

Moral Actions vs. Virtuous Characters:

Hursthouse's Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Personal Transformation

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I: Introduction

The central argument of this article is that the standard conception of character given in virtue theory, as exemplified in the work of Rosalind Hursthouse, is seriously flawed. Partially, this is because looking behind a moral action for a 'character' is suspiciously akin to looking behind an object for an 'essence', and is susceptible to the same interpretive errors as an epistemic strategy. Alternately, a character—once inducted and projected upon a moral agent—is supposed to be a more or less permanent property of that individual; a schema which leaves little room for the real possibility of personal transformation. I argue here that what is often referred to in virtue literature as 'character' can be productively re-described as the aggregate of all moral actions performed by any one moral agent: nothing more, and nothing less. My hope is that this interpretive strategy will result in broader and more coherent readings of moral actions, and thus also clarify moral confusion resulting from the current lack of the same.

II: Moral Motivation

Most standard moral theories, such as deontology and utilitarianism, offer relatively clear accounts of why agents are compelled to do the things they do, given the parameters of the moral schemas they subscribe to. The deontological agent, for instance, acts in order to fulfil ethical duties, and the utilitarian agent acts in order to maximise utility (various interpretations are attributed to these foundational

motivations, but they give—at least—the basic flavour of their theories of origin). Virtue theorists, in turn, are compelled to give a similar explanation of what the ‘moral motivation’ of virtuous agents looks like in virtue ethics.

The account of moral motivation offered by Rosalind Hursthouse in *On Virtue Ethics* is an iteration of the Aristotelian maxim that the virtuous agent acts “*from virtue*—from a settled state of good character.” (Hursthouse, p.123) But this affirmation alone tells us little about what kind of moral actions we can expect virtuous agents to perform. As the virtuous agent is, by definition, simply ‘one who acts virtuously,’ Hursthouse must also answer the question ‘*What is it to act virtuously?*’ in order to reveal more about the kind of character the virtuous agent possesses.¹

Hursthouse delimits four criteria that the virtuous agent must meet if her action is to be called a virtuous one:

- 1) the agent must perform an act that *is virtuous* in itself, i.e. the act must constitute an instance of ‘doing well’;
- 2) the agent must *know* her action for what it is, i.e. she must not be deceived about the nature of the act she is performing;
- 3) the agent must have acted for the *right reasons*, i.e. her true motivations must not have been contrary to her performance of the act; and
- 4) the agent must have the *right feelings* when she acts, i.e. she must have an appropriate emotional reaction during her performance of the act (Ibid., pp.123-5).

It is important to note the primacy of criterion (1), the objectively virtuous *act*; without it, the subjective criteria (2), (3), and (4) have no content. Each of these latter three criteria correspond, in their own manners, to Aristotle’s condition that a virtuous agent, in order to perform a virtuous act, must act “from a firm and unchanging state... from (a) virtue.” (Ibid., p.126) When a virtuous agent acts in such a way, however, that agent also satisfies another of Aristotle’s conditions for virtuous action—that an agent must choose an action “for its own sake” (Ibid.). This is because for the virtuous agent, these two features of moral life are inseparable: acting from virtue *is* just to choose to perform a given action for its own sake (Ibid., p.136).

Thus, on the neo-Aristotelian account, any disunity in the virtuous agent’s moral actions through time has clear ramifications for the concept of the virtuous agent as one who acts from the unchanging

virtues themselves. This is because disunity in the virtuous agent's moral actions may indicate disunity amongst these virtues. Hursthouse contests this notion, claiming that the puzzlement induced in us when we (for instance) see someone, whom we thought was virtuous, behaving viciously is suggestive of our inherent belief in the unity of the virtues (Ibid., p.155). Puzzlement is seen here as proof for the consistency (unity) of the thing whose inconsistency (disunity) causes our puzzlement in the first place. This is a demonstration of viciously circular reasoning on Hursthouse's part. Moreover, simply because I find a singular instance of one's malicious behaviour to be shocking (in light of what I know of her previous moral actions), this fact in itself has no logical connection to the unity of the virtues—it simply does not follow—in the same way that it would be a logical mistake for me to hastily conclude that a god exists on the basis of natural complexity.

