



Reparative futures in a thick, virtuous present

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ABSTRACT

Reparative action is often justified by appealing to consequentialist or deontological ethics. This paper argues that these ethics are dependent on an assumed continuity between the present and the future, and, further, that this assumption is not warranted in the face of a complex and uncertain future. If this is the case, actions taken to repair historic and emerging harms may lack justification. To strengthen the case for reparative action, this paper describes an alternative approach, one based on virtue ethics, and suggests that virtuous action can be imagined taking place within a ‘thick present’. Reparative action, on this account, can be justified by appealing to the degree to which it addresses human flourishing, without having to depend on an unreliable future. This focus on the present does not foreclose a reparative future, but instead re-orientates our relationship to it: reparative futures, on this account, become utopian lodestones that affirm our need to work for justice and repair, while the actions we take to bring them about can be justified through an appeal towards what matters in the present. But working in a thick, virtuous present is not without its own risks, and the paper describes some of the challenges that arise.

1. Introduction

In the light of the need to work for ‘reparative futures’, or futures in which injustices and harms of the past and present are recognised and addressed, I want to think about the kind of ethical frameworks that might underpin efforts to create such futures. In particular, I am interested in exploring how different ethical frameworks relate to the future, and how these relationships might make it easier or harder to work towards reparation in an uncertain future. I suggest that, given the uncertainty of the future and the temporal complexity of the harms and injustices that warrant reparation, those working towards reparative futures would benefit from considering themselves to be working within a ‘thick present’ rather than towards some future horizon. Further, I suggest that virtue ethics offers a more appropriate model than consequentialist or deontological approaches. Working within a thick, virtuous present might offer the possibility of having greater confidence in the justification for the moral choices being made, and in these justifications being less vulnerable to change and uncertainty, making it more likely these futures become reparative presents.

The article works towards this goal through the following stages. First, I offer a brief working description of ‘reparative futures’, and discuss some of the ways the notions of repair and the future are connected. I go on to suggest that many justifications for reparative action depend on broadly consequentialist or deontological ethical frameworks, and show how each of these frameworks depends on the future, and moreover on the future having particular qualities of continuity and certainty. I argue that moral judgements that are made using these perspectives are only reliable insofar as the actual future really does possess these characteristics, and that, if the future is uncertain or discontinuous, actions taken to repair past and present harms may lack the justification it is assumed they have.

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However, I claim that reparative futures are indeed necessarily uncertain and discontinuous, suggesting that an alternative approach to understanding moral action is necessary, one that relates to the future in a different way to consequentialist or deontological theories of ethical action.

In the next section, I outline a candidate for just such an alternative approach to understanding reparative action, drawing on ideas from virtue ethics to imagine moral actions undertaken by actors locating themselves within a thick present, in which anticipated futures play a constitutive role alongside consideration of previous moments in their careers as moral agents, and in which their focus is on the exercise of the practical wisdom developed through these career with respect to the reparative question at hand. Such a focus on the present is not intended to deny or foreclose a reparative future, but instead to re-orient our relationship to it: reparative futures, on this account, become utopian lodestones that affirm our need to work for justice and repair, while the actions we take to bring them about can be justified through an appeal towards what matters in the present, rather than depending on an uncertain future.

In making this argument, I am connecting a number of different fields, and necessarily will have to treat each of them more superficially than might be desired by specialists in these areas, in order to make progress. As a result, this is necessarily a first sketch rather than a final word: my hope is that I can make the case that the idea is worth exploring further. And, as a final prefatory note, it may be useful to position the present enquiry in relation to the many other investigations into the possibility of desirable futures. Since its foundation, futures studies has been concerned with what its practitioners call 'preferable futures' (Amara, 1981) and our obligations to future generations (e.g., Bindé, 2000; Masini, 2013), although the ways in which the desirability of possible futures are evaluated is frequently unexamined (Poli, 2011; Bell, 2009). More broadly, the aim of understanding and producing 'ethical futures', or futures that do not contain present-day risks and harms, is central to studies of responsible innovation, and underpins more popular calls to think long-term (e.g., Krznaric, 2021; Fisher, 2023). Policy and civil society groups concerned with topics such as sustainability and equality all advertise their wish for 'better futures'. The moral nature of the future is well-recognised and informs the work of all these groups. But the processes through which we agree (or not) on what constitutes a 'preferable future' are opaque and not often given attention. So this paper is a small contribution to the larger task of attending to the moral nature of the futures we prefer. I am interested in how the ethical frameworks we use to differentiate between desirable and undesirable futures themselves relate to the future. This is important, because, it seems to me, an ethics that depends on a view of the future that is not, in fact, how the future really is cannot be depended on to produce the ethical presents that must be what 'ethical futures' aim to produce — because to be satisfied with an imaginary just world instead of a real just world must fall short of what we aim to achieve when we think about ethics.

2. Reparation and the future

What is a 'reparative future'? For the purposes of this paper, a reparative future will be understood broadly as an imagined future arising at a present time when some harm done to a group is recognised, and in which future is imagined some circumstances that make that harm easier to bear for that group. The temporal relationships involved in reparative action are more complex than this implies. Repair, restoration, making good: these all suggest a return to how things were before the harm in question. But the world will always have the harm in it, and the repair will always outline the damage, in the same way that the gold lacquer used in *kintsugi* highlights the cracks in the mended pot. Rather than resetting time, any reparative action will be contributing a new layer to experience, sedimenting time in the way Koselleck (2018) describes. The intention behind reparation, then, is not to return to a time before the harm, but to enlarge the futures that lie ahead of those groups to whom reparation is due. If repair aims to renew the capacity of the thing repaired to act in our lives, then in the same way we might think of reparation as addressing the limits to action that are imposed on groups through suffering the harms described above. A practical implication of this, as Sriprakash et al. (2020) point out, is that meaningful reparation must not only compensate groups for particular harms, but also work to dismantle the structures that perpetuate those harms: a reparative future, then, is one in which certain kinds of harm are no longer possible.

