

Don't be a Flake

A conceptual and ethical analysis of the vice of flakiness

1. Introduction

This paper is about the vicious character trait of flakiness. Individuals consistently disposed to exhibit this vice are flakes. Flakiness is not the most extreme, dangerous nor the most harmful vice. It is not commonly associated with a sociopath or despotic evil genius. Rather it what one might call a “prosaic” vice, one that is so common we begrudgingly accept it, even if we rarely do so happily. Flakiness seems a worthy topic of discussion for several reasons. First, ethicists can show bias toward traits and behaviors that coalesce toward the dark pit of our moral basement. We like to talk about the worst acts, the most serious social problems, and those especially viciousness character traits, while overlooking more minor moral failings.¹ There is not always good reason for doing so. If we care about, for instance, improving as a moral person, then there is good reason to focus on moral short comings which we ourselves are likely to exhibit. “We” references the everyday folk who are not saints, politicians, heroes, serial killers, nor celebrities.

How *we* can become better human beings will naturally concern the sort of things *we* do in everyday life, i.e. how we treat others and how we respond to the way we are treated. These daily interactions are an important part of our moral life because they make up so much of it. What we are disposed to do in ordinary circumstances, moreover, is a large part of what makes up our character. As Aristotle has said, “[W]e must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine also the nature of the states of character that are

¹ Take a look at almost any ethics journal, and you will see a flurry of articles on poverty, social injustice, war, greed, racism, and so on. The study of psychopaths is becoming an increasingly hot topic. The aforementioned are all important moral issues, and I am glad ethicists study them. However, there seems room to study less awful and more common vices, vices that the average academic might deal with on a daily basis. To be clear, I am not saying that no work has been done on “every day” evils. However, it seems there is comparatively little work on these issues, and looking into them more deeply is a wise endeavor.

produced...”² If Aristotle is right, insofar as we should be concerned with our own character, we should thereby be concerned with everyday actions that contribute to everyday virtue and vice. Even more, the everyday vice of focus here, flakiness, is one that modern technology has (arguably) enabled.³ Hence there is special reason to pay attention now, so we can adjust our moral standards in accordance with the circumstances.

This paper is grounded in traditional Aristotelian virtue theory, although it is likely of interest to many other ethicists. To whatever extent possible, my claims are designed to be acceptable from a morally pluralistic view, i.e., supportable using multiple ethical theories. That said, flakiness will be understood on an Aristotelian spectrum of extremes. Trustworthiness is the middle virtue, and rigidness is the opposite vice of excess (flakiness being the vice of deficiency). In addition, persons can commit flaky acts without themselves being flakey. What matters for the possession of the vice is a *consistent disposition* toward flakiness. Hence it is possible to be a flake without ever committing flaky acts, as long as one has the relevant disposition.⁴

In what follows, this paper describes the defining features of a flaky act, a flaky person, and explains why this character trait is best categorized as a vice. While the last mentioned might seem obvious to some, flakiness is a trait that is increasingly excused or overlooked. Particularly telling, is a recent poll of millennials that show 45% see nothing wrong with flakiness at all (SWNS:2017). I argue these millennials are ethically mistaken. In doing so, I will delve into the literature on trust and trustworthiness, explaining how flakiness fits into this

² Ross, David. *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford Worlds Classics) (Kindle Locations 1165-1166). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

³ There is a flurry of popular articles on this topic, including in the NY Times from popular writer David Brooks, 2017. For more on how technology has made us flaky see Evangeline 2015; Hakala 2018; Rachel 2014; SWNS 2017, and Matyszczyk 2014.

⁴ Even though in principle one can be flake without actually exemplifying flaky behavior, it is unlikely they would be identified as such since the community would lack relevant evidence.

picture. While trustworthiness should be understood as the mean virtue opposed to flakiness, I will argue that untrustworthiness and flakiness are not identical.

2. What is a Flake? An Overview.

The flaky person can be recognized by the following interrelated traits, listed in no particular order. (none are individually necessary for flakiness, but when displayed often enough, perhaps just one can be sufficient):

- (1) Committing to X and either having no intention of Xing, or making no effort to ensure that one X's.
- (2) Otherwise disposed to renege on a variety of interpersonal commitments.
- (3) Having consistently weak reasons for (1 and 2).
- (4) Making impossible commitments (e.g. committing to both Xing and Ying, when Xing and Ying must be done at the same time in different places.)
- (4) Brushing aside, ignoring, or acting ignorant of one's failure to fulfill commitments. Said differently: politely downplaying commitment breaking.

The above list describes traits that are commonly representative of flaky characters. Some flakes are guilty of some of the above traits more frequently than others. But if agents display any frequently enough, they are likely identified as flakes (even if they are rarely guilty of the others.) Arguably, something like this is true of many vices. Greedy agents, for instance, might be identified as those who (1) refuse to share in their wealth, and, (2) obsessively accumulate material possessions. Frequently greedy agents fall victim to both (1) and (2). But the greater the refusal to share in one's wealth, the more likely a person is labeled greedy, even without the obsession of accumulating material possessions. Hence sometimes there are a number of characteristics representative of various vices, and vicious persons might not exemplify them all.

