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Pleasure in Virtue: The Possibility of Willful Virtuous Behavior

Kaleb TerBush

Abstract

Virtuous behavior has often been construed as having three requisite elements: right action, done for the right reason, and also carried out with the “right feeling,” i.e. without the contrary inclination of Aristotle’s merely continent individual. Some have argued that even if the right motivating reason(s) for action might not be directly within our power to act on at will, there are a number of steps we can take in order to make ourselves more responsive to the appropriate reasons – thus giving us indirect control over which reasons we take to be compelling. However, I believe that such accounts emphasize the importance of right action done for the right reason at the expense of giving a complete account of right feeling – and are thus incomplete pictures of both virtuous behavior and the way in which it is, to a degree, within our control, rather than solely a matter of moral luck. In this paper, I elaborate on these views, arguing that if we can control our reasons-responsiveness, it follows that we can likewise influence our sensitivity to what we have reason to desire. If we can make ourselves responsive to the best reasons in support of what we ought to desire, then in doing the right action for the right reason we will presumably satisfy a desire of ours, and thus we will take pleasure in acting virtuously, without a contrary inclination to do otherwise. And, I think this is true regardless of the outcome of debates surrounding the nature of both motivation and desires. In this way, then, I argue that the necessary components for virtuous behavior – doing the right action, for the right reason, and especially with the right feeling – are truly “up to us” in large part, and not merely to chance.

1. Moral Luck and the Possibility of Virtuous Behavior

Discussing moral luck, Thomas Nagel says that:

A person may be greedy, envious, cowardly, cold, ungenerous, unkind, vain, or conceited, but behave perfectly by a monumental effort of will. To possess these vices is to be unable to help having certain feelings under certain circumstances... people are morally condemned for such qualities, and esteemed for others equally beyond control of the will: they are assessed for what they are like.

To Kant this seems incoherent because virtue is enjoined on everyone and therefore must in principle be possible for everyone. It may be easier for some than for others, but it must be possible to achieve it by making the right choices, against whatever temperamental background. One may want to have a generous spirit, or regret not having one, but it makes no sense to condemn oneself or anyone else for a quality which is not within the control of the will.¹

He goes on to point out that Kant's view "rules out moral judgement of many of the virtues and vices," as these are ostensibly out of our control. However, Nagel believes that such a conclusion is "intuitively unacceptable"; even if one becomes convinced that it is unjustifiable to judge agents based on virtues and vices supposedly not within their power to influence, such evaluative sentiments "reappear involuntarily as soon as the argument is over."

Two things become immediately clear from this discussion. The first is that, as I believe Nagel rightly points out, we have a natural tendency to praise individuals with certain character traits, dispositions, inclinations, and so on, and to blame those with others. The second is that it seems to be of the utmost importance, morally-speaking, whether or not these characteristics are in any way within our ability to control. Both Nagel and Kant seem to believe that they are not, due to certain apparent facts about the nature of both moral luck and our moral psychologies; therefore, they think that we must look elsewhere than virtue and vice when assigning moral blame or praise.

On this picture, then, those who possess unvirtuous dispositions, feelings, and attitudes – or, vices – are stuck with them, so to speak, and are thus routinely subject to our (un)reflective moral blame. While they might be able to overcome said dispositions via a "monumental effort of the will" and still act in conformity with what the virtuous individual would do, and perhaps even do so for the right reason(s), they still do so in the face of a contrary inclination to act otherwise. Per traditional conceptions of virtue, this ultimately prohibits them from being considered fully virtuous. Instead, this person is akin to Aristotle's continent individual, whose "rational principle... urges them aright and towards the best objects; but there is found in them also another element naturally opposed... which fights against and resists that principle."² So, the merely continent – and not virtuous –

¹ Nagel, Thomas. "Moral Luck." *Mortal Questions*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979. Print. 32-33.

² Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W.D. Ross, Batoche Books, 1999. Print. 19.

person “acts with choice, but not with appetite”;³ they deliberately choose to act in the right way for the right reason but fail to actually desire or take pleasure in doing so, instead possessing a contrary inclination to act other than the way that they actually are. Thus, they lack the right *feeling*⁴ generally considered necessary for virtuous behavior.

So, we can formulate three necessary conditions for fully virtuous behavior: (1) doing the right action (2) for the right reason(s) and (3) with the right feeling, i.e. desiring to act as such, taking pleasure in doing so, and/or without having a contrary inclination to act otherwise.

