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VIRTUOUS FRIENDS: MORALITY AND QUAKER IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Recent work in moral philosophy and psychology has made deep connections between questions of morality and identity, suggesting that orientation to a moral framework, through community practices and discourses, contributes to the individual sense of self. I argue that contemporary Liberal Quakers in Britain thus use their moral judgments among other things to reinforce their social identity as Quakers, emphasising a shared approach to ethical framework and sources of authority over the substantive content of the judgments. The favoured ethical framework of Liberal British Quakers appears to be a form of virtue ethics, and I explore the possibility that links between virtue ethics on the one hand and the concepts of testimony and discernment on the other, enable the use of a virtue ethics approach to reinforce a sense of Quaker identity.

KEYWORDS

Quaker; Religious Society of Friends; ethics; deontology; virtue ethics; discourse ethics

Ethics must deal with being good as well as producing good
—May 1994: 75.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings evolved as group animals and, given the chance, most people still opt to live in collectives with others. An important part of what makes life in groups possible are the rules about how we ought to behave towards those others, rules that we call morality.[1] Although there is an assumption in modernist ethics that 'moral behaviour' is about the acts of individuals, the fact that people rarely live in isolation means moral behaviour is necessarily about individuals interacting in societies. Whatever function they serve for the individual, ethical statements are therefore also statements about the groups in which we live.[2] Descriptive ethics give more direct accounts, but even prescriptive ethics indirectly say a great deal about a society by presenting the kind of societal ideals, priorities and values it encourages, who the prescriptions are intended to cover, and who has the authority to make them.

Recent work in moral philosophy and psychology has foregrounded the idea that questions of morality are inescapably also questions about *identities*. Charles Taylor and other philosophers argue that to understand oneself *as* a self entails alignment to the moral framework of one's community (Taylor 1989). These theorists are not making the obvious statement that moral choices contribute to a person's *moral* identity, but that orientation to a moral framework, provided through the practices and discourses of the community, is a major part of knowing *in general* who we are. These scholars are saying that the stance we adopt to beliefs about right forms of living not only shapes our personal moral worlds, but makes statements, to ourselves as much as to others, about the nature of the various social groupings to which we belong. The moral frameworks to which we align ourselves are not clearly articulated codes or guidelines—these come later, when moral beliefs are justified or defended. Rather, they are the backgrounds of belief generated by the practices of the community. These practices constitute socially embodied, largely unspoken statements about what constitutes a good life for the community and its members. They describe basic values, and prescribe modes of living that reflect those values adequately in the eyes of the community. They also define procedures for making judgments in situations of difficulty—for example, they indicate how to identify the sources of moral authority. For the most part we are not conscious of the background of rules and values with which we work, especially when all the intersecting groups to which we belong are compatible. But because many people in contemporary society participate in a large number of interlocking and nested groups, and these groups will often have their own, subtly distinct pictures of the good life, the contribution of morality to identity becomes complicated. Conscious negotiation may be necessary when what is taken for granted is suddenly exposed as open to question, for example if a new social situation makes the differences between groups more apparent; or if the mores of one group change faster than another; or if someone joins a new group that has radically different moral expectations.

In this article I argue that contemporary Liberal Quakers in Britain use moral judgment to reinforce their social identity as Quakers. They do this through the ethical framework and the sources of authority they use, more than the substantive content of those judgments. Based on empirical observation of Friends' moral evaluations, I have previously suggested that Liberal Quakers today use a 'collage' approach, with the tradition known as virtue ethics having an especially prominent (but not exclusive) place (Scully 2002). Here I explore further links between virtue ethics and key features of Quaker faith and practice that make the virtue approach so appealing to Friends.

MORAL EVALUATION IN BRITAIN YEARLY MEETING

Between 1995 and 1997 I undertook a project within Britain Yearly Meeting, as a Quaker Fellow funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, focusing on the ethical issues raised by advances in gene technology. Through this I was also able to make systematic observations of British Quakers' processes of ethical evaluation: how they identify situations of moral difficulty, describe and structure them, the precedents

and values that inform their deliberations, and so on. Although the project was formally about genetic ethical dilemmas, the key observations seem applicable to ethical issues more broadly, as indicated by Chambers (2008).

