

Virtuism: Philosophy and the Aesthetics of Virtue

R.S. Pearson

www.rspearson.com

Preface

Virtuism started out as aesthetic theory and then moved into reflections about other areas of philosophy. I did not purposefully intend to create an "ism" and I have a somewhat Post-modernist idea about being wary of new narratives. But since people are starting to use the word "virtuism" (discovered by doing a search on Google) with no connection to my writings (much like the popularization of the word "Surrealism" without really understanding what it means as an aesthetic theory), I figured I had better formalize it the way I originally intended, because I have a certain idea about what a philosophy of Virtuism should mean.

Virtuism is about the aesthetics of human virtue, how virtuous deeds produce in us the same experience as great works of art. Witnessing or creating a virtuous act produces the aesthetic experience. This is a discovery in aesthetics that explains the power of many works of art and has implications in philosophy. Virtuism is the application of some of the laws of philosophy to the idea of human virtue, and has other philosophical implications such as understanding the artist's role in society, and how he or she can positively or negatively affect culture.

The universe acts in a way that is essentially "virtuous" towards us, in the long run, if we make an effort to act virtuous in it. I started calling this philosophy Emotive Virtuism a few years ago because the idea of the emotional impact of human virtue played into my philosophy very strongly. I also wanted to distance myself from the appearance of creating a simplistic philosophy because of the post-modernist critiques of narratives. But I think philosophical and aesthetic strains, even psychoanalytic ones, have often ventured so far away from historical ideas of virtue that I don't mind shortening the title again to Virtuism.

Virtuism is not necessarily bound to the rules of Western philosophy but it uses philosophical language and techniques. Virtuism could be seen as a "Virtuosophy" or a "Virtuology" and does not have to hold to rules of the modern philosophical conversation. Instead of having the limitation of a modern Western philosophy, the aim is to get a person closer to accepting the value of an easily defined concept of virtue which can be called "aesthetic virtue," defined as the type of virtue which only appears in human social interchange. This person can

then become a "Virtuist," which is a person that attempts to create acts of virtue and witness how the aesthetic experience develops from such acts. It takes two or more people to create this type of virtue, but many have also said that such beautiful experiences come from a life of prayer.

Most modern philosophers, even the logical positivists, were not moral relativists, and this is something that the untrained philosopher or modern thinker doesn't always realize. Virtuism is a philosophy that stands against the various relativistic philosophies today that state there is no such thing as good or evil. The statement that there is no good or evil is itself seen as a good axiom by the person making it. Usually, when examined linguistically, such people who believe there is no such thing as good and evil have in fact many things they hold as good and many things they hold as evil. Virtuism also believes there is objective meaning in the world that is deciphered by logic. I don't look at this from a Pollyanna perspective of the religionist: many sophisticated thinkers in the last hundred years held a similar view as I do (just look at the work of Sorokin). It is only those who are half-educated about the meaning of values in life that come up with these wrong ideas that there is no meaning but materialistic meaning.

Often these materialistic ideas "trickle down." Many desire to imitate the attitudes that they believe brought wealth and prestige, so people, even philosophers and aesthetic theorists, design philosophies to comfort themselves. The philosophies and aesthetic theories they design are ones that intrinsically disempower any idea of virtue because virtue is the force that has caused the evolution of society, and even political theory such as democracy. If society and political theory are not evolving, the result is that the democratizing force that has been growing for the last five hundred years will slow down. Elites have a vested interest, conscious or unconscious, in meaningless and even negative art and philosophy. This plays out in the film or fine art industry or in any other industry of aesthetic commerce.

However, of course the misguided desire to cleanse the world of all evil is the worse evil that we face on the planet today. As one sees this new morality of "fighting the fighters of evil" put into place, one sees clearly that the problem has two sides. Ideas of virtue are the ideas that cause us to be wary of those who are striving for some kind of "purity" in the world outside of themselves. So, how does one define virtue? It can be defined as having an objective positive basis in the meaning of life, in that, virtue is given authenticity by it often coming with a powerful experience like an aesthetic experience. This is not a beauty like the

physical beauty of human beings, but it is a beauty of the aesthetic experience, that is, it is something that brings emotion inside of us. This positive emotion is an epistemological proof that this ontology has an "objective" truth in it. These are big claims to make and yet I have lived with this philosophy slowly developing now for twenty years and I do sense its truth, so I continue to write along these lines. I am forced to keep this "ism" going.

