

Book Review

Neither Heroes Nor Saints: Ordinary Virtue, Extraordinary Virtue, and Self-Cultivation, by Rebecca Stangl. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 207.

One of the nice things about the state of contemporary normative ethics is that virtue ethicists no longer need to elbow their way into the debate with consequentialists and deontologists. Virtue ethics has been recognized as a distinct normative theory, and we can now start to think about how various frameworks might borrow from each other and grow. *Neither Heroes Nor Saints* is an important part of this research project. Virtue ethicists have historically tried to distinguish themselves from their older ethical siblings by rejecting or downplaying the central deontic notions of the obligatory, permissible, and impermissible. Those influenced by Anscombe, for example, have seen these evaluative categories as reflecting a law-like conception of ethics, which prompts us to seek the wrong kind of normative classification (1958, pp. 5–6); more recently, Annas has shown in her analysis of right action that while virtue ethicists can give an account of duty and related terms, traditionally deontological concepts should be explained *after* virtue terms have already done the landscaping (2014, pp. 16–18). So virtue theorists need not be averse to deontological vocabulary, and for those who feel the pull of virtue ethics but think that an adequate ethical theory should be able to give an account of supererogatory and suberogatory actions, Stangl's book is the thing to read. It is impeccably clear, well structured, and easily readable, and provides both deontologists interested in virtue and virtue ethicists interested in the deontological conceptual schema with the kind of account they need to bridge these approaches.

I will focus on three main issues, which question whether Stangl's approach is sufficiently motivated given alternative Aristotelian ways of dealing with the relevant problems, and consider whether we lose some important Aristotelian insights in the synthesis. The first issue concerns Stangl's analyses of some central cases of supererogation and suberogation, which arguably rely on a limited number of virtue and vice terms and are insufficiently described to give a virtue ethical evaluation. The second issue concerns the relationship between moral psychology and moral theory in Stangl's account, as Stangl gives some reason for thinking that supererogation and

suberogation do not actively figure in the psychology of virtuous agents. The final issue concerns the status of self-cultivation as a distinct virtue, as opposed to a component of each virtue. I hope that highlighting these issues will encourage Stangl to say more about them in her future work, as addressing such concerns would do much to encourage Aristotelians to adopt her framework.

1. Overview and summary of chapters

Stangl herself gives a concise motivation for and summary of her book in the introduction, and I encourage readers of this review to consult it. Her primary motivation is to show that the idealistic tendencies of virtue ethics needn't result in an overly harsh or demanding evaluation of actions; you can be a moral saint or a moral hero without being perfect, and many actions are good and right without being maximally virtuous. Stangl's account, then, makes these different standards of evaluation perspicuous by showing how virtue ethicists can account for supererogatory actions on virtue ethical grounds in so far as such actions manifest virtue to a greater degree than other virtuous actions, and conversely, by showing that some actions may be suberogatory in so far as they miss the targets of virtue but are not overall vicious. This framework also clearly distinguishes between ordinary people, virtuous people, moral heroes, and the ideals of virtue, which in turn provides Stangl with space to develop an account of the virtue of self-cultivation.

In chapter 1, Stangl defends her account of supererogation, which is that 'an action is supererogatory *iff* it is overall virtuous and either (1) the omission of an overall virtuous action in that situation would not be overall vicious or (2) there is some overall virtuous action that is less virtuous than it and whose performance in its place would not be overall vicious' (p. 4, emphasis in original); chapter 2 defends the account of suberogation, which is that 'an action is suberogatory *iff* it fails to hit the target of a relevant virtue but is not overall vicious' (p. 5, emphasis in original); chapter 3 strengthens the account by considering and responding to likely objections from Aristotelian virtue ethicists; chapter 4 clears the conceptual ground for the virtue of self-cultivation by showing how there can be virtues that the ideally virtuous agent would not need or have; chapter 5 lays out the positive account of self-cultivation, where it is defined as 'the disposition to engage in those actions and have those affective responses that develop one's abilities and character traits, when appropriate, because one values growth for its own sake, with pleasure and from an undivided motivational state' (p. 8); the final chapter completes the account by distinguishing the virtue of self-cultivation from its correlate vices of self-absorption and apathy. Thus the book is neatly divided into two main parts: chapters 1–3 defend the account of supererogation and suberogation, and chapters 4–6 defend the account of self-cultivation.

