We care about being generous, courageous, and fair. This looks as though we care about other people, since what we care about is having a disposition to help others, respect their rights, and intervene when they are threatened. But is it correct for concern for others to come in by way of my own dispositions? Is caring about virtue focusing too much on myself? This worry has been the basis of objections that virtue ethics, as a theory, is selfish or egoistic. In recent years defenders of virtue ethics have provided many responses, but the objection keeps coming up in revised forms. The objection can be met, and discussion of the issue is also useful in helping us to see what virtue ethics is, not just what it is not.

The egoism in question here is ethical egoism, the theory that holds that my own good is the ethical standard for what it is right for me to do, the dispositions I should have, and so on. The theory comes in several versions, depending on the many different possible interpretations of what my own good is. My own good might be held to consist in my having the maximum pleasure, or it might be given other content, such as my satisfying my desires, or achieving what is in my own interests. (And different versions will result from distinguishing what is actually in my interests from what I merely think to be in my interests.) Some versions of egoism are interested in my own good merely as a standard for “the rightness of action”, while others think of it also as what justifies my having some dispositions rather than others. But for present purposes I don’t think that it matters to distinguish these versions. The basic idea of ethical egoism is that what ethically justifies what I do, and the way I am, is my own good, where that is distinct from, and potentially in conflict with, the good of others. And we find at once a problem in the idea that this could be an ethical position, because of the very basic thought that ethics is fundamentally about the good of others, not my good.

**Why would anyone think that virtue ethics is egoistic?**

What is a virtue? A minimal conception is that of a disposition or character trait. Virtues are not just character traits, however, since forgetfulness or stubbornness are not virtues. Virtues are character traits which are in some way desirable.

But neither are they just desirable character traits; tidiness and punctuality are nice traits to have, but not yet virtues. A virtue is, at least, a character trait which is admirable, embodying a commitment to some ethical value. If we deny this, we are losing contact with everyday discourse about virtue and virtuous people, as we can see if we look at a typical list of virtues. Courage, fairness and patience are all virtues. They are not just character traits that are desirable to have—in fact, notoriously not everyone desires to be courageous, even when they think they ought to be. They are character traits which embody a commitment to some value, in a way which may benefit the agent, but equally may benefit others. The courageous person stands up for what is worthwhile against temptations to give in or compromise. This is a useful trait for the person to have in that it enables her to achieve her own goals without being sidetracked in various ways. But obviously this trait is also useful for others, in that it enables her to stand up for what is worthwhile when the interests of others are at stake.

Some accounts of virtue, stemming from Hume and the utilitarians, have thought that a virtue is just a trait which is useful for me to have in that it promotes a value which might benefit me or equally well might benefit others. This does at least capture the thought that there is something worthwhile about the virtues, something explaining why we think it important, and not just nice, to have them. But reduced virtue theories of this kind leave the virtues as merely plastic dispositions whose shape is determined by what happens to benefit people; and this is wildly revisionary as an account of virtue. Moreover, a virtue is not just a disposition which happens to have certain effects. It is a disposition which works through the agent’s practical reasoning, built up from decisions and manifesting and expressing itself in decisions and choices which reflect the agent’s deliberations.
The virtues, then, are dispositions which do not just happen to have the effect of achieving what is valuable for others as well as the agent; they are dispositions to do this—dispositions to choose actions that give others their fair share, treat others inconsiderate ways, stand up for the rights of others, and so on. These dispositions may also, of course, sometimes achieve what is valuable for the agent also, but that is not their point: they are dispositions to do what has value.

Where, then, does a charge of selfishness or egoism take hold? One kind of virtue ethics holds that I should cultivate the virtues because they are valuable, in a number of different ways, and that these cannot be reduced or simplified down to one. (This might be the way we begin to teach the virtues.) There is nothing egoistic about such a position; but it is obviously unsatisfactory from a theoretical point of view. Why are just these dispositions virtues? Can we really say nothing about what the values of the different virtues have in common?

Any theory of virtue will have something to say about the way the different virtues are valuable by contributing in a unified way to a further end. Since they are dispositions, they are ways that I am, traits of my character; they contribute to my living my life as a whole in a certain way. The reason it is worthwhile for me to cultivate the virtues is that they will make up or constitute my living my life as a whole in a way which it is valuable to live. The notion of “my life as a whole” is crucial here; the virtues make sense within a conception of living, which takes the life I live to be a unity. Thus the virtues will contribute to the overall final end I have in living my life as a whole; this is variously called eudaimonia, following Aristotle, or flourishing, or happiness, though the latter is always risky because of potential confusion with modern feel-good notions of happiness.

