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## Virtue Ethics and Modern Society—A Response to the Thesis of the Modern Predicament of Virtue Ethics

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**Abstract** The revival of modern Western virtue ethics presents the question of whether or not virtue ethics is appropriate for modern society. Ethicists believe that virtue ethics came from traditional society, to which it conforms so well. The appearance of the market economy and a utilitarian spirit, together with society's diversification, is a sign that modern society has arrived. This also indicates a transformation in the moral spirit. But modern society has not made virtues less important, and even as modern life has become more diversified, rule-following ethics have taken on even greater importance. Modern ethical life is still the ethical life of individuals whose self-identity contains the identity of moral spirit, and virtues have a very important influence on the self-identical moral characters. Furthermore, modern society, which is centered around utilitarianism, makes it apparent that rules themselves are far from being adequate and virtues are important. Virtues are a moral resource for modern people to resist modern evils.

**Keywords** virtue, ethics, modern society

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### 1

In the history of ethics, both Confucian ethic thoughts in the Chinese tradition and ancient Greek ethic thoughts with Aristotle as the representative are virtue ethics. In modern times, utilitarianism, represented by Bentham and Mill, and deontology, represented by Kant, have come into being in the West, and over a considerable amount of time, the tradition of virtue ethics has been in decline. In

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the 1950s, in an epoch-making article “Modern Ethical Philosophy,” G. E. M. Anscombe, a British ethicist, challenged utilitarianism and deontology from the perspective of Aristotelian virtue ethics. This was regarded as a sign of the revival of virtue ethics. Afterwards, notably in the 1980s, many ethicists developed virtue ethics from theoretical as well as historical aspects, igniting its momentous resurrection. Nonetheless, people have cast a suspicious eye on the resurrection, that is to say, they doubt whether or not theorists could revive the virtue ethics that has already degenerated. They believe that the transformation of virtue ethics to utilitarianism and the normative ethics of deontology indicates that virtue ethics are not appropriate for modern society, and it faces the dilemma of modern society’s changing social structure.

It is not a new view that virtue ethics face a dilemma in modern society. This view comes from MacIntyre. I will hereby discuss his theory and compare it to relevant arguments by Chinese scholars. Unlike other ethicists, MacIntyre is not only an ethical theorist but also an expert in the history of ethics. Analyzing the social history of virtues, MacIntyre proposes that we are in an after virtue age. The title of the book, *After Virtue*, according to the author’s explanation, has meanings on two levels: First, modern society is in an after virtue age, ancient, traditional Aristotelian virtues or traditional virtues represented by Aristotle, inevitably disappeared; second, this title indicates the search for the history of virtues. That is to say, the author must search for virtues in a society that has lost traditional virtues.

According to MacIntyre, virtue ethics was born in traditional society, which does not share a similar social structure with modern society. Traditional society is one characterized by hierarchy and status, wherein everyone has their status and mission. For instance, a noble is as he is at birth, and the same holds true to a chieftain, a king, a shepherd, etc. As a result, the established status of a person determines his duty, responsibility, and mission, which then shapes his character and virtue. At the same time, in traditional society, an individual not only spends his entire life engaging in one type of work, but so, too, are successive generations. These are the social conditions which are used to evaluate a person. The appearance of modern society dissolved these conditions, as a result of which the certainty of self disappeared. MacIntyre maintains, “the democratized self which has no necessary social content and no necessary social identity can then be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it is in and for self nothing...the self is no more than ‘a peg’ on which the clothes of the role are hung” (MacIntyre 1984, p. 32).

