View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by University of Missouri: MOspace

The Journal of Value Inquiry **32:** 325–341, 1998.
© 1998 *Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.*

The Vicissitudes of Common-Sense Virtue Ethics, Part I: From Aristotle to Slote

JOHN KULTGEN
Department of Philosophy, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211, USA

1. Introduction

In a treatise on methods of applied ethics, Abraham Edel, Elizabeth Flower, and Finbarr O'Connor distinguish between three traditional families of terms, "the family of right and wrong, duty and moral law, rights and responsibilities; the family of good and bad; and the family of virtues and vices."[1] They argue that "the formulation of an ethical question is choosing among ways in which it may explored. And it is turning to some rather than other of the resources that the history of ethical theory offers in its treatment of ethical concepts."[2] Under the inspiration of pragmatism, they recommend a pluralistic approach. "Instead of urging a choice among competing theories, we suggest building up an inventory of resources from the theoretical reservoir, with a clear understanding of which can be invoked from what kind of purposes."[3] They maintain that ethical theories can be utilized to resolve practical problems without unifying concepts into a single system.

Unfortunately, attempts by philosophers to resolve practical issues of great concern to the public such as abortion, physician assisted suicide, our obligations to nature and future generations, and capital punishment have resulted in stalemates among members of the same schools of thought and more intractably among members of different schools. Unification of theory seems mandatory if we ever hope to break the stalemates and approach a consensus on how to solve practical problems.

Suppose then, contrary to the counsel of Edel, Flower and O'Connor, we undertake to determine which of the three popular approaches to ethical theory is correct and to reduce the concepts of the others to it. We might be able to show that a theory of virtue is a department or application of a theory of the right or a theory of the good, as many modern ethical theorists have argued. We also might find virtue ethics to be fundamental and reduce the other families of concepts to it. A few contemporary moralists assert that it is time to try this route. Prominent among them is Michael Slote, who argues in two recent

books that the family of virtue concepts is irreducible to either or both the other two families.[4] He anticipates that the theory of virtue will evolve into a "free-standing" ethic rather than remain a "supplement to common-sense, Kantian, utilitarian, or other forms of ethics and moral philosophy."[5]

Slote and Roger Crisp sketch the program for such an ethic in the introduction to their anthology devoted to virtue ethics. They cite Elizabeth Anscombe to the effect that the notion of obligation makes no sense if we do not assume a lawgiver; and they declare: "Now that many of us no longer believe in God, our only route to providing a foundation for ethics is in the notion of virtue, understood independently from obligation as part of human flourishing."[6] With the concept of obligation go both utilitarian and Kantian ethics:

> How, then, is a virtue ethicist to carve out his or her own niche? It must be by providing an account of ultimate moral reasons which not only is neither utilitarian nor Kantian, but makes essential reference to the rationality of virtue itself. . . . The notions of virtue . . . are more basic than the notions at the heart of utilitarian and Kantian theory. They may even replace some of these notions, including perhaps "obligation" itself. The virtue ethicist at least does not *need* such language. Certainly, it is characteristic of modern virtue ethics that it puts primary emphasis on aretaic or virtue-centred concepts rather than deontic or obligation-centered concepts.[7]

In his treatment of virtue, Slote dismisses duty altogether, so there is no question of reducing virtue to the family of duty concepts. In *Goods and Virtues* he defines "virtue" as any admirable human trait and argues that many traits are admirable on other than moral grounds. In *From Morality to Virtue*, he argues that an account of the good life should drop all reference to what is moral, leaving as basic concepts only the admirable, nonmoral virtues, and the desirable, personal goods. He ends *From Morality to Virtue* by asking whether all admirable traits redound to the benefit of their possessor and are admirable for that reason alone. This is the question of whether or not virtues can be reduced to qualities that promote personal goods. He anticipates that the answer will be negative. He believes that an adequate treatment of virtue will require an independent virtue ethics in contrast to the usual treatments of virtue that are mere supplements to other ethical theories. In his most recent essay, Slote refers to his approach as "agent-based" which "treats the moral or ethical status of acts as entirely derivative from independent or fundamental aretaic (as opposed to deontic) ethical characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals."[8]

While Slote is right in thinking that ethical theorists should devote more attention to the virtues, he is wrong in thinking that it is time to develop a free-standing virtue ethic. It is never time to attempt the impossible. I shall not attempt to show the impossibility, but I will point out obstacles to the way Slote tries to surmount it. In both of his books, Slote appeals to common-sense intuitions to justify his claims, but he does not explain what he means by either "intuition" or "common sense." I will examine the appeal to throw light on the proper role of moral experience in the justification of theoretical claims. In the process, I will make some headway toward showing that a virtue ethic cannot stand alone; it needs a plausible theory of human nature for its base, and norms of right conduct based on concepts of the right or good independent of good character to hold it steady.

