

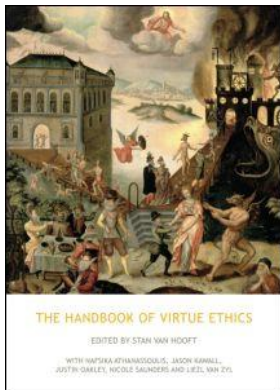
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The Handbook of Virtue Ethics

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The virtuous person and normativity

Yuval Eylon

INTRODUCTION: RELATIVISM AND REALISM

The notion of the virtuous person (VP) has featured prominently in moral philosophy in the past few years. This renewed interest in the VP has naturally led to lively metaethical controversies concerning the theoretical standing of the VP, as well as many contemporary discussions devoted to various individual virtues, moral emotions, and competing lists of virtues.¹

Some of the usefulness of the idea of the VP and perhaps some of its initial theoretical appeal resides in the fact that one way of elucidating a conception of ethical requirements simply is to describe the life and character of a virtuous person. This strategy can be discerned in literature as well as in common discussions of ethics. It can also boast a long and illustrious presence in the philosophical literature – from the superhuman portrait of Socrates given in the symposium which serves to illustrate his views on ethics and *eros*, to Susan Wolf’s indictment of both consequentialism and deontology for failing to provide a satisfactory conception of the good life (Wolf 1982).

Who is the VP and wherein lies the philosophical significance of this notion? The VP is someone who embodies ethical requirements, and who “gets it right” on every occasion: someone who is able to identify the correct course of action in any situation, and invariably pursues it. In other words, someone who is prudent, brave, just, compassionate, generous, kind, wise and so on, whenever and wherever these qualities are called for by the circumstances. What this means is that the VP is a blueprint for virtuous action. This relation between requirements and the idea of a person who embodies them is expressed by a biconditional: *something is ethically required in a situation iff it is what the VP would do in a similar situation*. This biconditional can be read in both directions: either what is ethically required is identified as what the VP would do, or else what the VP would do is that which is ethically required. The difference between the two readings is one of priority: what is defined in terms of what.

As stated, the biconditional itself is neutral with respect to the question of the explanatory priority of the VP, and leaves all options open: according to act-centred accounts of ethical requirements the virtuous person embodies sensitivity to independently given requirements. According to virtue-centred accounts, the virtuous person defines those requirements. According to both readings of the biconditional, the idea of objective and determinate ethical requirements is linked to the coherence of the idea of a virtuous person as a blueprint for the production of virtuous action. We will return to the issue of priority shortly

At least *prima facie*, the controversy over priority is irrelevant at least to some philosophical reflections on the VP: there is room for reflection on the life of the VP and on particular virtues that is committed neither to any of the readings of the biconditional nor to any specific role the VP plays either in ethical thinking or in philosophical theory. All that must be assumed (by *fiat*) for the purposes of this question is that the VP is someone who gets it right – regardless of whether the idea of getting it right is given independently and the VP is defined or discovered by reference to it, or whether the idea of the VP is prior and “getting it right” is defined or discovered by reference to it. In other words, what these discussions take for granted is the idea of a determinate VP – someone who at least embodies ethical requirements. We can label this assumption “the determinacy thesis”.

But although the proposed characterization is neutral with regard to definitional or epistemic priority, it is not completely without philosophical import or bias. The first thing that comes to mind is that as phrased, the idea of the VP is utopian in the sense Bernard Williams introduced in his discussion of value pluralism: utopian positions are positions that assume that all good things can coexist without loss, for example that both equality and freedom can be *maximized* in a given society (B. Williams 1981b). In our context, what this means is that all virtues can coexist within one, albeit ideal, personality. There are two ways in which the utopian assumption might be problematic: psychological and conceptual.

First, the assumption that all virtues might fit snugly within a single personality might be problematic for contingent psychological reasons. Quite conceivably, some virtues can rarely, if ever, coexist together within a single personality because the psychological tendencies underlying them are often incompatible. For example, determination or bloody-mindedness and kindness, or physical courage and tenderness, might be – or more plausibly tend to be – psychologically exclusive. If real, this problem might not be as easy to dismiss as might first appear. Whether this is “merely” a psychological problem, or one that would raise actual difficulties to an ethical view, would depend on the role ethical theory awards the concept of the VP (if any), and what must hold of the VP if it is to fulfil this role. However, I will not dwell on this issue here.

