

An Overview of the Early Revival of Virtue Ethics

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Abstract: The period from the mid-20th century to the end of the century marked the early stage of the revival of virtue ethics, during which moral philosophers such as Anscombe and MacIntyre leveled sharp criticisms against modern moral theories. Early virtue ethics highlighted the significant differences between ancient and modern moral philosophies and sought to offer virtue-based solutions. While these theories identified the flaws in modern moral philosophy, they also faced criticism from other schools of normative ethics. At the same time, the theoretical ideas emerging from this early revival laid the foundation for the development of later theories, such as those of Hursthouse.

Keywords: Revival of Virtue Ethics; Anscombe; MacIntyre; Modern moral philosophy

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1. Introduction

The mid-20th century to the end of the 20th century belonged to the early stage of the revival of virtue ethics. It is different from the construction of virtue ethics theory from different angles by writers such as Hursthouse, Slott, and Swanton in the later period of the revival of virtue ethics. In the early stage of the revival of virtue ethics, moral philosophers represented by G. E. Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others made sharp criticisms of the shortcomings of modern moral theory. Early virtue ethics theory emphasized the important differences between ancient moral philosophy and modern moral philosophy. These differences are manifested in the different applications of the concepts of “moral right” and “moral responsibility” in ancient and modern times; they are manifested in the disappearance of community and the failure of Enlightenment moral planning. Although the early revival of virtue ethics captured the shortcomings of modern moral philosophy, it was also criticized by other normative ethics schools. The revival of early virtue ethics opened the way for later virtue ethics theories such as Rosalind Hursthouse’s.

2. What is the early revival of virtue ethics?

G.E.M. Anscombe’s 1958 essay “Modern Moral Philosophy” marked the beginning of the revival of virtue

ethics. The theoretical roots of virtue ethics trace back to ancient Greece; the tradition of virtue—exemplified by Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*—was a dominant paradigm in ancient Greek ethical thought. However, this tradition was marginalized by theological ethics during the Middle Ages and subsequently overshadowed by deontology and utilitarianism in the modern era; it was not until the mid-20th century that it experienced a revival, driven by scholars such as Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre.

The various stages of the revival of virtue ethics have exhibited distinct characteristics, though scholars hold differing views on how to periodize this revival. On one hand, some scholars divide the revival and development of virtue ethics into three periods: the critical period (early stage), the period of meeting challenges (middle stage), and the period of establishing the virtue ethics approach (late stage), with the 1950s, the 1980s, and the end of the 20th century serving as the respective dividing points ^[1]. Proponents of this classification argue that key figures in the early stage included Anscombe, MacIntyre, Michael Stocker, and Bernard Williams; these thinkers expressed strong dissatisfaction with modern Western moral philosophy, pointing out the weaknesses or internal incoherence of its theories. During the middle stage of the revival, virtue ethicists—such as MacIntyre and Carol Gilligan—began to articulate specific theoretical demands and sought to delineate the unique nature of the virtue ethics approach. Key figures of the later period include Rosalind Hursthouse, Michael Slote, and Christine Swanton; they addressed the challenges faced by virtue ethics during its early and middle stages, systematically proposed research pathways for the field, and clearly distinguished virtue ethics from other forms of normative ethics. Scholars who categorize the revival of virtue ethics into three periods hold slightly differing views on the specific demarcations; for instance, some identify Alasdair MacIntyre as a representative of the middle period due to his extensive reliance on ancient sources, while others prefer to classify his theory as belonging to the early period ^[1–2]. Alternatively, some scholars divide the revival and development of virtue ethics into two periods: an early period spanning from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, and a later period beginning in the 1990s ^[3]. The transition between these two periods occurred around the turn of the millennium (late 1990s to early 2000s). This distinction is marked by the theoretical characteristics—distinctly different from those of G.E.M. Anscombe and her contemporaries—introduced to virtue ethics by figures such as Hursthouse, Slote, and Swanton. Hursthouse published “Normative Virtue Ethics” in 1996 and *On Virtue Ethics* in 1999. Subsequently, in the early 21st century, Slote published *Morals from Motives* (2001), and Swanton published “Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View” (2003). This period marked a shift in which virtue ethics engaged in theoretical development with a more proactive stance.

