

VIRTUES FOR A GROWING WORLD

by

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## **DEDICATION**

For Mom, who shows me what virtue looks like every day

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## **I. WHY VIRTUE?**

In at least one way of talking about my life, I have always been new to town. By the time I was seven years old, we were new to town for the eighth time. We had just moved to a town of about 2,000 people, the kind of place where no one else is new. It was a hard transition for all of us, I think—my mom, my sister, my brother, and me—even if my mom had lived there for a while when she was a kid. The first months were especially hard. My siblings and I couldn't speak the language yet, and it was difficult to make friends you couldn't talk to. My mom was adjusting to being a single parent. We had moved in the summer. By Christmas, things didn't feel much nicer to me. Then, we met the Garzas. Tonio, Mari, and their five kids lived on the other side of town. Mom was excited because their kids were kind of the same age as Anika, Soren, and me. And while I didn't get my hopes up, the thought of having friends again was really nice.

I can't remember exactly when it happened, but within a couple of months of knowing the Garzas, we were basically a feature of their house. Mari would cook for all of us at least once a week, refusing to let mom trouble with bringing any sides or sodas. Tonio would give us older kids money for a two liter bottle of Coke, and we'd run to the store to bring it back for our family meals. Mari is just incredible. She laughs deeply and often. She would wrap us into conversations around the table that would last for hours, and would then ask my mom if we kids could spend the night—it was late anyway, and she could get us off to school in the morning. I started bringing a uniform with us on Wednesdays, just in case it would be one of those times that mom said that we could stay. Mari would usually serve us sugary cereal or hot soup for breakfast. At home we just had

eggs. There's not a flashpoint or a date that I can say when I stopped feeling like a stranger to town; but it was after Mari had made it a point to make her home ours.

Come to find out, she didn't stop on Wednesdays. Over the years of living in town, we learned that most everyone knew the Garzas. Early into our knowing her, Mari opened the doors of her home to her sick aunt, letting her live in one of their two bedrooms. There were times that we would be over and someone would knock on the door. After whoever knocked had visited for a while, Mari would send them off with bags of food—at least when that was one of the reasons that they had come by. She is a person who makes a space for people who need it, who does it out of love, who seems not to have a cutoff point, and who acts this way all of the time. There were times when there wasn't food to share, but I just feel confident in saying that everyone who knew her knew that she'd be genuinely happy to have given it if there had been. I've been new to new towns so many times since we moved away many years ago, but our families still keep in touch. Today, Mari is raising her best friend's two daughters after her friend passed away, keeping them any time that their dad—who works twelve hour days—can't be with his girls. When I met the girls, it just wasn't surprising that Mari used the word *mija* when talking to them. This endearing way of saying “daughter” I think captures the way that she sees them now.

There's a sense in which I think it would flatten who Mari is by calling her “a generous lady.” Yes, *of course* she is generous. Is there a point in pointing it out? But I also think that if you are going to use a word for the way that she is, you'd have to include that one. Setting aside this thought for a moment, I want to affirm that I think Mari is good. I think that she does whatever it is “to be a human” well. I also think that if

we are going to talk about making claims in ethics, if we are going to have conversations about morality, and if we are going to peer into the mess of the goodness and badness around us, we have to have an idea of what it is that we are looking for. When I do philosophy, or have the audacity to write a book about virtue, I am interested in looking for those things that make us good people. That is my starting point. And if conversations about goodness exclude people like Mari, or some of the people I will talk about later in the book, I am not going to buy into that conversation. This isn't to say that I won't entertain the idea that I'm wrong about what it is to be good—in fact, here's as good a point as any to say that I just am not sure exactly what to say about that. Luckily, answering that question isn't what this book is about. But, when I think about the conversations we have over right and wrong, goodness and badness, I have in my mind an image of a world of people behaving in these allegedly right or good ways. I want to be confident that this image would, in fact, capture what a good world looks like. And while Mari is not a perfect person—who is?—I feel confident in saying that if all of us were like her in the way that she does that thing we call “generosity,” our world would be a better one.

So, let's fast-forward to the place where this conviction became a conversation for me. In college, I started to study philosophy as one of my majors. Philosophy holds thousands of conversations, kind of in the way that science does. To do philosophy isn't just one thing, and it doesn't involve just one set of questions. In science, chemistry and biology pick out a very different set of questions and answers. In philosophy, you get metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and logic, among others. As you may have realized by now, the conversations that I find myself most interested in are those that fall into the

realm of ethics. In ethics, there are a number of ways of theorizing about what it means to be moral. People answer the questions involved in theorizing in very different ways.

Is being good about following certain sets of rules? Do the ends ever justify the means? Is ethics mostly about figuring out how to live together without hurting each other? Different philosophers often answer these questions very differently and sometimes oppositely. Ethicists often venture their answers from within different frameworks—whether they are deontological, or consequentialist, or virtue ethical frameworks, or whether they aren't any of these. It was in having these conversations that I came to identify the virtue ethical one as the one that seems right(est) to me. It seems right to me because I think it's the one that best gels with my deeply held beliefs of what it is to be a good human person, and especially because I think there is just a huge variety of ways of being such a thing. But, this book isn't about convincing you to view goodness in the way that I do. This isn't a conversation about why this theory is the best or why you should believe it.

To repeat and combine some sentiments that I've already gotten at, but a bit differently: I think of myself as a virtue ethicist, I have a set of strong beliefs about what it means to live well and be good, and I am very much *not* sure if I am right. That said, I also think that there is a lot to learn by talking about virtue, and by my lights, virtue is as good a start as any for getting at a really important task that all of us are engaged in. All of us reading this are engaged in living lives. Probably all of us want to do that task in a better as opposed to a worse way. And we all make choices that affect ourselves as well as others. So, I think it's worth trying to talk about ourselves and the choices that we make, and to try to figure out if we are living well. At least, it's worth having this

conversation if we want to do well by each other and if we are at all interested in shaping a better world. How I see it, we are going to change the world, and we should want to do it for the better.

And that is where this book comes in. Within the conversations that I have about ethics, there is a lot of skepticism about how we can get ideas about virtue to do any kind of work for us in the real, messy, and growing world that we live in. Sure, people like Mari sound generous and great. But how can generosity help us out when we are faced with famine or natural disaster? And what if that famine is an ocean away and that natural disaster has harmed people we'll never meet? In fact, how can any of the old-fashioned virtues we may have learned on our parent's knee help us out here and now, whether it's compassion, empathy, prudence, courage, or respect? Can you talk about buying stuff respectfully? Does it make sense to talk about cities engaging compassionately with individual people? And even if it does make sense to talk about those things, what on earth do those virtue words even mean? I wanted to write a book that took a stab at questions like those.

So, the chapters here deal with contemporary problems that we face as citizens of a globalized world. Each chapter in this book has been selected to tackle a problem that we face in globalized modern life. I've chosen the kinds of problems that I face when I go browsing through the internet, or try to decide which causes I should get involved in, or want to have meaningful relationships with people who I am not at all like. In short, they're the problems that have just recently started to affect us. And as solutions, I am looking to some ideas about virtue that have been around for thousands of years. I think it's interesting to know what it would look like to be prudent in a grocery store aisle. But

I haven't found a book that does the work of exploring that question and other questions like it for me. So, I decided to write it myself. And I decided that because I have the training to read really dense and confusing texts about ethics, and the privilege of doing that as a kind of job, I would go ahead and put it in a format that I hope can reach people who don't have that training or who haven't been undeservingly bestowed that privilege. I also want to do this project in a way that doesn't sound stuffy or disconnected. A lot of philosophy sounds kind of stuffy and disconnected, unfortunately. So, there's a kind of promise I'd like to make: I am going to do my best to try and do good philosophy that's relevant to lots of our lives and that isn't super hard read.

I do hope that if you've read this far, you will keep going. I don't think you have to be sold on the idea of virtue to get meaningful help from those smart people and the long tradition that I am drawing from here. In fact, I really hope that virtue works for everyone. And I really hope that people living virtuously can, in fact, make a better world. For one, if those hopes are in vain, so is this book. But for two, I have yet to find a different way of talking about rightness and human goodness that makes sense of why the good people I have learned from would be rightly called "good." At least, the answers I've heard seem to miss a whole lot. So, I want to make an attempt at following those hopes where they seem to lead. And with that, let's turn to a chapter on what those virtue words mean anyway.

## II. WHAT'S VIRTUE?

This chapter is meant to introduce the concept of virtue. What does that word mean? What kind of thing are we talking about when we say it? In preparing for this chapter, I focused on introductions to books on virtue, hoping that I could find inspiration or be able to abstract a good tidbit on what makes virtue ethics a worthwhile pursuit.<sup>1</sup> I understand that for many readers, “virtue” will stir up quasi-religious imagery of charity and piety, while for others, the word won’t mean much of anything at all. So, a good introduction, I’ve thought, will get at what virtue is, what its opposites are, and why it relates to all the topics I’ve included in the chapters that follow.

Before I sat down to draft out this chapter, which I have been procrastinating on for a bit, I scrolled through lists of inspirational signs I might use to decorate my apartment. One caught my eye: “Do meaningful things.” Partly, this search for inspiration was meant to spur me into productive action—avoid Facebook!—to motivate me to do things like writing this. Mostly, it was because searching for signs was itself a way of procrastinating. Not long after this search, I came across this sentence in an essay by Daniel C. Russell, who writes on virtue ethics. He says, “Ultimately, one’s end in life is to give one’s life meaning and to make it about something.”<sup>2</sup> I don’t know that this kind of meaning-of-life claim will ever be definitively settled one way or the other. But I do think dealing with this question is a part of what’s going on in this chapter.

I think that the crossover between the kind of inspiration you see in Google images and the kind of thing that ethicists write about in published texts serves as a good

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1. My two top contenders are the introductory chapter to *Working Virtue* and Daniel C. Russell's chapter “Virtue Ethics, Happiness, and the Good Life,” which I repeatedly draw from in this chapter.

2. Daniel C. Russell, “Virtue Ethics, Happiness, and the Good Life,” In *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Daniel C. Russell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10.

starting point for the conversation I want to have here. So, it is with this emphasis on meaningfulness that I want to frame this conversation on virtue—recognizing that the interest in focusing one’s life on something meaningful is a widely shared pursuit.

Through the study of virtue and a reflection on what it has to offer to those who employ the concept, I have found that the phrase “living virtuously” captures what it is to live meaningfully and well.

Why do I think that this emphasis on meaningfulness matters? It may have something to do with the amount of time that I spend with college students. This is a bunch of folks that, typically, see themselves involved in an activity that is going to bring them into a good life. If you ask, “Why are you in college?,” a typical response is “To get a job.” This often leads down a trail from job, to money, to provision for oneself, to enjoyment of things, to happiness. A lot of the college students I’ve talked to want their lives to be happy and meaningful, and they see their time at school as a first step toward that goal. I think where I’ve become disillusioned is this: I’ve popped out on the other side of college, and I’ve seen many peers get the kinds of jobs that are meant to yield happiness. And many of those people will answer the “Why do you work?” question in the same way that college students answer the “Why college?” one. Working, like college, is this input process that is meant to give a good output, eventually. But I don’t see much good in putting off the worthwhile stuff forever, or to retirement, if most of one’s life is spent in the lead up stage—a stage that few of the college students or young professionals that I know seem to find fulfillment in. Virtue ethics offers a perspective on leading one’s life that frames *both* its goal *and* its path to that goal as distinctly human

and uniquely fulfilling for the person who lives it.<sup>3</sup> Virtue, the story goes, leads to *eudaimonia*—I’m going to translate this as “flourishing”—and both virtue and flourishing are good for the person.<sup>4</sup> So, while I still promise to talk about virtue, like the title of this book and my lead up thus far have suggested, I want to start by explaining the virtue ethical approach to human flourishing. This is the way that virtue ethicists talk about living a meaningful life.

### **Flourishing or “Living Your Best Life”**

Part of the understanding of flourishing is that there really is a way of living life that is best not only for humans generally, but for you specifically. Further, and this is where some people may start to bristle, it’s not solely up to you to determine what your good life will look like. At a certain level, the eudaemonist is committed to ranking certain life projects above others—“life project” understood as being one’s life focus taken as a whole, and not any particular task that occupies it. The good life just cannot be, for example, spent exclusively eating dreamsicles in a wardrobe. It does not matter whether you are eating the world’s snazziest dreamsicles, whether you are seated in the single best-crafted wardrobe, or how intensely and exclusively you love both creamy orange treats and acts of superior woodworking. This is to say, there are types of actions and external conditions that are needed in order to flourish, and some things just won’t

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3. I am choosing not to comment on the wide variety of approaches to virtue ethics that are out there. Surely, not all views are eudaemonistic, as mine is. Walker and Ivanhoe’s introductory chapter, cited in this chapter, provides a brief but useful account of the ways in which various virtue theoretical views differ from each other.

4. There is a lot of contention about how to translate this word. I follow the lead of thinkers like Hursthouse and Tessman who prefer to translate “*eudaimonia*” as “flourishing.”

count. At this point, some more people will be out. There is a temptation to view real fulfillment and flourishing as a project of one's unique, autonomous, and freely-chosen design. And while uniqueness, autonomy, and freedom all get a role to play in a good life, the position that I am committed to does not allow each unique person to have a final say in determining what gets counted as good or not. So, what does get counted as good?

There are a number of ways of getting at what flourishing is and consists of. Russell gives a nice list, adapted from Aristotle, that I think will be illustrative for our present purposes. Russell explains that flourishing must be an active rather than a passive life; it must lie in one's personal activity rather than in the activity of others; it must be stable rather than fleeting; it must be good in itself, not for the sake of something else; it must be comprehensive; it must be self-sufficient; and it must be distinctly human.<sup>5</sup> "Woah," you might say, "what could ever fit the bill?" And it is worth reviewing some top contenders that some people think are sufficient for flourishing. Making lots of money will be off the table, for a number of reasons, but one is that it isn't self-sufficient. Having social prestige won't cut it, in part because it relies on other people's activities—namely, honoring you—rather than relying on your own actions. Even more down-to-earth contenders, like having a couple of kids or fostering meaningful friendships, while fantastic, won't be the greatest good in themselves. Couldn't you just go on forever, listing all of the activities and finding an item on this list that disqualifies them? Yes, almost.

And this is where the claim gets even bolder, because not only do you *not* get to choose exactly what your flourishing consists of, like dreamsicle eating or earning loads

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5. Russell, "Virtue Ethics," 15.

of cash, but you also are going to have the same end as everyone else.<sup>6</sup> And you will achieve this goal by living out the virtues. The claim is this: there is one human purpose that we all share, it involves doing all of our daily activities a certain way, and the reason that we do things this way is because doing them is just what the human good consists of. The human good is a certain kind of life, lived out by people who exhibit distinctly human excellences. From this perspective, all people are united by a shared purpose, and each of them will do best by living their own best life. What helps you to live out this meaningful, focus-driven life of flourishing are the individual virtues, which we will talk about later. As a point of clarification, not all of these lives will look the same, but what makes them good will be held in common. I think of paintings. There are lots of really good paintings out there, and there are similarities in what makes them good. But even if good paintings have some things in common, they certainly don't all look exactly like each other. In fact, one of the things that makes paintings really good is that each of them is a unique combination of the different things that make artwork good. So, what are some of the things that makes *us* good?

I want to spend some time on some features of the human good. There is a lot to say about what a flourishing life looks like, but I want to focus on just three aspects. These are that flourishing is a social activity, it includes both self- and other-regarding acts, and that the whole person is involved. The first claim, that flourishing is a social activity, should not come as a surprise. After all, if humans share a purpose, then it makes sense to collaborate and depend upon each other in order to reach our shared goal.<sup>7</sup> One

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6. Russell, "Virtue Ethics," 9.

7. There is a lot to explore, here. I think that Alasdair MacIntyre does a nice job of getting at the importance of interdependence in his book *Dependent Rational Animals*.

good way of framing it is the way that Nel Noddings does when she talks about the importance of working toward “the establishment of conditions under which it is both desirable and possible to be good.”<sup>8</sup> I as an individual am excited and relieved that my flourishing isn’t a wholly private endeavor. This is because I am able to enjoy the fruits of other people’s efforts to create conditions that promote my flourishing. It’s also great that I can turn to others both to see the good modeled and to receive support in areas where I need it. Likewise, I see others’ goods not as secondary to my own, but shared. I seek to establish conditions under which we can all achieve goodness together. This helps us to see how important it is that virtue not be sought in isolation, being that, ideally, the moral agent works with others in this endeavor. There’s a lot that goes into getting this picture, but for the purposes of this book, it is enough to affirm that this is the image under which we are operating.

The second bit, that flourishing involves both self- and other-regarding acts, flows naturally from the first bit. It is tempting to believe that if my goal is my flourishing, then self-regarding acts will come above all others. Lots of people are happy to put other people’s interests on the moral backburner. This, however, is a mistake. The tradition of understanding both actions that are done for myself and actions that are done for the sake of others as being bound up with each other has deep roots. The root system that I am most familiar with grows out of ancient Greece, although there are certainly foundations for a collective view of flourishing outside of that tradition. In this ancient Greek tradition, “self and other are understood as interdependent.”<sup>9</sup> So, my flourishing depends

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8. Nel Noddings, "Caring as Relation and Virtue in Teaching," In *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, edited by Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 46.

9. Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (2005), 62.

on yours, and yours depends on mine. It is possible to go too far in the other-regarding direction, to the point where you just don't tend to your own needs. But while this is *possible*, I think it is worth noting that special emphasis on other-regarding virtues may sound very odd to American ears. I think we see this through the fact that phrases like, "Each man for himself" and "Do what it takes to get to the top" aren't just commonly heard, they're widely celebrated. The picture of flourishing that I want to uphold not only refuses to include such highly individualistic beliefs, but views them as fundamentally misguided. You can't just focus on yourself if you want to live a good life. Fend for yourself and climb to the top if you want, but—to borrow from one of my favorite literary quotes—"it will be a hollow victory."<sup>10</sup>

The final element of flourishing that I want to zero in on, before we talk about virtue, has to do with the fact that flourishing involves the whole person. At its core, this can be spelled out by saying that "committing to an end means committing *oneself* to it, in a couple of ways."<sup>11</sup> After all, flourishing is a life commitment. This means that it cannot be undertaken as something on the side. Flourishing isn't as a hobby that you take up from time to time. Flourishing, instead, involves the commitment of oneself in action, intention, and even emotion. Some of this will become clear as we talk about virtue, but the level at which flourishing involves our concerted effort and intent focus is well worth highlighting now.

So, to recap—flourishing is not a solo affair, it involves acting both for others and for oneself, and it isn't a sideline type of project. I want us to notice a couple of things.

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10. Robert M Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, (New York: Harpertorch, 1974), 214.

11. Russell, "Virtue Ethics," 23.

First, this picture of flourishing admits of the potential for user error. Basically, you might think that you're flourishing or living your best life, but be wrong in that belief.<sup>12</sup> And second, it's possible to live a life committed to living well—to “be virtuous, really virtuous”—without spending “clockable hours thinking about *eudaimonia*” or flourishing.<sup>13</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse makes this point, and I think it's important to reflect on it. This is to say that you don't need to read books, like this one, to get your life right. You don't need to have an abstract concept as your guide if you want to be a good person. This is because flourishing is ultimately a natural, human end. It admits of complexity and error, but at its core, to flourish is to be human. And you don't need to look to philosophers to understand what it is to be human. Just think of Mari from last chapter. I hope you know people like her. And if you do, odds are that they didn't get that way because they read a lot of philosophy. I'm committed to believing that people like this are good, really good, even if they haven't engaged in a formal study of goodness.

But, I do think that it can help to read books like this one and to have this kind of meta language in giving you a framework to think about what you're doing. I think that because projects like these have helped me. Think about it this way—while it is possible to arrive at a destination without spoken instructions or a GPS, it can be very helpful to have good ones in helping to get you where you're going. Even more helpful in getting this guidance will be to understand the word “virtue,” what it means, and what role it plays in getting us to this picture of flourishing that I've painted. So, let's talk about that now.

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12. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 59. Note that the reverse—you might be living a flourishing life and think you're not—doesn't necessarily follow, and I certainly do not claim that this reverse is true.

13. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 137.

## **Virtue or “The Excellences that Let You Flourish”**

If you are looking to replace the word “virtue” with a single other word in your mind as you read this book, I recommend the word “excellence.” This may sound silly, but you could say that it is a *virtue* of my alarm clock that it keeps time well and wakes me up punctually for work. Time-keeping is something that my clock does perfectly well. In this way, my clock exhibits all the virtues of good timepieces. The tradition that I am writing from within understands virtues as extending beyond objects and tools like alarm clocks, and into the realm of human life. If I am excellent at responding to frightening situations well, I am courageous. I have the virtue of courage. Now, it won’t work to keep the definition of virtue that broad. So, we will explore some aspects of virtue that will guide the chapters for the remainder of the book. Specifically, it will become clear that virtue involves a particular type of action, that it is cultivated through habit, that it can fall as a midpoint between two extremes, and that a whole range of human capacities are involved in virtuous activity. Laying the groundwork for virtue is a bit abstract, but it won’t do much good to get into the weeds about specific virtues—which we will do in most of the chapters in this book—if we don’t have an idea of what “virtue” means in the first place.

An initial way of sketching virtue is to say that a virtue is a stable character trait that disposes you to act and feel in the way that is appropriate for the context that you are

in.<sup>14</sup> A person fosters these dispositions so that she can flourish as a human person.

Recall, though, flourishing this involves acting; it involves doing something. How must you act? Hursthouse explains that virtue is a certain sort of action where the person acting—the moral agent—knows what she is doing, acts for the right reasons, and has the appropriate feelings while she is acting.<sup>15</sup> Let's break Hursthouse's explanation down.

Imagine that Viola is confronted with the following situation. After leaving her work, she walks down the sidewalk behind a father and his daughter. The little girl trips, and as the dad bends over to help her, his wallet falls onto the sidewalk behind him. In the distraction, he doesn't notice that his wallet is gone.

In this moment, Viola has a number of options. The virtuous one in this situation almost certainly involves *doing something*; that is, virtue involves a certain action. Virtue doesn't involve just having the passing thought, "How sad that this man lost his wallet!" Next, Viola picks up the wallet to return it to the man. If she were to be somehow forced into returning the wallet, or if she mistakenly thought the wallet was a trinket that she would have kept it if she knew it was worth some money, then Viola couldn't have been said to really *know* what she was doing in the relevant sense. Further, Viola returns the wallet because she has some loose version of the thought, "It is a good thing for me to return this wallet, rather than keep it for myself." If she returned the wallet because, just the day prior, she saw how one girl turned into a celebrated internet sensation after performing a small act of kindness, then we would rightly suspect that Viola did not act for the right *reason*. And finally, we might say that Viola should be relatively happy in

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14. Rebecca L. Walker and Phillip J. Ivanhoe, "Introduction," In *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). 4.

15. Hursthouse, *On Virtue*, 123–125.

doing this particular virtuous act. If Viola handed the wallet over resentfully or angrily, wishing desperately that she just had the good luck to keep it for herself, then we should rightly question whether Viola had the appropriate *feeling* in doing this. We may totally excuse her for wishing to keep the wallet if she was living in harsh poverty, for instance. But if she wanted to keep the wallet in order to splurge on makeup at Sephora, we should say that she seemed overly partial to her own desires at the expense of her neighbor's perceived need.

A full account of virtue doesn't end with actions done well with the aid of reason, good intent, and appropriate feeling. This is intuitive as soon as we ask the question, "If Viola returned this wallet after stealing a couple of people's identities and on her way to scam a few folks out of their money, can we say that she is an honest person?" I imagine that most people will say, "No! Doing one honest thing doesn't make her an honest person." And this affirmation is key to virtue, and should remind us of the assertion I made earlier: virtue is a *stable* character trait that disposes you to act and feel in the way that is appropriate for the context that you are in. What a shared intuition like this one helps to highlight is that real virtues aren't one and done events. Rather, they are acts performed from a habitual state. The idea that "practice makes perfect" fits nicely here. Aristotle makes this point very clearly in his work. A single good action does not a good person make. Rather, "we become just by doing just actions, ... brave by doing brave actions," and so forth.<sup>16</sup> If you want to become good, you must do good actions repeatedly, and so form your character to do these good things. So, maybe Viola who has been dishonest for years cannot magically be called honest after her wallet return. But if

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16. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 1103b.

this were to spark a change in her actions moving forward, she may be able to uproot her old habit in favor of a new, virtuous one. At least, the distinct hope is that such things are possible.<sup>17</sup>

A way of talking about the role of habit is to borrow Lisa Tessman's language: "One cannot simply will one's character to change."<sup>18</sup> Just wanting, even wanting badly, to be a virtuous person doesn't make you into one. Having the desire to be good can certainly help, but ultimately, the virtuous person will be a person who habitually exhibits and lives into the virtues. Character change will take time and effort, much in the way that any craft or skill will. It's possible that you will be more naturally inclined toward some virtues than others. But being that virtue involves more than a knack for good-seemingness, there will be habit involved in getting it right.

Now, not only does virtue require habituation, but certain types of virtue require that you find the mean between extreme actions. We don't have to worry here about which types of virtues are middle points and which aren't. A handy way of talking about virtue being a mean state this is to say that some virtues are about "hitting the mark." Aristotle sees the task of hitting the mark as being hard work, because the moral agent must seek to find the intermediate state between two competing vices.<sup>19</sup> A vice is the opposite of a virtue. Aristotle gives the example of generosity in the action of giving and taking money when talking about hitting the mean between two vices.<sup>20</sup> Too much

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17. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b25. Aristotle does not seem too optimistic about this prospect, as this citation shows.

18. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 23.

19. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109a25.

20. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107b17—23.

activity in giving and taking money and the person is wasteful, too little and she is stingy. There are, then, two ways of getting this activity wrong, and only one of getting it right.

There is another really important thing to emphasize with the mean between extremes point. If you picture virtue as lying on a spectrum between two wrongs, then it makes sense to make the Aristotelian observation that virtue looks like a vice from the perspective of a person who inhabits a vice. Pause on that: to the vicious person, virtue looks bad. Aristotle's way of saying this is that "the intermediate states are excessive in comparison to the deficiencies" and these intermediate states are "deficient in comparison to excess."<sup>21</sup> So, generosity will look stingy to the wasteful person, while generosity will look wasteful to the stingy person. Aristotle's advice to caution against misapprehending virtue as vice is to say that

[We must examine] what we ourselves drift into easily ... We shall come to know our own tendencies from the pleasure or pain that arises in us. We must drag ourselves off in the contrary direction, for if we pull far away from error, as they do in straightening bent wood, we shall meet the intermediate condition.<sup>22</sup>

I love this image. If you find yourself on the wrong path, it can be hard work to get on the right one—especially since it took habit to get there! But, with effort and self-reflection, you can drag yourself into goodness, straightening out what was once bent. Hitting the mark is no small task, but it seems to be a possible one.

Now, we've already talked about virtues both as habits and as means. Finally, and this is my favorite part, virtues have so much to do with what we live and experience every day. There are three points I want to make about this. The first has to do with emotion. As we saw with Viola's case, virtues involve having certain sorts of emotional

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21. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1108b19.

22. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109b1—8.

responses. It's not just *that* you do something, or even *why*, it's also *how* you do it that matters. And it's not only because your emotions might affect someone else. Indeed, we might think of cases where your emotions don't really affect anyone else or the quality of your action in any way. Even in situations like these, though, your emotions affect *you* and what kind of a person you are becoming in doing this action. This is because "emotions involve ideas or images (or the thoughts or perceptions) of good and evil, taking 'good' and 'evil' in their most general, generic sense, as the formal objects of pursuit and avoidance."<sup>23</sup> Your emotions are ways of saying, "I see this is good," or "worth honoring," or "worth celebrating," or any number of sentiments that encourage you to pursue some thing. Your emotions are also ways of saying "this is awful," or "how evil," or "I refuse to do this," or any number of similar ways of deeming something worth avoiding. In other words, your emotions, when they are helping you to be virtuous, are joining in the effort of drawing you toward the good, at times by helping you to avoid the bad.

On what I take to be a related note, insofar as I think that the following is a very everyday type of observation, virtue can be exhibited and modeled by the people around us. There will be a whole chapter devoted to this topic, but I want to talk a little bit about it now. Of course, it might be difficult to know another person's intention, and therefore difficult to correctly identify whether a person is fully virtuous. Still, many, myself included, are optimistic about the ability to learn virtue from really virtuous people.<sup>24</sup> You can look at exemplars to see what virtue looks like when lived out in the exemplars'

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23. Hursthouse, *On Virtue*, 111.

24. Rosalind Hursthouse, "Environmental Virtue Ethics," In *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 168.

contexts. I think that this captures a very human intuition, making sense of our celebration of heroic figures not only for what they did in their time, but also in our using them as examples to guide our behavior here and now. The examples of virtuous others can serve as a really helpful guide to living well yourself.

And yet, there will be times when contexts are so varied that you may find that virtue would point two virtuous agents in different directions. There are cases and there are cases. This is my third, virtue-is-familiarly-human point. As Tessman says, “when faced with no good choice, different virtuous agents may well act differently.”<sup>25</sup> This is to make a point about ethics lived out in non-ideal circumstances. Being good, on the virtue ethical account, does not involve following some preset script or unbreakable formula. In order to capture this idea, think of a situation where a community is called to tremendous risk and self-sacrifice for some good purpose—maybe a call to advocacy at the risk of imprisonment for a just cause. I think that, likely, virtue would point virtuous people in different directions in a context like this one. A single person will likely exhibit virtue differently than the sole care provider to young children when faced with the decision of whether or not to protest and be imprisoned. Virtue may call for greater risk or reservation in this case, depending on the individual’s unique circumstance. This is not to say that the good changes, but only to note that what the good requires may look different at times. Two artists with different sets of paints may both paint incredible pictures, but those paintings will look different in the end.

We have, then, gone over what virtue looks like. It is a certain type of action, formed through habit, at times falling between two extremes, done with the aid of

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25. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 31.

emotion and exemplars, and at times requiring something distinctive of you. All of this comes together in helping the individual to reach a flourishing, well-lived human life. The final catch is to recognize that, even after saying all of this, virtue is not *sufficient* for flourishing. Let's go back to dreamsicles and wardrobes idea to understand what this means. If someone forced you to live in a wardrobe and fed you only dreamsicles, it seems that it would *not* be right to say that you are living a flourishing life. Now, I think that there are ways of doing your best at practicing some virtues even in this context, and that it would be right to say that doing so would be honorable and good given the circumstances. But, even if we praise you for being resilient in the face of terrible outside forces, it would not seem right to say that *you* are living a full and flourishing life.

