailing notion of human nature, provides one explanation for why Mengzi presents the first explicit Confucian attempt at explaining the make-up of human nature. His famous claim that “human nature is good” should thus not be understood as meaning that humans are good from birth, but rather that all humans have the potential for—and indeed tendency toward—goodness. As Mengzi himself puts it, “As for what [humans] are inherently, they can become good. This is what I mean by calling their natures good. As for their becoming not good, this is not the fault of their potential” (2008, 6A6.5).

A further important aspect of Mengzi’s understanding of human nature that differentiates it from Yang Zhu’s is that Mengzi thinks human nature is most essentially that part of our nature which all humans share but which differentiates us from animals. In other words, the egoist argument that human nature is

---

48 I follow Van Norden in reading 端 as sprout, though this is not universally accepted. See Van Norden 2008, 211–218.

49 See Footnote 53, below, for more on competing Classical Confucian descriptions of human nature.
selfish is flawed from a Mengzian point of view insofar as it is predicated on an understanding of human nature that fails to differentiate human nature from the nature of other, non-human beings.

Mozi

Mozi famously advocated for “universal love” or “impartial care” (jiān ài, 兼愛), which some contemporary philosophers have identified as the world’s earliest form of consequentialism (Fraser 2015, “Mohism”; see also Van Norden 2007, 2008). The Mohist notion of jiān ài, in short, indicated that all people should be treated equally morally. As we saw, Mengzi glosses the take-away of this Mohist position as “not to have a father,” since from a Confucian point of view this position would be unacceptably impartial and unfilial (2008, 3B9.9).50

In Chapter 16 of the *Mozi*, “Impartial Caring”, Mozi argues that we should “replace partiality (別, literally “distinguishing”) with impartiality (or universality, 兼)”]. He argues that it is “those who are partial in their dealings with others who are the real cause of all the great harms in the world,” in short because stealing, violence, and the like are all a result of being preferential to ourselves and our loved ones (or our countries) over others (*Mozi* Ch. 16, as reproduced in Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 68). Rather than being partial, in Mozi’s view people should regard “other people’s states in the same way that they regard their own… other people’s cities in the same way that they regard their own… other people’s families in the same way that they regard their own.” (2005, 64)

Mozi argues not only for the desirability but also for the practicality of practicing impartial care. In arguing this, he starts by assuming that impartial care is impossible to enact and uses a *reductio ad absurdum* argument to conclude the opposite. In the same chapter, he states:

> Perhaps people will think that impartial care is too difficult to carry out. But things more difficult than this have been successfully carried out. In the past, King Ling of the state of Chu was fond of slender waists. During his reign the people of Chu ate no more than one meal a day and became so weak that they could not raise themselves up without the support of a cane nor could they walk without leaning against a wall. Curtailing one’s food is something very difficult to do, but masses of people did it in order to please King Ling. … Curtailing one’s food [is]… among [one of] the most

---

50 The Mozi is, as Van Norden (2007) and Fraser (2015) have pointed out, a collection of diverse writings composed at different times by different people, and although it aims to record Mozi’s thought none of it is regarded as having been written by him.
difficult things in the world to get people to do, but masses of people did it in order to please their superiors. … Now as for impartially caring for and benefiting one another, such things are incalculably beneficial and easy to practice. The only problem is that there are no superiors who take delight in them. If only there were superiors who delighted in them, who encouraged their practice through rewards and praise, and threatened those who violate them with penalties and punishments, I believe that the people would take to impartially caring for and benefiting one another just as naturally as fire rises up and water flows down.” (Mozi 2005, 75–76)

Here, Mozi in effect argues that human nature can be enculturated or trained so that humans can be led to do things that are seemingly unnatural with the right external motivation and education. In short, he advocates a view that is all “nurture” and no “nature.” Or, if humans can be said to have a nature, they are naturally flexible or suggestable; with the right examples from their “superiors,” humans can accept anything. For Mohists, then, human nature is both neutral and malleable. An interesting point to note with this passage is that Mozi argues humans can be led to “take to impartially caring… as naturally as fire rises up and water flows down.” (2005, 76) Mengzi also compares human nature to water, arguing that “Human nature being good is like water tending downward.” (2008, 6A2.2) We might see here that Mengzi assumes humans have a nature that is already directed at something (i.e., goodness), just as water is naturally directed down, while Mozi argues that it can be moved in different directions with relative ease.

As a Confucian, Mengzi was committed to advocating that one has greater ethical obligations to one’s family and friends than to strangers—in other words, he argued for “partial care”, against Mozi’s arguments for “impartial care.” To defend the Confucian idea of partial care (or “graded love,” “love with distinctions”) against the Mohist conception of human nature, Mengzi argued that attempting to divorce natural inclination (for example, to care for those close to us more than for strangers) from the source of morality as universal love was psychologically unattainable.

The Mohist view, Mengzi holds, asks agents to deny their natural partiality to loved ones by arguing that what is moral is not dependent on human nature. This is because Mohism advocates for changing one’s (in Mengzi’s view, natural) inclinations toward partiality, including the natural affection for one’s family over others. One example that Mengzi uses to argue that the Mohist practice of impartial care is impractical is its requirement that followers of Mohism bury their parents frugally.
Mozi regarded the lavish, ritualistic funerals and extended mourning practices Confucians promoted as a waste of resources, and a show of unacceptable partiality to one’s dead parents over other, living people (2005, Mozi, Chapter 22, “Simplicity in Funerals; see Analects 17.21 for a description of the mourning rituals of Confucians). However, as we have seen above, Confucians regarded both their elaborate funeral practices and the extended mourning period following as important rituals that helped to shape and display the proper filial response to one’s parent dying. Because of ritual’s role of responding to and serving as an outlet for natural human impulses, the Mohist impetus to forgo this process was argued to be impractical or harmful to put into practice. Here is the argument as it appears in the Mengzi. Mengzi said:

I have heard that Yi Zhi is a Mohist. In dealing with funerals, Mozi took frugality as the Way. Yi Zhi surely does not long to change the world to something that he thinks is wrong and base [i.e., a Way other than the Mohist one!] Nonetheless, Yi Zhi buried his parents lavishly, so he served his parents by means of what he demeans. (2008, 3A5)

Mengzi goes on to criticize Yi Zhi, stating that “Heaven (Tiān, 天), in giving birth to things, causes them to have one source, but Yi Zhi gives them two” (Mengzi 2008, 3A5.3). Again, Mengzi’s argument here is intended to show that Mohism is psychologically implausible. As Van Norden explains in his commentary on this passage,

People naturally love their own family members. This is the ‘one source’ of love that gradually extends outward to encompass friends, strangers, and even nonhuman animals. Mengzi holds that, because our compassion for others grows out of this source, it will naturally have gradations, being stronger for relatives than for strangers. Yi Zhi acknowledges that this is the psychological source of human compassion, and that he acted out of it in giving his parents a lavish funeral. However, Yi Zhi insists that there is also a second source of benevolence which is the Mohist doctrine of ‘impartial caring’ [or universal love]. (2008, 3A5.3)

That is: Mohists seem to hold that virtuous behavior necessitates going against what are, in Mengzi’s view, one’s natural impulses to be partial to our loved ones. Again, for Confucians ethics is grounded in (Heaven-given) human nature; so, they would reject any argument that suggested we must change or ignore our nature in order to do what’s right. Since Mengzi believes we have a natural tendency to love our family and friends more than strangers, ‘graded love,’ not ‘impartial care,’ is both psychologically more plausible and morally correct. The “one source” Van Norden describes above is gradually applied to others, such that the junzi remains partial to—and has greater responsibilities toward—his parents, but also extends love toward others
in gradations. As Mengzi puts it, gentlemen “treat their kin as kin, and then are benevolent toward the people… and then are sparing of animals.” (2008, 7A45.1)

Besides their understanding of human nature as neutral and malleable, and their conviction that people should practice impartial care, the other major feature of Mohist philosophy that is relevant to this dissertation is their focus on “profit” or “benefit” (利, li) as the ultimate moral metric. As Van Norden glosses it, “Mozi offers us a general algorithm for determining what is right: aim at maximizing benefits impartially.” (2007, 139) This is why Mohists are regarded by some contemporary philosophers and Sinologists to be putting forward a type of consequentialism. In this lens (which I believe is correct), Mohism is vulnerable to the critiques of deontic theories that were discussed in Chapter 1.

Recall that one major criticism of deontic theories, including consequentialism, was put forward by Michael Stocker, who argued that these theories promote a kind of psychological “disharmony” because these theories presuppose a split between motive and values due to their conviction that the moral worth of an action is evaluated based on something external to the agent performing it. This is exactly the kind of problem that Mengzi is pointing out in his criticism of Yi Zhi.

Mengzi considered both Yang Zhu and Mozi to advocate moral theories contrary to human nature. In contrast, Mengzi’s theory of human nature presents partiality as natural, and thus attacks impartiality as impractical and psychologically damaging. Because Mengzi believed that human nature is teleologically directed toward the good, he believed that ethics must be grounded in human’s natural capacities—in particular, for Mengzi, in the proto-moral sprouts. And—as we will see— because Mengzi argues that all humans possess the sprouts of virtue as part of their nature, his conception of ethical understanding is that of a sensitivity to moral qualities that are also tied to human nature, insofar as they are generated by uniquely human “feelings or sensibilities” or by the human way of life (Liu 2002, 120). In addition to his contemporary Yangist and Mohist rivals, Mengzi’s philosophy can also be illuminatingly contrasted with that of later fellow Confucian Xunzi. As we’ll see, despite their shared Confucian background these two thinkers espoused very different theories of human nature and moral development.
Xunzi

Xunzi, a later Classical Confucian (c. 310–235 BCE), is the most systematic Classical Confucian theorist who writes on ritual. In particular, Xunzi argued that rituals are necessary to properly cultivate human emotions (*Xunzi* Chapter 19, “Discourse on Ritual”). As Hagop Sarkissian explains it, for Xunzi, “Rituals channel, reshape and guide raw and universal emotions into appropriate gestures and expressions, fostering civilized acts and responses that conform to societal norms and role-specific paradigms.” (Sarkisian 2023; see also Sarkisian 2010). While the view that rituals help their performers develop and display proper affective responses is at least implicit in Confucius’s statements on ritual (*Analects* 2.3, 3.4, 3.6, 6.7, 8.2, 9.3, 9.11, 17.21, 11.10; see also Csikszentmihalyi 2020), Xunzi makes the transformative and training power of ritual more explicit and accords it a particularly important role in moral cultivation. This is because Xunzi believes that without the transformative power of ritual (and, relatedly, education), humans cannot develop *de*.

Although ritual was—as we have seen—an essential aspect of moral self-cultivation for all Classical Confucians, Hagop Sarkissian (2023) argues that we can distinguish between these Confucian thinkers based on their proposed origins of ritual. He argues that there are two differing explanations for the origin of ritual, which he labels as “constructivist” and “naturalist,” paradigmatically represented by Xunzi and Mengzi, respectively (2023, 7). Constructivists, like Xunzi, held that

> The rites were created to cope with human emotions. Whether lust, envy, elation, soul-crushing sadness, the rites were constructed to help humans work through basic emotions while living in harmony with others. The rites, in other words, are responsive to and must deal with human nature.” (Sarkissian 2023, 8)

The role of rituals in this view is to keep negative tendencies of humans in check, to transform naturally bad material into a good finished product.51 Naturalists, in contrast, believed the rites are not invented or created in response to human nature, but are instead expressions of it. Certain paradigmatic situations elicit certain paradigmatic (we might call them instinctual) responses,

---

51 As Xunzi himself puts it, “Ritual cuts off what is too long and extends what is too short. It subtracts from what is excessive and adds to what is insufficient. It achieves proper form for love and respect, and it brings to perfection the beauty of carrying out *yi* [righteousness]… Thus, I say that human nature is the original beginning and the raw material, and deliberate effort is what makes it patterned, ordered, and exalted. If there were no human nature, then there would be nothing for deliberate effort to be applied to. If there were no deliberate effort, then human nature would not be able to beautify itself.” (2014, 209–210, lines 300–310, 355–365)
and these responses have within them the beginnings of a course of action that then forms the basis of a ritual. (Sarkissian, 2023, 9)

In other words, ritual in this naturalist view is intended not to restrain emotions or keep them in check, but to offer an opportunity to express them in socially meaningful ways. As we'll see later, this understanding of ritual is also related to what Van Norden, drawing on Durkheim (2001 [originally published 1912]) and Radcliffe-Brown (1945), calls a “functionalist” account—that is, that ritual serves social functions such as expressing or reinforcing “human attitudes and conceptions” or “a sense of dependence on other people, groups, and forces” (2007, 106).

Thinking again of the example of a funeral and the subsequent mourning period, a constructivist like Xunzi might argue that these rituals exist the way they do to make sure mourners express their grief only during a particular place and time, and in particular civilized ways, rather than letting it consume them for too long or inspire inappropriate expression. As Xunzi himself puts it,

>The three-year mourning period takes measure of people’s dispositions and establishes a proper form for them. It is the means by which one sets a limit for the utmost hurt. Wearing the mourning garments, propping oneself on a crude cane, dwelling in a lean-to, eating gruel, and using a rough mat and earthen pillow are the means by which one ornaments the utmost hurt. After the twenty-five months of the three-year mourning period, the sorrow and hurt are not yet done, and the feelings of longing and remembrance are not yet forgotten. Nevertheless, ritual breaks off the mourning at this time. Surely this is in order that there may be a proper stopping point for sending off the dead and proper regulation for resuming one’s normal life, is it not? (Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 2014, Ch. 19, “Discourse on Ritual,” 213, lines 455–466)

A naturalist like Mengzi, in contrast, would emphasize that these rituals are meant not to “ornament” or perfect dispositions or to “cut off what is too long” (Xunzi 2014, 209, lines 304–305), but to “match and cope with the emotional needs that generate their existence in the first place.” (Sarkissian 2023, 10) In both cases the rituals needed to be discovered and refined by the sage-kings. For Xunzi, this is because the best means of shaping the emotions needed to be found; for Mengzi, it’s because the best way to express them did.

More generally than the naturalist/constructivist distinction Sarkissian (2023) thoughtfully draws between Mengzi’s and Xunzi’s understandings of ritual, we can also expand this basic contrast to their theories of human nature. Xunzi had the strong, constructivist view of ritual he did because he believed

52 Indeed, in Mengzi 3A5.4, Mengzi argues that filiality naturally leads children to desire to bury their parents (2008).
human nature needed to be shaped in this way to become good. Thus, Xunzi and Mengzi’s contrasting understandings of human nature belie their differing understandings of human nature and moral development. As Van Norden explains,

Broadly speaking, we can distinguish three models of the process of ethical cultivation: discovery, reformation, and development. According to a discovery model, each human has innately and completely whatever cognitive and affective capacities are required for full virtue (be it knowledge, or certain dispositions, or some true nature). All that is necessary is for each of us to discover this source of virtue within ourselves and apply it. According to a re-formation model, in contrast, each of us must undergo some fundamental transformation to create in us whatever knowledge, dispositions, or nature is required for virtue. Finally, according to a development model, each person innately has incipient tendencies toward virtue that must develop in order for the person to achieve full virtue… Mengzi emphasized a developmental model of cultivation. According to him, humans are born with incipient virtuous dispositions that require cultivation in order to develop into complete virtues. For example, Mengzi claims that all humans are born with some compassion for the suffering of others… Xúnzǐ 荀子 (the next major Ruist [Confucian] after Mengzi) rejects the notion that humans have incipient tendencies toward compassion, righteousness, or other virtuous reactions. Instead, Xunzi uses a re-formation model of cultivation. Whereas, according to Mengzi, human virtuous dispositions are like the sprouts of plants whose growth must be nurtured, according to Xunzi, transforming a natural human being into a virtuous person is like steaming and bending a straight piece of wood until it becomes a circular wagon-wheel. (2007, 46)

We will discuss Mengzi’s theory of human nature—as Van Norden explains, characterized by “incipient virtuous dispositions”—below (2007, 48). Here, the important thing to note is that Xunzi and Mengzi’s theories of human nature, and so of moral development, are radically opposed. As we’ll see, these differences are instructive for better understanding Mengzi’s moral philosophy in the context of the EV as well.

Briefly, Mengzi’s “development” model—which as Van Norden notes also has aspects of a “discovery” model—was grounded in his understanding of human nature as good. As we saw above, this understanding was itself predicated on the conviction that Heaven makes our human nature such that we will flourish by developing de in accordance with our dao. With these underlying metaphysical assumptions, Mengzi bad to believe that human nature provides the materials for (and indeed the tendency toward) virtue; and, relatedly, that rituals and other ‘socially constructed’ rules, norms, etc. at their best supported the cultivation of this good human nature. Xunzi, on the other hand, held that “human nature is bad” (xing è, 性惡) (Xunzi 2014, Ch. 23, “Human Nature is Bad”). As he puts it,

People’s nature is bad. Their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort. Now people’s nature is such that they are born with a fondness for profit in them. If they follow along with this, then struggle and
contention will arise, and yielding and deference will perish therein. They are born with feelings of hate and dislike in them. If they follow along with these, then cruelty and villainy will arise, and loyalty and trustworthiness will perish therein. They are born with desires of the eyes and ears, a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If they follow along with these, then lasciviousness and chaos will arise, and ritual and yi [righteousness], proper form and order, will perish therein. Thus, if people follow along with their inborn dispositions and obey their nature, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and order, and end up becoming violent. So, it is necessary to await the transforming influence of teachers and models and the guidance of ritual and yi, and only then will they come to yielding and deference, turn to proper form and order, and end up becoming controlled. (Xunzi 2014, Ch. 23, “Human Nature is Bad,” 248, lines 1–20)

Although Xunzi believes human nature is bad, he also—as a Confucian—believes that humans can develop de in accordance with Heaven’s dao. This is why he emphasizes the transformative power of ritual and education. While human nature has the potential to be transformed into something good (as noted above, Xunzi makes heavy use of crafting analogies, like steaming wood to make it straight), it will not develop this way without significant effort and outside intervention (Xunzi 2014, Ch. 23, “Human Nature is Bad.” 248) Hence: his “constructivist” view of rituals as a means to whip human nature into shape.

Xunzi can thus be considered a “rival” of Mengzi, despite both thinkers claiming to espouse the same Confucian philosophy.53 Contrasting Xunzi with Mengzi is helpful for highlighting both Mengzi’s innovations and his points of agreement within a broader Confucian tradition. What’s more, the contrast between these two Confucian thinkers can also reveal differences between Mengzi and Aristotelian versions of the EV. As we will see in more detail in the following sections (§4.3 and 4.4), Aristotle’s (and the Aristotelian tradition’s) model of moral development more closely resembles Xunzi’s than Mengzi’s.

In developing important, previously underdiscussed aspects of Confucian theory in response to rival philosophies, Mengzi came to advance several innovative ideas. In response (or at least in contrast) to Yang Zhu’s egoism, he developed a theory of human nature that was teleologically directed toward virtue. In

53 Xunzi’s and Mengzi’s “constructivist” and “naturalist” understandings of ritual, and their “reformation” and “development” models of moral cultivation, (respectively) are both plausible developments of Confucius’s philosophy, given his scant comments on human nature. Only one passage in the Analects explicitly refers to “nature” (xing). In this passage, 5.13, Confucius states that humans are similar by nature, and differ due to habit or custom. So, while it suggests that humans have the same nature, it does not provide a substantive statement about what this nature is like. In Analects 5.13, one of Confucius’s disciples bemoans the fact that Confucius does not teach about what human nature is like. Despite this dearth of explicit discussion of human nature, one of Confucius’s disciples quotes the Poetry, “As if cut, as if polished, As if carved, as if ground.” (Analects 2013, 1.15) (See Slingerland 2015, Wong 2015)
response to Mozi, he argued that innate human emotions and tendencies—e.g., toward particularity—were good, and that a plausible theory of human nature must not ask humans to act against these tendencies.

And, although Mengzi was a Confucian, we can identify some differences between his metaphysical commitments and Confucius’s. Mengzi is less traditionalist than Confucius, emphasizing the importance of intuition rather than study in moral cultivation. Ivanhoe argues that

While Kongzi maintained that an understanding of Heaven’s grand plan required mastery of the accumulated wisdom of the past, Mengzi insisted that it came from a direct, introspective awareness of human nature. By reflecting upon one’s own nature, one could come to understand not only oneself but also the proper role that all human beings are to play in the world. A proper understanding of human nature leads to an understanding of Heaven. Working to develop one’s nature fully is the way to serve Heaven. (2007, 216)

As this quote illustrates, Mengzi’s comparative focus on intuition rather than study is related to an understanding of Heaven that also differs from his predecessor. As we have briefly seen above—and will explore in more detail below—Mengzi believed that Heaven furnished humans with a good human nature (xing shàn, 性善), such that to discover the Dao of Heaven one needed first and foremost to attend to her own moral intuitions (Graham 2002; Ivanhoe 2007, 17; Van Norden 2007). This conviction that human nature is good and that our innate emotions and inclinations are directed toward virtue is a stark point of contrast from fellow Confucian Xunzi (and, as we’ll see, from Aristotle), and led Mengzi to posit a theory of ritual that suggests rituals are expressions of natural human emotions.

We noted previously in this section that Confucian’s traditionalism makes the theory less appealing cross-culturally and cross-temporally, though this worry can be mitigated by reading with a hermeneutics of restoration and noting that Confucians allowed for rituals to change over time (e.g., Confucius swapping out a hemp cap for silk in Analects 9.3). Mengzi’s conviction that ritual ought not to be followed “to the letter” seems—thanks to his “naturalistic” theory of ritual—to go even farther. So, although Mengzi retains the Classical Confucian traditionalism to a degree, it is also less traditionalistic than Confucius (and certainly less than Xunzi). Mengzi’s naturalistic conception of ritual, predicated on his understanding of natural human emotions and inclinations as teleologically directed toward virtue, thus opens up more opportunity of
traditions varying cross-culturally and evolving over time. As we’ll see in Chapter 5, this furnishes his theory with a powerful response to the critiques from Chapter 3.

Mengzi also introduced other important metaphysical and moral innovations to the Confucian tradition. In particular—as we will see in the following section—Mengzi’s most important contribution was his notion of the sprouts (duān, 端), present in the heart-mind (xīn, 心) and fundamentally characterizing human nature as good. In short, Mengzi both takes up existing Confucian ideas and innovative expansions on the Confucian tradition through his emphasis that human nature is good and characterized by the capacity for developing the virtues; that Heaven sets both human nature and roles; that personhood and virtue are importantly relational; and that ritual is an important aspect of moral development, but that it is an expression of human nature rather than a response against it. Each of these aspects of his philosophy differentiates it from the Western versions of the EV we have explored so far.

4.3 Mengzi’s EV

Now that we understand Mengzi’s philosophical context within the Classical Chinese philosophical tradition, let’s look at his moral psychology and theory of human nature in the context of the EV. We have seen that Mengzi emphasizes that human nature is good and characterized by the capacity for developing the virtues. He inherited the convictions that Heaven sets both human nature and roles, that personhood is importantly relational, and that ritual is an important aspect of moral development from Confucius. However, based on his understanding of human nature as good, he believed that rituals were expressions of human nature rather than a response against it (contra Xunzi).

In this section, I expand upon each of these aspects of Mengzi’s thought in the context of eudaimonic virtue ethics, and further demonstrate that despite important differences from the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition Mengzi’s virtue ethics fits the EV. Mengzi’s ethical theory features all of the “core” claims of the EV that were put forward in Chapter 1. Recall that we identified these major features of eudaimonic virtue ethics as the following:

(i) Virtue, in the sense of “an excellent trait of character… a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor… to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways” is the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., *areticism*);
(ii) Virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., *eudaimonism*);

(iii) Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function; doing this is a matter of fulfilling human nature (i.e., *naturalism*);

(iv) *Practical wisdom*, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for full virtue.

In this section (§4.3), I lay out Mengzi’s adherence to each of these four features and his particular developments of them—just as the specific developments of the claims for rationalists and emotionists were laid out in Chapter 2. Again, the EV’s core features are what I take to characterize eudaimonic virtue ethics in a thin sense, and so by arguing that Mengzi is a eudaimonic virtue ethicist I mean that he is committed to these four bare commitments. As we have seen, in this way we can consider Mengzi a virtue ethicist—and so, instructively compare his theory to that of classical and contemporary Western eudaimonic virtue ethical theories—while also acknowledging the crucial distinctions between the Confucian and Greek traditions.54

In particular, I point to ways the Mengzian theory of human nature (Claim iii-M, or naturalism-M) and understanding of practical wisdom (Claim iv-M, or practical wisdom-M) differ from both the rational and emotional versions of these claims that we have seen so far. And, though the differences between Mengzi’s and Western EV understandings of virtue (Claim i, *aretaicism*) and flourishing (Claim ii, *eudaimonism*) are less extreme, the Confucian tradition’s comparatively relational emphasis also leads to instructive points of contrast here. Although Mengzi has his own expansions on each of the EV’s core claims, we will also see that he generally falls on the more emotional side of the rational-emotional spectrum identified in Chapter 2.

**Aretaicism-M**

The first core claim of the EV is that virtues, in the sense of excellent traits of character or dispositions, are the foundation of ethics and the proper target for moral evaluation—i.e., *aretaicism*. As this feature was explained in Chapter 1, it includes both the claim that virtues are character traits and the claim that character traits—not, e.g., actions—should be the primary object of moral evaluation. Relatedly, as we saw, virtue ethicists hold that the virtues are irreducible to each other or to another source of moral

---

54 As noted in Chapter 1, virtue ethical theories that are not eudaimonic (like exemplarist or sentimentalist virtue ethics) are outside the scope of this dissertation. I hope to show the Mengzi’s metaphysical and moral commitments are relevantly similar to Aristotle’s, yet also offer fruitful avenues for reimagining some of the more problematic or criticized aspects of contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethical theories in the Aristotelian tradition.
evaluation; though the virtues for some proponents of the EV may be closely connected or even interdependent, they represent conceptually different, morally good traits.\textsuperscript{55}

As we have seen, some contemporary commentators—e.g., Ames (2011), Nuyen (2007)—have argued that virtues are also predicated on an individualistic notion of personhood and agency. However, as I have argued above, this is not a necessary feature of a thin conception of virtue ethics (such as the EV) (see also Sim 2017). Yes, Confucian virtue ethics—and Mengzi’s theory in particular—emphasizes the importance of attending to the moral force of one’s social roles and relationships; but it nevertheless puts forward an understanding of virtues as robust, reliable character traits. And, it regards the virtues as the proper starting point for moral evaluation.

In the first passage of his eponymous \textit{Mengzi} the Confucian rebukes King Hui: “Why must Your Majesty speak of ‘profit’? Let there simply be benevolence and righteousness,” where benevolence (仁, rén) and righteousness (義, yì) are virtues. (\textit{Mengzi} 2008, 1A1) In another passage, he remarks that “Life is something I desire; righteousness is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake life and select righteousness.” (\textit{Mengzi} 2008, 6A10). These quotes demonstrate that Mengzi considers virtues—like benevolence and righteousness—to be the most important pursuit in life, more important than “profit”—a reference to the utilitarian-like, benefit-calculation moral philosophy of the Mohists—as well as more important than life itself.\textsuperscript{56}

Moreover, \textit{Mengzi} 5A2 tells the stories of virtuous men who were misled by vicious ones, because they assume the best of them. Mengzi points out that “a gentleman [君] can be deceived by what is in line with his path, but it is difficult to trap him with what is not the Way.” (trans. Van Norden, 2008) As Van

\textsuperscript{55} The question of whether Mengzi and other Classical Confucians endorsed a unity of the virtues view is a matter of debate. As Van Norden notes, “[Important Neo-Confucian commentator] Zhu Xi [朱熹] argues explicitly that all virtues are, ultimately, manifestations of benevolence. This entails the unity of the virtues. It is hard to say what Kongzi’s own view was, but he does seem confident in attributing some virtues to individuals without attributing others: ‘Those who are Good will necessarily display courage, but those who display courage are not necessarily Good’ (14.4).’ (Van Norden, 2007, 43)

\textsuperscript{56} Mengzi’s reference to profit (利, lì) as a criticism of Mohism is endorsed, e.g., by Bryan Van Norden (2008, commentary on 1A1 [1]; and 2007, 301–305)
Norden further explains in his commentary on this passage, although the virtuous characters in Mengzi’s tales commit cognitive errors, their errors are regarded “to be highly admirable. This illustrates the extreme to which Confucianism is an ethics that evaluates actions in terms of the character they express, rather than evaluating character in terms of the actions it leads to.” (Van Norden 2008, commentary on Mengzi 5A2 [120]). In other words, the exemplars’ beliefs that those with whom they’re interacting are trustworthy is an indication of the exemplars’ own morally admirable characters. For this reason, these beliefs are praiseworthy even though they lead the exemplars astray. This suggests that Mengzi holds virtues to be the central material for ethical evaluation, rather than serving another, more primary ethical good. What’s more, virtues are praiseworthy in themselves irrespective of the actions they produce.

And, we have already seen that both Confucius and Mengzi regard De (德, dé) or charismatic virtue as characterizing moral exemplars. (See, for instance, Analects 2.1, 9.14, 12.19; Mengzi 1A7, 2A1, 2A3, 3A4, 6A6, 6A17, 7A9) That he makes frequent reference to moral exemplars further suggests that, like Aristotle, Mengzi endorses a theory of moral development in which we can learn from others in order to help us to develop moral character. And, Mengzi provides a list of virtues—benevolence (仁, rén), righteousness (義, yì), wisdom (智, zhì), and ritual propriety (禮, lǐ)—which Van Norden (2019) explicitly argues were “treat[ed] as what Western ethicists would call cardinal virtues; what’s more, “[e]ach of the four [cardinal] virtues is associated with a characteristic emotion or motivational attitude.” (Mengzi 2008, 6A5; Van Norden 2019, para. 1)57 Thus, Mengzi clearly endorses aretaicism, insofar as he holds virtuous traits of character, not actions, to be the proper material for moral evaluation.

As we have already briefly discussed, Mengzi believes that his cardinal virtues are perfections of proto-moral sprouts or beginnings (端, duān) of virtue that are part of humans’ psychology by nature. These sprouts are also called hearts or feelings (心, xīn), and in effect are the raw material that the virtuous person cultivates into virtues (in this way, they are closely analogous to Aristotle’s passions—though as we will see

57 In addition to these cardinal virtues, Mengzi also identifies minor virtues such as filiality (孝), loyalty (忠), and faithfulness (信) (Mengzi 1A5)
the sprouts and passions also have important differences). As Mengzi explains, “The feeling [xin, 心] of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The feeling of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The feeling of deference is the sprout of propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom.” (2008, 2A6) But how do we know benevolence (仁, rén), righteousness (義, yì), wisdom (智, zhì), and ritual propriety (禮, lǐ) describe qualities that meet our definition of virtue put forward in Chapter 1?

