

CHAPTER I

Are New Ethical Virtues Needed in Europe Today?¹

My aim in this essay is to suggest several plausible reasons why reflective citizens in European countries today may benefit from new ideas about ethical virtues. As to whether such citizens need new ethical virtues themselves, I do not know.² Before concluding, however, I will try nonetheless to offer a speculative sketch only of what a new ethical virtue might look like.

§1. Homeless Children in France

To begin, I would like to take a step back and consider briefly some of the general European contexts for the somewhat unusual title question. Take for example a complex situation a little more than ten years ago in France, one of the richest, resourceful, and socially advanced countries in Europe and indeed in the world.

In 2002 INSEE, the French national statistics office, for the first time officially estimated the numbers of the homeless, what

¹ This paper, originally entitled “Do Europeans Need New Moral Virtues Today?”, is a revised version of an invited presentation first read at the International Conference, “Europe and Its Cultural and Spiritual Heritage,” held in the Czech Republic at Vranov in Brno, October 15-16, 2007. My sincere thanks to Professor Petr Osolsobe for his invitation, and to him and to my colleagues, Martin Cajthaml, Jakub Jinek, and Czeslaw Porebski for their comments. The original paper, with fuller empirical documentation, first appeared in *Care of the Soul, Quest for Virtue*, ed. P. Osolsobe and M. Cajthaml (Brno: Democracy and Cultural Studies Centre, 2008), pp. 31-54.

² See the extraordinary three-page, double-column, small-print list of virtues and vices in R. M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 241-243.

French citizens call the “*sans domicile fixe*” or “SDF.” The official estimate then was some 86,000 persons.³

The estimate included many children. For among those persons without any fixed residence who made themselves known in one way or another to the social services – and these were in the minority – roughly 16,000 were below the age of 18. There are many more today as I review these numbers in January 2014.

Even in 2002, however, charitable associations insisted on a much higher figure than the official one. At the time they estimated the number of SDF persons at anywhere between 100,000 and 800,000, depending on a key variable. That variable was the length of time a person remains without a fixed residence. Other variables, however, had also to be taken into consideration, such as general health conditions, seasonal average temperatures, and changing social legislation.

SDF persons are quite various. Three out of four are male adults. The rest are women and a good number of children. About one in three is a foreigner between the ages of 18 and 29. Perhaps one in three has some kind of employment. Sometimes, a few of the SDF even have a car to sleep in.

But most SDF persons have neither work nor the possibility of sleeping in a car. About half of those without regular shelter at the time had roughly 380 euros per month (on July 2, 2007 the minimum wage in France was 1,005.39 euros net), and 15% had no financial resources at all.⁴

Since the winter of 2005, moreover, many SDF had become more sedentary. Part of this phenomenon was owing to *Medecins*

³ *France: Portrait social* (Paris: INSEE, 2002). This is a valuable annual publication that allows for regular updating of much of the most important official statistical information concerning the social situations in France. Such statistics must nonetheless be used cautiously because of some persisting irregularities in the practices of gathering, categorizing, and distributing official French statistical information, especially in the social domains.

⁴ C. Robert, “Le logement au coeur des inégalités sociaux”, in *L’Etat des Inégalités en France 2007* (Paris: Belin, 2006), pp. 175-181.

sans frontières, a well-intentioned but controversial practice of distributing tents to the SDF in order not just to provide make-shift shelter but also to make their situation more visible to the public. In the summer of 2006 public protests in some of the more comfortable Paris neighbourhoods resulted in the disappearance of many of these tents.

But with the coming of winter the tents reappeared. Now, however, the tents were largely confined to the banks of the Seine and to abandoned parcels of land in the midst of the Paris beltways. Despite continuing French government efforts, many tents can still be seen in Paris streets even today in 2014, more than ten years after INSEE's first official SDF count.

Most SDF persons do not, however, live in tents. Starting around 7 o'clock when they must leave, most of those in Paris without tents move daily from one overcrowded, violent, smelly, and noisy overnight shelter like the Abbé Pierre Shelter in my neighbourhood, to another one.

Perhaps 10% or more, however, continue to refuse such accommodations. They sleep in the Paris streets – in doorways, on benches, on heating grates, on church porches, under underpasses, in public gardens, on cardboard at the end of alleyways, and sometimes in parked subway trains lined up on railway and metro embankments.

Why so many people in one of the world's wealthiest cities continue to have no fixed residence remains largely unknown. Motivations and explanations vary widely.

Some persons are in the streets because of family troubles, either with parents or spouses. Others have suffered expulsion from their lodgings for unpaid rent or unpaid bills. Still others have arrived from abroad, whether legally or not, and are still socially and economically adrift. Others are illiterate and cannot find even part-time work. And still many others are chronically ill with alcoholism, schizophrenia, tuberculosis, and AIDS.

Against this sombre backdrop my general question here is whether trying to address substantively the immense sufferings

of so many destitute persons, not in the world at large but in just such extraordinarily wealthy European cities as Paris and London and Geneva and Munich and Milano and Prague and so on, might require inventing new ethical virtues.

In particular, one might ask whether trying to confront philosophically the unthinkable immensities of the human suffering of truly destitute children in such a world city as Paris might require sustained critical reflection on the possibilities of ethical innovation.