The notion of formal reparation depends on a degree of continuity between past, present and future. Promises are made that need to be kept. The institutions and systems of governance that manage the process of repairing a wrong must endure for at least the length of the process. The principles that set out what it means to be fair or just must similarly remain in place while any claim to justice is established and appropriate redress made. Some kind of identity between those injured and those bringing a claim on their behalf is needed, and likewise some identity between those perpetrating harm and those claiming some responsibility for it: indeed, the principle that descendants can bear some responsibility for their ancestors' crimes is central to the idea of reparation. But the world will also be changing as the process of reparation unfolds, and this will change the nature of the harm and the way it might be repaired. What constitutes a meaningful reparative act will therefore also change over time, as the context of the harm and the relationship between those groups involved changes. Continued inaction and sustained injustice may magnify the harm done, or, conversely, those connected to the harm may succeed in mitigating the injury to some extent, as investments in (for example) education unfold. Untended harms and injustices lead to further harms and injustices, as the impacts of inequality and oppression accumulate, deepening any need for repair and making conversations about meaningful redress more difficult. The moral character of a claim will change as time passes: a crime committed recently occupies a different place in a community than one remembered from generations ago. Or the weight of claim may diminish over time, as memories fade, and this attenuation might itself be a form of injustice.

Recent work on reparation (e.g., Bhambra, 2022; Thakkar, 2020; Wenar, 2006) recognises that reparation is temporally complex, and that justice is not something that can be provided in a neat and bounded way. Rather than reparations being a series of discrete events, such work imagines reparative action as a process, or set of related processes, given the inter-related nature of many of the harms for which reparation is sought. It recognises that the work of repair is continual and ongoing. Such a view of reparation might be thought of as aiming for a way of living that is just, rather than achieving justice.

The remainder of this paper is directed towards developing a general argument about the need for reparative action to avoid the

unreliable future, rather than working through the particulars of individual cases. But I want to briefly indicate the kind of reparative action that might be kept in mind while this argument is developed (without, of course, claiming that these actors would endorse it). We might think of the kind of formal reparative efforts that have been made by colonising states, such as the German recognition of their genocidal actions in Namibia between 1905 and 1908,¹ or the apology from the Dutch Prime Minister for the role of the Netherlands in the trans-Atlantic slave trade² — but, while these acknowledge the role of the state in perpetrating harm, and carry some substance (in the German case, a payment of €1.1bn), it is not clear that they warrant a description of ‘reparative’ or ‘restorative’.³ Acts that have a stronger claim to be restorative might share features with projects like the Heirs of Slavery, a group of people whose ancestors profited from slavery, and who have come together to work towards making meaningful repair for this injustice, through supporting “apology, dialogue, reconciliation and reparative justice”⁴; or with the Australian government’s decision to stop referring to Fraser Island, in Queensland, and instead to call it K’gari, the name used by the island’s traditional owners, the Butchulla people (Barrowcliffe, 2021); or with the arrangement between the V&A museum, in the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Yemen, whereby the V&A will take temporary care of four funerary stelae recovered in London, until they may be safely returned to Yemen;⁵ or the repatriation of artefacts belonging to the Anindilyakwa community from the Manchester Museum⁶; or the ‘Cotton Capital’ project set up by the Guardian newspaper in response to the discovery of their founder’s links to the slave trade.⁷ We might also have in mind less formally restorative actions that nevertheless work to accomplish some kind of repair, such as those of residents of Glasgow in 2021 when hundreds rallied to prevent the UK Border Force removing their Muslim neighbours,⁸ or the communities in Kent welcoming refugee survivors of the Channel crossing,⁹ or the hundreds of organisers establishing mutual aid groups via WhatsApp and Facebook during the pandemic (Carstensen et al., 2021). The success of these actions in contributing to a reparative future will, I suggest, be subject to the kinds of uncertainties and complexities just described. But these uncertainties should not call into doubt the justification of reparative actions like these.

3. Depending on the future: making reliable moral judgements

Moral justifications offered for reparations often appeal to general universal principles. Groups suffering harm might be reckoned to have had certain rights infringed: the right to safety or security, or to have the same opportunities as others. Those perpetrating the harm are seen to have an obligation to cease, and to recognise the harm, and offer some redress: this is a duty imposed on them by these general principles of morality. Other rationales for reparative action focus on the outcomes, suggesting that the aim of reparation should be to increase the quality of life for the injured group. That is, the value of a reparative act should be assessed on the consequences it holds for those suffering a particular harm. In practice, reparations tend to offer some combination of the two: we (those of us descended from the groups perpetrating the original harm, and who have benefitted from it) have a duty to redress a given injustice for which we are liable, and we should evaluate the reparations we might make according to the benefits they bring those wronged. Such a construction is in line with mainstream moral intuitions as they are generally discussed and recognised, at least within the European societies historically responsible for the harms discussed at present in the context of reparations. Within these societies’ traditions of moral philosophy, ethical theories that concern themselves with duty to universal principles are called ‘deontological’ (from the Greek for ‘duty’), while those concerned with the outcomes of action are ‘consequentialist’. (There are many versions of these two broad positions, which may hold more or less firmly to the boundaries I have caricatured here, and adherents of one version or another may dispute some aspect of my representation of them, but, for the sake of making the general arguments that follow, I will

¹ ‘Germany agrees to pay Namibia €1.1bn over historical Herero-Nama genocide’ Guardian, 28th May 2021 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/28/germany-agrees-to-pay-namibia-11bn-over-historical-herero-nama-genocide>)

² ‘Dutch PM apologises for Netherlands’ role in slave trade’ Guardian, 19th December 2022 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/19/dutch-pm-apologises-for-netherlands-role-in-slave-trade>)

³ ‘Why the Dutch apology for slavery leaves a bitter taste in my mouth’ Guardian, 14th January 2023 (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/14/dutch-apology-slavery-reparation-caribbean>), ‘We want trillions to heal our wounds’, BBC, 7th August 2021 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57961151>), ‘Germany, Namibia Need a Rights-Respecting Reparations Process’, Human Rights Watch, 7th June 2023 (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/07/germany-namibia-need-rights-respecting-reparations-process>)