I do not think there is a single platonic form of flakiness. We use the word "flaky" to refer to a variety of related (family resemblance) concepts. Of such conceptual variety, this paper elaborates on one. This is done not because the chosen conception of flakiness discussed is

somehow most accurate or gets closest to the “true” concept. Rather my reasons boil down to three points, (1) this is a single paper, and I can only have space to cover one concept; (2) the concept chosen has particular ethical significance; and (3) the concept chosen closely aligns with how the term “flaky” is frequently used in everyday conversation, thus providing some convergence point for discussion.⁵

To sum this up, we sometimes use the word “flaky” to describe a trait consistent with 1-4 above. This trait latches on to a modern-day vice often called “flakiness.” This vice makes its holders worse people, and causes general trouble in the moral community.

3. Failed Commitments

Perhaps the most universally recognized trait of flakes is making commitments but then breaking them. Urban dictionary, for instance, (which is an impressive collection of the hipster amateur’s conceptual analyzing) defines “flakey” as, “Someone who, after being invited to an event, implies they will come, but infact (sic) bitches out at the last second - in the hour or minute of the event” (Urban Dictionary:2018). Like most dictionary definitions, this is far too simplistic, but nonetheless highlights something important. The flaky person might happily make many commitments, i.e., agree to show up to events. Indeed, the flaky person might make more commitments than most. Then again, it is not difficult to make commitments when one does not fulfill them.

If flakes make commitments and then renege, some might wonder if flakes are simply dishonest. It seems they are dishonest, but not simply so. Flakes are surely dishonest in a certain respect. However, flakiness is distinct from dishonesty for several reasons. One key difference between flakes and classic liars is the former’s untruths are limited in scope. Flakes might be honest in some sense, indeed, being “generally” honest is consistent with flakiness. The flake’s

⁵ It does not follow that this is the only way we use the term. My claim is only that using the term this way is not uncommon.

dishonesty (if we are to call it that) is limited to claims about what the flake will do. And even that is too vague. Flakes might be completely reliable regarding their assertions about future career plans or their intent to one day run for congress. The flake's epistemic untrustworthiness is circumscribed to claims that involve certain kinds of *interpersonal commitments*. These are generally commitments involving future plans with others, but they could also be plans to do another a favor or perform a service. What matters is that another person is counting on the flake to follow through. (Unless, of course, the flake has disappointed so many times that their word is just not trusted.)

Let us note *the extent* that flakes bail on commitments. While every flake is different, it seems possible to be trustworthy in some matters, and be rightly called a flake nonetheless. Conceptually speaking, a flake might be someone who has proved completely unreliable in everyday matters, but who you know will follow through when the stakes are especially high. Whether this frequently describes the behavior of "real" flakes is an empirical question. But at the least, it is consistent with the character trait that one consistently bails on small commitments but remains reliable with more important matters. In other words, one can consistently fail to fulfill commitments while still fulfilling *some*. Perhaps it is those few big commitments that the flake manages to fulfill. Indeed, it might be tempting to see flakiness as a small moral fault precisely because being flakey in casual matters does not entail being flakey with serious matters. Hence when thinking of flakiness, one does not necessarily think of those who disappoint when the stakes are high.

4. Lies, Bullshit, and Excuses

Let us return to flakiness and honesty. Flakiness bears an uncomfortable relationship with honesty. At the very least, if not dishonesty, many instances of flaking involve untruth. If Albert promises to show up for lunch, and does not show, he broke his promise and said something

untrue.⁶ But in many ways a flake's dishonestly is not typical. While sometimes flakes commit to X while recognizing they have no intention of Xing, this need not be the case. The flake's untruths might be closer to what Harry Frankfurt has called "bullshiting." In Frankfurt's words, bullshit is a "lack of connection to a concern with truth... [an] indifference to how things really are..." (2005:33). Likewise, flakes might commit to Xing without any real thought to whether or not they will X. These flakes seem to forget, or perhaps not care, that their claims carry expectations.

I remember a classmate from undergraduate school. In a new place, not knowing many people, I was happy to have plans for the movies. But my classmate flaked, and acted sincerely surprised that I was upset. She incredulously responded, "When I said we will go to the movies, I didn't mean, like, that we would really go..." Alas. This is an all too illustrative flaky rejoinder. When called out on their failed commitments, flakes have a special way of brushing off the criticism. It is perhaps similar to the classic advice to laugh when someone is serious. Flakes admit their wrong with blasé that puts the victim in the awkward position of acting serious in response to casual. Consider, for instance, this advice from the millennial focused website *Lifehacker* (the particular words of wisdom below are taken from an article which advises readers on, "How to Flake Out on Someone Gracefully").⁷

Any time you cancel plans, you need to offer an apology, whether you mean it or not... Suck it up and accept the fact you're a jerk. Apologize honestly and they'll be much more likely to take your side... (Klosowski: 2012: paragraph 4 and 5).⁸

⁶ It is possible to flake without saying anything untrue. A flake might make the following type of commitment: "I will be at the party as long as I am not too tired from work." Of course, when the party rolls around, the flake is too tired.

⁷ *Lifehacker* was founded in 2005, and focuses both on technology and what we might call "general life advice." Their current editor in chief is writer/journalist Melissa Kirsch.

⁸ To be fair to the author of this article, he did suggest it is often best to not make plans in the first place if they are ones you are unlikely to fulfill.

The above is, indeed, good advice. The apologetic (yet casual) attitude allows flakes to get away with telling untruths in a fashion that the classic liar could only dream. As advised, apologies make it likely that the flake's victim will "take the flake's side." For unlike the classic liar's untruths, the flake's untruths cannot be questioned. Or at least, not without social cost. Consider the following hypothetical conversation:

FV (Flake's Victim): I thought we were meeting for coffee yesterday?

F(Flake): Oh yes, you're right! I am so sorry but I got really busy with work and had to meet a deadline.