A fuller account of the results is available elsewhere (Scully 2002). Two of the central conclusions were unexpected, at least to me. The first was to do with the *method of evaluation* that Friends used. Religious groups generally have a deontological bias to their ethics: they tend to organise their thinking around principles whose moral authority derives from their theological basis. Ethical commandments are accepted by the group because they are the word of God, for example. In the Christian tradition the Ten Commandments and the commandment of Jesus are often taken as the primary set of ethical principles; and orders like 'Thou shalt not kill', or 'you must love your neighbour as yourself' become moral imperatives because of their perceived status as articulations of what God wants. I had anticipated that as a religious group, Quakers' moral evaluations would be consistently deontological. This turned out to be wrong. Friends did show one distinctive deontological trait (and I will return to that later), but other, non-deontological approaches were equally or more popular.

By far the most consistent feature was that when faced with a moral problem, the study participants constructed what I call a *moral collage*. By collage I mean that they did not use the theoretically consistent, logically coherent form of argumentation that professional philosophers are obliged to generate. Their disinclination to do so might have been predicted by their lack of philosophical training. However, from the comments that participants made it was also clear that, on the whole, whether they *could* do it or not was beside the point, because constructing a consistent and coherent argument was not their real aim. What mattered was not theoretical consistency nor the construction of what philosophers are fond of calling a 'killer argument', but whether participants could adequately articulate their interpretation of the morally difficult situation at each stage in the process of understanding it and reaching a conclusion about the best way forward. Fidelity to what was discerned was more important than consistency to an analytic framework. From a philosophical point of view, using more than one school of argument at a time shows incoherence. From the users' point of view, however, it could equally well suggest that real problems are not in fact best tackled by sticking to any one style of argument, that doing so might be inadequate to provide workable solutions, and moreover that pushing one theoretical approach to its limits is guaranteed (as philosophers know only too well) to reveal its weaknesses.

Hence Friends were willing to pick up and put down analytic methods as 'seemed right'. In the art of collage, diverse media are combined to give an expressive whole that makes sense in its entirety, even though made up of elements that would not normally be found together. By analogy, Friends selected elements from the ethical traditions available to them that seemed most appropriate at any given point. Coherence was maintained not by sticking strictly to the parameters of a theory, but by using concepts and symbols that unite Friends' moral understanding with elements from their religious lives. Among these, as I shall discuss later, are concepts associated with the testimonies.

Making a 'moral collage' therefore does not imply that participants invent ethical elements wholesale. Just as in a real collage it is possible to identify the square of purple velvet or the end of cornflake packet, moral collages also contain patterns of argumentation that could be mapped onto standard ethical theories. It was possible to identify statements that fit comfortably within a consequentialist argument, a casuist formulation, or a deontological justification, for example. Some participants may have been drawing on an academic knowledge of utilitarianism or of Kant, but in fact the arrow of cause and effect is likely to point in the opposite direction. That is, the fragmentary resemblances reflect the origins of all ethical models and theories: however technically sophisticated, they originate in and are elaborated from features of the everyday approaches people bring to their real-life moral quandaries.

Since carrying out this project, other research (Scully *et al.* 2006 a, b; Banks *et al.* 2006) suggest that the use of moral collage is in fact characteristic of secular lay moral discourse. The way in which academic moral philosophers go about ethical analysis is not how most people do so. In fact an increasing amount of evidence from moral psychology and cognitive science suggests that people tend to form moral intuitions rather rapidly, which they then back up with compelling (to them) arguments (see, e.g., Haidt 2001). The moral collage would then be used to articulate and refine, and must be congruent with, these intuitions.

Use of something like moral collage is so widespread it cannot be considered distinctive of Quakers. Nor can it be assigned to one or other groups within liberal-Liberal Quakerism. Both Pilgrim's Inclusivists and Syncretists (Pilgrim 2008) would, I think, use the collage approach. (Exclusivists might not, for the same reason that non-secular lay discourse can deviate from the moral collage model: the preferred use of strongly deontological, scripturally based argument.) What is particular to Liberal Quakers, and might vary between subgroups of Liberal Quakers, is the pattern of which ethical elements are prioritised and which left aside. Although the moral evaluations of these Quaker participants were, as one might say, *collaginous*, not all ethical theories or analytic frameworks were equally popular, just as collage makers might not find themselves drawn towards cardboard, preferring the purple velvet. Although consequentialist reasoning was common, for example, utilitarian thinking was less so, and contractarian approaches were notably absent. By contrast, one approach turned up repeatedly: a mode of thinking that relied on a model of the person who *could do no other* than act in accordance with the good. The closest parallel to this in standard ethical theory is virtue ethics.