In the absence of convincing argumentation to the contrary, I am inclined to, if anything, subscribe to a philosophical picture of *disunity* amongst the virtues. But the simple multifariousness of virtues cannot theoretically account for dramatic swings of a moral agent's behaviour in an adequate manner. After all, virtue is not vice; and if virtues are in conflict with each other, should be only a matter of one good triumphing over another, and not a matter of the wilful abnegation of virtue on the part of a moral agent. Inconsistency in a virtuous agent's moral actions can, however, be explained through the actualisation of any one of the following three possibilities: (1) that we were epistemically mistaken in attributing virtue to the purported 'virtuous agent' in the first place (i.e., the person whom we thought to be a virtuous agent was actually a vicious agent who was able to fool us initially); (2) that we were epistemically correct in our initial attribution of virtue to the virtuous agent, but it turns out—*prima facie* paradoxically—that virtuous agents can perform vicious moral actions on occasion, and yet remain virtuous (n.b.: because this possibility runs against the grain of standard virtue theory, this situation is often rephrased as 'the once-virtuous agent has undergone a transformation of character, and has since that transformation become a vicious agent'); or (3) that the virtues themselves are not static, and so acting from them will fail to produce consistency in the moral actions of the virtuous person.

Possibility (3) we might rule out immediately because the ‘unchanging nature’, or constancy of the virtues is simply true of them via their definition in virtue ethics; that is simply what virtue is understood to be. Further, if we allowed for possibility (3) on the basis, say, that what counts as a virtue ranges over time and between cultures, then we would be compelled to conduct a sociological survey of so-called ‘virtues’ in various cultures spanning over several eras. But all of this would lead us far afield, in an exercise of ultimately questionable philosophical interest. The remaining two possibilities, on the other hand, pose interesting problems for virtue theory, and constitute the main concerns of this paper. Possibility (1) will be dealt with in the following section, entitled ‘Epistemology and the Virtues’, and possibility (2) will be dealt with in the section following that, entitled ‘Personal Identity and the Virtues’.

III: Epistemology and the Virtues

Virtue theory, in its standard formulation, faces the challenge of overcoming a serious epistemological gap; to be precise, it must address the possibility that a moral agent whom we thought was virtuous could actually turn out to be vicious or non-virtuous after all. The actualisation of this possibility would indicate that we were simply *wrong* in our appraisal of the agent’s moral status in the first place. This, on its own, is intuitively unproblematic if we are fallibilists. But, on the face of it, virtue is something we (ostensibly) ‘know when we see it’. Otherwise, if we are unable to identify virtue when we see it, then virtue becomes an ‘empty’ concept that cannot provide moral motivation, ethical orientation, or action-guidance. Virtue thus stated could have no practical influence on our moral lives. Unfortunately for virtue theory, the fact that we *can* be mistaken (and often *are*) about the moral status of various moral agents, and have differences of opinion with others about what constitutes a virtuous action, is perhaps telling of our lack of acquaintance with ‘the virtues’ themselves.

The concern stated above is, at its heart, an epistemological problem—one that calls into question not only the perceptual apparatus of moral agents (e.g., in being able to ‘spot’ or ‘pick out’ virtuous actions and agents), but also the special knowledge that we take the virtuous agent to be in possession of (e.g., the

knowledge yielded through the virtuous agent's perceptual sensitivity, which in turn facilitates the exercise of practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, when she acts in a virtuous manner). The knowing that arises from seeing a moral situation 'correctly' is generally understood as being requisite for the virtuous agent's formulation of her appropriate response to that situation. Such epistemological concerns arise from our concept of the virtuous agent as it comes to us from its standard usage, bound up as it is with problematic conditions of 'correct' knowing and seeing, which now demands our closer attention.