At this point I have given a general definition for virtuous action, one that has three requisite components. It seems plausible to assume, as I will for the rest of this essay, that merely choosing and doing the right action (the one consistent with what virtue requires, or what the virtuous individual would do) is something that is directly within our power. In that sense, we have the ability, and thus presumably the moral responsibility, to at the very least perform virtuous action(s)⁵ – fulfilling the first necessary condition for virtuous behavior.

But of course, the right action can still be done for the wrong reason. Following that, the extent of our abilities is less obvious when it comes to the second necessary condition for virtuous behavior – acting on, from, or for the right reason(s), meaning those reasons that are appropriate to and consistent with virtue, virtuous behavior, and/or what the virtuous individual would do. Consider an example: we ought to help a friend in need because we know that beneficence is a virtue (the right, appropriate, or virtuous reason), and not because doing so might mean that said friend will owe us a favor in the future (the wrong, inappropriate, or unvirtuous reason). Aristotle seems to assume that we are capable of controlling our reasons for action, or what reasons we ultimately take to be motivating and choose to act on.⁶ This is exhibited in his discussion of the continent individual, who acts rightly merely on the basis of having adequately exercised their “rational principle.” As Robert Audi⁷ has argued, however, it is far from clear that we are actually able to do this in such a direct way, as Aristotle assumes. I will turn to this potentially troubling possibility, as well as Audi’s discussion of it, in the next section.

Finally, what about satisfying the third and last necessary condition for virtuous behavior – acting with the right *feeling*, as I have been putting it? Aristotle seems to believe

³ *Id.* at 37.

⁴ I will refer to the complex set of dispositions, inclinations, attitudes, and affective states that characterize what Aristotle takes to be constitutive of the virtuous individual simply as possessing the right “feeling.” I do so for simplicity’s sake – admittedly, though, potentially missing some of the possible complexities involved.

⁵ Of course, there are often external constraints on our ability to act in a certain way, including and especially in the way that morality mandates. Keeping in mind the “ought-implies-can” principle, I will merely be considering cases where there are no such constraints on our ability to act virtuously. I will also not be addressing the normative issue of what sort of actions virtue enjoins in this essay.

⁶ This is in direct conflict with the Humean view of the relationship between desire, reason, and motivation. On such a view, the only real reasons to act are dependent in some way upon the desires of the agent. I return to this debate later on.

⁷ Audi, Robert. “Moral Virtue and Reasons for Action.” *Philosophical Issues*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1-20.

that adequate reasoning (i.e. seeing what the right reason to act is) and habituation (i.e. acting rightly for the right reason consistently and routinely) is sufficient for one to eventually take pleasure in acting virtuously, without the contrary inclination or desire that would make them merely continent. If what Nagel says is true, however, this right feeling requisite for truly virtuous behavior is in fact *not* directly within our power to regulate due to facts about our moral psychologies and/or moral luck that are seemingly beyond our control. This would put willfully being virtuous out of our reach. And, this would be true no matter how much effort we expend and even if we do the right action(s) for the right reason(s). I will return to this worry towards the end of my paper.

2. Reasons-Responsiveness: Influencing Our Sensitivity to Reasons for Action

Assuming that the capacity to act in some way that we have chosen – namely, to do the action consistent with what the virtuous person would do – is within our power, we have satisfied the first necessary condition for virtuous behavior. Let us now turn to the second condition, which requires that one acts for, on, or is ultimately motivated by the right reason(s). On the one hand, philosophers since Aristotle have presupposed that in some sense we have the ability to willfully determine what reason(s) to act on. Robert Audi, however, has argued that we in fact do not have the ability to exert such direct control over our reasons for action – and if that “disturbing... even paradoxical” conclusion is true, then virtue is not completely “up to us,” as commonly presupposed.

Instead, Audi believes that we actually have *indirect* control over our reasons for action. This is because we are able to influence, via a number of means, our responsiveness to reasons, including and especially the ones that are consistent with virtue. I will return to Audi’s argument explaining why he thinks this but will first draw out the problem a bit further.

