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CONTEMPORARY VIRTUE-ETHICAL ACCOUNTS OF RIGHT ACTION

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy, The University of Auckland, 2014.

## ABSTRACT

A longstanding objection to contemporary virtue ethics is that it cannot adequately account for the rightness of action. Promising to silence this objection, a variety of accounts of right action have been developed and defended by virtue ethicists in recent years. This thesis examines both the nature of virtue ethics and the adequacy of virtue-ethical accounts of right action. Focusing on the three most prominent virtue-ethical accounts of right action – Michael Slote’s agent-based account, Rosalind Hursthouse’s qualified-agent account, and Christine Swanton’s target-centered account – it argues that a modified version of the target-centered account is most plausible.

## PREFACE

I thank my supervisors (in alphabetical order): Rosalind Hursthouse, Glen Pettigrove, and Christine Swanton. Each of these supervisors provided excellent guidance and kind encouragement for which I am very grateful. I have been influenced by important aspects of the distinctive philosophical approaches and practices of each of my supervisors and I hope to make them proud of their roles in my philosophical, scholarly, and pedagogical development.

I especially thank Christine Swanton who has been the most involved in the writing of this thesis and who has gone far beyond the call of duty in her role as supervisor. Over the last four years, Christine has, through countless conversations and arguments, radically transformed both my philosophical views and my way of doing philosophy. I have no doubt that Christine's philosophical spirit will reside with me for the rest of my life. Christine has also been, as she called it during our first meeting, my "moral tutor", providing much needed emotional support which enabled me to persevere in completing the most difficult project I have ever undertaken.

I am grateful to both Education New Zealand and the University of Auckland for generous funding throughout my residence in New Zealand. Without such funding, the writing of this thesis would not have been possible.

Besides my supervisors, other members of the philosophical community at the University of Auckland – both faculty and fellow postgraduate students – have contributed to the completion of this thesis. I thank all of my peers and all faculty members, especially those who attended lectures with me, were involved in teaching-related activities with me, or who participated in the many stimulating reading groups held.

The project of this thesis is to consider how virtue ethicists can best account for the rightness of action. Representing the views of many philosophers in regard to the rise of contemporary virtue ethics in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Robert B. Louden objected that virtue ethics is "structurally unable to say much of anything about" the question, "What ought I to do?",<sup>1</sup> or about the rightness of action. In response, some virtue ethicists have argued that the notions of rightness and wrongness of action, at least as those notions

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<sup>1</sup> Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 227-236, at 229.

standardly feature in modern moral philosophy,<sup>2</sup> do not have a place in legitimate ethical theory.<sup>3</sup>

Other virtue ethicists have responded to the objection that there can be no satisfactory virtue-ethical accounts of right action by constructing and defending such accounts. I explore the adequacy of the latter response. Three decades after Louden's objection, virtue ethicists have a variety of accounts of rightness from which to choose. The question thus arises as to which of these types is most attractive. My conclusion in this thesis is that a target-centered account, if suitably developed, is the most plausible virtue-ethical account of right action.

In arguing for this claim, I consider the live options available to virtue ethicists in regard to right action – those options that contemporary virtue ethicists take seriously or have reason to take seriously. Among these options, I focus on the three most prominent – Michael Slote's agent-based account of right action, Rosalind Hursthouse's qualified-agent account, and Christine Swanton's target-centered account. I will also have occasion to discuss other virtue-ethical accounts in considering how Slote's, Hursthouse's, and Swanton's accounts might be modified in order to meet important objections.

Before beginning the analysis and evaluation of such accounts, my thesis begins with a discussion of how virtue ethics ought to be defined and what should be counted as a virtue-ethical account of right action. Louden's aforementioned objection was premised on the assumption that "for virtue ethics the central question is not "What ought I to *do*?" but rather "What sort of person ought I to *be*?"<sup>4</sup> Such a characterization of virtue ethics is misleading (specifically, the "rather" is misleading). Over the past three decades, not only have virtue ethicists constructed and defended a variety of virtue-ethical accounts of various topics, they have also worked toward a superior understanding of the nature of their own distinctive approach to ethics. Chapter 1 of this thesis contributes to this understanding by defending a definition of virtue ethics and by considering the relations between virtue ethics, consequentialism, and deontology.

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<sup>2</sup> It is standard to characterize "modern moral philosophy" in this context by reference to G.E.M. Anscombe's momentously influential article, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1-19. It is possible that mainstream contemporary moral philosophy is not modern moral philosophy in this sense.

<sup>3</sup> See Edmund L. Pincoffs, *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1986); Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); John Hacker-Wright, "Virtue Ethics without Right Action: Anscombe, Foot, and Contemporary Virtue Ethics," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 44 (2010): 209-224.

<sup>4</sup> Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," 229.

In Chapter 2, I analyze Michael Slote's agent-based account of right action. In doing so, I interpret the nature of agent-based virtue ethics and the nature of virtuous and vicious inner states on Slote's view. Additionally, I further develop Slote's view by pairing it with an account of motivation and the expression of motivation in action, since such notions are central in Slote's view of right action but are left unanalyzed in Slote's work.

In Chapter 3, I argue that Slote's account is correct to claim that the motivation of an action can be rightness-relevant, but I argue that it is incorrect to claim that all right-making and wrong-making features of action are motive-reducible features of action. In doing so, I consider the widely accepted distinction between the rightness and moral goodness of action, and I consider whether anything about the *moral* evaluation of action excludes there being cases of what Liezl van Zyl calls accidental rightness. I also discuss the breadth of fitting moral emotions in relation to these issues.

In Chapter 4, I interpret what is plausibly regarded as the default view of right action in contemporary virtue ethics – Rosalind Hursthouse's qualified-agent account. In doing so, I interpret Hursthouse's neo-Aristotelian view of virtuous agency, motivation, and practical wisdom, and I deal with several interpretive difficulties that arise from reflection on Hursthouse's criterion of right action. Such difficulties concern, for example, the individuation of circumstances, the individuation of actions, and Hursthouse's view of the bare concept of right action – the concept that is the subject matter of accounts of right action. I also discuss Hursthouse's distinction between right decisions and right actions, since this distinction importantly features in a reply to an objection discussed in the following chapter.

In Chapter 5, I argue that Robert N. Johnson's influential objection to Hursthouse's view is successful and I argue against two important replies to this objection. Further, since Johnson's objection has inspired some virtue ethicists to search for alternative qualified-agent criteria of rightness, I offer guidance to neo-Aristotelians engaged in this search by identifying what I argue is the source of the account's failure. It will turn out that Johnson's objection is plausibly seen as challenging an empirical, Aristotelian claim about virtue-development. I also argue in defense of Christine Swanton's objection that fully virtuous agents can, through inculpable ignorance, characteristically perform a non-right action.

In Chapter 6, I analyze Swanton's target-centered account of right action by interpreting its central claims. In interpreting these claims, I consider the ambiguity involved in describing an action as virtuous, the nature of hitting the targets of virtue, the nature of overall virtuousness, and the relation between an action's hitting the targets of virtue and its being

overall virtuous. I also discuss the relation between motivating reasons and hitting the targets of virtue as well as the nature of Swanton's holism in regard to overall virtuousness.

In Chapter 7, I defend the target-centered account's claim that an action is right just in case it is overall virtuous from important objections. Further, I reconstruct and evaluate Jonathan Dancy's argument for holism about reasons and consider its bearing on the interpretation of overall virtuousness of action outlined in Chapter 6. I argue that Dancy's argument for holism, although persuasive for what I call weak holism, does not lead to the conclusion that overall virtuousness is holistic, and I argue that Swanton's argument by example for holism in regard to overall virtuousness is not compelling. Nonetheless, I show that an interpretation of overall virtuousness in terms of defaults is neutral regarding whether holism about overall virtuousness is true.

In Chapter 8, I argue that the target-centered account is superior to both agent-based and qualified-agent accounts. After noting that the target-centered account escapes the objections to the virtue-ethical accounts discussed in the previous chapters, I argue that an additional way that the target-centered account is superior is in regard to its position regarding what makes actions right. Specifically, I argue that the target-centered account allows for the plausible view I call *recognitionism* regarding right-making features of action and that even the most resilient qualified-agent criterion of rightness is to be rejected on account of its denial of recognitionism.

I further argue in Chapter 8 that Swanton's version of the target-centered account is not completely successful in accounting for what makes actions right, since there are right-making features of action that it does not capture. Relatedly, I argue that Swanton's substantive position regarding the targets of virtue implies counter-intuitive evaluations of an action's being virtuous in regard to e.g. benevolence. In response, I show how target-centered accounts can be modified so as to avoid these objections. My conclusion is that a target-centered account modified accordingly is the most plausible virtue-ethical account of right action.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
PREFACE.....	iii
1. WHAT IS VIRTUE ETHICS?.....	1
1. The Definition of Virtue Ethics.....	1
1.1 Virtue Ethics and the Primacy of Character.....	2
1.2 Virtue Ethics and Virtue Notions.....	9
2. Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism, and Deontology.....	20
2.1 Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism.....	21
2.2 Virtue Ethics and Deontology.....	23
2.3 Taxonomical Aims.....	27
2. AGENT-BASED VIRTUE ETHICS: ANALYSIS.....	32
1. Agent-Focused, Agent-Prior, and Agent-Based Theories.....	32
2. Virtuous and Vicious Inner States.....	35
3. Rightness, Motivation, and Expression.....	47
3. AGENT-BASED VIRTUE ETHICS: EVALUATION.....	55
1. Motive, Rightness, and Goodness.....	55
1.1 The Rossian Argument and <i>What</i> is Done in Acting.....	57
1.2 That Motives Can Be Rightness-Relevant.....	63
2. Motives and Other Factors.....	66
2.1 Aptness for Moral Evaluation.....	68
2.2 Accidental Rightness.....	71
4. QUALIFIED-AGENT VIRTUE ETHICS: ANALYSIS.....	83
1. Virtuous Agents.....	84
1.1 Dimensions of Virtue.....	84
1.2 Emotion, Desire, and Appropriateness.....	90
1.3 Practical Wisdom and Deliberating Well.....	93



2. Circumstances .....	96
3. Contexts of Evaluation and What a Virtuous Agent Would Do .....	101
4. Right Decisions and Right Actions .....	104
5. QUALIFIED-AGENT VIRTUE ETHICS: EVALUATION .....	109
1. Right But Not Characteristic of the Virtuous .....	109
1.1 Russell's Strategy: Ought Does Not Imply Right .....	111
1.2 Van Zyl's Strategy: Action Guidance Through Avoiding Wrongdoing .....	116
1.3 Accepting Johnson's Objection .....	121
2. Characteristic of the Virtuous But Not Right .....	131
6. TARGET-CENTERED VIRTUE ETHICS: ANALYSIS .....	136
1. The Targets of Virtue .....	137
1.1 Disambiguating Virtuous Action .....	138
1.2 Hitting the Target of a Virtue: The Formal Account .....	142
1.3 Hitting the Target of a Virtue: The Substantive Account .....	143
1.4 Motivating Reasons and the Targets of Virtue .....	150
2. Overall Virtuousness .....	155
2.1 Atomism and Holism About Overall Virtuousness .....	156
2.2 Overall Virtuousness and Defaults .....	161
7. RIGHTNESS AND OVERALL VIRTUOUSNESS .....	164
1. Defending RIGHT .....	164
1.1 Rightness, Degrees, and Vagueness .....	165
1.2 Rightness and the Breadth of Virtue .....	168
1.3 Virtuous in Respect to a Virtue and Not Right? .....	171
1.4 Virtuousness, Rightness, and Circularity .....	176
2. Holism and Overall Virtuousness .....	180
8. RIGHT-MAKERS AND THE TARGETS OF VIRTUE .....	189
1. The Superiority of the Target-Centered Account .....	189
2. A Problem in Swanton's Version of the Target-Centered Account .....	196
3. Muddying the Aretaic Waters .....	202
4. Clearing the Aretaic Waters .....	206
5. Right-Makers and Complexity in Hitting the Targets of Virtue .....	215
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	220

# ONE

## WHAT IS VIRTUE ETHICS?

Virtue ethics is widely regarded as one of three prominent types of normative ethical theory in contemporary English-speaking philosophy. As such, it is standardly contrasted with both consequentialism and deontology.<sup>1</sup> Yet the definitions of consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics are all contested, and it is contested what relations there are between the types. In this chapter, I contribute to such contests by defending a definition of virtue ethics and by considering how the three types are to be contrasted.

### §1. The Definition of Virtue Ethics

In §1, I consider a definition of virtue ethics that is plausibly the most widely accepted such definition. After developing that definition, I argue that an alternative definition, recently defended by Christine Swanton, is superior if suitably developed. Given that my overall project in the present work is to consider which type of virtue-ethical account of right action is most plausible, I emphasize the implications that definitions of virtue ethics have on the issue of what counts as a virtue-ethical account of right action.

David Solomon, considering what is called for in “the revival of an ethics of virtue,” observes that there are several different claims “that might be taken to point to such a revival.”<sup>2</sup> Solomon considers three such claims. The first is essentially that ethical theorists do well if they do not focus on thin evaluative concepts such as rightness and goodness to such an extent that they ignore “richer and more concrete terms like ‘sensitive’, ‘compassionate’, and ‘courageous’” – in general, virtue- and vice-related concepts.<sup>3</sup>

Notably, this claim does not require an ethic of virtue to maintain any view about the relations between thin concepts and virtue concepts. One might, for instance, take interest in virtue concepts but see such concepts as e.g. irrelevant to or derivative from an account of

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Marcia Baron, Philip Pettit, and Michael Slote, *Three Methods of Ethics: A Debate* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). For dissent to the contrast, see Martha C. Nussbaum, “Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?,” *The Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999): 163-201.

<sup>2</sup> Solomon, “Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 428-441, at 428.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

right action. While a definition of virtue ethics should view virtue ethicists as emphasizing virtue concepts, it should not imply that the deployment of such concepts in an ethical theory is sufficient for the latter to be an instance of virtue ethics.

This point is related to Solomon's second claim associated with virtue ethics – the claim that “an ethical theory will be incomplete in an important sense if it does not have an account of virtue attached to it.”<sup>4</sup> Since there are e.g. consequentialist theories of virtue,<sup>5</sup> and consequentialism is supposed to be incompatible with virtue ethics (at least characteristically; more on this in §2), it is now standard practice to distinguish between virtue theory – any theory of the content and nature of the virtues – and virtue ethics.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, it is desirable for a definition of virtue ethics to leave room for theories of virtue which are not instances of virtue ethics. If so, virtue ethics should not be defined merely as the name for a subject matter – the virtues. Rather, virtue ethics should be understood as involving some commitment(s) that make consequentialist theories of virtue (characteristically) incompatible with virtue ethics.

Given this, a definition of virtue ethics can be viewed as an attempt to identify such commitments. Solomon's third claim associated with the revival of virtue ethics is plausibly viewed as one such attempt. The claim is that “assessment of human character is, in some suitably strong sense, more fundamental than either the assessment of the rightness of action or the assessment of the value of consequences of action.”<sup>7</sup> This claim has become known as the primacy of character thesis, and it is currently widely influential in defining virtue ethics.

### §1.1 Virtue Ethics and the Primacy of Character

Gregory Velazco y Trianosky and Gary Watson are among the most prominent of those who have defended and developed the primacy of character thesis as the defining mark of virtue ethics.<sup>8</sup> In Trianosky's account, virtue ethicists are all united by a rejection of nine claims, each characteristic of, though not individually necessary or sufficient for, what he calls neo-Kantianism. It is significant that seven of these nine claims all have the phrase

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>5</sup> See Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Compare Roger Crisp, “Modern Moral Philosophy and the Virtues,” in *How Should One Live?: Essays on the Virtues*, ed. Roger Crisp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1-18, at 5.

<sup>7</sup> Solomon, “Internal Objections,” 429.

<sup>8</sup> Trianosky, “What is Virtue Ethics All About?,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1990): 335-344; Watson, “On the Primacy of Character,” in *Identity, Character, and Morality*, eds. O. Flanagan and A.O. Rorty (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 449-483.

“basic moral judgments” in them, and the other two have the contrast between basic and derivative moral judgments suggested. While Trianosky’s neo-Kantian characteristically claims or implies that “[b]asic moral judgments are judgments about the rightness of actions,” virtue ethicists (implicitly or explicitly) deny this.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Trianosky claims not only that virtue ethicists deny such claims but that they counter with the claim that “only judgments about virtue are basic in morality, and that the rightness of action is always somehow derivative of the virtuousness of traits.”<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Watson asserts that any ethic of virtue implies the claim that “action appraisal is derivative from the appraisal of character...that basic moral facts are facts about the quality of character. Moral facts about action are ancillary to these.”<sup>11</sup> If Trianosky and Watson are correct, virtue ethics is the name of a type of ethical theory with a distinctive structure – a structure that treats ethical facts about character as more basic than ethical or at least evaluative facts about actions and states of affairs.

If some type or another of ethical fact is to be seen as more basic or primary than other types, then clearly we are in need of a division of types of ethical facts. Both Trianosky and Watson, in the above quotations, contrast ethical facts about character with ethical facts about action. A possible ethical fact about character is that benevolence is a virtue, and a possible ethical fact about action is that benevolent actions are right. In addition, Trianosky and Watson recognize ethical or at least evaluative facts that are not facts about either character or action. For example, there might be ethical or evaluative facts about consequences or, more broadly, states of affairs, such as that it is bad that someone is in pain on some occasion. The inclusion of possible evaluative facts about states of affairs is important for Watson and Trianosky, since it is by reference to such facts that they exclude the ethics of outcome (i.e. consequentialisms) from the ethics of virtue. An ethic of virtue, in contrast with an ethic of outcome, may not claim that ethical facts about character are derived from evaluative facts about states of affairs, since this would imply that facts about character are not primary. Thus, a consequentialist theory of virtue is excluded from virtue ethics, if virtue ethics affirms the primacy of character.

There are, however, relevant types of evaluative facts of which Trianosky and Watson are silent – evaluative facts about the inner states of an agent which are not evaluative facts about

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<sup>9</sup> Trianosky, “What is Virtue Ethics All About?,” 336.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 336. Trianosky restricts his claim to a “pure” ethics of virtue, thereby leaving open whether, on his view, all virtue ethicists must claim that only judgments about virtue are basic.

<sup>11</sup> Watson, “On the Primacy of Character,” 452.

that agent's character. Such facts include facts about occurrent motives, intentions, aims, motivating reasons,<sup>12</sup> and emotions. It is possible that an agent has benevolent motives but is not a benevolent person, and it is possible that an agent's motivating reasons include reasons of justice, although the agent is not just. I take it that, on the most charitable reading of Trianosky and Watson, a theory can be virtue-ethical if it takes basic evaluative facts to be facts about, say, motives rather than facts about character.<sup>13</sup> Since the category of inner states includes character and all other inner states, I modify the definition of Trianosky and Watson to read as follows:

(PoC): A theory is virtue-ethical just in case that theory claims or implies that ethical/evaluative facts about inner states have primacy over ethical/evaluative facts about both actions and consequences.<sup>14</sup>

What is it to claim that ethical facts about inner states are primary and that ethical facts about actions and consequences are derivative? To say that ethical facts about action are derivative from ethical facts about inner states is to say that ethical facts about action are made true by ethical facts about inner states – that ethical facts about action are facts in virtue of related ethical facts about inner states. To say that ethical facts about inner states are basic or primary is to imply that ethical facts about inner states are not true in virtue of facts either about actions or consequences/states of affairs.

Importantly, the claim that evaluative facts about inner states are more basic than evaluative facts about action does not imply that evaluative facts about action are *wholly* derivative from evaluative facts about inner states. Glen Pettigrove interprets Robert Merrihew Adams' account in *Finite and Infinite Goods*<sup>15</sup> as a view "in which virtue has a certain kind of primacy even though it may not be alone in possessing this quality" and a

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<sup>12</sup> I do not wish to imply here that (normative) reasons are inner states, and I accept that motivating reasons may have (normative) reasons as their content. However, there is a sense in which a motivating reason is an inner state, since to be a motivating reason, a fact must be accepted or taken as a reason by the agent, and such acceptance is psychological.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of virtue-ethical views that treat facts about inner states but not character as primary include those defended in J.L.A. Garcia, "The Primacy of the Virtuous," *Philosophia* 20 (1990): 69-91; Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> PoC = Primacy of Character.

<sup>15</sup> Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

view “in which rightness is governed but not wholly determined by virtue.”<sup>16</sup> Notably, Pettigrove’s Adams takes evaluative facts about both character and relationships as having primacy over evaluative facts about action. If so, evaluative facts about action can be derived from evaluative facts about both character and relationships.

Further, as Triantosky and Watson stress, to claim that evaluative facts about character are more basic than evaluative facts about actions and states of affairs is not to imply that evaluative facts about character are the most basic of all ethical facts. For instance, one might claim that evaluative facts about character are grounded in evaluative facts about human nature. In that case, evaluative facts about character would not be more basic than evaluative facts about human nature, but they could still be more basic than evaluative facts about actions and states of affairs. In short, *x*’s being more basic than *y* does not imply that *x* is more basic than everything or that *y* can be wholly derived from *x*.

Why would anyone care to claim that ethical facts about inner states are primary in the relevant sense? Consider the following claim from Linda Zagzebski:

It is hardly controversial that a good person generally acts from good motives and forms good intentions to do good acts and, with a bit of luck, produces good outcomes. What is at issue is not the fact that such relations obtain, but the order of priority in these relations.<sup>17</sup>

On Zagzebski’s view, it is plausible that the relations between virtuous inner states, right actions, and good results are, in general, non-accidental – that there are at least some conceptual or metaphysical links to be found among the proper evaluations of these objects. On this view, a theory would be *prima facie* implausible if it implied that a fully virtuous agent could regularly fail to do what is right or could regularly do more harm than good in her actions, at least given adequate epistemic and socio-political conditions. On the contrary, it should be no surprise that a fully virtuous agent gets things right in action and that her actions do good.

One way, then, to understand claims about what sorts of facts have primacy in ethical theory is as claims that attempt to explain why facts about virtuous inner states, right action,

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<sup>16</sup> Pettigrove, “Virtue Ethics, Virtue Theory, and Moral Theology,” in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft (Durham: Acumen, 2014), 88-104, at 100. Pettigrove also shows in this article how the primacy of character thesis can have bearing on moral-epistemological views. See Pettigrove’s discussion of Aquinas in pgs. 90-92.

<sup>17</sup> Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, 4.

and actions that do good are not accidentally related or at least not accidentally related in general.

Suppose, for instance, that right actions just are those that would be characteristically performed by a virtuous agent. In that case, it would be explained why virtuous agents and right actions are non-accidentally linked (while still leaving it open that right actions can be performed by the non-virtuous and that the virtuous can perform non-right actions). Suppose further that good or desirable outcomes just are outcomes at which a fully virtuous agent would characteristically aim. This claim, paired with the former claim about right action and the assumption that fully virtuous agents are competent in achieving their aims, would explain the non-accidental connection between right actions and actions that do good.

Of course, such claims are not the only way to attempt to explain such relations, nor are such claims the only way to attempt to explain such relations when character is given primacy. Nor is a theory necessarily doomed if it implies that fully virtuous agents, right action, and actions that do good are, quite generally, accidentally linked. My aim has been merely to point to a sensible context in which to understand claims affirming the primacy of character or inner states.

As the claim that right actions just are those that would be characteristically performed by a virtuous agent illustrates, one can attempt to explain facts about the rightness of action by appealing to facts about virtuous character (since a virtuous agent just is an agent with a virtuous character).<sup>18</sup> It is important to recognize that such explanatory relations only go in one direction. Suppose one claims that right actions just are actions that virtuous agents might choose. In order for this claim to explain what right actions are, we cannot further explain what actions virtuous agents might choose in terms of right actions. For if both claims are put together, they reduce to the claim that right actions are right actions, and such a claim is not explanatory. It is as if I am asked where the book is and reply in my office and, on being asked which office is mine, respond that my office is the one with the book in it. No doubt my claims may both be true, but they are not informative enough. If the notion of actions a virtuous agent might choose explains the notion of right action, then the notion of actions a virtuous agent might choose must be explained, if it needs to be explained,

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<sup>18</sup> I am not here claiming that if one claims that an action is right just in case a fully virtuous agent would characteristically perform that action in the circumstances, then one is necessarily attempting to explain facts about right action by appealing to facts about virtuous character. One could, for example, interpret this claim as a claim of mere extensional equivalence. Nonetheless, this does not speak against my point that making the claim *can* be a way of attempting to explain facts about right action by appealing to facts about virtuous character.

independently of the notion of right action. I later refer to this feature of explanatory relations as the unidirectionality of explanatory relations.

If (PoC) is true, what sorts of accounts of right action are consistent with virtue ethics? Only accounts that interpret the rightness of an action as being determined by that action's relation to certain inner states. Varieties of virtue-ethical theories of right action, then, can differ either in regard to the nature of the relation between the relevant actions and inner states or in regard to the nature of the relevant inner states. The following claims illustrate broad differences in regard to these variables:

(1): An action is right just in case (and ultimately because) it expresses the acting agent's benevolent motivation.

(2): An action is right just in case (and ultimately because) it might be performed by a just agent.

(3): An action is right just in case (and ultimately because) it would be approved by a fully virtuous and omniscient spectator.

(4): An action is right just in case (and ultimately because) it does not express the acting agent's vice.

To get clearer about the nature of such theories, two questions are pertinent. Firstly, can such theories allow that the consequences of an action are rightness-relevant? Secondly, can such theories allow, for example, that an action's fulfillment of a promise is a right-making feature of that action? The answer to both these questions is "yes", but such features or results of actions can be right-making or wrong-making only indirectly – they have their status as right-makers or wrong-makers only insofar as they bear a certain relation to certain inner states (or as I will illustrate below, to whatever else is basic in the theory e.g. relationships). The idea is that, on such theories, an action's having good consequences is not what ultimately makes that action right, although an action's having good consequences can be significantly related to what ultimately makes the action right.

Criterion (3) allows for straightforward illustration of this point. Suppose that an action results in someone's being benefitted in some way. If consideration of this fact – that the action has a beneficial result – is what makes a fully virtuous and omniscient spectator



approve the action, then the fact that the action is beneficial can be interpreted as having right-making status in a theory that accepts (3). It is right-making insofar as its consideration is what makes the spectator approve the action. However, on (3), the fact that the action is beneficial is not a right-making feature independently of the spectator's approval, since (3) claims that what ultimately makes an action right is that it would be approved by a relevant spectator. This implies that the relevant spectator *confers* upon the beneficial consequences their right-making status. The spectator does not *recognize* that they are right-making, she instead *creates* or *constructs* the fact that they are right-making in being (hypothetically) moved by it to approve the action.<sup>19</sup>

The same point applies to the right-making status of an action's fulfilling a promise. (3) may allow that the fact that an action fulfills a promise (indirectly) makes it right, but it must add that what makes the promise-fulfilling right-making is that it is appropriately related to the approval of a fully virtuous and omniscient spectator. So the right-making status of the promise-fulfilling is, on the present account, conferred by the attitude of the relevant spectator.

The point can be put more generally. Since, according to (PoC), evaluative facts about actions and states of affairs are true in virtue of evaluative facts about inner states, no facts about actions (e.g. it is a fulfillment of a promise) or their results (e.g. it has beneficial results) are right-making unless they are appropriately related to those inner states. This means that such facts are right-making indirectly or non-ultimately.

Similarly, a view in accordance with (PoC) which takes rightness to be determined by evaluative facts about both inner states and e.g. relationships will not view facts about the action or its results as right-making unless they are suitably related to prior evaluative facts about inner states or relationships. On such a view, an action's being a promise-fulfillment is right-making only if either it is suitably related to inner states (e.g. consideration of this fact motivates a just agent to perform the action) or it is suitably related to relationships (e.g. the action would violate the standards of a good relevant relationship by not fulfilling the promise).

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<sup>19</sup> Zagzebski defends a view in which the emotions of God confer value on acts and states of affairs. See *Divine Motivation Theory*, 386. See also Jason Kawall, "In Defense of the Primacy of the Virtues," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 3 (2009): 1-21. In this article, Kawall makes similar claims about what (PoC) implies about virtue-ethical accounts of right action and seeks to defend such accounts from important objections.

Hence, not all accounts of right action in accordance with (PoC) deny that consequences are rightness-relevant, although they do deny that consequences are directly rightness-relevant, when this is to deny that such facts are what ultimately make an action right.

Is (PoC) acceptable as a definition of virtue ethics? Ultimately, I reject (PoC) on the grounds that it is less desirable than a broader definition of virtue ethics of the type defended by Christine Swanton. In §1.2, I present Swanton's definition, show how it is desirably broader than (PoC), and show how it can be developed in such a way as to retain an attractive feature of (PoC).

## §1.2 Virtue Ethics and Virtue Notions

I interpret Swanton as making the following claim:

(VN): An ethical theory is virtue-ethical just in case that theory centrally features virtue notions.<sup>20</sup>

Importantly, (VN) centers on the concept of a virtue notion rather than the concept of a virtue. Virtue notions such as kindness, justice, and courage apply to a plurality of types of objects. There is room for talk of kind people, kind intentions, kind motives, kind feelings, kind actions, kind reasons, and kind aims. Kindness as a virtue notion rather than as the name of a virtue refers to a standard that can be correctly applied to types of objects other than character traits.

According to (PoC), a virtue ethicist is committed to an analysis of what it is for an action to be e.g. kind in terms of what it is for some inner state to be kind. That is, the standard of kindness would apply indirectly or secondarily to actions in that kind actions would be kind only on account of their bearing some relation to kind agents or motives, etc. (VN) allows for contrary positions some of which I now illustrate. Start by calling any sort of object that admits of being correctly predicated by a virtue notion a *virtue bearer*.<sup>21</sup> Virtue bearers thus

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<sup>20</sup> VN = Virtue Notions. See Swanton, "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Daniel C. Russell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 315-338, at 318 & 328ff; Compare Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>21</sup> "Virtuousness bearer" would be more accurate but it is a less felicitous expression, and I think no one would be tempted to think I am claiming that actions, for example, can have traits of character. I further discuss virtue bearers in §1 of Chapter 8.

include persons, actions, character traits, and reasons among other types of objects. Now consider the following claim:

(5): Kind agents are kind in virtue of being disposed to perform kind actions.

If attempting to state what makes an agent kind, (5) treats actions as primary virtue bearers and agents as secondary virtue bearers in the sense that agents bear virtuousness (e.g. kindness) only if they are disposed to perform independently understood virtuous (e.g. kind) actions. (5) represents a claim that denies the primacy of character but that can be consistent with a virtue-ethical theory, according to (VN).

(VN) also allows that there can be virtue-ethical views that deny that traits of character are more primary than action and that actions are more primary than traits of character. One view of this sort treats both actions and traits of character as secondary to some distinct primary virtue bearer. For example:

(6): Kind agents are kind in virtue of being adequately sensitive to reasons of kindness (e.g. that would make him feel welcome), and kind actions are kind in virtue of being adequate responses to reasons of kindness.

On (6), reasons are primary virtue bearers and both actions and traits of character are secondary virtue bearers. Finally, (VN) allows for the rejection of primary-secondary relations from all or some sets of virtue bearers. It is, for instance, possible to hold that a standard of kindness applies directly to all virtue bearers.<sup>22</sup> On a view of this kind, there could be satisfactory interpretations of all legitimate bearers of kindness, even when none of these interpretations appeal to the kindness of other virtue bearers – the kindness of a kind action would not be interpreted in terms of that action's relation to some other kindness bearer(s), nor would the kindness of a kind agent be interpreted in terms of its relation to some other kindness bearer(s).

Regardless of these varieties, any possible (non-circular) virtue-ethical theory, according to (VN), will treat at least one virtue bearer as *virtuous in its own right* – that is, there will be

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<sup>22</sup> Compare Swanton, "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," 331-333. Swanton there employs the notion of an "evaluative focal point", a notion from Shelly Kagan which has influenced my discussion of (4)-(6). See Kagan, "Evaluative Focal Points," in *Morality, Rules, Consequences*, eds. Brad Hooker, Elinor Mason, and Dale E. Miller (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 134-155.

at least one virtue bearer that is not treated as a secondary virtue bearer.<sup>23</sup> Assuming that all such theories offer an explanation<sup>24</sup> of what it is for its non-secondary virtue bearers to be virtuous or virtuous in some respect, the question arises as to what sorts of constraints (VN) places on such explanations. That is, if agents are treated as virtuous in their own right by a theory, then what ways can that theory account for that agent's virtuousness and still be a virtue-ethical theory, according to (VN)? The answer to this question, of course, is that such an account must treat an agent's virtuousness as being determined by its satisfying standards referred to by *virtue notions* and that such a theory's virtue notions must be *central*. What does this involve? I first discuss virtue notions.

Of virtue notions, Swanton does not offer a definition or a general account but rather a set of examples. Virtue notions, she claims, include thick evaluative concepts such as kindness, generosity, and justice.<sup>25</sup> This raises the question of whether all virtue notions are thick evaluative concepts. For instance, are the notions of virtue and virtuousness themselves virtue notions? Such concepts, when separated from accounts of what makes something virtuous or possess virtuousness, seem to belong to the category of thin(ner) evaluative concepts, alongside the concepts of rightness and goodness.

It might be thought that this question is unimportant for the reason that a person's being virtuous is reducible to her possessing and exercising the virtues (or at least the core virtues), when the latter are particular virtues referred to by thick evaluative concepts as applied to agents. Moreover, it might be said, anything's being virtuous clearly depends on its being virtuous in some particular way e.g. kind, so even if the concepts of virtue and virtuousness are not themselves virtue notions, they are inextricably bound up with virtue notions. If this is so, then any theory that centrally features the concept of virtue or the concept of virtuousness will at the same time centrally feature virtue notions such as kindness and justice.

However, it is indeed possible (and not conceptually confused) for a theory to account for a person's virtuousness without relying on thick evaluative concepts. Consider the following claim:

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<sup>23</sup> The notion of an action's being virtuous in its own right is further discussed in §1 of Chapter 8.

<sup>24</sup> In this context, to (successfully) explain *F-ness* requires no more than (correctly) stating what makes something *F*.

<sup>25</sup> Swanton, "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," 328-329.

(7): A person is virtuous to the extent that that person is excellent in recognizing, evaluating (e.g. weighing), and following practical reasons, when excellence in these respects is not to be understood through any thick evaluative concepts.

(7) illustrates what could be called an *irreducibly thin view of virtuousness*. Is it ruled out by (VN)? Surely the account of virtuousness in (7) could play a central role in a theory. Indeed, a theory may employ it in claims such as that right actions are those that would be approved by the virtuous and that good consequences are those of which the virtuous would be moved to bring about. In such a theory, the notion of a practical reason would be basic, and its understanding of what reasons are, and what appropriate responses there are to such reasons, would not be informed by thick evaluative concepts.

In response to the possibility of irreducibly thin views of virtuousness, I propose to treat virtue and virtuousness as virtue concepts, but only when such concepts are understood through thick evaluative concepts. The proposal is not that a virtue-ethical theory must understand e.g. the virtuousness of an agent through thick evaluative concepts, when such concepts are left unanalyzed. Rather, it can be the case that the virtuousness of an agent is understood as her being e.g. courageous, just, and temperate, when such thick concepts are themselves illuminated by (but not reducible to) other concepts such as those used in describing the objects which make up a virtue's sphere of concern such as e.g. the fearful, the lawful, and the pleasant and concepts used in describing the nature of virtuous responses to these fields of concern such as e.g. standing firm, compliance, and enjoyment.

This proposal, conjoined with (VN), implies that all virtue-ethical theories are committed to evaluating all virtue bearers (whether directly or indirectly) by standards referred to by thick evaluative concepts. If so, no virtue-ethical theory will feature an irreducibly thin view of virtuousness.

I take it that the category of virtue notions is sufficiently clear in this context, although there is room for substantive debate regarding the nature of thick evaluative concepts of which virtue notions are a species.<sup>26</sup> What is it for a theory to feature such concepts *centrally*? In "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," Swanton makes two claims regarding the appropriate interpretation of centrality in (VN). The first is that being central is being sufficiently central.<sup>27</sup> The concept of centrality is hence a *satis* or threshold concept. She

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<sup>26</sup> For an important collection of recent essays, see *Thick Concepts*, ed. Simon Kirchin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Swanton, "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," 334.

further notes that the concept of centrality interpreted as a *satis* concept is a vague concept and one whose application can admit of interesting debate in certain cases. This claim implies that, on Swanton's view, we should not expect a criterion of centrality that will clearly demarcate theories which centrally feature virtue notions and theories which do not. Rather, according to Swanton, there can be borderline cases of virtue-ethical theories.

The second claim of Swanton concerning the concept of centrality concerns what role centrality plays in a theory. Swanton agrees with Watson that a virtue-ethical theory is or implies "a set of theses about how certain concepts are best fitted together for the purpose of understanding morality," and she understands "this idea of fit in terms of the centrality of virtue notions."<sup>28</sup> Swanton thus implies that to centrally employ virtue notions in a theory is, in effect, to make some claim that has implications for how certain concepts are best fitted together for the purpose of understanding morality. Watson likely had in mind the thin concepts of virtuousness (of character), rightness (of action), and goodness or desirability (of states of affairs) when he made that claim, so the centrality of virtue notions interpreted *via* Swanton can be seen as a theory's connecting such thin concepts through the use of virtue notions.

One way of fitting together these concepts through the centrality of virtue notions is to maintain that the virtuousness of character, the rightness of action, and the goodness of states of affairs are all to be understood (at least in significant part) through virtue notions. So, for instance, the virtuousness of an agent is to be understood as that agent's having and exercising the virtues,<sup>29</sup> the rightness of an action is to be understood as that action's being overall virtuous when overall virtuousness is contributed to by the action's being kind, just, or courageous, etc.,<sup>30</sup> and the goodness of a state of affairs is to be interpreted as that state of affairs' warranting e.g. promotion when a state of affairs warrants promotion only if it is not contrary to virtue to promote it.<sup>31</sup> This way of viewing virtuous agents, right actions, and good states of affairs fits together these thin evaluative concepts (virtuousness, rightness, goodness) in that the concepts are all seen as having significant conceptual dependence on a shared base of thick virtue concepts.

