Virtues:

A Perspective on the Situation of Women

by Sue Sherwin

Introduction

In our society we distinguish virtues along sexual lines. The masculine virtues include self-confidence, independence, emotional strength, courage and an ability to think logically; the feminine virtues include sensitivity, compassion, supportiveness and a willingness to serve one's loved ones.

If we pursue the Greek ideal of a good man being one who performs his functions well; i.e., with the appropriate virtues, we can see that in our culture the criteria for being a good man and those for being a good woman are quite distinct. A woman who is functionally thought to be a "good man" receives not praise in our society but rather insulting derision; even worse off is the man who performs as a "good woman." The virtues one is encouraged to develop are a function of one's sex (and, to some degree, of one's race, social status and health).

There are, of course, some virtues which everyone is encouraged to develop; for example temperance, justice and perseverence but even here we can recognize a difference in emphasis in the social importance with which we assign them to each sex. It is commonly judged to be a more serious flaw for a woman to be intemperate than for a man; yet it is thought to be more important for men to acquire justice and perseverence than for women, presumably because they will have more need of these latter virtues than will women.

It does seem to be true in our society that, in general, men and women do have different character traits, interests and abilities. Men are more prone to be assertive, independent thinkers and to pursue risky occupations and ends. Women generally seem more likely to be content to stay in a safe, stable environment and to adjust

their preferences to mesh with others.

There are some who argue that there is a biological basis for some of these differences.(1) Unfortunately, we cannot settle that issue without a significant amount of empirical data which has yet to be collected. Nonetheless, we can refer to some of the data that has already been provided by the social sciences which demonstrates that there is at least some element of cultural conditioning which contributes to the development of sexually-tied character traits. There is clear evidence that, in general, males and females are raised differently. Even when they are exposed to identical schooling, books and, in rare cases, toys, there are still differences in their treatment. For example, at the age of six months, girls are held, spoken to and touched more often than are boys; by elementary school age, boys are encouraged more in problem solving than are girls.(2) The differences may be very subtle and quite unconscious, and yet it is plausible to assume that they do result in some differences in character and hence in ability. They may, therefore, be unjust. Whether or not there are also biological differences between males and females, such differences in upbringing almost certainly influence their ultimate characters. Society, then, is fostering a difference in virtues developed. Virtues are being encouraged and repressed in individuals on the basis of sex and other characteristics.

It is a problem of ethics and social philosophy to determine whether these differences in acquired virtues are simple discrepancies, as many of the sexual differences in fashion have been, or whether they are morally significant disparities which have been systematically benefitting or harming members of one group in an unfair fashion. The problem is one where philosophic skills are useful in resolving a pressing issue of social justice, for it is necessary to determine why this may be the sort of discrimination which is unfair and unnecessary rather than just a harmless custom.

The problem posed by the sexually-tied distribution of virtues is of particular value to the fields of ethics and social philosophy as well. Philosophers have tended to concentrate their attention in the area of social responsibility on questions of political, economic and legal rights. However, if it is in fact true that virtues are the sorts of things which significantly influence the well-being of an individual, and if it is also the case that society is to some degree responsible for an individual developing particular virtues and failing to develop others, then we may recognize another, deeper level of injustice which merits concern.

It is, then, necessary to understand the nature of virtues and to determine their effect on an individual who possesses them. We must try to determine how virtues contribute to the good of an individual, and whether there are significant differences between virtues such that they do not all carry the same value. While I am basically in agreement with Aristotle on the nature of virtues, there are some differences between his analysis of the concept and my own, particularly with respect to the domain of the set denoted.(3) Hence, I shall now develop my analysis of virtues insofar as it is necessary to understanding the problem virtues pose to a theory of justice.

Characterizing Virtues

As Aristotle claimed, virtues are traits of character. As such, they are distinct from acts and from act-types.(4) Because of this, we have difficulty in identifying virtues in an individual. Virtues cannot be characterized by simple physical descriptions in the way that acts can be defined. When we judge a person to be courageous, we do not simply describe some action or set of actions he or she performed. We take into account his or her past behaviour and dispositions to behave, while also considering that person's state of mind and conception of the situation. For instance, if Antigone(5)was seen to be simply burying her brother's body because he had died, she would not be considered heroic; but we also see that she knew that his burial was forbidden by the state and that she decided that her duty to bury him outweighed both her loyalty to the state and her personal risk. For this reason, we judge her to have acted courageously.

