BEYOND SILENCING: VIRTUE, SUBJECTIVE CONSTRUAL, AND REASONING PRACTICALLY

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In the contemporary philosophical literature, ideal virtue is often accused of setting a standard more appropriate for saints or gods than human beings. In this paper, I undermine divinity-infused depictions of the fully virtuous and argue that ideal virtue is, indeed, human. I focus on the virtuous person's imperviousness to temptation and contend that this imperviousness is not as psychologically implausible as it may seem. I argue that it is a virtuous person's subjective construal of a situation that silences reasons in favour of acting contrary to virtue. That silencing, however, is not the whole story when it comes to their practical reasoning. Practical reasoning can, and often does, continue beyond silencing, particularly in the search for what Bernard Williams calls 'constitutive solutions.' The upshot is a view of the virtuous as less god-like and more human—who will sometimes have to figure out what the virtuous response to a situation is, and who can still care deeply about the central concerns of human existence, including their life, health, loved ones, and life projects, even if those things will never provide them with a reason to act contrary to virtue.

Keywords: virtue, practical reasoning, subjective construal, silencing, John McDowell

1. Introduction

In the contemporary philosophical literature, ideal virtue is often accused of setting a standard more appropriate for saints or gods than human beings. There is, for example, Susan Wolf's well-known criticism that such an ideal depicts an unpalatable form of moral sainthood, one that 'does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive' [1982: 419]. In paying little to no attention to his own interests or happiness, the moral saint is 'too good for his own good' [Wolf 1982: 421], as ideal virtue seems to leave no room for the kinds of concerns that are often seen as central to a good human life, such as loved ones and life projects. There is also Simon Blackburn's charge that ideal virtue depicts a 'god-like nature' that 'belongs to nobody, and represents an ideal to which nobody can approximate' [1998: 37]. Anne Margaret Baxley echoes this charge, contending that ideal virtue 'would appear to give us a recipe for a divine or heroic

excellence, a state exceeding the normal capacities of embodied rational beings like ourselves…' [2007: 411]. Ideal virtue, these objections contend, is inadequately *human*.

There are two separate objections here. On the one hand, ideal virtue is inadequately human because it asks more from us than is psychologically possible. On the other, ideal virtue is inadequately human because it leaves no room for distinctively human characteristics and concerns—the kinds of things that make for a good *human* life. These objections question whether ideal virtue is an ideal that we *could* attain, and whether we ought even to *want* to attain it.

Several aspects of ideal virtue prompt such objections. One is the common characterization of ethics based on ideal virtue as *perfectionist*. Another is a commitment to the unity or reciprocity of the virtues, including practical wisdom, which can contribute to a view of virtue as all-or-nothing. Yet another is the Aristotelian distinction between virtue and continence: While those who act continently overcome contrary desires in order to act as they correctly judge that they should, the (fully) virtuous act willingly, their desires in harmony with their judgment. These aspects of ideal virtue can create an impression of the virtuous as ethically divine—individuals who always know exactly what to do in every kind of morally pressing situation and who are able to set aside completely concerns such as life, health, loved ones, and life projects in order to perform that action immediately and with ease.

I want to undermine this divinity-infused depiction of the fully virtuous and contend that ideal virtue is more human than these objections suggest. To do that, I will focus on the virtuous person's imperviousness to temptation to act contrary to virtue, for this imperviousness strikes many as epitomizing how ideal virtue fails to accommodate human concerns and limitations. Not only does this imperviousness strike many as unrealistically demanding psychologically, it also seems to require a devotion to virtue that precludes a genuine valuing of anything else. I will argue that the virtuous person's imperviousness is not as psychologically implausible as it may seem, nor does it entail that a virtuous person cannot have the kinds of concerns that we take to be central to a good human life.

The most influential elaboration of how it is that the virtuous are impervious to temptation to act contrary to virtue is John McDowell's silencing account of practical reasoning [1998]. Elaborating an analogy between virtue and perception, McDowell argues that the virtuous see situations in a distinctive way, a way that results in all considerations in favor of acting contrary to virtue being not merely overridden or outweighed in their practical reasoning, but altogether silenced. By 'silenced,' McDowell means that they fail to operate as reasons at all; this silencing secures the imperviousness of the virtuous. Moreover, their reliable experience of silencing makes the virtuous distinctive: they are not simply better or more skilled at dismissing considerations in favor of acting contrary to virtue; such considerations do not even enter into their practical reasoning.