It is at this point that charges of egoism begin to get a grip. The virtues are valuable because they contribute to my final end—but this is my final end, not yours, and so it looks as though it is my good, or interests, or whatever, which is justifying my acquisition of the virtues, and so they owe their ethical justification to their contribution to my good. So we have egoism?

No. This goes too fast. For the virtues are not just any old dispositions making up my life; they are courage, generosity, fairness, and so on. How does fairness, for example, contribute to my final end? The fair person will give others what is their due, sometimes to his own disadvantage. In what sense is this contributing to his good, interests, or whatever? One answer is that it need not. Exercising the virtues is part of my living my life as a whole; they are dispositions whose exercise makes up the way I live my life, my life overall. But the exercise of the virtues need not benefit me, or contribute to my living a life we would call flourishing. Exercising the virtues is admirable, and we do admire people whose lives are lived in admirable and valuable ways. But these need not lead to flourishing, and in the case of some virtues, those which primarily benefit others, they characteristically will not. The virtues, then, will be pursued as part of my whole life, but they need not benefit me or lead to my flourishing. This type of theory faces questions as to what does justify the distinct virtues, and why we think that the dispositions on our list are the virtues.

Many virtue ethicists have followed Aristotle and the rest of the classical virtue ethics tradition in holding that the virtues benefit their possessor. Not only are they dispositions whose exercise constitutes the living of a certain kind of life, they are (in the weak versions) necessary and (in the strong versions) sufficient for the living of that life to be good, for the life to be a good, flourishing one. Here we find a unified justification for the virtues, and do not have to rely on finding them valuable in a piecemeal way. However, accusations of egoism do begin to find a footing at this point. For it looks as though my flourishing is my good in a way which contrasts with the good of others, and if the virtues benefit me by leading to my flourishing, then my reason for acquiring and exercising them would seem to be my seeking my own flourishing. And how can this be a decently ethical reason for becoming virtuous? Shouldn’t an ethical reason for becoming virtuous be that the virtues contribute to the flourishing of other people, not to my flourishing?
Two versions of this objection are frequently made, but can be rapidly met. The first goes: if my reason for having the virtues is that they benefit me, contribute to my flourishing, then virtue ethics will come up with wrong recommendations as to what I should do. I should be brave, for example, in aid of my own flourishing, and thus only in the interests of what will benefit me. Courageous behavior in standing up for the interests of others would seem not to be virtuous, on this account, or at least not required by virtue.

However, it is clear what is wrong with this. Courage is a virtue, that is, a disposition to stand up for what is worthwhile even against temptation to avoid danger, difficulty, and so on. I have not so far specified how we are to identify what is worthwhile, but it is clear that, however we do this, courage is not a disposition which can be switched off when my own interests are not at stake. The virtues are dispositions embodying a commitment to values, not to my self-interest. Thus the thesis that the virtues benefit their possessor cannot be interpreted in such a way that the virtuous person acts in an egoistic way. Rather, we have to take the virtues as they are, taking into account the point that virtuous action may often lead to loss of various kinds on the agent's part, and so is not egoistic. We need to find an account of what it is for the virtues to benefit their possessor which does justice to this.

A second objection holds that, even if someone is virtuous in the sense of acting virtuously, still, if their reason for so acting is that being virtuous benefits them and is in his interests, he cannot have the right ethical motivation. If I stand up for someone else's rights, act generously to a stranger, and so on, then I may have acted virtuously, but if my reason for so doing is that doing the virtuous thing leads to my flourishing, then it is my own good which is my reason for acting in the relevant way. Is this not egoistic? The obvious answer to this is that if my motivation is egoistic then I am not acting virtuously. I could, of course, do an action which is such that a virtuous person would do it, but do it only because I have an eye on my own flourishing. But then I would not be virtuous, because a virtue is not a disposition that can be exercised in the absence of the right kind of motivation. If I have my eye on my own flourishing, then I am not acting from courage, or generosity, or whatever. The thesis that the virtues benefit their possessor cannot show that the virtues themselves lead to deliberations with egoistic content, or egoistic motivation. In either case, all that would be shown would be that it was not a virtue that was in question.

However, these objections, particularly the second, can take a more sophisticated form. The objection that virtue ethics is at bottom egoistic has recently been reformulated by Thomas Hurka in a general attack on virtue ethics, and meeting this objection turns out to be revealing about virtue ethics and particularly the relation of being virtuous to flourishing. Hurka claims that a virtue ethics (at least of the kind we are considering here) is what he calls “foundationally egoistic.” The claim that the virtues are necessary for flourishing, together with the claim that an ethics of virtue will give an account of what it is right to do in terms of virtue, leads, he asserts, to the thesis that for virtue ethics a person's reasons to act and be motivated in virtuous ways “derive ultimately from their own flourishing”, and this will, he claims, show virtue ethics to be egoistic.

