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**Moral Virtues and Responsiveness for Reasons**

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Moral discourse contains judgements of two prominent kinds. It contains deontic judgements about rightness and wrongness, obligation and duty, and what a person ought to do. As I understand them, these deontic judgements are normative: they express conclusions about the bearing of normative reasons on the actions and other responses that are available to us. And it contains evaluative judgements about goodness and badness. Prominent among these are the judgements that evaluate the quality of our responsiveness to morally relevant reasons. We have a rich vocabulary for making such evaluations – our vocabulary of aretaic terms. Aretaic terms are those which can be used to attribute virtues: terms such as “kind”, “honest”, “fair”, “tolerant” and “reliable”. However, while they can be used to attribute virtues, they have other uses too; and they can be applied not only to persons but also to various states of persons, to actions and other responses, and to patterns of response.[[1]](#endnote-2) In this paper, I offer an account of the relationship between some of the principal uses of aretaic terms; and I show how a useful taxonomy of moral virtues can be generated from the thought that these are ways of being well oriented to morally relevant reasons.[[2]](#endnote-3)

**I: Dimensions of Evaluation**

When we judge that a response, or the person who makes it, is virtuous we are making an evaluative judgement, not a normative one. A misreading of Aristotle might seem to encourage the contrary view. Here is the famous passage in which he presents his doctrine of the mean:

“We can be afraid, for instance, or be confident, or have appetites, or get angry, or feel pity, and in general have pleasure or pain, both too much and too little, and in both ways not well. But having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue. Similarly, actions also admit of excess, deficiency, and an intermediate condition.”[[3]](#endnote-4)

In this translation (Irwin’s), “right” surely cannot have the deontic sense of “permissible”. Aristotle is surely not saying that what is proper to virtue is having these feelings at the permissible times, etc. Questions of permissibility do not arise for feelings. Nor should we read “the right times” as “the times there is sufficient reason to have them” or “the times there is decisive reason to have them”. Whether a normative reason does count in favour of a feeling or other response is independent of whether you should think it does; but whether your response is virtuous is not. If you are credibly told that your friend has died, then feeling sad is proper to virtue, but if he has not actually died, then there is no fact about his death that actually counts in favour of sadness.

“Right”, then, should not be interpreted in this passage as expressing a verdict about objective normative reasons. Instead, we should read it evaluatively – in one of two available ways. If our interest is in identifying a state of perfect, unimprovable virtue, then we need to read “right” as meaning perfect or unimprovable. But if we are looking for an account of the kinds of virtue-attributions we ordinarily make, it must mean instead: good enough. The responses that are proper to virtue are the ones that are good enough, in the dimensions Aristotle mentions.[[4]](#endnote-5) He mentions five such dimensions for feelings. However, when the response in question is an action, there are two other dimensions of evaluation which it is important to distinguish.

*Aim and Motive*

It sounds odd to talk of having feelings “for the right end”. That makes it sound as though Aristotle thinks we choose to have feelings like anger and pity because there is some further aim we are seeking to achieve by doing so – but the relationship most of us have to our feelings (trained actors aside) is not like that. It also sounds a bit odd to have Aristotle talking instead of having a feeling “with the right motive” (as Ross’s translation does).[[5]](#endnote-6) We do have feelings because of our recognition of the normative reasons that count in their favour – I can feel pity because of my awareness of someone’s misfortune – but describing this as my “motive” for pity makes the response sound more deliberate than it is.

However that may be, when we turn to actions, we find that every intentional action has an aim, most have a motive, and that the distinction between them is important. The aim of an action is the goal towards which it is directed. In order for something you do to be an intentional action, there must be some such goal – something that makes it successful or unsuccessful, towards which you exercise control in performing it. Otherwise it would not qualify as an intentional action, only a bit of behaviour.

When aims are understood in this broad way – as embracing all the criteria of success for intentional actions – they include the further states of affairs that some actions are directed towards producing, but that is not the only kind of aim an action can have. What you are aiming to do might be expressive rather than productive. Actions, broadly speaking, may have two sorts of aims: they may be productive (of a state of affairs) or expressive (of a “meaning”), or both.[[6]](#endnote-7)

So: when you perform an intentional action, it has an aim. Normally, when you pursue an aim, your doing so is explained by an attitude of yours towards it – an attitude we can indicate by completing sentences of the form “She *F*-d out of…” or “from…” or “for the sake of…” or “in order to…” – where what is supplied in the first two cases is the name of the attitude and in the other two its content. When an attitude plays this explanatory role, it is your motive for acting.[[7]](#endnote-8) And normally, the attitude that explains why I pursue an aim includes the acceptance of some consideration as a reason for pursuing it. The two “normally”s are included to allow for exceptions. The first “normally” allows for intentional actions that lack a motive. I might idly pick up a crumb from the table without my adoption of this aim being explained by any further attitude towards it (not even “that I felt like it”).[[8]](#endnote-9) The second “normally” allows for cases of radical akrasia: cases which involve not only deciding to do what I think I ought not to do, but deciding to do what I think there is *no* reason at all to do. There might still be something for the sake of which I am doing it. I might be acting for the sake of revenge, despite knowing that revenge is not a normative reason for action. My action would then have a motive, but the motive would not be a state of reason-acceptance.

But in the normal cases, a motive is a state the content of which includes accepting some consideration as a reason in favour of my action. Someone who hinders you out of malice is treating the annoyance to you as a reason for hindering you; someone who helps you from compassion treats the relief of your distress as a reason for helping; and someone who attends your lectures for the sake of learning about philosophy is treating that as a reason for attending. Notice how this gives us two different ways of referring to agents’ motives. One is by giving the content of the consideration which is accepted by the agent as reason-providing (“He is motivated by the prospect of personal advancement”); another is by naming the agent’s state of acceptance of that consideration (“He is motivated by ambition”). It is important not to confuse the two. When we say that the motive of your action is ambition, we are not saying that what explains it is your accepting your own ambition as a reason for what you do. Rather, “ambition” names a state which includes the acceptance of another consideration – the prospect of personal advancement – as a reason for action. Seeing this is important in order not to misunderstand the other-regarding motives of morally virtuous action. To ascribe motives of kindness to an agent is to say that her action is performed for the sake of someone else’s welfare, not for the sake of her own kindness.

