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Science, Virtue, and the Future of Humanity

Why We Need a 'Stuck with Virtue' Science

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The essays in this symposium were first delivered at the second conference in the series "Stuck with Virtue." Sponsored by a generous grant from the University of Chicago's New Science of Virtues project, this conference examined the various Cartesian, Lockean, and Darwinian premises that help shape and inform the ethics and ethos of modern technological democracy. Held in April 2011 at Berry College in Rome, Georgia, the conference featured four main speakers: Ronald Bailey, Charles T. Rubin, Patrick J. Deneen, and Robert P. Kraynak, with responses to Mr. Bailey by Benjamin Storey and to Professor Rubin by Adam Keiper.

Ronald Bailey looks at the question of science and virtue from the perspective of contemporary libertarianism. Bailey fully appreciates how radically pro-choice today's techno-libertarians are. From this perspective, nature is cruelly indifferent to the existence of individual human beings; given this indifference, individuals should be free to maximize their choices and minimize their dependence on anyone—or anything—other than themselves. That means that modern technology and biotechnology should be unleashed to perfect human health, radically extend life, and greatly enhance our powers in the meantime, whether through genetic engineering, pharmacologic interventions, mind-machine interfaces, or other technologies. Bailey does recognize that some individuals might not want to partake in these enhancements or to live forever, and that others might fear the social consequences of a world characterized by indefinite longevity. A man of his word, he believes these people should be free to choose death. But he and everyone else should likewise be free to choose to live as long as possible and do with their bodies what they please. (Benjamin Storey responds to Bailey by challenging his conceptions of liberty and progress and by pointing him toward a richer anthropology

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that acknowledges both our animal origins and our nature as moral and intelligent beings.)

Charles T. Rubin examines the work of today's computer scientists of virtue: the theoreticians who believe it will be necessary and possible to inculcate morality in machines. Since we are on a path of asking machines to take over ever more responsibilities for us, they will require a moral framework to guide their anticipated autonomy. Rubin points out the confusions and contradictions inherent in this project, including the paradoxical belief that future artificially intelligent machines will be vastly smarter than human beings but that their actions will still be morally intelligible to us. To be truly moral actors, machines would first have to be free enough to choose morally—but freedom can come at a terrible cost, particularly when the machines would inevitably reflect the imperfections of their fallible creators. Ultimately, Rubin finds, the dereliction of human responsibility that is the impetus for moral machines is likely to exact a very high price whether the effort to mechanize virtue succeeds or fails. (In responding to Rubin, Adam Keiper, here joined by his colleague Ari N. Schulman, suggests that the philosophical commitments of the technologists who envision moral machines blind them to the very questions of human flourishing that should be their starting point.)

Patrick J. Deneen argues that the birth of liberalism was brought about by two transformations in our understanding of science: the move away from the contemplative study of nature to the project to harness and manipulate it for desired ends, and the new belief that human behavior is itself subject to predictable material laws. Liberalism thus arose as an effort to systematically and scientifically improve society. Along the way, modern society has replaced the virtue of Aristotle's self-governing social animals with the new virtue of the unimpeded will to mastery. Such a world has little respect for what human beings have been given by nature. As Deneen presents it, the modern view is that we are not really stuck with virtue; actually, we are not stuck with much of anything. Rather, all limitations—including even tradition and culture—are recast as forms of repression that we can eventually overcome.

Finally, Robert P. Kraynak argues that modern philosophy and modern science cannot explain why appeals to equality and dignity ought to be taken seriously. Thinkers like Daniel Dennett and Steven Pinker deny that human dignity has any natural foundation while simultaneously affirming well-respected common liberal pieties about the moral demands of justice and autonomy. They are, in the words of the late philosopher Richard Rorty, "free-loading atheists": they embrace Christianity's view of

virtue even as they vehemently reject its account of who we are as human beings. The Christian Kraynak agrees with the atheist Nietzsche that it is intellectually dishonest and even tyrannical to assert the teachings of Christian morality while dogmatically rejecting the creedal formulations on which those very teachings are based. Kraynak concludes by defending the need to take seriously the Bible's theological claims if we are to begin to understand who we really are.