More simply, do at least some reflective and resourceful persons in Europe need to consider seriously the speculative idea of ethical innovation itself?

In other words, does ethical innovation, the twofold idea both of articulating a fresh understanding of what ethical virtue is, and of trying to imagine what new ethical virtues might look like, require fresh reflection today?

§2. What Ethical Virtues Are

Since many continue to use the expression, “virtue,” in mainly traditional ways,⁵ before exploring this twofold idea of ethical innovation we need now to assemble several reminders as to how we usually understand the word, “virtue.”⁶ Perhaps we may restrict our reminders to English language uses only.

In common English parlance today, the word “virtue” refers mainly to any kind of human behaviour that continuously, exhibits a morally good quality. Such qualities, we may say here, are minimally just those that most societies and communities

⁵ Note that, historically, the notions of virtue and of conscience are closely related. See, for example, D. C. Langston’s investigations of the changing relations between these two notions in his *Conscience and Other Virtues: From Bonaventure to MacIntyre* (University Park: Penn State UP, 2001).

⁶ Detailed historical information about the various uses of the term “virtue” in the history of Western philosophy can be found in the 12 volume reference work, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel: Francke). I do not go into that complicated history here.

generally consider as highly desirable for persons to exhibit. By contrast, in broad philosophical parlance, the word “virtue” is used to refer mainly to some continuous and admirable trait of character that renders a person better, whether morally or intellectually or both.⁷

Historically, philosophical conceptions of virtue have varied greatly, from Greek Platonic Aristotelian and Stoic views, through Medieval Augustinian Thomist and Ockhamist views, into such modern views as those on exhibit in Hume’s naturalism, Kant’s deontology, and Mill’s utilitarianism. Between, however, broad philosophical usages and common, ordinary uses of the word, “virtue,” perhaps we can identify some useful middle ground.

Contemporary moral philosophy may be of some help here. For many moral philosophers today distinguish between systematic moral accounts⁸ that award conceptual priority to reflection on moral principles, such as various forms of deontology or of the general form of utilitarianism known as “contractualism,” and those that award such priority to various forms – Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, naturalist – of what has come to be called “virtue ethics.”⁹

Virtue of course figures in both kinds of moral accounts. But in several contemporary varieties of virtue ethics, whether classical, Christian, or modern, virtue is the major focus of moral reflection. Reflection on moral principles and moral rules

⁷ See, for example, S. Blackburn’s representative recent discussion in his *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 383.

⁸ Generally, I prefer here to speak more weakly of “moral accounts” rather than of “moral theories.”

⁹ Philosophers today differ on whether there is a distinction to be made between the moral and the ethical, and, if so, just how such a distinction is to be drawn. Throughout these essays I will be understanding the moral as most often, and mainly but not exclusively, a matter of the obligatory, of duties and of obligations. The ethical I will be taking, again most often and mainly but not exclusively, as a matter of one fundamental type of value, of certain kinds of ideals, even of what persons are most basically responsive to.

stands alongside. By contrast, in other forms of contemporary moral philosophy, systematic reflection on moral principles and moral rules is the major focus. And it is reflection on virtue that stands alongside.

Within different kinds of contemporary virtue ethics, moreover, we can distinguish different accounts of just what virtue is. Here, we can perhaps limit our considerations to two such accounts only, each one based upon ancient Greek philosophy.¹⁰

Generally speaking, some contemporary philosophical discussions that privilege Platonic accounts of virtue take virtue to be some set of independent, internal, and intuitively hierarchized admirable *states* of the psyche. Examples might include inner psychic harmony or inner psychic strength.

These internal states configure some of one's external actions. They do so in such ways that certain actions enhance the admirable internal states and motives that regularly generate them. Thus, this kind of account includes some form of sustained feedback mechanism.

Acting in a morally right way in this view then is acting virtuously, that is, acting in such a way as both to exhibit in one's actions the independent, internal harmony of intuitively hierarchized parts of the psyche and to reinforce that harmony.

By contrast, and again speaking generally, contemporary discussions that privilege Aristotelian accounts of virtue – and these are in the majority – take virtue to involve *perceiving* the right thing to do in the situation within which the agent is to act, and then actually doing it. Here, virtuous action is also un-

¹⁰ Note that some philosophers are beginning to explore Stoic accounts of virtue in the interests of providing a further ancient Greek alternative account to the almost exclusive reliance today in contemporary versions of ancient virtue ethics on either Plato's views or Aristotle's. See for example J. Annas, "Seneca: Stoic Philosophy as a Guide for Living," in *The Practice of Virtue: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Virtue Ethics*, ed. J. Welchman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), pp. 156-169; N. Sherman, *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind* (New York: OUP, 2005); and L. C. Becker, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton: PUP, 1998).

derstood to reinforce the perceptual activity, another feedback mechanism.

Thus, acting in a morally right way in this view does not follow from virtue in the sense of following from some kind of regular conformity between certain of one's acts and some kind of completely independent inner state. That is, morally right action does not follow from any intrinsic rightness of any internal state or motive or principle.¹¹ Rather, acting in a morally right way in this view is acting virtuously in the sense of acting from a certain fullness of perception.