Audi uses a number of examples to highlight the disparity that can, and often does, arise between what we see as either good or bad reason(s) to act, and which reason(s) we are actually inclined, compelled, and ultimately motivated to act upon. He characterizes this relationship as follows:

Suppose, for instance, that I am inclined to A [where A is a virtuous action] for a bad reason [i.e. one not in line with virtue] but have a good reason [i.e. one in line with virtue] to A. If I can bring it about at will [my emphasis] that either (1) I believe I should A for the good reason or (2) I want (strongly enough) to A for a good reason, I can thereby causing [sic] acting virtuously, i.e. A-for-r, where r is a good reason to A and of a kind appropriate to some virtue. This would mean we could sometimes act virtuously, and perhaps contribute to becoming virtuous or to strengthening our virtuous character if we already have it, just by a kind of mental exertion: what some would call a volition.⁸

In other words, he takes this to be a technical characterization of the sort of capacity presupposed in virtue theory since Aristotle: if we adequately understand that some reason

⁸ *Id.* at 15.

is the one consistent with virtue and thus the one that we ought to act on, then by some internal process we can will ourselves, as it were, to actually take said reason to be the overridingly motivating one by acting on it. If such a process is possible, he believes, then it must be formulated as such. Audi concludes, though, that so characterized “[i]t is doubtful that we have the kind of direct voluntary power just illustrated.”⁹ As he points out, the truth of this apparent fact about our moral psychologies worryingly entails that being completely virtuous is not attainable solely by some amount of mental effort. Instead, the ability to actually take the good reasons to be motivating is merely a matter of our happening to have the correct sorts of temperaments, personalities, dispositions, and inclinations – in other words, the things constitutive of virtuous character. Audi does believe that this claim about our (in)ability to “harness” or “unharness” certain reasons voluntarily is true. But he also believes that “how virtuous our actions are... can be very largely up to us.”¹⁰ How can he possibly hold both of these views?

Audi thinks that instead of having direct control over our reasons for action, we actually have *indirect* control over them, via our ability to influence which reasons we are sensitive to. He believes that this is possible because he considers our understanding of our reasons for action to be beliefs about the grounds supporting doing the action in question. Likewise, this entails that influencing our reasons for action involves influencing our beliefs about the “grounds supporting the action... [t]his is because what we believe, especially in normative matters, tends (if we are rational) to affect our actions, and is (other things equal) more likely to do so if vividly in consciousness.” Simply put, Audi takes our perception of the motivating strength of a reason for action to be belief(s) about the strength of the grounds that support performing the action. So, while we might not be able to directly control our reasons for action in the same way that we cannot simply will ourselves to believe something, it certainly is the case that we can influence our beliefs by making ourselves more responsive to certain justificatory reasons. In the same vein, then, Audi believes that we can influence which reasons for action we take to be motivating by making ourselves more responsive to the reasons supporting having some belief about the grounds supporting doing some action – namely, those good reasons that are consistent with those that the virtuous individual would act on.

Because Audi takes our reasons for action to be beliefs about the grounds we have for acting in some way, he also thinks that the methods we use for regulating our beliefs are also capable of allowing us to influence our reasons for action. If he is right in this, then it seems within our ability to make ourselves more amenable to certain reasons for action, ideally making the good reasons for action more forceful and thus overwhelmingly motivating to us. And crucially, our ability to indirectly control our reasons for action via directly influencing our reasons-responsiveness would put virtue back within our reach. This is, again, because virtue requires that we act from, for, or on the right reason(s) – something which does now appear to be within our power. For Audi, we merely have to fulfill the five “domains of moral responsibility” that he lays out, which are really just methods of regulating belief-formation.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.* at 17-18.

The five domains, per Audi, are as follows.¹¹ The first is the seeking of relevant reasons and counter-reasons for action that are “relevant to whatever matter is at hand,” as doing so “can give wider scope to nature in regulating conduct and richer content to our discourse in explaining or justifying our actions.” The second is the seeking of reflective equilibrium, or consistency amongst our set(s) of beliefs. The third is the clear and deliberate identification of, emphasis on, and assessment of reasons; in this way, we can better understand what beliefs and thus reasons for action we actually have and/or ought to have. The fourth is interpersonal comparison of reasons for action so that we can share evidence, erase bias, and ultimately have stronger agreement and communication about the grounds supporting acting in some way. The fifth and last is both recognizing and removing “a degree of motivation disproportional to the [actual] normative strength of our grounds.” This is akin to seeing that one holds a belief with “unjustified confidence,” then understanding that one ought to not do so.

I hope the point of this discussion is clear. Recall that the second necessary condition for virtuous action requires that it be done for the right reason. Audi argues that while we have good reason to think that we do not have direct control over our reasons for actions, we luckily seem to be capable of influencing which reasons we find compelling. So, although we cannot directly, willfully, and deliberately (un)harness the (in)appropriate reasons – those that are (in)consistent with virtue – we can, instead, epistemically conduct ourselves in such a way as to make ourselves more responsive and sensitive to, and thus more likely to be motivated by, the reasons consistent with virtuous behavior. If what Audi has said thus far is correct – which I take it to be and will assume it is for the rest of this essay – getting ourselves to be motivated by the right reasons is, albeit indirectly, something that we are capable of deliberately doing.