According to Hurka, two dilemmas for virtue ethics can be constructed. One goes as follows. Hurka tries to show that either virtue ethics is committed to accepting that it has an egoistic end, in which case it is not a satisfactory ethical theory, or, if not, it is committed to being a “two-level” theory, something that is problematic for virtue ethicists to accept.

This alleged dilemma starts from the assumption that a theory which holds that the virtues benefit their possessor is committed to egoism. “A flourishing-based theory ... says that a person has reason to act rightly only or ultimately because doing so will contribute to her own flourishing. If she believes this theory and is motivated by its claims about the source of her reasons, her primary impetus for acting rightly will be a desire for her own flourishing. But this egoistic motivation is inconsistent with genuine virtue, which is not focused primarily on the self. ... Someone motivated by the theory’s claims about reasons will therefore be motivated not
virtuously but in an unattractively self-indulgent way”. Hurka here lays out lucidly the claim that to act so as to achieve my own flourishing is to act from egoistic motivation, and the further claim that this is self-indulgence. The problem is that there is no argument for either of these claims. The first claim in particular is obviously denied by a virtue ethicist who thinks that the virtues are necessary (or sufficient) for flourishing. For if this is true, then aiming at my flourishing is aiming at acting and living virtuously, living as a person who is fair, just, brave, generous, and so on. How is this egoistic? The claim that an agent’s motivation is egoistic merely because she is aiming at her flourishing is not a claim from neutral ground between Hurka and the rest of us, including the virtue theorist. It assumes the truth of Hurka’s own claim, that aiming at flourishing is egoistic. So it is not an independently powerful objection to the virtue theorist, who can reasonably deny it.

The same is even more clearly true of the second claim, namely that pursuing my flourishing in being virtuous is “focusing on the self” and thus being “self-indulgent”. Again, this is hardly neutral ground between Hurka and the rest of us, including the virtue theorist. If I aim at living a good life, I am aiming at being just and generous, and thus “focusing” on others rather than myself. And it is particularly strange to hold that somebody living in a brave, generous, and just way is self-indulgent! The self-indulgent person is typically the person who cares too little for others. So Hurka has failed to show that the virtue theorist is forced onto the second horn of his alleged dilemma. This is so because, far from isolating a particular position of the virtue theorist, he has so far simply made theoretical assumptions with no argument for them. However, even though the first horn of the dilemma lacks force, let us look at this second horn, for it turns out to be instructive. The thought here is that there is a problem in being required by the theory to be motivated by what, according to the theory, is one’s aim. So, the theory has to tell you not to be motivated by what, according to the theory, is your aim, but by something else instead. In the present case, to avoid the alleged problems of being motivated by my own flourishing, the theory tells me to be motivated by the virtues themselves—to act, that is, from the motivation to be fair or generous, to give others their due, or to make them better off than they would otherwise be. For if I were to be virtuous with one eye always on my own good, I would not be properly virtuous. Hurka claims that “this requires the theories to be what Parfit calls self-effacing, telling agents not to be motivated by or even to think of their claims about the source of their reasons”.

A swift response by the virtue theorist here is that of course, if the virtues lead to flourishing, the agent would seek to have virtuous motivation—how else is she to flourish as a virtuous person? So there is no need for the theory to be self-effacing. Being virtuous is just what the theory tells you to do, not what it tells you to avoid—how could you flourish otherwise? This answer is correct, since the first horn of the dilemma has no force. But it does not get to the bottom of the issue of virtue and flourishing, so more needs to be said.

Fortunately, the way in which virtue ethics requires self-effacingness is perfectly harmless. First, there is a way in which virtue comes to efface itself from the virtuous person’s motivation. A beginner in virtue will have to try explicitly to become a virtuous person, and to do so by doing virtuous actions; his deliberations will include such thoughts as that so and so is what a virtuous person would do, or what virtue requires. This is, indeed, how he guides his own deliberations.

The truly virtuous person, however, will not explicitly think about, for example, being brave or performing a brave action. Rather, he will, as a result of experience, reflection, and habituation, simply respond to the situation, thinking that these people in danger need help, without explicit thoughts of bravery entering his deliberations. Thoughts about bravery, or the virtuous person, are no longer needed. This does not, however, produce a problematic split in the self, for the reasonings about virtue and virtuous action could still be recovered if needed, and are thus still transparent to the agent. In fact, they are recovered when the brave person explains his action, as he does, for example, to a learner.

