



The Vicissitudes of Common-Sense Virtue Ethics, Part II: The Heuristic Use of Common Sense

JOHN KULTGEN

Department of Philosophy, 438 General Classroom Building, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211, USA

1. Ethics and Scientific Procedures

In the first part of this study, I compared the ways in which Aristotle and Michael Slote utilize common sense, meaning the opinions and intuitions of the majority of people or some reference group among them. Both philosophers center their attention on human virtue and so both may be categorized in a very broad way as common-sense virtue ethicists. Aristotle uses common sense only heuristically as an aid to forming opinions of his own, which he then checks against the facts as he sees them. In contrast, Slote uses common sense probatively. When his views accord with common sense, he takes it as a confirmation and, at points, as a proof of their validity. He is thus a common-sense philosopher in a more profound sense than Aristotle. My criticisms of his views were designed to show that he is ill-advised in appealing to common sense in the way he does. Aristotle's guarded and limited use of it is the only approach that can be justified in ethical theory.

I will now sketch the way in which intuitions, whether the intuitions of all people, of a select group, or of the philosopher herself, should interplay with theoretical considerations in her development of an ethical theory. The department of ethical theory that I shall discuss will continue to be that devoted to virtue, but I shall argue that virtue as a property of persons cannot be understood without adequate concepts of the right as a property of actions, and the good as a property of goals.

In developing a theory of virtue from common intuitions, Slote claims to utilize a systematic procedure exploiting an interplay between theory and intuition. He observes that this is "a methodology at least partially analogous with scientific methodology."¹ In developing this procedure, we would expect him to improve measurably on Aristotle, since he has available a much more sophisticated form of scientific inquiry as his model. To see how far the analogy between ethics and science takes him, let me sketch a classic example

of scientific procedure. This example is Lavoisier's discovery of oxygen and explanation of combustion, which precipitated a revolution in chemistry and led to the development of a body of theory recognizably continuous with that current today.² The analysis will show that Slote does not go far enough with the analogy and that the analogy largely impugns the probative value of common sense as Slote uses it.

Here is the scientific story in simplified form. Lavoisier was schooled in the chemical ideas of his time. They included the notions that macroscopic substances are compounds of elementary substances and that their sensible properties are caused by the properties of their elements. Boyle had introduced the ideas that elementary substances are corpuscles characterized by the primary qualities of shape, mass, and position, and that they are indivisible by chemical means. Chemical reactions are combinations and separations of such corpuscles, and compounds are distinguished from mixtures by the fact that their corpuscles combine in definite proportions.

For Aristotelian science, the elementary substances are earth, air, water, and fire. By the late eighteenth century a vast number of distinct substances had been described empirically and it was suspected that they were compounds of a much larger number of elements than the traditional four, though water and air were still thought by many natural philosophers to be elementary. Even those who did not think so referred to gases as "airs" and dry solids as "earths." Fire had been replaced by a hypothetical element, phlogiston. A vast number of chemical phenomena had been observed and described, and chemists were acutely aware of the need to systematize them and the inadequacy of current theories to do so.

In this context, Lavoisier was geared to view chemical phenomena as reactions and to seek the elements involved in them. Chemists had isolated a number of airs distinct from ordinary air, so the idea of gas as a generic type was abroad. This suggested that ordinary air is a compound or mixture rather than an element, and the possibility was raised that other gases could be produced by separating the elements of air or adding other elements to it. Combustion was explained as the release of phlogiston from combustible substances and its absorption by the air. Since fire and hot air rise, phlogiston was thought to have negative weight. Phlogiston was also used to explain empirical phenomena that had been observed by metallurgists in the calcination of metals into earths or calxes, and the decalcination or smelting of earths or ores into metals. The absorption of phlogiston in the reduction of calxes to metals was supposed to explain why pure metals weigh less than do their calxes.