Each of these presentations made a valuable contribution to the larger goal of the "Stuck with Virtue" series. Central to that goal is the claim that virtue—or "being good," or acting well in light of what we know about ourselves and the world—is, and will continue to be, an intrinsically good and naturally desirable feature of a happy and fulfilling human life. In our view, the best way to "feel good" will necessarily always require human beings to *be* good or to act well. The much-prophesied time "after virtue," heralded by various liberationist ideologies from Marxism to transhumanism, will never come. Human beings as human beings are destined to live in a world where virtue will always be needed and will always be recognized as such.

A Brief History of Virtue

Defending this seemingly straightforward and commonsense claim is not easy. At a minimum, it requires the clarification of such weighty terms as *virtue*, *human life*, *nature*, and *happiness*. It also requires taking into account the various findings of a number of distinct and legitimate sciences, such as biology, psychology, neuroscience, sociology, political science, and philosophy, as well as theology. Appealing to what can be called moral and epistemological realism, our project incorporates what we know to be true from scientific empiricism, and the wisdom of twentieth-century European existentialism. Our approach does not uncritically reject what might be called the proto-existentialist elements of Descartes and Locke—for example, their shared focus on the autonomous "I" who is unencumbered by nature. Nor does it reject wholesale the findings of Darwin's reductionist naturalism, such as his negation of the same "I." We believe that these modern scientific accounts of virtue are necessarily abstract and partial. They masquerade as self-evident and exhaustive accounts of who we really are and what kind of virtue we can possess.

Our approach insists that a genuine science of virtue cannot be formulated abstractly. That means that such a science must be able to account for what we can see with our eyes and know with our minds. It must

comport both with the kind of excellence that we often see and rightfully praise in human life and with the kind of excellence that we rarely see but nonetheless revere and aspire toward as human beings. Virtue, of course, is not simply identifiable with any form of excellence. One can be brilliant or exceptionally proficient and not be virtuous. To be virtuous *does* mean, however, that one displays the kind of actions reflective of a truly admirable human being. Such actions can take different forms. They can be seen in the quiet, self-sacrificing work of a loving mother. They can be seen in the grand, courageous acts of the soldier who gives his life for his country. And they can be seen in the lives devoted to charitable service practiced by the Sisters of Mercy.

The best philosophers, theologians, and political scientists studiously refrain from articulating grand, definitive, and allegedly exhaustive "theories of virtue." The most reasonable and persistent objection to any "science of virtue" has always been that the nature of virtue, in contrast to the nature of physics or botany, is a constant point of contention. For example, to many in the ancient world, the Greek philosophers' discoveries of nature seemed to necessarily demote moral virtue to a matter of mere convention or tradition. As the Sophist Thrasymachus memorably explains in Plato's *Republic*, justice—and so moral virtue—is nothing more than the real-world manifestation of the will of those who hold political power. To add insult to injury, it is not at all clear that Plato's Socrates ever demonstrates that Thrasymachus is wrong, that we should not be deeply skeptical about the kind of morality that citizens, parents, and friends regularly display. Socrates himself distinguishes between "vulgar virtue" and the true virtue of the philosopher, who remains remarkably indifferent to the type of personal and social concerns that animate the lives of most men and women.

Aristotle further muddies these waters. He distinguishes between "moral virtue," the kind of virtue displayed by citizens with good habits, and "intellectual virtue," the kind of virtue displayed by human beings who are capable of knowing for themselves why a given claim is true or false. Aristotle also makes clear that those who think well do not always act well—that one can possess intellectual virtue without also possessing moral virtue. Moreover, he notes that those who act well quite often cannot give a coherent and intellectually compelling account of why they act as they do. He also famously remarks that moral science cannot speak with the kind of precision that the mathematical sciences can and that moral claims and principles consequently hold true only "for the most part."

Keeping with the spirit of this noble imprecision, Aristotle's *Ethics* finally leaves the true relation of the life of theory and the life of action ambiguous. Patrick J. Deneen's polemic against using science as the basis for morality echoes Aristotle's belief that virtue needs to be actively protected from the type of impersonal reductionism that inevitably seems to plague theoretical analyses of virtue. In sharp contrast to many of today's so-called virtue ethicists, Aristotle appreciated that the tension between "being good" and "being scientific" needed to be prudently managed, not logically or axiomatically resolved.

