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# Virtue Theory as a Feminist Ethical Framework

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## *Introduction*

In recent decades, feminists have pointed out how prominent ethical theories are primarily concerned with establishing rules of conduct between strangers who share (or are theorized as if they share) the same social status. As Claudia Card points out, such theories outline explicit expectations and rewards of formal relationships; these relationships characterize formal institutions, such as law and business, and the considerations of upper-class men who predominate in such institutions. An ethics which focuses on the impersonal application of rules risks overlooking attentiveness to personal needs, a crucial quality in caring relationships which women and poorer classes have had primary responsibility for sustaining. For example, women have had greater pressure than men to be attentive to the particular needs of their children and households, while poorer workers have had to attend to the idiosyncrasies of their customers and employers. Moreover, contractarian theories of ethics idealize an equality of status which is not always possible or desirable: Ethical theories should be able to inform us in how we ought to treat our children, or how people should take care of others with disabilities.

I will argue that virtue theories can be particularly responsive to these feminist criticisms. Since a feminist ethical theory must be able to evaluate and critique both women's and men's practical considerations, I will examine how virtue theories emphasize caring qualities (e.g. personality and emotional sensitivity) alongside some endorsed by contractarian theories (e.g. justice and impersonal respect). I will then discuss how the virtue of justice can complement attentiveness to personal needs in fostering personal relationships, by reference to Alison Jaggar's connection between large-scale formal institutions and the personal needs which characterize personal relationships. Furthermore, I will point out how emphasizing moral

agents' personal qualities and circumstances can inform conditions for just laws, as exemplified by Rosalind Hursthouse's ethical examination of abortion. In these ways, virtue theory can provide a moral context within which values of justice and care are jointly cultivated.

### *Part I*

In this section, I will outline and develop some criteria for a feminist ethical theory. By distinguishing between men's and women's practical considerations, I will outline how contractarian ethical theories are selectively drawn from and relevant to men's practical considerations, as well as the relationships and institutions which engender such considerations. In doing so, they fail to address important types of informal and personal relationships which women have primarily sustained. Finally, to emphasize the importance of both men's and women's ethics, I will outline cases in which informal and personal relationships would benefit from some of the values endorsed by contractarian theories.

To effectively examine gendered standards in ethical theories, a feminist ethics must be able to critique both men's and women's practical considerations. These considerations differ to the extent that men and women generally have different social roles, professional commitments, and relationships upon which their practical reasoning bears. I will refer to men's practical considerations as those which are especially relevant to historically male professions and relationships, such as those of law, business, and academia. Women's ethical concerns will refer to those involved in social duties traditionally assumed by women, especially domestic labor (including child care, elderly care and household tasks such as cooking and cleaning)<sup>1</sup> and caring

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<sup>1</sup> One should note that these gendered divisions of labor are less pronounced in non-white families, lower-class households, and non-heterosexual relationships (Young 1970; Lewis 1975). Where higher-wage jobs are not primarily available to one family member, financial duties (along with others) may become more distributed, as has occurred (to some extent) between male and female parents over the last few decades (Pew Research Center, 2013).

professions<sup>2</sup> (such as nursing, teaching, customer service, or other professions which involve a commitment to attending to another's needs.)

To examine the implications of these gendered ethical concerns, we should look to the different practices each set of considerations effects. As Claudia Card notes, women's practical considerations are involved in maintaining personal relationships such as those between friends, spouses, and family members. These relationships are characterized by a mutual concern between those involved regarding who the others in the relationship are (Card, p.89). This is not the case in many worker-client relationships, where workers are expected to treat customers with equal respect and attentiveness, regardless of their personalities. Personal relationships are often intimate, and the idiosyncrasies of the people involved change the nature of their mutual attachment and of the relationship itself. Also, personal relationships often grow out of informal ones which lack strict limitations regarding how and when to act toward others in the relationship. This freedom to creatively engage with and attend to others allows for people in informal relationships to 'really get to know' each other, and to appreciate another's subtle qualities with which one can identify. Informal obligations are fulfilled where one person keenly cares for another's psychic, emotional, or biological needs, and this care deepens the relationship from which such obligations arise.

