

CHAPTER VIII

Plato on Ethical Harmony¹

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds
*Wallace Stevens*²

Someone who is just or ethical... puts her own house in order, is her own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of herself like the three defining notes of an octave – low, high, and middle, creating a harmony out of them and out of however many notes there may be in between.

Once she has bound all the aspects together and made herself perfectly one instead of many – moderate, self-disciplined, and inwardly attuned – then and only then does she act, if she acts. And when she acts in everything she does she believes only that action to be ethical and fine that preserves and that promotes this inner harmony.

*Plato*³

¹ This text is a revised version of an invited lecture first presented at an international colloquium on Plato held in Gaflei, Liechtenstein in September 2000 under the auspices of The International Plato Society and The International Academy of Philosophy in the Principality of Liechtenstein. An initially revised version was published in *New Images of the Good: Dialogues on the Idea of the Good*, ed. G. Reale and S. Scolnicov (Sankt Augustin: Academia, 2002), pp. 197-210.

² W. Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking At A Blackbird," in *Poems*, ed. S. F. Morse (New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 12.

³ *Rep.* 443d-e. Very loosely rendered, with help from Reeve and Waterfield.

§1. After The Affair

Just after a bomb blast has blown out the windows and collapsed the walls in her rented London flat, Sarah desperately makes a solemn promise. Sarah promises God she will never see her atheist friend again if only his life is saved.

Then, quite suddenly, she sees him slowly stirring awake. And, in one of the many speculative moments in the most recent film version of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, the much celebrated English novel a generation ago of adultery, remorse, and religious redemption, of promises made and promises broken, Sarah turns aside from her lover to take up her part of a mysterious bargain, to try to keep her new promise, to lead an ethical life.

But after a little while, she fails. She does see her friend again. But she refuses to resume their affair. Then, unexpectedly, she contracts tuberculosis. She dies prematurely, leaving her friend and her husband at her bedside to puzzle over her final silence, over her promise-keepings and promise-breakings, and over the ethical course of her short life.

After promising not to, did Sarah act rightly in first refusing to see her friend? Was her promise-keeping ethically virtuous? Was her keeping her promise part of her living an ethical life? And did Sarah then act wrongly in later seeing her friend nonetheless? Was her promise-breaking ethically vicious?

Was her not keeping her promise part of her not living an ethical life? And was the crux of Sarah's ethical life finally a matter of virtues and vices at all?⁴

§2. Plato and the Revisions of Virtue Ethics

In what follows I would like to address, with Plato's assistance, one philosophical aspect only of this complicated although per-

⁴ Although many native speakers of English use the expression "a moral life" more frequently than "an ethical life," here and throughout I will speak of the ethical rather than of the moral to avoid any misleading suggestions of a Kantian framework. I thank Christopher Rowe for his helpful comment on this point.

haps not unfamiliar ethical situation, a situation some may know of in life as well as in art.

The problem I am concerned with here is largely epistemological. And it recurs, I think, in many contemporary discussions of virtue ethics. The difficulty concerns how to account properly for the rational justifiability of ethical beliefs.

After sketching a picture of what virtue ethics looks like, recording its verdict on the ethical or unethical character of such actions as Sarah's breaking her solemn promise not to see her friend again, and describing a difficulty with this verdict's epistemological perspective, I will turn to Plato for help with developing several critical second thoughts.

My suggestion will be that critically retrieving several Platonic reminders in *Republic* IV of the richness of the ethical life, and in particular his richly ambiguous descriptions of psychic harmony, may indicate a suitable treatment, if not a cure, for this recurring epistemological weakness.

§3. What Virtue Ethics Is

Here then is a summary account only of what many moral philosophers today think "virtue ethics" (VE) is.

Generally, we may say that VE is a set of philosophical views about the ethical lives of individual human beings, about ethical subjects rather than ethical theorists. And this set includes at least some such claims as the following.⁵

VE 1. "An action is [ethically] right if [if and only if] it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances."⁶

⁵ I follow here, mainly but not exclusively, the editors' introductions and the papers in three collections: *Virtue Theory*, ed. R. Crisp and M. Slote (Oxford: OUP, 1997), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*, ed. R. Crisp (Oxford: OUP, 1996), and *Virtues and Reasons*, ed. R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, and W. Quinn (Oxford: OUP, 1995). See also J. Gracia's "Virtue Ethics," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. R. Audi (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), pp. 960-961.