FV: Oh, I see. Yeah, no problem....

Illustrated above is the masterful skill of admitting responsibility and simultaneously refusing to take responsibility. The flake apologizes, yes. But this apology is mitigated by being "busy." Even more, the attitude suggests a fault, yes, but a fault which is no big deal. It is a casual sorry. This "sorry" makes sense when the wrong is excusable and no one got hurt. Psychologist, therapist, and author, Dan Neuharth, recently wrote an article for *PsychCentral* describing various ways in which persons offer "Fake Apologies". One of his examples was the, "I'm sorry, but..." apology. According to Neuharth, "People issue faux apologies for several reasons. They may not believe they did anything wrong or just want to keep the peace" (2018).⁹This seems fairly typical of the flake's apology. If flakes truly thought they were doing something wrong, it seems they would be unlikely to flake so often and with an excuse making apology. Since true flakiness demands a consistent disposition to flaky behavior, real flakes are not those who mess-up on a one-off occasion. And if one does have a consistent disposition toward

⁹ Another example from Neuharth (2018) was the "I guess I..." apology. This is also a typical flake apology, "I'm sorry I guess I forgot"; "I'm sorry I guess I didn't manage my time well"; "I'm sorry I guess I overcommitted", and so on.

flaky behavior, it is easy to question the sincerity of the flake's apology with behavior that happens again and again.

Admittedly, there is a sense in which the opinion that flaking is “no big deal” is *accurate*. Indeed, there is a sense in which this illustration is *accurate*: flaking is (usually) a small moral failure when compared to many others. Notwithstanding, it is not always victimless, often someone did get hurt, and often the wronging is more serious than flakes might admit. The way in which this wronging is more serious will be discussed in a later section. For now, let us note that apologies offered by the flake (while better than no apology at all) often downplay the act apologized for. And in doing this, there is not much the flake's victim can say in response without coming across as oversensitive. In *Lifehacker's* article on flakiness mentioned above, the corresponding discussion forum included the following comment:

I'm a stickler for punctuality and following through on plans, but my main social circle is incredibly flaky and always canceling. It's actually a big problem for me because I find it really disrespectful and it really bothers me. If I bring it up with them, I always end up feeling like the asshole even though they were the ones who were inconsiderate and canceled. What do I do about this?
(PeroxidePoofter:2012:comment 1).

The commenter above laments that she if she were to complain, then, she would, “end up feeling like the asshole.” And indeed, this is precisely the problem. Flake's wrong us in such a way that to complain is to make oneself look like the wrongdoer. Without changing societal norms, there seems little advice to offer in response to this conundrum.

5. Impossible Commitments

I asked my students to describe a flake. One responded, “a flake is someone who is always looking at their phone.” A bit confused, I asked, “Why is that?” His answer: because flakes are always searching for the best social opportunity. They promise to be at 10 places on a Friday

night, only to cancel on 9. This answer impressed me. While the characterization is too specific, it does illuminate flakiness as often manifest in a 20-something hipster. Indeed, in researching this paper, I came across an interesting article on flakiness. The article (found on a website geared toward 20-somethings) quotes 27-year-old “Cassie,”

I join about 12 Facebook events a month for shows or birthdays and go to something like two of them. There's nothing like that rush of realizing you won't be caught in a corner with some stale conversationalist or stuck seeing a horrific band” (Hakala:2015).

Making far too many plans is indeed *a* way flakiness is manifest. Other times, in other persons, the manifestation is distinct while the general scheme remains. While not necessary for flakiness, here is a very common feature of the paradigm flake: *making incompatible commitments*. In some cases, incompatible commitment making may be due to *akrasia*; at some level flakes know they cannot fulfill all their commitments, but feel compelled to make them. This is the flake who can't stand the discomfort of saying “no.” A flaky professor might accept three conference invitations, analyzing what offer is best before canceling on the others. Flakey parents might accept several playdates and decide at the last minute which one is worth keeping. And college students, of course, might accept offers to several parties only to show at one.

There is a popular suspicion that modern technology enables flakey behavior. This enabling, in turn, has arguably contributed to its social acceptability. On the point about social acceptability, we have at least some data to back this up, i.e., a poll that shows millennials see nothing wrong with being a flake.¹⁰ Along these same lines, consider this quote, from a recent *Huffington Post* article:

¹⁰ See SWNS, 2017.

Technology has made planning effortless. So effortless, in fact, that we often don't even realize when plans have been "made," so cancelling is a non-issue. You don't even have to make a phone call to hear your friend's disappointment. They're probably not even all that disappointed. It was probably half expected (Ryan:2013).

Not only does the above quote suggest that flakiness happens often, but also that it has become so socially acceptable we often assume it will happen. While none of this might seem like a big deal (there are far worse societal changes), upon reflection, it is quite remarkable that we commitments are regularly expected to be broken.

Cell phones are one technological change that has made flaking easier. Most of us possess a plan canceling device on our person at all times, that can be utilized with the most minimal effort. Emailing, also, has made cancelling easier. Admittedly, cell phones and emails have made cancelling not only easier on the flake, but also easier on victims. Before these technologies, commitment breaking imposed much higher costs. There was no way to cancel plans last minute, so flaking often meant leaving someone angry and confused while they waited alone for the flake. But today, with a quick text or email, we can bail on commitments last minute, *with notice*. Plausibly, this relieves the flake's guilt. Flakes are no longer leaving someone alone and confused, but rather offer-up a free block of time. As said in the quote above, the flake's victim is probably not, "all that disappointed." Or, at least, this is the story flakes might tell themselves. Not only does this story make flaking a much less serious fault, it also leaves less room for the flake's victim to respond with criticism. Why would anyone complain when they have been given notice of a free afternoon?