The second possibility is that there is some conceptual difficulty with the idea of the VP. The way in which this difficulty manifests itself is that certain circumstances allow for more than one virtuous response. This plurality of responses seems to emanate from one of two sources. The first source is that different virtues within an ethical outlook might prescribe different actions. The second is that different ethical outlooks might conflict and recommend different courses of action.

We can think of many cases that seem to present a moral dilemma – be it a real dilemma or merely an apparent or a *prima-facie* moral dilemma – as cases of conflicting virtues: a choice between going to war or taking care of one’s mother can be seen as a conflict of

patriotism versus parental love or responsibility; the dilemma faced when someone has to break into a store to steal a needed medicine can be seen as involving law-abidingness in conflict with responsibility, and so on. In general, it seems that the concepts of individual virtues serve a dual purpose – they highlight the different weaknesses or vices we might succumb to (this is especially pronounced if we think of virtues as means between vices), and they thus highlight the psychological grounds for preferring one apparently moral option over another. Thus, there is nothing surprising in the thought that, for example, kindness and courage or determination might conflict, generosity and prudence might conflict, and so forth.

The second source for the conceptual difficulty with the idea of a VP is the threat of cultural relativism – the apparent existence of conflicting versions of the VP. Consider how different ideals of the good life portray virtue in different, indeed conflicting, terms: the scholar, the parent, the warrior, the public servant, the artist, the lover and so on. These differences are present in our own culture, and are aggravated across cultures separated by space or time, perhaps to the point of incomprehensibility. It is through this type of conflict that Isaiah Berlin famously explicated the hold Machiavelli's *The Prince* has on us: the conflict between two familiar and recognizable conceptions of the VP that respond to deep needs and concerns of ours: the private, “moral” and Christian VP in contrast with the publicly engaged and politically active citizen of the ancient polis (Berlin 1971).

This example highlights what seems to be undeniable: there is more than one valid conception of the good life, or of valid ethical requirements,² and more than one valid conception of the VP. This of course neither implies, nor even suggests, that anything goes or that any purported conception of culture, of the good life or of the VP is valid or beyond criticism.

So the idea of a VP – a single personality that embodies everything that is good and valuable and worthy – is too simplistic. Furthermore, as our discussion of the conceptual issue highlights, the problem may not be psychological and contingent, but conceptual: nothing in advance seems to rule out the coherence of the idea of valid but contradictory and therefore exclusive conceptions of the VP.

The discussion so far suggests that one issue that should concern us in elucidating and enquiring into the concept of the VP is whether we have a single conception of the VP, corresponding to a single conception of ethical requirements, or many conceptions of the VP corresponding to various competing and sometimes incompatible ideals of the good life or conceptions of ethical requirements. Correspondingly we could label these positions “absolutist” and “relativist”. According to absolutists “something is ethically required iff it is recognized and acted upon by the VP”; according to the relativist “something is ethically required in society S iff it is recognized and acted upon by a VP-according-to-S”.³ However, both positions share a problematic assumption, namely the determinacy thesis. I will argue that this assumption should be rejected, and with it the idea of a determinate VP.

VIRTUE ETHICS: WHY THE VP?

The VP was characterized above as an embodiment of ethical requirements. As noted, the discussion was philosophically neutral with regard to the meaning of the idea of a VP, and, as will transpire below, its very coherence. We encountered some trouble only by

questioning the existence of a single conception of the VP, as opposed to several conceptions that are relative to different cultures and ethical outlooks. Following these preliminaries, it is time to look more closely at the theoretical role of the VP which motivates this debate.

The view which underlies the absolutist–relativist debate and seems to lend it importance is the idea that the concept of the VP lies at the heart of ethical theory. Indeed, both absolutist and relativist versions of virtue ethics – either “absolutely” virtuous or else virtuous relative to a particular ethical outlook – share the idea of the VP as a replacement for a system of rules as embodying ethical requirements. But why adopt virtue ethics – the view that places the concept of the VP at the heart of the theory? And where does this idea of the VP as a blueprint for virtuous action – as a theoretically prior concept – come from?