⁶ R. Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," in *Virtue Ethics*, p. 219, from which the following two claims are also quoted. My emphases.

- VE 2. “A *virtuous agent* is one who acts virtuously, that is, one who has and exercises the virtues.”
- VE 3. “A *virtue* is a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well.”
- VE 4. An *ethical agent* is a virtuous agent who lives an ethical life when he or she practices ethical virtues.
- VE 5. *Ethical virtues* are settled character traits that habitually lead a person both to choose and to effect, under the guidance of reason, what is ethically required.
- VE 6. *Examples* of such ethically conducive dispositions include such classical virtues as prudence, courage, temperance, and justice, and others such as benevolence, veracity, fidelity in keeping promises, and so on.
- VE 7. *The concept of an ethical virtue* is independent from, and at least as basic as, the concept of an ethical or moral duty or an ethical or moral right or of any other ethical concept, in the sense that the concept of an ethical virtue cannot be “reduced” in any way to the concept of any other ethical notion.
- VE 8. Now, *the connections* between the concept of an ethical virtue, the notion of practising ethical virtues, and the notion of leading an ethical life are causal and not conceptual (*pace* Aristotle). Thus, fidelity is an ethical virtue because it causes one to keep one’s promises, veracity because it causes one to tell the truth.
- VE 9. *Practising the ethical virtues* comes to leading an ethical life in the sense of leading a life of human flourishing. But human flourishing here is not to be understood either in terms of any inherent teleology of the human person or in terms of any revelation of the divine will, but in just those terms of the historical, societal, and cultural setting in which one practices such virtues.

So much then for a rough, summary account of several central, and I would repeat still problematic, claims of virtue ethics today.

In this uncertain light, I turn now to a consideration of the ethical valence of Sarah’s action in seeing her friend again.

§4. Virtue Ethics and Seeing One's Friend Again

After some time, Sarah remained acutely aware of her persisting inner pain in not seeing her friend again. She remained aware as well of what she imagined to be her friend's pain at not only not seeing her again, but at not understanding her reasons for not seeing him again. And she recalled repeatedly her solemn vow. Perhaps she thought herself caught up between a human, relative good and an absolute good?⁷

After protracted reflection on her own troubled state, Sarah decided to seek informed counsel. She consulted an emotionally mature and thoughtful Roman Catholic priest. But, the consultation was to no avail, for her painful inner conflict remained as acute as before.

Sarah deliberated further. And these deliberations brought her finally to decide – freely, intentionally, and conscientiously – to see her friend again, but not to resume her affair.

Her single, unambiguous intention was to explain to her friend, in person, her reasons for neither seeing him anymore nor renewing their affair. And her clear, reflective, informed, and sincere ethical belief was that her action of seeing her friend once more but not resuming their affair would, indeed, objectively break the letter of her solemn promise. But she also believed, just as clearly although perhaps in a slightly jesuitical vein, that her action would still subjectively preserve the spirit of her promise.

Willingly, she then broke her solemn promise to God and saw her atheist friend again.

Sarah did more. From the perspective of contemporary versions of virtue ethics, Sarah acted wrongly; indeed, she acted unethically.

For, in breaking her solemn promise, Sarah failed to exhibit, and to exercise in the circumstances, that particular settled disposition many would call the virtue of fidelity to one's word. And, since from the standpoint of a virtue ethics, acting virtuously is acting ethically, and in fact Sarah failed to act

⁷ I am very grateful to Rosamund Sprague for re-reading the novel and for her friendly help in correcting several details in this account.

virtuously, it follows that Sarah failed to act ethically. Thus, on a reasonably representative account of contemporary virtue ethics, in seeing her friend again, Sarah acted unethically.

§5. Ethical Judgments of a Virtue Ethics

Now, one central element in this verdict is epistemological. For the verdict depends on the implicit judgment that Sarah's ethical belief about alleviating their respective internal suffering by seeing her friend again was rationally unjustifiable.

But perhaps now we need to say a few words about two things only: about the epistemological standpoint that yields such a judgment, and about why I think that this standpoint requires displacing.

In the epistemological contexts of a virtue ethics we can say that an intellectual virtue is to be understood as "a power or ability or competence to arrive at truths . . . and to avoid believing falsehoods" in the appropriate environment of an ethical life. And we may take the "appropriate environment" as just that ethical environment in which the relevant cognitive mechanisms and processes that result from these intellectual capacities that secure ethical philosophical competence can reliably function under relevant circumstances.