The plausibility of these claims about motivated intentional action relies on not adopting an overly intellectualist conception of what it is for one’s action to be explained by accepting some consideration as a reason for acting. Take, for example, the actions that psychologists explain as being performed unreflectively under the control of the brain’s “System 1”: actions like that of the experienced firefighter who responds immediately to subliminal cues by getting out of a dangerous building.[[9]](#endnote-10) There, the firefighter’s action is intentional – it is directed towards the aim of getting out of the building. It is performed for the sake of safety: it has that motive. And here, too, we can say that there is a consideration – the fact that the building is unsafe – to which the firefighter is responsive, as a reason for getting out. Neither the fact itself, nor the acceptance of it as a reason, is tokened in an episode of conscious occurrent thought. But it is the firefighter’s sensitivity to the fact that the building is unsafe, and acceptance that there is a reason to get out, that explains the action of getting out. To cover all cases of motivated intentional action, “accepting a consideration as a reason for action” has to be interpreted broadly enough to include such cases.[[10]](#endnote-11)

The distinction between aim and motive is important because two actions can have the same aim but different motives, and this can affect how morally virtuous they are. Kant describes a shopkeeper who scrupulously gives his customers the correct change from motives of commercial prudence.[[11]](#endnote-12) Another shopkeeper might act with the same aim – to give his customers the correct change – but from a motive of respect: out of respect for their rights. Only the latter is morally virtuous. However, notice that Kant is correct that when the first shopkeeper gives his customers the correct change, “[p]eople are thus served honestly”: his action is honest. The applicability of the aretaic term “honest” to an action is settled solely by reference to its aim. If an action has the aim of open dealing, then it is an honest action, whatever the quality of the motive from which it has been performed. The motive, however, is relevant to whether an action expresses the *virtue* of honesty.

However, with other aretaic terms, matters are not so simple. Consider the aim of helping someone to get what he needs. That aim, too, can be pursued from various different motives. Your motive might be to promote the person’s welfare, or to demonstrate your superiority, or to hurt his pride, or to enhance your moral reputation, or (often?) some mixture of these. However, only to the extent that your action has the first of these motives could it qualify as *kind*. Moreover, having this aim and motive does not suffice. Your action must be performed with the right manner as well. Helping in a cold, rough or overbearing manner, even if for the right reasons, could disqualify your action from being kind.

Thus, different aretaic terms are defined by reference to different dimensions of evaluation. For an action to be honest, it is enough that it has a certain aim: that of open dealing with others. Another aim-specific aretaic term is “generosity”. To act generously is to act with the aim of sharing one’s resources with others. It does not matter what one’s motive is: you might give me an ostentatiously generous gift in order to humiliate me, out of revenge for some perceived slight. Then you would still have performed a generous action, from a reprehensible motive.[[12]](#endnote-13) But “kindness” is defined by reference to three dimensions of evaluation, not one. To qualify as kind, an action must have a particular aim (procuring a good for someone), a particular motive (furthering his welfare), and a particular manner (a gentle one).[[13]](#endnote-14)

Why the difference? This evidently depends on the interests we have in making these attributions. A prominent interest we have in distinguishing between different kinds of shopkeeper is to identify those with an aim of open dealing, whatever their motives. But the kindness it makes sense to encourage and care about is a way of interacting with others that has all three qualities, because all three are relevant to the conferring of fellowship-benefits, through receiving the assurance that we matter to others.

I should add a qualification to these remarks. Is it true that kind action *must* have a gentle manner? If I abruptly grab you, alarmed that you are about to be run over, might that not be kind? Perhaps so. Here, I agree with those who say that aretaic concepts are ones we possess in seeing the relationship of an instance to a prototype, rather than through the possession of a sharply bounded set of necessary and sufficient conditions.[[14]](#endnote-15) So my remarks are intended to apply to the prototypical cases. Roughly grabbing you could qualify as kind, then, because of the relationship it bears to those cases. It could be an expression of the same dispositions that issue in prototypically kind action, motivated in the same way.

**II: Virtue and the Aretaic**

Aretaic terms are those – like “honesty” – that *can* be used to attribute virtues. But they do not always do so: Kant’s shopkeeper just showed us that. If we say that “an aretaic property” is what something has when an aretaic term applies to it, then the relationship between virtue and the possession of aretaic properties needs to be handled with care. The case of honesty above shows us that this relationship is not straightforward. Kant’s shopkeeper performs honest actions. Indeed, he is an honest shopkeeper, since it is characteristic of him that he performs such actions. But he lacks the virtue of honesty.[[15]](#endnote-16) And the corresponding possibility exists for kindness. An action could possess the aim, motive and manner distinctive of kindness, and therefore be a kind action, without expressing the virtue of kindness. An example of this would be an act of kindness to a perpetrator in front of his victim: kindness needs to be properly discriminating in order to be virtuous. Having the three properties that are distinctive of kindness is not a guarantee of that.[[16]](#endnote-17)

How, then, can we explain the relationship between virtue and the possession of aretaic properties? I have a two-part proposal. The first part concerns the evaluative use of aretaic terms. They also have a non-evaluative use: that will be the second part, which we will get to shortly.

To state the first part, we need to introduce some terminology. When a pair of aretaic terms *Vn* (a noun such as “honesty”) and *Va* (the associated adjective, “honest”) is defined by reference to one or more dimensions of assessment, let us call those the *Vn*-defining dimensions, and the properties that something must have in those dimensions in order to qualify as *Va* the *Vn*-defining properties. There is then one honesty-defining property: the aim of open dealing with others. But there are three kindness-defining properties: the aim of procuring a good for someone, the motive of furthering his welfare, and a gentle manner.

