

Virtue and Moral Deference*

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ABSTRACT

Moral deference has come under attack for undercutting moral understanding, and thus, for undermining virtue. This essay defends the view that moral deference and virtue are not incompatible. Indeed, responsible moral deference is a kind of coping virtue, a trait that has value in counteracting either an agent's own deficiencies, or conditions that undermine the application of moral understanding in a particular practical situation (such as when the agent has insufficient time to deliberate).

KEYWORDS

Virtue, moral deference, moral understanding, moral worth.

A consensus has been reached that moral knowledge *can* be transmitted via testimony (Jones 1999; Driver 2006; Hills 2009). That is, one's belief, say, that "x is wrong" can be true, and can be justified *solely* on the basis of the testimony of a reliable and trustworthy authority. Yet, even granting this, one might still hold that a person ought not to rely solely on the testimony of someone else in deciding what one ought to do, that such reliance exhibits moral failure. Alison Hills, for example, argues that deference to moral testimony exhibits a lack of moral understanding, and it is moral understanding and not moral knowledge that is the "centrally important concept in moral epistemology" (Hills 2009, 97). Moral understanding is quite distinct from moral knowledge. Attributing knowledge to an agent with respect to a particular

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proposition is too thin to capture what we care about in assessing actions and in assessing an agent as a *moral* agent. This is because there is both something morally defective in the action an agent performs on the basis of pure deference to testimony, and something morally defective in the agent herself who needs to rely on testimony. What is missing is moral understanding, which is unpacked in terms of the agent possessing a full appreciation of the reasons that justify the action. When an agent possesses moral understanding, and acts in light of that understanding, her action possesses moral worth, and the possession of that understanding underlies moral virtue in the agent. Without such understanding, the action lacks moral worth and the agent fails to exhibit virtue. In this paper I assume for the sake of argument that understanding is very different from knowledge (though this has been very effectively challenged by other writers, see Riaz 2015). However, I disagree that *all* actions performed purely on the basis of testimony lack moral worth, and that *all* agents who rely on testimony lack moral virtue.

Deference

What is justified deference?

D defers to A that *m*, iff: D's judgment that *m* is adopted *solely* on the basis of A's judgment that *m*; D's deference is justified given that A is deemed by D to be the appropriate relative authority on the basis of [an appropriate level of] evidence that A is a reliably good judge in moral matters [within the appropriate domain of expertise], and must also responsibly judge A to be trustworthy regarding the testimony provided.

For the deference to be justified the deferrer must be justified in regarding the person providing the testimony as trustworthy and the relevant sort of relative authority. By 'relative authority' it is understood that A is an authority on *m* relative to D. In many cases, A will be an expert relative to D, though this need not be the case. For example, A might simply be more competent relative to D in some way that is time or situation specific. D might be drunk, for example, and A sober.

The word 'solely' is important. All are in agreement that moral knowledge can be responsibly and appropriately acquired via testimony *without* deference when the authority makes clear to the agent what the reasons are and how they are to be weighed, and the agent takes that on board; that is, she sees and appreciates what the reasons are and how they are appropriately weighed. The problem cases are those in

which the agent must defer because she either doesn't see the reasons at all, or has no understanding of their appropriate relative weight.

Moral Understanding

Hills develops an account of moral understanding that is very demanding.

If you understand why X is morally right or wrong, you must have some appreciation of the reasons why it is wrong. Appreciating the reasons why it is wrong is not the same as simply believing that they are the reasons why it is wrong, or even knowing that they are the reasons why it is wrong. Moral understanding involves a grasp of the relation between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true. (Hills 2009, 101)

For Alice to understand why stealing is wrong, she must grasp the reasons why it is wrong via an *appreciation* of those reasons, and that goes beyond simply knowing that it is wrong. Further, moral understanding does not hold for isolated facts. Moral understanding requires a “systematic grasp of morality.” It would be odd for Mary to realize that she should be nice to Sandra, to avoid causing Sandra pain, and yet not be able to grasp that this counts as a reason to be nice to others as well, and have some understanding that this is because pain is bad. Understanding requires the following abilities:

If you understand why p (and q is why p), then in the right sort of circumstances, you can successfully:

- (i) follow an explanation of why p given by someone else;
 - (ii) explain why p in your own words;
 - (iii) draw the conclusion that p (or that probably p) from the information that q ;
 - (iv) draw the conclusion that p' (or that probably p') from the information that q' (where p' and q' are similar to but not identical to p and q);
 - (v) given the information that p , give the right explanation, q ;
 - (vi) given the information that p' , give the right explanation, q' .
- (Hills 2009, 103)