The theoretical development of the revival of virtue ethics is generally characterized by a shift from critique to construction. Approaches that divide this revival into either two or three stages share a common perspective: they all recognize a transition from an initial phase dominated by critique to a later phase characterized primarily by constructive theorizing. There is also a broad consensus that Rosalind Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics* represents “the first monograph to consciously establish a system of virtue ethics” ^[2]. While this article does not aim to evaluate the merits of different periodizations, it adopts a two-stage division for the sake of conciseness: an early critical period and a later period of conscious theoretical construction. The early phase launched critiques based on problems arising in modern moral philosophy and sought to engage with classical ethics—particularly that of Aristotle—whereas the later phase is grounded in virtue ethics theory itself, aiming to provide a robust defense of the normativity and independence of the field.

3. Key arguments of early virtue ethics

The central figures in the early revival of virtue ethics—Anscombe and MacIntyre—both leveled radical criticisms against modern moral philosophy. They maintained that there is a profound difference between ancient and modern moral philosophy; Anscombe argued that this difference is most clearly manifested in the usage of terms such as “ought,” while MacIntyre contended that this difference directly led to the failure of the Enlightenment moral project. At the same time, both proposed virtue ethics as a solution.

3.1. The difference between ancient and modern moral philosophy

Both Anscombe and MacIntyre considered the vast disparity between modern and ancient moral philosophy to be particularly noteworthy. Anscombe held that the most significant distinction in moral philosophy lies between the modern and the classical eras, rather than among the various theories within modernity itself. As she stated, “Anyone who has read both Aristotle’s ethics and modern moral philosophy cannot fail to be struck by the contrast between them” ^[4]. She observed that moral philosophers since Sidgwick have differed only in minor respects ^[4]; in her view, Immanuel Kant’s rationalism and Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism are merely variations on a modern theme ^[3]. She argues that the vast difference between ancient and modern ethics manifests in certain ways—for instance, the modern meaning of the concept of “morality” (inherited from Aristotle) cannot be explained through an Aristotelian ethical framework ^[4]; furthermore, Aristotle lacked general terms—such as “illicit” or “unlawful”—to encompass the concept of “wrong.”

MacIntyre argues that the vast difference between modern and ancient societies lies in the fact that modern society has lost the kind of community that truly binds people together. On one hand, the language of morality in modern society has been stripped of its cultural-communal connotations; on the other, the modern self has lost the essential social content and identity once bestowed by the cultural community. The self “can be anything, can assume any role, and adopt any point of view, because in itself it is nothing and has no purpose” ^[5]. “In many pre-modern traditional societies, individuals defined their identities—and were recognized by others—through their membership in various social groups” ^[5]. Within these contexts, individuals determined their duties and obligations and discovered the ultimate goal defining what their lives as a whole “might be.” In contrast, the modern political community has often devolved into an arena where individuals pursue external interests—an “aggregate of citizens of Nowhere, who have bound themselves together for the sake of common defense” ^[5].

Both Anscombe and MacIntyre argue that the predicament of modern moral philosophy—or modern ethics—stems from specific events in the history of ethical thought. Anscombe, for instance, maintains that from the perspective of intellectual history, the divergence between modern and ancient ethics is attributable to the rise and prolonged dominance of Christianity during the Middle Ages. Christianity derived its ethical concepts from the Torah, bringing with it a “law conception of ethics” and a consciousness of sin. As the prevailing ethical framework for centuries, this perspective has become deeply embedded in our concepts, language, and thought ^[4].