While I am largely sympathetic to McDowell's view, his account leaves crucial questions unanswered regarding the scope of silencing and what, exactly, gets silenced. I contend that silencing ought to be understood in terms of *subjective construal*, that is, the way in which an individual understands or makes sense of the situation at hand. I argue that a virtuous person's construal of a situation silences all *reasons* in favour of acting contrary to virtue. That silencing, however, is not the whole story when it comes to their practical reasoning. Practical reasoning can, and often does, continue beyond silencing, and it is in this space between silencing and the execution of the action(s) that will meet the demands of virtue where a virtuous individual can—and indeed, often should—take central considerations such as life, health, and loved ones, into account. Such considerations, however, will never provide reason to act contrary to virtue, thereby preserving the virtuous individual's imperviousness to temptation. The upshot is a view of the virtuous as less god-like and more human—who will sometimes have to figure out what the virtuous response to a situation is, and who can still care deeply about the central concerns of human existence, including their life, health, loved ones, and life projects, even if those things will never provide them with a reason to act contrary to virtue.

2. An Example: Temperance and Donuts

In arguing for these claims, I begin with an example from McDowell. I use this example not only because McDowell's account has been a primary target for critics of ideal virtue, but also because it makes clear what both proponents and critics of ideal virtue have missed about the scope of silencing and the practical reasoning of the virtuous. The example is of an exercise of temperance in the face of delicious donuts:

> That the pleasure is available is a fact about the situation, at the disposal of a temperate person no less than anyone else. Such facts can engage a motivational susceptibility that is one of the standing concerns of a virtuous person. (Too little interest in the pleasures of appetite is a defect of character: see *NE* 3.11.) But on this occasion what matters about the situation, as the practically wise person correctly sees it, is not the opportunity for pleasure but, say, the fact that this would be his fifth doughnut at one sitting. The practically wise person registers, but counts as irrelevant to the question what to do, an instance of a kind of consideration (that pleasure is available) that does bear on that question in other circumstances. His counting it irrelevant shows in his being unmoved by it… [ibid.: 46-7]

What we have here is a situation in which a virtuous person is faced with a clear requirement of virtue: temperance demands that the individual refrain from eating more donuts. That there is a clear requirement of virtue is significant—McDowell only commits to the virtuous reliably experiencing silencing in such situations [ibid.: 51, 53 n. 5]. Surely, there are situations in which there is no such clear requirement. This is one way in which the scope of silencing ought to be understood as rather narrow.

The donuts are there for all to see and, McDowell notes, the virtuous individual registers their availability. Therefore, it is not as though the virtuous individual is able to exercise temperance out of ignorance of the availability of the donuts. Nor is it the case that the virtuous individual refrains from eating another donut because he is generally insensitive to or uninterested in their gustatory pleasure. For one, the virtuous individual has already enjoyed a (temperate, one supposes) number of donuts at this sitting. Moreover, McDowell explicitly notes that the individual has 'a motivational susceptibility' to donuts: he recognizes that they are delicious and will be motivated to enjoy them when appropriate.

The example presents two facts about the situation: 1) that gustatory pleasure is available (in the form of donuts) and 2) that eating another donut would be the individual's fifth at this sitting. In deciding what to do, McDowell claims, the virtuous individual takes the second fact as salient and considers the first irrelevant. As a result, the individual does not see this situation as an occasion for gustatory pleasure, even though the availability of donuts might, in other situations—say, four donuts ago—have meant that he would see *that* situation as an occasion for gustatory pleasure. Furthermore, the virtuous individual is not so much as tempted by the prospect of a fifth donut; he is impervious to temptation to act intemperately.

3. Subjective Construal and the Question, What to Do?

I turn now to the question of what, exactly, gets silenced in the donut example. McDowell claims that the virtuous individual 'counts as irrelevant to the question what to do' the fact that gustatory pleasure is available. This might lead one to think that it is the availability of donuts that gets silenced, or perhaps their (potential) gustatory pleasure. Neither of these can be right; it cannot be a feature of the situation that gets silenced.