VIRTUE ETHICS

Virtue ethics is one of the three main strands of contemporary ethics, along with Kantian deontology and consequentialist approaches. For the sake of simplicity, I am limiting my comparison of virtue ethics with these two theoretical frameworks, a focus that necessarily means ignoring significant but less high-profile ethical theories, including communitarian ethics, feminist ethics, discourse ethics, and the principlism favoured by medical and bioethics.

Originating in Greek moral and civic philosophy, and known especially from the surviving writings of Aristotle, versions of virtue theory dominated Western morality[3] until being effectively displaced by the post-Enlightenment philosophies of Mill and Bentham on one side of the channel, and of Kant and his successors on the other. Since the late 1950s, however, virtue ethics has undergone a renaissance in academic philosophy (Hursthouse 1999; Crisp and Slote 1997). To a large extent this reflects dissatisfaction with the inability of the other frameworks to answer the most pressing moral questions of modernity, or to give a satisfactory description of moral personhood or the ethical life.

All forms of virtue ethics prioritise moral character over moral behaviour. This does not mean that virtue ethicists think that behaviour is irrelevant, or that a bad act becomes good if done by a good person. But virtue ethics does hold that the right act is not found by following a defined rule or algorithm—the utilitarian calculus, for example—but by identifying what the act of the virtuous person in that situation would be. This contrasts with the other major theories which prioritise evaluating the *act* itself. The precise criteria for evaluation of an act depend on the theory concerned: where Kantian ethics would ask whether it accords with the categorical imperative, utilitarianism looks for the maximisation of happiness (or, strictly speaking, of utility. Utilitarianism continues to argue about exactly what utility is, and what relation it bears to different understandings of happiness). Virtue ethics, on the other hand, tries first to give an account of the features, traditionally called virtues or excellences, that would be expected of a person leading a morally admirable life. Such a person, according to the theory, would be able to identify and carry out the ethically correct act in situations of moral difficulty. It is important to the plausibility of the theory that virtues are understood as more than desirable quirks making a person more likely to be, say, honest or generous. Virtues are better imagined as enduring, mutually reinforcing dispositions, similar in many ways to the dispositions of the Bourdieusian habitus discussed by Collins (2008: 48-52). Moreover they are not exercised as isolated characteristics, but result from mobilising multiple interlocking attitudes, understandings, and expectations.

Virtue ethics' focus on agent as opposed to act does not mean that other moral theories ignore the prospect of the good person disposed to do what ought to be done. Any agent's readiness to commit herself to obeying a moral duty or to an ethical principle, such as maximisation of happiness, must indicate something about that agent's inward nature. Furthermore, even diehard deontological and utilitarian theorists will acknowledge that rules or principles cannot be applied without exercising a degree of ethical sensitivity informed by experience. But as May notes, this perspective still subordinates being to doing, and 'fails sufficiently to deal with a range of moral life that does not conveniently organise itself into deeds we can *perform*, issues about which we can make *decisions* or problems which we can *solve*' (May 1994: 78). This is the central criticism levied at act-centred ethical theories.

Giving an account of the enduring dispositions of a good person is only one part of virtue ethics. The second pillar of virtue theory is a person's ability to implement the virtues through making the right decisions. This is described in the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, the art of knowing what to do, and when

and how to do it, and is the key to understanding how virtues are put into operation in real life. A virtue is a disposition, but not a mindless reflex response to a stimulus. Although the basic disposition to act in a particular way has prereflexive, emotional roots, it needs to be consciously exercised through the reason of the agent. To a moral psychologist, the idea of phronesis includes many of the features associated with normative moral competence, including the ability to grasp the relevant features of a situation, identify priorities, and have a realistic idea of whether and how to intervene and what the consequences are likely to be. The combination of character trait and ability to make correct choices means that, while a virtuous person can be relied upon to be truthful (for example), she can also perceive salient differences between situations in which honesty is called for, and will know how to respond to them most appropriately. Phronesis, moreover, is acquired over time, as dispositions are laid down through the choices made, and then exercised in making further choices based on a gradually accumulating grasp of the values at stake.

