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Emotion, Executive Dysfunction, and Agency

Can Emotional Disability Impair an Agent's Likelihood of Virtue?

Kevin Timpe

3.1 Introduction

The revitalization of virtue theory has been well documented elsewhere.[1] Though this revitalization had a number of contributing factors, a central element was a concern about the neglect of emotions in normative ethics by deontological and consequentialist approaches. In contrast, the emotions are afforded a much more central role in virtue ethics.[2] Another is a focus not just on actions, but on human excellences of doing, thinking, and feeling. Robert C. Roberts refers to the psychological turn of ethics back toward the virtue tradition as a "revolution" in the fields of psychology and ethics. By returning to, including the needed reinterpretation of, the virtue tradition that characterized much of the ancient and medieval periods, and seeing those virtues as a proper part of what is now the distinct field of psychology, "ethics has taken a psychological turn, and philosophers now regularly engage in a discipline they call 'moral psychology'."[3] This is especially true of many philosophers who locate their normative views in the Christian theological tradition.[4]

[1] Central to this revitalization are Anscombe 1958; Foot 1978; MacIntyre 1981. For discussions, see Goldie 2010; Athanassoulis 2013; Timpe and Boyd 2014.

[2] See, for instance, Athanassoulis 2013, 35, and Kotva 1996: "Our emotions display the kind of people we have become, and our desires help determine our actions. There is, in other words, something very wrong with theories that devalue emotion.... The point here is that modern ethical theories tend to ignore and even undermine important human realities like close friendships and powerful emotions. I suggest that the return to virtue ethics stems in part from growing frustration with this inadequate treatment of central human realities. In contrast to modern theories, virtue ethics seems to offer a fuller, more comprehensive picture of the moral life" (10–11).

[3] Roberts 2007, 6. In fact, Roberts thinks that a hard and fast distinction between ethics and moral psychology cannot be drawn: "Throughout this book I take the position that certain kinds of psychology... is [*sic*] really a branch of ethics, and that ethics, insofar as it is about the virtues and vices, is really a branch of psychology" (Roberts 2007, 48).

[4] For excellent exemplars of this approach, see Kotva 1996; Roberts 2007; Cobb and Green 2017; DeYoung 2020.

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Much contemporary virtue theory as well as philosophical work on the emotions is shaped by interdisciplinary interaction between psychology and philosophy. The present chapter should be understood in light of these current forces. It needs to be noted that ancient and medieval figures in virtue ethics may not have in mind exactly what contemporary philosophers and psychologists mean by 'emotion.' There's a need for careful work on how these projects relate to each other. But that's not the focus of the present discussion. My primary goal here is to explore the connection between the emotions and virtue theory via an investigation of disabilities that affect emotions. In particular, I explore how certain kinds of emotional disability (or impairments with regard to emotional control) can impact an agent's ability to form certain virtues that, like fortitude, have emotions as their objects. Contemporary research in psychology about executive dysfunction and emotions give us reason to think that certain kinds of disabilities significantly impact an agent's ability to develop the proper dispositions regarding emotions. I end by arguing that the ways disabilities impair emotions give us further reason to think that moral agency is best understood as a degreed concept.

3.2 Emotions and Virtue

I begin with a brief discussion of the emotions and how their proper regulation is important for virtue theory. As Peter Goldie politely describes it, there is a "very lively debate about just what emotions are."[5] Similarly, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev writes that "the very complexity of emotions has made attempts to define them notoriously problematic.... In light of the complexity of emotions, I believe that no single mental element can adequately define emotions."[6] I will not be able to settle, or even directly address, the debate about how best to define the nature of emotion here.[7] Instead, following the lead of Ben-Ze'ev and others, I adopt a prototypical approach to emotions which doesn't seek to give necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being an emotion:

[5] Goldie 2010, 3. See also Deigh 2010. For a discussion of the impact of empirical work on the emotions for philosophical understandings of what the emotions are, see Sousa 2010.

[6] Ben-Ze'ev 2010, 56.

[7] For a discussion of the problems involved with providing an analysis of what the emotions are, see Jaggar 1989 and Deigh 2010. Jagger mentioned three particular problems involved here: "One set of difficulties results from the variety, complexity, and even inconsistency of the ways in which emotions are viewed, both in daily life and in scientific contexts. It is in part this variety that makes emotions into a 'question' at the same time that it precludes answering that question by simple appeal to ordinary language. A second difficulty is the wide range of phenomena covered by the term 'emotion'.... A further problem concerns the criteria for preferring one account of emotion to another. The more one learns about the ways in which other cultures conceptualize human faculties, the less plausible it becomes that emotions constitute what philosophers call a 'natural kind'" (153).

> [A] conceptual tool for coping with the complexity of emotions is that of using prototype categories. Unlike a binary category, which provides a clear criterion that constitutes the sufficient and necessary conditions for membership, membership in a prototypical category is determined by an item's degree of similarity to the best example in the category: the greater the similarity, the higher the degree of membership. Contrary to a binary category, a prototypical one has neither clear-cut boundaries nor an equal degree of membership.... Membership in the general category of emotions, as well as membership in the general category of a particular emotion, is a matter of degree rather than an all-or-nothing affair.[8]

It is often easier to agree on the prototypes—such as anger, fear, or compassion—than it is to agree on the definition that explains the prototypes and precisely demarcate the relevant boundaries of individual virtues. While the latter is a worthwhile project, it is not my project here.[9] So I here assume a prototypical approach to emotion. As a result, when I refer to emotions in what follows, I will be referring to them loosely and without pinning much weight on a fine-grained understanding of any of the particular emotions.

Turning, then, to virtue, and painting with a broad brush so as not to be too tightly wedded to any particular version of virtue theory, I take the virtues to be excellences which dispose their possessor to live well qua human in some particular way. Theologically, the virtues are required for humans to fully flourish and achieve perfect union with God in the eschaton.[10] Many virtues will be dispositions to act in particular ways, such as justice being the disposition to treat others as they are due. But some of the virtues are about being rightly disposed to feel particular emotions as called for by the situation rather than about particular external actions. The dispositions to feel anger and fear appropriately, to use two of the prototype emotions mentioned above, are the virtues of "good temper" and courage, respectively.[11] But, as Roberts points out, the connection between virtue and emotion isn't just that virtue requires us to have certain emotions; virtues may also require that we not have others (or not have them in inappropriate ways):

[8] Ben-Ze'ev 2010, 42. See also Roberts 2003; Walker 2006, 117.