2. Supererogation, suberogation, and virtue ethical analyses of cases

It is no surprise that Stangl finds the intuitive plausibility of analysing certain actions in terms of the supererogatory and suberogatory a strength of the theory (p. 172), but the book relies on key examples and thought experiments to help the reader share this intuition. Without these cases, for which existing virtue ethical analyses are supposed to be inadequate, the ensuing debate will depend on more general considerations about other advantages of the theories. Let me begin, then, by laying out why Stangl's analyses of cases may not be as straightforward as she takes them to be.

2.1 Supererogation

One central case Stangl introduces to motivate the importance of supererogation is that of giving money to a homeless person:

You generously give him \$20, and I give him \$10. We both have similar resources, and neither of us will suffer any real hardship from giving the money. The natural thing to say is that we have both performed a generous action, but your action is somewhat more generous than mine. But if an action qualifies as generous only if it is the (or a) best possible one, then this would be false. So it seems that an action can be generous without being perfectly generous. (p. 15; see also p. 65)

This is very quick in a number of its steps, and we should be wary of monetary examples that too easily lead to sorites problems (see pp. 66–7). What is puzzling about Stangl's analysis of this case (which also shows up in the slightly modified version of deciding how much to tip or to donate to charity; see, for example, pp. 26, 66–9, 71–2) is that we hear very little about the deliberations, motivations and justifications each agent might have for giving different amounts of money; similarly, we have no idea whether these are one-off, spontaneous actions, part of a pattern or habit of generosity, or part of a more thoughtful life-plan of generosity. In short, we have no clue what character traits these actions might be manifesting. To see why excluding these details is problematic, let's consider some real people.

I live in San Francisco, where it is extremely likely that upon leaving my home somebody will ask me for money, either for themselves or for some organization. Anybody who lives here has had to think about how to act in this aspect of their lives. One friend, call him Alf, works as a bartender, and so almost always has one-dollar bills on him; because he thinks it important to be a friendly presence in his community, he rarely says no to anybody who asks for money, and gives most people a few bucks (he also regularly tips servers above 40%). Another friend, call her Betty, is a philosopher who works in applied ethics and takes the effective altruism movement seriously; at the start of the year, she works out how much of her income she can afford to give, and then donates to charities she knows will do the most good; this means, however, that she chooses not to give money to the people on the

street (she has already given everything she can responsibly donate). Another friend, call her Gemma, works as a music teacher, giving an enormous amount of her time to local high schools to help with their shows; whenever she is at an ATM, she takes out \$20 to give to the people who might ask her for money, but a lot of people ask for money, so the first person gets lucky and the others do not.

Say we're walking to a restaurant, and a charity worker asks for money. Alf will probably give a few dollars, Betty nothing, and Gemma \$20. Who here has done what virtue required, who failed to do what virtue required, and who went above and beyond? On Stangl's analysis, it seems Alf did what virtue required, Betty failed to do what virtue required, and Gemma did something supererogatory. But this analysis is implausible once we know more about these people and the way that each has integrated generosity into their life as a whole. All of them in different ways have reasonably thought about how to deal with people asking for money, and while we could argue about the minutiae of who has the best policy, we should judge that each is a generous person.

A standard virtue-ethical strategy for analysing cases here is to think about how these actions flow from character traits. Sometimes this is relatively straightforward and easy to do (as with Alf and Gemma in the example), but Betty should give us pause. She didn't *at that time* do something generous, and yet it doesn't follow from this omission that she is either an ungenerous or a stingy person, *or* that she has failed to do what virtue required (Stangl notices this later in the book, on pp. 70–2, but these details should be on the table before we evaluate actions). The latter point is especially important, because what virtue requires is that generosity is incorporated into your life as a whole—that you have developed patterns and habits of thinking, feeling and acting which manifest across time. So we should be careful in jumping to judgements of virtue in underdescribed cases, especially ones that are only time-slices.

While it is a common misunderstanding that virtue ethics focuses on evaluating character rather than evaluating action, the deeper point is that we *cannot* evaluate action until we know more about the agent as a person and thus how the action might or might not reflect their character. Stangl alerts the reader to these considerations briefly in her discussion of a person who has multiple abortions (p. 56), but I hope it is clear why we cannot evaluate that person's actions—even as suberogatory—without knowing much more than a paragraph of potential background conditions that might be informing their deliberations.