Formal relationships, on the other hand, are well-defined "in ways that are publicly understood and publicly sanctioned" (Card, p.89). For example, judges in a U.S. court of law have certain explicit duties and oaths with respect to the state and people of the court. Formal relationships are deeply concerned with management, supervision, and accountability. Workers

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This does not imply that equal working hours necessarily come with equal domestic responsibilities.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for a list of caring professions and the degrees to which women predominate in such fields in the United States.

in a corporate hierarchy have explicit responsibilities for which they are hired, specific wages with which they are compensated, and particular penalties if the work for which they are contracted is not carried out. Determining precisely the extent to which actions award praise or penalty defines the domain of distributive justice, as well as formal institutions such as law and business. Additionally, as Card notes, contractarian and utilitarian ethical theories are primarily concerned with this type of control, and their characteristic notions of rights and goods derive from formal institutions of law and business. In these ways, contractarian and utilitarian ethical theories selectively address men's practical considerations.

This selectivity comes at two costs. First, ethical theories may fail to appreciate the ways in which women's practical considerations can inform our lives. As Card points out, personal, informal relationships are more foundational than formal ones in the sense that people need them (e.g. within families) to develop and mature prior to entering formal obligations or many social institutions. Also, personal relationships are often the source of emotional support which formal relationships do not provide. In these ways, informal relationships "tend to *underlie* formal ones, circumscribe them, come into play when formal ones break down" (Card, p.89).

Second, while the application of contractarian concepts of rights and mutual respect may prove beneficial in family life, it is inadequate or problematic (for reasons previously discussed). Nonetheless, there are risks which family members take on when they undervalue the rights and autonomy<sup>3</sup> of each other. For example, Sara Ruddick describes the potential for caregivers to dominate (i.e. control the opportunities and outcomes of action for) those for whom they care.

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I use the term *autonomy* in the traditional sense of one's independence from the inappropriate interference of others. Contemporary feminists and philosophers have challenged this notion, pointing out how autonomy can refer to a deliberative psychological capacity, an ability to recognize and develop human values distinct from immediate pleasure or pain, or a status in which one can act by self-imposed commitments (Hill, p.30-5). With a broader idea of autonomy, one can recognize how friends, family or mentors encourage rather than inhibit autonomy. Nonetheless, the traditional ideal of autonomy (as a right) is embedded in contemporary use; its potential neglect is what I emphasize here.

Dominators may “believe that domination is necessary for the eventual happiness and perhaps even survival of the dominated” (Ruddick, p.214). Ruddick suggests that families, as well as informal relationships generally, could benefit from a respect for autonomy within the relationship. This respect is undoubtedly difficult to practice alongside caring for another’s needs; parents may often override their child’s desires and choices for their child’s long-term benefit. Nonetheless, respect for autonomy is crucial to build the self-respect and self-esteem toward which personal relationships partly aim. The restraint which such respect requires is often associated with ideals of justice closely associated with contractarian theories.

Also associated with such theories is the examination of large-scale political and economic institutions. Alison Jaggar notes that a potential deficiency of personal relationships is their lack of attention to such institutions. Instead, the emphasis of these relationships on others’ particular needs can exclude awareness of systematic social injustices which consistently generate such needs (Jaggar, p.196). Values of justice, derived from formal relationships, and those of care, rooted in informal and personal ones, are each relevant to ethical theories that aim broadly to inform human action.

## ***Part II***

The need for values of justice and care presents a challenge to existing ethical theories. Some of these theories can more easily address such a challenge, and I will argue that virtue theory is especially apt for the purpose. To do so, I will describe virtue theory as an ethical theory which is distinguished from contractarianism and utilitarianism by its emphasis on personal development and emotional understanding. To illuminate this emphasis, I will first highlight the role of friendship in acquiring virtue. Second, I will relate Gabriele Taylor’s definitions of emotions, moods and character traits. Third, I will outline the importance of both

emotion and reason in building practical wisdom, according to Aristotle and David Hume. These three connections place virtue within a context of personal relationships and emotional sensitivity.