MacIntyre points out that in traditional society, people identified themselves by their membership in different social groups. One can be a member of a family, someone’s brother, a member of a village, and the like. He stresses that these are by no means tentative characteristics, nor do they require removing “the

discovering of authentic self,” but “part of my substance, defining partially at least and sometimes wholly my obligation and my duties” (Ibid.). Modern society is a contract society identified by contracts, or a society of equality whence people have status of freedom. Meanwhile, social members are not born with fixed careers; rather, their professions vary at any given time. Consequently, in such a modern society, the normative demands from their profession rather than those on individual virtue become the focus of ethical studies. It is in this sense that duty or responsibility becomes the key concept of modern ethics. Therefore, to resurrect virtue ethics, i.e., expanding the mode of normative ethics<sup>1</sup> appropriate for traditional society to modern society will encounter difficulties or become out-dated.

Virtue ethics focuses on what kind of person one may become or one should become, putting the subject rather than his acts at the center of its theory. Modern normative ethics, on the other hand, mainly concerns acts, namely, what acts are good. While utilitarianism stresses the moral value of actions from their consequences, deontology evaluates the value of actions based on the principles or rules they should follow. According to ethicists like MacIntyre, traditional virtue ethics cares about human character and virtue is not unrelated to determinate status and circumstances in traditional society. At the same time, the traditional self is a concept that integrates birth, life, and death on the whole, and in human life it is the search for good in the whole of life wherein virtue plays a key role. In modern society, individual life is no longer considered as part of a whole, as in traditional society. On the contrary, it has been taken apart and self has degenerated into separate fields with different fragments exerting different demands on character. Virtue through life has lost its living space. Such a degeneration of the holistic self in modern society has rendered the concept of Aristotelian virtue inactive.

MacIntyre also recalls the process in which traditional Western virtue theories represented by Aristotle declined. Since modern times, along with the establishment of the relationship between capitalism and the market economy, utility has become central to modern society. The market economy seeks the

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<sup>1</sup> “Normative ethics” was put forward by meta-ethicists in the tradition of analytic philosophy. Ethicists or ethic theorists, before the appearance of meta-ethics who, when studying or writing about ethics, circled around the making of value judgments in morality and advocated some moral values. According to them, this was the ethical study or work on a practical level. Meta-ethicists, on the other hand, carry out their investigation on a philosophical level concerned only with the analysis of ethical concepts and judgments, with the logical analysis of ethical sentences without involving value judgments. In other words, the concept of normative ethics is used to differentiate between meta-ethics and the work of previous ethicists. It is in this sense that virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and ethics of deontology are placed in the category of normative ethics. This article makes use of the concept of “normative ethics” in this sense.

biggest profits, hence the pursuit of utility or material profits, and financial profits are of overwhelming significance. In market economies, all relationships, even old and tender familial relationships, have been inscribed with money. It is in such a social setting that utilitarianism has become rampant, squeezing virtue out from the center to the periphery. MacIntyre points out that the concept of “utility” was born in contemporary times. Profound changes in contemporary productive relationships and the appearance of the commodity and market economies made it possible for the pursuit of utility to dominate. When people treat utility as a supreme principle for action and the canon for judgment between good and evil, virtue degenerates into whether or not it can have utility. Franklin’s view of virtue is a paragon.

Modern deontology is represented by Kant. It is a normative deontology with formal universality, concerned with form, not content. It is MacIntyre’s belief that this kind of deontology is indicative of the decline of virtue. To understand “What you should do” merely as formal categorical imperatives, we must consider moral rules or norms in previous social structures which, however, have disappeared along with changes in modern society. The original moral setting does not exist anymore, but the virtuous imperatives have survived, which, consequently, seem empty.<sup>2</sup>

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## 2

When virtue and virtue ethics only have significance in traditional society, efforts by ethicists to resurrect virtue ethics in modern society are simply a theoretical game without any practical meaning. When it is only the empty wish of ethicists, theorists are engaged in a battle like Don Quixote’s windmill. As a matter of fact, even MacIntyre himself holds a pessimistic attitude toward the resurrection of virtue ethics in modern society, contesting that it can only be realized in communities like the cleric educational center set up by Benedict. A communitarianist as he is, MacIntyre is also a virtue ethicist who, as a result, is thought to be advocating a kind of virtue ethics relevant to ancient communities which will surely fail. Does such failure however reveal the general trouble