Here, then, is the first part of my proposal. An action, or any other response, is prototypically *Va* when it has the *Vn*-defining properties. A response is *Va* when when it has enough in common with prototypically *Va* responses.[[17]](#endnote-18) A person is *Va* when she characteristically makes *Va* responses. A response is virtuous (according to the standards we ordinarily employ) when, for some virtue *Vn*, the response is *Va* and is good enough in all dimensions. And a person has the virtue of *Vn* (according to the standards we ordinarily employ) when she characteristically makes responses that are *Va* and are good enough in all dimensions.[[18]](#endnote-19)

The application to kindness and honesty is this. The actions of Kant’s shopkeeper are honest because they have the honesty-defining property (the right aim), and he is honest because he characteristically performs those actions. But his motive is morally indiscriminate: he is honest only for the sake of commercial gain. So his actions are not virtuous, and he lacks the virtue of honesty. Likewise, the indiscriminately kind person performs actions with the kindness-defining properties (the right aim, motive and manner), but is insensitive to the circumstances in which he performs them. It is because his action is bad in that dimension that it is not virtuous, and if this insensitivity is characteristic of him, he lacks the virtue of kindness.

Notice that this does not derive the aretaic assessment of action from that of character. Whether a particular action is honest depends only on the aim of that action: it is independent of whether the action is characteristic of the agent. There is no commitment to the view sometimes made definitive of “virtue ethics” that the rightness of an action is determined by whether it would be performed by a virtuous person (acting in character).[[19]](#endnote-20) On the contrary, this treatment makes it easy to see how an action (or other response) could be virtuous but wrong. “Wrong”, like other important parts of our moral vocabulary, is a word with different uses; but on one prominent use, wrong action is action that there is a set of one or more serious other-regarding reasons not to perform, with no adequate countervailing reason in its favour.[[20]](#endnote-21) On that use, wrongness is settled by the bearing that those reasons do have, whether we appreciate it or not. Virtue is a matter of the goodness or badness of our responses in all the dimensions in which that can be assessed, and this depends on what we accept as the reasons bearing on those responses, and why.

With this in mind, a more accurate statement can be given of the reasons-responsiveness view of virtue I am advocating. When a person makes a response because she accepts that consideration C is a reason for making it, let us call C “the reason for which she is responding”.[[21]](#endnote-22) One’s virtue, we can then say, is a matter of the overall goodness or badness of one’s responsiveness *for* (rather than to) morally relevant reasons – where this includes cases of mistakenly accepting that C is a reason as well as cases where there is no mistake.[[22]](#endnote-23) The virtuousness of a particular response is the goodness or badness of *its* responsiveness for such reasons.

This proposal allows that a response can be virtuous even though the person who makes it is not. That might seem incoherent: how can a response express a virtue that the responder does not have? But this is not incoherent: the phenomenon is ubiquitous, because of the patchiness of our proficiencies. I might be tactful with my parents but not my students. With my parents, I am sensitive to what will potentially upset them and perceptive about how to head off the disturbances; but my arrogance and self-consciousness around my students results in a pattern of clumsy, tactless behaviour. Given how common the latter pattern of behaviour is, I cannot be described as characteristically displaying the kind of sensitivity that is constitutive of tact; but in some contexts I do, and on those occasions my action does not just possess the aretaic property of tact; it is virtuous.

*Aretaic Advice*

Some of the words we deploy in moral discourse (and practical discourse more broadly) have two prominent uses. We can use them either to give prospective advice, or to make a retrospective evaluation. In the first use, we can draw people’s attention to reasons they are not aware of.[[23]](#endnote-24) In the second, we can evaluate the quality of their responses for the reasons they thought or should have thought they had.[[24]](#endnote-25)

One prominent word with these two uses is “ought”. Suppose Arthur receives a suspicious-looking parcel. You think it is a bomb; I know it is not. If you are about to destroy it out of a concern to protect him, I can advise you by saying, “You ought not to destroy it.” In doing so, I need not be negatively evaluating your intended response. On the contrary: if you thought Arthur’s parcel was a bomb, but failed to do anything, I could then express my *criticism* of you by complaining, “You ought to have destroyed it.” The first “ought”-remark advises you by expressing a verdict about the objective reasons bearing on your action. (Notice that it does not identify those reasons – it just says that there are good ones.) The second “ought”-remark evaluates something you have done, in the light of the evidence available to you.

Aretaic terms can be used in the same two ways. So far, we have been looking at their evaluative use. But they can also be used to give advice, by drawing the advisee’s attention to the existence of objective reasons. A psychologist could advise you, “The kind thing to do is to explain to the children how their parents died.” Experience of situations like this indicates that that would be better for them. In giving you this advice, the psychologist need not be negatively evaluating your intention to spare them the details. That intention may have been good, if it was motivated by a concern for their welfare and you were blamelessly mistaken about what is in their interests, not having experienced such situations before. Indeed, if (in the absence of this advice) you spared them the details through justifiedly (but mistakenly) believing that this would be better for them, then we could properly evaluate your response as both kind and virtuous. This evaluative use of the aretaic term would be explained in the way I indicated above. Your response is both kind and virtuous as long as it has the kindness-defining properties and is good enough in all other dimensions.

So what account can be given of the use of aretaic terms in advising, rather than evaluating? This is the second part of my proposal. In advising, we are drawing the advisee’s attention to the objective reasons that bear on her choices.[[25]](#endnote-26) When I advise you that “*F*-ing is the *Va* thing to do (or feel, or think, or say)”, or advise you “to *F* “because it is *Va*”, I am saying that it is because it is *Va* that there are good reasons to *F*.