3. Taking Pleasure in Virtuous Action

Thus far, I take myself to have given a definition of virtuous behavior that lays out its three constitutive components. I also hope to have, invoking Audi’s research, shown that at this point two out of those three elements are, more or less, within our ability to ensure: namely, that both right action and acting for the right reason(s) are “up to us,” rather than relegated to the domain of Nagel’s moral luck. So far, then, this at least partially preserves the possibility of willful virtuous behavior as traditionally characterized.

Yet, Audi peculiarly fails to explicitly mention anything regarding how one feels when doing the right action for the right reason. But as previously discussed, this is often considered the third and last necessary condition for virtue.

Let me get clearer about how I believe Audi conceives of virtuous behavior. Admittedly, he never explicitly defines his conception and only does so “implicitly.”¹² In his own words, “acting virtuously... is acting on the basis of motivation [sic] and beliefs whose content has a sufficiently close relation to the elements essential in the trait constituting the virtue in question.” In other words, Audi thinks that virtuous behavior is only virtuous insofar as it is rooted in virtuous character. In this way, it looks as if he is

¹¹ *Id.* at 10-11.

¹² *Id.* at 5.

positing another necessary condition essential to virtuous behavior: that the agent also possesses the virtue qua specific character trait, quality, disposition, inclination, etc. relevant to the situation, action, and reason(s) at hand.

However, when requiring that an agent have the relevant virtue necessary for the behavior to be considered virtuous, I believe that Audi likely has something in mind akin to my conception of right feeling. I think this interpretation of Audi's view is plausible because it seems fair to assume that if an agent has a temperamental propensity to act in a certain manner, then they will by definition not have a contrary inclination against acting in the way consistent with said disposition. If the disposition is a virtuous one, it follows that they will also not have a contrary inclination to act unvirtuously and will thus act without the desire to do otherwise, making their behavior fully virtuous. So rather than stipulating a fourth necessary condition, I take Audi to actually be offering a different formulation of the third necessary condition for virtuous behavior that I have been discussing throughout this paper – namely, that the right action done for the right reason be performed with the right feeling.

Returning to the possibility of virtuous behavior, then, if my interpretation of Audi is correct, the question now becomes: *are our dispositions within our control in a way such that we can willfully influence ourselves so as to not have a contrary inclination against acting in a way consistent with virtue? Are we able to cultivate within ourselves, despite whatever we have or have not been granted by the deliverances of moral luck, the capacity to desire to act virtuously and to thus take pleasure in doing so?* While the first version of the question emphasizes merely not having a contrary inclination and the second actually taking pleasure in acting virtuously, I believe that both are accurately captured by the term “right feeling.” If one is disposed to act in some way and is able to act in a way consistent with that disposition, then by definition one does not have a contrary inclination.¹³ Suppose I have a disposition to act beneficently towards my friends and that I am confronted by a situation in which I am able to act in a beneficent manner towards a friend of mine; a contrary inclination to act non-beneficently is presumably nowhere to be found, and I will also likely take pleasure acting in accordance with my disposition, as it were, by acting in a beneficent way.¹⁴

To frame the issue another way: the earlier passage from Nagel suggested that “to possess... vices is to be unable to help having certain feelings under certain circumstances”

¹³ In other words, I believe it would be contradictory to say that an agent can have two concurrent but contradictory dispositions; while we certainly can have conflicting *reasons* for action, it does not seem to be the case that we similarly can have contradictory propensities to act in certain ways. For example, I might have two different reasons to act beneficently towards a friend – a self-interested one and an altruistic one, perhaps. However, it does not seem plausible in this case that I could have both a disposition to act beneficently towards my friends in conjunction with a disposition to not act beneficently towards my friends. In some sense, then, reasons seem specific to instances, while dispositions to act in some way are by definition less instance-specific and more general in nature.

¹⁴ While we clearly can have dispositions that we do not take pleasure in acting upon, it seems that such cases are limited to those dispositions that are already decidedly unvirtuous – because we recognize them as such. Conversely, I find it plausible that we take a sort of second-order pleasure in acting in consistency only with our dispositions that are virtuous.

and that “people are morally condemned for... qualities, and esteemed for other equally beyond control of the will: they are assessed for what they are like.” From this he characterizes the Kantian view as saying that “it makes no sense to condemn oneself or anyone else for a quality which is not within the control of the will.” In these few phrases, there are a number of claims and assumptions about morality and agency that I believe are not as obvious as Nagel and Kant take them to be. Specifically, I doubt it really true that having a vice is simply being “unable to help having certain feelings” and that certain qualities of character are really “beyond control of the will.” I believe, contra Nagel, that these things are (to an extent) *not* beyond control of the will and that further, we are able to play an active role in what feelings we have when acting – because of our ability to effect which reasons we are responsive to.