Some preliminary remarks on the probative use of common-sense will set the stage for the analysis. It is one thing to use common sense in the decisions of practical life and another to use it to justify theoretical claims. In practical life, common sense is conceived to consist in sound judgment in dealing with concrete situations. This is not a matter of abstract theoretical knowledge. Though equipped with the most sophisticated theories, a person may not be able to make wise decisions or even sound recommendations for the solution of practical problems. People who know a great deal, but act foolishly, lack common sense in the practical sense of the term.

A common-sense philosopher, in contrast, uses common sense as a source of the content for the theories she constructs. To assess this approach to theory, we need to consider the proper role of theorizing in practical life and whether this affects its content. What will theory be about if it aspires to guide practical decisions? What will it be about if it shuns this responsibility? In answering these questions, we may decide that theorizing should or can only rationalize what some group of people agree about on the basis of shared intuitions. Ethical theory then will become an articulation of common sense or what is called ordinary morality. Alternatively, we may decide common sense needs revision in view of its incoherences and errors. Theory then becomes a formulation of ideals beyond common practices, assumptions, and attitudes. It becomes a critic of common sense rather than its advocate.

Slote's reliance on the deliverances of common sense is fundamental in both the practical and theoretic sense. He apparently leaves his common sense in place to guide his conduct, and he explicitly relies on its deliverances as a foundation for his ethical theory. In this approach his utilization of common sense is more fundamental than that of others who have been labeled common-sense philosophers. To bring out the distinctive features of Slote's approach, I will contrast it to the approach of Aristotle, who is widely

considered to speak for common sense and who also centers his analysis of the good life on virtue.

The purpose of the contrast is not to defend Aristotle on all counts, but to highlight lacunae in Slote's approach. His failure to specify the view of human nature, human society, and the human condition on which his argument can be based leaves it floating in air. Until he provides this sort of theoretical framework, his two theses, that the project of developing an independent virtue ethic is viable and that such an ethic should be grounded in the intuitions of common sense, cannot be convincing.

2. Aristotle

The notion of common sense is not to be found in Aristotle's analytic repertory. However, this does not preclude him from utilizing his own common sense or appealing to that of others in constructing political and ethical theories. Some observers assert that he bases his theories almost entirely on common sense. Thus Bertrand Russell opines about the *Nicomachean Ethics* that "the only doctrine in the book that is not mere common sense" is the claim that contemplation is the best activity for man. He concludes that the work "in spite of its fame, is lacking in intrinsic importance."[9] Edith Hamilton maintains that Aristotle got his key concept of *eudaimonia* from popular tradition: " 'The exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope' is an old Greek definition of happiness."[10] C. M. Bowra agrees that Aristotle took over the ordinary Greek notion of happiness, though he credits him with philosophical acumen in the way he develops it.[11] H.D.F. Kitto observes that while ordinary Greeks would not have admired the man of great soul in the way Aristotle does, "making due allowance for philosophical thoroughness and abstraction, the picture is entirely Greek, exaggerated though it is."[12]

It is obvious that Aristotle assimilated many traditional notions of his society in compiling his inventory of the virtues and developing his view of the place of the virtues in the good life. Did he think that the fact that the notions were age-old or that they were accepted by many Greeks was any reason to believe that they were correct? The three passages upon which S. A. Grave relies in categorizing Aristotle as the first major common-sense philosopher fail to show that he does.[13]

In the first passage, Aristotle argues that his definition of happiness incorporates features that many people look for. He says: "Now some of these views have been held by many men and men of old, others by a few persons; and it is not probable that either of these should be entirely mistaken, but rather that they should be right in at least some one respect or even in most

respects."[14] However, while Aristotle acknowledges that other people's opinions merit consideration, he clearly expects to go beyond their opinions and stands ready to contradict any of them when the facts as he sees them require him to do so.