Perhaps we may not unfairly summarize these two major contemporary approaches in virtue ethics to the understanding of virtue as follows. When we refer to "virtue" philosophically in either one of the two main varieties of virtue ethics today, what we are mainly referring to is something that determines what we might call figuratively "the moral valence," that is, the moral rightness or the moral wrongness, of certain human actions.

In the one case, virtue determines the moral rightness of a particular action. It does so by functioning as the determining element for the moral valence of an action. And this element derives independently from a hierarchy of internal mental states. In the other, virtue as the determining element derives from the fullness of a certain kind of perception.

The first notion here of virtue we may call "metaphysical," for this first notion derives mainly from the nature and kinds of certain inner states of mind, which is one of the central areas of metaphysical reflection. And the second notion here of virtue we may call "epistemic," for this second notion derives mainly from certain forms not just generally of knowledge but in particular

¹¹ The point about principle here is important since one central debate within philosophical ethics today has to do with whether or not morality is "principle-based." On the one side are "the generalists" who say "yes," for example, S. McKeever and M. Ridge in their book, *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal* (Oxford: OUP, 2006). And on the other are "the particularists" who say "no," for example, J. Dancy in his book, *Ethics without Principles*. See also J. Dancy, "How Dim is the Rim?" *TLS*, December 1, 2006, p. 32.

of perception, which is one of the main areas of epistemological reflection.¹²

Despite my simplifications here, perhaps we can now see more clearly what speculative talk of new virtues usually seems to intend. The “virtue” at issue in such parlance seems to be neither the commonsensical notion of virtue as a positive kind of behaviour, nor the broad philosophical sense of virtue as a positive character trait or habitual positive disposition, nor even any specific philosophical sense of virtue that we find in any individual modern philosopher such as Hume, Kant, or Mill.

Rather, “virtue” in speculative talk of ethical innovation today refers mainly to a particular philosophical sense of something that exhibits interrelated metaphysical and epistemic features.

Metaphysically, any novel ethical virtue that one might introduce, then, would be virtue in the sense of a particular habitual positive expression of some hierarchy of internal positive mental states concerning ethical values, such as some moral form of psychic harmony.

And epistemically, any novel ethical virtue would be virtue in the sense of a particular habitual perception of some independent positive features of a morally charged situation concerning ethical values, such as some novel form of cognitive and voluntary attentiveness.

§3. Three Difficulties

with Traditional Accounts of Virtue

Now when we return to the question of whether responding not inappropriately to the many ethically charged situations in Europe today¹³ such as the growing numbers of homeless persons

¹² I use the adjective “epistemological” here to refer broadly to general philosophical issues concerning knowledge, whereas I use the adjective “epistemic” here to refer more narrowly to particular aspects of perception.

¹³ For the general intellectual backgrounds here see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2007).

might require both new ideas about ethical virtues as well as even some new ethical virtues themselves, then at least three particular problems with such traditional accounts come into view.¹⁴ For such traditional understandings of virtue do not seem to be able to articulate fully enough the appropriate ethical responsiveness that such deeply conflicted moral situations continually solicit.

One problem with assuming a traditional understanding of virtue like the general one just sketched when considering whether some of the many morally charged situations in Europe today call out for fresh ethical reconsiderations about the nature and kinds of virtue is the adequacy of the philosophical bases of traditional conceptions. For traditional accounts of virtue are based mainly on ideas about the nature of right action, about what makes a course of action morally right and not morally wrong.

But such bases ground talk of ethical responsiveness to the suffering that issues from so many morally conflicted situations on considerations primarily of obligations and duties and rights. Such situations, however, call for ethical responses not so much in terms of whether some persons have a moral obligation or a moral duty to help alleviate unnecessary suffering. Rather, such situations call for some persons coming to be different than they presently are and, as a consequence, coming to live their lives differently than they presently do.

For one may argue that as persons we are not only what we are as a function of what we do. More fundamentally, what we do most often follows from the kinds of persons we already are. Moreover, when our ethical responsiveness arises from the -

¹⁴ Note that the “traditional accounts of virtue” under discussion here are, first, philosophical accounts and hence exclude the theological virtues as well as many other kinds of virtues whether political, economic, or whatever. These traditional philosophical accounts, moreover, include both classical accounts, whether those most notably of Plato or of Aristotle, and as well contemporary accounts such as those to be found in Alasdair MacIntyre’s and Philippa Foot’s neo-Aristotelian work as well as in that of other, mainly Roman Catholic thinkers.

primacy of who we are rather than exclusively from just what we do, then we may say that the ethical angle of vision shifts from the viewpoint of moral rightness to that of ethical goodness.

A further problem with traditional accounts of virtue is their most often relying on an extrinsic rather than on an intrinsic understanding of the nature itself of what might properly constitute ethical responsiveness to morally fraught situations.

The problem here is that appropriate ethical responsiveness calls for a certain excellence of moral character rather than for any ethics of mere benefit. So long as ethical reflection continues to understand the alleviation of unnecessary suffering exclusively in terms of benefit, utility, and well-being, then the inner and not just the outer devastation, that much protracted yet unnecessary suffering brings upon many persons caught up in seriously conflicted moral situations, cannot properly be addressed.

Still another and for now final problem with traditional accounts of virtue is their almost invariant focus on dispositions rather than on intentions.