A well-recognised practical problem of virtue ethics is that they are generally less helpful than rival frameworks when deciding between conflicting options. Acting in accordance with two different virtues (generosity vs. justice, for example, or honesty vs. compassion) may lead to opposing conclusions about the right course of action. In such cases, which one should take priority? Both utilitarianism and deontological approaches may offer clearer resolutions here. On the other hand, as Stohr puts it, 'virtue ethicists are not rushing to defend the idea that virtue ethics can supply a complete decision procedure' (Stohr 2006: 25). For a virtue ethicist, phronesis may manifest itself in knowing when to draw on other procedural or substantive resources, to resolve issues of priority between virtues.

Virtue ethics are also distinguished by the rich background picture of the good life they offer. Other ethical theories necessarily also contain normative ideas of how people ought to live in order to live well, but their focus on acts rather than agents means that the conceptualisation of 'living well' is secondary and sketchy. Virtue ethics distinctively prioritises the account of the morally excellent life, as the pre-requisite for morally excellent action. However, there is more than one contemporary version of virtue ethics and while they all agree that the virtues are constitutive of the good life, they disagree on the reason(s) why. For some, virtues are the traits that enable a person to *respond* optimally to the moral demands of life. Ethical naturalists consider that to live virtuously is to live a life that, for biological or other non-moral reasons, is fitting for a human being (Stohr 2006: 24). Others, taking the concept of *eudaimonia*[4] as the way of life that is morally good for people, say that the virtues are those traits the exercise of which enables a person to flourish, not just as a human being but in the way that a *eudaimon* life requires.

VIRTUE ETHICS AND QUAKERS

There are straightforward reasons why deontological or utilitarian approaches may not hold much appeal for Liberal Friends. A central one is Quaker belief about the source of moral authority, which is connected to the rejection of written creeds.

Quakerism gives primary authority to personal experience—of life in general, and more specifically to personal experience of the Light. This authority, common to all branches of Quakerism, is most explicit and defended most strongly in Liberal Quakerism. Deontological ethics, by contrast, is effectively creedal. It emphasises the obligation to sign up to a rule, whether religious or other, and, in general, Liberal Quakerdom resists appeals to the status of a text or figure over the authority given to individual conviction. Hence in the making of British Friends' moral collage in the study described earlier, the driving force behind the construction of the collage was the need to articulate with integrity each individual's *own understanding* of the situation, not whether that understanding was in conformity with scripture or even with Quaker precedent. Turning next to utilitarianism, it may be that what has been described as the 'utilitarian calculus', the maximisation of benefit for the greatest number of people, could never hope to be popular in a group that has rejected voting as a decision-making tool. The value Quakers place on social justice is also likely to sit uneasily with utilitarianism's inevitable tendency, as a quantitative system of sorts, to disadvantage minorities.

I want to suggest, however, that there are more structural reasons why British Friends favour a form of virtue ethics. There are features of virtue ethics which parallel beliefs and practices of the Religious Society of Friends in such a way that not only are they intrinsically appealing to Friends; they also reinforce the identity of the Society of Friends as a social group. These reasons are therefore more sociological than they are to do with tenets of Quaker belief. I outline some of these below. (For the purposes of this analysis I am not going to explore further how Quaker theology, or the lack of it, has itself determined how the Society is structured and functions.)

The Absolute Perhaps

Several authors acknowledge the cluster of ideas present in contemporary liberal-Liberal Quakerism indicative of a Quaker epistemology of the 'absolute perhaps' (Dandelion 2008): truth is partial, revelation is contextual and limited, spiritual life is a journey, the spiritual path involves seeking rather than finding. Quaker epistemology and Quaker ethics are deeply historical, contextual, and nonidealistic. By contrast, deontological frameworks are in principle none of these; and although utilitarianism can be contextual and pragmatic, both deontological and utilitarian frameworks operate around an assumption of *epistemological closure*—the right answer can be known, by following the commandment or by undertaking the evaluation that produces an irrefutable conclusion. (I recognise of course that these are highly simplified versions of the forms of ethical analysis these frameworks offer. My point is about the response of a lay group to exactly those fragmentary versions of these approaches available in lay moral discourse.) An ethical framework based on interior character, on the other hand, presents as more contextual and emergent, necessarily contingent on the moral 'revelation' available at a particular place and time.