Even if the virtuous individual does not, in this particular case, take the deliciousness of the donuts as a reason to have another, the fact that he is aware of that deliciousness and its availability makes the application of silencing language to those features of the situation seem inappropriate. Moreover, it looks as though the deliciousness of the donuts *can* serve as a reason for the virtuous individual, albeit not as a reason for him to have another. This becomes clear when we turn our attention to the question of what to do that the virtuous individual considers. McDowell does not explicitly articulate the question, and there are different ways of understanding what it might be.

One way to think about the question of what to do might be how to respond to the invitation, 'Would you like another donut?' In that case it does seem as though the deliciousness of the doughnuts fails to operate as a reason in the individual's temperate response: 'No, I have had enough, thank you.' But an alternative question of what to do might be: 'What should be

done with these remaining donuts?' With regard to this latter question, there is still the possibility that the individual could choose to eat more donuts. The virtue of temperance, therefore, remains very much in play, so to speak. There our virtuous individual stands—in the conference room at his workplace, say—wondering what to do with the remaining donuts. In this context and version of the question, it would be strange to discount completely the deliciousness of the donuts, or to claim that that feature is irrelevant. After all, it does not seem particularly virtuous to throw the donuts away when one could, say, share them with one's colleagues down the hall. But the answer to 'Why would you share these with your colleagues down the hall?' is, at least in part, 'Because these donuts are delicious and will bring them pleasure'. If the deliciousness of the donuts can fail to be a reason for the virtuous individual to have another, yet *be* a reason for him to share with colleagues, then it cannot be the case that the deliciousness of the donuts gets silenced.

What we are interested in is the way in which the virtuous take certain features of the situation at hand as reasons for *particular kinds* of responses to that situation. 'Delicious donuts are available' may be a reason to act intemperately and eat more donuts than one should. 'Delicious donuts are available' might be a reason to act considerately and share with one's colleagues down the hall. Features of a situation do not get silenced, then, but rather the reasons for non-virtuous behaviour that such features might serve. But if a certain feature of a situation, such as 'Delicious donuts are available,' can serve both virtuous and non-virtuous behaviour, how is it that only the non-virtuous options get silenced in a virtuous individual's practical reasoning? We do not get a clear answer in McDowell's account. I contend that it has to do with the way in which the individual subjectively construes the situation.[1]

When one encounters a situation, one pays more attention to some features of the situation than others; psychologists call this selective attention. Which features one pays

[1] A more detailed defence of this view can be found in Vigani [2019].

attention to are influenced by a number of factors, from contrast—for example, I am more likely to pay attention to the one chocolate frosted donut sitting on the tray if it is the *only* chocolate donut in the pile—to psychological features about the individual—I am more likely to pay attention to the glazed donut because glazed donuts happen to be my favourite. By selectively attending to certain features of a situation, and then interpreting and categorizing those features, an individual forms a subjective construal of that situation. One can think of a construal as a kind of label, brief yet informative [Ross and Nisbett 1991: 76]. It is a way, from the individual's own perspective, of organizing and making sense of the situation at hand. Moreover, construals tend to be affectively laden [ibid.], which makes thinking in terms of subjective construal particularly apt for those in the Aristotelian tradition who, like McDowell, resist drawing a sharp distinction between the intellectual and desiderative aspects of one's character (see, e.g., McDowell [1998: 40]).

One's construal of a situation plays a significant role in determining what reasons one takes oneself to have and for what. To take an example that has received considerable attention from psychologists, some individuals develop such a deep-seated fear of rejection that they are constantly on alert for signs of rejection by a partner. They thus have a tendency to perceive rejection in even ambiguous situations [Downey and Feldman 1996], and this perceived rejection tends to give rise to hostile behaviour [Ayduk et al. 1999]. That is, these rejection-sensitive individuals take themselves to have reason to be hostile—and so act in a hostile manner—because they construe an ambiguous situation as one of rejection.

To return to our virtuous individual faced with the remaining donuts, the availability of donuts serving as a reason to eat yet another depends on him construing the situation as an occasion for gustatory pleasure. If the situation is *not* construed as an occasion for gustatory pleasure, but instead as something along the lines of 'No more for me!', the deliciousness of the donuts *cannot* serve as a reason to eat another. It may, however, be a reason to share with colleagues down the hall. If the individual construes the situation as 'no more for me,' then he

does not take himself to have any reason to eat another donut. Reasons to eat another donut are therefore silenced, we could say, in his practical reasoning. There are, then, no reasons for acting contrary to temperance to be outweighed or overridden, and so we can see how the virtuous individual would be, in this case, impervious to temptation while being completely cognizant of the deliciousness of the donuts.