To explain why I think this, we need to return to Audi’s views. I believe they are accurate yet incomplete in virtue of not adequately addressing the requirement for virtuous behavior that one act with the right feeling. If my interpretation of Audi’s views is correct, he only satisfactorily describes the way in which willfully becoming continent – but not virtuous! – is within our control. He explains how we can get ourselves to be motivated by the right reasons when doing the right action, but says little to nothing about ridding ourselves of any contrary inclinations against doing so; he only gestures at the role of virtuous character in meeting the requirements for virtuous behavior, which as I have argued is plausibly his attempt at discussing the requisite right feeling I am concerned with. Thus, I believe Audi has only gotten us two-thirds of the way in justifying the view that virtue is “up to us” and not a matter of moral luck. To give a complete account of the way in which it is within our ability to deliberately satisfy the three necessary conditions for virtuous behavior, one must effectively explain the way in which we can willfully conduct ourselves so as to have the right feeling(s), the lack of which prevents Aristotle’s continent individual from becoming a truly virtuous one. I now turn to that task.

4. Desiring Virtue

My current aim is to show that we are capable of willfully conducting ourselves such that we can have some version and amount of control over our inclinations and dispositions – including, importantly, those that are contrary to virtue – in order to show that we are capable of intentionally and deliberately doing not just the right action for the right reason, but also ensuring we do so with the right feeling requisite for virtuous behavior.

It has traditionally been held by philosophers discussing virtue that routinely acting in the right way for the reason is generally sufficient to cause an agent to lose their contrary inclinations to act otherwise. For example, in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle discusses what he takes to be the necessary role that habit(uation) plays in the cultivation and development of virtue. Similarly, Audi briefly mentions that “... as with most kinds of virtuous actions, regularly acting generously [or in some other virtuous manner] is likely to lead to developing the trait in question...”¹⁵ These are empirical claims, but I think it is fair to say that they are likely accurate ones. So, if it is true that regularly acting doing the

¹⁵ *Id.* at 5.

right action for the right reason will likely lead one to acquire the trait or disposition that constitutes having some virtue, then it follows that habituation is the means by which one can ultimately behave in a virtuous manner.

However, Aristotle can be interpreted as simply assuming this to be the case in regard to our moral psychologies. Audi also appears to be making a similar move in presuming the legitimacy of this method. And although I agree that habituation is likely the means by which we develop the dispositions qua virtues of character that allow us to act without the contrary inclinations of the merely continent person, in the remainder of this essay I would like to give a more fine-grained analysis of just what this process involves. Moreover, I want to give such an account whilst keeping in mind that I, along with Aristotle and Audi, am arguing that virtue is “up to us” in large part. I want to demonstrate that it is within our power to willfully conduct ourselves in such a way so as to lose our contrary inclinations against acting virtuously and to consequently take pleasure in doing so – in other words, to show that we can largely control our dispositions and thus feelings, and consequently satisfy in a very deliberate manner the last necessary condition for virtuous behavior by desiring to act as such. Habituation is certainly the crux of not just cultivating virtuous action and increasing sensitivity to the right sort of reasons, but also (perhaps most importantly) of ridding ourselves of inclinations. However, I also believe that there is more to be said about just what occurs during habituation than is discussed by Aristotle and Audi. I believe that we have the ability to rid ourselves of contrary inclinations against acting virtuously. But just why do I think we are capable of doing this in a way above and beyond merely acting habitually¹⁶ in a certain way for certain reasons?

5. The Cultivation of Virtuous Desires

In the remainder of this essay, I will offer a brief sketch outlining the way in which I believe that transitioning from being merely continent to fully virtuous is something that is, to an extent, within our power rather than a matter of the moral luck discussed by Nagel and Kant. Just like we have control over which actions we choose to do and which reasons we are responsive to, I also take it that we likewise have a modicum of control over how we feel when doing the right actions for the right reasons. If what I say is correct, then all of the necessary components for virtuous behavior are at least partially within our ability to willfully influence and ultimately attain if we are purposely aim at doing so – especially including the way we feel when acting. In other words, the potential problem Audi initially raised for virtue theory, which I take him to have only partially dissolved, can be adequately accounted for. This, in turn, readmits the possibility of virtuous behavior, putting it out of the skeptic’s reach and back within our own. What follows is a short argument as to why I think this is the case.