Of course dispositions, that is, potentials or powers,¹⁵ are central to any account of virtue, whether traditional or contemporary. A unique focus on dispositions, however, undervalues the central role of the intentions of ethical agents. The ethical agent who would respond in particular to the complexities of morally fraught situations today needs to complement whatever moral dispositions he or she may have developed with specific ethical intentions to address effectively the most salient ethical aspects of those situations.

A strictly dispositional account of virtue will not do. For it omits precisely that intentional, willed focus on the solicitations of so many persons caught up, whether individually or collectively or both, in such complex situations.

However still fruitful, then, many traditional accounts of virtue in terms of right actions, maximizing extrinsic well-being,

¹⁵ See the entry on “dispositions” in the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*.

and internal dispositions may be, any new ethical virtues would have to be imagined in somewhat different terms. For the very nature of the ethical situations and the suffering they induce in so many persons insists on a fuller account of virtue in some less unsatisfactory terms than those on which traditional accounts standardly rely.¹⁶

§4. How a Non-Traditional Account Might Look

Given these difficulties with many traditional accounts of the nature of ethical virtues, perhaps we may now consider briefly an alternative account.

For some time now the American philosopher R. M. Adams has been at work elaborating a very general metaphysical account of just what virtues are.¹⁷ He situates his account within a perhaps overly sharp distinction he wants to draw between what we have already noted are two different matters, an ethics of right actions and an ethics of agents.¹⁸

An ethics of right actions we may take in this context as critical philosophical investigation into principles of choice for voluntary actions. Such an investigation seeks “to determine, in a general way, what is right or wrong to do.”¹⁹ Thus, an ethics

¹⁶ “Standardly” and “standard” throughout these essays refer to the largely consensual understandings of philosophical expressions to be found in such current English language philosophical reference works as the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, *The Routledge Dictionary of Philosophy*, and so on.

¹⁷ Besides the relevant sections of his *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), see his companion volumes on philosophical ethics, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) and *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006) which I rely on here.

¹⁸ For an important alternative perspective see Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

¹⁹ Adams 2006, p. 5. Hereafter I insert page references to this book directly in my text unless otherwise indicated.

of right actions comes to the philosophical investigation of moral decision-making.

Standardly, English language moral philosophers of this persuasion – for example, Bernard Williams, T. M. Scanlon, Allan Gibbard, and David Wiggins²⁰ – try to analyse moral right and moral wrong in terms of action. Their cardinal ethical question here is “What ought we to do?”

By contrast, an ethics of agents may be taken as critical philosophical investigation into moral character understood as a set of good and bad habitual moral traits. An ethics of agents, then, is not a philosophical investigation of moral decision-making, but of the moral life as a whole, including sometimes moral motivations and moral attitudes.

Standardly, English language moral philosophers of this persuasion – for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, Christine Swanton, Rosalind Hursthouse and Roger Crisp²¹ – try to analyse moral character in terms of virtue. The cardinal ethical question here might go “Who should we be?”

Distinguish now between virtue ethics and an ethics of virtue. The expression, “virtue ethics,” “has commonly been appropriated to designate the view that a theory of virtue provides

²⁰ For B. Williams see *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), and *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: UCal Press, 1993). For T. Scanlon see his *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998), and *The Difficulty of Tolerance* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003). For Allan Gibbard see his *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990) and *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003). For David Wiggins see his *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on Philosophy of Morality* (London: Penguin, 2006).

²¹ For A. MacIntyre’s later work see his two volumes of collected essays, both from Cambridge UP in 2006, *The Tasks of Philosophy* and *Ethics and Politics*. For C. Swanton see her *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: OUP, 2003). For R. Hursthouse, see her *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 1999). For R. Crisp see his *How Should One Live: Essays on the Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006) and his *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

the right foundation for all of ethics, and that the ethics of duty should be reduced to, or replaced by, the ethics of virtue” (6). Virtue ethics mainly focuses philosophical analysis on evaluations of actions, that is, on judgments of obligation. By contrast, the expression, “an ethics of virtue,” mainly denotes philosophical investigations into evaluations of character, that is, into judgments of virtue.²²

When taken together, these two distinctions, between an ethics of right action and an agent ethics on the one hand and, on the other, between a virtue ethics and an ethics of virtue, lead up to a quite general definition of virtue itself. Since virtue covers a broader domain than action, it seems reasonable to define virtue in other terms than in just those that refer mainly to actions such as obligation or duty or rightness.

Virtues are manifest in actions, but virtues arise out of more than just actions. They arise out of appropriate emotions, motives, and beliefs. Accordingly it seems preferable (although still controversial) to understand virtue mainly as a kind of goodness rather than mainly as a kind of rightness.

If one defines virtue this way in terms of goodness rather than of rightness, then assessing virtues in terms of judgments of goodness turns out in addition to accord more satisfactorily with certain logical patterns than assessing virtues in terms of judgments of rightness.²³

“Assessments of virtue,” Adams writes, “have a logical pattern more typical of judgments of goodness than of judgments of rightness. The concepts of the good and the right differ in the shape of the characteristic frameworks of evaluation they offer us, that of the good being much more tolerant of ambivalence and diversity” (10).

²² Note that Adams understands his own investigations as contributions to an ethics of virtue rather than to a virtue ethics.

²³ For a contrary view see Alice Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2007).

Moreover, assessing virtues in terms of judgements of goodness rather than in those of rightness also allows for a greater plurality of views.