Moreover, the virtuous individual's character is crucial in allowing him to construe the situation in this (correct) way. As mentioned above, the psychological features of an individual can direct that individual's attention and affect how he construes a situation. A virtue is a character trait, that is, a constellation of cognitive and affective psychological elements including beliefs, goals, emotions, and competencies. If one is a truly temperate person, then the prospect of, say, eating until one is uncomfortably full—five donuts is a lot of donuts—has absolutely no place in, for example, one's beliefs about appropriate eating. These beliefs about appropriate eating—along with other related cognitive and affect elements, such as an appropriate appreciation of the gustatory pleasure afforded by fried dough—are likely to direct one's attention to one's current sensations of satiety, and allow one to recognize this situation not as an occasion for one's own gustatory pleasure, but rather as an opportunity to offer such gustatory pleasure to others.

To say that the virtuous person's character allows him to get the construal right, however, does not mean that we can discern someone's character based solely upon their construal of a situation. The virtuous get things *reliably* right, and we cannot ascertain such reliability from a single construal. We could imagine, for example, a not-so-virtuous individual also construing the donut scenario as 'No more for me!', where the psychological underpinnings of that construal differ significantly from those of the virtuous. Perhaps our non-virtuous individual is exceedingly sensitive to the judgments of others, and so construes the situation as 'no more for me' from a trait of character whose constellation of psychological elements includes an excessive fear of disapproval—'exceedingly' and 'excessive' are meant here to indicate that

this trait, whatever it might be, falls outside of the Aristotelian mean and so is *not* a virtue. Such a trait of character will not deliver reliability where temperance is concerned; were our non-virtuous individual to encounter the donuts in an empty conference room, safe from the gaze of others, she may be inclined to construe that situation as a very *in*temperate, 'Go for it!'

That we cannot ascertain an individual's character from a single construal also reminds us that these isolated examples of an individual construing a situation are, to some extent, artificial. Our lives are not a series of isolable situations, each with their own distinct boundaries. And the construal alone—as important as it is to how one chooses to respond to a situation—does not provide us with a complete picture of that individual's response. This will become more apparent in the discussion below. But attention to the role of subjective construal—more specifically, of *virtuous* construal—reinforces the idea that virtue is a good way of being in the world, and that one significant aspect of that goodness is how one understands and makes sense of that world.

It is also worth clarifying the way in which the construal is subjective. A construal is subjective because it is an understanding of a situation from that person's perspective; that understanding, as I have argued, depends in significant ways upon the individual's psychology. Someone with different psychological features facing an otherwise identical situation may, as a result of those different features, construe that situation differently. In some cases, differences in construal will be intimately tied to differences in character. For example, where a just individual might construe an unexpected windfall as an occasion to repay a debt, a similarly indebted unjust, profligate individual might (mis)construe such a windfall as an occasion to splurge. The relevant psychological features, however, go beyond those involved in traits of character. They include things like special skills sets that one might have or social roles that one might occupy—the kinds of things that might equip one to construe certain situations in more specialized or nuanced ways. For example, when I see someone collapse in the subway car, I might construe the situation as a generic, 'Help!' A medical doctor, however, might recognize

the specific symptoms exhibited by the collapsed individual and construe the situation as, 'Cardiac arrest!'

None of this is to say, I should emphasize, that an individual's construal is *correct* insofar as it is underpinned by her psychology; 'subjective construal' is not subjective in that sense, which is why thinking about *virtuous* construal is helpful. For instance, if one construes coming across a vulnerable person in need as an occasion to insult or degrade that individual, then one has *mis*construed the situation, even if that construal is thoroughly underpinned by one's (vicious) psychology. The virtuous have the correct moral outlook; the cognitive and affective psychological elements that constitute that outlook direct their attention and shape their understanding of things in a way that allows them to construe correctly situations in which there is a clear requirement of virtue. This notion of getting things right need not be exceedingly rigid, however; as we saw in the example of rejection-sensitive individuals, there are genuinely ambiguous situations. In such cases, there may be multiple acceptable construals. For example, how ought I to construe my day off tomorrow? As an occasion to do something out of the ordinary? As a chance to catch up on daily life, to get rested and organized? The view of virtuous construal that I am elaborating here can allow for meaningful personality and preference differences between virtuous individuals, particularly in those kinds of ambiguous situations.