[9] I do attempt to get clear on the exact nature of envy and pride elsewhere; see Perrine and Timpe 2014; Timpe and Tognazzini 2017. Roberts's reason for not engaging in such a fine-grained analysis strikes me as sensible: "I will be specifying differences of a grain fine enough to make some of my attributions of emotion types to particular items of emotion vocabulary controversial among accomplished speakers of English. Such disagreement about vocabulary does not trouble me if I can garner agreement that my analysis has identified *some* distinct type of human emotion. In everyday usage, emotion vocabulary is not as discriminating as I try to be in the analyses of this chapter.... Something recognizably like what we call anger, fear, love, joy, hope, sadness, envy, pride, shame, disappointment, and regret seem to transcend cultural differences and to be found universally among human beings" (Roberts 2003, 185, 192).

[10] See, for instance, Timpe 2014; Boyd and Timpe 2021.

[11] See West 2016 for the former, and Cogley 2014 and McInerny 2014 for the latter.

> Some of these [traits, but the same holds for virtues more specifically too] are dispositions to have emotions (as to perform actions) of certain types in certain types of situations (justice, compassion); others are dispositions to overcome or master emotions of certain types in certain types of situations (courage, perseverance); some seem to be dispositions *not* to have emotions of certain types of situations (see 'not given to inordinate anger, or to vanity, and so forth').[12]

Some virtue theorists, such as Adam Morton, think there is a virtue for every emotion: "For any emotion we can define a corresponding character trait, namely the disposition to have that emotion readily."[13] Nothing in what follows requires this stronger correlation between emotion and virtue, though nothing I say below is intended to conflict with it either. All that is required is the weaker claim, as Jerome Neu refers to it, that there is "an ethic of emotion"[14] in addition to an ethic of action, and that among those emotions that can be the objects of virtues are some that can be affected by disability.

Few, if any, of us can intentionally cause ourselves to have a particular emotion by a simple act of will. While, as indicated earlier, we can't assume that they were targeting the exact same thing as contemporary discussions, it's suggestive that many ancient and medieval philosophers thought of the emotions as *passions*, things that we suffer or impinge upon us. I cannot will myself to feel hope or anger directly. However, we can do things that we know will cause us to have particular emotions. I can, for instance, walk to my bookshelf and reread parts of Kim Nielsen's *A Disability History of the United States*,[15] knowing that doing so will cause myself to become angry about the myriad ways that the U.S. has mistreated, marginalized, and oppressed individuals with disabilities. And the virtues which take emotions as their objects, like all moral virtues, can be acquired through the development of states of character.[16] By habituating myself toward the virtue of righteous indignation, I can (indirectly) become the kind of person that will be appropriately empathetic and angered by injustice in how we treat those with disabilities. The proper amount of an emotion that the agent ought to feel in a particular situation (as with the proper action that they ought to perform) is that which is in accord with "right reason" or "prudence."[17] The ideally virtuous agent will be the one whose emotions are in perfect harmony with the dictates of prudence, where prudence is judgment rightly calibrated to an all-things-considered view of what constitutes human flourishing. Training one's emotions, then,

[12] Roberts 2010, 565. [13] Morton 2010, 387. [14] Neu 2010. [15] Nielsen 2012.

[16] See, for instance, Kotva 1996, 105; Athanassoulis 2013, 43. I assume that the theological virtues are relevantly different in that they are infused rather than developed via habituation; see the discussion in Boyd and Timpe 2021.

[17] See Helm 2010; Boyd 2014; Wood 2014.

will involve a close connection with the agent's cognitive or intellectual faculties.[18]

In the next section, I discuss a number of ways that disability could impact an agent's emotions, drawing both on the role of executive function and by focusing on a number of particular disabilities.

3.3 Disability and the Emotions

While many people typically think primarily about the physical or cognitive manifestations of disabilities, disabilities can significantly affect an individual's emotional life as well. According to the National Institutes of Mental Health, for example, depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide.[19] Depression can affect many aspects of agency that will be relevant to forming particular virtues. It may, for instance, dampen the moral motivation to pursue a particular virtue (e.g., there is a rich literature on the impact of depression and anxiety on eating and sleeping, and their correlation with various eating and sleeping disorders).[20] While I don't mean to downplay the seriously of debilitating depression, I do want to focus our attention elsewhere. Disability's impact on emotion is multifaceted and often indirect.

3.3.1 Emotional Blunting and Flattened Affect

Numerous disabilities lead to emotional blunting or flattened affect, a decrease in the frequency or strength of emotions, both positive and negative.[21] Emotional blunting is commonly associated with schizophrenic syndrome and fronto-temporal dementia (FTD).[22] In some cases, emotional blunting—and the social

[18] The bifurcation of intellectual and moral virtue that traces back to Aristotle likely over-separates things that are interconnected in complex ways. On many views of the emotions, such as Roberts's view of an emotion as a "concern-based construal," a cognitive element is built into the emotion. And so the moral virtues involving emotions will also have a cognitive element.

[19] *In Harm's Way: Suicide in America* 2001. For work on the connection between depression and moral psychology, see Caton 1986; Ardal 1993; Silberfeld and Checkland 1999; Roberts 2001; Hansen 2004. Judith Butler approaches depression not from moral psychology but from political structure and oppression, both of which are important for disability theorists; see Butler 1997.

[20] See, for instance, Casper 1998; Bulik 2002. Tasca et al. 2009 examine how emotional regulation can mediate the severity of symptoms in patients with eating disorders. For sleep disorders and depression, see Nutt et al. 2008.

[21] See, for instance, Kim 2015.