At this point, I can imagine someone saying, "Why make all of the effort to be virtuous if it doesn't even guarantee that you will live a good life?!" And the virtue theoretical response really shows that—in a world where a lot of people may have to overcome great odds or escape tremendous evils to live fully—virtue is a modest proposal. The answer to this question is that while the virtues will not guarantee that you will flourish, "they are the only reliable bet."<sup>26</sup> Not only this, I think that it is morally praiseworthy to do your best to be good even when external circumstances serve to stand in the way of your flourishing. And finally, I am inclined to think that by having the sort of picture we've now gotten to see, the belief that a better life is possible can help to prompt well-guided change in areas where well-guided change is needed. Remember Noddings' comment about the establishment of conditions under which we desire to be good. I think that, even in a context without the actual circumstances one needs in order

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26. Hursthouse, *On Virtue*, 172.

to flourish, the pursuit of virtue can help to properly guide the alteration of those non-ideal circumstances into better ones. Understanding virtue can help us to understand what kind of a world we want to build in the first place. So, virtue, my modest proposal goes, gives you the best chance at flourishing insofar as your actions are concerned, enables a life best-lived for whatever circumstance you are in, and helps to guide us toward the changes that we need to see in order to guarantee that everyone will be able to live good lives. A virtue-based proposal is not the only one out there. But it does talk about goodness uniquely. So, let's briefly consider what virtue ethics is looking at.

### **What's Up With Virtue Ethics**

While some moral theories focus on actions when deciding whether a person did a good thing, virtue theory guides and assesses the people performing those actions. There are good things to be said in favor of approaching moral evaluation as act assessment, even if virtue ethics doesn't conduct moral evaluations in this way. For one, it's usually a lot easier to evaluate something that goes on in the world as opposed to looking *both* at what's going on in the world *and* at what's going on in some person's mind and emotions. However, I am inclined toward doing what virtue ethicists do for a reason that Russell gives. He writes that act-focused moral theories generate evaluations that "seem compartmentalized and disconnected from the rest of one's life."<sup>27</sup> I share this worry, and believe that a lot gets lost on other pictures of the rightness and wrongness of actions. When looking at the Viola situation, I want to ask questions like "What was she

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27. Russell, "Virtue Ethics," 18.

feeling?,” “What was motivating her action?,” and “What is her history of behaving in this way?” I think that virtue ethics captures the role that habit, emotion, individual contexts, balancing competing goods, and interdependence have to play in living the good life. And while of course anyone can ask the questions I just listed, I think that the virtue ethicist sees the answers as being related to the moral evaluation of the individual’s situation, and I think rightly so.

This is a very brief version of my reason for answering the questions I want to ask in this book in the way that I do. On other theoretical approaches to answering questions about being good, you will worry a lot about what effect you have in the world, or what kind of rules you follow when seeking to act well—and these are good things. But secondary is the question of what kind of person you are becoming, and what kinds of habits you are building so that you can continue to live well. And I think that these just aren’t secondary questions. Instead of saying that right action is about achieving some good ends or following some moral rules, virtue ethics flips the script. Where other theories focus on what *to do* in morally complex situations, the focus on virtue has us asking how to approach these situations with “kindness, courage, wisdom, and integrity... Rightness is about what we’re doing; virtue is also about *how we’re living*.”<sup>28</sup>

Please don’t read me as saying that thinkers from other theoretical backgrounds don’t care about the people who are doing right or wrong things. My only claim is that, from my perspective, virtue ethics gets close to capturing what I take to be important about being a good human living a meaningful life. Like I said at the beginning of the

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28. Daniel C. Russell, “Introduction: Virtue Ethics in Modern Moral Philosophy,” In *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Daniel C. Russell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2. Emphasis mine.

chapter, I don't know that the grand, meaning-of-life question will ever be fully settled. However, what I think virtue offers us is a good and followable way of directing that "something" that life is about: living virtuously and thereby well. I understand that this isn't saying a whole lot, but it is what I am saying. And I hope that throughout the course of the book, you can see how far I think that this approach takes us.

### **III. ATTUNED LISTENERS AND AFFABLE SPEAKERS: SPEAKING WELL IN A BUSY WORLD**

It wouldn't surprise me if you started off this morning by having a conversation with your wife or kids. If I had to guess, at some point this week you showed up somewhere familiar, whether it was work or school, and caught up with some people there. If you're from a place like Louisiana, you almost certainly can't get out of the grocery store without talking to a stranger about whatever topic was easiest to dive into, even if you were there for five minutes. And while some conversations are easier than others, all of these conversations serve to situate us in relationship to each other. While it would be wrong to say that all conversations make us feel closer to the people around us, conversations do unite us—for better or worse—and they do draw us into a space that we share. All of this is to say, this first chapter of the book is a gentle entryway into an activity that we all engage in, the activity of talking with each other. I think that the virtues of attunement and affability go a ways in helping us to do this everyday activity better than we would otherwise. And while the virtues we'll discuss apply to a huge range of dialogues, I do think that they can also help us out when we're having the kinds of meaningful conversations that have the power to shape a life.

So, to start our conversation about virtue in action, we will look at some of the virtues that surround good conversation or dialogue. The idea with starting off this section of the book this way is to narrow in on the relationships that we share with the people around us. I think it's important to dwell on the way that we engage in conversation, the meaning that this has for our moral lives, and the virtues that can help us to dialogue well. Now, you may be thinking, "How is this a contemporary problem? Haven't we always had to speak with and to each other?" Of course the answer to the

second question is yes. The answer to the first question, to my mind, is something like, “It isn’t a distinctly contemporary problem, but doing it well is going to be very important in facing issues here and now.” Who knows, it may be that it was less difficult to be a good conversation partner when we weren’t distracted by buzzing phones or flashing screens. It seems plausible that speaking well is more difficult when we think of the world as polarized and divided. And perhaps changing ideas around time, including its commodification, pressure us *not* to be as attentive to each other and as plugged into one on one conversations as before. Whatever the reason, the kind of business that many of us fall into almost certainly has an effect on the way that we speak with each other. The hope is that this chapter can help us to respond well if this is the case.

But, I don’t actually want to prove or argue for the claims that we are distracted, polarized, or inattentive—even if these ideas seem somewhat plausible. Instead, since virtue is very much about the interpersonal relationships that we are a part of, and dialogue is just a key part of so, so many of the relationships that we share with other people, I think that we should spend some time with what it means to be a virtuous dialogue partner. Since dialoguing involves two roles, being a listener and being a speaker, we are going to focus on virtues that govern each of these roles. But before we get to the virtues of attunement and affability, I want to focus on the activity of dialoguing in the first place. Why does it matter for a virtuous life, and how does it relate to the other endeavors that we are involved in? Let’s think about that for a moment.

One way to talk about dialogue is not only as something that we experience, but also as something that shapes our experiences. Dialogue doesn’t just color in the blank spaces of our lives. Rather, the conversations that we have and choose not to have can

easily change the course those lives themselves. Other conversations drastically reshape our relationships, or become the foundation of new ones. Dialogues may even help us to see something as morally important that we didn't recognize before, and so motivate us to pursue or promote new goals and aspirations. Just today I had lunch with a friend who became interested in education not by learning more about it, but by spending time with a passionate educator. My friend told me, "I didn't think I cared about doing work in education until I saw how passionate she was about her students. Then I started to think that, yeah, I may actually want to do what she does." This teacher's passion—that my friend only heard about, since she wasn't this teacher's student—encouraged my friend to see student-teacher relationships as being worth pursuing. So, why do we say things that minimize the importance of our words if they can have such big impacts? From silly sayings like "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me," to fancier-sounding sentiments like, "it isn't what we say that matters, but what we do," it seems like we often treat our verbal exchanges as not really mattering in our moral lives. There are certainly activists and heroes who have insisted that words are super important. Many of us, though, still use language in a way that relies upon the assumption that words won't be taken as serious indicators of our moral intentions. We want to separate what we say and what we mean. An example of this is the parent who insists that angry flare ups don't matter because she shows parental devotion in other ways. Taking a step back, though, it's clear that instances like these are problematic. Sure, lots of us have a hard time speaking virtuously and well. But even if it's hard to speak in morally responsible ways, I think it's still worth the effort.

One way that we can appreciate why the effort is worth it is by thinking about metaphor. In their work, *Metaphors we Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson get at some of these ideas in a very focused way. They explore metaphor as both an element of language and as a way of shaping thought and action. They begin by acknowledging that, typically, we view metaphor as being “a characteristic of language alone.”<sup>29</sup> But they insist that these linguistic concepts are not confined to the space of spoken rhetoric; rather, metaphors structure our perception, our interpersonal relationships, and the way that we get around in the world.<sup>30</sup> On the one hand, this idea is not at all radical. When we say things like, “I’m spent” or, “I’m burnt out,” we really do think of ourselves in terms of having expended energy or drive, of being unable to give more of our resources. On the other hand, Lakoff and Johnson’s recognition that “we classify particular experiences in terms of experiential gestalts in our conceptual system” has radical implications for how we can understand what language does to and for us.<sup>31</sup> We are going to explore the implications of Lakoff and Johnson’s work soon. But let’s pause for a moment to appreciate the kind of project that they are asking their audience to engage in.

Lakoff and Johnson’s work, as well as Deborah Tannen’s, invites us to think about language as a life-shaping force. Language, Tannen argues, “invisibly molds our way of thinking,” not only about our language itself, but about other people, our actions, and our world.<sup>32</sup> If you speak more than one language you have probably experienced this yourself. There are times when a word or phrase comes to mind that fits so well with

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29. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

30. Lakoff and Johnson, 3.

31. Lakoff and Johnson, 83.

32. Deborah Tannen, “Fighting for Our Lives,” in *The Argument Culture*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 15.

how you think about this thing, but the phrase just can't be translated into a language other than the one it's at home in. This way of talking and its relationship to thinking doesn't need to be noticeable, though. As Tannen says, while "we use expressions without thinking about their metaphoric implications," it is not as though those metaphors do not influence our thought and action.<sup>33</sup> Tannen describes the invisible force of metaphor in pointing to how war metaphors totally permeate our understanding of what it means to have an argument.<sup>34</sup> While it's likely that we don't consciously think about arguments as war, Tannen's point makes a whole lot of sense. "Who won the argument?," "She beat him in the debate," and "I will fight you on this," are all war-like ways of speaking about arguing that we surely have heard over and over. We may even talk this way ourselves.

But talking about arguments as war isn't neutral, even if it is normal. Thinking of someone you're talking to or even arguing with as competitor in a debate is very different than thinking of that person as a conversation partner. Recognizing that and how our metaphors shape our thinking leads the moral agent to think about what kinds of responsibilities follow from being a dialogue partner. If the way that we speak affects the way that we think and act, then it seems that dialogue is not only a way of talking about ethical concepts. Instead, it becomes clear that dialogue is an area for ethical behavior *itself*. This is an idea that's present in the work that we've been talking about in this chapter.

Both Tannen's and Lakoff and Johnson's work recognize the ethical significance of their key points. Lakoff and Johnson invite their readers to "imagine a culture where

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33. Tannen, 13.

34. Tannen, 4.

argument is viewed as dance” instead of adversarial confrontation.<sup>35</sup> The idea, here, is that changing our way of speaking or structuring metaphor will help us to change our societal behavior when it comes to sharing ideas. We may think that talking about arguments as dance is a bit cheesy, but agree with the general point that viewing them as war is counterproductive. Tannen moves beyond an invitation to imagination like Lakoff and Johnson extend, and toward a prescription for societal action. “We need new metaphors,” she says, suggesting that our current use of language is unacceptable.<sup>36</sup> If we take Tannen seriously, it’s clear that it’s irresponsible to view debates as wars or battles. What’s more, though, her affirmation invites reflection. In considering the need to construct and adopt new metaphors, the person who wants to live well is left to wonder what those metaphors *should* be. The moral agent is bestowed with the responsibility to think conscientiously about what it is that she says, acknowledging the real-world impact that metaphors have on her thoughts and actions.

If we should speak and interact in ways that draw us into virtuous relationships and enable our flourishing, then we must think about dialogues as places for ethical exchange. We must recognize that we can act virtuously and viciously in the simple act of conversation, whether it’s in the everyday exchange of words with a colleague, or the more consequential acts of issuing a statement or advocating for an idea. It’s possible to engage in conversation viciously. And it’s possible that using metaphors that put interpersonal relationships at risk by comparing them to wars or battles is a vicious way of engaging in conversation. Now, I must learn to think of dialogue as a place for ethics. I must re-think my verbal exchanges, choosing to see them as being bound by moral

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35. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 4.

36. Tannen, “Fighting,” 18.

responsibilities and possibilities for moral growth or failure. In conversation, I can't just say whatever. I should think about how my words affect you and how my words shape me.

If we take a step back real quick, we might notice how unsavory this sounds to a lot of people. Americans especially are very inclined to value free speech—and I think with good reason. So, it's worth noticing that saying, "we should be conscientious speakers and listeners" is not the same thing as saying that we should have restrictions on our speech. The moral values we strive for and the legal restrictions that we impose are very different things, for one. But secondly, if we really do believe that dialogue can play a part in the goal of achieving human flourishing, concerns about restrictions on freedom come under a different light. I think an example can help to illustrate what I mean. A few years ago, my mom and my brother got in an argument because he insisted that he wanted to make chocolate rice. He protested against not being able to combine cocoa powder and sugar with our rice leftovers, and mom eventually gave in. Clearly, though, my mom's attempt to restrict my brother's freedom was not a restriction on his freedom to be a good dessert maker. Rather, restrictions like my mom's ensure that the novice cook produces something worth praising, or at least, that he has the best chance for doing so. Similarly, insisting that there are more virtuous ways of dialoguing does not limit freedom *per se*. Instead, this serves as a guide for ensuring that dialogue is able to produce the best effects possible. We can insist *both* that a person should be legally allowed to make a chocolate rice *and* that it would be better if he didn't. In our family's case, working through the fallout of my brother's freedom, namely by trying to eat the chocolate rice leftovers, was no fun at all. Similarly, we can insist both that a person be

allowed to speak freely and that it would be better if she followed the precepts of virtue when engaging in this activity.

So, let's turn now to the precise virtues that we can seek to cultivate in order to dialogue well. Here, it's worth noticing what's involved in dialogue in the first place. In a dialogue, there are at least two parties. The self is situated both as speaker and as listener within the dialogical space. Different virtues govern different activities. As such, different virtues, or at least different aspects of some virtue, will govern dialogue, being that the agent is engaged in two roles at once. So, it's possible to examine virtue both as it is related to the agent as speaker and as it is related to the agent as listener. Let's start by talking about the activities involved in listening well.

When listening, the dialoguer can appreciate that her participation in dialogue with another person or group of people means that she's part of creating a shared, ethical space. This is pretty significant, and may encourage us to take the activity of listening seriously. The listener is first invited to be receptive. Listening allows the agent to at least have the opportunity to engage deeply with another person. There are definitely times when being present nonverbally with another person is a significant act. Still, though, engaging in the exchange of dialogue with another person is a morally significant entryway into a shared life with that person. Also, listening is a way of engaging with the world. If education is understood as dialogue, then students take up the role of being listeners. Listening in dialogue, both in educational and interpersonal environments, then, provides opportunities for the agent to access a world of knowledge and insight that may be really important to her human formation. Understanding listening in this way frames it

as an invitation for moral agents to act virtuously in the ethical space that dialoguing opens up.

I'd like to emphasize that there are going to be a number of virtues that we may exercise when dialoguing, not just the two that I will talk about. But, when I was choosing which virtue to focus on when it comes to being a good listener, one struck me as particularly helpful and very often relevant. This virtue is that of attunement.<sup>37</sup>

Recognizing that a virtue lies as the mean between extremes, we can ask which vices lie on either side of attunement. On one side, it seems as though there is a sort of closed-mindedness, a disposition that renders you unwilling or incapable of listening to the other. In such a state, one is simply unwilling to open herself to engagement with another or with the world that dialogue with that speaker promises to open. Let's imagine a difficult conversation where this vice might be especially attractive. It could be a conversation of apology, or of conveying a painful truth, or of revisiting past wrongs. Say that one friend approaches another to apologize for hurtful or insensitive behavior. On the receiving end, it can be very easy to just shut down, to refuse to listen, and to cut off engagement. And while we may grant that in situations of extreme hurt this may be justified, it seems that in cases where the friendship is worth saving, closed-minded behavior is not appropriate. A desire to engage with this other person should allow for a level of attention and of attunement to what she is saying. The vice involving total closed-mindedness and aloofness just doesn't open you up to those goods.

On the other side of the spectrum, there may be a sort of radical openness wherein the listener readily receives information, but does nothing about it. This kind of radically

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37. This project is similar in spirit to one that Lisbeth Lipari has undertaken in her work, *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement*.

open listening is engaged in for its own sake, not as a means of connecting with another person or with the world. Perhaps, radically open listeners listen simply as a way of encountering language devoid of its ethical import. In a radically open state, I listen readily, not to be engaged as a moral agent, but to be enlisted as a pair of ears that will receive any concept, language, or image without allowing it to affect me in any way. I think that this vice is probably more attractive when you are being presented with new opinions or ideas, and instead of considering whether these have any merit, you choose instead to treat them like a cabinet of curiosities. One problem is that if the information being conveyed is important, this radical and unengaged openness is just not going to allow the speaker to respond well to this information. Imagine explaining to a class that it's worth thinking about the impact that we are making on the planet, and insisting that we must step back to examine if we are leaving a livable world for future generations. A person exhibiting the vice of radical openness might respond by acknowledging that this is an interesting and provocative thought, and might even spend some time conjecturing what an unlivable world would look like. But, ultimately, the radically open person would be happy to leave this idea on a shelf as soon as the conversation is through.

What is the middle ground, then? Well, unlike falling on these extremes, the attuned person will engage with the person with whom she is in dialogue. She will actively listen and be present, trying not to disconnect from the conversation of which she is a part. Part of this will come from some kind of an appreciation that this person with whom she is in dialogue deserves her respect. Acknowledging this highlights something about virtue that I think is worth pausing on. Since virtue is about responding well in different contexts, I think it makes sense to say that virtue is likely going to look a bit

different in different situations. What does this mean for the virtue of attunement? Well, we can imagine that I am a student in a large seminar room. While it's good for me to be attuned to the speaker, it's not clear that my engagement with the speaker needs to be sensitive to our relationship. After all, I may not know the person who's speaking to me, and I may never meet this person face to face. So, attunement is required, but it's not clear that it will prompt me to focus much on the speaker as a person whose life I am invested in. It wouldn't be a moral failing for me to leave the talk and not think about the speaker's inner life or moral concerns, or how these things shaped the content of her presentation. But if my best friend is talking to me, part of being attuned will be engaging with her as a unique human person with whom I have a special relationship. If I've had a long day, it can be tempting to zone out, or if we've just fought, it can be tempting to be cold or dismissive. However, attunement is going to involve paying special attention to the respect that I have for my friend as a person with her own set of reasons, concerns, and cares, and whose position in the world really should matter to me. My friend's perspective on the world and the way that this shapes what she is saying should affect me. Clearly, this is different than being attuned to strangers speaking at the front of auditoriums. All of this is to say that attunement, like so many virtues, will likely look different in different contexts. And whether dialogue involves a stranger, a spouse, a best friend, or something in between, attunement is going to be shaped by the contours of that relationship.

Another important part of attunement involves how the listener engages with the content of the dialogue. The attuned person is surely not going to believe what everyone tells her or agree with anyone who makes an impassioned plea for some cause. But, it

seems as though a virtuous desire to know the good and be able to relate empathetically to those whose experiences deserve moral attention will have the virtuous person being *open to the possibility* that what is happening in this conversation may matter. And at minimum, it may matter to the person who is speaking, and so should not be ignored outright. And sure, to return to an idea from the start of the chapter, attunement may demand that you set down your phone or click off the TV. That said, the demands and stakes will be much greater in some contexts than in others, and your relationship with your conversation partner will likely also help to determine what attunement looks like. But in general, it seems that this is a helpful starting place for listening well.

When we look at what it means to be virtuous speakers, we find ourselves in a space where we are responsible for constructing and conveying words of ethical importance. We looked earlier at the high stakes that are involved in communication. Appreciating these stakes should help to reveal the way in which the speaker is a kind of builder, whether it's as a builder of a relationship, or of a space for communication, or of expectations for social engagement. As Tannen's and Lakoff and Johnson's works suggest, our words can have impacts in a good number of maybe unanticipated ways. Here, I want to highlight a virtue that I think helps to engage dialogue in the first place. In other words, this isn't really about how to communicate well. Instead, this virtue is about engaging well with the people with whom we communicate. I am going to borrow this virtue from Aristotle. And since Aristotle says that this virtuous state "has no name," I'll make the decision to call what he's talking about "affability."<sup>38</sup>

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38. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1126b21.

To start with the vices that surround affability, Aristotle points to the extremes of ingratiation and cantankerousness. On the one side, there is the person who “thinks they must cause no pain to those they meet,” who works hard to never cause discomfort or the least offense.<sup>39</sup> This manifests the vice of ingratiation. When I read Aristotle’s thoughts on this, it seemed to me to describe a certain type of people pleasing. The problem, of course, is that a disposition like this one makes it impossible to have certain conversations. We can think now of being the person who has to share a hard truth or request that someone behave more appropriately, just to give two examples. In these cases and many others, the act of encountering someone with whom you will dialogue is going to demand that you be open to causing some degree of pain. The good life is not one where we all just work to make the world as comfortable for each other as we can. This is because there are times when living well is going to challenge the comfortable status quo. And the person who is habitually ingratiating closes herself off to the possibility of creating this better world.

On the other end of the spectrum is the vice of cantankerousness or quarrelsomeness.<sup>40</sup> Where the ingratiating person does most anything it takes to not cause pain, the cantankerous person does “not care in the least about causing pain.”<sup>41</sup> Where the ingratiating person will tiptoe around difficult subjects to avoid causing pain or discomfort, the cantankerous person could not care less about giving offense. This may manifest even beyond situations where the subject matter is inherently painful, and a cantankerous person may just routinely exhibit an extreme lack of civility or tact when

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39. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1126b14.

40. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1126b18.

41. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1126b18.

engaging with others. This is perhaps the most extreme example of cantankerousness, but it surely is not unheard of in the moral life. I think it also makes sense to say that even if a conversation will be difficult and painful, the cantankerous person is acting wrongly by being insensitive to the pain she causes. Finding ways to have a hard conversation in a straightforward but not insensitive way is important, but it isn't what the cantankerous person will do.

So what will affability look like? It is going to involve presenting or accepting, agreeing or objecting to one's conversation partner "when it is right and in the right way."<sup>42</sup> The person will enter the engagement hoping to be pleasant and to avoid causing pain, but not when doing so undermines some good goal or end.<sup>43</sup> This is why I think that the word "affable" works well, because I think that it describes a person like this. What this virtue encourages is a degree of civility and openness, as well as respect for your conversation partner's experience of how it is that your conversation is being perceived. Here, it's worth saying that affability is going to look different depending on your level of acquaintance with some person, the capacity in which you encounter them, and the point of having this conversation at all.<sup>44</sup> Like attunement, affability may not be called upon in all conversational contexts. But affability isn't reserved for people we already know. Aristotle acknowledges that this virtue sounds a lot like friendliness, but he offers a helpful distinction when he says that this virtue doesn't require any special "fondness for the people we meet."<sup>45</sup> In other words, you can be affable to people you don't know and even don't like. And we can exercise this virtue in "meeting people, living together,"

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42. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1126b20.

43. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127a5.

44. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127a1.

45. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1126b23.

and in “common dealings in conversations and actions.” Which is to say, there are just a lot of situations where affability may be possible.<sup>46</sup>

Now that we’ve looked at the outlines of affability and attunement, it’s worth stepping back to see where that leaves us. Let’s acknowledge first that I’ve said nothing about what goes on in virtuous dialogue. I haven’t talked about how to phrase things well, when to raise certain issues, or really anything about the substance of the conversations themselves. Instead, I’ve focused on our dispositions when engaging in conversations in the first place, how to approach them, how to and not to respond, and what basic behaviors to avoid. Affability and attunement are very basic virtues, I think. But I also think that they are worth talking about, if not only because their opposing vices seem very common, but also because they help us to behave well when we are talking with each other—which we likely do often. I think that these virtues go a ways in positioning ourselves well in relationship to others. They are also easy to check in on. This is a nice feature, and it isn’t true of all of the virtues. At the end of each day, it’s likely a small task to ask yourself if you were attuned to the people around you or if you were disengaged. It’s not a big deal to consider whether you were affable with those you encountered, or if you snapped at a stranger or avoided a hard conversation with a loved one yet again. No, affability and attunement aren’t, on their own, going to make us good people or shining citizens. But I do think that they are good, start-small virtues that are helpful in doing something that we do all of the time.

Further, I do think that they can apply to much larger situations. The following example is pretty complex, and so it’s not as easy as saying “that wasn’t affable,” or “that

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46. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1126b11.

was out of touch.” But, I do think that the building blocks from this chapter work in this example, too. In cases like the one I’m about to talk about, which happen at the larger, societal scale, the level of responsibility and risk of irresponsibility are almost certainly much higher than in one on one contexts. The issue that I have in mind played out in the decision to separate families from each other at the United States border, a practice that the Trump administration engaged in in its efforts to shape immigration reform in the United States. In an episode of his late night talk show, John Oliver discussed this topic. Oliver’s analysis of the Trump administration’s techniques is incredibly similar to Tannen’s analysis of what is at play in our description of argument as war. As Oliver describes it, the Trump administration is engaged in conscientious metaphor crafting in its depiction of the refugee crisis in the United States. Oliver explains it this way:

The politicians routinely talk about [refugees] in the language of war. Remember, Trump referred to the caravan as an “invasion,” and sent troops to the border. And that kind of militaristic talk can make people think that it is necessary to make the kind of impossible choices made during a war, which is *how* things like family separation happen.<sup>47</sup>

Here, Oliver argues that the use of metaphor is shaping the administration’s actions in response to the situation this metaphor is meant to describe. If the refugees are invaders, the administration does well by keeping them out, and with whatever force necessary. Oliver is quick to explain this, as he says, “even though the language of war is being used, there is not a war. And the only reason that people keep talking like there is one is to give themselves permission to make the choices they want to be forced to make.”<sup>48</sup> Metaphor is being used to construct a nation’s thoughts and justify its actions towards a group of people who wish to seek asylum within her borders. Revisiting our two virtues

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47. John Oliver, “Family Separation,” hosted by John Oliver, November 4, 2018; HBO, video.

48. Oliver.

of good dialogue can help in unpacking at least a part of what is going on in a situation like this one.

In the refugee crisis, which when framed as war is used to justify tactics like family separation, there are a handful of elements that betray a lack of virtue in the Trump administration's engagement with this issue. First, as listeners, the dialoguers on behalf of the United States government displayed closed-mindedness, not attunement, when engaging with the refugees. This is evidenced in statements—made in the form of tweets—like Trump's, where he claimed that “many Gang Members and some very bad people are mixed into the caravan.”<sup>49</sup> Here, it is obvious that the U.S.' position was just closed off to reality, as there was simply no evidence to warrant such an assertion, thus revealing a refusal to hear or receive information from the other party in what could have been a dialogue.<sup>50</sup> Further, as dialoguer, the U.S. chose military action instead of speaking with the refugees in crisis, and used the harsh legalistic language of a judge in speaking about them. This language exhibited no degree of respect or sensitivity to the groups of people seeking refuge at the U.S. border. These persons were construed as criminals, full stop. The administration's implied reasoning seems to be that to speak about them in any other way was to speak on behalf of criminals, and so should not have been done. In situations like these, one might wonder what would occur if we engaged in the virtues of good dialogue, not only interpersonally, but in society at large. And surely, in situations like the refugee crisis, the effects of not engaging in dialogue as though it

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49. Meghan Keneally, “Is Trump ‘Stoking Fear’ Portraying Caravan as an ‘Invasion’ or Responding Reasonably? Views Differ,” *ABC News*, October 31, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-stoking-fear-portraying-caravan-invasion-responding-views/story?id=58848197>.

50. Miriam Valverde, “Is the Migrant Caravan an Invasion?” *PolitiFact*, November 7, 2018, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2018/nov/07/migrant-caravan-invasion/>.

were an ethical sphere—where metaphor construction must be done conscientiously and well—are obvious.

Like I said, this case is very complicated, and had the administration been affable and attuned, there were still other huge problems to be addressed. But focusing on the virtues involved in dialogue makes it clear that it isn't just what the administration *did* that was questionable—it was also how they *talked about* what they did, how they verbally justified what they did. I think that this is a prime example of the way that language affects our world and reshapes our lives. And while the conversations that we engage in at the watercooler or in the checkout line are much lower stakes, there are also rooms of very powerful people engaging in very high stakes conversations that will have monumental effects, and virtue is needed in both cases.

Throughout the course of this discussion, dialogue has been understood as an ethical arena. Within it, the moral agent finds herself situated as both listener and speaker. Both of these roles demand virtuous action, and the demands here are not identical. Learning to navigate this space should be expected to take time, and habituating oneself to do so is surely a learning process. What is hopefully evident is that the refusal to take moral responsibility for being a dialoguer is not a viable option. With the strong arguments and real-life examples that suggest that language really does form and inform thought and action, the virtuous agent is prompted to take dialogue seriously. In so doing, she opens herself up to the cultivation of attunement and of affability. Dialogue is not purely stylistic. It's not just a way of shaping words and conveying facts. Instead, it, like sticks and stones, is capable of forming and shaping our world, and of shaping ourselves with it.

#### **IV. FAMILIARIZING ACROSS PERCEIVED DIVIDES: BELONGING TOGETHER IN A DIVERSE WORLD**

In Chapter One, I talked a bit about Mari and her husband Tonio, the family that took ours under its wing when we had just moved. I spoke a bit about Mari's generosity, and how stories like hers inspire me to think about the possibilities that virtue opens up for us, as well as the importance of acknowledging the goodness of people like her. In this chapter, I want to talk a bit more about her family, because I think that they do such a good job of getting at the virtues that we are going to focus on in this chapter, a set of virtues I call "familiarizing." Like I said, Tonio and Mari and their kids included our family in theirs almost instantly. We ate most of our dinners with them, joined them in their local community service outreaches, and all of my siblings and I became best friends with their kids. I don't remember the first time that Tonio called me *mija*, but I remember that he often did. He still does when I visit. I remember how much that simple term of endearment meant to me as a child living without her father. I know how sincere it was by the way in which he treated me while saying this word, really providing fatherly support when I needed it. I know how authentic it was because now, even with the distance that separates me from them, I still have a family who chooses to love and accept me in it.

If there is something that many of us are incredibly good at, it's finding differences and divides between ourselves and others. This is precisely the opposite of what Tonio and Mari did for our family. But, I think that their family's behavior is pretty exceptional, considering that the activity of othering is so prevalent that it often goes unnoticed. It's almost cliché to take some unfamiliar trait that another person has and I do not—be it a difference of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical

or mental ability, or some other identity marker—and hold that difference up as a justification to keep that person at bay from myself. When we act upon that perceived difference to keep some person away from us in a morally significant way, we are engaging in the activity of othering. This happens all of the time. And while there are more innocuous forms of othering, there are those kinds that come at too great an expense.