Because understanding is itself so demanding, one can know that p without any understanding of p . Acting on knowledge without understanding both undermines the moral worth of the action and exhibits the lack of virtue in the agent.¹

Friends of moral deference hold that moral deference is not only appropriate, but also sometimes required, especially in cases where the harm in failing to defer is quite large.² Suppose that Mary believes, with very good reason, that she herself tends to become flustered when required to make decisions about her elderly mother's nursing home care, and that her sister, Donna, is much better able to make decisions that protect their mother's interests. It would seem that, for the sake of her mother, she ought to defer to Donna's judgment on how their mother's care should proceed, and follow Donna's advice about what instructions to provide the nursing facility. Here, Mary has enough self-awareness to realize that there is a feature of her temperament that interferes with her practical deliberations on a specific topic.

Do Mary's actions lack moral worth? Given how Hills characterizes moral worth, they must lack it. The notion of 'moral worth' has a long history, and accounts of moral worth attempt to capture Kant's idea that some actions are deserving of a special moral esteem in virtue of being properly motivated, or performed for the right reasons. Hills unpacks it the following way: "Your actions is morally worthy only if it is a right action performed for the right reasons..." (Hills 2009, 113) Kant's honest shopkeeper case is supposed to distinguish right action from morally worthy action (Kant [1785] 2002, 397). The action of an honest shopkeeper, who correctly charges his customer, and who is motivated by self-interest, is *right*, but lacks *moral worth*. This is because the honest action is done from a motive of duty. The honest action that *is* motivated duty, on the other hand, possesses moral worth. For an action to be morally worthy the person performing the actions needs to act for the reasons that make the action right. What makes charging one's customers the correct amount for their purchases is that duty requires it. Self-interest is not what properly justifies honesty. Of course, Hills is not at all committed to the way Kant happens to spell out the proper justification for moral actions. She is simply making use of the idea that there is, intuitively, a distinction between an action's rightness, and something else, call it "moral worth", which picks out a special sort of esteem for actions performed with the proper motivations, however we spell out those motivations.

There is an ambiguity here. Nomy Arpaly points notes that there is a difference between acting for reasons *known* or *believed* by the agent to be moral reasons, and

¹ Hills discusses other ways in which moral understanding is important, but the focus on this paper will just be the issue of how understanding is allegedly undermined by deference, and how this relates to moral virtue.

² David Enoch focuses on cases in which the risk of significant harm is quite large. In these cases it seems clear one ought to defer. See his "A Defense of Moral Deference" (2014).

acting *in response to* moral reasons, even if the agent does not perceive them as such.³ On her view an action has moral worth if it is done for the right reasons, and “done for the right reasons” is understood in terms of the agent simply being responsive to the right reasons – she need not herself think of the reasons as the right ones. The case of Huckleberry Finn is an illustration: Huckleberry has, out of genuine feelings of sympathy, helped a friend of his, Jim, escape from slavery. However, Huckleberry views what he has done as wrong since he doesn’t question slavery itself. Does Huckleberry’s act of helping Jim have moral worth? Arpaly correctly notes that it depends on how we reconstruct the case. If we understand Huckleberry as someone who is *not* accidentally, or whimsically, doing the right thing, as someone who is *rather* “...racist in conscious opinion but viscerally more egalitarian...” (Arpaly 2002, 229) then we might see Huckleberry as someone who, though lacking in moral insight still sees Jim as a person, and thus someone whose action has moral worth. I make a similar point about Huckleberry Finn in *Uneasy Virtue*. I note there that Huckleberry, “...though lacking a correct conception of the good, was still acting in accordance with the correct conception of the good....In order to be virtuous...one need not know that what one is doing is good or right.” (Driver 2001, 52) Huckleberry’s actions were virtuous, deserving of praise, and thus morally worthy, though he lacked systematic moral insight.

What seems crucial for moral worth is that the agent be “properly oriented” in performing the action. *One* way to spell this out is to hold that one’s actions are only properly oriented if they are done for the reasons that justify them. But this is not the only way to spell this out, and there are alternatives that would make deference to another’s testimony display a proper orientation.