⁴ <https://www.heirsofslavery.org/our-purpose>: see also ‘Laura Trevelyan urges King Charles to apologise for historical links to slave trade’, Guardian, Saturday 15th April 2023 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/15/laura-trevelyan-urges-king-charles-to-apologise-for-historical-links-to-slave-trade>) and ‘My ancestors profited from slavery. Here’s how I am starting to atone for that’, Guardian, Monday 24th April 2023 (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/24/ancestors-profit-slavery-atone-enslaved-people>)

⁵ ‘The V&A and Republic of Yemen’ V&A blog, September 21st 2023 (<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/the-va-and-republic-of-yemen>), ‘V&A to look after ancient Yemen stones found in London shop’, Guardian, 12th September (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/sep/12/v-and-a-ancient-yemen-stones-stelae-london-museum>)

⁶ ‘Manchester Museum to return Aboriginal artefacts in special ceremony’, BBC, 5th September 2023 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-66709623>)

⁷ ‘The Guardian and slavery: what did the research find and what happens next?’ Guardian, 28th March 2023 (<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2023/mar/28/the-guardian-and-slavery-what-did-the-research-find-and-what-happens-next>)

⁸ ‘Neighbours rush to street to block Home Office from removing Muslim immigrants on Eid’, Independent, Thursday 13 May 2021 (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/glasgow-kennure-immigration-evictions-sturgeon-b1847002.html>)

⁹ For example, the Kent Refugee Action Network (<https://kran.org.uk/>) supports young migrants, while the Channel Rescue human rights organisation monitor the actions of Border Force (<https://www.facebook.com/channel.rescue/>)

work with these broad characterisations).

It may be the case that many reparative acts that have been rationalised either in terms of duty or outcome were good and right actions. What is relevant here is that both of these perspectives depend on some aspects of the future to be the same as the past. In the case of consequentialism, if I contemplate some action, anticipating its likely outcome, and I base my assessment of whether it is a good action on the desirability of this anticipated outcome, then my judgement that it is a good action depends on being able to rely on this anticipation, and for it not to be undone by a change in its underlying causes. Evaluating a particular act as good on the grounds that what results will be good depends on being sure of the results: if the results that make it a good act are in doubt, or fail to happen, the grounds for thinking it a good act are weak. Consequentialism relies on being able to project likely outcomes, and so the causal factors and relationships underlying such projections must persist long enough for these outcomes to happen. In the case of deontology, the necessary continuity between present and future concerns the values and principles that enable actors to distinguish between good and bad actions, or (more properly for a deontologist) right and wrong. The collection of obligations, permissions, and norms that constitute a given deontology derive their value from their universal nature: they are categorical, in the sense of being absolute. In order to provide a coherent basis for action, duties cannot obtain sometimes, and sometimes not. If choices governed by a set of principles are not to be arbitrary, they must oblige us in the future just as much as they do now.

But the future is not certain, and such a continuity between past and future is not to be counted on. The world is complex, and therefore uncertain, since complexity gives rise to emergent novelty and discontinuity. It is not simply a truism to speak of an uncertain future — there are reasons to anticipate real disruption in our current patterns of life, as we continue to see changes in the deep planetary systems on which life and society depend (Letcher, 2021; Gaffney & Steffen, 2017). These physical changes will be mirrored by similar changes in politics, culture and society (Carleton & Hsiang, 2016), as we gradually establish new ways of living. New opportunities for harm and injustice are emerging, requiring new forms of repair. Perhaps existing sources of harm will wither and fade.

This uncertainty has implications for both consequentialist and deontological ethics. It is difficult, to say the least, to guarantee a particular consequence will result from a given action, especially when working on the kind of generational timescales that are encountered in the context of reparations. And history provides many examples, some in living memory, of social norms and values once treated as timeless and universal changing or being supplanted: we can expect similar changes in future values (Danaher, 2021). The certainty and continuity between present and future on which these ethical positions depend are not guaranteed. The future is unreliable, by which I mean that claims we make about the nature of the future (not just what we think will transpire, but the degree to which it is uncertain, or the state of our knowledge about it) are not to be relied upon: they may be true, but they may also not be, and it is not possible to consistently know which they are.

This is unwelcome news for those employing consequentialist or deontological approaches to justify reparative action, since they may not offer the justification it is presumed they do. I am not the first to note the dependence of these perspectives on a reliable future. Mulgan (2014) considers how different ethical traditions relate to the future, and how radically different futures from those commonly assumed undermine these traditions in different ways. Persson and Savulescu (2012, in Vallor, 2016:8) discuss the existential risks brought about through technological innovation, and ask whether these future catastrophes render calculations of potential human happiness irrelevant. Shannon Vallor's own work describes the "technosocial opacity" (Vallor, 2016:6) arising from increasing technological complexity and rendering the future un-knowable and unpredictable. She suggests this lack of knowledge is a serious problem for ethical approaches dependent on prediction or principle, since the greatest utility of a given action can't be evaluated, and it can't be known whether a particular good will remain a good in future.

It is not clear that these epistemic challenges are not already with us. But whether through lack of knowledge, as Vallor suggests, or through the ontological uncertainty produced through increasing complexity, there are good reasons to think the future unreliable, and consequently good reasons to doubt the value of consequentialist and deontological positions for helping us to work out what might constitute meaningful reparative action. This suggests, first, that an alternative temporal orientation is required, and second, that some other kind of ethical theory, one able to work in this alternative temporal orientation, will also be needed, if we are going to be able to identify and provide solid justification for the actions we take to repair harms and injustice.