Returning to the generosity case, Stangl could reply at this point that supererogation still plays an important role in explaining why Betty is arguably the *most* generous of the three. If we want to say that Alf and Gemma are generous people but Betty is more generous than both because she gives the most overall, then isn't there a sense in which Betty's generosity goes above

and beyond what virtue requires, that her generosity rises to the level of the supererogatory? Not necessarily. Virtue terms are not maximizing concepts that improve in quality if they are manifested more frequently or on a greater scale, and monetary examples are especially misleading because of their quantitative dimensions (cf. p. 27 n.31). What's important, then, is that generosity and the other virtues are integrated into your life, and different people will need to manifest some virtues more than others. So if Betty goes on to donate tens of thousands of dollars, and Gemma (whose income may never be enough to pay off her student loans) can only keep giving out her \$20 bills, we should *not* say that Betty is a more generous person than Gemma—rather, we should say that Betty was fortunate to have the material conditions that allowed her generosity more opportunities to manifest.

Stangl does, however, provide a promising strategy for explaining virtuous supererogation in choosing a *way of life* that rises to the level of the heroic or the saintly (pp. 30, 35). She mentions Doctors Without Borders, and we might add the caregivers at the L'Arche communities whom Zagzebski describes as exemplars of charity and compassion (2017, pp. 80–3). But rather than evaluating people in a scalar manner (who was barely virtuous, who sufficiently virtuous, who more virtuous than they had to be?), we might instead ask whether the kind of habits of deliberation and action they cultivated were right for the agent and fitted their life, talents and circumstances. Moreover, virtue ethicists could reasonably disagree about how different values should figure in the deliberation of the virtuous, and whether there is a meaningful distinction between the standard 'moral' virtues and the so-called 'non-moral' virtues, like virtues of intellectual understanding and aesthetic appreciation. If the latter are also traits that virtuous agents rightly value and think form part of a well-lived life, then it is not obvious that the saintly are deliberating more virtuously than Gemma in choosing to centre her life on the arts.

2.2 Suberogation

Despite these concerns, I do think that virtue ethicists could make good use of the supererogatory to categorize the actions of people who prioritize the moral virtues in their life in an outstanding or remarkable way, as Stangl suggests. I am less sure, however, that virtue ethicists should adopt the category of the suberogatory, as I can't think of any cases of actions that straightforwardly meet Stangl's criterion (an action that fails to hit the target of virtue but is not overall vicious). Every supposedly 'trivial' failure seems to me to be covered by a vice term.

Let us consider one of Stangl's central cases of suberogation, which is borrowed from Chisholm:

The forgetful diner is brought the wrong dessert, and his waiter, on request, exchanges it for him. But when his waiter returns with the correct dessert, he

forgets to thank him. His failure to thank the waiter is, Chisholm suggests, an instance of trivial suberogation. If he goes on to lodge a complaint about the mix-up to the manager, he will have committed a second act of suberogation. He is well within his rights to complain, but it would be bad to do so. (p. 47)

Stangl then considers a variation in which the waiter gets fired because of the diner's complaint, and she asks repeatedly whether the diner's action rises to the level of cruelty. But is *cruelty* the relevant standard?

Hursthouse notes that our enormous vocabulary of vice terms is extremely useful for helping us deliberate:

Much invaluable action guidance comes from avoiding courses of action that are irresponsible, feckless, lazy, inconsiderate, uncooperative, harsh, intolerant, indiscreet, incautious, unenterprising, pusillanimous, feeble, hypocritical, self-indulgent, materialistic, grasping, short-sighted, . . . and on and on. (Hursthouse 1999, p. 42)

Now, with a few more vice concepts at hand, does our diner act viciously? He surely does. From that list alone, inconsiderate, harsh, self-indulgent, materialistic, and grasping all seem good descriptors. Such a person also seems to present a paradigm of what the Stoics call small-mindedness, namely, the failure to be appropriately above the trivial things that regularly happen in life. Think of the scathing things Epictetus would say to somebody who not only complained about not getting the dessert they wanted but who complains *after* getting the dessert they wanted. Anybody wealthy enough to be ordering dessert and who has any understanding of what it's like to work as a server (especially in the US, where one's livelihood depends primarily on tips and there are disgracefully few protections for hospitality staff) and yet complains about an entirely normal error, which was appropriately remedied, and knowingly risks getting the server fired is aptly described with vice terms.