Virtue theory, like other ethical theories, aims to outline and justify the standards by which human actions are determined to be correct or not. These standards, and their respective justifications, distinguish ethical theories from each other. As Rosalind Hursthouse explains, virtue theory defines correct actions as those which would be undertaken by a virtuous person in the relevant circumstances, and such a person is one who possesses the virtues: character traits which humans need to flourish or live well. Two other kinds of ethical theories include deontological ones, which describe correct actions as those which are in accord with a moral rule or principle, and utilitarian ones, for which correct actions are those which maximize happiness (Hursthouse, p.225). Contractarian theories are deontological, since they define correct actions in terms of individuals' binding contracts.

Before going further, I will attempt here to resolve and more deeply examine the main focus of virtue theory, irrespective of its particular contrasts with those of other ethical theories. One of the central challenges of virtue theory is to distinguish exactly which qualities qualify as virtues. An issue with delimiting such a classification is that accounts of the virtues have varied, and such variations are sometimes incompatible with one another. For example, Aristotle notes the importance of accurate self-assessment in acknowledging one's own strengths and weaknesses, while Thomas Aquinas argues for the virtue of humility, in which one focuses attention primarily on where one is underdeveloped. Homer praises the virtue of physical strength through heroic poetry, while Benjamin Franklin holds the virtue of utility as that from which other virtues gain their legitimacy. To trace the impetus which gives rise to these varying

accounts, Alasdair MacIntyre renders virtues as beneficial to human societies. These societies are largely dependent upon *social practices*, which are sustained and developed by some qualities of their practitioners rather than others. These qualities are virtues.

MacIntyre provides the following definition of social practices:

“By a ‘practice’ I [mean] any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre, p.187).

With this notion, sciences, arts and sports are practices, while a science experiment, an artwork or a sports competition is not. Similarly, planting a seedling is not a practice, though farming is. MacIntyre clarifies the idea of internal goods as those which can only be directly experienced through engaging with the practice in which they are brought about. For example, understanding why cross-country running can be so enjoyable is difficult without trying to run long distances or training for similar endurance events. Furthermore, their achievement is a benefit for the entire community that engages with the practice: Maxwell’s formulation of classical electrodynamics, in which light maintains constant speed, prepared the whole community of physicists for the later advances of Einstein’s theory of relativity. Internal goods contrast with external goods, which are acquired and owned exclusively by certain individuals, typically at a loss to others. Examples of external goods are trophies in a chess tournament and cash grants awarded for scientific publications. In essence, virtues are acquired human qualities which aid people in their cooperation to sustain and advance social practices of which human societies are constituted

(MacIntyre, p.187-91).

MacIntyre's concepts of virtue and social practices are designed to unify the various accounts of virtue throughout history by highlighting their common underlying ideas—that virtues are crucially beneficial for individuals and communities, and that people can and should strive to exercise them. MacIntyre's encompassing account of virtue also avoids taking up the misogyny and classism of particular virtue theorists (most notably Aristotle), a crucial correction if virtue theory is to be feminist. For these two reasons, I will rely on MacIntyre's basic account in further discussion of the virtues.

There are a few features of virtue theory which are relevant to discuss virtue theory's exceptional adaptiveness to the previously noted feminist criticisms. First, virtue theory is *autocentric*, in that it emphasizes the importance of self-cultivation and personal development in attaining good character (Taylor 2006). In other words, virtue ethics contextualizes actions within the agent's patterned desires and deliberations<sup>4</sup>. The emphasis on autocentrism contrasts deontological and utilitarian theories, which treat isolated decisions as instances for the application of universally applicable rules or calculations. In order to act well, according to virtue theory, one must develop and maintain the virtues; to progress in this respect, one must also have an accurate assessment of one's own successes and weaknesses. Good friends aid us in this assessment. As Aristotle points out, good friends find pleasure in each other's good actions (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk.VIII, Ch. 3, §6): Where one succeeds, the other is proud; where one falls short, the other is likely to notice. To be sensitive to each other's values, desires and

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<sup>4</sup> The assumption that these long-term patterns actually exist and primarily govern our motivations for action has been undermined by recent work in experimental psychology (Doris 2002). This "globalist thesis" holds robust dispositions as the determinants of our actions, yet John Doris has documented how several morally salient decisions (e.g. whether to offer help to a fallen stranger) are strongly influenced by apparently small changes in circumstance (e.g. finding a dime beforehand, or running a few minutes late for a meeting.) While such findings elucidate risk in the hasty attribution of character traits, they do not rule out the possibility of obtaining such traits (with vigilance) on a path toward virtue.

practical reasoning, friends require “time and familiarity” with each other. This time is spent attending to each other’s personal abilities, values and concerns. In this way, virtue theory endorses a self-understanding and development which is fostered by personal relationships.