4. Thick presents

If the future is an unreliable support for evaluating moral action, is there some way we might rely more on the present? It's hard to imagine how a narrow version of the present, the 'specious present' (Clay, in James, 1890:609 constituted solely of our immediate sensory awareness, might support an account of agency. But many authors have made use of the notion of a 'thick present', one with duration, in which experience can unfold. The idea has a complex heritage and is put to use in a variety of disciplinary contexts. Within futures studies, Poli (2011) has introduced the phenomenological thick present as a central ontological principle, a concept since employed more widely in the field (e.g., Hodgson, 2017; Jönsson et al., 2021). Its roots lie within the philosophy of the early twentieth century. Husserl described a present encompassing awareness of past and future through the categories of protention and retention, or "remembrance" and "expectation" (Husserl & Churchill, 1964:62), an account in which ideas of the past, present and future are layered and overlapping, and one described ever since as 'thick'. Previously, Bergson suggested that the durations of the moments constituting consciousness were composed of multiple experiences, to be understood neither as discrete and sequential, nor identical and homogenous, but as a "qualitative multiplicity" (Bergson, 1960/1889:105), a notion echoed later in the "constellations" of moments available within Benjamin's (1940) *Jetztzeit*, which Barad (2017:25) describes as a "crystallisation of the past refracted through the present" in her own discussion of how the present may be thickened. Other scholars, like Barad working to reimagine our relationship to the world, have drawn on the notion of temporal 'thickness' to accommodate the weaving of relationships between humans and

non-humans and the interrelation of different temporal scales (e.g., Haraway, 2016; Neimanis & Walker, 2014). Accounts of a temporally-complex present with duration describe not only individual experience but also social time, from the entangled lives and experiences of human and non-humans described by Haraway (2016), through the timescapes of Adam (2005) and the social time of Gurvitch (1964), to the long *durée* of Braudel (1992/1979) or the sedimented time of Koselleck (2018) mentioned above. These varied accounts of the thick present share two common aspects: a thick present has duration, and, within a thick present, ideas of the past, present and future are entangled, appearing alongside each other.

If the thick present might be a suitable alternative to the unreliable future, given our focus on reparative action we might ask: how does one act within a thick present? I would like to suggest that it is precisely action that makes the present thick. Pursuing the ends that we have demands that we weave together pasts, presents and futures, producing the thick present through the exercise of our agency. Sociological accounts of agency necessarily have a place for the past and the future, whether thinking about the pre-existing structures that constrain and direct action, or the imagined futures that inform rational, reflexive choices. But there are theories of practice and agency that help us imagine how a thick present comes to be, ones that don't simply provide a place for the past or future, but illustrate the ways they overlap and intersect in the process of things being done. For example, Mische (2009) and Mandich (2017) each describe the importance of 'projectivity' as a general component of agency. Welch, Mandich, & Keller (2020) discuss two mechanisms that illustrate the temporal complexity of agency, the 'teleoaffectivity' of Schatzki, or the ends and orientations invoked within social practice, and the 'regimes of engagement' employed by Mandich (2020), following Thevenot, describing modes through which to approach the future. These very different theoretical notions each attend to the continual movement between past, present and future that makes the present thick. But I am going to draw on the earlier, but still influential, account of agency offered by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) to think about action in a thick present.

Their account is concerned with interior experiences of time and agency, how individual actions relate to, and sustain, the circumstances in which they act, and — crucially — how these circumstances change over time. Different circumstances bring with them different relationships to time, structures and other people, and it is in the movement of the subject through the changes from circumstance to circumstance, enmeshed in the relations obtaining in each, that the experience of temporality emerges. Actors are not isolated but part of each other's systems of structure and circumstance, each tracing their own path through time as their collectively-produced contexts change. The engine underpinning these interactions is intersubjectivity, the capacity of the subject to construct itself in relation to other subjects, including itself, imagined in other times and contexts. It is this capacity of intersubjectivity that bridges the gap, for Emirbayer and Mische, between interiority and the external world, and what enables them to characterise the experience of time as fundamentally social rather than individual (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998:968). Intersubjectivity also permits the interior consideration of other, imaginary, circumstances (they suggest): actors move their attention between routine, habitual responses and representations, reflexive evaluation of the practical constraints or affordances of the situation, and the cares and concerns that are the ends to which their action is directed. Experience within these modes of routine, judgement, and purpose, oriented as they appear to be towards past, present and future respectively, unfolds in the flow of time, providing each with a further layer of past, present, or future. These multiple elements are, they suggest, capable of being distinguished analytically, but can only be experienced in the presence of the others: empirically, routine, judgement and purpose all occupy an agent together. The temporal contexts in which agency is exercised are thus nested and multi-layered, woven together in a way that evokes the "fractal time" Groves (2017) describes.

Emirbayer and Mische do not use the term, but, it seems to me, theirs is a description of action within a thick present. There are implications that follow from this way of thinking. It becomes harder to think of actions as being discrete, closed, and isolated from one another, given that they might serve as pasts, presents or futures in other circumstances, and that therefore what might be considered an end of one might at the same time be a central part of another or the beginning of a third. And it reminds us that decisions are made in the context of other decisions, both in the sense of social activity being temporally layered, and because actors are able to review past decisions, or other decisions that are also in the process of unfolding. There is a place for imagining the future within a thick present. But these future aren't empty, in the sense used by Adam and Groves (2007:57) to describe the linear, abstract, open futures underpinning a rational, modernist view of the world, and on which consequentialist and deontological ethical frameworks depend. They are lived futures (Adam & Groves, 2007:123), the product of actors being embedded in the relations of care and connection that give rise to the interests and concerns which form the horizon of our experience, and which are continually renewed in the process of our becoming.

Before we move on, we might note that the thick present already offers us useful language for describing reparative action. The presence of the past in the futures we imagine, and the practical evaluation of what might be achieved at this moment by these actors, are features of the process of thinking about what form reparations might take. The notion of duration offers a way of seeing a harm and its redress as part of the same event, whatever calendars might say about the years or centuries that separate them. The principle that actions, harmful or restorative, take place in the context of other actions, those already underway and those anticipated, is something with which groups arguing for reparations are already familiar. Reparations, we could say, already take place within a thick present.

So we have some idea of how actors might make choices in a thick present. How are they to be sure that they are good decisions? How might it be possible to evaluate reparative action in the absence of a reliable future?