[22] See Berenbaum et al. 1987, 57 and Williamson and Allman 2011, 104, respectively. FTD can also lead to volitional impairment, which can intersect with other symptoms. More on intersectionality below. Damage to different parts of the brain can cause neurologically distinct kinds of blunting: "right hemisphere damage may produce disturbances in affective expression..., whereas damage to the frontal lobe convexity is more likely to result in apathy and avolition.... Thus, blunting might not be a unitary trait but, as presently measured clinically, may represent a heterogeneous symptom complex, with the various components having different clinical and theoretical implications"

and personality changes that it contributes to—may be more significant than a condition's cognitive or neuropsychological deficits.[23] This appears to be the case, for instance, in individuals with FTD:

> Neuropsychiatric changes are the most prominent symptoms of early FTD. During the first few years after onset, the neuropsychiatric symptoms usually overshadow any cognitive disabilities.... Symptoms such as decreased social tact and propriety, abulia and disengagement, and emotional detachment are out of proportion to memory deficits.... Investigators suggest that many of these neuropsychiatric changes have a basis in emotional blunting, such as social impropriety, decreased personal regulation, and overall lack of consideration for people.[24]

Individuals impaired by FTD can become emotionally detached; have a decrease in autonomic emotional responsiveness; lose empathy and willingness to comfort others; and more frequently fail to comfort or help others in distress, even if they are family members or close friends.[25]

Emotional blunting can impair other emotional responses, not just those involving empathy. Consider individuals with 2p15-16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome, a condition of unknown etiology which involves a deletion on the short (p) arm of chromosome 2.[26] The chromosome has one breakpoint in band 15 of the p arm and another in band 16, and the genetic material usually contained is simply missing. The deletion usually occurs in only one copy of the chromosome.[27] Even though only a small amount of genetic information is missing, as with other deletion syndromes there can be broad-spectrums impact on the individual. The emerging phenotype of individuals with the syndrome includes a number of physical affects (e.g., microcephaly, vision problems, kidney abnormalities); speech impairments; gross and fine motor control issues; and cognitive and developmental disabilities.[28] Cognitively, individuals with this condition have mild to severe cognitive impairment.[29] While cognitive impairment has its own

(Berenbaum et al. 1987, 58, citations omitted). FTD affects the ventromedial frontal region, which plays a key role in social and learned emotional responses to novel situations, and the anterior temporal region, involved in empathy; see Mendez et al. 2006, 245.

[23] Mendez et al. 2006, 242. [24] Ibid., 245, citations omitted. [25] Ibid., 245.

[26] *2p15p16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome* 2014. Most cases are believed to be caused by a *de novo* mutation.

[27] Leeuw et al. 2008; Piccione et al. 2012. [28] *2p15p16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome* 2014, 4, 7.

[29] There are a number of different ways to differentiate degrees of cognitive impairment. According to one influential system developed by Grossman, the classification according to IQ is as follows:

mild: from 50/55 through 70
moderate: from 35/40 through 50/55
severe: from 20/25 through 35/40
profound: under 20/25.

direct impact on agency, it also impacts successful executive functioning and its role in emotional regulation (more on this below). Some individuals with 2p15-16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome have emotional blunting that manifests across a range of particular emotions.[30] There is scientific evidence to suggest that too little emotion, as in the case of emotional blunting, can be just as detrimental for good decision making as overly strong emotional reactions.[31] On the assumption that this evidence is reliable then it's likely to be a potential detriment to specifically moral decisions as well.

A number of disabilities, including those related to 2p15-16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome, also produce alexithymia. Though not an official diagnosis in the *DSM-V*,[32] alexithymia is "marked by difficulties in identifying and describing feelings and difficulties in distinguishing feelings from the bodily sensations of emotional arousal."[33] Alexithymia has been clinically associated with reduced empathy.[34] And while there's not as much evidence supporting this stronger claim, there's at least anecdotal evidence suggesting that some individuals with alexithymia may actually be impaired from experiencing certain emotions (e.g., shame, jealousy, or self-resentment) altogether though the exact mechanism or mechanisms involved isn't clear.

3.3.2 Executive Dysfunction

Another way that disabilities can impact an agent's emotions is via impairments related to executive dysfunction. I've explored the connection between disabilities and executive function (EF) at greater length elsewhere, and here only want to summarize some of that discussion.[35] One difficulty which confronts anyone interested in how disabilities can impact agency via impaired executive functioning is the "failure to find consensus on a general definition of the construct."[36] Nevertheless, "many theorists treat executive functioning as one of the most important functions of the self."[37] For purposes of the present project,

For a history and discussion of a number of such rankings, see Richards et al. 2015, chapter 2. See also n. 52 below.

[30] Hancarova et al. 2013, 2. [31] Williams and Wood 2017, 37.

[32] The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition, published by the American Psychiatric Association.

[33] Bird et al. 2010, 1517; see also Ricciardi et al. 2015. It isn't obvious exactly how these studies differentiate feelings and other bodily arousals, at least not to the satisfaction of an analytic philosopher; they almost certainly have a thinner notion of emotions than Roberts's view involving concern-based construals. See also Kasari 2012 for a discussion of the impact of Down syndrome, ASD, and Williams syndrome on emotional understanding and expression, though with similar caveats.

[34] Bird and Cook 2013. [35] See Timpe 2016, from which this section borrows.

[36] Borkowski and Burke 1996, 244. Similarly, "there continues to be no consensus definition of executive functions" (Senn et al. 2004, 445); see also Chung et al. 2014, 13; Brier 2015, 2.

[37] Baumeister 2010, 180.

I understand EF to be an umbrella term that encompasses the following abilities:[38]

- agential planning
- initiation of action, particularly for goal-directed behavior
- working memory[39]
- self-monitoring[40]
- behavioral self-regulation (including restraint and inhibition)
- emotional self-regulation
- attention/focus
- selective attention
- task coordination and switching[41]
- effective performance.

Even this list is incomplete, as over thirty constructs have been included within the scope of executive function.[42] Of particular interest here, however, is the role that many of these abilities will play in emotions directly or in the formation of virtue. Emotional self-regulation, for instance, will have a direct impact.[43] And some scholars suggest that regulating the strength of many emotions is also explicable in terms of executive function.[44] However, many of these abilities will be involved in the agent's attempts to form virtues, including those that are excellences with respect to the emotions. For instance, impairments of behavioral self-regulation or inhibition will make it more difficult for individuals to behave temperately, and thus develop the virtue of temperance via habituation.