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<sup>2</sup> In effect, it is a misunderstanding by thinkers including Hegel that Kantian ethics includes only formal categorical imperatives. Kantian ethics involves not only formal categorical imperatives, but also substantial categorical imperatives, that are human beings are not only means but ends. When people take two categorical imperatives apart and concentrate only on the former, it is natural to find it empty. What must be seen is that the categorical imperative that takes human beings to be ends does not appear as the result of the disappearance of social construction, wherein ancient virtue was born. On the contrary, it is the embodiment of social construction in modern society. Therefore, we cannot completely attribute Kant’s categorical imperatives to the disappearance of the ancient environment.

plaguing virtue ethics, or simply indicate the modern trouble that ancient virtue ethics is suffering?

The degeneration of ancient communities and the rise of normative ethics as utilitarianism and deontology can be taken as the most important alteration in social and ethical thought in the process of the transformation from the traditional society to the modern one. Along with the degeneration of ancient communities and the coming force of modern society, the characteristics of self have changed significantly, that is the fragmentation of the modern self. Such a transition makes MacIntyre think that the basis for virtue ethics has vanished. Hence, the first question is whether or not people still retain virtues if traditional communities or the system of status and hierarchy no longer exists. It is our contention that traditional communities are no longer around does not mean people lack virtues. Since virtues are related to a certain social community or social culture, on which it depends to exist and survive, as long as people still live in a certain social structure, virtues will, whether in a traditional community or not, be the link for maintaining interpersonal relationships. In other words, since virtues are socially and culturally relative, modern society should, like its ancient counterpart, have corresponding virtue ethics appropriate for the modern social structure. The assertion that only ancient society (in the eyes of some communitarians, the idea of community has another significance, that is, society) has corresponding virtues does not conform to general logical reasoning.

A more important question concerning whether or not virtue ethics agrees with modern society is about the modern self, viz., the fragmentation of self. We must accept the fact that the characteristics of the modern self have changed. Have such changes nevertheless deprived self of its identity? Or, does the fragmented self still contain self-identity? Even so, is there an internal relationship between identity and virtue? Without this internal relationship, we cannot reveal the meaning and value that traditional virtue has for the self. To put it in other words, when the modern self is really ghostlike and without ethical value, virtues loses the ontological precondition for its existence in modern society.

It should be noted that MacIntyre's fragmented self refers to division in social life. The most important division that occurs for the individual from modern life is the separation of the public sphere from that of the private. In traditional society, due to the relatively narrow social sphere, inconvenient transportation, and underdeveloped forms of communication, people in a geographical community lived in a society consisting of acquaintances, in which there was virtually no private space. Even in the city-states of ancient Greece, people lived among acquaintances as such. Industrialization and urbanization in modern society has changed people's living state and life space. What has appeared along with urbanization is a society of strangers. The biggest difference between strangers and acquaintances lies in the fact that as far as a stranger is concerned,

he has no right to interfere in anything of mine. In this way, the modern city and modern industry have allowed strangers to emerge. Meanwhile, all the fields related to the public have developed, e.g. different professional groups and their life. Public spheres such as political activities, space for public opinion, networking, and public spaces etc., developed, wherein everyone must follow relevant social norms or moral standards. Such a separation of spheres has highlighted differences in social circumstances between modern virtue and its ancient counterpart, and make the professional morals in the professional sphere and the public morals in the public sphere as contrasted with the private morals in the private sphere emerge. Nonetheless, even though this has led to differences between ancient people and modern people on moral life, it does not mean that virtues have dissolved because of the division that has occurred in modern life and only universal ethical principles are permitted. As far as modern individuals are concerned, whether in the public life or private one, virtues are required. In modern society's market economy, due to the fragmentation of interpersonal interests, the possibility of conflict is far greater than that within a family or even a clan, and hence the virtue of righteousness is of greater importance than in ancient society. In other words, we need, all the more, righteous people, those with lofty ideas who hold good and justice in society higher than anything else.

