

## ResearchSpace@Auckland

### Version

This is the Accepted Manuscript version. This version is defined in the NISO recommended practice RP-8-2008 <http://www.niso.org/publications/rp/>

### Suggested Reference

Pettigrove, G. (2011). Is Virtue Ethics Self-Effacing? *Journal of Ethics*, 15(3), 191-207. doi: 10.1007/s10892-010-9089-4

### Copyright

Items in ResearchSpace are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated. Previously published items are made available in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher.

The final publication is available at Springer via <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10892-010-9089-4>.

<http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/issn/1382-4554/>

<https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/docs/uoa-docs/rights.htm>

## **Is Virtue Ethics Self-Effacing?** – Glen Pettigrove

The definitive version of this paper was published in *The Journal of Ethics* 15.3 (September 2011): 191-207 and is available at [www.springerlink.com](http://www.springerlink.com).

In “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” Michael Stocker claims that the “reasons, values, and justifications” that play a fundamental role in consequentialists’ and deontologists’ normative theories often cannot serve as a person’s motive when she acts. Or at least, they cannot serve as her motive if she is to act in the morally best way (Stocker 1976). Recently Thomas Hurka (2001) and Simon Keller (2007) have argued that virtue ethics suffers from the same malady: It, too, is self-effacing. However, I contend, the claim that virtue ethics is self-effacing is rooted in a mistaken understanding of the role that ideal agency and agent flourishing play (or should play) in virtue ethics. This paper will show how virtue ethics can avoid the charge of self-effacement.

The argument proceeds in four stages. In section 1, I present the case for thinking that virtue ethics is self-effacing and that self-effacement is something an ethical theory should try to avoid. Section 2 looks at Julia Annas’ (2008) attempt to defend virtue ethics from this charge. Although Annas draws a useful distinction between two different types of self-effacement, I contend that she fails to provide an adequate response to Hurka and Keller. In section 3 I lay out the conditions an ethical theory would need to meet in order to avoid being self-effacing and I explain how a virtue ethical account of *good* action could be developed so as to satisfy these conditions. In the final section I offer a virtue ethical account of *right* action that likewise satisfies these conditions and show that this account is genuinely an “ethics of virtue” rather than an “ethics of outcome” in disguise.

## 1. Virtue Ethics Is Self-Effacing

Stocker uses the following memorable example to diagnose what he calls the schizophrenia of consequentialist and deontological approaches to ethics. Smith has gone to see his friend Jones in the hospital. When Jones expresses her gratitude to Smith for having come to see her, Smith responds, in the first variant, by suggesting that there is no need to thank him. After all, he was simply doing his duty. In such a circumstance, if Smith is not merely being self deprecating and his motive in visiting Jones really is just the thought that by so doing he would fulfil his duty, we would expect Jones to be disappointed, perhaps even upset. “Oh,” she might say, “well if that was your reason, why did you bother coming in the first place?”

Nor does the situation improve considerably if Smith is an act utilitarian, rather than a deontologist. If, in response to Jones’s expression of gratitude, Smith replies that he came to visit Jones because it was the action whereby he could maximize happiness, we would not expect Jones to be any more pleased than she was in the previous case. “Surely,” Stocker says, “there is something lacking here . . . the wrong sort of thing is said to be the proper motive” (1976, 74).

Examples like Smith’s hospital visit highlight an important feature of deontological and consequentialist theories. The example does not just show that if he is going to visit his friend in the hospital because it is his duty (or because it will maximize happiness), Smith must hide his reasons from her if he is to succeed in cheering her up – although it clearly shows that. Stocker’s example cuts even deeper. Smith must also hide the deontological or consequentialist rationale from himself, if he is to pay her the sort of visit she would most appreciate or desire. By Jones’s lights – and the example is designed to help us see that we share Jones’s view on this point – Smith’s motive is relevant to his action’s moral worth. If we are right, then in order to

achieve what we deem to be the morally best action, an agent cannot be motivated by what the consequentialist and deontological theories say justifies the action. A theory that finds itself in this condition is, in Stocker's terms, schizophrenic or, in Derek Parfit's terms, self-effacing (Parfit 1984, 23-24).

There are several reasons one might think self-effacement is an undesirable quality in an ethical theory. The first stems from the common assumption that one of the purposes of a normative theory is to provide action guidance. If a normative theory is meant to help an agent answer the question "What should I do?" then it is problematic if the agent must put the theory's chief tool for answering the question out of her mind when she acts. At the very least, it introduces a time-lag between when the agent may consult the theory for guidance and when she may act in accordance with that guidance.

A second reason is closely related to the first. Even if one did not expect a normative theory to provide action guidance in the moment of action, one might nevertheless consider it an advantage in an ethical theory if thinking about it would train an agent to think about the kinds of things that should be salient for her when she is acting well. A self-effacing theory fails to be action guiding in this sense as well.

A third reason stems from the thought that excellent action involves a kind of insight into what really matters (Brady 2005). If this is so, then we would expect that the content of the agent's guiding thought is something morally important. If what a normative theory tells us is morally salient cannot serve in this capacity, then at best the theory would be incomplete. And it would raise the more serious question of whether the theory is looking in the wrong sort of place for what is morally salient.

A fourth reason for thinking self-effacement undesirable is a motivational variant on the point just made. Our interest in "what really matters" is not merely an

interest in knowing the truth. It is also an interest in caring about it in the right sort of way. “At the very least, we should be moved by our major values and we should value what our major motives seek. . . . [S]uch harmony is a mark of a good life.”<sup>1</sup> If what our normative theory says really matters should connect up with what we care about when we are caring in the best way, then a self-effacing theory will prove inadequate. Further, if the things that naturally motivate us when we are performing action X in the best way do not factor in the theory’s justification for X, then the theory owes us a story about how the things the theory takes to be important connect up with our motives (Stocker 1976, 75).