“If an action is right it is not wrong,” the same philosopher continues, “but an action may well be good (in one way) and bad (in another)... Nevertheless, notable forms of virtue may be manifested in actions that are in important ways good, even if they are not, all things considered, the right thing to do in the situation. A view of virtue as a kind of goodness rather than a kind of rightness makes it easier to see how there can be quite different alternative ways of being genuinely virtuous. And of course this is a point of some importance in our world of cultural, religious, and ethical plurality” (11).

These reflections bring Adams to define virtue accordingly. “I identify [moral] virtue,” he writes, “with persisting excellence in being for the good. This is a definition of virtue as goodness of character, as a holistic property of persons. Similarly I conceive of particular virtues... as excellent ways of being for (and against) things” (11). Further on he puts his definition more succinctly, “I define moral virtue as persisting excellence in being for the good” (14).

Now, much of this may strike many as cogent and persuasive. Nonetheless, the key terms here require some elucidation.

§5. Elucidating Three Elements

1. Moral and Ethical Excellence

The specific kind of excellence on view here is “excellence of moral character” (14). And we come to know and to assess moral character not just by a person’s actions. Rather, we also assess moral character by what lies behind the person’s actions, that is by his or her “motives,” “feelings,” “thoughts,” “intentions,” and “values” that give rise to their actions. These elements may be taken as the set of just what the person is for and what the per-

son is against. Thus, virtue is an excellence of moral character consisting in being for what is good.

Note that an excellence-based account of virtue is not a benefit-based one. That is, this account of virtue is a non-instrumental one since it assigns no central place to promoting and achieving certain levels of well-being or extrinsic benefits. Virtue here is not the enjoyment of a certain level of moral excellence for the sake of something else; virtue here is the moral excellence itself.

Thus, virtue is not an extrinsic, instrumental moral excellence but an intrinsic excellence fully worth having for its own sake. Virtue is, in this view, “among the [intrinsic] goods for the sake of which life is worth living” (15).

The intrinsic character of virtue, however, is not such that virtue is completely independent of everything whatsoever. For excellence here is completely independent neither of “the relations in which morally excellent persons stand” nor of “the value of its consequences” (24).

That is, the excellence of virtue is not an absolutely but a moderately intrinsic one. And a moderately intrinsic excellence is one in which the excellence of the moral quality of a virtue “is not defined in terms of the value of consequences” of having that virtue.

Moreover, the consequences of such a moderately intrinsic excellence of a particular virtue can be genuinely extrinsic to having that virtue and thereby occur independently of any person actually having that virtue. However, even on this moderate view of what it means for the excellence of virtue to be “intrinsic,” such excellence remains an objective good “independently of our actually valuing or prizing it” (25).

Further, excellence here is not understood just as the superlative degree of goodness. Rather virtue is excellence in virtue as both a degree of goodness and a kind of goodness in its own right.

Thus, something’s “being excellent is never [its] just being good for persons. Excellence is the objective and non-instrumental

goodness of that which is worthy to be honoured, loved, admired, or (in the extreme case) worshipped, for its own sake” (24).

In short, the excellence of virtue is an objective, a moderately intrinsic kind of goodness that implies neither that the excellence of virtue “is independent of all relations in which the virtuous stand,” nor that the excellence of virtue “depends on our actually valuing or prizing it” (25).

But if these are the relevant senses of the key notion of excellence in this contemporary alternative account of moral virtue, how are we to understand more fully the two further notions in this account, namely those of “the good” and “being for the good”?

2. Being for the Good

Take the second expression first. Virtue as a persisting moral excellence consisting in “being for the good” is not so much a disposition as, first, an intentional state. Thus virtue “must involve an action or attitude that means *X* or has *X* as an intentional object, or a tendency to such an action or attitude” (16; emphases omitted). Surprisingly, the properly intentional character of “being for the good” is left critically undeveloped.²⁴

Further, “being for the good,” second, “must involve dispositions to favour *X* in action, desire, emotion, or feeling. In that broad sense it must engage the will” (17; emphases omitted). Here, the will is understood in larger, medieval senses than just in more narrow, contemporary ones.²⁵

That is, here the will is taken to involve, besides sensation and a capacity for action alone, also intelligence, understand-

²⁴ For recent work, see for example several of the distinctions and analyses in Gabriel Segal, “Intentionality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Frank Jackson and Michael Smith (Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 283-309.

²⁵ The most thorough contemporary work shows up these differences in very great detail. See Brian O’Shaughnessy, *The Will: A Dual-Aspect Theory*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

ing, dispositions, intentional feelings, motivations, and decisions.²⁶ Further, these favouring dispositions are understood as influencing actions without completely determining them.

3. *The Moral and Ethical Good*

But what about the nature of the good that virtue consists in “being for”? The “good” that virtue is for on this account is more easily understood as a plural, “the goods.”²⁷ The goods at issue here are moral and ethical goods and they are quite various. This is a broad view. For the goods here include “any goods that human beings can exemplify excellence in caring about” (19).

A substantial qualification, however, needs stating. “I believe,” Adams writes somewhat unexpectedly, “that such virtue as we may attain is never complete, always surpassable. Always fragmentary, it is often visible only from a certain angle, so to speak. At best we can be virtuous sinners. Actual human virtue is frail, and dependent on conditions beyond the voluntary control of the individual whose character is in questions.