Virtue ethics is best viewed as a response to a pressing concern: namely, how ethical requirements can be both objective and requirements for us. To appreciate the significance of this problem and the difficulties it raises, consider act-centred views of morality such as consequentialism and deontology. In general, many varieties of these views seem to fare well on the objectivity front: both consequentialist and deontological views provide guidelines that determine whether actions should be performed or not, and both can – and normally do – purport to objectively ground and justify these guidelines. Thus, both types of view seem to explicate how ethical requirements can be objective: they are rationally required, or they stem from a basic and objective principle such as the principle of utility.

The difficulty facing such act-centred views is to explicate how the objective requirements they establish are at the same time felt as requirements for us.⁴ What is it in us that makes us care when we care, and makes it the case that we should care, about these objective requirements? This problem of course is not new. Bernard Williams famously distinguished between the ancient moral sceptics such as Calycles and the traditional sceptic (B. Williams 1985). The latter is a sceptic about knowledge. But the moral sceptic does not doubt the possibility of knowing the right the thing to do. Instead, the moral sceptic wonders why he should care. Why should objective moral facts matter to us?

The difficulties encountered by objectivist act-centred views lie in accounting for the fact that ethical requirements are “for us”.⁵ The problem is this: if we begin our enquiry with the issue of objectivity, then by the point objectivity is taken care of, it is typically too late to render whatever requirements are vindicated as requirements “for us”. This is so because the idea that ethical requirements are “for us” did not constrain the supposed account of objectivity, and now arbitrariness looms: it seems impossible to render the resultant requirements for us non-arbitrarily. The paradigm of arbitrariness would be a straightforward *fiat*: since we have determined what is objectively required, we can simply legislate that whatever is objectively required of us is what people should care about, and *eo-ipso* what moral persons do care about. But this response leaves Williams’s question intact. The reply to the sceptical challenge is straightforward denial – it is no challenge at all. The objectivist simply says you should care about morality because you should care about morality, and what is morally required just is something we should care about.

Again: what seems to be at the root of the “motivation” problem is that proposed accounts of objectivity are not constrained by the requirement that ethical requirements are “for us” from the beginning.

This diagnosis points to a simple solution: what is required is an account that anchors ethical requirements within a conception of human goals, ends and ways of life; in other

words, an account of human flourishing. This would entail that the justification of various requirements resides in what we care about from the start. Thus, Williams's sceptical problem does not arise: morality is tailor-made for us to care about – it responds to some of our basic needs or interests.

However, the solution is not so simple. This strategy risks merely reversing the order of explanation, and thus encountering the opposite difficulty. If we anchor ethical requirements in what we care for, we risk subjectivism and losing sight of normativity altogether. The reason is that, since what each one of us happens to care about seems unstable and often capricious, the resultant requirements would be similarly capricious or arbitrary. Consider a simplistic view that straightforwardly identifies ethical requirements with what people care for. This would entail not only different requirements for different persons, but it would entail that a person so inclined *should* poison his neighbour, or torture cats. Equating ethical requirements with whatever resonates with us undermines their objectivity.

In summary, the theoretical difficulty is that if we begin with objectivity, it seems that ethical requirements are no longer “for us”, and if we start with what resonates with us, then objectivity is in danger of being lost altogether.

This predicament motivates virtue-centred views. These views award explanatory priority to the notion of the VP – or else are no-priority views which view neither the concept of the VP nor that of ethical requirements as prior to each other – and equate ethical requirements with the responses of such a person in a given situation. According to both types of such views, we should abandon the idea that ethical requirements define who the VP is, and instead adopt a view in which the responses of the VP determine what is ethically required. The gist of such views is that ethical requirements are for us – for the VP is one of us – and they are *requirements* because they are independent of any particular person's particular sensitivities, desires, dispositions or circumstances. Instead, they stem from our conceptions of human flourishing, of goods or of an ethical life. Thus, according to virtue ethics, ethical requirements are “for us” because the VP is a person, and objective because the VP is virtuous.

WHY NOT RULE-CENTRED VIEWS?