Finally, a self-effacing theory may prevent us from performing the best sorts of action in an even more radical way. If what the theory says really matters differs from what we care about when we are moved to perform admirable, loving acts, then thinking about what the theory says may undermine our ability to care about our friends and loved ones in the best way (Stocker 1976, 75). If loving them in the best way involves loving them for their own sake, but the theory encourages us to view loving them as a means to some other end then the theory may undermine our ability to love them not only occasionally but also in a more systematic, and thus more disturbing, way.

In “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories” Stocker limits himself to the task of pointing out that common versions of deontology and consequentialism have a problem. He does not go on to make the further claim that virtue ethics is better situated in this regard. But, given the agent-based approach to moral evaluation

---

<sup>1</sup> Stocker 1976, 66. A similar thought informs Gary Watson’s suggestion that an agent’s motivational system should be in harmony with her valuational system (2004, 25-26).

that Stocker has championed in other articles (1970a, 1970b, 1973a, 1973b, 1979, 1981), it is tempting to read it as implying an argument of the following sort.<sup>2</sup>

1. If she is to act in the morally best way, a utilitarian or deontologist cannot let what her theory says justifies her action serve as her motive for acting (Stocker 1976, 68).
2. A virtue ethicist does not run into the same problem.
3. Virtue ethics is preferable to utilitarianism and deontology (at least in this respect).

However, recently Thomas Hurka and Simon Keller have argued that premise two is false. Virtue ethics is likewise self-effacing. To see why, let us return to Jones' hospital room.

Stocker's original examples took the following form.

1. Deontologist – I came to visit you because by so doing I would fulfil my duty.
2. Act utilitarian – I came to visit you because it was the action whereby I could maximize happiness.

When one looks at a virtue ethicist's reasons, Hurka and Keller insist, one observes something similar.

3. Virtue ethicist A – I came to visit you because it is what the fully virtuous person would do (Keller 2007, 225).
4. Virtue ethicist B – I came to visit you because it was conducive to my flourishing (Hurka 2001, 246-7).<sup>3</sup>

One would not expect Jones to be any more pleased if Smith was motivated by 3 or 4 than she was when he was motivated by 1 or 2. From this Hurka and Keller conclude

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Michael Slote (1992, 149-50) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1999, 94).

<sup>3</sup> Christine Swanton (1997) voices a similar concern; however, as we shall see, she does not join Hurka and Keller in concluding that this problem is insurmountable for the virtue ethicist.

that virtue ethics is no better off than consequentialism and deontology with respect to self-effacement.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Two types of self-effacement

In response to worries like these, Julia Annas (2008) attempts to defend virtue ethics by re-orienting the debate around an alternative conception of self-effacement. Up to this point in our discussion, to say that a theory is self-effacing has been to say that, at least sometimes, a good agent could not be motivated by what the theory says justifies her action when she is acting in the best way (call this SE1). Annas introduces a related, but nevertheless distinct, sense of self-effacement, which she suggests gets nearer to the root of the issue between consequentialists and virtue ethicists. A theory is self-effacing in the second sense (SE2) if thinking about what the theory says justifies her action would lead her to perform some act (where the act is defined merely in terms of externally observable qualities and does not include a reference to the agent's motive) that the theory itself would not endorse.<sup>5</sup> A paradigmatic example of a theory that is self-effacing in the second sense is act consequentialism. Annas, following Sidgwick, observes that we are not very good at calculating the consequences of our actions. If we tried to do so, we would end up producing worse consequences than if we employed the inexact, common sense resources that tend to guide our everyday practical reasoning. So if we are going to

---

<sup>4</sup> In fact each of them thinks virtue ethics is worse off with respect to self-effacement than is consequentialism.

<sup>5</sup> Annas does not spell out the differences between these two sense of self-effacement this explicitly. But I think this characterization captures the heart of the contrast between the sense of self-effacement upon which her argument depends (SE2) and that on which Keller's and Hurka's arguments depend (SE1). SE1 and SE2 differ not only from one another, but also from Parfit's sense of self-effacement (SE3). A theory would be self-effacing in his sense (SE3) if it "told everyone to cause himself to believe some other theory" (1984, 24). SE1 and SE2 identify two of the possible reasons a theory might tell everyone not to believe it, but there may be other reasons for a theory to be SE3.

perform the actions consequentialism recommends, we cannot think about calculating consequences (Annas 2008, 210).

Annas concedes that virtue ethics is self-effacing in the first sense.

“Fortunately,” she claims, SE1 “is perfectly harmless” (2008, 212; similarly, Slote 2001, 42-4). The problematic type of self-effacement is SE2, and virtue ethics is not self-effacing in this second sense. Annas attempts to show this in respect to both virtue ethicist A and virtue ethicist B. To begin with the former, ordinarily, “the truly virtuous person . . . will not explicitly think about” acting as the fully virtuous person would act (2008, 212). Nor will she think about manifesting some particular virtue. Instead, she will think about the person who is hurt, for example, and about what she can do to help that person. Nevertheless, she *could* think about manifesting a virtue or acting like the fully virtuous person, as she might be inclined to do if she were explaining her action to “a beginner in virtue.” And if she (or the beginner) did think about the situation in terms of manifesting the virtue of charity or in terms of acting as the fully virtuous person would act, she would still accurately identify the action the theory recommends and could perform that action (Annas 2008; Pettigrove and Meyer, 2009).