Lavoisier was bothered by the concept of phlogiston in view of Newtonian physics, which defined matter in terms of mass and gravitational attraction

and had no place for negative weight. He was able to show that the gases and residues produced by combustion gain exactly the weight lost by the air in which the reaction takes place. He inferred that the combustible material combines with something from the air that has positive weight instead losing phlogiston with its negative weight. Lavoisier was able to isolate this material, which he called vital air in recognition of its role in supporting life and which later came to be called oxygen. Priestley isolated the material about the same time but misidentified it as dephlogisticated air. This is why Lavoisier is credited with discovering oxygen: he identified oxygen in terms of its true properties, whereas Priestley isolated oxygen but mis-identified it as dephlogisticated air. Once Lavoisier had identified oxygen for what it was, scientists were able to explain calcination in terms of oxidation and decalcination in terms of the release of oxygen. They soon explained other phenomena for which phlogiston had been invoked, thus eliminating the need for phlogiston altogether. With the idea of oxygen in hand, the compound nature of water was demonstrated and a revolution in chemistry ensued in which anti-phlogistonists won the field from orthodox phlogistonists.

The experiments of Lavoisier and his colleagues were so persuasive that the quantitative method in which the components of chemical reactions are carefully weighed before and after each reaction became standard chemical procedure. The restructuring of basic concepts and reform of chemical nomenclature by the new chemists led to the articulation of a set of principles that hung together as a system that was extremely fertile in implications for further observations. This led to a vast number of discoveries. At same time, chemists dismissed many of the observations of prior experimentalists and artisans as faulty and reinterpreted the remainder to fit the new system. The system that has evolved under the weight of both the new and the reinterpreted observations is recognizable in chemistry today, though its principles have been explained by still more fundamental physical concepts and have been significantly altered in the process. For example, after Lavoisier physical theory still retained concepts of matter without mass in the form of caloric fluid in heat phenomena, electrical fluid in electrical phenomena, and ether as the medium of light. It took further decades for these concepts to disappear and Newtonian physics to be vindicated. It remained in place until mass itself was interpreted as a form of something even more fundamental. The aspects of scientific procedure illustrated in this example are fundamental and still practiced today despite immense advances in theory and instrumentation.

Slote would have the moralist utilize a comparable procedure, substituting moral intuitions for sensory observations. As best I can reconstruct from his sketchy remarks, he proposes something like the following:

An ethical theorist begins by collecting moral intuitions that are shared among credible informants. She includes only those of her own that are not challenged by the other members of her reference group. She treats shared intuitions as reliable evidence of the values she will incorporate in her ethical theory and hence as the empirical base for the theory.

This is analogous to the practice of the scientist who relies on his own observations when he makes them under appropriate controls and treats the observations of other scientists whom he has reason to trust as equally reliable. An ethical theorist and a scientist both dismiss from consideration anomalous intuitions or anomalous observations reported by unqualified persons. Thus Lavoisier trusted his own eyes and the eyes of respected colleagues, but was skeptical of much current chemical lore and many reported phenomena.

An ethical theorist quickly sees that not all the intuitions even of her reference group are reliable. Their unreliability as well as the unreliability of putative intuitions of people outside the group is shown by the numerous paradoxes and incoherences found in reports of intuitions. A common-sense ethical theorist exposes these flaws and in doing so may ally herself with critics of common-sense morality. Slote remarks: "What many recent critics of common-sense morality have been doing is formulating methodological criticisms of the overall shape or the underlying structures . . . of common-sense morality based on charges of inconsistency, asymmetry, incompleteness, oddness, and the like that are somewhat analogous to the sorts of methodological criticisms relevant within other kinds of theorizing."³ The reference to oddness in this list of imperfections alerts us to the likelihood that an ethical theorist will dismiss a considerable number of intuitions that do not fit her scheme. In the realm of science, Lavoisier certainly had reason to ignore many of the observations even of reputable chemists who reported phlogiston phenomena which could not be explained by the new non-phlogistic theory.

An ethical theorist poses a set of general normative propositions to explain the reliable intuitive data. On analogy to science, some of the propositions are reached by simple induction. Others may require an abductive process of hypothesis formation and confirmation and disconfirmation. By Slote's lights, the best ethical theory would explain what is intuitively admirable in persons and what is intuitively desirable for them to possess. This thesis is analogous to the generalizations that Lavoisier and his colleagues began to make about the combining weights of substances that entered into different compounds and the revisions in the table of elements that this dictated.