When the flake acts nonchalant in regard to canceling or other flakey behavior, this demeanor might be genuine. Perhaps the flake *really* thinks cancelling plans is no big deal (and sometimes this perception is accurate.) However, the flake *should* (that is, if they want to act with minimal respect toward their fellow human beings) have known better. They should

recognize that their words come with expectations. And these expectations matter, even if there is some sense in which flaking is not a big deal, or does not cause major harm. So even if flakes lack malicious intent, they are blameworthy nonetheless. In the coming sections, I consider what exactly explains this blameworthiness.

6. The “Niceness” Factor

This section delves into greater depth what has been hinted at in early sections. Flakes tend to corner their victim in an awkward and perhaps impossible position. This is partly because the flake’s victim is in an uncomfortable *epistemic* position. When others flake on us, we usually lack evidence against the flake, i.e. we cannot prove the flake is being flakey, rather than cancelling with a legitimate excuse. There is another factor complicating matters. *The flake is not an asshole*. While we should not go as far as to say that flakiness and “assholeness” are mutually exclusive, the two traits fit uncomfortably. The phrase “he’s kind of flakey” is common, and doesn’t suggest extreme disdain (barring mitigating factors like tone, etc.) But calling someone “kind of an asshole”, sounds kind of funny. If someone used that phrase, we might think they were being ironic. The phrase “asshole” is strong, and there is something almost misplaced with the qualifier “kind of.” If someone is an asshole, you want to be sure about it before throwing around that word. If he is only “kind of” an asshole, better to use another turn of phrase. In any case, being an asshole, *prima facie*, seems worse than being a flake. To go further, arguably the term “asshole” is inapt when applied to flakes. Of course, whether or not there is anything problematic with calling a flake an asshole will depend on just what is meant by “asshole.” Let us consider a definition offered by Aaron James,

Asshole: A person counts as an asshole when, and only when, he systematically allows himself to enjoy special advantages in interpersonal relationships out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that immunizes him against the complaints of other people. (2012: Kindle Location 81).

Let us step back. Admittedly, *some* aspects of the asshole latch onto *some* features of the flake. Some might even argue that the flake only departs from the asshole in margins. After all, one could interpret the flake as someone who “enjoy(s) special advantages in interpersonal relationships.” Flakes are known to casually and consistently bail on commitments. Through this very behavior, the flake assumes a special advantage, i.e., that their reasons for flaking are better than their reasons for upholding an interpersonal commitment. This, plausibly, is a way of taking advantage within the confines of an interpersonal relationship.

If flakes treat interpersonal commitments lightly, what makes them different from assholes? This is where entitlement becomes especially important. Consider the flake’s apology. While their apology might not recognize the true seriousness of the flakey act, it is still an admittance of some wrong doing. Not only that, but in apologizing one *communicates* to another. What they communicate is negotiable; but broadly speaking, the communication is one of regretting that the flake’s victim has been troubled.

There are many ways to criticize the flake’s apology. The flake might not really regret troubling the victim. The flake might think their wrong is not as bad as it is, and so on. But in even attempting an apology the flake does something the asshole does not. Assholes are the type who arrogantly assume no apology is needed. To return to James, “...the asshole makes no attempt to hear the person out and perhaps delivers a rude retort, such as ‘Screw you!’” (2012: Kindle Locations 298-299).

Flakes are not known for their “screw you” attitude, and this helps explain why flakes can get away with so much. Imagine someone who, just like the flake, is known to frequently cancel plans with lame excuses. However, he never apologizes, and gets angry when you even ask for an explanation. Instead of canceling with the excuse, “So sorry my hamster is sick I can’t make it,” the asshole merely texts, “Sick hamster won’t be there.” Or maybe even just “Won’t be there.” If then asked, “Why not?” the asshole would get angry and defensive. The asshole presumptively

assumes no explanation is needed, and is annoyed that anyone would think otherwise. In response to this type of asshole cancelation, few are likely to focus on the flakiness, but instead stand in awe at the asshole sense of entitlement. While this asshole might have all the same flakey qualities, these features seem unimportant compared to the more striking features of assholiness. In other words, it is not that flakes cannot be assholes, but rather *that assholiness swamps flakiness*. When flakes are assholes, we forget the former and focus on the latter. This is why those who we *call* flakes are usually are not assholes. If they were, we wouldn't bother calling them flakes in the first place.

One might make the argument that because the flake's apology is casual, and because they are likely to repeat the behavior, that therefore the apology is insincere. And if it is an insincere apology, then the flake really does act with entitlement. Yet even agreeing with the claim that the flake's apology is not a true apology, the latter need not follow from the former. When the flake's apology lacks sincerity, it is typically because flakes convince themselves that bailing is no big deal. The sense of entitlement which characterizes the asshole, however, is not of obliviousness, but contempt. Consider this description from James, of the way that a particular asshole showed his colors,

He meant of course to gloat but also to show his contempt. He meant to broadcast his contempt and to have a laugh about his being in a position to advertise it (2012: Kindle Locations 1106-1108).

This contempt that James describes does not characterize the typical flake. Flakes break commitments, but this commitment breaking is not manifest contemptuously. Rather, the flake convinces himself that commitment breaking is no big deal, precisely because he would not feel comfortable flaking otherwise. Assholes, on the other hand, shrug their shoulders, they consider themselves special enough that wrongs against others are irrelevant. In the next section, I

discuss a particular strategy frequently used by flakes as a way of mitigating their wrong-doing. It is worth noting that an asshole would not bother with this excuse, because an asshole is so comfortable wronging that they see no need to mitigate it.