Admittedly, if her only motivation were the thought that this is what the fully virtuous person would do, then the agent in question would not be performing the correct action precisely *as* the virtuous agent would perform it. Although acting *in accordance with* virtue, she would not be acting *from* virtue or “such as to show possession of a virtue” (Foot 1978, 13). Nevertheless, she could still perform the correct action. In this regard, Annas points out, there is a crucial difference between the consequentialist and the virtue ethicist with respect to self-effacement.



Annas employs a similar strategy in response to concerns about someone like virtue ethicist B, who justifies her actions by appealing to agent flourishing. She notes the different role that thoughts of flourishing will play in the beginner versus in the truly virtuous. The person who is still at an early stage in the development of the virtues may need to remind himself that performing benevolent actions and habituating himself to perform such actions will ultimately contribute to his own flourishing, in order to overcome his inclination to choose some less benevolent alternative. However, “as he becomes more virtuous, he will no longer need reminders about the point of being virtuous; these thoughts will gradually, as they are no longer needed, become effaced from his deliberations, and he will simply act, think, and feel virtuously without explicitly thinking about the point of it” (2008, 213).

By shifting the terms of the debate Annas is able to defend something like the argument with which we began: the consequentialist has a problem the virtue ethicist does not. However, there are two reasons for remaining dissatisfied with Annas’ response. First, the appeal to agent flourishing does not work quite as neatly as Annas suggests. Thinking about flourishing, whether as beginner or as mature virtuous agent, may not lead one to identify and perform the virtuous action. Aristotle quite plausibly claims that for a person to flourish she must enjoy certain social and material benefits as well as possessing a moral character of the appropriate sort.<sup>6</sup> If this is the case, then what is to guarantee that, if a conflict arises between the moral and non-moral elements of her flourishing, the agent who is considering her flourishing will derive from that consideration an overriding reason to act in accordance with virtue (Everitt 2007, 280-81)? A theory in which the justification for the virtues is their conduciveness to the flourishing of the agent who possesses them, appears to be self-

---

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle 1099a31ff. See also Hursthouse (1999, 171ff.).

effacing not only in the first sense, but also in the second. Thinking about what the theory says justifies her action may lead the agent to perform an act other than the one the theory would endorse. So the appeal to flourishing, unlike the appeal to the actions of the fully virtuous agent, may not be harmless.

This first objection does not pose an insurmountable challenge to a virtue ethical account that forges a link between the virtues and human flourishing. The defender of a flourishing account might respond by making a concern for one's flourishing identical to a concern for acting virtuously.<sup>7</sup> If virtue is a necessary condition for flourishing, and thinking about flourishing involves thinking about acting virtuously, then the theory that appeals to flourishing can avoid being self-effacing (SE2) in the same way that the appeal to the imagined actions of the virtuous agent did.<sup>8</sup>

The second objection to Annas' defense of virtue ethics, however, is more serious. Insofar as Stocker's example made us uneasy, it made us uneasy about SE1. Jones is not complaining that Smith has performed the wrong act, where 'act' is defined without reference to motive. In the case where Smith is an act utilitarian, Jones is not concerned about the odds of Smith having performed his utility calculations accurately. She would still be put out, we would expect, even if she knew Smith were a perfect utility calculator. Her complaint is that Smith has acted from the wrong reasons if his motivation is the thought that visiting her is the best

---

<sup>7</sup> Annas herself pursues such a strategy (2008, 209).

<sup>8</sup> Notice that this response involves more than merely making the possession of virtue a necessary constituent of flourishing. For one might possess virtue to some requisite degree and still, on occasion, act in a way that is neither from virtue nor even in accordance with virtue. This would leave open the possibility that thinking about promoting her flourishing might lead an agent to give preference to certain non-moral elements of her flourishing and perform an action that the theory would not endorse. The identity claim closes off this possibility, either by eliminating non-moral elements from the account of flourishing or by stipulating that they are always subordinate to the moral elements of an agent's flourishing. Notice, as well, that if one pursues this strategy, the idea of flourishing can no longer provide an independent justification for the virtues, as it does for Hursthouse. Nor – *contra* Annas – can flourishing, on such an account, be “the point of being virtuous” (2008, 213).

available way for him to maximize utility. And the force of the complaint is not altered if Smith is thinking about what an ideal moral agent would do or about what will contribute to his own flourishing rather than about calculating maximal utility. Addressing this objection will require a different tack than Annas has employed.

### 3. Avoiding self-effacement

The first step toward providing a defense of virtue ethics against the charge of self-effacement (SE1) involves noticing how many very different things might be lumped together under the label of “justifying an action.”<sup>9</sup> One thing that might be offered under this label is best described as a *justification for a particular audience*. The nature of this justification, and what will count as a justification, will vary based on the identity of one’s interlocutor. If someone is addressing a beginner in virtue who is wondering why she thought that X was the thing to do in this situation, it may be sufficient for her to say, “It is what Sensei would do, were he in that position.” But this clearly will not be an answer that would count as a justification for an amoralist. If she is addressing a card-carrying member of her own ethical (sub)community a number of things will count as justifications that would not so count if her interlocutor were a member of another ethical (sub)community. For example, referring to an argument as *ad hominem* will carry a different weight if she is addressing a fellow philosopher than it will if she is addressing a political speech writer. That is not to say that a reasonable speech writer could not be brought to see the questionable merits of *ad hominem* arguments and take that as a justification for omitting certain sentences from a speech. The point is simply that it does not yet provide him with

---

<sup>9</sup> For interesting discussions of some of these distinctions see Williams (1981), Taylor (1995a, 1995b), Broome (2004), Hieronymi (2005), and Gert (2007).

something that he will recognize as a reason or that he will take to be an end to the line of questioning that gives shape to this portion of their conversation.