In the second passage, Aristotle points out that everyone seeks pleasure and he argues from this fact that pleasure cannot be bad as such. He explains:

> Those who object that that at which all things aim is not necessarily good are talking nonsense. For we say that that which everyone thinks really is so; and the man who attacks this belief will hardly have anything more credible to maintain instead. If it is senseless creatures that desire the things in question, there might be something in what they say; but if intelligent creatures do so as well, what sense can there be in this view?[15]

That intelligent creatures pursue pleasure, however, establishes very little. People pursue radically different sorts of pleasure. Even though we can infer from the universal opinion that pleasure is good that some pleasures are indeed good, our own experience reveals that many are bad. Aristotle concludes that only cultivated persons are right about which pleasures are good. The many are wrong.

In the third passage, Aristotle says:

> About all these matters we must try to get conviction by arguments, using the phenomena as evidence and illustration. It would be best that all men should clearly concur with what we are going to say, but if that is unattainable, then that all should in some way at least concur. And this if converted they will do, for every man has some contribution to make to the truth, and with this as a starting-point we must give some sort of proof about these matters.[16]

Here "phenomena" refers to what seems to be true to many people and hence what serves as the basis for common beliefs. In the passage, Aristotle does cite common beliefs as evidence for the truth of his views. As far as I know, this is the only place where he does and the context suggests that this is not his point. Instead he uses common beliefs to get his analysis started, and he recognizes that he must add proofs based on objective facts to reach reliable conclusions. Moreover, the passage follows a statement to the effect that our primary aim in practical reasoning is to be virtuous rather than to know what virtue is. This suggests that his motive for pointing out the connections of his philosophical theory with common opinions is to make it persuasive and guide or induce people to cultivate virtue.

The remarks cited by Grave are thus insufficient to show that Aristotle seriously appeals to anything like common sense to prove his theoretical claims. The uses to which he puts the opinions of others show that the philosopher must decide whose opinions to consider even to ascertain what is the content of common opinions. After all, there are opinions and opinions. What is Aristotle's principle of selection? How does he decide which opinions to take seriously?

Aristotle defines dialectical reasoning as the deduction of the implications of "reputable" opinions. Opinions are reputable when they are accepted either by everyone or the majority or the wise.[17] In familiar passages dealing with the best form of life he treats opinions of three groups as worth reporting, but not necessarily worth adopting: (a) "the general run of men," "the many," "most men," "men of the most vulgar type" and "the mass of mankind"; (b) "people of superior refinement and active disposition"; and (c) "the wise."[18] His basis for discriminating among these types lies in his conception of human nature. While the capacity for practical wisdom is innate in people *qua* human and hence universal, it is found at radically different levels in different individuals. It is at its lowest in natural slaves, who are capable of understanding only that they ought to follow the commands of their masters. It is at a low level in females, who need guidance from males. Only an elite group of adult males, possibly restricted to those of Greek extraction, have the capacity at the highest level.

Moreover, it is only the capacity to develop practical wisdom that is innate. To operate, it must be cultivated, and in actual life it is cultivated to different degrees. Hence, both the capacity for wisdom and the degree to which it is actualized and utilized are shared unequally. Only relatively few people have actual wisdom sufficient to make their opinions worthy of serious consideration. Many of the opinions of the remainder are confused, ungrounded, or flat wrong and should be contravened.

In consulting the opinions of people, Aristotle considers not only what they say, but how they live, since their beliefs are expressed in their actions as well as their words. Moreover, their actions affect their character and their character affect their beliefs. Hence, their actions are a source of their beliefs as well as evidence of what they believe.[19] Only those who live well are in a position to give testimony about how to live well. While it is conceivable that "the many" in a good society such as Athens might be morally cultivated, live well, and possess a high level of practical wisdom, Aristotle clearly did not think that this was actually the case. He was skeptical about the wisdom of many of the Greeks, and he was convinced that wisdom was almost totally absent among barbarians. He certainly does not view wisdom as a sort of good sense or sensibleness shared equally by all people. Thus he expresses a low

opinion of adult Greek males in contrasting their beliefs with the beliefs of the cultivated or the wise. He laments that self-love is given a bad name by the fact that most men are ruled by their appetites and hence desire wealth, honor, and pleasure excessively. He observes that they fall into error because they are "forgetful," "not good at drawing distinctions," and "judge by externals, since these are all they perceive."[20] As a consequence, their opinions count for next to nothing. If what we mean by common sense is opinions shared by the many, Aristotle not only does not appeal to common sense, he would suspect that he was mistaken if he were to find himself agreeing with it.