7. Playing Ignorant

The following is a story from a friend who was organizing a conference, and sent off a keynote invitation. My friend, let's call him "Bob", hoped that the speaker, let's call the speaker "Charlie", would come, but if not, a polite decline was appreciated (so another speaker could be invited). Well after sending the invitation, 10 days went by with silence. A second email was sent, and Charlie asked for a few weeks to decide. A few months went by with several reminder emails, and still no response. Bob eventually took no response as a "no." Well Bob later runs into Charlie and (politely) brings up the unanswered email. Bob was meet with, "Oh, I forget" and, "I must have just completely missed those reminder emails, I get so many. I assume it was a successful conference?" What is Bob supposed to say? Of course, this excuse could be the truth (but seems unlikely given the multiple requests). Yet because it *could* be the truth, the victim feels as though the only response is to weakly smile and change the subject. Getting upset appears unreasonable. After all, it could have been an honest mistake.

If a flaky excuse comes from someone who is generally flakey, who has a history of this behavior, and if in addition the excuse is weak, then there seems defeasible evidence that the particular act of flakiness manifests the general trait. Consider the following post, on the discussion forum from *The Chronicles of Higher Education* website:

Every year, I solicit reviewers for the "Best Article" award. Every year, the same person volunteers and then never submits a review. She also volunteered to review for an edited collection I am putting together and then never submitted... At least I know who she is now and simply ignore her emails, but what the hey? Why volunteer every time and then never do the work? Just don't volunteer(hulkhogan:2014).

In the above situation, the flake repeats her behavior many times, and hence there appears strong evidence that the failure to follow through is not a one-off mistake, but representative of a stable character trait. In cases like this, there is some room to protest. But not *that much* room. Notice that the poster claims to have simply ignored the flake's email. As in, rather than call out the bad behavior, it is shrugged off. Letting flakey behavior slide is likely instilled via professional academic norms, and likely other types of professional norms as well. Calling out flakiness puts oneself at risk of being called out for rude or unprofessional behavior. As quoted earlier, some fear calling out the flake because they themselves do not want to be seen as the asshole. This is the catch-22, and hence frustration, of dealing with flakiness.

8. A Spectrum

Given the current social acceptability of flakiness, nearly everyone has flaked at one time or another. However, it is those who *consistently* manifest (or are disposed to manifest) flakey characteristics who are thereby true flakes. Because flakiness is a vice on a spectrum of extremes, flakes can be more or less flaky. There are boarder line cases. An agent might manifest the features of flakiness fairly consistently, but perhaps not enough to be rightly called a full-fledged flake.

If flakes are those who break commitments, ignore inquires, and consistently cancel at the last minute, the opposite virtue is possessed by someone who consistently does none of these. They are those we can always count on. We can call this virtue "trustworthiness." Trustworthy persons consistently say what they mean and do what they say they will do. They show up on time, and you never have to worry about last-minute cancelations. They respond to emails, and almost never cancel plans at the last minute. In the rare cases they do cancel, it is always with a valid excuse. The trustworthy person might turn down requests for social occasions or work commitments, but that is only because they are the type who declines

commitments they cannot fulfill.¹¹ If trustworthy persons fail to show, you begin to worry that they have been kidnapped.

If trustworthiness is the middle virtue, and flakiness is the vice of deficiency (not being trustworthy enough), then what is the vice of excess? Aristotle argues that while many virtues are means between extreme vices, we sometimes lack names for the extremes. If one end of the spectrum is particularly rare, language might have no need for a label¹² *Prime facie*, it might seem that the opposite extreme of flakiness is a case like this. Flakiness, after all, is (loosely speaking) a way of being not trustworthy enough. Hence the opposite vice is some form of the opposite extreme, that is a way of being “too trustworthy.” We might think that it is impossible to be too trustworthy. What would that even mean? And why is it any mark against one’s character to be “too” consistent at keeping commitments, responding to reasonable inquires, and keeping promises? However, if we inspect this further, there does seem a common vice of this type. This vice is the opposite extreme of the flake, and there are already names which closely approximate it, i.e. “rigid” “strict” and “inflexible.”

While rigid, strict, and inflexible all closely approximate the vice in mind, let us stick with the first mentioned for simplicity. The rigid person is, in a sense, too reliable. The rigid person refuses to break commitments even when something of greater moral importance arises. Suppose that Donny commits to a Thursday dinner date with Ernest. However, after making this commitment, Donny receives horrible news of his brother’s untimely death. Moreover, it turns out that his father’s funeral is scheduled for the same day as his dinner date with Ernest. Because Donny hates breaking commitments, and because he made a commitment for lunch and not yet to the funeral, Donny insists on the former. This seems clearly an example of taking

¹¹ As will be discussed later, Katherine Hawley expresses similar sentiments, arguing that, “Trustworthiness requires us to ensure that our commitments do not outstrip our actions...Trustworthy people must sometimes disappoint up-front by refusing new commitments, rather than violate trust later on: this is the moral ‘power of no’” (2014:15).

¹² “Among those who go to excess the excessively fearless person has no name—we said earlier that many cases have no names” (Aristotle: 41: 2009).

commitment keeping to an unvirtuous extreme. Donny lacks the judgement to recognize that family members' funerals ought to be a high priority, higher than keeping a commitment for lunch. Donny fails to recognize that a polite request for rescheduling is in order.