Stangl's discussion raises interesting questions about the role of minor vice terms in virtue ethics. It is surely a more serious failing to be cruel than to be petty and indiscreet, but it is important that it is still a failing to be petty and indiscreet. Consider, then, other potentially plausible cases of suberogation: whining and gossiping. Most of us know that it's better not to whine or gossip, and plenty of wisdom literature warns us against wasting our breath in that way—and yet most of us whine to our friends and gossip with our co-workers. So we're not hitting any targets of virtue by whining and gossiping, and Stangl would likely want to argue that such actions are not overall vicious (they're certainly not cruel or unjust or cowardly).

But gossips and whiners are not living well, and we shouldn't encourage our friends to gossip and whine, and we shouldn't foster such habits in our children. So what's going on? The problem is clear when, once again, we stop analysing the relevant cases as time-slices where a person at time *t* shares a single piece of gossip or whines about some new pointless bureaucratic

requirement, and instead consider what would happen if the gossiping and whining contributed to a pattern of deliberation and action. Such a person is cultivating vice, and pettiness and small-mindedness are genuine vices, and they're blameworthy. Minor vices often describe subtle ways of going wrong that frequently slip beneath our moral radar, and once we include all of the various vices in our analysis of action, it's hard to see how an action could go wrong in some way but be permissible in a virtue ethical framework. So we should take Hursthouse's insight seriously and consider a long list of vice terms when we evaluate action, recognizing that although some failings are more serious than others, there are nonetheless valuable lessons to be learned by thinking through why it is genuinely bad to be feckless and snobbish and flippant and crass, and bad to perform the actions characteristic of such people. Aquinas and Foot thus rightly say that 'a single defect is enough for badness, while goodness must be goodness in all respects' (Foot 2001, p. 75, citing Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II.I, XVIII.4).

Finally, the most plausible example of suberogation Stangl develops (borrowed from Julia Driver) is the case of Roger, who deliberates about whether to donate his kidney to his brother with severe kidney disease (pp. 50–4). In the version where Stangl judges that Roger's choosing not to donate to his brother is suberogatory, the relevant intuition is generated because of the risks and costs of doing what virtue requires (p. 51). But this reasoning presupposes that the requirements of virtue are relaxed in situations of great risk and sacrifice—which can't be right, as surely we need virtues precisely *for* such situations, times when the risks are calculated and the sacrifices called for (see Lieutenant Inouye's testimony on p. 81). Failing in testing circumstances may be predictable given the psychology of most people, but that doesn't mean that the failures cease to be vicious. If the sober judgement of the wise is that a great sacrifice is required and heavy costs are to be incurred, then it *would* be vicious not to rise to the occasion—such behaviour is characteristic of mercenaries and fair-weather friends.

3. Moral psychology and moral theory

Another place Stangl's account departs from neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is in the relationship between moral theory and moral psychology, for it is striking that Stangl *denies* that exemplary agents are reliable guides to the normative status of their own actions, especially in so far as they take heroic actions to be required when they are supererogatory (pp. 77–88); similarly, even more ordinary agents seem not to think in terms of suberogation because the virtue of self-cultivation motivates them to strive for the heights of virtue and not teeter on the precipice of vice (pp. 89–90). This is not the trivial point that virtuous people don't use philosophers' concepts like *phronesis* and *eudaimonia*; it is rather the more serious point that there doesn't seem to be an *analogue* of supererogation and suberogation in how virtuous

agents think about their own actions, and the virtuous have mindsets that seem to undermine the basis for introducing such categories. We might worry, then, about a disconnect between the concepts that philosophers use and concepts that virtuous agents use. Given that some philosophers' concepts improve moral reasoning and some distort it, we can put the point more practically: should we teach our children and friends to think in terms of supererogation and suberogation? If not, then something may have gone wrong, and instead of fulfilling Anscombe's hope that virtue ethics would be grounded in a robust moral psychology we have ended up with government house virtue ethics.