For Aristotle, then, only the opinions of the cultivated and the wise are worth serious attention. Sometimes we must look carefully to see that this is what he is saying. For example, his remark at the start of the discussion of continence and incontinence sounds as though he is appealing to a wider group: "We must, as in all other cases, set the phenomena before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the reputable opinions about these affections or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both resolve the difficulties and leave the reputable opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently."[21] Aristotle's reference to difficulties, puzzles, or problems is a tipoff that he is referring to the way things appear to the cultivated and wise rather than to the many. Difficulties arise from "an equality between contrary reasonings" on questions.[22] Hence, they arise only for people who reason. We do not look to the many for much in the way of reasoning. In point of fact, the problems that Aristotle considers are posed by such worthies as Socrates, Sophocles, the Sophists, and the anonymous wise men who are authors of proverbs. Moreover, in solving problems raised by such people, Aristotle always appeals to objective facts. The facts as he sees them refute some opinions of the wise men, prove others, and rebut objections to them. It is not the fact that some of Aristotle's own views are shared by everyone or even by the wise that makes them solutions of problems raised by contrary reasonings, but the fact that they are grounded in objective reality as Aristotle sees it.

By "people of superior refinement" Aristotle appears to mean people who have acquired moral virtue. This is indicated by his remark that only those who "desire and act in accordance with a rational principle," in contrast to the young and the incontinent, can profit from lectures on ethics because they are familiar with the beginning points for the inquiry in their own experience.[23] Aristotle may mean by the experience of virtuous people something like what many contemporary philosophers refer to as moral intuitions. Thus he observes "up to what point and to what extent a man must deviate [from the mean] before he becomes blameworthy is not easy to determine by reasoning, any more than anything else that is perceived by the senses; such things

depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception."[24] The perception must be that of a "man of practical wisdom."[25] In another place, Aristotle says that highest good "is not evident except to the good man; for wickedness perverts us and causes us to be deceived about the starting-points of action. Therefore it is evident that it is impossible to be practically wise without being good." The reason for both remarks is that "this eye of the soul acquires its formed state not without the aid of [moral] excellence."[26] What Aristotle calls perception and the eye of the soul may be equated with what is called intuition by later philosophers. His point is that there are intuitions and intuitions, and only those of the properly qualified person count. He generalizes: "the good man judges each class of things rightly, and in each the truth appears to him. . . . For each state of character has its own ideas of the noble and the pleasant, and perhaps the good man differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of things, being as it were the norm and measure of them."[27]

By "the wise" Aristotle means not only people who are practically wise such as Solon and the other six Wise Men and spokesmen for traditional wisdom such as the poets, Homer, Hesiod, Theognis, and Simonides, but also people who are theoretically wise, who possess wisdom in the narrow sense such as Anaxagoras and "friends who have introduced the Forms."[28] Aristotle seems to think that practical wisdom is a necessary condition for the acquisition of theoretical wisdom, so theoretic wisdom may be taken as a sign of practical wisdom. He therefore takes it as a point in favor of his opinions when they harmonize with the opinions of the wise; but even here he remarks that "while even such things carry some conviction, the truth in practical matters is discerned from the facts of life; for these are the decisive factor. We must therefore survey what we have already said, bringing it to the test of the facts of life, and if it harmonizes with the facts we must accept it, but if it clashes with them we must suppose it to be mere theory."[29] Thus Aristotle is prepared to fly in the face of the opinions of the wise when this is dictated by the facts.

No doubt when the cultivated and the wise agree with Aristotle, it reinforces his confidence in his own views; but this is a matter of psychology, not logic. Does he think their views confirm his own? Nowhere does he say so in a clear and unambiguous way, and in logic he should not. After all, how does he know who is truly cultivated, who is practically wise, and hence whose testimony is worth considering? It can only be because he himself has acquired wisdom, looked at the facts, and drawn his own conclusions. He says explicitly, "arguments about matters concerned with feelings and actions are less reliable than facts: and so when they clash with the facts of perception, they are despised, and discredit the truth as well."[30]

When Aristotle discusses dialectic in the sense of reasoning from reputable opinions, he emphasizes that the art is necessary not only to win debates with people who argue unfairly, but to teach people who are not yet ready for science, since it builds upon what they already believe.[31] He remarks that dialectic is also useful for "the study of the philosophical sciences" and hence in his own work, because:

> the ability to puzzle on both sides of a subject will make us detect more easily the truth and error about the several points that arise. It has a further use in relation to the principles used in the several sciences. For it is impossible to discuss them at all from the principles proper to the particular science in hand, seeing that the principles are primitive in relation to everything else: it is through reputable opinions about them that these have to be discussed, and this task belongs properly, or most appropriately, to dialectic; for dialectic is a process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries.[32]

Aristotle's point is that pitting opinions against one another is a heuristic exercise necessary to reach the point where we can directly comprehend the essences under study. The passage suggests that dialectic of itself proves nothing.