Impairments of executive function can be found in a number of disabilities.[45] Consider, at present, the diminished self-regulation that often occurs as a result of traumatic brain injury (TBI). Some scholars suggest the concept of "neurobehavioural disability" to describe the frequently clustered executive function impairments that TBI can cause:

[38] See Siegler 1991; Lezak et al. 2004, 611; Smidts et al. 2004, 386; Sample 2008, 75ff.; Baumeister 2010; Baumeister and Vohs 2012; Brier 2015, 2ff. As Weyandt et al. 2014 make clear, "a universally accepted definition of EF does not exist, and many have criticized the broad definitions of the construct" (69).

[39] Working memory allows "information to be held after sensory input so that a course of action can be planned" (Williamson and Allman 2011, 55). According to Baddeley 1992, working memory is central to executive function in virtue of its role in controlling attention; see also Baddeley et al. 1996.

[40] Self-monitoring refers to the processes that individuals "use to check in and note if their intended behavior is matching their actual behavior" (Brier 2015, 5). Williamson and Allman include the following under self-monitoring: "self-appraisal, agency, autobiographical memories, prospection, and theory of mind" (Williamson and Allman 2011, 123).

[41] See McLean and Hitch 1999, 243ff. [42] Goldstein et al. 2013, 4.

[43] For relevant psychological research on the connections between the emotions and executive function, see Lezak et al. 2004, chapter 19. On some models of executive functioning, management of the emotions also falls within the scope of executive functioning. Brandtstadter describes emotional-regulation and self-control as "basic requirements of social coexistence" (Brandtstadter 2000, 3).

[44] Kim 2015, 139. [45] Further examples are given in Timpe 2016.

> This new concept of disability pointed to patterns of maladaptive behaviour characterized by impulsivity; inappropriate social or sexual behaviour; lack of tact and discretion during interpersonal activities; diminished self or social awareness; an egocentric attitude lacking in warmth and empathy towards others; labile mood with shallow irritability that can escalate into impulsive aggression; poor attention control resulting in an inability to maintain goal directed behaviour; a lack of ability to spontaneously initiate purposeful behaviour; and fatigue, often associated with a lack of drive and motivation.[46]

It's not hard to see how these could further decrease the kind of emotional regulation required for certain virtues.

3.3.3 Cognitive Disabilities and Emotions

In additional to affecting executive function, the emotions are closely connected with the role of cognition in agency. This connection has a number of different elements. First, research has shown that the emotions impact the gathering of information and perception of a situation, and that emotional impairment can undermine the motivation for further inquiry.[47] Second, at least many emotions themselves have a cognitive element.[48] Antonio Damasio's well-known *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* is an extended treatment of the close interconnections between emotion and cognition with respect to the human brain. Since at least Plato, philosophers have thought that emotion can undermine rationality. But Damasio also argues that the emotions are "indispensable for rationality."[49] While the emotions can make us less rational, so, too, can their absence or impairment:

> I began writing this book to propose that reason may not be as pure as most of us think it is or wish it were, that emotions and feelings may not be intruders in the bastion of reason at all: they may be enmeshed in its network, for worse *and* for better.... It is thus even more surprising and novel that the *absence* of emotion and feeling is no less damaging, no less capable of compromising the rationality that makes us distinctly human and allows us to decide in consonance with a sense of personal future, social convention, and moral principle.[50]

[46] Worthington et al. 2017, 4, citations omitted.

[47] Elster 2010. For more on the motivational role of the emotions, and not just with regard to intellectual inquiry, see also Helm 2010; Morton 2010, 389; Prinz 2010, section 1.

[48] See Jaggar 1989; Roberts 2007; Elster 2010; Goldie 2010; Morton 2010; Tappolet 2010; Prizant 2015.

[49] Damasio 1994, xiii. [50] Ibid., xii.

Damasio gives the example of Elliot, discussed at length in chapter 3 of *Descartes' Error*. Elliot had a frontal lobe tumor which was surgically removed, resulting in impairments in both the emotions and executive function but with no cognitive or memory impairment. Nevertheless, the removal of the tumor led to agential failures. "He was still physically capable and most of his mental capacities were intact. But his ability to reach decisions was impaired, as was his ability to make an effective plan for the hours ahead of him, let along to plan for the months and years of his future."[51] Given these impacts, it would not be surprising if Elliot, as Damasio's treatment suggests, had a more difficult time undertaking the task of forming virtues (e.g., courage or righteous indignation).

Relatedly, there is evidence to suggest that cognitive disabilities[52] could make it more difficult for agents to foster certain virtues even if it does not necessarily impair the emotions themselves. In his work on the emotions, Roberts claims that emotions, qua concern-based construals, are shaped by concepts and narratives.[53] Similarly, he tells a very cognitive story of coming to no longer see one's reasons as adequate to justify one's actions or emotions.[54] Consider, for instance, the role that prudence is typically thought to play in virtue ethics. While there are a number of competing accounts of prudence, I'm going to draw on W. Jay Wood's recent account.[55] Those that prefer a different account can substitute their preferred view in what follows and I suspect such an adaption would not have major implications for the main contours of my argument. For Wood, prudence is that intellectual virtue connected with what ought to be done, and thus aims at action:

> Practical wisdom, or prudence, is thus a 'bridge virtue,' connecting reason with moral activity. Put briefly, prudence is the deeply anchored, acquired habit of thinking well in order to live and act well. Aristotle defines it as 'a state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being' [*Nicomachean Ethics* 1140b5]... It is a cultivated habit of good judgment that allows us to reason thoroughly and with

[51] Ibid., 37. See also 40–5.

[52] Not everyone uses the terms "cognitive disability" and "intellectual disability" in the same way, or in the same way as others use them. In the introduction to their *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, Licia Carlson and Eva Feder Kittay write that "We've chosen the term 'cognitive disability,' under which we include conditions like autism, dementia, Alzheimer's, and [what has historically been called] mental retardation, rather than 'intellectual disability.' The former is broader. Also, some forms of cognitive disability do not imply diminished intellectual capacity (e.g., autism)" (Carlson and Kittay 2010, 1, n. 1; see also Carlson 2010). Following them, I will speak of cognitive disability and intend my use of the term to cover the wider category of disability which includes but isn't limited to intellectual disability.