This chapter is devoted to exploring the activity of othering, highlighting its costs, and considering the virtue that might help the person who seeks to navigate this space well. My proposal is that we can consider the act of familiarizing—what I take to be the activity of adopting others into a kind of family—as a virtue that we should foster. I recognize that this is an ambitious goal. But I also think that it gets at the heart of the problem that othering poses, and points to the kind of future that is possible if we resist othering. So, I hope that the optimism I feel about familiarizing isn't a pie in the sky fantasy. I hope that it has the chance to meaningfully change the way that we go about our shared lives. Before we get to the encouraging stuff, though, I want us to look at the problem that I think we're up against.

Othering is very widespread. Perhaps the most detrimental and costly form of othering that we can see in contemporary America is manifest in racism. Some forms of racism are so extreme that “othering” is way too soft a word to describe them. But there are other, more seemingly innocuous forms of racism that fit this description quite well. A form of racism that is both serious and seemingly innocuous is the use of microaggressions. For example, the question, “Where are you from?,” can be a type of microaggression. Obviously, there are times when this question is totally harmless and

unproblematic. And even when it is a microaggression, it might not be intended to cause offense. However, when a white person asks this to a person of color in order to discover her ancestral history, this question takes on a nasty dimension. This is when it becomes a microaggression. In other words, “Where are you from?” can be a coded question, used to exact information on a person of color’s heritage, and suggesting that the question-asker expects that people who aren’t white aren’t “from here.” This is especially true if this question is followed with, “No, where are you *really* from?” While I have the privilege of not having been part of one of these exchanges myself, one of my friends told me about the countless experiences that she has had with this exact line of questioning. While her parents emigrated from India, she was born and raised in Houston—Houston is where she is from in every sense. In her experience, people asking, “Where are you from?” actually wanted a rundown of her heritage. Saying, “I’m from Houston,” isn’t enough, because her question-askers often followed this up with, “No, where are you *really* from.” Her repeating, “Houston,” leaves many people frustrated, but wrongly so. Exchanges like the ones she is made to live through suggest that belonging in America or saying that you are “just an American” is a privilege that only white people have. White privilege can look like answering the question, “Where are you from?” with, “Louisiana,” and not having anyone think that you misunderstood their question. And while it’s just clear that microaggressions aren’t as harmful as outright racial antipathy or race-based policing, even exchanges like these perpetuate race-based inequalities and racist attitudes. So, they deserve our moral attention, and we have an ethical responsibility to combat these wrongs.

Lori Gallegos de Castillo does a nice job of explaining some of the forces that are at play in situations like microaggressing. By practicing processes that rationalize racism, the agent of racism engages in various vicious activities. Gallegos de Castillo points to three of these vicious activities—arrogance, close-mindedness, and insensitivity. The first, arrogance, occurs when I believe myself to be as informed as I need to be about some area of knowledge.<sup>51</sup> One example of arrogance might be when a person is quick to conflate the knowledge or experience of some *small* cultural phenomenon with a much *larger* cultural reality. For example imagine someone saying, “Oh yeah! Dia de los Muertos is wild. My uncle brought me back a sugar skull one year, and he said that it was all parades and margaritas.” If the speaker in this situation allowed her exposure to one piece of information about the Dia de Muertos celebration to justify the belief that she fully understands this tradition, or worse, that she has some profound insight into Latin American celebration at large, her arrogance might stop her from fully informing herself on various, unfamiliar ways of living. In cases like understanding Dia de Muertos, the stakes aren’t high, but arrogance can take on much more insidious forms. Often, arrogance enables you to put some person, belief, or tradition that you experience as other, and to reduce it, keep it at a cold distance from yourself, or explain it away. This only serves to reinforce the activity of othering.

Close-mindedness and insensitivity are also ways of othering. Close-mindedness resists new information or alternate perspectives, while insensitivity causes you to treat others harshly or callously.<sup>52</sup> Just like with arrogance, these behaviors can take on more

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51. Lori Gallegos de Castillo, “Unconscious Racial Prejudice as Psychological Resistance: A Limitation of the Implicit Bias Model,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 6, iss. 2 (2018): 269.

52. Gallegos de Castillo, 269, 273.

and less serious forms. As with arrogance, close-mindedness and insensitivity needn't be done maliciously. Even if they aren't malicious, though, this doesn't make these behaviors less harmful. An example of these behaviors comes to mind, and I will share it because I think it is clearly an instance of engaging in othering that was done totally unintentionally and without malice. In college, a Sri Lankan friend of mine shared a traditional dish with a group of our friends. Her mom often cooked food for our friend group when this friend was coming back to school after break. Our friend served this dish without utensils, as this is how it is customarily eaten. Another one of our friends jumped up from the table to grab a fork, saying, "I'm going to eat this the *civilized* way!" While she said this lightly, I think that this behavior is just one small example of what closed-mindedness can look like in action—engaging in behaviors that protect and maintain one particular, familiar way of doing things. Incidentally, I believe that this was also insensitive, as it implied that our Sri Lankan friend constantly engaged in "uncivilized" behavior when dining with her family. Again, I am almost positive that this serves as an example of close-minded behavior that was done without malice. Unfortunately, though, even the things that we do thoughtlessly can hurt our relationships, as well as our ability to engage meaningfully across perceived divides. The goal isn't just to do things without *intending* harm to the people we care about, it's also to do things that aren't *actually* harmful to them.

In the instances I've described here, those who have perpetrated othering cannot be said to have done some grave evil or unredeemable wrong. However, it is not difficult to recognize ways in which othering can seriously harm or threaten fellow persons. Let's run through a few. Refusing to educate oneself on the lived experience of people in the

LGBTQ community in order to shield oneself from alternate perspectives; assuming that all African cultures are the same to avoid having to learn more than one narrative; or coolly suggesting that all immigrants—or, to the point, people of color who immigrate—are criminals or rapists to justify one’s behavior are all too common forms of othering that have profoundly negative impacts on American society. Recognizing that there are many ways to engage with different others wrongly is the starting point for figuring out how we should engage with each other rightly. Acknowledging and talking through what we’ve done wrong can be a necessary step for getting things right in the future. Let’s do a quick recap. Othering causes problems. We need to find workable solutions. This, I think, is where the idea of family-building comes in.

I’ve chosen to use the word “familiarizing” to talk about this virtuous disposition for two reasons: its common connotation and its etymological origin. Commonly, to familiarize means to “gain knowledge or experience of something.”<sup>53</sup> If we want to combat othering, we must be prepared to open ourselves to education about and experiences with those things that cause us to place ourselves in one box and perceived others in a second box. I must be willing to become accustomed to new ways of doing things, to be flexible in not insisting that my way of acting is not the only way that something ought to be done. I think it also involves recognizing that there’s a lot that we don’t even know how to look out for. To illustrate: I remember planning a party for the class I taught to English teachers in Mexico a few years back, when I lived there as a teacher’s assistant. I got to the classroom early, pushed the tables to the sides of the room, put a couple of circles of chairs across the classroom, and put all of the refreshments on

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53. “Familiarize, v. 2c,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed December 1, 2018, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/view/Entry/67962?redirectedFrom=familiarize#eid>.

the tables to the side. When my students showed up they all looked confused, but didn't say anything. No one sat in the chairs I arranged, which made it hard to eat our food. The next time we planned a class party—this was a favorite activity among the group of super enthusiastic educators I taught—I showed up right before the start of class, and asked for help setting up. The teachers pushed all of the tables into the center of the room, put the chairs around them, and we visited around the table family-style while we drank sodas and ate chips. When I remembered the awkwardness of the first party I set up for, it made a lot of sense.

Is this story a way of talking about being virtuous in party-planning? No, not really. I think the point is that when it comes breaking down othering, there are going to be things that we don't even know that we don't know. And breaking down othering means being able to accept that fact and respond appropriately. Not incidentally, this is going to involve a breakdown in arrogance, considering that I just can't consider myself an expert on all of the ways of life that I don't lead. Back to my classroom example, I just had no idea that socializing around a family-style table at a social function was the comfortable and expected way of doing things. And while it's not bad to mingle around in a room while at a party, it's perfectly appropriate to do this good thing in other ways. Familiarizing involves just becoming acquainted with different ways of doing some good thing. It can mean eating food without forks or sitting around a table to chat and drink soda. My examples of invitations to familiarize are both about people in positions of privilege, but I think that these are often the people who need the most practice in growing in this virtue. Just allowing yourself to become familiar with people who live differently, have different experiences, or who have different backgrounds is an

important part of breaking down othering. And gaining this knowledge is going to be really important if we want to build communities that flourish together.

In addition, though, I think that the word “familiarizing” has a lot to offer because of its etymological origin, namely, in the latin root word “familia” or “family.”

Historically, to be familiar was to belong or relate to one’s household or family.<sup>54</sup> A way out of othering has to do with the kind of thing that I described at the start of this chapter, the kind of thing that Tonio exemplified so well in his relationship to me. This involves treating each other in such a way that we learn to accept one another into our family. It’s about seeing myself and another as fundamentally belonging together, recognizing that our goal is to flourish together.

I can see how a reader might push back at the idea of family building as a starting place for virtue. Definitely not all family structures are exemplary or even decent. And I don’t want to idealize the family unit when I say that virtue involves family building. Instead, I wish to suggest that *at their best*, families recognize themselves as being deeply bound to each other, not by nature or accident, but by continual choice to affirm and establish unitive ties. At their best, family members are responsible for and to each other as participants in an interdependent community. And I think that understanding family in this way can help us to learn what it means to treat each other not as others, but as being like ourselves. This is true even if some families do a super bad job of accomplishing this goal.

What does framing interpersonal interaction across divides as opportunities for familiarizing do for our understanding of this activity? First off, I believe that it serves as

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54. “Familiar, *n.* 1a,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed December 1, 2018, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/view/Entry/67957#eid4722505>.

an immediate affront to closed-mindedness, as everyone who is in a family knows that simply ignoring the other person's existence is not a viable option. Dismissal is impossible in family units, and it is impossible for globally conscious citizens. Next, such a framework highlights the importance of coming to truly know each other. The more intimate that one is with a person, the more she realizes the tremendous import of speaking as an ally with—or, if necessary, speaking for—the person she loves. Arrogance is not only not an option, it is intuitively understood as a fundamental disrespect for the other person. Understanding each other is a part of working toward being a healthy family unit. But like in families, this understanding grows from spending time together. When I visit with my cousin over Christmas, it would be a bit much for him to assume that I am already caught up on his life. But, out of love for my cousin, I make an effort to learn about what matters to him and to get a working understanding of the important features of his lived experience. Mutual understanding grows out of time together, and the respect and love that I have for my family encourages me to engage in the process of understanding as we spend time together. Finally, family bonds are rooted in care-giving. To care for each other is to be sensitive to each other's needs and desires, which is well-modeled in mother-to-child relationships.<sup>55</sup> And while we don't all owe each other what parents owe their children, there are many ways that we care for each other's needs in society at large, whether it's through education, or medical provision, or infrastructure. Sure, being a parent is very different than caring about my neighbor having a road to drive on and a school to be educated in. But I believe that what compels us in both of

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55. Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*, (New York: Routledge, 1999). Kittay does much to explore this idea in her work, most especially in her chapter, "Relationships of Dependency and Equality."

these cases is both a basic recognition that we shouldn't be left alone in our need and the understanding that we have responsibilities to see that each other's needs are met.

Familiarizing, then, is an activity that can flourish in the space between us. As I've described it here, it's not so much one single virtue as it is a family of virtues.<sup>56</sup> Understood in this way, we can see that it falls between two families of vices. On the one side is a type of clannishness, on the other is a sort of free-floating disposition. Many attitudes and beliefs feed into clannish behavior. The clannish person lives closed-mindedness. She is quick to protect herself and her own at the expense of mischaracterizing another. For the clannish person, family is understood as a set and inflexible reality, incapable of accepting new members—or, at the very least, being fiercely protective of who can be accepted. The clannish person favors in-groups at the expense of out-groups, and so refuses to participate in cultivating a space for flourishing that is open to all of us. Not coincidentally, I think that groups like the Ku Klux Klan are prime exhibitors of severe clannish behavior. The problem with clannishness is that one's moral community becomes artificially small. Instead of recognizing that others are also deserving of moral attention, the clannish person looks out exclusively for herself and for her in-group. The KKK does a whole bunch of horrible things. In addition, though, their inability to take see other people as part of their moral community is very seriously wrong. While times of persecution may make careful attention to one's own community appropriate for the persecuted, this behavior is generally not going to do any good—if we understand our good to be shared.

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56. A bit like Alasdair MacIntyre's just generosity.

On the other side of the spectrum, a free-floating disposition renders one quick to attach to another, but just as quick to become unattached. The free-floating person will accept others, but will not see herself as responsible to them, nor them as responsible for her. I think here of a person who will make quick connections, but who won't follow up meaningfully with these. The problem is that the free-floating person doesn't connect herself with a community. She sees herself as fundamentally a single unit, and so ignores the fact that to live well is to be meaningfully interconnected with the people in her life.

On both ends of this spectrum, then, othering is maintained. For the clannish person, all outsiders remain others. For the free-floating person, even those who were once related to herself can slip out of her community, as she understands it, and into the category of the other yet again. Where familiarizing seeks out relationships to build, protect, and maintain, both clannishness and free-floating undermine these good ends.

Here, I think it might be helpful to consider a practical tip when it comes to familiarizing. If we are wondering, "How can I do some of this barrier breaking that is probably involved in familiarizing?," I think that Maria Lugones' work is a helpful starting place. Lugones describes the concept of loving playfulness in her work. Her image involves traveling between different "worlds," where our "worlds" are the various places and spaces that each of us inhabit.<sup>57</sup> One way of "world"-traveling is to engage in loving playfulness. Playfulness does not have rules; when I play, I am not worried about competence, I am there creatively, I am active rather than passive, I am open to being a fool.<sup>58</sup> When I am playful with others, and successfully travel to their "world," I

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57. Maria Lugones, "'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987), 9–10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810013>.

58. Lugones, 16,17.

understand both “*what it is to be them and what it is to be [myself] in their eyes.*”<sup>59</sup> By being playful with perceived others, I worry less about the complications in establishing new relationships. I do not worry about getting things wrong. I am fully participative in creating a lovingly playful bond between myself and another. Playfulness involves a certain kind of lightness in approach to those around us. I think that understanding playfulness in this way links up nicely with the characteristics of familiarizing that I touched on earlier—attentive engagement, loving understanding, and bonds of care-giving.

Lugones’ proposal to world travel by engaging in loving playfulness is one way of cultivating the family of virtues that make up familiarizing. Tonio’s behavior serves as an excellent model, here. Even when my language proficiency was low, he found ways of playing with my siblings and me that made us feel at ease. By engaging in slapstick humor, and always pretending that he’d place my little brother and his daughter in the rocket ship behind his house—a propane tank—he found simple yet loving ways to show rather than say that we belonged with his family. There are contexts where I can do the same type of thing when I encounter another whose differences may seem insurmountable at first. Complete mutual understanding may seem daunting when meeting a co-worker whose background is totally unlike yours, for example. But starting with friendly conversations on shared ground needn’t be a daunting task. Friendly conversations aren’t the only things that provide easy entryways into interpersonal relationships. Surely, the first small step will look different for different people in their unique contexts. What’s important to remember is that small, friendly, silly, kind, or

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59. Lugones, 17.

other gentle ways of being together don't ask much of us, and these can become a basis for deeper connections down the line.

We can choose to allow fear or uncertainty of the unknowns involved in interpersonal differences to keep us in exclusive contact with people like us. But we can also allow our desire to live well together to encourage us to take simple first steps toward the goal of building communities that include differences and represent the richness of diversity of experience. Setting aside the desire for competence, not because I disrespect some culture or custom, but because I recognize the need for growth before I understand it well, I can engage the person whom I desire to know as belonging *with* myself and vice versa. To adopt into my family is not to reduce another person as being identical to me, or to claim that our histories are the same. Rather, it is to recognize our shared participation in a community of respect, support, and understanding.

Many social discourses that have cropped up paint interpersonal relationship across perceived divides as super burdensome. I often hear the decry, "How can we be expected to adapt to their demands?!" leveled against persons whose own words reveal nothing more than a simple desire for being understood and respected. I have only outlined a tiny picture of how we might begin to engage in such situations well. There are definitely many ways of engaging that ultimately draw us closer to each other rather than further apart. However, what I hope is evident to each of us is that non-engagement is not a viable response if we are interested in flourishing together. Keeping the other at arm's length should never be the default. Also, I hope that I've made a case for engaging each other as family as a fruitful and virtuous starting place for understanding our relationship to each other. Without it, we may be drawn to clannishness or disengagement. But aided

by persons who are virtuous family-builders, we see lives change and relationships grow. Tonio and Mari's virtuous engagement with our family, their refusal to see our differences as insurmountable barriers, was what turned a group of strangers in town into a kind of family.

While I recognize that not all of us are going to be as close as my family is to the Garzas, I do think that there are ways of striving toward this vision of connection in society at large. For one, not all acts of familiarizing are going to lead to close personal friendship. Being the finite critters that we are, it's just impossible to be deeply connected to everyone. And also, in a world where not all of us are virtuous, it may turn out that extending the invitation of family membership to some person or group will be spurned or rejected, maybe even violently. In cases like these, it's quite possible that other virtues will count in favor of keeping a loving distance from these particular people, at least on the individual level. However, I do think that by seeing each other as belonging together, in recognizing that understanding may be a first step in combatting arrogance and close-mindedness, and in finding creative ways of foregrounding our commonalities instead of our differences, we can do a lot better. I'm willing to grant that we won't all have deep feelings of love and respect for each other, and that acting in each other's best interest won't always be exciting or attractive. But I refuse to say that we can't get way, way closer to a world where we see mutual respect and care, even across perceived divides. And I think that a world where we seek to familiarize ourselves with the lives and aspirations of our neighbors, coworkers, and peers brings us much closer to this better world. From there, it is only a matter of time before our social structures shift in response

to our interpersonal relationships. And this, in the wake of a history of othering and alienation, would be a good shift indeed.

## V. GLOBALLY COMPASSIONATE CITIZENS: FORMING MALLEABLE HEARTS IN A SUFFERING WORLD

As I write this, the Christmas season is fast approaching. Advertisers have done a great job of filling my internet browsing with ads for charitable outreaches, promises of the ways that my financial contributions can save people's lives. At the same time, the most recent reports suggest that nearly 250 migrant children have not been reunited with their parents after they were separated from their families over four months ago.<sup>60</sup> Many of them are being detained an afternoon's drive away from me. I am deeply aware that they are part of a group where hundreds were kept in cages or made to sleep in tents—children, kept in cages.<sup>61</sup> I can't help but think of my former kindergarten students when a report tells the story of a six year old boy named Henry getting separated from his mom. On my phone I have a memo of the Christmas gifts I would like to buy for my nuclear family this year. Balancing a tiny budget, I remind myself of how fortunate I am that it is a long list of people.

All of these considerations, which are really unexceptional for many citizens of our globalized world, are the starting point for the discussion that this chapter is engaged in. And this discussion is pretty popular in the world of philosophy, so I'm in good company.<sup>62</sup> Mine is a different approach, though, and it takes up a discussion that Lisa Tessman engages in in her virtue ethical work. In her book, Tessman describes what she calls "burdened virtues," which she defines as those virtues that lead to human

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60. Arelis R. Hernández, "Nearly 250 Migrant Children Still Separated from Parents, ACLE Report Says," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 18 (2018).

61. Monica Akhtar, "'Put in Cages' or 'Taken Care Of': How Separated Immigrant Children Are Housed in Detention," *The Washington Post*, Jun. 18 (2018).

62. Philosophers following Peter Singer's lead, especially in their engagement with the discussion of effective altruism, have explored such topics for many years.

flourishing “because they enable survival of or resistance to oppression ... while in other ways they detract from their bearer’s well-being, in some cases so deeply that their bearer may be said to lead a wretched life.”<sup>63</sup> Tessman concludes that virtues like these make it possible that the person who cultivates them will jeopardize her ability to flourish. But I think we can draw a different conclusion than Tessman. I think that we can be globally compassionate, responding to what we can, and allowing ourselves to be shaped by the problems we cannot actively address. Before we talk about this kind of compassion, though, let’s look at the vices that we are up against.

The two sides of the spectrum that I tried to outline at the start of this chapter are those that Tessman labels directly in her work—indifference and anguish. These are the vices I find myself between when I’m troubled over what to do with money around Christmas or how to respond to the migrant crisis at the border. On the one hand, I am drawn to anguish over the children whose lives are marred by my government’s immigration policy. I am anguished over the decision of whether to send my limited funds to save the lives of people with preventable diseases, or to use that money to buy gifts for my relatives. If I were to be completely anguished, stuck in inaction, made wretched by the vast suffering in the world, I would surely not be behaving virtuously. Becoming so sad that I don’t act at all isn’t praiseworthy or desirable.

If, though, I fall on the opposite extreme, I’m not any better off. On this other side of the spectrum, I am indifferent to others’ suffering, maybe even annoyed by any person or organization’s plea asking me to get involved in addressing global issues. Indifference sounds like, “I just don’t care about this suffering” or “I just can’t bring myself to worry

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63. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 95.

about this evil.” The problem is that, since the virtuous person recognizes that I must be interested in those suffering people’s wellbeing, and that suffering is undermining our shared flourishing, I can’t just ignore them. Indifference, too, is a vicious option. Facing a dilemma between indifference and anguish, Tessman concludes that any mean between these extremes is too anguished and too indifferent at once, that any virtue is somewhat vicious.<sup>64</sup> And her point should not be taken lightly. What does it look like to be somewhat distressed and somewhat aloof? And how can this be said to be a virtuous behavior? I believe that there is an answer, and that it lies in the virtue of compassion.

Mary Elizabeth Collins, Kate Cooney, and Sarah Garlington offer an illuminating discussion on the virtue of compassion in their work. They are interested in the relevance that global issues have in shaping our understanding of compassion’s role in our lives.<sup>65</sup> What sets compassion apart from other, similar virtues is that it is “to be with in suffering.”<sup>66</sup> This idea will immediately strike many of us as deeply uncomfortable, because suffering is not well-accepted or liked, nor is it integral to the ideological frameworks of many industrialized nations.<sup>67</sup> To be compassionate is to join in the suffering of another, to partake in the suffering of the sufferer. That may sound awful to some of us. But let’s see what we can make of it. Collins, Cooney, and Garlington do such a good job of describing this virtue, I’ll just share what they say about it:

Compassion requires an act of shared suffering, making it very difficult in practice. It is not a remote feeling of benevolence exhibited by charitable donation. It is not a feel-good emotion that comes with many volunteering

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64. Tessman, 85.

65. Mary Elizabeth Collins et al. “Compassion in Contemporary Social Polity: Applications of Virtue Theory,” *Journal of Social Policy* 41, iss. 2 (2012): 257, doi: 10.1017/S004727941100078X.

66. Collins et al., 255.

67. Collins et al., 225.

activities. It is not thinking kindly of those less fortunate. It should not be confused with charity.<sup>68</sup>

It is clear that compassion understood in this way involves pain, and so it links up nicely with what Tessman is driving at in her work. Compassion moves me to take up suffering as my own, even if I am not experiencing its causes at present. Compassion shares some features with anguish, in that it is sensitive to the wrong in the world. But as we'll see, it doesn't go as far as anguish does, and so does a better job of setting us up to respond well to the suffering we are made aware of.

Extending compassion to the world community leads me to the term "globalized compassion," which is what I am interested in in this chapter. We are probably familiar with the virtue of compassion when it comes to our relationships with close friends or relatives. However, what the discussions we've looked at here suggest is that compassion should shape our relationship to a much wider community as well. Basically, compassion could extend to my understanding of immigration, or humanitarian need, or any other issue that might be worthy of moral concern. Collins, Clooney, and Garlington say that as long as suffering is a part of the human condition, compassion will permanently be a part of "the virtue mix."<sup>69</sup> That is to say, compassion will be with us forever. I'm inclined to agree. And for those of us living in very interconnected global spaces, there will be a lot to be compassionate about.

What does it mean for us to foster and nurture compassion? Remember our conversation from Chapter Two, when we talked about Aristotle's suggestion that when you are stuck in vice, you must pull yourself away from it, like straightening bent

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68. Collins et al., 259.

69. Collins et al., 265.

wood.<sup>70</sup> I believe that for many of us, the vice that we will be pulling ourselves away from is the vice of indifference. I just think that indifference is the more attractive vice when compared to anguish, and so I imagine that lots of us will struggle with it. And indifference is the easy choice in lives that are saturated by media tellings of horrific injustices—the key here being that they describe immense suffering. It is all too easy to turn away from this deeply sad news, to become cold and desensitized to it. It's tempting to switch the pain off completely. As such, I think that we must be wary of indifference within ourselves.

I also think that we should be wary of behaviors that look like compassion, but that fall short. For example, I think that people like to act out compassionate behavior without fostering compassion at all, by saying the common phrase, "Our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims of *whatever horrible atrocity I've been commissioned to speak publicly about*." I do not think that this phrase usually indicates genuine, lived out compassion. However, I think that it does provide a starting place for explaining what it might look like to actually be compassionate people. Let's see if we can improve on where the hearts and prayers line fails.

Imagine if instead of saying that our thoughts and prayers extend to some suffering victims, we used the phrase, "Our hearts are shaped by your pain, suffering, and experience of injustice," or, directly, "Your suffering shapes my heart." I guess I don't actually mean "imagine we said this thing." What I mean is, imagine if we *meant* what it would be to truthfully say, "Your suffering shapes my heart." Recognizing that some mental space, some lived and significant part of ourselves belongs to the victims

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70. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109b7.

of suffering is a great starting point for compassion, I think. More than that, though, I believe that compassion demands that our hearts be formed and informed by the suffering of the world at large. And while it's worth acknowledging the difficulty of determining to what extent we must inform ourselves of global suffering, I believe that it is very often inappropriate to coldly dismiss accounts of it. Indeed, the "thoughts and prayers" phrase is often a stand-in for the much shallower, harsher, yet nonetheless true phrase, "I will forget and ignore your plight." And compassion refuses to forget or ignore.

Allowing ourselves to suffer with others involves caring for those others—perhaps accomplished through the virtues of familiarizing—refusing to ignore their needs, and doing something about it. And here, I think we must recognize that there are many ways of doing something about suffering, not all of which involve material aid. Also, not all of which involve actually changing one's occupation to address that particular need. In other words, I think that there are ways of allowing compassion to shape our hearts where the action that follows isn't some tangible response to this particular wrong. To be globally compassionate does not mean to act on every single instance of suffering as though it is my personal responsibility to alleviate this injustice.<sup>71</sup> This would just be impossible. Rather, being globally compassionate means really doing what we can about the suffering that we find or make ourselves responsible for, and taking the opportunities we are given to engage in education or advocacy about the rest of it. It means doing this over and over again, with each new discovery or emergence of some suffering that our global community now has as its responsibility to

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71. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 89. Tessman's account seems to suggest that it is my personal responsibility to help to alleviate all suffering caused by injustice.

alleviate—even if my membership in this community does not hold me personally responsible for this particular injustice.

What suffering do we find ourselves responsible for? What suffering do we make ourselves responsible for? These can be tricky questions, especially for those of us with the resources to give a lot, which endows us with the expanded responsibilities that follow. But let's start with the first one. What suffering do we find ourselves responsible for? There are cases where my actions or my membership in a community directly causes suffering or harm. Let's imagine a person who employs full-time workers at her business and pays them the lowest amount allowable with the least amount of benefits. Then, she reads a newspaper article on an employee who has to pick between paying the rent and getting medical care. In a situation like this, the employer is on the hook for that harm. If all other virtues have left that employer unmoved at this point, the pain involved in genuine compassion would prompt the person to ask, "What can be done?" In this situation, it would be quite a lot. The employer should respond to this pain she's caused directly by paying her employees a living wage with adequate benefits. There are situations, though, where responsibility is a lot more complicated, like when I'm buying goods that are made exploitatively or benefiting from a system of injustice. We will talk about taking responsibility for problems like these in a later chapter. But compassion is going to get us to ask whether or not there is a way for me to respond to this pain. And if it turns out that I am responsible for alleviating it, I will be encouraged to act on behalf of the harmed. This is even true if I didn't cause the pain, but do have a relationship that makes me responsible to the person who is suffering. So, if my sister calls me in pain, our relationship means that I should respond to the pain that she's in. To sum it up, then,

I can be responsible for suffering that I cause or for suffering that I am asked to be responsive to because of the relationship that I have with the sufferer.

But what about the second question, what suffering do we make ourselves responsible for? This is a different kind of involvement in responding to pain, because we choose to be accountable for the wrong that has been done. I think that this is what's going on when people get involved in activist causes, particularly if they don't stand to gain from the benefit they are fighting for. The animal welfare activist is going to make herself responsible for responding to the pain that nonhuman animals suffer at the hands of callous or cruel agents. The women's rights activist is going to respond to the painful fallout of those who refuse to recognize women's autonomy, equal moral status, or personhood. Activists make causes for which they are not responsible their own, and so compassion is going to involve them shouldering the responsibility that pain and suffering calls into account. And I think that in a world where the most harmful actors aren't responding with compassion to the pain that they cause, activism is needed. While I don't want to focus too much on who should be an activist or why, I think it makes sense to say that lots of us who can be activists should be, and that this activism should be in response to a suffering or pain that we know needs to be alleviated.

But how do we balance these demands of compassion? How do we do what we can about the suffering that we find or make ourselves responsible for, and take the opportunities we are given to engage in education or advocacy about the rest of it? I think that this will vary from person to person. Let's imagine that Mary is the sole caregiver to a seriously ill child, and while she provides a comfortable life for both of them, she doesn't have expendable income. In her case, the child's pain and suffering is

going to demand her compassionate attention in a big way. It's quite likely that there will be times that compassionate caregiving is going to take up tremendous amounts of energy and focus. If Mary learns about systemic inequality in the educational system, for example, it's unlikely that she will be well suited to become an activist for such a cause. And, considering that she focuses so much of her energy in the relationship with her child, it may well be unreasonable for her to expect to *do* all that much to respond to this systemic wrong. However, having compassion for those children affected by this injustice might involve her researching the candidates on the next ballot and voting appropriately. Maybe compassion means that she'll give her state legislator a call when she's in the car next. Or perhaps she'll make time to join a nearby protest if a friend invites her. But compassion for a person like Mary will have her very tuned into the suffering that she finds herself responsible for responding to, and may level much lighter demands for those things that she makes herself responsible for.