3.2. Discussion on the concepts of “moral right” and “moral obligation”

Anscombe argues that modern moral philosophy is characterized by the use of concepts such as “moral right,” “moral ought,” “moral obligation,” and “moral duty”—concepts absent from ancient moral philosophy, particularly that of Aristotle. Consequently, she contends that the concepts of moral obligation

and duty frequently employed by modern moral philosophers should be abandoned and replaced with the vocabulary and discourse of virtue ^[4]; doing so would rescue ethical reflection—specifically regarding practical wisdom and practical reason—from the distortions imposed by the notion of the “moral ought.”

In contemporary ethical discourse, moral concepts such as “ought” and “obligation” have devolved into historical remnants or derivative products, and their theoretical foundations face challenges rooted in moral psychology. On one hand, the so-called absolute and foundational “moral ought” is essentially tethered to the conceptual framework of divine law found in traditional Judeo-Christian communities—a framework presupposing the existence of universal moral imperatives promulgated by a divine lawgiver. On the other hand, as the process of modern secularization has eroded the ontological status of the divine lawgiver, the “moral ought” derived from that paradigm has lost the epistemological basis required for its continued existence. As Bernard Williams noted, the force of obligation—viewed as a stringent moral requirement—derives from a causal chain wherein the violation of an obligation inevitably invites condemnation ^[6]; once the mechanism of guilt-consciousness—which is inextricably linked to the divine lawgiver—is stripped away, the normative force of obligation is inevitably and fundamentally undermined. On this basis, David Solomon advocates abandoning the use of the concept of “moral ought” wherever feasible; the core of his argument lies in exposing the fragmented nature of modern moral concepts—concepts that attempt to construct morality as a realm of evaluation independent of the totality of human life practices, yet fail to provide a self-consistent metaphysical foundation ^[3]. Within the theoretical spectrum of virtue ethics, the concept of “right” as defined by Anscombe exhibits distinctively deontological characteristics, pointing toward normative judgments that carry absolute binding force. In contrast, the concept of “morally right” found in the later works of Rosalind Hursthouse attenuates this deontological tone. As Loudén observes, in Anscombe’s model, strong, irreducible responsibilities and obligations are to be discarded from the ethical landscape, replaced by concepts of vice such as “unchastity” or “dishonesty” ^[7]. However, Loudén also highlights a potential dilemma in this approach: even if an agent strictly adheres to Anscombe’s proposal to substitute terms, they still cannot avoid an implicit reliance on the concept of “moral ought” during concrete moral reasoning. For instance, when one requires a person to practice “honesty,” one is effectively stating that the person “ought” to be honest.

3.3. The disappearance of community and the failure of the enlightenment moral project

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre powerfully advanced the critique of modern moral philosophy initiated by G.E.M. Anscombe. He pointed out that “the language of morality in the actual world which we inhabit... is in a state of grave disorder.” ^[5] We employ merely fragments of a hollow system of moral concepts—even though we continue to use key terms such as “good,” “justice,” and “friendship.” However, the ancient Greek linguistic context that rendered these concepts of virtue intelligible has vanished, and the concepts themselves have become unintelligible. When individuals lose the linguistic and cultural context of a community, they also lose the overarching design for a meaningful life as a whole, as well as the intrinsic significance of their practical activities. This is because modern society has lost a certain concept of community. “Community involves a bond that fundamentally defines ‘who you are’; it shapes your identity, your ideals for life, your moral sensibilities, and your sense of responsibility” ^[8].

In traditional ethics, human beings are defined by both what they “are by chance” (or “accidentally are”) and what they “might become” (or “potentially are”). The function of ethics is to facilitate the transformation from the former state to the latter; in this process, the human being in a natural state (what one is by chance)