Again, character traits can be roughly defined, as they were in Chapter 1, as reliable (i.e., cross-situationally consistent) and stable (i.e., temporally consistent) tendencies or dispositions that predict and explain behaving, thinking, and/or feeling in certain characteristic ways (Alfano 2013b; Annas 2011; Aristotle 2019; MacIntyre 2007; Nguyen and Crossan 2022; Sarkissian 2017; Sreenivasan 2013). While Mengzi may not have had the same understanding of psychology and moral development that contemporary scholars do, he does seem to regard his virtues as predictive, explanatory, stable, and reliable. This is indicated from the way he describes a junzi:

What distinguishes gentlemen [jünzi, 君子] from others is that they preserve their hearts. Gentlemen preserve their hearts with benevolence and preserve their hearts with propriety. The benevolent love others, and those who have propriety revere others. Those who love others are generally loved by others. Those who revere others are generally revered by others. ‘Here is a person who is harsh to me.’ A gentleman in this situation will invariably examine himself, saying, ‘I must not be benevolent. I must be lacking in propriety (Mengzi 2008, 4B28).

In this passage, Mengzi suggests that a virtuous person, a junzi, will have certain predictable affective and behavioral attitudes toward others and toward their own moral development. Note, too, that Mengzi here encourages virtuous people to cultivate their own virtues by “preserving their hearts.” This is because, as will be discussed in more detail below, Mengzi believes that protecting and extending one’s nascent moral “sprouts,” (duān, 端) present in the heart-mind (xin, 心) by nature, is the key to becoming fully virtuous.

Mengzi further believed that the virtues could predict a virtuous agent’s actions. He argues that the sages (moral exemplars) BoYi, Yi Yin, and Kongzi (Confucius) had in common that
If any became ruler of a territory of a hundred leagues, he would be able to possess the world by bringing the various lords to his court. And if any could obtain the world by performing one unrighteous deed, or killing one innocent person, he would not do it.” (2008, 2A2.24)58

In other words, virtuous people have in common that they will predictably behave as the virtues require.59 Similarly, this indicates that Mengzi holds virtues to be cross-situationally consistent (in a limited way while also, as we’ll see, being situationally responsive). Regardless of the situation, these moral exemplars would not kill an innocent person—which, as Mengzi argues elsewhere, would fail to be benevolent (2008, 7A33).

Further evidence that Mengzi holds virtues to be cross-situationally consistent can be found in his discussion with King Xuan of Qi (1A7, referenced above). In this passage, Mengzi asks the King to “return to the root” of the compassionate impulse that led him to spare an ox for slaughter, in order to “extend” kindness to his people as well (Mengzi 2008, 1A7). Mengzi also states in this passage that if one treats “their elders as elders, and extend[s] it to the elders of others… you can turn the world in the palm of your hand.” This suggests that the same virtue (of kindness or benevolence), once acquired, motivates kind actions in government, toward animals, and toward family members—positioning the virtue as a global, cross-situationally consistent disposition. However, Mengzi’s conception of virtue is less cross-situationally consistent than comparatively “motivationally self-sufficient” understandings of the virtues (cf. Merritt 2000). This is because virtue is for Mengzi highly dependent on the agent’s social roles and relationships.

Despite the predictive power of Mengzi’s virtues, he also argues that the virtuous agent must act according to the particulars of his situation and context. As we saw above, Mengzi criticized his contemporaries who sought to “appeal to a universal standard outside of or ‘external’ to human nature as the foundation for moral claims,” and argued that “holding invariably to any external standard will lead one

58 Further examples of the predictive power of virtues can be found in Mengzi 7B10 and 7B33.

59 What’s more, Mengzi believed even the proto-moral sprouts, or beginnings of virtue, could explain and predict affective attitudes in certain paradigmatic cases; for example, anyone who possesses the sprout of compassion would necessarily feel “alarm and compassion” at seeing a child in danger (2008, 1A6.3).
astray.” (Ivanhoe 2002, 15,18)\(^6\) And, he holds that what is morally correct in a given situation is predicated, at least in large part, on the relevant social roles, relationships, and connected obligations in that context.

In passage 2A2 (quoted above), Mengzi argues that while the sages are similar in that they would never commit an unrighteous deed or kill an innocent person, they also would be attentive to particulars of what their context requires such that “[w]hen one should take office, he would take office; when one should stop, he would stop; when one should take a long time, he would take a long time; when one should hurry, he would hurry” (Mengzi 2008, 2A2.22). Because of this particularism, Mengzi notes, the sages BoYi and Yi Yin took actions that appear to be opposed—“if things were orderly, he would take office; if they were chaotic, he would leave office. This was Bo Yi… If things were orderly, he would take office, and if they were chaotic, he would also take office. This was Yi Yin”—however, this was due to the differing particulars of their situations and the sages’ use of “discretion” (quán, 權) about what was called for (Mengzi 2008, 2A2.22; see also 4A17, 4B31).

Mengzi provides a list of virtues; presents virtue cultivation as the most important project of a human life; conceives of virtues as character traits with predictive and explanatory power but which are still responsive to casuistic concerns and which are valuable in themselves irrespective of actions they produce; represents the virtues as perfections of inclinations present in humans by nature; and explicitly rejects consequentialist and other universal, rule-based understandings of morality in favor of virtue cultivation.

So, Mengzi, Aristotle, and contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethicists seem so far to be in agreement in endorsing Claim i of the EV, despite Mengzi’s comparatively situationally and relationally responsive understanding of virtue. As we saw in Chapter 2, Claim i-R (that is, the rationalist version of the EV’s Claim i, aretaicism-R) posits that virtue has to do with rational control of emotions, passions, or appetites. In contrast,

---

\(^6\) That Mengzi is suspicious of universal standards as guides to ethical action is clear in his criticism of Mohists’ “two roots” in 3A5. The thrust of his argument in this passage, as we saw above, is that Mohism advocated impartial caring (similar to utilitarianism) but that its followers were unable to ignore their emotional attachment to loved ones. For an excellent discussion of this passage, see Nivison, David S. (1980) “Two Roots or One?” Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, vol. 53, no. 6: 739–61.
aretaicism-E holds that virtue has to do in large part with attending to the normative content of our emotions or sentiments. What about Mengzi—where does he fall on this spectrum?

One complication for making a direct comparison between Mengzi’s understanding of virtue and these rationalist and emotionist understandings is that both the EV-R and the EV-E are grounded in Aristotle’s philosophy. This tradition, as discussed in Chapter 2, includes an understanding of the soul or mind as divided into three parts—(properly) rational, appetitive, and nutritive (NE, 1102b15–30). Against this shared metaphysical background, one can ask about the relationship between emotions or passions and reason. And, as we further discussed in Chapter 2, this division of the soul can also be compared to a proto-dualism, since some more rationalistic versions of the EV have further associated reason with an incorporeal mind/soul and emotions with the body (Aristotle De Anima iii 5, GA, 736b28–29, NE, 1102b30–1103a1, 1152b15, 1177b20, 1177b33, 1178a1–5, 1178a15; GA, 736b28–29; Ackrill 1972; Falcon 2023; Reeve 1992; Shields 2020).

In contrast, for Mengzi the virtues are present in the heart-mind (xīn, 心). The heart-mind is, in effect, equivalent to the Aristotelian mind or soul (psuche). As David Wong explains,

The nearest equivalent to the English term for mind in the classical period is xīn 心, which originated as a picture of the heart in human beings and animals and directs body’s behavior. Since ethical guidance in Chinese thought arises from both the cognitive function of the mind and the affective states attributed to the heart, xīn is frequently translated as “heart-mind”.” (2023, §1)

For Classical Chinese philosophers, including Confucians, the heart-mind “refer[red] to the physical organ in the chest, but… [also to] the psychological faculty of thinking, perceiving, feeling, desiring, and intending.” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 393) One immediate difference suggested here is that Mengzi’s metaphysics seems less likely to allow for a dualistic interpretation—like the one some proponents of the EV-

---

61 Although, as we noted in Chapter 2, Aristotle regards it as an open question “[w]hether [the parts of the soul] are separated as the parts of the body or of anything divisible are, or are distinct by definition but by nature inseparable, like convex and concave in the circumference of a circle.” (trans. Irwin, 2019, 1102a12–30) As we further noted in that chapter, though this division was put forward by Aristotle, its origins can be traced through Plato’s division of the soul into appetitive, spirited, and rational parts (Republic, 441b–c), and even earlier to Homer (Cairn 2015).
R have suggested of Aristotle—due its association of humans’ mental, moral, and affective faculties with a physical bodily organ. As Wong (2023) further notes,

Comparative interpreters frequently address whether the heart-mind is conceived as being separate or ontologically distinct from the body as they are, for example, in Cartesian dualism. The dominant view in scholarship is that Chinese thought is not dualistic in any fashion. The minority view is that it does not fall into ontological dualism, and that it is all the better for avoiding it, but other forms of dualism may fairly be attributed to Chinese thought. (Wong 2023, §1)\(^62\)

In other words, although there is some controversy around whether there may have been room for dualism in Classical Chinese metaphysics (e.g., because some philosophers acknowledge the existence of ghosts), most contemporary philosophers agree that the heart-mind and its functions were not regarded as separate from the body. As we’ve seen, even Heaven (Tian) was regarded as part of the “natural order” for Classical Confucians (Ivanhoe 2007).\(^63\) As Van Norden further points out, this difference has ethical import. He writes:

Because of their two-world metaphysical views, Plato and Aquinas see the highest human flourishing as consisting in a kind of loving contemplation of some higher reality: either the Forms or God. (Although Aristotle’s metaphysical picture is much more “this-worldly” than either Plato’s or Aquinas’s, Aristotle is notoriously torn between a conception of flourishing as political activity in this world and conceptions that emphasize theoretical contemplation or contemplation of the gods.) Ruism, in contrast, does not hold the sort of metaphysical picture that would make sense out of pure contemplation of theoretical truth as a significant constituent of human flourishing. (2007, 101)

Thus, we can see how this metaphysical difference allows for a strongly rationalist and proto-dualist reading of Aristotle but not of Mengzi. In short, Mengzi’s metaphysical background suggests that his version of the EV is less vulnerable (if at all) to criticisms of privileging the mind or soul, and its associated functions, over those of the body.

What’s more, Classical “Chinese philosophers do not explain behavior by a combination of cognitive and affective factors” (Wong 2023, §1.2). Again, Classical Confucians like Mengzi would have understood

\(^62\) Similarly, McRae notes that “In the ancient Chinese tradition there is no clear conceptual distinction between reason and emotion, nor is there any reason to think that the Confucians conceived of mind and body as different in kind. Rather the seat of the mental and affective capacities is the "heart/mind" (xin, a term that also refers to the physical organ of the heart)” (McRae, 2011, 588)

\(^63\) Although Slingerland (2013) has argued against a strongly holistic understanding of Classical Chinese metaphysics (i.e., he advocates the minority view Wong identifies), as Wong notes Slingerland still “grants that in early Chinese philosophy neither the mind nor postmortem spirits are immaterial.” (Wong 2023, §1.2)
what Aristotle would think of as the affective and rational parts as both located in the heart-mind (xin, 心).

And, as Wong points out, this means that “ethical guidance” necessarily includes elements that for the Western classical tradition would be identified as both rational and emotional. Thus, Mengzi’s background, unlike Aristotle’s, does not posit a distinction between emotions and reason or the mind and body (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, McRae 2011, Wong 2023). This significant difference in ancient Greek and Chinese moral psychology allows for Mengzi’s understanding of the sprouts—and thus the virtues, including wisdom—as both reasoning and emotional.64

So, the question of whether virtues are mostly emotional or mostly rational is in a sense nonsensical for Mengzi. Rather than the EV-R’s claim that “virtue has to do with rational control of emotions, passions, or appetites,” or the EV-E’s claim that “virtue has to do in large part with attending to our emotions or sentiments,” Claim i-M holds that virtues are responsive to both reason and emotions, but that these are not regarded as separable aspects of human psychology (let’s keep this in mind as a tentative definition for now).

That said, Mengzi’s view has much in common with Claim i-E, in that both the EV-E and EV-M are more appreciate of the positive moral force our natural emotions, sentiments, and inclinations can have. As Ivanhoe (2013) points out,

In many ways, Mengzi seems to advocate the kind of theory one finds in thinkers like Aristotle, whose conception of virtue is connected to a theory about human nature and a related view of human flourishing described in terms of an ideal agent. I will refer to this type of theory as virtue ethics of flourishing (VEF). On the other hand, parts of Mengzi’s view, particularly his emphasis on the role of the emotions and empathy, reveal significant similarities with thinkers like Hume and other sentimentalists, who describe the virtues primarily in terms of certain broadly construed emotions. I will refer to this type of theory as virtue ethics of sentiments (VES).” (49)

Thus, Ivanhoe suggests—as we suggested for the EV-E—that the EV-M is both eudaimonic yet bears similarity to sentimentalist views.

---

64 Like Aristotle, wisdom is one of Mengzi’s virtues (zhi, 智). However, these thinkers’ understandings of wisdom, and its relationship to virtue cultivation and performance, seem to differ dramatically; and, I suspect it is unlikely that zhi plays an equivalent role to phronesis for a few reasons. First, Mengzi’s virtue of wisdom is not located in a separate part of the soul from the character or moral virtues, like Aristotle’s is. Instead, it is the perfection of the sprout of knowing right from wrong (shifei zhi xin, 是非之心), and like the other sprouts is located in the heart-mind; so, like the other sprouts, it has both a rational and emotional component. This will be discussed in more detail in exploring Mengzi’s equivalent to practical wisdom, below.
We noted in Chapter 2 that a proponent of Claim i-R will comparatively emphasize the importance of reason over emotion, in that emotions are seen as providing at best neutral and at worst bad material for reason to work with—at least at first (see 1102b13–1103a5, 1103a15–30, 1119b1–15, 1138b10). The virtuous agent, of course, has properly cultivated emotions—but, for a rationalist, this is taken to mean that the emotions are fully under the control or sway of reason (Hursthouse 2001; Irwin 2019; Kraut 1989; Sorabji 1974; Yu 1998; 2007). Against this view, proponents of Claim i-E hold that emotions or sentiments have important moral content; that is, they are normatively valuable, not bad or neutral. Because proponents of Claim i-E are writing within the context of Aristotelian virtue ethics, though, they must still account for the important role of phronesis in virtue, which is explicitly identified by Aristotle as an intellectual virtue (trans. Irwin, 2019, NE, Book VI, Chapters 5, 12, and 13).

Two strategies proponents of Claim i-E have taken (as we have seen in Chapter 2) are to argue that phronesis provides merely instrumental means-end reasoning, while the evaluative component of virtue is part of the desiderative, not (strictly) rational, part of the soul. This accords with Aristotle’s claim that virtue “makes us achieve the end, whereas prudence [phronesis] makes us achieve the means to the end” (NE 2019, 1145a5–7; see also NE, 1151a15–19). Emotionists will tend to hold either this view of reason—i.e., that it helps the desiderative part of the soul determine the means to its desired end—or a broader conception of reason in which its evaluative part goes beyond a ratiocinative or means-end understanding of reason. In this second, broader view “reason”—at least in the context of practical reason and its constitutive role in virtue—includes not only rationality strictly speaking but also appropriate or cultivated values, desires, and emotions.

In this second strategy, emotionists emphasize an understanding of practical wisdom, and so of the role of reason in virtue generally, not as a kind of control of emotions but as a cultivated capacity to “see... the appropriate actions or emotions as worthwhile in the specific way that is expressed by bringing them under the rubric of the concepts of eudaimonia and the noble or virtuous, [and to...] read the details of the situation in [this] light.” (Kristjánsson 2010; see also McDowell 1996) In this view, then, “virtue appears not as willpower, but as a sensitivity to moral requirements” (Clarke 2017, 36). This conception has therefore
come to be known as a “sensitivity view” of virtue. As we’ll see below, I believe Mengzi’s understanding of virtue is essentially a sensitivity one.

Unlike Western virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition, Mengzi does not need to explain how reason and emotion can jointly contribute to virtue. This is because, as we’ve seen, they are not regarded as separate faculties or parts of the soul to begin with. We may say that emotions or sentiments play a large role in virtue for Mengzi—and indeed, the “sprouts” are, as we will see, akin in some sense to feelings—however, we must keep in mind that these emotions are not regarded as irrational.

Another difference to note between Mengzi’s understanding of virtue and those in the Aristotelian tradition is that virtues are importantly relationally responsive for the Confucian thinker. As Hutton (2015) points out, Rosemont and Ames’s (2016) criticism of Confucianism as a kind of virtue ethics hinges on these very differences. Quoting from Rosemont and Ames (2016), Hutton writes:

“[W]e argue that the Aristotelian and Confucian views on the moral life are grounded in fundamentally different conceptions of what it means to become a person, a factor that will be important in distinguishing Confucian role ethics from the more contemporary nuanced versions of virtue ethics that we associate with the sentimentalist virtue ethics of Slote [in The Ethics of Care and Empathy], the care ethics of Noddings [in Caring], and the particularist ethics of Dancy [in Ethics without Principles]. It is not merely Aristotelian virtue ethics that we believe different from classical Confucianism but contemporary variations of virtue ethics as well, keeping as they do the foundational role of the individual and of rationality (for which terms there are no close lexical equivalents in classical Chinese). (Ames and Rosemont 2011:20 [later reprinted in Ames and Rosemont, Confucian Role Ethics: A Moral Vision for the 21st Century? 2016])” (Hutton 2015, 339)

As we saw in §4.2 above, this criticism—as well as similar ones from Ames (2011) and Nuyen (2007)—are predicated on an assumption that virtues must be defined in a “motivationally self-sufficient way” (Merritt 2000).

Mengzi’s understanding of virtue, in my reading, is very similar to the virtue as sensitivity one. However, its comparative emphasis on the relational responsiveness of virtue also leads Mengzi to emphasize virtue’s necessary sensitivity to roles and relationships. We have already seen that, for Mengzi, virtue is a matter at least in part of “seeing” or recognizing what the particulars of a situation call for, including the obligations furnished by one’s social role or relational context (Mengzi, 7A45, 7A15). Further evidence for this view of virtue as a sensitivity can be found in Mengzi’s conversation with King Xuan of Qi.
In *Mengzi* 1A7 (2008), to demonstrate that King Xuan has the capacity to care for his people, Mengzi relates a story of the king sparing an ox being led to sacrifice. The king, who could not “bear [the ox’s] frightened appearance,” ordered that it be exchanged for a sheep. As Mengzi (2008) points out, the king does this because he “saw the ox but had not seen the sheep.” (1A7). Performing animal sacrifices was seen as an important duty of the king to appease Heaven. As Van Norden (2008) explains in his commentary on this passage, Zhu Xi, an influential Neo-Confucian commentator, interprets the situation like so: “killing the ox was something that the king could not bear to do. On the other hand, anointing the bell [for the ritual] was something that could not be dispensed with.” For this reason, another animal had to be sacrificed; hence the king’s substitution.

Mengzi further remarks that “This heart [xīn, 心]” that led the king to feel compassion for the ox and spare it “is sufficient to become [a true, virtuous] King” (1A7). The king’s potential—the “heart of a king” that Mengzi recognizes—is that the king both feels compassion for the ox in front of him, yet was able to “see” that his role as ruler necessitates that he serves his people by making the necessary ritual sacrifices (2008, 1A7). The king’s caring attitude toward the ox was not in itself a failure, nor was the substitution. Rather, the king’s relationship to the ox was changed when he saw it, which merited a change in response.

This reading suggests that virtue requires a kind of sensitivity to the particular requirements of a situation, but that for Mengzi this sensitivity must include, at least in part, a sensitivity to moral requirements that are furnished by relationally responsive or role-dependent features. In this case, the king has a responsibility, due to his role, to perform ritual sacrifices for the good of his people. On the other hand, his relationship to the ox, once he has seen it, also activates the sprout of compassion. In this way, virtue is both a trait of character and fundamentally relational.

So let us define Mengzi’s version of Claim i, Claim i-M, as follows:

(i-M) **Virtues, in the sense of excellent character traits or dispositions are the foundation of ethics or ethical action; virtues are relationally responsive, and are further both rational and emotional—these are not separable aspects of human psychology.**

As we can see, Mengzi’s aretaicism-M agrees, as all versions of the EV’s Claim i do, that virtues are excellent character traits or dispositions and that they are the starting point for ethical evaluation. However, like the
EV-E and the EV-R, it expands upon this bare claim with a particular explication of virtue (bolded above). In particular, Mengzi’s conception of Claim i-M emphasizes both the integration of what the Aristotelian tradition would regard as separable rational and emotional components, and virtue’s relational responsivity.

These differences also influence Mengzi’s understanding of both human nature and flourishing, since the nature of humans as “rational” is not a fundamental assumption, nor are people (or their characters) regarded as autonomous or self-sufficient. For Mengzi, the potential to be moral is part of (and indeed a defining characteristic of) human nature. All humans have a “heart-mind”. The heart-mind is the source of the moral “feelings” (the sprouts) which immediately motivate us to do the right thing (whether or not we actually do it). Moreover, some of the proto-moral inclinations that the sprouts make us sensitive to are generated by, and so depend on, relational considerations. And (as we will see shortly) because this tendency toward virtue is part of human nature, cultivating the virtues also contributes to human flourishing.

**Eudaimonism-M**

The second claim of the core EV was that virtue (or virtuous activity) is at least partially constitutive of *eudaimonia*. Although Mengzi does not tie virtue explicitly to *eudaimonia*—a uniquely Classical Greek concept—as Aristotle does, there is ample evidence that the Confucian thinker can be considered a eudaimonist in the sense of (a) tying human flourishing to cultivating virtue and (b) of conceiving of human flourishing as having both subjective and objective elements. There is evidence that Mengzi endorses the claim that cultivating and practicing the virtues contributes to the virtuous agent’s well-being.

As Van Norden notes, “it is not clear that there is any term in Classical Chinese that corresponds to ‘flourishing.’” (2007, 21; see also Huff 2015, 404–405). However, he goes on to argue, the fact that a term does not exist in a language does not mean that the concept doesn’t. As Van Norden points out, for instance, “Aristotle claims that there are “unnamed virtues,” by which he means virtues that he has a concept for but

---

65 For a more thorough discussion of eudaimonia and its role in the EV, see Chapter 1. Briefly, as Huff explains, “*Eudaimonia* refers to an overall state of a human being in the context of a life, and marks it as a state that is both good from an objective point of view, and also recognizable as good, and therefore desirable, to the person him- or herself.” (2015, 407–408)
which do not have names in Greek.” (2007, 22; NE II.7) With this in mind, let’s consider evidence for a Mengzian notion of flourishing that is connected to cultivation and performance of virtues.

First, Mengzi clearly thinks that the virtues and virtuous activity are intrinsically appealing. He states that “fine patterns and righteousness [i.e., virtue] delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths,” and that the sages discovered that all hearts prefer these “in common.” (*Mengzi* 2008, 6A7) This is in line with Mengzi’s virtue-as-sensitivity view, discussed above. Similarly, he argues in 6A6 that “people… are fond of this beautiful Virtue.” (*Mengzi* 2008, 6A6.8; quoting from the *Odes*, Mao n. 260) Indeed, virtues are more desirable than life itself:

Life is something I desire; righteousness is also something I desire. If I cannot have both, I will forsake life and select righteousness. Life is something I desire, but there is something I desire more than life. Hence, I will not do just anything to obtain it. Death is something I hate, but there is something I hate more than death. Hence, there are calamities I do not avoid… there are things one desires more than life, and there are also things one hates more than death. It is not the case that only the worthy person has this heart. All humans have it. The worthy person simply never loses it. (*Mengzi* 2008, 6A10)

In this passage, Mengzi argues that all humans have the “heart” (or sprout) of valuing virtue more than their own lives. The distinction between the worthy (or virtuous) person and others is that the former “never loses” this sprout. In other words, virtue for Mengzi is subjectively (i.e., from the perspective of the agent) yet also universally (i.e., for all humans) desirable. The reason that not all humans are in fact virtuous is not due to their inability to sense the right thing, or that they do not naturally recognize virtue as desirable, but due to “losing” the sensitivity (due either to their own lack of effort or to environmental barriers).

As we saw in §4.2 above, Mengzi believes that Heaven (Tīān, 天) provides humans with a good nature, such that they have a teleological direction toward the *Dao* and the ability to develop *de*. The Heaven-given *Dao* prescribes humans’ roles, including virtuous activity. For this reason, Mengzi believes that humans are by nature sensitive to moral concerns and attracted to virtue. This “naturalistic” (in a thin sense) origin of the virtues in human nature (which itself accords with the *Dao*) necessitates a close connection between human nature, virtue, and flourishing in much the same way Aristotle’s function argument does.

Like contemporary proponent of the EV John McDowell (who as we have seen endorses a sensitivity view EV-E), Mengzi uses analogies to senses to explain how humans perceive the motivating force of moral
qualities. Note that the taste metaphor Mengzi uses in *Mengzi* 6A7, quoted above, is one that takes for granted that the sensory capacity to perceive righteousness, like the capacity for taste, is common to all humans. Moreover, in the metaphor of Ox Mountain (*Mengzi* 6A8), Mengzi compares acting viciously to doing violence to oneself—arguing that “The way that [vicious people] discard their genuine hearts is like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees” (2008, *Mengzi* 6A8.2). This suggests that it is in humans’ objective best interest to develop the virtues.

So, for Mengzi (a) virtue is naturally attractive and (b) vice is harmful. Moreover, Huang Yong (2010) has argued that for Confucians the highest goal of moral self-cultivation is joy (lè, 樂). Yong points to *Analects* 6.20 (2013) as evidence; here, Confucius argues that “One who knows it is not the equal of one who loves it, and one who loves it is not the equal of one who takes joy in it,” where “it” is generally taken to refer to the Dao. Moreover, as Yong points out, in *Analects* 2.4 Confucius claims that he (as a virtuous person) “can act according to his heart's desire without violating any moral principles”; in other words, Confucius here argues that the morally good person enjoys being virtuous. (2010, 70) This further accords with the conviction, common to proponents of the EV, that someone who has cultivated the virtues has the correct motivational attitude, such that they want to be virtuous. As Ivanhoe argues even more explicitly, “Kongzi [Confucius] believed that virtue was the only way to the best kind of life and the most satisfying community because such lives were in part constituted by virtue.” (2007, 214)

Similarly, Mengzi (2008) claims in 7A4 that “There is no greater delight than to turn toward oneself and discover Genuineness [chéng, 誠].” Genuineness, chéng 誠, is alternatively translated as “realization.” As Yong explains this passage, “On the one hand, through self-examination, one realizes (knows) oneself or, rather, the nature (xing 性) or Dao within oneself; on the other hand, one realizes (fulfils or completes) one's self-nature by being moral.” (2010, 72) As this passage suggests, realizing one’s good, genuine human nature through cultivating the sprouts into virtues is, for Mengzi, the greatest joy (see also *Mengzi* 7A21). Whether we agree with Yong that joy is the highest goal of moral cultivation or not, we can agree that moral cultivation is joyful for Confucius and Mengzi. And, as we have begun to see and will explore in more detail below,
cultivating the virtues is also a matter of fulfilling one’s human nature. Thus, Mengzi’s philosophy is eudaimonic in the sense that developing virtue contributes to the flourishing of the virtuous agent.

Some authors have also influentially likened the Classical Confucian understanding of the Dao to the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* (Yong 2010; Huff 2015; Ivanhoe 2007; Van Norden 2007; Wong 2021, 2024; Yu 2007). As we saw above from Yu, for Classical Confucians

> Each thing’s virtue is the manifestation of Heaven’s way in that particular thing and becomes that thing’s way… Each thing’s well-being depends on whether it develops its own potential virtue [*de*] or way [*dao*], that is, whether it exists or acts in accordance with the way of Heaven.” (2007, 3–32)

Both *eudaimonia* and *Dao* thus provide a naturalistic and normative, objectivist grounding for evaluating flourishing. That is, both the Dao and *eudaimonia* represent a telos, or goal, toward which human nature is directed.

Both Aristotle and Mengzi also use an appeal to external goods as a rhetorical tool for suggesting to unvirtuous people that they work to cultivate virtue, while also recognizing that any external benefits that come from cultivating virtue (e.g., popularity, honor) are secondary to the pursuit of virtue itself. (Mengzi 2A4, 2B6, 4A3; *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.6, 1095b25–30.) In fact, it seems both thinkers see popularity and honor as natural consequences of virtue because others recognize the value of virtues to not only the virtuous agent but her community. This is especially clear for Classical Confucians, who as we saw above believed that virtue (*de*) had a natural charismatic power to attract others.

Because external goods like power are afforded to the virtuous only when others recognize the value of virtue, they don’t always result. As Benjamin Huff explains, “When the Way prevails, virtue will typically be accompanied by material comfort, although when it does not prevail, as it does not in the time of Confucius or Mencius, one must be prepared to forego many lesser matters for the sake of virtue.” (2015, 420) Thus, virtue is taken to be worth sacrificing other, lesser goods for but also to be accompanied by lesser goods in some cases. One further consequence of the Confucian understanding of the *Dao* as setting both humans’

---

66 Similarly, Confucius argues in the *Analects* that “Those who possess Virtue [*de*] will inevitably have something to say, whereas those who have something to say do not necessarily possess Virtue. Those who are Good [*ren*] will necessarily display courage, but those who display courage are not necessarily Good” (2013, 14.4).
nature and their roles is that Confucians tied individual virtue to the flourishing of one’s community and to the success of nations. As we have seen, virtue was thought to be rewarded by Heaven; and, *mutatis mutandis*, good governance regarded as important for allowing individual citizens to flourish. In the Confucian tradition, then, as in the Aristotelian one, individual human flourishing cannot be divorced from the flourishing of one’s community nor from natural capacities.

Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* and Mengzi’s *Dao* each concern an individual human’s flourishing in terms of both subjective happiness and in an objectivist sense, her flourishing in connection with her community, and a jointly naturalistic and normative foundation as fulfilling one’s role as determined by nature. Hence, it is fair to label Mengzi a eudaimonist—in the bare or thin sense that I have discussed—despite important differences between the ancient Greek and classical Chinese concepts. In short, Mengzi endorses Claim ii of the EV.

In Chapter 2 it was argued that, while virtue’s role in constituting *eudaimonia* may be the same for all versions of the EV, we may add for Claim ii-R the related claim that the *eudaimon* life is one of rational activity defined narrowly as contemplation, philosophizing, ratiocination, or study and for Claim ii-E the related claim that the *eudaimon* life is characterized by not just rational activity but also by a rich emotional and relational life. Mengzi, as a Confucian, held study in high esteem. Indeed, studying the lives of the Sage-kings, the rituals and music of the Zhou, and the texts of the ancients were regarded by Classical Confucians as an important element of moral development. This can be likened to Aristotle’s claim in *NE* Book X, Chapter 7 that—at least according to the “dominant” reading—study or contemplation (*theôrein*) is required for complete happiness (Taylor 2010) and suggests that at least one aspect of flourish has a strictly rational component.