Think of Sarah's cognitive abilities. Once in an appropriate environment – say, one that provides sufficient silence and time for reflection, opportunities for informed counsel and circumstances for patient deliberation – Sarah is very likely to be able to attain sufficient detachment and to arrive at plausible ethical beliefs about the ethical acceptability, or not, of trying to see her friend again, despite her promise not to. But are these ethical beliefs true?

With respect to the truth or falsity of ethical beliefs, the standpoint of virtue ethics is the standpoint of general epistemology.⁸ Hence, many philosophers today often speak of "virtue epistemology."

⁸ See E. Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), esp. pp. 225-44.

Thus, for virtue epistemology ethical beliefs that are true by accident are not instances of genuine ethical knowledge. Why? Because they do not result from the functioning of our otherwise reliable intellectual capacities and competencies in an appropriate environment.⁹ Only those ethical beliefs that are substantially true, that is, true on other and stronger grounds than accident, are instances of genuine ethical knowledge.

§6. The Justification and Aptness of Ethical Beliefs

Recalling several general epistemological points about belief and knowledge in the particular contexts of virtue ethics should remind us of a cardinal distinction between the justification and the aptness not of ethical knowledge but of ethical belief.

Justification of an ethical belief has its basis “in its inference or coherence relation to other beliefs in the believer’s mind.” But the aptness of an ethical belief requires that “the proposition believed must be of the right sort, [that is, situated] in [the right] field *F* of propositions, and the circumstances *C* must [also] be right (external circumstances often included).”¹⁰

Moreover, the justification of an ethical belief (say “ethical justification”) turns out here to be essentially internal, a matter for the ethical self, the ethical subject, the ethical agent. But the aptness of an ethical belief (say “ethical aptness”) is essentially external, a matter for the ethical other and for the ethical community.

Thus, in considering the ethical valence of any particular ethically pertinent action of Sarah’s and the justifiability of her ethical belief that she can keep the spirit if not the letter of her promise, we need also to focus on the aptness of its constituent ethical beliefs and not exclusively on their justification.

The justification of an ethical belief is a strong epistemological requirement. Justification always requires “the (implicit or explicit) use of reasons” in favour of any particular ethical belief.¹¹

⁹ Sosa, pp. 291-2.

¹⁰ Sosa, pp. 291-2.

¹¹ Sosa, p. 290.

But the aptness of an ethical belief is a weak epistemological requirement. Aptness is a matter of just how plausible, rather than how strictly truth-conducive, is the ethical belief that results from the proper functioning of an intellectual ethical competence in an appropriate ethical environment.

§7. Confounding Two Cardinal Distinctions

This is the account of the justifiability of an ethical belief that, in fact, informs the epistemology of virtue ethics. And it involves, I think, a serious problem. The problem arises from this account's mixing two incompatible yet crucial distinctions together.

The first is the distinction between the justification versus the aptness of an ethical belief; the second, the distinction between the internal versus the external forum. How are we to understand what the truth of an ethical belief is held to be given its requiring both internal justification on the part of the ethical subject only, and yet, at the same time, its having to exhibit external aptness on the part of the ethical community also?

In other words, how could we rightly evaluate Sarah's ethical belief (that seeing her friend again while breaking the letter of her solemn promise might nonetheless preserve its spirit) as rationally justifiable by appeal to such conflicting criteria? For, on this account, an ethical belief can be counted reasonable only when such a belief is both internally justified and externally apt?

And this double requirement, this mixing of conceptual cocktails with two rebarbative epistemological ingredients, can only lead to headaches, if not worse. How could Sarah satisfy simultaneously both the mainly epistemological and subjective demands of internal reason and the mainly ethical and objective demands of external community, the demands of herself and her husband, of herself and her God?

This is the epistemological weakness, the morning after, that needs treatment if at least some forms of virtue ethics are to continue to hold our critical attention today. And this weakness, I now want to suggest, is one that a critical rereading of at least one crucial and yet ambiguous element in Plato's mature ethical theory may help us to remedy.

§8. Plato on One's Own Good and That of Another

In *Rep.* IV,¹² Plato argues generally that justice or morality or ethics is a matter of “attending to others’ goods” in the negative sense of not trying to get more than one’s fair share, of not falling moral prey to “*pleonexia*.”¹³

Moreover, Plato spells out this quite general notion of ethics by arguing further that the best way to practice such attention to others’ goods is to carry out one’s proper role in society. For the nature of society is fundamentally cooperative – you do your job, I do mine; I keep my promises and you keep yours.¹⁴ However, such a practice is not without obstacles.