Stangl's strategy for dealing with the tension between the testimony of exemplars and her own account of supererogation is to deny that some exemplars are *phronimoi* (p. 80): the *phronimos* is an ideal, and somebody can be praiseworthy and exemplary without being ideal, so we oughtn't to expect real exemplars to have the kind of understanding characteristic of the ideally virtuous agent. But this reply fails to address the force of the objection. It is not problematic to deny that exemplars lack the full integrated unity of the virtues or lack the kind of moral understanding characteristic of the *phronimos*—it is problematic to deny that exemplars are correct in their judgements about what they need to do, what courses of action are morally open to them, and what their jobs entail in testing circumstances. A theory that takes the moral psychology of exemplars seriously will treat testimony about these facts as data that a virtue ethical theory needs to explain (it is worth remembering that academics have no privileged understanding of the content of virtue; Hursthouse 2006, p. 74). Thus rejecting such testimony is tantamount to saying that exemplars are mistaken in their ground-level judgements about what people should do in the circumstances they find themselves in, and that sounds like discounting the insights of people who are better and more experienced than us. This is a substantial theoretical cost, and a problem that ought to be addressed head on by philosophers who think that supererogation is a valuable ethical category—at the very least, we need an error theory for how some exemplars might understandably be going wrong.

We can say similar things about suberogation. If virtuous agents are *not* spending their time deliberating about actions that fall into the lower bounds of the permissible, we should be able to explain why. Stangl addresses an important part of this story by pointing out that 'there is . . . something amiss about someone who never strives to do more than is required. No one wishes to encourage the pursuit of the bare minimum' (p. 89), but it is also worth considering whether Stangl's conceptual framework *encourages* this kind of thinking. One reason Hursthouse was so frustrated with rights discourse in ethical discussions was that she thought it was far too tempting to conclude from the fact one was acting within one's rights that the ethical problem had been solved, when in fact it is clear that people can exercise their rights in horrid ways (Hursthouse 1991, p. 235). Thus there is a lingering worry that

setting up the evaluative categories in Stangl's way promotes the legalistic way of thinking about morality that Anscombe rallied against. In short, we should ask what we need the category of the suberogatory *for*, if it neither illuminates the psychology of the virtuous nor is useful for cultivating good ethical deliberation.

4. Self-cultivation as a distinct virtue

My final concern is somewhat scholastic: given that many of the major virtue ethical theories already build in some account of self-cultivation, why should we think that self-cultivation is a *distinct* virtue rather than a component of all the virtues, like reasons-responsiveness or affective control? It would be good to see Stangl further explain what the major contribution of this virtue is in relation to existing discussions of ethical development. For example, in her account of virtue as a skill, Annas explains that the development of virtue includes a drive to aspire (2011, pp. 16–32); similarly, in distinguishing moral exemplars from non-moral exemplars, Zagzebski specifies that moral exemplars prompt a kind of admiration and a desire to emulate, which in turn motivates agents to improve (2017, pp. 30–59). These accounts are nicely complemented by ancient literature in various traditions that emphasize the cultivation of the character. It is well established that no virtue comes to us fully formed, and so we must cultivate every virtue. Thus while I do not disagree that self-cultivation is important and that it corrects for both a kind of moral apathy and a kind of self-absorption, I was left wanting to know more about what Stangl thinks is missing from existing accounts that her own theory addresses.

That being said, there is a growing literature on the kinds of emotions, behaviours, and character traits that are appropriate and beneficial for people progressing in virtue that may not be part of the psychology of a fully virtuous person, such as humility, shame, deference, remorsefulness, and various kinds of moral and epistemic reservation. Stangl is right to note that virtue ethicists who overemphasize the standard of the fully virtuous agent and the ideals of virtue can have a tough time accounting for why these progressor traits are valuable. But Stangl makes clear why such traits are praiseworthy and why they are the goals on which most of us should focus. I would encourage Stangl to think more about whether we might need different criteria for determining the kinds of traits that fully virtuous people have and those good traits that less than fully virtuous people have, as getting clear on these stages of character formation and the structure of ethical evaluation for such people would be an extremely valuable addition to the literature, and Stangl has set herself up well to provide such an account going forward.*

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San Francisco State University, USA
jwreid@sfsu.edu
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JEREMY REID

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