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## Philosophical Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713441835>

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First published on: 13 June 2011

**To cite this Article** Besser-Jones, Lorraine(2011) 'The motivational state of the virtuous agent', *Philosophical Psychology*,  
First published on: 13 June 2011 (iFirst)

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/09515089.2011.569914

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2011.569914>

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# The motivational state of the virtuous agent

Lorraine Besser-Jones

*Julia Annas argues that Aristotle's understanding of the phenomenological experience of the virtuous agent corresponds to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of the "flow," which is a form of intrinsic motivation. In this paper, I explore whether or not Annas' understanding of virtuous agency is a plausible one. After a thorough analysis of psychological accounts of intrinsic and extrinsic states of motivation, I argue that despite the attractiveness of Annas' understanding of virtuous agency, it is subject to a serious problem: all virtuous activities are not ones that we take pleasure in independently of their connection to "virtue." Moreover, somewhat sadly, we have no compelling reason to think that they can become so. Our psychology is not constituted to find the exercise of virtue, in all of its extensions, interesting and enjoyable, apart from its connection to virtue.*

*Keywords: Intrinsic Motivation; Moral Psychology; Virtue*

## 1.

One of the most compelling features of Aristotle's understanding of the virtuous is his claim that the virtuous person takes pleasure in virtuous activities. While few of us experience this phenomenon ourselves, the appeal of being the sort of person who finds virtuous activities pleasant is undeniable. The person who takes pleasure in acting well represents the best of humanity: who would *not* want to be this person?

This basic idea is one that has been influential in both historical and contemporary discussions of virtue. Julia Annas (2008) recently suggested that Aristotle's understanding of the phenomenological experience of the virtuous agent corresponds to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of the "flow" (1990) which is a form of intrinsic motivation. In this paper, I explore whether or not Annas' understanding of virtuous agency is a plausible one. I argue that despite the attractiveness this ideal presents us with, it is subject to a serious problem: virtuous

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activities are *not* ones that we take pleasure in *independently* of their connection to “virtue.” Moreover, somewhat sadly, we have no compelling reason to think that they can become so. As hesitant as we may be to revise our understandings of the virtuous person, we ought to acknowledge that this understanding of virtuous agency is psychologically implausible.

My argument proceeds as follows: I begin by exploring Annas’ argument and considering the evidence for thinking that Aristotle may have had a state of intrinsic motivation in mind in his depiction of the virtuous agent. I then argue that while it may be plausible to interpret the Aristotelian account in terms of intrinsic motivation, psychological research shows that virtuous activity is not the sort of thing towards which we can be intrinsically motivated. Neither Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of the flow, nor any other understanding of intrinsic motivation, can be plausibly extended to the realm of virtuous activity. I go on to argue that autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation, wherein people are motivated for the sake of virtue, present a better construct for understanding the experience of the virtuous agent, and that this entails recognizing a fundamental role for occurring thoughts about virtue.

## 2.

In an inspiring discussion on the phenomenology of virtue, Annas (2008) claims that the distinctive mark of the mature virtuous person is the pleasure she takes in virtuous activity. Her discussion builds on the contrast between the person who must deliberate over how and why to engage in virtuous activities, and the person who has “mastered” virtue. For the master of virtue, occurrent deliberations regarding virtue have no place; their occurrence would serve only to interfere with one’s exercise of virtue.

Virtue, in Annas’ eyes, is thus analogous to practical skills such as learning a language or riding a bicycle. Once we have learned to ride a bicycle, we just ride it: we do not think about pushing one leg down after another in order to accelerate the bicycle. Likewise, according to Annas:

Someone who is, as we say, truly or really brave, the mature brave person, will respond to the other person’s need for rescue without having to work out what a brave person would do, or what would be a brave action here. Not only do we not need to suppose that such thoughts occur, we can see how they might, in the brave person, actually inhibit the needed response. Nonetheless, the brave person responds directly to the other person’s need for rescue as she does only because she has developed the virtue of bravery in the way a practical skill is developed—through the practice of exercising deliberations which did, as she learnt, have thoughts about virtue as their content. (2008, p. 24)

While those learning virtue do need to reflect on virtue, just as those learning to ride a bicycle need to think about the right combination of balance and movement requisite to successful cycling, the mature virtuous person does not need to reflect on the connection between the activities involved in the exercise of

virtue and virtue itself. Rather, her “*inclinations* [emphasis added] are in harmony with the results of [her] deliberations to do the virtuous thing” (Annas, 2008, p. 27).

