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# RETURNING TO VIRTUE THEORY: SOME PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Samuel Zinaich, Jr., Ph.D.  
Purdue University Calumet

## Abstract

*Recent illicit activity among professionals, politicians, and specifically among members of the business community has made scholars skeptical of the viability of traditional consequential and deontological theories. To correct this problem many advocate a return to virtue theory, a theory that focuses on character development and not just upon normative status of actions. Although such a return appears to have the tide of victory in its favor, it is necessary to make sure that there is well-authenticated evidence for such a return. Otherwise, how will we know whether we are just replacing one bad theory with another? In fact, in this essay, after I examine the metaphysical machinery needed for such a return, I argue that virtue theory has gone into bankruptcy, and therefore, unless we can find a different foundation, it is a flawed doctrine to preach now.*

## Introduction

In recent years, a resurgence of interest has occurred in Aristotle's teachings. This interest has been prominent in the general field of ethics.<sup>1</sup> Such resurgence makes sense because Aristotle's teachings, especially those teachings located in his book *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1999)

represents a rich focus on the moral side of human behavior.

Such an interest has also found a home in applied areas of ethics including business and professional ethics.<sup>2</sup> Understandably, scholars in these discussions attempt to show how Aristotle's teachings on virtue may illuminate and guide professional behavior. Joseph R. DesJardins (DesJardin, 2001: p. 95-99) also shares this optimism.<sup>3</sup> Like other scholars, he advocates a virtue theory approach to an occupational context because of the reasons I briefly outlined above.

In addition to these reasons, DesJardins also adds that such a turn towards virtue theory is necessary because he argues that a principle-based or a rights-based approach to ethics has failed. It has failed for two reasons. First, there are, as he puts it, "an endless series of problems" when one attempts to apply Kant or the principle of Utility to a business or professional context. For example, there are, what he calls, the "hopeless ambiguity" in the application of these theories, the "counterintuitive conclusions," and "apparently contradictory prescriptions," when one uses Kant or Utilitarianism. Beyond these problems, he adds, is the ever-present specter described in his words: "no ethical principle has yet been established in any plausible fashion as categorically binding upon all people" (DesJardins, 2001: p. 96).

Beyond these internal or logical problems associated with a principle-based or rights-based approach to ethics, DesJardins argues that there is an "unbridgeable motivational gap between the

applied principle and the action.” Here the problem is not so much with the failure of justifying the moral principles as with a lack of motivational reasons. In other words, even if we suppose that Kant’s theory is true, or even the principle of Utility for that matter, the following question still remains: “Why should I do what is required by this principle?”

Although certain compensations are associated with turning toward Aristotle’s virtue theory, there is also an important drawback as well. To sum up, the crucial point is that many scholars since the 1700’s, both scholars within the philosophical tradition as well as in the scientific tradition, reject the metaphysical machinery to support the views of Aristotle. That is, these scholars reject the existence of a non-arbitrary *telos* for man.<sup>4</sup> In fact, to his credit; DesJardins rehearses this point in his own defense of Aristotle’s virtue theory:

Traditionally, the virtues have been conceptually tied to some *telos* or some “good life for man. The virtues were those character traits that promoted the attainment of the good life. The good man, in turn, was that person who possessed these virtues. The history of moral philosophy from at least the seventeenth century essentially ignores the role of the virtues in ethical theory. At best, the virtues were given a position alongside sentiments and feelings as being part of the noncognitive, and therefore arbitrary and subjective, side of morality. The most compelling explanation for this view centers on the fact that modern philosophy has, by and large, rejected the notion that there is any

single, nonarbitrary *telos* for man. (DesJardin, 2001: p. 97-8)

Nevertheless, DesJardins ignores this problem and, instead, sketches out what he takes minimally to be some suggestions of his own version for a nonarbitrary *telos* for humans. As I am sure that DesJardins knows, arguing for the existence of a nonarbitrary *telos* is only part of the story. In fact, if he wants to encourage a return to Aristotle's virtue theory (or something like it), a great deal of metaphysical machinery must be put in place to support it. Unfortunately, it is the requirement for the metaphysical machinery that has led many scholars to reject Aristotle in the first place.

The aim of this paper, then, is to outline what is needed to support a return to an Aristotelian version of virtue theory. I will proceed by discussing Aristotle's metaphysical outlook. I will then describe how his virtue theory is related to his metaphysical theory. Next, I will discuss why seventeenth century scholars rejected the notion of a *telos* and ignored the virtues. I will conclude by arguing that without the metaphysical theory, we should reject the view that there is a nonarbitrary *telos* for humans and, therefore, discard any discussions that attempt to demonstrate Aristotle's teachings on virtue, *or any view like it*. Such attempts to illuminate and guide professional business behavior are fruitless and irrelevant.

## The Metaphysics and the Ethics of Aristotle

To understand Aristotle's metaphysics, we must discuss his viewpoint of particulars and universals (Aristotle, 1984: p. 1039b20-27). I will begin with the former. Aristotle's theory of particulars can be understood by positioning it between two different and competing metaphysical theories: the bundle theory and the substratum theory. I will begin with the bundle theory.<sup>5</sup>

The bundle theory attempts to defend a descriptive account of concrete particulars (e.g., concrete humans, dogs, cats, trees). According to the bundle theory, then, particular objects are made up of particular properties.<sup>6</sup> In addition; there is no underlying substratum.<sup>7</sup> that the properties depend upon. On the contrary, in the bundle theory, particular objects are just clusters or "bundles" of *its* own properties. Michael J. Loux describes the bundle theory in the following way: "Bundle theorists are, we might say, *ultraessentialists*: every attribute associated with a concrete object is essential to it" (Loux, 2002: p. 127). This means that the properties an object possesses are constituted exclusively in themselves.