One of Hills’ examples of an action that lacks moral worth is the following, which is a modified version of a case discussed by Arpaly:

The Knowledgeable Extremist – Ron is an extremist, believing that killing a person is not generally immoral but that killing a fellow Jew is a grave sin. Ron would like to kill Tamara, but he refrains from doing so because he wants to do the right thing, and he knows (on the basis of his rabbi’s testimony) that the right thing to do is to refrain from killing her. (Arpaly 2002, 115)

When Ron refrains from killing Tamara, he does the right thing, Hills believes, though his action clearly lacks moral worth. Though he is motivated by a *de dicto* desire to do what is right, he does not see that the fact that Tamara is a person gives him sufficient reason not to kill her. This is certainly a failure to be properly oriented. That much seems clearly right to me. Ron’s action lacks moral worth. However, I

³ N. Arpaly, “Moral Worth”, *Journal of Philosophy* 99 (2002): 223-245, 226.

don't believe that the lack of proper orientation that Ron displays is best unpacked as a mismatch between his reasons for acting and the justifying reasons for the action. Though, I also believe that Arpaly may be mistaken in her analysis of Huckleberry Finn. This might be a good example, though, of a case in which virtue and moral worth part ways. Huckleberry is described as someone who does the right thing, even though he thinks it is the wrong thing to do, so it is odd to view him as having a desire to do the right thing – he only has the desire to do the thing that, in fact, is right, but not under the description of it being right. So Huckleberry does not act out of a *de dicto* desire to do the right thing. If this is necessary for the moral worth of an action, but not sufficient, his action lacks moral worth.

Consider the case of Matilda:

Matilda wants very much to do the right thing, and has been brought up to believe that lying is wrong. However, she has a friend, Marilyn, who she justifiably takes to be an expert on morally appropriate social interactions, and Marilyn assures her that sometimes lying is not wrong, it just depends on the circumstances. Indeed, sometimes lying can be morally required. This puzzles Matilda. One day both she and Marilyn are attending the same baby shower. Marilyn, understanding Matilda's predilection for scrupulous honesty, tells her "You ought not to say the baby is ugly, or that the baby doesn't look like his parents at all – that would be wrong because it would hurt the parents' feelings to no good end." Again, this puzzles Matilda. It's not that she fails utterly to see the moral significance of hurting people's feelings, but she simply has no feel for the trade-offs Marilyn's judgment requires. However, she defers to Marilyn and though she does in fact think that the baby is ugly, and though she is asked her opinion, she lies and says the baby is quite lovely.

In certain structural respects, this case is similar to Ron's. Matilda wants to do the right thing – she has a *de dicto* desire to do the right thing. There is a mismatch between her reasons for acting and the reasons that justify the action. She is acting because she wants to do the right thing, and she knows, from Marilyn's testimony, that lying is the right thing to do in this circumstance. She lacks moral understanding because she clearly lacks the sort of *systematic* understanding of morality that is required on Hills's view. However, unlike Ron, she seems properly oriented. Her motivations, more broadly considered, are basically good ones. She wants to do the right thing, she has some idea of what sorts of considerations go into moral justification, but lacks more precise and systematic grasp of the relations

between reasons and competing considerations.⁴ She is not *utterly* unresponsive to the right sorts of reasons, unlike Ron, but she lacks the sensitivity to those reasons that would allow her to make the finer judgments and discriminations that Marilyn is capable of.⁵

It might be useful here to make a distinction between the act of deferring itself and the action that is the result of the deferring. Hills might hold that in the case of Matilda, her decision to defer to Marilyn is done for the right reasons, and thus has moral worth, though when she tells the lie she does not act for the right reasons, and so *that* action lacks moral worth. I don't think that this is open to Hills, really, if we take her at her word on what is required of moral understanding. *None* of Matilda's actions possess moral worth, if what is required is a systematic understanding of morality. But maybe this can be weakened a bit. When Matilda decides to defer to Marilyn she is doing so out of a desire to do the right thing, and surely that, along with the belief that Marilyn knows best in this case, is what justifies the deference. But this does not seem sufficient for proper orientation. Otherwise, Ron's decision to defer would have moral worth. Thus, there seems to be something more that is required for an action to have moral worth. Even in deciding to defer Ron displays a failure to appreciate, at any level, the sorts of reasons that count against something – the sorts of reasons that factor into an action's rightness or wrongness.