In giving aretaic advice in this way, we point to the existence of the reasons supporting *F*. However, that is not to say that we are spelling out what those reasons are. There are three cases to consider. Some aretaic terms, like “honesty”, are not motive-specific: there is no honesty-defining motive. So if I say that giving the correct change is the honest thing to do, I am saying that there are good reasons for acting honestly, and that those reasons support giving the correct change, but I have not said what they are. Secondly, there are aretaic terms, like “kindness”, which describe actions that are motivated for a distinctive reason, but without spelling out that reason directly. The psychologist who advises you that informing the children is the kind thing to do has told you that this action is given overall support by the reasons distinctive of kindness. But those reasons are *that this is in the children’s interests* and not *that this is the kind thing to do*. The latter is not the reason for which a kind person is motivated: it is too self-regarding.[[26]](#endnote-27) The third sort of aretaic term is one that does not just refer to a reason but states it. If I say that returning the stolen goods is the just thing to do, I *have* spelled out the reason for doing so. The just person’s reason for *F*-ing is *that   
F-ing is just*.

The use of aretaic terms to give advice is another respect in which the relationship between virtue and the attribution of aretaic properties is not straightforward. Virtue-attributions are always evaluative: to judge that a response or a person is virtuous is to make a judgement of goodness. However, aretaic judgements are not always evaluative.

**III: A Taxonomy of Moral Virtues**

Aretaic language, then, has a range of uses that extend beyond the attribution of virtue. But the best way to present a taxonomy of aretaic categories is as a taxonomy of virtues.

Moral virtues are ways of being well oriented to morally relevant reasons – of responding well for such reasons. We have seen how, when evaluating the quality of this responsiveness, different dimensions of evaluation are relevant to the application of different aretaic terms. We should, I think, be suspicious of attempts to systematize the variety of our aretaic vocabulary too neatly: the purposes that our aretaic evaluations serve are likely to be multifarious and to some degree haphazard. Some languages happen to lack words for qualities that are clearly morally admirable: English contains no word for “Mitfreude”, for example – the sympathetic sharing of others’ joy – and many languages lack a much needed word for responding well to the prospect of one’s own death. One might speculate on the cultural peculiarities that explain such linguistic facts; but that would not be relevant to a consideration of which qualities really are virtues. It should not surprise us if our actual aretaic vocabulary is to some degree a miscellaneous and accidental assortment of items. Some of the aretaic terms we happen to have do double duty, applying to more than one distinguishable virtue; some important virtues happen to lack names.

But having said that, I think the following classificatory scheme is helpful. When you make a response (of action, thought or feeling) to an object for a reason, there are three items in this relationship: the reason, the object and the response.[[27]](#endnote-28) An illuminating way of organizing a taxonomy of moral virtues is to classify them into three corresponding categories. Some virtues are reason-categoric: they are virtues of good responsiveness for particular reasons. Some are object-categoric: they are virtues of responding well to particular objects, for a variety of different reasons. And some are response-categoric: they are virtues of making particular types of response well, towards a variety of different objects and for a variety of different reasons.

In the three sections that follow, I discuss each of these categories in turn. The structure of the first category – the reason-categoric virtues – can be understood by reference to the relationships between the reasons for which these virtues are responsive. If some of those reasons are fundamental to morality and others derive their importance from those more fundamental ones, this will give us a way of understanding the relationship between the virtues of good responsiveness for those reasons.

However, not all virtues can be identified with good forms of responsiveness for particular reasons. Courage is a prominent example. Courage can be required in acting for reasons of concern, respect or cooperation, to protect someone’s rights or to stand up for justice, or for many other reasons. The courage-defining properties do not include being motivated by responsiveness for a particular kind of reason. Rather, to have the virtue of courage is to respond well to a particular kind of object: namely, the prospect of harm or humiliation. There are many reasons why that can be morally important; but because it is difficult to respond well when it carries the risk of harm or humiliation, it makes sense for us to have a name for the quality of doing so, in order to encourage and support it. Courage, then, belongs to our second category of virtues: those that are object-categoric, not reason-categoric. Object-categoric virtues are defined by reference to objects that warrant special attention in moral discourse, because of the special difficulty of responding to those objects well.

The third, counterpart category contains response-categoric virtues. These are defined by reference to particular types of response that it can be important to make towards many different objects, for many different reasons. Fairness will be my main example of this. As I see it, what the many forms of fairness have in common is that they are forms of fitting impartiality. There are many proper objects of responses of this type. Fairness can concern the distribution of goods of various kinds, the following of regulative procedures, the contribution one makes to collective enterprises, the response one makes to transgressions, the refusal to exploit others’ trust, and the judgements one makes about other people. What connects these various objects is that responding well in each case requires a form of impartiality. The feature that instances of fairness have in common – the fairness-defining property – is a property of the response, and not the objects of that response, nor the reason for making it.

The taxonomy that follows is intended as a contribution to moral theory, not psychology. I do not claim that the aretaic categories we use in attributions of virtue map onto the structures in terms of which we can best understand our psychological functioning. Instead, my interest here is in the relationships between the categories we use in evaluating persons and their responses. The extent to which there is a mapping of that kind is relevant to whether we take virtue-discourse to be referring to stable psychological dispositions by reference to which we can identify right action.[[28]](#endnote-29) But that is not my project; and the absence of such stable dispositions does not threaten the defensibility of our use of aretaic terms to evaluate either a person or her actions: it just means that moral generalizations about a person are difficult.[[29]](#endnote-30)

**IV: Reason-Categoric Virtues**

One important dimension of evaluation of our responses concerns the reasons for which we make them. When one acts for a reason, one’s motive for acting can be described by specifying that reason. And motives for acting are morally important: the motives of agents determine the quality of their will.[[30]](#endnote-31) Whether they are maliciously, arrogantly, respectfully or cravenly motivated in their actions towards us constitutes a large part of the “meaning” of what they do, and the relationships in which we stand to them.