This is not the only way of fitting together these concepts through the centrality of virtue notions, and indeed one can still fit together the important thin concepts of ethical theory

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<sup>28</sup> Watson, "On the Primacy of Character," 451; Swanton, "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," 334.

<sup>29</sup> Compare Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Compare Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, Ch. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Compare *ibid.*, Ch. 2.

while denying that some of what are commonly thought of as important thin concepts (e.g. rightness) are not important thin concepts at all. This makes room for eliminativist virtue ethics – those virtue-ethical theories that eliminate notions such as rightness of action from the domain of legitimate ethical theory.<sup>32</sup> The point was merely to illustrate how the centrality of virtue notions in a virtue-ethical theory can connect important thin concepts in that theory.

Above, I claimed that a definition of virtue ethics can be seen as an attempt to identify the commitment(s) of such theories which make them contrast with consequentialism and deontology. As developed thus far, (VN) does not identify any such commitments or presuppositions of virtue-ethical theories, since it is an open question whether all theories that centrally employ virtue notions share some commitment which makes them virtue-ethical and not e.g. consequentialist. Hence, it could be objected that (VN) is an unsatisfactory or at least incomplete definition of virtue ethics, since it does not identify the presuppositions of virtue-ethical theories which makes such theories contrast with consequentialism and deontology.

There are two ways of responding to this objection. The first, which will emerge as my favored response, is to further develop (VN) so that it does identify a commitment of all virtue-ethical theories which grounds their distinctiveness. The second is to deny that there is any such commitment and to deny that (VN) needs to be developed any further. The second response need not deny that virtue ethics is distinctive. Rather, it can affirm that virtue-ethical theories are distinctive but that there are a plurality of ways for a virtue-ethical theory to be distinctive, none of which are necessary for a theory's being virtue-ethical.

However, there are two ways one might understand the claim that there are a plurality of ways for virtue-ethical theories to be distinctive. One way is as the claim that virtue ethics is the name of a type of ethical theory which has a variety of instances, when such instances can be incompatible. I accept this claim. There are, for instance, varieties of virtue-ethical accounts of right action which are incompatible with one another.

The other way is to understand the claim that there are a plurality of ways for a virtue-ethical theory to be distinctive as the claim that varieties of virtue-ethical theories do not share a common commitment when this commitment marks off what is distinctively virtue-ethical in such theories. The idea is that, for instance, some virtue-ethical theories are

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<sup>32</sup> See Edmund L. Pincoffs, *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics* (Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1986); Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); John Hacker-Wright, "Virtue Ethics without Right Action: Anscombe, Foot, and Contemporary Virtue Ethics," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 44 (2010): 209-224.

distinctively virtue-ethical in that they affirm the primacy of character, but some other theories are distinctively virtue-ethical although the latter do not affirm the primacy of character. Further, and this is the important claim, virtue-ethical theories that affirm the primacy of character and virtue-ethical theories that do not, do not share some commitment which grounds their status as virtue-ethical. While I agree with the claim that some virtue-ethical theories do not affirm the primacy of character, I suggest that there is nonetheless a common commitment of such theories which makes them virtue-ethical, and such a commitment will feature in my modification of (VN) below.

First, I suggest that a theory can be virtue-ethical although it does not affirm the primacy of character. If we can find a theory that (a) denies the primacy of character, (b) centers on virtue notions, and (c) is not more plausibly classed as deontological or consequentialist, then we will have found a theory that is plausibly classed as virtue-ethical but that is distinctively virtue-ethical in a way clearly distinct from affirming the primacy of inner states.

Swanton's own pluralistic virtue ethics<sup>33</sup> is a theory that satisfies conditions (a)-(c). It meets (a) insofar as, on that view, the fact that an action is right is explained by facts about that action's hitting the targets of virtue, when what it is to hit the target of a virtue is not explained by facts about what it is for someone to be virtuous or to be virtuously motivated, etc. It meets (b) insofar as it understands thin concepts such as goodness of character, rightness of action, and valuable states of affairs through thick virtue notions. With regard to (c), the theory is not consequentialist insofar as it denies the sort of theory of value that is needed if consequentialism is to get off the ground in the first place. On Swanton's view, hedonistic, preference-satisfaction, and objective list theories of well-being are all implausible because they each understand value independently of virtue notions. Moreover, on Swanton's view, not all right actions are ultimately justified because of their promotion of value or because of their relation to something that is ultimately justified because of its promotion of value. Value is not the only sort of ground that warrants action, and promotion is not the only sort of action that is warranted or demanded by value.

Is Swanton's theory more plausibly classed as deontological? This will depend on what is counted as a deontological theory, as I discuss below. For now, it is sufficient to note that Swanton's theory denies many characteristic claims of deontological theories. For instance, it accepts both holism and particularism regarding reasons for action, it accepts that the motive of an action can have bearing on the rightness of that action, and it neither sets out nor

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<sup>33</sup> As presented in Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*.



emphasizes a distinction between moral and non-moral reasons for action. Moreover, and perhaps most tellingly, the theory denies that virtue notions are best explained even partially in terms of an independently understood notion of right action. On Swanton's view, rightness of action is explained in terms of virtue notions rather than the other way around. So Swanton's view is plausibly classed as virtue-ethical, and its distinctiveness as virtue-ethical is not based on its affirming the primacy of inner states.

If so, it is not necessary for a theory to affirm the primacy of inner states in order for that theory to be distinctively virtue-ethical. This is evidence against (PoC). To the extent that it does not affirm the primacy of character, Swanton's view might also be taken as evidence that theories can be distinctively virtue-ethical in a plurality of ways, none of which are necessary for being an instance of virtue ethics. Contrary to this, I suggest that the following claim is a commitment shared by both Swanton's theory and theories that affirm the primacy of character and that this commitment plausibly grounds their status as virtue-ethical:

(D): Virtue notions play an essential explanatory role in the most plausible accounts of what it is to live well, what it is for an action to be right, and what it is for something to be valuable, desirable, or beneficial (to the extent that what it is to live well, what it is for an action to be right, and what it is for something to be valuable, desirable, or beneficial are (viewed by the theory as) important or legitimate topics in ethical theory).<sup>34</sup>

The parenthetical qualification in (D) is there merely to allow for eliminativist virtue-ethical theories; I say no more about this here. (D), because of the aforementioned unidirectionality of explanatory relations, implies that virtue notions are not to be analyzed in terms of independently understood conceptions of what it is to live well, what it is to perform a right action, or what it is for something to be valuable, desirable, or beneficial. So, for instance, (D) rules out the conceptual analysis of kind actions as actions that are right and within the sphere of kindness (when the standard of rightness is not itself understood through virtue notions), and it rules out the justification of kindness as a virtue in terms of its having a tendency to promote valuable states of affairs (when valuable states of affairs are understood independently of virtue notions e.g. views that maintain that a states of affairs is valuable to

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<sup>34</sup> D = Distinctiveness. Taking into account Glen Pettigrove's discussion of Thomistic moral epistemology in relation to (PoC), I leave open that (D) can be further expanded to claim that e.g. virtue notions play an essential explanatory role in plausible accounts of moral knowledge. See Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics, Virtue Theory, and Moral Theology," 90-92.

the extent that pleasure or preference-satisfaction is maximized, regardless of whether such pleasures or preferences are e.g. cruel).

It is plausible that (D) is affirmed by all virtue-ethical theories. If so, (VN) could be modified to read as follows:

(VN\*): A theory is virtue-ethical just in case that theory centrally features virtue (and/or vice<sup>35</sup>) notions, and it affirms that virtue (and/or vice) notions play an essential explanatory role in the most plausible accounts of what it is to live well, what it is for an action to be right, and what it is for something to be desirable (to the extent that these are important or legitimate topics in ethical theory).

(VN\*), unlike (VN) but like (PoC), attempts to identify a commitment shared by all virtue-ethical theories, and it thereby affirms that there are commitments the affirmation of which grounds a theory's status as virtue-ethical. Is (VN\*) an improvement on (VN)?<sup>36</sup> The aforementioned objection to (VN) – that (VN) does not adequately tell us what makes virtue ethics distinctive, since it does not identify a shared commitment of all and only virtue-ethical theories – does not apply to (VN\*). I have suggested that this objection could be met by the claim that there are a variety of ways for theories to contrast with consequentialism and deontology, none of which are necessary for being an instance of virtue ethics. However, I have suggested that such a claim is challenged by (D), a claim that plausibly grounds the distinctiveness of all virtue-ethical theories.

I now offer further considerations for viewing (VN\*) as an improvement on (VN). Firstly, consider what makes (VN) preferable to (PoC). (VN) is preferable to (PoC) primarily on account of its being more inclusive of views that are both virtue-notion-centered and not *prima facie* implausible.<sup>37</sup> It is more inclusive in that it allows a virtue ethics to, for instance, account for the rightness of action in terms of virtue notions while simultaneously denying that actions are secondary or derivative virtue bearers. Since (VN) includes significant views

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<sup>35</sup> “Vice notions” are here to be understood as including all notions that are contrary to virtue notions, including those associated with continence, incontinence, and immaturity or lack of practical wisdom.

<sup>36</sup> It is unclear whether Swanton would accept (VN\*). In *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, at 5, she claims that “[i]n virtue ethics, the notion of virtue is central in the sense that conceptions of rightness, conceptions of the good life, conceptions of ‘the moral point of view’ and the appropriate demandingness of morality, cannot be understood without a conception of relevant virtues.” (VN\*), however, differs from this claim in several ways.

<sup>37</sup> Swanton also identifies this advantage of (VN) in “The Definition of Virtue Ethics,” 333-334.

such as target-centered accounts of right action into the category of virtue ethics, and (PoC) excludes such views, (VN) is to be preferred over (PoC).

However, accepting (VN) is not the only way to include such views into the category of virtue ethics, and it is possible that, in being concerned to avoid the excessive narrowness of (PoC), we will depart so much from (PoC) that we fail to retain its kernel of truth. What is this kernel of truth?

That (PoC) is a definition in terms of the notion of primacy or basicness is not arbitrary. Its notion of primacy is not epistemological and so is not committed to the assumption that all forms of ethical theory, or all virtue-ethical forms at least, are committed to epistemological foundationalism. It is rather the thought that an ethical theory, insofar as it is a theory, must implicitly claim that some sorts of facts explain other sorts of facts. The idea is simply that, for example, if I seek to account for what it is for an action to be right in terms of that action's being *F*, then, since explanatory relations are unidirectional, I am committed to the claim that *F-ness* is explanatorily prior to rightness in the sense that I am also committed to the claim that *F-ness* is not to be explained in terms of rightness. In this sense, all accounts of what it is for something to possess some property, ethical properties included, involve some claim that certain properties are explanatorily prior to some other properties.

So, given that all ethical theories involve some claim of explanatory priority, the question of Triantosky and Watson concerns what claim of explanatory priority is essential to virtue ethics. Their answer is that, for virtue ethics, the notion of virtue (when virtue is an inner state) is explanatorily prior to the notions of rightness (of action) and desirability (of states of affairs). Swanton's powerful and important point is that virtue notions may apply directly to objects other than inner states, such as actions or rules, and that this fact allows for a greater variety of variations than (PoC) allows of the claim that virtue notions are explanatorily prior to the notions of rightness of action and desirability of states of affairs. Where I think (VN) can be improved, in such a way as to capture the kernel of truth in (PoC), is in (VN\*)'s explicit claim concerning virtue ethics' commitment to the explanatory priority of virtue notions (i.e. the essential explanatory role of virtue notions).

(In addition, an attractive feature of (VN) (and (VN\*)) not mentioned by, and possibly not recognized by, Swanton is that (VN), unlike (PoC), allows for a virtue ethics that denies the existence of character traits. This is an important point given objections to virtue ethics made by philosophers influenced by the social-psychological school of thought known as

situationism.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Gilbert Harman has argued in favor of Judith Jarvis Thomson's virtue-ethical theory on the grounds that it is uncommitted to the existence of character traits.<sup>39</sup>)

Secondly, (VN\*) identifies a more substantive commonality in virtue-ethical theories than (VN) in that the former makes a *claim* essential to all virtue-ethical theories. Assuming (VN), it would not make sense to say that all virtue-ethical theories are false insofar as they are virtue-ethical, since a theory's central employment of certain kinds of notions is not something that can be false; only what a specific theory claims using those notions can be false. In contrast, assuming either (VN\*) or (PoC), it would make sense to claim that all virtue-ethical theories are false insofar as they are virtue-ethical.

Finally and relatedly, that (VN\*) attributes an essential claim to virtue ethics makes it more useful than (VN) in conceiving of the possible varieties of virtue ethics. I support this claim by showing the implications for virtue-ethical theories of right action, given (VN\*).

If (VN\*) is true, what will virtue-ethical theories of right action look like? Essential to all such theories is the following (implicit) claim:

(VNR): Virtue (and/or vice) notions play an essential explanatory role in the most plausible accounts of what it is for an action to be right.<sup>40</sup>

(VNR) implies that what it is for an action to be right is best explained in terms of virtue or vice notions, and (given the unidirectionality of explanatory relations) that virtue or vice notions are best explained independently of the notions of rightness or wrongness of action.

If paired with accounts of virtue or vice notions that are independent of the notions of rightness and wrongness of action, then, in addition to the claims (1)-(4) above allowed by (PoC), the following claims can prominently feature in virtue-ethical accounts of right action:

(8): An action is right just in case it is overall virtuous, when an action is made overall virtuous by its hitting the targets of virtue.

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<sup>38</sup> Particularly influential are Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999): 315-331; John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> Gilbert Harman, "Virtue Ethics without Character Traits," in *Fact and Value: Essays on Ethics and Metaphysics for Judith Jarvis Thompson*, eds. Alex Byrne, Robert Stalnaker, and Ralph Wedgwood (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 117-128.

<sup>40</sup> VNR = Virtue Notions Right.

(9): An action is right just in case it is vicious in no way (i.e. that no vice notion properly applies to the action).

(10): An action is right just in case it is virtuous in some way (i.e. that some virtue notion properly applies to an action).

(11): An action is right just in case it is in accordance with the virtue- and vice-rules.

(12): An action is right just in case it is neither cruel, callous, nor unjust.

Such claims differ most importantly in regard to the following variables: what virtue and vice notions a theory takes to be rightness-relevant, what virtue bearers are taken to be virtuous in their own right, and what specific relations are taken to obtain between rightness and virtue or vice notions as applied to the appropriate virtue bearer.

Since (VNR) claims that virtue notions play *an* essential explanatory role, the possibility is left open that a virtue-ethical account of right action uses concepts irreducible to virtue notions in accounting for the rightness of action, e.g. concepts specifying the norms of relationships as in Pettigrove's aforementioned interpretation of Adams, the concept of *eudaimonia*, or the concept of valuable outcomes. Regarding valuable outcomes, it is one thing to claim that the value of a valuable state of affairs is independent of virtue notions and another to claim that valuable states of affairs are irreducible to virtue notions.<sup>41</sup> The latter but not the former claim is consistent with a virtue-ethical theory, according to (VN\*).

## §2. Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism, and Deontology

In §1, I argued that (VN\*) is an attractive definition of virtue ethics and one that brings together the attractive features of (PoC) and (VN). Since virtue ethics is standardly contrasted with consequentialism and deontology, it is also desirable to consider how such contrasts are to be made, because, as my discussion will show, such contrasts can be deficient and they can be excessive. This is an important topic both in itself and because, for instance, excessively contrasting the types can give the false impression that virtue-ethical accounts of right action may not appeal to rights, duties, rules, or desirable outcomes.

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<sup>41</sup> Compare Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, Ch. 2.

## §2.1 Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism

According to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, consequentialism about right action “holds that whether an act is morally right depends only on the consequences of that act or of something related to that act, such as the motive behind the act or a general rule requiring acts of the same kind.”<sup>42</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong’s characterization allows for a variety of consequentialisms about right action by leaving open whether the consequences of actions, motives, or rules matter, whether the actual or expected consequences matter, what standards are to be used to evaluate the consequences in question, and whether the value of these consequences have to be optimal or merely satisfactory to make an action right. What unites all of these varieties is the claim that consequences are the primary bearers of value from which other sorts of things, such as actions or rules, derive their ethical status.

Given this characterization, we fully understand what consequentialism is only if we understand what consequences are. It turns out that the issue of what can be legitimately counted among the consequences of, say, an action, is not without controversy and that how “consequence” is understood can significantly impact how we view the relations between consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics.

What sorts of facts figure in the consequences of an action?<sup>43</sup> In standard interpretations of classical utilitarianisms – paradigmatic instances of consequentialism – only the causal effects or results of an action are counted among that action’s consequences. Thus, there are facts about actions (e.g. that it is the giving of an unjust verdict) and facts about the motives of actions (e.g. that it is motivated by racial hatred) which do not count among the consequences of those actions, if consequences are effects. Giving an unjust verdict is not the same as doing something (e.g. bribing) that results in the giving of an unjust verdict and so the fact that an action involves giving an unjust verdict is not a fact about the results of that action. Moreover, no action causes its own motive, and so the fact that an action is racially motivated is not a fact about the results of that action.

If consequences are effects, then consequentialism is incompatible with all familiar deontological and virtue-ethical theories, and so it is correct to contrast the latter two types with the former (even if there could be a theory that is an instance of more than one of the

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<sup>42</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Consequentialism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/consequentialism/>.

<sup>43</sup> I frame the question in terms of act-consequentialism merely for convenience of expression. The question concerns what consequences are, regardless of that of which they are consequences.

three types; I say more about this below). However, some philosophers claim that all possible theories of right action can be consequentialized – correctly represented as consequentialist. James Dreier explains how this is possible:

We merely take the features of an action that the theory considers to be relevant and build them into the consequences. For example, if a theory says that promises are not to be broken, then we restate this requirement: that a promise has been broken is a bad consequence.<sup>44</sup>

In order for Dreier's strategy to succeed in all cases, all possible features of an action must be correctly describable as consequences of that action. Of course, not all possible features of an action are effects or results of that action, so Dreier is implicitly appealing to a broader conception of "consequence" than was considered above. On Dreier's implicit view, a consequence of an action includes any feature of that action, including its relations. If this is so, then it is plausible that all theories of right action can be consequentialized, since it is undeniable that all right-making and wrong-making features of an action are features of that action.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, it would be a mistake to contrast deontological and virtue-ethical theories of right action with consequentialist ones, since the former two types would be species of the latter type.

Of course, there is the fact that such a broad conception of "consequence" is contrary to common usage in both ordinary language and philosophical discourse. Furthermore, if all possible theories can be consequentialized, then the fact that a theory is consequentialist is not an interesting fact about that theory, and so the question arises as to what motivation there is to adopt a revisionary conception of consequences when the upshot is an uninteresting category of ethical theory. Dreier's motivation is to undermine the significance of classifying ethical theories into consequentialist and non-consequentialist varieties, in order to support the claim that it is "far more fruitful" to classify theories into "agent centered" and "agent

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<sup>44</sup> James Dreier, "Structures of Normative Theories," *The Monist* 76 (1993): 22-40, at 23. Compare James Dreier, "In Defense of Consequentializing," in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, Vol. 1, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97-118, at 98-99.

<sup>45</sup> For influential dissent to the idea that all possible theories of right action can be consequentialized, see Campbell Brown, "Consequentialize This," *Ethics* 121 (2011): 749-771. Brown argues that any consequentialist theory is committed to "maximizing the good", the denial of agent-relative reasons, the denial of "moral dilemmas", and to a thesis of "dominance", and that not all theories share these commitments. While I believe Dreier's definition is too broad, Brown's seems too narrow, since, for example, it implies that satisficing utilitarianism is not an instance of consequentialism (an implication Brown recognizes).

neutral” varieties.<sup>46</sup> Although I agree with Dreier that his distinction between agent centered and agent neutral theories is significant, I remain unconvinced that the distinction between consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories is insignificant, since it is only on an artificially broad conception of “consequence” that the distinction becomes insignificant. If we adhere to common usage in understanding the consequences of an action to be nothing other than the causal effects or results of that action, then not all theories of right action are consequentialist.

No virtue-ethical theory is consequentialist, if consequences are understood as results whose value or disvalue is understood independently of virtue or virtue notions. The possibility is left open, however, that a virtue-ethical account of right action maintains that right actions are those that have the most beneficial outcomes, when what is beneficial is understood aretaically (e.g. some desire-satisfaction benefits someone only if that desire is not contrary to virtue). Yet it would be characteristic of virtue ethicists to deny that such a view is plausible. Correctly applying virtue notions to actions reveals that such notions are sensitive to more than the value of the outcomes of the action. Even if an action has the most beneficial outcome, it can still be unjust, disrespectful, unloving, imprudent, cowardly or rash.

The question remains as to whether a view of right action that treats right action as action with the most beneficial outcome, when what is beneficial is understood aretaically, is to be understood as consequentialist or virtue-ethical. However, this is a pressing question only if we view virtue ethics and consequentialism as mutually exclusive categories. I discuss this issue in §2.3 below. Before doing so, I consider the relation between virtue ethics and deontology, since, depending on how we view deontology, the categories of virtue ethics and deontology may similarly overlap. Hence, the question of exclusivity arises between these categories as well.

## §2.2 Virtue Ethics and Deontology

Like “consequentialism”, “deontology” is frequently used as the name for a type (or a set of heterogeneous types) of doctrine about what makes actions right, permissible and/or obligatory. For almost all taxonomists (excluding only the consequentializers), no deontological theory is consequentialist. Indeed, according to many philosophers, a

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<sup>46</sup> Dreier, “Structures of Normative Theories,” 23.



deontological theory of right action is best understood as any non-consequentialist theory of right action.<sup>47</sup> The task of the taxonomist of deontological theories is, on this understanding, to outline the ways one can be a non-consequentialist about right action. For example, one can be a non-consequentialist about right action by accepting that there are agent-relative<sup>48</sup> reasons for action<sup>49</sup> or by accepting that there are certain rights of individuals. Given this understanding of deontology, either virtue ethics is a species of deontology or consequentialism, or some virtue-ethical theories are instances of consequentialism and some others are instances of deontology, or else virtue ethics does not give an account of right action.

Taxonomists respond in different ways to this understanding of deontology and its implication for the place of virtue ethics. Consistent with the view that deontology is non-consequentialism about right action, some claim that virtue ethics does not seek to give an account of right action and is thereby neither consequentialist nor deontological about right action. Virtue ethics, on this account, is about what it is to be a good human being or what it is to live well *rather than* what it is to perform a right or wrong action on some occasion. This understanding of virtue ethics opens up two options for virtue ethicists. An *eliminativist* virtue ethics denies that the rightness, permissibility, or obligatoriness of an action stand in any need of explanation in ethical theory, perhaps because such concepts are incoherent or because they require a theistic background that is not available to a philosophical naturalist.<sup>50</sup> As such, an eliminativist virtue ethics seeks to eliminate the questions of what makes an action right, permissible, or obligatory from the domain of legitimate ethical theory.

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<sup>47</sup> See e.g. Larry Alexander and Michael Moore, "Deontological Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/ethics-deontological/>; compare Marcia Baron, "Virtue Ethics in Relation to Kantian Ethics," in *Perfecting Virtue: Essays on Kantian Ethics and Virtue Ethics*, ed. Lawrence Jost & Julian Wuerth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8-37, at 20.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Darwall details the nature of agent-relative reasons as follows: "Agent-neutral reasons contrast with agent-relative reasons, whose formulation includes an ineliminable reference to the agent for whom they are reasons (like "that it will keep a promise I made," "that it will avoid harm to others [i.e., people other than me]" and so on). Agent-neutral reasons can be stated without such a reference: "that it would prevent some pain from occurring to someone (or some being)." Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6, fn. 9.

<sup>49</sup> The question of whether a consequentialist theory can accept agent-relative reasons for action is contested. See Douglas W. Portmore, "Can an Act-Consequentialist Theory be Agent-Relative?," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (2001): 363-77. Portmore's answer to his question is affirmative. For a denial, see Campbell Brown, "Consequentialize This."

<sup>50</sup> See fn. 32 above.

A *complementary* virtue ethics, in contrast, seeks to account for what it is for a human being to live well but accepts that part of what it is to live well is to reliably perform right actions and further understands what right actions are in either consequentialist or deontological terms (however these are understood).<sup>51</sup> That is, a complementary virtue ethics sees virtue ethics as being complementary to or complemented by a consequentialism or deontology about right action rather than as being either opposed to or a species of either. In short, eliminativist and complementary virtue ethics both try to answer different questions than consequentialisms and deontologies about right action, but they differ in how they respond to the question that such deontologists and consequentialists attempt to answer.

Other taxonomists, however, deny that all non-consequentialist theories of right action are deontological and thereby leave room for a theory that is virtue-ethical and neither deontological nor consequentialist. Rosalind Hursthouse, for example, denies that all non-consequentialist theories of right action are deontological. To substantiate this, she claims that a deontological theory of right action contains two elements. The first is a claim to the effect that right actions are those that are “in accordance with the correct moral rules or principles.”<sup>52</sup> The second is some account of what the correct moral rules are, when these can be accounted for by presenting a more or less complete list of them or by identifying them with either the rules of God’s command, the rules that are universalizable, or the rules that would be the object of choice of all rational beings in suitable conditions.<sup>53</sup> Such ways of accounting for the correct moral rules are not exhaustive of deontological options, on Hursthouse’s view, since she says that they are merely examples of ways a deontologist can account for the correct moral rules, but they show that Hursthouse counts rule-intuitionism, divine command theory, Kantianism, and contractualism or contractarianism as species of deontology.

Being focused on the nature of virtue ethics, Hursthouse does not suggest any conditions that must be satisfied in a theory’s way of accounting for the correct moral rules in order for that theory to be deontological. It was likely not Hursthouse’s aim to give a complete definition of deontology,<sup>54</sup> but it is worth seeing what would follow if the two

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<sup>51</sup> It is plausible that Robert Merrihew Adams would see himself as a complementary virtue ethicist in this sense. See Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4. Although Pettigrove’s aforementioned interpretation of Adams’ view in *Finite and Infinite Goods* may cast some doubt on this.

<sup>52</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Early in her book, she states that there is no longer a “satisfactory short answer” to the question, “What is deontology?”. *Ibid.*, 4.

aforementioned conditions were to be offered as a complete definition. Since, in fairness, I wish to distance Hursthouse from such an offering, I refer to the claim that a deontological theory of right action is any theory that claims that right actions are those in accordance with the correct moral rules, when some view, any view, about the correct moral rules is also given, as the rule-based definition of deontology.

The rule-based definition of deontology is contrary to the definition of deontology as non-consequentialism in two ways. Firstly, it allows that a theory could be both consequentialist and deontological, since an act-consequentialist could maintain that there was only one correct moral rule: that we ought never act in such a way that a worse state of affairs is brought about than would have been brought about by acting in some other way or by not acting. In addition, the rule-based definition implies that rule-consequentialism is an instance of deontology.

Secondly, the rule-based definition leaves it open that there are theories of right action which are neither consequentialist nor deontological. This implication fits well with Hursthouse's taxonomical aims, since she wishes to contrast virtue-ethical theories of right action (or rather a particular kind of virtue-ethical theory of right action) with both consequentialist and deontological theories.

There are reasons to doubt the adequacy of the rule-based definition of deontology. Firstly, I presume that the definition should include all familiar deontological theories, but W.D. Ross' theory of *prima facie* duties does not happily fit. On a common interpretation of Ross, he claims that there are no rules that determine whether an action is right – whether it fulfills one's duty *sans phrase* in the circumstances; there are merely rules that determine whether it has fulfilled or violated various *prima facie* duties.<sup>55</sup> Secondly, it is not clear that the rule-based definition excludes all virtue-ethical theories from deontology (if, indeed, this should be our taxonomical aim; I cast doubt on the desirability of this aim in the next section). In Hursthouse's presentation of her own version of virtue ethics, she employs the notion of a "virtue-rule" such as "Be honest" or "Don't be dishonest".<sup>56</sup> Would a theory that understands the correct moral rules to be identical to the virtue- and vice-rules not yield a virtue-ethical theory of right action? Would it be deontological? Could it be both?

A natural reply to these questions is, "That depends on what counts as deontological and what counts as virtue-ethical?". Of course it depends on that in some sense, but the answer to the question of whether a theory could be both deontological and virtue-ethical is best seen as

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<sup>55</sup> See W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 30-31.

<sup>56</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 36.

partially determining which definitions of deontology and virtue ethics are best, instead of a question whose answer is determined by the best definitions of deontology and virtue ethics. Ultimately, the question here – whether virtue ethics and deontology should be seen as incompatible – invites us to reflect on what the aims of a taxonomist of ethical theories should be.

### §3. Taxonomical Aims

The two most basic questions to ask of our aims as taxonomists of ethical theories, and of theories of right action in particular, are these: Firstly, do we aim at classifying all possible theories? That is, do we wish our basic categories to be exhaustive? Secondly, do we aim at making our basic categories mutually exclusive?

Those who define deontology as any non-consequentialist theory of right action clearly aim at both exhaustivity and exclusivity. A critical question for such taxonomists is, why divide up theories in this way, rather than, say, in terms of theories that allow only intentions to be relevant to rightness of action and those that do not? Given nothing but the aims of exhaustivity and exclusivity, nothing hangs on which basic categories we use, but, rhetorically, it matters. Dividing up theories of right action into consequentialist and non-consequentialist varieties seems to rhetorically imply that consequentialism is an obviously intuitive or sensible view, with the result that any other possible theories, of which there is an indefinite variety, are to be measured by how they stand up to consequentialism. As an analogy, think of the implied perspective of someone who divides all possible views about the nature of the sacred and our relation to it into Christian and non-Christian varieties. In a basic division of *F* theories and non-*F* theories, when non-*F* theories are heterogeneous, a kind of default privilege is rhetorically assigned to *F* theories. One upshot is that non-consequentialists of all stripes are seen to be in need of justifying their view that things other than consequences matter, while the consequentialist is seen as being in the happy position of merely having to refute such arguments.

One may try to justify the division in terms of consequentialism for the reason that utilitarianism is an important tradition in the history of ethical theory, and consequentialism picks out a central element many critics have found objectionable in utilitarianism. But the same is true of other central elements found in other important traditions (e.g. universalizability in the Kantian tradition).

Another possible reason to divide up theories into consequentialist and non-consequentialist varieties is that consequentialist theories are special in that they exclude every feature of, say, an action from consideration except its consequences. But non-consequentialist theories are not typically exclusive in this way; they typically allow that consequences matter but also allow other types of things to be rightness-relevant. But, again, this does not uniquely pick out consequentialism, since theological voluntarism also excludes every kind of thing from rightness-relevancy except the pronouncements of God.

It appears that there is no reason for dividing theories into consequentialist and non-consequentialist varieties which uniquely picks out consequentialism as the most suitable basic category. Of course, that does not mean that we should not include consequentialism into our list of basic categories of ethical theory. Rather, it suggests that we should rethink our taxonomical aims, and, if need be, modify our conception of the nature of such categories accordingly.

If we have the taxonomical aim of exhaustivity, then it will be likely that one of our basic categories will be equivalent to “theories that are instances of none of the other types”. This is what deontology is equivalent to in the division of theories into consequentialism and deontology, when the latter is simply non-consequentialism. The trouble with this kind of category is that it does not say anything about the shared, positive features of such theories. It is there not to inform us of a different perspective about the topic, but it exists solely as a reminder that there are or could be other perspectives. Moreover, it encourages the illusion that there is some kind of homogeneity to be found in such perspectives. What, for example, does the view that the rightness of an action depends solely on whether it is legal in the jurisdiction it is performed have to do with, in positive terms, the view that the rightness of an action depends solely on whether it is performed while the agent is holding her breath? And what do either of these have to do with Rossian intuitionism or Kantianism? Given their tendency to mislead, it is not clear that such categories are desirable. But since the aim of exhaustivity requires us to include such categories unless we somehow carve nature up by its joints, doubt is cast on the desirability of the aim of exhaustivity in the taxonomy of ethical theory.

Whatever is ultimately to be said of the aim of exhaustivity, the aim of exclusivity is the most relevant to the contrast between virtue ethics, consequentialism, and deontology. In the case of ethical theories, what would it take for two types of theory to be mutually exclusive? Every instance of one type would have to be inconsistent with every instance of the other type.

However, contrasting types of ethical theory does not require viewing such types as mutually exclusive. Buddhist and Christian doctrines are significantly contrastable doctrines about the nature of the sacred and our relation to it, but they need not be viewed as mutually exclusive. In general, for two types of ethical theory to significantly contrast, all that is required is that instances of one type are characteristically not instances of the other. I see no reason to aim at exclusivity rather than significant contrastability in the taxonomy of ethical theory. I will not argue directly for the view that exclusivity is not a desirable taxonomical aim, but I will instead show how virtue ethics is significantly contrastable with consequentialism and deontology, even if these categories are not mutually exclusive. I thereby challenge a defender of exclusivity to identify what is lacking in such a view.

Virtue ethics is significantly contrastable with consequentialism. Instances of virtue ethics are characteristically not instances of consequentialism, since the correct application of virtue notions to e.g. agents and actions reveals that such notions are sensitive to features of agents and actions that are not effects of either performing an action or of possessing and exercising a trait of character. Only a highly implausible interpretation of virtue and vice notions as applied to actions or agents would interpret them as mere consequentialist notions even if the value of states of affairs is understood aretaically as in e.g. the view that valuable outcomes are those that satisfy virtuous desires. Moreover, the notion of virtuous desire could not then be specified consequentially, on such an account, without risking circularity.

It is comparatively unclear whether instances of virtue ethics are characteristically not instances of deontology. This is due to the fact that the nature of deontology is not clear unless taken to be non-consequentialism. Deontological theories of right action can be broadly characterized as those that claim or imply that the rightness of an action depends on whether that action fulfills the duties/obligations of the acting agent and/or respects the rights of individuals and/or is in accordance with correct moral rules/principles. There are, however, difficulties with this characterization, given the aim of either contrasting virtue ethics and deontology or making them mutually exclusive.

If virtue ethics is contrastable with deontology, and we accept this characterization of deontology, then virtue-ethical theories will characteristically deny, for instance, that justice is sensitive to rights of individuals, and that whether an action is right depends on whether it is in accordance with justice, since such a theory would be claiming that the rightness of an action depends on whether it respects the rights of individuals and so would be an instance of deontology. Nor could virtue ethics characteristically claim or imply that there are rightness-relevant duties of roles (e.g. spouse, teacher, friend) or that there are rightness-relevant rules

(e.g. laws and institutional procedures) or rightness-relevant virtue-rules. But many widely recognized and self-identifying virtue ethicists do acknowledge the rightness-relevance of, for example, rights. Rosalind Hursthouse, for example, claims that one can do “a terrible thing” by “violating someone’s serious rights.”<sup>57</sup> It is implausible to claim that Hursthouse’s view is anomalous in virtue ethics or a non-paradigmatic instance of virtue ethics. So something has gone wrong: either virtue ethics is not significantly contrastable with deontology or this characterization of deontology is flawed.

Is this conception of deontology – a deontological view is any view that takes duties, rights, or rules/principles to have bearing on the rightness of actions – too broad? Marcia Baron, following the model of Swanton’s definition of virtue ethics, suggests a more nuanced definition of deontology as those ethical theories that “have duty as a central concept.”<sup>58</sup> If left undeveloped, this definition does not clearly allow for significant contrastability of virtue ethics and deontology. It is indeed characteristic of virtue ethicists to claim, as Gary Watson claims, that “[d]uties and obligations are simply factors to which certain values, for example, fidelity and justice, are responsive. They do not compete with virtue for moral attention.”<sup>59</sup> As Watson claims, it is a failure in virtue to not recognize one’s duty as a teacher to carefully evaluate one’s student’s work. Failure to fulfill this duty can be uncaring or irresponsible.

Characteristically, virtue ethicists see duties (and rights) as belonging to the fields of concern of various virtues. If this is enough to make such views feature duty (or rights) as a central concept, then virtue ethics will not be significantly contrastable with deontology, given Baron’s characterization. My aim is not to defend a more adequate development of Baron’s characterization of deontology. I leave that up to deontologists. My point is that virtue ethics should not be understood as characteristically denying that duties and rights are important concepts in ethical theory.

I end my discussion with a suggestion regarding how virtue ethics and deontology can be viewed as significantly contrastable which does not appeal to a definition of deontology. The suggestion relies on the assumption that deontologists characteristically deny that virtue notions feature as *analysans* in plausible accounts of right action. Rather, deontologists characteristically claim that virtue notions are themselves best understood in terms of a prior conception of right action as in e.g. just actions are actions that are right and within the sphere of justice, when what is right is determined exclusively by e.g. whether the action is of

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<sup>57</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 74.

<sup>58</sup> Baron, “Virtue Ethics in Relation to Kantian Ethics,” 20-21.

<sup>59</sup> Watson, “On the Primacy of Character,” 451.

a type that can be universally willed by the agent. Alternatively, deontologists can characteristically claim that virtue notions are not best explained in terms of a prior conception of right action but that right action is still not best explained in terms of virtue notions. If so, deontologists characteristically deny (VNR) and hence are characteristically not instances of virtue ethics, according to (VN\*).

In this chapter, I have defended a definition of virtue ethics and showed how this definition applies to the issue of what counts as a virtue-ethical account of right action. Further, I have suggested ways to view the contrast between virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism in such a way as to avoid implausible claims such as that e.g. virtue-ethical accounts of right action must deny that beneficial or harmful consequences are rightness-relevant or that virtue-ethical accounts of right action must deny that duties and rights are rightness-relevant. In the next chapter, I begin investigating which type of virtue-ethical account of right action is most plausible. In that chapter, I analyze agent-based virtue-ethical accounts of right action, focusing on Michael Slote's view in particular.



## TWO

### AGENT-BASED VIRTUE ETHICS: ANALYSIS

Michael Slote characterizes an “agent-based form of virtue ethics” as a type of virtue ethics which “treats the moral or ethical status of actions as entirely *derivative* from independent and *fundamental* ethical/aretaic facts (or claims) about the motives, dispositions, or inner life of moral individuals.”<sup>1</sup> The primary aim of this chapter is to analyze agent-based theories of right action with focus on Slote’s own agent-based theory – the most developed and influential such theory. §1 clarifies the above definition of agent-based virtue ethics by analyzing its elemental claims and contrasting it with closely related views.