Like the bundle theory, the substratum theory also attempts to give an account of what particular objects are like. It differs from the former point of view, however, in this respect. Although this view defends the existence of properties, the properties depend upon the existence of a substratum (or substructure), which exists independently of the properties it possesses. In

contrast to the former theory, Loux calls this the *antiessentialist* theory. On this model, “nothing is essential to the literal bearers of attributes” (Loux, 2002: p. 128). This description means that no matter what property of an object can be picked out, it will always be extrinsic to the substratum and, therefore, always incidental or accidental to the substratum.

In contrast to both of these theories is the Aristotelian theory. Against the bundle theorist, the Aristotelian argues that not every property that an object possesses is essential. Against the substratum theory, an Aristotelian argues that not every property is accidental. So, for the Aristotelian, although particulars possess properties, some of these properties are essential to the object and some are incidental to it.

Against both views, the Aristotelians argue that the particulars are basic or irreducibly fundamental entities (Loux, 2002: p. 124; Aristotle, 1984: p. 1031a28-1032a11). This distinction means that if anything counts as a living being, it is an entity that cannot be reduced to more basic entities or components. This theory is contrary to the substratum theory because particulars are reducible to something more basic than its properties, viz., the substratum. It is also contrary to the bundle theory for basically the same reason. Particulars, according to the bundle theory, are, in a sense, built out of the properties from which an object is constituted. However, contrary to the bundle theory, the Aristotelians argue that none of the properties that are attributable to a particular object make sense outside of the framework of the material

particulars that they are supposed to generate (Loux, 2002: p. 124).

Although the discussion of this point has focused on the notion of properties, Aristotelians are also committed to the existence of *kinds*, to which concrete particulars belong. The notion of *kind* figures prominently in Aristotle's metaphysical theory, and so I will turn to that discussion.

According to this outlook, kinds are universals, which concrete particulars exhibit or exemplify by belonging to them (Loux, 2002: p. 125; Aristotle, 1984: p. 1039b20-27). Examples of kinds are universals such as human being, dog, cat, or tree. On this view, then, something counts as a *kind* of thing as long as it exhibits or exemplifies the universal kind. This means that a particular concrete animal will count as a particular dog as long as it exemplifies the universal kind, dog. Aristotle points out that *kinds* mark out their members as to what they are and enable us to answer the question "What is it?"

Associated with the concept of kind is the notion of *essence* (Loux, 2002: p. 126; Aristotle, 1984: p. 1029b15-1030b14). As I understand Aristotle, and as Loux makes clear, kinds furnish the essences of concrete particulars. Loux has an interesting metaphorical way of understanding this concept: "The kinds under which concrete objects fall are ontological 'cookie cutters.' They go around the universe, so to speak, partitioning it into the discrete particulars that are their instances. They cut the world up into individual human beings, individual dogs, individual oak trees, and

the like” (Loux, 2002: p. 130). Individual human beings, dogs, plants, etc., then, in Aristotle’s view, are furnished with essences, and it is by means of these essences that concrete particulars are characterized (Aristotle, 1984: p. 1036a7-8).

We come now to an important question. If it is true that a concrete particular is characterized by its essence, what can we learn about a concrete particular from its essence? There are, at least, two things. First, as Loux points out, the essence provides us “with principles for identifying, distinguishing, and counting objects” (Loux, 2002: p. 130; Aristotle, 1984: p. 1029b11-16). Such principles are made possible by the essential properties associated with the essence. That is, if something qualifies as a dog, then it will (minimally) have a snout and non-retractile claws. To this, I also add that the essence provides us with how things actually behave and grow (Aristotle, 1984: p. 983a30-31 and 1013a22). This means that when we understand the essence, we also understand how it functions.

But the essence of a concrete particular also unexpectedly provides something else. In addition to the illumination of various descriptive aspects of the particular object mentioned just now, the essence also provides a normative standard for evaluating the behavior of the concrete object. To sum up, the crucial point is this: the essence tells us not merely how a particular thing acts and develops, it also provides us a normative element, i.e., it tells us how a particular object *should* act or *should* develop (Aristotle, 1984: p. 983a30-31 and 1013a22). Of course, a qualifying point is



necessary. Again, as I understand Aristotle, we cannot learn how an object *should* act or *should* develop just by looking at its essence. The reason is that contained within the essence is the recipe, so to speak, of how an object will grow. Furthermore, it will grow into whatever it is supposed to be, regardless of whether it is properly trained according to its normative element. Thus, within the group of each kind, whether we are talking about human beings, dogs, or trees, will exist various examples of individuals that can be placed on a continuum, i.e., a scale that reflects which object is closer to or further from what it should become. If this is true, then how do we know what the scale is for each different kind? The answer lies in understanding the Good of each kind, so I will now turn to that discussion.

Aristotle's account of the Good is contained in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The breadth and the depth of the topics he discusses in the document are astounding; unfortunately, after reading his work, if one is not careful, one may come away with a feeling that this work is disconnected from his views in the *Metaphysics*. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nevertheless, this is the question we are to investigate now.