The corresponding point applies to responses other than action. Thoughts and feelings need not have *motives*, and need not be the product of any act of will; but we often make these responses through the acceptance of reasons for them. This, again, is an important dimension of evaluation for the non-active responses. The reasons one accepts for one’s responses largely constitute the meanings that those responses have in interpersonal relationships.[[31]](#endnote-32)

Consequently, we have an extensive aretaic vocabulary that treats the reasons for which responses are made as *Vn*-defining properties. *Reason-categoric virtues* are those for which there is a positive answer to the question, “In order for a response to express virtue *Vn*, does it have to be made for a particular reason?” When a virtue requires responding for a particular reason, we can then ask “What is the source of that reason?” The structure of the class of reason-categoric moral virtues is generated by the answers to that question. We can answer it by tracing the derivational relationships between morally relevant reasons.

When one reason derives from another, the relation of derivation is a relation of making the case: R’s being a reason for A derives from S’s being a reason for B when S’s being a reason for B is part of what makes it the case that R is a reason for A. Making-the-case is a linear, one-way relationship. So unless chains of derivation go on forever, there are foundational, underived reasons.[[32]](#endnote-33) Good forms of responsiveness for those foundational reasons can be classified as fundamental reason-categoric virtues.

To make this more concrete, we can consider three good candidates for foundational reasons, and examine how others can derive from them. Three candidates for underived, morally relevant reasons are the reasons we have to promote others’ welfare, not to interfere with their self-asserting activity, and to join in worthwhile collective action.[[33]](#endnote-34) If we accept this, it gives us three broad groups of reason-categoric virtues: virtues of concern, respect and cooperation. To the reasons that derive from these three foundational sources, there will then correspond more specific reason-categoric virtues belonging to these three groups: virtues of responding well for those reasons.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which one reason can derive from another is by subsumption, where making response A for reason R is a specification or a part of making response B for reason S. For example, considerateness – anticipating others’ needs and acting preemptively to meet or forestall them – is a particular way of promoting others’ welfare. So considerateness qualifies as a derivative reason-categoric virtue of concern. However, there are other, non-subsumptive ways in which one reason can derive from another. The derivation can involve a relationship of enabling, where making response A for reason R is an enabling condition for making B for reason S. For example, developing a moral vocabulary can be morally valuable in enabling us to treat others respectfully by giving them reasons for the way we treat them. To the extent that this is what motivates you to acquire that vocabulary, your articulacy can itself be morally virtuous: it can be a subsidiary virtue of respect. A third sort of derivation is neither subsumptive nor enabling but rather responsive: here, making response A for reason R is itself a response to someone else’s making the further response B for reason S. For an example of this third kind, consider the form that patriotism and other kinds of group loyalty can take when they express an appreciation of one’s place in a shared history. Here, what one is responsive to is others’ having acted cooperatively – that is, their having responded for reasons of cooperation – in sustaining the group to which one belongs. The reasons there are to be appreciative of that are reasons of responsiveness to others’ having acted for other, more fundamental reasons. So this kind of virtuous loyalty is a subsidiary virtue of (proper appreciation for) cooperation.

In these ways, we can explain the relationship between different reason-categoric virtues by reference to the relationship between the reasons for which the virtues respond. They can be classified as virtues of concern, respect, or cooperation, according to the source of the reasons for which they respond. However, a reason-categoric virtue can also respond for a reason which derives from more than one foundational source. Justice is a prominent example of this. The virtue of justice is a virtue of responsiveness for a particular reason: namely, facts about justice. But facts about justice, on one prominent view, are facts about whether a social structure is regulated by an authority as it morally ought, all things considered, to be. If so, justice is a reason-categoric virtue, but its derivational sources lie in all of the foundations of morality, not one alone.

**V: Object-Categoric Virtues**

Reason-categoric virtues are those whose exercise requires responsiveness for a particular kind of reason. But not all virtues are like that. The most obvious exceptions are the so-called “executive virtues” – virtues like courage, which are virtues of responding well to a particular object: in this case, the prospect of harm or humiliation. Given the strength of our aversion to that prospect, it can deflect us from doing what, all things (including that prospect) considered, we ought. The reasons for behaving courageously are reasons for not being deflected in that way, and they can come from anywhere. So there is no particular kind of reason for which a courageous person acts. Someone with the virtue of courage responds well to a certain kind of object, for whatever reasons may require doing so.

*Virtues of Self-Control*

Courage belongs to the most prominent class of object-categoric virtues – the virtues of self-control.[[34]](#endnote-35) There are two generic virtues of self-control: temperance, which is control over our natural appetites, and fortitude – control over our natural aversions. The point of calling these “executive” virtues is that they do not involve the pursuit of characteristic aims. Nor do they involve characteristic motives for pursuing aims. When we talk of acts of fortitude and temperance, we are not drawing attention to particular aims or motives, but rather the overcoming of powerful natural obstacles to doing the right thing: obstacles that lie in our aversions and appetites. Saying this allows for two ways in which these motivational aversions or attractions can be controlled. We can resist them when they are present but we judge it inappropriate to act on them. This is overcoming-by-continence. Or, more fully, there is the kind of state which Aristotle saw as the ideal for a virtuous agent, in which we train ourselves into only having a motivational aversion or attraction when it is appropriate to act on it. This state of full Aristotelian virtue, if we could achieve it, would be a state that supersedes continence.[[35]](#endnote-36)

The subsidiary virtues of self-control are all further specifications of temperance and fortitude. Thus, modesty is temperance with respect to the appetite for status, which our nature as social animals endows us with; “chastity” is the only word we have for temperance with respect to the sexual appetite.[[36]](#endnote-37) Equanimity and patience are names for fortitude with respect to our aversion to frustration; perseverance and industry, for fortitude with respect to our aversion to hard work; resilience, to stress; bravery and courage, to the prospect of harm or humiliation. Those are object-categoric specifications of the two generic virtues: ways of more tightly specifying the objects of appetite or aversion with respect to which self-control is exercised.[[37]](#endnote-38)