One might think that features related to the audience one is addressing, while relevant to agents who find themselves asked to give reasons for their actions, are not relevant when the justification in question is being offered by a theory, rather than an agent. However, such a conclusion would be premature. We noted above that one of the things that normative ethical theories are routinely expected to provide is action-guidance, i.e., an answer to the question, “What should I do?”. Typically, such guidance is sought by and addressed to persons who are already members of the moral community and who are committed, to some degree, to the project of trying to act well. A quite different thing that is often expected of a normative theory is to provide an answer to the question, “Why should I do *that*?” when it is posed by a sceptic or an amoralist. A normative theory may offer different answers to these two questions, each of which may correctly be described as what, according to the theory, ‘justifies’ an action. One of the things that we shall need to disambiguate, when formulating a response to the charge that virtue ethics is self-effacing (SE1), is which of these senses of justification is in view when the charge is levelled.

A second ambiguity related to “justifying an action” also has a bearing on the issue of self-effacement. When one says that reason *R* justifies doing *X* one may be offering a *sufficient reason* for doing *X*. On the other hand, one may be suggesting that *R* is not only a sufficient reason but also a *compelling reason*, such that doing something other than *X* would be blameworthy. Closely related to the distinction between sufficient and compelling reasons is the distinction between *promoting* (or *enabling*) and *constraining* reasons, and this, too, has a bearing on the ambiguities surrounding the notion of “justifying an action”. The former are reasons *for* caring

about, desiring, valuing, or promoting qualities of X. The latter restrict the scope of those things we should care about, desire, value, or promote. If we combine these contrasting types, we find that saying an action is justified by *R* could mean four quite different things. *R* could provide a sufficient promoting reason, a compelling promoting reason, a sufficient constraining reason, or a compelling constraining reason.

Finally, when we speak of what justifies an action we may be identifying the feature of the action that makes it good. Or, on the other hand, we may simply be indicating that it meets some criterion that can be used to identify good actions. The *criterion* used for picking out good actions may involve an *identification of the good-making feature of the action*. But it need not.

Before we look at the implications of these different senses of what justifies an action, we should clarify one further term, viz., motive. The motive of an action can be analysed in terms of two components: 1) that *for* which we act and 2) that *from* which we act. An agent's action-guiding thought or purpose identifies that for which she acts. The cares, concerns, desires, aversions, dispositions, etc. that – together with her action-guiding thought – move her to act supply the second component.<sup>10</sup>

Distinguishing between the many things that go by the name of a justification for an action enables us to clarify what would be required to avoid self-effacement. And this, in turn, enables us to formulate a different response to Hurka and Keller on behalf of virtue ethics than Annas develops. Recall that a theory is self-effacing (SE1) if, at least sometimes, a good agent could not be motivated by what the theory says justifies her action when she is acting in the best way. Once we spell out some of the very different things that go by the name of a 'justification' for an action, we can see

---

<sup>10</sup> Compare Stocker (1970b) 137, (1979) 221ff., and (1981) 760ff.; and Herman (1996) 25.

that many of them are neither identifying nor even attempting to identify something that would serve as an agent's motive when she is performing an excellent action in an excellent way.

For example, the kind of reason that is offered to the amoralist or the moral sceptic typically appeals to a very narrow range of self-interested desires that we expect the agent to have. Given that these reasons are aimed at answering the question, "What is in it for me?", it is unsurprising that such reasons would fail to provide an appropriate motivation for an action whose point was to benefit someone else. Appeals to agent-flourishing often play this role in discussions of virtue ethics. As long as the virtue ethicist has another justification available to her that could provide a suitable motive for excellent actions done in an excellent way, she need not be troubled if the appeal to agent-flourishing does not fulfill this role.

Similarly, as Stocker's hospital example shows, the kind of justification that appeals to a *mere criterion* of commendable action<sup>11</sup> does not provide a suitable motive for certain excellent actions that are performed in an excellent way. And this is why the response of virtue ethicist A strikes us as problematic, since the appeal to what the virtuous agent would do is an appeal to what is intended to be a mere criterion. The fact that this is what the virtuous person would do is not (at least on most accounts) what makes the action good.<sup>12</sup> So even if it is able to tell us *what* one should do, it does not tell us *why*. As a result, the person whose trip to see his hospitalized friend was motivated by the mere criterion would be motivated by the wrong sort of reason. Once again, provided the theory makes other justifications available to her, the virtue ethicist need not be troubled by the fact that the thought "the virtuous agent would do X in this situation" could not be her motive for doing X.

---

<sup>11</sup> This is what Stocker refers to as an index rather than a determinant of goodness (1976, 75-76).

<sup>12</sup> For a nice discussion of this point, see Sandler (2007) 87-91.

What is required to avoid self-effacement (SE1) is not that every justification for an action be capable of serving as an agent's motive when she is performing an excellent action. Nor is it that every informative normative claim offered by a theory be capable of serving as a motive.<sup>13</sup> Rather, it is that its major or fundamental values be capable of serving as its major motives.

What kind of justification does an ethical theory need to supply in order to avoid being self-effacing? The preceding discussion of the appeal to the virtuous agent points us in the direction of an answer. If what the theory says justifies the action is to be capable of serving as an agent's *motive* when she is performing an excellent action in an excellent way, then the theory will need to provide a) a particular sort of account of what makes the action good and b) the right sort of linkage between its criterion (or criteria) of good action and what makes the action good.