evolves into a “good person” (what one might become). Through this transition, human “potentiality” is actualized into “actuality,” allowing the human essence—and the natural human “telos” (purpose)—to be realized. The tripartite structure of ancient ethics—comprising the concept of “uninstructed human nature (what one is by chance),” “ethical norms,” and the concept of “human nature capable of realizing its purpose (what one might become)” —effectively ensured the validity of ethical norms and enabled the moral transformation of the individual from what they “are by chance” to what they “might become.” Modern moral philosophy is founded upon the loss of the concepts of natural teleology that characterized the late medieval and early modern periods, and it has been profoundly shaped by the Enlightenment project. The Enlightenment rejected the concept of a “telos”—an end or purpose—defining “what man is capable of becoming.” The tripartite structure of ancient ethics was transformed into a bipartite structure lacking a supreme “telos”: a dichotomy between “human nature as it happens to be” and “moral imperatives.” MacIntyre argues that, within this framework, the relationship between natural human nature and moral imperatives is deeply obscure; specifically, because moral imperatives lack a supreme “telos,” they cannot be derived from human nature. Consequently, the validity of moral imperatives cannot be guaranteed. The Enlightenment moral project undertaken by 18th-century moral philosophers “attempted to find a rational basis for moral beliefs within a specific understanding of human nature; yet, they inherited a set of moral prohibitions on the one hand, and a concept of human nature on the other, that were mutually contradictory” [5].

MacIntyre actively advanced and expanded upon Anscombe’s discussion. First, he offered a nuanced and profound analysis of modern social life as shaped by the Enlightenment [3]. Second, by situating virtues, the narrative unity of a life, and tradition within the framework of practice, he provided a substantive and comprehensive account of how virtues function, thereby establishing virtue as a central concept in ethical theory.

3.4. Other theoretical support for the revival of virtue ethics

Early Aristotelian ethics served as the core driving force behind the revival of virtue ethics. However, other scholars during this period also provided theoretical support for this resurgence. For instance, figures such as G. J. Warnock, Edmund Pincoffs, and James Wallace offered a non-Aristotelian perspective on the revival of virtue ethics. In his book *The Object of Morality* (1971), Warnock defended a form of “virtue-consequentialism,” arguing that modern ethics faced challenges in understanding and applying moral concepts—particularly noting that analytic ethics had recently tended to become overly abstract and vacuous. He posited that “bettering the human predicament” is the object of morality and that virtues are significant contributors to this end [9]. In his 1971 article “Quandary Ethics,” Pincoffs argued that the ethical focus on practical dilemmas or quandaries was misguidedly narrow. He contended that the neglect of virtue was a cause of this narrowness, suggesting that a shift toward virtue theory would steer agents away from a preoccupation with practical moral quandaries [10]. James Wallace’s 1978 book *Virtues and Vices* drew extensively on Deweyan ethical views and employed biological functionalism to argue for the central role of virtue in ethics [11].

In addition to these figures, there were other philosophers who, while not classified as virtue ethicists themselves, nonetheless made significant contributions to bringing virtue ethics back to the center of academic discourse. For instance, thinkers such as Bernard Williams and Charles Taylor have advanced the revival of virtue ethics by exploring ethical theory from a rich historical perspective and harboring deep

skepticism regarding the ambitions of modern Kantian and consequentialist theories ^[3].

3.5. Offering solutions through virtue ethics

During the early revival of virtue ethics, scholars argued that while deontological and utilitarian theories appeared to offer universally valid rules for ethical life, they were ultimately unsuccessful. Because moral life is inherently rich and diverse, any attempt to derive a single universal moral principle from it inevitably overlooks certain lived realities—such as the psychological foundations of morality and the cultural contexts and environments in which individuals exist. As Bernard Williams noted, modern moral philosophy harbors a strong desire to reduce all ethical considerations to a single model; various theories attempt to demonstrate that one specific type of ethical consideration is fundamental, while all others can be explained in terms of it ^[12]. However, in their attempts to resolve the ethical problems of modern life through universalizing approaches, these theories fail to “take seriously the particular perceptions of individual moral agents and the local practices of moral communities” ^[13].