Classical Christian thought preserved Aristotle's distinction between moral and intellectual virtue, but went on to point out the importance of the theological (or divinely infused) virtues of faith, hope, and charity. As St. Paul noted, the "greatest of these" virtues is charity, or love. Charity requires us to love God with our whole heart and our whole mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The authors of this essay believe that charity is ultimately indispensable and irreplaceable in the living of a truly virtuous human life. For this reason, we see something admirable, though woefully fragile and incomplete, in modernity's twin replacements for charity: compassion and empathy.

Accordingly, we remain mindful of Robert P. Kraynak's warning that it is a serious mistake to homogenize natural and supernatural virtue. The distinction between these two kinds of virtue needs to be preserved—even if that means that we sometimes find ourselves having to live out the tension between their respective claims. Emblematic of this tension is the insistence of Aquinas and Bonaventure that Aristotle's model of the magnanimous man needs to be reminded of the debts he justly owes to his parents, his family, his friends, and his fellow citizens, *and* that his genuine and visible greatness is predicated on gifts he received from God, not from himself. The great-souled man must humbly recognize that he cannot take final authorial credit for the great traits he possesses and the great deeds he performs. (Whether such modifications of classical virtue ultimately require the eyes of faith, or just a genuine realistic correction—or both—is an issue to address elsewhere.)

By contrast, Machiavelli claimed that the West's understanding of virtue needed to be manlier, as it were. Virtue needed to be transformed from an excuse for debilitating hesitation into a powerful tool that the strong and effective could wield. In a way, Nietzsche completed Machiavelli's project, by asserting that what previous thinkers disingenuously called *virtue* was really nothing more than the fictive projections of their own will to power. In a new way, he raised the Sophists' claim

that virtue is nothing more than the manifestation of arbitrary willfulness. Unlike the Sophists, Nietzsche labored to make such willing *noble*, by investing it with personal—and philosophic—depth. Nietzsche thus shouted what Machiavelli whispered: Even philosophy is an act of will. Nietzsche claimed to reveal the heretofore hidden truth: that Socrates or Plato *willfully created* the Western view of virtue, the view that Christianity would later transform into what Nietzsche calls "Platonism for the people."

The Problem of Virtue

This brief (and admittedly spotty) history of virtue is meant to show that "theorizing virtue," or attempting to give a scientific account of virtue, is not always good for bolstering the actual practice of virtue in ordinary human beings. One reason many public intellectuals do not, as Robert P. Kraynak shows, believe in any rational foundations for moral theory is their belief that the modern quest to establish *the* true theoretical grounds of virtue has finally done more harm than good in the world. Despite these concerns, the fact remains that we currently live at a time that is saturated, not by History, as Nietzsche thought, but by theory. The belief that our actions should be rooted in some recognizable and respected theory is almost second nature to human beings today.

No longer confined to the rarefied worlds of philosophy, theology, or political science, debates about the nature, grounds, and meaning of virtue have entered the mainstream of contemporary social and political life. Using theory to detach or abstract themselves from the responsibilities of social life, ordinary people proudly and regularly speak about their autonomy and their dignity. They also have trouble giving a compelling defense of the kind of virtue that parents, friends, and citizens typically exhibit, even though these virtues remain indispensable, desirable features of most lives. No doubt part of the reason for this difficulty is that prevailing theories of virtue—which so often reduce to some fashionable "theory of justice"—typically offer incomplete and distorted accounts of human beings and human life.

Present-day virtue theories have many sources. But most bear the fingerprints of three seminal thinkers: René Descartes, John Locke, and Charles Darwin. Their innovative teachings played an important role in shaping the views of nature, human beings, science, and virtue that many sophisticated people currently hold. Of course, these three did not agree about everything. For instance, Descartes urges us to think about

ourselves as autonomous individuals who grow ever more proficient at scientifically manipulating nature and the natural resources at our disposal. But Darwin informs us that our perceived autonomy is really an illusion—and that we are social animals that are hardwired not to oppose but to live according to nature.