There are no virtuous act-types *per se*, for identical behaviour (act-tokens) could be motivated differently so that in one case the act would be motivated by a virtuous trait and in the other by some other factor, and the latter, then, would not be virtuous. Consider, for example, the gift of $100 to a community charity: a generous person would do this out of a generous character, but a politician might make the contribution in order to impress his constituents and win votes and, if so, he would not be being generous. We cannot simply look at a situation and an agent's response to it and conclude whether or not that person has a particular virtue.

It is tempting to describe virtues as habits, but there are some important differences; in particular, habits are direct causes of action, but virtues influence the decision about actions without directly bringing about the action. And habits result in actions of a specific type, where the same virtue can allow for very different sorts of actions; i.e., habits are law-like while virtues are not. Habits are genuine dispositions to specific

act-types, they consist of actions done regularly and/or frequently according to some pattern; for example, scratching one's head, taking a shower every morning, walking around rather than under ladders and paying one's bills on the fifteenth of every month.

As traits of character, virtues, unlike habits, are not what Ryle calls "single-track dispositions" which can be expressed in simple hypotheticals. (6) They do not allow us to predict actions, since we cannot accurately define the behaviour by which a particular virtue is characterized.

Moreover, as traits of character they are not momentary states of mind, for they are not momentary states. If we have a particular virtue we have it even when we are not employing it. In this respect, virtues differ from moods, for we are not kind only at moments when we are doing kind acts, but we are angry only at those times when we are in the emotional state of anger. Not all traits of character are virtues since shyness, optimism and greed are not virtues; hence we must characterize virtues more sharply. We normally do that in terms of their value, for virtues are thought to be good in some significant respect.(7)

The Value of Virtues

The significance of virtues is that they affect our actions by influencing our choices; they keep us from reacting unthinkingly to our passions. Without courage, our fear would likely determine that we would automatically flee any danger that we judged to be escapable. Without temperance, we could probably never resist any temptations, however much they conflicted with our over-all interests. Virtues give us the strength of character to respond in accordance with our values to particular situations instead of simply reacting automatically to a set of stimuli. That is not to say that they keep us from responding to our emotions, for our feelings are a factor to be counted in any decision. We need not disregard them--in fact, it is irrational to do so--but we should not be governed by them. With virtues, our actions are chosen according to our ends; they are not reflex reactions.

Virtues differ from vices in this respect, for vices are characterized by irrational behaviour. While courage is employed by a process of deliberation under conditions of danger, cowardice is often an instinctual response to fear. Many cowardly people do not choose to run from all danger; in fact during calm moments, they may regret their cowardice and may even resolve to act more courageously in the future. And yet, every time they feel fear they may panic and flee in spite of any desires which fleeing may thwart. Such people lack the power to act in any other way; in each situation, their fear overpowers them and they

cannot rationally choose an alternative course.

There may be others who are "cowards" through choice. They decide that personal safety is a fundamental value to them and that they would not choose to risk their safety for any reason (or almost any reason). We might question their values, but we could not fault them for acting without deliberation. Their behaviour is motivated quite differently from that of the coward who wishes to be more courageous but cannot act rationally in actual situations that call for courage. (It also differs from that of the rash person who foolishly confronts all dangers indiscriminately). They have non-commendable values and may be called evil. We disapprove of their values, but we do not consider them weak since they are capable of deliberately pursuing their chosen ends.

In contrast, vices are generally the absence of the powers constituted by virtues. Intemperance is the inability to resist temptation, carelessness is often an inability to be conscientious, dependency is an inability to be self-sufficient or independent. They are weaknesses with which we can sympathize. Like habits, vices are stimulus-response dispositions toward unthinking responses to sets of conditions.

This distinction does not conceive of virtues and vices as traits of the same kind differing only in that the former result in actions that are in some sense right and the latter result in actions that are wrong. Rather, on my interpretation, virtues and vices actually belong to different categories, for they determine our actions in different ways. Virtues enable us to choose actions most consistent with our ends; vices have no positive force, but the term "vice" is used to describe an inability to choose rationally actions of a particular type; i.e., a weakness of character.

Bad character traits also belong to different categories according to whether they are weaknesses or conscious motivations to bad ends. When we disapprove of a trait like greed in someone's character, we should distinguish whether this trait is a result of vice, an absence of the power to be generous, or whether this trait is a deliberate response to values we consider bad, in this case selfishness. There are many situations in which we would choose to behave differently to the person who is weak-willed and to the person who is evil.