*Virtues of Proficiency*

Object-categoric virtues are not confined to virtues of self-control. There are also virtues of proficiency: for example, tact. Tact involves a perceptiveness about the potential for disturbance, upset or conflict, and the ability to say or do what will avert or resolve it. So it is a good form of responsiveness to a certain sort of object: difficult situations of this kind. It is not a reason-categoric virtue: the reasons why finding a tactful response is important may be reasons of concern for welfare (as when it is tactful not to mention something upsetting), but they might be reasons to preserve the harmonious functioning of a group, deriving from the importance of cooperation, or reasons to treat two people respectfully – say, by giving them both a fair hearing. And nor is tact response-categoric: there is no distinctive kind of response to difficult situations that is characteristic of tact. Not inviting two feuding friends to dinner might be tactful; but so might going ahead and inviting them, to show that one trusts them to handle their disagreement sensibly themselves.

This may invite the question: If the kinds of skill to which we give the name “tact” range so widely, should we really be prepared to say that this is the name of *one* kind of proficiency? No: we should not be prepared to say that. But in that respect, tact is no worse qualified to be a virtue than any other. We should resist the temptation to think of virtue-terms as naming categories that describe elements within the structure of the psychology of a good moral agent. They are components of our vocabulary for talking about kinds of goodness. The psychological constituents that need to be possessed in order to qualify for the attribution of such evaluative terms are another matter.

Indeed, it should by now be obvious that on the taxonomy I am recommending, when a response is virtuous, it typically expresses more than one virtue. When a particular action expresses an object-categoric virtue, it always expresses a reason-categoric virtue too: whenever an action is morally courageous, it is also kind, or just, or public spirited, or… To be a virtuous response to its object, it must be good in all dimensions of assessment. That includes its motive: the action must be performed for a good reason. So when one responds well to the object that specifies a virtue of self-control or proficiency, the reason for which one is responding supplies a reason-categoric aretaic property which is also possessed by the response. Indeed, as we will shortly see, there are response-categoric virtues as well, so nothing prevents the same action from expressing a virtue of that kind too.[[38]](#endnote-39)

*Object-Categoric Virtues of Relationship-Responsiveness*

There is a third type of object-categoric virtue. Some virtues are good forms of responsiveness to particular kinds of relationship. These, too, are virtues of responding well to a particular object – the relationship-type – in a variety of ways, for a variety of reasons. Loyalty and trustworthiness are examples of this. Loyalty is the virtue of responding well to the history of a relationship of special connection with some other individual or group. Relationships of special connection need not have a history in order to be important, of course – the relationship of a parent to a newborn child is an obvious example of that – but then it ceases to be appropriate to think of them in terms of loyalty. The virtuous forms of loyalty are those that show a proper appreciation of the history of one’s relationship to an individual or group, and how the meaning of that temporally extended relationship bestows upon my responses to it the significance of forms of fidelity or betrayal.[[39]](#endnote-40)

Trustworthiness is the virtue of good responsiveness to the relationships of reliance through which others are vulnerable to us. The variety of expressions that this virtue has, and reasons for its importance, come from the many ways in which we are vulnerable to each other – ranging from the general vulnerability we have to being deceived by someone we have never met, to our special vulnerability to being hurt by those we have shared our lives with most intimately.

**VI: Response-Categoric Virtues**

Response-categoric virtues are forms of goodness whose defining characteristic is the making of some particular type of response. The response can be made to a variety of different objects, and for a variety of different reasons. The virtues in this category seem to me more miscellaneous, so I shall not attempt to structure it further by organizing it into subtypes. Instead, I give three examples: fairness, honesty and generosity.

Fairness has a kind of generality that makes it comparable to the executive virtues just discussed. It, too, is not a sensitivity to one particular kind of reason. But it is response-categoric, not object-categoric.[[40]](#endnote-41) To say that a person, motive, action, institution, distribution or judgement is fair is to say that it exhibits a kind of impartiality which is fitting, given the context. That is not to say that it picks out one particular way of being impartial and tells us to exhibit that. Rather, there are many kinds of impartiality: judgements about fairness and unfairness concern actions for which one particular way of being impartial is fitting. What fair distributions, regulations, judgements, punishments and so on have in common is not that deliberation about them is directed towards a single common object. What is common to them is that they are fitting, in a field of deliberation where finding what is fitting requires a form of impartiality. An obvious reason for our having this aretaic term comes from the strength of our motives of attachment and the need to exercise self-control in contexts in which we ought to oppose those motives. If that exhausted the content of fairness then it would belong above, with the object-categoric virtues of self-control: it would be a form of temperance with respect to personal attachments. But fairness extends beyond such cases. The capricious judge who does not like the attire of one of the litigants or decides the case by tossing a coin is acting unfairly, but the unfairness there is not a failure to exercise self-control with respect to a personal attachment. The same is true of a lazy-minded person who criticizes someone unfairly on flimsy evidence. Personal attachment is only one of a range of different obstacles to exercising the impartiality that is contextually fitting: the virtue of fairness is the quality of doing so well.[[41]](#endnote-42)

A response can be fitting without being all things considered appropriate or right. So this explanation of fairness allows that there is a gap between the possession of the aretaic property and virtue.[[42]](#endnote-43) If, as the ship goes down, I waste time by insisting on organizing a lottery for the lifeboats, my action could be fair but would not be virtuous. The situation is one in which important interests generate equal claims to a scarce good, and that makes it lottery-worthy. But whether a lottery ought, all things considered, to be conducted depends on more than that – including, obviously, whether more lives will be lost as a result. This is another illustration of the earlier point: whether an action possesses the aretaic property of fairness depends only on whether it possesses the fairness-defining property: fitting impartiality. Whether it is virtuous depends on its being good enough in *all* dimensions of assessment. Fair action that is insufficiently sensitive to the loss of life is not virtuously fair.