There are certainly situations where the opposite is basically true. There are people for whom the demands of compassion closest to home are just not that big. Responding to local harms and familial suffering isn't all that taxing for some of us. And in these cases, compassion may very well move the virtuous agent to take up responsibility for some issue she is not directly linked to. Activism is on the table for a person like this in a way that it likely isn't for Mary. And for such a person, becoming educated about and engaging in advocacy for other serious wrongs is a more straightforward task.

For people with the freedom to follow compassion that leads far from home, as well as for people who respond to the demands of compassion in a much more personal

way, there is still a need to be attentive to the suffering- and anguish-causing news in the world. And perhaps there will be some issue big enough to change the direction of one's life, an issue that has the person stop and say, "I must do something big about this now." But barring this, navigating between indifference and anguish will have the person doing what she can, responding to that which she can't with a heart that makes space for these others' suffering, and allowing for the needs that have shaped her heart to guide her action. She feels with the sufferers, even if her feeling isn't nearly as big as theirs—compassion isn't about suffering as intensely or for as long as those who are directly suffering. Also, though, the compassionate person recognizes that her finite ability to respond to suffering at large has her focused on those things that she can do. And since this is all she can do, this is all we can expect that virtue will ask of her.

This type of understanding, I think, allows us to successfully situate ourselves in the middle space between indifference and anguish. We are neither wholly indifferent nor wholly anguished. We are distraught, yet wary and wise enough to not engage in each fight against injustice. We feel compassion, and allow our sorrow to shape the virtuous activities that we engage in.

Further, this globally compassionate behavior enables my flourishing, not because suffering is some objective good that I seek, but because it is good in light of my position in a global community. We must recognize that this is true, I contend, by recognizing that it is simply wrong not to suffer, or to avoid suffering at all costs, when suffering is part and parcel of the human experience. To be human is to be suffering, and to be compassionate is to be suffering with. This, I think, eliminates Tessman's concern that to be virtuous in a burdened world is to fail to flourish, as flourishing is related to being

human as well as is possible. Indeed, it is only by accepting and being formed by suffering that I am capable of being fully human. And so, it should come as no surprise that some virtues will help me to engage this suffering well, in the way that globalized compassion does.

## **VI. SOCIAL REASONING ON SOCIAL MEDIA: SPACES FOR REASON IN A CONNECTED WORLD**

At the time of writing this, I have 912 Facebook friends. When I got on Facebook over a decade ago, I kept track of that number and compared it against my friends' friend counts. Now that I'm at this number, I don't really keep it in mind at all—I had to pull up my Facebook to figure out what to say a sentence ago—and if I did care enough to keep track, I'd have nothing to brag about. Most of the friends I'm connected to on social media have well over a thousand connections, and most of my peers have more than one social media account. I have the one, on purpose. I bring all of this up because as you read the chapter I've written, it is helpful for you to know that I come at it with a bias. I'm a bit of a social media luddite compared to most of the folks who I know personally, at least the ones who fall between the ages of thirteen and forty-something. I disclose my bias not to say that all of us should land where I've landed on this. Not at all. This chapter just isn't about convincing you to be as unfriendly to social media as I am. But I do think that my decision to stick with my skepticism of social media platforms is likely what motivates this chapter. Now, I say this and hope that anyone reading this can put this piece of information in its proper place as we engage in the discussion that I hope this chapter opens up to us. Because if it's true that social media platforms and other common ways that we engage in internet connections pose a risk to our collective flourishing, then all of us have good reasons to figure out what to do within the technological world that so many of us partially inhabit.

This chapter will start with a discussion of reasoning, framing it in the way that Anthony Simon Laden does in his book *Reasoning: A Social Picture*. Then, we will focus specifically on the social space that reasoning requires and opens up. The hope is to

outline a way of thinking about reasoning. I imagine that lots of us won't think about reasoning in the way that Laden does, but I think that his view fits really nicely with the vision we've worked within throughout this book. After we look at Laden's work, we will look at some features of social media, then think about the ways that these features might pose challenges to our flourishing. At that point, it will help to draw in Laden's work, allowing us to think about how digital platforms link up with the social spaces that are necessary for reasoning together. And finally, I'll sketch what I think some next steps might be for us if we are interested in creating a healthier digital world for ourselves.

This chapter is a bit unique in that I won't be talking about a specific virtue. That is because the discussion that we are having here takes a step back from the practice of virtue itself, and looks at the conditions that we need to practice virtue in the first place. Think back to our conversation about dreamsicles and wardrobes from the second chapter: we wouldn't say that someone is living a good life if she is forced to live in a wardrobe and is fed a diet of pure dreamsicles. The point behind this example is that certain conditions are necessary for human flourishing. We can do our best with bad situations, but if the situations are bad enough, we can't be said to truly flourish. As this chapter will make clear, I think that the same is true for the exercise of the social virtues. We need to meet certain conditions for our environments to be conducive to the exercise of social virtues which enable our flourishing. I think that the same is true for our digital environments, and I think that if we aren't careful, those conditions are easily *not* met. Meaning, if we aren't careful, I think that our digital environments don't allow us to practice the social virtues and so flourish together. If this is the case, it's kind of a big deal, especially because so many of us spend so much time on platforms like these.

So, what goes into creating an environment where we can practice the social virtues? Laden's discussion of reasoning as a social picture is super helpful, here. As he explains it, most of us likely think of reasoning as a kind of cold, calculative, premise and conclusion involving affair.<sup>72</sup> On the common picture, reasoning is something that helps us to win fights against each other, or to stand side by side to express a rational view. If you were to describe reasoning by making reference to stuffy academics or politicians on a debate stage, then you might be thinking about reason in the cold, calculative way that Laden will ultimately reject. While there is the space and time for that kind of reasoning, I am inclined to agree with Laden that "reasoning is a (perhaps the) central activity of living together because in reasoning we are relating to one another in ways that are reciprocal and responsive to each other."<sup>73</sup> And if this is the case, I just don't think that the cold kind of reasoning is going to be what gets us to a flourishing and inclusive collectivity. Laden's social picture of reasoning provides a much more human alternative, and gives us a way of figuring out what kind of reasoning we should strive for in our collective life.

The social picture of reasoning that Laden paints involves four key features. First, on this picture, reasoning is "social, and ongoing and largely consists of the issuing of invitations to take what we say as speaking for our interlocutors as well."<sup>74</sup> By virtue of it being ongoing, reasoning "means you leave some space for [your interlocutors] to make a difference in what you do."<sup>75</sup> Second, in our issuing of invitations, we don't act as

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8. 72. Anthony Simon Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012),

73. Laden, 12.

74. Laden, 10—11.

75. Laden, 28.

legislators over one another, and we allow for the creation of a space of reasons where we can relate to one another in ways that previously were impossible.<sup>76</sup> Third, in speaking for each other, we find ways of articulating positions that are mutually agreeable to us.<sup>77</sup> But fourth, and most importantly for this chapter, reasoning is a social activity. It's something we do with other people.

There are a few things that are important to understand in order to grasp what Laden means by this fourth point, when he calls reasoning a social activity. By saying that reasoning is social, Laden means that in reasoning, a natural "openness to criticism" is involved; there is also the fact that in sharing reasons with each other, we must extend "a genuine offer, an invitation;" this invitation leaves open the necessity that it be accepted in order to reason together; and the "acceptance of reason, then, involves an acknowledgement that we share some, perhaps small, space of reasons."<sup>78</sup> The posture of receptivity, the unassuming extension of invitations, and the inhabiting of a shared space are all key features of reasoning together. At this point, I hope that the relationship between understanding reasoning this way and picturing flourishing as collective is clear. Let's draw it out, though.

If we are going to flourish together, we are going to have to live together. And if we are going to look for the best for each other, we can't think of other human persons as our adversaries. We have to work with them, to build shared spaces with them. And reasoning together helps us to do that. The conversations that shape our shared lives cannot be divisive and polarizing. Instead, they should work to draw us into relationship

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76. Laden, 33.

77. Laden, 38.

78. Laden, 15.

with each other. If these things are true, then it makes a lot of sense to describe reasoning in the way that Laden does. Like he says, “with the aid of the social picture,” we can think of alternatives to an adversarial picture of reasoning “where those who disagree come to see each other not as opponents and obstacles, but as partners from whom they might learn and with whom they might search for truly shared modalities of living together.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, both the collective picture of flourishing and the social picture of reasoning have a key feature in common—they understand human people’s lives as a shared life. What does this shared life require? It requires the creation of a shared space. Let’s look at what Laden has in mind for a space like this.

When saying that reasoning creates a space, Laden thinks that this idea of “space” works in three ways. It works in a “mathematical sense,” because reasons are not “merely a set of discrete points,” but a set of connected norms that govern the activity of reasoning.<sup>80</sup> The metaphor works in the “geographic sense” because reasons “constitute a realm that we can occupy.”<sup>81</sup> And finally, saying that we inhabit a space of reasons works in the most common sense of the phrase, because this space is “essentially public, social, and shareable.”<sup>82</sup> This last point, I think, is the most important. Drawing from the idea that reasoning must be public and sharable suggests that there are some governing standards that shape this practice; the most basic standard is that we must be mutually intelligible.<sup>83</sup> This requires that we use a shared language and say things in appropriate contexts, because if we don’t do those things, then we can’t be said to understand each

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79. Laden, 10.

80. Laden, 17.

81. Laden, 17.

82. Laden, 17.

83. Laden, 18.

other, much less reason with each other.<sup>84</sup> If we want to reason together, we need to create spaces where we can come together, reason together, and work towards understanding each other.

The last thing that I want to say about Laden's book before we talk about how it relates to social media is to point out what he says happens when reasoning fails. When reasoning fails, "we find ourselves alone, unable to reach out to others around us, to make ourselves intelligible to them, to interact with them as fellow subjects."<sup>85</sup> The opposite of community is isolation, and the failure of reasoning to create shared spaces leaves us isolated. Reasoning serves as a kind of bridge between us, because "it involves not only saying things that are intelligible to others, but others hearing what we say as intelligible."<sup>86</sup> So, to share this world well is to reason together, and to reason together well is to create a shared world. Laden recognizes the importance of building a world together, because it is not until we have a built world that we are able to share it.<sup>87</sup>

To recap: reasoning is something that we do with other people; it understands our lives as being shared; when it's done well, it opens up a space where we can understand each other; and if it fails, we are left in isolation. With this in mind, we can now ask what implications this has if we want to create a kind of shared space where we can flourish together. So, what implications does it have? For one, it means that if we want to live together, we have to reason together. And if we want to reason together, we need to make sure that we have spaces that are governed by shared norms, that allow us to occupy them, and that are public. Without a place of reasons that is shared in these ways, we will

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84. Laden, 18.

85. Laden, 22.

86. Laden, 23.

87. Laden, 23.

end up isolated. While Laden doesn't make this point, I think we also run the risk of ending up *isolated with select others* who think of reasoning in the way that we do. Even if we aren't alone, we might isolate ourselves into echo chambers. I worry that if this happens we'll end up with a bunch of factions whose individual members are willing to share reasons with each other, but who aren't willing share reasons with other isolated groups. We end up with the kind of picture that Laden describes on the individual level with the traditional picture of reasoning—individual folks who want to wage rational war against each other in order to win a fight—but instead of single persons we get groups of likeminded people. So, by building on Laden's view, we can see that a breakdown of social reasoning can either lead to isolation or to waging factions. What matters for our purposes is that neither of these outcomes is going to lead to the flourishing of an inclusive collectivity. And this means that we need to be very wary of spaces like these. Like imagined wardrobes, these spaces of isolation prohibit our flourishing, and so pose the most basic of risks to our leading the good life. And this is where Laden's conversation links up with social media platforms. This is because I worry that the digital spaces of social media platforms pose this most basic of risks.

In order to see why I worry about that, let's return to what a healthy space of shared reasons requires. As we saw earlier, the posture of receptivity, the unassuming extension of invitations, and the inhabiting of a shared space are all really important features of reasoning together. If these three things break down, we have reason to worry that the space that we need if we want to reason together no longer exists. So, to see if social media is a space like this, we can ask: do we assume a posture of receptivity in digital spaces? Do we offer unassuming extensions of invitations in these spaces? Do we

inhabit a shared space—with a shared, mutually intelligible language—in this digital world? I think that the answer to these questions is going to be maybe, but often no. The “maybe” part of this answer means that using these digital platforms is allowable. It also means that using digital platforms admits of reform. And the “but often no” part of the answer means that we run the risk of entering spaces that do not admit of flourishing when we use digital platforms.

Let’s focus on a distinction real quick: the risk of not cultivating virtue is different than being barred from virtue. The first means we need to be careful, the second means we need to avoid situations like these at most all costs. I think that social media platforms pose the first kind of problem—they are spaces where we run the risk of not cultivating virtue. We will focus on what a healthy social media space would look like later in this chapter, but that the creation of such a space is possible means that we don’t all have to go offline. That, I think, is a good thing.

However, it’s also a smart idea to not overlook the risks. I believe that three features of social media platforms make them risky places if the goal is being able to reason well together. These three features are: the audiences we have on social media, the form of social media posts or stories, and the self that social media users construct in these spaces. It is because of the people we reach, the way that we reach them, and the personas we take on in reaching these people that makes me worry that digital platforms can make it very difficult to exercise virtue. We will look at each of these risk factors in turn. But first, let’s briefly consider whether we should really care about what happens on these platforms in the first place. After all, if engaging in digital spaces doesn’t occupy much of our lives, then we may not have reason to be worried at all.

How much time are we actually spending on these platforms? Our individual answers to this question may leave us more or less worried that we are engaging in spaces where virtue may be impossible, but it is helpful to think about the trends. A Nielsen report from 2018 shows that “U.S. adults are spending almost half of every day interacting with media. Overall total media use remains unchanged year-over-year at *10-and-a-half hours a day*, or 44% of the total minutes available in a day.”<sup>88</sup> Not even close to all of this time is spent on social media, being that the most common way that people interact with media is TV, followed by radio.<sup>89</sup> However, almost four hours of the average adult’s day is being spent on the internet on a computer, on an app or the web on a smartphone, or on an app or the web on a tablet.<sup>90</sup> Now, if we are concerned with the kind of interactions we are having with each other, we’d have less reason to worry if we spent much more time with each other in person. We might say, “Even if I’m not practicing virtue online, I get plenty of chance to practice it in person!” However, a survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics from 2018 shows that most people fifteen and up spend a mere 0.64 hours of their day “socializing and communicating.”<sup>91</sup> That’s 39 minutes spent “socializing and communicating, such as visiting with friends or attending or hosting social events,” the kind of in person activities where we might practice virtue

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88. “U.S. Consumers are Shifting the Time They Spend with Media.” Nielsen Newswire, March 19, 2019. [nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2019/us-consumers-are-shifting-the-time-they-spend-with-media/](https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2019/us-consumers-are-shifting-the-time-they-spend-with-media/). Emphasis mine.

89. “Time Flies: U.S. Adults Not Spend Nearly Half a Day Interacting with Media,” *Nielsen Newswire*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2018/time-flies-us-adults-now-spend-nearly-half-a-day-interacting-with-media/>.

90. “Time Flies.”

91. “Average Hours per Day Spent in Selected Leisure and Sports Activities by Age,” *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/charts/american-time-use/activity-leisure.htm>.

face to face.<sup>92</sup> That means that if even just twenty percent of the time that you spend on devices that connect to social media is devoted to using those platforms, then you are likely spending more time interacting with others online than in leisurely socialization and communication. So, the “I don’t need to worry about virtue online because I practice it most in person” argument doesn’t work very well.

It’s trickier to find good research on how much time is spent engaging with family. But no matter the estimate, I worry that the opportunity to cultivate the social virtues will be seriously limited if so much of the time we spend socializing is in contexts where it’s really hard to be virtuous. So, I think we have good reason to worry about whether or not we have the potential to flourish in using the digital media platforms that connect us.

I think that our worries may be intensified when we examine why people get on social media platforms in the first place. After all, if most of us hop online to laugh at funny memes, then we wouldn’t need to worry about whether we are reasoning well, being that reasoning isn’t what we’re looking to do in the first place. However, a survey conducted by GlobalWebIndex in 2017 shows that many users answer the question “What are your main reasons for using social media?” in ways that show a desire to reason, at least as Laden understands reasoning. For Laden, if reasoning is an ongoing activity, then “understanding it requires investigating the whole range of casual conversation and idle chatter, interactions that have no particular end or aim, but which serve to situate and resituate us vis-à-vis each other in social spaces, and thus not only to

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92. “American Time Use Survey Summary.” *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Last modified June 19, 2019. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htmnielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2019/us-consumers-are-shifting-the-time-they-spend-with-media/>.

invoke shared spaces of reasons but to construct them.”<sup>93</sup> This means that the kinds of conversation that just help us to connect with each other get counted as reasoning. Considering that 41% of users say that one of their main reasons for using social media is “to stay up-to-date with news and current events,” 34% use it for “general networking with other people,” 30% use it “to share my opinion,” and 27% use it “to meet new people,” I think it makes sense to say that social media platforms are spaces that people use for social reasoning.<sup>94</sup> So, since many of us use social media quite a bit, and those of us who do are likely to use it for at least one of these reasoning activities, it seems that we should be concerned with what kinds of spaces that these are.

Now, let’s return to the features of social media platforms that I think potentially pose barriers to our flourishing. First, there is the audience. While the terms “friends” and “followers” suggests a sort of proximity between the platform user and the people with whom she is connected, the truth is that this audience admits of a huge variety of people. Between close connections, one is likely connected to some family members, old friends, and coworkers. Then there is the inevitable friend from elementary school, the ex’s friend that you actually got along with, the aunt—cousin?—you met once when your family still did reunions. While the kind of random acquaintanceship varies person to person, the point is that social media isn’t about just connecting with one particular group of people. And while platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat have features that are designed to put you in touch with one small group at a time, the driving idea behind these platforms is to get you to connect with lots of different people. This isn’t problematic in

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93. Laden, *Reasoning*, 31.

94. Olivia Valentine, “Top 10 Reasons for Using Social Media,” *GlobalWebIndex*, January 11, 2018, <https://blog.globalwebindex.com/chart-of-the-day/social-media/>.

itself. But when we think about the fact that reasoning requires us to have a shared, public space in which we are mutually intelligible, the fact that our audience is so wide complicates things.

What do I mean when I say that having a wide audience makes it hard for us to be mutually intelligible? Think first about posting a cute picture of your dog or kids. Messages like these just don't need much contextualization—these pictures can probably speak for themselves. But, when you post “The Left has resorted to abusing the vulnerability of children to further a fraudulent agenda. Do not allow these people to brainwash future generations!,” or share a GIF that fat-shames women, or declare that anyone who thinks capitalism is a good idea is a moral monster, or post a message comparing women who have had abortions to murderers, you are sharing a message with an audience which has members that are unlikely to find you intelligible. I say this because when I've seen these messages posted by people I know, I think, “*I just don't understand!*” And while it is tempting to reply that I do understand, and that these people are just plain vicious or ignorant, I know that is not always the case. I know because in having conversations with some friends—actual, real life friends—who have posted things like this, I learn that they would *never* use language like this in real life. I learn that they don't even believe their message in an unqualified way. I know that in real life, the picture, or graphic, or catchy slogan is just in the neighborhood of their truly held beliefs on the subject they've used Facebook to shout about. I understand that after talking to them. I also know that not all poorly phrased or insensitive posts are proof that the people who posted them were acting maliciously. I know this because when memories pop up on my timeline from forever ago, and I read them from my current perspective, I hope that

the adults who saw my timeline back then understood my meaning—I sound pretty rough, but know that young me wasn’t trying to behave badly. Friends who actually know you know what you mean—that you didn’t mean it that way, or that you were joking, tastelessly, but joking—but your meaning is not intelligible to so much of your audience. And being intelligible is a prerequisite to being able to reason together in the meaningful, social way that Laden talks about.

Yes, if the person writing up these posts, tweets, or statuses just didn’t say things like these in the first place—things that need context or background that the audience doesn’t and cannot easily get—then there wouldn’t be an issue to begin with. This is why the fact that we can connect so broadly just isn’t a bad thing in itself. But when it comes to fostering environments of mutual intelligibility, the fact that anyone with an email address has the platform to blast messages like these to hundreds of people magnifies the effects of what could otherwise be a small act of viciousness. Perhaps even, if sentiments like the ones I mentioned had been expressed to one’s friends in a smaller context, a friend’s conscientious, understanding response would allow the possibility for the speaker to grow in virtue. On social media platforms, though, the kind of work that would be involved in making sure that we understand each other to begin with often goes undone. And the mystifying messages stay there for acquaintances, siblings, and coworkers to scroll past. I think that social media platforms are the perfect *types* of places to ensure that hundreds of people seem way less intelligible to each other than they ever would seem in person.

The problem with social media audiences is even bigger, though. This is because the audience one has in social media is self-selective. That is, one can choose who is and

is not a part of the audience that one reaches in her posts, tweets, or stories. This is sort of an opposite problem to the one I just discussed, in that social media—in addition to posing the problem of having an extremely wide and varied audience—also enables the user to create a narrow, echo chamber of an audience. You can make sure that only like-minded friends stay in your newsfeed. In fact, users seem to find this feature attractive, as is evidenced by posts with messages like “Guess who will still be your friend no matter who you vote for. Not this bitch” with thousands of shares; or “If you’re a Trump supporter and you see me making fun of Trump supporters, I just want to say that I am talking about you personally and I hope you’re offended because I think you’re stupid” which has almost 20,000 shares; or the kinds of posts that are part of the “Unfriend Me” category, which refers to the sea of content that tags #UnfriendMe on a post that makes a claim about some particular issue. Whether a social media user invites her contacts who disagree on with her to unfriend her, or selectively unfriends all of those contacts who express their distasteful beliefs on the platform, these virtual spaces are created to be shaped by each user. So, these platforms are designed to be able to be made into digital echo chambers, where everyone you interact with agrees with you on the issues you care most about.

The nature of social media audiences, which are easily so broad as to make mutual understanding impossible, and are designed to be tailorable to be made into echo chambers, threatens all three standards of social reasoning. Within these spaces, the posture of receptivity is optional, the extension of invitations is easily turned into the invitation to cut off socialization rather than extend it, and the spaces are not shared in ways that make them into spaces of mutual intelligibility. So, I worry that if the user is

not careful, she won't be reasoning in the way that she wants, and certainly not in a way that puts her in a position that promotes her virtue. This is what I mean when I say that social media platforms are risky because of their audiences.

The second risk that I want to talk about is the form that interactions take on social media sites. Specifically, it is the short, bite-sized nature of the information that poses a risk to our ability to make these platforms into spaces of reasoning. Twitter is a platform which serves as a prime example of this feature of social media, as it enforces a 280 character limit per tweet (although users can get around this feature by posting multiple tweets in a series to form a continuous thought). On Facebook, to view a post with more than 477 characters, the user must click "See More" to read the post in its entirety. On Instagram, this is much shorter, as captions with more than 125 characters require a "See More" click. Unsurprisingly, longer posts receive less attention almost by definition, and users are encouraged to keep it short in order to boost their presence. Not all social media platforms share this feature. But the ones that do award brevity and discourage lengthy expression.

Let's agree that it is *possible* to express a well-formed, properly contextualized thought in a small amount of space. But even if it's possible, this is a tricky task. This means that the kind of reasoning that users hope to engage in has to work within the radical constraint of extreme brevity, or this reasoning gets pushed into comments on posts or private messages. Those who mainly communicate on these platforms through sharing content to their page are forced to reason in this odd kind of constrained way. It is odd, because in-person reasoning barely ever is shaped by such harsh time or space constraints. I'm reminded of trying to talk to my loved ones abroad when my family still

had to pay for international calling cards, and the kind of quick—“How are you? Great? Okay, bye!”—exchanges that we shared in order to save money. We never got into long, deep discussions on the phone, in those days. On social media platforms, instead of saving money, we save time. But in saving time, we sacrifice depth of interaction and prolongment of discourse that deserves extended engagement. Again, this feature of brevity isn’t bad if we are doing things like checking in with loved ones or sharing cute pictures of our dogs. But brevity becomes an issue if we are looking to express our opinions on a subject, to discuss divisive news, to get into controversial issues, or a whole bunch of things that demand space and time.

Remembering that reasoning together requires our receptivity, unassuming extension of invitations, and inhabiting of shared space, we should pause to see how the format of social media puts constraints on all of these acts. We have to recognize that if we want to give interpersonal exchanges the attention they deserve, we need to have the time and space to talk something out, give multiple reasons for our position, and listen for more than 300 characters’ worth of discourse, among other things. And recognizing this gives us really good reason to doubt whether we will be able to reason well when such constraints are in place. So, this is why I worry about the form of social media. I think that it forces our exchanges to be made in formats that make it really super hard to reason well together.

Finally, the last thing that I want to focus on when it comes to social media platforms is the self that users construct in social media spaces. As I mentioned earlier, a feature of these platforms is that they give users the ability to express their thoughts in ways that they might not express them in real life. And while this isn’t inherently

problematic, the kind of anonymity that these virtual spaces offers does, in fact, lead to real harm. A place where we see this in full force is in the problem of cyberbullying. This uniquely digital extension of interpersonal torment is a problem that's made worse by anonymity, which "is considered a crucial predictor of the *severity* of cyberbullying."<sup>95</sup> The more anonymous the user, the more severe the cyberbullying. Further, when the platform allows the user to feel anonymous, this perception serves as a predictor for "crueler online behavior."<sup>96</sup> Now, being that much social media use is not anonymous, it doesn't make sense for us to spend a lot of time on this point. However, anonymous cyberbullying shares a key feature with everyday social media use—namely, when sharing online, you don't have to look your conversation partner in the face.

These platforms provide a kind of digital separation to their users. And this separation gives its users the ability to say or express things without seeing the ramifications of these words or expressions. While this impersonality may be a benefit for the mild-mannered among us who hope to speak up against injustice, this depersonalizing feature of social media platforms makes it easier to stand in a posture, *not* of receptivity, but of hostility. I say this based on the uncontroversial belief that it is easier to be cruel when you don't have to see how your actions are hurting another person, and additionally, when you don't have to listen to what that person might say in return. And when hostility replaces receptivity, we don't have the kind of social space that we need in order to reason well together.

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95. Knack, J.M., P. Iyer-Eimerbrink, and R. Young. "Anonymity of Cyberbullying." In *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*, edited by Weekes-Shackelford V., Shackelford T., and Weekes-Shackelford V. Springer, Cham: 2016.

96. Knack.

In addition to altering the selves that we present on social media—selves who may be more hostile or less sensitive than our real life persons—social media has some worrisome effects on our physical selves. A study put together by the Royal Society for Public Health in the UK collected data on the effects that social media has on young people in particular. These negative effects span the spectrum from body image issues, to sleep deprivation, to heightened anxiety. In their comparison of these negative effects to the positive effects of social media, the study found that the only social media platform that ranks as having a “Net Positive” effect on young people’s health and wellbeing is Youtube; the worst is Instagram.<sup>97</sup> On Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram, young people reported to what extent social media platforms “made certain health-related factors better or worse.”<sup>98</sup> Across these platforms, with the exception of Youtube, respondents indicated that the following factors were made worse by their social media use: anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep, body image, bullying, and FoMo (fear of missing out).<sup>99</sup> Granted, this study is limited to 14–24 year olds. However, it is striking to realize the ways that these platforms—that so many of use for much of our time, with the hope that they will to help us to reason together—have such wide-reaching negative effects on our well-being. Now, this wouldn’t be reason alone to abandon social media platforms. You could argue or hope that the goods we get out of social media are worth suffering the bad effects. But even if this is true, some startling studies definitely prompt us to think about how these platforms are affecting us. I think that if we aren’t careful,

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97 “#Status of Mind,” *Royal Society for Public Health*, May 2017, <https://www.rsph.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/d125b27c-0b62-41c5-a2c0155a8887cd01.pdf>, 18.

98. “#Status of Mind,” 17.

99. “#Status of Mind.”

these platforms will both affect us in real life and will lead us to behave poorly in the digital spaces we inhabit.

This real-world reminder of the way that social media platforms affect many of us helps us to recall Laden's warning. What happens when reasoning fails? We are left alone. Young people self-report loneliness as an effect of their social media usage. This is not inconsequential. As I said, I think that we may be left alone with likeminded folks in factions, which doesn't enable healthy reasoning. Keeping all of this in mind, I think it makes sense to say that we have good reason to worry about the way that social media platforms affect our selves.

So, let's consider the following: social media platforms allow you to tailor your audience, which might make an audience so broad that some things become unintelligible or so narrow that you're sure that only people who agree with you will hear you in the first place. Next, the form of the content makes it harder to engage in deep discussion and incentivizes short, superficial contact. And finally, these spaces make it easy to slip into a vicious persona, and can have bad effects on your actual wellbeing. If we aren't careful to avoid engaging in spaces that have these features, or in ways that are not properly responsive to those unavoidable features, then I think we have reason to worry that we won't reason well. We won't be receptive to audiences that can't communicate clearly and who we have hand-picked; we can't extend meaningful invitations if those with whom we disagree opt out from the outset; and we can't inhabit a shared space well when the selves who inhabit these spaces are vicious or are damaged *because of* operating in these spaces. All of this is to say, I think that social media platforms run the real risk of

damaging our chances of reasoning well and together. And if this is the case, then I think we need to take this risk very seriously.

However, like I said earlier in this chapter, I don't intend for this to be a "Get off of social media now!" kind of writing. Instead, I think that this information equips us to think about what kinds of spaces we want to build in the digital world. For one, I think that we need to be conscious of our audiences when engaging on these platforms. It strikes me as a poor choice to eliminate everyone who disagrees with you from your social groups, creating a virtual echo chamber of likeminded peers. It also strikes me as a bad idea to phrase things in a way that may need more context than you will or can give; this is especially bad if the goal is to be understood by everyone your post will reach. Next, I think that it is important to be aware of the space constraints of social media platforms. Not all conversations should take place in these compacted spaces. And those conversations that aren't cut short by being sized down should get special attention because of their public nature. Finally, we should be careful to behave in ways that promote our and others' flourishing and well-being. This means wording our thoughts in respectful ways, and ensuring that we are taking care of ourselves in the spaces where we speak.

While I'm a bit skeptical that ordinary social media use allows the user to cultivate social virtues, there are some cases that give me hope. One is the story of Megan Philips-Roth, the granddaughter of the founder of Westboro Baptist Church—which is infamous for protesting soldiers' funerals and teaching that God hates gay people. While we can be all for churches, I think that Westboro Baptist is a good example of a really problematic community. Anyhow, Megan met her now-husband through Twitter, and

their interactions there paved the way for their long-term relationship and her journey out of Westboro Baptist.<sup>100</sup> Her story shows us that social media can be a catalyst for positive, interpersonal development and change. Speaking personally, I know that there are relationships that social media has helped me to maintain, and some important conversations that it has allowed me to have. So, it seems like there are at least some good ways of using social media platforms.