However, as we have seen, Mengzi is much less focused on study than his “rival” Xunzi. In fact, Mengzi states “It would be better not to have the *Documents* [or *Book of Documents*, shū jīng 書經, a Confucian classic believed to record speeches and events from the Sage-kings and other ancient moral exemplars] than

---

67 As Mengzi notes, “As for the people, if they lack a constant livelihood, it follows that they will lack a constant heart. No one who lacks a constant heart will avoid dissipation and evil.” (*Mengzi* 1A7) This is also the origin of the Classical Chinese concept of the “Mandate of Heaven,” (Tiānmìng, 天命) by which Heaven, or Tiān, expressed its approval or disapproval for rulers through the will of the people (e.g., uprisings or revolutions) or natural disasters.
to believe everything in it.” (2008, 7B3.1–2) While this does not directly suggest that Mengzi takes a broader, less ratiocinatic view than Xunzi does of flourishing—after all, he is here criticizing the unreflective acceptance of what one reads rather than contemplation or ratiocination—it does provide further evidence of Mengzi’s previously discussed deemphasis on the importance of tradition and education.68

Again, Mengzi believes that humans tend naturally toward goodness. For this reason he believes that humans can develop the virtues (and thus flourish, since as we’ve seen Mengzi is also a eudaimonist) without needing to be shaped or trained (contra Xunzi). Instead, if humans are provided with a supportive environment and make the effort to attend to and extend their innate sprouts, they will develop virtues. This underlying moral psychology—which is also evidenced by his “naturalist” theory of the origin of ritual (Sarkissian 2023), and which Van Norden (2007) describes as both a “development” and “discovery” model—suggests that Mengzi would take a broader understanding of flourishing, such that it is generally accessible (rather than exclusive). Moreover, and relatedly, Mengzi believes that emotions and inclinations play a foundational role in moral development. These convictions suggest in turn that Mengzi’s understanding of flourishing has more in common with the emotionist’s than the rationalist’s.

As we saw above in reference to Claim i (aretaicism-M), Mengzi’s version of the EV has much in common with the EV-E, and the sensitivity view in particular, in that it accords a moral importance to our sentiments or inclinations and regards virtue as a kind of sensitivity to morally important features of situations. Mengzi is in agreement with proponents of a sensitivity view of virtue, like McDowell, in holding that our emotions are normatively directed toward the good. Wrapped up with this view is, as was discussed in Chapter 2, a commitment to motivational internalism.

In short, Mengzi’s description of virtue as naturally attractive—e.g., in Mengzi 6A6, 6A7, and 6A8—helps to ground and explain the related claim that our emotions have moral content. Mengzi’s eudaimonia can thus be compared to McDowell’s, which as we saw in Chapter 2 regards “the relevant reasons for acting, on occasions when they coexist with considerations that on their own would be reasons for acting otherwise,

68 What’s more, study in the Classical Confucian context always has a practical orientation (see Van Norden 2007, 101, quoted in the body of the text above).
as, not overriding, but silencing those other considerations” (McDowell 1980, 370). Virtues benefit the agent by helping her perceive the properly motivating moral qualities, and “silence” other features that may lead her to act in a less excellent way; flourishing is, at least in part, a matter of attending to our own attraction to virtue.

Claim ii-E (eudaimonism-E) was argued to hold that *eudaimonia* is characterized by not only rational activity but also a rich emotional and relational life. As Van Norden (2007) argues, Classical Confucians “have a conception of flourishing different from that of any of the major Western virtue ethicists: one that emphasizes participation in familial life and in ritual activity.” (Van Norden 2007, 39) One way in which Mengzi’s concept of flourishing differs from the EV-E’s is, perhaps, its emphasis on the importance of relationships and roles. While a comparative emphasis on the importance of relationships and roles, as we will see, importantly distinguishes Mengzi’s EV-M from its Western cousins, this could be regarded however as a mere matter of emphasis when it comes to our already articulated Claim ii-E.

I believe that Mengzi’s conception of flourishing is similar enough to Claim ii-E that only a slight modification is necessary to furnish Claim ii-M (or eudaimonism-M):

(ii-M) Virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing; **flourishing is characterized by a rich rational (in a thin sense), ethical, emotional, and relational life.**

In addition to Mengzi’s emphasis on relationships, another difference to note is that Mengzi’s conception of human flourishing is not predicated on an understanding of rational activity—and certainly not in the thick, ratiocinatic sense endorsed by rationalists. And, what’s more, human nature is not characterized by rational activity for Mengzi. So, what is human nature for him?

**Naturalism-M**

Recall that for proponents of the EV, virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function. Mengzi again agrees with his Western virtue ethicist counterparts on this point.

Mengzi says, “That by which humans differ from animals is slight. The masses abandon it. The gentleman [junzi] preserves it.” (Mengzi 2008, 4B19.1) This is similar to Aristotle, who argues that “the virtue
we must examine is human virtue, since we are also seeking the human good and human happiness,” and that for this reason we must leave alone those faculties which are shared with other animals. (NE 2019, 1102a 14–17) Thus, both thinkers focus on what sets humans apart from other creatures in their attempt to isolate characteristic human nature.

And, both thinkers argue that human virtue is closely connected to human nature. For Mengzi, virtue is a matter of “preserving” that aspect of our nature that separates us from animals. But what is this nature, exactly? We saw in the discussion of aretaicism-M, above, that it cannot be reason or rational activity since Mengzi’s Classical Confucian background does not allow for a separation between reason and emotion. To see what characterizes human nature for Mengzi, it is instructive to first see what doesn’t characterize it.

Further evidence that Mengzi takes his view as offering a description of human nature—as distinct from the nature of non-human animals—can be found in Mengzi 6A1–6A4. In these passages, Mengzi debates a rival philosopher, Gaozi, who argues that “everything that has life shares one nature.” (Neo-Confucian commentator Zhu Xi’s [朱熹] gloss on Gaozi’s argument in 6A3, as translated by Van Norden, Mengzi 2008, 145).69 That is, Gaozi believes that human nature is fundamentally the same as the nature of other animals. Gaozi argues that human nature (the nature of all animals in Gaozi’s view), is characterized by “[t]he desires for food and sex,” and is ethically neutral. (Mengzi 2008, 6A4) He argues that

Human nature is like a willow tree; righteousness is like cups and bowls. To make human nature benevolent and righteous is like making a willow tree into cups and bowls… [and further that] Human nature is like swirling water. Make an opening for it on the eastern side, then it flows east. Make an opening for it on the western side, then it flows west. Human nature not distinguishing between good and not good is like water not distinguishing between eastern and western. (Mengzi 2008, 6A1 and 6A2)

Gaozi’s position here can be compared to Mozi’s. Both philosophers claim that human nature is neutral and malleable, and that humans become good through a process of training or shaping. This process by which humans are made good is also similar to Xunzi’s theory of moral cultivation, which as noted above makes heavy use of crafting analogies, like steaming wood to make it straight (Xunzi 2014, Ch. 23, “Human Nature

69 Gaozi claims that “life is what is meant by ‘nature,’” which, Mengzi shows, Gaozi takes to be a relationship of identity or equivalence, i.e., arguing that life and nature mean the same thing (Mengzi 2008, 6A3.1–3; see also Van Norden’s commentary on this passage).
is Bad,” 248). In both Xunzi’s and Gaozi’s view, while human nature has the potential to be transformed into something good, it will not develop this way without significant effort and outside intervention.

Gaozi continues, based on his belief that human nature is neutral, to argue that (at least some) virtues are “external” or socially constructed and enforced rather than part of human nature (Mengzi 2008, 6A4). In particular, Gaozi asserts that righteousness (義, yi), a key Confucian virtue, is external. He supports this by arguing that “[t]hey are elderly, and [so] we treat them as elderly. It is not that they are elderly because of us. Similarly, that is white, and [so] we treat it as white, according to it being white externally to us. Hence, I say [righteousness] is external” (Mengzi 2008, 6A4.1–4.2). In this passage, treating them as elderly may be understood as treating them respectfully or differentially due to their age; an instantiation of righteousness. Again, this argument seems to claim that righteousness is not part of our nature. According to Liu’s (2002) insightful reading of this passage, Gaozi’s argument is that our motivation to be righteous comes from some feature of the world outside us (such as a social convention to respect the elderly).

However, as Xiusheng Liu argues, this argument also relates to the question of motivational internalism versus externalism. In his reply, Mengzi states that

Elderliness is different from whiteness. The whiteness of a white horse is no different from the whiteness of a [white]-haired person. But surely we do not regard the elderliness of an old horse as being no different from the elderliness of an old person? Furthermore, do you say that the one who is elderly is righteous, or that the one who treats another as elderly is righteous? (2008, 6A4.3)

In this reply, Mengzi demonstrates two points. First: although elderliness is a fact of the world, its moral force is at least in part dependent on human recognition or perception of it. While objectively true that both the horse and the white-haired person are elderly, the moral fact of what this elderliness demands (respect and reverence in the case of the old person but not for the horse) differs because of some internal recognition on the part of the subject observing the elderliness.

Second: Mengzi is claiming that the moral motivation to treat elderly people with respect is a feature of human nature; hence, the “righteousness” is a part of one who respects the elderly person (internal), not part of the elderly person (external). As Liu explains it,

Moral qualities are conceptually tied to certain sensibilities. The line between moral and non-moral facts is then to be drawn by reference to characteristically human feelings. [T]he question [of]… why
‘respecting an old horse’ does not involve moral approval but ‘respecting an old person’ does can now be given a full answer. The former does not possess a moral quality, but the latter does. Why? Because the former does not evoke characteristically human feelings or sensibilities, while the latter does (Liu 2002, 119–20).

Through this reading, Liu thus positions Mengzi as a “moral realist of the sensibility theory kind”; in other words, as endorsing a sensitivity view of virtue, à la McDowell (2002, 101). So, if Liu’s reading is correct, Mengzi not only argues in these passages that (1) the virtues are part of human nature and (2) to recognize what virtue calls for is also to be motivated to do it but also (3) that part of the moral motivation is, at least in some cases, borne out by a particular social role or relationship. That is, Mengzi is here arguing that a “characteristically human feeling”—itself a feature of human nature—is evoked or activated by our relationship to human elders. This again supports my reading of Mengzi as endorsing a view similar to the EV-E.

Against Gaozi’s argument in these passages, Mengzi further asks, “Can you make it into cups and bowls by following the nature of the willow tree? You can only make it into cups and bowls by violating and robbing the willow tree.” (Mengzi 2008, 6A1) Mengzi thus explicitly rejects craft metaphors that suggest a need to alter human nature. Recall that, against Mozi’s theory of “impartial care” Mengzi argued that a worthwhile moral theory must be psychologically plausible, and not require people to act against their natures. Again, as a Confucian, Mencius was committed to arguing that our Heaven-given human nature is good, i.e., that we are naturally drawn or directed toward virtue. So, he rejects (or would reject) theories like Mozi’s, Gaozi’s, and Xunzi’s that require us to act against those sentiments or inclinations that are part of our nature.

Mengzi further claims that

70 Liu’s argument has been criticized by A.T. Nuyen (2007). In short, Nuyen accuses Liu of confusing two different meanings of “internal”: in this passage, Nuyen argues, Mengzi means that the motivation to act compassionately (if or when one is motivated to act in this way) comes from within the agent (because of the sprouts). This does not mean that this motivation necessarily overrides other reasons, as a strong motivational internalist account would. In my view, it is unclear whether Mengzi adopts a strong motivational internalism. However, I do believe that Mengzi adopts motivational internalism at least in the weaker sense. Relatedly, in my view Nuyen’s criticism fails to consider that Mengzi believes that virtues are naturally attractive to all people—evidenced, for example, by Mengzi 6A7 noting that “fine patterns and righteousness delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths,” and all hearts prefer these “in common” (2008, 6A7). In short, Nuyen’s criticism fails to take into account Mengzi’s moral psychology. When the claim that compassion is “internal” in the sense of coming from our xin (心) is combined with the claim that all xins recognize the attractiveness of virtue, the gap between these two notions of internalism—as coming from the agent and as motivating—collapses.
Water surely does not distinguish between east and west. But doesn’t it distinguish between upward and downward? Human nature being good is like water tending downward. There is no human who does not tend toward goodness…. Now, by striking water and making it leap up, you can cause it to go past your forehead. If you guide it by damming it, you can cause it to remain on a mountaintop. But is this the nature of water? It is only that way because of the circumstances. When humans are caused to not be good, it is only because their nature is the same way. (Mengzi 2008, 6A2)

As this passage makes clear, Mengzi believes that human nature is teleologically directed toward the good. As we saw with Claims i-M and ii-M, Mengzi believes that humans are naturally attracted to, and sensitive to the requirements of, virtue as part of their nature. And, as we began to see with Liu’s analysis of Mengzi’s debate with Gaozi, part of the moral force of motivating virtues is due to their relational quality.

Mengzi understands human nature as providing the incipient ingredients for virtue in the form of these sprouts, which are located in the uniquely human heart-mind. Thus, for Mengzi, virtues lie at the center of the human psyche in an undeveloped form. He states,

The feeling [xīn, 心]71 of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The feeling of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The feeling of deference is the sprout of propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom.

People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs. To have these four sprouts, yet to claim that one is incapable (of virtue), is to steal from oneself. (Mengzi 2A6.5)

So, for Mengzi, humans are born with the capacity to be virtuous, as they are born with four limbs, which must (and can) be strengthened to be useful.72 As we will see below, this understanding of human nature is importantly different from Aristotle’s.

For Mengzi, each of the cardinal virtues is developed from one of four moral “sprouts” or beginnings. The sprouts are also sometimes translated as “feelings” or “hearts” of virtue, indicating their emotional character.73 Although the beginnings of virtues are naturally present in us, their cultivation also

---

71 While translated in his Mengzi with Selections from Traditional Commentaries as feeling, Van Norden elsewhere (in Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy) translates xīn as “heart”. In different a context, it can also mean “heart-mind”. I devote more time to this rich and complicated concept later in this section, and will further expand on it in the dissertation.

72 One may note here that not everyone is born with four limbs, and it’s possible that not everyone is born with the four sprouts. This raises the question of whether Mengzi is here making a claim about all humans, or just a generic claim about what is typical for humans (cf. Van Norden 2007, 220–221). I believe that Mengzi is arguing that all humans are born with the sprouts. I argue for this claim, and its implications for the EV-M, in Chapter 5.

73 As I have briefly mentioned and discuss in more detail later, the emotional-rational nature of the sprouts is also an important feature of Mengzi’s philosophy, which helps to avoid criticisms of other, more rationalistic virtue theories.
includes a type of habituation or continual effort; as we have seen, part of this moral cultivation is achieved through ritual (里), which Mengzi believes serves to help humans express their incipient, proto-moral emotional and affective tendencies in socially meaningful ways (Sarkissian 2023; Yu 2007).

One difference between Mengzi and Aristotle is revealed by the naturalistic metaphors they employ to discuss the process of virtue cultivation. While both Mengzi and Aristotle hold that the virtues are part of human nature insofar as the potential to develop them is within humans, Mengzi holds that this potential is one that is already directed toward the positive development of virtue. Aristotle, in contrast, seems to hold that human nature is neutral (that is, not more directed toward the development of virtue than of vice).

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes his process of virtue development—habituation or *ethimos*—by comparison to a stone:

> Virtue of character results from habit [ethos]; hence its name ‘ethical’, slightly varied from ethos. Hence it is also clear that none of the virtues of character arises in us naturally. For if something is by nature in one condition, habituation cannot bring it into another condition. A stone, for instance, by nature moves downwards, and habituation could not make it move upwards, not even if you threw it up ten thousand times to habituate it; nor could habituation make fire move downwards, or bring anything that is by nature in one condition into another condition. And so the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature. Rather, we are by nature able to acquire them, and we are completed through habit. (trans. Irwin, 2019, 1103a15–30)

For Aristotle, our natures make us capable of developing the virtues, but do not direct us toward virtue. As Van Norden (2007) notes, Aristotle’s understanding of human nature and corresponding method of virtue cultivation resemble Xunzi’s (and Gaozi’s).74 Mengzi, on the other hand, argues that humans naturally possess the beginnings of virtue.

For Mengzi, the virtues lie at the center of the human psyche but in an underdeveloped form. Moreover, Mengzi thinks that the sprouts are “sufficient” for virtue, meaning that if we have the sprouts we

---

74 As Van Norden glosses it, “Aristotle takes as his paradigm a re-formation model: ‘the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature, but we are by nature able to acquire them, and reach our complete perfection through habit.’ [NE 1103a] In other words, the process of becoming virtuous does not exploit any innate knowledge or virtuous dispositions we have. Rather, we must be habituated to virtue by being made to perform virtuous actions: ‘we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.’ [NE 1103a–b] This may sound superficially like Mengzi’s view, but it is actually closer to Xunzi’s, for Aristotle thinks that the beginner in ethical cultivation does not do virtuous actions ‘in the way in which just or temperate people do them.’ [NE 1105b] Specifically, the beginner does not yet love virtue for its own sake, nor does he act out of a settled state of character. [NE ii.4]” (Van Norden 2007, 50)
can become virtuous as long as we make an effort to morally improve ourselves (and assuming the sprouts are not destroyed by a harmful environment). Again, Mengzi—in accordance with the Classical Confucian tradition—holds that the heart-mind, containing the sprouts, is given to humans by Heaven. Because of this, human nature has a normative, teleological tendency toward virtue; as Kim puts it, Mengzi identifies protomoral inclinations as part of humans’ first (or fundamental, pre-cultural) nature (2018, 147).

Like Aristotle, Mengzi has a forward-looking (or teleological in the thin sense discussed in Chapter 1) but naturalistic understanding of human nature. He explicitly refers to cultivating virtue as a Heaven-given norm toward which humans should strive, and elsewhere argues that

the function [guān, 官] of the heart [xīn, 心] is to reflect [sī, 思]. If it reflects, then it will get it. If it does not reflect, then it will not get it. This is what Heaven has given us. If one first takes one’s stand on what is greater, then what is lesser will not be able to snatch it away. This is how to become a great person. (Mengzi 2008, 6A15.2)

We have seen that for Mengzi human nature is characterized by possession of the sprouts (端, duān). For Mengzi, to develop the sprouts into virtues we first reflect on (attend to or come to recognize, sī, 思) the sprouts, then extend (tuī, 推) them. As we will see in the discussion of Claim iv-M (practical wisdom-M), below, these processes of moral cultivation are relevantly similar to Aristotelian phronesis.

75 Mengzi tells king Xuan of Qi that the heart (or sprout) of compassion is “sufficient” (zúyǐ, 足以) for him to care for his people and become a virtuous king (1A7). This is further supported by the fact that Mengzi elsewhere “goes so far as to identify the four feelings with the virtues themselves, saying, ‘The feeling of compassion is benevolent. The feeling of disdain is righteousess…”’ (Sim 2017, 192; she here quotes from Mengzi 6A6.7). Moreover, Mengzi argues that “Humaneness [rén, 仁] is simply being human. The Way is simply to harmonize with benevolence and put it into words” (2008, 7B16).

76 As A.C. Graham explains in his seminal “The Background of the Mencian [Mengzian] Theory of Human Nature,” human nature (xing, 性) for Mengzi “seems never to be looking back toward birth, always forward to the maturation of continuing growth.” (1976, 2) In other words, to say that something is natural is not to suggest that it is innate or present at birth, but that it will develop if unimpeded. As we have seen above, Aristotle—like Mengzi—holds both that the virtues contribute to human flourishing and are perfections of human nature, yet that human nature is not “thickly” natural in the sense of having no supernatural origin or component.

77 Admiringly repeating from The Odes the conviction that “Heaven gives birth to the teeming people. If there is a thing, there is a norm. This is the constant people cleave to. They are fond of this beautiful Virtue. (Mengzi 6A6.8, quoting from the Odes, Mao no. 260)

78 Mengzi also sometimes uses jí 及 or dá 達 for extension.
So, Mengzi argues that humans differ from other animals in that they possess the Heaven-given capacity to reflect on their (likewise Heaven-given) sprouts; this capacity is the function of their uniquely human heart-mind, which is also the seat of the sprouts. Through fulfilling this function, humans can develop the sprouts into virtues. We can thus regard Mengzi as adhering to Claim iii, identifying virtue with fulfilling human function. Both the sprouts, which are relevantly similar to Aristotelian passions insofar as they provide the starting point for virtues, and the process of cultivating them through reflection and extension (which is relevantly similarly to *phronesis*) are therefore part of human nature. Note, however, that the human function that provides the foundation for virtue and flourishing differs between Mengzi and Aristotle.

Human nature, in Mengzi’s as well as Aristotle’s understanding, is both natural and normative. As Mengzi chides King Xuan, “The commoners fail to receive care only because one does not use one’s kindness. Hence, Your Majesty fails to become [a true, virtuous] King because you do not act, not because you are unable to act.” (Mengzi 2008, 1A7.10) Our nature equips us with the capacity to develop the virtues, and developing them to their full potential is a normative ideal. Elsewhere, he reiterates that the capacity for virtue is common to all humans by nature.79 So, Mengzi relies on an appeal to a universal human nature to ground his understanding of human capacities and flourishing. Returning to Mengzi’s agricultural metaphor, every human possesses the sprouts of virtue.

In a famous example, Mengzi asks us to “[s]uppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well.” In such a situation, Mengzi asserts, anyone would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child’s parents, not because one wanted fame among one’s neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child’s cries. From this we can see that if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human. (Mengzi 2008, 2A6.3)

Through this thought experiment, Mengzi aims to show that it is a natural, immediate, and universal reaction for humans to feel “alarm and compassion” in certain situations, and that this reaction is not driven by

---

79 “In years of plenty, most young men are gentle; in years of poverty, most young men are violent. It is not that the potential that Heaven confers on them varies like this. They are like this because of what sinks and drowns their hearts… in general, things of the same kind are similar. Why would one have any doubt about this when it comes to humans alone? We and the sage are of the same kind.” (Mengzi 6A7)
calculated self-interest; this demonstrates that all humans have the sprouts, that this potentiality for virtue is part of human nature, and that the sprouts produce an immediate, affective response in moral situations.

As noted in Chapter 2, what Aristotle means by “rational activity” has been a subject of disagreement and debate for historical and contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethicists. To review, I argued in Chapter 2 that we can identify a rational and emotional version of Claim iii (respectively). These were the views (1) that: rationality or rational activity ought to be defined in a strict way—as ratiocination, theoretical study, contemplation, deliberation, the ability to grasp and articulate reasons, etc., and the related claim that virtues of the intellectual, or rational per se, part of the soul are superior to moral or character virtues. And (2) that: rational activity ought to be defined broadly as any activity that helps us to live our particularly human form of life well, including activities like creative or artistic expression, forming relationships, and cultivating the character virtues. Because Mengzi’s human function is not “rational activity” but cultivating the sprouts, it is not plagued by the ambiguity Aristotle’s “rational activity” has.

Again, as with the EV-R and EV-E, we can identify a Mengzian expansion on the core EV Claim iii, one that includes the thinker’s particular understanding of human nature. It was argued in Chapter 2 that Claim iii-R holds that it is humans’ rationality, ability to reason, or rational activity (logos) that best or most accurately characterizes their nature. In particular, rationalists also define rationality in a strict way—as ratiocination, theoretical study, contemplation, deliberation, the ability to grasp and articulate reasons, etc. In contrast, Claim iii-E holds that virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human or fulfilling human nature, and that human nature is characterized at least in large part by the possession of emotional instincts or sensitivities that can be developed into virtue(s).

A related idea for proponents of Claim naturalism-E is that the “contingent” features of our nature, including not only our emotions and appetites but also our relationships of dependency with others, are just as important or characteristic as our rational ones. Again, it is clear that for Aristotle human function is rational activity (logos). But, as previously noted, Aristotelians are divided on what counts as “rational activity.” Emotionists will take it very broadly.
For Mengzi, “As for what [humans] are inherently, they can become good. This is what I mean by calling their natures good. As for their becoming not good, this is not the fault of their potential.” (Mengzi 2008, 6A6.5) We can contrast this with Aristotle’s claim that human function is the activity of the rational part of the soul (Nicomachean Ethics, 1098a3–12). In short: the potential for virtue, not rationality, is what makes people people in Mengzi’s view. While the EV-R and EV-E may differ in their understandings of rational activity, because they are part of the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition they both agree that reason characterizes human nature (though, as we have seen, the definition and primacy of reason differ). Unlike both the EV-R and the EV-E, for Mengzi human function is not rational activity but cultivating the sprouts. We can thus define Mengzi’s version of the EV’s Claim iii as:

(iii-M) Performing human function well is a matter of fulfilling human nature; **human nature is characterized by potential for (moral) goodness in the form of the sprouts.**

However, as with the other claims of the EV-M, Mengzi’s understanding of human function is apparently closer to the emotionist’s than the rationalist’s.

While Aristotle and Mengzi are in agreement that we must focus on characteristically human features in order to discover human virtue, and that human nature is best understood in a potential or forward-looking way, they importantly disagree when it comes to determining what, exactly, characterizes human nature. Mengzi focuses on humans’ (jointly reasoning and emotional) ethical capacities, not their rational ones, when he distinguishes human nature from the nature of other animals. Moreover, as we have seen, Mengzi believes that our natural inclinations or passions are already teleologically directed toward virtue, rather than providing neutral content that must be directed or trained.

**Practical Wisdom-M**

I have argued that for proponents of the EV practical wisdom (phronesis) in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue. This is the view’s fourth and final core claim. Notice, however, that this allows for a broad understanding of practical wisdom.

As we saw in Chapter 1, practical wisdom is necessary to guide virtuous action or to fully recognize what virtue requires because virtue ethics is casuistic, and so places emphasis on the ability to discover what
response is called for in a given situation. For proponents of the EV, practical wisdom both allows for the virtuous agent to identify what virtue calls for in disparate situations and ensures that she develops “full” as opposed to natural virtues (or mere semblances of virtues). Mengzi, like virtue ethicists in the Western Aristotelian tradition, was cognizant of the need to allow for casuistry and situational responsiveness for the virtuous person, and of the need for distinguishing between true and apparent virtues.

The acknowledgement that the virtuous person recognizes what the particulars of a situation call for, rather than applying rules indiscriminately, is there from the Analects. As Analects 19.11 puts it: “As long as one does not transgress the bounds when it comes to important Virtues, it is permissible to cross the line here and there when it comes to minor Virtues.” (2013) As we saw above, Mengzi similarly emphasizes the importance of casuistry in enacting virtue, most prominently in 2A2 and 4A17. As he notes in 4A17, the virtuous agent must exercise “discretion” (quán, 權; literally, ‘weighing’) to determine what to do in a given morally ambiguous or fraught situation.

Recall a famous example illustrating the importance of discretion found in Mengzi 4A17:

Mengzi debated Chunyu Kun, who asked, ‘Does ritual [lǐ, 礼] require that men and women not touch when handing something to one another?’
Mengzi replied, ‘That is ritual.’
Chunyu Kun then asked, ‘If your sister-in-law were drowning, would you pull her out with your hand?’
Mengzi replied, ‘Only a beast would not pull out his sister-in-law if she were drowning. It is the ritual that men and women should not touch when handing something to one another, but if your sister-in-law is drowning, to pull her out with your hand is a matter of discretion [quán, 權].’ (2008, 4A17)

In this passage, Mengzi first acknowledges that it is a matter of ritual or etiquette (lǐ), that men and women who are not related or romantically involved should not casually touch (in his cultural context). However, he dismisses as absurd the idea that this norm should prevent one from reaching out to help his sister-in-law if she is drowning.

Really practicing and embodying the virtue of ritual propriety, like all the virtues, is not a matter of uncritically following rules. Rather, the truly virtuous person recognizes that the right thing to do is dependent on the particulars of one’s situation. Mengzi’s philosophy thus embodies the casuistry which
positions virtues, not overarching ethical norms, as the foundation of ethics. Moreover, like Aristotle, Mengzi recognizes the importance of distinguishing between true and “semblances” or “counterfeits” of virtues (Van Norden 2007, 41–58; Yearley 1990, 19–23).

So, we have at least shown that for Mengzi something like practical wisdom, which allows the sage or junzi to use “discretion” and to practice true righteousness (rather than the “righteousness that is not righteousness”) is required. That is, it is clear that Mengzi believes that in order to become virtuous one must develop a kind of sensitivity to or awareness of the casuistic or situational features of particular situations. But what does practical wisdom look like for him, exactly? This question is again complicated, as the discussion of the role of reason and emotion in virtue was, by Mengzi’s metaphysical background.

80 In another example demonstrating the importance of casuistry for Mengzi, Mengzi 1B1, Mengzi’s disciple Yuezhengzi argues that the fact that Mengzi’s mourning rituals for his mother were more “lavish” than for his father does not indicate that he was improperly enacting the virtue of ritual propriety (禮, lǐ), but rather was “due to the difference between being poor and being wealthy” (2008, 1B1.1–2). Mengzi’s more lavish funeral for his mother is justified due to the particular context of his situation—he had more to spend on her funeral than his father’s, as he was wealthier when she died. This also reflects his belief, discussed in §4.2, that rituals are important for their affective qualities, and that they can evolve over time.

81 As Van Norden explains, “The concepts of counterfeits and semblances illuminate some passages in Ruist [Confucian] texts. A paradigmatic demonstration of sagely Virtue in ancient China was for a king to step down and relinquish the throne to someone else (thereby showing his humility and lack of attachment to the prerogatives of rulership). Mengzi observes that this practice can be abused by a counterfeit of virtue. However, he also thinks that counterfeits are likely to be found out: ‘If one is fond of making a name for oneself, one may be able to relinquish a state that can field a thousand chariots. But if one is just not that kind of person, relinquishing a basket of rice or a bowl of soup would show in one’s face’ (7B11). And how else can we understand Mengzi’s reference to ‘the propriety that is not propriety’ and ‘the righteousness that is not righteousness’ (4B6) except as comments on either semblances or counterfeits of propriety and righteousness? Furthermore, the discussion of the ‘village worthies’ is quite lucid when understood as a discussion of semblances: Kongzi said, ‘I hate that which seems but is not. I hate weeds out of fear that they will be confused with grain. I hate cleverness out of fear that it will be confused with righteousness. I hate glibness out of fear that it will be confused with trustworthiness. ...I hate the village worthies, out of fear that they will be confused with those who have Virtue [de, 德].’ (Mengzi 7B37.12; Analects 17.13)” (2007, 42)

82 As Yu points out, there are a number of contenders for a Mengzian analog to practical wisdom. None of them is strongly suggested as the correct one (alone) by the text. He writes, “The notion of appropriateness (yi) appears in the Analects twenty-four times but receives no elaboration, let alone a definition. Appropriateness is also a key notion in Mencius, but he does not do much to clarify it either. Furthermore, there are a number of other intellectual qualities in Confucius and Mencius, such as zhi (wisdom), guan (discretion), and xin (heart/mind).” (2007, 141) ‘To this list I will add my own contenders: reflection (思, sī) and extension (推, tuī). We saw in Chapter 2 that Yu holds a relatively rationalistic reading of Aristotle. He defines practical wisdom for Aristotle as “the virtue of practical rationality, that is, the disposition for making right ethical judgments.” (2007, 140) Accordingly, Yu offers a relatively rationalistic reading of Confucius in making his argument that appropriateness (or righteousness), yi, is the Confucian equivalent of phronesis. However, note that Yu is making an argument for Confucius’s equivalent to phronesis, not Mengzi’s. Mengzi does not divide wisdom into practical and theoretical components, so Mengzi’s wisdom (zhi) cannot be identical to phronesis.'
As David Wong puts it, “Mencius [Mengzi] does not, as Plato and Aristotle do, employ the contrast between reason and emotion to assert the need for the primacy of reason.” (1991, 31). As we have seen, this allows for Mengzi’s understanding of virtues as jointly rational and emotional, with no conceptual distinction between these. We have also seen that Mengzi regards the sprouts—the naturalistic origin for the virtues—as likewise conative. And, his notion of human nature insists that we are teleologically directed toward an appreciation for virtue. What’s more, Mengzi, like Aristotle, believes that something like practical reason is required to cultivate and properly practice the virtues. However, a significant difference between these thinkers is that it is through extension and reflection, not practical reasoning, that Mengzi’s virtuous agent comes to full virtue. As we have already seen, Mengzi thinks that the sprouts or feelings of virtue are “sufficient” (zuyi, 足以) for virtue; this suggests they do not require a separate rational or deliberative process to direct them. (2008, 1A7)

For these reasons, Mengzi’s theory of moral development has less need for practical wisdom, conceived as a separable faculty, than Aristotle’s does. Yes, we have seen that Mengzi recognizes the importance of casuistry and distinguishing between true and counterfeit virtues. This suggests a need for a kind of situational awareness or recognition of casuistic and relational concerns—so, Mengzi must have something akin to practical wisdom in this thin sense. And, there must be some process by which the sprouts are cultivated. What he does not need, though, is a faculty that directs or shapes our natural inclinations so that they can be developed into virtues. Unlike Aristotle (and Xunzi, Mozi, Yang Zhu, and Gaozi), Mengzi’s human nature is not bad or neutral. While the sprouts need nourishment to grow, they do not need training.