If it is going to be possible for what the theory says makes an action good to serve as the agent's action-guiding thought, then one thing that will need to be true of the theory is that it must adopt a pluralist conception of value. It must accommodate the fact that there are a number of quite different ways in which different actions can be good. In cases like the hospital visit, a reason that in other circumstances would be good fails even to be adequate. And, importantly, this failure is not due to the production of bad consequences or a deficiency in respect for duty. On some other occasion, were Smith drawn to the hospital to visit *strangers* who were ill and needed cheering up, there would be nothing problematic about his being motivated by a sense of duty or a calculation of consequences. The difficulty arises in the case we have been considering because Smith and Jones are friends and thoughts of duty or generic

---

<sup>13</sup> Thus, Keller's objection to a *de re* criterion and Slote's argument based on the principle that "it is better to act from feeling than from duty" fail to establish that virtue ethics is self-effacing (Keller 2007, 229; and Slote 2001, 45).

consequence calculations do not seem to be the right kinds of motives for acts of friendship. However, it is worth noting that one need not appeal to relations between friends in order to raise the problem of self-effacement. Imagine that, while enjoying a stroll through Albert Park, Myles sees a child fall into the fountain. Presumably he would not be criticized by the child's parents if he were motivated to rescue her by thoughts about duty or net utility. But surely it would be better, even here, if he were moved instead by a concern for the child and her plight.

Someone who is a monist about goodness or value, who thinks that all apparently different types of value are really instances of or grounded in a single, underlying quality,<sup>14</sup> will have difficulty avoiding the charge of self-effacement,<sup>15</sup> because different action-guiding thoughts are required for different kinds of excellent action. The thoughts and attitudes one has when manifesting a type of goodness like creative self-expression will be different from those in which one is benevolently promoting another's good. And each of these (which involve promoting or enabling reasons) will differ, in turn, from a tragic situation in which an agent is forced to choose the lesser of two regrettable options (which is likely to involve responding to one or more constraining reasons). So a virtue ethical account that would avoid self-effacement will need to allow for a plurality of values.

However, even the virtue ethicist who accepts a plurality of values and for whom the virtues involve appropriate modes of responding to those values might not be off the self-effacement hook. Part of what motivates the hospital case is that the concrete person of the friend drops out of the picture when one offers any of the four types of reasons with which we began section 1. In certain circumstances, such as when a triage doctor in a military field hospital is assessing who should be treated first,

---

<sup>14</sup> Such as, for example, Roger Crisp (2006).

<sup>15</sup> Swanton (1997) develops this point in some detail. She notes that this is one of the reasons Annas is subject to the charge of self-effacement.



attending to the concrete individual may not be relevant to determining and pursuing the best course of action. The doctor focuses on the nature of the wounds with which he is confronted. Whose wounds they are is not relevant to his action. But most actions, even most medical actions, are unlike the actions of the triage doctor. In most cases, it is important to attend to the persons with whom one is interacting, as one is considering their pleasure, their preferences, or their well-being.<sup>16</sup> In the hospital case with which we have been concerned, the lack of attention to the concrete person of the friend is not a mere accident of the way in which the case has been described. It is symptomatic of a condition that affects many accounts of good action. In “traditional views of morally good action . . . the most general classification seems to have been reified and itself taken as the morally relevant goal” (Stocker 1976, 78).

Virtue ethics, even one that accepts a plurality of values, could be susceptible to the same charge. If what makes benevolence valuable is that it benefits someone-or-other, and if what makes this action good is the fact that it is benevolent, then a variant of Keller’s objection can be revived. Jones can once again complain that Smith’s visit is motivated in a way that detracts from its value. In order to avoid the charge of self-effacement, a virtue ethicist must allow concrete as well as abstract value a place in her value theory.<sup>17</sup> Within such a theory it will be the fact that it is benefitting this person – as opposed to promoting net utility or well-being – that makes this act of benevolence good. What is good, on such a theory, about the best kind of visit that Smith might make to the hospital is that he goes as a friend in order

---

<sup>16</sup> A common complaint in medical contexts is that doctors adopt the impersonal triage approach when it is not appropriate. Both to avoid such complaints and to combat the temptation to adopt the impersonal stance, doctors often make efforts to address their patients by name. “Because,” as Iris Murdoch observes, “it’s somehow easier to think about somebody if you know their name” (1969, 18).

<sup>17</sup> Stocker (1997, 209). This is a commitment to which many virtue ethicists will already be amenable. See, for example, MacIntyre (1984), Nussbaum (1990), and Swanton (2003).

to cheer her up. And he does so for her sake, “not for an ulterior reason” (Stocker 1981, 752). In the best instance, these are the things that move him.