Aristotle acknowledges that there is a good deal of truth in the opinions of cultivated and especially of wise persons. The wise clearly include his philosophical predecessors. He recognizes that it is his responsibility not only to extract the truth in their opinions and winnow out their errors, but to show how they came to see things as they did. In doing this, he appears to have two aims. First, he wants to express his appreciation for their help in articulating problems. Thus he remarks: "It is just that we should be grateful not only to those whose opinions we may share, but also to those who have expressed more superficial views; for these also contributed something, by developing before us the powers of thought."[33] To get inquiry started, it is essential to formulate problems. This focuses our attention on features of the world where we will find answers. But then we must look at those features to get the answers, and we must defend our answers by referring to facts, not by appealing to common opinions.

Second, Aristotle wants to instill confidence in his views in his audience, most of whom are politically active citizens. His aim is to improve practice by teaching such people how to promote the good life for everyone in society. His references to what others think are designed to persuade rather than to demonstrate – to convince his audience, not to prove to them or to himself that he is right.

Of course, these two aims need not conflict. We may persuade by proving, if we have the right audience. Aristotle notes that rational argument is just the right tool of persuasion for scientific audiences. A person of integrity will want to persuade such audiences by proving what is true and refuting what is false. "Further, we must be able to employ persuasion, just as deduction can be employed, on opposite sides of a question, not in order that we may in practice employ it in both ways (for we must not make people believe what is wrong), but in order that we may see clearly what the facts are, and that, if another man argues unfairly, we on our part may be able to confute him."[34] Aristotle says nothing here about proving the truth by common opinion. When he says shortly after, "persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question," he might mean that common opinions are probative as well as persuasive; but it is more probable that he means that deducing what is true from common opinions is a way of persuading people of truth without actually demonstrating or proving that it is true.[35] An exception would be cases where the common opinions of an audience actually comprise scientific knowledge because the audience is composed of scientists. Even then, it is the fact that the speaker knows the truth of the premises and can demonstrate the conclusion that makes the premises proper for use in persuading the audience, not the fact that scientific or wise people know the premises.

Uncertainties about the interpretation of crucial passages means that we cannot be quite sure that Aristotle finds no probative force in the opinions of properly screened others. However, his main theme is that the opinions of the wise are useful in guiding our attention to the parts of reality relevant to solving the puzzles that the opinions generate, but the opinions prove nothing in themselves. Their value is heuristic, not probative. They jumpstart inquiry but they do not bring it to resolution. It is moral experience that does this, and our own moral experience in the last analysis. People's experience or intuitions are reliable only if they are persons of practical wisdom, and it takes criteria provided by moral theory to tell whether they are. Moreover, intuitions are useful for the confirmation of theoretical claims only when they are informed by and then interpreted on the basis of a scientific theory of human nature and the universe. This appears to be the correct way to interpret Aristotle, and in any case I shall treat it as the Aristotelian approach in drawing the contrast to the approach of Slote.

Let us observe, finally, that Aristotle does not propose a free standing virtue-ethic. The virtues are indeed the focus of his attention, but he notes that we cannot tell what the virtues are and whether they are present in a person without a conception of right action or, as Aristotle would put it, a

conception of just and noble action. Virtues are dispositions or potentialities that are actualized in actions. The concept of virtue as a potentiality entails the concept of the activity toward which it disposes the virtuous person. The difference between virtue and vice is that virtue disposes us to good actions and vice to bad ones. To distinguish virtue and vice we must have independent criteria of good and bad actions. Aristotle makes this point in regard to natural potentialities, but it applies equally to acquired potentialities.[36] Moreover, Aristotle observes, virtues are acquired by doing virtuous things: "we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."[37] This implies that we are able to identify just, temperate, or brave acts by criteria that do not include the fact that they are the actions of a just, temperate, or brave person. Aristotle provides such a criterion. Virtuous actions either themselves fall in the mean or are motivated by feelings that fall in the mean. That such actions are ideal and hence that dispositions to perform them are virtues rather than vices is due to human nature, the human condition, and the kinds of behavior that fit a person to participate in the life of the city. To the extent, then, that Aristotle relies on intuitions to tell him what is good and noble, these are intuitions of things other than the presence of virtues in a person. Furthermore, they are intuitions that can be understood and validated only in the framework of a comprehensive philosophy.