Some may find that assessment of the human moral condition plausible but wonder how it can be consistent with belief in the reality of virtue as persisting excellence in being for the good, and in virtues as persisting excellences of character. How these views may be put together to obtain a realistic conception of virtue,” he promises, is to be “the overarching theme” of the last part of his three part work (12). Whether he fulfils this promise is another matter.

Two points here need our critical attention. Virtue is taken here as “always *fragmentary*.” This claim is designed as a

²⁶ See however the somewhat different view in Ernest Sosa’s 2005 Oxford Locke Lectures, *Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

²⁷ Adams notes that in chapters 1, 2, and 7 of his 1999 book, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, he identified “the good itself with God, seen as a unifying object (although in many cases only an implicit object) of all virtuous motivation” (19, note 5).

response to some empirical research in social psychology.²⁸ Such research has demonstrated that most persons are inconsistent.

That is, most persons do not habitually manifest the same degree of more than one virtue (say, being both courageous and conscientious to the same extent). Moreover, most persons also do not habitually manifest the same virtue *tout court* (say, being consistently self-restrained).

Thus, holding that virtue is a persisting excellence seems to be a mistake. Given the empirical evidence, we need to quantify. We need to say that some virtues although habitual are not fully persistent; they are “fragmentary,” or we might say, some virtues are intermittently persistent. Virtue then, *pace* Adams, is not “always fragmentary”; rather, virtue is but sometimes “fragmentary” in the sense that virtue is a fully persistent excellence, but sometimes only intermittently so.

Virtue is also taken here as “*frail*.” This claim is also designed as a response to empirical research that demonstrates the importance of social contexts and social supports for understanding the origins and perdurance of virtue.

In some social contexts, say, in some large city suburbs such as some Parisian *banlieus*,²⁹ we know that “moral luck” strongly conditions the origins and the development of virtue.³⁰ That is,

²⁸ Tom Hurka makes use of such materials in his *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford: OUP, 2000) that Adams criticizes extensively. See however Hurka’s, “Value Theory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (Oxford: OUP, 2006), pp. 357-379, and John M. Doris and Stephen P. Stich, “As A Matter of Fact: Empirical Perspectives in Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Frank Jackson and Michael Smith (Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 114-154 with extensive bibliography.

²⁹ See especially Thérèse Saint-Julien and Ranaud Le Goix, *La Métropole parisienne: centralités, inégalités, proximités* (Paris: Belin, 2007). Paris today has ca. 7 million inhabitants.

³⁰ On “moral luck” see Thomas Nagel’s essay of that title in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), and Bernard Williams’s title essay in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981).

the dependence of the existence or non-existence of some virtues on factors lies completely beyond agents' control. And we also know that, without appropriate social supports, the actual practice of some virtues remains highly improbable.

These considerations suggest that virtue on this account lacks robustness. Again, holding that virtue is a persisting excellence seems to be a mistake. And again some further quantification is in order.

Thus, the development and exercise of some virtues require at least appropriate social contexts and sufficient social support for their exercise.³¹ So, *pace* Adams once again, not all virtue is “frail”; rather, virtue is but sometimes “frail” in the sense that virtue is a robustly persistent excellence, but sometimes only conditionally so.

Nonetheless, we seem nonetheless to need an alternative account of virtue very much like the one Adams has been suggesting if we are to respond not ineffectually to our tragic knowledge of the immensities of suffering that afflict so many of Europe's destitute children today.³²

§6. Questions about a New Ethical Virtue

What then would an ethical virtue that might embody such a tragic knowledge look like?

Would such a novel ethical virtue – perhaps by analogy with both East Asian and Western talk of mindfulness we might use

³¹ I say “at least” because recent empirical findings of social psychologists need to be complemented with such neuro-physiological research such as that on view in, for example, Alain Berthoz and Jean-Luc Petit, *Phénoménologie et physiologie de l'action* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006) and Alain Berthoz, *La Décision* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2003). Adams neglects such work throughout his otherwise well-informed discussions.

³² Perhaps responding to such a tragic knowledge requires what Gabriel Marcel once called “a tragic wisdom”? See his essays in G. Marcel, *Pour une sagesse tragique* (Paris: Plon, 1968), tr. P. McCormick and S. Jolin as *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973).

for now some neologism like “heartfulness” – issue more from an epistemic fullness of perception, or rather from a metaphysical hierarchy of intuitively apprehended values?

Would it be more of an intellectual virtue than a moral one, or rather more moral than intellectual? Or would it flow from a dynamic harmony between the intellectualist and the voluntarist, the theoretical and the practical?³³

And what specific roles would any tragic knowledge of the vastness of innocent children’s suffering across the world today as well as on our doorsteps in Europe specifically play in any new eco-ethical virtue like “heartfulness”?

Would the practices of a “heartfulness” that incorporated a tragic knowledge of the vastness of innocent suffering and our radical contingencies substantively to alleviate such suffering be like seeing red?³⁴

³³ Besides intellectual and moral virtues, note that traditionally there are also “technical virtues.” See David Sedley, *Plato’s Cratylus* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp. 156-158, and his discussion there of *Crat.* 411d4-421e5.