These observations about making room in the theory for a plurality of concrete goods not only take care of the first task (a) mentioned above, they also point us in a promising direction with regard to the second (b). What is required in a non-self-effacing theory are criteria of what one should do that are transparent. That is, they must direct one’s attention to what makes the action good.<sup>18</sup> The type of virtue theory that emerges from these reflections is what Christine Swanton (2003) has called a target-centered view. The *virtues* will be defined, at least partly, in terms of the goods that they acknowledge, respond to, and/or promote. Different virtues will be distinguished from one another partly on the basis of the goods that they acknowledge, respond to, or promote, and partly on the basis of the way in which they acknowledge, respond to, or promote those goods. The *target of a virtue* will be defined in terms of these goods and the ways in which they are acknowledged, responded to, or promoted. Finally, the *criteria for good acts* will be defined in terms of hitting the targets of the virtues.<sup>19</sup>

To see how such a theory can avoid self-effacement, let us revisit Jones in the hospital. The relevant virtue in this case is *philia*, the virtue of friendship. Smith’s act will be good if it hits the target of *philia* (this is the pertinent criterion). The target of *philia* in the context of this friendship will be defined by certain facts about Jones and his relationship with her. So thinking about the criterion of good action, in this case, will involve thinking about Jones and his relationship with her. The criterion is in this sense transparent, since grasping the criterion involves seeing through it to the

---

<sup>18</sup> They will be, in Scanlon’s sense, at least partially buck-passing. See Scanlon (1998, 96) and Parfit (2001, 20) 20.

<sup>19</sup> Swanton (2003, 233-234). However, as shall become clear in the next section, the account of right action that I offer differs from hers.

concrete facts of the case. References to a virtuous act (do the benevolent thing, do what is courageous, behave temperately, etc.), for a well-informed agent, simply direct her attention to a familiar constellation of value-constituting factors that make up the target of the virtue.<sup>20</sup> And thoughts about these facts are precisely what will move Smith when he is paying the best sort of visit to Jones.

#### 4. Virtue ethics or an ethics of outcome?

I have argued, contra Hurka, Keller, and Annas, that virtue ethics need not be self-effacing. However, at this point there are two objections that one might raise against the argument I have offered. First, although I have explained how a virtue-ethical criterion for good action can avoid the charge of self-effacement, actions can be good without being all-things-considered good. If, as is usual, there is more than one virtuous act that an agent might perform on a given occasion, the agent will need to decide between them. In fact, much of moral evaluation is concerned with the question of whether, when deciding between two competing good acts, an agent has chosen well. To address this concern a normative theory needs to provide a criterion of right action. And, one might think, once a virtue ethical theory has provided such a criterion, the problem of self-effacement will re-emerge. It is, after all, precisely at this stage that the problem has been raised for consequentialism and deontology.

The second objection is that even if the view sketched above avoids self-effacement, I have not succeeded in defending *virtue ethics* from the charge of self-effacement, because there is nothing distinctively virtue-ethical about the view I have presented. It is really a consequentialist account: What makes an act good is that it

---

<sup>20</sup> The question of why these constellations are familiar is amenable to a number of different answers. It might be because they connect up with human motivation in the way that Foot proposes in “Virtues and Vices”. Or it might be because certain ‘spheres of experience’ figure “in more or less any human life” (Nussbaum 1988, 35).

promotes certain good ends, which in this case are the ends that constitute the targets of the virtues. Or, if it is not exactly consequentialist, it nevertheless ought to be classified with “ethics of outcome” rather than with “ethics of virtue” (Watson 1990, 456).

In response to the first objection, let us return to the *mere criterion* of right action discussed above, viz., “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances” (Hursthouse 1999, 28). What would a virtuous agent characteristically do? An answer that nearly every virtue ethicist would accept is that the virtuous agent would respond to her circumstances in a way that manifested practical wisdom. If the defining feature of practical wisdom is “perceiving the details of situations correctly” (Hursthouse 2006, 300), then we find ourselves with a criterion of right action that dovetails with the criterion of good action offered above and avoids self-effacement: *An action is right only if it is what someone would do who perceived the details of the situation correctly.* (Note that this is meant to identify a necessary but not sufficient condition for right action. Note, as well, that although ‘rightness’ and ‘correctness’ can be used synonymously, they are not being so used in this sentence. ‘Correctness’ in this context has the sense of ‘accuracy’ and ‘right’ means ‘commendable’.)

Those who are accustomed to deontological or consequentialist criteria of right action often find the *practical wisdom criterion* offered above frustrating because it strikes them as vacuous. But what prompts them to see it as vacuous (and I shall explain in a moment why it is not) is precisely what makes it useful for addressing the charge of self-effacement. Deontologists and consequentialists have traditionally offered criteria of right action that do a lot of theoretical work. And it is precisely because of this fact that they are open to the charge of self effacement (SE1),

because such criteria draw the deliberating agent's attention away from the concrete features of the situation that would make the commendable action good. The agent is invited to think about formal qualities of her principles of action (if she is a deontologist of a Kantian sort) or about further ends that might be promoted by this action (if she is an act consequentialist). By contrast, the practical wisdom criterion invites the deliberating agent to look carefully at the goods that make up the targets of the virtues. Deciding which of them should determine one's action need not involve looking at or thinking about something else. Rather, it involves something like seeing the relevant goods clearly. Just as, when trying to determine which of two shades of blue is lighter, one decides the matter by looking at them carefully (perhaps in different lights or at different levels of magnification, but looking at them all the same), so also, when an agent is trying to decide which of two available virtuous acts is better she looks carefully at their particular targets to "see" which (if either) of them is better.

Of course a theory that employed a criterion of right action like the practical wisdom criterion would be obliged to provide an account of what was meant by and involved in accurate moral perception. And such an account might run into other difficulties. But these difficulties would not be directly pertinent to the issue of self-effacement.

Responding to the second objection requires noting that character is a necessary constituent of the target-centered theory in a way that has not been fully explicated up to this point in the paper. By itself, of course, the claim that character plays an important role in the theory does not show that the theory does not offer an ethic of outcome. After all, character plays an important role in character

consequentialism, as well.<sup>21</sup> A further claim must be added in order to address the objection, namely, that the importance of character within a virtue ethical account that is not self-effacing is misconstrued when one attempts to explicate its goodness simply in terms of outcomes.