There is some conceptual murkiness and debate about whether or not the 'virtuous agent' referred to in virtue literature refers to (i) a real person or to (ii) an abstract, ideal person. While, no doubt, some authors use the term 'virtuous agent' with (i) in mind, and some others with (ii), for the sake of this discussion we need to (at least for the moment) settle the question of which is a more appropriate usage of the term. In finding a solution to this problem, I am compelled to assess the consistency of a virtue theory that posits a moral agent who can both 'possess human fallibility' and also 'be in possession of full virtue'. It occurs to me that to act in full accordance with unchanging virtues, and at the same time to possess human fallibility, is impossible to do. Either one must give up one's claim to human fallibility, or one must give up one's claim of being fully virtuous. On a particular occasion wherein one acted virtuously, one might say something to the effect that 'virtue guided my hand' (say, because one suddenly possessed the courage to overcome one's normal limitations and perform an exceptionally virtuous deed, such as saving a baby from a burning building; or some similar feat). But this does not imply that we are capable of emerging from similar moral situations in a similarly consistent and 'fully virtuous' manner. Exhibitions of virtue by a moral agent today do not in any way guarantee similar exhibitions of virtue tomorrow by the same agent. In fact, inasmuch as we are able to recognise virtue at all, this limited kind of recognition is only possible given the fact that exhibitions of virtue are noticeably irregular in some regard. Or, to coin a phrase: '*Virtue shines.*' This is the 'know it when we see it' feature of virtue I mentioned earlier. Consider the contrasting alternative: if we say that exhibitions of virtue are ordinary, everyday occurrences, we ought to barely notice them; and this is simply not the case. Thus, I am moved to side with the moral fallibilists on the subject of exhibitions of virtue, which strikes me as a seemingly innocuous concession.

Previously, I spoke of a moral agent being ‘moved by virtue’. For virtue theorists who hold that the character of a virtuous agent is determined fully by her relationship to the virtues, this is more than just a figure of speech. But we should be cautious in accepting this picture of the virtuous agent: for, if the virtues themselves constantly guide the hands of virtuous agents, then virtuous agents are mere puppets of the virtues with no real agency of their own to speak of. This certainly does not fit with our conception of the virtues as being willingly expressed through moral actions authored by virtue-loving moral agents. And as I argued above, this kind of moral constancy may not be possible in the first place, given human fallibility. So, until fallibility ceases to define the human condition (or consistency comes to redefine it), we must assume that the fully virtuous agent thus described is an ideal abstraction.

At the same time, the moral actions of ordinary, non-idealised, moral agents admit of qualitative evaluation by degree. As Hursthouse points out, one may act better or worse in a given situation, in comparison with the moral actions of other moral agents, or one’s own moral actions in previous instances (Ibid., p.125). This kind of evaluation is a useful ethical guide for one’s moral life. However, if we wish to retain this convenient and fruitful way of speaking about the virtues, then we must also assume that they are detectable in some way by ordinary moral agents who are not unlike you and I. The virtues must be salient to us if we are to speak of them; they must, in some sense, ‘shine’ or stand out. Hence, the lingering epistemic problem of our general inability to consistently detect virtue (with an appropriate degree of certainty) continues to haunt us.

Perhaps taking a cue from Wittgenstein can help us dissolve the weight of our epistemic woes. Let us consider that when people play the ‘language-game’ of speaking about virtues, the resultant conversations are perfectly meaningful to them. Although full epistemic certainty may elude us when we attribute the presence or absence of virtue to the characters or moral actions of ourselves and other moral agents, this level of certainty is not required in order for us to be able to say meaningful things about virtue. Further, our ability to make meaningful assessments regarding ethical matters using virtue terminology is too important to us as discerning moral agents for us to willingly discard it without stronger justification. For the moment, I am content to say that when I write of the ‘virtuous agent’, I am simply speaking of

actual, ordinary moral agents who have aggregated more virtuous moral actions than non-virtuous or vicious ones, given their entire history of performed moral actions. Regarding *phronesis*, or ‘practical wisdom’ as such, I take it to be more or less within the grasp of all virtuous agents: again, by this I mean any agents that have—on the whole—characters which we take to be more virtuous than not. Correctly seeing and knowing the appropriate aspects of moral situations is central to behaving virtuously, but we cannot expect to set a higher epistemic threshold for this practice than any other meaning-generative social practice. The test for whether or not we have correctly identified instances of virtue is simply whether or not other virtue-term users are able to concur with our uses of the word. Epistemologically, we can be said to ‘know’ the virtues as long as others are able to understand the reasons for which we recognise instances of their exhibition.