5. Virtuous presents

Along with a dependence on an unreliable future, the ethical positions we considered earlier, consequentialism and deontology, share a concern with the ethical quality of particular actions. Virtue ethics offers an alternative approach, one that concerns itself less with individual actions and more with the character of the agent. In this section, I will make the case for considering the kind of ethical behaviour described by virtue ethicists as taking place in a thick present, and go on to propose that using some form of virtue ethics to

assess reparative action would allow us to avoid depending on an unreliable future. Virtue ethics is not the only possible approach that might be explored here. Care ethics (e.g., Baier, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Robinson, 2011) might also offer a worthwhile alternative, for example, and shares many aspects with a virtue approach. What I hope to achieve through the following discussion is to identify some of the principal features of virtue ethics that, I believe, are most relevant to a consideration of reparative action, and which are compatible with imagining this reparative action in a thick present: it may be that other approaches that are also able to accomplish this. My purpose is not really to advocate for virtue ethics, but to explore one way of justifying reparative action without recourse to an unreliable future.

Recent philosophical interest in thinking about virtue, something previously associated with Aristotle and his contemporaries, is commonly reckoned to begin with Anscombe's (1958) essay, 'Modern Moral Philosophy' (see Statman, 1997, and van Hooft, 2013, for useful reviews of the field). She suggests that the notion that we 'ought' (in a moral sense) to do certain things is without meaning, and that we should reject abstract, law-based moral judgements in favour of judgements that recognise the contribution of an act to an agent's cumulative moral development. That is, moral philosophy should start with asking which virtues are "habitually" (Anscombe, 1958:16) displayed by someone, taking as the unit of analysis not discrete acts, which might be taken as instances to which universal principles may be applied, but the moral character of the agent, or the extent to which someone's regular virtuous behaviour tends to contribute to their being a good person. There are a number of ideas in this essay that have remained central to subsequent conceptions of what 'virtue ethics' might be. First, the notion that the aim of people is to 'flourish', a modern gloss for Aristotle's eudaimonia, which is understood as a state of wellbeing in which they are good, wise, successful, happy, secure, and so on (there are variations in how different systems of thought employ the idea). Second, that this state of flourishing is best represented as being virtuous: that behaving virtuously is what constitutes a flourishing life. Third, that a flourishing life is something built over the course of a lifetime of ethical action, developed through a career of moral judgements that display virtuous behaviour.

Virtue ethics pays particular attention to the nature of these judgements, using the Aristotelean notion of *phronesis*, commonly translated as 'practical wisdom' or 'practical reason': this is the capability of moral agents to give proper weight to the kind of good that ought to be the end of a given action, and not simply to follow their first best impulses. Lying to a friend to spare their feelings might show virtues of compassion or loyalty, but a wiser choice might be to tell them the truth, in the interests of their longer-term flourishing, and this might show greater virtues of love or courage. It is through practical wisdom that moral agents make good choices about which virtues to exercise, and in what manner. It is through the continual exercise of practical wisdom, too, that the character of a moral agent is developed, as moral agents strive to follow previous examples of virtuous action in approaching a paradigmatic ideal of the flourishing life. One consequence of this focus on the agent rather than principles is that virtue ethics is not able to issue general prescriptions about such and such an action always being the right thing to do, instead recognising that exercising practical wisdom requires a consideration of the particular context in which a moral choice has presented itself: an action that is appropriate in one circumstance may not be appropriate in another setting, and it is practical wisdom, rather than any set of principles, that allows moral agents to perceive this. A further consequence of this focus on character rather than principles, and of recognising the relevance of context to any decision, is that different virtuous actors may offer different responses to the same circumstance, and each may be a good choice. This independence of character and action implies, too, that good people may on occasion do bad things, and that some things are bad no matter what the character of the people doing them.

Concentrating on people's character does not require us to imagine that moral agents exist or act alone. In some versions of virtue ethics, the pursuit of personal flourishing certainly seems to risk painting moral agents as egoists (Toner, 2015). But virtues that relate to other people, such as justice or generosity, require us to value these other people in themselves, rather than for instrumental reasons. So one way to guard against self-centredness would be to claim that a virtuous moral agent will be concerned with the flourishing of other people, alongside their own. Perhaps a more satisfying argument, however, would be to follow MacIntyre (2016) in thinking of flourishing as seeking common goods, and our moral selves as produced through the connections we have with the other people in our community: "in many situations the question to be answered is not 'How am I to act?' but 'How are we to act?'" (MacIntyre, 2016:72). In Vallor's words, "a moral practice is irreducibly a social enterprise, not just the sum total of efforts to live well" (Vallor, 2016:49)

How compatible might a general virtue ethics be with the thick present described above? I want to suggest that there are two principal ways in which the general aspects of virtue ethics set out here resonate with the notion of a thick present. First, in its relation to context, and, second, in its relation to the future.

Just as the moments and events in a thick present are the products of particular circumstances, and have particular features, and are defined in their relations to those other moments that surround them, preceding and following and unfolding alongside, so too do the situations in which virtuous actors make their judgements on how to act possess their own distinct and particular features, aspects which need to be recognised in the proper exercise of this judgement. Thick presents are embedded in social lives, layered and complex, and so too are the real situations in which practical wisdom is most necessary. The abstract and universal are less relevant than the concrete and particular in describing a thick present or virtuous action.

The movement between routine, imagination, and reason that Emirbayer and Mische describe, and which I suggest describes action in a thick present, sounds very like the exercise of practical wisdom, in which agents temper their dispositions to act through reflecting on the features of their current circumstance and their wider ends. This movement requires agents to relate to the future in a particular way, considering the horizons of care that arise through their relations to other people (Adam & Groves, 2007:152), and which circumscribe the ends to which they commit and work towards. These ends, I suggest, insofar as they relate to the virtuous ideal of a perfected, flourishing life, are best thought of as utopian (Levitas, 1991), unreachable futures, aspirations that guide behaviour and offer direction, but which must necessarily be unrealisable. The individual virtuous actions that contribute, over time, to the development of character do not need to have a future outcome in mind: acts of love, of care, of compassion, of charity and so on are made precisely because to act in such a way exemplifies that virtue. A friendly act ought to be made out of friendship, not for some ulterior

goal, and we would think less of such an act if it were (Slote, 1995:132).

So a claim can be made that an agent's relationship to the future is the same in acts described by virtue ethics as that found within a thick present: as lived futures, futures produced through the horizons of care at work in the relations between members of a community. Further, virtuous acts need not rely on a particular outcome in order to be good things to do, and so they do not depend on an unreliable future. I would like to suggest that it is possible to think of virtuous action as taking place in a thick present. If this is granted, it might now be possible to consider whether we have what we need to describe reparative work in a way that frees us from depending on an unreliable future for its justification.