#### §1. Agent-Focused, Agent-Prior, and Agent-Based Theories

An agent-based theory is to be contrasted with theories that are (merely) agent-prior and theories that are (merely) agent-focused. As Slote claims, “being agent-based entails, but is not entailed by, being agent-prior and being agent-prior entails, but is not entailed by, being agent-focused.”<sup>2</sup> I first consider in detail what it is for a theory to be agent-focused.

Slote characterizes agent-focused views primarily by their claim that “the understanding of the moral or ethical life primarily requires us to understand what it is to be a virtuous individual and/or what it is to have one or another particular virtue.”<sup>3</sup> This is a claim about what is central in an adequate account of what it is to live well. Accordingly, I call this claim *the centrality of virtues*.

On any view that affirms the centrality of virtues, what it is to live well cannot be adequately understood independently of what it is to be virtuous or at least virtuous in some particular way (e.g. kind). The centrality of virtues is clearly implied by the Aristotelian claim that living well consists primarily in having and exercising the virtues. Yet the implication only goes one direction, since, contrary to the Aristotelian claim, one might hold that, for example, one lives well just in case one adequately approximates or resembles a virtuous agent, when such adequate approximation or resemblance does not require actually

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<sup>1</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

being virtuous. On this view, it may be that none of us are virtuous although some of us live well. Nonetheless, these latter claims would still imply that understanding what it is to be virtuous is central to an adequate understanding of what it is to live well.

Secondly, according to Slote, affirming the centrality of virtues is to be contrasted with viewing the “the moral life as [primarily] a matter of relating properly to moral rules.”<sup>4</sup> The point here concerns the content of the virtues. If Slote is correct about this contrast, then it is at least characteristically not the case that to be virtuous in some way is primarily a matter of being respectful or obedient to certain rules or principles. (This is contrary to John Rawls’ claim that “the fundamental moral virtues” are “strong and normally effective desires to act on the basic principles of right.”<sup>5</sup>) Such a contrast does not however preclude an agent-focused view from finding some place for rules, and any common-sensical account of the natures of justice and politeness as virtues would place laws, rules, protocols, or other conventions into their fields of concern.

No matter the issue of the relation between virtues and rules, the main point is that an agent-focused view affirms the centrality of virtues, and since all agent-based views are agent-focused, agent-based views also affirm the centrality of virtues. I now consider agent-prior theories, which take us one step closer to full-fledged agent-based virtue ethics.

An agent-prior theory is one that, in addition to affirming the centrality of virtues, claims or implies that the ethical status (e.g. rightness) of actions is entirely derivable from the virtuousness of the inner states of agents.<sup>6</sup> The idea is that an action gets its rightness or wrongness from the virtuousness or viciousness of inner states to which that action stands in a certain relation – that what makes an action right/wrong is its bearing some relation to some virtuous/vicious inner state(s) of some agent(s). (If virtue-consequentialism is not compatible with agent-prior theories of rightness, it is only because it denies the centrality of virtues; if virtue-consequentialism does not necessarily deny the centrality of virtues, then affirming agent-priority is weaker than affirming the primacy of character as discussed in the last chapter.)

Different versions of agent-priority differ in regard to what the relevant virtuous/vicious inner states are, who the relevant agents (i.e. bearers of inner states) are, and/or what the relevant relation is between actions and inner states. For instance, one possible agent-prior view is that an action is made right by its arising from motives of the agent which are neither

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>5</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999), 382.

<sup>6</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 6.

unkind, unjust, nor imprudent, while a contrary agent-prior view is that an action is made right by its being an action that would be approved by some virtuous agent, when such an agent need not be the agent whose action is under consideration.

Mere agent-priority is neutral in regard to what makes an inner state virtuous. Agent-based virtue ethics, in contrast, claims that the virtuousness/viciousness of inner states is fundamental.<sup>7</sup> To understand the relevant kind of fundamentality, consider Slote's examples of views that deny that the virtuousness of inner states is fundamental. If one regards the virtuousness of inner states as at least partially grounded in (the value of) their consequences or as based on their relation to *eudaimonia*, then, according to Slote, one grounds the virtuousness of an inner state, whether in whole or part, on (the value of) something else.<sup>8</sup> Such views are contrary to agent-based virtue ethics, since to claim that the virtuousness of inner states is grounded or based on (the value of) something else is to deny that the virtuousness of inner states is fundamental. (Since Slote understands the fundamentality of evaluative facts about inner states to be the primacy of such facts over *every other kind of evaluative fact* (e.g. those about the *eudaimon* life and human nature) and not just those about actions and states of affairs, it follows that a view that (merely) affirms the primacy of character is weaker than an agent-based virtue ethics.)

In more positive terms, Slote claims that one will treat the virtuousness of inner states as fundamental if one holds that certain inner states “are, intuitively, good and approvable in themselves and apart from their consequences or the possibility of grounding them in certain rules or principles,”<sup>9</sup> though, to rule out eudaimonism as Slote intends to, such states must also be intuitively admirable apart from their relation to facts about human nature and the *eudaimon* life. For a theory to regard the virtuousness of inner states as fundamental in the relevant sense is thus for it to maintain that virtuous inner states are intuitively admirable or approvable, and that their intuitive admirability is not based on the intuitive admirability or approvability of anything else. Daniel C. Russell labels this feature of agent-based virtue ethics *virtue intuitionism*.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, an agent-based virtue ethics may be defined as any view that affirms the centrality of virtues, affirms an agent-prior view about the ethical statuses of actions, and affirms that virtuous inner states are fundamentally virtuous or intuitively admirable, considered

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 6 & 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>10</sup> Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 94.

independently of their relation to everything else. Since any agent-based theory of right action derives the rightness of actions solely from that action's relation to virtuous and/or vicious inner states, any developed such theory will offer answers to the following questions:

(Q1): Which rightness-relevant inner states are virtuous and which are vicious?

(Q2): What is the relation or relations between actions and relevant inner states which must obtain in order for the ethical quality (e.g. virtuousness) of an inner state to generate the associated ethical quality (e.g. rightness) of an action?

The aim of §2 is to interpret Slote's response to (Q1).

## §2. Virtuous and Vicious Inner States

Since Slote's theory is agent-based, its official position concerning virtuous inner states is that their virtuousness is fundamental or intuitively admirable. What precisely does this amount to? Consider the following claim:

(I): Inner states are virtuous just in case they are intuitively admirable or at least agreeable (considered apart from their relations to everything else), and inner states are vicious or at least contrary to virtue just in case they are intuitively deplorable or least disagreeable.<sup>11</sup>

Is Slote, *qua* agent-based theorist, committed to (I)? "Admirable" is ambiguous between, on the one hand, what elicits (arouses) admiration and, on the other hand, what merits (warrants) admiration. Obviously, if "admirable" in (I) is taken to mean merely what elicits admiration, and there are no constraints placed on whose admiration matters, then (I) will have either subjectivist, relativistic, or non-cognitivist implications. A's sadistic desires might arouse agreeable feelings in B but disagreeable feelings in C. Is A's sadism, then, both virtuous and vicious? Is it virtuous "for" B but vicious "for" C? Is it not the case that one of them is incorrect about the virtue-status of A's sadism?

In *Morals from Motives*, Slote speaks only of *our* admiration of certain qualities of individuals: for instance, their inner strength and their benevolence. He thus assumes, for

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<sup>11</sup> I = Intuitionism.

instance, that his audience will largely share his feelings of admiration towards kindness and his feelings of disapprobation towards cruelty.

But does Slote offer resources for saying anything about B's admiration of sadism? In some passages, Slote claims that when he asserts that, for instance, benevolence is intuitively admirable (to us), he is asserting that it is "initially plausible" for us to regard benevolence as a virtue, for the reason that we actually admire benevolent people and that we do so in response to their benevolence.<sup>12</sup> Such initial plausibility is intended merely to grant a presumption in favor of regarding benevolence as a virtue. Accordingly, Slote allows that our admiration of an inner state will be challenged if, after reflecting on what exactly benevolence is (puzzlingly given agent-priority, he includes here even the kinds of actions it characteristically motivates), it no longer elicits such admiration in us or that it elicits such admiration only in qualified forms (e.g. benevolence that is not misguided).<sup>13</sup>

However, to claim that it is intuitively plausible that benevolence is a virtue and that there thus exists some presumption in favor of the virtuousness of benevolence is a far cry from committing oneself to a denial of eudaimonism or any other attempt to provide a basis or ground for the virtue-status of benevolence. So we should not take these claims as sufficient for taking benevolence to be fundamentally virtuous.

Slote, in *Morals from Motives*, is simply silent on how to regard cases like the one above in which someone does not share our approbation or disapprobation. All that Slote's claims suggest is that if B admires A's sadism, then B does not share a similar initial emotive outlook as us and so (s)he will not occupy a similar starting point as us in the exercise of the method of reflective equilibrium.<sup>14</sup>

Slote's claims aside, can agent-based virtue ethics treat the admirability of an inner state as a matter of that inner state's warranting or meriting admiration and thereby maintain that B's admiration of A's sadism is distorted? On such a view, what makes an inner state virtuous is its meriting admiration (or at least approbation). What can agent-based virtue ethics claim about what merits an inner state's being admired? Daniel C. Russell claims that "agent-basing holds that admirability can *have* no explanation."<sup>15</sup> The idea is that if the virtuousness of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>14</sup> That Slote sees legitimate ethical theorizing as an exercise in reflective equilibrium is evidenced by *ibid.*, 10-13. It is, however, unclear whether his exercise of reflective equilibrium in *Morals from Motives* is wide or narrow. For an authoritative discussion of this methodology in ethics, see Norman Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics," *The Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979): 256-282.

<sup>15</sup> Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 88.

inner states is not grounded or based on (the value) of anything else, then there can be no properties of inner states which merit admiration and make them virtuous, since if there were such properties, they would at least partially ground the virtuousness of that inner state. For example, if an inner state's tendency to promote desirable states of affairs merits approbation, and an inner state is made virtuous by its meriting approbation, then that inner state would be made virtuous, at least in part, by its tendency to promote desirable states of affairs. This consequent is inconsistent with the fundamentality of virtue, and so all agent-based theories must deny that such properties of inner states merit or warrant admiration of those inner states, if an inner state is made virtuous by its meriting admiration. But since it is hardly informative to claim that what makes an inner state virtuous is its meriting admiration while what merits an inner state's admiration is its being virtuous, it is tempting to see an agent-based virtue ethics as denying that there are properties of virtues which merit admiration and make them virtuous or, in the language of Russell, that the admirability of virtues admits of explanation.

However, there is a way for Slote to deny that the virtues have no criteria (other than being admirable, when this is criteria-less) and to deny that their criteria is relativistic, subjectivist, or non-cognitivist. In more recent work, Slote defends a form of moral sentimentalism which claims that fully developed human empathy is the basis for all (sound) moral judgments, including those regarding what inner states are virtuous.<sup>16</sup> In this work, Slote claims that fully developed empathic reactions "fix the reference" of moral terms such as "virtuous" and "right".<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Slote claims that fully empathic reactions respond warmly or favorably to inner states that are themselves fully empathic, and that such reactions respond coldly or disfavorably to inner states that are themselves unfully empathic or unempathic.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that an inner state is virtuous to the extent that it is a fully developed empathic inner state. Moreover, this is consistent with the fundamentality of virtue, if fully empathic reactions to inner states are not based on fully empathic reactions to other things (e.g. desirable consequences) to which such inner states are related.

Hence, on Slote's recent view, the virtuousness of inner states is still plausibly seen as fundamental, but Slote can be interpreted as denying (I) *when* no constraints are placed on whose admiration or approbation matters. Rather, to claim that the virtuousness of an inner state is fundamentally admirable is to claim that they (would) arouse admiration or

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<sup>16</sup> Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

approbation in spectators who possess fully developed empathic caring and that such spectators would admire such inner states independently of their relation to other sorts of things (e.g. *eudaimonia*, human nature, certain kinds of actions, or certain kinds of outcomes). This allows Slote to claim that B's admiration of A's sadism is misplaced, and that A's sadism is not virtuous. This is allowed if B is a spectator who does not possess fully developed empathic caring. Hence, Slote's fundamentality thesis does not commit him to subjectivism or relativism regarding the criteria of virtue and it does not preclude him from accounting for what it is about virtuous inner states that (would) make suitable spectators approve them.

In this framework, to ask what it is about virtuous inner states that (would) make suitable spectators approve them is to ask about the *content* of virtue – what is involved in possessing virtuous inner states such as benevolence – on Slote's view. I now detail Slote's view of the content of virtuous inner states as presented in *Morals from Motives*.

Slote advocates what he calls a *warm* agent-based virtue ethics. Such a view “bases all morality on the aretaic value, the moral admirability, of benevolence.”<sup>19</sup> The term “morality” is important here, for Slote, like many modern moral philosophers but atypically for a virtue ethicist, sees the domain of morality as sharply contrasting with or separate from the domain of prudence and self-interest. On this kind of view, the targets of moral virtues largely concern avoiding harm and unfairness to others, and the moral life need not involve competently caring for and respecting the self. As such, Slote may claim that one can live a morally decent or even admirable life without thereby living well, construed broadly as it is in the ancients.

For Slote, the history of ethics suggests that there are two broadly different ways of developing such a warm view, since there are two broadly different ways of conceiving of benevolence: benevolence as universal and impartialistic contrasted with benevolence as partialistic caring. Slote contrasts both such warm agent-based views with *cool* views<sup>20</sup> – those that base all morality on the admirability of either inner strength or health, *pluralistic* views<sup>21</sup> – those that base all morality on the admirability of a plurality of inner states, and *agapic* views<sup>22</sup> – those that base all morality on the admirability of agapic love.

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<sup>19</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

I read Part I of *Morals from Motives* as involving an extended process of elimination from among the above options. Slote argues against cool views, pluralistic views, agapic views, and the warm view that interprets benevolence as universal and impartial. The remaining view, which Slote “tentatively prefer[s],”<sup>23</sup> is a warm view that interprets benevolence as partialistic caring. Such a view is an instance of the *ethics of care* – roughly those ethical views that maintain that care as either a virtue or relationship plays an especially prominent role in living well.<sup>24</sup>

The persuasiveness of a process of elimination depends on both the breadth of options considered and the strength of the eliminating arguments. Slote does not see all such options as deserving of equal attention. Indeed, the view that I find most plausible – pluralism in regard to moral virtue – is rather quickly dismissed by Slote with thoughts such as that it is not clear that all virtues that are not primarily concerned with well-being are *morally* admirable.<sup>25</sup> Slote’s main focus is on developing his view of partialistic caring and showing how it contrasts with competing views with which he engages, which are primarily other forms of warm agent-based virtue ethics.

Slote contrasts his understanding of virtuous benevolence – that inner state whose moral admirability is to ground all morality (on a warm view) – with an account of benevolence that he sees as an “internal analogue” to utilitarianism.<sup>26</sup> To account for virtuous benevolence in this quasi-utilitarian way is to make the following claim:

(IB): Virtuous benevolence is an inner state that motivates one to promote the well-being and avoid the harm of all human beings impartially.

It is, however, misleading to refer to (IB) as the claim that virtuous benevolence is “universal benevolence” as Slote sometimes does, because it is meant to contrast with Slote’s ethic of caring, and Slote’s view of virtuous benevolence as caring is indeed universalistic in the sense that “humanitarian caring”, a form of virtuous benevolence, is to be directed towards all human beings. What Slote rejects is the impartialist element and not the universalist element in (IB). For this reason, I label it “impartial benevolence” or (IB) rather than “universal benevolence.” I now outline Slote’s view of virtuous benevolence as care and afterwards compare the latter with (IB).

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>24</sup> See further Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 25.



Slote sees virtuous benevolence as manifesting itself in different forms, based upon the object of virtuous benevolence's relationship to the benevolent agent. He calls virtuous benevolence that is directed towards those near and dear, including friends and family, *intimate caring*, while he calls virtuous benevolence directed towards those who are known by the benevolent only through description *humanitarian caring*.<sup>27</sup> Virtuous agents display intimate caring towards their children but humanitarian caring for flood victims they read about in the newspaper. (Though it is not the case, as will become clear, that intimate caring and humanitarian caring differ only in regard to the relationship between carer and cared-for; such relationships make appropriate different kinds of caring responses.) In addition, Slote recognizes that there are people who are appropriately cared for which are neither near and dear nor known only through description. Such people include (mere) acquaintances and (mere) colleagues. Slote thinks that we can best account for virtuous benevolence towards people in this category as appropriately related to by a form of caring that is somewhere between intimate and humanitarian caring.<sup>28</sup> As such, intimate caring and humanitarian caring are to be seen as occupying opposite ends on a spectrum of caring which has intermediate forms.

Slote views all forms of virtuous benevolence as forms of caring: to be a virtuously benevolent agent is to be a virtuously caring agent and vice versa. To get clear about the nature of virtuous caring on Slote's view, consider first the following important claims, all of which are accepted by Slote:

(The Wishing-Well Claim): Virtuously caring for someone or some group primarily involves (dispositionally) wishing them well, and such wishing well primarily involves both desiring for them to be good (virtuous) as well as desiring good (beneficial) things for them.<sup>29</sup>

(The Non-Self-Focused Claim): To virtuously care for someone, one must wish them well independently of one's desires about one's own well-being and virtue. One cannot wish them well only because their well-being is (believed to be) conducive to one's own well-being, and one cannot wish them well only because (it is believed that) doing so makes one virtuous.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 33 & 65.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 26 & 41.

(The Epistemic Well-Motivatedness Claim): That one's motivation for some action consists in one's wishing someone well for their own sake does not suffice to make one's motivation virtuously caring. Such wishing well can be contrary to virtuous caring if one is not adequately motivated to seek out the truth about the other's good or what actions or policies would conduce to that good in the circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

(The Holistic Claim): That one's motivation for some action consists in one's wishing someone well for their own sake does not suffice to make one's (overall) motivation virtuously caring. Such wishing well can be contrary to virtuous caring if one "has too much concern for near and dear and/or too little for human beings generally." That is, the virtuousness of one's caring about some particular person has some dependence on one's caring about people other than that person.<sup>32</sup>

According to The Wishing-Well Claim, virtuous caring primarily involves wishing another well, and wishing well primarily involves having desires for the other's good and aversions towards the other's harm. This is not a trivially true claim in that it contains an implicit view concerning the nature of caring motivation. Throughout *Morals from Motives*, Slote treats "motive" and "desire" as interchangeable,<sup>33</sup> but one need not understand motivation primarily through the notion of desire. Rationalist theories of motivation, for example, see motivation primarily in terms of reasons-responsiveness. A rationalist might interpret caring for someone, considered as a motivational state, as primarily a matter of taking certain facts about them ("they are hoping that I will come") or their situation ("those slippery steps are dangerous") as reasons for action. Rationalist theories of motivation are to be contrasted with belief-desire theories of motivation in that the latter see motivations as involving beliefs and desires which together constitute an agent's reasons for action. On a rationalist view, what an agent takes to be a reason is her reason for action, and although she may have a desire to act on or in accordance with that reason, such a desire need not, even partially, constitute her reason for acting.

In §3, I argue that Slote maintains an implicit belief-desire theory of motivation, and I use Donald Davidson's widely influential version of that theory as the primary basis for an

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 40 & 105.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. *ibid.*, 28, 41, 52, 55, & 61. The most telling of these are 52 & 61.

appropriate account of what it is for an action to express, manifest, reflect, or display (all terms used interchangeably by Slote) a motive.

The Non-Self-Focused Claim plays at least two important roles in Slote's presentation of his view. Firstly, it distances Slote's position from egoism in regard to the virtues – roughly the view that the ultimate rationale or target of all virtues is the fulfillment, perfection, development, and/or enrichment of the self. Such distance from egoism is important for Slote, since, as noted above, he views the *moral* life as strongly contrasting with the prudent or self-interested life.

Secondly, the claim that caring about someone is not virtuous caring if it is done only for the sake of the self's virtue is a claim that Slote uses to defend his theory against the objection that an action cannot be made right by the aretaic quality of what it is motivated by, since it is characteristically illegitimate to deliberate about what to do by considering what one's motives are for doing it. Slote sees this objection as misfiring, since, on his view, deliberating well about what to do never requires deliberating about what it would be right to do, and such forms of deliberation can even be in tension with one another.<sup>34</sup>

The Epistemic Well-Motivatedness Claim indicates that, for Slote, virtuously wishing someone well involves serious concern for success. If I, as a policy maker, am not adequately motivated to investigate the consequences my policies are likely to have on a group of people, then what is shown is that I do not virtuously wish that group well.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, Slote can accept the old saw that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” given some popular interpretations of that phrase.<sup>36</sup> This epistemic constraint on virtuous caring plays an important role in Slote's defense against the objection that virtuously motivated actions need not be right, since they need not be successful in their aim of benefitting others. While Slote accepts that right actions can accidentally do more harm than good, he emphasizes that if the harm results from inadequate epistemic motivation of the sort incompatible with virtuous caring, then such actions are not right on his view.<sup>37</sup> However, Slote suggests that epistemic well-motivatedness is not sufficient for having epistemically justified beliefs.<sup>38</sup> One can be both epistemically well-motivated and epistemically

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<sup>34</sup> This is a main point of *ibid.*, Ch. 2

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>36</sup> Compare Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*, 133.

<sup>37</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 34.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

incompetent. In this respect, Slote denies the Aristotelian doctrine that virtue requires practical wisdom.<sup>39</sup>

The Holistic Claim clarifies Slote's stance on virtue-bearers in his theory. On Slote's view, it is not the case that isolated, occurrent motives are the most basic bearers of virtuousness or admirability, and that, for instance, a person is more virtuously caring the more virtuously caring occurrent motives she has. Rather, the virtuousness of an isolated, occurrent motive is dependent on the virtuousness of "the agent's total or overall motivation."<sup>40</sup> The idea is that one's caring motivation for one's mother can be rendered non-virtuous if it is significantly related to other features of one's overall motivational state, such as one's indifference to strangers. If so, one's desire to buy one's mother a new house can be non-virtuous caring if that desire is not adequately integrated with a desire to promote the good of people other than one's mother.

The Holistic Claim, with its appeal to an agent's overall motivation, is to be understood in part by reference to Slote's account of "balanced" caring, which involves a balance between those one intimately cares for as well as a balance between humanitarian and intimate forms of caring briefly mentioned above. I now outline the nature of these forms of caring and explicate what balancing care amounts to.

In *Morals from Motives*, the fundamental difference between intimate and humanitarian caring concerns the way in which the cared-for is viewed by the caretaker – the one who cares. In intimate caring, the cared-for is presented as an individual, separate from others that are cared for.<sup>41</sup> Thus, a virtuous agent sees to it that her intimates are taken care of individually, and this implies that it will not always be the case that a virtuous agent will seek to promote the greatest good for her intimates considered as an aggregate.

Slote argues for this point by appealing to the case of a father with two children, one of which can do well enough without him and the other of which is disabled and thereby more dependent on him. Slote's claim is that even if the overall well-being of the two children collectively would be greater if the father devotes all his efforts to the disabled child and stops being involved in the other child's life, a loving or caring father will not in fact do so, for he, as a matter of psychology, will choose to continue to care for his other child.<sup>42</sup> If so, intimate caring is directed towards individuals rather than aggregates.

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<sup>39</sup> Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*, 154, fn. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

This feature of intimate caring is plausibly grounded in bonds between caretaker and cared-for. The point is that virtuous caring is not always a matter of doing whatever would be the most beneficial for a group of individuals. The bonds between the caretaker and cared-for can warrant some response by the care-taker which conflicts with such promotion.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, we should view the target of virtuous intimate caring as involving the development, maintenance, and enrichment of such bonds, in addition to the promotion of the cared-for's welfare.

In humanitarian caring, by contrast, the cared-for individual is viewed as a fungible member of a group of people for which one cares.<sup>44</sup> If the cared-for is viewed in this way, then, according to Slote, caretakers are led to prioritize the best for the group considered as a whole over the well-being of the individuals making up that group, considered separately. The point is that, if, for example, we are concerned to help some group of people such as a community greatly affected by a recent earthquake, then a virtuously caring agent who seeks to help this community will have the aim to do as much good as she can for the community as a whole. It will not bother her, for instance, if her efforts or money do not benefit each and every individual member of the community, though presumably she will be bothered if her efforts or money do not benefit the most needy.

(In this characterization of humanitarian caring as promoting the overall good of an aggregate, Slote remains neutral in regard to how the overall good of an aggregate is best conceived. He could say, for instance, that humanitarian caring aims to promote the maximum net amount of well-being distributed across all individuals in a group or the maximum average amount of well-being distributed across all individuals in the group or that humanitarian caring promotes the maximum net amount of well-being distributed across the least well off in the group. Slote is clearly influenced by utilitarianism in his account of humanitarian care, and the above views are merely different utilitarian variants on the target of humanitarian care.)

On Slote's view, both intimate caring and humanitarian caring admit of virtuous and vicious forms, and their virtuousness depends centrally on their being "balanced". Balanced caring, in Slote's presentation, is understood primarily by contrast with imbalanced, disproportionate, or lopsided caring.

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<sup>43</sup> Compare Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 216-219.

<sup>44</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 69-70.

The notion of imbalance in this context is meant to capture vicious forms of caring exhibited in caring too little or too much for near and dear, caring too little or too much for humanity in general, caring too little or too much for one of one's children, and caring too little or too much for one's group of belonging (e.g. members of one's nationality).

The notion of balance is not made precise by Slote, nor does he offer a robust account of balance. The hope is that we will be able to latch onto its sense through being reminded of its use in ordinary contexts. Such contexts include the kind mentioned above such as when a father cares too much for one child over another, but the relevant notion of balanced concern can even be found outside of interpersonal contexts. For instance, if one is too concerned with a project, then one's concern for it is imbalanced in that it involves a neglect of other pressing concerns. Though Slote does not mention the connection between imbalanced concern and neglect, it is plausible that too little concern for  $x$  is neglect of  $x$  and too much concern for  $x$  is "too much" because it involves neglect of  $y$ . If so, then we achieve fully or perfectly balanced care if we neglect no one (and perhaps nothing, though Slote de-emphasizes non-person-directed care).

There are competing ways to understand the notion of balanced care. Slote contrasts his own intuitive understanding both with balance as aggregation and balance as equality. As the case of the father with the disabled child illustrates, virtuous, balanced intimate caring of one's children does not require aggregating their welfare, and such aggregation can even be at odds with balanced caring. If the father spends all of his time and energy on the disabled child, then, on Slote's view, his caring will be disproportionate or imbalanced – the father will care too much for the disabled child or not enough for the non-disabled child.

Neither does balanced care require equality of concern for the cared-for. The father may balance his concern among his children without giving equal amount of attention to both children.<sup>45</sup> Even clearer, a father may fully balance his concern for his daughter with his concern for an acquaintance without thereby being equally concerned with the daughter and the acquaintance.

The inequality of balanced care makes it clear that partiality plays an important role in virtuous caring, on Slote's view. Such partiality makes Slote's view of virtuous benevolence (as balanced caring) contrast with (IB) above. While an advocate of virtuous benevolence as universal and impartial instructs us to treat "each person as one and none as more than one" as in the Benthamite dictum, Slote argues that such treatment can express imbalanced care.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

Slote argues for his view of virtuous benevolence as balanced, partialistic caring primarily on the basis of intuitions about how, for instance, parents ought to care for their children more than strangers.<sup>46</sup> Slote claims in general that it is “morally appropriate to care more for people the closer they are to one,” though he believes that any attempt to quantify such a principle leads to counter-intuitive results.<sup>47</sup> Slote also supports his view by arguing that it avoids the overdemandingness of impartialist views which imply, for example, that “we are morally obligated to reduce ourselves and our families to a condition of poverty or near-poverty, given that we can relieve more and more serious human suffering by doing so.”<sup>48</sup> Yet by maintaining that balanced caring involves humanitarian caring, Slote hopes to avoid the opposing error of assuming that we do not have substantial and demanding obligations to people that are quite distant from us (in terms both of bonds and of physical distance).

As is discussed below, an action is made wrong by its expressing a vicious inner state, on Slote’s view. If so, an understanding of vicious inner states is just as essential as an understanding of virtuous inner states to an adequate understanding of right action.

If morally (i.e. rightness-relevant) virtuous inner states are states of balanced caring, then morally vicious inner states are opposed to balanced caring. As such, at the most basic level, morally vicious inner states involve either an absence of other-regarding caring (or one or more of its elements such as epistemic well-motivatedness), an imbalance of other-regarding caring, or a positive state of anti-caring such as malice or cruelty.

On this account, if one is to claim that, for example, cowardice is morally vicious, then one will need to claim that cowardice involves some failure in balanced caring. Perhaps the cowardly soldier has imbalanced concern in, for example, caring too much for himself and not enough for his country. Illustrating this general point in practice, Slote takes great care to argue that justice is a form of balanced caring and that injustice is contrary to balanced caring.<sup>49</sup> But Slote does not try to derive all virtuous inner states from balanced caring, and he does not try to derive all vicious inner states from their opposition to balanced caring. His claim, rather, is that all *moral* virtues are forms of balanced caring, and that all *moral* vices are contrary to balanced caring. Other species of virtues include *rational* virtues (grounded

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 136-137.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., Ch. 4.

in self-concern, on Slote's view) and he leaves open that there are virtues outside of both the moral and rational spheres.<sup>50</sup>

### §3. Rightness, Motivation, and Expression

Above I claimed that any developed agent-based theory of rightness will have an answer to the following question:

(Q2): What is the relation or relations between actions and relevant inner states which must obtain in order for the ethical quality (e.g. virtuousness) of an inner state to generate the associated ethical quality (e.g. rightness) of an action?

In §3, I interpret Slote's response to (Q2) and further develop this response by appropriating Donald Davidson's theory of motivation and action. Here is Slote's criterion of right action:

(RA): An act is morally acceptable if and only if it comes from good or virtuous motivation involving benevolence or caring (about the well-being of others) or at least doesn't come from bad or inferior motivation involving malice or indifference to humanity.<sup>51</sup>

(RA) provides a partial response to (Q2): the relevant inner states are motivations, and the crucial relation between action and inner state is one referred to by "coming from". Right actions come from non-vicious motivations, and wrong actions come from vicious motivations, when the motivations under consideration are the motivations of the acting agent in performing the action under consideration. If we conjoin (RA) with the substantive account of morally virtuous and vicious inner states presented in §2, the result is that wrong actions come from motivations that are contrary to balanced caring, and right actions are non-wrong actions. Praiseworthy or morally good actions are those that come from motivations of balanced caring (but these are perhaps saliently praiseworthy only when such balanced

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 201, fn. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 38. I here take Slote's "morally acceptable" to be equivalent to "right". RA = Right Action. For similar criteria, see Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, 31; Slote, *From Enlightenment to Receptivity: Rethinking Our Values* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 110. Such criteria show that Slote's view about right action has remained stable over the last couple of decades.



caring is “put to the test”). Slote’s synonyms for “coming from” include “expressing”, “displaying”, “reflecting”, and “manifesting”,<sup>52</sup> and I follow Slote in treating these terms as interchangeable.

According to Slote, it is impossible for someone to act contrary to balanced caring unless the acting agent has some motive which is contrary to balanced caring, and thus it is impossible for anyone to perform a wrong action unless they possess some vicious motive, since it is impossible for an action to come from bad or inferior motivation unless there is some bad or inferior motivation from which that action can come.

Although (RA) thus implies that possessing a vicious motive is necessary for performing a wrong action, it is not sufficient, since one may possess a vicious motive, and one may perform an action, yet it still be the case that the action does not express the vicious motive. Slote, trying to make room in his theory for the principle that “ought implies can,” claims that “a benevolent person is typically *capable* of choosing many actions that *fail to express or exhibit* her (inner state of) benevolence.”<sup>53</sup> The general point is that possessing some inner state while performing an action or choosing to perform an action is not sufficient for that action’s expressing that inner state. All this raises the question of what it is for an action to express some motive.

Slote offers an account neither of motivation nor of motivational expression. However, since these concepts play a central role in his theory of rightness, and they are appealed to by Slote in defense against important objections such as that the theory does not allow that “ought implies can,” I here present an account of motivation and expression appropriate for inclusion in Slote’s theory.

The type of inner state that is rightness-relevant on Slote’s view is motivational. Actions get their rightness or wrongness from the virtuousness or viciousness of the motives out of which they arise. But our view of virtuous and vicious motivation and their expression depends, to some extent, on our view of motivation in general. My creative interpretation of Slote attributes to him a belief-desire theory of motivation and a causal theory of motivational expression.

Why do I attribute a belief-desire theory of motivation to Slote? There are two presumptive reasons for doing so. The first is that Slote tends to use “desire” and “motive” interchangeably.<sup>54</sup> The second is that the belief-desire model of motivation is still regarded

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<sup>52</sup> See e.g. Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 16-17.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>54</sup> See fn. 34 above.

as the “standard account of agency” in contemporary philosophy<sup>55</sup> and, as such, it is more plausible to attribute this view rather than any other to an author whose writings do not themselves defend a theory of motivation but which depend for their fleshing out on some such theory. These two reasons provide some basis, however weak, for attributing a belief-desire theory to Slote.

A stronger reason for such attribution is to be found in Slote’s own statement that, throughout his philosophical development, he has consistently been much more drawn to belief-desire accounts of motivation than to rationalist accounts of the kind defended by Thomas Nagel. Of Nagel’s view in *The Possibility of Altruism*<sup>56</sup> (as paraphrased by Slote) that “we can derive a motivating reason for certain actions from a certain kind of rational understanding of our situation and its possibilities and without basing our reason on some sort of antecedent desire...”, Slote, after his first reading, agreed with Feinberg and Davidson that the view is “clearly indefensible” and then, after a second reading, moved to regarding it less harshly as merely “outré and counterintuitive.” After still further reflection, Slote now reports that “...although it is very difficult to fault Nagel’s arguments in philosophical terms, I am actually still not entirely convinced he was correct; my inclination to believe that desire is necessary to the motivation of action is somehow just too strong.”<sup>57</sup> (In this discussion of Nagel, Slote slips between the claim that desires ground or (partially) constitute motivating reasons and the weaker claim that desires are necessary conditions of motivating reasons, but Slote is clearly attracted to both claims, since Nagel can agree that desires are necessary conditions of motivating reasons.) On this basis, I take it that there is adequate reason to attribute a belief-desire theory of motivation to Slote.

The most influential such theory is the one constructed and refined by Donald Davidson in the 1960s through the 1980s. On this view, a motive or a motivating reason is a set of beliefs and desires (or “pro-attitudes”) – a desire for some end and a belief about what will contribute to the achievement of that end in the circumstances.

To ask what someone’s motivation was for performing some action is to ask for what reason the agent performed the action. On Davidson’s view, we adequately see for what reason an agent performed an action only if such a reason “leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action – some feature, consequence, or aspect of the

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<sup>55</sup> Stephen Everson, “Motivating Reasons,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, edited by Timothy O’Connor and Constantine Sandis (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 145-152, at 145.

<sup>56</sup> Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>57</sup> Slote, “Under the Influence: A Very Personal Brief History of Late-Twentieth-Century Ethics,” in *Essays on the History of Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 134-149, at 139-140.

action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear, thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory, or agreeable.”<sup>58</sup> Further, to ask about an agent’s motivating reasons is to ask about a feature, consequence, or aspect of an action toward which the agent has (had) some pro-attitude. An agent’s belief that her action is obligatory motivates her only if she has some pro-attitude toward fulfilling her obligations. If an agent cares not at all about doing her duty or pleasing her grandmother, then her belief that an action will fulfill her duty or please her grandmother will not be her reason for performing the action.

It is standard practice in the philosophy of action to distinguish between *normative reasons* – the reasons there are for doing something, *motivating reasons* – the agent’s reasons for doing something, and *causal reasons* – what causes an agent to do something.<sup>59</sup> On Davidson’s causal theory of action, motivating reasons are also causal reasons: an agent’s reasons for doing something – her beliefs and desires related to that action – cause her to (choose to) perform that action. I suggest a Davidsonian reading of Slote’s theory according to which an action *expresses* or *comes from* some motivating reason just in case that action or the decision to perform that action is caused by that motivating reason. This view allows that an agent possesses some motivating reason *m* and performs  $\phi$ , although  $\phi$  does not express *m*. This account thus preserves Slote’s claim that possessing some motive while performing some action does not suffice for that action’s expression of that motive.

Mirroring this claim of Slote’s is Davidson’s claim that “a person can have a reason for an action, and perform the action, and yet this reason not be the reason why he did it.”<sup>60</sup> Timothy O’Connor illustrates this point thus:

Your rich uncle lies dying, in great and continuous pain. You want to see his suffering cease; you also want to receive your inheritance. You pull the plug on his life-preserving respirator. Why? We seem to be able to distinguish three basic scenarios – you were motivated by compassion, you were motivated by greed, you were motivated by both...<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 60 (1963): 685-700, at 685.

<sup>59</sup> Wayne A. Davis, “The Causal Theory of Action,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, edited by Timothy O’Connor and Constantine Sandis (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 32-39, at 35.

<sup>60</sup> Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” 691.

<sup>61</sup> O’Connor, “Reasons and Causes,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, edited by Timothy O’Connor and Constantine Sandis (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), , 129-138, at 130.

On the present view, whether you are motivated by compassion or greed or both depends on what causes you to pull the plug. If you did not desire to receive the inheritance (soon) or did not believe that pulling the plug would contribute to your receiving the inheritance (soon), would you still have pulled the plug? If the answer is “no”, then you were motivated by a desire for the inheritance. If the answer is “yes”, then either you were not motivated by a desire for the inheritance or you had more than one motive for performing the action.<sup>62</sup>

O'Connor notes one complication for causal theories of action: in order to be plausible, there is a need to qualify the way that a motivation can cause an action. Davidson, refining his earlier view, uses the following example to illustrate that there is a kind of causation between motives and behaviors which does not result in action or at least not action expressive of or done out of the motive:

A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never *chose* to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally.<sup>63</sup>

If the motivation's causing the behavior is not sufficient for the expression of that motivation by an action, then the causal theorist needs to say what kind of cause is sufficient. Presumably, Davidson wants to say that such a cause must involve an agent's choice and thereby pass through an act of the will. Otherwise what is caused is mere behavior, not action. If so, then perhaps an action is caused by an act of will and an act of will is caused by motivating reasons. At any rate, coming up with an account of the appropriate kind of causation is a task that lies beyond the proper focus of this work. I leave this issue unresolved and simply claim that, on my creative interpretation of Slote's view, an action  $\phi$  expresses a motive or motivating reason  $m$  just in case  $m$  causes, in some appropriate way, the agent to (choose to) perform  $\phi$ .