[53] Roberts 2007, 29ff. Another approach to the emotions which has a very cognitive flavor is found in Taylor 1985. In particular, Taylor focuses on pride, shame, and guilt, and gives a "propositional" account of their nature.

[54] Roberts 2007, 39ff.

[55] Wood 2014.

> finesse amidst the particularities of our moral, interpersonal, emotional, political, and various other life circumstances, toward the end of human flourishing.[56]

Think of how many of the abilities that fall under executive functioning would seem to be involved in prudence here: agential planning, initiation of goal-directed behavior, self-monitoring, behavioral and emotional regulation, attention, and task coordination. The greater the degree of involvement of executive function tasks in the exercise of prudence, the more reason we have for thinking that disabilities that affect executive function will also be relevant for the formation of prudence.

Prudence is not only a cardinal virtue; it is the first, in one important sense of first, of the cardinals. Prudence is necessary for the proper development of the other cardinal virtues and other moral virtues since it is by prudence that the agent is able to know *how* to develop the other virtues.[57] Wood gives the example of temperance: "If, for instance, temperance in eating requires that one avoid too much or too little suitably nutritious food, one must discern the truth about the type and amount of food best suited to health and overall well-being."[58] On such a model, it might not be surprising then that cognitive impairment often contributes to obesity.[59] I'm not suggesting here that all obesity is caused by gluttony; but cognitive impairments could make it more difficult for an agent to develop prudence and thus properly train their desires. It also may be that the root of an agent's obesity isn't gluttony at all given that their moral agency may be mitigated in a way that precludes the formation of either a virtue or a vice. A similar point could also be made about those virtues which have emotions as their objects. Prudence can be understood as involving the agent's excellence with respect to believing the relevant normative reasons and the excellence of weighing them properly. So cognitive disabilities in some cases may impair the agent's abilities to weigh the objects of desires or emotions in the way, or with the sensitivity, that the formation of moral virtues requires.

On Wood's view, prudence doesn't deliberate about the end to be achieved by one's action. It deliberates insteasd about "the best means of achieving some end before reaching judgments and issuing its specific commands."[60] It is via prudence that the agent recognizes and responds to the various factors relevant to the moral virtue in question and helps the agent figure out how to achieve that virtue. This is

[56] Ibid., 37.

[57] While Wood puts this point explicitly terms of prudence's role in the development and deployment of the other cardinal virtues, the same point would also hold regarding other moral virtues, and perhaps other intellectual virtues as well.

[58] Ibid., 38. Similarly, Wood writes that "Prudence is essential for moral virtue because it provides the ineliminable sound judgment required to practice any of the virtues in our particular moral circumstances" (ibid., 38).

[59] Doody and Doody 2012 document a 59% higher rate of obesity among individuals with intellectual disabilities as compared with the general population.

[60] Wood 2014, 44f.

what Wood refers to as prudence's need to respond to the "circumstantial."[61] To stick with the example of temperance, "prudence takes stock of several factors—age, weight, activity level, other medical and physical conditions—and calculates the path of action between excess and deficiency in the particular case."[62] It shouldn't be hard, then, to see how a cognitive impairment which makes prudence more difficult to achieve could, by consideration of prudence's role in forming the other virtues, also make it more difficult to develop other virtues as well.

3.3.4 Particular Disabilities

In addition to those already mentioned above, there are a number of disabilities which impact an agent's emotions. Myotonic Dystrophy, for example, involves both cognitive and emotional impairments, including "moodiness, suspiciousness, dullness, apathy, excessive somnolence, [and] lack of motivation."[63] Certain mental illnesses which can also be debilitating also can impair the emotions—including depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia. According to researchers, in schizophrenia "what is normally the tacit integration of cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors is disrupted at the level of first-order experience; the implicit unity of the self breaks down, and one begins to feel alienated from one's thoughts and actions."[64] Dementia often involves deterioration of emotional control.[65]

Or consider the case of autism. A full discussion of the connections between autism and agency cannot be undertaken here, both because of space constraints and because the nature of autism is contested and changing.[66] Furthermore, the formal diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) covers a wide range of particular manifestations with a significant degree of variation.[67] While many researchers think that there are underlying biological bases for autism, presently formal diagnoses of autism are based entirely on behavioral considerations in the *DSM-V*. Given the uncertainty regarding its etiology, many scholars suspect that the present diagnostic criteria are adequate.

[61] Ibid., 45.

[62] Ibid., 42. For a discussion of temperance which dovetails nicely with Woods' approach to prudence, see Roberts 2014.

[63] Bungener et al. 1998, 353. Myotonic Dystrophy, as with many diseases, also correlates with "emotional disturbances—in particular emotional defect" (ibid., 355).

[64] Mundale and Gallagher 2009, 515.

[65] Swinton 2012, 38.

[66] For some of these difficulties, see Cushing 2008; Sample 2008; Stubblefield 2008; Anderson and Cushing 2013. Cushing suggests that autism might involve a Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" rather than an essential nature (Cushing 2008, 22). One reason for the disagreements about the nature of autism is the inseparability of purported claims about its nature from normative issues; see Anderson and Cushing 2013, 10.

[67] Even the language of spectrum is notably problematic: "To the mind of a physicist or logician... spectra are linear and autism is not. Autism is a many-dimensional manifold of abilities and limitations" (Hacking 2010, 265). See also McGeer 2010, 279ff.

Despite the difficulties with defining or specifying the exact nature of autism, the current scientific understanding of autism includes a number of aspects that could impact emotions. These include impairments of emotional connectedness (which includes recognizing and responding to emotional states in others);[68] emotional dysregulation;[69] difficulties in emotional communication, recognition, or expression;[70] and magnified emotional memory, which can in turn motivate behaviors that are often hard to understand for others.[71]

Some researchers have also suggested that deficits in executive function may be central to autism.[72] If this is correct, then it further reinforces the idea that various impacts of disabilities on agency may be intersectional. My use of the term "intersectionality" comes from feminist theory,[73] though I'm putting it to a slightly different use. Ann Garry describes intersectionality as "a framework or strategy for thinking about issues . . . to consider their mutual construction or at least their intermeshing (if these are different)."[74] Just as a number of dimensions of social oppression can intersect so the total oppression one experiences is greater than the sum of the individual oppressions, I want to suggest that various disabilities can intersect so that the total impact on agency is greater than the sum of the individual disabilities. In both contexts, intersectionality should be thought of as multiplicative rather than merely additive. In a parallel way to how various kinds of oppression or privilege may intersect to amplify their individual magnitudes, I've argued elsewhere that disabilities can also intersect in their impact on executive function's role in agency.[75]

3.4 Application

3.4.1 Degrees of Agency

The ways that disabilities can affect agency gives us further reason to think that responsible agency (including the development of virtue) should be understood as

[68] Hobson 2005; 2010.