As we saw, virtue ethics is one way of anchoring ethical requirements in human concerns while trying to account for the objectivity of these requirements. We will return below to the question of the success of such views in providing a model for the normativity of ethical requirements for us.

First we must address another concern – why does virtue ethics not insist on a rule-centred view that anchors or justifies rules by an appeal to basic human concerns, such as utility, pleasure, well-being or rationality? Such a view might be difficult to come by, but it seems to offer theoretical advantages that are not only worth the effort, but are essential. After all, there is much to be said in favour of a view of ethical requirements as a system of rules – rules that can actually be appealed to in order to resolve ethical questions and conflicts, can be discussed and deliberated upon publicly and appealed to in order to justify actions and explain them to others and so on. On such an account, the idea of appealing to the VP in order to account for ethical requirements comes at an apparently high cost. Debunking rule-centred views of ethical requirements in favour of a virtue-centred view

seems to be a way of “giving up” on moral philosophy altogether, or at least on its normative and prescriptive aspects.

What rule-centred views assume is not only the determinacy thesis, but also more specifically that ethical requirements are codifiable – they can be expressed in the form of generalities. My aim in this section is to invoke John McDowell’s anti-codifiability argument and thus explain that the shift to virtue ethics is not just an *ad hoc* manoeuvre tailored to dissolve the difficulty of seeing how ethical requirements can be both objective and for us. Instead, it relies on considerations that pertain to the meaningfulness of ethical concepts. In what follows, it will be shown that uncodifiability leads to a rejection of the determinacy thesis, and therefore to the centrality of the concept of the VP.

As claimed above, the traditional reason for rejecting rule-centred accounts is that they fail to disclose how ethical requirements are “requirements for us”. This criticism is often discussed (by friends and foes of such accounts alike) in terms of motivation. Generally speaking, it is claimed that rule-centred accounts of ethical requirements, and in fact any account of ethical requirements that does not recognize the explanatory role of the concept of a virtuous person, fail to disclose the sense in which ethical requirements are requirements for us because they fail to disclose why these requirements are motivating – why we should care about what is ethically required.

However, McDowell’s argument against the codifiability of ethical requirements (McDowell 1998b, 1998c) highlights the fact that the underlying issue concerns what it is that makes ethical requirements meaningful at all. Thus, he shows that the motivation problem is merely a symptom of a deeper problem.

McDowell’s argument begins with Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations which show that nothing – no “fact” given from outside a linguistic practice of use – can determine the content of a concept. When applied to the ethical realm, this claim implies that rules cannot determine the meaning of ethical requirements. The point is not simply that rules fail to motivate, but rather that in and of themselves, rules cannot account for their own application. Thus, pure rule-centred accounts fail to respond to the question “What is it that should be done?”, and not merely to the question “Why should I care about it?” The latter question presumes a response to the former: only if the meaningfulness of ethical requirements is taken for granted can the question of motivation be asked coherently: only once it is determined what is ethically required, can one act according to what is ethically required, fail to do so, dismiss or ignore ethical requirements, and so on. But the lesson of Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations is that a system of rules cannot provide a response to this question. So before we raise the motivation question, we must first address the meaningfulness question.

The question raised by the rule-following considerations is, “If objective ethical requirements – such as ethical ‘rules’ – cannot account for the meaningfulness of ethical concepts, what can?” Before we proceed, it is important to note that McDowell’s response implies that once the meaningfulness question is addressed, the motivation question should not even arise. The gist of the argument is that ethical requirements, if meaningful and recognizable as such, must be motivating. In other words, they are motivating “all the way down”. I will not elaborate on this claim here, but proceed to the argument against the codifiability thesis which will be employed in what follows.

McDowell’s Wittgensteinian response to the meaningfulness question is that nothing can account for the meaningfulness of ethical concepts, in the sense that the question

presupposes. Instead, the VP is simply a particular type of rule-follower. A rule-follower has the ability to “go on” in a particular realm; for example, the ability to add rather than quadd.⁶ In ethics, this is the ability to recognize ethically relevant aspects of a situation and act accordingly – to “go on” in the ethical realm.