And hence, even such a trait as kindness or compassion may, in certain cases, not be a virtue. If a person is compassionate compulsively so that he responds unthinkingly to any immediate suffering without viewing the broader picture, he may not be being

virtuous. The driver who swerves to avoid killing a dog, thereby demolishing his car and his family on a telephone pole, might have been kind to animals, but he did not have the power of the virtue. So, too, the philanthropist who gives away his fortune to anyone who approaches him in shabby clothes and, hence, has nothing left for organized relief projects or even for his own support may not be virtuous. Compassion that is deliberate is more meaningful and more valuable than that which is compulsive. To have a virtue is to have the power of choice in relevant situations. Those people who lack virtues and, as a result, are restricted in pursuit of their own ends suffer from the corresponding vices. They are unable to attain their own preferences.

Further, virtues affect our choices in yet another, even more valuable way. In effect, virtues increase our range of practical choices. They open options we would otherwise not have available. A cowardly person could not choose to save a child from a burning house (unless he was not fully aware of the danger). Nor could an intemperate person choose to diet and act in accordance with that choice. Similarly, if we understand self-confidence to be a belief in one's own ability to handle situations which others are known to have been successful in, but which are still new to the person in question, we can see that the self-confident person will be able to attempt many more new activities than will the person without self-confidence.

Virtues, then, are mostly powers. They allow an individual broader freedom by making practical more choices. Each actual choice is made according to some complex whole consisting of the agent's conception of the situation, his ends and his relative values. Virtues enable the person to make a choice even in situations that produce highly emotional reactions, and they allow that choice to be made from a significantly wider set of options than those available to someone without the relevant virtues.

Those people who lack virtues and as a result are restricted in pursuit of their own ends suffer from the corresponding vices. Society is probably harmed by vices in its members; the individual is certainly harmed by his vices in terms of his freedom.

Here, though, we run into the basic paradox of virtues. We have seen that virtues can benefit an individual, yet it seems clearly true that they can at times, also harm him. In fact, virtues tend to be strongly tied to morality and are generally self-denying; think, in particular of courage, a paradigm virtue. We can easily imagine instances when a person would seem to be better off without courage. For example, we occasionally hear of pilots who stay in their planes until

they crash in order to steer them away from highly populated areas; each pilot could have bailed out but chose to be killed rather than allow the plane to kill many others. They were courageous, but it seems that their courage actually harmed them, however, socially beneficial it was.

And yet even though their courage harmed them, courage is still desired by people and in fact was probably desired by those pilots. Even those who suffer or die through their courage choose to be courageous for it is consistent with their personal values and ends to develop this virtue. Courage itself does not require them to give up their lives but, under some circumstances, their value scheme does. We can rationally choose to act in ways that conflict with our own welfare; altruism can be perfectly consistent with an agent's interests as that agent sees them. Personal welfare is not the ultimate value for everyone.

Because virtues increase our rationality and enable us to perform actions which we would otherwise be psychologically incapable of performing (or even choosing), they are desirable. They are powers and hence it is in our interest to develop them. The choices which we ultimately make will be a function of our ends and values. Virtues benefit us by enabling us to act more directly in accordance with our values; they are not good for us per se, but, because they help us to achieve that which we believe to be good, they can be considered beneficial.

We should like to say that only powers directed towards good ends are considered beneficial. But any power may be misapplied and used for evil purposes. Both knowledge and money can be used as tools for causing great harm. Powers alone do not result in good ends; they must be combined with good values. However they are a necessary factor in achieving good ends and if one has any faith at all in human goodness, one will choose to increase people's powers to do good.

We can now see why it was reasonable for Plato and Aristotle to have believed that the virtue of justice is in one's interest. Philosophers have had difficulty accounting for how such an other-regarding virtue could possibly be in a person's interest. They have failed to recognize the dual aspect of the just characteristic. Being just is not simply being concerned with fairness; it is also having enough self-control to resist temptations for personal satisfaction for the sake of some higher value. It is having the power to weigh conflicting interests impartially. If an individual thinks it important to act justly, then it is important for the individual to have the virtue of being just in order to resist the temptation to

always act from purely self-interested motives. The person who values justice will choose to have the virtue of being just, because it is only with the virtue that one has the power to choose one's social actions in accordance with one's own value scheme. There are many who say that they would like there to be a fair distribution of income in this country but feel that their lives are currently so committed to pleasures dependent on their incomes that they resist being taxed more heavily even for the sake of improving welfare schemes. Such people live with a conflict in their desires and their ideal values which they cannot resolve because their self-concern dominates them. With the virtue of justice, they could resolve this conflict to their own satisfaction.

Virtues keep our actions within our personal control by allowing our choices to be made as a function of our values. It is a separate question to decide the value of justice as a goal, for having the virtue or power to be just is necessary for everyone who wants to be just for whatever reason.