Linkage of Virtue Ethics to Testimony

Virtue ethics are agent-centred because they make the statement 'I am this kind of person' rather than 'I think this is the kind of principle to follow'. Moral philosophers

may dispute the idea of virtue ethics as always and entirely agent-based, and deontological or consequentialist approaches as always and entirely act-based. As I mentioned earlier, even in virtue ethics acts are not irrelevant, while act-based approaches acknowledge to a limited extent the actor's motivations. Nevertheless, it is broadly true that virtue ethics distinctively prioritise what it is about a *person* that leads her to choose one course of action, while the other two prioritise what it is about the *act* that leads a person to choose it. Virtue ethics therefore makes a distinctive type of connection between the inward nature of the person and her outward behaviour. The idea of an action being performed 'from virtue' entails a particular causality between the action and the agent's beliefs and desires. In virtue ethics outward acts are not simply *expressive* of the agent's interior moral nature; they are *generated* by it, and considerable attention is given to how that internal moral structure is developed.

Continuity of inner and outer life is also central to the Quaker concept of *testimony*, one of the cornerstones of living as a Quaker. As Dandelion argued (1996), religious self-identification for Quakers is in terms of behaviour more than through statements of belief. It accords with a model of religious commitment that sees the mode of life as the outward evidence of the inner orientation to God, as testimony, so that *what Friends do*[5] becomes a more convincing statement of faith than any words. In Quaker thinking, testimony relates both to the pattern of life to which Friends should adhere, and to the rationale behind that way of life. The global term (testimony) is often broken down into discrete aspects ('the testimonies') that are more easily used as guidelines in everyday life. At the start of the twenty-first century these are generally held to include the peace testimony (probably the best known outside the Society), and testimonies to justice, to simplicity, to equality, to integrity/truth, to community, and latterly what has been described as an 'emerging testimony' to the environment. Not only has the number of separate testimonies varied through the Society's history, but their sociological function has changed as well. Until around the middle of the twentieth century they served to mark the separate identity of the group *against* that of the non-Quaker world, while the testimonies that are maintained today are more concerned with structuring the Quaker role *in* the world (Dandelion 1996: 121).

A few of the testimonies as given could map directly onto a list of virtues. Honesty, simplicity, or integrity would be among these. Others might be better understood as the *enactment* of particular virtues: equality, for instance, might express the virtue of giving the same respect to all people. To view the testimonies as unproblematically equivalent either to the virtues themselves or to their enactment, however, is a major oversimplification. For one thing, not all of the traditional virtues could be extracted from the testimonies without some strained reformulation, because—unlike the virtues—the testimonies are not intended primarily as a guide to ethical living. According to *Quaker Faith and Practice* the testimonies are 'not abstract qualities, but vital principles of life', derived from the 'experience of Friends…that the Light led them into an understanding of the Christian life and the way it was to be lived' (1995: 19.33). Thus testimony is simultaneously an ethical statement (about the right way to live), an anthropological statement (about the nature of human beings), a

sociological one (about the ordering of the Society), and a theological one (about Quakers' relationship with God). Moreover the testimonies, unlike virtues, are not *themselves* the dispositions to act in good ways: rather, they are the moral principles, articulated by the Society throughout history, that guide the choices made by Friends so that, in the end, the appropriate dispositions are laid down.

Although the virtues cannot be equated straightforwardly with the testimonies, there is nevertheless a significant structural parallel. If the virtues are seen as enduring dispositions towards actions that reflect a background commitment to the *eudaimon* life, this is echoed in a view of the testimonies as setting up analogous enduring dispositions towards actions that reflect a background commitment to the Quaker ideal, the Peaceable Kingdom. The model of right living given by testimony certainly has more in common with the virtue approach than it has with those ethical theories that evaluate the outward act, more or less detached from the inner life of the agent. The right act in utilitarian and deontological theories need not say anything about the moral identity of the actor; but for virtue ethics, it is *necessarily* a reflection of the actor's moral commitments, especially if it is part of a consistent pattern of right actions.