3. Slote's Approach to Ethics

Slote regularly appeals to common sense to justify his claims, but he nowhere says that this is his ultimate or sole appeal. In the end he may be but another Aristotelian who relies on common opinions to pose problems but not to provide definitive solutions. The strongest evidence that he is a common-sense philosopher in a deeper sense is negative: he fails to advance Aristotle's kinds of reasons for his normative judgments. He writes as if those reasons are unnecessary or irrelevant. Thus he seldom refers to facts about the universe, nature, human nature, or human society to justify his normative judgments. The concordance of his theory with common sense appears to validate it in his eyes. Certainly this is the ground on which he recommends his theories to the reader.

To determine what Slote's procedure entails, we will consider whose common sense it is that he consults, what content he ascribes to it, the ground for its authority, and how he utilizes its content and authority in his theorizing. To close in on how he thinks, let us begin with the way he talks. Common sense in both ordinary and philosophical parlance refers to sense in contradistinction to nonsense. In regard to the question of whose sense is worth consulting, Slote refers to "common," "usual," and "everyday" moral beliefs,

"ordinary morality and thinking about morality" and "commonplace, but, none the less for that, deeply held ideals."[38] He ultimately settles on "common sense" as the name of this oracle. His terminology suggests beliefs shared by all or most human beings. At one point he explicitly equates "common" with "human."[39] He seems to be addressing his readers as ordinary human beings. He includes himself in the group since he refers to our understanding, beliefs, and ideals. He is just one ordinary human being talking to others.

At other points Slote seems to have in mind what is common among the distinctive persons who compose his philosophical circle rather than what is commonplace among everyone or ordinary persons. He refers to "our considered" opinions and judgments, "our most irrecusable ideas," "deep-seated" convictions and "deepest" understanding.[40] At one point he refers to "reflective" common-sense ideas and calls his own approach critical common-sense ethics and commonsensism.[41] At these points his appeal seems not to be to humanity at large, but to reflective persons comparable to Aristotle's "the cultivated and the wise." Clearly he is a reflective person and he assumes that individuals who wade through his books are reflective also.

Unfortunately Slote gives us no instructions as to when to consult the intuitions of the person on the street and when to seek out reflective persons. All of us are subject to the all-too-human tendency to solicit the advice and accept the intuitions of people who agree with what we already think. If we have no independent guidelines to tell us whose sense to consult, we cannot assess their authority. Not knowing whom to consult, we cannot pin down the judgments we are to accept on the say-so of common sense. This applies to Slote, but it is unclear what credentials he uses to screen his consultants or reference group.

An important indicator of the ethical opinions shared by a group of people is the way they use key terms. In view of the uncertainties about Slote's reference group, we cannot be sure what he has in mind when he appeals to ordinary or common usage. He may mean the way the common person uses words, something which can be determined by consulting the dictionary. He may mean the usages of his circle of friends, which he can only know by social intercourse with them. He may mean the usages of ethical theorists, which he can know by studying their works. I surmise that he relies upon the last two types of usage. When he appeals to what we mean by key terms, he is appealing to people like himself. Many of his readers and certainly most of his non-readers may use the terms in other ways. We must wonder, therefore, why we should assume that the usage of his reference group, whatever it is, reflects the way things are.

To turn now to Slote's use of the term "intuition," throughout *From Morality to Virtue* he refers to "common-sense intuitionism," "intuitionist morality,"

"our everyday sense of what is intuitive or plausible," "intuitive thinking," and "intuitive appreciation." Without qualification, such phrases suggest the experience of everyone. However, Slote strikes the note of the critical intuition of reflective persons when he refers to "what a morally sensitive and educated adult will discern."[42] He clearly appeals to such persons when he refers to a "deep seated intuition – an intuition that I have counted on most of us sharing" to make a subtle point against a critic.[43] Only a reflective reader schooled in ethical theory is likely to appreciate such points.

As to the content of the common sense of whatever reference group he consults, Slote feels free to pick and choose among its deliverances. This raises the issue of how he decides which parts to trust. Etymologically, "intuition" suggests a looking at and into what is directly before our gaze. The term has been used in philosophy for both looking at particulars and looking at universals. Slote has in mind looking at particulars. He announces that he seeks to understand the phenomena of the moral life through our reactions to examples, and he makes free use of the method of counter-examples.[44] He cites particular actions, states, or events that our intuitions assure us are good or bad to show that our theoretical claims are mistaken when we assert the opposite.