According to Aristotle, *practical wisdom* allows us to judge circumstances and make good choices in accordance with the details.¹³ In the absence of practical wisdom, what otherwise seems like a "virtue" can become vicious. Rigidness is a case of this kind. While keeping one's word is usually virtuous, in the absence of practical wisdom it can make us morally worse instead of better. Rigid agents put too much moral weight on keeping commitments even when breaking them is not a big deal and fulfills higher moral needs. Sometimes breaking commitments makes moral sense, all things considered. Rigid agents, however, do not consider all things.

In addition to holding too fast to commitments, rigid persons might be judgmental of commitment breaking, even when the reasons for renegeing are good ones. I once had a conversation with an administrator about another administrator. I said, "At least he always does what he says." Her response: "Yes, but he also expects me to be perfect." This administrator's rigidness meant he could be counted on, not only to keep his commitments, but giving you hell if you strayed an inch from yours. In sum, the flake undervalues the importance of commitment-keeping, while the rigid person overvalues the same.

9. Flakiness, Trust, and Trustworthiness

Since trustworthiness lies on the same spectrum as flakiness, it makes sense to say a few words about the literature on the former, which is vast. There is not enough room to discuss all of nuances and arguments in the trust literature. But covering some of the most relevant issues is

¹³ See Aristotle, 2009, Book 6, Ch. 7.

important.¹⁴ However, before getting into specifics, let's address some important distinctions that may not be obvious. We can distinguish between the attitudes of trusting someone, (or distrusting), and having the character trait of being trustworthy (or untrustworthy). Much (but by no means all) of the trust literature focuses on the former, while my paper is mostly focused on the latter (i.e. the character trait of flakiness, which in some way is connected to untrustworthiness). Consider, for instance, Katherine Hawley's description of trust:

To trust someone to do something is to believe that she has a commitment to doing it, and to rely upon her to meet that commitment. To distrust someone to do something is to believe that she has a commitment to doing it, and yet not rely upon her to meet that commitment (2014:10).

In the above, Hawley delineates what it is required in order for X to trust Y. This is different from delineating what it is for Y to possess the virtue of trustworthiness (which Hawley does discuss later.) We can trust someone who is not trustworthy, and refuse to trust someone who is actually trustworthy. Even if X knows Y's history of flakiness, X might still trust Y, perhaps because X is simply a very trusting person.

As mentioned, in addition to discussing trust, Hawley also discusses trustworthiness. Here she describes something which fits well with my spectrum view:

On the commitment account, trustworthiness requires us to ensure that our commitments do not outstrip our actions. This requires judiciousness in acquiring commitments as well as doggedness in fulfilling commitments already acquired, independent of others' expectations. Trustworthy people must sometimes disappoint up-front by refusing new commitments, rather than violate trust later on: this is the moral 'power of no' (2014:15)

¹⁴ While this is not a complete list, the literature on trust includes Baier 1986; Hawley 2012, 2014a and 2014b; Hardin 1996 and 2002; Jones 1996 and 2004; Pettit 1995; MacFarlane 2005; McGeer 2008; Nickle 2007 (This list is skewed toward the moral literature on trust, as that is the most relevant for this paper's aim. There is also, however, an epistemic literature, as well as an applied ethics literature specific to bioethics.)

If this was a paper on trustworthiness, I could argue about the details. But for my purposes, Hawley's account will do just fine in explaining the virtue of which flakiness is the deficiency. Flakes fall short in "assuring their commitments do not outstrip their actions." They also say yes to commitments when the trustworthy person says no. In this sense, flakiness is very much a vice opposed to the above virtue. My account fits less well with affective or motivational accounts of trustworthiness like those of Jones (1996) and Hardin (2002). Hardin, for instance, argues that, "...trustworthiness is a motivation or a set of motivations for acting" (2002:31). If this is trustworthiness, then it fits at best uncomfortably with my account of flakiness. If flakiness is on the opposite side of the spectrum which includes trustworthiness, and if trustworthiness is a set of motivations, then flakiness must be the absence of these motivations or perhaps the opposite motivations. But this doesn't seem right. Flakes can have many motives, but none seem necessary, and none seem disqualifiers. Motives themselves do not define the flake, although certain motivations might be common. Notwithstanding, motivations are not a necessary feature of the vice itself.¹⁵ Flakes bail on commitments with weak reasons, but those reasons can be of many sorts.¹⁶

Some of the discussion on trustworthiness mentions distrust in opposition to trust¹⁷. Along these lines, we might ask, "Is flakiness the same as distrust, or what we might call untrustworthiness"? Hawley claims that, "When we distrust someone, we take them to have commitments but don't expect them to fulfil these commitments" (8). This description sounds very much like flakiness. But what Hawley describes is not true in all cases of distrust. Flakiness

¹⁵ One of Hawley's (2014a) criticisms is that distrust is hard to understand on the motivational account. This seems right to me, and perhaps the inability to understand flakiness is a similar mark against motivational views. However, let me be clear this is just speculation. My paper is not meant to take a stance on the true concept of trustworthiness, but just to say what concept fits well with the particular vice I describe and label "flakiness"

¹⁶ Perhaps if apparent flakiness can be attributed to mental illness, this might make a difference in how we assess the vice, or whether we label it a vice at all. But the way in which mental illness excuses (or does not excuse) vice is complex, and not unique to flakiness.

¹⁷ Throughout her paper Hawley seems to assume something along these lines, as does Harden.

is a particular sub-genre of untrustworthiness. But I would argue that flakes make up only *part* of this end of the spectrum.