Along with individuals’ personal qualities, virtue theory emphasizes emotionality, a second characteristic of informal relationships which women have had primary responsibility for maintaining. As mentioned previously, personal and informal relationships often provide emotional and social support which may be lacking in formal institutions. For example, a distraught worker may well rather express his worries of his mother’s health with a close friend than with his colleagues.

To understand the impact of this emotional support, I will outline an account of emotions which relates them to the character traits with which virtue theory is primarily concerned. As Gabriele Taylor argues, emotions involve a cognitive assessment of the world. For example, fear of a dog may derive from the belief that the dog may bite. The intentional self to which such assessments refer is the ‘internal object’ which constitutes the emotion. To use the previous example, I may be fearful not merely that a dog may bite, but that I, or someone, or something which I value or care about, may be bitten. Emotions, therefore, are characterized by relationships between one’s perceptions and intentions (Taylor, p.13-4).

Emotions also can have particular ‘external objects’ toward which our perceptions are directed (e.g. a dog). However, these external objects do not necessarily motivate emotion, as is the case in what are commonly called ‘moods’ (Taylor, p.14). Depression, for instance, does not focus its pessimism on any particular aspect of the world, but instead dims all prospects indiscriminately. To the extent that moods are long-lasting and strongly influence other moods, emotions and behavior, they may be called personality traits. Personality traits may be classified

as character traits if their possessor has responsibility for their perpetuation; on the other hand, some personality traits are environmentally or genetically determined (Taylor, p.16).

On this conception, character traits are inseparable from our emotional tendencies. Emotional sensitivity is therefore helpful for one to understand both our own and others' motivations for action. With such an understanding, one may better correct oneself and the company with whom he or she pursues the virtues. This emotional correction is essential to Aristotle's conception of virtue; he writes that "[virtue] is about feelings and actions, and these admit of excess, deficiency, and an intermediate condition...[H]aving these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. II, Ch. 6, §10-11). In contrast, contractarian ethics either do not consider emotion as playing a role in the application of their characteristic moral rules, or they relegate emotion as a risk to the diligent application of such rules. Even regarding friendship, Kant asserts that "it is never for a moment safe from interruptions if it is allowed to rest on feelings...[T]he love in friendship cannot be an affect; for emotion is blind in its choice, and after a while it goes up in smoke" (Kant, p.586). Here, Kant discredits emotions as volatile and threatening, rather than potential foundations for long-term commitments.

Similar to Aristotle, David Hume recognizes the capacity to shape our own emotional motivations with reflective reasoning. Hume maps two sources for moral knowledge: (1) rational deduction, by which people appeal to reason and proof to explain why a particular course of action is morally acceptable, and (2) affective attraction: moral qualities (e.g. generosity) are said to be amiable rather than odious, and our desires for moral qualities act as the motive force in sustaining moral activity. This two-part moral evaluation allows for emotion

to give our study of virtues the tendency to regulate and enrich our actions, while permitting deliberative argumentation to shape and correct our emotional perceptions. In a similar fashion, emotional appreciation of fine arts is acquired through practice and careful, perceptive discernment (Hume, p.14-5). Hume holds that this dialogue between emotion and reason can direct us as individuals and communities toward better lives. Virtue theory, distinguished by its emphasis on personal reform toward virtuous character traits, relies on this dialogue.

### ***Part III***

Here, I will show how virtue theories motivate the development of just action which can arise from a contractarian concept of justice. To give an outline of this concept, I will draw upon the account of one of its most noteworthy contemporary theorists, John Rawls. I will then compare the guiding principles which follow from his fundamental axioms with the practical dispositions of a virtuous agent, as described by Alasdair MacIntyre.