In response to the way modern moral philosophy obscures human psychological factors, lived realities, and cultural contexts, virtue ethics seeks to return to classical ethics to find an ethical framework that incorporates these elements. Anscombe pointed out that it is possible to conduct practical reasoning using the language of virtue while avoiding the moral “ought.” Aristotle’s ethics did not employ the modern moral “ought”; instead, it relied entirely on discourse regarding virtue ^[4]. If a form of virtue ethics is possible, then it is also possible to do without the “moral ought” ^[3]. MacIntyre similarly argued that we should return to ancient ethics, particularly that of Aristotle. Aristotelian ethics presupposes the “polis (community)” as the arena for the practice of the “highest good,” wherein individual identity is teleologically linked to the common good through social roles and the practice of virtue. MacIntyre emphasizes that this teleological framework enabled ancient societies to resolve moral disagreements through a “shared conception of the good,” rather than becoming trapped in the dilemmas of rule-based contention characteristic of modern liberalism.

4. Criticisms faced by early virtue ethics

When Anscombe pronounced the death sentence on deontological ethics in “Modern Moral Philosophy,” she likely did not foresee that this wave of rebellion against Enlightenment ethics might also precipitate a crisis of legitimacy for virtue ethics itself. Early proponents of the virtue ethics revival—such as Anscombe and MacIntyre—sought to cure the “maladies” of modern moral philosophy by returning to the Aristotelian tradition; however, because their theories were more critical than constructive and placed heavy emphasis on human moral life and character, they drew several lines of criticism.

4.1. Indifference to action

In “Applying Virtue Ethics,” Hursthouse notes that critics often argue virtue ethics cannot answer the question “What should we do and not do?” but only “What kind of person should I become?” ^[14]. Philosophers typically identified as virtue ethicists—such as Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, and G.E.M. Anscombe—have been criticized by figures like Robert B. Louden, Gregory E. Pence, and Gregory Trianowsky for focusing on theory while neglecting its application to action ^[7]. When virtue ethics places excessive theoretical emphasis on the character of the agent, a structural deficiency in the evaluation of

actions inevitably arises: “In focusing on the goodness or badness of the agent, virtue ethicists are forced to downplay individual actions in favor of long-term, characteristic patterns of action” ^[7]. Furthermore, virtue ethics is often viewed as prioritizing the agent—rather than the action itself or its consequences—as the primary object of moral evaluation; consequently, the relevant concepts take the agent as their starting point or are centered upon the agent ^[7]. On this basis, critics argue that virtue ethics cannot function as a form of normative ethics. For instance, Frankena maintains that any attempt to define virtue ethics inevitably collapses into either Deontology or Utilitarianism ^[15]. This is because the fundamental question of normative ethics is “What ought I to do?” Virtue ethics, however, merely critiques normative ethics; it does not focus on action, let alone answer the question “What ought I to do?” Consequently, virtue ethics is fundamentally incapable of providing guidance for action or serving as a form of normative ethics. If this view is accepted, virtue ethics cannot stand alongside deontology and utilitarianism as an equal; instead, it can only serve as a supplement to them—enriching their theories with its own concepts and perspectives when problems arise that cannot be resolved through the application of their core principles ^[16].

4.2. Inability to address specific moral issues

The guidance offered by virtue ethics is often considered too vague to be applied to specific moral issues ^[17]. For instance, the concepts of moral perception and practical wisdom—upon which virtue ethics frequently relies—have been criticized for being uncodifiable; consequently, they cannot be applied to concrete moral practice or used to resolve ethical disagreements and moral dilemmas ^[14]. This is partly because moral perception and practical wisdom cannot be directly transferred from one agent to another. Some argue that, due to the inherent nature of virtue, virtue ethics can offer only very limited advice regarding moral dilemmas. As Louden observes, virtue ethics is often grounded in vague interpretations of ancient ethics—with proponents frequently citing the Greeks as advocates of the approach—yet they fail to articulate precisely what the Greeks recommended regarding specific actions. Therefore, Louden suggests that articulating a modern form of virtue ethics requires conceptual scrutiny ^[7].