Recall Audi’s view that our understanding of our reasons for action are really just

¹⁶ While habituation is a coherent means of actively and willfully cultivating virtue, it does not by any means guarantee it; Audi himself notes this. For example, it seems entirely possible that one could grow to dislike acting in a certain way the more one does it, and that the strength of one’s contrary inclination(s) will increase accordingly. I want to argue, therefore, that there are steps we can deliberately take that reduce the likelihood of this decidedly unvirtuous possibility.

constituted by our beliefs about the strength of the grounds that support performing some action. From this, he argues that via being able to influence our beliefs, we can likewise influence our responsiveness to certain reasons, namely the right or appropriate ones that are consistent with acting virtuously. In this way, we have indirect control over what reasons we ultimately take to be motivating. We cannot at will choose to act on a reason, even if we know it is the one that we ought to be acting on; however, there are certain epistemic procedures we can routinely practice so as to make ourselves more responsive to the reasons that we really ought to be acting on.

So, per Audi let us grant that we can influence both which reasons we are responsive to and, because of that fact, what we believe. Broadly speaking, like Aristotle's continent individual we can presumably use our "rational principle" to see what action(s) virtue requires of us, as well as what the virtuous reason for doing said action is. By understanding those facts and then fulfilling some or all of Audi's five domains of moral responsibility qua epistemic practices, we can make the right reason(s) actually motivating to or for us. But again, what about how we *feel* when acting in accordance with virtue by doing the right actions for the right reasons(s)? If we act whilst still feeling a contrary "appetite," or inclination, then we are merely continent and not truly virtuous. If Audi's account is correct, we can see what the good, right, and appropriate reasons for action are *and* make ourselves more sensitive to and motivated by those reasons that are consistent with virtue. However, his views, while accurate as they stand, are incomplete because they only demonstrate the possibility of willful continence, and not willful virtue.

Building on Audi's analysis, though, I believe that it follows from his discussion of our ability to influence our reasons-responsiveness that the right *feeling* requisite for behavior to meet the criteria for being virtuous is something that we can willfully cultivate, because of the relationship between reasons, beliefs, and desires.

My central point is that, similarly to the way in which we can apparently influence our receptivity to reasons for belief and action, we can therefore: see what we have reason to desire, including and especially per the dictates of virtue; make ourselves more responsive to and motivated by those reasons; instill within ourselves those appropriate, virtuous desires; and then, ultimately act in accordance with those desires whilst lacking any contrary inclination(s) and thus presumably taking pleasure in doing so. In other words, it seems that via our ability to influence our reasons-responsiveness, we can plausibly influence our responsiveness to the reasons supporting not just we have reason to do or believe but also what we have reason to desire. And if we desire to act in some way for some reason, and then actually do act in said way for said reason, we necessarily do so without a contrary inclination (because we desire to act in this way rather than another) and presumably take pleasure (broadly speaking, desire-satisfaction results in some sort of pleasure) in doing so – making the behavior virtuous rather than merely continent.

Per Audi our comprehension of our reasons for action is constituted by beliefs regarding the grounds supporting doing some action, and because we have the ability to influence what we believe, we can thus influence our proclivity to be motivated by the right reasons – not just those supporting certain beliefs and actions, but also desires. Further, I take there to be a parallel between beliefs and desires in the sense that they are both intentional states – we believe *something*, just as we desire *something*. In this way, if something is true about beliefs, then in a general sense it is *prima facie* plausible to think

that that same thing holds regarding desires as well. And, one thing that seems true about our beliefs is that they are informed by reasons; we often believe what we believe on the basis of the strength of the grounds qua reasons in support of believing that thing. Likewise, I want to argue as intentional states akin to beliefs, desires are in some sense similarly influenced by reason(s). Of course, this prompts the question: are desires directly informed by reason(s), or are desires informed by beliefs which are themselves informed by reason(s)? This can be respectively formulated in two different ways: one, with desires being directly informed by reasons alone, without any mediating beliefs in between; or two, with desires being influenced by beliefs and then with desire-informing-beliefs themselves informed by reasons. For my purposes, I will leave this as an open question. My main claim is that our ability to influence our reasons-responsiveness realistically entails that we can influence our desires; because reasons and our sensitivity to them play an essential role in each interpretation, I take it to be one of the upshots of my argument that it can accommodate both of the above formulations about the relation between reasons, beliefs, and desires.