Not all untrustworthy persons have flakey characteristics, nor do all untrustworthy persons consistently break commitments. Let us look at what Harding says about distrust. He argues, "...we might not trust those who have power over us, especially when they have little reason to care for us individually..." (2002:100). This seems true. It seems uncontroversial that we often distrust the powerful. This distrust, however, commonly has nothing to do with flakiness. Suppose that Gertrude dislikes her boss. Indeed, suppose Gertrude distrusts her boss. Yet we can imagine scenarios where such distrust has nothing to do with flakiness. Perhaps Gertrude's distrust is founded on her knowledge that her boss is a malicious employer who cares little about his underlings. So while Gertrude might distrust both flakes and her boss, the sense in which she distrusts them is clearly distinct. Flakiness is just one way in which an untrustworthy character trait might manifest.

10. Why is Flakiness Bad?

We already discussed how the flake downplays commitment breaking, i.e. acting as though breaking commitments is no big deal. And again, to an extent, there is some truth to this. Missing lunch is *not* a big deal. Even flaking out on bigger things (e.g. a conference at which one is a key speaker) is rarely "the end of the world." Notwithstanding, flakes wrong other agents, and in so wronging often cause harm. We can look at the wrongs of flakiness in two senses, one "particular" and the other "general." The particular wrong is simply not keeping one's word in a given instance. A variety of harms can then result from this failure to fulfill one's word. Consider first the potential harm from the specific broken commitment at hand. If a flake fails to make a lunch date, for instance, the particular harm is whatever disappointment or inconvenience ensues from missing this lunch. Even something as small as missing a lunch could be a serious disappointment, in addition to imposing opportunity costs. Perhaps Henry wanted to make a

commitment with someone else, but declined because of his commitment with the flake. In this case the harm caused by the flake is not only the harm of missing lunch, but the opportunity cost of what Henry could have done instead.

Consider the conference speaker who ignores several emails. The organizer is then in a dilemma, not being able to send another invitation until the original speaker declines. Here the opportunity cost is another conference speaker. By the time the flake responds, it might be too late. There are many other like examples. If Ingrid flakes on her commitment to dinner with Johnny, the latter now has an empty evening which he could have spent with someone else. Flakes often blame their flakiness on being “busy.” But most of us are, busy, aren’t we? And flaking on busy persons is particularly harmful, for that lost time is of special value. We could go on with examples. But the point should be clear: flakes cause more harm than initially meets the eye, because flakes might not be thinking of things in terms of the imposed opportunity costs.

We just discussed the particular wrong that often comes alongside missed opportunities. Yet we should not forget the more general way in which flakiness is wrong¹⁸, the wrong which is divorced from the particular commitment and particular opportunity cost. In some cases, after all, the particular wrong might not cause any harm at all. We have probably all had an occasion where we were *happy* that someone flaked. Sometimes we want to stay at home, and flakes do nothing but bring us relief in the instance. Perhaps there is no missed opportunity, for there is nothing we would have rather done instead. But even in this case, there remains a wrong that comes through disrespect. This wrong is present, whether or not one classifies it as a harm. Suppose Cindy makes an insulting comment to Dory. Perhaps Dory is thick-skinned, and there is no lasting harm from this event. There is no psychological damage. The rude comment, moreover, occurred when no one was watching. Hence Dory faces no reputation damage.

¹⁸ Whether disrespect is a harm or not, it seems less controversial that it is of morally negative value, and its presence makes the world morally worse, *ceteris paribus*.

Notwithstanding these things, Dory has been wronged; Cindy's comment was disrespectful, whether Dory was bothered by it or not. This is the wrong that occurs when one rational agent diminishes the moral equality of another. Moral equals deserve better, regardless of whether they demand better.

There are many ways to parse the flake's disrespect, depending upon the particular flakey action or inaction. Many forms of flakiness involve dishonesty. And simple honesty is something we (moral equals) expect and deserve. But whether dishonest or not, flakes back their victim into a corner. In this corner the victim cannot complain, even though they have likely been wronged. In usual circumstances, when one moral equal wrongs another, the wronged agent has grounds to protest. For instance, if a fellow moral agent insults me, I can immediately reply in protest and point out that I am worthy of more respect. However, flakes tend to wrong another in a way that leaves the guise of plausible deniability. Flakes might make up false excuses, or pretend that bad reasons for flaking are good ones (if there *is* a legitimate reason for the behavior, then it is not actually flakiness.)

Whether faced with a false excuse or a bad one, the flake's victim lacks a defensive strategy. With dishonesty, the victim lacks epistemic grounds to prove that the flakey excuse is a lie. In the case of casually breaking commitments for a real but weak reason, the flake's victim can only protest at the risk of appearing overly sensitive. Hence the flake not only disrespects his victim through dishonesty, but disables the victim's path to moral protest. This is a bad thing to do to a moral equal.

There are many ways that flakiness might manifest. But a general theme is the display of disrespect that comes through the implicit suggestion that the other agent (the flake's victim) is *just not that important*. For whatever reason, the flake decides that other things are higher

priorities.¹⁹ Karen Jones (1996) has argued that trust requires being confident that the trusted knows that you are “counting on them,” and takes this counting on them into consideration when making their decisions. In her own words, “...one would not trust if one thought that the fact that one was counting on someone, while always being taken into account, would nonetheless be reliably overridden by other considerations...” (1996:9). If we distrust a flake, it is often because we know there are many, many, considerations that will override the fact that we are counting on them. A common feature of flakiness is that flakes are not motivated (or not motivated enough) by the fact that other agents are counting on them. Flakes break plans with weak reasons. To the flake, however, these weak reasons appear stronger than the following competing reason: “I should keep my commitment to (or acknowledge and respond to) P, because P is worthy of my respect.”