Aristotle begins this discussion with his commitment to the existence of the Good (Aristotle, 1999: p. 1097b22-24).<sup>8</sup> He argues that whatever the Good truly is, most people believe that it is well-being. And yet although there is agreement about what the Good is, the issue of how to understand well-being is another matter. What I mean is that in his day, as in our own, there are many competing

versions of well-being. Some argue that it is pleasure; others argue that it is tied to virtue or honor. Still others argue that it can be found in study (or reflection) or in the making of money. Aristotle rules out all but study (Aristotle, 1999: p. 1095b13-1096a11); unfortunately, he leaves his discussion of study until the last chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1999: p. 1176a30-1179a33).

Prior to that last chapter, he discusses what we have to understand in order to have a clearer account of the Good. In this account, we see the connection to his metaphysical views discussed earlier. The most important discussion occurs in his famous function argument (Aristotle, 1999: p. 1097b35-1098a21).

Aristotle begins this discussion with an assumption that the Good, or what he refers to sometimes as the best Good, will somehow be tied to the human function. His argument immediately turns to what the human function is. He says that it must be one of three activities. The human function is growth and nutrition, or sense perception, or a life that expresses reason. The assumption here is that these three disjuncts are mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive. Since he rules out the first two, the human function must be a life that expresses reason.

Next he connects the Good to the human function. His argument, in short, is that the function of an object is the *same in kind* as the function of an object that is excellent. For example, using Aristotle's own example, the function of a harpist is the same in kind as being an excellent harpist. But

just what does this mean? It means that if something can qualify as an example of something excellent, its excellence is not something over and above its function. On the contrary, its excellence will be tied directly to its function and what he calls the superior development of the function. The implication, then, for humans is that the Good, i.e., the human Good (or the best Good), turns out to be living a life of not just reasoning but a life of *reasoning well*.

But now the question is this: How do the *virtues* fit into all this discussion? DesJardins pointed out earlier that the notion of virtue is tied to the conception of the Good. That certainly is correct. In fact, as he points out, the virtues are those character traits that promote the attainment of the good life, i.e., a life that reflects or exhibits the Good. But how are we supposed to understand this point? Unfortunately, the exact narrative of this point is too complicated and too long for this essay. Nevertheless, this much can be said about it. Like the Good, virtue is connected closely to our function. Indeed, as Aristotle makes clear, virtue makes a human being good by making him perform his function well (Aristotle, 1999: p. 1098a16-17). But why? The reason is that when virtue is added to one's function (in terms of teaching and habituation), it contributes to the individual's ability to reflect the Good, or reason well. Let me make this point a little clearer.

According to Aristotle, when an individual is trained according to the standard that the Good provides, he will be taught at least two different ways of reason. (Again, a human will grow to

reason, but without the proper training, i.e., without the virtues added to a natural ability to reason, a human being will not learn how to reason well in Aristotle's sense.) First, it causes a human being to find the "mean" or the middle of an action, if it admits one. That is, it causes him to find the middle ground between the excessive aspects of an action and the deficient aspects of an action (Aristotle, 1999: p. 1106b17-1107a9). Second, it causes him to keep the right relationship between his feelings and his reason (Aristotle, 1999: p. 1139a22-26). The relationship spoken of here is one metaphorically related to that of a master and slave. Reason is master and one's feelings are to be trained to listen to and agree with reason. Thus, adding virtue to one's function causes a human being to attain the Good and as a result become a good or virtuous person.

Although it may not be apparent, we are now in a position to connect Aristotle's metaphysical outlook to his virtue theory. The underlying line of thought, in brief, is as follows. As I discussed earlier, according to Aristotle, every living substance, whether plant, animal, or human, has an essence, which has been, in a sense, brought about by a universal kind. This essence does a number of things for us. Minimally, it provides us with a way of identifying, distinguishing, and counting objects.

The most important concept is the following. The essence determines (or contains within it) the function of the object. But what exactly does this mean? Apparently, it leads to these two conclusions. First, associated with the

function of an object is its distinctive natural goal or *telos*. By understanding the *telos* of a substance, we understand how it actually acts. For example, in the case of plants, the function is growth and nutrition. In the case of animals, the function is sense perception. And the same reasoning applies equally to humans. The function of a human is to live a life of reason and study. Second, by understanding the distinctive natural *telos* of a substance, we are provided a standard for evaluating its activity and development. This statement means that the function also acts as the basis for our understanding of the Good for each substance because the Good of each is tied to its function.

### **The Rejection of Aristotle's Metaphysics**

I will now turn to the following issue. DesJardins points out that scholars from at least the 17th century essentially reject the notion that there is any single, nonarbitrary *telos* for man. One consequence of this rejection has led many scholars to ignore the role of the virtues in ethical theory. As DesJardins makes clear, the virtues no longer play an important role but are merely given a "position alongside sentiments and feelings as being part of the noncognitive, and therefore arbitrary and subjective, side of morality" (DesJardins, 2001: p. 97-98).

The question we must ask ourselves now is why 17th century scholars became disenchanted with the concept of a *telos*? But this is not all. We must also ask why the rejection of a *telos* ultimately led to the demise of the virtues? The answer to both

of these questions, as I will soon show, is tied to the *rejection* of Aristotelian universal kinds and essences and to the *acceptance* of an atomistic outlook on the universe initially described as *corpuscularism*. I will now turn to this discussion.

Largely, two 17th century scholars led the attack against essences: Sir Robert Boyle (1627-1691) and John Locke (1632-1704).<sup>9,10</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I will concentrate primarily upon Locke's arguments against the Aristotelian world-view and supplement Locke's argument with Boyle's views when needed.