On Annas’ interpretation, once a virtuous agent has chosen to engage in virtuous activity, she finds herself immediately drawn towards them: she *wants* wholeheartedly to engage in virtuous activity. She has not chosen the acts because of her inclinations; rather her “feelings endorse the action” (Annas, 1993, p. 53). As a result of the harmony between her inclinations and the action she has chosen, her experience of “acting virtuously is more *harmonious* and *effortless* than it is for [those of us who lack virtue]” (Annas, 2008, p. 27). Upon acting, she no longer thinks of the virtue she is exercising; occurring thoughts of virtue drop out of the picture. Whereas those of us whose inclinations are not aligned harmoniously with virtue will have to keep “the fact that this is virtuous” in center stage, the virtuous person does not; consequently, she finds herself in a position where she can take enjoyment in virtuous activity. Because finding enjoyment in virtuous activity is unique to those who have developed the appropriate state of character, it is a distinctive mark of the virtuous person.

Psychologists identify the motivational state depicted here, and illustrated in more depth in Annas (2008), as a state of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Moller, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reiss, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b; Waterman, 2005). The construct of intrinsic motivation was developed as a means of describing the enjoyment we find in pursuing challenges, in pushing ourselves to learn and to try new things (Koch, 1956).<sup>1</sup> Ryan and Deci describe the phenomenon of intrinsic motivation in a manner that highlights its appeal to Annas, and, I suspect, to most of us:

Perhaps no single phenomenon reflects the positive potential of human nature as much as intrinsic motivation, the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn. Developmentalists acknowledge that from the time of birth, children, in their healthiest states, are active, inquisitive, curious, and playful, even in the absence of specific rewards (Harter, 1978). The construct of intrinsic motivation describes this natural inclination toward assimilation, mastery, spontaneous interest, and exploration that is so essential to cognitive and social development and that represents a principal source of enjoyment and vitality throughout life (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993; Ryan, 1995). (2000a, p. 70)

In many ways, the capacity we have to be intrinsically motivated reflects the best of human nature. If the virtuous person represents the best of human nature, then it seems natural that her motivational state should reflect the exercise of this capacity.

The similarities between Ryan and Deci’s description of intrinsic motivation and Annas’ description of the phenomenology of the virtuous person are clear: virtuous activity engages a person in distinct challenges, requires mastery of skills, and, for the mature virtuous person, generates spontaneous interest. Annas herself describes the motivational state of the mature virtuous person as a specific form of intrinsic motivation described by Csikszentmihalyi as “the flow.” The flow is one way of understanding the subjective experience of agents who engage in an activity towards which they are intrinsically motivated.<sup>2</sup> As in all instances of intrinsic motivation,

people in the flow operate solely out of a sense of interest and enjoyment, as opposed to for the *sake* of their ends. While they likely have an end in mind, which factors into their reasons for engaging in the activity, thoughts about attaining that end are not motivating them to act. Rather—and this is specific to the flow experience—they become “completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself” (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005, p. 599).

Flow experiences occur when individuals engage in complex and challenging activities that test one’s capacities and, frequently, require skill to engage in successfully. A classic example of a flow experience is rock-climbing. The goal is to reach the summit, and while the rock climber never loses sight of this goal, the goal is not what motivates her in the moment. Rather, in the moment, she finds herself driven by the challenge of exploring the configuration of the rocks and crevices, of finding footing on a vertical wall. She enjoys the activity and loses herself in it, all the while maintaining cognitive engagement with it. This cognitive engagement is crucial, as part of the enjoyment lies in the exercise of her intellect—in the problem-solving.

Annas believes that the flow experience provides the best way of understanding the phenomenology of the mature virtuous person, in that virtuous activity is analogous to the exercise of practical skill. In reference to Csikszentmihalyi’s account, she writes:

It makes sense of the claim that virtuous activity, as opposed to merely self-controlled activity, is pleasant, not in involving extra feelings but in being unimpeded by contrary impulses, and in harmony with all of the person’s thoughts and feelings. In the virtuous, virtuous activity can be thought of as an example of “flow” because it is an unforced expression of the person’s reasoning and feelings, in harmony with the rest of her character and structured system of goals. (Annas, 2008, p. 30)

Two specific features from the Aristotelian account of virtue that Annas finds in Csikszentmihalyi’s account are (1) that, as in flow experiences, virtuous activity is experienced as enjoyable independently of its connection to virtue; and (2) that, as is the case with the person experiencing the flow, the experience of virtuous activity is unmediated by thoughts of virtue (Annas, 2008, p. 30). In section 4, I challenge the viability of these claims as claims about virtue, and question whether or not virtuous activity can be experienced as a flow activity, or can give rise to any form of intrinsic motivation. In section 3, however, let us take a minute to explore Annas’ interpretation of Aristotle.

