ABSTRACT. Virtue ethics is standardly taught and discussed as a distinctive approach to the major questions of ethics, a third major position alongside Utilitarian and Kantian ethics. I argue that this taxonomy is a confusion. Both Utilitarianism and Kantianism contain treatments of virtue, so virtue ethics cannot possibly be a separate approach contrasted with those approaches. There are, to be sure, quite a few contemporary philosophical writers about virtue who are neither Utilitarians nor Kantians; many of these find inspiration in ancient Greek theories of virtue. But even here there is little unity. Although certain concerns do unite this disparate group (a concern for the role of motives and passions in good choice, a concern for character, and a concern for the whole course of an agent’s life), there are equally profound disagreements, especially concerning the role that reason should play in ethics. One group of modern virtue-theorists, I argue, are primarily anti-Utilitarians, concerned with the plurality of value and the susceptibility of passions to social cultivation. These theorists want to enlarge the place of reason in ethics. They hold that reason can deliberate about ends as well as means, and that reason can modify the passions themselves. Another group of virtue theorists are primarily anti-Kantians. They believe that reason plays too dominant a role in most philosophical accounts of ethics, and that a larger place should be given to sentiments and passions – which they typically construe in a less reason-based way than does the first group. The paper investigates these differences, concluding that it is not helpful to speak of “virtue ethics,” and that we would be better off characterizing the substantive views of each thinker – and then figuring out what we ourselves want to say.

KEY WORDS: Aristotle, ethics, Hume, Kant, Kantianism, Utilitarianism, virtue

I. THE STEREOTYPE

Here is a misleading story about the current situation in contemporary moral philosophy:1 We are turning from an ethics based on Enlightenment

1 I once offered a similar characterization and then said afterwards that it was “confused and confusing”: see my “Virtue Revived,” Times Literary Supplement, July 3, 1992, p. 9.
ideals of universality to an ethics based on tradition and particularity; from an ethics based on principle to an ethics based on virtue; from an ethics dedicated to the elaboration of systematic theories to an ethics suspicious of theory and respectful of the wisdom embodied in local practices; from an ethics based on the individual to an ethics based on affiliation and care; from an ahistorical detached ethics to an ethics rooted in the particularity of historical communities.

This story (which from now on I shall call “the confused story”) is told with satisfaction by some, who see in the rejection of the ambitious abstract theories of the Enlightenment the best hope for an ethics that is realistic, historically grounded, perceptive, and worldly. It is told with deep alarm by others, who see in the ascendency of particularity and local knowledge a grave threat to the Enlightenment’s noble aspirations to social justice and human equality. But the story is, even on its face, confused. It links elements of the moral life that are not at all necessarily linked and that may even turn out to be in tension with one another (can one be a good parent, for example, if one refuses on principle to criticize local traditions in the name of justice and equality?). By accepting the confused story we may come to believe that in order to attend to friendship we must give up on universal justice, that in order to care sufficiently about history we must abandon general theory, that in order to care about the psychology of character we must abandon rational reflection. Such conclusions would be as practically pernicious as they would be intellectually unwise.

The confused story derives much of its support from the idea that there is such a thing as “virtue ethics,” that this thing has a definite describable character and a certain degree of unity, and that it is a major alternative to both the Utilitarian and the Kantian traditions. For it is “virtue ethics” that is taken to have accomplished the transition that the confused story describes, from Enlightenment to neo-Greek theories. And “virtue ethics” is now regularly presented as a major genus of ethical approach (I don’t say “ethical theory” because the confused story usually presents virtue ethics as radically anti-theoretical). In the typical class in medical ethics in the US, for example, young doctors learn that there are three approaches to deciding an ethical question: the Kantian approach, the Utilitarian approach, and the “virtue ethics” approach. A similar trichotomy increasingly makes its appearance in high-level works of academic moral

This was a mistake, because I have since seen my characterization of the confused view quoted as if it is my own view: apparently people read one paragraph without consulting the next [for one example, see Susan Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves: Carol Gilligan and Moral Theory* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1995), pp. 37–38]. I therefore preface the characterization with an indication of my opinion. One may at least hope that this will prevent its being attributed to me again.