Having for the moment dealt with our epistemological concerns, then, we may conclude that we are able to speak meaningfully about moral actions—for example, about their being either ‘better’ or ‘worse’ actions than one another (or ‘more virtuous’ and ‘less virtuous’ if one likes these evaluative terms better). This type of ethical assessment, I argue, tracks from our evaluations of moral actions to the ‘characters’ of the moral agents who perform them. My argument for this is as follows:

- (a) Virtue is detectable: it can be seen in moral actions performed by moral agents; i.e. witnessed by other moral agents who ‘know’ what they see.
- (b) Because we do not have direct epistemic access to the minds or intentions of others, we can only judge the virtue of another’s moral character through the level of virtue demonstrated in the moral actions performed by them (moral actions being, in themselves, demonstrations of character).²
- (c) Due to human fallibility, the level of virtue exhibited in the moral actions of any moral agent will vary over time.
- (d) Thus, if we are to speak meaningfully about the character of any moral agent, we should first understand that our assessment of the character of any moral agent is in actuality based on the aggregate level of virtue we have detected in the sum of the moral actions they have so far performed (because having direct access to the character of another is not possible—‘character’ being simply a conceptual construct).

I want to take this argument one step further, and claim that the concept we call ‘character’ can be defined as *nothing but the aggregate sum of the moral actions one has performed*. Seeing character as otherwise is to conflate the aggregation (via memory) of an agent’s moral actions with some unnecessary

metaphysical construct—a ‘character’—said to somehow exist beyond these. The aggregation model explains (better than the static character model) why others have different opinions of us than we do of ourselves: others have seen us perform a limited set of moral actions (they do not have access to the full set of moral actions performed by us which range over our lifetimes), and thus they (to help themselves remember us more easily) attribute this running aggregate to something temporary—a ‘character’—which, unfortunately, has contingently come to have specious connotations of permanence. We ourselves, as thinking and choosing agents, rarely think of ourselves in terms of character (which largely reflects others’ perceptions of us, partially influenced by our choices of which moral actions to perform, or to refrain from performing); rather, we experience ourselves as phenomenal beings, and generally feel free to modify our actions without being transfixed by pictures of ourselves as ‘characters’ (which would bind us to behavioural consistency). We simply act, and ‘character’ is something attributed to us after the fact, a pattern of behaviour sensed by others that, indeed, we may well be unaware of. This model preserves something important about the very possibility of moral agency, which would be threatened if a limiting condition called a ‘character’ cognitively dominated the way we saw ourselves and thus impinged upon our choices. This is the main concern I will pursue in the next section, ‘Personal Identity and the Virtues’.

IV: Personal Identity and the Virtues

To review: in the previous section, we settled with a picture of the virtuous agent as one who may experience some epistemic uncertainty, but who on the whole will know how to correctly identify exhibitions of virtue (virtuous actions) more often than not. As well, we accepted the language-game of virtue as one that we ought to retain due to its usefulness as a tool for facilitating ethical assessments. This section is concerned with the question of how issues of personal identity may come to further alter the standard conception of the virtuous agent.

Let us begin with (1) the possibility that a person who we had epistemically assessed to be—and who, indeed, actually *was*—a virtuous agent, could then *cease to be one* afterwards... and, conversely, (2)

the possibility that a person who we had epistemically assessed not to be—and who, indeed, actually *was not*—a virtuous agent, could then *become one* afterwards. If we believe that these are genuine possibilities, their actualisations would expose the inconsistency of our conception of the virtuous person as being one who acts from 'a settled state of character'.³ Villains, it seems, can sometimes come around to heroism, and heroes can sometimes come around to villainy. How can virtue ethics account for these transformations? For even if we grant that humans are fallible, and thus that some minor inconsistencies in the execution of their moral actions is to be expected, many virtue theorists will still remain reluctant to attribute virtue to the actions of moral agents who undergo such radical transformations of their characters: whether these transformations are from virtuous to vicious, or vice-versa. This sticking point in virtue theory nicely captures the tension between (i) our desire, on the one hand, to accept transformations in the character of a moral agent, and (ii) our suspicions surrounding the authenticity of such purported transformations, on the other.⁴ This brings us squarely back around to our discussion on character initiated in the previous section.