### 3.

Did Aristotle really have in mind a state of intrinsic motivation when he describes the phenomenology of the virtuous person? As Annas rightly highlights, Aristotle is clear in his view that the distinguishing mark between the mature virtuous and the self-controlled lies in the pleasure the mature virtuous takes in the exercise of virtue.

The situation becomes more extreme in considering the contrast between the virtuous and the vicious: noble acts produce pleasure in the virtuous, yet pain in the vicious (Aristotle, trans. 1962, 1099a, 8–22, & 1104b3–1105, a18).

Establishing that the virtuous person finds pleasure in the exercise of virtue is not enough to determine that she experiences intrinsic motivation. To establish that the virtuous person is intrinsically motivated, we need to determine whether or not she finds the *activities* enjoyable and so pleasant, apart from their connection to separable outcomes. If her pleasure results not from the activity, but from her attainment of the end towards which her activity aims, then she is extrinsically motivated, and does not experience intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation occurs when agents are motivated by the end, rather than by features intrinsic to the activity. An extrinsically motivated agent can indeed take pleasure in her experience, although not necessarily so. When she does take pleasure in her experience, the source of her pleasure lies in the attainment of her end, and not in the activity itself.

The interpretative question so becomes whether or not Aristotle believes that the virtuous take pleasure in virtuous activities or pleasure in attaining the ends for which those activities strive. This question is a familiar one to Aristotelian scholarship. Much has been written regarding the appropriate way to understand Aristotle's view of the connection between virtue and the emotions, and in particular on the extent to which his view differs from Kant's (e.g., Broadie, 1993; Hursthouse, 1999; Sherman, 1997). I cannot do justice to this debate here; I will limit my remarks to showing why it seems *prima facie* plausible to understand Aristotle as portraying the virtuous person as intrinsically motivated.

In her interpretation of Aristotle's assertion that pleasure and pain serve as an indication of someone's virtue or vice (Aristotle, trans. 1962, 1104b, 3–8), Annas writes:

For the virtuous person, virtuous activity is enjoyable. Aristotle is careful to specify that this does not mean that the brave person enjoys wounds and death; rather, the exercise of the virtue is pleasant insofar as it achieves its end (Aristotle, trans. 1962, 117b, 15–16). What the virtuous person finds enjoyable is the exercise of bravery itself, not the risks, dangers and so on that this involves. (2008, pp. 27–28)

This passage on its own seems to equivocate between the two types of pleasure (taken here to mean enjoyment) in question. On the one hand, Annas' claim that virtuous *activity* is enjoyable suggests that enjoyment comes from the activity itself, which lends support to the interpretation that she experiences intrinsic motivation. This claim stands in tension with her latter claim that what the virtuous person finds enjoyable is the exercise of bravery (i.e., the exercise of virtue), and not the particular facets of the activity itself. The latter claim suggests that pleasure results from the attainment of the end. This, in turn, suggests that the virtuous person is motivated extrinsically and so stands in tension with Annas' overall thesis.

To determine whether we can resolve this tension, let us consider the extent to which Aristotle believes that virtuous activity is enjoyable. When writing of virtuous activity in general, Aristotle does indeed make this claim.<sup>3</sup> He writes that "Actions

which conform to virtue are naturally pleasant, and, as a result, such actions are not only pleasant for those who love the noble but also pleasant in themselves” (Aristotle, trans. 1962, sec. 1099a, 12–14). In this passage, Aristotle makes a claim about the nature of the activities: it is the *activities* that are naturally pleasant, and so produce pleasure in the appropriately situated person.

This is the sort of view that lends support to the idea that virtuous activities generate flow experiences, and spur intrinsic motivation. It also entails that the brave person must enjoy the risks and challenges, just as the rock climber enjoys the risks and challenges. It is these features of the activity, considered in itself, that generate the enjoyment distinctive of the flow. It cannot be the activity considered insofar as the end is attained, for, while she engages in the activity, thoughts about the end do not stand as motivating considerations.

To illustrate, consider the following report by a rock climber and poet, taken by Csikszentmihalyi to be prototypical of the flow experience:

The mystique of rock climbing is climbing; you get to the top of a rock glad it is over but really wish it would go on forever. The justification of climbing is climbing, like the justification of poetry is writing; you don't conquer anything except things in yourself. . . . The act of writing justifies poetry. Climbing is the same: recognizing that you are a flow. The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a pear or utopia but staying in the flow. It is not a moving up but a continuous flowing; you move up to keep the flow going. There is no possible reason for climbing except the climbing itself; it is a self-communication. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 54)

To be in a flow experience, or to be intrinsically motivated more generally, the agent must find the *activities in themselves* enjoyable. It is the climbing that provides enjoyment, not reaching the summit. It is the writing that provides enjoyment, not the poem. To the extent that we hold Aristotle to his statement that virtuous activities are naturally pleasant in themselves (Aristotle, trans. 1962, 1099a, 12–14), it is plausible to interpret him as suggesting that the virtuous person experiences intrinsic motivation.