How does this claim lead to a rejection of the codifiability thesis? In a nutshell, McDowell contends that once we recognize the significance of the ability to “go on”, there is simply no justification to presume that ethical requirements are codifiable. The reason for this is that the presumption that ethical requirements *are* codifiable is tempting only if we view codifiability as necessary. However, codifiability is neither necessary nor sufficient for the meaningfulness of ethical concepts. Consequently, there is no reason to presume that ethical requirements are codifiable, complex and sensitive to a multitude of different circumstances as they are. Since the argument awards a central role to the ability to “go on” – the sensitivity to recognize the salient ethical aspects of a situation, and the disposition to act accordingly – it supports a virtue-centred view of ethical requirements.⁷

Note that this conclusion does not deny the underlying motivation for rule-centred accounts of ethical requirements: rules provide guidance in a plural society, and shape and function in public deliberation and justification of individual and collective actions alike. Furthermore, it does not deny the possible usefulness of rules in replacing non-discretionary procedures. What is denied is that rules preceded the VP in the order of justification. I will return to this point below.

THE PARADOX OF ANALYSIS

If not a system of rules, what determines the content of ethical requirements, and how can they be objectively justified if not by appeal to general principles? McDowell’s argument points towards virtue ethics – towards the responses of a VP – so that by invoking the conception of a VP, we can fix ethical requirements by appealing to the responses of the VP; and by independently characterizing the sensitivities and dispositions of the VP, we can insulate them from capricious idiosyncrasies: what is ethically required is what a VP would do in similar circumstances.

What is the status of the proposed analysis? The question is of course an instance of a more general issue concerning the possibility and significance of philosophical analysis, as well as the status and import of conceptual truths. In the following paragraphs, I will very briefly sketch what I take to be Wittgenstein’s response to this question, as presented in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

In sections 65–78 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein discusses the challenge of defining the concept “game”. The discussion of these sections often focuses on the possibility of providing an extensionally adequate definition. But Wittgenstein asks poignantly what the import of providing such a definition would actually be.

We can summarize Wittgenstein’s claims thus:

- Claim I. A definition of “game” does not guide our use of the term or mastery of the concept (this also shows that a definition is not necessary).
- Claim II. Adopting a definition might entail a difference in use as opposed to not adopting one – there is no possible guarantee that will not occur. In other words,

adopting a definition amounts to making a prescriptive choice – a definition is normative, not descriptive.

- Claim III. In particular, any philosophical analysis (non-priority interpretations of biconditionals included) involves making a normative choice that is not forced upon us by past use, and thus might entail a difference in use as opposed to not adopting one, and is therefore *prescriptive*.

Let us look at these claims in some detail.

Claim I

Wittgenstein's argument for this claim is straightforward – he writes about the definition of “game”:

66. Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” – but look and see whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! – Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. – Are they all ‘amusing’? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

Some readers have focused on the question of whether Wittgenstein successfully demonstrates that “game” is unanalysable or whether the difficulties he points to are merely obstacles that can be overcome by a suitably ingenious analysis.⁸ However, it is possible to defend claim I without committing to the impossibility of finding an apparently satisfying definition. Instead, the difficulties of finding one suffice to show that as a matter of fact, it is unwarranted to assume that our use of “game” is actually guided by an explicit definition – a definition is not only unavailable (readily), but eludes us even upon reflection. As for an implicit definition – Wittgenstein suggests that to insist that an implicit definition guides our use despite its unavailability is utterly unwarranted: how could it possibly do so?

Claim II

Claim II takes the problem a step further: suppose we do accept a certain definition of games because we find it adequate and convincing. How can we know that adopting this definition has no consequences – and would not lead to a difference in possible use? One response is of course to check – to treat actual use always as the criterion for the adequacy of definition, thus rendering it purely descriptive. But this means that such an implicit definition does not in fact guide our use. Thus, this response does not help us in the case of the VP and ethical requirements – because it means that ethical requirements are prior to any conception of the VP. The conclusion is that any philosophical analysis that relates an analysans and analysandum or else exposes an internal relation between two concepts is prescriptive: it expresses a commitment to use the defined term in the future as the defining term would prescribe.