The term *justice* has been used across a variety of times, places, and academic and professional disciplines. To provide a standard for evaluating concepts of justice, John Rawls asserts that just associations are characteristically fair in that they are guided by principles which would be collectively chosen by free, equal, rational persons prior to or without knowledge of their associations (Rawls, p.11). The “original position” is a situation in which such free, equal, rational people are ignorant of their respective places in society, yet deliberating about the basic rules and terms of their future associations. Concepts of justice are more or less accurate to the extent that they reflect the choices of people in the original position. Just societies implement the guiding principles which define an accurate conception of justice.

Rawls elaborates on what qualifies people as free, equal, and rational in the original

position:

“[They are] situated behind a veil of ignorance. They do not know how the various alternatives will affect their own particular case and they are obliged to evaluate principles solely on the basis of general considerations....[N]o one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like” (Rawls, p.136-7).

Rawls places these restrictions on the original position in order to prevent agents from choosing principles that would enable them to exploit contingent circumstances of society to their own advantage (Rawls, p.136). For example, if a wealthy businessman knew that he would benefit from lenient tax laws and environmental regulations, he would likely be tempted to make such laws or diminish divisions between business and government. Alternatively, where people are ignorant of their future (or actual) privilege or misfortune, they may focus their concerns on the welfare of each person in society. This focus can in turn safeguard fairness in the social distribution of goods and opportunities.

Rawls further argues that agents in the original position would agree upon two main principles. First, “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.” Second, “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (Rawls, p.60). Rawls emphasizes the priority of the first principle over the second: as societies become more developed, obstacles to the exercise of the liberties decline and the right to pursue freedom of thought and expression becomes more significant. Since agents in the original position do not know their own life plans, their decisions will be motivated in light of the desire for liberty and the expectation that this desire grows as

people's basic wants are fulfilled (Rawls, p.543). Additionally, the second principle requires that, regarding a just inequality, the representative person in society reasonably prefers his or her prospects with the inequality rather than those without it. This requirement permits fewer infringements of liberty than the principle of utility alone, which assumes that the gains by some compensate for the losses of others (Rawls, p.64-5).

Rawls argues for all social primary goods, including liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect, to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favored (Rawls, p.303). This general rule would be agreed upon by agents in the original position which is constructed to preserve the sense of fairness with which justice is closely associated. Rawls' account of justice serves as a means by which to measure justice in societies and their institutions, and it provides a goal toward which social policies could aim.

While Rawls' account of justice involves the postulation of principles from a hypothetical scenario of rational agents, it does not precisely describe how justice can be practiced as a virtue. If defining features of Rawlsian justice, together with their emphasis on fair economic and legal institutions, are supported by justice as a virtue, then virtue theory is capable of informing formal institutions and relationships in which men have been predominant. Here, I will clarify the notion of justice in the context of virtue theory.

To understand how justice can manifest in virtue theory, we should first return to MacIntyre's definition of a virtue: acquired human traits which tend to enable us in the acquisition of internal goods definitive of social practices. As MacIntyre points out, there are three virtues which are crucial for sustaining these practices: *courage*, or the willingness to take on risks for developing oneself and one's practice, *honesty*, or the ability to acknowledge one's

own faults and care for truthfulness in one's relationships, and *justice*, or the ability to recognize what is due to whom (e.g. in a team or organization) (MacIntyre, p.191).

Knowing "what is due to whom" involves an awareness of social obligations. These obligations are moral to the extent that they arise from the practitioners' need to reliably assist each other in cooperatively sustaining their social practices. Within practices, such obligations may include acknowledgment of the authority of practitioners from whom one may learn, respect and courtesy toward one's peers, and willingness to teach others where one is able. Each of these obligations depends upon a sense of relative skill or merit within a practice or organization: In MacIntyre's terms, they rely upon those standards of excellence toward which practitioners collectively strive and attempt to focus. A practice falters when authority is given to those who do not look after its standards or its people.

The danger of illegitimate authority is examined by MacIntyre as he traces the role of social institutions in maintaining social practices (MacIntyre, p.194). Institutions are primarily concerned with external goods, the security of which is necessary for steadily paying the costs of a practice as they arise. Medical professionals need hospitals and clinics, while professors and students require schools and universities. A lack of these institutions is detrimental to their respective practices: Where money dries up, public resources dwindle, and practitioners lack benefits or a central location which eases their communication and stabilizes their commitment. While institutions aim toward external goods, however, the practices which they support seek internal goods. These different aims may draw conflict where internal goods are undervalued by institutional administration. For example, professors hired primarily based upon their likelihood to attract grant money may lack the ability to communicate with and educate university students. In such a situation, the practice of education suffers.