[69] Stimming behaviors are likely attempts to regulate emotions; see Kim 2015; Prizant 2015. Not all researchers think that autism involves emotional dysregulation, however. See, for instance, Williamson and Allman 2011.

[70] Williamson and Allman 2011; Prizant 2015.

[71] As Prizant describes it, "When a child has a sudden meltdown or goes into an extreme panic with no warning or apparent cause, one reason might be unrecognized negative emotional memories" (Prizant 2015, 96). In this regard, autism has similarities with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); see ibid., 101ff.

[72] See Ozonoff et al. 1991; Ozonoff et al. 1994.

[73] Carastathis 2014.

[74] Garry 2012, 517.

[75] For more on the intersectional nature of disability with respect to agency, see Timpe 2016. Further discussion of the intersectionality of autism in particular can be found in Prizant 2015.

coming in degrees.[76] The idea that responsible agency should be understood as a degreed concept has recently gathered support.[77] Discussions of the degrees of agency typically come up in discussions of children, with a focus on responsible agency. Consider, for instance, this representative passage from Al Mele:

> Normal parents eventually come to view their children as having some degree of moral responsibility for what they do. The word degree is important here. Normal four-year-olds are not as well equipped for impulse control as normal eight-year-olds, and they have less developed capacity for anticipating and understanding the effects of their actions.... Moral responsibility is very commonly and very plausibly regarded as a matter of degree. If young children and adults are morally responsible for some of what they do, it is plausible... that young children are not as nearly *as responsible* for any of their deeds as some adults are for some of their adult deeds.[78]

Jeanette Kennett also endorses a degreed concept of agency, with a particular focus on self-control:

> Moral responsibility comes in degrees. The ordinary view implicitly recognizes both degrees of difficulty in the exercise of self-control (and indeed of judgement), and a distinction between those who are capable of synchronic self-control and those who must instead rely on diachronic techniques of control. Factors which impinge on the ease with which the capacity for self-control can be exercised mitigate responsibility. Some of those are obstacles to good judgement as well: for example, tiredness, emotional pressures, and lack of information.[79]

Though she doesn't make specific reference to children, contemporary developmental psychology would connect typical child development to an increase in self-control.[80]

Manuel Vargas suggests that cognitive impairments are one kind of paradigmatic case of less-than-full responsibility.[81] An agent can be cognitively impaired either in their ability to recognize the relevant moral considerations or in terms of their ability to be properly motivated by those reasons that they do recognize. "The

[76] This section draws on Timpe 2016 with minor modifications.

[77] For three recent papers examining and defending the claim that responsible agency does come in degrees, see Coates and Swenson 2013; Nelkin 2014; Vargas, n.d. For accounts which reject degrees of responsibility, see Fischer 2006, 233; Warmke, n.d. On Fischer's view, responsibility is a threshold concept, and it is blameworthiness and praiseworthiness that come in degrees. Much of what I say here could be modified to fit Fischer's framework by talking about degrees of blameworthiness or praiseworthiness. However, I think there's a closer affinity to the developmental nature of virtue and degrees of responsibility, not just blameworthiness and praiseworthiness.

[78] Mele 2008, 271–4, emphasis added.

[79] Kennett 2001, 182.

[80] For some relevant empirical work, see Baird and Fugelsang 2004; Blakemore and Robbins 2012.

[81] Vargas, n.d.

mitigating element in impairment cases is not the absence of the relevant faculty, but something like the diminution of the involved capacity, or perhaps, the difficulty in exercising the relevant capacity or power."[82] Though Vargas doesn't examine disability in any detail, it should be easy to see how various disabilities—such as cognitive disabilities—could also impair responsible agency. Some individuals are able to consider a wider range of moral considerations than are others, and some individuals are more sensitive to the relevance of moral considerations than are others. It is commonly held that responsible agency involves the ability to detect and weight reasons.[83] So if morally responsible agency depends on certain cognitive capacities or emotional sensitivities, and disabilities can impair those capacities and sensitivities—either by making it harder to recognize the reasons that the agent ought to be considering or by making them unable to compare or weigh those reasons properly—then another way that cognitive and developmental disabilities could impact responsible agency is by lessening the degree of responsibility, even if it doesn't entirely undermine it. To bring this point into direct engagement with accounts of the virtues in traditional Christian theology, it's possible that there are disabilities that would make it harder for the individual to form certain virtues.

Consider, for instance the virtue of proper anger.[84] That is, suppose that there's a virtue that involves the disposition to feel anger toward a proper object and with a proper mode of expression—where the anger is appropriate, proportional to the injustice at which it aims, and is in line with human flourishing. Having a proper construal of the situation will require certain cognitive tasks for the individual, tasks that may be made more difficult or less likely by a disability. Furthermore, having the relevant virtue will require that the agent can differentiate the emotion of anger from other emotions that may have nearby phenomenological qualities such as spite or resentment. This will be made more difficult by either alexithymia or flattened affect. This doesn't undermine the more common point made by many virtue ethicists that disproportionate anger can also undermine our ability to differentiate our feelings or reason carefully. Afterall, we can err in a number of ways. Finally, having the proper disposition toward the emotion of anger still might require strength of will and self-control to express virtuous actions, and hold in check vicious actions, that arise out of that emotion. And here considerations of executive function could, likewise, make it more difficult for a disabled individual to be virtuous with respect to their anger. It may be that they're an instance of 'less-than-full' moral agency, through no fault

[82] Ibid., 19. [83] See, among others, Vargas 2010; Timpe 2014, 87–8; Timpe 2017.