While Locke's discussion of essences occurs throughout all four books of the *Essay*, the most concrete discussion of the nature of essences occurs in Book Three of the *Essay*, and in particular within his inquiry into the nature of language. Locke asks why, if we assume that all things that exist are particular, we come to use general terms (Locke, 1973: p. III. iii. 1). For Locke, such a question is important because he wants to show that the Scholastics' insistence that if there are no (Aristotelian) universal concepts, there would be no general terms is mistaken. He makes several points, two of which are relevant for our purposes.

First, in Chapter Three, Locke points out that since all things that exist are particulars, it is reasonable to assume that the terms in our language should be particular too. But this is not the case. The greatest numbers of words are actually general terms (Locke, 1973: p. III. iii. 1). Next, Locke attempts to answer the question of how general words and ideas come to be formed (Locke, 1973:

p. III. iii. 6). He suggests that there are two competing views of how general words come about. The first, which Locke only briefly alludes to, is that we have general ideas because there are *general natures*. Although Locke never says what he means by this term, A. C. Fraser points out, in his own edition of the *Essay*, that we should understand Locke as attacking the realist view of universals in this passage (Fraser, 1959: p. 16). According to this view, among the set of facts belonging to the world is the "substantial reality of universal natures" which exist independently of our beliefs about them.

Locke, then, sets in opposition to the realist position a view, which may be characterized as "definition by abstraction."<sup>11</sup> This expression means that people enlarge their ideas through learning to recognize common elements that are associated with different things. People begin, as children, with a sense of particulars. With the acquaintance of others and the enlargement of our experience, however, we begin to see that the terms we used to refer to only one individual have other referents also (Locke, 1973: p. III. iii. 7-9).

At the end of his account of how general words and ideas come to be formed, Locke's attack against the metaphysical assumption of the competing realist view becomes apparent: "[T]o return to general Words, it is plain, by what has been said, That *General and Universal*, belong not to the real existence of things; but *are the Inventions and Creatures of the Understanding*, made by it for its own use, and concern only Signs, whether Words, or *Ideas*" (Locke, 1973: p. III. iii.

11). This quotation suggests that the appeal to some metaphysical status for universals presupposes that such an assumption is an essential part of our explanation of our having "general" ideas. But for Locke, at least, we do not need to posit the metaphysical existence of general natures or universals. The best explanation for the existence of these impressions of complex ideas is not the existence of general natures "but in the leaving out something, that is peculiar to each Individual; and retaining so much of those particular complex *Ideas*, of several particular Existences, as they are found to agree in" (Locke, 1973: p. III. iii. 9). General and universal natures, then, belong not to the real existence of things.

Immediately after these remarks, Locke runs an argument against the Scholastic view of universals and essences. His argument, in brief, is as follows. According to Locke, when we analyze both what the Scholastics call the essence of a species and our abstract ideas that general words signify, we realize that their natures are *qualitatively* the same. That is, both Locke and the Scholastics agree that general ideas are complex abstract ideas and omit the individuality that particular ideas possess. Since there is no qualitative difference concerning the nature of these abstract ideas, Locke draws the inference that the essence of sorts or species must also be formed the same way that he thinks abstract ideas are formed: "From whence it is easy to observe, that the essences of the sorts of things, and consequently the sorting of Things, is the Workmanship of the Understanding, since it is the Understanding that abstracts and makes those general Ideas" (Locke,



1973: p. III. iii. 12). In other words, Aristotelian universals are not needed to explain why we have general ideas and terms. The ideas of species are formed the same way our abstract ideas are formed: our minds create them.

In the rest of this chapter, Locke does basically two things. He continues his attack against the Scholastic view of essences, and he offers an account of the signification of the term essence.

First, Locke tells us what essences are not. Essences are not the sort of things of which there are just a certain number. This distinction refers to the Scholastic doctrine that there are only a finite number of essences that exist, which account for all the different species that exist. In fact, the ones that do exist act like “molds,” or as Locke writes, “wherein they do exactly every one of them partake, and so become of this or that *Species*” (Locke, 1973: p. III. iii. 17).

Locke also adds that such a view has greatly perplexed the knowledge of natural things. Although Locke does not spend much time on this point, Boyle discusses this doctrine at length and arrives at the same conclusion. The controversy, as Boyle describes it, concerns “whether or not the forms of natural things . . . be in generation *educed*, as they speak [i.e., the views of the Scholastics], out of the power of the matter” (Boyle, 1991: p. 53-54). Boyle responds with three different arguments, one of which is particularly interesting:

For if the form produced in generation be, as they would have it, a substance that was not before to be found anywhere out of that portion of matter wherewith it constitutes the generated body, I say that either it must be produced by refining or subtiliating some parts of the matter into form, or else it must be produced out of nothing -- that is, created (for I see no third way how a substance can be produced *de novo*). (Boyle, 1991: p. 56)

Boyle denies both disjuncts. He denies the former disjunct first by pointing out that if it is true, then the form will indeed be a substance because matter, however subtiliated, is still matter (Boyle, 1991: p. 56). But the Scholastics cannot accept this concept because they also "teach that the form is not made of anything of the matter" (Boyle, 1991: p. 56).