Based on Davidson's theory of action and motivation, we now have an account of what it is for an action to express a motivation which preserves the claim that the mere presence of

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<sup>62</sup> Daniel Jacobson argues that the possibility of an action's expressing two different motives, one virtuous and one vicious, poses a significant problem for Slote's view. See Jacobson, "An Unsolved Problem for Slote's Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," *Philosophical Studies* 111 (2002): 53-67, at 56-57.

<sup>63</sup> Davidson, "Freedom to Act," in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 63-81, at 79, cited in O'Connor, "Reasons and Causes," 131.

some motivation in the agent during the performance of an action is not sufficient for the action to express that motivation. In the remainder of the chapter, I aim to further support a Davidsonian reading of Slote by illustrating how such a reading enriches our understanding of what is involved in an action's being expressive of virtuous and vicious inner states. To this end, I offer Davidsonian analyses of two examples of Slote's, the first involving action expressive of virtuous motivation and the second involving action expressive of vicious motivation.

A daughter travels to be with her ill mother in the hospital. The daughter is eventually put into the position of having to decide whether to let her mother die or rather to have her kept alive on some sort of life-preserving machine. Since the woman virtuously cares for her mother, she is motivated to find out the truth about what the life of her mother will be like on the life-preserving machine. "Then, once the facts have emerged and assuming they are fairly clear-cut and point to horrendously painful and debilitating prospects for her mother...it would be...benevolent or kind not to" decide to have the mother live on the life-preserving machine.<sup>64</sup>

This case illustrates the Epistemic Well-Motivatedness Claim insofar as the daughter's deliberation and the beliefs involved in such deliberation have their source in epistemically well-motivated practices of virtuous caring. Further, insofar as the daughter is virtuously caring, the daughter desires her mother's good and so is averse to her needless suffering. We can see the daughter's decision to pull the plug as flowing from her belief that her mother no longer has any real chance of a decent life and that to keep her alive would result in nothing more than pain and suffering for the mother. So the daughter's decision can be seen as arising from desires and aversions related to her mother and from beliefs regarding her mother's prognosis and the likely consequences of pulling the plug and not pulling the plug.

Had the daughter also had a desire for receiving her inheritance soon, and the belief that pulling the plug would be conducive to such a soon reception, this would have formed a non-benevolent (though not yet contrary to benevolence) motivational reason for the daughter to pull the plug. But if such a motivation were the only or the only primary motivational cause of her action, then her action would not have expressed benevolent motivation. Whether the action expresses the daughter's virtuous caring for her mother or her self-love or both depends on what causes her to (choose to) perform the action. Since the notion of causation is importantly connected to counter-factual reasoning, we consider what causes the

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<sup>64</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 40.

daughter's decision or action by considering what the daughter would have done, if, counterfactually, her desires and beliefs were altered in various ways. Suppose that the daughter either did not desire her mother's good or did not believe that her mother's good would be served by pulling the plug. If the daughter would have still chosen to pull the plug, then her pulling the plug did not express virtuous caring for her mother.

Consider also the case in which the daughter decides to not pull the plug. If what primarily causes the daughter to make that decision is a desire to avoid feelings of regret and/or guilt and the belief that pulling the plug is likely to cause such feelings in herself, then the action will not express virtuous caring. Rather, it will express imbalanced caring (caring not enough for her mother and too much for herself) and perhaps misguided caring, if it is misguided for the daughter to believe that it will benefit her to cowardly avoid such feelings of regret.

Consider now a case originally from Henry Sidgwick in which a man is a "prosecutor who does his duty by trying to convict a defendant, but who is motivated by malice."<sup>65</sup> Whether the prosecutor performs a wrong action, according to (RA), depends on what motivation the prosecutor's decision or action comes from or expresses. Slote asks, "If actions are wrong when they result from morally bad motives, doesn't that mean that the prosecutor acts wrongly in prosecuting?" and implicitly answers this affirmatively.<sup>66</sup> (The use of "result" here strongly suggests a causal tie between the action and the motivation it expresses, and, as such, gives further support to a Davidsonian reading of Slote.) Since the prosecutor is malicious toward the defendant, he non-merely-instrumentally desires to harm the defendant. If the prosecutor believes that convicting the defendant will harm the defendant, and this set of beliefs and desires causes the prosecutor to (choose to) convict the defendant, then his convicting the defendant expresses malice and is thereby wrong, according to (RA).

Interestingly, Slote argues that in the case that the prosecutor does *not* convict the defendant, there are also grounds for regarding the action as wrong, according to (RA), since if the prosecutor does not prosecute, his action will "come from...insufficient concern for the public (or general human) good or for being useful to society."<sup>67</sup> The point is that if the prosecutor chooses to not convict the defendant out of a desire to avoid acting out of malice, then it is arguable that the man's desire is one of imbalanced concern in that he cares too much for himself, specifically his virtue, and not enough for humanity or his community.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 14.

Whether this is so or not, there is an important point in the background here concerning the connection between The Holistic Claim and my Davidsonian reading of Slote. Suppose that the prosecutor or anyone else has vicious motivation in that it involves too little or an absence of, for instance, humanitarian caring. The *absence* of a desire or concern is not part of a Davidsonian motivational reason (nor would it be part of a motivational reason on a rationalist account), so how can we make sense of an action's expression of insufficient humanitarian caring? On the Davidsonian view, we are motivated by what we desire and what we are averse to. How, then, can motivation involve indifference? The answer is that indifference is not absence of motivation but is itself a positive state or a range of positive states that may include callousness, apathy, depression, and egocentricity.

Recall the The Holistic Claim's suggestion that the virtuousness of some inner state is dependent on the virtuousness of the agent's total or overall motivational state in the sense that the virtuousness of, say, a desire for the good of one's mother will not be virtuous if it is not integrated with or constrained by, say, a desire for the good of human beings generally.

Any desire in an agent which is present only because of an imbalanced or uncaring overall or total motivational state (when the "total" of course depends on absences of motives and desires) is thereby a vicious desire. So, if, for instance, one desires to benefit one's mother in a specific way, at a particular time, and in a particular place but one would not have that particularized desire if one had a virtuously caring attitude towards humanity at large, then that desire, present in the agent and thereby capable of constituting a motivating reason, nonetheless involves insufficient humanitarian concern in the sense that its presence in the agent depends on the insufficient humanitarian concern in the agent's overall motivational state, the insufficiency of which may be due to e.g. apathy, depression, or egocentrism.

Given this, the prosecutor's refusal to convict the defendant will express insufficient humanitarian concern if the motive or desire that causes him to (choose to) refuse is such that it would not have been present if his total motivational state were one of balanced caring. Or it will express insufficient humanitarian concern if that desire's presence in a total motivational state of balanced caring would not cause the prosecutor to refuse to prosecute, since it would be defeated or overpowered by competing desires or concerns present in the prosecutor's total motivational state, were it one of balanced caring.

In this chapter, I have analyzed and, when appropriate, further developed Slote's agent-based account of right action. In the next chapter, I argue that this account of right action is correct to claim that the motive of an agent can be rightness-relevant, but I argue that the account is incorrect in claiming that only the motives of the agent are rightness-relevant.

### THREE

#### AGENT-BASED VIRTUE ETHICS: EVALUATION

On Slote's view, an action is right just in case it comes from an overall (morally) virtuous motive or at least does not come from a motive that is contrary to (moral) virtue<sup>1</sup> – what makes an action right or wrong is exclusively the virtue-status of the motivation, holistically considered, of that action. This view implies the following claims:

(MRR): Facts about the motives of an action are rightness-relevant.

(OMRR): Only facts about the motives of an action are rightness-relevant.<sup>2</sup>

Are (MRR) and (OMRR) plausible? In §1, I argue in favor of (MRR), and in §2, I argue against (OMRR).

#### §1. Motive, Rightness, and Goodness

Characteristic of modern moral philosophy is the claim that the rightness – permissibility, correctness, and/or successfulness – of an action is to be sharply contrasted with the moral goodness – moral worth, admirability, and/or praiseworthiness – of that action. Some critics see Slote's motive-centered theory of rightness as confusing the rightness and goodness of action.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, if the rightness and goodness of action are to be *sharply* contrasted, in a sense to be explained below, then the motive of an action is never rightness-relevant. This is an important objection to (MRR), and one that involves issues that are important beyond the issue of the rightness-relevance of motives. To formulate the argument against (MRR) based on the sharp distinction between rightness and goodness, I first characterize the distinction itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38.

<sup>2</sup> MRR = Motives Rightness-Relevant; OMRR = Only Motives Rightness-Relevant.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Swanton, "A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action," *Ethics* 112 (2001): 32-52, at 36; Liezl van Zyl, "Rightness and Goodness in Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 36 (2011): 103-114.



To distinguish between the rightness and goodness of action is not yet to commit oneself to a substantive conception of either rightness or goodness of action. It is rather to make the claim that there are at least two sorts of ethical statuses of actions and that these ethical statuses do not share the same criteria. The following claims each maintain that rightness and goodness of action are distinct, and some maintain that they are entirely independent of one another:

W.D. Ross: “Moral goodness is quite distinct from and independent of rightness, which...belongs to acts not in virtue of the motives they proceed from, but in virtue of the nature of what is done.”<sup>4</sup>

William Frankena: “[W]hether or not an action is morally good depends on its motive, but whether or not it is right depends on what it does, what it ‘brings about’.”<sup>5</sup>

Liezl van Zyl: “[V]irtue ethicists like Hursthouse and Slote tend to blur the distinction between rightness and goodness by using ‘right action’ not merely in the sense of what may or ought to be done, but also in the sense of a ‘good deed’ – an act that gets a ‘tick of approval’...[T]here is a difference between evaluating an action – the thing done – and evaluating the agent’s motive.”<sup>6</sup>

These claims indicate that the distinction between rightness and goodness of action primarily concerns the relevance of motives to the rightness of action. Ross and Frankena appear committed to the claim that facts about one’s motives never contribute to the rightness or wrongness of one’s actions. An action’s being virtuously motivated may make it praiseworthy, admirable, and/or possessive of some moral worth, but none of this ever contributes to the rightness of an action. Nor does an action’s being viciously motivated ever contribute to the wrongness of that action.

Van Zyl’s contrast is not as sharp: that there is a difference between rightness and goodness of action does not imply that they are always independent of one another or that their criteria never overlap. Rather Van Zyl sympathizes with a view that she attributes to

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<sup>4</sup> Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 156, as cited in Liezl van Zyl, “Right Action and the Targets of Virtue,” in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft (Durham: Acumen, 2014), 118-129, at 121.

<sup>5</sup> Frankena, *Thinking about Morality* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 48, as cited in J.L.A. Garcia, “The Right and the Good,” *Philosophia* 21 (1992): 235-256, at 237.

<sup>6</sup> Van Zyl, “Right Action and the Targets of Virtue,” 121.

Christine Swanton according to which “an agent’s motive or inner state can affect rightness in those cases where the contextually relevant virtues have targets that are internal.”<sup>7</sup> My view, developed in this section, is that Van Zyl and Swanton are correct in the claim that facts about an agent’s inner states and motives can be rightness-relevant.

To fix ideas, to draw a *sharp* contrast between rightness and goodness of action is to hold that a fact that makes an action right is never what makes that action good, and that a fact that makes an action wrong is never what makes an action bad. A *soft* contrast maintains that the same fact (about inner states or motives) can be both right-making and good-making or both wrong-making and bad-making, but that the criteria for an action’s rightness and its goodness are not the same, and so a right-making feature need not be a good-making feature and a good-making feature need not be a right-making feature. Paired with the claim, accepted by Ross, Frankena, and Van Zyl, that (some subset of) facts about the motives of an action are always relevant to the goodness of that action, accepting (MRR) requires denying the sharp contrast but not the soft contrast.

### §1.1 The Rossian Argument and *What* is Done in Acting

An argument against (MRR) based on a sharp distinction between rightness and goodness requires premises about the bare concepts of rightness and goodness as they are found implicit in legitimate evaluative practices as well as premises regarding the nature of action. Concerning the bare concepts of rightness and goodness as they are found implicit in legitimate evaluative practices, the idea is that people are not asking the same questions when they ask “What may or ought to be done in this situation?” and “What would or does performing this action, understood in light of the agent’s motivational and epistemic states, say about the agent’s virtue status, moral worth, admirability, or praiseworthiness?”. The distinction between these questions in common evaluative practices is evidenced by common claims such as “He did the right thing but for the wrong reasons” and “It was wrong, but you can’t blame him for doing it”. According to those who draw a sharp distinction between rightness and goodness, when we ask about right actions – about what may or ought to be done – we are asking about *what is done* or about *what is brought about* and not about *why it is done*. This last claim concerns the nature of action since it supposes that *what is done* and/or *what it will bring about* are (always) independent of *why it is done*.

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<sup>7</sup> Van Zyl, “Right Action and the Targets of Virtue,” 128.

With these claims, I construct what I call the Rossian argument (though I do not attribute this argument to Ross):

(P1): An action is right just in case it may or ought to be done.

(P2): Only facts about what is done in the performing of an action are relevant to whether that action may or ought to be done.

(P3): All facts about the motive of an action are facts about why that action is done.

(P4): No facts about why an action is done are facts about what is done.

(C): Therefore, no facts about an action's motive are relevant to that action's rightness.

A similar Frankenean argument can be constructed by replacing all instances of *what is done* with *what is brought about*. The resultant argument would affirm consequentialism about rightness in its second premise (if conjoined with (P1)). Since the Rossian argument is neutral regarding consequentialism (assuming, as is illustrated below, that what is done can include facts about what is brought about), it is less contentious and so is the better choice for consideration.

Is the Rossian argument sound? It is valid, so if it is unsound, at least one of the premises is false. (P1) has been denied by Daniel C. Russell. According to Russell, there is no necessary connection between "right" and "ought". For Russell, a right action is understood in virtue ethics as "one that warrants 'the satisfactory review of [one's] own conduct,' in David Hume's phrase or as Hursthouse puts it, one that warrants a 'tick of approval.'"<sup>8</sup> If so, varieties of virtue-ethical theories of right action are to be understood as varieties of ways of specifying what it is for an action to warrant a tick of approval. (Though this has the odd interpretive implication that Slote is claiming that an action warrants satisfaction and approval whenever it is not viciously motivated, even if not virtuously motivated.)

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<sup>8</sup> Russell, "That 'Ought' Does Not Imply 'Right': Why It Matters for Virtue Ethics," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 299-315, at 303. Russell here cites Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46-47 & 50. Russell initially limits his claim to be about how "right" is understood in virtue ethics, but he argues that this understanding should not be limited to virtue ethics. The idea that 'right' and 'ought' are independent is further discussed in §1.1 of Chapter 5 of the present work.

If Russell is correct about the bare concept of rightness, then “ought” does not imply “right”, because it may be that one ought to do something but, due to the circumstances, what ought to be done is so terrible or horrible that it warrants regret rather than approval or satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Assuming that “ought” implies “may”, the implication is that (P1) is false.

Quite apart from Russell’s challenge to (P1), we might doubt (P1) because we think that “what may or ought to be done” is identical with “non-wrong action” but that there are actions that are neither right nor wrong, just as there are actions that are neither just nor unjust. In §2, I show that an important feature of Slote’s motivation for affirming (OMRR) and, implicitly (MRR) depends on his implicit denial of (P1). But, on my view, the Rossian argument is significantly flawed even if (P1) is true; my reasons for affirming (MRR), unlike Slote’s reasons, do not depend on the falsity of (P1). Moreover, even if (P1) is false, and there are other significant senses of the phrase “right action”, then the Rossian argument can be adapted to different terminology. It is not crucial that “right action” is used only for actions that may or ought to be done, since it would still be a significant fact if motives were never relevant to what may or ought to be done. I take it, then, that at least one significant way of interpreting the question of whether (MRR) is true is to take as the question of whether an agent’s motives in performing an action ever have an impact on whether that agent should (not) perform the action.

(P2) and (P4) are difficult to evaluate entirely independently of one another. One may be inclined to reject (P2) because one thinks that facts about *what an action brings about* are rightness-relevant although these facts are not facts about *what is done*. In general, the acceptability of (P2) depends on how inclusive *what is done* is. Or one may be inclined to accept (P2) but only because one has a broad conception of *what is done* which may include not only facts about *what an action brings about* but also, contrary to (P4), facts about *why an action is done*. The only clearly true premise in the Rossian argument is (P3): the facts about the motive of an action are indeed always facts about why that action was done.<sup>10</sup>

My position is that (P2) is true but (P4) is false. On this view, if some fact is rightness-relevant, it must be a fact about what is done. However, facts about what is done are not

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<sup>9</sup> Russell, “That ‘Ought’ Does Not Imply ‘Right’,” 304.

<sup>10</sup> It is true that one can have a motive for performing an action and yet that that motive not be why one performs that action, because, in Davidson’s language, it is possible that that motive did not cause one to (choose to) perform the action. (P3) allows for this, if, naturally enough, we understand “the motive of an action” to be “the motive that motivated the agent to perform the action”.

always independent of facts about why it is done.<sup>11</sup> I now consider the nature of what is done, and show how facts about why something is done can impact what is done.

In a broad sense, one says something about *what is done* whenever one's statement makes sense as an answer to a question such as "What was he doing?". Elizabeth Anscombe points out that there are, for any action, a great variety of different statements that would be correct answers to such a question.<sup>12</sup> "He was dribbling", "He was playing basketball", "He was exercising", "He was embarrassing his significant other", "He was disobeying his doctor's orders", and perhaps even "He was venting aggression" can all be true descriptions of what he was doing in acting, even if not all of them would be descriptions that are known by the man.

Descriptions about *what an action brings about* can also make sense as responses to a query about what someone did. Both "He tickled the driver" and "He caused a car accident" can specify what he did.

Facts about the agent's inner states or facts that significantly depend on facts about the agent's inner states can also specify what he did, e.g. "He tried to unlock the door", "He snubbed me", and "He sought help from the police".

Given such a broad conception of *what is done*, I regard (P2) as irresistible. But, on such a broad conception, (P4) is clearly false, which indicates that the Rossian argument needs to appeal to some narrower conception of *what is done*. Is "He was flirting" a specification of what he was doing or rather a specification of what he was doing mixed with a specification of why he was doing it? Although "He was flirting" does not tell us why he was flirting, it clearly contains some information regarding why he was engaged in certain behaviors. If he did not aim at (consciously or not) eliciting the sexual attention of someone, then he could not be flirting, and such an aim tells us why he was, say, tickling the driver. So, if (P4) is true, then "He was flirting" must be a specification of what he was doing mixed with a specification of why he was doing it. Otherwise, a fact about *why it is done* would also be a fact about *what is done*.

What conception of *what is done* allows (P4) to be true? Only what I will call a behaviorist conception of *what is done*. On such a conception, *what is done* is determined exclusively by the facts describing what the agent is doing, when such facts are about the

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<sup>11</sup> I was first led to see that why something is done can affect what is done by reflecting on Rosalind Hursthouse, "Are Virtues the Proper Starting Point for Morality?" in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, ed. James Dreier (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 99-112, at 109.

<sup>12</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, Second Edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), §6.

behavior involved in that action, conceived of independently of the motivational or intentional states of the agent. If so, pure or unmixed specifications of what he did will include “His eyes moved towards me” and “He did not respond to my greeting” but not “He snubbed me”, since “He snubbed me” appeals to a fact about the agent’s motives or intentions.

It should be noted that the behaviorist conception of *what is done*, as characterized above, can include facts about some inner states. For instance, “He was amusing the children” is true only if the children were amused, and such a fact depends on the inner states of the children. Such inner states are consequences of the behavior. “He did something that he later regretted” is also a description of this kind. As I am using the term, the behaviorist conception of *what is done* excludes facts about the motivational or intentional inner states of the agent, but it does not exclude facts about inner states that are caused by the behavior.

A serious problem for the behaviorist conception of *what is done*, in this context, is that, if it is accepted, then (P2) will be false on all theories of right action except some versions of consequentialism. If (P2) is paired with the behaviorist conception of what is done, only the purely behavioral aspects of lying, murdering, cheating, and stealing are rightness-relevant. But no deontologist or virtue-ethicist accepts such a narrow view of rightness-relevant facts. Hence, the behaviorist conception, if attached to the Rossian argument, makes that argument unpersuasive.

Is the initial, broad conception of *what is done* outlined above too broad? Consider “He was venting aggression”. Although such a statement seems to make sense as a response to the question, “What was he doing?”, some, I think, will be inclined to deny that it tells us what he was doing or, more plausibly, that it adequately tells us what he was doing in the context of assessing its rightness. For in order to know adequately know what he was doing in such a context, we need to know what he did in venting his aggression. Did he throw a basketball at another player’s face? Was he venting his aggression simply by exercising? The same sorts of concerns apply to “He expressed care for his mother”. Could such a description adequately inform us regarding what he did?

Whether a statement can adequately tell us what someone did depends on the context in which the question “What was he doing?” is or could be asked. When we are asked to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” about what he did in a legal context, we are not asked to do the impossible: to list every true description about what he did. Rather, the request to tell “the whole truth” directs us merely not to leave out descriptions of what he did that are relevant to the application of law. In this context, “He expressed care for his

mother” would not count as “the whole truth”, for it does not provide enough information to see whether what he did was legal or not. In such a case, we have not been adequately told what he did.

When the context is the ethical assessment of action and in particular when we are considering whether what he did was right, an adequate description of what he did is a description that informs of the features of that action that are relevant to the criteria of rightness of action. If classical utilitarianism is true, then the description, “He expressed care for his mother” is not an adequate description of what he did, for this description does not tell us anything about the utility of the action. An adequate description of what he did, judged by a classical utilitarian interested in assessing the rightness of action, will give us information relevant to whether what he did promoted the greatest pleasure for the greatest number or not.

If, on the other hand, Slote’s view of rightness is true, then “He expressed concern for his mother” is an apt description of what he did, although it does not tell us “the whole truth”, because we also need to know whether such concern was balanced and virtuous. Did he at the same time express callousness for humanity at large? Was his motivation epistemically well-motivated?

These considerations illustrate that what counts as an adequate description of what is done is not only contextual but is also theory-laden. Act-consequentialism and Rossian intuitionism differ in regard to what counts as an adequate description of *what is done*. On the latter but not the former, to leave out the fact that he broke a promise is sufficient for not telling “the whole truth” about what he did. There are, I suggest, no theoretically-neutral criteria of adequate descriptions of *what is done* which could rule out an act-consequentialist views of what counts as an adequate specification of what is done or views such as Slote’s which include descriptions of an agent’s motives and intentions in its interpretation of what counts as an adequate specification of what is done. Given these considerations, (P4) is unacceptable.

At this point, I take myself to have removed an important obstacle to accepting (MRR) by showing that the Rossian argument is unsound.<sup>13</sup> I now offer positive support for regarding (MRR) as true.

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<sup>13</sup> Other types of arguments against (MRR) are mentioned in Steven Sverdlik, “Motive and Rightness,” *Ethics* 106 (1996): 327-349; Liezl van Zyl, “Motive and Right Action,” *Philosophia* 38 (2010): 405-415; Steven Sverdlik, *Motive and Rightness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

## §1.2 That Motives Can Be Rightness-Relevant

Consider the following act-types discussed by Steven Sverdlik: having sex, getting married, giving a child up for adoption, having an abortion, hunting, killing, joking, and refusing to sell a house.<sup>14</sup> Sverdlik claims that one's motive<sup>15</sup> in instantiating these act-types can make one's action wrong. If one has sex, gets married, or gives up a child for adoption out of a desire for money, has an abortion for convenience, hunts or kills for fun, jokes to embarrass or humiliate, or refuses to sell a house for racist reasons, then, according to Sverdlik, it is plausible to regard such actions as at least characteristically wrong, even if performing those act-types would not be wrong if the agent's motives were altered.

It is plausible to claim that hunting for fun is characteristically wrong, although hunting for food is not characteristically wrong, at least in a pre-industrialized, hunter-gatherer setting. But is hunting for fun made wrong by the fact that it is motivated by a desire to have fun or is it made wrong for some other reason? Liezl van Zyl has argued that, in every case discussed by Sverdlik, there are alternative, not implausible accounts for what makes the ill-motivated actions wrong which do not appeal to the vicious motives of the agent.<sup>16</sup> As I read Van Zyl, she sees Sverdlik as offering a series of arguments to the best explanation for the wrongness of such actions, and she claims that such arguments are weak, since other, equally plausible explanations have not been ruled out. In the remainder of §1, I defend Sverdlik's view, though possibly not his way of arguing for his view, from Van Zyl's objections.

Consider the following two actions discussed by Sverdlik and Van Zyl (in the words of Van Zyl):

A cruel hunter goes into the forest and kills many birds for the sheer fun of it.

A friendly hunter in similar circumstances kills the same number of birds in the same way as a measure of ensuring a proper population of them.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Sverdlik, "Motive and Rightness," 339-341; Sverdlik, *Motive and Rightness*, 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Sverdlik understands motives to be "the ultimate desires causing actions." "Motive and Rightness," 336; see also Sverdlik *Motive and Rightness*, 18ff.

<sup>16</sup> Van Zyl, "Motive and Right Action," 407. In this paper, Van Zyl is neutral about whether motives are significantly rightness-relevant; her main thesis is that influential arguments for (MRR), especially Sverdlik's, are unpersuasive.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 413; Sverdlik, "Motive and Rightness," 340.



On a plausible reading of Sverdlik, he reasons that since the only significant difference between the two actions is the motive of the hunters, and the first action is wrong while the second action is not wrong, it follows that the first action is made wrong by its being cruelly motivated.<sup>18</sup> Van Zyl correctly objects that the motives are, in fact, not the only significant difference between the two actions. If the friendly hunter is indeed motivated by conservationist concerns, then, according to Van Zyl, it is likely that he will have the relevant knowledge and gear appropriate to the task of conservationist bird-killing, but the cruel hunter is unlikely to have such knowledge or gear. Therefore, it is merely accidental that the cruel hunter kills the same number of birds in the same way as the friendly hunter. As Van Zyl sees it, it is the associated *riskiness* of the cruel hunter's action – the comparatively high likelihood of undesirable consequences – which plausibly explains the wrongness of the cruel hunter's action.<sup>19</sup>

If Van Zyl is correct here, then the motive of the cruel hunter is rightness-relevant only in a weak sense: the cruel motive is not itself contributing to the wrongness of the action; it is rightness-relevant only because the possession of such a motive is correlated with risky hunting.<sup>20</sup> I argue in defense of Sverdlik's view that the motive of the cruel hunter is rightness-relevant in a more significant sense: it itself contributes to the wrongness of the action.

Van Zyl's evaluation of the actions indicates that she sees the welfare of the animals living in the forest and other conservation-related issues as the primary salient issues involved in the cases. If only those issues are involved in the cases, then Van Zyl is quite right to point out the cruel motivation of a hunter is relevant only insofar as it makes the hunter far more likely to produce undesirable outcomes. But are any salient issues present that Van Zyl's evaluation neglects?

Seeing the cruel hunter's act as primarily one of killing obscures what else is being done by the hunter in the killing. What, in addition to killing, is being done by the cruel hunter? We know that he is pursuing enjoyment, since he is killing for fun. Moreover, we know that the enjoyment he is pursuing is unfitting or perverse insofar as it is cruel to enjoy killing birds.

Considering the action *qua* pursuit of enjoyment, it is natural to think that the hunter ought not perform the action because it is a cruel pursuit of enjoyment. If so, then what the agent is

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>19</sup> Van Zyl, "Motive and Right Action," 413-414.

<sup>20</sup> Compare *ibid.*, 414.

doing – pursuing enjoyment – is made wrong by its being cruel. But since “pursuing enjoyment” also specifies a motive for the man’s behavior, this implies that (MMR) is true and that motives can be significantly rightness-relevant in that their virtuousness or viciousness can actually contribute to the rightness or wrongness of an action.

How plausible is it that the action is made wrong by its involving a cruel pursuit of enjoyment? Van Zyl may object that it is not necessary to appeal to the hunter’s cruel pursuit of enjoyment to ground the action’s wrongness. In this, she would be correct, as her evaluation above shows. But it is arguable that this response demands too much of the one who claims that the cruelty of its pursuit of enjoyment is a wrong-making feature of the cruel hunter’s action. The question is not whether the hunter’s cruel pursuit of enjoyment is the only ground for its wrongness, it is rather whether it is a ground for its wrongness. In order to be sure that the cruel pursuit of enjoyment is wrong-making in this case, there is no need to claim that it is the only non-implausible ground for its wrongness. Rather, all that is needed is the claim that one will not fully understand what makes that action wrong if one does not attend to the fact that it involves a pursuit of enjoyment which is wrong *qua* cruel. The only reason for doubting the natural thought that the cruelty of the hunter’s pursuit of enjoyment makes his action wrong is the claim that pursuing enjoyment is not *what* the hunter is doing but rather *why* he is killing, when what he is doing is killing. Again, I see no reason to not see it as both. The hunter is in fact killing but that is not all he is doing. Only a behaviorist conception of what is done excludes all descriptions of why something is done from descriptions of what is done, and such a conception, I have argued, is inappropriate in the context of ethical evaluation.

Moreover, I suggest that it is not uncommon that appeal to why the agent is doing the action is essential for fully understanding why it ought not be done. Consider the common claim that “If that’s your reason, you shouldn’t do it.” This kind of claim is sometimes said in the context of advising someone that if they feel inclined to do something only because they are being unduly pressured by family or friends, then they should not do the action. It is significant that the claim is that they should not do the action, not merely that it is not the case that they should do it.

Consider someone who is pursuing being an artist in New York City but has parents who are unduly pressuring her to move back to her rural hometown. There may be strong reasons for her not to move back home, for instance that it will almost certainly mean the demise of her artistic livelihood. But if she chooses to move back home for the primary reason that her parents are demanding that she do so, then there is the further and important wrong-making

fact that the woman is being servile in moving back home. Such servility is a way of disrespecting oneself and, as such, is contrary to virtue. A significant part of the reason why she ought not move back home is that to do so would be to disrespect herself, which, in this case, involves failing to see herself as a being with value that exceeds her role as daughter and whose ambitions have important practical weight. Correspondingly, a significant reason why the woman ought to resist her parent's pressures is that such resistance is virtuously defiant and rebellious. But an action's being an act of defiance or rebellion is motive-dependent, so there are important right-making features of the woman's resistance which are motive-dependent.

Indeed, significant disrespect to oneself or another in one's actions can often not be fully apparent except by considering why one is doing some action. Consider Sverdlik's case of the one who refuses to sell a house for racist reasons. There are, as Van Zyl could point out, non-motive-dependent reasons for why this action ought not be done, e.g. that it causes inconvenience for the would-be-buyer. But there are also significant motive-dependent reasons for why such an action ought not be done. Such reasons include the facts that the seller is disrespecting the would-be-buyer – failing to treat her as an end in herself – and that the seller is degrading or humiliating the would-be-buyer. Non-derivative cases of participation in racial segregation such as refusing to sell a house for racist reasons and their wrongness cannot be fully understood without considering the motive-dependent disrespect and degradation involved in such cases.

## §2. Motives and Other Factors

In §2, I argue that (OMRR) – the claim that only motives are rightness-relevant – is implausible, and I respond to the motivations of Slote and J.L.A. Garcia for maintaining that (OMRR) is plausible.

Pre-philosophically, we are confident in taking facts about the consequences of actions to be rightness-relevant, and we are confident in taking facts about the non-motive-reducible features of actions, such as an action's fulfilling a promise, to be rightness-relevant. Accordingly, any theory that denies that such facts are rightness-relevant is *prima facie* implausible and the acceptability of such a theory requires a persuasive argument that our pre-philosophical confidence is mistaken in this regard.

What does Slote's theory imply concerning the rightness-relevance of consequences? Slote takes it for granted that motives have ends or targets.<sup>21</sup> The target of virtuous caring (as is implied by the Wishing-Well Claim discussed in the last chapter) includes benefitting others, and whether or not one benefits someone depends on the consequences of one's action. However, if an action comes from a virtuous motive aiming at benefitting someone, then this suffices for the action to be right, on Slote's account, regardless of whether it actually hits the target of that motive. In general, it is virtuous targeting which makes an action right, and right actions are in no way dependent on hitting such targets. The implication is that consequences are not rightness-relevant on Slote's view.

J.L.A. Garcia, whose view of right action<sup>22</sup> is strikingly similar to Slote's (and, it is reasonable to assume, importantly influenced Slote), puts the point this way: "[W]hat matters is not the *effect that is foreseen* but rather *your foreseeing the effect*."<sup>23</sup> My foreseeing harm to another and not caring matters for the rightness of my action, because not caring makes my action viciously *qua* callously motivated. But any harm that comes from my action does not matter for the rightness of my action, because I may cause harm without being viciously motivated and I may not cause harm while being viciously motivated.

In addition to its denial of the rightness-relevance of consequences, Slote's theory implies that the fact that an action fulfills a promise is not rightness-relevant, since the fact that an action fulfills a promise is not a fact about whether the action is well-motivated or not. While keeping promises can be targeted by just, honest, or loyal motives, hitting the targets of such motives does not affect the rightness of the actions they motivate. What matters to the rightness of an action is not its fulfillment of a promise but rather the agent's good-faith intention to fulfill the promise (when such an intention could be absent only in overall vicious motivation).

Since there is presumption in favor of the claim that consequences and other non-motive-reducible features of actions are rightness-relevant, I take it that denying (OMRR) is reasonable if arguments in its favor are shown to be unpersuasive. Accordingly, my aim in

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<sup>21</sup> E.g. Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 24-25. The relation between motives and ends is interestingly discussed by Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski in *Divine Motivation Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 22-25.

<sup>22</sup> "[A]n action is morally wrong if and only if it expresses a morally bad intention-state, and an action is morally right if and only if: (i) it expresses a positive intention-state that, in the agent's circumstances it would be good to have and bad not to have, and (ii) it expresses no intention-state that, in her circumstances, it would be bad to have." Garcia, "The Right and the Good," 246. I believe that the point made by (ii) is covered by The Holistic Claim discussed in the last chapter.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

§2 is to argue against (OMRR) mainly by showing that arguments in favor of (OMRR) are unpersuasive. In addition, I suggest that to fail to see non-motive-reducible features of action as rightness-relevant is to excessively narrow the domain of moral emotion.

### §2.1 Aptness for Moral Evaluation

What reasons do Slote and Garcia offer for denying that consequences are rightness-relevant? Both emphasize the distinction between the moral evaluation of actions and the non-moral evaluation of actions. Slote claims that “if we judge the actions of ourselves or others simply by their effects in the world, we end up unable to distinguish accidentally or ironically useful actions (or slips on banana peels) from actions that we actually morally admire and that are morally good and praiseworthy.”<sup>24</sup> Garcia rhetorically asks, “If its bad effects were sufficient to make an action morally wrong, then why don’t the bad effects of natural events such as tornadoes and earthquakes make them morally wrong as well?”<sup>25</sup>

Slote and Garcia should not be read here as arguing directly for the conclusion that consequences are not rightness-relevant. Rather, they should be seen as arguing for, or at least pointing to, a distinction between the moral evaluation of action and the non-moral evaluation of action. To non-morally evaluate an action is to evaluate it as a mere event and on the same grounds that one appropriately evaluates non-action-events such as weather occurrences, which is in terms of the overall beneficial or harmful impact such events have. Such events can be beneficial or harmful, but they cannot be right or wrong.

Is it plausible that there is a distinction between the moral and non-moral evaluation of action? If all the claim amounts to is that there are rightness-relevant facts about an action which are not facts about the consequences of that action and that moral evaluation takes into account such facts while non-moral evaluation does not, then the distinction is plausible. The problem is that this claim will not get Slote and Garcia very far in the argument that consequences are not rightness-relevant. So what else is involved in the claim that there is a distinction between moral and non-moral evaluation? In particular, what is involved in moral evaluation?

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<sup>24</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 39.

<sup>25</sup> Garcia, “The Right and the Good,” 239. Adam Smith makes a related, though not identical, point when he claims that judgements of utility are “originally and essentially different” from judgments of virtue, since if judgments of virtue were based merely on judgments of utility, “we should have no other reason for praising a man than that for which we commend a chest of drawers.” *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 220.

Here is Garcia on what makes something apt for moral evaluation:

[A]ll moral interest in a person's dealings and relations with others focuses on her attitude or stance towards others' welfare: does she favor it, neglect it, or oppose it?...Actions, desires, dispositions [sic], intentions, motives, persons, and traits of character are, or express, or have, such interpersonal responsive attitudes and can thus be judged good or bad, right or wrong on the basis of the relevant attitudes. Earthquakes, etc. are not, do not express, and do not have, such attitudes, and therefore provide no basis for moral assessment. Thus, actions can be morally right or wrong only because they express such virtuous and vicious attitudes.<sup>26</sup>

On Garcia's view, what makes something apt for moral evaluation is its being, expressing, or having an attitude or intentional inner state<sup>27</sup> towards the welfare of others. This view is given some support by its explaining why earthquakes are not apt for moral evaluation. From this claim about what makes something apt for moral evaluation, Garcia draws a conclusion about the proper locus of moral evaluation:

Given this...it is in virtue of the particular intention-states an action manifests that it is right or wrong. Why think instead that, although an event can be morally right or wrong only because it is a human action (and therefore expresses some intentions, beliefs, and desires), nevertheless *what* intentions, etc. it expresses are irrelevant to its being right instead of wrong? Such a thesis is strange indeed.<sup>28</sup>

Here Garcia can be viewed as merely arguing in favor of (MRR), albeit in different language. However, he takes the argument to be supporting a stronger position:

I have tried to show that our moral interest is such that in moral discourse we evaluate human actions as human actions, not merely events, and thus we focus on their distinctively human aspects, that is, on how, or, better, *why* [an] action of a certain kind was done or omitted.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Garcia, "The Right and the Good," 239-240.