The self-effacingness here is as harmless as it is with a practical skill. A skilled plumber or pianist will simply respond to a challenge, without explicit thoughts about good plumbing or
playing; the occurrence of such thoughts notably marks the learner and it is a sign of expertise that they are no longer on the scene. Yet the expert can recover such thoughts to convey the expertise to a learner; no problematic split in the self, or in the agent's practical reasoning, has been introduced.

What, however, of the virtuous person's thoughts about flourishing? On some theories of virtue the virtuous person would not need to have these. But we are considering theories in which the virtues are held to benefit the agent by leading to his flourishing, and it is hard to see how on this conception of virtue someone could be virtuous while having no, or the wrong, thoughts about flourishing. If bravery does benefit the agent and lead to his flourishing, then thoughts about flourishing have to play some role in the agent's becoming virtuous. Let us try to imagine someone who is brave, but has no thoughts about what it is to flourish, or who thinks that you flourish only by having a good time. We find a tension. If he really has no thoughts about his life as a whole, then what we called bravery looks more like a localized routine habit, and so not a virtue at all. If he really thinks that you flourish only by having a good time, then again what we called bravery looks shaky; if it really is the disposition to stand firm against danger only in the service of having a good time, then again we do not actually have a virtue.

The virtuous person will, then, have thoughts about flourishing. These will be like the explicit thoughts about virtue and virtuous action; they will be explicit in the beginner, who needs to be taught the point of being brave, generous, or whatever. As he becomes more virtuous, he will no longer need reminders about the point of being virtuous; these thoughts will gradually, as they are no longer needed, become effaced from his deliberations, and he will simply act, think, and feel virtuously without explicitly thinking about the point of it. Still, this progressive effacement from his explicit thoughts does not mean that thoughts about flourishing evaporate and leave a blank. For, as with virtue itself, the thoughts can be recovered, when they need to be conveyed to a learner, and so they remain transparent to the agent. But, as with virtue itself, the progression is like that in a skill from a learner to an expert: explicit thoughts gradually become effaced from explicit deliberations, but can be reactivated if required without creating any split in the self, or problem for unified deliberation.

There is, however, a second alleged [problem] in store, on the basis of Hurka's assertion that all virtue ethics is “foundationally egoistic” in aiming at flourishing. So we need to look further at the relation of virtue to flourishing. According to Hurka, [if] flourishing is defined in a substantive way, [then] virtue ethics is committed to implausible claims...

[Hurka says:] “A substantive conception equates flourishing with some determinate state F of people or their lives, where both the nature and the goodness of F are defined independently of the virtues”. This is a common way of stating the issue. The major objection to this, also common, is that we have to find such a state F (call it success) and a plausible list of the virtues (properly conceived), and show that having these will lead to achieving F, that is, success. And it is unlikely that we will succeed in this.

How much does this matter? Of course it is unlikely that being just, fair, and so on is a good bet for achieving success, if this success is defined independently of the virtues. A fairly common conception of success might be financial prosperity and security. A flashier definition might be, for example, being very rich and having a trophy spouse. These definitions are certainly “independent of the virtues”. But whoever thought for a moment that being fair, generous, and so on was a good way to achieve that? Where success is defined independently of the virtues, it will always be hopeless to try to show that the virtues are a good way of achieving that. This does show something about the virtues. It shows that problems are likely to lurk in any theory which as Aristotle's does, comes up with an account of flourishing which allows it to contain even some elements whose value for flourishing is defined independently of the virtues. But as far as concerns the general relation of virtue and flourishing, it shows only that no sensible virtue ethics works with a conception of flourishing which is substantive in this sense.

This is not to claim that the virtues are not useful in achieving some kinds of success defined
independently of the virtues. Brave people will achieve their ends more reliably, and can be trusted more, than the cowardly; people who are cruel and mean have difficulty sustaining the relationships needed for social cooperation; and so on. But it is a fact about the world that the virtuous are not guaranteed to succeed in worldly terms, and that virtue may even prevent it: brave people, for example, will protest against injustice rather than go along with it; honest people will refrain from taking advantage of a corrupt system plundered by the greedy; and so on. While it would be wrong to think of the virtuous person as always at a disadvantage in worldly terms, it is still true that no sensible virtue ethics works with a conception of flourishing which is substantive in the above sense. A virtue ethicist who defended such a substantive conception of flourishing would be committed to holding an unrealistic view of the extent to which the world will work in favor of the virtuous.