Boyle turns next to the latter disjunct mentioned above: "But if they will not allow, as indeed they do not, that the substantial form is made of anything that is material, they must give me leave to believe that it is produced out of nothing, till they show me how a substance can be produced otherwise, that existed nowhere before" (Boyle, 1991: p. 56). He denies this disjunct by pointing out that since no one believes, neither he himself nor the Scholastics, that a natural agent has the power to create matter, why, then, would we believe that it could create something like a form out of nothing:

And since it is confessed on all sides that no natural agent can produce the least atom of

matter, it is strange they should in generation allow every physical agent the power of producing a form -- which, according to them, is not only a substance but a far nobler one than matter -- and thereby attribute to the meanest creatures that power of creating substances which the ancient naturalists thought too great to be ascribed to God himself, and which indeed is too great to be ascribed to any other than him; and therefore some schoolmen and philosophers have derived forms immediately from God, but this is not only to desert Aristotle and the Peripatetic philosophy they would seem to maintain, but to put Omnipotence upon working I know not how many thousand miracles every hour, to perform that (I mean the generation of bodies of new denominations) in a supernatural way which seems the most familiar effect of nature in her ordinary course. (Boyle, 1991: p. 56-57)

In the end, Boyle writes that such doctrines are so inexplicable that it is no wonder many men have worked so hard to explain such problems: “[T]he manner how forms are educed out of the power of the matter, according to that part of the doctrine of forms wherein the Schools generally enough agree, is a thing so inexplicable that I wonder not it hath put acute men upon several hypotheses to make it out” (Boyle, 1991: p. 54).

After Locke tells us what essences are not, he states what they are. First, all natural things have a "real . . . Constitution of their . . . Parts" (Locke,

1973: p. III. iii. 17). By using the term "real," Locke appears to be setting his view apart from those who might teach that being or existence is somehow dependent upon knowing it. Of course, this concept applies directly to the human consciousness, but for Locke it may even apply to God. In fact, Boyle writes that God created matter and put it into motion (Boyle, 1991: p. 69). Locke also mentions that these real things, whatever they are, are made up of parts. This statement refers to the Corpuscularian doctrine that everything can be reduced to matter in motion. Indeed, as Boyle teaches, "the matter of all natural bodies is the same, namely, a substance extended and impenetrable" (Boyle, 1991: p. 50).

These parts, however, are "unknown [and] insensible" (Locke, 1973: p. III. iii. 17). Here we must not take Locke to mean that the terms "unknown" and "insensible" are two separate predicates modifying the term "parts." Instead, Locke is arguing that the corpuscles are unknown in the sense of being directly imperceptible. But this does not mean that Boyle and Locke were not convinced that there was no evidence at all for the existence of corpuscles. The reason is that both Locke and Boyle believed that corpuscles were needed to explain why objects interact with our senses the way they do; i.e., corpuscles causally contribute to those things, which causally interact with our senses.

Locke's example of this reasoning is mentioned in this passage. The corpuscles of which each object are made up are the best explanation for why we can empirically perceive the sensible

qualities which he says "flow from" the corpuscles. These sensible qualities, as Locke relates, are what "serve us to distinguish them [i.e., each object] one from another, according as we have Occasion to rank them into sorts, under common Denominations" (Locke, 1973: p. III. iii. 17).

Although Boyle talks in these terms, he also describes many interesting experiments and makes clear that the results of the experiment are best explicated in terms of corpuscles and not substantial forms. One such experiment, perhaps the easiest to understand, involves turpentine.

Boyle attempts to show that if we assume that turpentine is a substance which occurs naturally and has its own substantial form, which gives it its being and denomination and from where all its qualities are supposed to flow, then if we could reproduce the turpentine which has been deprived of its substantial form, this would show that turpentine exists by a modification of the matter it consists of, and not by a substantial form. And indeed, as Boyle's experiment seems to show, after it is broken down into its parts, it can be recreated into the very substance from the parts it had been broken down into. In fact, Boyle reports that the turpentine was "so well reunited to the more fugitive parts of the concrete, that there is scarce any that by the smell, or tasted, or consistence, would take it for other than good and laudable turpentine" (Boyle, 1991: p. 96).

Having laid out why Locke and Boyle reject the existence of essences, we are now in good position to talk about the implication this discussion

has for the existence of a non-arbitrary, human *telos* and why this ultimately leads to the demise of the virtues. I will discuss the matter of the *telos* first.

As I mentioned earlier in the first part of this essay, the *telos*, or end of a substance, is causally connected to the essence it receives. Roughly put, the argument against the existence of a *telos* goes something like this. If there are universal kinds, then there are substances that are partitioned into discrete particulars by a universal kind. If there are substances that are partitioned into discrete particulars by universal kinds, then the substance will have a corresponding immanent essence. However, according to Locke and Boyle, the unhappy situation is that substances do not have immanent essences that correspond to a universal kind. Therefore, there are no substances that are partitioned into discrete particulars by universal kinds, and there are no universal kinds. That is, there are no universal formulas of a species or a *telos*.

Although I believe that Locke understood what the upshot would be for final causation if we reject essences, he merely hints at this conclusion. However, Boyle actually addresses this point.

Again, as I noted, Boyle defends a corpuscular view of the world, which favors scientific explanation in terms of efficient causes and is Locke's major source for this theory. Although Boyle does not discuss the role of final causes in *The Origin of Forms and Qualities according to the Corpuscular Philosophy*, he addresses this topic in the following books written

roughly twenty years after the publication of the *Origin: A Disquisition about the Final Causes of Natural Things* (Boyle, 1772: p. 392-452) and *Advice in Judging of Things Said to Transcend Reason* (Boyle, 1772: p. 447-469). In both of these works, he dispenses with imminent final causes, the kind spoken of earlier. However, as John Colman correctly points out, even though Boyle accepted the corpuscular theory, he interprets Boyle as not ruling out completely the role of final causes in explanations (Colman, 1983: p. 241). According to Boyle, it is possible to understand the mechanical operations of things in terms of their final causes, as God has assigned them through divine revelation: “[N]onetheless, such things can still be said to have ends in the sense that they may be instruments serving the purposes formulated by intelligent beings. As God is creator of the universe, it is reasonable to suppose that everything in it fulfills purposes, which He intends” (Colman, 1983: p. 241).