6. Reparative futures in a thick, virtuous present

This section attempts just that, using the account of virtuous action in a thick present sketched above to describe some aspects of reparations as we generally understand them. The aim is to explore an alternative way of explaining how and why reparative acts might be good things, one that allows us to rid ourselves of a dependence on the unreliable future. There are some ways in which this alternative approach may not immediately correspond with our intuitions or experiences of reparation, and, in the section following this one, I attend to some of the challenges that may arise when using these ideas to think about reparative acts.

As the description above suggests, a focus on the present does not deny the possibility of a reparative future. Instead, it allows us to re-orient our relationship to it. Rather than using the future instrumentally, as a means to judge the eventual success or failure of reparative acts, and remain dependent on an unreliable future, we might use the image of a just future to imagine reparative utopias, in which there is no longer a need to repair lives and relationships, in which harms have been recognised and addressed, and the means for future harms removed, and use these utopias to shape our understanding of what a reparative act might contribute to, and to direct our efforts accordingly. These reparative acts themselves might be imagined as part of events within a thick present that demonstrate particular virtues of empathy and care, and so can be justified as good in themselves, rather than in light of some future that may be uncertain. Within this thick present, such reparative acts could be seen to contribute over time to a collective change in the relationship between harmed groups and those with the capacity to provide redress. Reparative futures, then, become two-fold: a lived future, embedded in relations between groups causing and suffering harms, circumscribed by the horizons of care these relations construct, and a utopian beacon orienting the ongoing work of justice and repair.

There is a further, possibly deeper, re-orientation required in order to imagine reparations as virtuous action in a thick present: it is necessary to give up talk about rights, obligations, duties, and other act- and rule-based ethical ideas. These are central to the way reparations are imagined at present. But, as we saw earlier, they depend on an unreliable future, and so they might not have the power we imagine they have, and perhaps should not be missed greatly. Instead, a virtue- or agent-centred approach to reparation would begin with the groups pursuing restorative ends, and the virtuous qualities that lie behind their efforts to work towards justice: the insight and empathy that allow them to perceive the need for some form of restoration. The realisation and understanding necessary to begin this work might come from these groups reflecting on the impact their actions have in the world. Historically, of course, such realisation has depended on efforts of activists from, or representing, those groups suffering various forms of harm, who have fought to bring injustices to the attention of those able to make redress: this labour is an extra burden on them. But taking a virtue approach allows us to make the case for greater reflexive consideration of our own impacts on the world, which, if practiced more widely, could reduce this burden for those suffering future harms.

Jettisoning a rule-based approach to reparations might also allow us to avoid the issue of persuading specific individuals or groups to accept blame or responsibility for problems which are the collective product of many actions, any individual one of which seems insignificant when set against the deep, structural nature of the processes causing harm. This is challenging enough in colonial societies, and will be harder still when seeking to repair the harms of climate change, those underway now and those still to come. Focusing on actors with the capacity to act virtuously, rather than seeking to demonstrate liability for historic wrongs, might allow the emphasis to be placed on addressing harm, which is something we can act on now, rather than establishing liability, which is a process that might delay action indefinitely. It also affords actors the opportunity to consider their own role in society, recognising opportunities to develop their moral character, and seeing virtue in initiating restorative efforts, rather than being dragged into such efforts reluctantly. And it circumvents the problem of moral luck (Williams, 1993), whereby some bear more responsibility for repairing harm than others simply through accidents of birth or circumstance: the virtue approach offers other reasons for wanting to contribute to reparative action. Intuitively, there is more virtue in someone who wronged another recognising it themselves, and making amends, than in their needing to have it explained to them.

Instead of beginning with questions of liability and responsibility, a virtue approach would begin with questions about the nature of flourishing, and what might be done to contribute to flourishing amongst those suffering harm and those benefitting from it or perpetuating it. Starting from this position might prevent us imagining the ethics of reparation as a zero-sum game, in which one side is at fault in direct proportion to the harm experienced by the other. It might be possible to recognise that the opportunity for flourishing is diminished in the lives of those suffering harms from colonialism or the effects of a changing climate, and to be motivated to increase their opportunities to flourish out of charity, compassion, empathy, love, or other virtues of care, without requiring that some degree of responsibility be established first. And it might be possible to recognise that acting to redress the harm of some past action would increase the responsible group's flourishing, through exercising virtues of justice or conscientiousness, regardless of the material impacts of that past action, or whether the injured group were calling for redress. In keeping with the understanding of flourishing as a collective good, and virtue as reflecting the collective norms and shared ethical practices of communities, it might be possible to recognise that the flourishing of one group contributes to the general flourishing of all, and that to work towards the flourishing of others is a good in itself. Reparation, then, would be understood as healing and restoring all of us, not one group in particular.

Judgements about the appropriate form reparations might take in a given situation would need to attend to the particular characteristics and context that make that situation distinct, as well as the aspects it has in common with other situations. A blanket application of a universal rule or principle risks distorting the circumstances to make them fit a template, and minimises the importance of testimony from those affected, failing to treat them as persons, adding to the injury. Conversely, treating each instance of harm as a discrete case risks failing to learn from experience and remaining blind to the wider patterns that reveal the true scale of systemic harms such as colonialism. Balancing these concerns and risks is an opportunity for the exercise of practical wisdom. Making use of practical wisdom would help virtuous groups and agents recognise that events that demand reparation will not be definitively closed or finished, and that their aim should not be to resolve issues, but to find a way to make it possible to live with them, while they change into a different situation.

It might be objected that an act-based ethics working with general moral principles might still be able to take other relevant cases into account, as in a courtroom where precedent matters. To the extent that doing so requires the exercise of what I am calling practical wisdom, this ought not to be a surprise: we should expect to find the virtues outside discussions of virtue ethics, if they are indeed virtues, and if taking other instances into account is an example of wisdom, we ought to be unsurprised when (for example) a judge shows wisdom. The difference is in the primacy that virtue ethics gives to the character of the actor. Duty- or rule-based approaches may incidentally benefit from the virtuous behaviour of those involved, but they don't require them. However, employing such approaches in the context of new kinds of claim, such as those made by or on behalf of indigenous groups, or for future generations, or on behalf of environmental features granted personhood, would, I suggest, in the absence of established cases, require the exercise of practical wisdom.