Justice, then, thought of as a virtue which consists in the knowledge of social obligations that involves the recognition of practices' standards of excellence, is a character trait of individuals. Justice on Rawls' account, on the other hand, is a property of a social system (including its practices, institutions and activities) which involves a distribution of goods (and freedoms) to the greatest benefit of the least fortunate people involved and which arises from fundamental principles agreed upon in a hypothetical original position. These two definitive qualities of justice, though distinct, can be mutually supportive. Where people are respectful, aware of their own deficiencies, and praising of each other's achievements, they are more apt to arrange organizational positions so that these achievements are encouraged—so that they are open to all with equality of opportunity. Conversely, recognition and correction of systematic injustice, such as that of discrimination<sup>5</sup>, can lead individuals to become more respectful and see each other in terms of his or her character. Just people make for just societies, and vice versa.

We have so far established that virtue theory renders personal development, emotional sensitivity, and awareness of social obligations as hallmarks of the virtuous agent. These qualities manifest in caring and just individuals, who seek the well-being of other people and the establishment of just practices and institutions. Since virtue theory provides ideals and measures of justice and of caring qualities, it is well-suited to evaluate men's and women's practical considerations.

#### ***Part IV***

In this section, I will examine concrete ways in which justice and care can be jointly and

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<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Saul Mather (2003) has distinguished between two notions of discrimination. One involves solely those actions which arbitrarily take into account one's race, gender, sexual orientation, or other identification in granting awards or responsibilities. Another definition regards discrimination as actions that perpetuate social, political or economic disparities which are delineated based upon such identifications. The latter is the definition I use here.

constructively cultivated. First, I will revisit Alison Jaggar's warning that personal relationships are often maintained at the exclusion of attending to large-scale socioeconomic institutions. In doing so, I will show how personal relationships may be strengthened by developing a sense of justice with which one may insightfully critique the political systems that bear upon those for whom one cares. Second, I will explain Rosalind Hursthouse's normative account of abortion to focus on how justice can be informed by attentiveness to personal needs, a quality typical of personal relationships.

As mentioned previously, Alison Jaggar illuminates how personal relationships are concerned with others' personal needs and well-being. If such concern is not supplemented with attention to large social institutions which broadly influence human activity, then many of the needs of those for whom one cares may be left continually unmet. Alternatively, acknowledgment of political and social patterns allows one to recognize injustice in social systems and take actions toward correcting it. Where these injustices are corrected, people's needs can be better addressed. For example, a teacher of homeless children may fight for reforms of government-sponsored foster care for the sake of her students. By practicing the virtue of justice, one can become more sensitive to political practices that endanger or safeguard the interests of those for whom they care. Justice, then, can help one fulfill the informal obligations which characterize personal relationships. Since such fulfillment strengthens and enriches personal bonds (as mentioned in Part I), justice can complement emotional and personal attentiveness in deepening personal relationships.

At the same time, attentiveness to personal needs may inform requirements for just laws and practices. In Rosalind Hursthouse's "Virtue Theory and Abortion", she examines how virtue

ethics directs one toward particular considerations in evaluating the morality<sup>6</sup> of abortion—considerations which are not commonly taken into account during discussions on the matter. There are primarily two contentious issues which are commonly understood as most relevant in the moral evaluation of abortion: the metaphysical status of the fetus (particularly, “whether or not it is the sort of thing that may or may not be innocuously or justifiably killed”) and women’s rights (Hursthouse, p.233-4). Hursthouse notes that, though women’s rights to choose abortion are important in political dialogue, rights to choices of action do not entail the morality of such choices. One may exercise one’s right to free speech to spread racism, or one’s right to privacy to avoid intimacy with family or friends. The metaphysical status of the fetus, on the other hand, is a highly contentious issue among academic philosophers and theologians, rather than a kind of wisdom which is, like all virtues, accessible to people who do not embark on such specialized inquiries<sup>7</sup>.