This is an important response, but it can be seen to be unsatisfactory. The reason is that the roles that God assigns are arbitrary roles that do not have any basis in nature whatsoever. This conclusion means that one cannot look to nature as Aristotle prescribes to discover those roles. Instead, one must look to Divine Revelation to discover them. But now the problem should be apparent. Final cause explanations depend upon the relationship between natural and supernatural explanations. Such an affiliation can hardly be satisfactory to a modern scientific outlook.

Having given some reasons why we should dispense with the notion of a *telos*, we must ask ourselves what is to become of the virtues? Without a non-arbitrary *telos* that applies to all (well-formed) humans, according to DesJardins, it does not make sense to discuss the universal applicability of virtue or vices. Let me discuss why this assertion is true.

From a Scholastic or an Aristotelian point of view, the ascription of a virtue or vice to an individual relies heavily upon the metaphysical machinery necessary to make that statement true. For example, suppose we consider the statement, “John is courageous.” From Aristotle’s point of view, what is needed to make this statement true? There are two things. First, its truth depends upon what the statement says and, second, upon whether it mirrors or corresponds to a non-linguistic structure (Loux, 2002: p. 26). The first condition is a requirement to ensure that the sentence is capable of being either true or false. In other words, the sentence must express a simple basic fact in the declarative mode. The second condition requires that the truth-value of the sentence can be tested against the world. That is, it is true only if the nouns in the statement match up to the world. Of course, as Loux points out, this statement means that not only should the subject term correlate to something in the world, but also the adjective in the predicate should correlate to some sort of structure in the world (Loux, 2002: p. 26). In other words, the predicate term ‘courageous’ must correspond to a universal – the virtue of courage.



Notice what happens now. Suppose we rid the world of the metaphysical machinery to support the truth conditions just mentioned. That is, suppose, as Locke and Boyle do, that there are no universal kinds and no corresponding essences. What do we have left? According to the Aristotelian or the Scholastic, a statement ascribing courage to John is a descriptive statement that can be corroborated by the world only if it matches up correctly. However, according to DesJardins, without the presence of a universal, claims that ascribe a virtue to an individual are no longer verifiable by the world; instead, they are prescriptive in nature and reflect our sentiments and feelings about John's actions. They reflect our own subjective approval for such actions and perhaps expose a recommendation that others achieve the same virtue.

### **The Challenge to Virtue Theory**

So far my discussion has concentrated on showing why DesJardins's view about the demise of the virtues is plausible. I agree with this outlook as well. Additionally, I have attempted to formulate why this view fell out of favor in the 1700's. As I attempted to show, Aristotle's views are connected together in such a way, that if you remove one piece of his theory, e.g., immanent essences, the whole argument falls in on itself. Such was the attack of Locke and Boyle.

Nevertheless, even though DesJardins is conscious of this point, he still recommends a return to a virtue-centered morality. What does he have in

mind? Is he recommending a return to an Aristotelian outlook? Or is he recommending that we merely attempt to formulate, in a sense, a *new* non-arbitrary telos for humankind?

Let us suppose momentarily that he means to argue for the first option. If this is true, then he is burdened with the position of arguing that we should return to an outlook that is outdated and, as some argue, a point of view fraught with numerous and unmanageable problems, like the ones discussed earlier. Even though he mentions Aristotle by name, it is my opinion that Aristotle's theory is not what he has in mind.

Perhaps what he means is something like the second option. If this conclusion is true, then he appears to be recommending an alternative approach to a virtue-centered morality and one that still makes use of a non-arbitrary *telos*. Let us suppose for the moment that this is his viewpoint, (and I do indeed think that this is what he intends). The following question immediately arises. What metaphysical machinery, if any, is needed to support the existence of a non-arbitrary human *telos*? I will now turn briefly to that question.

The answer to this question really depends on what he wants to accomplish. I imagine that since DesJardins wants to formulate a non-arbitrary *telos*, he wants to avoid embracing a non-cognitivist analysis of virtue claims. This means that he must want to avoid arguing that virtue claims are merely a reflection of our attitudes and feelings. Some might put the point this way. He would want to avoid saying that virtue claims are merely world

correcting instead of world corrected. I also imagine that he wants to avoid holding to the view that the claims about virtue and vice, despite being truth-valued, are nevertheless all false (Sayre-McCord, 1988: p. 5). In other words, he would want to avoid implementing an error theory about virtue claims.

Additionally, I imagine that his commitment to a non-arbitrary *telos* may motivate him to avoid articulating, what Geoffrey Sayer-McCord calls, *idealism* (Sayre-McCord, 1988: p. 7-9). This term means that he would want to avoid saying that although virtue claims, when literally construed, are literally true or false; the truth-values of virtue claims depend on someone's attitude toward them (Sayre-McCord, 1988: p. 16). Avoiding this view would also make it impossible to embrace two versions of idealism, viz., *subjectivism* and *intersubjectivism* (Sayre-McCord, 1988: p. 16-19).<sup>12</sup>

Although the spirit of DesJardins's point of view may motivate him to avoid the positions I just (albeit briefly) outlined, what standpoint seems consistent with his project? Barring any other competing views I have neglected to mention, the strongest and most rigorous view would be *moral realism*. On this view, he would attempt to defend three theses. First, it would be necessary to defend *moral cognitivism*, which means that a moral claim, and in DesJardins's case, claims about moral virtues, is literally true or false. Second, he would have to defend the view that some of these claims are literally true. Finally, he would have to defend

an objectivistic account of the truth-conditions of the claims in question.