Descartes is, in many ways, *the* philosophical theoretician of modernity. Descartes claimed that if science were to minister to human beings' needs, it had to alter its traditional purely theoretical posture. Whereas pre-modern theoretical sciences principally tried to discover what things *are*, Descartes' new science would focus on how things *worked*. Knowledge would not primarily be seen as desirable for its own sake, but because it proved useful in fulfilling our seemingly inexhaustible desires. Cartesian science required that nature be looked at as a complex collection of matter in motion. Such matter could, and should, be mastered to bring about, in Bacon's famous phrase, "the relief of man's estate." Descartes' new science alluringly promised that, with its aid, particular individuals could now live longer and biologically healthier lives than the nasty, brutish, and short ones that stingy nature had in store for them. The dramatic shift of emphasis this new science brought about can be glimpsed in the distance that separates Aristotle and Aquinas's refrain that human beings should act in accordance with nature from Descartes' injunction that nature should be forced to yield to our desire for freedom. Descartes challenged us to transform the natural world in a more personally satisfying direction.

Descartes' legacy is currently felt in the exaggerated hopes many people place in uninterrupted biomedical and biotechnological progress. It is also present in the modern tendency to subordinate concerns about virtue and morality to the more immediately felt needs of utility and expediency. It even allows some to think that virtue demands nothing other than keeping those people who happen to be alive right now around as long as possible. Moved by Descartes' poetic vision of the infinite power and unquestionable beneficence of science, we are tempted to adhere to a technological imperative that declares that if it can be done, it must be done. Such an imperative always views technological progress as a victory of the free individual over natural determination. Followed to its logical conclusion, it culminates in a world wholly of our own making, a world where the notion of living well with those things that we really cannot control would be superfluous.

Descartes' philosophical and scientific writings were perhaps best pressed into political service by John Locke. Arguably his greatest politically-minded descendant, Locke enlisted the Frenchman's thought

to secure the autonomous individual's moral, political, and spiritual liberation. Indeed, when viewed politically, the "I" of Descartes' famous *cogito* turned out to be none other than the rights-bearing individual Locke found in the state of nature. Locke admitted that whether or not such a creature ever actually existed was, for all practical purposes, irrelevant. What mattered was that this autonomous "I" was held as the natural standard that ought to guide all societal transformation. Thus, just as Descartes claimed that the cogitating "I" looks out on a world of virtually infinite space onto which it can chart positions and paths, Locke claimed that the individual looks out on a world characterized by infinite freedom and pure possibility. Just as Descartes insisted that the cogitating "I" can—and thus should—willfully impose order on the mechanistic workings of nature, Locke insisted the individual can—and thus should—willfully exercise his freedom on the natural world, transforming it into a constructed world that responds to the individual's concerns about his comfort and security. To the "I" that is not defined in part by being natural, the natural world provides human beings with little or nothing of human value. Rather, the natural world must be forced to yield to our distinctively human power of abstraction, and to our singular capacity to invent ways of overcoming our natural limitations. This abstract individual ceaselessly labors to transform the given world in light of our theoretically conceived project of liberation.

Whereas thinkers as diverse as Aristotle and Aquinas claimed that political communities exist to cultivate virtue—especially social virtue—in human beings, Locke described the aim of civil society in far less lofty terms. On his account, it is untrue and unjust to say that individual men and women belong to a whole that is greater and whose good is more important than they are. Virtue comprises those qualities that maximize individual freedom and thereby allow the individual to think and act as a self-conscious and self-sufficient whole. Virtue becomes interchangeable with self-reliance; it requires, among other things, that grown children are freed from the shackles of tyrannical parents and that wives are liberated from their dominating and domineering husbands. The history of marriage and the family in our country for the most part has followed these Lockean lines.

Following Descartes, Locke reduces the theory of virtue to a series of technical issues—issues that, once resolved, dissolve: it becomes unnecessary to understand virtue as virtue. So, for example, virtue is found in whatever enhances our productivity, and the unproductive virtues—such as those traditionally connected with caregiving, reflection, and civilized

leisure—turn out to be nothing more than quite optional lifestyle choices (or even hobbies). Lockeanism today is, of course, found in our creeping and sometimes creepy libertarianism—a trend that periodically transcends our division into two parties. It is also found in our progressive view that each generation of Americans is entitled to more freedom than the one that preceded it. And it is found in our universities' institutionalized pragmatic belief that a traditional liberal arts education really is not at all liberating, at least as compared to the genuine liberation that a technical and entrepreneurial education affords.