Given the well-known 'situationist critique,' one might worry about the extent to which this view relies on the existence of character traits. Marshalling experimental evidence from social psychology, the situationist critique argues that humans do not develop the kind of robust traits that the virtues are supposed to be, and that situational factors, not facts about their characters, better explain people's behaviour (see, e.g., [Flanagan 1991; Doris 2002]. While virtue theorists have resisted the situationist critique from the get-go, the debate has changed dramatically in the last several years with the replication crisis in social psychology, as some of the studies thought to be most damaging to the idea of robust character traits appear to lack replicability. This does not, of course, settle the question of the empirical plausibility of robust

character traits. But there is renewed optimism that empirically plausible accounts of character traits can be developed through collaboration between philosophers and psychologists. Significantly, some have argued for the need to attend to the ways in which specific situational features provide reasons for certain kinds of responses; my account of virtuous construal seems consistent with that kind of empirical project.[2]

While there is much more that could be said about virtuous construal, hopefully I have said enough to give a sense of how thinking about a virtuous individual's construals of situations in which there is a clear requirement of virtue provides an answer to the puzzle of silencing, an answer that makes clear how it is that the range of reasons in favour of acting contrary to virtue's demands gets silenced: how one construes a situation determines what one counts as a reason and what one takes that reason as a reason *for*. This allows both for the silencing of an entire range of reasons and for awareness on the part of the virtuous individual of the situational features that may have potentially served those silenced reasons.

Moreover, this yields a decidedly human view of ideal virtue. Yes, the virtuous are impervious to temptation to act contrary to virtue. But this imperviousness is not the result of superhuman feats of willpower, or a divine ability to detach wilfully from and/or ignore what is right in front of them. Rather, it is the result of their character, which is itself the result of the process of habituation that Aristotle outlines for us. In coming to accept certain things as worth going in for and others as having absolutely no place in their conception of what constitutes a good human life, in learning 'to delight in noble actions' [McDowell 1998: 42], in practicing *this* kind of response to *this* kind of situation, they come to see, feel, and understand features of and situations in the world in certain (correct) ways. And that outlook, in turn, informs their construals, influencing the reasons that they take themselves to have and for what. To be clear, this *is* a demanding picture; developing the outlook of a virtuous person is no easy task. In

[2] For discussion of the replication crisis and its implications for the situationist critique and virtue theory, see Alfano [2018].

addition to habituation, a process that he acknowledges as continually ongoing [1180a1-3], Aristotle grants crucial roles to friendship, government, and education in cultivating and maintaining an individual's virtue. We are all shaped by our upbringing and repeated activities such that we come to possess a character of one sort or another [1103b14-25]. If that character is to be an excellent one, we need considerable and continuous training and social support. But notice: this is hardly a depiction of divinity. Rather, it reflects the kind of social, interdependent creatures that we humans are.

4. Beyond Silencing: Constitutive Solutions

The idea that the virtuous are not only impervious to temptation but also practically wise, particularly as it is emphasized in discussions of silencing, can leave the unfortunate impression that a virtuous person will always know exactly what to do in every kind of morally pressing situation and perform said action easily and immediately. McDowell, for example, notes that the virtuous individual's distinctive view of a situation where there is a clear requirement of virtue *necessitates* action [1998: 56 n. 10], but there is no acknowledgement or discussion of any space for practical reasoning between the arrival at that view of the situation and the execution of (an) action. This lends credence to the criticisms of ideal virtue as god-like and inadequately human. It seems markedly implausible that mere recognition that virtue demands a response to a situation—even recognition in the distinctive manner of the virtuous—will always lead immediately to an action that meets that demand. Such a view fails to acknowledge the multiple levels at which practical reasoning can and does take place.