I will now make three comments about this standpoint. My first comment is that in the first part of his essay, DesJardins criticizes principled-based theories in a certain way. He points out that “no ethical principle has yet been established in any plausible fashion as categorically binding upon all people” (DesJardin, 2001: p. 96). Unfortunately, as I understand DesJardins, in order to defend a plausible account of moral virtue, not only must he defend the viewpoint of moral realism, but he must also defend a particular example of a moral principle that states a connection between a group of persons having a certain virtue (i.e., an ethical property) and the same group having some non-ethical property. For example, he may end up defending something like this principle. For any person chosen, if she gives money to the right person, at the right time, for the right reason, and in the right amount (non-ethical properties), then she is generous (a virtue or ethical property).<sup>13</sup> But if this statement is true, then he is committed to something he thinks cannot be done. In fact, he articulates the same: “we must admit the outright failure of the project of justifying moral principles” (DesJardins, 2001: p. 96).

My second comment is this. DesJardins claims that principled-based theories fail to satisfy the motivation question: Why should I do what is required by this principle? He elaborates by writing, “Principle-based ethics leaves us with an unbridgeable motivation gap between the applied principle and the action” (DesJardins, 2001: p. 96).

Of course, DesJardins implies that a virtue theory, whether Aristotle's or the one he proposes, can bridge that gap. But how will he do so? Perhaps he will use Aristotle as a model. If he does, then he will have to do something such as the following. As I pointed out in the first part of this essay, Aristotle bridges that gap by tying our Good to our function. Again, the human function is to reason, and the Good for humans is to reason well. The gap is bridged because, according to Aristotle, we have a natural incentive to reason because of the driving power arising from our essence (even if we do not use it in the right way).

Unfortunately, DesJardins never really says how he will accomplish this goal. This is understandable because his essay is rather short. Nevertheless, the issue remains. How will he proceed? It seems to me that he will have to defend the view that we are motivated to pursue our *telos* because we have some driving impulse that pushes us to do so. In other words, in addition to his defense of a metaphysical realist account of our *telos*, he will have to defend something like a human function. But now the cost of defending such an outlook should be apparent. Like Aristotle, DesJardins will have to defend (minimally) two metaphysical positions. Not only will he have to defend the metaphysical principle of realism, a view which commits him not only to the existence of a natural order *and* also to a moral order, but also he will have to defend the existence of essences. In my opinion, such a defense is as untenable as it is implausible.

My final comment is this. With an appeal to MacIntyre, DesJardins illustrates the epistemological requirements for the discovery of the *telos*. It amounts to something like the following. There are two steps. First, we must find out how people answer the following question: What is the good life for me? After this, we attempt to find what all those answers have in common. Once we accomplish this, we can answer the last question: What is the good life for man? (DesJardins, 2001: p. 98). That is, what all those answers have in common will reveal the metaphysical existence of the *telos* of humanity.

Unfortunately, a number of problems immediately emerge. I will mention three. Before I begin, let us assume for the moment that we can discover an answer that is common to all people. Assuming that this goal is possible, the following problem comes into view. DesJardins seems to assume that the answer will give us something that is morally relevant. But why should we assume that this would be the case? It seems possible as well as equally plausible that the answer will not be morally relevant. For example, what if the common answer we get focuses on the accumulation of wealth? Would we want to say that this answer is morally relevant and make it the human *telos*? No, because there are good reasons to think that wealth accumulation is not the human function or the *telos* we are to pursue.

Second, let us suppose for the moment that we can find an opinion that is common as well as morally relevant. What does such an opinion prove? DesJardins would have us believe that this

would be evidence of the human *telos*. But is it? To defend this view, he will have to do (at least) two things. First, he would have to show us why the equally plausible view that the convergence of beliefs is not just the result of parental (or societal) education and habituation. Second, he will have to face a logical problem. He will have to show us how to bridge the logical gap between believing a statement is true and whether that implies the truth of that statement.

The last problem may be expressed in this way. The first two problems for DesJardins turn upon the assumption that we can discover an opinion that is common to all people. While such a task would be daunting, it is still nevertheless logically possible. Notwithstanding this possibility, my intuitions tell me that it is equally possible that no such answer is forthcoming. I am not saying that there will be nothing in common. On the contrary, my point is that if we attempt to find out what all people, or at least the majority of people, believe about their own good, what we will (probably) find is that there will be several groups of mutually exclusive answers. If this is the case, then DesJardins's epistemological challenge fails again.

But perhaps I am giving up too quickly. Let us give his view the benefit of the doubt. In fact, the following situation may materialize. Even though there are several different mutually exclusive answers, we can discover a group with an interesting position. This group affirms the goodness of life over death and the goodness of pleasure over pain. Certainly this answer seems to be plausible as well as morally relevant.