³⁴ Cf. N. Humphreys, *Seeing Red: A Study in Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006) and the review by J. R. Searle, “Minding the Brain,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 2, 2006, pp. 51-55. See also the recent work that Searle mentions, C. Koch, *The Quest for Consciousness: A Neurobiological Approach* (New York: Roberts and Company, 2004), and Searle’s review in *The New York Review of Books*, January 13, 2005. I am sympathetic to some of Searle’s own views about the quite controversial topic of consciousness (probably basic to any satisfactory account of virtues as dispositions). For example, I agree with his rejection of any strict identity theses (consciousness “cannot be reduced to – cannot be shown to be nothing but – an objective or third-person phenomenon”, 2006:51). And I partly agree (for qualifications, see Sydney Shoemaker, *Physical Realisation* [Oxford: OUP, 2007]) with, at least in the light of what neuroscientists now know, advocating a completely causalist account of the functioning of brain processes (“Consciousness is entirely caused by brain processes” [*Ibid.*], even though explaining “how brain processes cause conscious experiences... may well require a much richer conception of brain functioning than we now have”, 2006:55). With other of Searle’s views on these matters I am unsympathetic, for example, with his general, insufficiently qualified naturalistic approaches to all philosophical issues about consciousness.

That is, would such a novel virtue be a private phenomenon rather than a public one, a first-person one rather than a third-person one? Would it be all at once subjective, qualitative, fully unified, and yet not just finally “up to me”?

Would it be fully caused by brain processes,³⁵ and yet not be reducible to any strict identity with such processes? Would it be a species of perception with more than one pathway, like seeing light whether green or white, with both conscious and unconscious aspects? Would it be fully or only partly independent of sensation? Would it comprise sustained feedback mechanisms?³⁶

And would that tragic knowledge find its place in any ongoing modifications of the mainly naturalistic metaphysical and epistemic accounts of virtuous dispositions? Or would such a tragic knowledge have to tincture ineradicably our stuttering practices of moral discourse, our dark knowledge of moral realisms, our weak willed pursuits of moral relativisms, our erratic imaginings of moral irrealisms, and even our dreams of utter simplicity?

After reflection on queries like these, it seems to me that those who would perhaps choose to engage themselves still further in the ongoing task of trying to rationally elucidate and to reasonably appraise both new ideas of virtue and new virtues like heartfulness have to face up to some hard sayings. For the truth is that, when we do philosophy, we find the mind darkened, whatever the small candles of its hard-scrabble wisdom

³⁵ See the Allen Institute for Brain Science’s only very recently completed atlas of the brain available online at www.brain-map.org. The institute is named after Paul Allen, the billionaire former partner of Bill Gates, who has devoted much of his fortune to charity while reserving some for the founding of his institute. For details see “The Allen Brain Atlas: Network Navigator,” *The Economist*, September 30, 2006.

³⁶ The empirical psychological as opposed to the philosophical backgrounds here can be found in such reference works as *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*, ed. R. J. Gregory, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2004) and *APA Dictionary Psychology*, ed. G. R. VandenBos (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2006).

might elucidate. And when we turn outwards, whatever our small gestures may bring to others, we never do overcome the incessant shortfalls of our inconstant efforts at compassion.

And perception is unreliable. And language itself seems broken in such a way that it can never articulate the real without basic distortion.

And, what is perhaps even worse, philosophical self-deception is unconscious, pervasive, inescapable, and finally thoroughly corrosive.

§7. Imagining A Newly Virtuous Person

With some such reflections and queries in mind perhaps we might not be in an unreasonable position now to allow ourselves to entertain several imaginative speculations.

A novel ethical virtue, perhaps something like “heartfulness,” would be coloured with none of this dreary and tiresome small-mindedness. For such an effective disposition would not first of all turn the agent inwards into the darkness of the mind and then outwards into the weakness of the will.

Rather than first moving the ethical agent, the “heartful” person first finds herself moved. And what actually moves the person here is not the agent herself. What moves the “heartful” person is others in their ineluctable sufferings, the truly destitute children in the midst of Europe’s plenty.

That is, what moves the agent is the never-ending irradiations of the negative sublime,³⁷ the unthinkable vastness of both innocent human suffering and the evil that ceaselessly brings such suffering about, enormously powerful ejections we may imagine like coronal sun-bursts of whiteness in a green garden.

The negative sublime is linked unbreakably with, if not “the moral law within,” then surely with the moral vastness without,

³⁷ See P. McCormick, *The Negative Sublime* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 2004).

with the dark matter and the dark energy of the “the starry sky above.”³⁸

The apprehensions of the negative sublime are what eventually drive the reflective person back into the recesses of his or her unfathomably dark inner world in search of efficacious capacities to try to help alleviate that vastness of innocent suffering in some substantive way.

And the ongoing, ever-recurring, and overwhelming recognition of a final dark emptiness within, an utter desolation, the radical contingency of one’s own invincible incapacity to alleviate that suffering substantively, may bring the person to an effective realisation. For, thanks to the experience of the negative sublime, the “heartful” person as perhaps a new ethical agent, may come to realize that such a vastness of innocent human suffering he or she can never substantively alleviate.