The conclusion of Wittgenstein's claim is that the existence of a "blueprint" for what a game is is not necessary for the applicability or usefulness of the concept.⁹ This entails that a definition of *any* shared concept or term (e.g. ethical requirements are those a VP would act on) is prescriptive – it purports to determine something that was not necessarily thus determined before. For example, imagine that all our games happen to be card-games. If we then ascertain that games must involve cards, we determine in advance that any new possible non-card game is not a game. This commitment is the consequence of the definition, not something it exposes or brings to light.

WHOSE RESPONSES?

What about ethical requirements and the VP? Claim III applies the general lesson to any philosophical analysis. In particular, if it is claimed that if what is ethically required in a particular situation is what an independently determined and identifiable VP would do in a similar situation, then we are in fact committing ourselves to a certain conception of what is ethically required in that situation – namely, what some independently specifiable VP would do.

What does this mean? An analogy often serves to clarify this and provide a model for objective yet response-dependent qualities: that of the normal observer (NO) and secondary qualities such as colours. If we adopt a similar response-dependent account of colours in reaction to a similar question – how can they be "for us" (tailored to human vision) and objective – then the NO plays a similar role to that of the VP.

Who is a NO? As it happens, the NO has "normal vision" in the statistical sense, and also the NO is someone who correctly identifies colours. But this is not all – there are things that can be said about the NO and in particular about the requisite sensitivity – namely, normal eyesight – in addition to mere competency or the prevalence of his responses. This possibility of further elucidation stems from the fact that colours are *seen*, and seen by humans. In other words, it is a fact about colours that they are visible to normal humans.

What about relativism? When it comes to creatures with a different mechanism for sight, it seems that common practice allows for a plurality of normal observers: a normal human, a normal bee, normal night-sight, and so on. But once we are dealing with humans in normal conditions, it seems that colours are exclusively determined by the responses of

the NO. This attitude is manifested by the fact that it seems that we would treat a creature that can detect colours correctly by, for example, measuring the wavelength, as a creature that can identify colours but does not “see” colours. Therefore, no matter how successful it is, such a creature would not qualify as a NO, and when faced with the question “What colour is this particular surface?” the reactions of the NO would be the ones that count. The responses of such a creature, if and when they diverge from those of the recognized NO, do not and cannot present us with a challenge and can be treated either as faulty, or relativized to its mechanism, or not colour responses at all. When it is colours we are interested in, it is the responses of normal observers we are to consider.

But this confidence in the status of the NO does not show that the biconditional expresses a necessary truth, and not a prescriptive injunction that can function as rule of meaning but can also lose its standing as such. A sufficiently different practice, with a different role allotted to the wave detecting creature, could yield a different response and sever the tie between the naturally described mechanism of the NO and colour judgments. What this means is that colours are determinate because the sensitivities of the NO are independently determinate. And the fact that the sensitivities of the NO are this determinate expresses a commitment – one which might not withstand any possible challenge but is nevertheless relatively stable.

What about the VP? Who is the person whose responses in a particular situation determine what is required, and what determines what are the requisite sensitivities and dispositions? Recall that the priority awarded to the notion of the VP was intended to capture the sense in which different and revisable conceptions of the good life, of happiness, of goods, and so forth all play a part in determining what is ethically required in a situation. This plethora of considerations that determine what is or is not ethically required in a particular situation, and that can be invoked in order to justify these requirements, is antithetical to the idea of a blueprint for virtuous action – of someone who is “wired” in advance to produce the correct response. What this suggests is that the multifarious nature of the factors that are relevant to determining what is ethically required *do not* determine any particular set of sensitivities that define a VP.

The point, in a nutshell, is this: the main difference between ethical requirements and colours is that a different or competing conception of ethical requirements can and might challenge our own. Furthermore, any claim that they could not expresses a normative – not metanormative – proposition. The basis for rejecting out of hand competing conceptions of the VP (or denying that what is presented as a competing conception is in fact one at all) is much weaker, and arises not only from within an ethical outlook, but by appealing directly to the factors that supposedly determine the identity of the VP. In other words, the only way to respond to an ethical challenge is by appealing to what underlies any conception of virtue – a concept of the good life, ethical requirements, and so on. And this renders the concept of the VP – the middleman – redundant.