Let us now revisit the tension by considering the alternative interpretation against which this interpretation stands. As Annas notes, Aristotle's specific discussion of courage makes a different claim about the enjoyment of virtuous activities. Here, he grants that exercising courage involves pain, yet maintains “the end which courage aims at is pleasant” (Aristotle, trans. 1962, 1117a, 34–b3). This discussion grants that the brave does *not* enjoy the risks and challenges. But if the brave person does not enjoy the risks and challenges involved in courageous activity, and instead takes pleasure in only the end at which it aims, then the brave person is not intrinsically motivated.

To read Aristotle as offering a unified theory of the motivation of the virtuous person, we must hold that the brave person enjoys the activity and not just the end.<sup>4</sup> Courageous activity may indeed be painful, but, as the discussion of the flow experience suggests, it is enjoyable insofar as it challenges the agent, encourages her to push her capacities, to practice skills that she has mastered. The flow experience

provides us with a helpful model of capturing this phenomenon, and this is what attracts Annas to it. However, Annas fails to appreciate the tension I have developed here, which suggests that interpreting Aristotle's theory in terms of the flow experience involves taking literally his claim that virtuous activity is enjoyable. This claim is essential to establishing that Aristotle believes the virtuous are intrinsically motivated.

While my goal in this paper is not Aristotelian scholarship, but simply to reach a viable understanding of what drives the virtuous, it is plausible to interpret Aristotle's view to be one of intrinsic motivation. As Annas' discussion attests, this understanding of the virtuous agent as intrinsically motivated is one that pervades contemporary and historical discussions of virtue, for good reason (Annas, 2008, p. 27). We like to believe that the virtuous agent enjoys virtuous activities, and finds pleasure in them, even though we ourselves do not. We think this way largely because we are optimistic about human potential, and the virtuous person is meant to constitute the ideal person. The gulf between the mature virtuous person and us should not cause us too much worry, but instead should give us something towards which to strive.

Given the deep roots that this way of thinking about virtue has, Annas' thesis requires careful attention. We need to explore whether or not it is plausible to understand the virtuous agent as intrinsically motivated. As we will see, the difficulty facing this thesis is that psychological research provides us with no grounds for thinking that the flow experience, or any other state of intrinsic motivation, can be experienced through virtuous activity.<sup>5</sup> The reason why we do not enjoy virtuous activities is *not* because we lack virtue: it is because our psychology is not constituted to find virtuous activities, considered in themselves, enjoyable. Moreover, we have no reason to think it can so adapt. Psychological research suggests it is simply not within the realm of human potential. I believe this gives us good reason to revise our understanding of virtuous agency, even if this means departing from Aristotle and revising deeply rooted intuitions about virtue.

#### 4.

As we have seen, central to Annas' argument is an understanding of virtue as a practical skill. Bravery, for example, constitutes a practical skill of being able to face death in the eye, confident in one's ability to escape its clutches. The brave and skillful firefighter is a master. As my above discussion suggests, it is plausible to think that for him, firefighting is a flow experience. His goal is to put out the fire, and this reason explains his activity, but once within the flames, this goal drops out of his motivational state. He becomes caught up in problem solving, in overcoming the specific challenges faced by the burning building. Being brave seems to be what enables him to engage in the flow; a coward would lack the ability to set aside fear for his own life and would struggle to maintain the requisite harmony between his goals of self-preservation and of saving others by risking his life.



Let us grant that the exercise of bravery in these situations involves a flow experience. Is it plausible to generalize from a phenomenon that arises from the exercise of this discrete virtue to the exercise of virtue considered generally? Reflection on the range of experiences in which one exercises virtue shows such generalization to be unwarranted. Exercising virtue does not always (even, does not often) involve engaging in an *activity*, in the sense that firefighting and rock-climbing are activities. Rather, exercising virtue requires engaging in all sorts of mundane actions that lack the coherence and structure found in activities associated with flow experience. Exercising virtue involves keeping one's promises, helping someone pick up papers she has dropped on the sidewalk, being a whistleblower, loaning money to a friend, raising money to help victims of natural disasters, and so on.<sup>6</sup> These virtuous activities simply are not the *kinds* of things that generate flow experiences, even for the virtuous agent who finds herself harmoniously engaging in them.