Rather, the metaphysical details which are significant to the virtue theorist’s examination of abortion are what Hursthouse describes as “the familiar biological facts”: “that, standardly (but not invariably), pregnancy occurs as the result of sexual intercourse, that it lasts about nine months, during which time the fetus grows and develops, that standardly it terminates in the birth of a living baby, and that this is how we all come to be” (p.236). These familiar facts are important to the extent that they factor into the actions, decisions, emotions, and desires of the virtuous and of the non-virtuous. A shift in perspective moves attention toward the emotional

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<sup>6</sup> Hursthouse emphasizes that her argument is not intended to evaluate “the rights and wrongs of laws prohibiting or permitting [abortion]” (p.234). However, if laws are to be informed by what is and is not moral, then providing a richer moral evaluation of abortion can better inform the laws which supervene on it. Hursthouse suggests the possible legal implications of her arguments where she writes, “If we suppose that women do have a moral right to do as they choose with their own bodies, or, more particularly, to terminate their pregnancies, then it may well follow that a law forbidding abortion would be unjust” (p.234).

<sup>7</sup> That philosophical sophistication is unnecessary for virtue is an assumption of virtue theory, as Hursthouse notes (p.235), and I will not attempt to defend that assumption here.

strength, depth, and longevity of the relationships that pregnancies normally bring about—those between parents and their offspring—as well as the care that such relationships require. The premature termination of a pregnancy is, “in some sense, the cutting off of a new human life” (p. 237). To terminate a pregnancy, then, is to connect with our understandings of life and death<sup>8</sup>, family relationships, and parenthood—these matters should not be taken lightly. To take them lightly is to disregard them in one’s practical considerations where they have bearing on others’ and one’s own emotions and lives. Parenthood is a greatly worthwhile activity<sup>9</sup> which can constitute part of a flourishing human life, and one is “callous and light-minded” where one rejects this activity for grossly materialistic, shortsighted or shallow reasons (p. 241).

Parenthood may nonetheless be rejected for good reasons: Where women are in poor physical health, or are utterly exhausted, or have jobs which demand difficult physical labor (e.g. coal mining), they do not dismiss parenthood lightly in preventing the physical distress which full-term pregnancy and birth bring along. When women already have children for whom they are unsure they can effectively care with another child, they are not undervaluing the importance of motherhood. These cases demonstrate where women may be virtuous in addressing the gravity of their situations while ultimately deciding to terminate their pregnancies. Even where such decisions are well-founded, the lack of good working conditions or material resources which bring them about may point to broader social needs that should be addressed to make

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<sup>8</sup> Exactly how we are to regard the nature of life and death as applied to a fetus seems to be a salient goal of questioning its metaphysical status. Nonetheless, Hursthouse’s examination brings to light the importance of family relationships and personal circumstances—aspects which are not entailed by the metaphysical status of the fetus—in understanding the morality of abortion. Considerations of emotional relationships and personal circumstances can be well understood with reference to ‘the familiar biological facts’.

<sup>9</sup> Hursthouse defends this notion more thoroughly in her book, *Beginning Lives* (1987). To summarize her main point briefly, the value of parenthood derives primarily from the values of love, of family life, and of enriching emotional development throughout one’s life. Parents not only foster these values in their own lives, but in those who are an intimate part of it—grandparents, siblings, and relatives who can learn to live with and care for a new addition to the family.

parenthood more accessible for those who would prefer it (p. 240).

Additionally, one may feel that one is simply not yet ready for parenthood. This readiness can be a measure of one's personal development, or of one's strength, independence, resoluteness, responsibility, serious-mindedness, and self-confidence. While one may rightly acknowledge one's own lack of development in making a decision to terminate a pregnancy, this lack can itself be a moral failing. Alternatively, one may have other worthwhile things to do which are incompatible with being a parent—after all, raising children takes much time, effort, and money, to say the least. Still, one should be cautious not to fool oneself into thinking that comparatively worthwhile things are abundant where they are not (p. 242, 244).