If morality and ethics are essentially about how people behave towards each other, as I suggested earlier, then to position an individual's behaviour as equivalent to her statement of faith is to connect moral life with religious identity in an unusually direct way. Obviously, this does not mean that other denominations or faith groups exclude moral behaviour from their visions of religious life. It is hard to imagine a faith group that would not expect spiritual commitment to be evidenced outwardly in the believer's actions. But a religious identity primarily defined through belief statements such as 'accepting Jesus Christ as my lord and saviour' does not depend on particular behaviours, and hence a gap is inserted between moral life and religious commitment. This cannot be the case for a Friend claiming to be a 'good Quaker' in any sense that the Religious Society of Friends would find meaningful.

DISCERNMENT

Virtue ethics also differ from the other major theories in that *discernment*, based on experience, is an integral part. It is not enough to have a characteristic such as generosity or compassion, or a theoretical grasp of what being generous or compassionate means: you have to know how to do it. Knowing how to do it is phronesis, the wisdom acquired through experience and practice. For the other major ethical theories, discernment is not essential, although some degree of wisdom in the exercise of ethical judgment will be desirable in practice. In theory, and unlike acting from virtue, all you need is to grasp the central rule by which one is bound by obligation, or that lies behind the version of utilitarianism you prefer, in order to exercise adequate moral behaviour.

The requirement for phronesis also explains why virtue approaches use a model of a *socially embedded* moral agent. The development of the virtuous person is dependent on human interactions: the accumulation of experience in making wise judgments about problematic interpersonal situations cannot happen outside a social world in which we learn how to do so. Virtue ethics therefore place weight on ethical

formation in the family and school, through mentors, role models, and so on, in a way that neither utilitarian nor deontological theories do.

Liberal Quakers will spot an overlap here between the concept of phronesis and the Quaker understanding of spiritual discernment. In lay terms the word discernment tends to be understood rather passively, as relating to how things are perceived. In contemporary Liberal Quaker thinking, however, discernment is a skill the rudiments of which are present in each of us, but which can be actively developed in spiritual life. Moreover, in Quaker thinking discernment usually means identifying the right course of action: according to *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 'Throughout the discernment process there should be one overriding principle before the hearts and minds of all: is this individual or group right to believe this *action* or *service* has been "laid upon them" by God?' (1995: 13.06, my italics). Finally, like phronesis, discernment is tied to the model of a collectively embedded moral agent. It is not anticipated that a Friend will be able to exercise discernment without guidance from the Quaker tradition, as practised in the 'collective phronesis' of discernment during Meeting for Worship for Business and similar problem-focused gatherings (Scully 2007).

I have downplayed one essential difference between phronesis understood in the context of secular virtue ethics, and Quaker discernment. This is the *source* of the expertise. Skills of discernment and practical wisdom are both acquired through the combination of experience, practice, and internalization of the traditions of the moral community. However, Quakers (and other religious groups that use the concept) would claim that although discernment requires rigorous thought, it is not a cognitive skill. It has a spiritual source: it requires input from/access to God. Discernment for a Quaker is less about the cognitive skills of perception or assessment than about the ability to attend to 'the promptings of love and truth in our hearts' (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: 1.02).

THE VIRTUE OF CARE

In Susan Robson's discussion of internal Quaker conflict (Robson 2008) she identifies in passing several characteristics that Friends value, i.e. Quaker virtues. Among the expected virtues (honesty, quietness) this empirical observation finds that value is placed on self-control and restraint, with a corresponding dislike of vehemence and any expression of strong feeling. In the context of internal disagreement, Robson finds that 'the thread of relationship exerts more pull than the thread of right outcome or justice' (2008: 144). What makes this interesting in terms of virtue ethics here is the identification of a strong *care ethic* among Friends. The ethic of care is defined as an orientation that prioritises relationality and empathy, rather than rights and autonomy, and there is ongoing academic debate about whether care ethics is a subspecies of virtue ethics (McLaren 2001) or a broader concept that has a place in other ethical theories and approaches as well (Baier 1985; Held 2005). Without getting into that debate, it does seem that Robson has identified the existence (and drawbacks) of a bias towards care-related virtues in the ethical economy of Quakers. Although care ethics was initially associated with feminist ethics (Carol Gilligan's original work described a gendered bias towards the use of justice or care concepts in moral evaluation; see Gilligan 1982) recent work suggests that relationality is morally