What we need to do is to work toward more cases of successful socialization and reasoning, and away from those risks that threaten our ability to engage in the very human interpersonal good of reasoning together. If we don't, we run the risk of stopping our virtuous development before it really gets a chance to start. And if we do manage to use these tools well, we are able to throw open the door to a world of possibility in a technological field that promises constant development and exciting change. My hope is that more and more of us as individuals and as communities are able to do the second kind of thing.

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100. Terry Gross, "How Twitter Helped Change the Mind of a Westboro Baptist Church Member," *NPR*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/10/768894901/how-twitter-helped-change-the-mind-of-a-westboro-baptist-church-member>.

## VII. COURAGEOUS COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTION: STANDING UP FOR BETTER IN AN UNJUST WORLD

*“My life is not easy. I’ve had to work hard for what I have, to get ahead. Hard work pays off. If everyone stopped complaining long enough to get some work done, they might learn that for themselves instead of blaming other people for their problems.”*

*“I’m just a man that happens to have been born white.”<sup>101</sup>*

*“Sure, I think that there’s such a thing as privilege. All groups have privileges—whether you’re white or black, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, male or female—those privileges are just different depending on what you happen to look like. It doesn’t make sense to say that just one group has a privilege.”*

I have heard all of these lines of reasoning either in person or in the media. People who look like me and my family are the most common mouthpieces for sentiments like these, although white people are surely not the only group with members who believe that privilege either doesn’t exist or is actually just a leftist way of saying “merit” or “advantage.” Privilege isn’t a synonym for “a good thing about being who you are” or “an advantage you have in life.” So, that’s a source of a lot of confusion. But this chapter really isn’t about explaining the difference between privilege and benefit, or privilege and oppression, or privilege and work ethic. Instead, this chapter is about community

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101. Don Gonyea, “Majority of White Americans Say They Believe Whites Face Discrimination,” NPR, October 24, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/24/559604836/majority-of-white-americans-think-theyre-discriminated-against>.

membership and creation, and how to engage in these activities in a way that is responsive to the privileges that you might have in your life.

Through my personal experience of coming to understanding the concept of privilege and how it works in real life, I have become increasingly aware of the wide variety of ways that people are made to reckon with the communities of which they are a part. The fact that this realization has been a journey rather than an immediate fact of life for me is evidence of privilege itself. In fact, the white, conservative South Louisiana community that I spent high school in formed part of the story that made me think that privilege was only something that the rich and powerful had to worry about. It wasn't until later that I began to wrestle with the idea that I—a white, straight, able-bodied, college educated, Christian person—might have some privileges to respond to as well. All of us form parts of communities that come to be in any number of ways, whether it is through birth, socioeconomic status, education, or otherwise. And all of us have to reckon with the groups that we are born into, or are educated, working, or living in—good or bad, healthy or toxic. At least, very few of us live lives hermitted enough to avoid such a task. I will call this reckoning with our group membership “community construction,” because, so long as one's acts within her community of privilege, she helps to construct and to shape it. This is true even if she just works to maintain her community; without actions of maintenance or continuation, the communities we are a part of would lose their shape. So while it might be tempting to think of certain privileged categories as unchangeable or fixed, luckily for all of us, the communities of which we are a part admit of change. This means that each of us has a role to play in how these communities are constructed.

At its foundation, this chapter is about how to construct communities that enable their members to flourish. We will start by exploring Lisa Tessman’s view of inclusive collectivities and the implication that this view has for members of privileged communities. Then, we will look briefly at the way that privilege operates. After this, we will dive into our conversation on courage, what feelings it involves, what its opposing vices of cowardice and rashness look like, and how it might operate within communities of privilege. To start, though, it is important to understand what kind of a large-scale community it is that we are trying to build through our exercise of the virtues.

In her chapter “The Ordinary Vices of Domination,” Tessman embraces the Aristotelian idea that virtue and flourishing “are tied and that the sociality and interdependence of humans makes *eudaimonia* impossible to achieve outside of a social collectivity.”<sup>102</sup> However, not any community will do. Rather, we must work to form communities that promote and enable flourishing. Tessman argues that there must be the stipulation that “the pursuit of one’s own flourishing cannot qualify as morally praiseworthy ... unless one is engaged, as part of that pursuit, in promoting the flourishing of *an inclusive collectivity*.”<sup>103</sup> This is where the point becomes uncomfortable for many to stomach, as objections to the idea of privilege such as the ones I painted at the start of this chapter come in with full force.

While it is tempting to view privileged groups as “living the good life”—and while a comfort-based conception of the human good would support a view like this—recognizing that flourishing requires the good of an inclusive collectivity leads us to what Tessman articulates so well in her chapter. Namely, while “one would expect conditions

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102. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 72.

103. Tessman, 75–76. Emphasis mine.

of oppression to prevent the victims rather than the beneficiaries of these conditions from living the good life,” it is actually “more plausible to conceive of the privileged as morally deficient than as morally good, since their privileges result from *unjust* social positions.”<sup>104</sup> While privileged persons may be comfortable, their unjust social advantages put them in the starting position of moral deficiency. Benefiting from injustice isn’t good for your character. Now, privilege is obviously *way more harmful* for the people who are victims of unjust systems. This is important and true, and should absolutely motivate us to act relentlessly on behalf of victims of injustice. But we can also recognize that those who benefit from privileges don’t get to be called morally good if they simply accept those benefits.

Let’s pause for a second to take in some more implications of Tessman’s view. To do so, consider a snapshot of what this might mean in practice. Picture a commercial-style panorama of a white, middle-class family seated around table for Thanksgiving dinner. A perfectly cooked turkey is in focus, surrounded by steaming side dishes. The shot only lasts for eleven seconds, but you can see that Grandpa is laughing, holding his wife’s hand. Kids and grandkids are chatting with each other, telling old stories. Everyone seems really happy—a kind of rare, cherished moment in a family’s private life. Right before we cut to black, the family takes hold of each other’s hands and bow their heads to say grace before the meal.

I like this example because it is relatable to me, being that I’ve enjoyed Thanksgivings that look a lot like this. I also like it because I think that, for lots of readers, it will conjure up warm sentiments. Like, even if this isn’t what your family

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104. Tessman, 53.

looks like around a table, it's the *kind of* thing that America was made to make possible. A lot of us might see such events or moments as providing the reason for doing we do what we do—as a goal to attain or an ideal to pursue. Tessman, on the other hand, suggests that Thanksgivings like the ones I have loved for a lifetime are not snapshots of upright, virtuous communities in action *as long as* the members of those communities aren't seeking the "well-being of those whose very lack of well-being may have been a condition of [their] privileges."<sup>105</sup> That is, if the backstory of this commercially-shot family doesn't involve the active pursuit of the wellbeing of those who had to be down in order for them to be up, this white, middle-class family *cannot* be said to be flourishing.<sup>106</sup> This view makes sense when we remember how we as persons are interdependent, and so cannot be said to be truly flourishing if life is lived in isolation. It's a cutting view, though, and it stands in stark juxtaposition to the kinds of ideals that many hold dear.

Since this chapter is meant to help us to figure out how to build good communities that we can flourish in, I want to address ways of doing that from positions of privilege. I take this approach not because oppressed communities cannot construct themselves in ways that best allow for flourishing. Rather, I take this approach because I believe that the most effective way to get at a widespread social construction of healthy community structure is to involve oppressors in that task. While much literature focuses on privileged groups, I often find that this literature is slanted. Overwhelmingly, it seems that conversation focused on privileged groups makes it sound like those in a position of

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105. Tessman, 76.

106. While I said I wouldn't use this chapter to define privilege, this is how I, along with many others, understand it. Privilege is the backside of the coin of oppression. Where there is oppression there is privilege.

privilege would be “helping from the top.” This is frustrating and problematic on a number of levels, one of which is illustrated by the phenomenon of the “savior complex.” Indeed, privileged persons may very well not be the saviors that anyone needs, and any aid that does not foreground the needs and desires of the people you’re trying to help is not much of a help to begin with. So, I think it’s right to resist efforts that try to enlist the help of the privileged on the basis of making those helpers into “saviors” who feel gratified by their own good deeds. This chapter is *not at all* an effort like that one. Rather, this chapter is a call to courageous community construction, spurred by the recognition that oppression cultivates vice in the life of the oppressor while also harming those oppressed by one’s unjust advantages.

This isn’t a call to help from the top, then. Instead, this is a call to start from the bottom, not reaching out from a place of comfort in one’s good fortune, but in an effort to see that the goods one unjustly enjoys are distributed justly so that everyone can ultimately flourish. Indeed, if one either positively endorses her unjust privileges or “exhibits a culpable passive acceptance” of them, then she isn’t at the top of anything that one should be morally comfortable with.<sup>107</sup> The privileged person who responds to her privileges, then, isn’t leaning down from a high castle. Instead, she recognizes that what unjust privileges she has endow her with the responsibility of undoing them. And until she undoes them, she isn’t even in the position to be a right recipient of moral praise.

For those who would be tempted to skip this chapter, thinking that maybe they aren’t morally responsible for privilege—either because they don’t have it, or because they don’t have a responsibility to do anything about it if they do—I want to encourage a

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107. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 54.

pause on that. I don't think that this chapter will exclude many people from being *exactly* the kind of audience members that I think should think hard about this subject. Privilege takes many forms. And even if there are practical reasons that make you feel irresponsible for responding to that privilege, I think that the virtue of courage offers a compelling motivation to respond to those privileges anyway. I think that a discussion of privileged communities will make it clear that many of us are responsible for responding to unjust advantages in one way or another. This is not to ignore that some groups have a sort of silver platter of social privileges and advantages, while some others only lay claim to one or two. And of course, those of us with more privileges are going to be *way more* responsible for responding to these privileges than those of us with fewer of them. This conversation is also tricky because when I say "communities of privilege," of course I don't mean that there are some homogenous groups of perfectly privileged people out there sucking up all of the benefits that have been systematically granted to them. What I am talking about are the families, friend groups, or other social, academic, religious, or work environments where the members of that community all share some, particular privilege. For example, my family is white. And while it would be just be plain wrong to say that my uncle with a cognitive disability and I benefit from privilege broadly construed, we can point to the particular way in which we share privilege in our group. The same would go for my highly educated group of friends where some of us have additional privileges that others don't share. I have the privilege of being straight that some of my classmates don't share, and some of them benefit from male privilege that I don't have—just to give two quick examples. So, while some of us as individuals and

groups will have to work less hard than those who have to respond to the very privileged communities that we belong to, many of us will have to be up to the task.

What are we responding to, though? In part, it is a history of oppression that citizens of countries like the United States have to reckon with. Beyond that, though, is the response to the current imbalances of power, wealth, and status that are pervasive to this day. For example, “In 2010, ... the median net household worth of white American families was \$110,729 compared to \$4,955 for black American families—a whopping *2,234 percent difference favoring white people* (Lubby 2012). In 2012, African American women made 64 cents and Latinas earned 55 cents for every dollar that a non-Hispanic white man made (Kerby 2013).”<sup>108</sup> In 2019, women as a group “earned 85% of what men earned” in an analysis “of median hourly earnings of both full- and part-time workers in the United States,” which means that “it would take an extra 39 days of work for women to earn what men did in 2018.”<sup>109</sup> When it comes to able-bodied privilege compared to living with disability, we see that in 2014 the “median earnings for people with no disability were over \$30,469, compared to the \$20,250 median income reported for individuals with a disability.”<sup>110</sup> And these are just economic indicators. There are so many ways that privilege and lack of privilege affects people’s lived experience that go well beyond our pocketbooks. That there are lots of places where same-sex couples can’t hold hands in public without censure, and jobs where taking time off to have a child will

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108. Cited in Shannon Sullivan, “White Privilege,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, edited by Naomi Zack, February 2017, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190236953.013.8, 331. emphasis mine

109. Graf, Nikki, Anna Brown, and Eileen Patten. “The Narrowing, but Persistent, Gender Gap in Pay.” *Pew Research Center*, March 22, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/22/gender-pay-gap-facts/>.

110. “Disability and Socioeconomic Status,” *American Psychological Association*, Accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/disability>.

get you fired, and that we live in a country where being a black woman means that your chance of dying in childbirth is *2.5 times as bad* as it would be if you were white—all of these are just a thimbleful of examples from an ocean of experiences that lack of privilege generates.<sup>111</sup>

One immediate response to this history of oppression and its modern manifestations is to find a quick and straightforward way out of having to take responsibility for any wrongdoing. Who wants to be accountable for any of that, after all? Shannon Sullivan offers a nice example of the way that this plays out between groups of white people in her book *Good White People*. She discusses the phenomenon of middle-class white people distinguishing themselves from “white trash.” The story goes something like this: “Those white people (the lower class) are racist; we middle-class whites are not like them; therefore we are not racist.”<sup>112</sup> In discussing this phenomenon of othering other white people, Sullivan reveals how this task “is not necessarily an attempt to eliminate racial injustice ... but a desire to be recognized as Not Racist, perhaps especially by people of color.”<sup>113</sup> There is a problem with excuses like blaming white trash or finger pointing, apart from the fact that not much good is likely to come out of these acts. In the perspective that we are operating from, no one will be able to flourish if those who need to claim responsibility fail to do so. If all of us must work together to respect the interests of everyone, then simple finger pointing or high-ground-taking do no real good.

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111. Elizabeth Chuck, “The U.S. Finally Has Better Maternal Mortality Rate Data. Black Mothers Still Fare the Worst,” *NBC News*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/womens-health/u-s-finally-has-better-maternal-mortality-data-black-mothers-n1125896>.

112. Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (Albany: State of New York Press, 2014), 5.

113. Sullivan, *Good White People*, 5.

I think that a good way of responding to privilege from within a privileged community is to act with the virtue of courage. Aristotle affirms that courage is the virtue that finds the mean with regard to “feelings of confidence and fear.”<sup>114</sup> What is there to fear in the realm of community construction as it relates to privilege? Well, for one, there is the retaliation from one’s fellow community members. To illustrate this point, let us return to the commercial we imagined earlier, set around the Thanksgiving table. Let’s imagine for a second that one of the daughters seated around the table feels uncomfortable that the things that her family is thankful for are unjust privileges rather than objects of simple gratitude. Imagine also that this daughter knows that her family has not done much of anything to ensure the wellbeing of those whose disadvantages have secured her family’s advantages. While we may object to her initiating this conversation during dinner itself—thinking perhaps that a more appropriate context will be available that evening—it is hard to think of a conversation starter about her family’s privilege that might be well-received. The family will shift uncomfortably at best, call her ungrateful at middlest, and cut her off from future family events toward her at the worst end of the spectrum. Saying that she should just accept her family’s rebuke as a necessary side effect of privilege checking—suggesting that you don’t need the love of family members who fail to recognize their privilege—misses the point, in contexts like these. While we will talk about the kind of approach that the daughter can take later in this chapter, the fact that she is liable to be diminished for it, and by her family, is not an insignificant thing

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114. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1117a30.

Another fear that operates in community construction is the fear of error. While fear of rebuke or punishment is fearful of the response from within one's privileged community, there may also be fear of what outsiders to your privilege will say. Like I said, I think that we should be wary of donning savior complexes. But this fear of thinking ourselves as saviors may also cripple us from acting because of worries about how the people we are seeking to include will see our actions. An example comes to mind. During a mini class field trip to the library on campus, I inadvertently found myself in a conversation with a group of guys. One of them was railing against the idea that any trans or gender non-conforming people should request that others use their preferred pronouns. The language that he was using to talk about people who have distinctive preferred pronouns was blatantly dehumanizing and demeaning, and obscured the argument he was trying to present. Knowing that one of my friends who is a well-educated activist for the people this guy was attacking was within earshot, I became afraid at once that I might "say the wrong thing" in responding to my classmate's hateful rhetoric. I think that fear like this, in the cases I'm worried about it, is born out of a sensitivity for those whom your language affects. In other words, it is fitting to fear that you will use language in a way that will further negatively affect oppressed persons. If, on the other hand, I were afraid because I might seem "not woke enough," or stupid, or ignorant, then I think this kind fear isn't quite fitting. That is because the goal of courage is justice and inclusivity, not personal moral purity. I know that at least some of my fear outside of the library was coming from the wrong place. But when fear of error is born out of sensitivity and attunement, I think that it—like fear of rejection from one's community—has a role to play in shaping our courageous responses.

Family relationships, established work environments, religious groups, and even clubs organized around a shared hobby are the kinds of networks that nourish and sustain you. Suggesting that severing your tie from them should be painless is misguided, as is the suggestion that severing is the morally right thing to do in all situations. Further, communities of privilege just aren't kinds of clubs that you can deny your membership to. So, trading one set of people for another doesn't address the root concern of one's privilege. A male who surrounds himself with female friends still enjoys male privilege, and still needs to find non-harmful ways of living out maleness. All of this is to say, it is fitting to be afraid of losing or straining your communal ties, or suffering rebuke from the ones you love, or seeing a person to whom you're connected suffer at your words, or speaking hurtfully about the people whose disadvantages have secured your privilege. In the context of community construction, then, Aristotle's assertion that courage involves pain makes good sense.<sup>115</sup> It's painful to be courageous.

Courage isn't just acting in situations of fear, though. There must be something that the courageous person is aiming for in her action. This is why we wouldn't call someone courageous if she overcomes her fear of death in order to pick up the habit of chain smoking. There's nothing worth praising, here, even if the person faced her fear of dying from lung cancer in order to do what she is doing now. No, "the brave person's actions and feelings accord with what something is worth."<sup>116</sup> This is to say that for an act to be courageous, it must be aimed at accomplishing something worthwhile. As Aristotle puts it, the brave person "chooses and stands firm because that is fine or because

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115. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1117a33.

116. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115b19.

anything else is shameful.”<sup>117</sup> In the case of courageous community construction, the thing of value that one is aiming for is the kind of thing that Tessman talks about—the promotion of an inclusive collectivity’s flourishing. So, courage in this context looks like facing one’s fears of rejection or error for the sake of promoting the good of an inclusive collectivity, which spans beyond one’s community of privilege.

Before we explore what courageous community construction might look like in action, it will be helpful to think about the vices that oppose it. Courage is a virtue that sits between the extremes of cowardice and rashness.<sup>118</sup> The person who does not fear in situations where it is appropriate to fear and who has a lot of confidence is rash. The person who fears in situations where it is not appropriate to be afraid and who lacks confidence is cowardly. It will be helpful to think about what these vices might look like in action when it comes to the way that we construct communities of privilege. The examples of vice that I think will be most instructive will be from people who are actually trying to get to the good end that we have in mind. In other words, the relevant examples of vice won’t be of cowardly or rash people like outright and unabashed Neo-Nazis or anti-women’s rights advocates who have no end of an inclusive collectivity in mind. But rather, it will be from people who ostensibly want to build an inclusive collectivity.

Let’s start with the vice of deficiency, cowardice. Remember that the feeling involved with courage or bravery is fear, and in the case of the communities that one is a part of, this is likely fear of ostracization or alienation. What we are looking for, then, is an instance where someone is too afraid of those things such that she doesn’t act for what

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117. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1116a12.

118. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.7.

is valuable. Sullivan's discussion of "playing the slaveholding card" counts as an example of cowardice, I think.<sup>119</sup> In talking about contemporary, middle-class white people's self separation from their pre-Civil War ancestors, Sullivan explains that it is tempting to say something like, "I'm not racist even if my ancestors were. They owned slaves and I don't!" Sullivan explains what happens here:

Operating as a red herring, the slaveholding card not only ensures that we don't detect modern forms of slavery. It also tries to throw us off the trail of the relationship between contemporary white people and white slaveholders by establishing an insurmountable moral gap between "us" and "them."<sup>120</sup>

What I think is cowardly is that this distancing language serves to protect the perceived integrity and wellbeing of "good white people" who are afraid to deal with the ways that their current acceptance and use of privilege are part of a system of harm and oppression. While the speaker is clearly condemning racism in its basest form, she does not let the sting of this label prick the conscience of her privileged community. Her fear keeps her from responding to her privilege in such a way that she could actually foster the inclusive collectivity she strives for. The fostering of this collectivity, in the case of racial privilege and oppression, requires that white people do something about the privileges they currently enjoy. It requires that they not ignore their privileges by pointing to past racists.

What about the vice of rashness? Like cowardice, the rash person responds to the fear of community building the wrong way. In this case, though, the person doesn't experience fear when she should. Here, I think it is helpful to think of the willingness to lose something valuable just to make a point, not worrying about the thing that is lost in

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119. Sullivan, *Good White People*, 66.

120. Sullivan, *Good White People*, 66.

performing this action. I think that this is often—but definitely not always—behind the command to “cut toxic people out of your life.” In some situations, this is *absolutely* the right thing to do. However, in the case of community construction, I think employing the idea of having courage will cause us to take some other steps first. It matters who it is that’s expressing or acting upon racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, Islamaphobia, anti-semitism, or any other number of sentiments. If it’s a casual acquaintance, cutting that person out of your life may be appropriate, as what is lost is not valuable. But if this person is a member of a community that you really value, it is worth discovering whether such rapid distancing from this person or group would be rash. Let’s return to the Thanksgiving table. If at the first homophobic joke she heard her family make the daughter were to say, “I refuse to be associated with a family that talks this way about gay people,” and left dinner, knowing that this would serve as a decisive break with a family who she loves and cherishes, we might worry that her behavior was rash. Again, we must have the purpose of courageous community building in mind when engaging some action—the example here is responding to a harmful comment, but there are many other actions that demand courageous responses. If we respond to anti-inclusive language by cutting ties with the speaker, we may be performing a disservice to both our privileged community and to the larger, inclusive community that we hope to construct. Feeling no remorse for cutting ties with communities that have formed part of making you who you are, or cutting these ties at strike one is not an act of courage, but rashness.

If the self-protection of cowardice and the throw-your-neighbor-under-the-bus spirit of rashness are inappropriate, what does courage look like? I think that Sullivan’s

vision for white people can apply more broadly to the kinds of localized communities of privilege that we have been talking about. Sullivan suggests that

the social fabric does not so much need ripping up as it needs reweaving. This creative act will involve a great deal of unraveling of what currently exists, but such unraveling should not be the final goal of racial justice and related liberatory projects. Something new needs to be created and ... that something new includes a positive racial identity for white people.<sup>121</sup>

This language of reweaving gets at the spirit of community *construction* that I am interested in. While some communities—like the KKK, to use an extreme example—must be undone completely, many others need for its members to engage in the conscientious reconstruction that Sullivan talks about. We are concerned with constructing small communities well because we are interested in promoting a flourishing collectivity, which includes smaller communities. Sullivan affirms that “white people need to become spiritually healthy enough that they do not poison other races when interacting with them but instead reciprocally nourish each other.”<sup>122</sup> This goal of mutual nourishment extends beyond the realities of whiteness, and to other identity markers that are tied up with privilege. The goal is for us to find ways to respond to our privileges such that all of us are able to flourish, to achieve an inclusive collectivity, and to break from vicious habits of oppression.

What does this look like? Now, we can talk about courage in action. I think that exploring what goes into acting courageously in the contexts of privileged communities will help us to think more clearly about this virtue. Our exploration will draw from our discussion of what is involved in virtue from chapter one. We will look at the contexts in which it is appropriate to act, the feelings that we might expect for the courageous person

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121. Sullivan, *Good White People*, 140.

122. Sullivan, *Good White People*, 148.

to have, and the reasons for action that motivate this courageous behavior. Let's start with the contexts in which courageous action is reasonable.

The opportunities for courageously constructing your community of privilege are many, and the contexts varied. So, I don't know that we will be able to outline exactly which contexts admit of courage as opposed to others. However, I think that we can talk about some questions that the agent can ask. These questions might help her to feel out the situation and see if it's possible to act well. For one, she might ask, "Is it possible for me to be constructive?" Understanding the place in which you find yourself in relation to your fellow community members seems important. Returning to the dinner table, the moment after a family member proudly shares the news of his promotion is likely *not* the kind of context in which it will be constructive to talk about ways of combatting male privilege. Gauging receptivity is key.

Thinking back to the chapter on good dialogue, I think that modeling receptivity and attunement is likely helpful. If your loved ones know that you receive constructive criticism, correction, or advice with openness and gratitude, they may be inclined to do the same. And even if they are not so inclined, you might be able to situate the conversation by saying something like, "You know how much I respect you. I hope that what I'm saying can be received respectfully, too, because I want our relationship to be built on mutual respect."

In addition to receptivity, you might gauge your courageous act of community construction on how much you think it's possible to build or accomplish in this relationship. For example, going hard on the details of the destructiveness of microaggressions may be a tad too much when talking to someone who exhibits open

animosity at the sheer idea that racial inequality exists. When building a community with such a person, small steps can be courageous ones, too, and are more likely to foster the kind of inclusivity you aim for by not alienating your conversation partner. This means that some kinds of conversations or constructive actions may not be possible at first, but gauging an appropriate entry point seems to be well-advised for the courageous person. A soldier won't rush alone into a battle she knows she will lose for the glory of her cause because she understands that such an act is rash, not courageous. Taking reasoned, measured steps seems well-advised.

Let's turn now to the feelings involved in acting courageously. As we've said, courage involves feelings of pain. I think that for those of us who enjoy lots of privileges and who constantly have to combat its effects, remembering that our communities are worthwhile and deserving of our affective response will be hard to keep in mind. By this I mean, if you are used to a continuous fight for inclusivity within your communities of privilege, it might be easy to go numb to the pain of what you might lose in acting this way. It can be tempting to think of others within your community as not deserving of your sorrow were you to lose them. But the courageous person will keep the goods of her community in mind when she acts, or else risk acting rashly—as she would if she were to think, “these people just aren't worth it if they don't get the point that we can't hang on to our privileges.” It's one thing if the advocate learns that she didn't have reason to fear in the first place—that her communities are surprisingly open to change—but it's another if the thought of rejection isn't perturbing. Recognizing both that a failure to attain an inclusive collectivity is worthy of sorrow and that losing valuable ties is worthy of feeling pained will be at the heart of the courageous person's actions.

Another feeling worth briefly highlighting is the feeling of undue self-congratulation. While it is often proper to feel happy when acting virtuously, this is different from feeling that you are somehow deserving of high moral praise. This is especially tricky when acting courageously in communities of privilege, I think. This is because responding to privilege is almost certainly just morally decent. Again, the privileged fighting against oppression are not stepping down from moral high castles. Rather, they are combatting the vices of oppression. Courageous community construction is unlikely to be supererogatory, then. The courageous person should keep this in mind, and must be careful not to play into the “good us” versus “bad them” dichotomy that Sullivan talks about. So, the courageous person will have to deal with feelings of pain and combat feelings of superiority in her activity.

It’s also important to keep track of your motivations when acting courageously. We must remember that the courageous person is acting in order to promote an inclusive collectivity and the flourishing of all involved. In the case of responding to privileges, it’s possible that such a promotion will involve accepting change at even personal expense. The courageous person will recognize that her habitual patterns may incline her to advocate for change, but elsewhere and for other people. She will be wary of this. Think of a group of mostly Christian parents—or at least culturally Christian parents—seated at a committee for their school board. When the discussion of days off for the holidays comes to the table, courage might look like advocating for Rosh Hashanah and Eid al-Fitr to be given as days off, even if it means cutting into the time given off for Christmas break. In this case, the loss to oneself is likely not that great. But, the thought of losing cherished time around Christmas may be painful, and keeping quiet and hoping that the

Jewish and Muslim parents in your community won't speak up is an easy position to default to. So, taking the initiative to advocate for change even at personal expense can be a small act of courage. Situations that challenge you to put the reasons that you are courageous to the test may be small, like this one, or they may be much larger, but they help to ensure that the motivation for action is guided by this virtue rather than some veneer of moral goodness.

Finally, I think that the courageous person in her communities of privilege will heed a warning that Tessman alerts us to. Tessman says that the privileged seek "*inter subjective*" agreement to reaffirm their own beliefs and to bolster their confidence in their moral goodness.<sup>123</sup> That is to say, when looking to answer the question, "Is this good? Am I morally justified in seeking this out?" people enjoying a privileged life often look to others who share their privileges for the answer. I am inclined to think that the widespread belief that living a life of white, middle-class comfort and luxury *is* the good life has likely been molded by inter subjective agreement. Unsurprisingly, inter subjective agreement leads to feeling validated in your choices and behaviors. Because this kind of echo chamber poses a problem for the person who seeks to live a life of virtue, I think that courageous community constructors are going to need to look beyond their own communities to determine the appropriateness of their behavior. How do people who don't enjoy my privileges see and think of me? Is there a critique or concern that I need to be sensitive to? Asking and answering these kinds of questions are likely to be important tasks in keeping the courageous person on the virtuous path.

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123. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 77.

Before we close this chapter, I want to draw something out of the background and into the foreground of this discussion. And it is that the hope that motivates courageous actors in contexts like these is that, one day, identity markers or certain benefits like whiteness, education, maleness, heterosexuality, class membership, etc. will no longer be privileges. The hope is not that everyone will be treated exactly the same, but that characteristics and traits that are irrelevant to the treatment one is receiving will no longer be treated as though they are relevant. This is unique, then, because courageous actions in the contexts that we've gone great lengths to talk about are aimed—long term—at the erasure of those particular contexts themselves. Nevertheless, I myself find it almost impossible to imagine that unjust privileges will cease to exist any time soon. So, we are, unfortunately, likely to need to exercise courage in these contexts for many, many years to come.

Let's do a quick review of what we've covered in this chapter. Courage is needed for privileged persons to respond well to their communities of privilege. The aim of courageous action is the construction of an inclusive collectivity. But in this case, the goodness of the aim does not take away the pain of acting well. Fear of error or of rejection are appropriate fears to have, but the courageous person does not allow this fear to stop her from combatting the effects of privileges. The vices of oppression are too serious, and the wellbeing of others is too important for her to accept the benefits of her privileges as they come. Whether it is at the dinner table, at a school board meeting, or in a group of friends, those of us who enjoy privileges must seek the appropriate moments in which to combat the perpetuation of the privileges that we enjoy. This, importantly, moves the burden for advocating for justice off of the shoulders of the victims of

injustice. I think it's super common to expect the most active advocates for racial justice to be people of color, for gender equality to be women, for accessible spaces to be people with disabilities, and so on. While those communities do heroic work in advocating that they be treated justly, they shouldn't have to shoulder the burden of fixing the wrongs that they suffer from. The privileged must work to fix the systems that their predecessors created and that they maintain. And I hope that courage helps, here. In behaving courageously, we may find that the kinds of communities that so many of us cherish can become centers of virtue rather than perpetrators of oppression. This would be a very good thing for all of us.