Nevertheless, the following question must be answered: How do we know that this group is the *correct* one? What will be our standard to tell that this group is correct and the rest are incorrect? We certainly cannot use DesJardins's criterion because his view relies on a global convergence of opinions. Perhaps someone might say that we could tell the difference by appealing to our moral intuitions. Although such an outlook seems plausible, we still have the problem of why we should think that our intuitions are correct. It seems, therefore, that DesJardins's outlook fails again.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this essay, I have attempted to accomplish several goals. First, I attempted to show why DesJardins's comments about the demise of virtue theory are correct. I did so by first briefly elaborating upon Aristotle's own account of virtue theory and how that theory rests in an important way upon his metaphysical outlook. Next, I brought forth evidence from two 17th scholars, John Locke and Sir Robert Boyle, who attacked not only the Aristotelian scholars of their own time, but who also rejected the metaphysical machinery of Aristotle's universe. Finally, I attempted to elaborate upon DesJardins's own views. In my view, he advocates a return to a virtue-centered theory of morality that is very similar to Aristotle's own view. Again, his motivation to do so is that such a theory will be a better foundation for our own understanding of business and professional behavior. Unfortunately, as I argued, such a return appears to be fraught with too many problems,



which makes such a return highly untenable, and possibly, in the end, indefensible.

## Notes

1. The most prominent are: Terzis, 1994: p. 333-342; Woodruff, 1991: p. 307-335; Montague, 1992: p. 53-61; Hursthouse, 1991: p. 224-246; Slote, 2000: p. 175-238; Slote, 1992; Crisp and Slote, Eds., 2000; Sherman, Ed. 1999; Roty, Ed., 1980.

2. Some of the most notable are: Cohen, 1985: p. 38-58; Gutman, 1993: p. 1759-1771; Koehn, 1995: p. 533-539; Moriarty, 1995: p. 75-93; Martin, 1992: p. 21-40; Preston, 1998: p. 69-82; Pellegrino, 1985: p. 237-255; Slote, 1993: p. 5-37; Solomon, 2003: p. 42-63; Solomon, 1992: p. 317-339.

3. I would like to clarify why I chose to make DesJardins's essay the focus of my article. I understand that a number of scholars might bring to mind that any article of this nature should focus on the representatives that are better known or more established in the literature. I am acutely aware of such an outlook. Nevertheless, there is something especially relevant about DesJardins's article; something I think has been overlooked. Granted, like the other advocates of virtue theory, DesJardins argues that business and professional persons can benefit from being taught virtue. In fact, as DesJardins makes clear, virtue theory is far superior to the traditional approach to moral theory. This is nothing new. However, unlike many articles in the literature, DesJardins articulates the most important problem that faces any scholar who advocates a return to virtue theory. I have observed that many

scholars are not aware of this problem or if they are, their articles do not express the same. This is an unfortunate oversight. Additionally, although I do not discuss this point in this essay, many of these same scholars seem to think that returning to Aristotle's virtue theory is just a matter of exposing business people and professionals alike to Aristotle's theory of virtue. Of course, Aristotle does teach that virtue is attainable; regrettably, what most scholars in this literature fail to understand is the way Aristotle qualifies his point of view about the likelihood of attaining virtue. In fact, among other things, I intend to show in another paper Aristotle's skepticism about his own point.

4. By the term 'non-arbitrary *telos*', I mean roughly the claim that there is a single, ultimate, standard that all people are required to follow. This standard is not relative to just one culture or one historical time period. On the contrary, the existence of this standard has cross cultural as well as historical importance. Typically, the standard or *telos* is described as the Good or Happiness. As Aristotle, and as others within this tradition will point out, any action that leads to it (or brings about the Good) is considered right or virtuous, and any action that detracts from the Good can be considered wrong, base, or vicious

5. The following discussion relies heavily upon Michael J. Loux's characterization of Aristotle's metaphysics. See Loux, 2002: p. 123-138.

6. The properties associated with objects include qualities like colors, sounds, tastes, and odors. In

addition to these, we include the qualities that give the object textures, shape, width, and depth.

7. The term 'substratum' characteristically refers to the substructure of an object that acts as the underlying or supporting part of the properties of an object.

8. The word here is *eudaimonia*. Some translate it as happiness. I follow W. D. Ross here and argue that happiness is not an accurate translation because of the tendency to associate with this term certain psychological states that were not a part of the Greek understanding of this term. See Sir David Ross, *Aristotle* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1971), 190.

9. Boyle, 1991.

10. Locke, 1973. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was originally published in 1690. In this article, I will refer to his book as *Essay*. Additionally, as traditional Lockean scholarship dictates, I will quote the *Essay* by book, chapter, and section.

11. This distinction is also made by R. S. Woolhouse. See Woolhouse, 1971.

12. According to Sayre-McCord, subjectivism is the view that moral claims are true or false relative to the desires, preferences, and the goals of agents. Intersubjectivism is (minimally) the view that moral claims are true or false relative to the conventions and practices actual in force in the relevant society.

13. My example relies on Robert B. Scott, Jr.'s view of moral principles, even though he does not discuss the virtues per se. See Scott, 1980: p. 261.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Samuel Zinaich, Jr. is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Purdue University Calumet. His area of specialization is ethics. He has published articles on John Locke's (1632-1704) moral theory, philosophical counseling, abortion, and professional ethics. Professor Zinaich is also co-editor of the anthology *Ethics for the Professions* published by Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, and he is under contract with University Press of America to publish a new text that critically evaluates John Locke's moral and political views from 1664-1690. He can be reached by email at [zinaich@calumet.purdue.edu](mailto:zinaich@calumet.purdue.edu).