This is quite different from the Aristotelian tradition. With Aristotle’s (and his inheritors’) view that human nature is neutral, phronesis is necessary to guide virtuous action or to fully recognize what virtue requires. For Mengzi, the sprouts are already drawn toward what virtue requires. For all proponents of the

83 As noted in §2.2.3, Aristotle believes that practical wisdom is not only necessary but also sufficient for full virtue, and that the virtues of character are, mutatis mutandis, necessary and sufficient for practical wisdom. (NE 1144b30–1145a5) It’s unclear whether Mengzi accepts a similar “unity of the virtues” thesis; and, as discussed in §2.2, this thesis does not seem to be required to ascribe to a eudaimonic view of virtue.
EV, the virtuous agent desires to do the right thing and feels no conflict between his inclinations and what reason requires. But, as we saw, the way this conflict is resolved importantly differs between the rationalist and emotionist conceptions of virtue and practical wisdom. Because he posits no division between rational and appetitive parts of the soul, Mengzi need not think of practical wisdom as conceptually distinct from the sprouts—and so, this problem of how reason and emotion are integrated in the moral psychology of the virtuous agent is also avoided. Let’s explore this in more detail.

As we saw in Chapter 2, rationalists and emotionists again disagree on the particular character and role of practical wisdom. On a rational reading, this deliberative process is similar to “rational calculation” and *phronēsis* the perfection of a (strictly) rational faculty that applies reason to practical matters, or as the ability to correctly reason through which actions one should take in order to further one’s aim of achieving the good. In particular, proponents of Claim iv-R tend to hold that *phronēsis* is the perfection of a kind of deliberation or syllogistic reasoning; *phronēsis* in this view, then, seems to represent reason ruling over the emotions, rather than a unified ratio-emotional virtue. (NE, I.13, 1102b30–1103a5, 1113a3–13)

On an emotional reading, *phronēsis* is contrarily understood either as means-end reasoning or, more commonly, as the perfection of a sensitivity. As we saw in our discussion of Claim i-M above, this latter strategy is connected to an understanding of virtue in general as a kind of sensitivity to the moral force of particular features of a situation. Because emotionists tend to deemphasize the importance of rationality in general, they also regard *phronēsis* less as a separate intellectual faculty but more as an aspect of unified virtuous response or sensitivity which, as Wiggins puts it, “articulates the reciprocal relations of an agent’s concerns and his perception of how things objectively are in the world.” (1980, 48)

---

84 Hagop Sarkissian (2010a) points out that the characterization of Confucius in the *Analects* is that of a virtuous person who does not struggle to act virtuous, but who has perfectly cultivated his emotions and desires such that virtue is easy and attractive for him (*Analects* 2.4). Indeed, the characterization of the person of *de* in both the *Analects* and the *Mengzi* is of one who can naturally and pre-reflexively sense what the right thing to do is (notwithstanding that reaching the point requires effort and habituation). Mengzi states, “Treat your aged kin as the elderly should be treated, and then extend that to the treatment of the aged kinsmen of others; treat your young kin as the young should be treated, and then extend it to the young children of others. If you do this, you will be able to govern the world as though you turned it in your palm… If you extend your kindness it will be enough to protect all within the Four Seas of the world.” (*Mengzi* 2008, 1A7)
Mengzi’s equivalent to *phronesis* is close to the emotionist view of practical wisdom as a sensitivity. For Mengzi, I believe that practical wisdom (or his equivalent) is actually made up of two processes: reflection (sī, 思) and extension (tuī 推). For Mengzi, to develop the virtues we first reflect on (attend to or come to recognize) the sprouts. Bryan Van Norden defines reflection (sī, 思) as “focusing one’s attention upon and thinking about one’s feelings and the situations that elicit them… an activity that involves feelings, thoughts, and perception.” (Mengzi, trans. Van Norden, 2019, 149, notes on 6A6) Van Norden (with Ivanhoe) notes elsewhere that “[a]lthough the term is often translated as ‘thinking,’ it does not generally refer to ratiocination or theoretical reasoning.” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 2005)

As Mengzi uses it, reflection emphasizes attending to the innate feelings the sprouts produce. Once we reflect upon the sprouts, extension helps us come to recognize the proper moral response to a situation. In this sense, it is similar to practical wisdom (*phronesis*) or decision (*prohairesis*) in that it helps guide the agent’s action. However, neither extension nor reflection is a straightforwardly logical or universalizing process, and as we have noted need not be regarded as a separate faculty. In fact, as we saw in the discussion of Mohism above, Mengzi worried that ethical theories that prioritize rationality are psychologically unattainable, since they force us to disregard our natural partiality toward family and friends.

Although there is some disagreement in the literature about how best to understand extension, most scholars agree that it is a kind of “analogical resonance” or recognition between like moral cases or of morally salient features of a situation. This is different from regarding extension as a process of recognizing logical

---

85 For example, he states in 6A6 that “Benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect [sī] upon them.”

86 The idea of rationality as a source for determining the rightness or wrongness of ethical action, which is an undercurrent of many systems of ethics traditionally endorsed by Western philosophers, was thus not unknown to Mengzi. As we saw, a rival philosopher, Mozi, advanced a similar view with his notion of “impartial caring” (jiān ài, 兼愛). So, it seems clear that Mengzi was opposed to the idea of ruling reason as a source of ethical action, not that he merely didn’t think of it. This is demonstrated by his criticism of Yi Zhi, a Mohist, in which he states that “Heaven (Tiān, 天), in giving birth to things, causes them to have one source, but Yi Zhi gives them two.” (Mengzi 3A5)

87 See Ivanhoe 2002, “Confucian Self-Cultivation and Mengzi’s Notion of Extension,” 221–21. In this essay Ivanhoe discusses prevailing views of extension and provides his own take. David Wong (2002), in contrast to Ivanhoe’s “resonance” view, proposes an understanding of extension as a type of “analogical reasonings,” in which (as Emily
consistency between relevantly similar situations, but still includes a rational component in the thin sense of a kind of cultivated sensitivity that allows the virtuous agent to pick up on which features of a situation are morally important.\footnote{As P.J. Ivanhoe explains it, extension can be thought of as analogous to learning music. A student learning to extend the moral feelings of the sprouts into full virtues first learns to recognize the moral sprouts based on past experience; he then learns to “regularly engage his moral sense,” and to “pick out the chord again” in new situations. (2002, 232)} As P.J. Ivanhoe explains it, extension can be thought of as analogous to learning music. 

As we have already seen, this is possible because Mengzi endorses motivational internalism as well as an understanding of human nature as good. So, humans are both capable of recognizing what is morally required, and naturally motivated to do what is required. Through the process of extension, Mengzi argues, we can achieve full virtue: “if one extends one’s kindness, it will be sufficient to care for all within the Four Seas… That in which the ancients greatly exceeded others was no other than this. They were simply good at extending what they did” (Mengzi 2008, 1A7)\footnote{As with other Confucians, Mengzi takes the ancient sage-kings to be paragons of virtue or moral exemplars. This statement is thus suggesting that extension is the key to cultivating full virtue. In a similar passage, he claims “That which people are capable of without studying is their best capability. That which they know without pondering is their best knowledge… Treating one’s parents as parents is benevolence. Respecting one’s elders is righteousness. There is nothing else to do but extend these to the world.” (Mengzi 7A15)}

Alternative conceptions of extension have been proposed, e.g., by David Wong (2002) and Emily McRae (2011). Wong (2002) proposes an understanding of extension as a type of “analogical reasoning,” in which “the moral agent judges one case to be relevantly analogous to another prior to formulating an abstract principle stating that relevant characteristic” (Wong 2002; McRae 2011, 593). In Wong’s view of extension “reasoning is insufficient, but at the same time integral to the process of extending feeling by changing the intentional objects of feeling and thereby refining and altering the direction in which feeling is ‘aimed’”
He rejects both a “logical extension” view, which posits that extension plays the role of a systemizing rational principle, and “emotive extension,” which suggests that extension has no rational component at all. McRae similarly emphasizes the emotional-rational nature of the sprouts, and “agree[s] with Wong’s rejection of the logical and emotive interpretations of extension” (2011, 593).

According to both thinkers, in the “emotive extension” view “[t]he feeling is already within us; extension is simply the process of getting us to recognize the need for such extension. Once this need is recognized, the emotion is effortlessly and, in a sense, automatically applied to the appropriate objects” (McRae 2011, 592). McRae, like Wong, recognizes that Mengzi’s extension must be developed, but disagrees that analogical reasoning is the way it is developed. Rather, she argues that “extension engages our rational and intellectual capacities by requiring some reflection on human nature, the nature of virtue, and the nature of its cultivation[ and] works to cultivate our feelings by accessing and manipulating those beliefs, judgments, and images that trigger, maintain, heighten, and lessen our affective states” (2011, 594). So, for both Wong and McRae, extension is a process of using reason to develop the proto-ethical affective sprouts. For Wong, reason helps lead us to recognize relevant similarities between cases; for McRae, it helps us reflect on and identify the sprouts.

There is much I agree with in both Wong’s and McRae’s (differing) interpretations. In particular, I think both thinkers are correct in emphasizing the extent to which Mengzi’s method of moral cultivation, in the form of extension, requires what in a Western context would be considered (conceptually distinct) rational and emotional components. Keep in mind, though, that for Mengzi the sprouts are already regarded as having conative elements. So, extending the sprouts need not require a conceptually distinct, thickly rational process. And, as we have seen, reflection may be conceived not in a strictly deliberative way but as an attending to the natural sensitivity the sprouts give us to morally motivating features of the world.

In addition to being an expansion of our natural ethical feelings to relevant situations, I believe extension should be seen more fully as also “extending” one’s emotional-rational sprouts to different relational or role-based ties and obligations that are present within the same situation. In this way, extension
can account for a rational component, in the thin sense of a cultivated sensitivity. This also accords with Slingerland’s (2011) reading of extension; he writes:

Although many scholars have portrayed this process of Mencian [Mengzian] extension as a rational equation of logically similar situations, it seems more accurate to understand it as a process of ‘analogical resonance,’ involving ‘emotional resonance not cognitive similarity’ (Ivanhoe 2002, p. 226). In addition to his skill as a moral psychoanalyst, Mencius has at his disposal the standard tools of Confucian moral self-cultivation — ritual, music, the inspiring examples of the sage kings—which clearly involve a kind of analog, somatic-emotional prototype modeling. Moreover, it is precisely these sorts of cultural templates for thought and behavior that could be expected to ensure proper behavior in creatures guided by habit and automaticity: the absence of an all-powerful, all-knowing cognitive commander-in-chief matters little if ritual and custom are there to catch you.” (Slingerland 2011, 98)

We’ve seen that Mengzi, like Aristotle, believes virtues must be cultivated or habituated, and that this is done in part through communal moral education. However, as Slingerland here explains, learning to be need not entail a strictly logical or ratiocinatic understanding of, e.g., similar articulable reasons for acting. Rather, Mengzi’s process of extensions can be said to be rational in a thin sense of being responsive to reason, without holding (as, e.g., a proponent of the EV-R would) that the virtuous agent must be able to “give an account” of these reasons (Annas 2011, Bloomfield 2000, Hills 2016).

We also saw from Ivanhoe’s “analogical resonance” conception of extension one way of conceiving of extension as akin to a sensitivity to morally salient features of situations. Van Norden endorses a similar reading of Mengzi’s method of moral cultivation, which Wong (2002, 191) identifies as close to the emotive extension view (that the latter rejected as insufficiently rational). As Van Norden explains it,

‘[Active] Self-cultivation’ refers to practices that an individual engages in through his own agency. Self-cultivation may be divided into two types: ‘inner-directed’ and ‘outer-directed.’ Inner-directed cultivation involves a turning of mental focus inward. Outer-directed cultivation involves turning one’s mental focus to external situations, individuals, and texts. The lines between these kinds of

---

90 Slingerland further argues that this is in line with Confucius’ theory of moral education. He notes that in “Analects 13.5… Confucius remarks, ‘Imagine a person who can recite the several hundred Odes by heart but, when delegated a governmental task, is unable to carry it out, or when sent abroad as an envoy, is unable to engage in repartee. No matter how many Odes he might have memorized, of what use are they to him?’ As many commentators have noted, the point of Confucius’ remark is that learning involves not merely the acquisition of abstract scholastic knowledge, but more importantly the ability to flexibly apply this knowledge in real-life situations. As is made quite clear throughout early Confucian texts, this sort of ability is only acquired once one has learned how to feel the right sort of things at the right sorts of times, and this sort of feeling can only be produced by an acculturation process—involving music, ritual, and role-model emulation—that transforms both the body and the mind of the student.” (Slingerland 2011, 81)
cultivation are not sharp... In addition, outer-directed cultivation involves inward processing of what is experienced as external. (2007, 227–228)

Active inner-directed ethical cultivation requires reflecting (sī, 思) on the sprouts.91 Active outer-directed ethical cultivation, or extension, Van Norden argues, “is a way of focusing one’s mind on external situations that allows one to come to see them more clearly and (we might say) ‘feel them more clearly’” (2007, 234). Thus, Van Norden adopts a reading of Mengzi’s moral cultivation that emphasizes the emotive component of the sprouts (“inner” cultivation) as well as a notion of extension as improving a kind of sensitivity (“outer” cultivation). Again, this understanding of reflection and extension suggest that, for Mengzi, cultivating and practicing the virtues require a process of reflecting on (in a thin sense of attending to or noticing) our natural attraction to virtue that is given as part of our human nature, then cultivating a sensitivity (which is rational in a thin sense) to what virtue calls for in disparate situations.

The perfection of this combined process of reflection and extension is, then, relevantly similar to the role of practical wisdom in Aristotelian conceptions of virtue development and practice.92 This is because, together, they allow us to attend to and cultivate the sprouts into virtues, as well as to practice the virtues correctly as required by particular situations. However, in my reading Mengzi’s process of moral cultivation, in the form of reflection and extension, is more akin to cultivating innate feelings or inclinations which are

---

91 As Van Norden further explains, “to sī the sprouts is to focus one’s attention on the sprouts in a way that involves longing for their proper development [and...] delighting in their operation” (2007, 232) In his notes on Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries (2008) Van Norden similarly defines reflection (sī, 思) as “focusing one’s attention upon and thinking about one’s feelings and the situations that elicit them... an activity that involves feelings, thoughts, and perception.” (2008, 149, notes on Mengzi 6A6).

92 Although Mengzi thinks of the virtues as character traits, it is not clear that this ratio-emotional process of reflection and extension admits of a virtue in the strict Aristotelian sense of being a disposition or state (as phronesis is). This difficulty arises due to comparing two traditions with very different metaphysical understandings of the soul. While they might not be an exact analog, we might consider someone who has perfected the process of extension (and reflection) as possessing a “floodlike qi.” Qi is a notoriously difficult-to-translate metaphysical concept. It can be described generally as a kind of moral energy. Mengzi describes himself as being “good at cultivating [his] floodlike qi” in Mengzi 2A2, and clarifies that this is “a qi that is supremely great and supremely unyielding. If one cultivates it with uprightness and does not harm it, it will fill up [sai, 塞] the space between Heaven and Earth.” In his commentary on this passage, Zhu Xi explains that “[by] ‘cultivating the qi,’ one has the wherewithal to harmonize with the Way and righteousness and to not be in fear about any situation in the world. This is the manner in which he can assume a great responsibility yet have an unperturbed heart.” (Mengzi 2008, 39) This suggests that possessing the floodlike qi may result from fully extending one’s virtue; however, more research is required to determine the exact relationship between qi and extension.
already directed toward virtue, rather than shaping, directing, or constraining the neutral contents of human nature. This is an important consequence of the different understanding of human nature as, for Mengzi, important characterized by emotions and inclinations that are teleologically directed toward the good, compared to the Aristotelian tradition’s more neutral view.93

That is not to say that the process is not rational at all—like McRae and Wong, I think it is important to note that there is a rational component. What I want to emphasize, though, is that this rational component is rational in a thin sense, like that endorsed by proponents of aretaicism-E and practical wisdom-E, and that this rationality is already part of the sprouts. As we have seen, Mengzi does not understand the human psyche as divisible between (properly) rational and less rational parts. For this reason, his equivalent to practical wisdom is not regarded as a faculty of a separate part of the soul, and so the question of how the intellect and the emotions relate with regard to virtue is avoided entirely.

This less rationalistic understanding is a key difference between Aristotle (at least as his thought has been traditionally understood) and Mengzi—one which allows for a process of practical reasoning that does not require shaping our emotions to obey reason, as the EV-R has it. At the same time, because reflection and extension are jointly reasoning and emotional, Mengzi’s equivalent to practical wisdom needn’t be relegated to a mere means-end reasoning, as in the view of some proponents of the EV-E.

Finally, while we have seen that Mengzi’s analog to practical reason is similar to those proponents of the EV who endorse a “sensitivity” view of virtue, virtue cultivation and practice is moreover importantly relationally responsive for Mengzi. As I have argued elsewhere (Lebkuecher 2024) and will argue in more detail in the following chapter, this emphasis on the importance of our ever-shifting relationships and role obligations helps Mengzi’s particular version of a sensitivity view of virtue avoid the criticisms we discussed in

93 As we saw in Chapter 1, Aristotle’s understanding of human nature is also teleological (as are all instantiations of the EV). That is, Mengzi and Aristotle agree that virtues are characteristics which humans can develop by nature, and that developing them will contribute to their objective flourishing (i.e., both endorse the EV’s core claims of naturalism and eudaimonism). However, as we have further seen, Aristotle holds that “the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature. Rather, we are by nature able to acquire them, and we are completed through habit.” (NE 1103a30) This makes his theory of human nature similar to Xunzi’s—suggesting a “constructivist” or “reformation” model of moral cultivation rather than and “naturalist” or “developmental” one. To borrow from Kim (2018), Aristotle holds that our ‘first nature’ equips us to develop virtue but is not already directed toward virtue (contra Mengzi).
Chapter 3 of this view—i.e., as unable to respond to the situationist critique or to explain cross-cultural variation.\footnote{In short, I argued in my 2024 article that both Mengzi and McDowell (a proponent of the sensitivity view of virtue) endorse a particular kind of motivationally internalist naturalistic moral realism, and explain virtue as analogous to perception of secondary qualities. However, because the sensitivity view downplays the role of practical wisdom conceived of as a kind of deliberation in favor of a conviction that precludes the possibility of true or “clear eyed” weakness of will insofar as the virtuous agent just “sees” what virtue requires and is motivated to do it, it is difficult to account for apparent differences in moral perception or examples of a virtuous agent changing her mind about what is morally correct. Applied to the situationist critique, as we saw in Chapter 3, a related problem is that virtue for emotionists is a matter of perception, sensitivity, or attention, and they explicitly deny that the phronimos must be able to explain their actions, or indeed that their actions need be the result of (an analytic, syllogistic, or articulate kind of) reasoning at all (McDowell 1998; Rietveld 2010). For this reason, unless we can explain that seemingly contingent or non-moral features of situations in fact have legitimate moral force, the EV-E cannot seem to explain how or why a virtuous agent can escape the situationist critique. Again, this argument will be developed in more detail in the following chapter (Chapter 5). There, we will see that the relational conception of personhood and morality endorsed by Mengzi provides a fruitful avenue of response.}

Call Mengzi’s understanding of practical wisdom Claim iv-M (or practical wisdom-M):

(iv-M) Practical wisdom, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue; \textit{practical wisdom can be understood more specifically as the perfection of an emotional-rational process of extending and reflecting on the sprouts.}

While it is true that Mengzi holds something akin to practical wisdom to be required to develop full virtue, in his notions of extension and reflection, his is a much less rationalistic conception than the EV-R reading of Aristotle. In my view, Mengzi’s practical-wisdom-M shares some commonalities with the EV-E’s notion of practical wisdom as a sensitivity, but goes beyond it by emphasizing the importance of sensitivity to relationships. And, unlike both the EV-E and EV-R, there is no assumption of reason and emotion as conceptually distinct components of human psychology as Aristotle’s tripartite soul suggests. Due to this difference Mengzi provides a fruitful way of thinking about practical reasoning (and its corresponding virtue, practical wisdom) that is jointly reasoning and emotional.\footnote{Although Mengzi did not share Aristotle’s tripartite understanding of the soul, this jointly reasoning and emotional understanding of extension (and of the heart-mind) suggests that we would reject the Aristotelian notion of a rational part of the soul intervening on our natural appetites. May Sim argues that “while Aristotle relegates our desiring part that includes our feelings and appetites to the non-rational soul, for Mencius, feeling and thinking stem from the same heart/mind. For Aristotle, feelings aren’t the beginnings of virtues; they must be trained to abide by reason and respond appropriately for someone to become virtuous.” (2018, 191)}

Aristotle’s understanding of practical wisdom (\textit{phronesis}) as the perfection of a deliberative capacity or intellectual virtue is a product of his understanding of the soul as divided into rational, affective, and nutritive parts, as well as his conviction that human nature is ethically neutral. As we saw above, Classical Chinese
understandings of the soul or mind did not have the same strict rational/emotional division. Rather, they understood what Aristotle would think of as the affective and rational parts as both located in the heart-mind (xīn, 心). This significant difference in ancient Greek and Chinese moral psychology allows for Mengzi’s understanding of the sprouts—and thus the virtues, including wisdom—as both reasoning and emotional.

Despite this comparatively less rationalistic quality, I have argued that Mengzi’s combined process of reflection (sī, 思) and extension (tuī 推) can be considered a type of practical reason. This is because, like phronesis, these processes together allow for the development of virtues and their successful performance.

### 4.4 Conclusion

We have seen that Mengzi’s EV is characterized by the four core claims that:

(i-M) Virtues, in the sense of excellent character traits or dispositions are the foundation of ethics or ethical action; virtues are relationally responsive, and are further both rational and emotional—these are not separable aspects of human psychology.

(ii-M) Virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing; flourishing is characterized by a rich rational (in a thin sense), ethical, emotional, and relational life.

(iii-M) Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function or fulfilling human nature; human nature is characterized by potential for (moral) goodness in the form of the sprouts.

---

96 The heart-mind “refer[s] to the physical organ in the chest, but... [also to] the psychological faculty of thinking, perceiving, feeling, desiring, and intending”; it is also “the seat of our ethical inclinations.” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 393 and 126 [respectively].) The heart-mind is also the location of the moral “feelings” (the sprouts).

97 Like Aristotle, wisdom is one of Mengzi’s virtues (zhi, 智). However, these thinkers’ understandings of wisdom, and its relationship to virtue cultivation and performance, seem to differ dramatically; and, I suspect it is unlikely that zhi plays an equivalent role to phronesis for a few reasons. First, Mengzi’s virtue of wisdom is not located in a separate part of the soul from the character or moral virtues, like Aristotle’s is. Instead, it is the perfection of the sprout of knowing right from wrong (shifei zhi xin, 是非之心), and like the other sprouts is located in the heart-mind; so, like the other sprouts, it has both a rational and emotional component. As we saw from David Wong, “Mencius does not, as Plato and Aristotle do, employ the contrast between reason and emotion to assert the need for the primacy of reason.” (1991, 31). This is quite different from Aristotle’s notion of practical wisdom, which is the perfection of a kind of deliberation or syllogistic reasoning; phronesis seems to represent reason ruling over the emotions, rather than a unified ratio-emotional virtue. (NE, I.13,1102b30–1103a5; 1113a3–13) Moreover, Mengzi does not divide wisdom into practical and theoretical components, so Mengzi’s wisdom (zhi) cannot be identical to phronesis. Perhaps the most powerful objection to this reading is put forward by Myeong-seok Kim. Kim argues against “the recent trend in the scholarship on Mengzi that emphasizes the positive roles emotions play in one’s ethical life and argues that there is no significant contrast or distinction between reason and emotion in Mengzi’s thought,” specifically targeting David Wong (and David S. Nivison). (2014, 49–50.) The thrust of his argument is that scholars of Mengzi’s thought have often seen the four moral sprouts as analogous; but, Kim claims, the sprout of knowing right from wrong, which can be cultivated into the virtue of wisdom is not a “cognitive feeling” as the other sprouts are supposed to be, but in fact is akin to means-end reasoning or judgment. (2014, 53.)
Practical wisdom, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue; practical wisdom can be understood more specifically as the perfection of an emotional-rational process of extending and reflecting on the sprouts.

And, we have explored some important differences between Mengzi’s EV-M and the EV-R and EV-E discussed in Chapter 2. In the following chapter, the resources that Mengzi’s version of the EV provides for addressing the critiques levied at the EV from disability scholars, feminists, and empirical psychologists will be investigated.
CHAPTER 5

A MENGZIAN RESPONSE TO THE THREE AVENUES OF CRITIQUE

5.1 Introduction

We have seen that contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics theories can be understood as leaning either emotional or rational, and that this division can be seen both in the historical development of Western eudaimonic virtue ethics and among contemporary proponents of the EV (Chapter 2). Moreover, I have argued that these differing “emotional” (EV-E) and “rational” (EV-R) versions of the EV are differently vulnerable to the critical camps introduced in Chapter 3. In particular, I argued that the feminist and disability critiques are more damning against the EV-R due to its narrower understanding of human nature, flourishing, and practical wisdom (as rational), and that the psychology critique is more damning to the EV-E due to its understanding of practical wisdom as akin to a sensitivity.

Despite these differing vulnerabilities, it was also argued in Chapter 3 that both the EV-R and EV-E are threatened, at least to some extent, by all three avenues of critique. This is because the criticisms target the EV’s core features (explained in Chapter 1). To review, the four core features are the views that

(i) Virtue, in the sense of “an excellent trait of character… a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor… to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways” is the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., aretaicism);
(ii) Virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., eudaimonism);
(iii) Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good performance of human function; doing this is a matter of fulfilling human nature (i.e., naturalism); and
(iv) Practical wisdom, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue.

As we saw in Chapter 3, the disability and feminist critiques attack Claims ii–iv, by problematizing the EV’s reliance on an understanding of human nature and flourishing predicated on rationality, understood strictly as
ratiocination, deliberation, or decision. As disability theorists and feminists have argued, this understanding precludes some humans from being able to develop virtue or achieve eudaimonia, despite the theory’s purported empirical and universal grounding. The psychology critique attacks Claim i by problematizing the existence of virtues, regarded as well-entrenched character traits that can predictably motivate and guide action and which are universal parts of human nature. Because the EV-E regards virtue as akin to a sensitivity or perceptual capacity, it cannot adequately explain how the *phronimos* could counteract the influence of the morally irrelevant situational features that situationists have identified as impacting behavior. Moreover, it is less equipped to explain cross-cultural variation in virtues.

The first three chapters of the dissertation therefore served to identify the positive and characteristic features of the EV, its two main (rational and emotional) trends of interpretation and expansion in the Western tradition, and the three major critiques that have been levied against it. In Chapter 4, I introduced Mengzi’s version of the EV, including explaining both his commitment to the EV’s core claims and some important points of difference between his view and that of Western eudaimonic virtue ethical theories.

It was argued in Chapter 4 that Mengzi’s moral theory ascribes to the four core claims of the EV (introduced in Chapter 1). So, Mengzi’s moral theory can be considered a version of the EV. As noted in Chapter 1, the EV’s four key features ground what proponents of the theory see as its important advantages: its agent-centeredness or *aretaicism*; the close connection it maintains between ethical reasoning and agents’ personality, motives, and emotions; the theory’s acknowledgement of the importance of emotions and community in moral education; and finally virtue ethics’ situational responsiveness or casuistry.

To review, Claim i—the centering of virtues, understood as character traits, as the starting point for ethics—implies the first three “pros” of the theory: its *aretaicism*, the close connection it draws between ethical reasoning and agents’ personality, motives, and emotions, and its emphasis on the importance of emotional

---

1 This is because Mengzi regards virtues as traits of character and the starting point for ethical evaluation (see *Mengzi*, trans. Van Norden, 2008, 1A1, 1A6 2A2, 4B28, 6A10, 7B10, 7B33); suggests that cultivating virtue is required for flourishing (6A7, 6A6, 6A8, 6A10, 7A4); regards the virtues as fulfilling human nature or function (2A6, 4B19, 6A1–6A4, 6A6, 6A15, 7B16); and believes that something akin to practical wisdom (namely, for Mengzi, reflection and extension) is required for developing full virtues (1A7, 2A2, 4A17). For more about Mengzi’s adherence to the EV, see Chapter 4, §4.3.
cultivation and communal moral education. Claims ii and iii—eudaimonism and the virtues’ grounding in human nature—provide further support for the psychological harmony desideratum and support the theory’s empirical plausibility by suggesting that ethics is grounded in discoverable features of the natural world. Claim iv, the theory’s emphasis on phronesis, helps to ground its emphasis on situational responsiveness or casuistry and to explain the intuition that moral exemplars happily do what’s right but that doing the right thing requires effort.2 Because Mengzi’s theory endorses the four bare claims of the EV, his EV-M comes along with these advantages.

As we further saw in Chapter 4, though, Mengzi’s moral theory also differs significantly from those versions of the EV that were described in Chapter 2. In particular, major differences lie in Mengzi’s Confucian—as opposed to Aristotelian—conceptions of the natural (and supernatural) world and of human nature; his understandings of the mind or soul, of what the virtues are, and how they are cultivated; the role ascribed to rationality in virtue; and the extent to which flourishing and virtue are relational as opposed to individual. Due to these differences, Mengzi’s version of the EV puts forward a comparatively relational understanding of persons and virtues, as well as a conviction that human nature is good (xìng shàn, 性善; Mengzi, trans. Van Norden, 2008, 6A2, 6A6) and a moral psychology that does not suggest rationality and emotion are clearly distinguishable.3 As we’ll see in this chapter, these differences allow a Mengzian EV to navigate some of the criticisms (discussed in Chapter 3) that the EV has faced.

5.2 The EV-R, EV-E, and EV-M

We identified Mengzian expansions on the EV’s core claims in Chapter 4, just as we identified the rationalist and emotionist versions of these claims in Chapter 2. Mengzi’s EV-M reflects his Classical

---

2 If you endorse an ethical theory without, e.g., Claim i, you lose the advantage of the theory’s empirical and psychological plausibility insofar as virtues are the means by which agents’ emotional and communal moral development is explained. Without Claim ii, the close connection between our motives or desires and ethical reasoning is lost. Without Claim iii, the naturalistic grounding—and so accessibility—of morality is lost. And finally, without Claim iv casuistry, situational responsiveness, and the concept of moral exemplars who happily do what’s right are lost.