The aretaic property of honesty was discussed earlier. I pointed out that there is one honesty-defining property: the aim of open dealing with others. An action performed from any motive can be honest; but in order to express the virtue of honesty, its motive (along with every other dimension in which it can be assessed) must be good enough. However, the defining property of an honest action is its aim. That makes it a response-categoric virtue, since the aim of an action is a property of the response one is making to an object, and not of the object to which one is responding in performing that action. And while the reason for which one performs a virtuously honest action must be good enough, it does not have to come from any particular source. Kant’s shopkeeper, who acts honestly only because it keeps him in business, lacks the virtue of honesty, but a shopkeeper could have that virtue by treating his customers honestly for the sake of their welfare, or out of a respect for their rights, or from an appreciation that this is what we each must do if society is to function harmoniously – that is, for reasons of concern, respect or cooperation. So honesty is a response-categoric virtue, along with fairness.

Generosity was the other aim-specific aretaic property I mentioned in Section I. This has the aim of sharing one’s possessions with others; when it is a virtue, it is a response-categoric virtue, in the same way as honesty. Typically, generosity is a response to others’ needs, in order to benefit them. When that is true, generosity is a form of beneficence; but it is not always true. I might be generous in forgoing some of my allocated speaking time in order to accord your views a hearing: then I am acting for reasons of respect. And if I generously volunteer more than my fair share in contributing to a joint cause, I might be acting for reasons of cooperation. So generosity can have various objects and be bestowed for various reasons. It is response-categoric.

**VII: The Moral Virtues**

This short discussion has left many moral virtues undiscussed. I cannot claim, therefore, to have demonstrated the adequacy of the taxonomy I am proposing, since if there are any moral virtues it cannot accommodate it has to be rejected. However, it would be a mistake to ask whether it can generate a complete list of “the” moral virtues: that would be to misunderstand the nature of moral evaluation. Our evaluative vocabulary does not itself exhaust the respects in which we and our responses can be good and bad. Some terms are finer-grained specifications of others; many apply in overlapping ways. No doubt, our vocabulary will continue to evolve, drawing our attention to particular morally important reasons, objects and responses, and sometimes duplicating terms we have already. And a glance at any thesaurus will supply a vaguely bounded list of further words we already possess for making aretaic evaluations. So: is love a moral virtue? Flexibility? They appear on some lists; and “loving” and “flexible” are certainly terms that we use to make positive evaluations of a person or a response. If we did count them as moral virtues, they would both be response-categoric.

Moreover, providing a taxonomy like this one does not preclude the provision of others, structured to serve other theoretical purposes. The point of the taxonomy outlined here is to show how we can understand the relationships between the aretaic members of our evaluative vocabulary on a view of virtue as good responsiveness for morally relevant reasons. As I have emphasized, the vagaries of our evaluative vocabulary and the variety of purposes it serves should make us wary of an overly neat taxonomy of this domain. The one I have provided does at least allow us to understand some of the overlaps and provides a structure for seeing how further extensions of our aretaic vocabulary could be possible.[[43]](#endnote-44)