When we speak of the virtuous agent as one who acts from a 'settled state of character', we presumably mean that the virtuous agent possesses something called 'character' which persists over time (indeed, there is little else this *could* mean). In the traditional schema of virtue ethics, modifications to one's character may be accommodated in light of new experiences; but transformations that are radical enough to threaten the physical, psychological, or narrative continuity of a virtuous agent's character cannot be tolerated if one's 'virtuous' status is to be preserved or restored. In practice, extreme transformations in these areas may threaten our conception of personhood itself, as we shall see below.

To clarify our analysis of personal transformations in this section, and how these may affect one's character, or personal identity, I here refer to Derek Parfit's distinction between two disparate types of identity: numerical and qualitative. He states that:

...two white billiard balls are not *numerically* but may be *qualitatively* identical. If I paint one of these balls red, it will not now be *qualitatively* identical to itself yesterday. But the red ball that I see now and the white ball that I painted red are *numerically* identical. They are one and the same ball. [Parfit, p.201: italics mine.]

In the remainder of this section (and throughout the rest of the paper), I will be focusing exclusively on *qualitative* identity. This is because virtue ethics is a character-based ethics, and changes in the character of

a moral agent are of a distinctly qualitative nature. To wit: the question is not whether a moral agent has a *numerically* identical character at time T_1 and time T_2 , but whether a moral agent can have an unchanging, *qualitatively* identical character at times T_1 and T_2 .

Let us now consider a scenario drawn from English literature in which some sort of transformation in personal identity ostensibly takes place. A paradigmatic case of such a transformation is that of Scrooge, the central character of Charles Dickens's famous *A Christmas Carol*,⁵ who comes to be changed—by the visitations of three spirits—from a misanthrope to a philanthropist, literally overnight. Naturally, at first Scrooge's fellow townspeople, who are familiar with his old, curmudgeonous self are suspicious of him, and are hesitant to attribute virtue to his new-found philanthropy—rather, many think that he has gone insane. But why should this be? After all, Scrooge's charitable acts, according to Dickens, are genuine exhibitions of virtue, and accord with all of the appropriate criteria as such. I would argue that the townspeople's reactions are due to the fact that on the morning after his transformation, Scrooge has not yet been able to perform *enough virtuous actions* to even out the moral deficit accrued through his years of acting from vice (although Dickens assures us at the end of his story that Scrooge eventually goes on to do just that and more). In Hursthouse's terms, Scrooge has not adequately resolved the *moral remainder* of his actions. Alternately, in terms of my thesis, I would like to say that Scrooge has not yet *aggregated* a virtuous character by the morning following his transformation.⁶

Bernard Williams, in one of his many discussions on personal identity, formulates a case of the opposite variety: he describes a fictitious person who I will nickname 'Inverse Scrooge' for the sake of convenience in our discussion. Williams sketches out his Inverse Scrooge in the following passage: "Formerly quiet, deferential, church-going and home-loving, he wakes up one morning and has become, and continues to be, loud-mouthed, blasphemous and bullying." (Williams, *POS*; p.2) Here we have the Scrooge case in reverse: on the morning after his transformation, Inverse Scrooge has not performed *enough foul deeds* to have yet aggregated a *vicious* character (though we know he eventually will). But let us assume for a moment that Inverse Scrooge's turnabout in behaviour will reverse itself again and come full circle, back to where he started: his bad behaviour in the interim would be, in that case, nothing but a

statistical anomaly, averaging out his character as being generally virtuous—worse perhaps than some, but certainly better than many others. However, in accepting the possibility of such transformations (both from ‘good-to-bad’ and ‘bad-to-good’) we must also accept that the possibility that the virtues are not qualities that we necessarily permanently possess. Thus, in both the cases of Scrooge, and Inverse Scrooge, problems are posed for a virtue theory that attaches exhibitions of virtue to a ‘settled state of character’.