3 That is, as a consequence of Mengzi’s Confucian commitments, his version of EV (the EV-M) importantly differs from the EV-R and EV-E in having a more relational and situationally responsive understanding of persons and virtues. Moreover, Mengzi’s innovative theory of human nature and moral cultivation leads him to adopt an understanding of human nature (as good and characterized by possessing the sprouts) that also differs from the Aristotelian model.
Confucian metaphysical commitments as well as his innovations in moral psychology. Mengzi’s version of the
EV was said to be characterized by the following four claims:

(i-M) Virtues, in the sense of excellent character traits or dispositions are the foundation of ethics or ethical
action; virtues are relationally responsive, and are further both rational and emotional—these
are not separable aspects of human psychology.

(ii-M) Virtue is at least partially constitutive of human well-being/flourishing; flourishing is characterized
by a rich rational (in a thin sense), ethical, emotional, and relational life.

(iii-M) Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human, or in the good
performance of human function or fulfilling human nature; human nature is characterized by
potential for (moral) goodness in the form of the sprouts.

(iv-M) Practical wisdom, in the sense of understanding how to live well, is required for achieving full virtue;
practical wisdom can be understood more specifically as the perfection of an emotional-rational
process of extending and reflecting on the sprouts.

Each of these represents an expansion on the EV’s bare claims; I have bolded Mengzi’s additions. These
additions can also be called aretaicism-M, eudaimonism-M, naturalism-M, and practical wisdom-M.

In Chapter 2, I argued that the EV has been understood in the Western tradition along a spectrum
as, on the one hand, taking up an ethical account that emphasizes the role of reason in virtue, and, on the
other, emphasizing the role of the emotions. I called these the EV-R and EV-E, respectively. As we further
noted in Chapter 2, both of these readings of, or expansions on, the core EV can be plausibly supported by
Aristotle’s work (and, I have not argued that either is more accurate than the other).

To summarize these views, we saw in Chapter 2 that rationalists hold that virtue or virtuous action
consists (at least in large part) of rational control or guidance of emotion; that a eudaimon life is characterized
by rationality or rational activity understood strictly as ratiocination or contemplation; that human nature is
fundamentally rational, or that rationality (again understood strictly) is what makes people people, and that
practical wisdom is the perfection of a rational process. In short, these thinkers either read Aristotle as putting
forward a view in which virtue is more rational than emotional or hold that such a view is a correct
understanding of virtue. Proponents of at least some of the four claims of the EV-R were identified as Julia
Annas, Paul Bloomfield, Ben Bradley, Sarah Broadie, J.M. Cooper, Alison Hills, Rosalind Hursthouse,

---

4 As we saw in Chapter 4, each of these expansions on the EV’s core claims reflects Mengzi’s convictions, based on his
Confucian background and differing metaphysical and moral psychological assumptions, that human nature is best
understood as relationally constituted and characterized by humans’ possession of the conative, jointly rational and
emotional, sprouts.
Emotionists, on the other hand, hold that our emotions have important normative content, and that by attending to them they can help direct us toward moral truth and the good life. Emotion and reason are not seen as opposed, nor rationality as primary or more characteristic of human nature (or of the soul/mind) than emotion. Rather than the virtuous agent using her reason to control or direct her emotions, she reflects on or attends to the way emotions like love, anger, or shame can help her to ascertain what is ethically required. Moreover, and relatedly, this view sees phronesis as not akin to the wisdom of a technically skilled artisan, nor as rational calculation or syllogistic reasoning, but rather as a kind of cultivated moral sense or perception. Relatedly, though it is rational in a broad sense, phronesis in this view is seen as an undifferentiated aspect of the affective dispositions of a virtuous agent. Proponents of at least some of the four claims of the EV-E were identified as Sarah Broadie, Mario De Caro (et al.), Dan Haybron, Kristján Kristjánsson, Antti Kauppinen, Christine Korsgaard, Mauro Rossi and Christine Tappolet, John McDowell, David Wiggins, and Bernard Williams. But where does Mengzi’s version of the EV fall along this spectrum?

We noted in Chapter 2 that three particular points of disagreement between proponents of the EV-R and EV-E are: (a) the role and character of practical wisdom (phronesis), since it is an intellectual virtue but...
necessary for the moral virtues; (b) whether the emotions or reason identify the end of, or provides the motivation for, virtuous action; and (c) what precisely it means to say that human nature is characterized by rationality or rational activity. The EV-R, as we saw, holds that practical wisdom is akin to theoretical wisdom or skilled expertise, positioning it as an intellectual virtue that helps to guide or direct the affective element of virtue (Claim iv-R). The EV-E, on the other hand, downplays the rational element and insists that practical wisdom is closer to an undifferentiated sensitivity or perceptual capacity (Claim iv-E). The EV-R focuses on reason as identifying the end of virtuous action, while the EV-E says the emotions do. And finally, the EV-R holds that a eudaimonic life is one spent in contemplation or study and that it is in practicing these strictly rational pursuits that human nature is best realized (Claims ii-R and iii-R), while the EV-E holds that humans’ rational nature, and the rational activity that constitutes a eudaimon life, must be understood broadly to include rationally responsive appetites and emotions, as well as humans’ social nature (Claims ii-E and iii-E).

As we further saw in that chapter, because the EV-E and EV-R are expansions upon the Western Aristotelian tradition they share in common the underlying assumption that the human psyche can be divided into rational and emotional parts, and that human nature is primarily characterized by rational activity. Thus, although Mengzi’s view has much in common with the sensitivity view of virtue (i.e., the EV-E), it differs from both versions of the Western EV on these points. For this reason, some of the identified points of difference between the EV-R and EV-E will not perfectly apply to Mengzi’s EV-M.

This is because Mengzi does not separate between intellectual and moral virtues, so the question of how an intellectual virtue like phronesis relates to moral virtues is nonsensical. Relatedly, the lack of distinction between reason and emotion generally makes the question of which provides moral motivation difficult to parse. And, finally, as we have seen, Mengzi does not characterize human nature by rationality or rational activity (but by possession of the proto-moral sprouts). Nevertheless, because the debate between the relative roles of emotions versus reason in virtue is a major feature of both the eudaimonic virtue ethics tradition and contemporary EV debates, it is helpful to identify how Mengzi fits into this conversation. Below, please compare each of the EV-R’s, EV-E’s, and EV-M’s expansions on the four core claims of the EV:
Table 2. The EV-R, EV-E, and EV-M’s Expansions Compared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EV-R</th>
<th>EV-E</th>
<th>EV-M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i-R) virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of rationally controlling or directing emotional impulses or appetites (aretaicism-R).</td>
<td>(i-E) virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of attending to our emotions or sentiments and recognizing their normative content (aretaicism-E).</td>
<td>(i-M) virtues are relationally responsive, and are further both rational and emotional—these are not separable aspects of human psychology (aretaicism-M)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii-R) flourishing is characterized by rational activity, understood strictly as ratiocination or contemplation (eudaimonism-R).</td>
<td>(ii-E) flourishing is characterized by not just (strictly) rational activity but also by a rich emotional and relational life (eudaimonism-E).</td>
<td>(ii-M) flourishing is characterized by a rich rational (in a thin sense), ethical, emotional, and relational life (eudaimonism-M).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii-R) human nature is fundamentally characterized by reason or rational activity (naturalism-R).</td>
<td>(iii-E) human nature is characterized at least in large part by the possession of emotional instincts or sensitivities that can be developed into virtue(s) (naturalism-E).</td>
<td>(iii-M) human nature is characterized by potential for (moral) goodness in the form of the sprouts (naturalism-M).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iv-R) practical wisdom can be understood as the perfection of a (strictly) rational process (practical wisdom-R).</td>
<td>(iv-E) practical wisdom can be understood as the perfection of a sensitivity (practical wisdom-E).</td>
<td>(iv-M) practical wisdom can be understood as the perfection of an emotional-rational process of extending and reflecting on the sprouts (practical wisdom-M).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 (above) shows, these three versions of the EV—despite agreeing with the EV’s base claims—have very different ideas about what virtue, flourishing, human nature, and practical wisdom are like (note that this table lists only each version’s expansion on the core claims, not the core claims themselves).

The EV-E and EV-M have in common that both emphasize emotions comparative to the EV-R. But the EV-M also differs from both the EV-R and EV-E in its understanding of human nature, its moral psychology, and the comparatively relational character of virtue and moral agency it suggests. We will see in this chapter that these differences provide the EV-M with resources to address Chapter 3’s critiques.

The starkest difference between Aristotle and Mengzi is that, for Mengzi, “moral inclinations are the only natural impulses that belong exclusively to [hu]man[s].” (Graham 2002, 19). For Mengzi, then, “moral capacity (not reason, as in the Western tradition) [is] what primarily distinguishes[s] human from animal nature”; thus, morality or the potential for virtue is the most essential aspect of human nature, which must be “preserved.” (Graham 2002, 26; Mengzi 2008, 4B19). This understanding of human nature as providing the
incipient ingredients for virtue includes Mengzi’s theory of the “sprouts” or “beginnings” of virtue (duān, 端) as part of human nature, and underlies his claim that “human nature is good” (xìng shàn, 性善).

As we saw last chapter, this understanding of human nature is explicitly opposed to theories that emphasize the need for humans to rationally control, ‘temper,’ or ‘tamp down’ their natural inclinations or emotions (like Mozi’s; cf. Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, NE, 1119b1–15). So, Mengzi’s understanding of human nature rules out a rationalist reading akin to the EV-R.7

As Kim (2018) further notes, Mengzi—unlike Aristotle—identifies proto-moral inclinations as part of our first nature. Recall from previous chapters that we can distinguish (as Kim explains) between humans’ “first nature”—those features that belong to human beings as such, and ‘second nature’—those characteristics that human beings develop through habituation and culture.” (2018, 145) Although both Mengzi and Aristotle take a teleological view of human nature, they hold that it is aspects of human’s first nature (characterized by rational activity or the sprouts, respectively) that allow them to develop the virtues and fulfill their telos or function. As we saw in Chapter 4, Aristotle’s “rational activity” characterization (NE, 1097b22–1098a20) gives humans the capacity to form virtues (1103a15–30). Mengzi’s “sprouts” (Mengzi 2A6, 6A9, 6A10) go further by giving us the tendency to do so (6A1–6). Related to suggesting different ‘first natures,’ Aristotle and Mengzi accord different value to the role of reason or rationality in human nature. While reasoning is part of human nature, for Mengzi—this is clear prima facie in Mengzi’s identification of wisdom (智, zhì) as one of his four cardinal virtues—it is not what sets humans apart from other animals nor what characterizes our capacity to live our particular form of life.8

7 This is not to say that the EV-R is the correct reading of or expansion on Aristotle; as we saw in Chapter 2, both the EV-R and EV-E readings are plausible. And of course, proponents of the EV-E would argue that the EV-R is mistaken.

8 Despite my language here, identifying “reasoning” as part of human nature, it should be emphasized that reasoning or rationality is not a conceptually distinct faculty for Mengzi. There is some difficulty in talking about the extent to which Mengzi’s sprouts are “reasoning” or “emotional” within implying the distinction due to the Western metaphysical background that presents these as intuitively opposed. Wong makes a similar point in his “Reasons and Analogical Reasoning in Mengzi” (2002).
Additionally, and relatedly, Mengzian *extension* (tuī 推) and *reflection* (sī 思, alternatively translated “concentration” [as in Van Norden 2007]) differ from Aristotle’s *phronesis* in that the process through which one determines the proper ethical response is not a conceptually distinct intellectual virtue.\(^9\) Rather, for Mengzi the combined process of reflection and extension is akin to resonance or sympathetic recognition (Ivanhoe 2002), which cultivates innate rational-emotion inclinations already directed toward virtue. But this understanding of reflection and extension will require some argumentation.

As we noted in Chapter 2, what exactly *phronesis* is—what it means for it to be an intellectual virtue yet required for developing the moral virtues (located in the affective part of the soul)—has been a major source of conflict between proponents of the EV-R and EV-E. In contrast, as we have seen in Chapter 4, Mengzi thinks that the sprouts or feelings of virtue are “sufficient” for virtue; this suggests they do not require a separate rational process to direct them (Mengzi 2008, 1A7; see also 6A6.7).

We also saw in Chapter 4 that Van Norden glosses the distinction between reflection and extension as “inner-directed” and “outer-directed” processes of moral cultivation, respectively (2007, 227–228, 317). Mengzi’s reflection is a process of attending to the innate feelings, motivations, or desires the sprouts produce. Once we reflect upon the sprouts, extension helps us come to recognize the proper moral response to a situation. Van Norden describes extension as “a way of focusing one’s mind on external situations that allows one to come to see them more clearly and (we might say) ‘feel them more clearly’” (2007, 234).

We further saw that both reflection and extension can be understood in more or less rationalistic ways. For example, reflection is said to allow us to “discern proper perceptions at given situations” by Choi (2018, 334), and to be a kind of “identifying and understanding one’s motivational set including one’s beliefs.

---

\(^9\) We should note that, for Aristotle, *phronesis* is not necessarily distinct from the virtues, once they are developed. He argues at *NE* 1145a1 (trans. Irwin 2019) that “one has all the virtues if and only if one has prudence [*phronesis*], which is a single state.” This suggests that prudence is part of—or as Aristotle says, “involved” in, the (full) virtues (*NE*, 114b30). However, this does not mean that *phronesis* is not conceptually distinct for Aristotle; indeed, although it is integrated into virtues once they are perfected, he clearly regards it as conceptually distinct insofar as he devotes much of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to explaining its relationship (as an intellectual virtue) to the character (or moral) virtues (see especially *NE* Book VI, Chapters 5, 7, 12, and 13). What’s more, only a few lines after expounding his “unity of the virtues” thesis (i.e., the claim that *phronesis* is both necessary and sufficient for all the moral virtues), he further claims that “virtue makes us achieve the end, whereas prudence [*phronesis*] makes us achieve the means to the end.” (1144a5–8) This suggests that *phronesis* has a function distinct from its role in constituting the virtues.
desires, feelings, and goals that restrain one’s sensual and selfish desires” by Ramsey (2015). Similarly, David Wong (2002) proposes an understanding of extension as a type of “analogical reasoning,” while Ivanhoe (2002) regards it as an “analogical resonance.” These rational versus emotion interpretations of Mengzi’s reflection and extension interestingly parallel the rational and emotional readings of the EV within the Western tradition.

Although I did not argue that the EV-R or the EV-E is a more accurate reading of or expansion on Aristotle, I argued in Chapter 4 that the more “emotional” reading of Mengzi’s process of moral cultivation (Claim iv-M) is correct. Again, a primary reason for this is because, as Wong (1991, 31) and McRae (2011, 588) (among others) have demonstrated, there is no real distinction between reason and emotion for Mengzi. So, a “rationalistic” conception, in which reason or the intellect is seen as a conceptually distinct process that helps to guide or shape the emotions, is untenable.

Reflection and extension are thus thinly rational processes—in the sense that they are responsive to motivating features of a situation—but which are also akin to a kind of emotional sensitivity, and which are not regarded as a separate mental or intellectual process but a kind of natural development of the sprouts. As Van Norden explains,

One aspect of reflection is particularly salient: it is insufficient for successful extension that one merely recognize, in an abstract or theoretical manner, the similarity between two situations. One must come to be motivated and to act in relevantly similar ways… From a Western perspective, one of the noteworthy aspects of Mencius’s view of extension is that he regards emotions as a crucial part of ethical perception and evaluation. Although it would be anachronistic to saddle him with any specific contemporary account of the emotions, it seems clear that his underlying view is close to what Western psychologists and philosopher call an “appraisal theory” of emotions, according to which emotions are motivational states closely connected to evaluations of situations (de Sousa 2014, Section 4). (2019, §2)

Van Norden here compares Mengzi’s moral psychology to that of Ronald de Sousa, who has argued that “emotions play [a broad role] in providing the framework for cognitions of both perceptual varieties (e.g., what we see and hear) and non-perceptual varieties (e.g., what we believe and remember).” (Scarantino and de Sousa 2021, §7.3; de Sousa 1987) Thus, Mengzi’s view is in line with the EV-E’s understanding of practical wisdom. Mengzi, like proponents of the EV, holds that emotions have normative and evaluative content.
Moreover, Mengzi’s understanding of both virtue and flourishing emphasizes their important relational qualities more so than the Aristotelian tradition does. For this reason, he emphasizes that even if we regard virtue as a kind of sensitivity to morally motivating features of situations, and practical wisdom as a kind of recognition of these features, we must also keep in mind that this recognition includes the extreme importance of relational context and role obligations. These relationships and roles are both impacted by our traditions and cultures, yet also subject to change. The virtues themselves are regarded not as individualized but relationally responsive traits, i.e., the virtuous King is virtuous based on his response to the needs of his people, a father is virtuous based on his attitude and affect toward his children (Mengzi 2008, 1A7, 3A4).

Again, some aspects of the Mengzian EV I have just discussed seem to fall squarely on the emotional side of the EV spectrum. In particular, Mengzi’s naturalism-M and practical wisdom-M both closely resemble the “virtue as sensitivity” view put forward by proponents of the EV-E like John McDowell and David Wiggins, but with this added focus on relational responsiveness. We can thus think of Mengzi as putting forward a sensitivity account of virtue, but which includes a sensitivity to changing relationships and roles.

Both Mengzian and McDowellian (e.g.) sensitivity require development and aim to help agents better perceive intrinsically motivating moral qualities. But, Mengzi recognizes that the moral qualities to which the virtuous person responds are not only akin to secondary qualities; they are also generated (sometimes or in part) by characteristic features of human life like the social structures and relationships we form. So, Mengzi’s ethical cultivation is a matter of improving our recognition or perception of naturalistic moral features, but also (as a consequence) calls for different moral responses in different cultural or societal contexts since moral facts change with our roles.

That is, Mengzi’s EV-M is both “particularistic” and “pluralistic” in that it “recognize[s] some variety in ethically valuable lives” and holds that “there are multiple kinds of value and that they are not reducible to one kind of value,” respectively. (Van Norden 2007, 325, 328) Particularism is closely related to casuistry, which we have seen is a positive feature of the EV. It also, in the case of the EV-M, captures the belief that our moral response is highly situationally dependent. Pluralism both captures the EV’s belief that there are multiple, irreducible virtues and Mengzi’s particular belief that there are some universal, objective moral
values (based on human nature) but that one’s social position (within a given society and culture) may lead one to value some moral goods over others. For example, affection and righteousness are both goods. But a father, *qua* father, ought to prioritize affection; a ruler, *qua* ruler, ought to prioritize righteousness (*Mengzi* 2008, 3A4.8). In my charitable, modernized reading of the EV-M (as we’ll see), this pluralism can be further taken to indicate that a father in, e.g., Classical Chinese culture versus in contemporary American culture would also accord different weight to different moral values.¹⁰

Some aspects of the EV-M thus differ from both the EV-R and the EV-E. Although Mengzi agrees with contemporary proponents of the EV-E in the important role of emotions or sentiments in virtue, on the importance of a rich emotional and relational life in flourishing, and on the understanding of practical wisdom as akin to a sensitivity, he disagrees with their conception of human nature as characterized by rational activity—even in a broad sense. Moreover, as we have seen, the extent to which virtues are responsive to our roles and relationships goes beyond the comparatively static, individualistic understanding of the virtues in the Western eudaimonic virtue ethics tradition generally.

In the following sections, I introduce the EV-M’s responses to the critiques introduced in Chapter 3. A Mengzian EV avoids the vulnerabilities of both the EV-R and EV-E by drawing on these important differences between the EV-M and other conceptions of the EV. While many contemporary virtue ethicists have addressed critiques largely by going forward—that is, by building on and altering the transmitted Aristotelian tradition—my defensive strategy is therefore to go backward, and to look not only to classical Western virtue ethicists but to the classical Confucian tradition (and Mengzi in particular). I also sketch a contemporary version of Mengzi’s view and briefly consider some vulnerabilities the EV-M might have.

In particular, I argue that a contemporary Mengzian EV can respond to the disability critique because, rather than positioning humans’ rationality as their defining characteristic, Mengzi identifies the sprouts as what separates humans from other animals. He explicitly argues that all people have these sprouts,

¹⁰ As Van Norden (2007, 325–332) has stressed, pluralism is not the same as moral relativism or subjectivism. This is because, while pluralism recognizes multiple moral goods—i.e., does not endorse a monism about moral value—it still holds that there are universal, objective facts-of-the-matter about what those goods are. These goods do not vary based on culture or perspective; only their relative importance or salience does.
does not divide between reason and emotion, and presents his version of *phronesis* as one that is explicitly not a controlling rational force; so, his moral psychology does not position some people as unable to access *eudaimonia* or develop the virtues. I argue that Mengzi can also respond to the feminist critique by acknowledging the large extent to which our social roles impact our moral development, and because—unlike Aristotle—Mengzi does not suggest that men and women have different natures. Finally, Mengzi’s emphasis on the important part our roles and situations play in shaping our moral development and obligations also provides a promising avenue of response to the psychology critique.

5.3 Moral Luck and Constructivism

We saw in Chapter 3 that both the disability and feminist critiques can be more properly understood as constructivist expansions on the moral luck critique. As was discussed in that chapter, moral luck is the idea that circumstances outside one’s control can affect one’s moral character, responsibility or blameworthiness for actions, or ability to achieve *eudaimonia* (Card 1996; Friedman 2009; Nagel 1979; Tessman 2005; Williams 1976). This is regarded as a problem because it illustrates a tension between the commonsense judgment that one should be blameworthy only for what is within their control, on the one hand, and the fact-of-the-matter that sometimes our actions, decisions, and characters are shaped by features that are not up to us, on the other (cf. Foot 2002). For example, aspects of our social identity—like gender, race, or disability status—seem to be outside our control, yet to limit our ability to develop the virtues and to flourish (due, constructivists claim, at least in large part to discriminatory social structures). Since some social identities are more discriminated against and/or face more barriers than others, the problem of moral luck is particularly salient for members of marginalized or oppressed groups.

The disability and feminist critiques both build off of the moral luck critique, by arguing that aspects of our social identities or roles (e.g., our disability status and gender) are socially and culturally constructed. On a naturalist or biologically realist understanding (of, e.g., gender, disability, or race) this relative inability to flourish may just be an unfortunate but unavoidable instance of bad moral luck for those who are born with certain embodiments. On a constructivist reading, though, one may point out that the barriers to flourishing that women and people with disabilities (as well as other members of marginalized groups) face are not
natural or inevitable, but rather produced by human social structures. These identity categories—which preclude some people from virtue and a *eudaimon* life—are not accidental features of life but human-created.

The moral luck and related constructivist critique is a particular problem for the EV (as we saw in Chapter 3). This is because the disability and feminist critiques argue that the EV—with its purported empirical grounding, close connection between virtue and flourishing, and emphasis on the human nature as rational and practical wisdom as required for full virtue—puts forward a theory of flourishing and virtue that privileges certain human lives above others and excludes others (e.g., women and people with disabilities) as naturally inferior. In particular, criticisms from disability theorists and feminists have largely focused on Aristotelianism’s traditionalism and privileging of rationality: they target the Aristotelians notion of practical wisdom, flourishing, and human nature, and are particularly damning against the EV-R’s relatively narrow, ratiocinatic conceptions of both rational activity and human nature.

Here, I argue that Mengzi’s version of the EV avoids the rationalistic charges by focusing on emotional-and-thinly-rational reflection and extension, rather than intellectualist or ratiocinatic *phronesis*, as its version of practical wisdom. Moreover, the EV-M defines human nature through its potential for ethical action (in the form of the sprouts) rather than its rationality. For this reason, it is *prima facie* less exclusionary than Western versions of the EV.

### 5.3.1 The Disability Critique

We might understand criticisms of the EV from a disability perspective as centering around two questions: first, can people with disabilities lead a flourishing life in this theory? And second, what is owed to people with disabilities from the standpoint of the EV? These questions, which concern both the possibility of a *eudaimon* life for people with disabilities and their status as agents worthy of moral consideration, are not unrelated. Recall that the most powerful criticism of the EV from disability theorists has been directed at Claims i-R, ii-R, and iii-R. These claims hold that

(i-R) Virtue is the foundation of ethics or ethical action (i.e., *areticism*); *virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of rationally controlling or directing emotional impulses or appetites.
Virtue is at least partially constitutive of or a necessary condition of human well-being/flourishing (i.e., eudaimonism); moreover, a eudaimon life is characterized by rational activity, understood strictly as ratiocination or contemplation.

Virtue or virtuous activity consists in doing well that which is characteristically human or fulfilling human nature; human nature is fundamentally characterized by reason or rational activity.

(I have bolded the EV-R’s expansions on the core EV claims.) As was discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3, these understandings of virtue, flourishing, and human nature all suggest that people who are not rational in a strict and narrow sense cannot develop virtues or flourish.

Although one may hold that the question of whether one can lead a flourishing life is unrelated to the question of what one is owed ethically, the EV’s grounding of ethics and flourishing jointly in human nature suggests that these two concepts are closely related. Recall that for eudaimonic virtue ethicists, human nature is both the grounding for virtues and for eudaimonia. Humans’ particular function, or their characteristic way of living, generates both a list of virtues and an objectivist account of happiness or flourishing. The virtues, in turn, are characteristics that contribute to that flourishing. To say that some humans (e.g., people with intellectual disabilities) are incapable of a eudaimon life seems also to say that they are incapable of living a characteristically human life.

We saw in previous chapters that one reason discrimination can be considered wrong from a eudaimonic perspective is that it limits individuals’ opportunities to flourish (see, e.g., Altman 2020; MacIntyre 2016; Nussbaum 2001; and Tessman 2005). This understanding of discrimination is an advantage of eudaimonic theories because it provides one avenue of articulating the harms of even unintentional and structural discrimination. However, if some humans are regarded as having different natures than others—natures that prevent them from flourishing—this suggests that our moral obligations toward them also differ.

Disability theorists have argued that rationalists’—and Aristotle’s—focus on reasoning as a defining feature of human nature precludes people from disabilities from being considered properly human moral agents. In short: by grounding humans’ ability to be moral agents (and to do well) in their rational capacity, this view suggest that those with limited rational capacity—like people with certain intellectual disabilities—should not be regarded as full moral agents, and that we therefore do not have the same moral obligations toward them that we do toward others. The EV thus suggests that people with limited rational capacity are
somehow less than fully human, or at least do not exist in the same moral realm as other humans. Insofar as humans’ moral rights and responsibilities are predicated on their nature and capacities (Claim iii of the EV), people with disabilities that keep them from realizing that nature are left out.

As we saw in previous chapters, proponents of the EV-R (like Irwin [2019], Kenny [1966, 2000], Kraut [1991, 2018], Reeve [1992], and Sorabji [1974]) specifically argue that a less-than-fully-rational life cannot be a *eudaimon* or virtuous one, and that a “rational life” is one of study or contemplation (*theoria*). Relatedly, they hold that intellectual virtues have higher intrinsic value than the character virtues (Taylor [2010]). Thus, the narrower conception of rationality put forward by the EV-R leaves out more people than the EV-E’s broader one.

More than that, though, people who cannot practice decision (*prohairesis*) cannot even be considered full moral agents in the rationalist view. As I have shown, for proponents of the EV-R decision involves means-end reasoning and “aiming in accordance with calculation,” which would *prima facie* exclude some people with intellectual disabilities. (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, NE, 1112b13, 1141b8–15) Lacking decision, their actions can only be considered voluntary to the extent that a child’s or a non-rational animal’s would (111b5–15).11 Again, insofar as human’s particular kind of life is characterized by a nature that some people do not possess, they do not have the same *telos* as other humans. And, because our moral obligations toward others are predicated on their ability to fulfill their human functions and to flourish, this understanding of people with limited rational capacity as less able to flourish implies they have less moral worth.

Again, the EV-R is especially vulnerable to this critique due to its narrow understanding of what counts as reason or rationality—including its emphasis on decision or choice (*prohairesis*) in the practice and development of virtue—and its privileging of this narrow understanding of reason with regards to both virtue and *eudaimonia*. Note, however, that ableism seemingly plagues the EV from its inception in Aristotle. As we

---

11 As Sophia Connell explains, that “practical reasoning is required for self-determining action and rests mainly in the ability to properly deliberate” means that “[people lacking practical reasoning] would not be able to make their own choices- thus would not be self-determining agents (or autonomous in modern parlance).” (2016, 31). Though in this case Connell is discussing whether women have *prohairesis* in Aristotle’s view (she will go on to argue they do), her description applies to anyone who lacks it.

> that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule… Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their body, and who can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master. For he who can be, and therefore is, another's and he who participates in rational principle enough to apprehend, but not to have, such a principle, is a slave by nature. … It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right. (*Politics*, I.5)

As this passage suggests, Aristotle believed that some people were born lacking a rational capacity. And, Aristotle not only believed that people who do not have a “rational principle” cannot live *eudaimon* lives, but also that they should not be treated as full and equal citizens. Rather, they are natural slaves and should serve other, more rational, people. They should not be treated as full moral agents with the freedom to determine their own life course.

As Shane Clifton further explains:

> For Aristotle, ill health, mental deficiency, and ugliness—characteristic ways of describing disability—are not only undesirable for their own sake (how could anyone consider the disabled life to be a good life?) but necessarily restrict the full exercise of virtue. … There is also the problem of capacity, since Aristotle considers slaves and women to be “naturally” incapable of virtue, particularly intellectual virtue, a judgment that would inevitably apply to a person with a disability. And so we come to the crux of the matter. For Aristotle it is impossible for the disabled person to be truly happy. This prejudice cannot be brushed aside, since it indicates one of the problems of virtue ethics, which is the tendency for virtue to be conceived of in ways that entrench the status quo. (2018, 57)

As Clifton points out, then, Aristotle considering people with disabilities (as well as many other marginalized people) to be incapable of living a *eudaimon* life indicates a problem for eudaimonic virtue ethics more generally—one that cannot be dismissed as a mere artifact of his view. Rather, Aristotle’s belief that some are naturally born inferior makes clear that the EV can (and, according to some critics, does) endorse an understanding of “human nature” that identifies certain humans as outside of this category of characteristically or properly human. And, this belief—at least for Aristotle—straightforwardly suggests that such people should also be treated differently (i.e., we do not owe them the same ethical considerations). For

---

12 This passage also notes that “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.”
this reason, the disability critique can also be regarded as a problem for all (Aristotelian) versions of the EV, even though the EV-R is disproportionately vulnerable.

Mengzi’s EV can answer this avenue of critique due to its understanding of human nature as characterized not by rational activity (which, as we’ve seen, Aristotle believes sets off some humans as inferior) but by the sprouts, by its less rationalistic understanding of (Mengzi’s equivalent of) practical wisdom, and by its clear conviction that human nature (the sprouts) is available to all humans, even if it appears otherwise.