Annas' discussion leads one to hope that, as long as a person is unified in her goals, she will find goal-directed activities intrinsically motivating. But this view neglects the extent to which those activities themselves have to be of a certain kind before anyone can experience the flow. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow activities as having "as their primary function the provision of enjoyable experiences. Play, art, pageantry, ritual, and sports are some examples. Because of the way they are constructed, they help participants and spectators achieve an ordered state of mind that is highly enjoyable" (1990, p. 72). Different factors can enhance or inhibit the flow experience, but the most essential factor in stimulating the flow has to do with the structure of the specific activity in question: does it provide a sense of discovery? Does it tap into creative feelings? Does it push the person to a higher-level of performance? (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 74). The *activity* needs to be such that it has these features, so that the activity can stimulate interest and be found enjoyable by those who are not preoccupied with reflection upon their goals and ends. Activities requiring bravery may very well be those types of activities; activities requiring the exercise of justice, compassion, and temperance are in all likelihood not.

A similar consideration, regarding the sorts of activities that generate flow experiences, holds true for activities that generate *any* state of intrinsic motivation. While flow experiences are more specific to activities that demand a balance of challenges and skills, more general states of intrinsic motivation arise from activities one finds enjoyable, such as drawing and learning, which tap into our natural inclinations "to take interest in novelty, to actively assimilate, and to creatively apply our skills" (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, p. 56). The actions required by virtue are just not of this kind. Intrinsically motivated activities are those that "individuals find interesting and would do in *the absence of operationally separable consequences* [emphasis added]" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 233). Most of our virtuous activities are ones we do only because of the separable consequences: i.e., only because they fulfill a promise, only because justice requires it, only because raising money will help others. They do not invoke a specialized skill, and do not present

agents with challenges towards which to rise. They are not ones that people have a propensity to find interesting and enjoyable.

This does not entail that people by nature do not have a propensity to help others, or even that they do not have a propensity to enjoy helping others. The point is limited to a claim about the *activities* involved in helping others and in the exercise of virtue more generally. While firefighting may be interesting and enjoyable, the activity of picking up a stranger's wallet from a muddy puddle, and then running through the rain to return it to them is just not interesting and/or enjoyable on its own, considered apart from its connection to the importance of helping others. A virtuous person may spontaneously engage in these activities, and she may do so without experiencing inner conflict. But to say that she finds these activities interesting and enjoyable in the sense mandated by the nature of intrinsic motivation is not plausible.

## 5.

Because the activities involved in the exercise of virtue are not those that one can find, on the whole, to be interesting and enjoyable, it is a mistake to claim, as Annas does, that intrinsic motivation is the defining characteristic of the virtuous person. Rather, we need to acknowledge that the motivational state of the virtuous person, even the mature virtuous person, most often will be one of extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation, recall, occurs when agents are motivated for the sake of some separable outcome, and not because they find what they are doing interesting and enjoyable. When Annas describes the virtuous person in training, she appears to have a model of extrinsic motivation in mind: the novice may engage in “thoughts which have *virtue* or *being a good person* [emphasis in original]” (2008, p. 21) as part of her deliberative process, and as motivating considerations.<sup>7</sup> Agents who do something because it is virtuous, or because it is what a virtuous person would do, exhibit extrinsic motivation.

Some may worry that understanding the virtuous person as extrinsically motivated provides us with an impoverished ideal. The concern is that someone who fails to enjoy virtuous activity is far less virtuous than one who keeps the fact that this is virtuous in mind as a motivating reason. My discussion has already shown that situations where a person does not find virtuous actions enjoyable do not necessarily signal anything specific to the agent, but instead reveal something about the structure of the virtuous activity. I will now show that there is nothing impoverished about the extrinsically motivated agent as long as we specify the mode of extrinsic motivation.

When we say a person is extrinsically motivated, we are making a statement only about the extent to which she engages in those activities for the sake of the end towards which her actions aim. We can refine our understanding of her motivation by looking at how it is she perceives her end: does she embrace her end as her own? Or does she view it with resistance, because it is one that she does not value?<sup>8</sup> These sorts of considerations mark different forms of extrinsic motivation, which we can

conceive as existing along a spectrum, a spectrum through which we might also gauge degrees of virtue.<sup>9</sup>

The most significant divide between forms of extrinsic motivation is between “controlled” forms and “autonomous” forms. A controlled form of extrinsic motivation is one in which agents perceive their goals as being *externally* imposed on them, whereas an autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is one in which agents perceive their goals as autonomously legislated (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 236; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Instances of controlled forms of extrinsic motivation include activities where a person does something because she “has” to, as opposed to because she “wants” to. When we *have* to do something, we perceive ourselves as being controlled by external features—be it the threat of punishment or the promise of reward. The distinguishing feature of controlled forms of extrinsic motivation is that agents experience detachment from the goals, even alienation: they work to pursue goals that are not of their own making, that others have put into place for them as incentives for engaging in goal-directed activities.

