Précis of *Knowing Better: Virtue, Deliberation, and Normative Ethics*

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How is it possible for there to be genuine normative reasons that ordinary virtuous agents are able to rely on to determine what they should do, given that they are, generally speaking, ignorant of fundamental ethical principles of the kind that interest philosophers, and the reasons such principles purport to specify? It is naturally tempting to suppose that they are able to do this by responding to reasons that are of a non-fundamental or derivative kind. The fact that a friend is experiencing grief is a reason for you to console her, but we do not expect the basic principles of a normative ethical theory to refer to grief. The fact that an act would be a lie is a reason not to do it, but not even Kantian normative ethicists would view such a claim as fundamental; it might be said that all lies involve disrespecting the rational capacities of the person being lied to, but, even if this were true, it would not be facts concerning (actual or potential disrespecting of) rational capacities that we expect ordinary virtuous agents to be directly responding to when they avoid lying.

Not everyone will accept that there is a genuine philosophical problem here. On the one hand, some dogmatic ethicists, both consequentialist and non-consequentialist, will insist that the genuinely virtuous do know, or are committed to, the correct ethical theory (perhaps "implicitly", which is an easy thing to say, but a difficult thing to make sense of). Others, especially those drawn to utilitarianism, will claim that we should reject the idea that the virtuous reliably act on or for the right reasons. Still others will endorse a particularism about ethical principles that holds on to the traditional thought that the virtuous reliably act on the right reasons, but gives up on the central project of modern normative ethics.

I recognize that some philosophers will wish to respond in one of these ways, and I do say some things in *Knowing Better* about why I think this would be a mistake (in Chapter 1, especially), but the main aim of the book is not to persuade people who wish to get off the boat this early on that they should not do so, but rather to provide a satisfactory response to what I hope many philosophers will take to be a genuine problem. A couple of convictions stand behind this project. The first is that ordinary virtue is often on a more secure footing than philosophical theorizing—it seems odd to me when moral philosophers purport to *believe* very general normative theoretical principles, as distinct from purporting to believe, say, that they should normally keep their promises.

Unwarranted dogmatism of this kind is inconsistent with the virtue of epistemic humility, and risks giving normative ethics a bad name (this is compatible with thinking that we are justified in making such theoretical claims when doing philosophy *as if* one believed them). The second is the conviction that normative ethics, of the kind that aspires to articulate and defend sophisticated principles, is a worthwhile enterprise, slowly but steadily making genuine progress—from this perspective, particularism about principles is best viewed as a position of last resort.

One thing is clear: taking the main problem of the book on its own terms, it is not enough to simply say that there are derivative, non-fundamental reasons that ordinary virtuous people directly respond to in a way that generally allows them to act as they should, for we can ask: how are the virtuous able to *reliably* respond to such reasons (as reasons), when they are ignorant of fundamental normative reasons and associated ethical principles? I contend that an account of normative reasons that I have previously defended with Stephen Kearns, *reasons as evidence*, is both illuminating with respect to understanding the metaphysical relationship between derivative and fundamental reasons, and uniquely well-placed to explain how we might reliably respond to derivative reasons when ignorant of fundamental reasons. Since, on this account, practical reasons are facts that are evidence that one ought to do one thing or another, many very mundane facts count as reasons, and since evidence is the golden standard for reliability from the deliberative perspective (when one doesn't already know the answer to a question one is asking), it is difficult to see how any other account of reasons could, on its own, deliver a better story about reliability. At least, it is difficult to see how this might be done without effectively giving up on solving the main problem of the book, and returning to the way of attempting to avoid it that would have us believe that it is of the essence of virtue to be directly responsive to fundamental reasons.

After providing a general outline of my solution to the main problem of the book in Chapter 1, I present, in Chapter 2, a new argument for *reasons as evidence* that is connected to the thought, just mentioned, that evidence is the golden standard for reliability from the deliberative perspective, in the absence of knowledge concerning what one ought to do. The first premise of this argument is that if there is a class of facts that can very generally play the role of being good guides for deliberation for agents that are ignorant of the fundamental reasons for action, then facts in this class also get to be reasons for action. I call this premise the *Razian Insight*, due to the fact it can be located in Joseph Raz's well-known work on practical authority. The second premise is that facts that are evidence that one ought to do some act or other constitute just such a general class of facts. I consider alternative candidates for such a class of facts and argue that none of these candidates (for example, facts concerning one's desires, and evaluative facts) are as well-suited to play the role in question. To the extent that other facts appear to be good candidates this, I contend, is because they converge with evidence concerning what one ought to do; where there is no such convergence it will always be more rational to follow evidence concerning what one ought to do.

In Chapter 3, I turn from reasons to virtue. The chapter begins by arguing against the idea that the virtuous always do the right act, all things considered (I won't rehearse the argument here, suffice to say I use a new thought experiment to back up other arguments in the literature; the thought experiment has the virtue, I think, of indicating how it is that virtuous acts do not even coincide with subjectively right acts, where rightness is taken to be relative to the evidence one possesses). I suggest that we should instead think of

the virtuous as doing their best to respond appropriately to normative reasons, and of individual virtues as consisting in stable dispositions to respond to reasons of various delineable types. I propose that individual virtues be analyzed in terms of reasons and non-normative properties, and discuss some examples. Once the account of reasons defended in the previous chapter is put together with the new account of virtue, the practical virtues can be understood to be mostly epistemic in nature (the will to follow through on our ethical judgments in intention and action escapes this reductive program). Finally, I consider a problem for this evidence-of-ought account of virtue, the solution to which requires positing that the virtuous possess a body of mundane (non-sophisticated) ethical knowledge. Fortunately, this is an independently attractive idea.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the role knowledge plays with respect to deliberation and action in general. I begin with the idea, associated with Timothy Williamson's *Knowledge and its Limits*, that the norm of practical deliberation and action is knowledge, and I argue that *reasons as evidence* provides a much needed supplement to that idea. The combination of these two views provides an attractive picture of when it is rationally appropriate for facts to figure in practical deliberation as pro tanto considerations, and when it is rationally appropriate for them to be the basis for action (the idea that knowledge is the norm of practical deliberation and action does not distinguish between and settle these two separate issues). Facing up to a challenge to this view, which has its origin in Hume's thought that one cannot deduce an 'ought' from an 'is', forces us to accept that appropriate practical deliberation requires not just non-ethical knowledge, but essentially ethical knowledge as well. So the solution to the main challenge raised in this chapter is the very same solution as that provided for the challenge raised regarding the theory of virtue defended in the previous chapter. Given the main aim of the book, it is important that we not take ordinary ethical knowledge to be the same kind of knowledge that we aim for as an ideal in normative ethics. A concern that the favored account of reasons is talking past accounts of reasons that focus primarily on fundamental reasons is also addressed, in a manner that aims to shed new light on the nature of fundamental reasons.

References

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