At first blush, Charles Darwin's thought seems to have little, if any, relation to the line of moral and scientific thought that runs from René Descartes to John Locke. That Darwin revolutionized the way sophisticated human beings think of themselves is undeniable. Darwin taught that species gradually but continuously adapt to chance external changes in their natural environment. The preservation of adopted traits was not the result of the unfolding of some cosmic evolutionary plan, but merely the response to biological necessity. To be sure, genetic transformations grew out of untapped potential that had previously lain dormant in organisms. But in Darwin's eyes, the acquisition of these new traits remained radically accidental, dependent on the unforeseeable ability of biological matter to find new and novel ways to respond to the incessant struggle for survival and reproduction.

Darwinian biology provides little support for any substantive understanding of the relation of virtue to human nature. Taken on its own terms, it could claim that certain favorable social behaviors have gradually become woven into the fabric of human beings' biological nature. It could perhaps even claim that with the passage of time, these biologically acquired behaviors have now become viewed as moral imperatives of one sort or another. Yet, in the end, it can only view these behaviors as the unintended byproducts of nature's mechanistic efforts to perpetuate the survival of the species. Natural selection cares not at all about individual members of the species; in fact, it remains blissfully unaware of the particular members of the species.

Darwinism thus provides a sort of antidote to the excesses of Lockeanism. Locke's individual pursues happiness, but has no idea how to find it. His autonomous intention is to free himself from nature. But this freedom is *for* nothing in particular. Yet Darwinism shows, contrary to Locke, that we are actually social animals. As a result, we are happier when we fulfill our social duties as parents, children, friends, and members of groups and communities.

But as useful as Darwin may be for correcting some of Locke's excesses, ultimately virtue is even less real for Darwin than it is for Locke. For Locke, virtue—and our natural capabilities, such as speech—are little more than weapons for securing our individual liberty. This virtuous self-reliance of the free individual, however, is at least real, and thus admirable. By contrast, for Darwin, our virtuous acts are not for the benefit of ourselves but our species. This leaves little ground for our actions to be called virtuous at all, since the excellence of individuals does not matter. Because the Darwinian cannot consistently incorporate a particular person with particular significance—or even a particular species with a particular significance—into the evolutionary process his theory conceptually describes, he methodologically forces himself to view nature from a perspective outside of it, in which humanity matters little and humans even less.

Meanwhile, as Robert P. Kraynak explains, the moral values endorsed by Darwinian public intellectuals are largely parasitical on Christianity. The Darwinians simply assume that human beings possess the kind of dignity that comes from being a unique and irreplaceable person, even though their scientific theory produces no evidence for that claim at all.

One sign of the depths of our theoretical confusion is that we often claim to be Cartesians and Lockeans and Darwinians all at once. But this is impossible. According to Descartes, all biological *matter*—including the human body, but not the mind—is governed by mechanistic laws of natural necessity. But according to Darwin, the *whole* of the human being, the union of mind and body, is assimilated into a continuum that incorporates all biological forms of life. Taken together, these accounts assert that human beings are both essentially similar to and radically different from the rest of the biological world. One account brackets human freedom, leaving it conspicuously excluded from its description of the mechanistic workings of biological necessity. The other weaves human freedom into its all-encompassing account of natural selection, making it the epiphenomenal and subservient product of a blind, accidental process.

Yet neither account does justice to the basic fact of human freedom. Neither account is able to give a morally, intellectually, and spiritually satisfying explanation of the type of freedom that human beings visibly possess and uniquely display. Neither account, moreover, is able to give a compelling reason why human beings should use their freedom virtuously. The truth is that words are not just weapons for the perpetuation of either the individual or the species. Words open us up to the truth—a truth that we can know and share with other naturally free, social, and political people like us.

Toward a 'Stuck with Virtue' Science

A compelling science of virtue must be able to incorporate the real but partial truths articulated by Cartesian, Lockean, and Darwinian thought. But it must also have the moral and intellectual courage to come to terms with the permanent limitations of these sciences. A genuine science of virtue necessarily has to be informed by the findings of modern natural science and modern biology. Many scientists, though, have consistently exaggerated the continuity of human beings with the rest of nature. Similarly, a genuine science of virtue will undoubtedly be informed by the kind of moral and political science that issues from Locke's writings. But it cannot be exhausted by a science that so disingenuously overplays the individual's freedom from both nature and other individuals.