Morality is like this for many people. Many people act well because the goals of morality have been externally imposed on them, be it through society, educators, or religious institutions. They know they “should not cheat” but do not appreciate *why* they should not cheat; they know that those around them will disapprove of them and chastise them for doing so; they know that because of these considerations they will feel bad if they do cheat. These are the considerations that motivate many people to avoid cheating, and to act well in general. In such cases, people are controlled by thoughts of rewards or punishments that are external to them. These are classic instances of controlled forms of extrinsic motivation.

The virtuous person, in contrast, does not experience morality as controlling, and this is what distinguishes her from the controlled, less virtuous person. Whereas the controlled person knows that she should not cheat, and knows that there will be negative consequences for so doing, she does not embrace honesty and integrity as goals personally important to her; she does not truly grasp why she should not cheat and why it is important to act well even in the absence of negative consequences. The virtuous person understands the goals of morality and the reasons why it is important for her to act well. Most importantly, she identifies with those reasons and integrates those reasons into her own identity. She acts well because she finds it important to act in this way; she acts well because it is the exercise of virtue and virtue is something important to her. She acts well not because she has to, but because she wants to.

The virtuous person is extrinsically motivated, but not controlled. Her goals are her own and reflect the state of character she values in herself. She thus exhibits an *autonomous* form of extrinsic motivation. The most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation, which nicely captures the nature of the virtuous person, is the “integrated form.” In instances of this form of motivation, agents not only identify with a particular goal and so see it as their own, but have also integrated it into their sense of self and so have brought it into harmony with their other goals.

Understanding the virtuous person as driven by an integrated form of extrinsic motivation preserves the notion that essential to the possession of virtue is understanding virtue and committing to it fully and without conflict. It does, though, give up the idea that the virtuous person *necessarily* takes pleasure in what she does and finds the exercise of virtue interesting, enjoyable, or valuable apart from its instrumental value and connection to virtue.<sup>10</sup> As we have seen, there may be some instances in which virtuous activities have the structure requisite to the generation of intrinsic motivation, but these cases will be rare. In many if not most instances, even the best of us will simply not be able to find enjoyment in the exercise of virtue. Because this is a reflection of the activity and not of the agent, and because there is indeed much that is admirable about the agent who successfully integrates moral values into her sense of self, recognizing this basic fact of human nature does not leave us with an impoverished or otherwise unattractive ideal, while at the same time it puts virtue back within the realm of human potential. Nonetheless, some may wonder whether the revisions I advocate are too strong, and so wonder whether or not the integrated form of extrinsic motivation ought to be construed as an important and admirable *developmental* stage for the virtuous person who, in full maturity, will develop intrinsic motivation. Why not encourage the development of an integrated extrinsic motivation as a means of reaching the further ideal of the development of a state of intrinsic motivation, even if it does exceed the limits of human potential?

The problem with this approach, and line of thinking more generally, is that it neglects the distinct differences between the structure of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. While we can describe the *subjective experiences* of the two species of motivation along a spectrum, with integrated extrinsic motivation hitting up right next to intrinsic, the actual structure and causal inputs make it the case that extrinsic and intrinsic forms of motivation are two very different species. Intrinsic motivation appeals to interests, extrinsic motivation appeals to values (Deci & Moller, 2005, pp. 591–592). While it may be the case that one can engage in an activity for its instrumental value and then discover that the activity is also interesting, one does not come to find a given activity interesting simply *because* one values the ends that activity promotes. Rather, as we have seen already, whether or not an activity is interesting on its own and so is a source of intrinsic motivation, has to do with the structure of the activity considered independently of any value associated with it. *If* the activity is one that taps into our natural propensities, then it has the potential to prompt a state of intrinsic motivation in the agent. Whether or not an agent also sees the activity as instrumentally valuable, and so is also extrinsically motivated, is irrelevant to whether or not she finds the activity itself enjoyable.<sup>11</sup> Extrinsic motivation may contribute to the development of intrinsic motivation insofar as it prompts an agent to engage in a potentially enjoyable activity she might not have engaged in otherwise, yet such a connection is merely incidental. To suggest that an agent could develop intrinsic motivation by first developing a form of extrinsic motivation is to misrepresent the structure of intrinsic motivation.<sup>12</sup>

The following example provides a particularly vivid contrast between the motivation by interest specific to intrinsic motivation, and the motivation by values that is specific to extrinsic motivation. Consider the 40-year-old man facing a family history of heart disease who commits himself to engaging in a healthy lifestyle. With this goal in mind, he decides to take up running for the first time. The first few runs are torture, but he nonetheless feels a genuine sense of satisfaction in engaging in an activity he knows is instrumental to his goal of healthy living. Gradually, though, the runs become less of a struggle. One day he goes for his usual run and finds that his experience of the activity has become transformed. He no longer has to coach his body through every quarter mile; he no longer has to distract himself from the physical struggles by engaging in mind games. In fact, all of these mental distractions disappear as he finds himself completely lost in the rhythm of the activity. Without even noticing it, he runs further and faster than ever before.