An ethical theorist organizes her general propositions into a consistent whole displaying logical relations among its parts in a perspicuous manner. She drops the smallest number of pre-critical intuitions that will eliminate

incoherences from the theory. Thus Slote drops all intuitions of things that are moral as distinct and independent of things that are admirable or desirable.

Though dropping some alleged intuitions, the theorist also eschews some possible generalizations so as to avoid having to drop other intuitions that are particularly vivid. In this dropping and retaining process, she must weigh gains and losses in theoretical perfection for the system against gains and losses in its intuitive grounding. In doing so, she should seek a balance between generalizations and intuitions that Slote, following John Rawls, calls a “reflective equilibrium.”⁴ Slote declares his preference for the equilibrium achieved by his version of virtue ethics. He develops this theory in competition with the nearest rival for his affections, utilitarianism. In explaining his preference, he maintains: “No moral view can do without (appeals to) intuition altogether, and the real question, then – as between, for example, utilitarianism and virtue ethics – is whether the relatively greater systematic unity that arises out of an appeal to fewer intuitions can justify the unintuitive consequences that arise from leaving so many other intuitions to the side.”⁵

Slote prefers to retain more intuitions at the price of less unity, but this is not the whole story. He denies that the intuitions to which utilitarians appeal are sufficient to decide among the varieties of utilitarianism. In his judgment the under-determination is fatal for utilitarianism as such. The weakness, if indeed it exists, is due to the dismissal by utilitarians of too many intuitions. There are not enough left to determine which of the forms of utilitarianism is correct and perhaps not enough to judge that utilitarianism in any form is correct.

With a theory based on, and balanced with, intuitions to guide her, an ethical theorist can then seek more subtle observations to test and revise the theory. They will take the form of what we may now call critical intuitions. As Slote asks: “Why should we hold that intuitive but critical moral thinking has already yielded up its full harvest of moral solutions or abstractly conceived moral questions?”⁶ The theorist is likely to find new intuitions and reasons for reinterpreting old ones in process of dropping inconvenient ones. She may then have to reconsider her theoretical principles and seek a new equilibrium between critical or screened intuitions and considered principles. Here the example of science is heartening. Chemistry took off after the work of Boyle, Lavoisier, and Dalton in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because scientists now had available well grounded theories from which to generate hypotheses to guide their search for new phenomena. Slote may hope that ethical inquiry will take off in like manner, if aretaic concepts replace deontic concepts.

2. Gaps in Slote's Approach

In what remains, I will trace the consequences of the indeterminacy in Slote's concept of common-sense intuitions and then his failure provide a metaphysical and psychological foundation for his normative claims. I will argue that this omits an essential feature of scientific procedure and as a consequence makes no provision for the kind of theoretic controls on observation that work so well in science. I will complete the discussion by sketching the foundation that is needed for an adequate account of virtue, arguing that the nature of this foundation counts against the possibility of an independent virtue ethic.

Slote remarks that he makes no attempt to "analyze the ethical notions or terms we have been working with."⁷ He thus does not provide a psychological or epistemological analysis of the process of intuition and gives us no reason to trust some intuitions over others. This means that there is no reliable body of intuitions available to justify his theory. Let us review a few details of his approach.

Slote needs a reliable method for collecting intuitions from trustworthy sources. However, he does not call for an empirical survey of the opinions of everyone or of all reflective people, nor does he explain how we might go about conducting such a survey. He provides no criteria by which we might identify who is reflective and which of their opinions are considered ones. He simply declares *ex cathedra* what the deliverances of common sense are. When his theory does not rest easy with certain intuitions, he dismisses these as spurious, leaving a remainder that can be reconciled with his theory. The only reason he advances for his choices is the strength of his own intuitions reported in what might be called the confessional mode: "my own tendency, at this point, is to agree with common-sense virtue-ethical judgment in these matters and disagree, therefore, with utilitarianism," "I find myself unable to go along with the utilitarian view of things," and "[I am left] with a preference for [the balance between theory and intuition in his virtue-ethics]."⁸ To interpret this practice as generously as possible, where Slote says "it seems to me" or "I find it plausible," he is inviting us to accept that he is representative of the reference group with which we ourselves identify and that his judgments are therefore commonsensical in a sense that we accept. His claims may be construed as invitations to us to confirm that ethical matters seem the same to us as they do to him and that he is accurately reporting the shared sense of our group. We must then be supposed to take our acquiescence as evidence that he is speaking for our common sense and that there is truth in what he says.