A morally, intellectually, and spiritually compelling science of virtue must be able to draw connections among human biology and human psychology, human freedom and human happiness. Developing and sustaining those connections is perhaps the central task of the science behind the claim that we are stuck with virtue. That science aims to connect what nature equips us with to our distinctive longings to know and be known, and to love and be loved, by other human beings. It also aims to show that one reason we are stuck with virtue is that we cannot help but be born troubled. Finally, it aims to show that our distinctive excellences and flaws—including our capacities for good and evil—are rooted both in our nature and in the kind of lives we actually lead. Consequently, it speaks of the tangible concerns of particular human beings and their particular struggles with love, reason, and death. This science takes seriously the lives of real people—fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, daughters, brothers, friends, lovers, citizens, physicians, poets, priests, philosophers, and politicians—for what they are.

To affirm that human beings necessarily remain stuck with virtue is to refuse to succumb to the tempting thought that Darwinian, Lockean, or Cartesian abstractions could actually ever become true depictions of who we really are. As pervasive and influential as these theoretical concepts have been, they have thankfully not succeeded in eradicating our thoughts about the psychic needs and longings that we have as human beings. From this perspective, the warnings of a looming post-human future or Brave New World seem exaggerated, as do the suggestions that modern science and hence the modern world is largely devoted to scientific and technological mastery of nature. In their own ways, these arguments mirror the very theories they criticize, for they too tend to take a theory as their

point of departure when they set out to analyze the world and the people around them, rather than letting the world provide fodder for theoretical reflections upon it. These warnings tend to equate, and thus confuse, the actual practice of Americans and the American regime with the Lockean theory that informs part, *but only part*, of the lives of those people and that regime. The real devotion by most living and breathing Americans to things much deeper and greater than the Lockean imperatives for power and mastery deserves to be taken seriously.

Modern liberty and modern science no doubt will continue to pose serious challenges to our ability to live a dignified and virtuous human life. And the enhancement impulse remains a real and powerful one, as Ronald Bailey makes clear in this symposium. But human nature finally resists the radical dehumanization feared by the well-meaning doomsayers of a post-human future, and the radical divinization longed for by the perhaps not as well-meaning prophets of a transhuman future. Because we are human beings, we will always remain saddled and blessed with an irrepressible natural desire for happiness. Born to seek this end, we will continue to have to face the challenge of living virtuously in light of what we know to be true about ourselves and our world. We will continue to live lives that partly fulfill our natural—that is, sometimes confused, misdirected, or frustrated—desires for wholeness and happiness. Despite our and modern technology's best efforts to smooth out life's rough edges, we will remain less than wholly at ease with ourselves, our world, and each other. The good news is that we will remain free. The bad news is that unless we can think more clearly and completely about who we really are, we will most likely be less happy.

A central feature of the true science of virtue is that we can never be completely or perfectly happy in this world. Even when human beings cultivate and acquire virtue, even when we are being unusually clear about who we are and what we are supposed to do, we only gain some measure of perfection and happiness—and this often comes at the price of some injustice. At its limits, the science of being stuck with virtue points to the fact that we are beings who are not fully satisfied by what we rightfully find to be good and desirable in the world. The true science of virtue shows that *eros*, *logos*, *thumos*, and *thanatos* individually and collectively fill us with longings that elude satisfaction in this world. And that fact, if nothing else, helps us to be at home with our inevitable homelessness. As important as it is, virtue is not a cure for everything that ails us.

That we currently need a science that can explain why we are stuck with virtue is undeniable. That we nonetheless *remain* stuck is a less than

wholehearted endorsement of our virtuous lives. We should be grateful that we have been given morally demanding lives. At the same time, the modern thinkers, at their best, are right to point out that we cannot be wholly satisfied in a world where our freedom is enslaved and where we somehow remain a mystery even to ourselves. That is why the true science of human virtue must acknowledge its incompleteness, reflecting the incompleteness of each of us and each of our lives in this world.