It is simple-minded to fear creating an "ism," as long as it comes about as a natural course of evolution. Going about to start an "ism" in this way is also acceptable if it is linguistically valuable to coin new terms for new thoughts. In my early twenties, I created some art manifestoes as young aesthetic theorists are bound to do. Because of the shock value, I called them "Virtue Manifestoes." I was serious but there was also some notion of the humor in such titles. In fact, I was shocked when I got good responses from other modern artists. I thought virtue was hopelessly out of fashion. I then formalized some aesthetic theory, which then turned into broader philosophical writings. During this process the "ism" aspect was coined.

It is a problem in modern philosophy that most new works published by originators of new directions are often written far above the reading level of even an educated college graduate in subjects other than philosophy.

It is irrelevant if one has a degree in the arts, or social or physical sciences, the writings of a Derrida or a Heidegger are often so self-referential with philosophical language or other references that there is very little for an untrained reader to hold on to. But philosophy should not be a privileged pursuit only. One of the most read philosophers of recent time is Friedrich Nietzsche, a writer who almost always writes in a simple style, not using the jargon of the philosopher but more a language of an essayist or the everyday educated person. Perhaps his popularity is due to the fact that he is one of the only recent philosophers most modern people find readable! So, in the following at times I've never tried to write in that obscure tone which can often be so pleasant to the trained philosopher yet which whittles down one's reading audience to about one tenth of what it could be otherwise. I've also left in some tougher words like ontology and epistemology which may have some people running for dictionaries but I believe that is a good thing.

If we look the Western philosophy writers like Rorty, Wittgenstien, Kierkegaard, and Foucault, we can call that "high philosophy." I believe in writing in a style that embraces both high philosophy and the philosophy that could be called popular philosophy -- to not avoid the subject matter of the higher philosophers that the popular philosophers don't touch, yet helping to introduce the popular philosophy readers to these other realms of thought. Everyone who is interested in philosophy is curious about these high philosophers but don't find them to be immediately rewarding. Popular philosophy could be defined as that philosophy that isn't specific about it's language or subject matter being limited to what has been considered logically provable as high philosophy does.

Most philosophers state that you can not prove the existence of God, but go ahead anyway and take an unfounded position of believing there is no God and write their books from the perspective that there is no God. Therefore, I will occasionally throw in the concept of there being a God without having to base it on any logical proof. I sometimes refer to an idea that some would define as God by calling it the "structure." The universe that exists has certain laws and in some ways it can be seen a type of God because these laws have control over us. I rely on no proof of the existence of God since supposedly one can not be given in a philosophical work. By defining a worldview that seems to have a maternal caring force in it, my work is just as valid as those who define a world that must not have one.

Time is spent on religion in this work because religion has chiefly been the area of study that is concerned with virtue. Since Earth has often had a violent past, one must examine how humanity interacts with religion to see how its relationship to virtue can be improved.

Virtuism does not negate by any logical proof the idea of God, nor the benefit that may come to people from following a spiritual path. It hopes to point out however, that often the drive to be virtuous can be negated by the need to be sectarian. If one cannot ascribe a "divine" status to one's fellow human being, then all one's respect towards that person could be misplaced in the way one considers how that person measures up to a sect's judgment of outsiders.

One: What is Virtuism?

What is Virtuism? Virtuism first started in the mid-1980's as an aesthetic philosophy that also reflected on ethics and metaphysics. It states that acts of virtue produce the aesthetic experience, and this fact was one proof of the objective value of living a virtuous life. The pleasant and beneficial nature of the aesthetic experience is one proof Virtuism is lucky to have. Virtuism states that philosophy, science, technology, and art must look at what is inherently virtuous towards society, while they are discovering their theories. It is the idea that philosophical truth is only complete if it incorporates into its structure not only epistemological truth (the virtue of its arguments) but truisms about the experiential relationship of human reasoning and the lives of human beings themselves. Thus, a philosophy of ethics is not necessarily whole in itself as an epistemological study only, it must eventually look at what is needed in ethics by human experience. The virtue of this need being filled is a truth in itself.

There is so much criminality on earth not just against people, but the way people treat animals, that we must see that virtue is the complete other side of the story, that to be open to it, is to be open to a completely different universe. We all hope to witness more of the virtuous. We usually can never do "too much virtue" because the only perspective we have is a world that has far too little virtue. Too often this world calls the mundane and mandatory virtuous, so we can only do what might be considered too much virtue -- and in this we begin to do what is really virtuous.