However, as with other areas of philosophy, the field of ethics is inevitably characterized by controversy. This controversy is rooted in the very nature of ethics: different moral theories hold fundamentally divergent views on what constitutes “right action,” while real-world moral issues often involve conflicting value choices. From certain perspectives, a particular choice may appear clearly correct, yet there are always reasons that could justify an alternative course of action. Thus, it seems that “no moral theory should claim to be uniquely adept at resolving moral conflicts, even though some do make such a claim.” ^[18]. Each option in a specific situation may embody certain moral values, while inevitably compromising others. This structural conflict suggests that the primary role of ethical theory may not lie merely in providing definitive answers.

4.3. The instability of the virtuous agent

The character of a virtuous agent is often considered to be unstable. This is because, in certain situations, a virtuous agent might act in a way that contradicts their own character; indeed, even the best of people can sometimes perform wrong actions. In such instances, even if the agent possesses sufficient information and acts in accordance with their character, the outcome may still be tragic. For example, when external goods are lacking, the agent’s virtue may fail to manifest. As Aristotle stated: “Happiness evidently requires external goods, for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment” ^[19]. Once external

goods are absent, “we may be deprived not only of external resources but also of intrinsic value itself and the good life itself” ^[20]. Consequently, the virtuous agent upon whom virtue ethics relies is inherently less stable than the universal, fixed rules found in other ethical frameworks.

Furthermore, situationists argue that the stable character traits upon which virtue ethics relies do not actually exist. They contend that the character people display is merely a reaction to the immediate situation; thus, the very foundation of virtue ethics is nonexistent. Scholars such as John Doris and Gilbert Harman—who are deeply influenced by social psychology and behaviorism—hold this view.

5. The transition from early virtue ethics to later theories

While early virtue ethics’ critique of Deontology and Utilitarianism exposed the latter’s inadequacies in addressing complex moral issues, the critical strategy employed tended to prioritize negation over construction—their “primary goal is to oppose traditional modes of inquiry rather than to state positively the claims they favor”—and consequently drew significant criticism. Building upon the foundations laid by the early revival of virtue ethics, later virtue ethicists such as Rosalind Hursthouse sought to address these criticisms and rectify the early approach’s tendency toward excessive negation ^[7]. She argued that such criticisms did not signal the impending failure of virtue ethics; rather, they indicated a need for the field to respond to these challenges and supplement its framework with a theory of right and wrong action—specifically, by incorporating the strengths of Utilitarianism and Deontology regarding the analysis of action, while leveraging virtue ethics’ own advantages in focusing on the moral agent to confront new challenges and tasks ^[21]. As Alasdair MacIntyre emphasized, genuine ethical progress lies not in an “either-or” replacement of theories, but in the integration of practical wisdom drawn from diverse traditions ^[5].

5.1. Incorporating the strengths of utilitarianism and deontology

Virtue ethics needs not only to critique other normative ethical theories but also to engage in a complementary dialogue with them. A common criticism leveled against virtue ethics is its alleged lack of concern for action. Conversely, a direct focus on action is considered a major strength of both Utilitarianism and Deontology: “These two types of theory, despite their many obvious differences, share a common focus on action rather than on the character of the agent” ^[7].

The advantages of utilitarianism and deontology regarding action are evident in several respects: First, when facing specific moral decisions, judgments based on either the “principle of utility” or “deontological principles” provide clear reasons and expectations for action. Second, both principles offer explicit directives for how to act. Finally, when evaluating specific actions, it is relatively easy to determine their rightness or wrongness based on these principles; an action is deemed right if it conforms to the principle and wrong or improper if it does not.