If Slote, like Aristotle, were using common sense heuristically, he would not need to worry about confirmation by the opinions of others. It would not be important whether he had accurately ascertained the deliverances of

common sense, only whether whatever he took to be common sense had led him to examine the relevant facts in the world and confirmed that common sense was correct about them. However, he does not point to facts about moral choices that are informed by a viable theory of human nature either to explain which parts of common sense he accepts or to confirm the truth of his ethical claims. His failure to do so, and the arguments in which he appeals exclusively to common sense and its supposed intuitions, show that he assigns more authority to common sense and intuition than is warranted by a merely heuristic use.

The defects which Slote finds in common-sense thinking – complexity, asymmetry, and incoherence – are flaws of theory. They may be reduced by discarding some intuitions which a theory cannot accommodate, but this opens the possibility that a theory that is more effective in practice might be obtained by a different selection of intuitions. Hence, a theorist who seeks a practical theory ought to concern herself with the content, nature, and origins of the common sense of her community or reference group. Slote, however, says that it is not his aim to correct practical common sense. He is willing to let it be and not try to change people's everyday thinking or ways of living, perhaps not even his own. He is interested in perfecting his theory by rationalizing some common-sense intuitions, discarding many, and reinterpreting the rest in terms of a theory tailored to display theoretical perfections. This denies him the critical test for his theory to which other common-sense philosophers, and moralists in general, appeal, the pragmatic test or the test of practice. A good theory is one that works in practice, one that leads to a successful resolution of personal and social quandaries. Unless we put our theories into practice, we will not have an adequate range of intuitions to justify them in the face of alternative theories. An ethical theorist who eschews exoteric questions about how her ethical theory works in practice is in no position to settle esoteric questions about the validity of the theory as a theory. A theorist who refuses to address practical problems does not have the data necessary to resolve theoretical ones. The ultimate test of an ethical theory is whether people live better if they live by it. By staying out of the arena of applied ethics, Slote provides us no sufficient reason to choose his theory over others of comparable theoretical perfection and intuitive base, and no reason to want any theory at all for anything other than intellectual delectation.

What is highlighted by the foregoing discussion, and obvious in any case, is that there are intuitions and intuitions, among the candidates for evidence for ethical theory. Genuine intuitions are strewn amidst spurious ones, and it is not possible to tell which are genuine just by looking at them. Subjective feelings of confidence, which we express by locutions such as "it seems to me that" and "if you can't believe this, you can't believe anything," are not per-

suasive to others whose flux of feelings differ from ours, or even for ourselves when we view things now in one light and now in another. Yet common-sense philosophers such as Slote provide no criterion to glean the genuine from the spurious.

Before we plunge for commonsensism, it is imperative to examine the relation between theories and intuitions. To tie this point down, let us return to our consideration of the analogy between ethical theory and science. The analogy should teach us that our theories have as much to do with our discrimination between genuine and spurious intuitions as our intuitions have to do with our discrimination between sound and unsound theories. We need to discard or reinterpret our intuitions when they do not fit our theories as often as we need to revise our theories to fit our intuitions.

As we have noted, Slote treats intuitions as analogous to empirical observations in science. While his discussion of the quasi-scientific approach to ethical theory building is sketchy, he does refer to the steps discussed above. What is missing is any analogue of the scientist's use of a theory about the fundamental nature of things to determine the shape of the special theory he erects to account for his body of specific phenomena. Lavoisier's explanation of combustion, identification of oxygen, and dismissal of phlogiston were not accepted by the scientific community solely on the basis of a few dramatic experiments. They were accepted because they also helped to show how chemistry could be reconciled with physics, which had taken Newtonian form.

In his methodological passages, Slote says nothing about the integration of ethical theory with a general theory of value or, even more broadly and fundamentally, a theory of human nature and a metaphysical scheme within which the theory of human nature in turn is embedded. As far as he explains, ethical theorists merely seek an equilibrium between a system of well-formed ethical propositions and an inventory of critical intuitions. They do not restrict themselves to systems that are coherent with some comprehensive theory of the nature of things. Different assumptions sanction different intuitions and lead us to interpret them in different ways. Different interpretations in turn generate different ethical theories.