[84] See Rebecca DeYoung's wonderful "What Are You Guarding? Virtuous Anger and Lifelong Practice" (Chapter 2 in this volume) for an insightful discussion. I specifically pick a moral rather than a theological virtue because I think it's problematic to assume that disabilities can prevent the agent in question from having infused virtues.

of their own, because of the ways that a disability affects aspects of their agency as spelled out above.

3.4.2 A Parallel: Psychopathy

The ways that emotional disabilities can impair agency and contribute to a degreed conception of agency can also be seen by considering a parallel. The parallel I have in mind is the impact of psychopathy on moral agency.[85] Recently, Benjamin Kozuch and Michael McKenna, together, and Ishtiyaque Haji have argued that certain kinds of mental illness could impact agency in a way similar to my claims about disabilities.

Consider first the work of Kozuch and McKenna, who also think that agency is best thought of as degreed.[86] They argue that while it is commonly thought that mental illness often functions as a moral excuse, "the relation between mental illness and moral excuse is simply far more delicate than it is sometimes taken to be."[87] Rather than undermining morally responsibly agency, they argue that in many cases—even when a mental illness plays a nontrivial causal role in an agent's actions—mental illness instead diminishes the degree of responsible agency. Some mental illnesses thus might make it harder for an individual to flourish fully in their relationships both with others and with God.[88] While I find much to agree with in their treatment of mental illness, I find their presentation of disability to manifest some of the oversimplifications that they argue against regarding mental illness. See, for instance, their discussion of Lenny from Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.[89] Just as they claim that the focus on dramatic cases of mental illness skew the understanding of more mundane cases,[90] so, too, do I with many discussions of disabled agency.[91]

A similar argument is made, with a focus on psychopathy in particular, in work by Ish Haji. Haji thinks that an examination of psychopathy, specifically how psychopathy affects emotions and ethical perception, speaks in favor of diminished moral responsibility. The impact, Haji thinks, is indirect: "Attending carefully to one of the leading marks of psychopathy—emotional depravity—I argue that emotional insensitivity has a decided influence on ethical perception. Ethical perception, in turn, has a pronounced impact on what we are morally responsible

[85] I am *not* claiming that having a disability is equivalent to having psychopathy in all respects. In fact, much harm could be done by such an equivalence. The point here is that there is a parallel between an argument a number of scholars have given regarding psychopathy and the argument I'm trying to make in the present chapter.

[86] They use the language of "gradualistic" agency. This paragraph is adapted, with modification, from Timpe 2016.

[87] Kozuch and McKenna 2015, 89.

[88] See Greene-McCreight 2005 for a relevant discussion.

[89] Kozuch and McKenna 2015, 92

[90] Ibid., 103.

[91] See Timpe 2016.

for, our decisions, choices, intentional omissions, and over actions, for instance."[92] By ethical perception, Haji means the ability to recognize, with proper moral training, that a certain action is morally right or wrong in a way that doesn't require the agent to engage a moral syllogism. Haji avoids giving a philosophical analysis of ethical perception, but cites with approval Gilbert Harman's example of coming across people lighting a cat on fire: "you do not need to *conclude* that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can *see* that it is wrong."[93] Haji characterizes ethical perception in a broadly Aristotelian way such that an agent's character shapes how, the degree to which, and whether they recognize the morally salient features of a situation.[94] By engaging in certain practices (either intentionally or unintentionally, an agent can train their moral perceptions.[95] This kind of training however, is only partly under the agent's control and depends, in part, upon the agent's moral community. These Aristotelian considerations lead Haji to conclude that "ethical perception is not an all or nothing affair."[96]

But habituation isn't the only factor affecting moral agency. Other factors can influence the sensitivity of an agent's ethical perception. The factor that he focuses on regarding psychopaths is emotional impairment.[97] Drawing on previous literature, Haji takes there to be strong evidence that psychopathy often causes a person to experience deficits in fear and empathy. (Even if this is wrong empirically, I can still make use of the general argumentative structure.) These emotional deficits then impact the agent's moral reasoning and agency. Consider, as an example of this kind of claim, the following from Walter Glannon, whom Haji cites with approval:

> So it is at the stage of reasons in the pathway leading to action that emotions play a causal role in this action. Because psychopaths lack empathy, concern for others does not figure in their reasons for action, which is why they are not motivated to act on moral reasons. Moreover, the psychopath's deficiency in emotions like fear, anxiety, or general concern about the future explain why he is equally bad at prudential reasoning.[98]

Haji mentions a number of ways that psychopathy can impact agency: (i) by impacting the psychopath's ability to recognize moral reasons;[99] (ii) by impacting the motivational force on the agent that moral reasons, even if recognized, exert;[100] and (iii) by making certain alternatives or the range of options less salient

[92] Haji 2010, 136. [93] Harman 1977, 4. For more on moral perception, see Starkey 2006.
[94] Haji 2010, 138. See also Sherman 1989, 29.
[95] I discuss the ability to shape the motivational reasons one has for acting, and one's responsiveness to those reasons, in Timpe 2017.
[96] Haji 2010, 139. [97] Ibid. [98] Glannon 1997, 268. [99] Haji 2010, 141.
[100] Ibid., 143, 145. See also my discussion of Vargas's squirrel example from Vargas 2013, chapter 2 in Timpe 2017.

to the agent.[101] As a result of these reasons, Haji thinks that "these emotional deficits [in psychopathy] have ramifications for moral responsibility."[102]

It is not my intention here to evaluate Haji's claims regarding psychopathy.[103] Rather, *if* he is correct that the above three reasons should lead us to think that psychopaths have diminished moral agency as a result of their impairments, then the same reasons also support the claim that other disabilities that impair an agent's emotions could also diminish moral agency.[104]

3.4.3 Flourishing

This degreed conception of agency aligns with the ways in which the virtues are themselves thought of as degreed. And given that human agency is involved in developing the moral virtues, that disabilities that can decrease aspects of human agency would also make it harder to form certain virtues shouldn't be surprising. And this point isn't just about the social environment of which the individual is a part—though of course, as a matter of contingent fact many disabled people live in communities that are structured in a way that doesn't serve their flourishing. But even if we could somehow eliminate all those social pressures, ableist prejudices, and exclusionary practices the currently undermine the flourishing of disabled individuals, it looks like some disabilities are such that they make those who have them have a harder time developing some of the moral virtues. And to the degree that the moral virtues, like virtues in general, are necessary for human flourishing, this conclusion will mean that some disabilities can make it harder for individuals to flourish by making it harder for the agent to realize one of the constituent elements of flourishing.