What’s more, it was argued (briefly) in Chapter 3 that one could address the disability critique by positing a human nature that is not rational but relational and dependent. Such an appeal to a social/relational human nature can ground the equal moral status of people with intellectual disabilities. This is because if it is this aspect of human nature and function—the capacity and necessity of living with others, not rationality—that grounds our moral obligations to people and their status as moral agents, people with disabilities can rightly be recognized as full moral agents (with the commensurate moral worth). We will see that—on top of the positive features of the EV-M just discussed—this is precisely what Mengzi’s EV-M allows due to the theory’s emphasis on relational selves and moral development.

**Rationality’s Role in Human Nature and Flourishing.** As we’ve seen (in Chapter 3), it’s not Aristotle’s personal prejudice against people with intellectual disabilities that makes the EV vulnerable to the disability critique. Rather, Aristotle’s insistence that humans without a rational principle cannot fulfill the human *telos*, and so are not granted the same ethical concern, is the source of the problem that the disability critique identifies. Again, this is because this conviction that some humans are precluded from fulfilling the human function by nature shows that—depending on one’s interpretation of human nature and function—the EV’s supposedly objective and empirically supported grounding for moral worth in human nature can justify discrimination against certain “non-normative” or “defective” people.13

---

13 There is some (scant) evidence of ableism in the *Mengzi*. For example, Mengzi asks us in 6A12 to “Suppose someone has a ring finger that is bent and will not straighten. It is not the case that it hurts or that it interferes with one’s activities. But if there is something that can straighten it, one will not consider the road from one end of the world the
Because Mengzi defines human nature as most fundamentally consisting in its potential for moral development (in the form of the sprouts), his notion of human nature by definition positions all humans as moral agents. As we saw in Chapter 4, Mengzi argues that possession of the sprouts is what makes people people, and that the sprouts are proto-moral inclinations toward virtue (2008, 1A7, 2A6). He further states that all people have the sprouts, even if they appear not to (2A6, 6A8). This notion of human nature has two important implications: first, there are no humans who cannot fulfill their function due to an accident of their birth; and, second, our capacity for ethical action toward and with others is humans’ first nature.

Moreover, Mengzi’s moral psychology does not divide the soul into parts. In fact, I have argued that he does not cleanly distinguish between what Aristotle see as “affective” and “intellectual” capacities or virtues. So, the idea that virtue requires rationally controlling or directing the emotions, or that our emotions/inclinations/passions should “obey” or “be subordinate to” reason can’t take off the ground (cf. Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 2019, NE, 1102b15–30, 1102b30–33, 1103a1–3, 1119b8). Similarly, neither can the idea that humans’ rational nature is their “better” or more divine nature, since humans’ nature simply isn’t divisible this way. This means that less “rational” agents are not excluded from the possibility of fulfilling their natures and becoming full moral agents.

However, it is not clear that the explanation of human nature as characterized by possession of the sprouts (rather than by rationality or rational activity) entirely solves the problem of excluding some humans from the possibility of developing into virtuous agents or of flourishing—despite Mengzi’s conviction that all...
humans have the sprouts by nature. Some have wondered how Mengzi’s moral psychology can account for people who seemingly do not possess the moral sprouts.¹⁴

Mengzi argues that “Humaneness [ren, 仁] is simply being human. The Way is simply to harmonize with benevolence and put it into words.” (Mengzi 2008, 7B16)¹⁵ Elsewhere, he states that “if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human” (and he implies this is also true for the other sprouts) (2008, 2A6). While this seems to be a more inclusive understanding of human nature than one characterized by a strict understanding of rational activity, it still may be taken to exclude those who are incapable of proto-moral feelings like compassion. We might think, for example, of sociopaths (or people with Antisocial Personality Disorder [ASPD]), who are arguably born without the capacity for compassion or empathy. Human nature for Mengzi is both naturalistic and normative; this is a necessary feature of any instantiation of the EV. But as we’ve seen, if human nature is defined in a way that suggests some humans cannot fulfill this nature—and fulfilling this nature is the basis for virtue and flourishing—the problem of moral luck is again introduced. Like Aristotle, then, Mengzi’s claim that human nature is characterized by the sprouts seems to at least prima facie exclude some people from living a good human life. However, unlike Aristotle, Mengzi (a) offers an environmental explanation for why some humans lack (or seem to lack) the sprouts and (b) excludes those humans that he does exclude (if any) based on their inability to have moral emotions or inclinations.

In 6A7 and 6A8, Mengzi considers the case of people who do not have the sprouts. He uses agricultural metaphors to explain that people come to lack (or seem to lack) the sprouts either because of their own failure to attend to and cultivate them or because of environmental barriers. For example, in 6A7 he writes that

In years of plenty, most young men are gentle; in years of poverty, most young men are violent. It is not that the potential that Heaven confers on them varies this. They are like this because of what sinks and drowns their hearts. Consider barley. Sow the seeds and cover them. The soil is the same


¹⁵ This translation is tricky because, as Van Norden elsewhere notes, Mengzi often uses ren in a narrow sense to refer to one of the four sprouts, benevolence, but here seems to use it in its earlier Confucian sense as “the summation of human virtuousness.” (2007, 214) I agree with Van Norden that in this context it is meant to mean virtue broadly and hence have followed him in rendering it humaneness.
and the time of planting is also the same. They grow rapidly, and by the time of the summer solstice they have all ripened. Although there are some differences, these are due to the richness of the soil and to unevenness in the rain and in human effort. Hence, in general, things of the same kind are all similar. Why would one have any doubt about this when it comes to humans alone? We and the sage are of the same kind. (2008, 6A7.1–4)

This passage argues that all humans are equally able to develop the virtues by nature, and that the difference between sages (moral exemplars) and those who are not virtuous comes down to either environmental factors or individual effort.

Anticipating the critique that some people appear to be so vicious by nature that they must lack the sprouts, Mengzi provides the analogy of Ox Mountain. He argues that

The trees of Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But because it bordered on a large state, hatchets and axes besieged it. Could it remain verdant? Due to the respite it got during the day or night, and the moisture of rain and dew, there were sprouts and shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were barren. Seeing it barren, people believed that there had never been any timber there. But could this be the nature of the mountain? When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness? The way that they discard their genuine hearts is like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. With them besieging it day by day, can it remain beautiful? … Others see that he is an animal, and think that there was never any capacity. But is this what a human is like inherently? Hence, if it merely gets nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow. If it merely loses its nourishment, there is nothing that will not vanish. (2008, 6A8)

People without (or who seem to lack) the sprouts are like Ox Mountain; due to harsh external conditions, they have lost the sprouts—or at least, the part of the sprout that appears above the soil, which we may compare to a partially cultivated or “extended” sprout—and appear (wrongly) to have never had them. However, this example also suggests that, if they were exposed to more ideal conditions, even such people could come to develop virtue (or at least, the beginnings of virtue).

While this does not solve the problem of explaining people who lack the sprouts by nature (if such people do exist), it does suggest that even those who seem to lack the sprouts may in fact be able to regain their ethical capacities with the right “nourishment.” As we saw from the Politics above, Aristotle explicitly identifies natural slaves as being unable to develop full virtue or reach eudaimonia by virtue of their birth. Mengzi, in contrast, is quite clear that anyone who lacks (or appears to lack) the sprouts does so because of
their circumstances or their own lack of effort; so there is no problem with moral luck in the sense of being unable to flourish or develop a virtuous character from birth.\(^{16}\)

Because of his emphasis on the importance of a good environment for the development of the virtues, Mengzi stresses that rulers must provide an environment that is conducive to their citizens’ development and flourishing. Specifically, Mengzi (trans. Van Norden 2008) argues (in his Warring States Period China context) that rulers should set limits on using public lands to gather wood and on the size of fish that can be caught to ensure there are enough natural resources to go around (1A3); provide each household with enough land to feed themselves and supply food from public stores when people are starving (1A3); provide public moral education (1A3, 1A7); lessen punishments and reduce taxes (1A5); and establish public events and parks (1B1). As these specific policy recommendations demonstrate, a consequence of understanding all humans as capable of flourishing if provided a suitable and supportive environment grounds moral obligations to provide public resources and supports. In Chapter 6, modern day policy implications of endorsing Mengzi’s EV will be briefly explored.

Whether people can genuinely lack the sprouts by virtue of birth (i.e., if sociopaths can be born rather than made) is still an open question, in both contemporary Mengzi scholarship and psychology. For example, Bryan Van Norden (2007) argues that Mengzi allows for the existence of people who lack the sprouts by birth, despite the Classical Confucian thinker’s claim (in 2A6) that anyone who lacks the sprouts is not human. Van Norden writes that this interpretation of Mengzi’s claim is supported by his comment in 2A6 that ‘People have these four sprouts like they have four limbs.’ Surely, Mengzi knows that some people – either through genetic defect or hostile environment – do not have four limbs. Similarly, some members of our species may lack the four sprouts. But in neither case are these representative samples of a human. (2007, 222)

\(^{16}\) We also saw in Chapter 4 Mengzi 6A2 argues that “Human nature being good is like water tending downward. There is no human who does not tend toward goodness. There is no water that does not tend downward. Now, by striking water and making it leap up, you can cause it to go past your forehead. If you guide it by damming it, you can cause it to remain on a mountaintop. But is this the nature of water? It is only that way because of the circumstances. When humans are caused to not be good, it is only because their nature is the same way.” (2008, 6A2) How the EV-M responds to other aspects of moral luck—e.g., occupying a discriminated-against social position—will be discussed in more detail below.
In this discussion, Van Norden relies on a “generic” understanding of a human’s function or characteristic life form as defined by an appeal to those species-characteristic functions that allow a member of that species to do well or flourish in normal circumstances (see Van Norden 2007, 220–221).

As we saw in Chapter 1 (from Kim [2018] and Foot [2001]), this understanding of human nature is a teleological one, predicated on an apparently objective and empirically discoverable recognition of how a species (like humans) ought to live given their environment, capacities, and needs. However, as we have further seen, a problem with this teleological grounding is that it may lead to positioning some humans as outside the realm of the moral by virtue of their birth—for example, if they have “genetic defects” that preclude them from fulfilling their proper function.

In other words, this explanation brings back the problem we identified with Aristotle, of introducing discriminatory evaluative/interpretive criteria into purportedly empirical or objective observations about human nature. As Van Norden further points out, another problem with this interpretation of Mengzi is that it runs the risk of “reducing the arguments of 2A6 and 6A10 [that all people have the sprouts] to tautologies,” because it suggests that by “‘person’ [Mengzi] means “someone who has sympathy” (or the other sprouts). (Van Norden 2007, 222) For these reasons, I believe a better interpretation is that Mengzi believes everyone really does have the sprouts at birth, and that people who lack them (or appear to lack them) do so because of hostile environments or destroying them themselves.

Contra a generic reading and in line with mine, Ivanhoe argues that “Mengzi seeks to show that all humans have an equal capacity for moral development; that such development, while natural, requires human attention and effort; and that barring differences in environment, influence, attention, and effort people all will tend toward a common moral end.” (Ivanhoe 2013, 53) If we endorse this reading of Mengzi, we deny the possibility of people who lack the sprouts by birth and take the barley and Ox Mountain analogies from 2A6 and 2A7 to show that extraordinarily vicious people just seem to lack the sprouts (but not to really lack them). While this is an advantage for responding to the disability critique, it could be regarded as empirically implausible—if, indeed, sociopaths can be born rather than made.
Empirical psychology research on Antisocial Personality Disorder (or ASPD, the clinically preferred term for sociopathy or psychopathy) suggests that the disorder develops due to a combination of environmental and genetic factors (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 301.7 [F60.2]; Wesseldijk et al 2018).\textsuperscript{17} Even if people may be genetically predisposed toward Antisocial Personality Disorder, the DSM-5 notes that “[p]revalence is higher in samples affected by adverse socioeconomic (i.e., poverty) or sociocultural (i.e., migration) factors.” (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 301.7 [F60.2], 662) So, Mengzi’s insight that viciousness is due to environmental factors or personal choice seems to be at least empirically plausible, even in the case of ASPD.

Furthermore, even if people can be born without the sprouts, because these people who are “not human” are those who have demonstrated they are incapable of behaving humanely, we do not have the same problem Aristotle does of seeming to write off people as moral agents based on a feature of their birth for which they are not culpable. Rather, they are not human \textit{because} they are not moral agents. Sociopaths, by definition, “lack empathy and tend to be callous, cynical, and contemptuous of the feelings, rights, and sufferings of others.” (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 301.7 [F60.2], 661) Although one could argue this returns to the moral luck problem of holding people morally culpable for characteristics outside their control, there is a subtle difference here. If we argue that it is morally bad to lack the sprouts, and also hold that some people lack the sprouts by birth (which, as we’ve seen, is empirically debatable), we are indeed arguing that some people have morally bad characters through no fault of their own.

But, the aspect of their character that we are holding to be wrong is precisely the part that makes them capable of morality (and nothing else). There is no “slipping” here between non-normative features or circumstances of one’s birth (like one’s disability status) and moral responsibility. In other words, there is no normative value ascribed to an aspect of one’s personality or capacities that are superficially non-normative

\textsuperscript{17} For example, Wesseldijk et al. found that "During childhood, genetic and environmental factors shared by children in families explained 43 and 44% of the variance of conduct problems, with the remaining variance due to unique environment. During adolescence and adulthood, genetic and unique environmental factors equally explained the variation.” (2018, 1) And, the DSM-5 notes that “Adoption studies indicate that both genetic and environmental factors contribute to the risk of developing antisocial personality disorder.” (301.7 [F60.2] 662–663)
So Mengzi does not suggest, as Aristotle does, that someone can lack access to a *eudaimon* life, or lack the ability to cultivate the virtues, due to arbitrary circumstances of her birth. Rather, any diminished flourishing is directly tied to immoral or antisocial characteristics or actions. The EV-M therefore is considerably less vulnerable to the disability critique.

Moreover, Mengzi’s emphasis on humans’ relationality and dependency as a characteristic feature of human nature—as is revealed by the conviction, discussed in Chapter 4, §4.2, that virtue and flourishing are heavily dependent on agent’s relationships and roles—provides a grounding for a universal and naturalistic human nature that not only does not preclude people with intellectual disabilities but helps to support moral obligations toward them. As we began to see in Chapter 3, Eva Feder Kittay (2011) has argued that discrimination against people with disabilities is often predicated on the assumption that dependency on others is a moral failing. If human nature is instead recognized as naturally dependent, our obligations toward those who have more apparent needs for support can be justified with reference to our shared nature.

As Kittay writes,

> It is part of our species typicality to be vulnerable to disability, to have periods of dependency, and to be responsible to care for dependent individuals. We as a species are unique (or nearly so) in the extent to which we attend to dependency, most likely because we experience the long dependency of youth. When we recognize that dependency is an aspect of what it is to be the sorts of beings we are, we, as a society, can begin to confront our fear and loathing of dependency and with it, of disability. When we acknowledge how dependence on another saves us from isolation and provides the connections to another that makes life worthwhile, we can start the process of embracing needed dependencies. (2011, 56–57)

Returning to our discussion, in Chapter 4, that for Confucians personhood and morality are both conceived of as dependent, Mengzi’s relational understanding of human nature suggests—just as Kittay’s feminist care ethical one does—that dependency on others be recognized as a necessary and indeed positive part of human nature. So dependency—whether due to disability, sickness, youth or old age, or circumstances like poverty, discrimination, natural disaster, or war—does not reflect poorly on the dependent agent.
**Rationality's Role in Practical Wisdom.** Moreover, because Mengzi does not require that ethically evaluable (that is, praise- or blame-worthy) actions be performed in accordance with as rationalistic a conception of practical reasoning as (arguably) Aristotle and (certainly) the EV-R do, Mengzi’s theory would seem to allow more people with intellectual disabilities to be considered self-determining (in a thin sense that does not imply independent) agents even if they are precluded from achieving full virtue.

We noted in Chapter 1 that something like practical wisdom or *phronesis*—understood as an ability or capacity to know “what is truly worthwhile, truly important, and thereby truly advantageous in life, [to] know, in short, how to live well” (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018, “Practical Wisdom”)—is required for a theory to be considered an instantiation of the EV. This is because of the theory’s emphasis on casuistry, situational responsiveness, and the importance of a holistic understanding of agent’s situation, history, and psychology in determining what is ethically called for. Additionally, as was noted, practical wisdom helps to explain our intuition about moral exemplars—that for truly virtuous people it is easy and enjoyable to do what is virtuous, but that becoming a good person takes effort (Foot 2002). However, we also defined practical wisdom in a very broad or “thin” way, and noted that there are significant differences between the EV-R’s and the EV-E’s understanding of the character and role of practical wisdom. It was further noted (in Chapters 2 and 3) that the disability critique particularly problematizes the EV-R’s specification of *phronesis* as the perfection of a (strictly) rational process.

To review, the EV-R holds that:

(iv-R) practical wisdom can be understood more specifically as the perfection of a (strictly) rational process.

While the EV-E holds that:

(iv-E) practical wisdom can be understood more specifically as the perfection of a sensitivity.

(I have reproduced only their expansions on the core EV Claim iv, which holds that practical wisdom is required for developing full virtue.) As these differing conceptions of practical wisdom reveal, emotionists hold a relatively ‘thin’ conception of practical wisdom while rationalists’ conception is more substantive (and thus also more exclusionary).
As we’ve seen, proponents of the EV-R draw on Aristotle’s depiction (in parts of the *NE*) of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as a process of deliberation or rational calculation (e.g., *NE*, 1113a3–8, 1113a13, 1140a25–28, 1141b8–15). Contemporary rationalistic versions of the EV describe practical wisdom as, e.g., a “faculty of deliberation and decision: that by which we can consider what to do as distinct from acting on impulse” (Broadie 1993, 68); or as comparable “to the kind of reasoning we find in someone exercising a practical skill” (Annas 2011, 1). These descriptions, as noted in Chapters 2 and 3, seem to position practical wisdom as a ratiocinatic process. Since practical wisdom is required for developing virtues (*NE*, 1107a1, 1138b18–34, 1144b14–1145a, 1178a16–19; Hursthouse 2021, 289; Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018), practical wisdom-R precludes anyone who is incapable of deliberation or rational calculation from becoming virtuous—which *prima facie* excludes many people with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

Proponents of the EV-E, in contrast, argue that practical wisdom is best understood as a kind of “situation-specific discernment” (McDowell 2007, 341), “reliable sensitivity’ to the demands of the specific situation” (Rietveld 2010, 190), or “ability to respond to subtle differences in the appearance of… situations” (Dreyfus 2005, 58). This understanding of practical wisdom does not posit a strictly rational or deliberative process. The EV-E’s broad or ‘thin’ understanding of practical wisdom, like their understanding of rationality as a defining feature of human nature, suggests that it is accessible to more human agents—including more people with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

As we have seen, Mengzi’s understanding of (his equivalent of) practical wisdom is similar to the EV-E’s account, but with a few key differences. First: although the EV-R’s more ratiocinatic understanding of practical wisdom is *prima facie* more exclusionary, the EV-E’s version is also plagued—to a lesser degree—by the disability critique. This is because, like the EV-R, the (Western tradition’s) EV-E is borne out by Aristotle, and so has to grapple with the Aristotelian moral psychology. That is, the EV-E’s conception of practical wisdom, while akin to a sensitivity, still conceives of it as an intellectual virtue due to its grounding in the Aristotelian tradition. And, even if Claim iv-E seems to avoid the disability critique the EV-E is still vulnerable to the disability critique to a lesser extent because it is predicated on an understanding of human
nature as rational, even if it understands rationality in a broad sense. Mengzi’s process of extension and reflection, by contrast, does not posit a distinction between reason and emotion.

Second, Mengzi’s “sensitivity view” includes a sensitivity to the moral force of social roles and relationships—this will prove important for responding to the psychology critique, and also relates to the Confucian thinker’s understanding of the self as dependent and relational (which as we’ve seen can ground a more inclusive account of our moral obligations toward those who are comparatively vulnerable or dependent, including people with intellectual disabilities) . Next, let’s consider the EV-M’s vulnerability, and response, to the feminist avenue of critique.

5.3.2 The Feminist Critique

Recall that criticisms of the EV from the lens of feminist philosophy include (a) that it has not paid adequate attention to, or has relegated as unimportant, virtues associated with women or the domestic sphere; (b) that it is not suspicious enough of traditionalism; and (c) that its supposedly universal understandings of human nature and flourishing in fact prioritize traits traditionally seen as masculine (or, more broadly, traits associated with socially dominant groups). Let’s look at these first two critiques first. As we have noted in this chapter and in Chapter 3, these critiques are closely related to the disability avenue of critique and to more general moral luck and constructivist critiques.
Traditionalism and Sexist Understanding of Human Nature. Feminist scholars have noted that, historically, understandings of what constitutes human nature, virtuous conduct, and a life well-lived are problematically influenced by the writers’ culture and context. In particular, feminist critics note that traditional virtue theories are sexist or patriarchal. This is so because they are based on an understanding of what a good life is like that takes for granted that the lives and values of dominant groups—e.g., men in a patriarchal culture—are the most choice-worthy and morally valuable.

Mengzi’s *junzi* (君子), his word for a morally upright or admirable person, literally means a gentleman or nobleman. Women are rarely discussed in either the *Analects* or the *Mengzi*; when they are, they are often in the roles of wives, seductresses, servants, or concubines (*Analects* 6.28; *Mengzi* 3A4, 3B2, 4B33). And, most damningly, Mengzi (2008) argues in 3A4.8 that the roles of husband and wife are properly characterized by “distinction,” suggesting that women ought to be subservient to their husbands. In general, as Chan (2000), Goldin (2018), Hu (2023), Lai (2018), Li (2018), Pang-White (2018), and Woo (2018), (among others) have noted, Classical Confucians like Confucius, Mengzi, and Xunzi took women’s subordination for granted.

The charge of traditionalism—and traditional sexism—seems, prima facie, to be an effective one against Mengzi (as well as against the Aristotelian tradition). Indeed, as we have seen (in Chapter 4), Confucianism’s traditionalism is core a feature of its philosophy; this traditionalism is reflected not only in the conviction that one should study ancient texts and emulate the sage-kings to develop the virtues, but also and more substantially in its emphasis on the moral force of ritual. And, the Confucian tradition after the Classical period is characterized by strictly enforced gender hierarchy (see, e.g., Ames 2011; Chan 2000; Hu 2023; Koh 2008; Pang-White 2016). Moreover, like Aristotle, Classical Confucians assumed that their culture was

---

18 For arguments that Western virtue ethics’ origin in Aristotle and Ancient Greek culture was predicated on sexist assumptions, see Chapter 3.

19 As Ames notes, “Confucianism has all too often been appropriated by the powers-that-be to reinforce class and gender inequities. More than a fair share of despotic rulers have ruled imperial China over the centuries and have oppressed generations in the name of Confucian values. And in Chinese homes, patriarchy has often reduced the complex notion of “family reverence” [or filial piety] (孝) to blind obedience and unquestioning loyalty to adult males.” (2011, 17) As we will see, this appropriation took place well after Mengzi’s Classical Confucian period. However, it does highlight the importance of building safeguards into the EV-M’s strongly relational and role-based understanding
superior to others. Confucianism is therefore vulnerable, as Aristotelianism is, to criticisms of its
tradition, cultural chauvinism, and historical sexism.

Despite these difficulties, Ann A. Pang-White has noted that the *Analects* permits of feminist
readings. She points out that Confucius’s conviction that

‘humans are by nature similar to one another; they become far apart because of practice (性相近也,\n習相遠也[])’ (*Analects* 17:2), given a creative reading, resonates quite well with Simone de
Beauvoir’s belief that gender is not a quality we are born with but is rather a product of social
construction... Furthermore, the Confucian advocacy of self-cultivation as a transformative means
open to all persons (women included), coupled with its teaching that ‘in education, there should be
no distinction of kind/class (*lei*) (有教無類[])’ (*Analects* 15:38) constitutes a very powerful
argument for ensuring adequate social-political infrastructure for equal access to education for all
genders. (Pang-White 2018, 6; see also Van Norden 2007, 330–332)

Although this reading is, as Pang-White herself acknowledges, a “creative” one, it highlights an important
feature of Confucian thought—namely its recognition of the strongly socially constructed character of
persons—that, as we will see, provides the EV-M with resources to combat feminist constructivist critiques
of the EV.20

What’s more, as we have further noted, Mengzi’s emphasis on the virtues’ origin in our innate
inclinations leads him to take a more critical attitude toward traditional moral education compared to other
Confucians. Mengzi emphasizes that traditions and rituals should be ignored if adhering to them is harmful.
He states, e.g., in 7B3 that “It would be better not to have the *Documents* [a Confucian classic] than to believe

Reading charitably with a hermeneutic of restoration, and keeping in mind that the important role of ritual—
for Mengzi and for Confucius—lies in its ability to express incipient human emotions in socially meaningful

---

20 As Van Norden (2007) similarly notes, “Ruism [Confucianism] emphasizes the importance of acting in accordance
with our roles. But it is not a requirement of Ruism in itself that these roles be static or attached to specific genders.”
(330)

21 See also *Mengzi* 4A17. Mengzi argues that it is appropriate for men to touch women they are not married to (contrary
to tradition and ritual) if it is to save them from drowning.
ways, we can envision a contemporary Mengzian EV in which ritual is regarded as important but which does not import Classical Confucianism’s cultural and male chauvinism.

As Jiyuan Yu notes, “both [Greek virtue ethics and Confucian ethics] seek to understand what is good for human beings as such, rather than just for the Greeks or for the Chinese” (2007, 10). Just as Greek virtue ethics has been revived and fruitfully applied even to those who Aristotle and his contemporaries would have considered barbarians,22 Mengzi’s insights can still prove useful despite his context. While the critique that Confucianism is too traditional—and that it is therefore insufficiently attentive to the biases and shortcomings of the culture in which it was entrenched—has merit, Mengzi’s particular flavor of Confucianism is at least open to acknowledging the need to change traditions to suit new evidence and contexts. But what of the critique that virtue ethics (including Confucianism) is predicated on sexist understandings of human nature, virtue, and/or flourishing?

There is compelling evidence to suggest that the social inferiority of women was not predicated on an underlying metaphysical or biological assumption of Classical Confucians, as it apparently was for Aristotle. As Hu points out,

Confucian philosophy offers greater philosophical resources to women [compared to the Western tradition] because of its relational view of moral agency—women and men are not defined by their biological features or reasoning capacities. The implication is that in Confucian philosophy, women are never considered to be limited in any way by their natural endowments. This is especially inspiring when compared to philosophical theories that base our understanding of personhood on capacities such as narrowly defined rationality. On the other hand, Confucian women are limited by social activities and education. (2023, 59)23

As this quote from Hu makes clear, despite the social and political inferiority of women in Classical Confucian culture, there was no accompanying argument for their biological or metaphysical inferiority, as

22 Such as “bestial” “races of distant foreigners,” who Aristotle claims “naturally lack reason and live only by sense perception” (NE 1149a7–12). As Eze glosses it, “in both the realms of philosophy and politics, classical Greek[s] articulated social and human geographical differences on the basis of the opposition between the cultured and the barbaric. For Aristotle who defined the human being as a rational animal, it was understood that the cultured people (such as the male, aristocratic Greeks) were capable of and lived according to ‘reason,’ and organized their society accordingly (democratically), while the barbarians, the non-Greeks, incapable of culture and lacking in the superior rational capacity for social organization, lived brutishly and under despotism.” (2002, 283)

23 Hu goes on to note that “As some philosophers point out, the division that separates the realm of women from that of men in Confucian philosophy is not feminine versus masculine or emotion versus rationality; instead, it is the distinction between the inner and outer domains (Rosenlee 2012; Pang-White 2018).” (2023, 59)
there was in the Classical Greek one. As Chan further points out, “the explicit subordination of women in
Confucianism only started with the Han Confucian Dong Zhongshu (179–104 C.E.).” (2000, 147)

It was argued in Chapter 3 that Aristotle’s biology is, at best, a necessary yet flawed precondition of
his moral theory and, at worst, an intentional invention used to justify the political oppression of women
2023). Briefly, as we’ve seen, Aristotle believed women to be naturally politically and ethically inferior to men
(Politics 1254b3–15, 1260a4–14; Eudemian Ethics 1237a1–5). Moreover—and in my view relatedly—he argued
that “the female is as it were a deformed male” (Generation of Animals, Book II, Ch. 3, 737a27–8) and that “the
male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of
necessity, extends to all mankind.” (Politics Book I, Part V, 1254a32–b16). Based on these assumptions that (a)
women are by nature inferior to men and (b) women are also ethically and politically inferior to men, feminist
critics have argued that the very foundation of Aristotle’s EV is unacceptably and intractably rooted in a
sexist understanding of human nature which serves to justify or support Aristotle’s views about women.
Despite the reality of women’s social and political subordination in Classical Chinese culture, the same
justification for this lower social-political position (in their inferior natures) is not present in Confucian texts.

Not only are women not explicitly identified as ethically or naturally inferior in the Classical
Confucian texts, the linguistic and metaphysical context in which these works were written seems to preclude
the possibility of these thinkers’ regarding women as naturally or morally inferior to men. As Pang-White
notes, despite the frequent use of gendered role names (like that of father, junzi, etc.) in both the Analects and
the Mengzi, at that time there were no gendered pronouns, nor was the word for human, ren 人, taken to refer
to men by default; so, there is no reason to think the classical texts were intended to apply only to men (2016,
6–7; see also Koh 2008).

This belies a significant difference between the biological and metaphysical assumptions about
human nature in the Confucian and Aristotelian traditions. We have already seen that, for Aristotle, there is
no conflict in presenting some feature as characterizing human nature yet as inaccessible for some members
of the human population. For example, the identification of human nature as rational, and as “natural slaves”
(which as Clifton [2018] points out, would have included people with intellectual disabilities) and women as less-than-fully rational by virtue of their birth, implies that human nature need not, for Aristotle, be a descriptive feature of all humans.

We have pointed out that this makes Western versions of the EV grounded in Aristotle vulnerable to moral luck critiques, and that it undermines the theory’s purported empirical basis. Although Mengzi (and Classical Confucians generally) uncritically accepted the biases of their culture, as Aristotle did, they did not take the additional step of attempting to explain or justify social and political inequality in biological or natural differences; whether for women or for people with disabilities. So, the EV-M does not start from an understanding of virtue, human nature, or flourishing that is necessarily discriminatory or unavailable to certain humans by circumstance of their birth.

Beyond pointing out that traditional definitions of ‘human’ nature are actually sexist and predicated on an understanding of men as more ‘properly’ or fully human, though, some feminist philosophers have been critical of appeals to human nature altogether (Antony 2000; Stohr 2015) The feminist critique—as we saw in Chapter 3—can thus be divided into a weaker version and a stronger version. The weaker version, which we’ve discussed above, problematizes appeals to human nature as a grounding for the virtues based on the claim that the purportedly “human” nature is inaccurate, biased, or discriminatory.

As we’ve seen, a Mengzian EV can respond to this critique due to its grounding of human nature, flourishing, and virtue in the sprouts, which are explicitly argued to be available to all humans from birth. That is, the EV-M’s understanding of human nature does not regard marginalized groups—such as women or people with disabilities—as less-than-human.

However, the stronger version of the feminist critique argues that appeals to human nature are a problematic grounding for ethics altogether. This version also attacks Claim ii of the core EV—eudaimonism—because it problematizes the idea that virtue and flourishing are necessarily connected. Thus, although Mengzi’s theory is not based on a purportedly universal standard of human nature that actually excludes women—despite the problem of them being rarely discussed, and their social and political
subordination going unchallenged—it could still have a faulty and discriminatory understanding of human nature in other ways.

