Mark Alfano, ed., *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 174 pages. ISBN: 9780415658218 (pbk.). Hardback/Paperback/E-Book: $130/$39.95/$27.97.

This short book aims to provide an accessible snapshot of contemporary debates in virtue theory, and it achieves this aim well. It's written as a point-counterpoint discussion, and the quality of the essays, as well as level of inter-action between each "expert" pair, makes for an insightful contribution to the literature. The book is made especially enjoyable by the common conversation threads interwoven in the apparently disparate pairwise discussions. For example, James Montmarquet's objections made in reply to Mark Alfano's contribution bear on contributions from Roberts and Snow, and Russell and Miller. In what follows, I highlight this common thread by providing a brief summary of the three chapters mentioned above. Unfortunately, this means that I have to overlook two other excellent chapters: "What is Virtue?" by Heather Battaly and Liezl van Zyl, and "How Are Virtues and Knowledge Related?" by Ernest Sosa and Jason Baehr. I conclude by rising some worries and questions about the last chapter's arguments.

In Chapter 2, "Does Virtue Contribute to Human Flourishing?" Robert C. Roberts notes that answering the titular question requires two clarifications. First, we need to clarify the meaning of flourishing. Targeting what he calls a "subjective time-slice positive affect" conception of happiness and flourishing, Roberts advances the broadly Aristotelian account where human happiness is constituted by a well-lived, virtuous, and meaningful human life. Roberts argues that if we take the concept of human nature to be normative and not merely statistical, and if human flourishing is understood in terms of a person being the best person she can be, then an individual human being might not be the best judge of whether or not she is flourishing. That is, she could experience life as a fairly uninterrupted string of time-slices of positive affect, but not be flourishing as a human being. Roberts's second clarification is that it's not very informative to say that human flourishing is constituted (at least in part) by virtuous activity, unless we are able to specify what activity and which character traits count as virtuous. Finding an answer to the latter question, Roberts suggests, requires an articulation of a basic conception of human nature, since which traits count as desirable / beneficial for a particular being depends on its nature and on its environment. Roberts uses a case study of humility, compassion, and obedience to demonstrate his point. Nancy Snow agrees with most of Roberts's account. However, because she sees the concept of human nature as foundational to one's account of human virtue and flourishing, she offers a cautionary tale of the past subjugation of women and African-Americans that

has been enabled by the mistaken conceptions of human nature in general, and female and African natures in particular. Snow urges us to re-examine our assumptions about the nature, flourishing, and virtue of children so as to avoid repeating these past mistakes.

Chapter 4, "How are Virtues Acquired?" centers around the question of whether a traditional understanding of virtues as character traits enabling us to consistently respond to appropriate reasons for action can withstand the weight of empirical research, which shows that most people's actions have little to do with responding to reasons. Daniel Russell draws on social-cognitive theory for understanding character trait formation and ways to improve in our ability to act in reasons-responsive ways. He argues that we can look at ways in which we acquire skills, understood as reasons-responsive habits, to discover developmental paths for virtue formation, since acquisition of a new skill runs into the same limitations that frustrate our attempts to acquire virtues. Russell is modestly optimistic in estimating an average person's ability to make moral progress. By making consistent arduous effort to counteract the effects of our bounded awareness and morally pernicious unconscious dispositions, we can get closer to the regulative (but not normative) ideal of virtuous character, even if this progress is slow and incremental. Christian Miller is less sanguine, arguing that Russell greatly underestimates the prevalence of what Miller calls "Surprising Dispositions" (SDs) and their effects on our behavior. Miller suggests that these unconsciously held dispositions diminish the hope we might have for developing virtue by either prompting non-virtuous behavior or by prompting appropriate actions for non-praiseworthy reasons. Since SDs are so numerous and wide-spread, Miller worries that Russell's strategy of combining education with self-monitoring in order to guard against SDs' influences won't be practically feasible. Miller concludes by offering several lines of enquiry for future research into Russell's proposal.