In the same vein, in different professional fields, duty and responsibility or rule-following ethics are found in the center. Be that as it may, as far as an individual is concerned, when he does not change these duties and rules into his internal demands, but treats them as the external demands of professional duties, there is no virtue whatsoever. The difference between virtues and external rules lies in that the former is the manifestation of an individual's character whereas the latter is no more than an instrument to reach a goal. Such is the case wherein both professional moral demands and professional techniques are needed to fulfill a professional task for which the former two are means. But, for an individual, can we regard duty and responsibility as necessary means for him to fulfill a duty? If so, people would not be able to follow the bondage of these duties and responsibilities or rules where profits from professional life can be made without their stipulation; instead, they may seek these interests through more convenient and lucrative means. Such means however would damage people's professional lives, negatively affecting or even ruining their careers. The *Sanlu* 三鹿 (a trade mark in China) powdered-milk case is one such instance for people to ponder. Virtue means to treat duty and responsibility as internal requirements, making them key factors in one's moral character so that one cannot help doing so, and it is not a means to profit from external interests. In this sense, any modern profession, as such, cannot be without virtue. Additionally, unlike those virtues (e.g., courage, generosity, etc.) conceived of by Aristotle from the perspective of individual life, virtues in modern society have a closer

bearing on duty and are more diverse. This is to say that professions appeal to professional virtues. As a result, it is not in a general sense that virtue ethics has suffered in modern society. The so-called trouble is only meaningful in the sense of traditional virtues. People should not believe that Aristotelian virtue ethics hold no significance for modern life (this is an issue deserving of more detailed discussion, which cannot be done here).

What is more, the separation of spheres in modern society refers to neither the fragmentation of the self's personality nor the degeneration of the identity of the self. Seen from the segmentation of the external life, the modern self seems to have degenerated. The individual has no self, his essence is not defined by himself, and the self becomes a hanger for a role. The case, seemingly, is not so however when we see from the point of view of the individual mental and psychic identities such as mental identity, moral identity, and identity of tendency to act. As is demonstrated by developmental psychology, the identity of an individual's mental self comes from one's childhood experience, and throughout the development of the behavioral subject, his ability to speak and act takes form and develops, building some consistency. Self qua subject keeps its own identity during separation from and interaction with other objects. As Harbermas puts it, self may keep his identity when interconnecting with others and, in all the games relevant to roles, express that kind of relationship akin to others yet absolutely different hence ambivalent. What's more, as such a person—he incorporates the inner interaction into some unquestioned complex mood of life history—he makes himself appear (Harbermas 1989, p. 113). We do not mean to say, of course, that a person will never change his mentality or moral tendency to act etc., but we mean that there will be changes, and there is consistency which, as it were, enables us to recognize from mental and moral identity as well as physical identity the same person from several years ago, decades ago, or even earlier. The mentality and moral tendency to act is an important facet of one's identity. We cannot deny that a person, from his youth into middle age and to old age, has personal identity. Indeed, most people have relatively steady personalities, albeit some have alternating personalities. Nevertheless, even this alternation does not come from large everyday changes and, even if it were a great change, is the result of gradual and quantitative changes, or a significant change occurs after some juncture has been reached. In other words, it is the change, in lieu of the fragmentation, of personality.