In tracing the analogies between ethical and scientific theorizing, we should keep in mind the theory-ladenness of observations in science. This should lead us to expect ethical convictions to shape intuitions in a radical way. A quick glance at familiar facts confirms this expectation. When we move from the pre-critical state of mind of everyday life to the critical state of mind of an ethical theorist, we find that our intuitions change. Surely everyone who has reflected has experienced the shift in gestalt. This means that intuitions do not simply confirm or disconfirm theories; the adoption of plausible theories

causes intuitions to change. Hence, we need special rational procedures for utilizing intuitions to test ethical theories analogous to the procedures for utilizing empirical observations to test scientific theories; and we should not expect the procedures in ethics to be any more linear and unidirectional than the procedures in science. They must include ways of utilizing theories to assess intuitions, as well as intuitions to assess theories.

Earlier I characterized intuition as a looking at and looking into. Even where the objects of intuition are provided by the senses, the looking at is intellectual rather than sensuous and hence subject to the influence of the deposit of theories in the back of a viewer's mind. To work the data of the senses into a form where they bear logically on a theory, it is not enough to look at an object, event, action, state of affairs, or trait of character. We must read off information about it from it. We must articulate the data in some language that is semantically and syntactically related to the language used in the theory. At the very outset we must subsume the data under categories and form judgments in terms of the relations that obtain among things of those categories. Categories come in sets. We must use either A, B, C, . . . or P, Q, R, . . ., but not both. We may judge that A is B, or A is not B, but not that A is P, or A is not P. Since sets of categories go with specific theories, the choice of categories constrains the choice of theories and, conversely, commitment to a theory confines us to a set of categories and so intimately affects what we report that we have observed.

The common sense or shared opinions of different groups of different times and places supplies different sets of concepts with which to interpret experience and evaluate actions, motives, and persons. This is true even where the same or cognate names are used for cognate concepts, for example, *arete*, *virtu* and virtue as names in different languages for certain traits of character. To see such facts as this, we have to stand outside of a culture and pass judgment on what passes as common sense in it.

Slote acknowledges this casually. He takes for granted that he is equipped to do so when he criticizes the Victorian notion of morality: "In the light of what seems to be a genuinely deeper understanding of human psychological phenomena, a totally self-sacrificing, selfless individual would automatically be suspected of masochism, of being burdened by inordinate and misdirected guilt, and one really doesn't, therefore, have to be a Nietzsche or an Ayn Rand nowadays to take such a view of (Victorian highminded) selflessness."⁹ Slote observes that it is hard for us to share Kierkegaard's admiration of Abraham because we do not accept the framework of Kierkegaard and his contemporaries.¹⁰ He refers to "ordinary Greek thought" in questioning whether Aristotle is commonsensical on a particular point.¹¹ And he remarks that only recently have we come to condemn slavery, and only very

recently inequality of job opportunities for women.¹² Thus, he recognizes that common sense is often wrong even when it really is common or shared by an entire society.

In an age of broadcast ideas, even the least educated person is exposed to a variety of ethical concepts from a plethora of moral traditions. The reflective person familiar with a broad range of examples provided by anthropology and history is in a position to reject whole bodies of common sense as less satisfactory than other bodies. This applies to the common sense of her own group. We have the option of rejecting our community's way of looking at the world for that of other communities. Thus in the twentieth century General Patton chose to live by the code of Achilles, and Mother Teresa by that of the medieval saint. Some people exchange their Western ways for the ways of Buddhism or Islam. Personally, the genial humanism of eighteenth-century Hume appeals to me more than the stern moralism of nineteenth-century Kant or the calculative contractarianism of twentieth-century Rawls.

Moreover, the community with which a rational person identifies need not be an actual one, present or past, but an ideal one informed by an ideally perfected ethic. By that I do not mean an ethic for ideal or superhuman persons, which Slote rightfully rejects, but an ethic ideal for people as they are or and ethic that will help them become what they could be.¹³ Thus we find non-violent vegetarian communitarian pacifists in our midst, and some people even dare to live by the Law of Love.