**Exclusionary Essentialism about Human Nature.** Again, the stronger version of the feminist critique raises questions about whether an empirical grounding for the virtues, by determining a universal human function and human nature, is possible without replicating existing biases about which human lives, or features of human life, are most valuable. As a Confucian, Mengzi certainly looked to his culture and history in developing his theory of the virtues; so his theory, like Aristotle’s, is guilty of replicating at least some of the biases of his context.  

However, here a more contemporary version of Mengzi’s EV can again offer a solution. In addition to his attitude toward ritual—which, as we’ve seen, allows for rituals to change over time and in disparate contexts and suggests that rituals serve a social function—Mengzi also emphasizes that right action depends on one’s ever-shifting relationship to others. In *Mengzi* 6A5, for example, he argues that, if one’s younger brother is playing the role of the deceased in a sacrifice, his role affords him respect above an uncle, who would normally be afforded more respect by virtue of his age; and that, “[t]he reason [why my respect changes] has to do with the role my younger brother occupies.” (trans. Van Norden, 2008) So, Mengzi acknowledges that ethical obligations and norms depend on one’s positioning and role.

Because women’s place in society, including the roles they occupy, is radically different from the role they occupied in Mengzi’s Warring States Period China, a new Mengzian virtue ethics would not replicate traditional sexist attitudes. This flexibility based on moral intuition and roles suggests that a contemporary

---

24 Arguably, he is even guiltier than Aristotle is of this, since as we’ve seen, the Confucian tradition of which Mengzi was a part considered a specific period of Chinese history (namely, the height of the Zhou dynasty or Western Zhou period, from c. 1045–771 B.C.E.) as the model for government and its leaders as paragons of virtue.

25 And, again, as we have seen, although Classical Confucian culture was sexist, philosophical justification of the natural inferiority of women was not a feature of Confucianism during the time of Confucius and Mengzi.
Mengzian virtue ethics could emphasize a sensitivity to social roles as an important element of practical reasoning (that is, reflection and extension).26

### 5.3.3 The Socially Constructed Confucian Self

Mengzi’s (Confucian) insistence on understanding the self, including the moral self, as importantly relationally and socially constructed thus helps to address postmodern feminist critiques by helping to offer a middle path between personal agency/autonomy and a strongly socially constructed understanding of the self.

From a Confucian standpoint, as we saw in Chapter 4, we can connect following one’s human nature in a linear fashion to (a) developing the virtues, and relatedly (b) performing the proper duties of one’s role, which leads to (c) a resultant harmonious social order (in which Kings act as Kings, ministers as ministers, and so on such that society as a whole, as well as its individual members, flourishes). This is in line with what Van Norden (drawing on Durkheim 2001 [originally published 1912] Radcliffe-Brown 1945) labels a “functionalist” reading of ritual. As he explains,

> According to a functionalist approach, ritual expresses and reinforces certain attitudes and conceptions of the world. In particular, ritual is often associated with expressing and reinforcing our connection with, dependence on, and obligations to others. (2007, 317)

It was argued above (§5.3.1) that the Confucian understanding of the self as relational and dependent can help to address the disability critique by recognizing dependency as a natural and positive feature of being human, such that those who are regarded as more dependent need not be summarily regarded as morally inferior. As this point from Van Norden shows, this understanding of the self as relational and dependent is closely connected to Confucianism’s theory of moral development through ritual.

A further point suggested by the “functionalist” reading of ritual is that expressing our sociality or communally constructed selves is a feature of ritual, such that moral development cannot be understood apart

---

26 As we’ve seen, Mengzi’s response to rival philosopher Gaozi in 6A4 provides a helpful example of the former thinker’s understanding of social roles as (at least partially) contributing to determining virtuous action. Mengzi asks (rhetorically), “surely we do not regard the elderliness of an old horse as being no different from the elderliness of an old person? Furthermore, do you say that the one who is elderly is righteous, or that the one who treats another as elderly is righteous?” Mengzi here demonstrates that the virtuous person responds to elderliness as demanding certain attitudes or actions of us (respect and reverence in the case of the old person but not so much in the case of the horse) by virtue of our relationship to the (person or animal) who is elderly. My reading of this passage is heavily influenced by Xiusheng Liu’s “Mengzian Internalism” (2002).
from one’s social positionality or relations with others. For this reason, the EV-M can avoid critiques levied at the EV of being insufficiently attentive to the role of one’s social roles or situatedness in impacting moral development, opportunities, and obligations. However, a strongly relational understanding of the self comes with its own shortcomings. Recall that the moral luck critique problematizes attaching moral responsibility, praise, or blame to features of one’s character, motivation, or actions over which the agent has no control. It was noted that feminist and disability critiques point out that people who inhabit marginalized identity groups—like women and people with disabilities—appear to have limited opportunities for developing the virtues and flourishing under the EV, thus making it vulnerable to this moral luck critique.

For example, if how I develop as a moral agent is dependent on the way I’m raised, but I am born into a family or culture that defines women’s roles as submissive, then it seems I will develop an understanding of women and of myself as, properly, submissive. I would thus come to hold moral values like submission, and understand my moral obligations as including, for example, deference to my father and husband. In this way, the role I take up—for example, as demure wife—will limit my own freedom and flourishing insofar as I have fewer opportunities to determine my own values and life course.

On the other hand, as we have seen above and in previous chapters, overly individualistic or biologically realist understandings of the self and moral agency have also been criticized—especially from a feminist perspective (see, e.g., Anderson, Willett, and Meyers 2021; Benson (2000); Held (2006); Horowitz 1976; Lange 1993; Leunissen 2010, 2017; Okin 1979 [reprinted 2013], 1989, 1996; Spellman 1983; Walker 2008; Witt et al. 2023). I argue that the EV-M’s understanding of the self and moral agency as relationally constructed, yet of human relationships as part of a universal and empirically discoverable human nature, helps to “split the difference” between these critiques and so to address constructivist and moral luck critiques of the EV while retaining the theory’s positive feature of naturalism.

Jing Iris Hu, in her recent contribution to *The Ethics of Social Roles*, writes:

Confucian role ethics (CRE)... claims that roles and relationships are intrinsic to people’s moral life not only on a practical level but also in a constitutive sense—that is, we are constituted by our roles and relationships with others (Ames 2011; Rosemont 2016). According to this view, I do not just act as a good daughter, fulfil my role as a good teacher, and take seriously my obligations as a good citizen; instead, I *am* the good daughter to my own parents, the good teacher to my specific students,
We can compare this understanding of the constitutive role of roles to the Aristotelian “function argument,” where to say something is a “good x” is to say that it performs the specific function of “x” well. A good daughter is someone who fulfills her function as daughter, which includes commensurate obligations but also affective attitudes and motivations.

We saw in Chapter 1 that the EV is characterized by its understanding of virtue as connected to fulfilling one’s human nature or function. And, recall that the function account importantly grounds the EV’s advantageous naturalism. Confucianism’s emphasis on the moral importance of roles and relationships simply expands this idea by noting that part of fulfilling one’s human nature includes fulfilling the responsibilities that adhere to us by virtue of our roles within human culture and society; including, e.g., our familial and professional roles.

What’s more, that Mengzi holds that roles to generate not only obligations of action but also of affect, attitude, or motivation can be seen in his claim in 7A37 “To care for someone without respecting him is to treat him like a pet.” As Meng Zhang further explains, “instances of respect,” which Zhang takes as an umbrella term to describe the “sentiments” or “mental state that undergirds yi [righteousness, one of Mengzi’s four cardinal virtues] motives,”

in the [Mengzi] show that it involves subjecting oneself by prioritizing another person and almost always motivates the agent to serve and honor that person. In 4A2, he says, ‘One who does not serve one’s ruler in the manner that Shun served Yao does not revere one’s ruler.’ … In addition to being a ‘frame of mind’ or a mere mood, respect in the Meng-Zi is associated with motives to treat others in a certain way. In 7A37, Meng Zi says, ‘To care for someone without respecting him is to treat him like a pet,’ and indicates that ‘empty ‘respect’ without actuality (shi 實) cannot ensnare a gentleman.’ In the context of the Warring States period, “actuality” involves giving gifts appropriate to the status of the person according to ritual and offering him governmental positions according to his ability (see 5B3). (Zhang 2020, 141, 147–149)

In other words, the moral obligations that correspond to one’s social role—in this example, a role that accords with respecting or honoring another, like a parent or ruler—include not only performing one’s related ritual actions correctly, but also having the correct affective attitude and motivation. This not only supports our argument from Chapter 4 that Mengzi ought to be regarded as a eudaimonic virtu ethicist, but
also shows that the proper affect, motivation, and action that virtue generates is, for him, highly contextual and relational.

As Hu goes on to note, Confucian Role Ethics can be understood in more or less “radical” ways. We saw in Chapter 4 that a “radical view contends that neither I nor my moral agency can exist independently of these relationships and roles,” and in “a less radical understanding… roles and relationships are still considered important and are dealt with carefully in Confucian ethics but… moral agents are not to be reduced to their roles and relationships.” (2023, 49–50) Hu advocates for this latter, less radical view, thus placing herself in the camp—with Hutton (2015), Van Norden (2007, 2013, 2016), Wong (2004, 2020), and others—that considers Confucianism to be a type of virtue ethics, while nonetheless acknowledging its important emphasis on the way our selves, including our moral selves, are relationally and communally constituted.27 I agree that Mengzi’s EV is a type of virtue ethics. Nevertheless, as we have noted, this understanding on the self as relational marks an important difference from Western virtue ethics.

It was noted in Chapter 4 that two important elements of Confucians’ (like Mengzi’s) relational and situational understanding of the self are rectifying names (正名, zhèngmíng) and ritual (禮, lǐ). We saw, from Nuyen, that moral obligations are importantly predicated on one’s roles and the corresponding rituals (2007, 317). Again, we do not have to accept that selves are fully socially constructed to hold that these are important features of moral development for Confucians. As was argued in Chapter 4, that virtues and moral agency are relationally responsive for Mengzi is only a problem on a certain “thick” reading of virtue ethics—not for understanding Mengzi as endorsing the EV as we have defined it. In fact, it is interesting to note that a strong insistence on motivationally self-sufficient virtues, and/or of the moral self as independent and

---

27 She therefore disagrees with “radical” role ethics views, in which there is no self outside of relationships and roles, like those put forward by contemporary Confucian scholars like Roger Ames (2011), Paul D’Ambrosio (2024), A.T. Nuyen (2007), and Henry Rosemont (2016, with Ames).
autonomous, would make the theory less empirically plausible—since, as we saw in Chapter 1, the emphasis on communal moral development can be regarded as an advantage of the EV.28

As we saw in Chapter 4, related to the idea that roles and ritual serve to cultivate and display relational human nature is the important concept of rectifying names. Confucians believed that rectifying names (正名, zhèngmíng)—that is, making sure that names correspond with their referents—was a morally important exercise, and that ensuring this “congruence” between names and reality would lead to social harmony (D’Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller 2018). Although zhengming does not exclusively refer to correcting names in accordance with social roles, this social, relational aspect was especially salient for Confucians.

Putting these concepts of ritual and rectifying names together, we can see that Classical Confucians believed that human moral development happened through this reinforcing network of roles and rituals in response to natural human needs, emotions, and impulses. Rituals serve to display and shape our emotions in a culturally meaningful way, such that we can develop and live in community with others. They are thus expressions both of the performing agents’ human nature and yet of a human nature that is not individualistic but fundamentally communal. Shaking hands, for example, helps to express and cultivate relationally appropriate attitudes of respect.

Roles, likewise, reflect basic human needs—like the need for parents to care for children. But if these rituals and roles fail to serve their phenomenological and social purpose—i.e., of cultivating and expressing human nature in a way that allows it to flourish—they ought to be challenged or “rectified.” Returning again to our example of a woman whose role in a patriarchal system is understood as submissive and differential,

---

28 To briefly review our discussion from Chapter 4, ritual describes social, religious, and etiquette norms, customs, or practices that help to order, and display socially meaningful attitudes and affects. Rituals both display and shape moral development in accordance with human nature. Though rituals are in a sense arbitrary—for example, another culture may signify respect with a bow rather than a handshake—their meaning comes from a shared cultural “grammar,” as Li (2007) puts it; a recognition of their purpose and symbolism within a shared cultural context (or “language”). Moreover, as we noted, rituals not only convey attitudes like respect, they help shape them. We provided the example, in Chapter 4, of a parent teaching a young child rules of etiquette (“What do we say when someone gives us a present?”); by performing rituals, like saying “thank you,” children learn to cultivate attitudes like gratitude and to display them in culturally meaningful and appropriate ways. Relevant passages from the Analects and the Mengzi include, e.g., Analects 9.3, 12.11, 17.21; Mengzi 3A4, 4A17.
we might examine whether such a role serves her autonomy and flourishing even regarded as fully constituted by her roles and relationships. We do this by looking at whether the rituals or role “do their jobs” of displaying and cultivating natural human emotions in a way that allows her to flourish within a community. So, rituals are roles were regard by Classical Confucians as negotiable and embedded in a normative understanding of relational human flourishing. Thus, they can solve the problem of conceiving of the self as relationally constituted—as constructivist understandings put forward by feminists and disability scholars suggest—while also avoiding the problem of moral luck and maintaining a naturalistic grounding for virtue.

In this understanding, social identities can be socially constructed and yet reflective of a universal or empirically determinable human nature. This is because roles and relationships, though dependent on one’s particular culture, reflect universal human modes of relation. Two passages from the Mengzi and the Analects (respectively) can help to illustrate this point. Mengzi says in 3A4.8 that

> The sage Shun [a moral exemplar]… appointed Xie to be Minister of Instruction, and instruct [the common people] about human roles: between father and children there is affection; between ruler and ministers there is righteousness; between husband and wife there is distinction; between elder and younger there is precedence; and between friends there is faithfulness. [Shun] advised, “Work them, draw them, straighten them, rectify them… make them get it themselves, and thus benefit them.”” (trans. Van Norden, 2008, Mengzi 3A4.8)

And the Analects 12.11 (as we saw in Chapter 4) tells us:

> Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about governing. Confucius responded, ‘Let the lord be a true lord, the ministers true ministers, the fathers true fathers, and the sons true sons.’ The Duke replied, ‘Well put! Certainly if the lord is not a true lord, the ministers not true ministers, the fathers not true fathers, and the sons not true sons, even if there is sufficient gran, will I ever get to eat it?’” (Confucius 2013)

In these passages, Mengzi and Confucius both suggest that fulfilling the responsibilities, obligations, and affective attitudes of one’s roles will contribute to both individual and communal flourishing. As we can see

---

29 If, for example, fetching her husbands’ slippers in the morning helps to display and cultivate care and respect as is appropriate to that relationship and to both parties’ (as well as society as a whole’s) flourishing, the ritual should be continued. If it instead cultivates attitudes that do not serve the relationship and moral development of those involved, or which are improper to roles that would serve social harmony, the role or ritual should be abandoned or “rectified” as needed.

30 Again, this is because ritual and the rectification of names together encourage agents to reflect on social roles and to abandon those that do not contribute to flourishing. An important consequence of the Confucian social and relational understanding of the moral self—when combined with this idea of roles as normative and rituals as an important aspect of moral cultivation—is thus that Mengzi’s EV is thus better equipped to address moral luck and constructivist critiques.
from the *Mengzi* passage, fulfilling one’s roles includes developing the virtues proper to the roles or relationships (like righteousness or affection) (as we’ve seen, a related claim is also put forward in *Mengzi* 7A37). And, as we can see from the *Analects* passage, the obligations and affects that each role comes along with are so central to the role that we can think of fulfilling them as fulfilling the function of that role.

Again, these passages display the Confucian conviction that when roles are rectified, and so when occupants of roles inculcate and practice the proper moral and affective attitudes, society will flourish. Worth noting here is that the roles must be “rectified” to benefit both society as a whole and those inhabiting those roles, and that the roles are, when rectified, are again reflective of relational attitudes—for example of affection between family members. Just as with ritual, roles serve the purpose of expressing or shaping human nature, conceived of as relationally constituted; they are normative. So, if someone embodies her role of “daughter” correctly, she will not just meet her related obligations but will have the related correct affective and moral attitudes (for example, affection).

What’s more, agents are regarded as having the resources to contribute to—and if needed, combat—the social salience of their roles. So, we can endorse an understanding of social roles, relationships, and identities as importantly socially constructed without further suggesting that for this reason our social positionality makes us vulnerable to the moral luck critique. This is because our roles and relationships are normatively grounded—as are the virtues—in human function and flourishing. Should our society, culture, or family come to be characterized by roles that do not contribute to *eudaimonia*, we can and should rectify them.

5.4 The Psychology Critique

Empirical psychologists have attacked the notion of virtues as stable character traits (Claim i of the EV, aretaicism). This critique, as we saw in Chapter 3, can be subdivided into three related arguments. First, it charges that character traits of the type virtues are meant to be may not exist; or at least, that they may not exist cross-culturally as universal features of human nature. Second, it argues that an agent’s situation—that is, their context or environment—has a greater impact on their actions than character does. Third, it argues that even if character traits do exist, if they may be silenced or overridden by other, seemingly morally irrelevant, features of the situation it seems that they are unlikely to guide action.
These latter two (closely related) arguments have together been known as the situationist critique. As we have seen, these three related objections can also be understood as stronger—challenging the existence of virtues—and weaker—challenging their efficacy—versions of the same critique (see Kristjánsson 2008). Let’s look at the first critique—that character traits may not exist—next.

Recall that we identified character traits (in Chapters 1 and 3) as temporally and cross-situationally consistent dispositions or tendencies, which reliably predict and explain an agent’s motivations, affect, and actions (see, e.g., Alfano 2013; Annas 2011; Aristotle 2019; Fabiano 2021; Hursthouse 1999; Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018; MacIntyre 2007; Merritt 2000; Miller 2018; Nguyen and Crossan 2022; Sarkissian 2017; Sorenson 2010; Sreenivasan 2013). As we saw in Chapter 4, although Mengzi does not explicitly endorse an understanding of character traits that fits this description, evidence from the *Mengzi* suggests that he holds that the virtuous person possesses stable traits that reliably predicted his affect and actions (see, e.g., *Mengzi 2A2, 4B28, 7B10, 7A34, 7B33*). So, Mengzi can be regarded as endorsing Claim i of the EV.

As was further argued in Chapter 1, the grounding in ethics in the evaluation of character traits (i.e., *aretaicism*) is a positive feature of the EV because it is more psychologically plausible than a deontic focus on abstract reasoning or autonomously directed actions. Because virtue ethics “focuses on the cultivation of moral virtues *qua* stable dispositions conducive to human flourishing,” the theory’s *aretaicism* also closely relates to its advantageous features of *eudaimonism* (Claim ii) and to its emphasis on the importance of communal and emotional cultivation. (Kristjánsson 2008, 55) Additionally, conceiving of virtues as traits of character ensures that even unreflective virtuous action originates in the virtuous agent, because the automatic response is a product of deliberate habitation. Claim i thus further accords with the commonsense intuition that virtuous people easily and happily do what’s right.

However, empirical evidence suggests that seemingly morally irrelevant features of one’s situation are more likely to impact behavior than global dispositions are.31 Even if one argues (e.g., as Kristjánsson 2008

---

31 As we saw in Chapter 3, two reasons that one might challenge the existence of character traits are: (1) contemporary psychology does not support the existence of reliable behavioral dispositions, and (2) relatedly, there is a dearth of good empirical evidence of cross-culturally consistent character traits or virtues. As Doris (1998, 2008), Harman (1999, 2000,
has) that situationists tend to emphasize action at the expense of virtue’s motivational or affective components, since being able to reliably predict and explain action is at least part of virtue this critique can still be taken to suggest that virtues do not exist. Moreover, even if stable, predictive, and evaluative dispositions do exist, as we further saw in Chapter 3 there is some empirical evidence that suggests they may vary cross-culturally, as do moral values. This problematizes the connection between virtues and human nature. This is because this cross-cultural variation supports the strong influence of one’s culture or environment—rather than one’s nature—on shaping not only one’s character but also what is regarded as good or flourishing.

It was pointed out in Chapter 3 that contemporary empirical evidence suggests that “priming” subjects with exposure to certain environments, opportunities, language, movies, smells, or levels of light significantly impacts their morally relevant behavior (Baron 1997; Chartrand and Barge 1996; Darley and Batson 1973; Geen and Stonner 1973; Hartshorne and May 1927; Linenquist et al. 2010; Milgram 1963; Spino 2020; Zhong et al. 2010). Again, this evidence can be taken either to suggest that character traits (and therefore virtues) do not exist, or that if they do they cannot help us to reliably act as virtue requires in challenging situations.

So, the psychology critique can be taken as challenging the existence of virtues (and character traits); as challenging their grounding in human nature; and as challenging their usefulness in ethically fraught situations, if they do exist. It was further pointed out in Chapter 3 that proponents of the EV-E emphasize

2003, 2009), Fabiano (2021), Kamtekar (2004), Merritt (2000), Sarkissian (2017), Spino (2020), and Sreenivasan (2013) (among others) have argued, there is scant evidence for reliable (cross-situationally and cross-temporally) behavioral dispositions.


33 As we saw in Chapter 3, some have responded to this weaker version of the situationist challenge by “biting the bullet” and arguing that virtues do exist but do not reliably guide action in ethically difficult situations, or that they the virtues exist but in very few people. However, as we noted this is an unsatisfactory response because it diminishes the accessibility of virtue that was taken to be a positive characteristic of the EV.
that human nature is relational and endorse an understanding of phronesis as sensitive—an integrated, inseparable part of one’s affective and conative dispositions—rather than deliberative. For this reason, practical wisdom-E leaves less room to argue that virtuous agents can correct for the dangers of situationism.

We noted in Chapter 2 that proponents of the sensitivity view explicitly deny the need for a virtuous agent to be able to “give an account” of why a given response is merited by a particular situation. Claim iv-E thus suggests that the phronimos does not rely on articulable reasons for acting as virtue requires, and that she instead is particularly sensitive to what she feels or perceives to be required by a particular situation. As we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, this understanding of ethical “reasoning” (in a thin sense) is supported by recent empirical observations. As Slingerland (2011) points out (drawing on Damasio 1994), evidence suggests that when we are presented with a situation—or called upon to imagine a situation (neurophysiologically not that different a process)—we rely on the ‘dispositional representations’ ([Damasio 1994,] p. 104) that constitute our full repository of knowledge in order to comprehend it, and these representations inevitably include emotional information. As Damasio observes, ‘When we recall an object . . . we retrieve not just sensory data but also accompanying motor and emotional data. . . . We recall not just sensory characteristics of an actual object but the past reactions of the organism to the object’ (p. 161). In other words, the images that form the basis of our concepts are somatically ‘marked; with visceral and often unconscious feelings of ‘goodness’ or ‘badness,’ urgency or lack of urgency, and these feelings play a crucial role in everyday, ‘rational’ decision making… In any given situation, the number of theoretically possible courses of action is effectively infinite, and the human mind is obviously not capable of running simultaneous analyses of all of them at once. Therefore, the body contributes by biasing the reasoning process — often unconsciously — before it even begins. (Slingerland 2011, 84; see also Damasio 1994)

As Slingerland here notes, even at a perceptual level our emotions play a crucial role in determining the ethically salient features of a given situation. What’s more, these emotional-perceptual understandings of the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ seem both casually and temporally primary to any strictly ratiocinatic or deliberative understanding. While this represents a point in favor of Claim iv-E’s empirical plausibility, it also highlights a weakness when it comes to responding to situationist critique.

As this empirical evidence from Slingerland and Damasio suggests, the way that our perceptions and emotions color our ethical reasoning is often unconscious. With this in mind, it seems that agents may not be able to combat irrational responses to, e.g., morally irrelevant situational features. Although proponents of this claim will argue that she correctly identifies what features are morally relevant because other, competing concerns are “silenced,” it’s opaque in this version of the EV exactly how she figures out which features are
morally relevant and which are not (McDowell 1980, 370). Thus, the EV-E seems to be comparatively vulnerable to this critique.

What’s more, and relatedly, this sensitivity account of virtue is also less able than the EV-R to account for cross-cultural variation in virtues. This is because, as Ivanhoe (2011) argues, a “problem with any strong analogy between color and moral perception is that we would expect to find greater consensus about ethical values in the world than we seem to.” (Ivanhoe 2011, 278) In other words—as we argued in more detail in Chapter 3—the problem with a sensitivity understanding of *phronesis* is that it makes ethical understanding seem too “easy,” such that further explanation is required as to why different cultures have come to endorse such different virtues and moral standards.

We saw in Chapter 2 and 3 that Slingerland (2011) musters a wealth of empirical evidence to support his claims that (1) emotional, sensitivity, or perceptual accounts of moral reasoning accord more closely with contemporary empirically supported understandings of how humans actually reason ethically in normal circumstances, and (2) that, nevertheless, some evidence suggests that at least in some cases rationality (in the strict, deliberative) sense can override our initial affective reactions.

While it was pointed out that rationalists may argue that the kind of (possible but rare) rational control Slingerland points to in (2) is precisely what is required for one to act ethically, Slingerland points out that the evidence suggests that “conscious overriding of automatic emotional responses… significantly interfere[s] with… reaction time… which suggests that cognitive control is a fairly costly and time-consuming process.” (2011, 9) He therefore argues that more emotionist accounts of moral reasoning are more likely not only to describe our everyday moral reasoning but to usefully guide our responses in real-world ethical lemmas.

The EV-R’s solution is therefore unsatisfying too, insofar as it reintroduces the empirical implausibility that was seen as a reason to reject deontic theories. What’s more, although the EV-R's

---

34 As he further remarks, this is because “ethical decision making in the real world takes place in an environment characterized by time pressure, limited and often inaccurate information, indistinct physical and temporal boundaries, and often only limited or entirely nonexistent conscious involvement.” (2011, 92)
understanding of *phronesis*—as the perfection of a (strictly) rational process—and of virtue as including rational control can better explain how a virtuous agent could combat morally irrelevant situational factors and account for cross-cultural variation, this version of the EV is also subject to the psychology avenue of critique. This is because both the EV-R and EV-E rely on an understanding of virtues as reliably leading their possessors to do the right thing. And the situationist critique holds that they cannot do this reliably.

While Mengzian virtue ethics cannot completely avoid the charge that features of our situation significantly impact our action, it does suggest that a situationally responsive understanding of virtue means that the psychology critique need not problematize moral agency. I argue that the EV-M more fully captures the important role an agent’s environment plays in her moral development, and in so doing can explain the moral significance of seemingly morally irrelevant features of one’s situation. As we have seen, Confucians—including Mengzi—put forward a notion of the moral self as importantly relational, and so take seriously the impact that environmental and social factors have on agents’ moral development.

Moreover, this emphasis on the mutually dependent relationship between society and individual—through its focus on the importance of ritual and social roles—also provides an avenue of response to situationist critique. This is related to our understanding of the EV-M as pluralistic (Van Norden 2007), and so as allowing for variation in the primacy of certain (nevertheless objective and universal) moral goods.

Again, Mengzi’s focus on virtuous action as dependent on the particulars of one’s social roles is a fruitful avenue for addressing criticisms from empirical psychology. As Hagop Sarkissian has pointed out, that our behavior is highly interconnected with others is pervasive in classical Confucian thought… [there is] a great deal of preoccupation with relatively minute matters of conduct, such as one’s posture, countenance, tone of voice, choice of words, ceremonial attire, and overall comportment, as these were thought to affect how others behave and how interpersonal situations unfold. (Sarkissian 2010, 7)35

---

35 Although Sarkissian focuses on the *Analects*, this “preoccupation” can be found in the *Mengzi* as well insofar as he emphasizes the importance of ritual (li, 禮). See *Mengzi* 3A2, 3A7, and 4A27 for some of Mengzi’s most substantial discussions of ritual.
We saw above (in §5.3.3) that the self for Confucians both is socially constructed and yet has an essential human nature. Part of human nature, for Mengzi, is this highly situationally and relationally responsive process of moral development.

Ritual propriety, as we have seen, is one of Mengzi’s virtues. As Lee H. Yearley (1990) and Kwon-lun Shun (1993) have argued, ritual propriety for Mengzi “involves the expression of respect through ritual activities.” Ritual actions, then, have ethical import. This suggests that the situationist critique can be resolved by acknowledging that seemingly insignificant features of our environment or interactions have a profound impact on virtue cultivation. Rather than taking this as a failing of the EV, we can develop an EV that acknowledges and uses this situational responsiveness as an additional tool in moral cultivation.

As Kristjánsson has noted,

situationism does not involve a complete rupture with the idea of human dispositions. Although [situationists claim that] cross-situational dispositions, such as global compassion, go overboard, intra-situational dispositions, such as consistent ‘dime-finding, dropped-paper compassion’, remain. Furthermore, situationists acknowledge the fact that many people appear to possess global dispositions by virtue of having been diligent enough in selecting and modifying the situations to which they could be exposed. For example, if I assume the role of a devoted husband and carefully avoid situations in which my devotion can be tested, then I may be able to deceive myself and others into considering it a global character trait.” (Kristjánsson 2008, 61)

Here, Kristjánsson makes the point that even studies that support situationism—that is, the thesis that global, cross-situational dispositions of the type virtues are meant to be do not exist—acknowledge that “intra-situational” dispositions likely exist. For example, as Kristjánsson notes, the Hartshorne and May “honesty”


37 Kristjánsson here references the Isen and Leven “dime experiment,” in which “subjects were adults making calls from public telephones in US shopping malls. Some of the subjects found a dime secretly left in the phone by the experimenter; others did not. As the subjects left the phone booths, a confederate of the experimenter ‘accidentally’ dropped a folder full of papers on the floor. As it turned out, most of the subjects who had found a dime stopped to help the confederate pick up the papers, but only one out of 25 participants who did not find a dime offered help. The experimenters (Isen and Leven) hypothesised that finding a dime led subjects to feel in a good mood, and that their mood – rather than any consistent character trait – prompted the helping behaviour.” (Kristjánsson 2008, 58; see also Isen and Leven 1972). However, the replicability of Isen and Leven’s findings has been challenged (see, e.g., Weyant and Clark 1976). Regardless of whether this particular study is empirically sound, Kristjánsson’s point—that empirical evidence suggests that dispositions are much more “particular” than “global”—remains.
study that did not find strong evidence of a correlation between honest-relevant disparate situations (like the opportunity to cheat on a test versus to steal change left unattended) did find strong evidence of temporally consistent honesty in a more fine-tuned context (e.g., children that did not cheat on a test in one instance could be reliably predicted not to cheat in subsequent instances). (Kristjánsson 2008, esp. 59; see also Hartshorne and May 1927). What’s more, as Kristjánsson points out, global character traits can appear to exist if one avoids situations that challenge them.

On the one hand, these responses seem initially unhelpful for virtue ethicists in responding to the situationist critique. If character traits must be reimagined as idiosyncratic or extremely situationally specific, it seems difficult to see how we could habituate ourselves in a way to prepare for new situations. So, virtues on this picture seem to be much less predictive and cross-situationally consistent to a degree that they lose any efficacy in guiding our ethical actions. And, as we have said, “biting the bullet” and agreeing that virtues cannot be relied upon to produce the right actions in ethically fraught circumstances weakens the usefulness of virtue ethics. Simply declaring that the virtuous person ought to avoid situations where her virtue might be tested seems to “pass the buck” and emphasize the ethical import of determining which situations might be risky over developing characters that help us to thrive even under duress. And, this picture clearly is not Aristotle’s—who, as we have seen, held that the virtuous person reliably acts well even in dire circumstances (NE, 1100b16–23, 1100b34–1101a5, 1105a30, 1169b3–8, 1177a27–b1).