Consider the “trolley problem,” where an agent faces the moral dilemma of either sacrificing one person to save five or sacrificing five to save one ^[22]. Although the action theories of utilitarianism and deontology may lead to different moral choices, both provide clear guidance on how the agent should act. When making a moral decision, the agent can clearly choose whether to follow utilitarian or deontological principles. These two principles focus on different aspects of action: the former emphasizes consequences, while the latter focuses more on motives. An agent decides based on utilitarian principles when choosing to maximize the well-being of the greatest number of people, whereas an agent decides based on deontological

principles when prioritizing the duty not to harm innocent life. Secondly, regarding implementation, the action directives provided by utilitarianism and deontology appear concise and clear. An agent adopting utilitarian principles would divert the train, sacrificing a worker on the other track, whereas an agent adhering to deontology would choose not to pull the lever, thereby protecting the fundamental rights of an innocent person. Finally, when it comes to the moral evaluation of these actions, applying utilitarian calculation reveals that safeguarding the well-being of five workers outweighs protecting that of one; thus, pulling the lever is deemed morally justified. Conversely, under deontological criteria, the act of pulling the lever is not morally justified, as it violates the rights of an innocent individual. In summary, whether in terms of moral decision-making, the execution of actions, or moral evaluation, both utilitarianism and deontology offer clear guidance that facilitates action. This characteristic constitutes a practical advantage—one that later theories of virtue ethics should incorporate and draw upon.

5.2. Constructing a theory of “right action”

While Anscombe and others deconstructed mainstream normative ethics and paved the way for the revival of virtue ethics, they failed to propose alternative normative principles for action, thereby inviting significant criticism. One of the most significant criticisms is that virtue ethics cannot provide guidance for specific actions. Later virtue ethicists have attempted to incorporate frameworks from rule-based ethics while maintaining an agent-centered focus, striving to ensure that virtue ethics is not dismissed as merely a “classical theory lacking practical guidance.” This shift perhaps signals the maturing of virtue ethics as a theory.

First, virtue ethics needs to temper its radical criticism of modern moral philosophy. Early proponents identified fundamental errors in the basic claims or practical structures of modern moral philosophy; indeed, a “key feature of virtue ethics was its anti-Kantian and anti-utilitarian stance, and its attempt to position itself as an alternative to those two theories”^[23]. However, this approach did not gain acceptance within the broader landscape of normative ethics. To “secure a place for virtue within the accepted structure of contemporary academic ethics,” virtue ethics must acknowledge certain fundamental claims of modern moral philosophy and moderate its radical critique^[3]. As Rosalind Hursthouse noted, the aim of her book *On Virtue Ethics* was not to “focus on how to be different, but rather to welcome shared ground,” nor to adopt a “combative stance”—that is, there was no need to be “eager to prove that virtue ethics is not merely a competitor to the other two approaches, but the best choice among them.”^[24] Secondly, virtue ethics must provide an account of right action. Hursthouse’s fundamental perspective and core line of inquiry are evident in how she addresses the relationship between action and the agent. She argues that virtue ethics answers not only the question “What sort of person should I be?” but also “What should I do?”^[21]. To gain recognition alongside other normative ethical theories, virtue ethics must incorporate their strengths and propose ethical claims capable of explaining right action. At the same time, its discussion of action must reflect the characteristics of modern ethics. Aristotle held that the perfection of individual virtue is not a matter of isolated character cultivation; rather, it requires transforming innate, contingent endowments into optimal character qualities by participating in the practices of a political community and becoming a citizen possessed of the virtue of justice^[25]. However, Aristotle’s context was that of a small-scale community where a broad consensus on human character could naturally be expected^[7]. In contrast, contemporary virtue ethics cannot be content merely with providing action guidelines for members of small communities. The moral pluralism and social mobility characteristic of modern society demand that virtue ethics develop a generalized framework

for evaluating action—one that transcends localized consensus. Finally, virtue ethics must also respond proactively by addressing what it can contribute to normative ethics—specifically, its unique contribution—while maintaining its theoretical independence. What distinguishes virtue ethics from other forms of normative ethics is its emphasis on the “agent.” For instance, virtue ethics answers the question “What kind of person should I become?” by establishing the ultimate human purpose and cultivating virtues; it also addresses the question “What should I do?” through propositions regarding right action—grounded in the “virtuous agent”—and through virtue-based rules.

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