A feature of virtue ethics is that it is compatible with moral and philosophical traditions outside the classical and modern European traditions. Shannon Vallor suggests that "an exclusively Western approach to virtue would be inadequate and provincial" (Vallor, 2016:18), and makes a sustained argument that Buddhist and Confucian traditions of ethical practice share important characteristics with Western virtue ethics, without claiming them to be identical or virtues to be universal across human cultures. Purcell (2017) makes a similar case regarding Aztec moral thought, in which a form of practical wisdom mediates virtuous behaviour on the "slippery earth". In the context of reparations, so often arising in the context of colonialism, those who have suffered have often, historically, employed different systems for knowing the world than those who have caused the suffering — indeed, have been made to suffer precisely for working with these different knowledge systems—and so it might be suggested that recognising alternative, non-Western philosophical sources of ethical judgement is an important element in ensuring any reparative acts are just. The thick, virtuous present described here might be one route towards this kind of recognition.

What are the virtues that are particularly exercised through reparative action? A number have already been mentioned, principally those centred on care, empathy and justice. Humility, honesty, and courage are required to recognise harm and argue for reparative action, as well as perhaps modesty, to appreciate that particular reparative acts will not, in themselves, effect a complete repair of what is broken, and to understand the importance of listening to those groups in whose interests reparative work is being undertaken. For reparative work to be meaningful, it must be done with sincerity and trustworthiness. These are principally virtues we might associate with those groups taking responsibility for harm and making redress. Within the work of activists making the case for reparation and groups prepared to detail the harms done to them, alongside honesty and courage, we see in addition forgiveness (McNaughton & Garrard, 2013), generosity, and patience. These virtues, which I would like to suggest might all be understood as aspects of the virtue of care, play a vital role in considering reparative work from the perspective of a thick present: they offer a motivation for acting that avoids depending on unreliable instrumental futures, since to care is a good in itself. Such a position does not deny the future a role in agency. The horizons produced through relations of care are part of the lived futures that contribute to the thick present in which agents work. But it does encourage a humility about specific claims about the future. The future is a rationale for action — but not a justification for particular acts. Reparative acts, on the account offered here, are justified because they are virtuous.

7. Challenges

There are many challenges and questions raised by the account above. Many authors have offered substantive critiques of virtue ethics and, while I will not discuss them here, they are as germane in this case as they are elsewhere. For the moment, I want to engage with two fundamental questions: Isn't all this impossibly naive and idealistic? And doesn't it risk being deeply insulting to groups in need of reparative action?

In the absence of universal principles and obligations, reparative action will only be taken if there are virtuous actors who perceive the necessity of repair and who see virtue in acting appropriately. But if reparative action depends on the character of those undertaking it, there is a risk that we condemn those in need of reparation to gambling on the moral nature of those with the power to offer repair. For injured groups to take this risk demands a degree of trust on their part that, for the historic reasons that make reparations necessary, they might have good reason not to feel is warranted. Even if this trust is warranted, if an injury demands repair of some kind, surely it is important enough that it should not simply be left to chance. We seem to have introduced another kind of moral luck. Assuming that there are sufficiently virtuous people to address historic or future wrongs seems naive. Asking the groups suffering these wrongs to simply hope that this is the case seems insulting, in part because it diminishes the importance of reparative work by implying that it doesn't much matter whether it is done or not, but for the most part because it denies them any agency or power to compel another group to take responsibility or act: they must sit and wait, and hope the descendants and beneficiaries of those who originally caused the harm care sufficiently for their flourishing to act. Even if they do act, the power to define degrees of responsibility or culpability remains with these historically powerful groups, depending as it does (in this account, at least) on the character of those within each group. This risks perpetuating two further harms, in addition to any specific injustices. First, it makes it possible to act

without accepting responsibility, and second, it denies historically marginalised groups the capacity to direct any reparative process, undermining any efforts to address the power imbalances underlying harm and injustice. It may be that a group responsible for some harm sees virtue in handing leadership to the groups demanding redress. But, intuitively, it is not within their gift to do so, and any account that suggests otherwise ought to appear suspect.

A similar problem appears when considering the nature of the virtues on which reparative action depends: whose understanding of virtuous behaviour is relevant? Virtues vary across cultures, and reparative acts similarly often involve different cultures, for the historic reason that harms were often visited specifically on cultures different to those powerful enough to impose their dominance. The risk here is that the dominant group's understanding of virtue drives any reparative process, since the process depends on members of that group seeing reparation as virtuous, and so a precondition for reparative action being undertaken is that the harmed group accept a definition of virtue and the good from the very group behind the original injury. In the context of reparative action addressing harms from colonisation, the idea that the colonising group should be the arbiter of good character seems in poor taste, given the historical harms and injustices that have stemmed from colonisers arrogating this capacity to themselves. Groups seeking repair and justice for past wrongs have strong reasons to prefer a system that pays no mind to the character of the groups from whom reparations are sought, and instead is able to establish responsibility and culpability as moral facts through appealing to universal principles, whether or not those responsible for harm see any virtue in agreeing. Under a principle-based or deontological ethics, there is a necessary connection between harm and the right to have this harm recognised and addressed, which makes it possible to claim what is owed. A character-based ethics makes the connection between harm and repair contingent on circumstances, and does away with the notion that anyone is owed anything, and this seems, intuitively, to miss the point of how reparations support injured groups to take their place as equals deserving of dignity and respect.

A virtue ethicist might make two kinds of rejoinder to these challenges. They might point out that, within the cultures of those groups responsible for harms, virtues such as empathy, respect and charity mean listening to those with complaints and appreciating any accounts of harms done on their own merits. Or they might suggest that some harms are so great that they prevent flourishing for all humans, and so there are no differences between the two groups' aims. These are variations of the general argument that virtuous people will behave virtuously, and if this were to diminish another group's flourishing it would not be virtuous behaviour. I think this is a thin reed on which to hang the well-being of groups suffering actual harm and injustice, not least because these positions are already demonstrated by activists who are predominantly working within a principles-based ethics.