There is an assumption here, though, which should be spelled out: namely, that it is good for a person to have the power to choose. Genuine freedom of choice is thought to be in a person's interest. There are arguments which claim that freedom is always a burden and is harmful to an individual. I disagree with such views for reasons I will not develop here. Those who see freedom of choice as harmful, however, will probably not be convinced here of the value of virtues, but I hope that those who grant the assumption that freedom is beneficial will now agree that virtues are good for the individual.

How We Acquire Virtues

We acquire virtues through practice and learning. As Aristotle explained, they are not innate dispositions that humans develop according to nature, but neither are they unnatural. We are disposed to learn virtues but we still must learn them; they do not become part of our character of their own accord. And the way we learn them is by practising them, just as we develop any other talent:

> Men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.(8)

We learn virtues through processes of socialization in which virtuous behaviour is encouraged and reinforced. The media of our culture present role models in which various virtues are demonstrated and rewarded and the absence of particular virtues results in suffering. Since we acquire virtues by socialization, it is not surprising

that many virtues are socially beneficial; i.e., they are good with respect to others and to society as a whole. Since virtues are taught and developed by others--some by family, some by popular media, some by the state through the educational system--traits of character which are in the interest of the broader community are going to be encouraged.

There are many virtues which are directly concerned with the interests of others like justice, honesty and generosity. We are taught these virtues because it is in the social interest that we develop them. A society that consists of just, honest, courageous, generous, sympathetic, kind individuals is clearly going to function better than one whose citizens lack these characteristics. We learn these virtues because we are encouraged to learn them. We are rewarded when we are discovered to be acting honestly and we are punished when we are found to be acting dishonestly. It is in our personal self-interest at least to appear to be acting in accordance with these social virtues.

These virtues seem to be especially directed towards particular values and those values are a part of their nature. For instance, in learning to act honestly we also learn to value honesty. Generally, we acquire the power and learn to appreciate the value simultaneously through the same processes. We are not taught the value and the virtue separately, and hence we fail to distinguish between them. But they are distinct and it is important to recognize this distinction: one can value honesty and still be incapable of being honest at particular times, and, conversely, one can be quite capable of being honest under any circumstances and yet choose not to be honest at certain times. Acquiring the virtue of honesty tends to make a person value honesty because it produces appreciation for the workings of a society whose citizens are honest, but this appreciation is different from the acquisition of an honest character trait.

The virtue of honesty; i.e., the power to be honest, is "honesty" in the narrow sense. "Honesty" is generally used in the broad sense to represent both the power and the end; and similarly "justice" is usually used in the broad sense to identify the power and the end. In naming virtues we use the character trait names in their narrow sense. Developing these traits of character which have a broad sense entails adopting the values they represent as our own, for otherwise it is unlikely that we would bother to acquire the relevant powers. But we must keep in mind that it is not sufficient simply to adopt the values; we also need to develop the corresponding traits of character because it requires a strength of character to act justly, courageously,

etc., however well-intentioned we are. As mentioned earlier, a weak-willed person may be unable to act justly when his own interests are at stake, even though he values the ideal of justice.

Other virtues have a broad sense, too, in that they are developed in relation to an evolving system of ends. Self-confidence, conscientiousness, assertiveness, poise, responsibility and decisiveness are all correlated with particular ends or sets of ends. We develop virtues which contribute to our system of values and ends, and our ends are influenced by our powers or virtues. The actual relationships are complex and varying, but we can see that both the virtues and the ends are significantly socially determined. Society encourages the development of virtues in both the broad and the narrow sense.

Society's Responsibility

Virtues are acquired through learning within a social context. They are at least partially socially conditioned. And, as Aristotle claimed, if we are not taught to respond to situations in ways that develop virtues, we will learn to respond in ways that are contrary to virtues.(9) Thus it certainly harms us not to learn virtues, especially since it is possible to be maimed in respect to one's potentiality for virtue(10)so that one may never be able to develop some virtues as an adult. Not only do such persons lack the relevant powers, but the absense of these virtues becomes incapacitating to them in a way that is difficult to overcome. They become conditioned to behaviour which is not rationally chosen and find it very difficult to act differently even when encouraged to make deliberate choices. Instead of virtues, they have acquired harmful vices.

Thus we can understand the predicament of women who have been taught to believe themselves incompetent at anything not directly related to running a household and raising children. They are now being told that they are free to be doctors, politicians, managers, etc., and yet these careers are not really options to them because they do not have the self-confidence needed to pursue them. They are psychologically crippled by their feelings of incompetence and lack of self-confidence, and they cannot choose to try tasks at which they believe they must fail.