To summarize, my primary assertion is this: we have the ability to influence our reasons-responsiveness such that we can willfully be more sensitive to those reasons that are consistent with virtue, and because of this ability we can deliberately influence our sensitivity to reasons regarding what we have reason to desire, and thus willfully guide our desires themselves (to an extent). In turn, by being able to cultivate within ourselves the desire to act in consistency with virtue and in conjunction with then doing the right actions for the right reasons, we will likely take pleasure in doing so, without any contrary inclinations, ultimately making us fully virtuous rather than merely continent in a way that, above and beyond the deliverances of moral luck, is actually “up to us.” And while only a preliminary outline, I believe that my view as presented is a plausible one on its face. In that spirit, I now turn to and will spend the remainder of this essay responding to two preliminary objections.

6. Humean Motivation and Belief-Desire Bootstrapping

Thus far, I have proposed that we can actively cultivate the appropriate virtuous desires that would allow us to satisfy the third and last necessary condition for virtuous behavior: taking pleasure in acting virtuously, without a contrary inclination against doing so, because we have a desire to act virtuously – or, acting with the right *feeling*. I have argued that this is because, per Audi’s arguments, it seems that even if we cannot willfully choose what reasons we act on, we can influence and increase our responsiveness to the right reasons, which will then, in turn, cause us to have the appropriate beliefs and desires that are requisite for both being motivated by the right reason(s) and for carrying out the action with the right feeling. In this way, the satisfaction of all three necessary conditions for virtue – including and especially the last one – are within our power, to a degree, to actively, willfully, and deliberately cultivate.

However, there are two objections that come to mind when considering my proposal that our desires and thus the capacity to take pleasure in acting virtuously is something that is within our control. The first comes from a set of views regarding the relationship between reason, desire, and motivation, taking after Hume’s belief that “reason

is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” and arguing that any account – including mine – that claims reason can in some way motivate behavior is mistaken from the outset; rather, only desires can be motivating, and reason both cannot and should not have any prominent role in explaining motivation. The second objection says that just as seeing what we have reason to do is often not enough to actually motivate us to act in that way and/or on the basis of that reason, merely seeing what we have reason to desire is not sufficient, on its own, to actually cause us to have that desire.

The first objection to my proposal, then, arises out of the Humean view regarding motivation.¹⁷ I will only briefly describe the view, as my aim is not to refute it but rather show how my proposal is entirely consistent with its picture of the relationship between reason, desire, and motivation. Briefly put, and substituting Hume’s “passions” for desires, the Humean picture is as follows: regarding our practical, means-end reasoning about how to act, desires are the only thing able to produce ends, while reason, on the other hand, can only produce beliefs. Because of this, desires are the only sort of thing that can be and actually are motivating; reason on its own is insufficient to “generate... [the] impulse”¹⁸ necessary for action. A key part of my proposal is that we both can and should use reason, via influencing our reasons-responsiveness, to cause ourselves to carry out the right action on the basis of the right reason and with the right feeling, the latter of which I argued arises from having the right desires. Such a proposal, then, is clearly at odds with Hume’s claim that our rationality and actions are beholden to our desires.

I believe, however, that my proposal is entirely consistent with the Humean view of motivation, and that this is true regardless of whether or not that view is in fact true. Recall that I am arguing that because of our ability to play an active part in influencing our reasons-responsiveness and thus belief formation, we can make therefore make ourselves see what we have reason to desire and actually take those reasons to be compelling, which conceivably eventually instills those desires within us. Hume’s view is that only desires can be motivating, but it is compatible with such an outlook that our reasons can and do inform our desires, as I am claiming. In other words, for Hume using reason to arrive at a belief regarding what ends we ought to have is insufficient; we also need to actually desire that end in order to be motivated to act in such a way as to attain it. Yet, we often use reason to deliberate about what we ought to desire, and it is consequently entirely plausible that reasoning about what we ought to desire actually informs what desires we ultimately end up possessing. My proposal is that we can make ourselves responsive to the appropriate reasons in support of beliefs about what we ought to desire, with the underlying implication that we ought to desire to act virtuously.¹⁹ That is, we do the epistemic practices that make us sensitive to the best reasons; we become sensitive to those reasons, which support having some beliefs about what we ought to desire; we then end up with the belief about what we

¹⁷ I rely on Amy Schmitter’s interpretation of Hume here. Schmitter, Amy M., "17th and 18th Century Theories of Emotions." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Winter 2016 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ That is, I am referencing the widely-held view that the dictates of morality and virtue are in some sense reason-granting. While accounts as to the source of that granting of reasons for action and belief differ, the stance itself is widely held as a constituent feature of moral discourse.

ought to desire; and because we are actually compelled by those reasons, the belief about what we ought to desire often results in our actually having that desire.²⁰ And because we now actually have the desire to act virtuously, we satisfy the Humean condition requisite for actually motivating us to act in that manner. Just as Hume thinks it is impossible to even use rationality itself without the prior desire to do so, I hold that it is likewise incoherent to think that reason plays no part in informing or creating our desires.²¹ If the Humean view of motivation is true, my proposal can accommodate it; if it is false, then so much the better for me.