This point becomes clear when we start to consider what Bernard Williams calls 'constitutive solutions' [1981: 104]. Take a relatively simple example: suppose that my child's birthday is approaching. One can imagine me looking at my calendar, seeing the upcoming date, and construing that as an occasion to acknowledge my child. There is undeniably a clear requirement of virtue: *of course* I acknowledge my child's birthday (assuming a relatively healthy parent-child relationship). I have recognized that demand, but now I must find a constitutive

solution to it: *how* should I acknowledge my child's birthday? In other words, what will constitute my acknowledgement of my child's birthday? The answer to this question will depend on the particularities of our relationship, as well as facts about me and my child—our personalities and preferences, geographical proximity, financial resources, etc. So I reason practically about how to acknowledge my child's birthday and arrive at a decision: I shall buy my child a birthday present.[3] I have made a decision at one level of practical reasoning.

My practical reasoning is unlikely to stop there, however, because I now have another constitutive solution to find: What *particular* present should I buy for my child? There I stand in the toy aisle of the store, a wide array of possible gifts before me. Maybe I ask a store clerk or text a fellow parent for advice. Maybe I weigh reasons for and against various potential purchases (more on weighing reasons in a moment). Whatever I end up deciding and however I eventually arrive at that decision, the point is that there is plenty of room for deliberation, additional practical reasoning, and decision between my recognition of a demand of virtue and my meeting that demand. Indeed, some demands of virtue seem to call for just that kind of additional reasoning: barring extenuating circumstances, it probably would not have been very virtuous of me had I stopped my practical reasoning at my initial decision to buy a gift and outsourced the rest of the process to my administrative assistant, say.[4] After all, the constitutive solution that I seek is to *my* acknowledgment of my child. A gift that is not reflective of *my* thought and consideration—allowing, of course, that that can include drawing on the knowledge and resources of others—would likely fail to constitute an excellent acknowledgment.

That practical reasoning can and often does continue beyond silencing is a crucial aspect of the psychological plausibility of ideal virtue—part of what makes it clear that the virtuous are human, not divine—yet it is underappreciated by both proponents and critics of ideal virtue.

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[3] I take this birthday present example from Hursthouse [1999, 66-7], although I am not considering it in the context of irresolvable dilemmas, as she does.

[4] On the distinction between practical and productive thinking—which, in this case, would distinguish reasoning about how to acknowledge my child's birthday from reasoning about how to go about purchasing a gift—and outsourcing to others, see Müller [2018].

This is evident in the problematic use of 'irrelevant' in McDowell's donut example. If the availability of gustatory pleasure was indeed irrelevant to the question of what to do, then the virtuous person would have no reason to prefer sharing the donuts with colleagues down the hall over simply throwing them in the garbage. But as I argue above, to throw out perfectly good (albeit not exactly healthy) food that could be shared easily with others hardly seems virtuous. There *has* to be a sense in which the availability of gustatory pleasure *is* relevant to the question of what to do.

We can properly understand the relevance of the availability of gustatory pleasure through the distinction that Iakovos Vasiliou makes between what he calls 'aiming deliberation' and 'determining deliberation' [2008, 6-7]. When I deliberate about my aims, I consider what my ultimate aim in acting should be. For instance, should I aim at virtue and the fine or noble, or should I aim at personal profit and the advancement of my own self-interest? Some individuals might do this kind of aiming deliberation in the moment, as it were: Should I give back the money that the woman standing in front of me unwittingly dropped on the ground (thus aiming at virtue and the fine) or should I discreetly put the money in my pocket (and so aim at profit and self-interest)? The virtuous, however, will not do this kind of deliberation in the moment. They have already decided and committed to their ultimate aim being virtue. Thus, they have no need to deliberate about whether or not to respond in accordance with virtue when faced with an occasion to act. This is not to say, of course, that the virtuous never engage in deliberation about aims, and so unreflectively abide by the demands of virtue. To the contrary, they are likely to take time in their lives to reflect on why they take virtue to be their ultimate aim, even if not explicitly in those terms (see, e.g., Vasiliou [2007]). But this kind of reflection is likely to take place during discussions with friends, say, or in response to questions posed by one's children, or perhaps in ethics lectures, rather than in the moment of one's day-to-day living. In the moment, this aiming question is one that, for the virtuous, has already been settled.