The idea of gratitude coming back to oneself from others who one has helped is a type of metaphysical system that is important in Virtuism. Does a person want to live a life in which people are grateful that they have lived, or one in which people have anger at that person for the life that he or she has lived? In doing things that make others grateful towards oneself, one creates a type of energy. One might argue that these energies somehow come back to a person at one time or another. If one believes that they come back to one in this life, to create these gratitude-producing acts is a type of proving the validity of a metaphysical system. One can do these virtuous acts to animals as they are easy targets, but also to all people that we live around.

The question arises: can you only improve your life if you improve the life of others? That is to say, are those who believe they are improving their own lives always wrong when they are still causing damage and undue stress to the lives of others? What is it to improve one's life? It seems most of all it is in emotional health -- positive emotions -- and physical health. Improving one's life is also having access to the past, being able to be what one was in good seasons in one's life, because often in life people can become less than what they were at earlier ages.

Deep help, a great relief, equals a reward in itself, a reward to the person who receives our help because we know we will receive a deep gratitude from some of those who we have helped. Have we given this level of gratitude in our mind to those who have helped us? Is the acknowledgment that we have been helped a part of the cure for much of human incompetence or evil?

The aesthetic experience of virtue may be of higher value or signify higher cultivation than the aesthetic experience of art because it involves understanding the rewards of living a good life, which is testified to in all cultures. A life that has only the appreciation of the aesthetics of art can sometimes result in a person who becomes depressed, bitter or drug addicted.

Aspects of seeing the aesthetic value of virtue:

1) We develop better capacity to take care of ourselves. That which is called "vice" always tears a person apart. Historically, vice means things like drug addiction, drinking in excess, promiscuity, laziness, and overindulgence in cheap entertainment. One can see how avoiding these things can lead to obvious benefits. Not just tobacco but over-consumption of alcohol and other drugs do serious damage to a person's body.

2) We develop a world in which people are grateful we are alive, versus one in which people are angry with us. Treating others with kindness and having a forgiving attitude avoids both external and internal stresses and free oneself to do more in life.

3) The virtue of applied non-attachment to the negative in life gives one a freedom from those mental obsessions surrounding the negative that do so much damage in life. This is not to say one avoids the negative or one's responsibility.

It's not the purpose of this book to speculate on the idea of energy fields, auras, or any of the other ideas that might state that our positive deeds have a

way of coming back to us. One can see the present result of living a loving life compared to one which is filled with slander, cheating, lying, or breaking other laws of the land. These types of people often become caught in their lies and destroy relationships. People get tired of overly negative and slanderous people. Likewise, people who don't get caught up in petty gossip, who don't give reports to others of slandering people live easier social lives, as people easily become duplicitous and will report a slanderer to the slandered . So, even without positing a metaphysical doctrine on how our good deeds come back to us, something based on faith, one can at least see the beginning of these rewards.

This is also seen in the regenerative effect on health in witnessing the virtuous and appreciating it like a fine work of art. A life left without thinking of virtue as a beautiful thing, a life that cannot feel the beauty of a human experiencing the virtuous actions of another human, is prone to the destruction and degeneration that so often captures human life. For we become what we witness, we cannot truly witness something if we cannot appreciate and understanding its various aspects. We become what we hold in the mind by the very nature of the fact that it is what we occupy ourselves with, and our mind is the program of our experience of life.

A person becomes committed to virtue when he or she decides that creating virtue in the world is the highest return he or she can make on the investment of living. A person spends life no longer concerned with the question of whether he or she is doing too much good. One no longer feels as if one must make accounts of how people have treated them, of whether one is too generous. One always knows the way out of despair, out of a mundane life. A person really proves life, not by belittling and crass attitudes of how we demand to be treated, but proves life by seeing what happens when we pour out a force of creating virtue in the world around us.

This is the perfect action for those who wish to live a life on the edge of intelligence and creativity. The world is at its most frozen in that which is against virtuous interaction between human beings. There are literally hundreds of thousands of improvements that can be made in this world. All of these take intelligence, creativity, bravery, stamina and love. To the artist, even the most modern and innovative, this is an aesthetic doctrine that never ends.

Humility keeps beauty alive, but it also keeps our possibility and the future alive.

As we value others, the earth, the way things can be and often are, this value is reflected in us. As we hold the thought, the container of the thought, ourselves, takes on that form of beauty and value.