The second objection turns out to be closely related to the first, and I have already partially addressed it. It holds that merely seeing what we have reason to desire – in other words, having a belief about what we ought to desire – is insufficient on its own to actually cause us to have the desire in question. This certainly occurs; we often have beliefs about what we ought to desire but fail to have the corresponding desire itself. I believe, though, that this is more unlikely and implausible when it comes to matters concerning morality and virtue. By definition, ethics deals with agency and normativity – specifically regarding what we ought to do, but as I have discussed there is a close relationship in virtue theory between what we ought to do and what beliefs and desires we ought to have. Generally speaking, I take there to be a common awareness qua belief that morality involves reason-giving imperatives, and that therefore most people have some sort of a set of beliefs and desires regarding what we ought to do – maybe just a belief that there are some things we ought to do, and just a desire to do the things that we ought to do. Assuming the truth of the objection, it is still plausible that we can bootstrap up, as it were, from those aforementioned initial desires and beliefs to arrive at the higher-order beliefs and desires necessary for virtue, by using our agential reason-responsiveness-influencing capacities (a la Audi) to create these “new” beliefs and desires. In this way, it is not as if the beliefs and desires essential for virtue need to be spontaneously generated; rather, they can be grounded in broad, general beliefs and desires that we all already have merely in virtue of being agents with agency participating in moral practice and discourse. And this is

²⁰ This, of course, is the controversial part of my thesis. I admit that there is likely no necessary connection here; there do seem to be cases where we have a belief about what ought to desire without actually having the corresponding desire. I do believe, however, that my thesis does generally hold in the context of morality generally and specifically virtue. Presumably, if one arrives at the belief that one ought to desire to act virtuously, then the aforementioned sort of disjunction will not occur. If one is not just aware that it is commonly held that that one ought to desire to act virtuously but actually believes that they ought to desire to act virtuously, then I take it to be fair to say that one will then actually have that desire. The key elements here are actually having the belief, and the parallel that I take there to be between beliefs regarding acting in some way and beliefs regarding desiring something; if I have a belief about what I ought to have a belief about, then I almost assuredly actually end up having that latter belief – it makes no sense to say that I would not. Similarly, if I have a belief about what I ought to desire (namely, acting virtuously), it seems likely that I will actually end up with that desire.

²¹ While clearly some, perhaps many, of our desires are a-rational or irrational, it is similarly clear that many of our desires arise as the result of rational deliberation and/or on the basis of reasons. I desire to write and complete this essay because there are many reasons in support of why I ought to desire to do so: to get a good grade in my seminar, to think carefully about an interesting philosophical topic, to have a potential writing sample for doctoral applications, and so on.

precisely what I think is implicitly occurring in both Audi and Hume's accounts, as for morality to even get off the ground, as it were, we have to have certain beliefs and desires, as well as the means to rationally navigate them during practical deliberation whilst aiming at behaving virtuously.

7. Conclusion: Is Virtue Up to Us?

In this paper, I wish to have accomplished a number of things. Mainly, I hope to have convincingly demonstrated that taking pleasure in virtuous action by desiring to act virtuously is something that we can deliberately and willfully cultivate, which would mean that virtuous behavior is "up to us," to an extent, and not purely a matter of moral luck. I gave an account of what virtuous behavior is and what it requires: right action, done for the right reason, and done with the right feeling. Drawing on Audi's work, I showed that the first two of these three elements is indirectly within our power to ensure. I then argued that in the same way we can make ourselves responsive to virtuous reasons for action, we can similarly make ourselves more responsive to reasons regarding what we ought to desire – namely, to act virtuously. In this way, I concluded that we can conceivably cause ourselves to have the desires necessary for one to take pleasure in virtuous action, without a contrary inclination to do otherwise that prevents the continent person from being a virtuous one. And, I think this is true due to the nature of morality and agency itself, and regardless of the outcome of debates surrounding motivation and desires.

Briefly put, I have argued that the actions, reasons for action, and now desires requisite for virtuous behavior are not merely a matter of moral luck and are rather, in large part, under our control, if we choose to put in the effort – and of course, we ought to. This leads to an affirmative answer to the question posed in the title of this section: virtue is, in fact, largely up to us.