Does deference undermine moral virtue? Consider the case Hills' uses to motivate the intuition that it does:

The Incompetent Judge – Claire has just been appointed as a judge and is very anxious to sentence people justly. But she finds it exceptionally difficult to work out the just punishment for various offenses, though she listens to the evidence presented carefully and tries her best to get the right answer. Luckily she has a mentor, a more experienced judge, Judith, who has excellent judgment. Claire always consults with Judith and gives her decision in accordance with Judith's

⁴ One might hold both Ron and Matilda to be morally fetishistic, since they act from a *de dicto* desire to do what is right. However, that someone is morally fetishistic is not really problematic. See Jonas Olson, "Are Desires *De Dicto* Fetishistic?" (2002). Further, Matilda does not seem to be pure case, since she has awareness of the moral reasons, and is just unclear on how to weigh them (though it is true that it would be hard to characterize her *de re* desire to do the right thing).

⁵ Eric Wiland (2014) notes that the focus in the literature has been on what is wrong with those who need to defer on matters such as "Suffering is wrong" and deference to something like that is odd indeed. The more realistic cases are those that involve weighting different factors. Wiland discusses this issue in light of Ross' distinction between *prima facie* duties and duties proper. We are clear on our duties, but weighing them is more complicated since an act in one way may be *prima facie* wrong, but in another way *prima facie* right.

guidelines, offering Judith's explanation of why the sentence is just to the defendants.

Claire lacks moral understanding, and thus lacks virtue. This is another instance in which I agree with Hills's verdict on the case itself, but disagree on the lessons to be drawn from it.

In rendering the just verdict Claire is not responding to considerations of justice (i.e. the right reasons). Rather, she is responding to Judith's judgment – and on Hills's view this is the wrong sort of reason, at least if we want to characterize the agent as virtuous. This is because she holds that the virtuous person must be a moral authority, an authority on what is right (Hills 2009, 111-112). Further, the virtuous person is someone whose "...thoughts, decisions, feelings, and emotions as well as her actions..." are "...structured by her sensitivity to morality" (Hills 2009, 112). Claire, like Matilda, is someone who is motivated to do what is right. What she lacks is good judicial judgment, and this is what undermines her virtue, on Hills's view. But we can agree with Hills that Claire lacks virtue. The critic only needs to find cases where deference is responsible, and even virtuous, the critic need not hold that *all* cases of deference that lead to the right decision are indeed virtuous.

Human beings are subject to limitations, both epistemic or cognitive, and temperamental. We often need to seek out advice to make responsible decisions. Of course, it would better if we had no limitations, and we did not need to seek out advice. But this shouldn't detract from our capacity for virtue. A responsible moral agent will want to do the right thing *more* than she will want to exhibit the sort of moral understanding Hills regards as necessary for virtue. She should care about that more than her own possession of virtue. In cases where she is unsure of which reasons obtain, or have greater weight, as in the case of Matilda, the desire to do the right thing should lead her to get moral advice. But it may be that in spite the advisor's best efforts she still doesn't grasp how it is that one reason has greater weight than another. She knows what the right thing to do is. She must defer. Hills has defined virtue so that moral understanding is a part of it. It looks as though being concerned with the moral worth of one's actions, and with virtue, are obstacles to doing what is right since doing what is right in situations where deference is required for doing what is right requires that one act in such a way that one's action lacks moral worth, and one is failing to exhibit virtue. On my view, responsible moral agency requires deference in such cases, and given the very plausible assumption that those who are responsible moral agents possess *some* virtue, we have an argument that responsible moral deference is required of the virtuous person in some circumstances. Responsible moral deference is not incompatible with virtue.

When we rely on advice we can do so responsibly or irresponsibly. In order to responsibly rely on advice we need to consider factors such as the reliability of the putative advisor, along at least two parameters: does the advisor reliably come to correct judgments on the matter at hand, and is the advisor trustworthy – someone who can be relied on to honestly communicate those judgments?

A person who seeks to make important decisions in isolation, without seeking out advice, does not represent the relevant sort of ideal for us. Again, certainly, it would be *better* if we all knew everything we needed to know to engage in effective practical deliberation on all issues of moral significance, and if we possessed a fully systematic understanding of morality. It would be better if we had capacities that allowed us to use that knowledge more efficiently – if we could think more quickly, for example. But again, given our limitations, seeking out advice from reliable sources is not just in keeping with virtue, it is required of it. And a similar argument can be made – by extension – to deference. The conditions for responsible deference are the same as those for responsibly trusting advice. The difference is that when one is relying on advice *as opposed to* deferring, one comes to appreciate for oneself the moral reasons at play in the decision or judgment and their relative weight and significance. Full deference involves lack of moral understanding. A person who seeks out and relies on advice either possesses moral understanding already or comes to possess that understanding through the advice. But if we are operating with the very demanding notion of moral understanding articulated by Hills, it will be hard to motivate the distinction between pure deference and relying on advice. If the person possesses moral understanding to begin with, the only advice that person will need will be on purely empirical matters. For example, I may need advice on which charity is the most efficient in making a decision about where to send a contribution. No moral advice is required. However, if a person does need moral advice, it seems incredible to me to suppose that any single provision of that advice will result in moral understanding – given that *this* requires a systematic understanding of morality. Thus in practice, as a practical matter, on Hills's view the distinction between moral deference and advice will be difficult to make.