Yet however intent one is on doing the virtuous thing here and now, and however confident one is that virtue demands a response to the situation at hand, one will still need to find one or more constitutive solutions to that demand. In some cases, arriving at a constitutive solution may indeed be fairly immediate.[5] If someone comes by with the tray of donuts and offers me another after I have already had four, if I am temperate, I could probably smile, shake my head, and say, 'No, thank you,' without much thought. But in many cases—and, importantly, many cases in which there *is* a clear requirement of virtue—there will be substantial questions about how to go about fulfilling that requirement, questions that will require additional practical reasoning and decision-making. This kind of additional practical reasoning is what Vasiliou calls 'determining deliberation'. Significantly, considerations might be irrelevant to one's aiming deliberation, yet quite relevant to one's determining deliberation. This is just what we see in the donut example: the availability of gustatory pleasure is irrelevant to the aiming question of whether to act contrary to virtue; it is not relevant because the answer to that question is *always*, for the virtuous, '*Of course not*.' Yet in his determining deliberation—that is, in his search for a (virtuous) constitutive solution to the question, 'What should be done with these remaining donuts?'—the availability of gustatory pleasure is, indeed, a relevant consideration.

5. Reasoning Practically

To make clear the roles of virtuous construal and the search for constitutive solutions in the practical reasoning of the virtuous, let me use an Aristotelian example: courageously defending the *polis*. By this I mean to stipulate that our virtuous individual finds herself in a situation in which courage demands defending the *polis*. Given her virtuous character—including beliefs about the kinds of risks that are worth taking, an appropriate confidence in her own abilities, and an emotional attachment to her community—she construes the situation correctly as, say, 'Defend!' The coward, given her excessive fear and lack of confidence, will construe the

[5] I would want to insist that such an act still fulfills the Aristotelian 'agent condition' of being chosen [1105a33].

situation quite differently—probably as something along the lines of, 'Avoid risk to self!' The citizen soldiers, too, despite their outward similarities to the courageous, are likely to construe the situation differently than our virtuous individual. Lacking the internal motivation of the virtuous, the citizen soldiers are externally motivated by reputational considerations to defend the *polis* [1116a19-30]. Thus, they seem likely to construe the situation, depending on their confidence in their own abilities, as either 'opportunity for honour' or 'Avoid shame!'

Their different construals give these individuals access to different sets of reasons. For instance, once the virtuous individual has construed the situation as an occasion to defend the *polis*, then the fact that, say, the opposing forces appear quite formidable *cannot* serve as a reason to flee, as it likely would for the coward, given her construal of the situation. The same goes for central concerns like life, health, and loved ones: that these things may be at risk *cannot* serve as reasons to act contrary to courage's demand. But that does not mean that these central concerns play absolutely no role in the virtuous individual's practical reasoning about what to do in this situation.

If virtue demands that I contribute to the defence of the *polis*, there is still the question of constitutive solutions to that demand: Do I run to get help or attempt to fight myself? Do we attack first or let the opposing forces make the first move? It is in searching for these constitutive solutions that such central concerns as life, health, and loved ones, might—indeed, seem quite likely to—come into play, providing reasons for one or more particular courses of action that might meet the demands of virtue in the given situation. Once I have made the decision to stand firm and courageously fight, say, then preserving my life *cannot* serve as a reason to run away. But it *can* serve as a reason to wait until nightfall to attack. Indeed, to fail to consider such concerns as the preservation of one's life in one's plan of attack would seem foolish, and contrary to practical wisdom.

Moreover, the recognition that practical reasoning can continue past silencing allows us to leave open how individuals might arrive at constitutive solutions. This, I contend, is another

way in which understanding the role of virtuous construal renders ideal virtue more psychologically *human*. For one, we have no reason to insist that a virtuous person will, immediately upon recognition of a demand of virtue, always have at her disposal a constitutive solution to that demand. A significant aspect of being practically wise is, after all, knowing one's own limitations. One way that a virtuous person might arrive at a constitutive solution, then, is by calling on others for advice and/or assistance. Furthermore, weighing reasons and silencing are often portrayed as opposing views of practical reasoning; indeed, McDowell explicitly presents his silencing view as an alternative to the view of practical reasoning as a matter of weighing up reasons [1998: 47-8]. With this dichotomous framing, those who object to the idea of reasons being silenced can point out the fact that people do, obviously, weigh reasons when thinking through at least some decisions—think, for instance, about buying a car or choosing a college. To claim that individuals do not weigh reasons at all, the objection goes, is to paint a psychologically implausible view of human practical reasoning. Understanding the role of virtuous construal in silencing, however, makes clear that silencing and weighing reasons are not mutually exclusive.