Whether or not abortion is a virtuous decision, then, strongly depends upon the motivations, reasoning, and circumstances of the person who considers it as a course of action. If legal principles are to be derived from moral ones, then laws concerning abortion should allow for a variety of choices from which people in very different circumstances can consider the most worthwhile courses of action. To determine whether an action is worthwhile, one must examine one's emotional, biological, psychological, material, economic, and familial needs and circumstances. Justice, then, can be informed by an attentiveness to personal needs.

In this section, I have demonstrated how virtues of justice and personal relationships can be simultaneously developed. As Alison Jaggar highlights, effectively caring for someone in a personal relationship can involve a sensitivity to just social practices and institutions which affect one's life and well-being. Additionally, as Rosalind Hursthouse explains, attention to the needs of people from diverse circumstances can help reform and construct just laws which respond to those needs. In these ways, justice and care can be not only independently desirable, but also mutually cooperative.

## ***Conclusions***

We have examined how virtue theory, unlike deontological and utilitarian theories, places a greater emphasis on agents' emotionality and personal development, two features which render it suitable to inform human activity in personal relationships. To the extent that informal relationships "tend to *underlie* formal ones" (Card, p.89) and "domestic life is not an elective but an *essential* practice for human flourishing" (Okin, p.219), virtues which foster personal and informal relationships are of great importance in human life. Virtue theory's inclusion of these virtues alongside more traditional ones of justice and respect enables it to address both men's and women's values in practical considerations. The distinction between men's and women's values, as mentioned previously, is not meant to reinforce gender stereotyping in ethical decision-making. Rather, by distinguishing between (1) the values involved in those relationships definitive of formal institutions in which men have predominated, and (2) those characteristically involved in relationships of domestic labor and caring professions for which women have had primary responsibility, we might more keenly avoid biases in ethical standards which ignore the importance of actions, skills, and people in one of these domains. Virtue theory can help us to do so.

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*Appendix A:*

**30 Leading Occupations of Employed Women**

**2013 United States National Averages**

Occupation name	Total number of women employed (in thousands)	Women as a percent of total employed in the occupation <sup>1</sup>	Women's Median weekly earnings	Men's Median weekly earnings
All occupations	46,268	47%	\$706	\$860
Elementary and middle school teachers	2138	81%	\$937	\$1025
Secretaries and administrative assistants	2113	94%	\$677	\$772
Registered nurses	2023	90%	\$1086	\$1236
Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides	1207	89%	\$450	\$499
Customer service representatives	1068	66%	\$616	\$639
First-line supervisors of retail sales workers	981	43%	\$612	\$778
Accountants and auditors	945	62%	\$1029	\$1268
Cashiers	932	72%	\$379	\$426
Managers, all other	905	34%	\$1105	\$1399
First-line supervisors of office and administrative support workers	828	70%	\$748	\$846
Receptionists and information clerks	828	92%	\$527	\$600
Retail salespersons	737	50%	\$485	\$719
Office clerks, general	734	84%	\$596	\$620
Bookkeeping, accounting, and auditing clerks	702	89%	\$670	\$751
Financial managers	613	55%	\$1064	\$1518
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	605	88%	\$406	\$467
Waiters and waitresses	558	70%	\$400	\$449
Personal care aides	539	84%	\$445	\$470
Secondary school teachers	529	57%	\$986	\$1093
Social workers	507	80%	\$818	\$978
Teacher assistants	501	89%	\$475	\$501
Preschool and kindergarten teachers	484	98%	\$624	\$ -
Education administrators	450	64%	\$1130	\$1543
Postsecondary teachers	424	50%	\$1100	\$1338
Janitors and building cleaners	421	33%	\$418	\$517
Cooks	418	40%	\$382	\$411
Childcare workers	410	95%	\$418	\$ -
Licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses	404	92%	\$732	\$ -
Counselors	391	69%	\$884	\$889
Billing and posting clerks	380	92%	\$629	\$ -
Notes: 1. All data (unless otherwise noted) are 2013 annual averages for full-time wage and salary workers only, from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey <a href="http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.htm">http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.htm</a> 2. Women as a percent of total employed are 2013 annual averages for all people employed (includes part-time and self-employed), from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey <a href="http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm">http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm</a> 3. Dash indicates no data available or base is less than 50,000. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey				

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