The major obstacle to living ethical lives on this Platonic account is what most gets in the way of practising such attention to others. This obstacle is the inveterate human proclivity to desire to get and to keep more than one’s fair share. And this tendency, Plato thinks, arises from individuals’ desires escaping from the lead of the bridle of reason. When such escapes occur, then unbridled desires profoundly disrupt a person’s normal psychic harmony.¹⁵

How can such escapes be prevented? Keeping such a tendency to *pleonexia* under proper restraint and thereby overcoming the major obstacle to leading ethical lives in society comes to keeping a tight but reasonable rein on the ceaseless and clamorous dynamisms of desires.¹⁶ Socrates says, for example: “I must do what I promised to do.”¹⁷

¹² Since the new Oxford classical text for the *Republic* was still in process as I wrote, I rely here on Burnet’s Greek text from 1902. Two recent English translations, including their helpful notes, textual references, and bibliographies, have proved helpful: C. D. C. Reeve’s revision of G. M. A. Grube’s earlier much admired version (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), and R. Waterfield’s rendering (Oxford: OUP, 1993). For texts and English translations of other works I rely respectively on the other volumes of the Oxford classical texts series and on *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper (Hackett: Indianapolis, 1997).

¹³ *Rep.* 343a; 372a.

¹⁴ *Rep.* 369b-c.

¹⁵ Cf. *Rep.* 443e; 589d-590c.

¹⁶ For some examples at both the individual level and at that of the community see *Rep.* 428c-d, 442c, 484c-d, 488a-489a, 520c.

¹⁷ *Rep.* 427e.

But one can do this in different ways, depending on just what kind of a person one is. For instance, one person may habitually subordinate his desires to his reason, whereas another person may habitually coordinate her desires with her reason.¹⁸ In the first case, I think reason rules; in the second, reason guides. But, in either case, there is psychic harmony.¹⁹

Surprisingly, however, Plato does not disentangle here the relevant ethical psychological ambiguities in his varied uses of the still resonant Pre-Socratic word, *harmonia*.²⁰ And the main ambiguity is a matter of what we choose to emphasize in Plato's ambiguous discussions of *harmonia*.

So, since Plato's discussion is ambiguous, just where should one put the accent in such a Platonic account of ethics? Should the accent in such an account fall on extensive philosophical reflection mainly on the nature of ethical action? Or, to the contrary, should the accent fall on extensive philosophical reflection mainly on the nature of the ethical agent?

That is, should such an ethics center on what we have called earlier internal questions about ethical justification, or on external questions about ethical aptness?

¹⁸ Cf. C. H. Kahn, "Plato's Theory of Desire," *Review of Metaphysics*, 44 (1987), pp. 77-133 with the more general piece of S. Lovibond, "Plato's Theory of Mind," in *Companions to Ancient Thought II: Psychology*, ed. S. Everson (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 35-55.

¹⁹ For Plato's uses of *harmonia* in the *Rep.* see: 397d, e; 398d, e; 400d, e; 401a,d; 402d; 410e; 411a,e; 412a; 413e; 430e; 441e; 442a, c; 443d, e; 444a; 462a; 519e; 522a; 546c; 547a; 554e; 590a; 591c; 601b; 617b. For Plato's uses of *harmonia* in his other works, see the list of citations in the Index to Cooper 1997, s.v., p. 1771.

²⁰ For an especially suggestive use of *harmonia*, see Hippolytus' citation in his *Refutation* 9.9.2 of the Heraclitus fragment, DK 22B51. A recent English translation of this fragment runs: "They do not understand how, though at variance with itself, it agrees with itself. It is a backwards-turning [reading "*palintropos*" instead of "*palintopos*"] attunement like that of the bow and lyre" (tr. R. D. McKirahan, in his *Philosophy Before Socrates* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994], pp. 120-121, slightly abbreviated).

§9. On Harmonizing Reasons and Desires

The response seems simple. It all depends, we want to say. If we put the accent on, say, the psychic harmony arising from attending to others' goods, and take "attending" as an "act," then this Platonic account seems to be a good example of an act-centered ethics, an ethics oriented to external ethical aptness.

If, however, we put the accent on, say, the psychic harmony that arises from reason's right relations with desire, then this Platonic account seems rather to be a good example of an agent-centered ethics, an ethics centered on internal ethical justification.