The main aspect of mental identity is individual moral identity, the root of which is virtue or the moral character of a person. Character is the moral life of a person, a layer above his natural one. As is pointed out by Aristotle, virtue is cultivated from a person's habit to act or gradually formed in his life experiences, and consequently, becomes a person's second life. Mencius contends that there is a slight difference between human and animals, and it is moral character. Human



essence is not one's nature, but his social attributes, of which morality is the most essential. To put it in another way, human identity in moral character embodies our particularity as human beings. Nonetheless, while this particularity leads to generic identification between others and us, it differentiates us from others qua a moral self. As Harbermas puts it, in self identity, some paradoxical relationship is revealed: As a common one, and self is the same as all the others; as an individual however, he is by no means identical with any other individual (Ibid., pp. 93–94). Because of different psychological processes and life experiences, an individual's moral characteristics which are formed by his long-term habits may differ. As far as the self is concerned, self identity maintains consistent individual tendencies to act so that we can expect consistency from an individual due to his life experiences. In other words, when someone acts a certain way under some circumstance, it stands to reason that he would still do the same under similar circumstances. Take, for example, a brave man. It is more than that his life experiences have demonstrated his bravery. We can also expect his behavior to be the same in the future. This is to say that a righteous man would behave righteously, a brave man bravely, a moderate man moderately, a benevolent man kindly, and so on. Aristotle repeatedly mentions what a brave man would do and what a righteous man would do, referring to virtuous agents in the sense of self-identity. When a person is not worthy of expectation with regard to virtue, it means that people do not know how to communicate, cooperate, or co-exist with him. Individual self-identity is related to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships and the plan and expectations of human life.<sup>3</sup>

Will a man of virtue disappear as the result of the fragmentation of life in modern society? Whether in ancient society or modern society, there is always the virtuous self or the self lacking of virtue, and this will not change as modern living conditions vary. Self-identity and moral identity are cultivated from mental experiences and moral tendencies to act. Both in ancient times and in modern times, individuals exist and develop in communication with the external social circumstances and others. Based on this, if the fragmentation of modern life leads to the fragmentation of self, it only means that there is no standard for individuating individual self in society. In effect, none can be found to have been totally lost his moral self in any society. Self-identity is a unique psychological, moral and spiritual basis of individuals qua individuals. In self-identity, moral identity or the identity of moral character is of much

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, we by no means deny that Aristotelian virtue ethics includes the idea that slaves are not men, but this also does not conform to Aristotle's view that treating virtue as coming from the inner construction of humanity and human praxis. Pointing to this, we do not deny that virtue ethics discuss virtue in a general sense of humanity.

importance.

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### 3

The second important issue presented by MacIntyre is: Modern society is utility centered whereas traditional society is virtue centered. Virtue has been marginalized in modern society. According to MacIntyre, we are now in an after virtue “dark age.” What this view holds is not that there is no virtue in modern society, but that virtue is no longer important in modern society. In Aristotelian ethics, happiness centers around virtue; in utilitarianist ethics, on the other hand, happiness takes utility as its core or treats the utilitarian consequence of action as the standard for judgment. MacIntyre is correct in this sense when judging the place of virtue in modern society. Others also contend, on the basis of rule-following ethics represented by deontology, that modern society puts rules in the center and hence virtue at the periphery of moral life. The following two views deserve our notice: The first is judging the marginalization of virtue as a fact; the second is taking it as value identification. It is MacIntyre’s position to make a judgment on the fact, ignoring value identification. His opinion with respect to the circumstances of virtue in modern society fails to lead him to the conclusion that virtue is not important in modern society. Just the opposite, he argues that we need to seek virtue because we have lost ancient Aristotelian virtue. As has been stated before, the pun, i.e., “after virtue” used by MacIntyre which contains the dual meaning of after virtue and searching for virtue demonstrates this. Where, nevertheless, should we cultivate or find virtue? Maybe the too much element of ancient Aristotelian complex in MacIntyre has inscribed in him the idea that authentic virtue can by no means be cultivated in modern society. A considerable number of modern Western ethicists however do not agree with him. For instance, Max L. Stackhouse, the famous ethicist once told me, even though we do not have Aristotelian ancient virtue, we still have virtue!