3. The Metaphysics of Virtue

Presumably ethical theory is about an aspect of reality from which the social sciences abstract. What the aspect may be for Slote is suggested by the way he characterizes the key concepts of his own theory, virtue and personal good. Virtues are admirable traits of persons and personal goods are things that are desirable for them. Slote does not state whether he thinks that "virtue" refers to things insofar as they are admired or whether he takes admiration only as a criterion for the application of the term. Is something admirable because we can admire it, or do we admire it because something about it makes it admirable? This is on a par with the question, is something good because we can desire it, or do we desire it because something about it makes it good? The "able" in "admirable" and "desirable" is ambiguous. It can refer to something that can be admired or desired, or it can mean something that ought to be admired or desired, or something that would be by a properly prepared observer. The "can" sense is clearly too broad: "does" implies "can" and in point of fact someone does admire practically every trait of persons, even those that disgust most people, and someone does desire practically every

thing, including things that repel most people. Practically anything we might mention is admirable or desirable in the sense that it can be admired or desired. Slote must have one of the narrower senses of admirable and desirable in mind.

His appeal to common sense suggests that Slote takes the criteria for the application of the terms to involve admiration and desire by all or most people or reflective people. Yet this does not seem to be exactly what he has in mind. He appears to use “admirable” and “desirable” for what should be admired and desired. “The admirable” signifies a trait of a person which makes her worthy of being admired and “the desirable” signifies a feature of a thing that makes it worthy of being desired. Being admired and desired are only signs, and hardly sufficient or necessary ones, that something is admirable or desirable. They are not what the terms mean or refer to.

This does not mean that the admirable and desirable are absolute properties rather than relational ones. It does not mean that they are traits of a thing in itself rather than traits of a thing in relation to something else. For example, a trait may be worthy of admiration if it is related in a certain way to the needs or the quality of existence of the one who possesses it, or to the needs or quality of existence of people who interact with the person. The same applies to things worthy of desire. Slote appears to have this in mind in some of his statements about goods. Here some assumptions about human nature do creep into his analysis. After arguing that certain virtues are appropriate to a person’s time of life, social circumstances, or features of her world as contrasted to other possible worlds, Slote asserts that “friendship and love, even if not good for every possible being or person, may none the less be good *for men and women*, personal goods relative to *our sort of nature*.”¹⁴ He goes on to say: “Moreover, since what is (a personal) good for humans is supposedly a function of basic human needs (desires), such mankind-relativity of goods . . . runs no risk of the sort of relativism which, by making values depend on choice or belief, makes them seem subjective. What is not absolute may none the less be objective.”¹⁵ From these remarks, I infer that Slote believes that ethical theory should provide a systematic description of what is objectively valuable to people, given human nature and the human condition. Yet he disappoints, for he provides no descriptions of either the valuable or human nature, nor does he indicate where he would look to find such descriptions.

I believe that the touchstone for admirable and desirable human qualities and possessions is to be found in their contribution to a satisfactory existence. An adequate conception of a satisfactory existence must be derived from experience with alternative ways of living. The conceptions that our experiences and those of other persons suggest must be refined by interpreting

the experiences in terms of all that the sciences have to tell us about human nature and the human condition. The results of the sciences in turn have to be understood in terms of a coherent metaphysical framework before we can find the final meaning of axiological or any other kind of concepts.

The metaphysics of virtue is crucial for the discussion of virtue ethics. Under my conception, the genus of virtue is acquired disposition. Its differentia is excellence. Virtues are excellent acquired dispositions in human beings. They are excellent because they are actualized in activities that are good in themselves or contribute to good ends. Thus virtues are admirable, by which I mean that they should be admired, precisely because they tend to produce good actions.

Aristotle observes that we know potentialities in a person through their actualizations.¹⁶ I would add that we know them as excellences because we see that the activities in which they are actualized are good. We know that a person is just when he acts justly and takes pleasure in just actions, and we know that justice is a virtue because just actions are essential to community and human flourishing. This means that we must have a criterion for just acts before we can understand justice as a trait of character and appreciate it as a virtue. This metaphysical and epistemological truth throws us right back into the dispute among utilitarians and Kantians, as well as contractarians and other ethical theorists, about the right and the good. What is good about just acts, their utility, conformity to moral law, or place in the social contract?