We still, however, face the issue of showing how virtue has a role in my achieving eudaimonia, living well. But is this really puzzling? As Rosalind Hursthouse has recently stressed, when we bring up children, we teach them to be brave, generous, and so on, and we do so in their own interests, not just ours: we take it that to have a character of a certain kind is a good way for them to live. Few people in fact doubt that the virtues are goods which a person has reason to want.

Virtue ethics wants more than this, of course; it claims that virtue is, more weakly, necessary, or, more strongly, necessary and sufficient for flourishing. It must, as Hurka puts it, “give these virtues priority over other goods, by stating that they are uniquely necessary for flourishing”. Many critics have tried to show that this is not going to succeed, because it depends on showing that virtue is important and central to a person’s good, a view which is, it is asserted, “not plausible”.

This kind of objection is very familiar; virtue ethics is held to flout common sense when it holds that virtue is at least necessary for leading a life which is a flourishing, good one. For if this claim is true, then the wicked are not leading flourishing lives, however wealthy and glamorous they are. And is this not completely counterintuitive?

Surprisingly many critics have thought that defenders of virtue ethics hold both that virtue is at least necessary for flourishing and that wealth, glamour, and other indications of success are acceptable as indications of a flourishing life. Of course, this combination of positions is doomed to be hopelessly implausible. In fact, defenders of virtue ethics strongly reject the second position. Wealth and the like are quite unreliable as indications of flourishing. What matters for flourishing are a range of concerns, engagements, and commitments which are available to people with a virtuous character and unavailable to the vicious.

Criticism is generally renewed at this point on the grounds that claims about flourishing are now including claims about virtue, and are thus no longer common ground to the defender and the critic of virtue ethics. But virtue ethics has never held that they are, so this is not a problem. It is only to be expected that the virtuous will differ from the nonvirtuous in their assessments of flourishing, because we are dealing here with virtue in the context of a formally characterized conception of flourishing. Virtue ethics is not telling us that virtues are a good bet to achieve an independently defined flourishing, but rather telling us that the virtuous life is the best specification of flourishing. This is already a claim which the nonvirtuous dispute, since they think that wealth (etc.) matters more. How could we expect that such competing specifications of flourishing would agree as to how to achieve it? They are not disputing about means to an agreed end. Many critics have failed to see this point, because they have assumed that virtue ethics must have a substantive account of flourishing which is common to their opponents, defining flourishing in a way that is independent of the virtues. So they have cast the virtue ethicist in the thankless and clueless role of arguing that the virtues are the best means to an end agreed on by virtuous and nonvirtuous alike.

Virtue, then, relates to flourishing in that living a virtuous life is claimed to be either necessary (in weaker forms of virtue ethics) or necessary and sufficient (in stronger forms) for flourishing; virtue ethics is one way of specifying our final end of flourishing. So there is no conflict latent in
living a virtuous life as a way of achieving flourishing. If virtue ethics is correct, it is the only way to go. Holding the virtues to be a way of achieving flourishing, and thus benefiting their possessor, is in no way egoistic.

... 

[We] have seen that egoism is in no way involved [in virtue ethics]. We can appreciate, by the time we have seen even sketchily how a eudaimonistic virtue ethics actually works, that the point that I am aiming at my flourishing does not make the theory egoistic in any sense. If I am aiming at flourishing by living virtuously, I am aiming at being a just, generous (etc.) person. The formal point, that I am aiming at my flourishing, just comes down to the point that I am trying to live my life virtuously. If you point out that I am doing this as my way of flourishing not yours, the retort is that I am trying to be virtuous in living my life, not yours, because my life is the only life I can live. It would be objectionable, as well as ill advised, for me to try to live your life, but this is not egoistic of me.

There is one final misunderstanding that needs to be mentioned. Hurka claims at one point that even virtue ethics within a formal framework of flourishing is egoistic because he “assum[es that the agent’s] flourishing is a state of him”. But my flourishing is obviously not a state of me, as we have already seen. It is the way I live my life, my activity as a (hopefully) virtuous person. We misunderstand eudaemonist conceptions of happiness and flourishing if we construe them as states or static conditions. To flourish, to be happy in the ancient understanding of that, is to live your life actively, not to be in a state as a result of what you (or possibly even someone else) does. This is a peculiarly modern misunderstanding, which perhaps derives from thinking of happiness or flourishing as a state of pleasant feeling. We can see that the issue of whether or not virtue ethics is egoistic cannot even be properly discussed until we clarify the way in which being virtuous relates to our final end, eudaimonia or flourishing. Getting this clear removes the misunderstandings which have led to thinking of virtue ethics, at least in its classical version, as egoistic. We are brought back to our original thoughts: when I care about being generous, courageous, and fair, I am caring, quite straightforwardly, about other people.