<sup>27</sup> "Intentional inner state" is meant here as an inner state with intentionality, not necessarily an inner state that an agent intentionally has.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 242.

If all Garcia were trying to argue is that the inner states an action expresses are rightness-relevant, then he would not see himself as having shown that the moral evaluation of action *focuses* on such inner states. Moreover, as the article goes on, focussing on inner states in the moral evaluation of action becomes focussing exclusively on inner states. Is there a way of interpreting Garcia's argument which supports either a claim of focus or even (OMRR)?

Consider an argument analogous to Garcia's: Not all linguistic passages are apt for logical evaluation, since some such passages are reports, explanations, expositions, or stories rather than arguments. What makes a linguistic passage apt for logical evaluation is its (implicit or explicit) claim that some claim follows from some set of claims: this is what makes a passage an argument. Moreover, a linguistic passage is logically evaluated based on (the truth or falsity of) *what* such claim it makes: to logically evaluate a linguistic passage is to ask whether it is true or false that some claim follows from some set of claims. These are not accidentally related facts about logical evaluation. A natural explanation is that the presence of what one evaluates in logical evaluation is the very same thing as what makes something apt for logical evaluation.

If the analogy holds between logical and moral evaluation, then the presence of what one evaluates in moral evaluation is the very same thing as what makes something apt for moral evaluation. If so, then if something is made apt for moral evaluation by its being or involving an attitude or intentional inner state, then attitudes and intentional inner states are what is evaluated in moral evaluation. But consequences do not include attitudes or intentional inner states (of the agent in acting), and so are not what is evaluated in moral evaluation. Hence, consequences are not rightness-relevant.

This argument is not persuasive. While it is true that consequences are not "what is evaluated in moral evaluation" in the sense that they are *not all* that is evaluated in moral evaluation, it does not follow that they are *not among* what is evaluated in moral evaluation. To better see the source of the argument's error, consider the disanalogy between logical evaluation, narrowly defined, and moral evaluation.

In logical evaluation, understood simply as the evaluation of an argument in terms of its validity or strength, there is only one proper object of evaluation: the argument's claim that something follows from something. Garcia sees moral evaluation in the same way: the only proper objects of moral evaluation are "intention-states". If so, the plurality of types of objects that are morally evaluable are reducible to intention-states: no aspects of actions are morally evaluable outside the intention-states such actions express. This implicit monistic view about the proper objects of moral evaluation explains why Garcia does not take

seriously the possibility that an action could be morally evaluable on grounds other than its expressing virtuous or vicious intention-states, even if it is made apt for moral evaluation solely by its expressing intention-states.

To illustrate the point, consider that once logical evaluation is broadened to include evaluating an argument in terms of its soundness or cogency, it is no longer true that what makes something apt for logical evaluation is the very same thing as what is evaluated in logical evaluation, since what is evaluated in such evaluation includes more than just the claim that something follows from something. It is true that only an argument can be sound or unsound (in the logician's sense of these terms), but there are sound-making features of an argument – that it contains no false claims – which are present in non-argumentative passages such as reports, even though they are not sound-making in such passages. Likewise, even if an event can be right or wrong only if it is an action, it does not follow that there are no right-making features of actions – e.g. their benefitting someone – which are present in non-action-events, although they are not right-making in such events.

## §2.2 Accidental Rightness

Garcia's argument from what makes something apt for moral evaluation does not adequately support (OMRR). But perhaps (OMRR) is supported by some other feature of moral evaluation. As noted above, Slote suggests that we “distinguish accidentally or ironically useful actions (or slips on banana peels) from actions that we actually morally admire and that are morally good and praiseworthy.”<sup>30</sup> One can benefit someone by accident – without aiming or intending to benefit them or even contrary to one's aims and intentions. But does someone who benefits someone accidentally perform a right action or is it merely a useful action, when such utility has no bearing on the applicability of *moral* predicates such as rightness? Liezl van Zyl calls the question of whether an action can be right although what makes it right is a matter of accident or luck the problem of accidental rightness.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 39. If Slote's criterion of rightness is correct, then the same point can be made about right actions and not merely morally good or praiseworthy actions. Slote's view concerning the relation between rightness and praiseworthiness is discussed below.

<sup>31</sup> Van Zyl, “Accidental Rightness,” *Philosophia* 37 (2009): 91-104, at 93. Accidental rightness is not the same as moral luck as the latter is usually understood. Moral luck concerns the relation between luck and the praiseworthiness and blameworthiness of the agent, but rightness of action arguably need not bear on such issues. Compare “Accidental Rightness,” 94-95. Discussion of moral luck in the context of evaluating agent-based virtue ethics can be found in Julia Driver, “Monkeying with Motives: Agent-Based Virtue Ethics,” *Utilitas* 7 (1995): 281-288; Nafsika Athanassoulis,



Van Zyl correctly claims that if there is no such thing as accidental rightness, then an action cannot be made right simply by its being in accordance with duty or simply by its having good consequences, since one can fulfill one's duty by accident and one can produce good consequences by accident. That is, one need not either aim at or intend to fulfill one's duties in order to fulfill one's duties and one need not either aim at or intend to produce good consequences in order to produce good consequences. Accordingly, Van Zyl takes the denial of accidental rightness to support the claim that "motive is relevant when assessing [the rightness of] an act."<sup>32</sup> (The implicit premise is that only the presence and operation of certain motives, taken broadly to include all the agent's inner states that explain why she performs an action, can make it non-accidental that the agent fulfills her obligations or produces good consequences.)

So Van Zyl sees the denial of accidental rightness as at least supporting (MRR), but I think an argument can be constructed which moves from the denial of both accidental rightness and accidental wrongness<sup>33</sup> to the affirmation of (OMRR). If there is no accidental rightness, then features or results of actions which are unintended or not properly (more on this below) aimed at by ill-motivated agents cannot make those actions right (assuming that what is intended or aimed at by *ill*-motivated actions could not make those actions right either). If so, then ill-motivated actions are never right. This implies that right actions are necessarily well-motivated (when "well-motivated" is equivalent to "non-ill-motivated" and includes both virtuous motivation and motivation that is merely not contrary to virtue).

It certainly is possible (and this is the reason for Van Zyl's caution) to hold that an action's being well-motivated is necessary but not sufficient for its being right. Nonetheless, this possibility is ruled out by the denial of accidental wrongness. If there is no accidental wrongness, then features or results of actions which are unintended or not aimed at by well-motivated agents cannot make actions wrong. If so, then well-motivated actions are never wrong (again, assuming that *non-ill*-motivated actions could not be made wrong by what they aim at or intend), and so being well-motivated is sufficient for an action's being right.

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"Common-Sense Virtue Ethics and Moral Luck," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8 (2005): 265-276.

<sup>32</sup> Van Zyl, "Accidental Rightness," 91.

<sup>33</sup> Van Zyl never mentions the possibility of accidental wrongness by name but she discusses a would-be case of accidental wrongness in *ibid.*, at the bottom half of 93.

Thus if there is neither accidental rightness nor accidental wrongness, and we assume with Slote that all actions are either right or wrong,<sup>34</sup> then actions are right just in case they are well-motivated. This strongly supports (OMRR). Hence, if it is plausible to deny both accidental rightness and accidental wrongness, then there is good reason to affirm (OMRR).

Is the denial of accidental rightness and accidental wrongness plausible? Before answering this question, I clarify the nature of accidental rightness and illustrate some of its varieties. Clear-cut cases of accidental rightness<sup>35</sup> include two broad types in that the accidental, attractive features or results of the action can be either unintentional or contrary to the agent's intentions or aims (assuming consistency in the agent's intentions and aims, the latter is a species of the former but it seems to me that one may be inclined to deny accidental rightness of the latter kind but not all cases of the former kind and so it is significant to draw the contrast). Consider first a case in which an action has attractive features or results but these are accidental in that the agent neither aims at nor intends them:

A man takes a midnight walk and while walking past his out-of-town neighbor's house, he unknowingly frightens away an opportunistic burglar.

If there are no accidental right-making features of action, then the prevention of the crime does not contribute to the rightness of the man's going on a walk. Consider second a case in which the attractive features of an action or its results are accidental in that they are contrary to the agent's aims or intentions:

Bundy has trapped a woman in a garage, and the woman is trying to escape. Bundy attempts to turn out the overhead lights but hits the wrong switch and the door to the garage opens (suppose the switch will not work again until the door has finished opening). The woman escapes.

If there are no accidental right-making features of actions, then the fact that the woman got away only because of Bundy's hitting the switch does not contribute to the rightness of Bundy's hitting the switch.

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<sup>34</sup> Slote, *From Enlightenment to Receptivity: Rethinking Our Values* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 110.

<sup>35</sup> For convenience of expression, I use the phrase "a case of accidental rightness" as shorthand for "a case of accidental rightness if there is accidental rightness". According to this usage, only the claim that some case is a *genuine* case of accidental rightness commits one to the claim that there is accidental rightness.

Besides these two clear-cut kinds of accidental rightness, Van Zyl includes, and indeed focuses on, cases in which the attractive features of the action are accidental in that they are improperly related to the agent's (more) ultimate or final aims in performing the action. Here is Van Zyl's example:

Joe, a medical doctor, is dining out in a restaurant when he notices a diner from a nearby table choking on a chicken bone. Joe is not at all inclined to help — indeed, he is somewhat irritated by the disturbance. He continues eating his steak, but then he realises that death in the restaurant will really disturb his meal. Always eager to show off, he senses that coming to the rescue of the choking man will impress everyone in the restaurant. He walks over, announces his credentials, and with an impressive nudge dislodges the chicken bone from the man's throat.<sup>36</sup>

In one straightforward sense, that the action saves the choking man is not aptly described as accidental since Joe intended to do just that. However, Van Zyl counts this action as a case of accidental rightness “because he didn't choose it for good reason, [so] it is a matter of luck that the act turns out to be in accordance with duty.”<sup>37</sup> The thought appears to be that since Joe did not non-instrumentally aim at saving the man, his intention to save the man was merely contingently related to his more ultimate aims in saving the man. Had Joe not had the desire to impress others or the aversion to a disturbed meal, he would have not saved him.

Another example of this kind comes from Ramon Das:

A man dating a woman with a young child dives into a swimming pool to save the child from drowning. He cares not at all for the child, and is motivated exclusively by a desire to impress the woman as a means, let us suppose, to sleeping with her.<sup>38</sup>

Of this case, Das claims that “an agent acts out of bad motives, but the foreseeable consequences are so beneficial that it counts intuitively as clearly the right thing to do.”<sup>39</sup> Likewise, Van Zyl regards Joe as having performed a right action. So both Das and Van Zyl are committed to their being genuine cases of accidental rightness of the third kind.

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<sup>36</sup> Van Zyl, “Accidental Rightness,” 92.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>38</sup> Das, “Virtue Ethics and Right Action,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 324-339, at 326. Das presents this case as a counter-example to Slote's theory.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

It is, however, not clear that Slote's position implies that Das' man and Joe fail to perform right actions. Joe is not a virtuously caring man in that he has insufficient humanitarian concern. Nonetheless, it is possible that Joe's saving the choking man did not express his insufficient humanitarian concern.<sup>40</sup> Joe's primary Davidsonian motivating reason consists of his desire to impress people and his belief that saving the man will impress people. This motivating reason is contrary to virtuous, balanced care only if it is such that if Joe's total motivational state were one of virtuous, balanced care, then Joe would not possess this motivating reason. But I see no reason to think that if Joe was virtuously caring, then he would not desire to impress people, nor do I see a reason to think that if Das' man was virtuously caring, then he would not desire to impress or sleep with the woman he is dating. It is clear, of course, that if Joe or Das' man were virtuously caring, then such thoughts and desires would be far removed from their minds in acting. But this implies nothing about these motivating reasons being contrary to virtuous caring. Joe and Das' man, if they were fully virtuous, would have additional motivating reasons for performing their actions, but it is at the very least unclear that they would have fewer motivating reasons.

No matter whether Slote and/or Garcia can accept that Joe and Das' man perform right actions, Van Zyl and Das will still differ over what makes the actions right. Van Zyl and Das think that in such cases, what makes the actions right is at least partly their good outcomes: lives are saved by them. Such actions hit salient features of the target of benevolence even if they do not involve benevolent targetting. And put in the language of targets, the relevant sense of accidentality becomes more apparent. Hitting the target of benevolence is accidental, according to my interpretation of Van Zyl, whenever hitting that target does not involve benevolent targetting/motivation. One can intend to hit the target of benevolence but not from benevolent motivation if what is targeted is considered *de re*. This is what the case of Joe illustrates: he intends to hit the target of benevolence but only because his desire for recognition just happens, in this case, to target what benevolence targets in the same case.

What does Slote need to deny and what can he accept concerning accidental rightness of the third kind? If Slote required that right actions be virtuously motivated, then he would have to deny all such cases of accidental rightness, if being virtuously motivated to hit the target of  $v$  requires having  $v$  motivation. But given that Slote requires only that right actions

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<sup>40</sup> Compare Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 17, 53-54, & 100.

not be viciously motivated,<sup>41</sup> it is not clear that he needs to deny all such cases. I need not further pursue this issue. Once it is shown why accidental rightness and wrongness are supposed to be problematic from the standpoint of moral evaluation, then the answer to the question of whether Slote needs to deny all cases of accidental rightness of the third kind will be apparent, since they either will or will not involve this problematic feature.

So what is it about the moral evaluation of action that is supposed to make accidental rightness and wrongness problematic? In Slote's aforementioned claim about accidentally useful actions and slips on banana peels, he suggests that such actions and behaviors are neither morally good nor praiseworthy, when this means that the agent does not deserve credit for producing such good consequences. In this, he is surely correct. But if this is to be a claim about right action, then we must take Slote to be claiming that there is a tight connection between rightness and praiseworthiness or moral goodness. On Garcia's view, "a morally right action is always a morally good one"<sup>42</sup> but that is at least sometimes denied by Slote as when he claims that an act is right or "morally acceptable" if it does not come from vicious or bad motivation.<sup>43</sup> But if actions that come from virtuous motivation are praiseworthy, then it is strongly suggested that actions that come from vicious motivation are blameworthy. If so, then an action is wrong just in case it is blameworthy, on Slote's view, and if right actions are non-wrong actions, then an action is right just in case it is not blameworthy.

What makes an action blameworthy? Most philosophers seem to agree that an action is blameworthy just in case it comes from motivation that is contrary to virtue.<sup>44</sup> What makes this an attractive idea is that other facts about actions are unreliable guides to the quality of the agent's inner states, since such facts can obtain accidentally. It is the accidentality of non-motive-reducible facts about action which makes such facts unfit for grounding the blameworthiness of an action, since no one deserves blame for what they accidentally do unless it is out of culpable ignorance, but whether an agent is culpably ignorant is plausibly interpreted as a question about the virtuousness of the agent's motivating reasons. (I am not committed to these claims about blameworthiness and I say more about blame and

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<sup>41</sup> Van Zyl rightly points out that Slote sometimes suggests that virtuous motivation is required for performing a right action but sometimes suggests that it is not. *Ibid.*, 97. See also Van Zyl, "Rightness and Goodness in Agent-Based Virtue Ethics."

<sup>42</sup> Garcia, "The Right and the Good," 248.

<sup>43</sup> Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 38.

<sup>44</sup> Compare Van Zyl, "Rightness and Goodness in Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," 111.

blameworthiness below, but these claims are popular, and, for now, it is important to see their implications for the dialectic.)

If proper evaluation of the blameworthiness of an action rules out accidental blameworthiness and accidental non-blameworthiness, then if an action is right just in case it is not blameworthy, proper evaluation of an action's rightness rules out accidental rightness and accidental wrongness. And this, as I have shown, strongly supports (OMRR). The crucial, unexamined premise is that actions are right just in case they are not blameworthy. In effect, this premise is claiming that the fact that an agent performs a wrong action is always a fact that makes the agent deserving of blame (again, this can be paired with the plausible view that it is not always right to blame someone even if they are deserving of blame). The implication is that the wrongness of an action always implies something about the moral status of the agent who performs that action.

Van Zyl claims that if we understand wrong actions to be actions that ought not be done, then any attempt to forge a necessary link between wrongness and blameworthiness will be "deeply counterintuitive."<sup>45</sup> Presumably, the reason for this is that someone can do something that they should not have done, and yet be blameless for doing it. It might be that I should not have bought you those peanuts because you are allergic to peanuts even if I am not blameworthy for doing so.

Van Zyl concludes from this that Slote is best seen, despite his statements to the contrary, as not offering an account of right and wrong action at all. Instead of reducing the deontic to the aretaic, he is best seen as *eliminating* the deontic in favor of the aretaic.<sup>46</sup> She sees Slote as eliminating the deontic notions of *what ought not be done* and *what may or ought to be done* from ethical theory on the grounds that they are not notions that properly belong to *moral* evaluation.<sup>47</sup> If so, then right action cannot be the same as actions that may or ought to be done, since the former notion properly belongs to moral evaluation while the latter does not. Note that this is a denial of (P1) in the Rossian argument.

Has an impasse been reached? Slote can appeal to the necessary connection between blameworthiness and wrongness in order to defend the non-accidentality of rightness and wrongness and thereby (OMRR), but those like Van Zyl who accept (P1) of the Rossian argument will deny that there is any such necessary connection. To this, Slote can respond that if there is no such necessary connection, then to evaluate an action as wrong is not

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 111.

necessarily to make a *moral* evaluation at all. It might be that I should not have bought you the peanuts, but if I am blameless in doing so, what has this to do with *morality*? Is this just at bottom a clash of intuitions which cannot be rationally resolved? Perhaps, but I think that at the very least more can be said in favor of positions like Van Zyl's which see the concepts of *what may or ought to be done* and *what ought not to be done* as properly belonging to moral evaluation. In what follows, I argue that positions like Slote's, which deny that the wrongness or *moral* disvalue of an action can be grounded in accidental features of that action, are shown to be implausible if we consider the breadth of fitting moral emotional responses to actions.

First let me note that "praise" and especially "blame" are somewhat ambiguous in that they can name clusters of action-types and they can name clusters of emotion-types (though I am not suggesting that such clusters are unrelated). In the actional sense, to praise someone is to give them credit for something they did that was good in some way or for something that they achieved etc. by sincerely saying something such as "Good job!" or giving an award etc. To blame someone, in the actional sense, is to hold them responsible or accountable for some wrong they have committed or for some harm they have caused by filing a grievance, sending a bill, punishing etc. To blame someone, in this actional sense, does not require feeling anger, resentment, indignation or any other negative emotion towards the blamed. Indeed, the blamer may even think that having such emotions toward the blamed is unfitting. I may hold you responsible for breaking my computer even if I think you are not a fitting object of anger, resentment, or indignation, since, for instance, you may have broken my computer by accident. That you have broken my computer by accident does not preclude my legitimately holding you responsible for the breaking of my computer.<sup>48</sup> This illustrates that blame, in the actional sense, does not preclude accidentality.

In the emotional sense, to praise someone is to admire them or hold them in high regard in response to something they have done, expressed, or achieved etc. To blame someone, in the emotional sense, is to deplore, feel indignation or anger towards, or resent someone in response to something they have done, expressed, or caused. Plausibly, one might forgive someone by forgoing blaming them in the emotional sense even though one continues to blame them in the actional sense. Unlike blame in the actional sense, it is not immediately implausible that blame in the emotional sense precludes accidentality in what is fittingly responded to with blame. From this fact, and the fact that Slote often interchanges "praise"

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<sup>48</sup> Compare Garcia, "The Right and the Good," 248.

with emotion terms such as “admiration”, I conclude that Slote is best seen as conceiving of blame in the emotional sense.

There are two relevant questions. Firstly, does blaming in the emotional sense preclude accidentality? Secondly, is it plausible that all fitting emotional responses to wrongdoing belong to the cluster of blame-related emotions? An affirmative answer to both is required for there to be support for (OMRR) via the denial of accidental rightness and wrongness based on the necessary connection between an action’s wrongness and its blameworthiness. My main point in what follows is that not all fitting emotional responses to wrongdoing are immune to accidentality, and therefore that the argument from the non-accidentality of wrongdoing to (OMRR) is unpersuasive. In support of this claim, I offer an example of a fitting response of an emotion which I argue is plausibly seen both as moral emotion and as a response to wrongdoing even though there is accidentality present in what makes the action wrong.

Consider shame. As is well known, Oedipus killed his father, married his mother, and in marrying his mother, significantly contributed to her suicide. In response, he violently blinded himself and pleaded to be exiled from Thebes. The latter acts are acts of retribution. As such, Oedipus saw himself as having committed wrong acts in killing his father and marrying his mother, and it was for the reasons that it was his father that he killed and his mother that he married that Oedipus saw these acts as wrong. Slote may be able to say that Oedipus’s acts were wrong, but he will not be able to say that they are wrong for the reason that they are acts of parricide and incest, because Oedipus could not have known that they were such. But as Oedipus saw things, what made his acts wrong was their being acts of parricide and incest, and importantly, they were wrong even though he was inculpably ignorant of the features of the acts which made them wrong. Oedipus therefore saw himself as having committed accidentally wrong actions.

So what? Oedipus may have been confused; maybe he made a mistake instead of having done anything wrong. In order to avoid mere intuition clashing, my premises will be independent of whether or not Oedipus performed any wrong actions and if so, what made them wrong. Regardless of the wrongness of Oedipus’ marrying his mother, his feeling ashamed in response to that act is fitting or appropriate. He was not in the grip of an illusory or irrational shame. Moreover, his shame is aptly described as a moral emotion. The morality of his emotion stems from the fact that its content is centered on who he is, his place in society, and his correspondent worth as a human being. Hence, Oedipus had a fitting



emotional response to some action, and this emotional response was an instance of a moral emotion.

It will be important for my argument that Oedipus' shame is a moral emotion. But note that I do not need to claim that all instances of shame are moral emotions. For instance, some might be inclined to say that one can feel shame at being seen naked by one's flatmate while also believing that there is nothing morally objectionable about one's being seen naked by one's flatmate.<sup>49</sup> If this is so, then my comments below about moral emotions do not apply to such instances of shame; rather, they only apply to instances of shame that are also moral emotions.

If some action is such that responding to it with a moral emotion is fitting, then this action must have moral properties and its moral properties must figure in what makes responding to it with a moral emotion fitting. Every action has moral properties, since every action is, for example, wrong or not wrong (i.e. permissible), possessing of moral worth or not. But not every action is such that responding to it with a moral emotion is fitting (e.g. typically merely permissible actions). My going to the supermarket last Saturday is not such that responding to it with any moral emotion is fitting, at least not under that description. Only if I redescribe my action using significant moral predicates does it become such – e.g. in going to the supermarket last Saturday, I manifested and reinforced my junk-food-buying habit and hence acted intemperately and so feeling shame is fitting even if not overall advisable.

If an action's moral properties must figure in what makes responding to it with a moral emotion fitting, then Oedipus' marrying of his mother must have moral properties, and its moral properties must figure in what makes his shame fitting. Clearly what it is about Oedipus' marrying his mother that makes responding to it with shame fitting is that it involved marrying his mother. Hence, the fact that Oedipus married his mother is a morally relevant fact about his action. Though, to avoid unnecessary controversy, I decline to say what thick evaluative concepts would make salient the moral relevance of this fact. If the fact that Oedipus married his mother is a morally relevant fact, then there are some morally relevant features of actions which are accidental features of that action. Therefore, there are morally relevant features of action which are accidental features of that action.

A similar point can be made about instances of regret that are sensitive to accidental features of actions. I may fittingly regret doing something when what makes my action

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<sup>49</sup> I thank Glen Pettigrove for this example.

regrettable is accidental – e.g. it had unforeseeable harmful consequences – and when my regret is plausibly viewed as an instance of moral emotion.

Slote and Garcia could respond that their accounts allow that incestuous, parracidal, and harmful actions are characteristically wrong, since an action's being incestuous, parracidal, or harmful characteristically demotivates decently motivated agents from performing such actions. Nonetheless, as my examples illustrate, their accounts can not capture all instances of such wrong actions. Furthermore, it is dubious that their accounts identify the correct wrong-making features in such cases. Is an action's being harmful wrong-making because it demotivates decently motivated agents from performing the action or does it demote such agents because the action's being harmful is wrong-making? My view is that it is more plausible that decently motivated agents are decently motivated partially in virtue of their being sensitive to right-making and wrong-making features of action which have their status as right-makers and wrong-makers independently of their being taken as such by decently motivated agents. I present some considerations in favor of this view in §1 of Chapter 8 of the present work.

Finally, does the existence of morally relevant but accidental features of action imply that there are genuine cases of accidental wrongness? Not necessarily since there may be morally relevant features of actions which are not rightness-relevant or wrongness-relevant. Nonetheless, the moral significance of the shameful of Oedipus' act shows that it is not the case that proper moral evaluation of action always ignores all accidental features of actions, and it shows that it is not the case that to claim that an action is morally disvaluable in some way is always to imply that the agent is blameworthy, if blameworthiness precludes accidentality (though Oedipus, at any rate, did not seem to think that blameworthiness precludes accidentality, for otherwise he would not have punished himself).

But, as discussed above, the only reason for maintaining that an action's being wrong is anything other than its being such that it should not be done is the claim that *moral* evaluation ignores accidental features of actions. Since that claim is shown to be false, there is no reason to deny the attractive view that an action is wrong just in case it should not be done. But if an action is wrong just in case it should not be done, then, contrary to (OMRR), there are rightness-relevant features of actions which are not motive-reducible and there are rightness-relevant results of actions, since the fact that an action involves breaking a promise is characteristically a reason why it should not be done and the fact that an action harms someone is characteristically a reason why it should not be done, regardless of whether such features or results obtain accidentally or not.

In this chapter, I have argued that motives can be significantly rightness-relevant, but that there are right-making and wrong-making features of actions that are not reducible to motivational or intentional facts about those actions. In the next chapter, I analyze qualified-agent accounts of right action. Such accounts can allow that an ill-motivated action can be right and that a well-motivated action can be wrong.

## FOUR

### QUALIFIED-AGENT VIRTUE ETHICS: ANALYSIS

Since at least the 1990s, the default criterion of right action in contemporary virtue ethics has been:

(V): An action is right just in case a virtuous agent, acting in character, would perform that action in the circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

(V)<sup>2</sup> has been characterized as a qualified-agent<sup>3</sup> criterion of rightness, since it interprets the rightness of an action in terms of that action's bearing a certain relation to qualified agents – agents distinguished by their (not) having certain qualities. (V) is not the only qualified-agent criterion of rightness, but it is the one that has received the lion's share of critical attention. Dialectically, qualified-agent alternatives to (V) are best understood as modifications of (V), which are motivated by various objections to (V). Such objections and modifications are discussed in the next chapter, where a definition of “qualified-agent criterion of rightness” is also presented. In this chapter, my aim is to develop (V) primarily through interpretation of the work of Rosalind Hursthouse.

A fully adequate development of (V) requires a specification of what virtuous agents are, direction concerning how circumstances and actions are to be individuated, and a specification of what it is for an action to be such that it would be performed by such agents in such circumstances. This chapter addresses all such issues.

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<sup>1</sup> V = Virtue. Compare Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of (V) is that an action is right just in case “it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances.” Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991): 223-246, at 225. This earlier criterion does not mention the notion of acting in character or acting characteristically. Christine Swanton explains the change thus: “In her late account of rightness, Hursthouse realizes the danger that actual virtuous agents may at times judge and act out of character, so she inserts into the definition a qualification to rule out this possibility.” Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 229. (V) allows that fully virtuous agents can perform non-right actions when they are e.g. tired, ill, drunk, or shell-shocked. See Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 78.

<sup>3</sup> The first published use of “qualified-agent” in this context is in Christine Swanton, “A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action,” *Ethics* 112 (2001): 32-52, at 33.

## §1. Virtuous Agents

Virtuous *agents* are beings who actively engage in, interpret, react, and respond to a world, who make choices, who take certain facts as reasons for action, and who evaluate situations, actions, selves, and institutions. *Virtuous* agents are agents who possess and exercise certain character traits – the virtues.<sup>4</sup> What are the virtues and in what ways do they distinguish virtuous agents?

### §1.1 Dimensions of Virtue

Like Slote, Hursthouse takes it that it is initially plausible that what we ordinarily think of as virtues are genuine virtues – that there is presumption in favor of regarding e.g. honesty, benevolence, and courage as genuine virtues.<sup>5</sup> What are we committed to when we claim that an agent is virtuous e.g. honest?

Firstly, if an agent is honest, then there is reason to have expectations about what sorts of actions that agent will (not) perform. We do not expect honest agents to “lie or cheat or plagiarize or casually pocket other people’s possessions” but rather “to tell the truth, to give sincere references, to own up to their mistakes.”<sup>6</sup> Honest agents do, of course, lie, but such lying is exceptional, surprising, or in need of explanation, at least when the lying is significant, e.g. lying to one’s medical patient about their health status versus lying to one’s patient about how one’s day is going.

What is the nature of the actions that honest agents *qua* honest are disposed to perform? They are, of course, honest actions. Hursthouse denies that honest actions are to be understood only as actions typical of someone with the virtue of honesty; she claims that virtue and vice notions as applied to actions “have a certain amount of independence” from such notions as applied to agents.<sup>7</sup> Such independence makes it illuminating to say that honest agents are disposed to perform honest and not dishonest actions. Hursthouse expects that we have some competence with such notions, and she does not attempt conceptual analyses of any of them.

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<sup>4</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 29, see also 123-124.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of proper methodology in ethics, see Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 164-166.

<sup>6</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

It coheres well with Hursthouse's remarks about virtue notions as applied to action to claim that virtue notions as applied to action are understood, in the first instance, by reference to certain paradigmatic action-types. Paradigmatic action-types of courageous action include facing danger and enduring pain, and paradigmatic action-types of honest action include telling the truth and owning up to one's mistakes. If virtue notions as applied to action are understood in this way, then it is sensible for Hursthouse to claim, as she does, that virtue notions as applied to agents allow us to "fine tune" our everyday understanding of such notions as applied to action.<sup>8</sup> The idea is that it is, for instance, not always (virtuously) courageous to face danger or endure pain. Rather, we should "[f]ace danger when and only when a courageous person would."<sup>9</sup> Such fine-tuning allows us to deny that every instance of paradigmatically courageous action is (virtuously) courageous and that every instance of paradigmatically cowardly action is contrary to courage. When a courageous person would *not* face danger but rather flee for her life, then, on Hursthouse's view, fleeing in such a case is not cowardly even though fleeing for one's life is a paradigmatic action-type of cowardly action.

If such fine-tuning is to be possible, then it cannot be the case that, for instance, an agent is honest just in case she is disposed to perform honest actions, for in that case, virtue notions as applied to agents would not provide any additional content for us to latch onto in asking when honest agents would perform paradigmatically honest or dishonest actions. So what else does being honest involve other than being disposed to perform honest and not dishonest actions?

Hursthouse follows Bernard Williams in claiming that each virtue of character has a distinctive range of reasons, when this range encompasses reasons that are characteristic motivating reasons of someone exercising that virtue.<sup>10</sup> Honest agents act for different sorts of reasons than non-honest agents. Kant's shopkeeper<sup>11</sup> charges his customers a fair price but only because it makes it more likely that his business will succeed. Were he to be sure that his cheating of customers would go undetected and thereby would not tarnish his business' reputation, he would cheat them. What Kant's shopkeeper lacks, and an honest shopkeeper possesses, is a sensitivity to reasons such as "But that's not the set price", "They won't be able to make an informed decision if you don't point that out", "That wouldn't be

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 128; Williams, "Acting as the Virtuous Person Acts," in *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, ed. Robert Heinaman (London: UCL Press, 1995), 13-23.

<sup>11</sup> Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:397.

fair” and “It would be dishonest not to”.<sup>12</sup> Such reasons are included in honesty’s distinctive range of reasons. Typical motivating reasons of someone exercising the virtue of justice include “I agreed to do it”, “That’s your fair share”, and “That’s her right”.<sup>13</sup>

On Hursthouse’s Aristotelian view, virtuous agents are distinguished in that they characteristically act for the *right* reasons,<sup>14</sup> when their acting for the right reasons is importantly related to their seeing the world correctly and pursuing correct ends.<sup>15</sup> Benevolent agents aim at benefitting others, just agents aim at equity, and temperate agents aim at avoiding shameful and harmful pleasures. Since a benevolent agent aims at benefitting others, she takes the fact that someone needs something as characteristically a reason for giving it to them, and she sees the needs of others as salient features of the world. To say that benevolent agents characteristically act for the right reasons and pursue correct ends is to say that benefitting others is a worthwhile aim and that the needs of others provide normative reasons for action. It is also to say that selfish and apathetic agents fail to recognize important reasons for action and that their view of the world is distorted.

Plausibly, the reasons-sensitivity of virtuous agents differs from that of non-virtuous agents not only in that virtuous agents recognize more facts as reasons than non-virtuous agents, but also in their recognizing fewer facts as reasons than non-virtuous agents. While an unjust agent may take the fact that A’s father wronged him as a reason for punishing A, no just agent will take such a fact as a reason.

Consider also that Kant’s shopkeeper takes the fact that by cheating A, he will increase his profit as a reason for cheating A, although this reason is outweighed by the consideration that by cheating A, he risks the reputation of his business and thereby endangers its success. John McDowell influentially claims that, in virtuous deliberation, “considerations that would otherwise appeal to one’s will are silenced” if such considerations point to an action that is contrary to virtue.<sup>16</sup> On this view, a virtuous shopkeeper will not see the fact that by cheating his customer he will increase his profit as any reason at all for cheating his customer. The consideration that would otherwise appeal to his will – his profit will be increased – is silenced – viewed as no reason at all – by the fact that cheating his customer is contrary to virtue. If so, the virtuous shopkeeper, unlike Kant’s shopkeeper, is not to be imagined as

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<sup>12</sup> Compare Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 128.

<sup>13</sup> Compare *ibid.*, 128.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>16</sup> McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 50-73, at 55-56.

*weighing* the two competing reasons, since the consideration that his profit will be increased by cheating A is not seen by the virtuous shopkeeper as any reason at all to cheat A. Only by seeing the virtuous agent's reasons-sensitivity in this way, McDowell claims, does the distinction between virtue and continence make sense. The continent or self-controlled agent is the one who is torn between competing considerations and acts in accordance with virtue only after struggling, while the virtuous agent is one who characteristically acts in accordance with virtue without struggle because considerations that run contrary to virtue are silenced.<sup>17</sup> The fact that an honest agent recognizes fewer facts as reasons than a dishonest agent explains why honest shopkeepers in tempting circumstances do what is honest unhesitatingly in comparison to continent shopkeepers who hesitate to do what is honest in such circumstances.

The distinctive reasons-sensitivity involved in possessing virtue is one of the most important aspects of virtuous agency. With the reasons-sensitivity of the virtuous in mind, Julia Annas points out that the disposition of an honest agent to perform honest actions in certain circumstances is significantly dissimilar to the disposition of a glass to break in certain circumstances.<sup>18</sup> Breaking is something that the glass undergoes, but telling the truth to a patient is something that a virtuous doctor does, chooses, and chooses by taking certain facts as reasons for action.

Moreover, it is the virtuous agent's distinctive sensitivity to reasons that explains why she is disposed to (not) perform certain kinds of actions. Why can we count on an honest doctor to tell us the truth? It is because the honest doctor recognizes the value of truth-telling in such contexts – the patient's need for the truth in making informed decisions and having reasonable expectations about her prospects – and the honest doctor takes such facts to be strong reasons for telling the truth, even if it is a grave truth. Furthermore, a virtuous doctor also recognizes the graveness of a truth as a reason for telling the truth in a certain way and so is not cold in her honesty.

A virtuous doctor is hence also distinguished *qua* virtuous by her being disposed to have appropriate feelings.<sup>19</sup> Suppose that a doctor knows that it is highly likely that her patient will lose his hearing. A caring doctor is distressed by such a fact and accordingly tells such a

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<sup>17</sup> Though see Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 94-99 for discussion of cases in which a virtuous agent, acting characteristically, struggles to act in accordance with virtue. In these cases, what makes a virtuous agent struggle is circumstantial rather than characterological.

<sup>18</sup> Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8-9.

<sup>19</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 125.



truth empathetically and with care. A just parent is upset when her child uses hate-speech, and she is thereby moved to worry about her child.

Such considerations illustrate that a virtue's impact on agency is multi-dimensional. Virtuous agents are distinguished from non-virtuous agents not only by being disposed to perform paradigmatically virtuous actions and avoid paradigmatically vicious actions but are also distinguished by their having distinctive ends, a distinctive sensitivity to reasons for action, a distinctive sense of what is salient, and distinctive values. Being virtuous also implies something about one's strength of will, since honest agents not only recognize reasons of honesty but also characteristically act on such reasons and hence are not weak-willed or incontinent (though this may just be an aspect of the virtuous agent's distinctive sensitivity to reasons on a view like McDowell's).

I noted above that Hursthouse takes common-sense thinking about the virtues as an appropriate starting point in ethical theorizing. However, Hursthouse points out an apparent problem for ordinary thinking about the virtues: we have conflicting intuitions that arise because we think of the virtues *qua* virtues and we also think of them *qua* traits adequately described by ordinary language terms. According to Hursthouse, when we think of the virtues *qua* virtues, we view them as excellences, not defects, but this conflicts with our view that honesty is a virtue but that one can be "too honest" or honest "to a fault."<sup>20</sup> Thinking of merely what can be accurately described as honesty in ordinary language, it is plausible that one can be defective insofar as one is too honest, since one can be too honest in, for example, not being polite or kind enough – excess in one virtue is correlated with deficiency in other virtues. On Hursthouse's view, when it is possible that one's honesty can be excessive and can make one defective, the term "honesty" is not being employed as a virtue term. To use "honesty" as a virtue term is to use it as equivalent to "excellent honesty" – honesty of the sort that contributes to one's excellence as a human being considered as a rational, purposive, willful, emotional, and social animal. If so, virtues are always excellences, although not all traits correctly described as instances of honesty or courage are excellences. The upshot is that one is to understand Hursthouse's claims about the virtues to be claims about those virtues as they are found in overall excellent human beings.