To see why the target-centered virtue theory is not an ethics of outcome, consider it in contrast to the type of character consequentialism that Julia Driver has advanced. Driver defines a moral virtue as “a character trait . . . which, generally speaking, produces good consequences for others” (1996, 122). Similarly, a vice is a trait that, “generally speaking . . . leads to bad effects” (1996, 123-4). On a story like this, it is irrelevant which motives or intentions might be characteristic of the trait. Provided a trait reliably produces good consequences, it does not matter what trait it is.

Obviously, character consequentialism will be self-effacing. Whether it defines a good action by way of a direct appeal to its consequences (a good act is the one that would produce the best consequences), or an indirect appeal to its consequences (a good act is one that would be performed by an agent who possessed the character trait most conducive to producing the best consequences), Smith cannot attend to what it says makes an action good when he is paying the best sort of visit to Jones. So if the position sketched in Section 3 were too much like Driver-style consequentialism (call it DC), it would fail to avoid self-effacement.

There are two respects in which the virtue ethical account will diverge from DC. First, unlike DC, for the virtue ethicist, it is not enough for the character trait to lead to good consequences. The objects of the agent’s care and concern must themselves be good. Second, not only will certain motives be ineliminable elements of certain virtues, this fact will be important for the full assessment of good actions.

---

<sup>21</sup> See Adams (1976), Watson (1990), Hurka (2001), Driver (2001), Bradley (2005), and Russell (2007).

For example, the kind of love that is a characteristic virtue of friendship will play an important role in Smith's best trip to see Jones. He will visit her in order to cheer her up and for her own sake *out of friendship*.

Clarifying the difference between the virtue ethical position and DC goes some way toward distinguishing the position articulated in Section 3 from an ethics of outcome. A key difference that emerges when thinking about the example of friendship is that the appeal to acting *out of friendship* is not teleological (Stocker 1981; and Scanlon 1998, 88-90). The goodness of the best kind of action in such cases, the virtue ethicist insists, is not merely a matter of ends but also a matter of origins. As such, it resists characterization in terms of an ethics of outcomes.

However, one might attempt to overcome that resistance by including a reference to the agent's motive in the characterization of the state of affairs that the optimal action is said to bring about (Stocker 1969). To revert to the Smith-Jones case, the good visit will be the one that brings about the following state of affairs: a) cheering Jones up for her own sake by visiting her out of friendship. And this will, in various ways, be a better state of affairs than b) cheering Jones up by visiting her, or even c) cheering Jones up for her own sake by visiting her.<sup>22</sup> (Call this TC, insofar as it resembles the target-centered view we have been discussing.)

There are two things to notice about a view like TC. First, the same sort of strategy could be employed to convert deontological norms into "outcome" form (Stocker 1969). What makes it good to keep a promise to person X, one might say, is that doing so produces the following good outcome: benefitting X by keeping a promise. Some, of course, will find this a strength of the view. Others will consider it a weakness. Whichever side one is on, one thing is certain: We are a long way from

---

<sup>22</sup> See Hurka (2006).

the point where the ethics of requirement was defined in contrast to the ethics of outcome. For, on this view, an agent's character plays a foundational (even if not exhaustive) role in defining both goodness and rightness.

Second, one might ask, "Of what are (a) and its analogs an outcome?" The answer to this question is not entirely clear. However, it is clear that it cannot be an outcome of the Smith's deliberation and decision to act *if* "outcome" is meant to be the kind of thing that could be an agent's objective. For he could not act in order to visit her out of friendship and at the same time visit her out of friendship, any more than he could act in order to act out of duty and at the same time act out of duty. If one attempts to incorporate the motive into the end, one thereby changes the end. And it should come as no surprise if an act that is aimed at a different end proves, in important respects, to be a different act.<sup>23</sup> That is not to say that there might not be a systematic relationship between aiming at the one and performing the other. In fact, the virtue ethicist traditionally has insisted that there is such a relationship. Thus, a parent might encourage her child to aim at becoming more benevolent, for example. If the child responds to this direction, she might frequently think about being benevolent and allow such thoughts to direct her action in such a way that she acts for the sake of benevolence and in accordance with benevolence but not from benevolence. Nevertheless, thinking about benevolence in this way may make her more alert to the proper objects of benevolence. And acting with the aim of becoming more benevolent may habituate her in attending to such features of her environment and giving them a certain priority in directing her actions. In this way, aiming at the one may eventually lead to achieving the other. Nevertheless, in their individual instances the two acts will remain distinct.

---

<sup>23</sup> See Herman (1996) and Hieronymi (2008) for nice discussions of this point.



But does this not mean that a target-centered virtue ethics is back on the self-effacement hook? By attempting to incorporate the appropriate motive into the description of the good state of affairs, TC guarantees that it will be a self-effacing theory. For what it claims makes the action valuable cannot be the agent's conscious thought at the time she performs the best action.

Addressing this objection requires us to return to the characterization of a 'motive' that was offered in Section 2. There it was noted that a motive involves two elements: 1) that for which one acts, and 2) that from which one acts. Most of the paper has focused on ways in which what makes an action good could be the first of these elements. And that is surely part of the story, but it is not the whole of it. Some of what makes an action good, the virtue ethicist insists, has to do with the second element, viz., that from which one acts. Although "out of friendship" or "as a manifestation of the virtue *philia*" cannot be the object of one's action, they nevertheless can be a crucial part of one's motive. Noting the second element of a motive enables the account I have offered to address the self-effacement worry. According to SE1, a theory is self-effacing if a good agent could not be motivated by what the theory says justifies her action when she is acting in the best way. On the account I am proposing, part of what makes the action good is included in the contents of the virtues. Those good-making features can provide the first element in an agent's motive when she is acting in the best way. The other part of what makes the action good is provided by the desires, attitudes, emotions, and dispositions from which the agent acts. And these good-making features can provide the second element in the agent's motive when she is acting in the best way. Together these two types of good-making feature compose the class of fundamental values for the target-centered virtue ethicist. So not only can some of the things the theory says justify an

action serve as the agent's motive when she is acting in the best way, the theory expects its fundamental values to play precisely this role.