Great care needs to be taken at this point, however, lest it appear that the above discussion seems to reinforce a view of disability that I elsewhere have argued is false. The conclusion—namely that there are some disabilities that affect the emotions in such a way as to make it harder to be virtuous and thus to flourish—isn't a claim about the intrinsic relationship between disability and well-being in general. Given that it is a much more restricted claim, it falls short of what Stephen Campbell and Joe Stramondo, following Ron Amundson, call "the Standard View," which they describe as "the common belief that disability

[101] Haji 2010, 143–4. [102] Ibid., 143.

[103] Though it is my understanding that there is presently strong evidence to think that psychopaths have impairments with regard to the affection of empathy.

[104] Even if my point here—that both psychopathy and certain disabilities can diminish moral agency—is true, it does not follow that the proper social response to both groups is the same. While it may be necessary to institutionalize psychopaths for the safety of others, we need not and ought not think that the same is true of disabled individuals. History shows that institutionalization of disabled individuals is morally fraught. I thank Rebecca DeYoung for encouraging me to flag this point.

tends to have a negative impact on one's well-being."[105] Campbell and Stramondo distinguish four different versions, or what they call "interpretations," of the Common View. Each of these versions is intended to be a normative or evaluative, rather than merely descriptive claim, about the impact of disability on our well-being. These four interpretations are:

(1) Having a disability tends to be *intrinsically bad* for a person.
(2) Having a disability tends to be *instrumentally bad* for a person.
(3) Having a disability tends to be *comparatively bad* for a person.
(4) Having a disability tends to be *overridingly bad* for a person.[106]

Notice that I've made no claim about comparative flourishing, since knowing how to evaluate it would require more knowledge about all the goods and bads involved with disability than I think I am in an epistemic position to have.[107] And I've made no claim about the even stronger claim about what is *overridingly bad* for individuals with disabilities. As Elizabeth Barnes has shown in her work on mere-difference views of disability, it is possible that something that is neutral *simpliciter* can still be globally bad for the individual.[108] Furthermore, as already indicated, I'm also not interested here in the claim of instrumental badness. Of these four interpretations of the Standard View, the one my conclusion is more likely to support would be (1), the claim about intrinsic badness. But (1) is a claim about what "tends" to be the case for people with disabilities, where the use of disability here is presumably intended to range over all disabilities. And I've not made a claim about what *tends* to be the case or is so *in the majority* of cases of disabilities, and certainly am not claiming anything about *all* disabilities. I don't think we have enough relevant empirical information at hand to make a statistical claim. And elsewhere I've argued that we can't generalize about disability as a whole in a way that captures all cases of disabilities in some unified treatment.[109] All that I've claimed here is that some disabilities can hamper flourishing because of how they undermine virtue formation, and that claim is consistent with the falsity of (1). In fact, insofar as I've argued elsewhere that disability *per se* does not get in the way of perfect union with God and, through God, with others, I can't think that interpretation (1) of the Standard View is correct.[110]

Second, is it compossible with what I've argued above that there are some disabilities that would make it easier (or more likely) for those individuals who have them to develop other virtues. Virtues such as patience, hospitality, or what MacIntyre calls "the virtues of acknowledged dependence" are plausibly such

[105] Amundson 2005, 103; Campbell and Stramondo 2017, 151.
[106] Campbell and Stramondo 2017, 154.
[107] One specific reason we don't have the relevant knowledge is what Campbell and Stramondo call "counterfactual opacity"; see Campbell and Stramondo 2017, 161.
[108] Barnes 2016, 80. [109] Timpe forthcoming. [110] See Timpe 2019b; 2020.

examples. Disability theologian Shane Clifton has argued that there are, in fact, some disabilities that may make it easier for some individuals to develop particular virtues.[111]

Furthermore, as I've argued elsewhere, human agency in general is not simply a function of intrinsic properties of the agent, but instead depends on the moral ecology that the agent in is.[112] Philosophical work on agency has too often failed to note the parallels between cases involving disabilities and other cases. By paying attention to how we structure the social environment and providing scaffolding around people with disabilities, we can mitigate some of the agential impact of those disabilities, helping the individuals in question flourish better. The social nature of this scaffolding, of course, shouldn't surprise us, especially given the parallels between cases of "typical" and disabled human agency. "The flourishing of every person, whether disabled or not, is dependent on others."[113]

Such a conclusion doesn't arise, however, just from Aristotelian-inspired claims about virtue formation. It's also deeply embedded in the Christian theological vision. Theologians such as Shane Clifton, Stanley Hauerwas, Charles Pinches, and Alasdair MacIntyre remind us that all human flourishing in the Christian tradition "occurs in the context of our interdependency"[114]—both on others and ultimately upon God. For those of us that share this theological vision, it becomes incumbent on us to work to provide the kind of scaffolding in question for the good of our fellow humans.[115] If all this is right, as I think it is, then those in the Church—those seeking to be part of the breaking-in of God's kingdom into the present in hopeful anticipation of its full consummation in the future—have particular reason to seek to provide communal scaffolding to support the flourishing of all. I've discussed what this might look like elsewhere.[116] At the very least, it will require us to think more communally; to take a more intentional and flexible approach to moral formation, since what is needed for habituation might differ among individuals; and rethink how we approach time.[117]

3.5 Conclusion

I have argued above that certain disabilities which impact an agent's emotions may undermine (even if not fully eradicate) moral agency, and make it harder for an individual

[111] See Clifton 2018, chapter 6 (generosity) and chapter 9 (humility); see also Yong 2007, 289.
[112] See Timpe 2019a. [113] Clifton 2018, 132.
[114] Ibid., 141; see also Hauerwas and Pinches 1997; MacIntyre 1999.
[115] For discussion of what that scaffolding might look like, see Timpe 2019a.
[116] See Timpe 2018. [117] In this context, see also Swinton 2018.

to flourish. Virtue theory often holds that aspects of an individual's flourishing depend on factors outside of their direct control (e.g., being born into a vicious community, illness, or civil war), and emotional disability can be seen as another way that this is the case.[118]

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