Thus, as Hursthouse understands the question, "When would an honest agent perform paradigmatically honest actions e.g. tell the truth?", the honesty of the agent is to be viewed as a virtue notion rather than as a concept fully captured by ordinary language. Further,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 13 & 154.

Hursthouse accepts a limited unity of the virtues according to which “anyone who possesses one virtue will have all of the others to some degree, albeit, in some cases, a pretty limited one.”<sup>21</sup> Hence, the fact that an “honest” but unkind agent would tell the truth in some situation does not imply that an honest (understood as a virtue term) agent would tell the truth in some situation. Relatedly, Hursthouse follows Aristotle in claiming that virtuous agents are *practically wise*, and that practical wisdom includes possession of all virtues of character, since agents who do not have e.g. benevolent aims will not deliberate well (will not exercise practical wisdom), even if they deliberate cleverly.<sup>22</sup> The important notion of practical wisdom is discussed in §1.3.

What is it to claim that a virtue is an excellence? Hursthouse initially tells us that it is to claim that a virtue “makes its possessor good and enables her to act well.”<sup>23</sup> The thought is that one is a good human being in virtue of being just, kind, courageous, etc., and that being a good human being is what enables one to reliably act well – as a human being ought to act.

What, more substantively, is it about an agent’s virtue that makes her good and that enables her to reliably act well? Concerning what it is about a virtue that contributes to her goodness as a human being, Hursthouse defends a version of Neo-Aristotelian naturalism.<sup>24</sup> Such a naturalism interprets claims about human excellence and virtue as being determined by teleological facts about human nature expressed in logically distinctive (they are not quantifiable) types of claims called “Aristotelian categoricals”. Plausible Aristotelian categoricals about wolf nature include that the wolf hunts in packs and that the wolf has four legs. If so, wolves that do not hunt in packs or that have more or fewer than four legs are thereby defective. Plausible Aristotelian categoricals about human nature include that the human being takes on social roles and thereby contributes to her society and that the human being respects others and cares for her environment. Human beings that do not respect others are thereby defective, if such Aristotelian categoricals are true. The basic neo-Aristotelian naturalist criterion of virtue is that a virtue is a character trait of a human being that she needs

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 13 & 154. For important discussion of the idea that each virtue contributes to its possessor’s overall goodness, see Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 91-95.

<sup>24</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Part III. See further Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

to live well as a human being, when what it is to live well as a human being is determined by teleological facts about human nature.<sup>25</sup>

Interpretation and evaluation of neo-Aristotelian naturalism concerning the criteria of virtue is beyond the scope of my project. I mention it here only to contrast it with what my project involves: discussion of Hursthouse's view of the content of the virtues – what is involved in the possession and exercise of the virtues – regardless of what it is that ultimately makes them virtues. An adequate development of (V) can remain neutral regarding the criteria of virtue but not the content of virtue.

What is Hursthouse's view of the content of virtue? We have already seen that, on Hursthouse's view, being virtuous requires acting in certain ways, for certain reasons, having certain aims, etc. What else does Hursthouse contribute to our understanding of virtuous agency? Since I am concerned with what a virtuous agent would (not) do in certain circumstances, the most relevant such contributions concern what is distinctive about the motivation and deliberation of virtuous agents. I have already discussed the distinctive reasons-sensitivity of virtuous agents. Hursthouse also sees emotion and desire as playing important roles in virtuous motivation. In §1.2, I discuss the appropriateness of the virtuous agent's emotions and desires, and in §1.3, I discuss the notion of practical wisdom.

## §1.2 Emotion, Desire, and Appropriateness

Hursthouse does not defend a robust theory of the emotions but she makes important claims regarding what is characteristically involved in having an emotion and what is distinctive about the emotions of virtuous agents. Concerning emotion in general, Hursthouse is plausibly interpreted as claiming that emotions characteristically have affective, cognitive, and conative aspects.

To say that emotions have an affective aspect is to say that, when conscious, emotions are felt.<sup>26</sup> To be angry, afraid, or jealous involves feeling anger, fear, or jealousy. To say that emotions have a cognitive aspect is to say that they involve intentionality: that they are directed *at* something – the emotion's intentional object. For me to be angry is for me to feel

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<sup>25</sup> Compare *ibid.*, 167. Hursthouse also pairs this criterion with eudaimonistic criteria that I do not mention.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 108. For insightful discussion of the affective and cognitive aspects of emotion, see Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59ff.

anger at something, such as a rude person, in response to, for example, their jumping the queue at the grocery store.

For Hursthouse, emotions “involve ideas or images (or thoughts or perceptions) of good and evil, taking ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in their most general, generic sense, as the formal objects of pursuit and avoidance.”<sup>27</sup> To fear something is to see something as evil *qua* dangerous, and to be ashamed is to see one’s self as shameful *qua* e.g. cowardly and to see one’s being shameful as evil. Linda Zagzebski claims that having an emotion involves representing the intentional object of that emotion as falling under some thick concept such as *rude*, *dangerous*, *shameful*, or *pitiable*.<sup>28</sup> If so, emotions involve evaluations or appraisals, when such evaluations can be viewed as either evaluative judgments or evaluative perceptions (seemings).

Although the emotions involve such thoughts or perceptions, Hursthouse distances herself from judgmentalist or doxastic theories of emotion, since she sees the existence of recalcitrant (not her term but standard in the literature) emotions as speaking against such theories: “I know perfectly well that the insect is harmless but am still terrified of it.”<sup>29</sup> Although being afraid of the insect does not require believing or judging that it is dangerous, Hursthouse nonetheless regards it as plausible that being afraid of the insect characteristically involves perceiving it as dangerous – if the insect ceases to seem or appear dangerous, then one will (at least characteristically) no longer be afraid of it.

Desires and aversions, even if not emotions, similarly involve ideas or images of good and evil. To desire something is characteristically to perceive it as good or worthy of pursuit while to be averse to something is to perceive it as evil or worthy of avoidance. Desires and aversions are also characteristically felt.

Besides cognitive and affective aspects, Hursthouse regards emotions as involving or at least generating desires and aversions.<sup>30</sup> If so, emotions have a conative aspect. Illustrating the conative aspect of emotions, Aristotle claims that anger is “a desire accompanied by pain, for a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight at the hands of men who have no call to

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<sup>27</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 111.

<sup>28</sup> Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, 61. Zagzebski distinguishes her use of “thick concept” from other uses, but the distinction does not concern me here. Hursthouse illustrates the relatedness of thick concepts and emotions in *On Virtue Ethics*, at 115.

<sup>29</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 110. See further Michael Brady, “Recalcitrant Emotions and Visual Illusions,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 44 (2007): 273-284.

<sup>30</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 110.

slight oneself or one's friends."<sup>31</sup> Although one might reasonably think that one can be angry without desiring such conspicuous revenge, there is plausibly a close relationship between being angry at someone and desiring e.g. revenge, reparation, an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, or a display of respect. Fear is closely related to a desire to flee, love to a desire to be near, and envy to a desire to take away. Such desires involve, on Hursthouse's view, ideas or images of good and evil. An envious desire to take something away involves a perception of it as being good in some way to take it away, and, in this sense, desires involve evaluations (or evaluative seemings).

If emotions and desires involve evaluations of this sort, then they can be *inappropriate* in that the evaluation involved represents A as F, when A is not F. So one will have an inappropriate emotion of amusement in the case that one, in being amused, represents a remark as funny when the remark is not funny, and one will have an inappropriate desire to flee in the case that one's desire represents facing danger as an evil when it is not.

On Hursthouse's view, it is characteristic of virtuous agents to have appropriate emotions:

In the person with the virtues, these emotions will be felt on the *right* occasions, towards the *right* people or objects, for the *right* reasons, where 'right' means 'correct' as in 'The right answer to "What is the capital of New Zealand?" is "Wellington".'<sup>32</sup>

If virtuous agents have emotions at the right objects and for the right reasons, then a fully virtuous agent will not characteristically be ashamed of what is not shameful or be envious of those who are not enviable. As such, a virtuous agent will not have motivation arising from such inappropriate emotions. If someone is such as to be an inappropriate object of anger, then a virtuous agent will not desire, say, revenge on that person. Hursthouse also claims that virtuous agents do not characteristically feel emotions on inappropriate occasions. It might be that a remark is funny although to be amused by it is inappropriate, since, for example, the remark might be a slip of the tongue during a solemn speech at a funeral. It is characteristic of the virtuous not to be amused in such situations.

Such claims about the appropriateness of the virtuous agent's emotions can be extended to other motivational states such as desires, aims, and reasons-responsiveness, for such states have the same relevant features: they all involve taking things to have evaluative features such as being worthy of pursuit or being a reason for action. The virtuous agent, on

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<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1378a31.

<sup>32</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 108.

Hursthouse's view, characteristically has appropriate emotions, desires, aims, motivating reasons, and other evaluative attitudes. On an Aristotelian view of virtue such as Hursthouse's, a virtuous agent's being well-suited to have appropriate evaluative attitudes is largely grounded in her possession of practical wisdom.

### §1.3 Practical Wisdom and Deliberating Well

What is it to be practically wise? Practical wisdom is the virtue of deliberation or choice-making – that quality or set of qualities the possession of which enables an agent to reliably deliberate and choose well, when such deliberation includes unconscious deliberation, conscious deliberation, momentary deliberation, and deliberation extended over longer periods of time.<sup>33</sup> Hursthouse inherits much of her view of practical wisdom from Aristotle.

On Aristotle's account, the practically wise are contrasted with two different kinds of agents: the good-hearted-but-naïve – those, in Aristotle's language, with merely *natural virtue* instead of *full virtue*<sup>34</sup> – and the clever-but-wicked. The practically wise differ from the good-hearted-but-naïve not in their aims but in their knowledge, and the practically wise differ from the clever-but-wicked, not in their knowledge but in their aims.<sup>35</sup> Cleverness is a quality, or set of qualities and skills, shared by both the practically wise and successful gangsters, but it is absent in the merely good-hearted. Indeterminate aims such as to help those in need and to respect others are shared by both the practically wise and the merely good-hearted, but the merely clever will either not have all such aims, or will have aims contrary to good-hearted aims, or will not have such aims as the good-hearted and wise have such aims – as final, non-merely-instrumental aims.

Daniel C. Russell, also an Aristotelian about virtue and practical wisdom, importantly claims that Aristotelian deliberation involves both the *specification* of an indeterminate aim in a concrete situation (what would count as the patient's being benefitted in the circumstances?) and the *formulation* of a plan about how to achieve the specified aim (how can I effectively actualize the benefit of the patient in this case?).<sup>36</sup> Successful deliberation involves success in both the specification of the aim and in the formulation of the plan.

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<sup>33</sup> Hursthouse, "Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 106 (2006): 285-309, at 302.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144b3.

<sup>35</sup> Hursthouse, "Practical Wisdom," 298.

<sup>36</sup> Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6-7. Compare David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 76 (1975): 29-51.

Although both the practically wise and the merely good-hearted aim at benefitting others, they may disagree about what would count as benefitting someone in the circumstances, and thereby have opposed specified aims. Parents who enable their drug-addicted children to continue abusing drugs by providing shelter, clothing, and food for them are plausibly viewed as having good-hearted aims but as having failed in practical wisdom vis-à-vis the specification of the aim of benefitting the child.<sup>37</sup>

The fact that Aristotelian deliberation involves both specifying indeterminate aims in concrete situations and formulating plans for effectively bringing about the specified aims implies that there are at least three broad ways of failing in deliberation: one may either incorrectly specify the indeterminate aim in a concrete situation or one may formulate a faulty plan for actualizing the specified aim. A third way of failing results from not having virtuous, unspecified aims or not having them as the virtuous do.

Since practical wisdom is that which enables virtuous agents to deliberate well and which grounds their reliability in deliberative success, it includes intellectual capacities and skills such as good comprehension and correct discernment, many of which Hursthouse discusses in “Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account”. I will not discuss such capacities here. It is sufficient for my purposes to present a general picture of the ways that practical wisdom impacts virtuous deliberation and motivation. I now present such a picture.

In deliberation, one interprets features of a situation as warranting or calling for some response. That a friend is worried can warrant comforting him by, for example, talking with him, or it can warrant leaving him be. Whether such responses are warranted depends on what the friend is like, what the agent is like, what the relationship is like, and what the friend is worried about. In general, whether something calls for some response by some agent depends on both facts about that something and facts about that agent. Whether a friend’s illness warrants my treatment depends on whether I am competent to treat it, and whether someone’s distressing dilemma calls for my advice depends on my relationship to that person, my knowledge of the dilemma, and whether I am competent for advising in regard to such dilemmas.

Such considerations suggest that reliably deliberating well requires both self-knowledge and world-knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Knowing how waiting in line works, how debts work, how promises

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<sup>37</sup> On misconceptions of someone’s good in deliberation, see Hursthouse, “Practical Wisdom,” 295.

<sup>38</sup> If practical wisdom is a threshold concept, then the possibility is left open that a wise agent does not perfectly possess such knowledge. Moreover, complications can arise regarding what to say if e.g.

work, how illness is caused, correctly treated, and prevented, what is a matter of expertise and what is not, who is to be trusted in what situations and in what domains, and what expectations are assigned to what roles are all examples of world-knowledge. Such knowledge includes social facts, causal facts, and facts about how human beings typically act, feel, and think. Knowing one's own powers, talents, roles, limitations, and idiosyncrasies are all examples of self-knowledge of the kind essential for reliably deliberating well.

Important to both self-knowledge and world-knowledge as they feature in practical wisdom is an appreciation of flawed human tendencies. Since human beings are prone to short-sightedness, self-centeredness, and over-estimation of the self's powers and knowledge, the practically wise are sensitive to such flaws in deliberation. Deliberating virtuous agents thus ask themselves questions such as "Is it my place to do this?", "Could I or someone else be engaging in wishful thinking or self-deception?", "Do I have competence to advise in this domain?", "Given both my powers and my limitations, is it unlikely that I'll do more harm than good here?"

The idea is that the practically wise, having a basic understanding of human nature, their own society, and their place in it are well-suited to recognize what calls for what from whom. Since possessing such understanding and knowledge enables one to reliably deliberate well only in the case that one has correct indeterminate aims, being practically wise requires the possession of the core virtues of character. In this sense, not only does being fully virtuous require being practically wise, but being practically wise also requires possessing core virtues of character. In Aristotelian views of virtuous agency, this fact grounds the (limited) unity of the virtues.

If practical wisdom is included in virtuous agency, (V) excludes a significant range of well-intentioned actions from rightness. That a good-hearted agent would perform an action does not imply that a virtuous agent, acting characteristically, would perform that action, since it may be that only a short-sighted agent would be motivated to do it. Julia Driver has argued against Slote's view by claiming that the latter implies that a bungling or incompetent do-gooder performs right actions insofar as they are well-intentioned.<sup>39</sup> Such an objection does not apply to any version of (V) which requires practical wisdom in virtuous agents.

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an agent has a high degree of world-knowledge but a low degree of self-knowledge. I do not address these issues here.

<sup>39</sup> Driver, "Monkeying with Motives: Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," *Utilitas* 7 (1995): 281-288, at 285.



## §2. Circumstances

In the following passage, Julia Driver presents a dilemma for the interpretation of the notion of circumstances in (V):

Suppose that Al is walking along a river and happens to see some children struggling in the water – in danger and in need of assistance. Suppose also that it's clear to him that the assistance could be rendered at little risk to the normal person. The virtuous person – given an acceptable level of risk – would enter the river and try to help them (by pulling them to the river bank, for example). But suppose Al knows that – given his severe water phobia – he would simply enter the river and freeze, and thus risk drowning with the others. Under these circumstances, it seems that this is not the right thing to do. Instead he should do something else, like call the police or a rescue squad. Of course, one could argue that the water phobia should be part of the circumstances, so the real issue is what a virtuous person who had water phobia would do. But then, do we build real character flaws into the circumstances? Suppose that it isn't water phobia, but just plain cowardice that keeps Al from entering the water. It seems incoherent to ask what a virtuous person – who was a coward, i.e. vicious – would do in that case. So, if flaws are not considered to be part of the circumstances, this account gives us the wrong answer. If flaws are counted, then it risks being incoherent.<sup>40</sup>

Driver's dilemma, then, concerns whether to include flaws of the agent in the circumstances. However, the problem is best stated as a trilemma since there are three possibilities: that *no* flaws are counted as part of the circumstances, that *all* flaws are counted, or (deemphasized by Driver) that *only some* flaws are counted. Moreover, the trilemma can be generalized, since it is equally problematic whether to include other sorts of facts about the agent into a description of the circumstances. When thinking about what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances, are we to consider what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances, when the circumstances include the facts that the agent is a doctor, is wearing a swim-suit, and/or is a good conversationalist, or are we to think of what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances while ignoring all or some such facts about the agent?

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<sup>40</sup> Driver, "Virtue Theory," in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, ed. James Dreier (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 113-123, at 117-118.

Consider first whether Driver correctly reasons regarding the implications of the alternative interpretations in the case of Al.

Is Driver correct in claiming that if no facts about the agent are counted as part of the circumstances, then (V) implies that Al will perform a right action if he attempts to save the children by entering the river? While it is true that some virtuous agent, acting characteristically, would attempt to save the children by entering the river, this does not imply that any action which could be so described is an action that a virtuous agent, acting characteristically, would perform, since significantly distinct action-tokens can be described in the same way. Have all relevant descriptions of Al's action been taken into account? What Al is doing is unnecessarily risking his life, knowingly doing something futile, likely confusing the children, and perhaps disobeying his doctor's orders, but none of this is what we imagine virtuous agents to be doing in entering the river (it is not even clear that Al is aptly described as attempting to save the children, since attempting to do something arguably involves at least some degree of confidence that one can do it). But no virtuous agent would do *that* action, and so Al's action, adequately described, is not right, according to (V). This suggests that at least some of Driver's worries can be assuaged by properly individuating actions in applying (V). Such individuation is further discussed in §3.

Is Driver correct in suggesting that (V) is incoherent if all of the agent's flaws are included in the circumstances?<sup>41</sup> The reason why Driver thinks that (V) becomes incoherent is that it seems incoherent to ask what a virtuous agent would do if she were not virtuous e.g. cowardly, presumably in the same way that it is incoherent to ask what a tall man would do if he were not tall. In one obvious sense, such questions are incoherent. Yet it is not incoherent to ask what A, a tall man, would do if he were not tall, since being tall is not an essential feature of A's personal identity. Likewise, it is not incoherent to ask what A, a non-virtuous agent, would do if A were a virtuous agent, since being non-virtuous is not an essential feature of A's personal identity. Or at least we talk as if it is not, since we say that a person who became good went from being non-good to being good, and thereby suggest that it is the very same person who was non-good and who is good. Can the lack of incoherence in such questions, so interpreted, address Driver's worries about incoherence in (V)?

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<sup>41</sup> Hursthouse agrees that "if you include *real* character flaws such as cowardice in the circumstances, the account becomes incoherent", but she rightly takes issue with the suggestion that water phobia is a flaw of the same kind as cowardice so that if one is included then the other will have to be included as well. "Are Virtues the Proper Starting Point for Morality?," in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, ed. James Dreier (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 99-112, at 111.

Robert N. Johnson interprets (V) as claiming that an action is right just in case it is an action that the (acting) agent would perform in the circumstances if that agent were (completely) virtuous and acting characteristically.<sup>42</sup> I regard this as a natural way of reading (V),<sup>43</sup> and one that shares an obvious similarity to interpreting the question, “What would a non-virtuous man do if he were virtuous?” as “What would A, a non-virtuous man, do if A were virtuous?”.

To see the significance of this interpretation of (V) in relation to Driver’s trilemma, consider that many facts about the agent will figure in an application of (V) so understood. In applying (V), we are to imagine the acting agent, Al for instance, as having every feature that he has, as long as such features are consistent with Al’s being completely virtuous. So if being aquaphobic is consistent with being completely virtuous, then Al’s being aquaphobic can figure in what he would do were he completely virtuous, and if being cowardly is inconsistent with being completely virtuous, then Al’s being a coward cannot figure in what he would do were he completely virtuous.

Assuming that being aquaphobic is consistent with being virtuous, this interpretation of (V) implies that Al’s entering the water is not right, since it is not the case that Al, being both completely virtuous and aquaphobic, would enter the water if he were acting characteristically. To do so would be a failure in practical wisdom vis-à-vis the formulation of an efficient plan to achieve the specified aim, given that Al realizes that there are efficient ways to help the children, such as calling the police.

Assuming that being cowardly is not consistent with being virtuous, this interpretation of (V) implies that the non-aquaphobic Al’s *not* entering the water is not right, since it is not the case that Al, being completely virtuous and having no relevant impairments that make his attempt likely to fail, would not enter the water. If Al, being completely virtuous and having no relevant impairments, is acting characteristically, then he would enter the water if he judges that, as Driver’s description of the case suggests, it is not very risky for him to do so and that it would be more efficient than, say, calling for help.

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<sup>42</sup> Johnson, “Virtue and Right,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 810-834, at 813.

<sup>43</sup> There is one possible discrepancy between (V) and Johnson’s interpretation, which is that while (V) leaves room for the possibility that there are a variety of different, mutually incompatible (e.g. eating now and sleeping now) right actions that could be performed in a given situation, Johnson’s interpretation might not share this feature. Can it be the case both that I, if virtuous, would sleep now and that I, if virtuous, would eat now? If not, then perhaps “might” should replace “would” in Johnson’s interpretation. Since this issue is not my concern here, I leave Johnson’s interpretation unmodified.

Hence, (V) adequately interpreted, recognizes that facts about the agent can have bearing on what that agent should do, and all relevant flaws of the agent are to figure in applications of (V), as long as such flaws are consistent with the agent's being completely virtuous. Thus, there is a principled way to separate out which flaws to count and which flaws to discount, and this principled way avoids the undesirable implications Driver attributes to (V).

This interpretation of (V) separates facts about the agent from facts about the circumstances. Al's being aquaphobic is a fact about him and his fully virtuous counterpart but not about his circumstances. I want now to say something about the notion of circumstances in (V). In particular, I address the issue of whether the circumstances are to be interpreted objectively or subjectively.

Facts about the circumstances are facts about the situation in which an agent acts. But no human being, practically wise or not, is infallible.<sup>44</sup> This means that, on some occasions, there will be a difference between the circumstances as they really are and the circumstances as a completely virtuous agent construes them. To interpret the circumstances *objectively* is to take them as they really are, while to interpret the circumstances as an agent construes them is to interpret them *subjectively*. Only if one claims that complete virtue, as it features in (V), includes omniscience, will there never be any difference between the objective circumstances and subjective circumstances in an application of (V). Virtuous agency, as understood by Hursthouse and other neo-Aristotelians, does not require omniscience or infallibility. Indeed, some features of practical wisdom do not make sense as applied to an omniscient being, since, for instance, the practically wise are epistemically cautious but no omniscient being is epistemically cautious, and while practically wise agents have to deliberate to figure out what to do, when this includes making inferences, an omniscient being, having no need for inferences, will not so deliberate.

To motivate the question of whether to regard the circumstances objectively or subjectively in applying (V), consider the following case:

A is walking down the street and comes across B, who is having a heart attack and is in shock. B tells A that he needs a pill from his bag. A looks in B's bag, gets a pill, and B swallows the pill. Unfortunately, it is the wrong pill and B dies.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Compare Swanton, "A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action," 35. See also §2 of the next chapter.

<sup>45</sup> I have seen Hursthouse present a version of this case in a lecture, but I am unaware of her having discussed it in print.

If A were completely virtuous and acting in character, would he have given B the wrong pill? If the circumstances are interpreted objectively, when this is to ask what virtuous A would do were he to be responding to the circumstances as they are, the answer is “no”, for he would give B the right pill had he known which pill was right, and the facts about which pills are right and which pills are wrong are facts about the circumstances as they are. But if circumstances are interpreted subjectively, when this is to ask what virtuous A would do were he to be responding to the circumstances as he (virtuously) construes them, the answer is “yes”, since it is not through any failure in virtue or practical wisdom that A has the belief that the pill he gives B is the pill B needs.

Hursthouse’s work is indeterminate regarding whether to interpret the notion of circumstances in (V) as objective or subjective. On my reading of (V), the circumstances are to be interpreted subjectively. In applying (V), we are to ask what the agent would do were she fully virtuous and acting in character, given that she construes the situation as she would if she is fully virtuous. (The last qualification allows for dealing with cases of culpable ignorance, since misconstruing a situation through culpable ignorance is a way of failing in virtue.) In all other contexts, the question of what a human agent, virtuous or not, will or will not (choose to) do in some situation is never altered by facts about the situation of which the agent is ignorant (though whether, of course, she succeeds in doing what she intends to do can be dependent on such facts). Virtuous agents are practically wise and have excellence in reason-recognition, but while such qualities make virtuous agents reliable in choosing well and in acting successfully, they do not guarantee success and they do not preclude misconstruing situations.

If we interpret the circumstances objectively in applying (V), then an agent’s declining to do something on the grounds that they do not have enough knowledge about the situation will not be right, according to (V), since a fully virtuous agent responding to the circumstances as they are, independently of the way they are construed, will not have such a lack of knowledge. Surely, it can be right for me to decline to advise you about how to treat your illness on the grounds that I am not competent to give such advice, but a fully virtuous version of myself responding to the circumstances, objectively construed, would not decline to give such advice. Moreover, if (V) is paired with an objective reading of the circumstances, then there will be no significant difference between (V) and the alternative qualified-agent account that an action is right just in case a completely virtuous and omniscient agent would perform that action in the circumstances.

On an interpretation of (V) that interprets the circumstances subjectively, (V) implies that A performs a right action in giving B the wrong pill, although the act is not successful in helping B and would not have been chosen by virtuous A had A construed the circumstances as they really were.

### §3. Contexts of Evaluation and What a Virtuous Agent Would Do

On one reading of (V), an agent can perform a right action for the wrong reasons, since there is a difference between doing what virtuous agents would do and doing it as virtuous agents would do it.<sup>46</sup> (Though this does not imply that what agents do is always independent of why they are doing it.) A contrary reading of (V) is suggested by Justin Oakley in his claim that “‘doing what a virtuous person would do’ is to be understood as requiring not merely the performance of certain acts, but also acting out of certain dispositions, and (in many cases) motives.”<sup>47</sup> (V) is thus ambiguous. As I read Hursthouse, she recognizes and supports both such readings of (V). On her view, “right action” is contextually ambiguous and the ambiguity in (V) corresponds to this ambiguity. If so, the relevant ambiguity in (V) is desirable.<sup>48</sup> My aim in §3 is to present Hursthouse’s view about the contextual ambiguity of rightness and show how (V) is correspondingly ambiguous.

The contexts in question are contexts of evaluation – contexts in which an action is evaluated in terms of its rightness – rather than contexts in which we are deliberating about what to do. To say that rightness is contextually ambiguous is to say that an action’s status as right can change depending on the context of evaluation in which that action is evaluated. Such contexts of evaluation are differentiated according to the aims of the evaluations. On Hursthouse’s view, we have a plurality of aims in evaluating actions. Here is Hursthouse describing one such aim:

We have, after all, a strong interest in people doing what is honest, just, generous, charitable, or benevolent, etc.; to a large extent that’s what keeps society ticking over and enables us to live fairly pleasantly, and that – or those – purposes are served tolerably well even when a lot of people are doing what is right for the wrong reasons – out of fear

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<sup>46</sup> Robert N. Johnson endorses this reading of (V). See “Virtue and Right,” 813.

<sup>47</sup> Oakley, “Varieties of Virtue Ethics,” *Ratio* 9 (1996): 128-152, at 136.

<sup>48</sup> Hursthouse, “Are Virtues the Proper Starting Point for Morality?,” 108.

of disapproval of the law, or because it suits them better than doing otherwise, or to curry favor or whatever.<sup>49</sup>

The idea is that one of our aims in differentiating between right and wrong actions and in evaluating them under these categories is to separate out the kinds of actions that, if performed regularly, would undermine society and its useful conventions and laws. A decently ordered society offers its members important benefits and so we are well served in preventing social disorder, at least given decent socio-political conditions. If such prevention is our only aim in differentiating between right and wrong actions, then, as Hursthouse claims, it will not matter much whether people are doing what they should but for less than virtuous reasons. No matter the motivation, if a company abides by their policies and exchanges their defective products, no harm is done. And my expectation, necessary for comfortably going about my business, that I will not be attacked on the street, is not undermined if the reason why people generally do not attack me on the street is their fear of punishment or reputational damage. When our aim is preventing social disorder, the central question is “What actions threaten or damage the social structures that allow us to meet our needs and carry out our plans in life?”. Reliably avoiding such actions is undemanding, and it demands very little, if anything at all, in regard to motivation.

According to Hursthouse, the aim of preventing social disorder is not always our primary aim in evaluating actions as right and wrong. “[I]n contexts related to moral improvement – of ourselves, of our children, of the way too many doctors behave...we up the standard.”<sup>50</sup> When our aim is rearing good children or training or being good doctors, Hursthouse regards actions done out of inferior motivation as not uncommonly failing to meet the aforementioned standard:

Thinking of the virtuous agent as the one who sets the standard to which we should all aspire, we get a richer notion of “what is done.” What you *do* does not count as right unless it is what the virtuous agent would *do*, say, “tell the truth, after much painful thought, for the right reasons, feeling deep regret, having put in place all that can be done to support the person on the receiving end afterwards.” Only if you get all of that right are you entitled to the satisfactory review of your own conduct, and we want the children,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 109.

and the insensitive arrogant doctors, and ourselves to grant that simply making the right decision, and telling the truth just wasn't good enough to merit approval.<sup>51</sup>

The point is not that a doctor telling the truth but without adequately caring about the patient's feelings performs a wrong action; it is that such a doctor does not perform a right action without qualification – one that merits unqualified approval.<sup>52</sup> Some aspects of the doctor's action are correct, but not all, and, in certain evaluative contexts, this makes a difference to how we evaluate the action.

Some might think that Hursthouse is here rejecting the distinction, discussed in §1 of the previous chapter, between rightness and goodness of action, but she need not be so read (though she is of course denying a *sharp* distinction). Her point is that *why* something is done can affect *what* is done, and that when it does, it can affect the rightness of that action, at least if our aim in evaluating actions in terms of rightness goes beyond the aim of preventing social disorder. A child who tells the truth but only because the child knows that his teacher is going to tell his parents what he did anyway is not *coming clean*; he is rather avoiding further or worse punishment. If our aim is to raise a good child, this fact can have bearing on how we evaluate the action and not only the child.

None of this implies that the agent's motivating reasons will always have bearing on the rightness of her action, much less decisive bearing. Consider again Ramon Das' case:

A man dating a woman with a young child dives into a swimming pool to save the child from drowning. He cares not at all for the child, and is motivated exclusively by a desire to impress the woman as a means, let us suppose, to sleeping with her.<sup>53</sup>

Since why the man saved the child need not figure in an adequate description of what he did, and seems not to in this case, the man's action may merit the satisfactory review of his *conduct*, even if his *character* does not merit satisfactory review. Moreover, even if the man is not doing all of what virtuous agents would do in the circumstances, e.g. expressing care for the child, such aspects of the man's action need not count against the rightness of his

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>53</sup> Das, "Virtue Ethics and Right Action," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 324-339, at 326.



action, according to (V), since such facts may not be salient in the context.<sup>54</sup> Or at least Hursthouse can be read in this way, and I regard it as charitable to do so.

So, according to Hursthouse, rightness of action is contextually ambiguous. (V) is correspondingly ambiguous in that the notion of *what is done* as it features in (V) can be understood behavioristically or in a richer sense that can include facts about why it is done. If the child's *coming clean* is behavioristically indistinguishable from the child's telling the truth only to avoid further punishment, then (V), paired with a behavioristic reading of *what is done*, implies that the child performs a right action. If Hursthouse is correct, then there are contexts in which such a reading of (V) is appropriate, but there are also contexts in which such a reading is inappropriate. With a richer sense of *what is done*, the child's telling the truth may not be wrong, and it may be overall right, but it will not be right without qualification if the child is not doing what he would do, i.e. coming clean, were he fully virtuous (for a child) and acting in character, and his not coming clean is salient in the context.

#### §4. Right Decisions and Right Actions

In *On Virtue Ethics*, Hursthouse discusses three types of moral dilemmas: resolvable, irresolvable, and tragic. A dilemma in general is a context of deliberation in which there are significant reasons for not making each choice that the deliberator can make. Suppose that one has to choose between *x* and *y*, but that both *x* and *y* involve breaking different promises. If so, one is typically in a dilemma, since that an action breaks a promise is typically a significant reason why it should not be done or chosen.

*Resolvable* dilemmas are dilemmas in which there is adequate reason for favoring *x* over *y* or for disfavoring *y* over *x*. This can be the case, say, when both *x* and *y* involve breaking promises but one promise is clearly more important in the context than the other. *Irresolvable* dilemmas are dilemmas in which there is no adequate reason for favoring *x* over *y*.<sup>55</sup> *Tragic* dilemmas are dilemmas “from which even a virtuous agent cannot emerge with her life unmarred.”<sup>56</sup> If one is in a tragic dilemma, then one's life will be marred, ruined, or ended no matter what one chooses to do and no matter what one does. Tragic dilemmas can be resolvable or irresolvable.

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<sup>54</sup> Contextual salience is an important notion in Christine Swanton's work on right action and is discussed in Chapter 6 of the present work. To my knowledge, Hursthouse has never employed this notion in conjunction with (V).

<sup>55</sup> Compare Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 63.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

In discussing such dilemmas, Hursthouse importantly distinguishes between right decisions and right actions. Her point is that one may make a right decision to perform some action and yet that that action is not right. I interpret Hursthouse as claiming that:

(D): A decision is right just in case (i) it is what a virtuous agent [deciding in character] would decide in the circumstances<sup>57</sup> and/or (ii) it is overall in accordance with the virtue-rules (e.g. do what is kind) and vice-rules (e.g. don't do what is callous),<sup>58</sup> when what is overall in accordance with the virtue- and vice-rules is uncodifiable.<sup>59</sup>

My aim in §4 is to present the two significant ways that one can, on Hursthouse's view, make a right decision without performing a right action. Hursthouse's commitment to one of these ways leads her to claim that (V) sometimes gives incorrect assessments of actions, and she accordingly qualifies (V). I focus first on the other way, the one in which Hursthouse regards (V) as giving correct assessments of actions.

According to Hursthouse, some situations are such that no virtuous agent would be in that situation, and these are situations that an agent lands herself in through doing something that no virtuous agent would do. Hursthouse provides an example of such a case (my paraphrase):

A man induces two woman, A and B, to bear his children by cunningly convincing each that he intends to marry her. Both A and B are pregnant with his child. The man cannot marry both.<sup>60</sup>

The man is in a dilemma (or trilemma). Assuming that both A and B still want to marry the man after learning of one another, there are significant reasons that count against his choosing to marry A, his choosing to marry B, and his choosing to marry neither. Depending on further details, the decision may be resolvable or irresolvable, but the point is that (V) implies that the man does not perform a right action no matter what he does because there is no action that the man could do in the circumstances that a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances, since "no virtuous agent would have *got* himself into these circumstances in the first place."<sup>61</sup> Hursthouse regards this implication of (V) as attractive for the reason that

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 52-59. D = Decision.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 46 & 50.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 51.

it fits with her view that, no matter if the man makes a right decision – does what he ought to do – his action does not warrant a tick of approval but rather merits regret and shame.

It has, however, been argued that Hursthouse is not entitled to claim that the man can make a right decision in this case.<sup>62</sup> I here argue that she is entitled to this claim. According to (D), there are two ways one can make a right decision – either by deciding to do what a virtuous agent would decide or by deciding to do what is overall in accordance with the virtue- and vice-rules. The man in the example cannot make a right decision in choosing to do what a virtuous agent would decide in the circumstances, since no virtuous agent would be in the circumstances and so no virtuous agent would decide anything in the circumstances. Hence, if the man is to make a right decision, he must do so by choosing to do what is overall in accordance with the virtue- and vice-rules.

Recall that virtue-rules include rules such as “Do what is loyal”. But, as discussed above, since Hursthouse “fine tunes” virtue notions as applied to action, this virtue-rule is to be understood as directing an agent to do what is loyal when and only when a loyal agent would do it.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, since Hursthouse subscribes to the limited unity of the virtues,<sup>64</sup> an agent’s being loyal requires that she possesses all (core) virtues to some extent. But it is dubious that an agent who possesses all core virtues, even to some limited extent, could have landed himself in the man’s circumstances. If not, then the man cannot act in accordance with any virtue-rule in the situation, since he cannot do what is e.g. loyal, if that is understood as a loyal act that a loyal, overall virtuous agent would do in the circumstances.

Nonetheless, the vice-rules, I argue, are applicable to the man’s situation. Hursthouse argues that the man can make a right decision if it would be callous to abandon A but not B, and he marries A.<sup>65</sup> In so arguing, Hursthouse is applying the vice-rule “Don’t do what is callous”. Hursthouse maintains that vice-rules are also to be fine tuned by appealing to virtuous agents who are subject to the limited unity of the virtues.<sup>66</sup> If so, the vice-rule “Don’t do what is callous” can be understood as directing an agent to avoid paradigmatically callous acts (e.g. abandoning someone) when and only when no virtuous agent, acting in character, would perform those acts – to avoid a callous act unless a virtuous agent, acting in character, would do it. Given this, the question is whether the man, in marrying instead of

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<sup>62</sup> Frans Svensson, “Virtue Ethics and the Search for an Account of Right Action,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13 (2010): 255-271, at 260. Svensson argues this by leaving (ii) out of (D).

<sup>63</sup> Compare Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 81.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

abandoning A, is avoiding a callous act that no virtuous agent would do in the circumstances. But since no virtuous agent would be in the man's circumstances, no virtuous agent would do that callous act – abandoning A – in the circumstances, and so the man is acting in accordance with a vice-rule, even when the vice-rule is fine tuned. Hence, Hursthouse can apply vice-rules in such situations and so she is entitled to make the claim that the man can make a right decision in the circumstances.