Weighing reasons will, at least in some cases, be a perfectly reasonable approach to determining a constitutive solution. But notice that the range of reasons under consideration are restricted by the virtuous construal. The various courses of action under consideration will be restricted to those that can (potentially) meet the demand(s) of virtue. That means that if and when the virtuous do weigh reasons for and against various courses of action, none of those reasons is a reason to act contrary to virtue, nor does any of those reasons constitute a contrary desire that must be overcome in order to respond to the situation in accordance with virtue. The courageous defender of the *polis* may very well weigh the reasons for attacking at night against those for waiting until dawn. What she will *not* do, however, is weigh reasons for (courageously) attacking against reasons for (cowardly) fleeing. That is because this latter weighing of reasons would be an aiming, not determining, deliberation.

But surely, one might think, there comes a point at which standing firm to defend the *polis* is no longer courageous, but rash. So how can it be that the appearance of the opposing forces cannot serve as a reason to flee? Here again we can see the artificiality of isolated examples; I have oversimplified things to be sure. Of course the virtuous will not be insensitive to the evidence before them. If situational features change enough—for example, if it becomes evident that the opposing forces have an additional cavalry unit of which one was, through no fault of one's own, previously unaware—an individual's construal of the situation could change. But this reconstrual will, like the original, be shaped by one's character. It is not, therefore, the result of weighing reasons for acting as courage demands against reasons for acting contrary to courage. In reconstruing the situation, the virtuous person is not reconsidering her ultimate aim; she remains just as committed to virtue as ever. And so, as with the original construal, her courage—including her beliefs about what is worth taking personal risks for, appropriate confidence in her abilities and resources, and hope in her achievement of her ends—shapes her understanding of the now different situation at hand. Perhaps she revises her construal from 'Defend!' to 'Protect!' This shift means that she has a different set of constitutive solutions to find: rather than planning how to mount a defence, maybe she now has to figure out how to evacuate the *polis* quickly and get people to safety. In no way, however, have the additional facts about the situation that have prompted her reconstrual caused her suddenly to acknowledge reasons to make like a coward, save her own hide, abandon her fellow citizens, and head for the hills.

Attention to the need for constitutive solutions further contributes to a view of the virtuous as decidedly human. Even when they see a clear requirement of virtue, they may have to figure out what the virtuous response to the situation is, and they can go about doing this is in many of the ways that us ordinary humans do: by asking for help or advice, weighing the pros and cons, and so on. Moreover, we can see why the virtuous need not be like Wolf's moral saints: they can care deeply about their lives, their loved ones, etc., although these things will

never provide them with a reason to act contrary to virtue. It is not as though the virtuous individual fails to value her life, or that once she recognizes a demand of courage, she suddenly ceases to value her life. On the contrary, she may very well put considerable effort into identifying a constitutive solution to courage's demand that avoids death. And if no such constitutive solution is to be found, she can be genuinely sad about that fact, even while that sadness fails to constitute a reason to act like a coward (see Vigani [2019: 237]). We ought not, therefore, conceive of the virtuous as ethical superheroes, or as saints devoid of human concerns.

6. Conclusion

Ideal virtue has been criticized as seeming more divine than human. My hope is that the view elaborated here has gone some way toward undermining that criticism. While the virtuous are, unlike most of us, impervious to temptation, they acquire that imperviousness in a decidedly human way: through an ongoing process of habituation that involves significant social support. This process of habituation results in them coming to see and understand the world in a certain kind of way, which informs the reasons that they take themselves to have and for what. Just because they can reliably recognize the demands of virtue, however, does not mean that the virtuous will always immediately know how to respond; like the rest of us, they may have to ask for help or advice, or weigh up the pros and cons of potential courses of action. And while central human concerns such as life, health, loved ones, and life projects will never provide them with a reason to act contrary to virtue, it is not as though the virtuous suddenly consider these important things as wholly irrelevant in the face of virtue's demands. Ideal virtue is a demanding ideal, but it is a decidedly human one.

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