## Conclusion

This paper began by offering several reasons for thinking an ethical theory ought not be self-effacing. If these reasons are compelling, then more attention ought to be devoted to developing theories that avoid self-effacement. I have identified a number of conditions that a theory must meet if it is to avoid self-effacement and have argued that a virtue ethical theory of a certain sort – one with target-centered criteria for good action and a practical wisdom criterion of right action – can satisfy these conditions. However, it has not been my aim to show that, of the three standard approaches to normative ethics, virtue ethics is best situated to avoid being self-effacing. It may be that, by paying more careful attention to the very different things that go by the name of 'justification,' a non-virtue-ethical account could likewise avoid self-effacement. Indeed, it may be hoped that this paper, by clarifying what is at stake, has made the articulation of such an account more likely.<sup>24</sup>

## References

- Adams, Robert Merrihew. 1976. Motive Utilitarianism. *Journal of Philosophy* 73: 467-481.
- Annas, Julia. 2008. Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism. In *Morality and Self-Interest*, ed. Paul Bloomfield, 205-23. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aristotle. 2000. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

---

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to audiences at the University of Glasgow, the University of Stirling, and the Australasian Association of Philosophy Meeting in Christchurch, New Zealand for feedback on earlier versions of this paper. I am particularly indebted to Michael Brady, Garrett Cullity, Rosalind Hursthouse, Jonathan McKeown-Green, Bill Ransome, and Christine Swanton for numerous discussions of the issues addressed herein.

- Bradley, Ben. 2005. Virtue Consequentialism. *Utilitas* 17: 282-98.
- Brady, Michael. 2005. The Value of the Virtues. *Philosophical Studies* 125: 85-113.
- Broome, John. 2004. Reasons. In *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, ed. R. Jay Wallace, 28-55. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crisp, Roger. 2006. *Reasons and the Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Driver, Julia. 1996. The Virtues and Human Nature. In *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*, ed. Roger Crisp. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2001. *Uneasy Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Everitt, Nicholas. 2007. Some Problems with Virtue Theory. *Philosophy* 82: 275-99.
- Foot, Philippa. 1978. *Virtues and Vices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gert, Joshua. 2007. Normative Strength and the Balance of Reasons. *Philosophical Review* 116: 533-62.
- Herman, Barbara. 1996. Integrity and Impartiality. In *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 23-44. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hieronymi, Pamela. 2005. The Wrong Kind of Reason. *The Journal of Philosophy* 102: 437-457.
- . 2008. The Reasons of Trust. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86: 213-36.
- Hurka, Thomas. 2001. *Virtue, Vice and Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2006. Value and Friendship: A More Subtle View. *Utilitas* 18: 232-42.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 1999. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2006. Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 106: 285-309.
- Keller, Simon. 2007. Virtue Ethics Is Self-Effacing. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85.2.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1969. *The Nice and the Good*. New York: Penguin.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1988. Non-Relative Virtues. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13: 32-53.

- . 1990. *Love's Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2001. Rationality and Reasons. In *Exploring Practical Philosophy: From Action to Values*, ed. D. Egonsson, J. Josefsson, B. Petersson, and T. Ronnow-Rasmussen, 17-39. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing.
- Pettigrove, Glen and Michael Meyer. 2009. Moral Ambition. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87: 285-99.
- Russell, Luke. 2007. What Even Consequentialists Should Say about the Virtues. *Utilitas* 19: 466-86.
- Sandler, Ronald. 2007. *Character and Environment*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Slote, Michael. 1992. *From Morality to Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2001. *Morals from Motives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, T.M. 1998. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stocker, Michael. 1969. Consequentialism and Its Complexities. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6: 276-89.
- . 1970a. Intentions and Act Evaluations. *Journal of Philosophy* 67: 589-602.
- . 1970b. Morally Good Intentions. *The Monist* 54: 124-41.
- . 1973a. Rightness and Goodness: Is There a Difference? *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10: 87-98.
- . 1973b. Act and Agent Evaluations. *Review of Metaphysics* 27: 42-61.
- . 1976. The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories. *Journal of Philosophy* 73: 453-66. Reprinted in 1997. *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, 66-78. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1979. Good Intentions in Greek and Modern Moral Virtue. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 57: 220-24.
- . 1981. Values and Purposes: The Limits of Teleology and the Ends of Friendship. *Journal of Philosophy* 78: 747-65.
- . 1997. Abstract and Concrete Value: Plurality, Conflict, and Maximization. In *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Swanton, Christine. 1997. Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Indirection. *Utilitas* 9: 167-81.
- . 2003. *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1995a. Explanation and Practical Reason. In *Philosophical Arguments*, 34-60. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1995b. To Follow a Rule. In *Philosophical Arguments*, 165-80. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Watson, Gary. 1990. The Primacy of Character. In *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology*, ed. Owen Flanagan and Amelie Rorty. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- . 2004. *Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1981. Persons, Character, and Morality. In *Moral Luck*, 1-19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.