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**Notes**

1. “Response” will be my catch-all term for types of action, thought and feeling, and “object” for that to which a response responds. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. For this thought, compare Robert Audi, "Moral Virtue and Reasons for Action". [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b19-24. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. “Good enough for what?” The correct answer to this is the frustrating-sounding one: for virtue. Compare: “sloppy” means insufficiently attentive – we specify how much attentiveness is insufficient through the instances of behaviour that we censure as sloppy in our evaluative practice. In the same way, we specify standards for morally adequate responses through our practices of aretaic evaluation. This allows that when I fall below such a standard, my circumstances might make it unreasonable to criticize me for doing so – resulting in blameless vice. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Reeve’s “for the sake of what we should” is better. But even that carries the misleading suggestion that there is some further state *towards* which we form our feelings. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Actions can have expressive aims, but they can also be expressive in other ways – as is illustrated in what Rosalind Hursthouse calls "Arational Actions". When spontaneously hugging someone expresses affection, the affection can be part of the *manner* in which one acts rather than an aim of the action. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. This covers the motives for which we do things. But there are also motives we do not act on: these cannot be attitudes that explain any actions. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Compare G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Sections 16-17. On Anscombe’s view, what makes an action intentional is that the question “Why?” has application in a sense in which a positive answer gives a reason for action. Here, she maintains, the question *applies*, even though the answer to it is, “For no reason”, so the action is intentional. However, we can ask: in virtue of what does that question have application? The answer, I think, is that the action is directed towards an aim. Actions are intentional in virtue of their aim, not their motive. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. On Systems 1 and 2, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Part I. For the firefighting example, see Gary Klein, *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions*, Ch.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. An interesting and important question is what further account to give of “accepting a consideration as a reason for action”. Exploring this would take us too far afield here. But for a more detailed attempt to provide an account of reason-acceptance, and reasons-responsiveness more generally, see my "Stupid Goodness", Sect. III. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:397. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Compare Christine Swanton, "A Particularist but Codifiable Virtue Ethics", p.47. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. This point is not sufficiently acknowledged in my paper “International Aid and the Scope of Kindness”. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. See Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, Chapter 13. On prototype concepts, see William Ramsey, "Prototypes and Conceptual Analysis". [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. “Honesty” is an aretaic term, because it can be used to attribute a virtue and a virtue is a form of excellence. The properties named by aretaic terms are aretaic properties. But bearing an aretaic property need not be a way of being excellent, as Kant’s shopkeeper illustrates. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Most aretaic properties are such that a response or a person can possess them without being virtuous. But “wise”, “just” and “tactful” are different. Being properly discriminating is necessary for the possession of these properties. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Enough, that is, for our interest in identifying *V*aresponses to be served by classifying the cases together. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. This proposal leaves it open what further account to give of what it is for responses to be “characteristic”. My own preferred view is that this requires that they are non-accidental manifestations of stable dispositions, so that the expression of these dispositions in *Va* responses has a degree of modal robustness: were the circumstances to change somewhat, the *Va* response would still be made. What degree of modal robustness? A degree that is good enough – see note [4]. But this supplementation of the proposal in the text is independent of it: if there is a better account of “characteristic” responses, it can be substituted for this one. This does not close off the possibility that “situationists” could succeed in showing that no unqualified attributions of virtue to persons are defensible: see note [28]. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. E.g. by Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp.28-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. This way of thinking about wrongness – an “inadequate reasons” conception – is is actually a family of different views. Members of the family differ concerning the “others” whose relationship to me generate “other-regarding” reasons. And they offer different accounts of what it for an other-regarding reason to be “serious” and a countervailing reason to be “adequate”. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. This is a stipulation, not a claim about the meaning of this phrase in ordinary English. It is hard not to hear “C is the reason for which she is responding” as factive – as implying that C. For “acceptance”, see note [10]. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Mistakes in what one accepts as a reason can themselves be morally evaluable, so they can bear on the virtuousness of one’s response. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. We can also advise them about the relative strengths of the reasons they are aware of. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. We can also evaluate the quality of their awareness. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Not all responses are subject to choice. But only the responses that are subject to choice are candidates for advice. It makes no sense to offer someone advice about the kind way to feel – even though there are reasons for feelings, and our feeling-responses to those reasons are properly subject to aretaic evaluation. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. This point has often been made (e.g. by Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives", p.165; Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p.10; R.E. Ewin, *Co-Operation and Human Values*, pp.195-6; and J. D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices*, p.128); but it is sometimes contested – for example (on Kant's behalf) by Marcia Baron, "Varieties of Ethics of Virtue". [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. This classificatory scheme is consistent with the point that all reasons for responses can be cast as references to response-types. Whenever the question, “Why make response *R*?” has the answer, “Because *X* is true”, that answer can be rephrased in the form, “Because *R* belongs to the type: responses of which *X* is true.” [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. So I do not see the following discussion as joining the debate initiated by the situationist critics of virtue theory, such as John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* and Gilbert Harman, "The Nonexistence of Character Traits" and "Scepticism About Character Traits". (This response to the situationists is labelled “the dodge” by Mark Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction*, pp.62-4.) However, it is true that if the facts of human psychology are such that there is no sense in which the making of good responses is “characteristic” of a person, then the unqualified attribution of virtues to persons of the form, “She has the virtue of *Vn*” will be indefensible – they will need to be replaced by judgements of the form, “She acts with the virtue of *Vn* in situations of type *T*.” [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Here I am in sympathy with Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good*, Ch.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Compare the quality-of-will theory of moral worth developed in Nomy Arpaly, "Moral Worth" and *Unprincipled Virtue*, Ch.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. See T.M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Meaning, Permissibility, Blame*, p.54. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. This is not to say that the *epistemology* of judgements about reasons or their derivation is foundationalist rather than coherentist. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. I hope this at least has some prima facie plausibility. A defence of this large claim requires showing how it helps us to make the best sense of the overall structure of morality. I attempt that much larger task in my *Concern, Respect and Cooperation*. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. According to G.H. Von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness*, Ch.7, all virtues are specifications of *the* virtue of self-control. I think he over-generalizes. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. We need not see this Aristotelian ideal as a state in which the natural appetites themselves are lost. For we can distinguish between an appetite – a state of experiencing something as attractive – and the motivation to satisfy it. The Aristotelian virtue of temperance should not be seen as a state in which one does not feel hungry when one has not been fed; but it is a state in which one is not motivated to take someone else’s lunch when one is hungry – there is no motivation to act that has to be resisted. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. Chastity, of course, has acquired a bad reputation through the use of the word as an instrument of sexual repression. Perhaps our word for it needs to be retired. But we should not be led by that to doubt whether there is a virtue of self-control in relation to one’s sexual appetites. As our culture becomes increasingly sexualized, our lacking a vocabulary for talking about this virtue becomes increasingly problematic. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Are these virtues better classified as *emotion*-categoric? I think not. Someone lacking any feelings of frustration can still have the virtue of patience, in responding well to the situations that are the object of frustration in others. The virtue is a virtue of responding well to a particular kind of object, rather than of handling one’s emotions well – although the objects with respect to which we classify these virtues can be identified by reference to the emotions they do typically elicit. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. An example: in a case where reasons of respect require you to treat someone impartially although you will be vilified for doing so, your action could express the object-categoric virtue of courage, the reason-categoric virtue of respect, and the response-categoric virtue of fairness, all at once. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. For discerning treatments that distinguish virtuous from unvirtuous forms of loyalty, see John Kleinig, *On Loyalty and Loyalties: The Contours of a Problematic Virtue* and Simon Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty* – with Kleinig tending to emphasize the former and Keller the latter. For the view that there is no virtue of loyalty, see R.E. Ewin, "Loyalty and Virtues". [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. “Why aren’t *all* virtues ‘response-categoric’? Aren’t ‘kindness’ and ‘courage’ the names of the *responses* characteristically made by people with those virtues?” Yes, but in order for a response to qualify as kind, it must be made for a particular sort of reason; in order for a response to qualify as courageous, it must be made to a particular sort of object. The response-categoric virtues are those for which no corresponding claim is true. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. I discuss fairness and its relationship to the morality of cooperation more fully in my "Public Goods and Fairness". [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. This is a point I fail to make in "Public Goods and Fairness". [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. For insightful comments on previous drafts of this essay, I am grateful to Damien Cox, Christine Swanton, Justin Oakley, Glen Pettigrove, Nic Southwood, Robert Audi and an anonymous referee. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)