The second significant way in which right decisions and right actions come apart, on Hursthouse's view, is in the case that one makes a right decision in a tragic dilemma. A strong candidate for a tragic dilemma is provided by the following case from Bernard Williams:<sup>67</sup>

Jim finds himself in the central square of a small South American town. Tied up against the wall are a row of twenty Indians, most terrified, a few defiant, in front of them several armed men in uniform. A heavy man in a sweat-stained khaki shirt turns out to be the captain in charge and, after a good deal of questioning of Jim which establishes that he got there by accident while on a botanical expedition, explains that the Indians are a random group of the inhabitants who, after recent acts of protest against the government, are just about to be killed to remind other possible protestors of the advantages of not protesting. However, since Jim is an honoured visitor from another land, the captain is happy to offer him a guest's privilege of killing one of the Indians himself. If Jim accepts, then as a special mark of the occasion, the other Indians will be let off. Of course, if Jim refuses, then there is no special occasion, and Pedro here will do what he was about to do when Jim arrived, and kill them all. Jim, with some desperate recollection of schoolboy fiction, wonders whether if he got hold of a gun, he could hold the captain, Pedro and the rest of the soldiers to threat, but it is quite clear from the set-up that nothing of the sort is going to work: any attempt at that sort of thing will mean that all the Indians will be killed, and himself. The men against the wall, and the other villagers understand the situation, and are obviously begging him to accept. What should he do?<sup>68</sup>

Jim is in a dilemma: there are significant reasons for him not to kill an Indian and there are significant reasons for him to kill an Indian. Importantly, Jim may find himself in this

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<sup>67</sup> Hursthouse mentions this example but does not clearly commit herself to the claim that it describes a genuine tragic dilemma. *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>68</sup> Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, with J.J.C. Smart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 77-150, at 98-99.

dilemma through no fault of his own; it is consistent with his being fully virtuous that he finds himself in this situation. Hence, if Jim does what he would do were he fully virtuous and acting in character, then (V) implies that Jim will have performed a right action. Let us suppose that Jim kills an Indian, and that (V) implies that this is a right action. Yet Hursthouse denies that Jim performs a right action in killing an Indian, even if (V) implies the contrary. According to Hursthouse, (V), applied in tragic dilemmas, “says the wrong thing (except in cases of self-sacrifice), giving this terrible deed, the doing of which mars the virtuous agent’s life, a tick of approval, as a good deed.”<sup>69</sup> On Hursthouse’s view, then, no action is right in a tragic dilemma (unless that action ends the agent’s life), and this is because the doing of such actions mars the life of the agent. This leads Hursthouse to qualify (V) so that that an action is right just in case it is what a virtuous agent, acting in character, would do in the circumstances, except in tragic dilemmas, in which case no action is right.<sup>70</sup>

Hursthouse continues to affirm (D) in tragic dilemmas, and so supports the view that Jim can make a right decision to kill an Indian even though his killing the Indian will not be right. Jim can do what he ought to have done and be blameless in having done it, yet he will have not done something which merits the satisfactory review of his conduct, since what he does is too terrible or horrible for that. This implies that Hursthouse accepts circumstantial luck regarding right action: bad luck in being placed in a tragic dilemma disallows one from performing right actions. But, in affirming that the agent is, or can be, blameless in performing a non-right action in a tragic dilemma, Hursthouse is not implying that circumstantial luck has any bearing on one’s blameworthiness.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 78.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>71</sup> See further Liezl van Zyl, “Can Virtuous Agents Emerge From Tragic Dilemmas Having Acted Well?,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24 (2007): 50-61. In this article, Van Zyl argues that Hursthouse is well-advised to accept (V) in tragic dilemmas, largely on grounds having to do with luck.

## FIVE

### QUALIFIED-AGENT VIRTUE ETHICS: EVALUATION

There are at least three important types of objections to (V).<sup>1</sup> One type claims that there are right actions that are not characteristic of the virtuous. In §1, I evaluate such an objection and argue that it is successful and that important defensive responses to this objection are not successful. Since the success of this objection has motivated a search for alternative qualified-agent criteria of rightness, I also consider such a search in §1. Further, I locate the source of the problem so as to provide guidance for how neo-Aristotelians such as Hursthouse can best respond to this objection.

A second type of objection to (V) claims that there are actions characteristic of the virtuous which are not right. I evaluate two such objections in §2 and conclude that one of these is successful.

Finally, a third type of objection claims that the fact that a virtuous agent would characteristically perform an action is not what makes an action right even if the class of right actions is extensionally indiscernible from the class of actions characteristically performed by virtuous agents. I do not consider this type of objection until §1 of Chapter 8, where I argue that the target-centered account is superior in regard to what makes actions right.

#### §1. Right But Not Characteristic of the Virtuous

Robert N. Johnson argues that there are actions that are right but would not be performed by any fully virtuous agent.<sup>2</sup> If so, (V) does not capture all right actions. In response to Johnson's objection, a dialectic has been unfolding regarding the prospects of qualified-agent criteria, especially (V). The aim of §1 is to map this dialectic, evaluate its movements, and consider how it should progress by locating the source of (V)'s problem. Achieving this aim also involves considering alternative qualified-agent criteria of rightness.

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<sup>1</sup> (V): An action is right just in case a virtuous agent, acting in character, would perform that action in the circumstances.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, "Virtue and Right," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 810-834. See also Robert N. Johnson, *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7. An earlier version of the objection can be found in Gilbert Harman, "Human Flourishing, Ethics, and Liberty," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (1983): 307-322, at 315.

I begin by explicating Johnson's objection. The argument works by offering examples of actions that are right but would not be characteristically performed by any fully virtuous agent. According to Johnson, there are at least three types of actions that can be successfully used in arguments of this kind: self-improving actions, self-controlling actions, and guidance-asking actions.<sup>3</sup>

Self-improving actions are actions done for the sake of improving the self, specifically one's character. Johnson's example is of a habitual liar attempting to become honest. The habitual liar, following the advice of a therapist, engages in remedial tasks such as:

writing down lies that he tells, no matter how insignificant, to become more aware of his habits and to keep track of improvements. Further, whenever he is aware of temptations to lie, he tries to develop a concrete idea of what would happen if he told the truth. Who, exactly, is protected by my lie? Why do I want to protect her?...Finally, since he suspects that his mendacity may have something to do with low self-esteem, he engages in activities that enhance it.<sup>4</sup>

Johnson claims that no fully virtuous agent would perform such actions, because they are actions that only a habitual liar would have reason to perform, and no fully virtuous agent is a habitual liar. Moreover, Johnson maintains that the habitual liar ought to perform such actions and therefore that they are right.

Self-controlling actions of the relevant sort are actions aimed at preventing oneself from indulging or exercising one's vice. Consider the actions of a self-consciously intemperate agent such as A, a glutton who avoids certain types of situations in order to avoid temptations that he will find difficult to resist. He might forbid himself from keeping certain foods in the house or decline invitations to weddings for no other reason than to avoid indulging his gluttony. Johnson would claim that such self-controlling actions are right, because A ought to perform them, even though A, if he were completely virtuous, would not engage in such preventative measures because he would have no reason to do so.

Finally, Johnson claims that on some occasions it is right for someone to ask for guidance about what to do and yet that asking for guidance on these occasions would not be characteristic of any fully virtuous agent. His example is of "a person who lacks moral

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, "Virtue and Right," 817, 821, & 822.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 817.

sensitivity in some area.”<sup>5</sup> Consider a good-hearted agent who lacks practical wisdom and is aware of this. In a case where such an agent is not sure what to do, he asks guidance from a mature person, and the mature person is able to correctly instruct the agent regarding what he should do. Johnson would regard this as what the agent should do and hence as a right action. But since a fully virtuous agent is practically wise, a fully virtuous agent would have no need to ask for guidance in some circumstances, and so to ask for such guidance is not characteristic of the virtuous.

Note that although the third counter-example relies on the assumption that no fully virtuous agent would need to ask for guidance in some circumstances, there is no need to assume that no fully virtuous agent would need guidance in any situation whatsoever. The latter assumption is implausible, since being a fully virtuous human being does not entail having expertise in, for example, medicine or pedagogy. All Johnson needs to assume is that there are some pieces of advice in some circumstances for which no fully virtuous agent would need to ask. Given the obviousness to the practically wise of what some situations call for, this is not a problematic assumption.

All of these (types of) counter-examples work by pointing to some action that an agent should do, but only if he is not fully virtuous. Does the existence of such actions lead to the conclusion that “the claim that right actions are those of a virtuous person is...utterly false”?<sup>6</sup> I first evaluate defensive strategies – strategies seeking to defend (V) – in response to Johnson’s objection.

### §1.1 Russell’s Strategy: Ought Does Not Imply Right

Daniel C. Russell responds to Johnson’s objection by attempting to show that it fails for the reason that none of the actions involved in the counter-examples are right. Russell denies that the habitual liar performs right actions in, say, writing down his lies even if the habitual liar should write down his lies. (Russell agrees with Johnson that the actions in the counter-examples are not right according to (V).)<sup>7</sup>

Why does Johnson think that the actions in question are right and why does Russell disagree? In each case, Johnson implicitly infers that the actions are right because the agent

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 822.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 810.

<sup>7</sup> Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 48-49.



ought to perform the actions.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Johnson, when presenting his counter-examples, *never* describes the actions featured in those examples as right; he merely says that the agent ought to perform them. But since the actions must be right in order to constitute successful counter-examples to (V), we can attribute to Johnson the implicit assumption that if an agent ought to perform an action, then that action is an instance of right conduct. This implicit assumption is clearly identifiable when Johnson writes, “That he ought to do such things goes directly counter to the claim that right conduct is conduct characteristic of the virtuous.”<sup>9</sup>

Russell denies this implicit assumption; on his view, it is possible both that an agent ought to perform an action and that that action is not right. Why so? Firstly, Russell, following Hursthouse, claims that “right action” in ordinary language is ambiguous between “an action that ought to be performed” and “an action that warrants a tick of approval or the satisfactory review of one’s own conduct.”<sup>10</sup> When we say that an action is right in the sense that it ought to be performed, we are engaging in *action guidance*, and when we say that an action is right in the sense that it warrants a tick of approval, we are engaging in *action assessment*.<sup>11</sup>

Further, action guidance and action assessment can come apart, on Russell’s view, in that some actions that ought to be performed do not warrant a tick of approval. Hence, Russell claims that ought does not imply right, when “right action” is understood as “action that warrants a tick of approval”.<sup>12</sup> To directly challenge Johnson’s objection using this distinction alone, Russell would need to claim that although each of the counter-examples identifies actions that ought to be performed, they do not identify actions that warrant a tick of approval, and so one would reasonably expect Russell to make this claim. Yet Russell does not make this claim, but rather a qualified version of it. To see why, consider the following claim by Johnson, who was perhaps anticipating an ought-but-not-right objection:

[T]here is, or at least can be, something truly excellent in a moral respect about the reformations of the liar...the kinds of actions that I have discussed are not ‘morally excellent’ in one sense, the sense in which they are not actions that would be characteristic of a virtuous person. But there are no other grounds than these on which to

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, “Virtue and Right,” 818, 821, & 822.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 818.

<sup>10</sup> Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> Russell is following Hursthouse in distinguishing between action guidance and action assessment. As rightness of action is to action assessment, rightness of decision is to action guidance. See §4 of the last chapter for discussion of Hursthouse’s view of right decision.

<sup>12</sup> Russell also claims that right does not imply ought, but this claim does not feature in the reply to Johnson’s objection. I briefly discussed the less contentious claim that right does not imply ought in §1.1 of Chapter 3 of the present work.

hold that self-improving actions and the like are not every bit as morally excellent as any actions that would be characteristic of the virtuous.<sup>13</sup>

Johnson can be read here as claiming that the actions in his counter-examples *do* warrant a tick of approval. Moreover, such a claim is plausible, and so to deny that the habitual liar's self-improving practices do not warrant a tick of approval even though they ought to be done is not persuasive. Russell, I think, sees that such an objection is not persuasive. But since Russell still wants to affirm (V), he makes the following claim:

The virtue ethicist can, I think, make 'what a virtuous agent would characteristically do' a necessary condition of right action, without denying for a moment that other sorts of action can be morally excellent as well. What the virtuous ethicist does, rather, is to identify certain cases of morally excellent action as central cases, and restricts the account of right action to these.<sup>14</sup>

If Russell is correct, advocates of (V) are well-advised to say that only morally excellent actions that are characteristic of the virtuous are right, and hence that there are morally excellent actions that are not right, given that remedial actions of the habitual liar can be both morally excellent but not characteristic of the virtuous.

What does Russell understand by "morally excellent action" and what motivation is there to claim that there are morally excellent actions that are not right? Plausibly, by "morally excellent action", Russell means action that merits a tick of approval. For Russell, morally excellent actions that are not right are *non-central* cases of morally excellent action. On Russell's view, it is plausible to distinguish between central and non-central cases of morally excellent action, since to deny such a distinction would be to say that telling the truth as the continent tell the truth is "on a par with" telling the truth as the virtuous do.<sup>15</sup>

Russell's central cases of morally excellent action, then, are actions done as the virtuous would do them. Non-central cases of morally excellent action merely approximate central cases and hence are not "excellent without qualification," when the latter presumably means that such actions do not warrant unqualified approval – that there is something about such actions which counts against their being appropriate objects of approval or satisfaction.<sup>16</sup> The remedial actions of the habitual liar do not warrant unqualified approval, since they do

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson, "Virtue and Right," 825.

<sup>14</sup> Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 54-55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Compare *ibid.*, 56-57.

not express “full commitment to standards of virtues.”<sup>17</sup>

Essentially, then, Russell argues that right actions are actions that warrant unqualified approval and that only if an action is done from virtue – done as the virtuous would do it – does it merit unqualified approval.

I argue that Russell’s strategy faces at least three significant problems. Firstly, the argument depends on a contrast between action guidance and action assessment. The rationale for this contrast is that one can do what one ought to do without thereby performing a good deed – one that warrants a tick of approval or the satisfactory review of one’s conduct. When one does what one ought to do, one makes a “right decision”, and when one does what warrants (unqualified) approval, one performs a “right action”. It is Hursthouse’s and Russell’s view that one can make a right decision to perform an action although that action is not right. Hursthouse argues that one can make a right decision to perform a non-right action in tragic dilemmas and in situations that agents land themselves in through previous wrongdoing.<sup>18</sup> Johnson’s cases can likewise be seen as cases in which an agent makes a right decision to perform a non-right action.

But the rationale for the distinction between action assessment and action guidance is not convincing. Consider again the man who induces two women, A and B, to bear his children by convincing both that he intends to marry them. The man has to make a choice whether to marry A, B, or neither. Is it true that the man cannot perform a right action no matter what he does? Let us suppose for the sake of argument that the man marries A, that this is what he ought to do, and that the man’s action is right only if it warrants a tick of approval. On my view, it is plausible that an action that ought to be done warrants a tick of approval in virtue of its being such that it ought to be done (or of whatever makes it the case that it ought to be done). (I am not claiming that the *agent* necessarily warrants a tick of approval in performing an action that ought to be done.) As far as I can gather from the work of Hursthouse and Russell, they would object to this view on the grounds that the man’s doing what he ought to do in e.g. marrying A does not warrant a tick of approval, since his getting himself in the situation in which he performs the action precludes that action’s being approvable.

Now while it is true that the man’s *getting himself into that dilemma* does not warrant approval, it does not follow that *what he does in the dilemma* does not warrant approval. These are distinct actions. Likewise, in a tragic dilemma, although it is appropriate to feel regret at *being in these circumstances*, it is not clear that it is appropriate to transfer that

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>18</sup> See §4 of the previous chapter of the present work.

regret to *what one does in the circumstances*. Finally, although the habitual liar's *being a habitual liar* warrants disapproval, *what he does in response to his being a habitual liar* need not warrant disapproval. In general, the rationale for distinguishing between action assessment and action guidance is convincing only if we run together distinct intentional objects of (dis)approval. Hence, for Russell's strategy to be persuasive, we need a defense of the idea that, for instance, the demerit of a man's getting himself into a bad situation can have bearing on the merit or demerit of that man's way of handling that situation. I do not see how such a defense could be persuasively made.

Secondly, Russell's strategy involves altering the presumed subject matter of a criterion of right action from "what an agent may or ought to do" to "what merits (unqualified) approval". Russell sees such an alteration as a "protest" against traditional ways of conceiving normative ethics: not only does virtue ethics offer a different criterion of rightness but also "a different conception of it."<sup>19</sup> To this claim, Liezl van Zyl aptly observes that such a protest "in a way, involves buying into the traditional view that a criterion of rightness forms the centrepiece of any normative theory."<sup>20</sup> If we do not think that performing right actions is all there is to acting well, we have no reason to suppose that performing right actions requires warranting unqualified approval. Moreover, and this will be my point, even if we accept Russell's specification of the subject matter of (V) as actions that warrant unqualified approval, such a specification allows Russell to avoid Johnson's objection only at the cost of inviting other objections to (V).

The reason for this is that (V) does not capture all and only actions that warrant unqualified approval. Some actions that virtuous agents characteristically perform do not warrant unqualified approval, since they may have, say, regrettable aspects. Having regrettable aspects does not necessarily make something such that it does not warrant approval, but it does count against the appropriateness of its *unqualified* approval. (Remember, the *unqualified* bit is what allows Russell to exclude the habitual liar's remedial actions from rightness.) Consider first a case of a right action with moral remainder – an action that is right but nonetheless warrants distress, regret, sorrow, or remorse. A virtuous philosophy professor, acting in character, tells "a dedicated, mature student that, contrary to

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<sup>19</sup> Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Van Zyl, "Right Action and the Targets of Virtue," in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft (Durham: Acumen, 2014), 118-129, at 122. See also Liezl van Zyl, "What About Ought? Response to *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* (2011): 1-5.

his hopes and dreams, he [is] not capable of postgraduate work in philosophy.”<sup>21</sup> Although such an action is right according to (V), it does not warrant unqualified approval, since the fact that the action involves dashing the student’s hopes is a regrettable feature of the action. Furthermore, virtuous agents, acting in character, can unintentionally perform actions with disastrous consequences. Such actions do not warrant *unqualified* approval since their having such consequences is regrettable. Hence, it is not the case that all and only actions that warrant unqualified approval are captured by (V), and so to say that actions that warrant unqualified approval is the proper subject matter of (V) is to invite other sorts of objections to (V).

Thirdly, restricting right actions to actions that warrant unqualified approval or actions that are unqualifiedly excellent, when this requires acting from virtue, is to contradict the Aristotelian doctrine that we become virtuous by habitually performing virtuous or right actions.<sup>22</sup> If Russell is correct, then children do not perform right actions in correctly imitating the actions of the virtuous, because such actions do not express “full commitment to standards of virtues.”<sup>23</sup> Like Aristotle, I see no reason to claim that such actions cannot be right or e.g. just actions.<sup>24</sup> On my view, Aristotle recognized something important when he distinguished between performing a just action, for example, and performing a just action as the just do – from the virtue of justice. In accounting for right action, we are accounting for the virtuousness of that *action*, when actions can be virtuous even if they are not done in the way that the virtuous do them (though, as argued in earlier chapters, *why* an action is done can affect *what* is done). Given these three problems, the ought-does-not-imply-right reply to Johnson’s objection is unsatisfactory.

## §1.2 Van Zyl’s Strategy: Action Guidance through Avoiding Wrongdoing

Liezl van Zyl’s strategy for responding to Johnson’s objection on behalf of Hursthouse’s theory<sup>25</sup> is best seen as an attempt to extend that theory so that it can adequately provide action guidance for the non-virtuous. Such an extension thus aims at accounting for an

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<sup>21</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52. Hursthouse does not present this as a case of right action with a moral remainder, but it is plausible that it is such a case.

<sup>22</sup> Hursthouse made this point to me in conversation. This Aristotelian doctrine and its relation to (V) is further discussed in §1.3.2.

<sup>23</sup> See fn. 16.

<sup>24</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a18-1105b18.

<sup>25</sup> Van Zyl, “Right Action and the Non-Virtuous Agent,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 28 (2011): 80-92.

action's being such that it may or ought to be done in situations in which no virtuous agent would be. Van Zyl acknowledges that Johnson's objection shows that (V) fails to give correct action guidance for non-virtuous agents – fails to offer a criterion for what may or ought to be done which has correct implications for actions of non-virtuous agents such as the habitual liar. In response, Van Zyl offers a qualified-agent criterion which is meant to both fit well with (V) and provide action guidance for non-virtuous agents.

It is important to first see how Van Zyl clarifies an important issue regarding the interpretation of Hursthouse.<sup>26</sup> It is natural to think that, on Hursthouse's view, since an action is right just in case it would be characteristically performed by a virtuous agent, it follows that an action is wrong just in case it would not be characteristically performed by any virtuous agent. This is natural because many philosophers view "right action" as equivalent to "non-wrong action", and so take it that all actions are either right or wrong and that no action is such that it is neither right nor wrong. Yet this cannot be true of Hursthouse's view, since in tragic dilemmas for example one can perform an action that is neither right nor wrong. So, (V) is a criterion of right action, but it leaves room for a variety of views concerning wrong action.

Concerning the relation between right action, wrong action, and what one ought to do, the following two claims are plausible:

(OR): One ought to perform a right action, if one can perform a right action.

(ONW): One ought not perform wrong actions.<sup>27</sup>

Although (V) does not imply that the habitual liar ought to perform self-improving actions given only (OR), it will turn out that (ONW), paired with a suitable criterion of wrong action, implies that the liar ought to perform such actions. Further, pairing (ONW) with a suitable criterion of wrong action allows advocates of (V) to discriminate between the actions of those who are in circumstances in which no virtuous agent would be. Even if the habitual liar does not perform right actions by performing his remedial actions, it is clear that his performing such actions is ethically superior to his not doing anything to improve his character. If it can

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<sup>26</sup> Compare *ibid.*, 84.

<sup>27</sup> OR = Ought Right; ONW = Ought Not Wrong. I regard (ONW) as the least contentious of these two claims, since "ought" can be taken to mean obligatory and "right" can be taken to mean admirable, but my construction of Van Zyl's strategy only relies on (ONW); (OR) is there just for illustrative purposes.

be shown that the habitual liar is doing wrong in not doing anything to improve his character, and we accept (ONW), it will follow that the habitual liar ought to do something to improve his character (and performing such remedial actions can be a way of doing something to improve his character).

The above remarks about (OR) and (ONW) and their relation to Johnson's objection to (V) is a plausible way of interpreting the background rationale in Van Zyl's presentation of a qualified-agent criterion of wrong action to pair with (V). On Van Zyl's view, a criterion of wrong action that pairs well with (V) is the following:

(W): An action is wrong just in case it is what a vicious agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.<sup>28</sup>

(W) and (ONW) together arguably imply that the actions in Johnson's examples are such that they ought to be done. If we assume that the habitual liar will do what a vicious agent would characteristically do if he does nothing to improve his character, then (W) implies that it is wrong for him to do nothing to improve his character. If so and if (ONW), then the habitual liar ought not do nothing to improve his character. If so, then the habitual liar ought to do something to improve his character, and this is the sought after implication. Similar evaluations of the other examples can be given, if it is characteristic of the vicious to not prevent themselves from indulging their vices and to not ask for advice when they need it

Is Van Zyl's strategy successful? It is plausible that it achieves the goal of giving correct action guidance in Johnson's cases. But is (W) attractive and does it really pair well with (V)?

One worry is whether it is possible for an action to be such that it would be characteristically performed by both some virtuous agent and some vicious agent in the circumstances. If this is possible, then (V) and (W) would evaluate the same action as both right and wrong, which would indicate that they do not pair well.

Consider buying a cup of coffee on the way to work in ordinary circumstances. It is possible for some fully virtuous agent to do that while acting characteristically, but it is also possible for a wicked agent to do so if a coffee-loving villain. Is it then both right and wrong to buy a cup of coffee on the way to work? (Of course, buying a cup of coffee can involve further descriptions which would make it such that what the virtuous agent is doing is not what the vicious agent is doing and vice versa, but I take it that this does not *need* to be the case; all relevant descriptions of the actions can be the same).

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 84. W = Wrong.

So does the pairing of (V) and (W) lead to inconsistent assessments of actions? A natural way to avoid this objection is to modify (V) or (W) so that the objection can no longer apply.

This would involve modifying (W) to read as follows:

(W\*): An action is wrong just in case (i) it is what a vicious agent would characteristically do in the circumstances, and (ii) it is not the case that it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

And/or modifying (V) to read as follows:

(V\*): An action is right just in case (i) it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances, and (ii) it is not the case that it is what a vicious agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

Accepting either or both of these modifications would defeat the inconsistency objection. Another worry is that good-hearted but non-practically-wise agents might perform wrong actions, although the actions they perform need not be characteristic of the vicious, since the good-hearted are not *vicious*. So, for instance, a merely-good-hearted man may perform a wrong action by making an unsuitable dinner for his friend, since he failed to consider his friend's dietary requirements. But such an action, although arguably wrong – in the sense both that he should not have done it and that it warrants disapproval or dissatisfaction – does not need to be characteristic of the vicious.

In response to this objection, it might be thought that using *vicious* agents in (W) sets the bar for wrong action too low. If so, (W\*) and (V\*) could be modified as follows:

(W\*\*): An action is wrong just in case (i) it is what a *non-virtuous* agent would characteristically do in the circumstances, and (ii) it is not the case that it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

(V\*\*): An action is right just in case (i) it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances, and (ii) it is not the case that it is what a *non-virtuous* agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.



But these modifications are also problematic, since (W\*\*) implies that Johnson's habitual liar performs a wrong action in performing remedial actions, since such actions can be characteristically performed by a non-virtuous agent (e.g. one on the way to being virtuous) although not by a virtuous agent. Obviously, such a result undermines the attempt to give correct action guidance in Johnson's cases. Moreover, the characteristic actions of a continent agent will exclude many actions from being right on (V\*\*), since a continent and thereby non-virtuous agent can characteristically tell the truth on some occasion in which honesty is appropriate. If so, (V\*\*) implies that telling the truth on such occasions is not right, even if a virtuous agent would characteristically tell it. The only right actions, according to (V\*\*), are those that *only* virtuous agents would characteristically perform. Such a standard of rightness is too demanding.

A final worry concerns the fact that Van Zyl's strategy shares with Russell's strategy an appeal to the distinction between action guidance and action assessment. (Moreover, *any* defensive strategy that accepts that the habitual liar ought to perform the remedial actions will have to appeal to this distinction or something close to it.) Even if a theory which accepts (V), (ONW), and (W) can provide adequate action guidance in Johnson's cases, the adequacy of its action assessment is still dubious, for it is still plausible that the e.g. remedial actions are right (both in the sense that they ought to be done and in the sense that they warrant a tick of approval). Regarding action assessment, Van Zyl "share[s] the intuition that self-improving actions can be admirable, and believe[s] that virtue ethics can account for it."<sup>29</sup>

Although Van Zyl presents a persuasive case for the claim that virtue ethics can account for the rightness of the habitual liar's self-improving actions, her case, I argue, does not support the claim that a virtue ethics that accepts (V) can account for the rightness of such actions.

Van Zyl essentially claims that the habitual liar's self-improving actions, although they are not virtuous *qua* honest, are virtuous *qua* courageous, determined, and persistent (and we may add prudent). The habitual liar does not perform honest or dishonest actions in remedying his dishonesty, even if remedying his dishonesty is responsive to his dishonest actions. Van Zyl further claims that the habitual liar "does what a virtuous — courageous, determined, persistent — person characteristically does in facing difficult challenges (which is to seek professional help when needed, to persist until the problem is resolved, to not give

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 89.

up hope, etc.), thus giving his action a tick of approval,” although such a tick of approval will not be “unqualified” in the case of the habitual liar.<sup>30</sup>

It is not clear if Van Zyl intends here to argue for the claim that (V) implies that the habitual liar acts rightly in performing his remedial actions or for the more modest claim that some virtue-ethical theory can imply that it is right. (My inclination is to think that it is the latter claim). But if it is the former claim for which she is arguing, the argument is dubious. Although the habitual liar might be doing what a virtuous agent would do in facing difficult challenges, the truth remains that the habitual liar is facing difficult challenges that no virtuous agent would face, and this truth is what makes (V) imply that the action is not right.

Perhaps Van Zyl or a defender of (V) would respond that (V) does not, after all, imply that the habitual liar’s actions are non-right, since we could interpret (V) as implying that such acts are right in the case that the habitual liar, if he were *suddenly* virtuous, would characteristically perform such actions. However, such a response does not work. Although an interpretation of (V) that allows for sudden virtue-conversions will allow that the habitual liar could be virtuous while in the circumstances he is in, he would not be a habitual liar in those circumstances, given that being virtuous is incompatible with being a habitual liar. As such, he will have no reason to perform such remedial actions and hence would not characteristically perform them. Moreover, if one claims that being a habitual liar is not incompatible with being virtuous, then it becomes highly implausible that anything that a virtuous agent characteristically does is right.

Hence, even if a theory that accepts (V) can give correct action guidance in Johnson’s cases and even if, through suitable modifications of (V) and (W), it can silence the worries about its inconsistency and its otherwise incorrect implications illustrated above, it still does not persuasively show that (V) gives correct action assessment in Johnson’s cases.

### §1.3 Accepting Johnson’s Objection

In §1.1 and §1.2, I considered defensive responses to Johnson’s objection, and I concluded that, although (V) paired with some other assumptions, may be able to generate correct action guidance in Johnson-style counter-examples, such defensive responses fail to persuade that (V) generates correct action assessment in the examples. Many virtue ethicists (myself included) accept that Johnson’s objection is persuasive against (V). The actions of the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 90.

habitual liar are right and (V) implies that they are not right. In response, some virtue ethicists have proposed alternative qualified-agent criteria of rightness. Before stating my project in §1.3, I sketch the substance of a fairly recent article by Frans Svensson<sup>31</sup> in which Svensson presents and evaluates several qualified-agent criteria of rightness. I do so because my project in §1.3 builds on and responds to Svensson's article.

In this article, Svensson begins by arguing that (V) is false on the basis of Johnson-style counter-examples. His question is then, "Could [(V)] be revised in some way to accommodate [Johnson-style counter-examples]?"<sup>32</sup> Over the course of the article, Svensson considers six proposals for revising (V). In what follows, I present each of these proposals together with Svensson's objection to each (my paraphrase throughout):<sup>33</sup>

(VRT): An action is right just in case it is in accordance with the reasons that would characteristically guide a fully virtuous agent acting in the circumstances.<sup>34</sup>

Objection 1: If the reasons that guide a fully virtuous agent are independent of the fully virtuous agent, then there is no need to refer to a fully virtuous agent in (VRT).<sup>35</sup>

Objection 2: (VRT) does not escape Johnson-style counter-examples, because no fully virtuous agent would have reason to improve her character.<sup>36</sup>

(VRA): An action is right just in case a fully virtuous agent would characteristically advise the acting agent to perform it in the circumstances.<sup>37</sup>

Objection: A fully virtuous agent might characteristically advise someone to do what is not right. If the advisee is known to do the opposite of what the advisor says, the advisor might advise the advisee to do the opposite of what the advisor thinks the advisee should do.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Svensson, "Virtue Ethics and the Search for an Account of Right Action," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13 (2010): 255-271.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>33</sup> I use Svensson's own labels for the criteria, but he does not say what his labels mean. I think V = Virtue, R = Right, T = Tiberius, A = Advise, AP = Approve, and D = Decent.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 261. Valerie Tiberius defends a version of (VRT) in "How to Think about Virtue and Right," *Philosophical Papers* 35 (2006): 247-265.

<sup>35</sup> Svensson, "Virtue Ethics and the Search," 263.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 264.

(VRAP): An action is right just in case a fully virtuous agent would characteristically approve its being performed in the circumstances.<sup>39</sup>

Objection 1: (VRAP) makes no room for right but not supererogatory actions, since fully virtuous agents would characteristically approve only the or a best action to perform in the circumstances.<sup>40</sup>

Objection 2: Some actions e.g. eating pasta and not fish for lunch are right even if all fully virtuous agents would be indifferent to which action is performed in the circumstances.<sup>41</sup>

(VRAP\*): An action is right just in case a fully virtuous agent would not characteristically disapprove of its being performed in the circumstances.<sup>42</sup>

Objection: Since any fully virtuous agent would characteristically disapprove any but the or a best action being performed in the circumstances, (VRAP\*) makes no room for right but not supererogatory actions.<sup>43</sup>

(VRD): An action is right just in case it would be characteristically performed by a decent agent in the circumstances.<sup>44</sup>

Objection 1: (VRD) implausibly implies that no right action can be performed in circumstances in which no decent person would be.<sup>45</sup>

Objection 2: Since some decent agents do not aspire to to be virtuous, (VRD) implausibly implies that it is permissible for everyone who is already decent not to aspire to become virtuous.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 265. Jason Kawall defends a version of (VRAP) in "Virtue Theory and Ideal Observers," *Philosophical Studies* 109 (2002): 197-222.

<sup>40</sup> Svensson, "Virtue Ethics and the Search," 265.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 266. Johan Brännmark defends a version of (VRD) in "From Virtue to Decency," *Metaphilosophy* 37 (2006): 589-604.

<sup>45</sup> Svensson, "Virtue Ethics and the Search," 267.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 267.

(VRDAP): An action is right just in case a decent agent would not characteristically disapprove of its being performed in the circumstances.<sup>47</sup>

Objection 1: Since some decent agent would characteristically be indifferent to whether someone aspires to become virtuous, (VRDAP) implausibly implies that it is permissible for someone not to aspire to become virtuous.<sup>48</sup>

Objection 2: Since some decent agents would characteristically be indifferent to the fact that someone else is doing something wrong, (VRDAP) implausibly implies that such wrong actions would be right.<sup>49</sup>

After presenting the above criteria and objections, Svensson expresses doubt that (V) can be satisfactorily revised. He concludes that the lesson to be learned from Johnson-style counter-examples is that an action's rightness can depend on the developmental stage of the agent's virtue.<sup>50</sup> The plausible thought is that what is right for a fully virtuous agent to do is not necessarily the same as what is right for a decent agent to do, just as what it is right for a learner of a skill to do is not necessarily the same as what is right for an expert to do.

Now that I have sketched the substance of Svensson's article, I describe my project in §1.3. In §1.3.1, I show how the criteria considered by Svensson can be seen as instances of a general schema that I take to be definitive of qualified-agent criteria of rightness, and I show that evaluating instances of this schema by the method of counter-example, as Svensson does, although useful for eliminating some instances of the schema, is not useful for considering which instances are worthy of evaluation. In §1.3.2, I develop what I regard as a plausible way to motivate (V) and show how exactly Johnson-style counter-examples challenge this motivation. It turns out that Johnson's objection to (V) can be plausibly seen as a challenge to an empirical claim about virtue development. I conclude that neo-Aristotelians such as Hursthouse will respond well to Johnson's objection if they motivate an alternative criterion of rightness, qualified-agent or not, based on a more adequate or complete view of virtue

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 269-270. This point is developed in Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Ch. 3. I think Annas is correct to claim (pg. 42) that "the right thing to do can range from what the learner does to what the truly virtuous person does." However, if virtue-learners are counted among virtuous agents as they feature in (V), then it becomes more implausible that an action is right if it is characteristic of the virtuous, since virtue-learners need not have practical wisdom and thereby can wildly fail in deliberation.

development.

### §1.3.1 Qualified-Agent Criteria and the Method of Counter-Example

The criteria considered by Svensson can be plausibly interpreted as instantiating the following schema:

(QA): An action is right just in case it stands in some relation  $r$  to some qualified-agent  $q$ .<sup>51</sup>

The criteria variously specify  $r$  as:

- $x$  would be characteristically performed by  $y$
- $x$  is in accordance with the characteristic reasons of  $y$
- $x$  would be characteristically advised by  $y$
- $x$  would be characteristically approved of by  $y$
- $x$  would not be characteristically disapproved of by  $y$

The criteria variously specify  $q$  as:

- fully virtuous agent
- decent agent

I define a qualified-agent criterion of rightness as any criterion that can be plausibly interpreted as instantiating (QA). A qualified-agent criterion that is also virtue-ethical must specify  $q$  using virtue or vice notions or a notion (e.g. ideal observer) that is to be interpreted using virtue or vice notions (e.g. the ideal observer's being ideal is at least partly constituted by her being virtuous).

The above specifications of  $r$  and  $q$  together generate ten different ways to instantiate (QA). In fact, there are an indefinite number of ways of instantiating (QA) since there are an indefinite number of ways of specifying  $r$  (e.g.  $x$  would not be characteristically advised against by  $y$ ) which are absent from the above list and there are an indefinite number of ways of specifying  $q$  (e.g. vicious agents) which are absent from the above list.

Given these possibilities, the question arises as to how to choose between them. Svensson

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<sup>51</sup> QA = Qualified Agent.

employs the method of counter-example to eliminate some of the possibilities. To employ the method of counter-example is to argue that some claim is false on the grounds that it implies something false about some example. How successful is Svensson's employment of the method of counter-example?

Some of Svensson's objections are unpersuasive. For instance, some rest on dubious claims about what a fully virtuous agent would characteristically (not) do, advise, or approve. He maintains that a fully virtuous agent would not approve of anyone doing something other than the (or a) best action open to the agent.<sup>52</sup> However, if, as is plausible, to approve of something is to view it as good enough or adequate, then to approve of something does not require viewing it as best. Or consider Svensson's implicit inference that if a virtuous agent would be indifferent to whether I eat pasta or fish for lunch, then that virtuous agent would be indifferent to my action of eating pasta for lunch.<sup>53</sup> The error here is in not recognizing that being indifferent in regard to what I eat for lunch does not imply being indifferent in regard to my eating lunch. If my eating lunch is prudent, there are grounds for a virtuous agent not to disapprove it, even if I can prudently eat lunch in a variety of ways. That virtuous agents do not care about all descriptions of an action does not mean that they do not care about that action. In addition, if we are considering what a virtuous agent would approve, clearly we should be considering what a virtuous agent would approve given that she is to take some evaluative attitude towards it.