In these moments, our runner experiences the flow; more generally, he discovers that running is enjoyable on its own, apart from consideration of its beneficial health effects, and so finds himself developing a state of intrinsic motivation. Of course, he still believes running is instrumentally valuable, and still is committed to healthy living. His initial state of extrinsic motivation has not transformed into intrinsic motivation; rather, his intrinsic motivation developed parallel to his extrinsic motivation. His intrinsic motivation developed because running itself is an intrinsically enjoyable activity, although his physical limitations initially prevented him from experiencing it as such. In addition to being enjoyable on its own—the requisite feature of any form of intrinsic motivation—the activity of running has both of the markers of flow activities: it challenges one (mentally and physically), and requires skill to engage in. It is these features of this specific activity that stimulate the development of intrinsic motivation in our runner; his values and commitment to healthy living could not have prompted the development of intrinsic motivation. Regardless of how valuable an activity is, where it does not tap into our natural propensities, intrinsic motivation cannot develop.

We thus must acknowledge that the distinctive mark of the mature virtuous person—that which she cannot be considered virtuous without—is not the interest, enjoyment or pleasure that she takes in the exercise of virtue, *and* that there is no meaningful purpose to be had by idealizing her experience to include this facet. Instead, we ought to understand her in terms of her commitment to virtue. The mature virtuous person values acting well, and acts well because she identifies with the goals of morality and has integrated them into her sense of self. She may or may not enjoy the exercise of virtue; whether or not she does so is a reflection of the nature of virtuous activities. It is not a reflection of her state of character. It is not a mark of imperfection on her part.

The problem is thus not that idealizing the virtuous agent as experiencing intrinsic motivation sets the bar too high: it is that it sets the wrong bar. Virtuous activity is not the sort of thing that generally generates intrinsic motivation. As a result, we ought no longer to conceive of there being a necessary connection between the possession of virtue and the experience of any particular emotion. With the

relinquishment of this aspect of virtuous agency comes in its place a revival of the significance of her commitment to virtue, conceived as an end, and so a greater emphasis on thoughts about virtue playing a central role in both her deliberative process and her motivational state. This shift in how we must understand the experience of the virtuous agent calls for a renewed reflection on how we think about virtue itself. In the following section, I touch on just one of these areas, on which the revised understanding of virtuous agency seems to have a particularly germane effect. This is the connection between virtue and well-being.

## 6.

Because the revised understanding of virtue gives up the idea that the virtuous person necessarily enjoys or takes pleasure in the exercise of virtue, we might wonder whether or not this revision threatens the connection between virtue and well-being. Fundamental to Aristotle's account of virtue is that the virtuous flourish and that happiness is "at once the best, noblest and most pleasant thing" (Aristotle, trans. 1962, 1099a, 24–25). The pleasure Aristotle believes that the virtuous finds in the exercise of virtues is not definitive of well-being, but it certainly contributes to it. The question arises: if the virtuous does not take pleasure in virtuous activities, what remains of the connection between virtue and well-being?

The task at hand is to determine the extent to which experiencing pleasure, and finding one's activities interesting and enjoyable is essential to well-being. Positive psychologists, including Csikszentmihalyi (1990), believe it is: the more you can engage in intrinsically motivating activities, the more you can experience the flow, the happier you will become. Following this theoretical framework seems to lead to the regrettable conclusion that developing virtue is not a fundamental component of attaining well-being.

This conclusion is counterintuitive from both a philosophical and a psychological viewpoint, both of which maintain that there are real benefits to acting well, even if happiness is not one of them. Indeed, it is a well-established fact that engaging in prosocial behavior benefits the helper in numerous ways that go beyond subjective reports of happiness (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010, p. 222). This suggests that the subjective experience of happiness may not be the best, or only, way to understand well-being.<sup>13</sup>

Many influential psychological accounts of well-being that reject this approach to defining well-being hold, in contrast to positive psychologists, that well-being consists in positive psychological functioning. Positive psychological functioning, in turn, depends on satisfying objectively ascribable features of human nature, such as our need to be self-determined and have control over our lives, and our need to engage in warm and trusting relationships with others (Reis & Gable, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2006; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998, 2008). On these accounts, happiness is not a decisive factor in determining well-being, although

subjective experiences of happiness and life satisfaction are likely to emerge from this state of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

If we understand well-being in these terms, as the positive psychological functioning requisite to psychic health, then it is clear that even if the virtuous does not enjoy virtuous activities, she still develops a state of well-being through engaging in them. Moreover, there is also evidence suggesting that the connection between virtue and well-being may be a causal one, as long as we understand the virtuous agent to possess an autonomous form of extrinsic motivation. Weinstein and Ryan (2010), for instance, find that the benefit to the helper is increased when the helper is autonomously motivated, in that being so motivated yields greater needs satisfaction, e.g., by enabling people to experience control while securing more meaningful interactions with others than occurs when one helps another for the sake of external rewards.