In the final chapter, "Can People Be Virtuous?" Mark Alfano adopts David Lewis's Ramsification method to propose a novel naturalistic way for determining the nature of virtues, as well as conditions under which it might be possible for people to possess them. The Ramsification of virtue involves assembling all and every known platitude about virtues into a big conjoined sentence, replacing all its virtue-terms with existentially quantified variables, and seeing whether there is anything in the actual world that satisfies the resulting sentence. Alfano claims that virtually no virtue theorist believes that the Ramsey sentence (RS) is satisfied, which leads Alfano to consider two possible scenarios. First is to admit that virtue-terms lack real-life realizers (i.e., that which satisfies the RS). Second is to "fudge" the original sentence in order to make it more realizable. Not surprisingly, most virtue theorists choose the second

option, with different scholars choosing to omit from consideration different families of virtue-platitudes. Alfano focuses on two possible ways of fudging the RS. One way is to drop the prevalence-of-virtues platitudes, but the cost of this, Alfano argues, is too high. He then offers what he considers to be a less costly alternative: drop the platitudes about virtues being impervious to non-relevant situational changes and add statements about virtues being socially constructed. On this view, to have a virtue is to be in a "feedback loop" of picking up on social expectations of virtuous behavior and adjusting one's behavior to meet these expectations. When "fudged" this way, the RS is satisfied, but its realizer – virtue – no longer resides entirely in the virtuous person – it now partly inheres in other people.

James Montmarquet only briefly addresses specific concerns with Alfano's account. He dismisses Alfano's claim that omitting the prevalence-of-virtue statements carries too high of a cost. He then shows that the cost of Alfano's own view is too prohibitive: it reduces our ability to understand vices, and it makes moral evaluation into something odd. Most of Montmarquet's effort is spent on challenging Alfano's basic assumption that virtue theory is best pursued from a naturalistic point of view. Montmarquet attack is three-pronged. (1) He advocates for a broadly Aristotelian starting point of investigation, which is to examine the connections between character and ways we assign moral responsibility. (2) Drawing on such disparate sources as Tolstoy and Hume, Montmarquet argues that understanding a character isn't a scientific endeavor, but an art process akin to painting. This has an important implication: while character, like a portrait, is helpful for understanding and judging a person's actions, motivations, etc., it isn't a good predictor of a person's behavior in a difficult situation. (3) Montmarquet questions the naturalist's reliance on statistics about human behavior, arguing that the more we understand about a particular person who's making a choice in a given situation, the less we rely on statistics when judging the said choice. Montmarquet is not fully opposed to usage of social sciences in virtue theory, but he doesn't want us to confuse the commonplace or socially-cued behavior for the genuinely admirable, hard-to-get character traits that are virtues.

I want to add another worry to Montmarquet's objections. Alfano is ostensibly after the Ramsification of virtue theory – a process that involves collecting all and only the platitudes about virtues. These platitudes are to be "commonsense psychological truths that everyone knows, and everyone knows that everyone knows, ... and so on" (p. 126). Alfano's own preferred way of "fudging" the RS, however, would have us include in that sentence statements that are far from platitudes. Instead of folk-psychology, Alfano offers a peculiar account, which allows for the "possibility of external character" (p. 135) and has

an individual's virtues partially residing in someone else. By mixing such so-
phisticated philosophical explanations with the otherwise genuine platitudes,
Alfano undermines his project. In the end, he doesn't have a merely "fudged"
RS, but a sort of Frankenstein's monster that can shed little light on the prob-
lem it is meant to illumine.

I also have a worry about Montmarquet's position: the *really* troubling claims
of the social sciences aren't the ones about most people lacking virtues. It's the
ones that suggest what we see as paradigmatic manifestation of virtue might
actually be caused by Miller's SDs. If SDs really do cause apparently virtuous
behavior for non-praiseworthy reasons, and if they do unconsciously prompt
vicious behavior, then it's perilous for virtue theorists to dismiss the findings
of psychologists as irrelevant. Rather, we need to investigate questions like, are
SDs fully opaque to their possessors? Is it possible to change one's SDs, and if
yes, then what would such process of re-training involve? etc. Such investi-
gation can only benefit from psychological research, when the latter is used
judiciously.

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