## **VIII. MORALLY PERCEPTIVE AND COLLECTIVELY RESPONSIBLE: DOING SOMETHING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE IN A WARMING WORLD**

As I've spent time thinking about this chapter, I have really struggled to get my mind around what to say. It seems clear to me that climate change is the thorniest moral problem that we face as members of an industrialized and globalized world. And as is clear at this point, thorny moral problems are the types of problems about which this book is concerned. So it seems that there must be something for virtue theory to offer here. At the same time, this is a really big and complicated problem. This particular big problem is a collective action problem. With this kind of a problem, since no one person can fix it, and because most of us believe that you can't be told that you must do something you cannot do, it seems that no one person has a responsibility to fix it. It's also the type of problem that can't really be fixed at this point, being that the changes are irreversible. But it is getting worse, and doing nothing accelerates the rate at which it's getting worse. And saying, "I'm not responsible for fixing the problem" doesn't fix the unfixable problem. A conundrum.

Finally, I had an exasperated phone conversation with my mom about this. I explained how frustrated I was that there seems to be nothing to say that makes anyone responsible for the thing that it seems so important that someone claim responsibility for. And pointing at collectives who don't seem to want to take responsibility any time soon doesn't do much, either. Mom inhaled, "Alyse, you've been going on about this all year," she's not wrong, "and up to this point I've said nothing. But I just don't see what you're talking about. If everyone has to be on board to fix this problem, it seems all the more obvious and urgent to me that I have to do something. If everyone has to do something, it

has to be me.” I am left with the sense that this is the right kind of thing to say. Of course, it doesn’t *have* to be me in the strict sense. If every individual in the world were to change tomorrow to start facing the problem of climate change—which really would have to occur at the collective level more than the individual one—it wouldn’t matter if *I* found a way to continue living the life that I live. Just as I can’t be the one to fix the problem, I can’t be the one to perpetuate it all on my own. But I stand by my claim that this is the right *kind* of thing to say. And as it turns out, there are conceptions of responsibility that align nicely with this way of thinking about taking charge of issues in this way.

So, this chapter won’t be about things that we can do as individuals which, ultimately, won’t make that much of a difference. This isn’t a chapter of dos and don’ts when it comes to plastic straws or setting your thermostat. Instead, this chapter is about getting to the kind of virtuous attitude that we might seek to cultivate in the arena of environmental concern. This virtuous response is not going to resemble my despair or frustration. Instead, this attitude will have us making reasoned, fine-grained responses at the communal level. In our discussion of this virtue, we will work backwards, first by looking at the kind of problem we’re in, then by looking at the kinds of responses that can be successful in addressing this kind of problem. Here, we will consider how our interdependence grounds a forward-looking responsibility to respond to serious wrongs, even if they are collective issues. This will require that we understand responsibility in a certain way, and borrowing from Iris Marion Young’s conception of responsibility will help us to do that. Finally, we will examine Martha Nussbaum’s virtue of moral perception. This isn’t the kind of virtue that will have us driving electric cars and raising

our own crickets—an excellent, low-carbon-footprint source of protein. At least, moral perception won't leave us with the impression that these are the most important things to do on an individual level. Rather, I think that this virtue sets us up to say the kind of thing that Mom said, and the kind of thing that, ultimately, we all have to say if something is to be done.

Let's pause briefly to dissect the claim that climate change is a collective action problem. When responsibility for some major problem becomes diffuse, and the solution doesn't lie in the hands of a single person or group, then the solution to this problem is going to require some kind of collective action. A list of collective action problems includes poor treatment of humans in sweatshops, poor treatment of nonhuman animals in intensive animal agriculture, various forms of systemic inequality, and neighborhood gentrification. But the full list is much longer than this. A common way of explaining collective action problems is by illustrating a particular type of them—a tragedy of the commons case. The illustration goes like this: imagine that a whole bunch of us live on a piece of shared land. I graze my sheep here and so do you. It is in each of our individual interests to graze as many sheep as possible, but doing so will lead to the collapse of our shared pasture. In such cases, I impose costs that we all share.<sup>124</sup> The tragedy comes down to the fact that—assuming we live with “selfish and short-sighted actors with open access to a resource”—“the resource will be destroyed.”<sup>125</sup> I actually think the claim needs to be stronger. If we are selfish *or* short-sighted the pasture will collapse. The selfishness claim doesn't need much additional explanation. Focus for a second on the

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124. Bryan Norton, “Sustainability as Multigenerational Public Interest,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, (Nov 2015), DOI 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199941339.001.0001, 357.

125. Norton, “Sustainability,” 359.

short-sighted claim, though. Bryan Norton affirms that the urge to live sustainably, whether at the individual or the collective level, “is to propose an obligation to future generations.”<sup>126</sup> I still have enough planet to go do most anything. We all do. The group of us alive today could be the last, bright spark of finite-resource-burning humans in earth’s history. We could make a pact to go out with a bang: private jets, a steak a day, and a newly razed lot in the rainforest for everyone! If this claim is at all unsettling, it’s because of a worry about who comes next.<sup>127</sup>

This chapter is not going to be enough of a space to get into the complexities of the climate change problem. For a great, accessible read on this topic, I recommend checking out Dale Jamieson’s *Reason in a Dark Time*. I will use this chapter to explore a bit about what Jamieson suggests in the way of a response to this problem. He is quick to admit that individual contributions to the collective action problem of climate change do not “stack up, overflow the atmosphere, and cause damages.”<sup>128</sup> The nature of carbon emissions does not lend itself to making each of my drives around town in my Prius like a drop in the shared bucket of the Earth’s climate. However, even though my individual contribution doesn’t matter because of its effect on the planet, Jamieson is of the mind that what we do “matters because of its effects on ourselves.”<sup>129</sup> The virtue ethicist is among the first to agree.

I want us to consider where endorsing a claim like Jamieson’s leaves us. If the act of me contributing to climate change matters because of its effect on me, then the tragedy

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126. Norton, 355.

127. Not even “what comes next.” Enough non-human critters could survive to make the world an interesting kind of place. If you do ascribe to the view that some of these species are valuable in themselves, then there are still ways of seeing us as the last generation of finite resource users to drive around in Hummers, who also avoid killing off intrinsically valuable species.

128. Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 181.

129. Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time*, 182.

of the commons becomes at once a problem of another kind. Not only is this collective action problem tragic because of how it leaves the commons, it is also tragic because of how it leaves the commoners. This should remind us of the conversation we had in the last chapter on courageous community construction, since we recognized that the privileged among us are left with a similar situation when it comes to responding to systemic injustices. And if this is the case, those of us who take part in the problem of climate change may become concerned with what we can be expected to do about it. And unlike those of us responsible for systemic injustice, basically all of us are part of the climate change problem. So, we all should be concerned. Even so, the question, “What am I responsible for, if I know that acting alone won’t do anything at all to solve the problem?,” is a very reasonable one. In the case of collective action problems, it’s true that an individual response is likely to be ineffective. Even if I were to go off the grid, the climate would continue to change. And even if I were to stop buying new clothes, sweatshops would keep chugging away, unfazed by my boycott. So, how should the virtuous person respond, recognizing both the harm of some problem propagated by a collective of which she’s a part and her inability to undo this problem?

To start, let’s envision a case that helps to animate this concern. Picture Julia, a working-class mother of three whose husband works in the oil industry. While scrolling through Facebook one day, Julia sees Eve’s profile pop up, and she shoots off a friend request. The women had been close in high school when Eve lived in the city with her Dad. Although they had drifted apart over the years, catching up online leads them to decide to meet in person, next time that Eve will be in the city. Over coffee, Julia learns that Eve and her whole town are being relocated. It’s the kind of news that gets you to set

your coffee on the table and ask a quick “What now?” Eve explains that because of rising sea levels, Isle de Jean Charles is in the process of being evacuated.<sup>130</sup> Julia knew that Eve was from the Native American community that had long lived on the island, but hadn’t ever thought that the town’s location would put it at a risk like that. Who had heard of a whole town getting picked up and moved? She and Eve had driven out there once when they were back in school. Eve had a story about every building in town. Now, Eve’s voice gets unsteady as she talks about leaving the home she grew up in and moving to a new house with her family. It is undisputedly an effect of the changing climate that the whole town had to relocate. In an attempt to switch the conversation toward a cheerier catch up, Eve smiles and shrugs, “What are you going to do?” Julia finds it hard to answer her follow up question on the kids’ Halloween costumes that she had posted pictures of a few days ago.

Isle de Jean Charles is a real place that underwent this science-fiction-seeming project not long ago. As the measurable impacts of climate change continue to set in, they will affect the world’s poorest inhabitants first. This is already happening in places like this town in Louisiana. And as people adapt to climate change as it continues to take its toll, those with the most resources will, of course, have more at their disposal when adjusting. In thinking about how this problem affects her friend, Julia wants to work through how she should respond. So, what should Julia think about on her drive home? What would it even look like to be responsive to the issue that has driven her old friend out of her town? One true thing is that no matter what Julia does, she won’t reverse the

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130. Inspired by Stein, Michael Issac Stein, “How to Save a Town From Rising Waters,” *Citylab*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.citylab.com/environment/2018/01/how-to-save-a-town-from-rising-waters/547646/>.

damage that's been done or remove even a drop in a bucket's worth of input into the ongoing problem. Her individual actions don't seem to matter when it comes to alleviating the pressing issue of climate change. However, there are some considerations that she might raise.

As the problem gets worse, which it will soon, she can imagine herself mourning the loss not only of a home gone but a life ended. If predictions are right, people will die and have their quality of life diminished because of this problem. And the sheer thought of being a victim of this ill, or of having to be the one to explain what's happened to her kids, makes her sick. In fact, she's often thought about how disappointed she was by those who came before her, people who thought a person could be property and who were part of a system that hurt and murdered so many people and whose effects she's dealt with her whole life. It seems to her now that she is part of a massive problem, different in kind but not in magnitude, and it just feels totally innocuous. Even though she's a small part of raising up a community whose effect will be felt beyond her life time, even though this community depends on people *like* her making sure that it's set up to do and be well, and even though she herself understands what it's like to suffer a problem that no one person was responsible for, she just can't imagine in what sense of the word could she be said to have done the wrong thing. The problem is people *like* her, and people much more powerful than she, but how can she really be what's gone wrong in the picture? In fact, to think about her life being the key problem is totally nonsensical.

Perhaps, though, in thinking about the collectives of which she's a part, it makes sense to think about how others depend on her to enact change for good, in much the way that she has depended on others. No, it's not like she depended on any *one* person in

particular for her to be set up for a good life in the ways that she is—it's not like that at all. But, she still depends on all of those people who set up her life in this way, as all of them formed part of the conditions that she will never cease to benefit from. She is the beneficiary of the strong women and men whose efforts allowed her to have the goods that she now enjoys. There is bad that has been done already; that's indisputable. But it seems that when there is a chance for good to be done still, those who have yet to benefit from it depend upon people like Julia to make this good come about. Julia's intuition meshes with my Mom's—if everyone is responsible, it has to be me.

It seems that we can even talk about responsibility in a way that makes sense of this intuition. Young acknowledges that often, when we talk about responsibility, we talk about it in the sense of liability<sup>131</sup>. Liability looks for people to blame, for someone to be responsible for an ill—maybe even for a wrongdoer to feel guilty about what she's done.<sup>132</sup> Of course, we recognize mitigating circumstances that make us think the person isn't responsible for this or that reason. But when we watch an episode of CIS or try to figure out which kid shattered grandma's porcelain vase, we are finding out who's responsible in the liability sense. Justice, in this context, involves having the criminal do time and having the kid apologize, maybe even pick up a broom and buy a new container for grandma's flowers. The thing is, the issue that affects Eve and troubles both her and Julia isn't going to be a case of simple blame assignment. There's no criminal to point to who can shoulder the responsibility for climate change. Blame for climate change fits the liability model about as well as a square peg fits a round hole. But does that mean that no

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131. Iris Marion Young, "A Social Connection Model," in *Responsibility for Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97.

132. Young, 97.

one is responsible? What Young calls the “social connection model” of responsibility does a nice job of getting to concerns like these, concerns that the liability model can’t cover.

Young explains the social connection responsibility such that it is linked to our interdependence and interconnectedness. She writes that “our responsibility derives from belonging together with others in a system of interdependent processes of cooperation and competition through which we seek benefits and aim to realize projects.”<sup>133</sup> We don’t do away with justice, but rather, “each of us expects justice toward ourselves, and others can legitimately make claims of justice on us. All who dwell within the structures must take responsibility for remedying injustices they cause, though none is specifically liable for the harm in a legal sense.”<sup>134</sup> On this model, then, Julia is responsible because she’s part of a system that grants her benefits—having gained from those very things that lead to climate change. While she’s not liable for climate change, she expects justice, and there are those to whom justice is due, like her friend and the community of Isle de Jean Charles.

When Young describes responsibility in this way, she says that it’s inherently *forward-looking*.<sup>135</sup> It won’t be an act of social responsibility for Julia to find a perfect answer to who caused this problem in the first place—unless this becomes necessary to solving it. Rather, she must figure out how she can take responsibility in the future. And, importantly, because the responsibility is shared, responsibility requires that a group of people work to transform the unjust structures that yield unjust outcomes.<sup>136</sup> The idea of

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133. Young, 105.

134. Young, 105.

135. Young, 108.

136. Young, 110.

understanding yourself as having responsibility in this way likely sounds something like this, “While I’m not liable for this harm, I know that I am responsible for it because of my belonging in a system that perpetuates or benefits from this harm, or both.” But taking responsibility is only part of the picture. It is important for the agent to figure out how to direct that sense of responsibility. The person who feels responsible for polluting waterways hasn’t responded to this environmental ill by the sheer fact that she feels badly. Feeling guilty doesn’t make you less responsible for the thing you feel bad about. When it comes to figuring out what to do with a sense of collective responsibility, Nussbaum’s work helps.

In a deep look at a novel by William James, Nussbaum identifies the virtue of moral perception as an act that enables James’ characters to engage virtuously with each other. In a key description of moral perception, Nussbaum precisely articulates what kind of act she has in mind: “it is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling.”<sup>137</sup> On the interpersonal level, perceiving each other rightly is the starting point for a loving relationship that does well in acknowledging the fundamental dignity of the other person.<sup>138</sup> This moral perception involves creativity and imagination, generosity and attunement to the particular. It also involves recognizing the intricacies of life, that an appropriate act in one context may be inappropriate in another.<sup>139</sup>

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137. Martha Nussbaum, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination,” in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 152.

138. Nussbaum, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible,’” 153.

139. Nussbaum, 154.

The virtue of moral perception falls as a mean between extremes. On the one end, the person is prone to the vice of lack of nuance and astuteness. Nussbaum calls this vice “obtuseness,” which occurs when we “confine ourselves to the universal.”<sup>140</sup> By only looking at the big picture, one ends up dangerously out of touch with the particulars of the situation. The person who is vicious in this way is likely inclined to make broad, overgeneralizing claims about the problem, and to propose solutions that won’t work in all contexts. Here I picture an attitude like Thanos’, the super-villain of the *Avengers* film series, who, when faced with the realities of global warming and species extinction, decides to eradicate half of all life in the universe. He identifies a problem, but carries out an act that doesn’t ground itself in the realities of the situation—in this case, the fact that such an act disregards the dignity of the creatures he destroys.

On the other end of the spectrum is the vice of “fine-tuned perception to a dangerously rootless extreme.”<sup>141</sup> Nussbaum describes a character who rejoices in attention for its own sake, who cares about her perception for its style alone, and who ignores the content of the situation she examines.<sup>142</sup> Here, we could imagine the scholar who rejoices in the multiplication of abstract solutions to global warming that are neat, well-crafted, and free of negative side effects, but who ignores the urgency of the problem at hand. Some might worry that this is what happens when leaders fight over the particularities of a plan while letting wars wage, crises intensify, or people die. A virtuous observer might rightly remark that a messy solution in action is better than a thousand neat solutions on paper.

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140. Nussbaum, 157.

141. Nussbaum, 158.

142. Nussbaum, 158.

It may seem odd to talk about moral perception as a virtue related to climate change. However, I believe that extending this virtue to the community will enable us to take up the challenges that it presents. Part of the reason for this is that there are so many challenges to begin to attend to as members of the species that threatens to launch our world into a new mass extinction.<sup>143</sup> Only a communal response will suffice. Because this is a collective problem, I believe that we must craft collective solutions. Young, in her description on how to act responsibly within collectives, certainly agrees. I think that by extending Nussbaum's moral perception to the community—and specifically to communities defined by geographic locales—we might enact the kind of virtuous behavior that we need here. I believe that this takes seriously Jamieson's claim that "it would not be surprising if there were questions relating to anthropogenic climate change about which our everyday morality is flummoxed, silent, or incorrect."<sup>144</sup> So, if this extension of moral perception to the communal collective doesn't look like everyday morality, that's the point.

Even though we are extending Nussbaum's virtue of moral perception, I believe that the framework in which it operates is much the same at the communal level. Indeed, seeing ourselves as parts of a global story, a kind of collective novel, might be a helpful way of envisioning what is at stake with climate change. I realize that the image of a global novel might not resonate with everyone. Perhaps you find it more convincing to conceive of this as a history, or as making steps in saving up for a public trust, or as a

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143. Jeremy Bendik-Keymer and Chris Haufe talk about the looming possibility of anthropogenic mass extinction in their chapter; Jeremy Bendik-Keymer and Chris Haufe, "Anthropogenic Mass Extinction: The Science, the Ethics, and the Civics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, (Nov 2015), DOI 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199941339.001.0001.

144. Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time*, 147.

series of causes and effects in some tightly connected series of events. I think that all of these images can work. However, I am inclined to think that the image of a novel captures the community's role in responding to climate change very well—but as a literature nerd I'll admit my bias. Nussbaum points to actual novels as excellent training ground for practicing the virtue of moral perception. She says that an individual book has the opportunity to show “us what it would be like to take up that position in life.”<sup>145</sup> Here, I think the trick is to begin thinking about ourselves as forming part of a human story.

So, what would it look like for us to take up the task of communal moral perception? What would it mean for us to examine our paths forward only after taking a moment to consider where we are, and how precisely we might respond? First, I think that we would recognize our temporal location. We should recall our discussion from earlier this chapter, where it became clear that we mustn't act as short-sighted actors if we are to respond to the collective action problem of climate change. This involves realizing that we don't form part of the first chapter in history. Forgetting the past seems to be a great way of losing sight of the kind of community we form part of. Climate change is the kind of thing that threatens our ability to “relate to the old stores and tales.”<sup>146</sup> Not only has climate change already begun to erase vast pieces of land that once were the homes of communities and cultures, like Isle de Jean Charles, but it will continue to do so.<sup>147</sup> Climate change threatens to erase the backgrounds in which we have survived and thrived, making it impossible to connect with the same places that our

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145. Nussbaum, “Finely Aware,” 162.

146. Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time*, 238.

147. This is happening in my home state of Louisiana; Elizabeth Kolbert, “Louisiana's Disappearing Coast,” *The New Yorker*, March 25, 2019, [https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/01/louisianas-disappearing-coast?fbclid=IwAR2BNWzUK6DraT8RsvE-by0vixD8\\_NKYkFo3jM0onR7iMWq4pdgcbT7gY8](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/01/louisianas-disappearing-coast?fbclid=IwAR2BNWzUK6DraT8RsvE-by0vixD8_NKYkFo3jM0onR7iMWq4pdgcbT7gY8).

ancestors formed lives in. It threatens to erase the backgrounds of the chapters that it took for us to get to the page we are living in now.

Further, and continuing the task of recognizing our temporal location, climate change threatens our future in even more drastic ways than it threatens our relationship to the past. Norton aptly points out that climate change will “harm communities in the future by depleting resources,” threatening the very human activity of being able to pass along a heritage, culture, and life to those who will replace us.<sup>148</sup> The reason that moral perception is important, here, is because the kinds of efforts that will ensure the continuation of the human story—of which we form but one chapter—will vary from place to place. Moral perception seems to be a prerequisite if subsequent virtuous action is going to have the effect of responding appropriately to the ill at hand. Jamieson gets at the fact that there are a variety of problems and solutions by saying that there “is no magic bullet” that will solve the issue.<sup>149</sup> Figuring out how to adequately care for those who have yet to be born is going to be community-specific, even if there are some shared projects in which many communities engage. Recall that Young urges that communal responsibility is forward-looking. The agent who has developed her moral perception is going to cultivate an attention toward the future that involves her responding from within her community.

I believe that conceiving of our communities as part of a novel also makes sense of the importance of taking communal responsibility. If I consider my life to be a self-contained story in which I am the protagonist, I am just not going to feel a need to respond to those problems that I was born into. My individual moral perception may only

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148. Norton, “Sustainability,” 363.

149. Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time*, 238.

extend to my immediate surroundings, in which I act and claim responsibility for my own actions. Moving from the individual to the communal in the act of moral perception involves leaning into a much larger story.<sup>150</sup> Nussbaum suggests that the universalizing that occurs when reading a novel provides “a direction of thought and imagination.”<sup>151</sup> On my own, I may direct my life to be a bit like other lives that I admire—I abstract from these examples, and follow a guideline for my unique situation. At the communal level, we are invited to consider how our community is going to form part of the species that we are. This is a much bigger undertaking. We must direct our thought and imagination into the construction of a human history, recognizing the ability to shape this story in a variety of ways. At this level, background ecologies become more important, in the way that background settings are important in the telling of the story of a single life. The effects of climate change become, at once, incredibly important to reckon with. The urgency of maintaining ecologies becomes evident in a way that it just isn’t when I focus on myself as an individual.

I believe that this act of positioning the community to bear communal responsibility also responds to two concerns, including one that Jamieson articulates. He explains how one problem with nations’ responses to climate change catastrophes is that they look like acts of altruism.<sup>152</sup> However, one community responding to a problem that it bears at least partial responsibility for creating clearly isn’t altruistic, it is simply an act of justice. Engaging in the act of communal moral perception, then, enables us to

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150. I think that various ethnic communities’ discussion of their shared identities, which in some cases involves claiming responsibility for their current privileges because of past injustices they’ve perpetuated, serves as a good model for what I am trying to describe, here.

151. Nussbaum, “Finely Aware,” 167.

152. Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time*, 218.

attribute responsibility where it is due. A second problem arises when we think of harm in precisely the way that Young identifies—in the liability sense, where someone ought to be held responsible. In these cases, it is easy to feel guilty for wrongdoing, and to work for some goal in order to get rid of that bad feeling. While feelings of sadness or guilt may be appropriate in some cases where an individual partakes in collective harming, the goal of responding to this problem is not self-soothing or a kind of moral hand washing. Those of us who find simple or even convoluted ways of trying to respond to harm for the sole purpose of having the sense of having done our part or having done what one can are missing the mark, it seems. After all, the goal in taking collective responsibility isn't to make me seem like or feel like a better person. The goal in responding to the harms of collective action problems is out of concern for the harmed, not for concern for one's own reputation or moral standing.

If we keep both temporal location and communal responsibility in mind, I think it becomes clearer to see how I am called to respond to the problem of climate change. Because it is incumbent upon all of us to act, and I am a member of all of us, I must do something. However, I think that it is also clear that my act matters as a member of a community, and so forming part of a communal response is really important. The community is invited to be finely attuned to the complexities of its own situation, the responsibilities that it must assume by virtue of its relationship to the past, and the importance of acting well for its future. The community must not act in a way that is “flat and toneless” like a paraphrase, but rather, in a way that is richly alive in the way that moral actors must be when responding to complex problems.<sup>153</sup> It must be connected to

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153. Nussbaum, “Finely Aware,” 154.

the particularities of the situation, perhaps in the way that Julia and especially Eve connect with the very real and concrete community which is being affected.

What are some actions that might grow out of a virtuous moral perception that involves the recognition of a community's responsibility to respond to climate change? Young rightly focuses on the importance of structural reform: "taking responsibility for structural injustice under this model involves joining with others to organize collective action to reform the structures."<sup>154</sup> The collective and structural natures of collective action problems demand collective responses. This can take place in the context of a particular community or "as a supplement to state policies and programs," and may involve that those who are reforming in light of this agitation for change answer to one another in public.<sup>155</sup> Those who join together engage in a public process that elicits a public response. One interesting feature of this picture is that even victims of injustice are "called to a responsibility they share with others to engage in actions directed at transforming those structures" of which they are victims.<sup>156</sup> Even though people like Eve are more obviously victims of human induced climate change than people like Julia, Eve may still take part in the change necessary to respond to this problem.

Young's insights into collective action issues show that the moral agent should find ways to work with collectives in response to the problem that she faces. And for those who have the virtue of moral perception, this is going to be focused on the particularities of the community at hand. I don't think that this is how lots of us think about environmental problems. For example, one popular face for the movement to

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154. Young, "A Social Connection Model," 112.

155. Young, 112, 122.

156. Young, 113.

reduce plastic is concern for sea turtles—I can’t count how many times I’ve overheard costumers at coffee shops or restaurants cite the turtles when choosing a low plastic option. While it’s definitely helpful to have a real understanding of some harmful action’s effects in mind when making a choice, it is helpful to have a real appreciation for the magnitude of the collective action’s effects. So, in communities surrounding Isle de Jean Charles, for example, making environmentally-minded choices can have a more concrete goal than benefitting faraway turtles. Louisianians can remember their neighbors who had to desert their whole town when thinking about climate change, even if turtles are pretty great and do deserve moral attention. On this front, communities can engage in consciousness raising efforts just to help others understand the issues that need their attention. Part of responding to some problem is understanding the nature of the problem in the first place.

Then, members of those communities can look for impactful or effective ways of actually responding for the sake of their own community’s future. Not using a plastic straw isn’t going to help evacuees of environmental catastrophe. So, while reducing waste is a worthwhile pursuit for a host of reasons, it’s helpful to understand what problem some set of actions is an actual response to. This will vary depending on context. In Louisiana, it may make most sense to focus efforts on preserving and restoring coastlands in an effort to help with environmental changes at home. People like Julia may want to seek out ways to get involved with efforts that are also compatible with their other life commitments. If there are already organized, effective, and transparent community action groups in place, it will likely make most sense to begin getting involved there. But in some cases, it may be necessary to organize a new group, or if this

isn't possible, to find a way of making the need for such a group known among people who have the resources to start it. These groups may well grow out of the moral consciousness of those who perceive the importance of protecting the environment for the sake of their community's future. On this front, communities can engage in consciousness raising efforts just to help others understand what issue it is that needs their attention. Part of responding to some problem is understanding the nature of the problem in the first place.

Of course, there are *some* straightforward ways of responding immediately and by all of our communities, perhaps most importantly by cutting down on coal use as much as possible.<sup>157</sup> Another is to protect the resilience of our resource systems.<sup>158</sup> The language of perception is helpful, I think, because it demands that these acts be taken with an eye on the specifics of the situation in which it is enacted. Further, this is where I think that the importance of understanding our moral perception as *communal* is essential. Just as essential is thinking about the communal nature of all of the moral action that follows from our communal moral perception. I cannot deal with these tasks all by myself. My solution won't be big enough. But the fact that I am not solely responsible does not eradicate my responsibility. If everyone has to be on board, I must be, too.

I am aware that this chapter is fairly abstract. One approach to talking about this issue would be to take the issue of climate change, look at one community's collective response to it, and consider how one individual's virtuous moral perception helped her to respond to and partake in her community's action. There are a few reasons that I hesitated to write such a chapter. One reason is that climate change is such a multifaceted problem,

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157. Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time*, 236.

158. Norton, "Sustainability," 360.

communities are situated so differently in relationship to it, and there seem to be so many starting points for virtuous action. Another reason is that I find this problem particularly difficult to talk about is that responsibility likely looks quite different for different people. A third reason is that different people and different communities are just going to have different amounts of bandwidth when it comes to responding to climate change. Since I don't want to presuppose too much or too little about the capacity of communities to respond to the problems they face in this arena—maybe there are collectives out there that are well situated to do unbelievable things—I think that the virtuous person is going to have to do a lot of negotiation with the particularities of her and her communities' situation to figure out precisely how to act. Hence the vagueness of this chapter.

One way that I hope the vagueness helps, though, is that it allows us to use this framework in other collective action problems, too. Say that some community is working to combat the growing wealth inequality at home. Here, too, virtuous people should look at this complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way. They should take it in, envision which forward-looking responses fit this issue, and join with collectives in order to respond to it. Climate change is not the only collective action problem, and I think that cultivating communal moral perception can help in responding to all such problems. Still, I understand the criticism that a step-by-step list that doesn't fit the problem always and everywhere may do more good than a chapter like mine. In fact, I spoke earlier about how the virtuous person prefers messy solutions in action than perfect solutions on paper. Please, then, don't read this chapter as the solution to climate change. Instead, I hope it's useful as a starting point for people who want to respond virtuously to this problem, who desire to begin to act well, and who want a way of

thinking about what they're doing. I know that this is really challenging when it comes to this particular issue. I imagine that most everyone who's old enough to read this now, no matter how valiantly they work, are going to feel incredibly discouraged at the state of the environment by the end of their lives. I think that moral perception and social responsibility make sense of the impetus to act anyway.

Why this vague-ish chapter at all, then? My hope is pretty modest, really. I think that these outlines of social responsibility and moral perception can serve as starting points for how to begin to respond to the pressing collective action problems that we face. Fundamentally, I think that we need to refocus our attention to the ways that we are positioned within communities if we want to face these issues well. And this means that lots of us are going to have to think about the word "responsibility" quite differently in these contexts, doing our best to distance ourselves from the very popular way of understanding responsibility to be bound up with liability. This also means that we are going to have to be attuned to the issues that affect our particular collectives, and that we have to move beyond the individual level in order to respond to them. And this means that we are going to need to work together.

## **IX: PHRONESIS IN THE FOOD AISLE: CONSUMING AS WELL AS WE CAN IN A MESSY WORLD**

The day that I got my drivers license, my mom asked me to make a grocery run for her. On that first trip, I know I picked up a gallon of 2% milk. I probably also picked up a few other things, but I can't remember. I just wasn't thinking about the food that I was buying. A few years later, I'd stand in the grocery store as a junior in college, the first year I began to meal prep and cook for myself. I was motivated by my desire to make good, healthful, and environmentally-conscious choices. I was compelled by the phrase, "vote with your dollar." I'd come back to my tiny apartment kitchen with a haul of odd-sounding products and pasture-raised meats. A few years further down the line, my grocery shopping looked even odder. I became aware of the false labelling of food products, the inefficacy of organic labels in signaling morally praiseworthy food choices, a sense of what counts as a "pasture" in intensive animal agriculture, and a whole host of other concerns that caused me to raise an eyebrow. When this happened, grocery shopping became less of a joyful exercise in independence and more of an arena of moral tightrope walking. This example of my act paralysis is certainly not the stuff of virtue, however. I bring it up because many of us may have fallen on multiple spots of the spectrum of concern over food, from "totally not worried" like I was on my first grocery trip, to "really super concerned," in the way that I have been prone to be recently. This chapter is an exploration of the way that some questions about food pan out when your eyes are fixed on virtue and your feet are stuck in aisles where you have little to no readily-available information on how these foods landed on the shelves around you. It's an exploration of how to reason well in this circumstance. And it's a recognition that this

reasoning may lead us to some uncomfortable conclusions regarding our own food choices.