prioritised in many socially marginalised groups, including women and ethnic minorities (Stack 1979; Cortese 1990; Tronto 1993). The implication is that while socially dominant groups can afford to trust in existing frameworks of justice, since their experience shows it works for them, marginalised groups must prioritise (or feel they must prioritise) mutual support of their members over the formal implementation of justice. Seeing the Religious Society of Friends apparently operating in the same way therefore raises some intriguing questions about Quakers' perception of themselves in relation to dominant social organisations.

QUAKER IDENTITY AND THE DEONTOLOGICAL TETHER

British Friends have compelling sociological, as well as theological and ethical, reasons for taking an approach to moral problems that resembles a virtue ethical theory. This does not mean that all Liberal Quakers use virtue ethics in a form that moral philosophy would endorse: moral philosophers will find my account of virtue ethics, and its use by Friends, sketchy. Nor does it mean that Friends are *only* virtue ethicists; their strategy is an eclectic one of moral collage, but with more reference made to the motivations of the good Quaker than to any other style of ethical thought.

One of the theoretical limitations of virtue ethics is that it only 'works' as an ethical system in the context of a common ideal of the good or excellent or virtuous person. Virtue theorists are divided on whether there are universal virtues that cut across all cultures or if some, at least, are culture-specific. Some virtues seem to go out of date: a common example in the literature is how meekness and servility are no longer (universally) taken as the markers of the virtuous woman. As Martha Nussbaum points out, 'Past writers on virtue, including Aristotle himself, have lacked sensitivity to the ways in which different traditions of discourse, different conceptual schemes, articulate the world' (Nussbaum 2000: 175). Like other faith groups, the Religious Society of Friends today is engaged in ongoing discussion about the shared identity, or loss of identity, of post-war British Quakers. Several observers have diagnosed the disappearance of a predominantly Christian framework of belief and its replacement by multiple, often less clearly defined positions (see Pilgrim and Vincett 2008), although this has been challenged (Mellor 2008). Dandelion (1996, 2008) has identified strategies that enable British Friends to accommodate an ongoing diversification of belief by (i) making epistemological uncertainty prescriptive: the 'absolute perhaps', and (ii) retaining a collective identity through a Quaker double-culture in which a behavioural creed conserves patterns of outward practice as inward belief diversifies.

Dandelion (1996) applied the model of double-culture to behaviours within Quaker time, e.g. the format in which Meeting for Worship is held, or the retention of archaic terminology. It may also be fruitful to look at it in a more general form, less as a separation of the domains of belief and practice and more as a means to spiritualise the performance of religious identity. To an extent all religious groups use behaviours and practices to carry their religious self-conceptualisation, since meaning is embodied, as Collins's discussion of habitus (2008: 48-52) shows. In sociological terms, this is the function of Quakerism's theology of testimony. Part of the appeal of

the virtue ethical framework, then, is that its emphasis on an inner nature generating certain acts makes it entirely congruent with the Quaker theology of testimony, and through such congruence virtue ethics consolidates Quaker identity in a way that other ethical frameworks cannot.

Within the Religious Society of Friends, a shared understanding of what being a 'good Quaker' involves is generated by a number of routes. The testimonies provide not merely the theological rationale for a way of life, but some indication of what that way of life should look like. Knowing that 'a testimony to simplicity' is part of Quaker orthodoxy indicates that the virtuous Quaker is supposed to lead a simple lifestyle, although the details of what constitutes simplicity (or equality, or peace, or any other aspect of testimony) in a given context are always up for discussion (see Chambers 2008, reprinted above, for one example of how interpretation of testimony is negotiated). Other models for the good Quaker life are provided by the written obituaries, known as 'Testimonies to the grace of God as shown in the life of' a deceased Friend. These are produced by local Meetings and sent to Friends House, the central administrative body of Britain Yearly Meeting, to be published at the time of the annual Yearly Meeting gathering. They are distinct in form and content, and convey to successive generations a clear sense of the kind of Quaker life that is admirable. In these and other ways, a felt sense of a good Quaker life is inculcated.