Slote maintains that he is using intuitively sorted examples and counter-examples in the way an empirical scientist uses empirical observations to verify and falsify rival theories. This suggests a use of theory to decide which intuitions to accept as well as the reverse, the use of intuitions to decide what theories to accept. It thus suggests an interplay between theory and intuition comparable to that between theory and observation in science. Let us look at the implications of this notion. Scientific inquiry is directed toward the development of theories conceived as systems of logically interrelated general propositions confirmed by observation.

Some philosophers, beginning with Aristotle himself, have claimed that we intuit the truth of the primary propositions of perfected theories.[45] I have in mind the tradition that follows from Aristotle through the medievals to Descartes and Kant and subsequent philosophers of rationalist inclination. The philosophers in this tradition take the principles of metaphysics and logic to be self-evident for the properly prepared mind and known *a priori* in relation to the demonstrations based on or controlled by them.[46] Intuition is conceived to be a matter of direct intellectual vision of universals rather than sensory apprehension of particulars.

Slote does not accept this model for ethical inquiry, for he does not maintain that all people or reflective and sensitive people intuit the truth of the principles which ethical theory should articulate. While he refers to claims of John Rawls about the primacy of justice and of W. D. Ross in his inventory

of *prima facie* duties as "intuitive," he does not maintain that the generalities that he himself asserts are self-evident.[47] He does not maintain that we have direct insight into the truth of fundamental propositions that are necessary to interpret the particulars of normative experience. Rather he appears to maintain that his principles are inductively inferred from intuitions of cases. This is a much more modest claim for intuition than that which is made in so-called intuitionist moral theories.

Slote asserts that common-sense philosophers may ignore the practical impact of their theories altogether, an attitude that he ascribes to many utilitarians.[48] He follows this path himself. His aim is to create a structure of concepts that will display the perfections of consistency, symmetry, uniformity, economy, unity, and explanatory power and is reasonably well confirmed by intuition. His concern is not to create a structure that will provide guidance for practices in real life. In this regard, he clearly differs from Aristotle, who says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that "the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what excellence is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use)" and in general "the aim of studies about action is surely not to study and know about each thing, but rather to act on our knowledge."[49] Aristotle specifically seeks principles which the statesman can implement through laws and customs of the city.

Even if the moral theorist does not aim at improving the practices of her community but only utilizes its preconceptions, her thinking proceeds under a different set of controls than that of the community. Ordinary people do not verbalize all of their beliefs, much less systematize them. Even reflective people supply a rationale for their actions only when challenged by some critic or paradox or problematic claim. When they do, they come up with some saw or adage such as "to thine own self be true" or "penny wise and pound foolish" or some second-hand philosophical sentiment such as "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" or "people have a right to be treated with respect." These rationales tend to be free-floating rather than connected together in a comprehensive theoretical scheme, even an unconscious or implicit one. Slote acknowledges this obvious fact when he asserts that Kant's views about a certain a question "seem quite close to those most of us would naturally espouse if we were asked appropriate leading questions."[50] We do not espouse any views until we think about them, and questions that cause us to think about them must come from some theoretical perspective if our views are to lead us anywhere. Hence, we should not expect to find a consistent and structured theory of ethics embedded in common sense or common morality.

Slote recognizes that much in common sense is ill-considered. He credits utilitarianism with pointing out "the primitive, or at least intellectually unsatisfactory, thinking that lies . . . behind our ordinary moral thinking."[51] Most persons wend their way through life with a set of opinions that are inarticulate, fragmentary, unsystematized, incomplete, and inconsistent. Their opinions do not cover all of the situations of life and dictate contrary actions in some of those they do. Such flaws are tolerable in life but not in theories. Hence, Slote says, once "we have seen where intuitions without system lead us," we realize that "we are going in any event to have to drop some intuitions."[52]

In *From Morality to Virtue*, Slote dismisses whole congeries of common-sense intuitions, notably those that tell us of moral goods that are irreducible to either virtues or personal goods and those that tell us that we are under command, obligation, and judgment for what we do. Despite this cavalier treatment of the intuitions of a great number of people, including prominent philosophers who purport to speak for ordinary morality, he claims that his views retain a firm grounding in common sense. Thus, he says he is advancing "a virtue ethics that gives credence to intuition (when and where it doesn't lead to incoherence and paradox)."[53]