On the other hand, Kristjánsson’s insights here about how acknowledging the strong impact of situational factors on agents’ actions can be helpful when considered in concert with Mengzi’s relationally responsive understanding of virtue. It was noted in Chapter 3 that one response to the situationist critique is to argue that virtues can be regarded both as character traits and yet as responsive to situational contexts.38 In response to this it was remarked that the situationist critique specifically targets “behavioral inconsistency… that differ[s] only with respect to trait-irrelevant situational features,” where a “trait-irrelevant feature” “is both

---

38 Proponents of the EV could, we noted, argue that the importance of *phronēsis* is due exactly to the importance of particulars in making moral judgments. While a situation may seem the same to an outside observer, the apparent lack of cross-situationally robust and predictive character traits may actually be relevantly different situations due to the particulars of the situation, the agent’s background, etc.
minor and morally irrelevant with respect to whatever the trait-relevant behavior happens to be.” (Spino 2020, 76) Situational features like smell, lighting, whether one in a hurry, etc. certainly do not seem like features that a phronimos would use to guide her action. If one were to further respond that seemingly irrelevant features are in fact morally important, the EV seems to open itself up to another avenue of the moral luck critique since in that case minor features of a situation outside of the agent’s control, like smell or lighting, are given moral significance. However, the moral luck critique is avoided if agents are understood as having control over these “trait-irrelevant” features after all.

This avenue of response is precisely what Mengzi’s socially constructed, relationally and situationally responsive self allows for. One thing that the evidence mustered by situationists shows is that we can have profound impacts on others’ behavior, even if they are not aware of this. As Sarkissian has argued,

it is chimerical to think we can effectively refrain from influencing others in our midst. We must rather accept that influencing others is part of social existence, something we bring about not solely through volitional acts but simply by being a focus of others’ attention and awareness. Once we accept these facts, I argue that the only remaining question is how to influence others. (2017, 490)

Classical Confucians have been keenly aware of this ability to influence others through seemingly morally insignificant actions and aesthetic considerations. We saw in Chapter 4 that, in addition to bodily comportment and etiquette, music (Analects 3.25, 7.14, 8.8, 13.3, 16.2, 16.5, 17.8), modes of dress (Analects 10.6, 17.18, 20.2) and other seemingly morally irrelevant features of a situation were seen as importantly contributing to individuals’ moral development. It doesn’t seem too far of a stretch to add aesthetic considerations like lighting (Zhong et al. 2010) or good smells (Baron 1997; Liljenquist et al. 2010) to the mix.

As Sarkissian (2010, 2017), Brink (2013), Engelen et al. (2018), Vargas (2013) and others have pointed out, this understanding of situational features’ effect on behavior is similar to the concept of “nudging” in contemporary empirical psychology. As Engelen et al. explain, a nudge strategy… is a deliberate intervention in some choice architecture predictably to influence people’s behavior, without making use of the conventional strategies of coercing, sanctioning or incentivizing… typically based on empirical evidence from psychology and behavioral science about the interaction between choice architectures and people’s psychological set-up.” (2018, 350)
Thus, a “nudge” is just making intentional use of the situational features that situationists have identified as impacting behavior. With this and a functionalist account of ritual in mind, the EV-M can motivate an understanding of situational features as tools for moral development.

Although situationist critics have focused on the way situational features may lead away from virtue, Sarkissian (2017) and Alfano (2013a) have pointed out that empirical evidence also suggests “that we can shape the behavior of people in particular situational contexts intentionally by attributing to them virtues and other laudable character traits.” (Sarkissian 2017, 490; here, he draws on Alfano 2013a, as well as Miller et al. 1975) Sarkissian further notes that “Alfano speculates that, over prolonged periods of time, such labeling can indeed lead individuals to develop real virtues.” (2017, 491) This shares interesting parallels with the Classical Confucian idea of rectifying names—which, as we have noted, can take the form either of changing the name to match reality or changing reality to match the name—and ritual. Labeling someone a generous friend or a caring spouse might, this evidence suggests, help lead them to develop these traits.

Moreover, as Rosemont and Ames (2016) have argued, the “Confucian tradition is preemptive in trying to establish a social fabric that would reduce the possibility of crime.” (70; see also Sim 2015, 65) Relatedly, Slingerland (2015) has also argued that the Confucian emphasis on the importance of social supports in virtue development and practice “low[ers] the bar” of what virtue requires “by building into the social environment a variety of situational supports designed to enhance virtue.” (212) An emphasis on the moral force of one’s situation and environment can thus be used as a kind of social engineering to both encourage the formation of virtues and to limit the chances that they will be tested.

As we saw from Sarkissian (2010) above, the importance of seemingly insignificant rituals—such as making sure one’s mat is straight (Analects 10.10, 10.15)—in Confucian thought underscores their understanding of the moral force of situational features, and is closely related to their understanding of selves as deeply relational. Thus, the EV-M respond to the situationist prong of the psychology critique through acknowledging the impact of situational features but by further arguing that humans are obligated to support each others’ moral development by making use of them.
We have seen, in Chapter 4 and above, that some critics of identifying Confucianism as a type of virtue ethics—like Ames (2011), Rosemont and Ames (2016), and Nuyen (2007)—have argued that Classical Confucians do not take individuality and autonomy as central, and that proponents of a strong Confucian role ethics (CRE) view argue that there is no individual for Classical Confucians. The relational and role-centric aspect of Confucianism not only makes Mengzi’s Confucian theory of moral development less susceptible to the moral luck critique, it also turns out to be a strength for responding to the psychology critique. As Owen Flanagan argues,

A cold, hard look at what is known about human nature not only undermines certain overly rationalistic philosophical views of moral agents as general-purpose reasoners. It also undermines many recent forays into virtue theory. Virtue theorists are right in thinking that moral responsiveness is mediated by a complex constellation of traits and dispositions rather than by a general-purpose moral rule or principle, for example, the principle of utility or the categorical imperative. But they are insufficiently aware of the degree to which the virtues and vices are interest-relative constructs with high degrees of situation sensitivity. (1993, 3)

As this critique points out, the psychology critique can be seen as attacking a concept of virtue that shares much in common with deontic notions of moral value. We saw in Chapter 1 that virtue ethicists have been critical of deontic theories for their overly rationalistic attitude toward moral development, reasoning, and evaluation. Yet just as deontic theories were criticized as psychologically implausible due to their denigration of the role of emotions and community in moral development and obligation, so Western virtue ethical theories have been critiqued for being insufficiently attentive to everyday relational and situational factors in the same.

Although Mengzi, like Aristotle, believes that virtues are character traits, it does not seem that virtues in his conception are ideally motivationally self-sufficient; in fact, because the sprouts (and their corresponding virtues) seem to be activated by our relationships with others, virtue has an importantly social quality.39 As we saw in Chapter 4, for Mengzi what virtue calls for is strongly dependent on one’s context,

39 Sarkissian argues that the Confucian tradition’s “concept of individuality is more relational and context-dependent, emphasizing the fundamental ties between individuals” in general (2010, 7). Chengyang Li argues similarly in his 1994 “The Confucian Concept of Jen [Ren] and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study.” McLeod has even argued that ren (仁), the central virtue of the Analects, is “a moral property primarily of communities, one that individuals can possess derivatively.” (2012, 505)
including the relationship one has with others involved. This helps to address the first prong of the psychology critique, which argues that character traits—conceived of as robust, action guiding, and motivationally self-sufficient—may not exist. In short, Mengzi puts forward a version of the EV that holds that virtues are traits of character, but does not define traits of character as ideally independent or individualized.

As we’ve seen, Mengzi argues not only that developing full virtues requires a suitable environment but also that individuals can impact their environments through enacting virtue, even if this is manifested through seemingly insignificant actions or aesthetic features like following rituals regarding dress or social conduct. This suggests that both character traits and one’s situation are more malleable and interdependent than the Aristotelian tradition implies. And, by emphasizing the circle of dependence between an individual and her community and environment, Mengzi provides a response to the situationist critique by suggesting we foster, as Sarkissian puts it, a mutual “ethical bootstrapping” through which, by “being mindful of the interconnectedness of our behavior, we not only affect how others react to us, but also thereby affect the kinds of reactions we face with in turn.” (2010, 12)

This understanding of virtue as relational and situationally developed not only is more empirically plausible because it can account for the evidence mustered by situationists that features of our environment affect our conduct, it also seems to be more in line with the kind of “intra-situational dispositions” that situationist psychology has supported the existence of. (Kristjánsson 2008, 61) That is, Mengzian virtues are still character traits but, because they are highly situationally responsive, one aspect of their communal moral development includes creating an environment in which they can be successfully cultivated and practiced. A contemporary Mengzian virtue ethics, then, emphasizes that attending to our actions and attitudes, even if seemingly insignificant, contributes importantly to our own and others’ virtue cultivation.

Another positive feature of Mengzi’s EV is that it can better account for differences between cultures while still positing a universal human nature as the grounding for ethics. This is due to his acknowledgement not only of environment on moral development but also his recognition that human nature is characterized in large part by relationships, which may look different in different contexts. This is related to Van Norden’s
insight that a robust contemporary Confucianism must be pluralistic as well as particularistic (2007, Chapter 5). I have argued that a charitable and modernized reading and expansion of Mengzi’s moral theory, i.e., the EV-M, is pluralistic and particularistic given his understanding of not only rituals but relationships as serving individual and societal flourishing. This is because this functionalist account of rituals and relationships can ground an EV that is both naturalistic and eudaimonic (Claims ii and ii) and yet allows for considerable variation in individuals’ and societies’ ordering of moral values as well as an understanding of selves and virtues as relational. But how exactly does this solve the problem of cross-cultural moral inconsistency?

We saw above that poor environments can affect the sprouts’ ability to flourish, and that humans must also put in effort to cultivate their sprouts into full virtues. In Mengzi’s barley example (6A7) this was likened to barley plants that grow differently due to variations in weather, soil, or human effort. However, we might also ask: what about when the climate is not the same, and so different functions or characteristic forms of life are called for? Is it possible for the sprouts to flourish in different ways, based on adapting to different (but not necessarily bad) environments? As I have argued elsewhere, for Mengzi (as for Aristotle and other proponents of the EV) there is a right way for humans to live, as there is a right way for plants to live, based on objective, species-dependent standards (Lebkuecher 2024). However, within this teleology there is room for variation.

Mengzi argues that “in general, things of the same kind are all similar” (2008, trans. Van Norden, 6A7.3). He provides the example of a shoe. He writes:

In general, things of the same kind are all similar. Why would one have any doubt about this when it comes to humans alone? We and the sage are of the same kind. Hence, Longzi said, ‘When one makes a sandal for a foot one has not seen, we know that one will not make a basket.’ The similarity of all the shoes in the world is due to the fact that the feet of the world are the same.” (6A7.3–4)

This supports our point, from earlier, that all humans are regarded as capable of developing the virtues by nature for Mengzi (assuming this capacity is not barred by a hostile environment or their own voluntary lack of effort). But, of course, shoes do differ in some respects, based on the materials, size, sole, etc. that are suitable for the person and their circumstances (e.g., flip-flops may be useful in one context, snow boots in
another). While all shoes have the same general function, certain aspects (like fashion, breathability, or durability) may be differently valued within that function as needed.

We have further seen that for Mengzi (as for other Classical Confucians) one’s flourishing depends in large part on her social roles and relationships. But of course, roles and relationships also vary cross-culturally, and even among individuals with the same culture. This suggests that Mengzi’s understanding of human nature is one that is universally accessible, but which is highly variable in response to one’s particular cultural, familial, and social context. And, as we saw in §5.3.2 above, social roles not only vary cross-culturally but also ought to be “rectified” if or when they fail to express and support our natural human capacities and needs. Thus, Mengzi’s moral theory supports an understanding of virtues as predicated on a universal, objective understanding of human nature and flourishing, but which nevertheless includes a sensitivity to the way flourishing may vary based on context—just as shoes all share the same basic function of protecting feet, but their particular way of doing so will vary based on the environment.

Looking again at the EV-R’s, EV-E’s, and EV-M’s versions of Claim i:

(i-R) virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of rationally controlling or directing emotional impulses or appetites.

(i-E) virtue or virtuous action consists, at least in large part, of attending to our emotions or sentiments and recognizing their normative content.

(i-M) virtues are relationally responsive, and are further both rational and emotional—these are not separable aspects of human psychology.

We can see that it is Mengzi’s conviction that virtues are relationally responsive that helps the EV-M respond successfully to the psychology critique. This relational responsiveness (1) provides Mengzi’s theory with resources to explain cross-cultural variability in virtue—because relationships and roles vary cross-culturally, but nevertheless are instantiations of universal human needs and capacities, like being a part of a family, though different aspect of human life and the corresponding virtues may be differently weighed in different cultures or contexts. And, (2) it emphasizes the extent to which sensitivity to one’s situation, including one’s relational or role-based obligations, is not a “bug” but a “feature” of virtue.
5.5 A Contemporary EV-M

I have here argued that the EV-M retains the positive features of the EV—or of eudaimonic virtue ethics in a thin sense—while improving upon the typical instantiations of the EV in the Western tradition. This is because the EV-M (a) identifies the sprouts, rather than rational activity, as characterizing human nature; (b) holds that all people have the sprouts, and so does not rely on an exclusionary understanding of human nature or flourishing; (c) does not suggest that men and women have different natures; and (d) acknowledges the large extent to which our social roles impact our moral development, while holding that these roles are also grounded in a naturalistic account of human nature and flourishing.

Despite these advantageous features, we have also noted that Mengzi’s moral theory comes with its own downsides. First, as we saw in §5.3 above, Mengzi’s theory, like Aristotle’s, was developed in a cultural context that took for granted that men’s lives and values were more representative of human nature than women’s, that non-normative embodiments are natural bads, and that the authors’ cultures were superior to that of others. For Mengzi in particular, this included the belief that ancient Chinese Sage-Kings had perfected the rituals and relationships that properly characterize and develop humans as moral agents. In large part due to Confucianism’s lauding of traditionalism and ritual, the theory came to be used to justify gender oppression in later centuries.

What’s more, as we saw in Chapter 4, Mengzi’s moral theory is based on a metaphysical background—in which Heaven (Tian) sets a proper Way (Dao) that ought to guide human action—that makes his theory less naturalistic in the sense of being empirically discoverable and in accordance with contemporary science. And, just as we may disagree with Mengzi’s metaphysical grounding for human nature, we might also be suspicious of the particular virtues he identifies.

These problems, I argue, are surmountable with a modernized version of the EV-M. First, although Mengzi’s cultural context, like Aristotle’s, was sexist and culturally chauvinistic, his conviction that all humans have the sprouts by nature explicitly positions human nature as accessible to all, rather than suggesting that some humans have a different, lesser nature. Second, because he does not characterize human nature as most properly rational, nor suggest that a rational or intellectual process is required for moral cultivation, his theory
does not present those who are regarded as less rational or more dependent as morally less-than. And, while Confucianism emphasizes traditionalism, Mengzi’s belief that our innate tendencies toward virtue are more important than studying the ancients, and that rituals are important due to their phenomenological character and ability to contribute to human development leaves room for a contemporary EV-M to stress revising or “rectifying” traditions that do not serve human flourishing.

Finally, regarding Confucianism’s metaphysical grounding, I have argued for an EV that, as a thin conception of eudaimonic virtue ethics, allows for a weaker understanding of naturalism that permits a supernatural origin of human nature in the virtues as long as the virtues are still regarded as promoting human flourishing on this world or in this life. In this way, the EV can be inclusive of faith traditions while retaining the advantage of having a naturalistic, empirically supported grounding for morality. What’s more, since I have argued that for Mengzi the virtues are grounded in human nature and contribute to human flourishing, the EV-M could, with modernizing tweaks, do away with the conviction that Tian sets human nature in accord with the Dao in favor of more strongly naturalistic understanding of human nature that aligns with modern science (including the theory of evolution).

In fact, the EV-M (modernized to exclude the grounding of morality in Tian and Dao) can actually provide a more empirically supported theory of human nature than the Aristotelian tradition. Slingerland (2011a, 2011b, 2015), as we saw above, has argued that Mengzi’s theory of moral development has empirical plausibility. In particular, he points out that empirical evidence suggests that “a person’s ability to reason their way abstractly through moral dilemmas and other theoretical problems… [does] not translate into an ability to make actual reasonable ethical decisions” (Slingerland 2011a, 81; see also Damasio 1994) This finding supports the empirical plausibility of a virtue ethics model of moral development and decision over deontic ones.

Moreover, though, Slingerland argues that “Mencius’ views about morality and ethical education strikingly anticipate findings coming out of the modern Western cognitive sciences, and therefore… can serve as an important conceptual resource in envisioning what an empirically responsible modern virtue ethic might
look like.” (Slingerland 2011a, 82) This is because of Mengzi’s understanding of human nature as grounded in our conative-emotional sprouts as incipient tendencies toward virtue.40 As Slingerland points out,

On the cognitive-evaluative view of emotion [like Mengzi’s], emotions tell us something important about the world, and the basic set of normativity-beslowing emotions experienced by human beings (and many higher mammals) seem to be universal cross-culturally. This is what one would expect from evolution. (Slingerland 2011a, 93)

Relatedly, Shirong Luo has argued that Mengzi’s theory of the sprouts has exciting intersections with the “moral foundations theory” of moral development, though these two theories identify different proto-moral sprouts (or, as they are called in moral foundations theory, “triggers”). (2015)

That is—even if we may disagree with the sprouts that Mengzi identifies, or with his conviction that the sprouts are made part of humans’ nature by Heaven, a Mengzian understanding of the grounding, character, and developmental process of morality is empirically plausible. A modernized, more empirically supported EV-M might focus not on (or not on all of) Mengzi’s sprouts of compassion, disdain, deference, and approval and disapproval but on other proto-moral emotions that are likely to be universal and cross-cultural based on contemporary empirical research. (Mengzi 2008, 2A6)41

Although there is good reason to believe that Mengzi’s EV-M is an empirically plausible theory of moral psychology and developing, another potential point of criticism—suggested by the above discussion of Mengzi’s conviction that all humans are born with the sprouts even if it appears otherwise—is that his understanding of human nature is empirically unsupportable. That is, while his understanding of human nature as grounded in proto-ethical, emotional and conative sprouts, and his conviction that moral development and perfection requires strong social supports and a recognition of humans’ dependency and

40 Slingerland—with (here, and Lebkuecher 2024), Ivanhoe (2002), and Van Norden (2007)—explicitly rejects an understanding of extension as logical and emphasizes both the sprouts and Mengzi’s version of practical wisdom as emotional (2011a, 96).

41 Candidates for these empirically supported universal “sprouts” include, e.g., empathy and righteous indignation (as a sprout of justice), which may be interestingly compared to Mengzi’s compassion and disdain (Slingerland 2011a, 93-94), the “Big Five’s” conscientiousness, agreeableness, or openness (Fabiano 2021, de Raad and Mlacic 2016), or moral foundations theory’s five foundations of “care/harm, fairness/justice, loyalty/betrayal, authority/respect, and purity/pollution” (Luo 2015; see also Haidt 2007, Haidt and Joseph 2008).
relationality are both supported by contemporary empirical science, his conviction that the sprouts—and so
taste and flourishing—are available to all humans may not be.

This feature of Mengzi’s theory ought not be abandoned because, as we have seen, it provides a
grounding for morality that is accessible to all humans and so avoids the disability and feminist critiques of
the Western EV. That is, for the EV-M to both retain its positive features and be empirically plausible, it
would need to show that there exists a universal, empirically supported understanding of human nature which
does not exclude any humans and which also has normative content. We saw that one challenge to this
understanding of the sprouts as universally present in all humans by nature is problematized by the existence
of people with ASPD, but that this evidence does not deal a killing blow because, while contemporary science
suggests ASPD is in part heritable, it also appears to be partially environmental. As we have just noted, a
contemporary EV-M would also not necessarily endorse the sprouts that Mengzi identifies as the correct
ones, and would instead rely on empirically supported universal inclinations or tendencies. Nevertheless, this
is a point that would benefit from future empirical research.

Relatedly, a contemporary EV-M may need to be expanded beyond only humans. If a contemporary
EV-M were predicated on the belief that humans have the sprouts due to evolutionary factors (rather than
from Heaven), then we would need to consider whether our close relatives may also possess these. Persons in
this view would include not only all humans but also any non-human animals that have the sprouts and a
social/relational nature. That said, it could also be regarded as a strength of the EV-M that it’s based on a
“thin” naturalism, and so is more inclusive/accessible to different faith traditions. Thus, a modernized EV-M
would not necessarily have to be grounded in thick, evolutionary naturalism.

Finally, two additional counterpoints to consider are (1) that the EV-M’s strong emphasis on
relationally responsive and role-based moral development and obligation could be used to justify unjust (e.g.,
hierarchal or patriarchal) social arrangements, as Confucianism has been used. And, (2) that due to its
strongly relational understanding of human moral development and agency, that it does not pay adequate
attention to, or does not protect, individual liberty. This problem is especially salient given my argument
above that ritual and roles could be used as “nudges” toward virtue development—which may seem to diminish agent’s freedom to direct their own lives.

To address these problems, I believe a contemporary EV-M would lean heavily into a functionalist account of ritual and promote a greater suspicion of traditionalism than Mengzi did (Van Norden 2007, 317). We have seen that the EV-M takes rituals and roles as instantiations of universal human nature, by expressing and shaping human tendencies—e.g., to live in community, to mourn the dead, to mark significant life events like entering adulthood—in a way that serves the individuals involved and is responsive to the particular demands of their environment and culture. It was argued above that roles and rituals that do not serve the communities in which they are embedded and the individuals involved should be rectified or abandoned, as they are in this case no longer serving their function.

In the following chapter, I provide a short conclusion by revisiting the motivations and research questions that spurred this project; summarizing my arguments throughout the dissertation; and thinking through a few more implications of adopting a modernized EV-M.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND LOOKING FORWARD

In this chapter, I conclude with a summary of the arguments presented in this dissertation. Here, I also argue that insights from the contemporary Mengzian view proposed in Chapter 5 can helpfully inform contemporary virtue ethics—not only by providing answers to the criticisms to which the received Aristotelian tradition is vulnerable, as we saw in Chapter 5—but also by generating insights into applications and implications of contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethical theories.

Bryan Van Norden, drawing on Lee Yearly (1990), writes that if we wish to engage in the “historical retrieval” of earlier philosophical views, our goal should be to produce a position that is, in Lee Yearley’s formulation, “credible” and “appropriate.” Our interpretation should be “credible” in the sense that it is plausible for us today. A credible appropriation of an earlier philosophical view is one that is a “live option” for contemporary thinkers, given our knowledge of cultural diversity, historical change, modern science, and at least some of the values and institutional forms that have been emphasized as a result of the Western Enlightenment. But at the same time historical retrieval should result in a position that is “appropriate” in the sense that it is faithful to the philosophy that inspires it. It must be recognizable as being, at some fundamental level, a version of the original philosophy. A third criterion, not explicitly mentioned by Yearley but (I think) implicit in what he says, is that the resulting position be “inspiring.” By this grandiose term I mean simply that it should be clear why the reconstructed position offers something distinctive and valuable to ongoing philosophical debates.” (Van Norden 2007, 323)

In this dissertation, I hope to have provided an account of a contemporary EV-M that is credible, appropriate, and inspiring. I have aimed to show that the EV-M is credible—in showing that it is empirically plausible, responsive to contemporary criticisms, and useful for generating ethical prescriptions. I have argued that it is appropriate, in that it still incorporates Mengzi’s core tenants while including modernizing tweaks. And finally, I hope to have shown it is inspiring by offering a novel version of the EV.

Although Neville (2016), Rosemont and Ames (2016), and Van Norden (2007) (to name a few) have already presented rich and thoughtful discussions of what a ‘Neo-Mengzian’ or contemporary Confucian virtue ethics might look like, I believe my investigation and elucidation of a contemporary EV-M was valuable for a number of reasons. First, these other discussions do not include an in-depth engagement with the
Aristotelian tradition in a way that highlights how it has been interpreted in relatively “emotional” or “rational” ways, which as we have seen is important for illuminating how and where this tradition developed particular vulnerabilities to the disability, feminist, and psychology critiques.

Second, I start from a different characteristic both of eudaimonic virtue ethics—as the EV—and of Mengzi’s philosophy than these thinkers do. Neville (2016) and Rosemont and Ames (2016), as we have seen, position Confucianism as a kind of role ethics, as distinguished from a virtue ethics. I have argued that there is good evidence that Mengzi is a eudaimonic virtue ethicist because he holds the EV’s core tenets of aretaicism, eudaimonism, naturalism, and practical wisdom. I have, relatedly, argued that, while Neville and Rosemont and Ames (among others) are right to emphasize Classical Confucians’ (including Mengzi’s) emphasis on the importance of our social roles and relationships and on understanding both selves and virtues as highly situationally and relationally dependent, this is not a reason not to regard him as a virtue ethicist.

Van Norden and I have the closest understandings of Mengzi’s philosophy as well as what a contemporary Mengzian ethics might look like. Although Van Norden and I are in agreement that Mengzi is a virtue ethicist, recall from Chapter 1 that Van Norden offered his own “thin characterization of virtue ethics as giving accounts of (1) human flourishing, (2) the virtues that support leading a flourishing life, (3) ethical cultivation, or how one acquires the virtues, and (4) philosophical anthropology, or a view of human nature.” (2007, 116) While this characterization is helpful, as we saw in Chapter 1 Van Norden’s description lacks the emphasis on practical wisdom—which I have argued is an essential component of the EV. Moreover, although Van Norden argues for the need for a “Pluralistic Ruism” (2007, in the chapter of the same name), he does not provide a detailed account of what such a pluralistic Confucian approach would look like or how it would be grounded (as Angle 2009 has also noted). I hope to have shown that the EV-M is one such approach.

6.1 Practical Implications of a Mengzian VE

We saw in Chapter 5 that, due to his conviction that human nature is good and that all people can develop the virtues given effort and a supportive environment, Mengzi encouraged the rulers he visited to
implement social supports to support their citizens’ moral development and flourishing. As Van Norden notes,

At a general political level, [Mengzi] thinks that the problems of society can best be addressed by cultivating virtue in individuals and then giving political authority to the genuinely virtuous, who will provide for the basic needs of the people and rule by ethical inspiration rather than coercion and warfare. (2007, 313)

We saw in Chapter 5 that Mengzi advocated that rulers enact specific policies ensuring that all of their subjects had enough food, means to support themselves and their families, and access to education. Applied to contemporary political and social issues, this suggests that a contemporary EV-M would support strong social programming and robust and well-funded public education.

We also saw that Classical Confucians held rituals and social roles to have normative weight, such that customs or roles that fail to serve their communities’ development and flourishing should be “rectified” or abandoned. From these features of the EV-M we can further motivate ethical obligations to combat harmful gender and racial stereotyping and norms. Additionally, as briefly discussed in the previous chapter, a strongly naturalistic EV-M would call for us to investigate the evolutionary foundations of our proto-moral tendencies, such that we could determine whether (and which) animals that share the sprouts might be owed greater moral consideration.

What’s more, we have seen that Mengzi believes all humans—even those who seem to lack the sprouts by nature—can develop the virtues. And, as Sim (2015) has noted, Classical Confucians generally disapproved of punitive rather than rehabilitative measures (64–66; see also Analects 2.3, 12.19). Thus, in a contemporary context the I believe EV-M could be used to support the abolition of the death penalty and a strong focus on rehabilitative approaches to crime, thus motivating carceral system reform.

Finally, we also saw that, unlike Aristotle, Mengzi does not hold that people with intellectual disabilities are incapable of flourishing or that we owe less to them, morally, than to other people. He would thus advocate for the equal rights—including societal support to facilitate public engagement—for people with disabilities. This is evidenced not only by his conviction that all humans are born with the sprouts, but also by his frequent assertion that humans have an obligation to care for the elderly (which we might take as a
proxy for comparatively vulnerable or dependent populations generally) (see, e.g., Mengzi 2008, 1A3, 1A7, 1B12, 2B4, 5A1)

6.2 Summary of Dissertation

In Chapter 1, I argued that contemporary (eudaimonic) virtue ethics offers certain advantages over other normative ethical theories. These advantages were identified as the theory’s aretaicism, focus on emotional and communal moral cultivation, psychological harmony, casuistry, and eudaimonism. I further argued in that chapter that one way of conceptualizing these advantages, which are also core tenets of contemporary eudaimonic virtue ethics, is to identify four core claims that make up the “Eudaimonic View” (EV) of virtue. The EV’s four claims of aretaicism, eudaimonism, naturalism, and practical wisdom were argued to both ground the eudaimonic virtue ethics’ advantageous features and to provide a thin yet falsifiable conception of eudaimonic virtue ethics that could be fruitfully applied to virtue ethical theories from disparate cultures and time periods, which may also have substantial differences insofar as they expand upon the EV’s four claims.

In Chapter 2 I identified two frameworks through which Aristotle’s philosophy, and Aristotle’s interpreters throughout the Western tradition, can be understood: the rational EV-R and the emotional EV-E. I identified each interpretation’s expansions on the core EV, identified historical and contemporary proponents of each view, and pointed to important ethical implications of holding each of these views. In Chapter 3, I summarized criticisms of the EV from the perspective of disability theorists, feminist philosophers, and empirical psychologists, and identified the EV-R’s and EV-E’s comparative vulnerable to these criticisms. It was further argued in this chapter that these criticisms that these criticisms strike at the heart of the EV, and that for this reason a reimagined EV is required to address them.

Chapter 4 introduced a way to respond to these disability, feminist, and psychology critiques by drawing on insights from Mengzi. This chapter introduced Mengzi’s classical theory, including both his Confucian convictions and his innovations, and argued that his theory is an instantiation of the EV. In Chapter 5, I demonstrated how the Mengzian EV (EV-M) introduced in Chapter could, with modernizing
tweaks, provide a fruitful resource for responding to the criticisms from Chapter 3. Finally, in this chapter (Chapter 6) I have highlighted the ethical positions this reimagined EV-M might lead us to adopt.


413


VITA

Dr. Gina Lebkuecher (she/her) earned her PhD in Philosophy from Loyola University, Chicago, as well as a Master’s Degree in Philosophy and Social Policy from American University and a Bachelor’s degree in Philosophy, with minors in Chinese Language and Culture and Women’s and Gender Studies, from Vanderbilt University.

Her research specializations include ethics (especially comparative and applied) and Classical Chinese Philosophy. Her dissertation, titled “Reconceiving Virtue: A Mengzian Adaptation of Eudaimonic Virtue Ethics in Response to Contemporary Criticisms,” was a comparative ethics project, arguing that contemporary virtue ethics can benefit from integrating insights from the Confucian tradition to address critiques from feminist philosophy, disability studies, and psychology. Her long-term research interests are to further explore applications of Western virtue ethics, Confucianism, and feminist ethics to contemporary applied ethics and social-political issues.