I think that taking the opportunity to examine our food choices is important. For one, we eat every day. There are few products that we as consumers consume more than food. For many of us, these purchases are also going to be a significant part of our budget. It seems wise to carefully consider where we are allocating these funds. But also, as I've alluded to already, and as we will continue to explore, there are so many ethical intersections in the realm of food. In industrialized, globally-connected spaces, dinner plates can be multidimensional reflections of a world of choices—a world where almost 100% of these choices are made independent of you. Making ethically-minded food decisions, then, seems to be fairly challenging.

I want to dwell on this challenge before we move on. There are two tricky aspects of food purchasing that I want to highlight. The first is intuitive, but worth noting. If Casey, a virtue-seeking college student is made aware of the tragedies of sweatshop labor practices, there is an obvious way of dodging this morally complex bullet. She can easily shop second hand at thrift shops or consignment stores, including at online stores like Thred Up, or she can regularly raid friends' giveaway piles of clothes to avoid supporting industries that spit out new fabrics spun in sweatshops. With food, though, this kind of behavior just isn't an option. Unless Casey is in a rare situation where she can easily eat a whole diet of food that would otherwise have been thrown into a landfill, she is going to form part of the demand for food products.

The second challenge is less intuitive. Casey thinks, like I and many others are naturally inclined to believe, that shopping for less of some food item will cause a

decrease in production of that food. “If I buy less, they’ll make less,” seems straightforward enough. However, a body of research in the field of food ethics suggests that “you *usually* aren’t going to be the one shopper whose purchase changes how much gets ordered.”<sup>159</sup> There are a lot of reasons for this, but a big one is that stores are just *designed* to be “insensitive to any small difference in purchasing.”<sup>160</sup> So, even if Casey avoids buying a brand of coffee that she knows is made with child labor, this change in her purchasing will not affect how much of this unethically sourced coffee is produced. It almost certainly won’t even change how much of it her local grocery store orders next week. If buying food is like voting with your dollar, it’s like voting in a winner take all electoral college system. This causal inefficacy problem paired with the unique kind of consumer problem of having to buy new food products leaves Casey in a vexing spot. With food, it seems harder to make straightforwardly praiseworthy choices than it is in other areas of consumer ethics.

A key virtue in the virtue ethical tradition is going to be helpful in figuring out what it looks like to make responsible food choices, especially in light of the complexity of the conundrum that food creates. The Greek word for this virtue is *phronesis*, a word that I am going to follow Rosalind Hursthouse’s lead in translating into “practical wisdom.” “Practical” because this virtue is not about impossible or imaginary choices, or “things that cannot be achieved in [your] action.”<sup>161</sup> “Wisdom” because this virtue involves the ability to “reason correctly” about the various options that you have open to

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159. Bob Fischer, *The Ethics of Eating Animals: Usually Bad, Sometimes Wrong, Often Permissible* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 49.

160. Fischer, *The Ethics of Eating Animals*, 60.

161. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a29.

you as a moral agent.<sup>162</sup> This is to say, practical wisdom doesn't help you to deliberate about things that you can't achieve or that are outside of your control. Instead, it helps you to choose well between the options that you have available to you. My hope is that we can talk about this virtue in a way that helps us to understand how we might go about narrowing down our available food choices.

This intellectual virtue is really important to Aristotle. Here I'll highlight a kind of throwaway point I made in chapter two about some virtues not being a mean between extremes. Intellectual virtues, like practical wisdom, are the kinds of virtues that aren't means between extremes. Rather, practical wisdom is a virtue that is "concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being."<sup>163</sup> This means that practical wisdom isn't a virtue that aims at some end. Instead, practical wisdom is about the things that lets us promote some end; it helps us to achieve the good that our action is targeted towards.<sup>164</sup> If virtues are tools in a toolbox, practical wisdom would be like a tool that told you whether you should use a Phillips head or a flat tip screwdriver on some project.

Framing practical wisdom in this way helps us to see why Aristotle claimed that "full virtue cannot be acquired without [practical wisdom]."<sup>165</sup> When faced with a complicated set of moral considerations, and you aren't sure which virtue you should practice in this case, exercising practical wisdom helps you to determine what path you should take to achieve your goal. To borrow the toolbox example once more, you won't be a successful craftsman if you are building with all of the wrong tools. I might get the job done well enough by using a high heel instead of a hammer to build my bookshelf—

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162. Hursthouse, *On Virtue*, 12.

163. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b5.

164. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145a6.

165. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144b16.

I've done this on more than one occasion—but I won't be fully competent craftsman until I employ the right tools for the right projects. Further, and importantly, practical wisdom doesn't make you good and virtuous.<sup>166</sup> Virtuous people will engage in some projects and not others. The kind of skill involved in practical wisdom is going to help you along with those projects whether they are praiseworthy or not. So, practical wisdom is necessary to help you be fully virtuous, but you will need to be on the right path in the first place to exercise this virtue. And if you are on that path, but don't have practical wisdom, you are never going to be achieving virtue as fully as possible. So, other virtues first, then practical wisdom to perfect the exercise of them.

If I've decided that I want to be fully virtuous, what question does practical wisdom prompt me to ask? Alasdair MacIntyre explains that the deliberative question that we have to answer as wise, practical reasoners is "Given that such and such an end is to be achieved, what action is it best to perform as a means of achieving it?"<sup>167</sup> The trick will be figuring out what the "such and such" is that we are aiming for. In the realm of food choices, maybe the aim is to reduce harm to farm laborers, or to ensure that pesticides don't make their way into water supplies, or to treat the living creatures involved with due respect, or to make a healthy choice for your body, or to reduce your carbon footprint, or not to overuse water supplies, or to leave the land as healthy as you left it, or something else, or some combination of these. It is here that I think it's important to reflect back on the particular complexities of food purchasing that we examined at the beginning of the chapter. In food consumption, it will likely be hard for

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166. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144b1.

167. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1999), 106.

the average person's purchasing patterns to track her moral concerns. We will consider what paths the virtuous person might take in response to this obstacle later in the chapter. But I think that this trickiness makes the deliberation component of practical wisdom particularly important. If deliberation is a way of weighing concerns, it's worth noting that in food purchasing, the virtuous agent might find herself assigning weight to and disregarding the apparent weight of certain concerns in ways that seemed counterintuitive at first.

Deliberation is absolutely key in practical wisdom. If the practically wise person does one thing, it is to deliberate excellently. Aristotle explains that the person who practices practical wisdom "studies well each question" about her own good.<sup>168</sup> In an increasingly complex world, I don't think we need to say that each person takes it upon herself to figure out exactly what will promote her best good via independent research. If I break a bone, I needn't pick up a medical degree to promote my healing if I am to be practically wise. But it would seem to be a failing of practical wisdom to entrust my arm's recovery to the counsel of an online advice columnist and a palm full of ibuprofen. That said, it's clear that there is some knowledge requirement for the proper practice of practical wisdom. There is some study involved. It's important that we understand the end that we are striving for.<sup>169</sup> Basically, there are some things that I have to know if I am going to be able to deliberate well. This doesn't solve it all for the person who is trying to be virtuous in the grocery store, though. There remains the question, "What do I have to know about my food in order to make a practically wise choice?" I'm going to briefly

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168. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141a26.

169. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b23.

take a stab at this question, borrowing once again from Aristotle, but this time from a different part of his body of work.

When he is explaining what it means to know something, Aristotle talks about four “causes” of a thing that help us to understand what it is. Each of these causes help us to understand why some object is the way that it is. I think that these causal questions about the foods we want to buy serve as helpful starting points for gaining some knowledge about the food we are purchasing. Before I list these questions, I want to be careful to say that I don’t think you need to have a clear answer to all of them before purchasing all food items if you want to be virtuous. There are going to be cases, particularly that fall outside of your normal routine, where it would be a very high bar to insist that you know exactly what it is that you are buying if you aren’t going to be a moral failure. This is especially true because no food purchasing practices that I know of cause serious and direct harm, which would pose a sizable obstacle to acting well. So, these questions are just meant to serve as rules of thumb for more routine and everyday types of food purchasing.

To the four questions. The first thing we may want to figure out when it comes to food is “that out of which” it is made.<sup>170</sup> Knowing what food is made of seems to be an important part of making a practically wise choice. So, to make it short, the agent can pause and ask “What is this made of?” or “What is in this?” when trying to decide whether or not to buy some item. If she has reason to avoid certain ingredients in the pursuit of some virtuous goal, this question alone might help her to narrow down the food choices she has available to her.

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170. Aristotle, “Physics,” in *Introductory Readings*, translated by Terence Irwin and Gail Fine (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 195a19.

The second kind of question to ask is maybe the most basic kind of question to ask about a thing, “What is it?” This involves getting to know the thing as a whole, the structure that some thing takes when all of its constituent parts have come together.<sup>171</sup> I think it’s worth highlighting here that it is easy to overlook what packaging the food comes in when you are purchasing some food product. So, asking “What is it?” is a question worth pausing on when in the food aisle, even if it is a basic question.

The third of our four questions is potentially the trickiest cause to determine in food purchasing. This question involves asking about some object’s producer, or that which caused it to become the kind of thing that it is.<sup>172</sup> The question to ask here is “How was this made?” or “Where did this come from?” The reason that this is such a tricky question to answer in the realm of food is that, unfortunately, labels are often deceptive and misleading. Reading some reliable sources on the food choices you have is likely a good start to answering this question. This can be overwhelming, of course. So, perhaps the way to start is with one product or group of products. Go home and do a little research on these different items. Try to figure out if there is a place to exercise virtue within the space that these choices open up. Make what seems to be the best choice. Then, move on to another product as life allows. This isn’t perfect, but it seems reasonable, and the nice thing about grocery shopping is that it usually involves repeatedly buying certain staples. If you plug away at it, in time you will be pushing a cart of items that reflects the commitments you’ve deliberated over.

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171. Aristotle, “Physics,” 195a21.

172. Aristotle, “Physics,” 195a22.

Finally, it is worth asking “What is this for?”<sup>173</sup> This may often result in a trivial answer. However, on some occasions, one might find that purchasing food for a celebration, or to donate to local hunger relief, or for a friend, may open the door to purchasing products that she may not normally purchase. Realizing that food is a means by which we may accomplish certain goals helps us to appreciate another dimension involved in the act of buying food.

So, based on this exploration, I find myself with four questions that I can ask when buying food. What is this made of? What is it? How was this made? What is this for? It’s worth noting here that virtuous actions don’t always need to be made explicit to ourselves in order to be virtuous. These are the kinds of questions that will, with time, likely fade into the background of the everyday routine of food purchasing. Now, this is not to say that these questions will never resurface—but we will get to that later. What I think is helpful is to have these questions as starting points for deliberation in order to help us to make some headway in our food purchasing practices.

Now, let’s imagine that Casey is doing her best to deliberate well with respect to her food choices. Casey may seek answers to these four questions, but she may just prefer to be told exactly what she should do in the grocery store. While I think that Casey may have some good choices, I hesitate to list what these might be because I believe that food purchasing is an incredibly complicated and varied field. Remember that practical wisdom deals with what is available to you as a moral agent. If I can’t do a particular thing, then it’s unreasonable to expect for me to do it. A person reading this chapter in a food desert and a person reading this chapter in an affluent community connected to lots

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173. Aristotle, “Physics,” 195a24.

of local farms are just going to be making very different food choices on their path to virtue. And both can be virtuous! So, my hope is that these questions provide a useful springboard for further individual deliberation. This list of four questions isn't going to tell you what to think. Instead, the questions are simply meant to offer some guidance on how to start deliberating about food.

Once the virtuous person starts to answer these questions, though, she may find that it is possible to pursue some virtues and not others in her role as a food purchaser. Casey, our college student, may be in an economic bind when it comes to her grocery bill. She cares a lot about the planet and workers' rights, and finds that focusing on the way that food is grown is a good way of addressing both of these concerns. She joins an advocacy group for farm laborers with a student organization on campus, and identifies an effective charity that works to defend their rights. Casey believes that, ideally, her trip through the one chain grocery store available to her should reflect her concerns. However, after some careful deliberation she might find that purchasing cheap, unethically sourced food so that she can have money to donate to the effective laborer rights organization is the best she can do in a bad circumstance. She refrains from buying the worst products that she can do without, but buys a lot of products that are sourced poorly.

Later in life, Casey may live in a place where she can shop from local farmers, and with her steady income, continue to express her virtue-driven concern for laborers through charitable giving and advocacy. Her family is also situated to grow some food with relative ease, so they meet some of their food demands themselves. And even though shopping local can have a higher carbon footprint than buying imported food,

Casey determines that her dollar goes far in her local community, and that it goes to farmers whose production practices she recognizes as virtuous. Here, Casey ends up paying a cost she'd prefer not to pay in an ideal world—the cost of a higher carbon footprint—but ultimately decides that it's a worthwhile tradeoff.

I am convinced that this situation will end up playing out very differently depending on where you live and shop, and how much access you have to nonconventional methods of food consumption—which, again, is just harder to get to in the area of food than it is with many other consumer products. I am also pretty sure that for some people situated in trickier situations than Casey's, there is just not a great way of expressing the virtues through their consumption habits.

So, it's here that I want to stop and consider where practical wisdom may actually lead. Although it may sound a bit skeptical, I think that when it comes to food, there may just not be straightforwardly good choices for lots of us. What then?

Let's recall that practical wisdom takes for granted that there is some good end to be achieved and only then asks which action is the best to perform as a means of achieving it. I don't think that it makes sense to say that there *aren't* goods to attain in the act of producing, selling, and buying food. It seems clear to me that there are good things to be accomplished in all of these areas. But the question arises of whether we as food purchasers will have clear grasp of what all of those goods are. In fact, I think it makes the most sense to say that *we know there are things we don't know* about our food. Even the most astute consumer runs the risk of getting excited about a company that underpays its workers, or endorsing a seemingly eco-friendly product that isn't actually sustainable, or subscribing to a service that claims to be transparent but actually misleads its customer

into believing its glittery claims, or any number of unknowable things. Casey gets to a point in life where she is able to exert a lot of control in the area of food choice. But not many of us live in such a context, and we too may want to be virtuous.

I think that the thing to say, here, is that practical wisdom is going to have to keep us on our toes. It is going to have us repeatedly revisiting our relationship to food.

Recalling that practical wisdom picks out virtues to exercise in some sphere, I think that practical wisdom is going to often have us exercising humility with regard to our food purchases. Why humility? If we think of humility as the skill of honest self-assessment, then humility will tell us that we can't be sure how well we are doing with regard to food. Those things that we know we don't know are going to introduce an un-erasable level of uncertainty. The constant influx of new products on the market or ways of buying food is going to request the probably limited attention that we have to devote to buying food. The difficulty in knowing what I should even aim for—that good to be achieved—may shift over time. Coming to respect animals as deserving of moral concern leads to a huge paradigm shift, for example, and will probably shuffle the order of the goods that you care about. Other issues can do similar things, and all at once. Honest self-assessment may sound a bit like, “I dunno.” A wise deliberator will look to do her best anyway, even if it is uncertainly. And let me step back and say that it's sobering to think of virtue in this way—as a way of living that highlights moral uncertainties as well as victories. But even if it is sobering, I don't think it's any less true. Growing in virtue in a growing world will involve some discomfort, and I don't know that that discomfort will ever fully evaporate.

I will say that coming to this conclusion was discouraging at first, at least for me. I live in an apartment with no yard space, in a town with basically two grocery stores and

a very small weekly farmers market, and on a budget that doesn't have me buying brand name black beans. What I'd like to hear is that I'm doing great, that I've deliberated wisely, and that I should therefore feel confident in the choices I have made given my circumstance. I speak personally because I think that lots of us want that same kind of confidence and reassurance. I just think that real practical wisdom won't give it to us very often, at least not as long as food production works in the way that it works now, and at least not for those of us who make purchases within these systems. But I also think that's okay if it's true, and that it's a good reminder that virtue is habitual. The decisions I make when grocery shopping today will likely have to change in the near future. Those decisions will have to change because I will have deliberated under a different set of conditions than I did when I started shopping. And the knowledge that I may very well have gotten something wrong will keep me humble, as will the knowledge that the impact I can make is either small or nonexistent. I think that this makes practical wisdom and the deliberation that it entails *more*, not less important for the virtuous agent. Indeed, it is only by really examining the situation in which I am purchasing that I will know exactly what I am up against, and how much I can do to live into certain virtues in the first place. But this knowing what I'm up against does mean that practical wisdom may be a virtue that sobers me when it comes to the food that I buy.

What I hope that this chapter has done is to suggest that eating and buying food is a space for moral decision making, and that there are techniques that we can use to make sense of the jumble of concerns that it creates. Just because food is a busy intersection doesn't mean that I should throw up my hands and give into the traffic. Further, I will do well, here, to remember a point MacIntyre makes that "rational enquiry is essentially

social;” this is to affirm that I needn’t navigate this space alone.<sup>174</sup> If this chapter sparks the creation of local, ethical food-themed discussions—whether around kitchen tables or in group chats—I would count that as one success. I think it would be successful even if these groups do a lot in the way of urging humility and flagging moral uncertainty. In all, I believe that in the case of food, the exercise of practical reason will lead to the expression of virtue in a fairly wide variety of ways, including in ways that have the agent feeling unsure about her exercise of virtue. This being the case, we’ll do well to always have deliberation on the table.

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174. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 156.

## **X. EXEMPLARS AND RATCHETING UP: LEARNING WHAT TO ASK OF OURSELVES BY LOOKING TO OTHERS**

Growing up, these were the people I knew. Doña Maria, a woman whose legs were amputated during her childhood, and who lived in a house with her husband and mom. Her house was not anything like wheelchair accessible, so she walked with her arms, taking care of her home and family this way. She helped to support her household by selling intricate needlework in town. Her house was never anything short of clean and guest-ready. This is true even in the years when we visited and her mom was ailing. Her mom, Doña Pepa, was an unbelievably kind woman. When she wasn't resting, she would join in on our conversations during visits. I sat as a kind of onlooker to the friendship between Doña Maria and my mom. And between Doña Maria and Soren. Soren, my little brother who wasn't in school yet, had a close connection with Doña Maria. He would play with all of her decorative cats, and she would just delight in his precious mess of hair and very blue eyes. I wished I could visit Doña Maria and Doña Pepa as often as mom and Soren did. I remember that once her mom started getting very sick, Doña Maria told my mom that she would have to hold her upright at night while she coughed. Doña Pepa would fall asleep that way, with her daughter staying awake to make sure she didn't fall back down and could get some rest. Doña Maria would give her mom medicine every so-many hours. When Doña Pepa rested, and when our family was over, Doña Maria would talk about how much she loved her. Even when Doña Pepa was awake, they'd talk about each other with such fondness and closeness. Doña Maria mourned deeply and for a long time after her mom passed, an empty bed in the room where she did all of her work, and a bedside table free of pill bottles and needles.

I knew Doña Juanita and her son, Don Francisco. Doña Juanita was over 100 years old when we met her. She was the sweetest person I've ever met. At that time, when she was only about one hundred, she would sit outside with a fly swatter and a white plastic sheet in front of her to attract flies. Then, she would wait for flies to land on her trap, swat them, and put them in a jar. After this, she would spend almost an hour walking with her walker and jar to and from the chicken coop that was about fifteen feet from her front door. She would feed all of the flies to her chickens. When mom asked why, she explained, "Oh, the chickens *love* the flies!" Was this their only food? Her son explained absolutely it wasn't. They had plenty to eat. The flies were for the chickens to snack on, Doña Juanita explained. Her son took care of her and of the house. He was almost eighty. He would climb up onto the roof to patch it. He would cook and clean for them. He would have conversations with his mom, who could chat about anything. I remember that her laugh was like tinkling bells, the only person I've ever known who actually laughs in the way that all children's books describe. I remember once Doña Juanita was angry with her son, the only time I saw her angry. This was years into our family's relationship with hers. She had always love cooking tortillas fresh on the comal. But her eyesight was failing now that she was over 110 years old, and she'd burn her fingertips. Her son took the comal away to keep her from burning herself. She didn't talk to him for days. Doña Juanita passed when she was one 116 years old. By that time, we had moved away. But I visited Don Francisco once a few years later. I realized then that he was an old man. He missed her so much. He still took care of her chickens.

I also knew Padre Pedro ("Padre," the Spanish word for "Father," the title for a Catholic priest). He was put in charge of our town of 2,000 people, and of 60 much

smaller surrounding towns. Most priests put here wouldn't bother trying to make it to all 60 towns, ever. But Padre Pedro, convinced that no place was too small for its faithful to deserve the recognition of support from their Catholic community, made an effort to go to every town. Some towns only had ten or so people living there, and he would go. This means that places that hadn't been remembered by their religious leaders for years or even decades at a time received multiple visits a year from a priest. Additionally, Padre Pedro poured tremendous energy into our town. He celebrated more Masses in local churches than the previous priest had. He preached with warmth and energy. I never remember hearing him get angry with us the parishioners, something that was a rare experience for me growing up Catholic. He wouldn't get angry when kids ran up and down the aisles at church. "Wouldn't get angry" is an understatement. He loved it. Soren, who loved Padre Pedro, would run up during Mass to sit next to him. Mom would go red with total embarrassment, but Padre Pedro would look to her to ensure her that it was fine. Something lost on me at the time but whose weight hits me now is that Padre Pedro would never meet one on one with anyone in the parish in private. Should he have to meet with someone, he would do so in public. In public, in front of everyone at Mass, Soren would run up and put rocks at Padre Pedro's feet and *on* the altar. There were few things Soren loved more than finding interesting rocks, the bigger the better, and he wanted to share them with his friend. Padre Pedro would just scoot the rocks on the altar right over and celebrate Mass as usual. When the Doctor told Padre Pedro that he was working himself to death, that he wouldn't recover if he didn't lower his stress levels, Padre Pedro resisted as long as he could. Then he pushed the archdiocese to get two

priests to serve his 61 towns. Those two priests weren't able to keep up with the workload that Padre Pedro had maintained for years.

When I hear about moral saints or moral exemplars, I have lots of people who I've known well who come to mind. I could include Mari's story and Tonio's in the list as well. I don't know whether or not knowing moral exemplars is a common experience, but I think there is reason to believe that it's a morally significant one. This chapter is about our relationship to moral exemplars, including why I think that we have reason to be them. At its core, this chapter aims to make the case for the relationship between moral exemplars and the virtues that we need if we want to flourish. This chapter is at the end of the book because I hope that it provides a framework of how I think about one of the reasons why having the conversations we've engaged in is important. When I learn about the virtues on paper or in conversation, I want to know what to do about them. I want to know what image I should have in mind when I think about being a real life virtuous person. And I think that one of the ways that they make sense becomes clear in having this conversation about moral exemplars.

This chapter is going to talk about what it means to be a moral exemplar. Looking at the philosopher Vanessa Carbonell's work is going to be key, here. Then, we will see what role these moral exemplars have to play when it comes to thinking about virtue. Specifically, we will talk about how their relationship to sacrifice affects the rest of us. At this point, we will look at some work by Alasdair MacIntyre that will help to link up Carbonell's conversation on moral exemplars with virtue theory more broadly. Finally, we will talk about some ways that this conversation can help us in our pursuit of virtue. I will flag a concern that I have about the opposite of moral exemplarism, and we will

think through some ways to address this problem. In all, the hope is that this chapter gives us a way of thinking about virtuous high achievers and how their example can help us in our paths to flourishing.

First, let's look at what Carbonell is doing in her project. Carbonell talks about moral exemplars in her work, although she uses the term "moral saints" to describe them.<sup>175</sup> She defines moral exemplars as:

human beings with more-or-less ordinary psychology who have devoted their lives to a moral project, who consistently perform actions that are: (1) good but not required; (2) morally significant; (3) undertaken at some personal cost; and (4) not outweighed by other morally bad or blameworthy actions.<sup>176</sup>

This is to say, moral exemplars are like the rest of us, but they engage in projects that are morally worthwhile and involve some sacrifice, and their goodness isn't overshadowed by vicious actions. For example, even the most generous and devoted doctor who also abuses his family won't count as a moral exemplar, because his bad actions stop us from elevating him to that level. And while we might admire the brilliant florist who engages in excellent work with tremendous devotion to her task, we should ask whether her acts have moral significance and cost her something before saying that she is a *moral* exemplar.<sup>177</sup> However, my experience of the people I mentioned earlier leads me to believe that they qualify as moral exemplars. While my lack of knowledge of

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175. I see a reason for using this language of sainthood, but choose to use the word "exemplar" for a couple of reasons. I'm skeptical about the religious import of the word "saint" that certain readers will certainly bring to the chapter, distorting what Carbonell means when she uses the word. Further, I'm only interested in looking at how moral saints serve as exemplars. Carbonell's definition allows for a saint that no one can learn from because no one knows about her, and that's just not the kind of person that I have in mind in this chapter.

176. Vanessa Carbonell, "The Ratcheting-Up Effect," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93 (2012): 228–254, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0114.2012.01425, 229.

177. She might be. It's just not clear that she is by virtue of this description of her work.

some features of their life might mean that I am mistaken, I am fairly confident that they would qualify.

A further feature of moral exemplars that Carbonell's work brings to light is the nature of their perspective on moral demands. Let's imagine that Helen, a working-class mother of a family, considers the question, "How should I and my family respond to the homeless population in town?" In asking a question like this, Helen is asking what morality demands of her. Depending on the information that she has about the nature of homelessness, helpful ways of engaging in outreach, and the extent to which she should care about this issue, she may decide on any number of answers to this question. There are lots of possible answers to this question, she may decide that she ought do nothing at all, or that she should keep money and food on hand to share with folks that she sees when she's out and about, or that her family ought to regularly cook meals for and spend time with their neighbors experiencing homelessness. And which path she chooses *will all* depend on the kind of view that she has of herself in relationship to the world and how moral demands shape this relationship. Knowledge of facts is going to affect her moral behavior.

Carbonell notes that moral exemplars' perception of facts about sacrifice is key. How moral exemplars think about sacrifice matters when we are looking to make sense of their lives. Carbonell also recognizes that there is a gap between what moral exemplars recognize as a sacrifice and what the rest of us recognize as a sacrifice.<sup>178</sup> There's a disparity here. Basically, there's a gap in perception between the moral exemplar who performs some act and the onlooker who observes her doing so. Let's say that Helen

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178. Carbonell, "Ratcheting-Up," 231.

decides on the last line of approach, where she regularly engages with and seeks to spend time with those experiencing homelessness in her community. Now, if her co-worker decides not to do anything at all about homelessness in her community, it's clear that there is a disparity, or a difference, in the way that the two view facts about sacrifice. While the co-worker might think that any act is at once too sacrificial for this group of people, Helen will surely think differently. This is where Carbonell's point that "one of the reasons for the agent-observer disparity is that agents and observers have asymmetric access to facts about sacrifice" comes into play.<sup>179</sup> She immediately follows this by saying that "moral obligation depends partly on what we can reasonably believe about sacrifice."<sup>180</sup> This is related to her view of moral obligation as being what we can reasonably demand of each other. The idea is that we can't think of obligations as demands that would be unreasonable to expect of us, considering that we cannot be expected to do what we cannot reasonably do.

While I don't really think about morality in terms of moral obligation, I think that Carbonell's point relates to the virtue ethical framework. When as aspirers to virtue we think, "how can I live out a life of stable, authentic virtue?," it matters that we know what level of virtue we might attain in our own lives. It matters that we understand what great virtue can look like. I think that especially in a virtue ethical framework, the question of how much sacrifice is involved in attaining virtue is also pretty important. After all, the goal is flourishing. And extreme, long-lasting, and preventable suffering does not play a role in the good life. So, the aspirer to virtue should be concerned with how much sacrifice is involved in pursuing some virtuous end. If the sacrifices involved in doing

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179. Carbonell, 231.

180. Carbonell, 23.

something are totally unreasonable, this will be good reason to think that virtue will not demand this action of her.

Moral exemplars' different point of view gives them access to the experience of serious sacrifice for a moral cause.<sup>181</sup> Many of us lack this point of view. When moral exemplars see some action that looks like a real sacrifice to the rest of us, they can make an honest, experience-tested assessment as to whether or not this act is reasonable for them to aspire to. When the rest of us see some action that looks like a real sacrifice, we can't say whether or not this sacrifice is too big to handle, at least not from our personal experience. Additionally, though, and importantly, moral exemplars "also know what it feels like to reap the rewards generated by their good deeds."<sup>182</sup> This is to recognize the reward that exemplars experience in performing morally praiseworthy actions. While the reward they experience may be different from the satisfaction that many of us feel in carrying out our lives, we ought not downplay the weight of this reward. I think that this is something that really stands out to me in the stories of all of the people I talked about earlier. All of them, from Don Francisco to Doña Maria, in addition to being really admirable people, were super joyful. While I might worry that the sacrifices that they made would break me if I made them, they all seemed not to think about their behavior primarily in terms of the sacrifices it involved. Based off of the time I spent with each of them, I think it makes sense to say that they found great reward in behaving in the virtuous ways that they did.

So, while all of us balance the good and bad that we experience, and adjust our aims according to this balance, moral exemplars "have calibrated their scales

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181. Carbonell, 238.

182. Carbonell, 238.

differently.”<sup>183</sup> This difference in calibration may be the most marked when we compare exemplars to those of us who enjoy relative wealth and prosperity. What we who experience relative prosperity view as hardship may seem especially small in comparison to the sacrifices of moral exemplars.<sup>184</sup> If my idea of sacrifice involves forgoing an additional video streaming subscription in order to donate more to malaria prevention organizations, this just won’t seem that big of a deal when compared to the person who gives up most all of her time and financial prospects to work in relief aid. We will talk more about what’s going on here later in the chapter. But for now, the question is, does this comparison between exemplars’ scales and the rest of ours help us at all or teach us anything? Does the fact that my sacrifices seem small when compared to the sacrifices of real-world exemplars have any moral weight? The answer seems to be yes, perhaps especially from a virtue ethical perspective.

MacIntyre discusses the importance of having social influences to help us to figure out how it is that we should cultivate the virtues of independent practical reasoning. The virtues of independent practical reason affect us as individual moral decision-makers in the real world. MacIntyre explains that if we are to develop the capacities of independent practical rationality, we need three things. These three things that we need are certain relationships; the ability to put distance between ourselves and our desires; and—what we will focus on here—the “ability to imagine realistically alternative possible futures, so as to be able to make rational choices between them.”<sup>185</sup> When MacIntyre talks about the third thing, he means that we need the ability to discern

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183. Carbonell, 238.

