

Truth and Virtue: Comments on Micah Lott's *Moral Virtue as knowledge of Human Form*

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Micah Lott presents a clear and intriguing account of the relation of virtue to knowledge, an account which raised two principal questions for this reader: (1) Can the merely clever person attain knowledge of human form and, if so, does that diminish the connection Lott finds between virtue and knowledge? And (2) how, if at all, is virtue necessary or at least helpful for doing philosophy? Here I will respond to MacIntyre's treatment of the issue in *Edith Stein*.

1

Lott distinguishes the knowledge a virtuous person has from that of the merely clever person, noting that for the former, knowledge of what it is right to do in a particular situation appears in the form of a personal imperative. The clever person, knowing, for example, how the concept of justice operates, can also *indicate* what a just person would do. But can the clever person also know the human form? Admittedly, the clever person fails to model virtue, but perhaps like the novelist, may have an imaginative eye for detail and concrete description even beyond that of the typical genuinely virtuous person. If so, actual virtue would seem to be unnecessary for knowing human form.

Against this, Lott might argue that (1) the clever person's knowledge of how the concept of justice operates ultimately depends on the conduct of the just, without whom no such concept would have been formulated and/or (2) the clever person depends on direct observation of just conduct and/or (3) even the most imaginative eye for detail will ultimately fall short of insider's knowledge. Like one become expert after long

experience in a practice, the one who knows from the inside is more attuned to all the subtleties and more original in his or her expression, for example, of how love behaves, more than even the most astute observer could imaginatively project. Altogether, then, the clever one's understanding is parasitic upon actual virtue and/or otherwise inferior. So actual virtue would still seem to be necessary for knowledge of human form.

Now when Lott claims that the virtuous "know" the human form *by knowing how to act*, we may ask whether this is only "practical knowledge" or also includes a conceptual account of human form? In either case, the conceptual account will require some philosophy. And the relation of virtue to philosophizing is important for MacIntyre.

2

In *Edith Stein*, MacIntyre sees Stein's practice of philosophy as a collaborative effort requiring humility and her social view of the self developed in the phenomenology of empathy as informed by her care for others as a nurse. Stein also developed the virtues necessary to sustain philosophically-important long-term friendships. That is, her virtues made her philosophical progress possible.

On the other hand, Martin Heidegger is seen to fail in these respects. While intriguing, I want to argue that MacIntyre's proposed relation between virtue and philosophy exemplified in these philosophers is problematic. To the extent Lott would argue for virtue as a condition of conceptual knowledge, his account may be subject to the same challenges.

MacIntyre considers the claim of Heidegger's defenders that his philosophical development is separable from his political engagement with National Socialism. For

MacIntyre, it is unimaginable that someone's political and philosophical life should be disconnected since they express a single underlying character.²⁹ In the Carus Lectures, MacIntyre claims that, "our intellectual errors are often, although not always, rooted in our moral errors," and that "from both types of mistake the best protections are friendship and collegiality."³⁰ Two such avoidable errors are (1) taking a false position based on our dislike of someone, and (2) misinterpreting a situation by projecting our own private fantasy.

There is certainly good evidence that Heidegger might have avoided involvement with National Socialism had he not committed the second type of mistake since, by all accounts, he colored that movement with philosophical motives quite foreign to it. And Heidegger had friends at the time who disagreed with him. On the other hand, if we follow Aristotle or Cicero, it is the true friendship of the good which serves the protecting role MacIntyre assigns to friendship generally. A friend group could be corruptive. MacIntyre acknowledges this point and the consequent need to break with others at times.³¹ So how we know whether to follow the advice of friends, or of which friends when they disagree, turns out to be a problem for the virtue and philosophy relation MacIntyre advocates.

Cases in which expressed character traits do vary between philosophy and politics MacIntyre considers psychologically remarkable, something like schizophrenia. Yet this phenomenon should not really surprise us, even if it were true of Heidegger, for reasons MacIntyre argues so well in chapter fifteen of *After Virtue*. As he observes, the way

²⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), p. 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.96.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.97.

modern societies tend to segment life into public and private, corporate and personal, work and leisure, makes a unified narrative self with integrated virtues a difficult achievement. So on MacIntyre's analysis, divided character traits are likely to be the rule in a society of fragmented roles.

Where does the difference in virtue between Stein and Heidegger ultimately take us philosophically? In view of her comparatively limited contribution to philosophy, it is hard not to conclude that her exemplary Christian life and martyrdom are what continue to draw even philosophical biographers. As Erwin Straus remarks in the foreword to the second edition of Stein's *On the Problem of Empathy* some forty years ago, "Today the fate and legend of Edith Stein, who in silent heroism enacted the transition from phenomenology to existentialism, keeps interest in her book alive."³² And since her canonization, interest in Stein has increased all the more and for the same reason.

³² Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 2nd edition (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), p. v.