Common visions of a good Quaker life are generated at various locations and structural levels that differ subtly in which community they represent. The Religious Society of Friends as a whole, local and regional Meetings, the numerous specialised groups within the Society such as Quaker Action on Alcohol and Drugs (QAAD) or the Quaker Lesbian and Gay Fellowship (QLGF), even short events at places like Woodbrooke and Swarthmoor Hall,[6] are all instances of what Pilgrim calls 'heterotopia'—real or conceptual spaces that offer the conditions of possibility to be other. These are spaces the feminist theologian Sharon Welch referred to as 'communities of resistance and solidarity' (Welch 1985), and the ethicist Cheshire Calhoun as 'abnormal moral communities' (Calhoun 1989); within them heterodox opinions can be invoked and counterstories (Lindemann Nelson 2001) crafted, with the aim of articulating and presenting the meaning of virtuous identity for that particular community. It needs to be noted here, however, that 'abnormal' and 'dissident' and 'hetero-' are always terms relating to a tacit standard. While I argue that the Religious Society of Friends offers alternative moral discursive/physical/temporal/cognitive space to be 'other' to the wider society, at other times we need to recognise the groups within Quakerdom, such as Quaker Pagans (Vincett 2008), the Experiment with Light (Meads 2008), and adolescent Friends (Best 2008) that bear the same relationship of otherness to the Religious Society of Friends itself. In terms of virtue ethics, they are all engaged in the task of providing visions of eudaimonia, the excellent life that is their moral goal.

There is more work to be done here to clarify what makes visions of the good life, and certain moral collages of justification, compelling to Quakers while other visions and justifications are not. Although there is considerable potential for diversity in the understanding of what a 'good Quaker' is, some options are clearly excluded (the good Quaker arms dealer is a near impossibility). Some kind of centrifugal core of

moral value is present, and it sets the parameters for multiple interpretations of the good life to be produced. This is why at the same time as inclining towards a virtue ethical approach, British liberal-Liberal Friends also make use of one outstanding deontological 'tether', and this is George Fox's injunction that Quakers must recognise 'that of God in everyone', the phrase that some writers identify (Dandelion 1996: 289; Scully 2002: 217) as the bare minimum left which all Friends can still sign up to. Whatever its theological interpretation, it sets the normative standard demanded of Friends in their dealings with others. The good Quaker not only responds to that of God within herself but recognises and responds to it in others. Like 'love your neighbour as yourself', or Kant's categorical imperative that people be treated as belonging to the realm of ends, with all the respect and care that entails, this Quaker categorical imperative provides the minimum normative core around which the virtues of Quakers cohere. The deontological statement that I was at first unable to find in this religious group's ethics is present not as a set of commandments, but as the heart of the Religious Society of Friend's vision of how best to live, through which contemporary Quaker identity is operationalised in the individual and collective acts of virtuous Friends.

NOTES

1. The debate over whether these 'oughts' derive primarily from the *non-moral* realm of society or biology (for example, that we ought not to kill each other because doing so produces unstable societies) or whether they are primarily rooted in some kind of *ethical* statement (such as, that killing others is wrong because it fails to show proper respect for them as persons) is not one I want to enter into here.
2. The terms 'moral' and 'ethical' are variously defined. In this article I take moral to refer to patterns of how people live, ethical to the systematic reflection on it.
3. Although I refer to Western virtue ethics here, some comparative philosophers consider Chinese Confucianism to be a school of virtue ethics.
4. *Eudaimonia* is a notoriously hard concept to translate, but in Aristotelian virtue ethics it connotes a broad idea of happiness in the sense of flourishing and doing well.
5. I mean this in terms of how they behave in the world rather than 'how they go about being religious', that is, not the behavioural forms that Dandelion claims are the social glue for British Liberal Quakers, but everyday ethical and social choices.
6. Woodbrooke is the Quaker study centre near Birmingham and Swarthmoor Hall is a building in Cumbria of major significance in Quaker history. Both run courses and events, often residential, for Quakers or other interested people.

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