We should note that some people consider excellences of character as good independent of the good actions they produce. Aristotle himself hints at this when he says “the virtue of a human being [is] the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well.”¹⁷ This suggests that being good is distinct from performing functions well, since the state precedes the performance and the performance may be blocked. Thus, a deep analysis of virtue might convince us that its presence in this universe is an intrinsic good over and above the good actions it disposes a virtuous person to perform. If that is the case, virtue ethics would be a coeval department with consequential and deontological ethics as part of a system that embraces all of the virtuous, the good, and the right as equi-primordial, though it would not displace them as the foundation for ethics as such.

4. A Last Word from Aristotle

Both the value and the proof of an ethical theory are to be found in its application to practice. For this reason it is reasonable to seek out the advice of the wise about how to live. Since Aristotle was the wisest of us all, it would be wonderful if we could consult with him about our own lives, though even if

we could, we should not take his word for things, as he would be the first to advise. We know more than Aristotle, since we know Aristotle and more.

If Aristotle had known what we know, the following is what he might have said about the matters we have discussed.

I had the good fortune to have been raised well. I had fine parents who attended to my moral training and I spent my early years in well-governed, if provincial, Greek cities. I was exposed to cultivated people such as the nobles at the court of Amyntas. I was educated by the greatest philosopher at the very best school in the most civilized city of the world. These influences instilled in me the moral and intellectual virtues at a high level. They developed in me the pivotal virtue of practical wisdom.

Except for a few times of hardship and danger, I enjoyed good fortune throughout my days on earth. I lived a long and variegated life in which I had ample scope to exercise virtue to the fullest. My personal experience and my inquiries in association with the best minds of the day enabled me to see clearly what was best for myself. They enabled me to see better than most what is best for humanity at large.

I not only acknowledge, I proclaim in piety and gratitude that I acquired many of my ideas from the philosophers, poets, statesmen, and other distinguished men of a large number of Greek polities. I learned much from their traditions and practices. Whatever I took from others, however, I did my thinking for myself. I examined the beliefs of others critically and I modified, supplemented, and integrated them in my own distinctive way. The proof of my theories, therefore, lies in the nature of things. It lies in human nature and the enduring features of the human condition, not in the way my theories originated. My ideas are correct because they are true to reality, as a qualified observer can see for himself, not because I was introduced to them by people whose insight had penetrated some distance into the nature of things.

I had to reject many of the ideas urged on me because they were patently false in view of the facts. I had to see the truth of the remainder for myself. Otherwise I would not have known which ideas to keep and which to reject, whom to listen to and whom to ignore, whom to believe and whom to refute.

From what I hear, the human virtues in your age have been sadly neglected both in theory and in practice. In saying this, however, I do not imply that ethical theory is bankrupt in its analysis of the right and the good. After all, the concept of virtue cannot be defined without the concept of the right or, as I would prefer to put it, of the noble and just. It certainly cannot be defined independently of the concept of the good, since virtues are dispositions and both the nature and the value of dispositions depend on the activities that actualize them. Particular virtues in a person can be identified only by observing how he acts. Judging how he acts presupposes a criterion for virtuous

actions apart from the fact that they are acts of a virtuous person. Thus, both to understand the virtues and to ascertain their presence in individual people, we must bring facts of the matter to bear. We must determine the role of the virtues in the good life in the good society, which is a matter of scientific observation.

In comparing the foundations of my ethical system with those of the systems of you moderns, I freely concede that there are facts of which you are aware and I am not, since 2,000 years of human experience are available to you for scrutiny. Tell me about these facts and I will revise my views. But please do not babble about the authority of the many or even of the cultivated or the wise. And drop that ridiculous oxymoron, “common sense.”

Notes

1. Michael Slote, *From Morality to Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 67.
2. I rely on the account of M. Daumas, “The Birth of Modern Chemistry,” in René Taton (ed.), *The Beginnings of Modern Science*, trans. A.J. Pomerans (New York: Basic Books, 1964). I also utilize George Gayle’s analysis in *Theory of Science* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), Ch. 5.
3. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue*, p. 171.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 18 and 106.
10. Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 94.
11. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue*, p. 128.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
13. Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, p. 131.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 415a16–23.
17. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a23.