184. Carbonell, 239.

185. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 83.

what futures are actually open to us. And, through this discernment process, we need to be able to determine which realistic possible future will best aid us in our development toward flourishing. While I may want to become a doctor who serves the underprivileged, the facts of *my life* might make it such that this isn't a future that's open to me. Without the kind of self-knowledge and skills that we gain by virtue of our relationship to and dependence on the people around us, we won't be able to "imagine that range of alternative possible futures that are, given the social circumstances and [our] own characteristics, futures that it would be realistic for them to attempt to make [our] own."<sup>186</sup> This means that we need knowledge of *both* "the particularities of those parts of the natural and social world" in which we live, *and* "those generalizations which will enable [us] to judge the probability of different outcomes of this or that kind of action in this or that kind of situation."<sup>187</sup> Again, while I may want to become a doctor who serves the underprivileged, the facts of *the world* might make it such that this isn't a future that's open to me. To recap: first, we need to be able to determine whether it is possible that some potential future will occur, and we need to determine this well. And second, we need knowledge of the world in which we live if we want to figure out how we can best operate as independent practical reasoners within it. All of this serves to help us in figuring out how to be better equipped for a life of virtue.

So, MacIntyre's work helps us to see that we need some knowledge about our world if we want to live good lives within it. Without knowledge of what's possible for us to achieve in our community and out there in the world, we won't have the kind of information that will be helpful for us in deciding what it is that we can strive for in terms

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186. MacIntyre, 94.

187. MacIntyre, 94.

of virtuous achievement. Put another way, if I want to know how virtuous I can be, and how best to exercise the virtue that will get me there, it will be very helpful for me to have as examples people who achieve virtue especially well. It will be helpful to look to those who achieve virtue in the face of sacrifices that I might otherwise think are too great to allow for flourishing. Moral exemplars provide us with some important facts about the moral world that we inhabit.

The person who looks out into the world to decide how she can best be virtuous makes a good choice when she looks to moral exemplars, because they provide the kind of evidence of how a person can be virtuous, withstand sacrifice, and do well. Even if the moral exemplar does not provide an exact model for how *I* can be, she does provide proof that people *like me* can be so virtuous, perhaps even more than I previously thought possible. She provides proof of how a virtuous agent can act in the world while cultivating her and others' flourishing. So, even if my relationship with Tonio doesn't encourage me to be exactly like him, his example does offer a kind of proof of what virtues are possible in the real world, and how it's possible to do what it takes to cultivate this virtue while flourishing and helping others to do the same. Carbonell discusses the two types of reactions that we can have to exemplars in her chapter, saying that exposure to these moral heroes might make us think "that they are just fundamentally better people than we are and there is no hope for us."<sup>188</sup> This first kind of thought isn't encouraging at all, and is quite possibly not true. But a second kind of thought is possible. It's possible that this exposure to moral exemplars might serve "as evidence that we could do more,

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188. Carbonell, "Ratcheting-Up," 239.

and that it might not be as hard as we thought.”<sup>189</sup> It is the second type of conviction that plays a role in shaping our development as independent practical reasoners.

As pursuers of the life of virtue, the example of moral high-achievers can help us in a couple of ways. The first way that their example can help us is that the comparison between their lives and ours can help us to determine how we might fit into the moral ecosystem. The second is that this example can help us to figure out what virtue might look like for us personally. To the first: moral exemplars help us to see what kind of role we might play in the moral ecosystem. If I am interested in becoming a virtuous, independent reasoner in the world, I will look to see what kinds of things I can do in that world. One of the ways of figuring out what that looks like is to learn from the examples of other independent reasoners who have devoted themselves to lives of virtue. Using them as a guide may well turn out to be helpful in determining what kind of part I can play in society. Basically, moral exemplars provide living proof of the way that individual virtuous people can help to shape the world around them. And looking at this example can help me in figuring out what *kind of life* I can lead.

A second way that exemplars may help me is by helping me to figure out what virtue might look like for me personally. I think that part of this will be learning how to adjust to the sacrifices that being virtuous might demand. So, for example, let’s imagine that Helen, the mom from earlier in the chapter, is at square one. She wants to help people suffering homelessness in her community. Say that she decides to start in this endeavor of helping out. Without guidance, Helen might decide that what she will do is donate money to her local homeless shelter. Recognizing the financial sacrifice involved,

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189. Carbonell, 239.

appropriate intentions, and context in which she performs this act, she might be confident that she is behaving virtuously. However, say that a few months in she meets another mom—let's call her Gretta—who volunteers with and donates to the organization that she is currently involved with. Gretta manages to do much more than Helen does, and she finds herself in a similar situation to Helen's. Now, Helen may ask herself if her own understanding of sacrifice is lacking. Perhaps careful deliberation reveals, for some reasons of the particularities of Helen's life, that it isn't. If Helen realizes that she really can't do anymore, then her deliberation stops. This is super important, because the idea of ratcheting up doesn't mean that the bar automatically gets set higher for all of us. Our own lives are going to have some role to play in where the threshold is. Some of us will be doing all that we can or should when we do something small in comparison to exemplars.

But say that after meeting Gretta, Helen deliberates and realizes that she *can* do more. If Helen can communicate with Gretta, she might ask her directly how she managed to balance those things that Helen perceives as hefty sacrifices—less time, money, comfort. Even if she can't communicate with her, Helen can do her best to learn from afar, taking this opportunity to ask herself how she might strive for the virtuous self-outpouring that Gretta has achieved. Did she start at this level of perceived self-sacrifice from the beginning? What motivates her? How does she balance her activities with her other life commitments? What kind of impact does her generosity have on herself and the community she serves? The list could go on. After doing this, Helen may decide to communicate more deeply with the people she seeks to serve, learning to be more responsive to their needs. She may give a weekend to the organization serving the

homeless in town when the organization needs it most. She may cook meals for and form relationships with individuals suffering homelessness nearby. She may start doing more than she thought made sense for her in the beginning, and grow from there. In short, the self-reflection prompted by her exposure to an exemplar might help the onlooker to decide what she might do in addition to, or instead of, those acts she decided on for herself.

I think that all of this points to the importance of having exemplars' models to guide us in our lives. Without them, it may be difficult to know what is both possible and virtuous. Those of us who are able to withstand seemingly unstandable sacrifice teach the rest of us that such sacrifice may be borne well, and that it brings with it its own set of rewards. Further, the guidance of those others helps us to know what kind of role we ourselves can play in the world. This guidance also helps us to figure out what virtue will look like in our own lives.

What does this mean for us? Well, for one, I think it speaks to the importance of taking exemplars' guidance seriously. When we come across some morally admirable person, I think that it helps to take the opportunity to learn from her example. For instance, upon meeting Doña Maria, I can do a few of things. One thing that I can do is think, "Well, that's an incredible woman. Good for her!," and not be affected personally. Another thing that I might do is think, "Wow, that's an incredible woman. She lives a life that I didn't think I could bear, but she does it with virtue and reward. How might I be more generous, kind, compassionate, and attentive like her? How can I learn from her example of special and devoted care to the people with whom she interacts most closely?" Doing the second type of thing encourages me to raise the bar for what I think

that virtue might look like for me in my own life, all because I have the example of someone whose bar was higher than mine.

Another thing that this means is that virtuous exemplars help to establish a standard for achievement out there in the world. I understand that the case of Padre Pedro is complicated by the fact that religious convictions are tricky things to praise from an impartial perspective. However, let's agree to assume that he held his religious beliefs for an unproblematic set of reasons. If others who seek to engage in the type of outreach that Padre Pedro did were to look to his example, they might recognize that the bar for what's possible is higher than they thought. Now, they might have to slowly work their way up to this exemplary level instead of trying to go from zero to one hundred. Virtue, as habit, can't be cranked up overnight. But, having Padre Pedro's example in mind rather than the example of lazy and selfish religious leaders is going to make a difference. Those seeking to learn from Padre Pedro might have a heightened idea for virtuous achievement, and so might aim to do better by the communities that they serve, even if this involves lots of small steps.

The final way that this reflection impacts us is by showing the danger of the opposite of ratcheting up—let's just call it ratcheting down. I think this is important to mention because I see a kind of widespread, maybe unconscious, effort to ratchet down our expectations of what is possible of and expected for us as moral agents. Let's take the #FirstWorldProblems joke as an example. This hashtag is a way of drawing attention to the little struggles that relatively affluent people face, problems that you can only experience because you already have a set of advantages or privileges. So phrases like, "Latte without enough foam," or, "When your phone charger doesn't reach the outlet in

the bathroom,” or, “Bread crumbs the same color as your granite counter top,” are all contenders for getting labeled with the first world problems hashtag. Another half-true, ironically stated hashtag that has spread the internet is #adulting. This gives a way of talking about the tasks involved in daily life, tasks that are generally expected of adults, by playing up the struggle or burden involved in accomplishing them. Now, making these jokes is not immoral or even the least bit problematic, so long as people are just joking. However, I think that talking about this phenomenon of complicating the mundane is helpful here. Let’s just say that we do come to think about filling your tires as a hefty obligation. Or maybe we actually think that not getting a foamy enough latte is a real world sacrifice. Whether a hashtag formed this belief is totally irrelevant. If the fact of the matter is that we go through the world viewing lives of relative comfort and luxury as taxing and sacrificial, we will be inclined to ratchet down our expectations of the good life.

Here’s what I may end up thinking if I give into ratcheting down effects: “If I take care of my car, house, and kids, and don’t complain about lattes, iPhones, or granite counter tops, then I must be doing pretty well! I’m a good person.” What will happen if we think that average expectations of the moral life set the bar for goodness? And what if this bar is lowered because lots of us believe that leading lives of relative prosperity is actually very hard? I think that the result will be that we’ll end up with an impoverished, shallow, and deprived vision of the good life. This caution should sound similar to the worry that Lisa Tessman flags about interpersonal affirmation in communities of privilege, which we discussed in the chapter on courage. If the result of low shared expectations about the morally admirable life is a really low bar of moral achievement,

it's no wonder that the idea of taking care of your ailing parents or serving others tirelessly seems to be an insurmountable task.

I can't say for sure what a perfect response to being worried about the temptation to ratchet down our moral expectations would look like. Here's a couple of possible answers, though. One answer might be to distance yourself from widespread ratcheting down efforts, whether it's by being aware of the fact that these efforts are occurring in real time, or by distancing yourself from cultural phenomena that tempt you to adopt this idea as your own. Maybe don't watch tons of reality TV or subscribe to #FirstWorldProblems pages; maybe don't seek intersubjective affirmation of the good life from privileged communities if you're influenced by them; maybe be wary of shiny American dreams and promises of material comfort. Another answer might be to conscientiously connect yourself with stories of moral exemplars, making an effort to expose yourself to witnesses of moral excellence and achievement who raise the bar of your moral self-expectations. Get to know great people, read their stories, think of their examples. Another solution might be to do a sort of introverted stock-taking of those things that you struggle to do well. You can identify areas where you feel that you are sacrificing a lot to be virtuous, and then make a concerted effort to work on those areas of your life. Take a step back, see where you're struggling to keep up with what virtue seems to be asking of you, and find ways to respond well to these challenges. Whether the actual solution to combatting widespread ratcheting down efforts is in my list or not, I think we have a reason not to lower our moral expectations for ourselves. The reason, of course, is that in so doing, we risk the chance of not flourishing; and we certainly run the risk of not fostering the flourishing of our communities.

Let's indulge in some imagination for a couple of paragraphs. Let's think back on some virtues that we have looked at in this book, and consider what having exemplars could do to our understanding of them. I'm going to imagine that you just loved reading my chapter on moral perception—you and my mom both found it to be incredibly insightful and provocative. After reading it, you put down the book and thought, "I want to work on becoming more morally perceptive." So, you chipped away at it. You looked for small ways to incorporate this virtue into your daily life and to practice it when you got the chance. After a while, though, I think it probably got a bit harder. Like, no one is talking about moral perception, really. When you tell your brother about it he just says, "that's cool," and changes the subject. You wonder if working toward this virtue is worthwhile at all, considering that my chapter that you loved isn't all the guidance you need to pursue this virtue for a lifetime.

Then, you meet my friend Amélie. You quickly learn that Amélie, who works for three charities that fit her skillsets perfectly, is just super. She works constantly on projects that are carefully tailored to the communities that she's engaged with—whether it's with young women, undocumented migrants, or local gardeners. For years, she's worked toward the goal of helping people in concrete ways that respond to the needs they actually want addressed. She's given up on projects where it's clear that other people have it covered, and has refused to get involved in things that she loves but knows she can't be devoted to. She's built a family in light of her vision to impact the little worlds she lives in. She's raising a son in the hopes of helping him to become sensitive to the story of which he is a part. Amélie, you realize, gets the moral perception thing right. Among other things, she is just the kind of person who lives out the stuff that you're

quickly realizing my pages didn't capture very well—because pages are kind of flat in comparison to learning about this virtue from someone who lives it. Faced with the gap between you and your improvement in this virtue, it turns out that knowing Amélie helps a ton. In addition to helping to build up the communities that she has given her life to improving, Amélie helps you in your path to flourishing by providing one example of what this virtue you want to work on looks like.

You may not ever meet my friend and, while I think you'd be lucky to be able to, that's okay. Like I said earlier, we can't all expect to learn virtue from real life exemplars. But, I think that learning from them, even if it is from afar, can be really helpful. I do wish that in reading every chapter in this book, you had someone come to mind who, even if they're not full blown moral exemplars, live out this particular virtue pretty well. When I said at the start of the book that we should be happy that our flourishing is bound up with each other's, there's something to be said for the exemplars who provide a lot of meaningful support in this shared task. I still think it's true that flourishing is possible without exemplars' guidance. But I do think that they make it easier for the rest of us. I, for one, am grateful to know lots of them. And I'm grateful to have learned from them before I ever started learning ethics in a more abstract way.

Before we close, I want to address the curious case of those people who are the firsts in their aspirations to a virtuous life of a certain kind—the virtue trailblazers among us. I think of the person who lives in an otherwise morally corrupt environment and sees the error of the corruption on her own. I wonder, for example, about people who refused to see certain diseases as punishments for a sinful life, and who worked to counteract these systems that oppressed the already downtrodden. Or those who fought for just

treatment of animals as intensive animal agriculture was on the rise. Or those who both refused to condone and actively worked to undermine the institution of slavery when it was not only common practice, but was heralded as a morally praiseworthy system. Do we need to have examples of outstanding virtue if we want to live up to such virtue ourselves?

I think that the answer is no, but that it will certainly be harder to pave the path oneself. However, I think that the importance of exemplars also serves as a reason to do this kind of path paving. This is important. The person who recognizes that there are unknown sacrifices on the road ahead, but who sees the end goal as virtuous and worthwhile has multiple reasons to pursue this goal. The most important reason to aim to do well is clearly just that it is virtuous and will enable the flourishing of her community and of herself. But also, and importantly, the person wanting to walk down this road has a really good reason to be the moral exemplar within her ecosystem who will serve as an example to those around her. I think that this conversation on moral exemplars makes this second point clear. The goal isn't only for herself and her immediate neighbors, then, but also for those who may learn something important and worthwhile about the pursuit of this virtuous goal by having her as an example. Now, because the first goal I mentioned is inherently worthwhile, I don't think that it makes sense only to act when these acts will be recognized by others. If a would-be abolitionist knew she would die in obscurity and chose not to act because of that, this would definitely be very bad. So, if the only goal were recognition, the call to moral exemplarity would sound like an invitation self-congratulation, pride, or other vicious traits. This makes it clear that recognition should not be the motivating goal.

But I still think that it does make sense to be a moral exemplar for an additional reason than we might originally think, considering that learning from each other can be super helpful in our pursuits of a life of virtue. In short, I think we all have good reasons to strive for exemplary virtue because doing so is good, but also because we raise each other up in so doing. And when I think about the book I've chosen to write, I especially hope that, if I've gotten right about any of these virtues, I'll continue to get the chance to learn from people who forge ahead in them. Even if the virtues have stayed the same for millennia, figuring out how to live in them in a growing world is an evolving and animate project. Having people living out this project in real time would certainly be good for the rest of us. If virtue is about helping us to live full and flourishing lives, it's really nice to be able point to a person who's getting it right. This person may well be working with some skills and tools that only she has. But I guess I'm optimistic that we can still learn from her in the way that artists learn from others whose craft they'll only emulate, not copy. And if getting us all closer to moral goodness means that we need some people to be virtuous trailblazers in contexts of moral decline, I guess I don't see a reason why you and me can't be among these firsts ourselves.

Recognizing the role that moral exemplars play in our life provides a kind of framework in which we can aim for virtue. This exposure to people who take on suffering and do it well makes it impossible for us to claim ignorance that actions like theirs are both possible and virtuous. This is important, because if these people were examples of total suffering, then we wouldn't have moral reason to be like them.<sup>190</sup> Moral exemplars' examples help us in the task of self-reflection. These examples also help us as we try to

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190. Carbonell, 228.

figure out what our futures might look like in our relationship to our communities and to our world. I said at the start of this chapter that I want to know what to do about the virtues after I read about them. I hope that it's clear now that I think one thing to do is to be inspired by the sacrifices that exemplars make when living these virtues themselves. As we begin to step back from reading about the virtues in this book, then, I hope we can identify people who are living these virtues out in our world. I wouldn't be at all surprised if, in looking to people like them, we become amazed at what we can do.

## **XI. CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

I guess it's hard to say from the perspective of a single life, but it does seem like our world is changing pretty quickly. The word I chose to capture this change is to say that we live in a *growing* world, and there are definitely ways in which that seems true. Talking about the increasing interconnectedness of our world, the ways in which our communities admit of tremendous diversity, and our loose relationship to the products that we consume are just methods of highlighting the ways in which our lives are quite different from many humans' lives before us. What's more, it's clear that these changes are still happening, that our children's and grandchildren's lives will look somewhat different from ours, and that new obstacles will arise that they will have to respond to well. While there are ways in which the world hasn't grown, developed, or changed, I wanted to highlight a small number of features that show growth. I've wanted to talk through those differences. What these changes mean for us as moral agents is that we will have to find ways of living well in situations that go off script. We are all finding ways of living well in life contexts that don't match up exactly with the lives of people who wrote about goodness before us. I do think that conversations about virtue can keep pace with a world that changes. But in order for that to happen, we need to be having these conversations in the first place. You've participated in one such dialogue for every chapter that you've read of this book. Now, I want to take this conclusion as an opportunity to talk through where having this conversation can take us.

In thinking about how virtue should keep pace with our growing world, a story comes to mind. I first heard it from my grandma, but my mom shares it sometimes too. It goes like this. A woman is cooking a ham for dinner, following her family's recipe.

When she slices off both ends of the ham before setting it to bake, just like she's always seen her family do it, she wonders what she's wasting these pieces for. So she calls her mom to ask. Her mom isn't much help, though. "That's how I learned it from my mom," she explains. But after hanging up the phone, her mom is curious too, and decides to call up her mom. When she calls, she asks "Why is it that we cut off both ends of a ham before we bake it?" Her mom laughs, "Honey, I always did that because my pan was too small to fit the whole thing."

My grandma thinks that the ham story is just too funny. But I wanted to share it because I think that talking about recipes and hams may help us to think about virtue. For those of us who are interested in learning from the virtues, it's a bit like inheriting a recipe. Reading Aristotle suggests that when life gives you battles, you mix together a bit of confidence and a bit of fear if you want to get courage right. But when the examples that we've learned from Aristotle don't apply much to us anymore—whether it's about being a soldier, or a male head of household, or a deliberator in a direct democracy for a city state—we're left with recipes for virtues that seem woefully out of touch with our lives. If the world is growing, and we're dealt components of a life that don't match the circumstances our ancestors dealt with, what next? I think that talking about virtues in the way we've done here gives some guidelines for where to get started. A creative cook will learn how to sub for butter when there isn't any, or will recognize that the herbs from her windowsill will taste great with this recipe that doesn't call for them. What's more, the good cook will know that blind devotion to a recipe is often a very bad idea. There are a lot of reasons why we appreciate ingenuity and adaptation in cuisine. In both cooking and

ethics, I think that the end goals can be described as the creation of something rich and beautiful.

If we seek to create lives of richness, meaning, and beauty, I do think that the recipes go a ways in helping. In cooking, having a recipe can help, even if it's not something codified or learned through the Food Network. When we prepare the food we've followed a recipe to create, we likely expect for it to reflect the unique situation we find ourselves in when we make it. For instance, when I was living in Maryland, I'd often want to make gumbo, a traditional dish from Louisiana. I'd have to improvise with the unseasoned sausage from the grocery store, since this was all that was available. Now, a few years later, I've adapted a meatless recipe to reflect my vegetarianism. My mom's recipe did serve as a helpful starting point in each of these endeavors, but it was often just that—a starting point. When I said at the start of this book that I think reading about virtue isn't necessary to living virtuously but that it can help, this was the point I was trying to make. Yes, learning about courage can help, in sort of the way that reading recipes can. But living out virtue doesn't always grow out of learning about it, which is just fine. And when there is learning, there will have to be real world application of it in order for this education to be at all meaningful, which is as it should be.

To push the recipe metaphor just one step further, it's important to recognize that there is some unity in what results after preparing what we've intended. There are definitely things I could do which would ensure that what I cook isn't actually a gumbo. Lord help me if I threw a tomato in there. But whether I'm cooking gumbo in Louisiana or Maryland, or whether I use andouille sausage or double down on bell peppers, I still recognize what results as the dish I grew up with. I think we should expect the same thing

of the virtues. Sure, the guidelines are there, but how we live out the virtues will have to be reflective of who and where we are, as well as what we are dealing with. There are constraints—not anything goes if we want to be virtuous. When we do aim to be compassionate, though, the goal isn't to live out an example of compassion that looks identical to the compassion exhibited by all of those before you, or that will look identical to the compassion you will practice in years to come. Instead, the goal is to do the best that we can in the moment that we are acting in, with the hope that we become more compassionate in so doing. There will be mess-ups and close calls. But there will also be successes, and we should not expect that these look identical to each other.

This discussion should highlight the limits and confines of a project like the one we've worked through together. There are so many more conversations to be had, so many more contexts to think about how to behave in, so many more virtues to reevaluate in light of the lives that we lead. There's just no way to talk about how different courage will look for you than how it will look for me, or to account for the different strengths that we will bring to the table when we attempt to live it out. Sometimes, thinking about the virtues will make it clear that this guidance fits the situation before us. Sometimes, thinking about the virtues makes you wonder whether this one should ever have counted at all—a reaction I had when I read what Aristotle described as magnanimity. But always, we will need to throw ourselves into the project, living through the complexities and nuances, and sorting through the ways of living well that may help us to get through that messiness. Even with the best instruction, talking about virtue just serves to guide us. Understanding the virtues' contours cannot tell you precisely what to feel, how to respond, when to act, who to tend to, why to proceed, and so on. That's for us to figure

out, with the information that we have, the rational capacities we're endowed with, the emotions we experience, and the options available to us.

Still, I'm optimistic that having conversations in common can go a ways in assisting us in our path to—and, hopefully, life of—flourishing. I do worry that this book may not have helped as much as would be nice. I'm skeptical, for example, that I've said the right thing about how we should approach buying food in grocery stores. I worry that asking compassion of all of us seemingly always is too high a bar. Obviously, these worries haven't overshadowed my belief that practical wisdom can help in the aisles at Target and that compassion can serve us well when listening to the radio. But I hope that for these issues, along with all of the others that we've discussed, my voice isn't the last to speak up on this subject. And I know that in order to get to the truth, we have to venture answers and float ideas. I hope that the answers I've ventured serve as helpful starting points for those of us who desire to live lives of authentic virtue. But I mainly hope that my answers serve as conversation starters. So, before closing the book, I want to spend some time thinking about how this conversation might go.

In thinking about what this ongoing conversation about virtue might look like, two images come to mind. The first is an image of my family around the dinner table. Our family debates things more than any other family I've met. While we've gotten a number of boardgames in recent years that help us with this task, shiny topic cards are totally optional components in getting us crazy riled up about something. This past year, we've gone on *for days* about whether or not you should think someone's attractive if you're going to date them—turns out it's pretty easy for us to waste days. It also turns out there are at least three ways of answering this question. When we talk about an issue,

each of us brings a different perspective to the table, and we all understand that what's happening is meant to be constructive. I've had close friends get thrown off when they see my family go at some subject, asking me after if I feel okay. And of course I do. This is just my family's way of working through the things that we find interesting or worthwhile. Sometimes the stakes of the conversation are much higher than others—our differences over the perceived quality of Paul Simon's voice will never actually drive a wedge between us—but hashing it out gives us the chance to rethink where we're coming from and to change our thoughts on what the right thing to say might be.

In this Alyse's-family-dinner-table model of talking about virtue, there's likely to be a good deal of commotion and at least some degree of personal change. If you walk in having just read my chapter on courage, and your friend walks in minutes after closing chapter fourteen of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, there's going to be some interesting chatter to follow. As you know, I think courage involves finding some kind of middle point in confidence and fear, and I think that these feelings are likely at play when we engage in risky conversations with people who share our privileges. "Courage won't mean picking fights that won't get anyone anywhere," you say, agreeing that this seems like a good way of talking about this virtue. Your friend shakes her head. Atticus Finch thinks that courage is knowing you've lost before you've begun and then seeing that thing through no matter what it takes. She agrees. Now, the both of you are trying to figure out how your friend is going to talk to her boyfriend about male privilege, and it sounds—at least at first—like being courageous would look different depending on who you think described it right. So, you sound it out. Maybe you call up another friend who you both agree is courageous in order to weigh in on the conversation. In other words, there are

ways in which conversations about virtue can mean *actual conversations* about it—not just discourses that texts capture and preserve. And there are also ways in which these conversations needn't be at all philosophical. These conversations may sound more like, “Hey, can I get your advice on this?,” where specific virtues end up way further in the background of the dialogue that follows.

Whatever the case is, the end of these conversations may not lead to agreement. You may think that what your friend ends up doing is too rash, even though she thinks it's just the courageous thing to do. Stuff like that is going to happen. But thinking through different perspectives on the same issue can go a long way in shaping the lives that we lead with each other. While you may never agree that Harper Lee got it right in her book, taking the possibility seriously will help you out when you are practicing courage in the future. At least, it will help if you can't say for certain that you got it right. Getting things right with certainty is great, and I for one would love to know what certainty would look like. If you figure it out, please consider sharing it with the rest of us. But while we continue to do the best that we can, shared input can go a long way in helping us to move forward. At least I'm inclined to think that this is how it works. And if that's true, then a book like this one becomes one part of a multitude of possible conversations. I believe that having these conversations and growing in understanding virtue is both dynamic and interactive. My hope is that we don't just absorb the definitions of all the virtues from some book that we read and leave untested.

But I said that two images came to mind when I think about what ongoing conversations about virtue might look like. The second image I have in mind is much more introspective. I'll draw on the example of Marianne Dashwood from *Sense and*

*Sensibility*. For those of us unfamiliar with Jane Austen's text, Marianne is the sensibility to her sister Elinor's sensibleness. At the start of the book, Marianne is described as being smart and kind, deeply emotional, and every good thing other than prudent. Marianne takes her cues from her mother, who she models herself after her in many ways, and she is very influenced by the romantic poets. As the Dashwood sisters develop, though, Marianne and Elinor become more like each other. Before the happy resolution of the novel, Marianne learns that Elinor suffered through the pain of a great secret with calmness and reservation. She learns that Elinor did this because she firmly believed that it was the right thing to do. After gaining insight into Elinor's reasons for behaving in the way that she did, Marianne tells Elinor that her "merit cries out," and resolves to engage the problem that they face in a totally different way than she was used to.<sup>191</sup> Marianne's story is one of seeing attempts at virtue modeled differently, reevaluating her own behavior in light of these, and adjusting accordingly. While Marianne tells Elinor that she admires her, they don't really talk about how Marianne should move forward. Marianne thinks this through on her own. She learns and introspects. Comparing her ideas of right behavior from her mom, her reading, and her sister gives her the chance to step back and decide what to do. Austen seems enthusiastic that this kind of personal development is possible and good, being that it's only after the sisters grow as people that they enjoy the happy ending written for them. I share her enthusiasm.

Learning virtue in the introspective way that Marianne models is pretty different than the dinner table model. But it seems to be a good way of deepening an understanding of those traits that we should have if we want to lead flourishing lives. I

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191. Jane Austen (*Sense and Sensibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 199.

think that learning virtue from stories, people, movies, or books is very possible. At least, it's possible when this learning is followed by an attempt to behave accordingly. I think this is good news for those of us who don't have people to converse with about virtue. But I also think that it's good news for those of us who do have people to talk with, being that learning in these ways likely offers new insights into virtue that are hard to come by in conversation. There's something about gaining perspective on a life, in the way that Marianne does, that is really helpful in picking apart the details of virtue and the nuances of acting virtuously. Conversations can be really helpful. But learning from accounts or from examples can be helpful, too.

So, if you're getting to the end of this book and you're wanting to figure out what to do next, here's what I'll say. Talk about it. Talk about it with real people who you actually know, if you can. Find stories or movies that offer new perspectives on virtue. Learn from people whom you respect. Go back and listen to that podcast episode that you thought of when reading one of these chapters. Continue to engage with the kinds of questions that you have about ethical behavior, and continue to work through ideas of how to answer them. Sure, I would love it if you found my chapter on moral perception to be super helpful. But I also think it would be great if this happened: The chapter sounded wrong to you. So, you started to work through the reasons why it sounded wrong, and you came up with a more realistic approach to the issue at hand. If it turns out that there are better ways for us to think about global warming, it doesn't really matter who came up with that better idea to begin with. We're in this together, and our successes benefit all of us.

I also think that it would be helpful to think on each of the virtues that we've talked about here, and to consider the kinds of things that they ask of us. Compassion asks for sorrow, familiarizing invites us to care, courage enlists our confidence, practical wisdom recruits our powers of deliberation, attunement asks that we be present, affability keeps us from causing pain, and moral perception requires imagination. This list doesn't nearly capture the full list of the virtues. And thinking about just these can make the bar can seem high already. I think the bar probably is high. I also think the obstacles to clearing it are many. So, recalling chapter two, I'll just reaffirm that I think virtue is a modest proposal. It's modest because we have a long ways to go. It's modest because becoming virtuous in just one of these ways is slow work. It's modest because even if we achieve it, there's still things to be done.

In other ways, though, virtue is a proposal that's both bold and exciting. We as persons have been talking about goodness for a long time. We as individuals have opportunities to reckon with what goodness means each and every day. We as communities have to pave a path forward if we want to flourish together. And we as conversation partners have a lot more to talk about along the way. So, there's work to be done. In a world that continues to grow and change, I think we need people willing to rise to the challenges this change presents, and who are focused on meeting these challenges well. There's a lot going on, whether it's on social media, at the town hall, or in the office. Getting these changes to change for the better is tricky, and we should work on that. But each of us is going to have to start where we are and with what we've been given. I can do my best to make the best of my life. Only I can do that. But it won't be for the absolute best if we're not in it together. I'm optimistic that virtue can help with each

of our lives, with the life we build together, and with our one, growing world. And I'm excited about what that world will grow into if we decide to do our bests together.

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