My position, I contend, provides a balm for these woes; for I proffer a virtue ethics that is theoretically coherent with the possibility of radical personal transformations.⁷ As I suggested earlier, we can easily re-describe the concept of one’s moral character as the aggregate sum of one’s moral actions. To restate an earlier point, this is because we can only see ‘the virtues’ as they are expressed in moral actions—presumably, they have no independent (Platonic) existence outside of these carriers—and so we assign virtuous characters to moral agents solely on the basis that they have, on the whole, performed more virtuous than vicious moral actions (at least of those we are able to recall). Thus interpreted, a ‘transformation of moral character’ in an agent actually means nothing more than the addition of new, qualitatively divergent moral actions to the pool of moral actions which were already constitutive of the personal moral history (one could read this as ‘character’, if one liked) of that agent. The authenticity of such a transformation, then, is decided on the basis of whether or not the new moral actions being added to this pool serve to tip the scales of aggregated moral action noticeably toward a cancellation of one’s moral remainders, or a depletion of one’s moral sums. For example, the transformation of the Biblical archangel Lucifer into the devil Satan counts as an authentic one—due to the fact that *as* Satan, Lucifer continues to evermore perform vicious deeds and never repents; never reverts to the life he once lived in accordance with the virtues. In doing so he performs (read *accumulates*) countless vicious moral actions, which eventually negate and outweigh, on the whole, the acts of virtue he previously performed as an archangel; which makes Satan’s character, *ceteris paribus*, a vicious one.

Significantly, transformations of character are not always of a moral agent’s choosing. Neither Scrooge nor Inverse Scrooge engineered their mysterious transformations, for instance. Thus, we must also consider what effect moral luck might have on transformations of character. Martha Nussbaum, for one,

remarks on the involvement of moral luck in the tragic transformation of Oedipus' character. She claims that Oedipus' morally just or blameless actions are transformed into morally hideous ones, due to facts about the world he was ignorant of at the times when he performed them (Nussbaum, 380). But even though Oedipus is the victim of bad moral luck (and of bad epistemological conditions), and is not lacking in virtuous intentions, none of this can prevent his transformation from noble to outcast. And with this reversal of fortune, Oedipus' moral character is obviously qualitatively changed as well. It is on these grounds that I must object to Williams' assertion that "in the realm of character, it is motive that counts, not style, or powers, or endowment" (Williams, *ML*; pp.20-1). Oedipus' motives, in this case, are clearly not enough to preserve the integrity of his character. However, what Williams calls 'powers' (which I take to be the abilities requisite for one to be able to act upon one's moral motivations) are central on my account of character as the aggregate of moral actions. This becomes particularly evident in the case below, which I shall now outline.

Let us consider the hypothetical case of Jeannie, a virtuous agent (a moral agent who is on the whole more virtuous than not), who is suddenly rendered mentally and physically vegetative as a result of a car accident that she was involved in (through no fault of her own), and whom remains in that state indefinitely thereafter, morally powerless. Do we grant the comatose Jeannie the same 'virtuous' status that she had before her accident? Perhaps we would be hesitant to, except in the past tense. But why should this be, given that the sum of her moral actions was on average virtuous, and that she is incapable in any way of doing any more moral wrongs? *Prima facie*, this observation might seem to pose a problem for my position. But if, as I intoned above, what we call 'character' can be more precisely re-described as the aggregate of all the moral actions performed by a moral agent, then it should also become apparent that this particular moral agent cannot add any new moral actions to her overall aggregate sum. Since virtue is only detectable via moral actions, we are incapable of making moral assessments of moral entities that are incapable of performing any such actions. The process of aggregation ceases when new members can no longer be added to the set. Plainly put, when individuals stop performing moral actions, they cease to have 'characters' (be moral aggregators), and can only be referred to in memorial.⁸ Thus, in this section I have not only

established that characters may undergo considerable qualitative changes in identity; I have also demonstrated that *when moral actions cease to accrue, what we call 'character' itself disappears*. The observance of this should serve to evince character's causal dependence on moral actions.