This research shows that not only will the virtuous attain well-being when motivated by the integrated form of extrinsic motivation, but also that her motivational state *enhances* her well-being, when compared to those who engage in the same acts from controlled forms of well-being. The revised notion of virtue thus nicely preserves the deeply rooted connection between virtue and well-being fundamental to virtue ethics.<sup>14</sup> The account of virtue defended here thus affirms and re-establishes the virtue ethicist's emphasis on the connection between virtue and well-being, although it does require moving away from the identification of well-being and happiness, a move that I believe is warranted on both philosophical and psychological grounds.

## 7.

To conclude, while acknowledging that human nature is not built to find all virtuous activities interesting and enjoyable on their own may be seen as a regrettable conclusion, acknowledging this aspect of human psychology enables us to develop a more informed understanding of virtue. A central appeal of virtue ethics has always been its efforts to spell out the best state of human nature. It is thus imperative that we work with a clear conception of what is possible for human nature.

## Notes

- [1] Koch (1956) is recognized as being one of the first to call attention to intrinsic motivation, which has since been widely recognized as an important and promising phenomenon.
- [2] For an overview of the different interpretations of the subjective experience of intrinsically motivated persons, see Waterman et al. (2003).
- [3] Compare to Curzer's interpretation of Aristotle, which argues that, on Aristotle's account, even the virtue experience painfulness in virtuous activity (Curzer, 2002, pp. 150–154).
- [4] Alternatively, we could reject his idea that virtuous activities are pleasant in themselves. This is a move similar to the one that Hursthouse (1999) makes in her neo-Aristotelian virtue theory and, as my discussion in section 4 demonstrates, is one that is warranted.

However, 1099a, 12–14, establishes that Aristotle is committed to this idea. Rejecting the notion that virtuous activities are pleasant in themselves thus makes a significant departure from Aristotle's own theory.

- [5] Annas herself recognizes that Csikszentmihalyi's research is limited to "local applications of the exercise of skill" (2008, p. 30) as it occurs in day-to-day life, but nonetheless maintains that if we take seriously the notion that virtue is a practical skill, "we can at any rate see that Csikszentmihalyi's account of flow need not be restricted to local skilled activity, but can be used to characterize the experience of the virtuous person in acting bravely, generously and so on" (2008, p. 31).
- [6] These examples are not specific to Aristotle, but similar examples exist on Aristotle's own theory. See Curzer (2002, p. 151) for an overview.
- [7] The mature virtuous person, on the other hand, cannot: "the virtuous agent, then, will not, in his deliberations, be even in part motivated by thoughts with virtue as their content" (Annas, 2008, p. 24).
- [8] As Ryan and Deci note, "students can perform extrinsically motivated actions with resentment, resistance, and disinterest or, alternatively, with an attitude of willingness that reflects an inner acceptance of the value or utility of a task" (2000b, p. 55).
- [9] For the full spectrum of extrinsic motivation, see Ryan and Deci (2000b, p. 61).
- [10] Ryan and Deci note: "integrated forms of motivation share many qualities with intrinsic motivation, being both autonomous and unconflicted. However, they are still extrinsic because behavior motivated by integrated regulation is done for its presumed instrumental value with respect to some outcome that is separate from the behavior, even though it is volitional and valued by the self" (2000b, p. 62).
- [11] Indeed, there are many activities we find enjoyable even though we know they inhibit the pursuit of that which we value.
- [12] As Deci and Ryan put it, intrinsic motivation "thus does not result from internalization" (2000, p. 239).
- [13] For a very helpful discussion of the different psychological accounts of well-being, see Tiberius and Plakias (2010).
- [14] There is also reason to think that the account of virtue defended here *requires* the connection between virtue and well-being. Research on goal integration suggests that in order for an agent to be successful in goal integration, the goal itself needs to be intricately connected to an agent's psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2002, pp. 19–20; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999, p. 495). If virtue were not connected to well-being, then it would become questionable whether or not people would be able to integrate the goals of virtue into their sense of self.

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