An alternative approach might be to claim that principles-based ethical systems, underpinning institutions from judiciaries and legislatures to governance boards and management committees, depend on shared social understandings and norms around what is good and what constitutes ethical behaviour, and that, despite their apparent fixity and independence, without shared ethical norms these institutions are fragile.¹⁰ In order for principles to successfully govern behaviour, it is first necessary that people believe it to be a good thing that principles govern behaviour. But it is not necessary for principles governing virtuous behaviour to exist before people behave virtuously. That is, rules need virtues to work, while virtues can work in the absence of rules. So for any claims about responsibility or redress to succeed, there must be virtuous people involved, and so to suggest that principle-based ethics are less vulnerable to the challenges set out above is not quite as strong a claim as imagined. This is potentially a better defence. But perhaps virtue ethicists would be better focusing on demonstrating the worth of an agent-led ethics over time, since their focus is on the way people grow as moral agents, and since character is something that becomes evident over the course of many actions. In the face of these objections, perhaps the task is to demonstrate how thinking about virtue and character, rather than rights and obligations, leads to action towards repair and justice in the present, rather than promised future outcomes. And for any who prefer to work with a principle-led ethics, the task is to show how reparative action is not vulnerable to the uncertainty of an unreliable future.

8. Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with the different ethics used to justify reparative work and how they relate to the future. This is important, I suggest, because an ethics that is mistaken about the nature of the future — that is, one that does not recognise the degree to which the future is uncertain — cannot dependably justify the reparative acts that are made necessary by historic and emerging harms. The risk is that we are satisfied with an imaginary reparative future, one that depends on an illusory continuity between present and future, and such a mistaken future, one so wrong about the nature of the world, cannot lead to the just and equitable presents that are what we seek to create through reparative action. Failing to appreciate the unreliability of the future risks broken promises, stalled action, compensation and support that never arrives in the hands for which it is intended, and a perpetuation of the harms which demand repair.

The consequentialist and deontological ethics most often used to justify reparative action make just such an error, each depending on a future that is unreliable. In this paper, I have proposed an alternative approach to justifying reparative action, one that locates agency within a thick present, and so avoids the unreliable future. This approach is agent-centred, rather than act-centred, drawing on virtue ethics, which focuses on how actions demonstrate virtues that contribute to collective flourishing over time, rather than specific outcomes. I describe a way of thinking about virtuous action in a thick present which allows agents to recognise the particular and

¹⁰ Recent examples of this principle might be seen in the reluctance of an outgoing US President to participate in a peaceful handover of power (Politico, 21st December 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/12/21/trump-pressure-campaign-overturn-election-449486>), or the unlawful prorogation of the UK Parliament ('Supreme Court: Lady Hale's statement on 'unlawful' Parliament suspension', BBC, 24th September, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-49810680>)

distinctive features of a given moral choice, which justifies action by reference to the virtues and contribution to collective flourishing that it demonstrates, and which works with the futures produced by the horizons of care that arise from their membership of a community, rather than projected, abstract futures. My claim is that such a framework can be used to describe reparative action in a way that is consistent with our intuitions about repair and justice, but which does not depend on an unreliable future for its justification. Virtuous, reparative action that takes place in, and constitutes, a thick present makes use of two kinds of future, each of which may be relied on. Lived futures, produced through the relations of care and concern between people and communities are considered, along with pasts and presents, as part of the work of exercising practical wisdom: since these are produced through really existing relations, they are not vulnerable to differences between expectations and reality. This ongoing work is given direction by the utopian reparative futures that describe a just, equitable, flourishing ideal: these are similarly immune to the uncertain future, for the opposite reason, that there can be no expectation that they correspond to really existing circumstances.

But there are significant challenges with this approach. It risks perpetuating existing inequality by asking those suffering harms to relinquish claims to redress made under principle-based ethics, and instead trust that some other group will be sufficiently virtuous to make repair on their own initiative. A virtue approach may also allow those making reparations to do so without necessarily recognising their responsibility for any harm, since it rejects the deontological ethics which would establish it. This undermines a foundational aspect of reparation, and risks treating those in need of recognition and justice as less than full persons. These challenges illustrate how far a virtue approach might depart from established ways of thinking about reparations and justice, and show that any efforts to make use of it will need to proceed carefully and sensitively. But, even if this particular approach is rejected, some kind of alternative must be explored, or the problem of the unreliable future will remain, and the work of repair and restoration will remain vulnerable.

Rather than seeking a definitive position, we might draw on principles of practical wisdom to find a useful way of working within principle- or action- based ethics. There is no need to repudiate existing victories argued from within rights-based frameworks. But thinking with a thick, virtuous present might possibly offer an additional way of thinking about reparation that complements and strengthens existing reparative work. It may offer grounds for smaller-scale, grassroots reparative actions, work that is undertaken outside the formal institutional settings in which apologies are made on behalf of nations and large sums offered or demanded in compensation. Perhaps these smaller, more local, reparative efforts will find greater success in enlisting community support by appealing to ideas of care, virtue and flourishing than to legalistic abstractions, and even offer a model for larger, more formal reparative efforts, should the uncertainty of the future and the difficulty of keeping promises of restoration become more apparent.

In any case, at present this is only a theoretical argument about how reparative action might be known to be justified. MacIntyre (2016:242-243), making the case that we understand our choices and reasons better through narrative than theoretical argument, suggests a proper understanding can only be had through attending to particular empirical cases, and, now the initial argument has been made, this would be necessary for understanding of the value of thinking about reparative action in the terms used here. It would be valuable to examine examples of reparative action, such as those mentioned at the start of the paper, to explore which might be well-described using the ideas of virtuous action in a thick present. From this work it might perhaps be possible to derive a sense of what new forms reparative action might take, if it were understood first as virtuous action in a thick present, concerned with what can be done in reality now, motivated by virtues of compassion and empathy, working for collective flourishing in whatever way might best secure it in that moment.

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