This completes the first part of this study, in which I have compared the ways in which Aristotle and Michael Slote appeal to common sense in developing their respective theories of virtue. By common sense I have meant the opinions and intuitions of the majority of human beings or some special reference group among them. We have seen that Aristotle uses common sense only heuristically, as an aid in forming opinions of his own which he then checks against the facts as the sees them. In contrast, Slote uses common sense probatively. He takes it as confirmation and at points apparently as proof of the correctness of his views when they accord with common sense. He thus is a common-sense philosopher in a more profound sense than Aristotle. My criticisms of his views have been designed to show that he is ill-advised to be such. Aristotle's guarded and limited use of common sense is the only use that can be justified in ethical theory.

In the second part of this study, I will sketch the way in which intuitions should be used in the development of an ethical theory. I shall continue to focus on the theory of human virtue, but I shall argue that virtue as a property of persons cannot be understood without adequate concepts of right as a property of actions and good as a property of goals or consequences of actions. Properties of a person are good and hence are virtues rather than vices or neutral qualities because they dispose the person to do what is right or achieve what is good, not because they can be seen intuitively or otherwise to be good independently of the actions they motivate.

Notes

1. Abraham Edel, Elizabeth Flower and Finbarr O'Connor, *Critique of Applied Ethics: Reflections and Recommendations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), p. 138.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., pp. 138–139.
4. Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) and *From Morality to Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
5. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue*, p. 254.
6. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 2.
7. Ibid., pp. 2–3.
8. Michael Slote, "Agent-based Virtue Ethics" in *Virtue Ethics*, p. 239.
9. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1945), p. 181.
10. Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way to Western Civilization* (New York: Mentor, 1948), p. 18.
11. C.M. Bowra, *The Greek Experience* (New York: New American Library Penguin, 1984), p. 97.
12. H.D.F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 246.
13. S.A. Grave, "Common Sense," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1963).
14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1098b27.
15. Ibid., 1173a1-4.
16. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1216b26-31.
17. Aristotle, *Topics*, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 100a29 and 100b20-12.
18. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1095a17-28 and 1095b15-30.
19. This is a subtext of *Nicomachean Ethics,* Bk. I, ch. iii and v; see especially 1113a30, 1140a30-35, 1140b17, and 1142b23-35.
20. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168b14-22, 1167b27, 1172b4 and 1179a16.
21. Ibid., 1145b1-6.
22. Aristotle, *Topics*, 145b17.
23. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1095a10.
24. Ibid., 1109b20-24.
25. Ibid., 1107a1.
26. Ibid., 1144a30-34.
27. Ibid., 1113a30-34.
28. Ibid., 1096a12.
29. Ibid., 1179a16-22.
30. Ibid., 1172a35-1172b2.
31. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1355a30-32.
32. Aristotle, *Topics*, 101a35-101b4.
33. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 993b12.

34. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355a30.
35. Ibid., 1356a20.
36. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 415a16-23.
37. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1103a32.
38. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue*, p. 231.
39. Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, p. 15.
40. Ibid., pp. 77, 112, and 113, and *From Morality to Virtue*, pp. 52, 123, 126, and 210.
41. *Goods and Virtues*, p. 13, and *From Morality to Virtue*, pp. 31 and 142.
42. Ibid., p. 33.
43. Ibid., p. 217.
44. Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, p. 1.
45. Aristotle's name for the act of apprehension in *Posterior Analytics*, 72b13 and 100b5-17, *De Anima*, 429a13, and *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141a7 is *noesis*. This term is rendered in English by translators as "rational intuition," "comprehension," and "understanding." What we apprehend in the noetic act are primary premises for scientific demonstrations, both those that are specific to sciences of particular species and those that are common to many or all of the sciences. They include principles of valid reasoning such as the principle of non-contradiction.
46. See the survey of this tradition by Richard Rorty in "Intuition," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1963).
47. Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, pp. 72–73, and *From Morality to Virtue*, p. 33.
48. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue*, p. 80.
49. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b26 and 1179b1. See 1094a23 and 1095a6; and *Eudemian Ethics*: "For we do not wish to know what bravery is but to be brave, nor what justice is but to be just, just as we wish to be in health rather than to know what being in health is, and to have our body in good condition rather than to know what good condition is." (1216b20-25).
50. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue*, p. 190.
51. Ibid., p. 219.
52. Ibid., p. 52.
53. Ibid., p. 210.