Further, the view that a person who relies on deference is acting incompatibly with virtue relies on a very narrow understanding of what a virtue – or excellence of character – is. One way to approach virtue is to ask what sorts of character traits a morally conscientious person would want to have – including, what a morally conscientious person *who is not perfect* – would want to have *in light of those imperfections*. A similar issue arises in the debate between possibilists and actualists: should I do the best that I think I can do, or should my decisions about what to do be guided by my views about what I will do, given various features of my character? The classic example used to illustrate the distinction involves a procrastinator who

needs to decide whether or not to agree to write a book review (Jackson and Pargetter 1986). The best option would be to agree to write the review and then write it in a timely manner. If the review is not written in a timely manner, however, it would be better not to agree to write it in the first place. The procrastinator is aptly named – she knows that she has a tendency to procrastinate and that it is unlikely that she will finish the review in a timely manner. What should she do? The actualist holds that she should not agree to write the review – and, after all, isn't that the advice a friend would give her? The possibilist, however, believes that she should agree to write the review, and then write it in a timely manner.⁶ Taking into consideration what she will likely do, given her character flaw, is letting herself off the hook. The connection to the question we are considering here has to do with how we should approach the question of what we should be like, *given that we have flaws and limitations?* This is taking an actualist perspective to the question of virtue. However, the question we are considering isn't wholly analogous to the question of what we should do given our limitations – in the actualist/possibilist debate the actualist concedes that it is possible for the agent to do what is best, it is just very unlikely. Here, though, we also consider cases where it isn't possible for the agent to make the right decision on her own, without deferring. In this case, even someone who leans in favor of the possibilist would hold that the deference is warranted, and given that the agent has certain limitations, the deference is good, not bad. Thus, the opponent of deference when the agent cannot make the right decision on her own, the opponent who thinks that such an agent is lacking in virtue, is in the odd position of holding that in deferring she is doing everything she ought to do, for good reasons, too, and nevertheless is exhibiting vice in so deferring.

Can we make a stronger case for deference counting as virtuous? Some virtues seem to be 'coping' virtues.⁷ They are virtues that we need or that benefit us precisely due to certain character deficits. Philippa Foot had the view that all virtues were *correctives*: "...each one standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good" (Foot 1978, 8). Her claim is both broader and narrower than the one I would like to make. It is broader in that she views *all* virtues, not just a subset, as corrective. It is narrower in that she restricts what needs to be corrected for, or what needs to be managed in some way, to those deficits regarding our abilities to withstand temptation and be properly

⁶ I discuss the actualism/possibilism debate in "The Actual in 'Actualism'." (2008).

⁷ I briefly discuss coping virtues in the context of a discussion of epistemic virtue in "The Conflation of Moral and Epistemic Virtue." (2003).

motivated.⁸ I agree that these are two prominent ways in which a sort of deficit impedes practical deliberation, but there are other ways – some relating to features of the person herself, and some relating to that person’s circumstances. One person may benefit from a strong will precisely because she is tempted. We can call these ‘*coping*’ virtues. Deferring to greater authority on important moral matters may be such a virtue. It is only because Matilda lacks a systematic grasp of the reasons that she is required to defer. And there will be other cases where the agent has difficulty trying to figure out which reasons among a range of possible reasons are the right ones. So, for example, someone might know lots of reasons that are not the right ones, but be unsure about which ones are the right ones. Consider Melissa, who has taken a class on contemporary moral problems and comes to believe that abortion is morally permissible. She knows that there are good arguments for not viewing the human fetus as a person; she also knows that there are good arguments to the effect that even if the fetus is a person, abortion is still permissible. She doesn’t know what to think about fetal personhood at all, but she does know that either way, whichever is the right way to go, abortion is permissible. Here she isn’t able to identify which line of justification is the correct line of justification; just that permissibility ‘dominates’. Does this qualify as appreciating the reasons that justify the permissibility of abortion? Or does the agent need to get things *precisely* right? It seems that given Hill’s criteria such an agent lacks moral understanding. This seems highly counterintuitive to me, but perhaps this shows that we simply need to acknowledge different ways in which someone can possess moral understanding. One way is through a generalizable appreciation of the reasons that morally justify actions in such a way as to be able to apply them to particular cases; another way is by appreciating reasons more generally, without, in some cases, being able to tell which ones apply and/or how they apply, as in Mary’s case. In the latter sense, then, someone who completely doesn’t see that causing pain is a bad thing, and a wrong making feature of an action, is lacking moral understanding. Melissa, however, is not like this, though she lacks the sort of appreciation that allows her to properly identify the operative reasons.