At least in the sense of exercising some power strictly and independently of one’s own, the ethical agent can never substantially grasp such a vastness. This kind of vastness can only be surmised, acknowledged, and then received in an unending gratitude for the continuing realisation of the inner desolate emptiness this recognition has brought about. For this kind of emptiness is the necessary condition for any salutary openness.

Like the electro-magnetic refining plasmic fires of a dying galaxy in the starry sky above, the intermittent, pulsing, and fiery apprehensions of the vastness of innocent suffering has annihilated absolutely everything from the heart until nothing is finally left of the self. Bursts of fiery apprehensions have consumed it entirely.

That is, the experience of the negative sublime has fully emptied the heart of such a newly virtuous person, desolated it in such a way that the person is now full of nothingness. Yet her heart is full; she has become a “heart-full” of nothingness.

³⁸ For much of the figurative language in what follows I rely mainly on the articles on astrophysics in *Galaxies: Fenêtres sur l’Univers: Le contenu, l’évolution, la naissance*, ed. Bénédicte Leclercq, *Dossier: Pour la science, Édition française de Scientific American* (Paris: Pour la science, July-September, 2007).

Perhaps she too is now both homeless and yet at home for awhile. For whatever the extent of all her previous desires and aspirations, her struggles and strivings, she is only now actually ready to receive at last whatever finally mysterious consolation there may or may not be.

She has not become, however, anything like some pure passivity. Rather, she is now *a nothing but* simple, active, aspiring receptivity. And this simple, active, aspiring receptivity is the single overriding and responsive condition for the possibility of any ultimate consolation, for some as yet unimagined conflagration. “*Feu*” was the word that Pascal sewed into his jacket.

Having returned to herself, she has found nothing remaining there of her previous self that the eventualizing of such a fiery vastness has not already annihilated. While waiting upon consolation³⁹ in simple receptivity, she is finally ready in her deso-

³⁹ Ever since Boethius, the word, “consolation,” (“*consolatio*,” “*paráklêsus*,” and the Hebrew word, “*nhm*”) has remained deeply problematic for philosophers, for example, with respect to the notion of divine foreknowledge. I use the word here mainly in the late Stoic contexts of fate, destiny, and providence that Boethius, although a Christian, insisted on in his remarkable work synthesising Greek and Roman philosophical reflection on the matter. For a recent critical discussion of the problematic relations between “Hebraism” and “Hellenism,” see S. Sekine, *A Comparative Study of the Origins of Ethical Thought*, tr. J. Wakabayashi (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), esp. pp. 211-257. At the same time I do not wish to exclude any echoes of some Jewish and Christian traditions as to be found, for example, in the Hebrew Bible’s wisdom *Book of Job*, the prophetic books of *Hosea*, *Deutero-*, and *Trito-Isaiah*, and in the Christian New Testament Gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke* together with passages in Paul’s epistles, *Corinthians* and *Romans*. For extensive references to these two fundamental traditions of Western philosophical as well as religious reflection see notably *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. D. N. Freeman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 276-277. Many of these echoes can be found in the works of Meister Eckhart which I have found suggestive here. See for example the new French translations of both A. de Libera (which some critics think are too firmly anchored in the medieval scholasticism of Albert the Great) and J. Jarczyk and P.-J. Labarrière (which some critics think are too much inspired by Hegel). Note that some Japanese philosophers have also worked quite carefully on the difficult texts of Meister Eckhart.

lation to receive the consolation of that substantive capacity she so fundamentally has lacked.

Such a capacity is not a self-power but an other-power, an absolutely fundamental empowerment from without.⁴⁰ It is an empowerment to be able to move out from one's tenebrous shelter, "the inner citadel" of Marcus Aurelius, to make a now enlightened room for the homeless others with a now completely simple availability for taking on with them their own suffering selves. For nothing of her own self remains. And there is at last room, there is now essential space, for others.

And having been fully emptied, the heart of the newly virtuous person has become full of nothingness in such a way as to be able to participate in the everything of others. Any consolation she may receive not from her own power but from some other power will enable her to live out her life in a continual efficacious capacity for participation. This was unexpected.

Even more unexpectedly, she can no longer go back to her previous state. "Heartfulness" is not reversible. Like some versions of Buddhist enlightenment, "heartfulness" does not allow any traditional moral back-sliding (*akrasia*). For the dynamic vastness of innocent human suffering can never stop filling her heart, can never again leave any place at all for herself. She can no longer live any other way than "heartfully".

And whenever accepted by others, her virtuous and efficacious capacity for participating in their being for the good will help conditions to be established – how she cannot know – for their own eventual experience of the negative sublime, the active and not just passive realisation of their own emptiness, a nothingness that becomes a readiness for perhaps receiving eventual substantive consolation in their own right.

⁴⁰ Talk here of a distinction between "self-power" and "other-power" derives from the celebrated work of the Japanese medieval religious thinker, Shinran. See under these expressions the indices to *The Collected Works of Shinran*, edited and translated by D. Hirota et al., 2 vols., Kyōto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997.

Envoi

Do Europeans need new virtues today? I don't know.

But I do know that the unthinkable immensities of children suffering before our eyes daily in Europe as well as in the much wider world today raise serious questions.

These unthinkable but ever present immensities of suffering raise serious questions about, among other severely trying matters, the adequacy of our traditional understandings of ethical virtue to respond fully enough to such tragic and unending solicitations of the truly destitute forever among us.