What enables an individual to attend to others' goods, and, conversely, what disables an individual from doing so turns on whether reason manages to entertain right relations with desire. And that matter has strong links with an empirical as well as a philosophical psychology. When, however, we resituate this ambiguous talk of harmony within the general picture of ethics in *Rep.* IV by adding to it Plato's extensive reflections there on wisdom, courage, and temperance or self-discipline, then we find the idea of calling Plato's account of ethics in *Rep.* IV an agent-centered account much more plausible than calling it an act-centered account.

Moreover, given the central role that Plato awards the ethical virtues in his account, such a Platonic account of ethics and the ethical life seems to be one version of an agent-centered ethics of virtue.

But, if this is so, then we can ask just what conceptual resources does such a Platonic account provide for remedying the major epistemological weakness we noted earlier with even sophisticated epistemological versions of contemporary virtue ethics?

My suggestion here is twofold. A Platonic account of the ethical life, with, first, its strong accent on mediating the conceptual tensions between a subjective inner harmony in self-fulfillment and an objective outer harmony in an attentiveness to others in community, and with, second, its reliance on an ambiguous notion of harmonization as either the subordination of desires

to reason or the coordination of desires with reason, suggests a fortifying simplification in the weakened epistemological account of the reasonableness of ethical beliefs for action.

To see this point, however, we now need to remind ourselves of what makes an ethical action rationally justifiable.

§10. When is an Ethical Rationale Reasonable?

We have been inquiring whether Sarah's seeing her friend again is rationally justifiable.

Now, an epistemically rational ethical action is one where it is reasonable to believe the propositions that comprise the reasons for acting so long as "those propositions are uncontroversial for you, given what else you believe and given your own deepest epistemic standards."²¹

The standards themselves are to be understood as "a matter of what you would believe about the truth-preservingness of various arguments were you to reflect to the point of stability, if there is one" (179). And the point of stability is to be taken as "the point at which further reflection would not alter your opinion of the argument." Such a point is said to be reached "when you yourself, no matter how much more you reflect on the matter, would not regard your opinion as mistaken" (180).

In other words, you can take Sarah's seeing her friend again as epistemically rational if, among the many beliefs this action comprises, no one of its constituent beliefs commits her to believing anything she herself would not be satisfied with were she to be "appropriately reflective" (170). This is the fallibilist mark of an epistemically rational action.

More generally, you can take an ethical action as epistemically rational if the set of ethical beliefs that comprise the reasons for action can be judged from some perspective as satisfying your goals as an ethical agent.²²

²¹ R. Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), p. 169.

²² Note that, when the ethical beliefs comprising the reasons for action are viewed as uncontroversial for you, given your own "deepest standards,"

This standpoint, however, is just the elaborate epistemological standpoint that leads to the ethical condemnation of Sarah. For this standpoint entails the conclusion that Sarah, in seeing her friend again, acted in an ethically unjustifiable way because she acted contrary not just to the dictates of virtue. She acted contrary to the dictates of reasons as well. In short, Sarah acted unethically because her ethical beliefs were not rationally justifiable.

§11. Side-Stepping Some Rational Justifications?

Some work however undercuts the major issue that drives this epistemic version of rationality. This issue is the misplaced attempt here, in the ethical domain, to settle in a definitive way on some solution to a now classical problem in the exclusively epistemological domain.

This problem is the Gettier problem, the problem of what other conditions, besides the traditional Platonic triad of belief truth and justification, must be satisfied for having genuine knowledge. But, in the ethical domain, this exclusively epistemological interest needs displacing.

That is, in the case of the ethical beliefs comprising the reasons for ethically relevant actions, we need to be centrally concerned not with what has to be added to justified true belief to yield knowledge, properly speaking. Rather, when we ask just what makes a particular ethical action reasonable, we should be centrally concerned with the links between the reasons for action being evidentially well-supported and with these reasons being plausible or true.

This, I think, is the first part of the epistemological significance of Plato's ambiguous talk in *Rep. IV* about *harmonia* as "harmonization." Taking such concern seriously involves taking

these standards are not taken as "objective" in either of two current senses. That is, the standards at issue in this epistemic version of ethical action are neither those that govern rational belief as a function of their objective probability on the evidence available, nor those that govern rational beliefs that arise from a reliable source only. They are simply the ethical agent's own most fundamental and most foundational standards.

two steps sideways.