As hinted at earlier, there are not merely personal consequences to flakiness but also societal consequences, at least when flakiness becomes wide-spread. Philip Pettit, in his article on trust, made a simple but important statement in saying that, “...a society where people are disposed to be trusting, and where their trust is generally well placed, is almost certain to work more harmoniously and fruitfully than a society where trust fails to appear or spread.” (1995:202). This seems uncontroversial. What also seems likely is that when one individual repeatedly displays flakey behavior this will cause us to distrust the flake, at least with respect to a certain range of commitments. Likewise, when it seems many or most people repeatedly engage in flakey behavior, this will cause us to distrust people in general. Indeed, there are signs that this is already happening across various communities. When enough members of society are flakes, and when enough people recognize as much, a societal distrust ensues. Individuals will not take one another’s word seriously, at least they will not do with regard to a wide range of

¹⁹ This is a good time to again note that I am not including in the class of flakey acts those occasions when agents might appear to flake but actually had strong reasons for behaving as they did.

behaviors. To repeat the earlier quoted article, these days when someone flakes, “It was probably half expected (Ryan:2013).”

Flakiness is only a subcategory of distrust, so a society full of flakes is not the same as a society full of completely untrustworthy citizens. But it still seems true that any sense of distrust will inhibit, rather than promote, social cooperation. Consider this case. Kelsey is considering starting a support group for academics struggling with divorce. She envisions how this project might work. She knows she will need the help of several others if her project is to be a success. But then Kelsey thinks back to the times that friends and colleagues have ignored emails, “forgot” about meetings, or otherwise bailed out on commitments. After some thought, she concludes the project is unfeasible. This is just one example of how wide spread flakiness can interfere with a cooperative society. Even if no single instance of flakiness seems a big deal, the sense of interpersonal skepticism brought on by repeated flakey interactions can have serious and negative effects on a societal sense of trust.

11. Objections

11.1 Does flakiness really matter?

Some might argue that I have been making too big a deal out flakiness; something so minor is not worthy of being called a vice. But is this true? Well, *some* think flakiness is a big deal.

Consider the words of NYT writer David Brooks:

Bailing is one of the defining acts of the current moment because it stands at the nexus of so many larger trends: the ambiguity of modern social relationships, the fraying of commitments, what my friend Hayley Darden calls the ethic of flexibility ushered in by smartphone apps — not to mention the decline of civilization, the collapse of morality and the ruination of all we hold dear (2017: paragraph 2).

Well, this paper is arguing that flakiness needs to be taken more seriously. But admittedly, “the decline of civilization, and the collapse of morality” might be a bit of hyperbole. Still, we should be careful not to downplay the seriousness of flakiness. Actually, let us step back and say we should not underestimate the psychological harm sometimes caused by a single instance of disrespect. There is increasing psychological evidence that social rejection causes very serious psychological harm, often mimicking physical harm. In addition, social rejection causes harm not only to the rejected, but to society at large as the rejected can become aggressive or otherwise antisocial.²⁰ While flakiness might not always be interpreted as social rejection, it certainly has the potential for this.

So perhaps you accept that flakiness is a vice. And perhaps you accept that the flake is indeed disrespectful and sometimes results in psychological harm. But do we not have bigger problems? Should not, as ethicists, we be worrying about social injustice, world hunger, and war? Here are two responses. The first is that of course we should worry about these things. But the two are not mutually exclusive. In ethics, like all things, there is division of labor. Many great minds are working on world hunger, war, and social justice. Moreover, as long social injustices exist, those lower on the social totem pole are especially likely to be victims of flakiness. One need not break all commitments all the time to be a flake. It is enough if one breaks lots of them, a lot of the time. So which commitments are kept, and which commitments are broken? Well, most of us (including flakes) are disinclined to do things that cause self-harm or inhibit personal goals. In many circumstances, breaking commitments with powerful people will cause harm and set back our goals, while breaking commitments with the powerless will not. Along these lines, it

²⁰ I could cite hundreds of research articles about social rejection, suicide, and the long-lasting effects of social rejection.. Instead I will only give the reader a few references to get them acquainted with this body of research. These articles include work that discusses the similarity of mental pain to physical pain, and the ways in which individual mental illness harms society at large: Kross et al. 2011; Eisenberger et al., 2006; Gaertner et al., 2008; Twenge et al., 2005; Leary et al., 2006; Van Orden et al., 2005 and 2010; Davidson et al., 2011; Stillman et al., 2009, and Murphy et al., 2013.

is much easier to flake on the powerless than the powerful. Hence the more acceptable flakiness becomes, the more likely the socially marginalized are its victims.

Let me return to another reason why flakiness is worth our concern, the reason mentioned at the start of this paper: we should not overlook the moral importance of everyday life. Most of us are not going to save the world, nor destroy it. Most are trying to get by taking care of our family and paying our bills. Most of us will not die saints. Yet it seems odd to preclude this large group, i.e. most people, from the ethical world. Indeed, it seems immensely implausible that ninety plus percent of the population has no need for ethics. If this is implausible, we need an ethics of ordinary life and ordinary persons. This paper delved into a slice of such an ethics. Said differently, if there is such an ethics, flakiness falls under its umbrella.

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