As we limit what other people are by certain stereotypes we limit what we too can become because we limit possibility. Like the lack of value we give to others, we hold this lack in our cognition, it becomes the shape of our mind, and it limits our possibility and perceptions of the future.

The future exists in the human perception in grades, in amounts. How we limit the concepts of possibility in others, is how we limit ourselves in our own life. The way we perceive our future existing is created in ratio to the amount of possibility we allow others to have. Some people can be said to have much of the future, some people can be said to have little.

Virtuism works in the realm of trying to achieve regenerative emotional states by perceiving the beauty of human virtuous action. Sometimes it is the act of doing or witnessing kindness, but it can also come upon reflection of the virtue inherent in creation. Living with the thought of a benevolent God in the mind also can transform the person who holds this quality in the mind. However, if there is a lack in the ability to perceive value in others because of religious regulation, the regenerative effects of virtue can be impeded.

The person who practices aesthetic virtue tries to make the world artful in a way which will seek to keep this regenerative energy flowing. The idea of Virtuism can be applied to the ideas of art. A Virtuist act creates benefit and beauty in the world.

What holds a person back from seeing the beauty in virtue?

One thing that can stop a person from seeing the beauty in virtue is having values in the mind that one holds as higher than virtue. When it can be seen that these values do not serve any purpose in fulfilling any unmet needs, the value in virtue can be affirmed. Achieving a state of appreciating virtue becomes seen as a way of fulfilling the need of regenerative thought.

The act that approaches the aesthetic in virtue is the act that gets in where no virtue was -- seeing a disabled person not as their limitation but as a normal

person, or the feeling a person has if they have not been touched or kissed for a long time becoming embraced for the first time in a long time.

Two: Virtue and the Balance of Progress

Why does mastering and taking a position in recent modern philosophy necessitate an atheistic stance? If philosophy admits it can not prove the existence or non-existence of God, why do so many create philosophies that base all premises in a worldview that exists without higher meaning and the help of a benevolent God?

There is a delicate balance that progress teeters on. Philosophy cannot progress unless it takes into account the things that have passed out of vogue in philosophy and became the domain of psychology. The relationship between philosophy and psychology can be seen like the arc of a sine wave getting longer. Now philosophy could take into account difficulties in areas such as psychology and anthropology. How can such questions that were once the domain of philosophy, such as "Are the voices men hear internally, even men such as Socrates and Sir Isaac Newton, only in their minds?" or "Why is there so much evil in human affairs?" that have passed into the social sciences pass back into philosophical inquiry? How can we make meta-philosophical statements back at philosophers who are making meta-philosophical statements? Ultimately, answers to these questions can be important, because they can affect life. One answer better prepares a person for one type of life, another one for a different type of life. And when many people are giving the right answers for themselves, better things happen to society. This means more meaningful art, better progress in science, more people acting their best and more humane to each other.

Philosophy can not progress unless it takes into account the things that occupy more common human thought, not only taking into account the things of "philosophical power" that occupy those who can spend their days reading philosophy to understand difficult references. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. When this "philosophical power" is used in the disciplines to negate epistemology it has corrupted philosophy. This is because it can no longer use more simple forms of logical reasoning to discuss the kind of embracing thought that philosophers once in the past used to inform all other disciplines.

Recent Western philosophical traditions state they cannot prove the existence nor non-existence of God yet still maintain that one must make philosophical statements starting from the idea that we exist in a universe devoid

of God. Many modern philosophers have taken the leap of faith in the direction of assuming that because life is painful and difficult, that supposes that God does not exist. But they wouldn't assume that because learning Calculus is difficult, this means that learning mathematics has no value or aim, nor the meaning of equations do not exist in reality. All religious traditions also take this idea that life is difficult and painful. All major religions state that you must be wise and spiritual in life or you will be destroyed. It wasn't just in the story of the Job that the righteous suffer, but Jacob was killed by his brother. In fact, the Israelites suffered almost constantly under oppressors. Buddhism speaks of life also as suffering and that the only way to happiness is through non-attachment. This idea of non-attachment can also be a basis for Judeo-Christian happiness, coming under "surrendering to the Will of God." Neither religion would praise the ways of slothfulness but instead point man toward responsibility and even heroic action. Grace is seen as the underlying virtue of renouncing the fruits of one's own actions or surrendering to a belief in the omnipotent love of God.

What is important "meaning" for us? Food, sex, belongings? Yes, in their right place. But also positive emotions, controlling negative imaginations about our future, self-mastery, and the further feeding of the soul that comes from historical ideas of the arts.