Thus, a first step in accounting for the reasonableness of ethical actions is displacing the accent from general problems with defining knowledge to particular questions about ethical belief. We then set aside ratification in favour of explication.²³ And we proceed to talk, not of evidential structures linking up with true beliefs (an accent on Cartesian-like warrants), but of evidential patterns connecting with plausible beliefs (an accent on Lockean-like grades of evidence).

This allows ethical deliberators like Sarah enough conceptual leeway to articulate a justifiable rationale for ethical action in neither exclusively empirical nor exclusively a priori ways. She has conceptual room for “the continuing relevance both of empirical considerations about human beings’s cognitive capacities and limitations, and of considerations of a logical, deductive character” (2).

The second step is a related shift from internalist to externalist considerations.²⁴ And this, I think, is the other part of the epistemological significance of Plato’s ambiguous discussions in *Rep. IV* of *harmonia* as “harmonization.”

Thus, when considering the reasonableness of a rationale for ethical action, we need to attend not just to internalist concerns with warrant and justification of the beliefs that comprise that ethical rationale. We need as well to scrutinize the substantive and constructive external aspects of the ethical rationale’s shifting goals. And these externalist aspects of the rationale are just as germane to any assessment of its reasonableness as are its internalist ones.

In summary then, Plato’s ambiguous talk of the harmonization of reason and desire in *Rep. IV* suggests critical second thoughts about the overly strong epistemological constraints on what virtue ethics takes a rationally justifiably moral belief to be.

But now in concluding I would like to return to our friend, Sarah.

²³ S. Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), p. 7.

²⁴ A. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: OUP, 1993), p. 5.

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Was Sarah's seeing her friend again, despite her solemn promise not to, a re-establishing of the inner dynamic equilibrium in her own psychic harmony and hence ethically justifiable? Or was Sarah's seeing her friend again merely breaking one more of her promises and hence ethically unjustifiable?

An analysis of some epistemological components of her action in terms of current conceptions of virtue ethics would need to conclude that Sarah's action was ethically unjustifiable. For, on current conceptions of virtue epistemology, an action is ethically justifiable if, and only if, that action "is what a virtuous agent [that is, "one who has and exercises the virtues"] would do in the circumstances."²⁵

But Sarah cannot claim to be a virtuous agent. For, in the circumstances, she is breaking a solemn promise. And promise-breaking is not a representative example of any virtue in the only pertinent sense here of a settled "character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well."²⁶ So Sarah's action is ethically unjustifiable.

I think that we should now be able to understand that, whatever a right ethical verdict might finally be on the ethical justifiability or unjustifiability of Sarah's action, an ethical verdict based at least on this kind of virtue epistemology is, philosophically speaking, seriously problematic.²⁷ For our ethical evaluations of Sarah's action depends here on whether, and if then just how we succeed philosophically in comprehending what living virtuously rightly comes to. If living virtuously comes

²⁵ R. Hursthouse 1991 in *Virtue Ethics*, p. 219.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ In fact, there is an epistemological "flexibility" in Aristotle's as well as in Plato's understanding of what makes an ethical belief rationally justifiable that, it would often seem, at least some virtue ethicists today have perhaps forgotten. (I owe this comment about "flexibility" to Christopher Rowe, in conversation; however, the responsibility for the comment about some virtue ethicists is not his but mine.)

to living well, at least in the sense of *subordinating* all our desires in situations of ethical conflict to the rule of reason, then the conclusion seems inevitable. In seeing her friend again, Sarah unreasonably breaks her promise not to, and hence Sarah acts in an ethically unjustifiable way. Living virtuously is living well, living a life of human flourishing, living an ethically good life.

If, however, living virtuously comes to living harmoniously, at least in some critical sense of *co-ordinating* all our desires in situations of ethical conflict with the guidance of reason, then this conclusion seems questionable.

In her attentiveness to her own human good and to that of her friend's, and – who knows? – perhaps to some absolute good in the mysterious world of her religious experience, Sarah aspires to re-establish an inner psychic harmony among both her own conflicting desires and beliefs and those of her friend, an inner psychic harmony that her refusal to see her friend even once more has profoundly disturbed.

In seeing her friend again, Sarah acts on the basis of reasonably justified ethical beliefs that, plausibly although not necessarily truth conductively, her action will help re-establish the lost inner psychic harmony. Perhaps then Sarah acts in an ethically justifiable way.

Living virtuously is, as Plato not unambiguously held, is not just living well; living virtuously is living harmoniously – keeping the truth of one's words, valuing the fullness of life, and participating in what is not just ethically good but in the ethical harmony of thinking and being with the good.