It is odd that if all virtues are desirable, they should be taught unevenly. Yet in our society virtues are taught discriminately: boys are encouraged to be brave, strong, independent, self-confident; girls are taught to be understanding, compassionate, non-aggressive and sensitive. Moreover, children are actively discouraged from developing the virtues associated with the other sex.(11)

Virtues are powers which are employed by their possessors in accordance with their ends. Nonetheless, in our society we decide in advance what a person's ends are likely to be and permit each child to learn only the powers we envision as contributing to those ends. In doing so, we severely restrict a person's freedom.

Further these disparities are not merely non-uniform, but actually unfair. We restrict girls' freedom even more strongly than that of boys, for boys are taught powers for a wider variety of ends. Boys are taught to believe themselves capable of doing almost anything they want; with such self-confidence they are in a good position to develop even the virtues which they are discouraged from adopting. Girls, on the other hand, are taught to be passive and unassuming. It is most difficult for them to try suddenly to change their character by an act of will. In general, boys are taught to be flexible and adaptable to situations calling for a variety of skills. In contrast, girls are taught that they are competent only at being wives and mothers, and they anticipate failure whenever they attempt to act outside of these roles.(12) Boys learn virtues which contribute to their thriving, whereas girls learn virtues inconsistent with full human thriving.

Feminists claim that a girl's long training in passivity and dependence reduces her motivation to achieve, to search for new ways of going things and to welcome the challenge of new problems.(13) The empirical evidence gathered to date seems to indicate that girls do learn not to develop their own independent skills but al ways to lean on others, women become incapable of choosing their own directions, for the virtues they have learned are appropriate to a slave mentality. Since we seem to believe that living well requires self-directed activity, that a good life is an active one, it is particularly unfair to raise half the people in this world to be incapable of actively choosing their various ends.

Hence, it is wrong of society to maim people with respect to particular virtues. It is also wrong to allow people to be so maimed by others, for much the same sort of reasons we think it wrong to allow parents to deprive their children of schooling. If we allow everyone to learn any of the traits of character we conceive to be beneficial and not destructive, then each person will develop a strong character and will be able to choose courses which particularly suit him or her. Everyone will not turn out alike, because we will be variously disposed to particular virtues according to our individual natures, just as there are great differences between particular men now. And even if we were to develop identical sets of virtues to identical de-

grees, we would still choose to live different lives, for virtues do not prescribe specific actions or life patterns.

A society concerned with the well-being of its members will have to provide them with an opportunity for developing the powers to pursue good lives; i.e., with virtues. Even those societies which do not hold beneficent ideals and do not concern themselves with the well-being of their citizens still have an obligation to be fair. Hence, they should assure that virtues, like political and economic powers, and like education, be fairly distributed and accessible to all individuals. They should ensure that character traits like assertiveness, compassion, and courage not be repressed in anyone and that no one be deprived of the opportunity to acquire such powers.

NOTES

1. Freud's famous "anatomy is destiny" quote is probably the best-known formulation of this widely held position. More recent statements of the biological view can be found in Judith M. Bardwick, Psychology of Women (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

2. Sandra L. Bem and Daryl J. Bem, "Training the Woman to Know her Place: The Power of a Nonconscious Ideology," in Michele Hoffnung Garskof, Roles Women Play: Readings Towards Women's Liberation (Belmont, Ca.: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1971).

3. This analysis of virtues is part of a long tradition, largely shaped by Aristotle's analysis of the concept. My own approach is like Aristotle's in the abstract formulation, but arrives at very different conclusions from Aristotle because of a different interpretation of the facts. Aristotle's views on virtues are found in Nicomachean Ethics, especially Books I-VI.

4. An act-type is a description of a physical action; I am making a type-token distinction for acts analagous to that for linguistic expressions.

5. Antigone, by Sophocles.

6. Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1966) p. 43.

7. At least within the philosophic tradition on virtue including not only Aristotle, but also such ethicists as Hume and Spinoza.

8. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. by W.D. Ross, 1103a35-1103b2.

9. Ibid., 1103b14-26.

10. Ibid., 1099b19.

11. Bem and Bem, op. cit.

12. Ibid.

13. Matina S. Horner, "Toward an Understanding of Achievement-Related Conflicts in Women," in Women and Achievement, ed. by Martha Tamara Shuch Mednick, Sandra Schwartz Tangri, and Lois Waldman Hoffman (Washington: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1975).