There are coping virtues that help people counteract deficits they have, that may or may not be typical for the average human being. Some virtues, such as graciousness, involve responding appropriately to one’s own failure. This may include things like sincerely apologizing, not allowing one’s disappointment to interfere with showing the correct respectful behavior towards others. This raises the issue of diachronic versus synchronic coping. The latter example of graciousness

⁸ Foot seems mainly worried about deficits that afflict persons in general – e.g. so that a virtue is still a corrective even in cases where a person is not tempted to do the wrong thing. However, my reading of “Virtues and Vices” holds her as allowing that virtues also correct for individual deficits.

could be handled by the Aristotelian by noting that the gracious person has *become* virtuous – they had lacked it when they behaved badly – but the recognition of their own bad behavior and what the appropriate response is to said behavior shows that they have grown into virtue – thus, the coping is diachronic – not at the same time as the lapse – and this is not at all incompatible with the Aristotelian view. Synchronic coping, on the other hand, would be – because it involves coping with a lapse as one is experiencing or displaying the lapse. This doesn't affect my overall point, since synchronic coping can still be virtuous – and responsible deference is an example of synchronic coping.

There are a variety of deficits someone might need to cope with, and how one copes says a lot about one's level of virtue. There are epistemic deficits – some may involve features of the person, such as an inability to focus on solving a problem, confusion over what sorts of reasons apply in a given case, or lack of the relevant sort of experience; some may involve features of a situation a person might find herself in, such as lack of time to carefully think through the options, or the presence of other environmental factors that impede practical deliberation. Other deficits might be temperamental, such as a tendency to get angry too quickly. Yet other deficits may have to do with attention, or salience (perhaps these also qualify as epistemic). Perhaps Sally has a tendency to get lost in her own world as she walks home from work, and thus fails to notice the suffering of others around her, or perhaps she is too easily distracted by kitten pictures on social media, and fails to attend to more serious issues.

These deficits, in one way or another, undermine one's ability to make the right judgment, not *necessarily* one's virtue. In any of these sorts of situations, it may make perfect sense to defer to a trustworthy expert. It is actually *required* of the virtuous agent.

The coping virtues fall into the category of what Robert Adams calls 'structural' virtues (Adams 2009, 33ff.). He contrasts these virtues with what he calls 'motivational' virtues. Motivational virtues are defined by their good motives: so, benevolence must involve "desiring or willing" what is good for others. Structural virtues are not defined by their aims. Examples are courage, self-control, and patience. These may or may not have good ends in any particular case. All by themselves, then, they don't make a person good. This is certainly true of deference. Responsible deference, on the other hand, deference for a good end, just like courage, strength of will, and patience, are good. As Adams notes, without such virtues one cannot be "excellently for the good". A disposition to defer in standard 'coping' situations seems to be a structural virtue. One's ends may or may not be good; but the deference is necessary to really do good in these situations, where the agent is motivated to act well.

To test this lets look at some of the other structural virtues. Consider self-control. If one has a view of virtue in which it consists of having one's desires in conformity with what is right, as many neo-Aristotelians do, then self-control is not a virtue either since one only needs it when one is working towards virtue. It is a kind of crutch for those who lack virtue – but even if we accept this picture of virtue, which is highly contentious – this view of how self-control functions as a crutch is too one-dimensional. I can learn virtue through the exercise of self-control – this could be part of the natural developmental picture for virtue. Rather than undermining virtue, it makes it easier for people to become virtuous. After all, what really is the alternative? And the same can be said for responsible deference. Even if one accepted the neo-Aristotelian view of virtue, responsible deference is a developmental aid as plausibly as it is an undermining crutch.⁹

But responsible deference doesn't simply help someone develop out of limitations. We will not be able to avoid all limitations, and, we will need deference as part of our decision-making tool kit, a quality that if responsibly deployed is part of an excellent human character. Thus, 'the virtue of deference' is not an oxymoron.

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⁹ Wiland (2014) notes that trusting in an advisor is one way to acquire moral understanding.

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