Of course, adherents to the ethical doctrine based on rules who affirm virtues from value considerations do not deny that virtue is needed in modern society. They simply believe that virtue is less important. What cannot be denied is that there is a great difference between ancient or traditional social life and modern one regarding the significance of virtue. The development of modern material civilization and the abundance of material life have changed the appearance of material life in traditional society. The upsurge in material wealth is the origin as well as product of the utilitarian pursuit. The conversion of human spiritual value has greatly improved the living conditions of modern man and should be commended for this. Nonetheless, the loss of the central status of virtues has also

brought about problems such as the alienation and money-orientation of interpersonal relationships, damage brought to human beings camouflaged by the neutrality of technological value, the massacre of Jews in World War II, to name just a few. On this issue, I agree with MacIntyre's words, namely that history has its merits and faults, so we should not stop thinking about what we have lost when celebrating what has been given to us by progress. Needless to say, historical changes have led to a great change in status of virtue in human life, but we cannot claim that virtue has become less important because it has no place in modern society. It is just the opposite. The evils that have happened in modern society are unprecedented and unanticipated for our ancestors, demonstrating how necessary virtue is for modern society. Maybe utilitarian pursuit in modern society has produced many morally indifferent individuals or even evil ones, and has greatly degraded moral standards in modern society. It does not mean however that we no longer need virtue or virtue is no longer appropriate for modern society. If this is the plight, we should admit that it is the plight of modern man in lieu of virtue.

Virtues are necessarily important to the continuing existence of mankind and to the continuing development of human civilization. Can we say that it is enough for modern society to merely have rules? Is it worthy of our concern that virtue is in the periphery? Undoubtedly, virtues in modern society are very different from that in ancient society. We thus cannot return to the age of Confucius or Aristotle. Being unable to renew the exact Confucian or Aristotelian virtue notwithstanding, we cannot claim that it is dispensable. The emergence of professional life, urban life and technological life has considerably changed the human environment, further reinforcing the need for rules. Rules nevertheless cannot replace virtues in people's social and moral lives. Rather than a kind of elusive mental state, virtue is the inner character of a moral self. What is more, utilitarian pursuit in modern society has changed the direction of human pursuit for value and people's attitude toward material interests. The change of the human environment and values has led to changes in virtue and its enrichment. In addition, modern life centered on utility presents a greater demand for the practice of modern virtue. Modern man is confronted with stronger temptations from greed and selfish desires than his ancestors, and a society of strangers has enlarged the possibility of committing evil. The virtual cyber world has presented far greater demand for human virtue than the *shendu* 慎独 (self-discipline) stressed in traditional Chinese society. On this account, we hold that virtue, especially modern virtue, is needed in modern society; rules alone are not enough.

The last problem is: There are ethics, to wit. utilitarian ethics and ethics of deontology, that fit in with modern life, do we still need virtue ethics? The point is, can utilitarianism and deontology alone respond to the need for virtues? We do

not think so. Issues pertaining to virtue should not be categorized into that of consequence of acts or rules of acts. Utilitarian ethics interprets the moral significance of utilitarian consequence from that of acts, and deontology stresses the moral significance of rules to acts from the significance of rules. Nevertheless, they fail to answer modern society's moral demands. Virtue ethics reaffirms the importance of virtue from the significance of individual virtue, which is precisely what the aforementioned two theories lack. Seen from the perspective of ethics, morality is concerned with voluntary acts. It appeals to the voluntariness, autonomy and self-consciousness of the subject, so that it focuses on individual character and virtue rather than external rules. Acts originate from the subject or the actor, which indicates that it is insufficient to do ethical studies merely from the significance of acts. Virtue ethics embodies this particularity of virtue by taking individual virtue as the focus. Hence, on the whole, albeit the declination of traditional virtues has its origin in the transformation of social structure and social history, this is, as a matter of fact, a serious theoretical deviation to ignore virtue ethics due to the development of utilitarianism and deontology. As a matter of course, an in-depth study of virtue ethics is needed to answer this question. Only in this way can the particular value of virtue ethics be made evident, which I will examine in another article.

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