The point goes further than the insight of relativism: that actual ethical conceptions vary seems to suggest many VPs rather than one, and a relativist conception of ethical requirements rather than an absolutist one. Instead, we are faced with the following: the VP is supposed to embody the considerations that underlie and justify ethical requirements. But this idea only makes sense if we insist on some relatively determinate sensitivity that can determine responses – be it determined naturally or socially. Since these factors do not have a status similar to that of natural facts *vis-à-vis* the NO, we are left with the ethical

considerations themselves – a conception of human happiness, moral requirements, and so on. They are all that is left to determine who the VP is.

Thus, the only candidates that it seems plausible to adduce in order to “fix” the VP are objective and fixed ethical requirements. But of course, this implies a priority of these requirements – a priority that was supposedly dispelled by the seeming inability of such a view to respond to the question of what makes our objective requirements “for us”, and by McDowell’s argument. Without such sensitivity, we are left with ethical considerations.

But as we saw above, these considerations themselves are in a state of flux in the absence of a philosophical compulsion to view them as codifiable or, for that matter, fixed. Again: McDowell’s argument did not entail virtue ethics or an appeal to a VP – it undermined codifiability. What it really implies is rulelessness and the indeterminacy of ethical requirements. The argument presented above shows that the concept of the VP cannot be adduced to “fix” ethical requirements because, unlike the NO, we are not committed to an independently specifiable sensitivity that yields ethical requirements. This means that, given the variety and multitude of considerations, there is no reason to presume that ethical requirements are determinate. Thus, there is no reason to deny apparent particularism. In other words, there is no reason to deny that the significance of different factors varies from situation to situation – from context to context. But what this means is that, whereas the spirit of relativism is retained, the determinacy thesis and with it the philosophical import of the very idea of the VP is lost.

NOTES

1. For a survey of virtue ethics as well as of some the issues mentioned above, see Hursthouse (2012).
2. This plurality applies to ethical requirements in the broad sense – as providing a response to the question “How should we live?” in all its richness – and not necessarily to moral requirements in a narrower, more austere sense. I will not dwell here on the demarcation of the “moral” and the distinction between “moral” and “ethical” which includes much that is of value in our lives but is not necessarily moral (issues such as friendship, the place of music in this or that person’s life, etc. fall under this category).
3. The label “absolutist” is intended to evoke the idea of the VP as possessing a “second nature” which means he is really sensitive to the normative requirements presented by a situation, and habituated to act accordingly.
4. I elaborate elsewhere that the issue is not only to explain how these are requirements for us, but also how to relate their normative force to the way in which they motivate us. The idea is that an account of the value of, e.g., music or of sex, should relate such a value to the ways in which we value music or sex. See my 2011, and also van Hooff, this volume, Chapter 13.
5. I argue in my 2012 comment on David Enoch’s 2011 work that this problem plagues any attempted defence of ethical realism that does not treat the “relevance for us” of ethical requirements as its starting point.
6. The idea is that no finite number of applications of a “rule” can determine future applications. Kripke elucidated this in his interpretation of Wittgenstein’s rule paradox by introducing the function of “quaddition” which is similar to the function designated by “addition” if both arguments are smaller than 57, but gives 5 if they are. Now, suppose someone is asked to calculate “57 + 65”. This person has never yet added numbers larger than 57, and has shown he can add until now. Is there any fact that determines whether for this person “+” designates addition and the correct answer is 125, or “quaddition” and the correct answer is 5? The point of Kripke’s sceptical argument is that there is no such fact.
7. I include no-priority views such as McDowell’s (1998b, 1998c) in this category. The reason is that no-priority views resemble virtue-centred views in recognizing that ethical requirements are meaningful only from within the “swirl of the organism”, and because – as will become manifest – they share the determinacy of ethical requirements thesis which will be rejected below. For a criticism of McDowell’s view, see my 2009.

8. For an attempt to define “game”, see Suits ([1978] 2005). Thomas Hurka considers this attempt a successful refutation of Wittgenstein’s claim in his introduction to the 2005 edition of Suits. Simon Blackburn has made similar remarks.
9. The claim that a definition or rule does not suffice to guide use is the gist of the private language argument.