V: Conclusion

In order to best understand the actions of a moral agent, we may find it useful to use a conception (usually provisional rather than fixed) of that agent's past patterns of moral behaviour—the 'character'—of the moral agent who performs them. Character attributions, I have posited, can be most aptly expressed as (our estimate of) the aggregate sum of a moral agent's virtuous and vicious actions. Thus my account allows for both sudden character reversals and gradual character drifts, because it views character as provisional (as a running sum that shifts in accordance with the quality of each new moral action performed that is added to it), while on more traditional accounts of virtue theory character is seen as fixed (it is represented *through* moral actions but not *altered by* them). The tendency of many—including virtue ethicists such as Hursthouse—to conceptualise character as fixed is reinforced by our commonplace practice of describing atypical moral actions as being performed 'out of character'. At least initially, such atypical actions may seem unintelligible, and induce puzzlement: a story needs to be told about how the incongruent action fits in with the bigger pattern of a moral agent's behaviour. The concept of character, then (rather than acting as a support structure for the theory of the unity of the virtues), helps form the narrative that makes our atypical actions intelligible (in retrospect) to ourselves and to others. Though a narrative requires unity to be intelligible, I can see no reason that my re-description of character as provisional should threaten a moral agent's narrative unity in any way. Viewing character as provisional implies only two things, both of which are surprisingly uncontroversial and were perhaps already intuitively apparent to us at the onset at the onset of this investigation: (1) that the moral character of an agent is never completely fixed, or fully epistemically knowable by us (even if those agents are ourselves; as, due to moral blindness or other epistemic distancers, we are only ever privy to, or aware of, a limited and perhaps poorly representative set

of our moral actions)⁹; and (2) that in judging a single moral action to be right or wrong without wide, equilibrated reflection on its significance—in light of the narratively-charged aggregate of other moral actions performed by its author—our judgements on that action will lack substance.

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¹ In assigning this task to Hursthouse, the reader should note that I am making an implied assumption that requires some defence—that actions define character in a manner that is not necessarily reciprocal. I will return to justify this premise in the subsequent two sections of this article.

² This point expresses a variety of ethical behaviourism—intentions do not count here, or are only counted as secondary in importance to actions (in those cases wherein the role of intention cannot be ignored, such as in instances of coercion or undetected insincerity).

³ Presumably, the vicious agent also acts from a settled state of character—but in this case the character is a ‘bad’ one, as opposed to ‘good’. If this is true, then inconsistency in character is not *a priori* an undesirable thing: it allows for the possibility of the reformation of villains.

⁴ On this point I am indebted to Pierre Mailly. During a presentation of a draft of this article, he made the interesting observation that modern Christian philosophy’s general acceptance of the concept of personal transformation runs fundamentally counter to ancient Greek philosophy’s general adherence to the concept of the static character.

⁵ I will assume, for brevity’s sake, that the reader is roughly familiar with this Dickens classic.

⁶ In the purview of Parfit’s account it should be fairly obvious that Scrooge’s character after his personal transformation is *not qualitatively identical* to that of the character he possessed before the transformation.

⁷ Although Hursthouse makes a (somewhat grudging) concession to the possibility of radical personal transformations (“...even if we allow sudden transformation of character, nothing but supernatural intervention could transform someone hitherto quite lacking in virtue to anything better than, say, fairly virtuous.” [Hursthouse, p. 159]), it should be noted that the very allowance of such changes seems to threaten her main premise of viewing virtue as arising from ‘a settled state of character’.

⁸ In cases like Jeannie’s, there may be some window of time in which it would still be appropriate to refer to her in the present tense—to call her strong, or courageous, or loving—but the more time that passes, and the more unlikely her recovery is assessed to be, the less assured we can be in making such attributions of virtue... until we are forced by circumstance to surrender such pretensions entirely, regardless of the positive moral sum she had accrued. In response to a point raised by Masaki Ichinose, I must add that the same result should obtain even if Jeannie had left behind a significant moral remainder: if she had been a mass murderer, for example, we should not seek to exact justice upon her inert body, which is—as a thing in itself—blameless. Conversely, we may proceed to with our attributions of vice (and appropriate legal actions) if she were ever to awake from her vegetative state.

⁹ Even after a moral agent's last moral action has been performed—when her story, so to speak, is over and the process of moral aggregation ceases—additional moral actions may come to light with the passing of time which may change our memorial attribution of virtue or vice to her. Heroes can 'become' villains (and villains 'become' heroes) even long after their deaths.