Svensson also presents some strong objections. For instance, his objection to using the relation of advising in specifying *r* is that the qualified-agent may advise something other than what the qualified-agent believes should be done.<sup>54</sup> This is an important point, and the valuable lesson to be learned from it is that, in specifying (QA), we should not use a relation that does not track the content of the evaluative attitudes of the virtuous. Further, he is correct in claiming that (VRD) does not escape Johnson-style counter-examples.

It would be tedious to consider each of Svensson's objections to each of the specifications of (QA). I do, however, make some points regarding Svensson's overall project. As Svensson presents the various criteria and subjects them to the method of counter-example, each new criterion is considered for the purpose of seeing whether it can avoid the counter-examples that the previously considered criterion fails to avoid. We are given no reason to think that, for example, (VRA) is a promising criterion of rightness other than the fact that it

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 264.

may avoid counter-examples that (V) and (VRT) do not. Considering this, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Svensson's project is *ad hoc*. This is not to deny that Svensson's work is important. After all, if some view is attractive and it is subject to counter-examples, then it is reasonable to search for views that retain the attractive features of the original view but avoid its unattractive features. I regard Svensson's work as significantly contributing to such a search. Further, like Svensson, I view all of the above criteria as being subject to counter-examples. But instead of presenting such counter-examples, I take as my starting point Svensson's concluding assessment that the search for an alternative qualified-agent criterion has, as of yet, not succeeded.

Given the many failed attempts to successfully modify (V), I suggest that those who are attracted to (V) but accept Johnson's objection are now well-advised to adopt a different strategy of response. This strategy involves locating the source of the problem in (V) and the wider view of virtue and right action that makes virtue ethicists, and neo-Aristotelians in particular, attracted to (V). The idea is that a search for an alternative qualified-agent criterion of rightness needs to be guided not solely by the aim of avoiding counter-examples but also by a view of what motivates virtue ethicists to accept (V) in the first place and how this motivation is challenged by Johnson-style counter-examples. Otherwise, we may end up considering criteria that promise to avoid such counter-examples but that are not independently plausible.

What is the motivation for affirming (V)? Advocates of (V) rarely, if ever, argue directly for (V) but instead indirectly support it by defending it from various objections. Nonetheless, I think an argument for (V) can be constructed by seeing it as the product of what I call a teleological method of criterion construction. Seeing (V) in this light will reveal what plausibly motivates advocates of (V) such as Hursthouse and other neo-Aristotelians, and it allows us to pinpoint just what view Johnson-style counter-examples are best seen as challenging. The upshot is that (former) advocates of (V) will be given direction for how to best respond to Johnson's challenge.

### §1.3.2 The Teleological Method and Virtue-Development

To employ the *teleological method* in constructing a criterion of rightness is to move from claims about what the primary aim is or should be in distinguishing between right and wrong actions and evaluating actions using these categories to claims about what right action is. For instance, if the primary aim of evaluating actions as right is to encourage and acknowledge



the development and maintenance of virtue in those whose actions are evaluated, and if, as Aristotle argues,<sup>55</sup> one becomes and perhaps remains virtuous by habitually performing actions of the sort that the virtuous perform (I call this view the *imitative* view of virtue development), we will have reason to say that actions should be viewed as right just in case they are of the sort performed by the virtuous.

A different view concerning how one becomes and remains virtuous will suggest a different criterion of rightness. Just as (V) can be tied to an imitative view of virtue development, (VRA) can likewise be tied to an *obedience* view of virtue development – the view that an agent becomes virtuous by habitually obeying what virtuous agents advise or would advise the agent to do.

The teleological method is neutral regarding the substantive issue of what the primary aim is in distinguishing between right and wrong actions and evaluating actions using these categories. As I argued in §3 of the last chapter, Hursthouse maintains that there are a plurality of aims of rightness-evaluation and that the plurality of such aims gives rise to contextual ambiguity in the notion of right action. I also there argued that Hursthouse claims that an (if not the) most important aim in rightness-evaluation is to encourage and acknowledge virtue development and maintenance. On Hursthouse's view, this is the primary aim of rightness-evaluation in child rearing, training doctors, and in evaluating one's own actions in aspiring to full virtue.

For brevity's sake, call the claim that the primary aim of rightness-evaluation is to encourage and acknowledge the development and maintenance of virtue in the acting agent the *virtue-developmental view of rightness*. I do not argue in favor of the virtue-developmental view of rightness, but I take it that Hursthouse regards it as plausible. Getting from the virtue-developmental view of rightness to (V) can be achieved by affirming the Aristotelian imitative view of virtue development. Johnson's objection, since it challenges (V) and (V) is motivated by these two views, can then be seen as challenging either the virtue-developmental view of rightness or the imitative view of virtue development.

It is most plausible to see Johnson's objection as challenging the imitative view of virtue development, since the whole point of the habitual liar's self-improving actions is that the habitual liar can become virtuous by performing actions that no fully virtuous agent would perform.

The imitative view of virtue development is commonly viewed as a central tenet of

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<sup>55</sup> E.g. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105b5-1105b13.

Aristotelian ethics. Given this, I want to point out that Aristotle's position regarding virtue development is a complex topic and that he should not be interpreted as maintaining that seekers of virtue are always well-advised to do what virtuous agents would do.

Howard J. Curzer argues that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle offers three recommendations for those seeking to be virtuous, and that these recommendations conflict both with one another, with the imitative view of virtue development, and with "the facts of moral development."<sup>56</sup> The first recommendation is roughly that the non-virtuous should aim at acting in accordance with the vice that is least opposed to virtue, when the vice most opposed to virtue is the one toward which most human beings naturally tend. So if most human beings naturally tend toward cowardice rather than rashness, then a human being seeking to become courageous is well-advised to aim at acting rashly. Of this recommendation, Curzer argues that although "cowardice and stinginess are common...[c]hildren, for example, do not typically make moral progress by picking fights with bigger kids and giving away their lunch money."<sup>57</sup>

The second recommendation is a modification of the first which differs only in recommending that we aim at acting in accordance with the vice that *we ourselves* least tend toward, regardless of what most human beings least tend toward. So, even if human beings generally tend toward cowardice, a man who himself tends toward rashness is well-advised to aim at acting cowardly. Although Curzer accepts that this can be good advice for e.g. alcoholics and drug addicts who tend toward intemperance, he claims that it is not in general good advice for the non-virtuous seeking to become virtuous, since it suffers from the same kinds of problems as the first view. For example, if a glutton attempts to become temperate by under-eating, he risks developing an eating disorder rather than a virtue.<sup>58</sup>

The third recommendation is that non-virtuous agents should avoid pleasure. The idea is that the non-virtuous take pleasure in the wrong sorts of actions and so are well-advised to avoid activities in which they take pleasure. Curzer's main criticism of this view is that "learners enjoy both virtuous and vicious acts, so they should not simply avoid whatever acts are pleasant for them."<sup>59</sup>

It is possible that Curzer's criticism of these recommendations fails in that Curzer unfairly

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<sup>56</sup> Curzer, "Aristotle's Bad Advice about Becoming Good," *Philosophy* 71 (1996): 139-146, at 139. See further Howard J. Curzer, *Aristotle and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), Chapter 16. Curzer's primary textual evidence for attributing these three recommendations to Aristotle is from *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109a30-1109b13.

<sup>57</sup> Curzer, "Aristotle's Bad Advice," 142.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-144.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

treats the recommendations as non-context-dependent and as intended to hold for most non-virtuous agents most of the time. But whatever the status of Curzer's criticism, the discussion shows that Aristotle regards it as plausible that non-virtuous agents are sometimes well-advised to act in ways that are not characteristic of the virtuous and that by no means is it clear that Aristotle is of the view that the non-virtuous are always or even typically well-advised to do what is characteristic of the virtuous. This suggests that Aristotle would be appreciative of Johnson's point about the habitual liar being well-advised to do actions that are not characteristic of the virtuous. Thinking of the habitual liar, Aristotle might recommend that he aim at being excessively honest in action, and perhaps Aristotle would regard correctly acting in accordance with that aim as what the habitual liar ought to do and even as warranting a tick of approval.

In addition to Aristotle's apparent denial that the imitative view of virtue development is to be interpreted as exceptionless, it may just be that Aristotle was flat wrong about virtue development and that imitative activity does not even play a central role in virtue development. Assuming the virtue-skill analogy, this is unlikely since imitation is important in learning a skill, although, as Svensson noted above, it is sometimes right for a learner of a skill to do things that experts do not do. Neo-Aristotelians are well-advised to engage with the contemporary empirical literature on the topic of character development. Only after being properly informed about the ways that human beings develop and maintain virtue in action will we be in a position to make general and insightful claims about what sorts of actions ought to be viewed as right given the virtue-developmental view of rightness.

I have argued that (V) is plausibly seen as motivated by the virtue-developmental view of rightness and by the imitative view of virtue development. I argued that Johnson's cases challenge the imitative view of virtue development and I showed that Aristotle should not be seen as unqualifiedly committed to the imitative view of virtue development. I then suggested that a better criterion than (V) can be constructed by tying the virtue-developmental view of rightness to a more adequate view of virtue development. If the source of (V)'s problem is its reliance on an inadequate or at least incomplete view of virtue development, then Johnson's objection is best responded to by neo-Aristotelians not by searching for an unmotivated qualified-agent criterion that avoids counter-examples but by motivating a new criterion based on a more adequate view of virtue development.

## §2 Characteristic of the Virtuous but Not Right

In §2, I consider whether or not a fully virtuous agent, acting in character, would perform some action and yet that this action is not right. I argue that this is indeed possible and therefore that (V) is false. As I showed in §4 of the last chapter, Hursthouse also argues that this is possible but only in tragic dilemmas. No action is right in a tragic dilemma (except cases of self-sacrifice), on Hursthouse's view, because no agent emerges from a tragic dilemma without having her life marred or even ruined. My focus in §2 concerns cases outside of tragic dilemmas in which actions characteristic of the virtuous are not right.

First I consider an unpersuasive but instructive argument for the conclusion that actions characteristic of the virtuous are not always right. Julia Driver approvingly relates the following objection by David Estlund:

Hursthouse's definition is too broad...Suppose that it turns out that virtuous persons characteristically (if that is understood as "typically") knock three times, or let the phone ring three times before answering, etc. It would follow that all of those are thereby "right," yet this seems absurd, since surely they are neutral.<sup>60</sup>

Estlund is correct to claim that (V) implies that if a virtuous agent, acting in character, knocks on the door three times in the circumstances, then it is right to knock on the door three times in the circumstances, assuming that what one does in knocking on the door three times is what the virtuous agent is doing in knocking on the door three times. However, it is not absurd that an action that involves knocking on the door three times can be right. What is absurd is that knocking on the door three times can be right simply in virtue of its being an instance of knocking on the door three times.

There are two errors in the argument. Firstly, not all descriptions of an action are adequate descriptions for the purpose of applying (V). To apply (V) to an instance of knocking on the door three times, more information about what is being done in knocking on the door is required. What is the agent doing in knocking on the door three times? If she is deliberately annoying Grandma, then that is a defeasible reason for saying that the action that involves knocking on the door three times is not characteristic of the virtuous. If she is rather doing what Grandma asked her to do, then that is a defeasible reason for saying that the action that

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<sup>60</sup> Driver, "Virtue Theory," in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, ed. James Dreier (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 113-123, at 122-123. Estlund's objection is unpublished by him.

involves knocking on the door three times is characteristic of the virtuous. If the agent is not doing anything significantly related to virtuous motivation, emotion, or deliberation in knocking on the door *three times*, then the fact that the agent knocks on the door *three times* is not an ethically significant fact, according to (V). Moreover, even if an agent's knocking on the door three times is right and does not have any admirable features – it is just a polite and efficient way to get someone to open the door – only a view that treats “right action” as something like “admirable action” would regard this as counter-intuitive. If we view right action as what may or ought to be done or as what would fittingly be done in the circumstances, then such an implication is not counter-intuitive. Of course, Hursthouse says that she views right action as action that merits approval, but if approving something is to view it as good enough or adequate, then there is no reason to think that such a case of knocking on the door three times does not merit approval.

Secondly, actions characteristic of the virtuous are not to be understood as actions typically done by the virtuous. Only act-types can be typically done by the virtuous. It makes sense to say that Jim typically goes to church on Sundays, but it does not make sense to say that Jim typically kills an Indian in the Jim and Pedro case. In contrast, it does make sense to say that it would be characteristic of Jim to kill an Indian in the Jim and Pedro case. To say that it would be characteristic of Jim to kill an Indian in the Jim and Pedro case is to say that, given Jim's character – his deep-seated motivational, conative, emotional, evaluative, rational, and deliberative dispositions – Jim would kill an Indian given that he construes the situation in the way he does. This is why describing an action simply as an instance of knocking on the door three times is not an adequate description of the action for the purpose of applying (V). Knowing nothing else about what the action involves and how the agent construes the situation, it is simply indeterminate whether the agent, if fully virtuous, would knock on the door three times in the circumstances, and whether the agent, if fully virtuous, would construe the circumstances in the way that the agent actually does. If an action's being indeterminate implies its being ethically neutral, then the act-type of knocking on a door three times *is* ethically neutral, according to (V). Hence, the Driver-Estlund objection is unpersuasive.

A different kind of argument for the claim that actions characteristic of the virtuous are not always right appeals to undesirable features or results of actions of which fully virtuous agents can be ignorant, even while acting and deliberating characteristically. Christine Swanton makes an argument of this kind in the following passage:

Actual human agents, no matter how virtuous and wise, are not omniscient. As a result, an important end of a virtue may be something about which there is large scale ignorance and for which no blame can be attached to individuals or even cultures...No matter how well motivated and practically wise the virtuous policy maker, if her policies prove environmentally disastrous, one would think, they cannot be regarded as right.<sup>61</sup>

I view Swanton's argument as convincing, but there are two ways to challenge it. The first is to deny that a fully virtuous policy-maker would make (or advocate) an environmentally disastrous policy if she were acting in character. The second is to deny that a fully virtuous policy-maker would perform a non-right action in the case that she did make (or advocate) an environmentally disastrous policy. In what follows, I defend Swanton's objection by arguing that both such challenges fail.

The only reason for supposing that a fully virtuous policy-maker would never characteristically advocate an environmentally disastrous policy (given that this is not outweighed by other considerations) is that, being fully virtuous, the policy-maker would reject that policy on the grounds that it is environmentally disastrous. Swanton's point, however, is that one cannot reject something on grounds of which one is ignorant. Swanton makes room for such ignorance by claiming that fully virtuous agents need not be omniscient.

Note that Swanton's claim, in effect, interprets the circumstances as they feature in an application of (V) to be subjective – the circumstances as they are construed by the agent – rather than objective – the circumstances as they really are.<sup>62</sup> If the virtuous policy-maker were to be viewed as responding to the circumstances as they really are, then she would not be ignorant of the fact that her policy is environmentally disastrous and hence would characteristically reject that policy.

In light of Swanton's counter-example, it is advisable for an advocate of (V) to interpret the circumstances objectively rather than subjectively? Such an interpretation of (V), I argue, would avoid Swanton's counter-example only at the cost of inviting other counter-examples. If virtuous agents as they feature in (V) are responding to the circumstances as they are, when this grants them full knowledge of all relevant facts about the situation, then (V) will imply that it is not right for an agent to e.g. investigate a suspect for a crime who is not guilty of that crime, buy insurance when one will not use it, or drive around all night searching for one's dog, since no agent who is fully informed about the circumstances would have reason to

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<sup>61</sup> Swanton, "A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action," *Ethics* 112 (2001): 32-52, at 35.

<sup>62</sup> See §3 of the previous chapter for my discussion of this distinction in relation to (V).

perform such actions. Hence, this strategy fails, and so Swanton should be granted the premise that it is possible that a fully virtuous policy-maker, acting in character, would advocate an environmentally disastrous policy given that she is ignorant of its being environmentally disastrous.

If such a policy were to be put in effect and its being environmentally disastrous were to become apparent, it would be fitting for the policy-maker to think that she should not have advocated the policy and to regret having advocated it. Can an action be right even if it should not have been done? Hursthouse and Russell claim that an action can be non-right although it should be done, but they never, to my knowledge, have had occasion to make the converse claim that an action can be right although it should not be done. Given that the case for the former claim is that an action can be such that it should be done although it does not merit (unqualified) approval, the converse case would be that an action can merit (unqualified) approval even though it should not be done. If so, and if an action's meriting (unqualified) approval is sufficient for an action's being right, then an action can be right although it should not be done. Is such a challenge plausible?

If we consider Russell's suggestion that an action's meriting unqualified approval is sufficient for an action's being right, it does not apply to the case at hand, since the agent's advocating the policy does not merit *unqualified* approval, since what she advocates is environmentally disastrous and hence her advocating it is regrettable.

What of Hursthouse's suggestion that an action's warranting a tick of approval is sufficient for its being right? Again, I think that it does not apply to the case at hand, since the policy-maker's action does *not* warrant approval. The notions of approvability and should-not are all-things-considered notions, and it is plausible in general that the features that make an action such that it should not be done are also features that disfavor that action's approvability. The only apparent rationale for claiming that the action would warrant approval is to claim that the relevant kind of approvability is not sensitive to accidentality or luck, since the agent cannot be justly evaluated by appeal to such features. But Hursthouse is in general opposed to this rationale, since she denies that actions in tragic dilemmas warrant approval even though they are clear cases of circumstantial bad luck. Moreover, to say that an action does or does not warrant a tick of approval is not to say that the agent warrants or does not warrant approval, and so the above rationale is unconvincing. I conclude that Swanton's objection is persuasive and so there are actions characteristic of the virtuous but not right even outside of tragic dilemmas.

In this chapter, I have argued that (V) is unacceptable both because there are right actions

that are not characteristic of the virtuous and because there are actions characteristic of the virtuous which are not right. This does not support the claim that no qualified-agent criterion of rightness is acceptable. I have addressed some alternative qualified-agent criteria, and I have offered guidance to former advocates of (V) who are searching for an alternative criterion by locating the source of (V)'s problem in the imitative view of virtue development. In §1 of Chapter 8, I discuss a more resilient qualified-agent criterion and argue that it does not adequately capture what *makes* actions right, even if it does not admit of counter-examples.



## SIX

### TARGET-CENTERED VIRTUE ETHICS: ANALYSIS

The most recent type of virtue-ethical account of right action is Christine Swanton's target-centered account.<sup>1</sup> The target-centered account is neither an agent-based nor a qualified-agent account. Rather, it views the rightness of action as the correctness or successfulness of that action, and it allows that virtuous (human) agents and virtuously motivated (human) agents, no matter how wise and competent, may fail to perform correct or successful acts. It thereby promises to avoid counter-examples to agent-based and qualified-agent accounts that arise from the fact that virtuous agents and virtuously motivated agents are not always successful in action.

The target-centered account has, to date, received far less critical attention than either agent-based or qualified-agent accounts.<sup>2</sup> Yet I argue in Chapter 8 that the target-centered account is the most plausible kind of virtue-ethical account of right action, though I will modify Swanton's target-centered account in order to resolve some problems I there identify. Swanton's target-centered account<sup>3</sup> revolves around the following two claims:

RIGHT: An action is right just in case it is overall virtuous.

TARGET: An action is virtuous in respect to a virtue *v* just in case it hits the target of *v*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> First presented in Swanton, "A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action," *Ethics* 112 (2001): 32-52. My claim is not that this account is the most recent virtue-ethical account of right action; some of the alternative qualified-agent criteria mentioned in the last chapter are more recent.

<sup>2</sup> Though see Ramon Das, "Virtue Ethics and Right Action," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 324-339; Robert N. Johnson, "Virtue and Right," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 810-834; Ronald Sandler, *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), Ch. 4; Rebecca Stangl, "A Dilemma for Particularist Virtue Ethics," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (2008): 665-678; Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 107-112; Rebecca Stangl, "Asymmetrical Virtue Particularism," *Ethics* 121 (2010): 37-57; Liezl van Zyl, "Right Action and the Targets of Virtue," in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft (Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing, 2014), 118-129.

<sup>3</sup> Generalizing from Swanton's target-centered account, a target-centered account could be defined as any account of rightness that claims that an action is made right either by its hitting the target(s) of virtue or some subset of the virtues and/or by its not missing (some) such targets.

<sup>4</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 228. "RIGHT" and "TARGET" are not Swanton's labels for these claims.

An adequate development of RIGHT and TARGET will include an account of what it is to hit the target of a virtue, what it is for an action to be overall virtuous, and how an action's being overall virtuous relates to its hitting the targets of virtue. This chapter aims at illuminating all such issues as they feature in Swanton's work. In §1, I discuss Swanton's view of the virtues and hitting the targets of virtue. In §2, I discuss the overall virtuousness of action.

### §1. The Targets of Virtue

Swanton characterizes a virtue as follows:

(D): A *virtue* is a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way.<sup>5</sup>

(D) implies that all virtues have fields. The field of a virtue is its sphere of concern – the range of (types of) items to which that virtue is responsive. Danger, difficulty, and pain belong to the field of courage in that courage is responsive to dangerous items such as dangerous acts, persons, or situations. Likewise, bodily pleasures and items that are pleasurable to one's body belong to the field of temperance; entitlements, laws, and procedures belong to the field of justice.

Fields of virtues are at the same time fields of vices. Dangerous items belong to the fields of courage, cowardice, and rashness. While courage is a disposition to respond to or acknowledge dangers in an excellent or good enough way, cowardice and rashness are both dispositions to respond to or acknowledge dangers in inadequate ways.

Responding excellently to items in the field of a virtue is complex insofar as responding excellently to dangers can involve, for instance, fittingness of emotion and desire, correctness of aim and deliberation, strength of will, and fittingness of action in relation to such items. Since (D) does not require excellent responsiveness but only good enough or adequate responsiveness, (D) makes room for threshold views of virtue, such as Swanton's, according to which virtue is a *satis* concept. If virtue is a *satis* concept, then to be courageous, for

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 19. D = Definition. Swanton presents this claim as a neutral definition of "virtue".

example, is to be courageous enough.<sup>6</sup> A threshold view of virtue allows that one's responses to items in the field of that virtue may be virtuous even if not ideal, perfect, or flawless. The threshold view of virtue has implications for what it is to hit the target of a virtue, and these implications are discussed §1.2.

If possessing a virtue  $v$  disposes one to respond adequately to items in the field of  $v$ , then one's actional responses to items in the field of  $v$  will be virtuous if they are adequate or excellent responses to such items. On Swanton's view, adequate or excellent actional responses to such items can be adequate or excellent in different ways. In §1.1, I distinguish different sorts of virtuous responses in order to separate out the kind of virtuous response that consists in hitting the target of a virtue. In addition, I disambiguate different sorts of claims about an action's being virtuous in order to clarify the subject matter of TARGET.

### §1.1 Disambiguating Virtuous Action

In the interpretation of Swanton, it is crucial to distinguish several different ways of describing an action as virtuous in some particular respect (in contradistinction to overall virtuous). Consider the following four claims:

(OLB):  $\phi$  is benevolent.

(TB):  $\phi$  hits the target of benevolence.

(FB):  $\phi$  is done from benevolence.

(BM):  $\phi$  is benevolently motivated.

None of the above claims are definitionally equivalent. Moreover, it is not clear how such claims relate to the following claim:

(VB):  $\phi$  is virtuous in respect to benevolence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 24-25. See further Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 112-117.

<sup>7</sup> OLB = Ordinary Language Benevolence; TB = Target Benevolence; FB = From Benevolence; BM = Benevolently Motivated; VB = Virtuously Benevolent.

I now characterize how all such claims are to be understood. (OLB) is a sentence that describes an action as falling under the thick concept of benevolence. The truth-conditions of (OLB) are provided by the ordinary language standards for correctly applying the English adjective “benevolent” to actions. So construed, it is plausible that (OLB) cannot be true if  $\phi$  neither significantly benefits anyone other than the agent nor is aimed at or intended to significantly benefit someone other than the agent. My linguistic intuitions suggest that if the agent non-instrumentally aims at benefitting someone in  $\phi$ -ing and yet fails to do so, (OLB)’s truth-value is indeterminate. Likewise, if  $\phi$  significantly benefits someone and yet the agent did not non-instrumentally aim at doing so, then (OLB)’s truth-value is indeterminate. If so, ordinary language is simply neutral regarding the issue of whether, for instance, a non-benevolently motivated act can be aptly described as benevolent.

(VB) involves a technical phrase – “virtuous in respect to benevolence”. How are we to understand this phrase? TARGET is a thesis about what it is for an action to be virtuous in respect to a virtue. Since TARGET is conjoined with RIGHT, it is natural (and correct) to regard Swanton as implicitly claiming that an action’s being virtuous in respect to a virtue can contribute to that action’s being overall virtuous. The “can” is important. As I discuss in §2, Swanton accepts a holistic view of overall virtuousness according to which it is not the case that if *some* action’s being *F* contributes to the overall virtuousness of that action, then *any* action’s being *F* contributes to the overall virtuousness of the latter action. Such a holism leaves open the possibility that an action may be virtuous in respect to a virtue *v* and yet that the action’s being virtuous in respect to *v* does not contribute to the overall virtuousness of that action. Hence, an adequate interpretation of (VB) cannot simply be that (VB) is true just in case both (OLB) is true and  $\phi$ ’s being benevolent contributes to  $\phi$ ’s overall virtuousness.

Since an adequate interpretation of claims like (VB) needs to forge a link between being virtuous in respect to *v* and being overall virtuous but also needs to make room for holism regarding overall virtuousness, I suggest that (VB) is to be interpreted as claiming that both (OLB) is true and that either  $\phi$ ’s benevolence contributes to the overall virtuousness of  $\phi$  or else  $\phi$ ’s benevolence does not contribute to the overall virtuousness of  $\phi$  but only because  $\phi$ ’s benevolence is *undermined* – negated as a contributor to  $\phi$ ’s overall virtuousness – by some other fact about  $\phi$ . I do not discuss the nature of such undermining until §2. For now, it is sufficient to understand that (VB) claims that an action has some property that characteristically contributes to the overall virtuousness of that action, and that property is tightly connected to the action’s being benevolent.

I have, of course, yet to address the content of sentences such as (TB), but the above characterization of (VB) partially clarifies the subject matter of TARGET. TARGET claims that sentences of the type that (VB) exemplifies are true just in case the corresponding sentence of the type that (TB) exemplifies is true. TARGET is thus to be understood as making a claim about what properties at least characteristically contribute to the overall virtuousness of an action. Moreover, TARGET is to be understood as making a claim about what properties of action must involve if they are to contribute to the overall virtuousness of an action. On the target-centered account, if some action satisfies someone's desire but this satisfaction does not significantly figure in the action's hitting the target of some virtue, then it is not the case that the fact that the action satisfies someone's desire contributes to the overall virtuousness of that action. Otherwise, RIGHT and TARGET would have to be supplemented by some account of what other properties can contribute to an action's overall virtuousness besides the properties involved in that action's being virtuous in respect to some virtue.<sup>8</sup>

I take it that Swanton is not making the claim that, for instance, (OLB) is true just in case (TB) is true, and thus is not making the claim that (OLB) is true just in case (VB) is true. That is, TARGET is not to be understood as a thesis about ordinary language predicates. Of virtue predicates in general, Swanton claims that "[l]oyalty', 'trust', and even 'honesty' must be treated warily as virtue terms. For example, loyalty as a virtue must be contrasted with non-virtuous forms of loyalty."<sup>9</sup> Swanton's point is that ordinary language virtue predicates can correctly apply to non-virtuous character traits, and it is natural to extend this claim to virtue predicates as applied to action. The upshot is that TARGET cannot be refuted merely on the grounds that there is some action that is benevolent but does not hit the target of benevolence.

On Swanton's view, claims such as (FB) are not logically related to claims such as (VB). That is, an action's being done from benevolence is neither necessary nor sufficient for an action's being virtuous in respect to benevolence. This claim plays an important role in

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<sup>8</sup> Compare Rebecca Stangl, "Asymmetrical Virtue Particularism," 47-48. Stangl there claims that if, in accordance with the most radical form of holism, an action's being vicious in some respect can contribute to an action's overall virtuousness, then Swanton's account will be incomplete. I take this claim to be an instance of the more general point that if an action's being *F* can contribute to an action's overall virtuousness and yet being *F* is not a property involved in the action's hitting the target of a virtue, then a theory of rightness consisting only of RIGHT and TARGET will be incomplete in that TARGET will not inform us regarding all properties that can contribute to the overall virtuousness of an action.

<sup>9</sup> Swanton, "Virtue Ethics, Role Ethics, and Business Ethics," in *Working Virtue*, ed. Rebecca L. Walker & Philip J. Ivanhoe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 207-224, at 213-14.

Swanton's criticism of rival virtue-ethical accounts of right action. As discussed in §2 of the last chapter, Swanton claims that (V)<sup>10</sup> is faulty in that it implies that all actions from virtue are right actions.

According to Swanton, we find in Aristotle the distinction between an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue and an action's being done from that virtue in the following passage:

A difficulty, however, may be raised as to how we can say that people must perform just actions if they are to become just, and temperate ones if they are to become temperate; because if they do what is just and temperate, they are just and temperate already, in the same way that if they use words or play music correctly they are already literate or musical. But surely this is not true even of arts. It is possible to put a few words together correctly by accident, or at the prompting of another person; so the agent will only be literate if he does a literate act in a literate way, viz. in virtue of his own literacy. Nor, again, is there an analogy between the arts and the virtues. Works of art have their merit in themselves; so it is enough for them to be turned out with a certain quality of their own. But virtuous acts are not done in a just or temperate way merely because *they* have a certain quality, but only if the agent also acts in a certain state, viz. (1) if he knows what he is doing, (2) if he chooses it, and (3) if he does it from a fixed and permanent disposition.<sup>11</sup>

Aristotle thus maintains that one can perform a virtuous e.g. just action without thereby acting from justice – performing it in the way that the just do. Common sense agrees with this claim insofar as it deems it possible that one can act in accordance with justice without thereby being just.

Claims such as (TB) are also to be distinguished from claims such as (BM): an act's being benevolently motivated is neither necessary nor sufficient for its hitting the target of benevolence. This distinction fits well with the idea that one can perform a right action for the wrong reasons, and, as such, a virtue-ethical account that takes this distinction seriously promises to account for the rightness of an action in such a way that right conduct does not (always) require acting for the right reasons. I discuss the relation between the agent's

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<sup>10</sup> (V): An action is right just in case a virtuous agent, acting in character, would perform that action in the circumstances.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thompson, revised H. Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 1105a9-1105b2, cited in Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 231-232.

motivating reasons in performing some action and that action's hitting the target of a virtue in §1.4.

If an action that is virtuous in respect to a virtue is not an action from that virtue or an action done out of motivation characteristic of that virtue, what is it? Swanton, of course, claims that it is action that hits the target of that virtue. What is it to hit the target of a virtue? Swanton offers both formal (i.e. thin) and substantive (i.e. thick) accounts of the targets of virtue (though she has not used these labels). In §1.2, I present the formal account and in §1.3, I show how Swanton develops the formal account using substantive claims about the profiles of the virtues.

### §1.2 Hitting the Target of a Virtue: The Formal Account

Swanton's earliest formal account of what it is to hit the target of a virtue is as follows:

Hitting the target of a virtue is a form (or forms) of success in the moral acknowledgement of or responsiveness to items in its field or fields, appropriate to the aim of the virtue in a given context.<sup>12</sup>

According to this characterization, the type of excellent or adequate actional response to items in the field of a virtue which constitutes hitting the target of that virtue is *successful* response to such items. While actions from virtue might always be reasonable (since they issue from practical wisdom), they are not always successful. Moreover, an action can be successful in realizing the aim of some virtue without being an action from virtue, since e.g. one can hit the target of honesty by charging one's customer a fair price without being honest and without being honestly motivated. Rebecca Stangl even claims that "an unkind person might perform an action that realizes the end of kindness out of mere luck."<sup>13</sup> However, Swanton (and possibly Stangl) does not regard it as possible to hit the target of kindness out of mere luck in every context, since, as is discussed below, the targets of virtues can have internal aspects and it is plausible that kindness is such a virtue.

Aside from the success involved in hitting the target of a virtue, the above characterization also importantly suggests that the target of a virtue can be contextual and that the success

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<sup>12</sup> Swanton, "A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action," 38-39.

<sup>13</sup> Stangl, "Asymmetrical Virtue Particularism," 51.

involved in hitting it can take many forms. I clarify these claims in light of Swanton's more recent formal account of hitting the target of a virtue in action:

[T]o fully meet the target of a virtue V and thereby the mean in relation to V involves acting (in respect of V) in the right circumstances, in the right manner, at the right time, to the right extent, for the right reasons, with respect to the right people, deploying the right instruments.<sup>14</sup>

Swanton is here appropriating Aristotle's doctrine of the mean (or one of the several doctrines that go by that name). The mean characterization of the targets of virtue complements the earlier characterization in at least two important ways. Firstly, the forms of success referred to in the earlier characterization are here specified. The main point is that hitting the target of a virtue involves success along a plurality of dimensions. A benevolent action may be successful in some respects – it benefits the right people for the right (motivating) reasons – but it may be unsuccessful in other respects – it deploys the wrong instruments.

Secondly, Swanton here suggests that hitting the target of a virtue is a threshold concept. To *fully* meet the target of a virtue requires success along all (applicable) dimensions of the mean, but one can hit the target of a virtue without fully hitting it. This latter point is related to the claim that the target of a virtue can be contextual. Depending on the context, time, for instance, can be more or less important. Typically, to fail to turn up to a business meeting on time constitutes a failure to hit the target of politeness, but to fail to turn up to a friend's party on time does not typically constitute a failure to hit the target of politeness. More significantly, Swanton views acting for right (motivating) reasons as necessary for fully hitting the target of a virtue, but she denies that acting for right reasons is always necessary for merely hitting the target of a virtue. I further discuss the issue of hitting the target of a virtue while having non-right motivating reasons in §1.4.

### §1.3 Hitting the Target of a Virtue: The Substantive Account

On the formal account, hitting the target of a virtue requires responding adequately to items in the field of that virtue and such adequacy involves contextual, multi-dimensional

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<sup>14</sup> Christine Swanton, "Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement," *Philosophical Topics* 38 (2010): 157-180, at 164.



success. What are the substantive standards for responding successfully to items in the field of a virtue? These standards, in Swanton's framework, are determined by the "modes" and "bases" of moral responsiveness which make up the "profile" of a virtue. I now outline Swanton's view of the profiles of the virtues and show how this view bears on the targets of virtue.

Swanton draws an important contrast between bases of moral responsiveness and modes of moral responsiveness.<sup>15</sup> *Modes of moral responsiveness* are types of acting and feeling. They include promoting, honoring, producing, appreciating, loving, respecting, creating, being receptive to, using, and handling.<sup>16</sup> Modes of moral responsiveness are different *forms* of response, and these forms are plausibly unified and individuated by their distinctive rationales. Buying a car and selling a car are different ways of responding to a situation but they can both share the rationale of, for example, promoting someone's welfare. Such responses are instances of the same mode of responsiveness e.g. promoting welfare insofar as they share this rationale – roughly a cost-benefit rationale of the kind seen in contemporary, mainstream decision theory.

To hit the target of a virtue requires instantiating one or more modes of moral responsiveness internal to the profile of that virtue. Since promotion of welfare is internal to the profile of benevolence, one may hit the target of benevolence by promoting welfare. However, not all instances of acts with the rationale of promoting welfare hit the target of benevolence. Such instances must be integrated with the other modes of responsiveness internal to the profile of benevolence, and they must be warranted or demanded by bases of moral responsiveness. These claims are developed in what follows.

*Bases of moral responsiveness* are features of items within the field of some virtue which warrant or demand some mode of responsiveness by some agent.<sup>17</sup> They include *value* (as in a valuable work of philosophy), *status* (as in the dignity, role, or authority of a person and the legality of a practice), *good* (as in what is beneficial), and *bond* (as in the bonds of friendships as well as bonds with one's projects).<sup>18</sup> The value of a work of philosophy can warrant or demand creating, honoring, using, or promoting it. The authority of a supervisor can warrant or demand obeying her orders. The harmfulness or unfairness of what a

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<sup>15</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 21-23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

supervisor orders can warrant or demand questioning or rebelling against that order. A bond with one's supervisor can warrant or demand celebrating her achievements.

To hit the target of benevolence through an act having the rationale of promoting someone's good, such an act must be warranted or demanded by the bases that have bearing on the mode of promotion. Since, for example, one may have a misconception of someone's good, one may attempt to promote someone's good by satiating their addictive desire for heroin. But giving someone heroin is warranted as an act of promotion only if giving them heroin is warranted by the fact that their having heroin would be beneficial to them. If, as is typical, it is not the case that a heroin addict's having heroin is beneficial to them, then one's act of giving them the heroin is unwarranted as an act of promotion, and hence such actions typically miss the target of benevolence.

To illustrate the distinctiveness of the rationales of the modes of moral responsiveness and their relation to the bases of moral responsiveness, consider that what is responded to partially determines which modes of responsiveness are warranted. That someone's good can be furthered by one's action is a fact that can warrant promoting her good, but the authority of a supervisor does not characteristically warrant promoting that authority but rather respecting it. The rationale of respect differs from that of promotion, since, in respecting the authority of a supervisor, the point is not to give the supervisor authority or to give her more authority or to prevent her from losing authority. To respect someone's authority is rather to acknowledge that their directing or demanding that one do something (within the domain of their authority) provides a reason for doing it.<sup>19</sup> Or consider grief as a mode of moral responsiveness. Swanton plausibly claims that grieving is warranted by facts about the griever's bonding relationship to the grieved-for rather than by the value, good, or status of the grieved-for.<sup>20</sup> The rationale of grieving is hence not primarily to benefit the grieved-for, to respect her status, or to appreciate her valuable achievements; it is rather to express one's bond-based love for the grieved-for.

This is not to deny that distinct modes of moral responsiveness can be responsive to the same basis of moral responsiveness. Creating and honoring, for example, are both responsive to value, but creating a valuable work of philosophy has a different rationale than honoring a

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Darwall insightfully claims that a legitimate demand by an authority constitutes a reason for action which is irreducible to the reasons the authority has for making that demand. He sees respecting persons as involving respect for their authority and dignity and thereby as involving acknowledgement of the practical reasons that derive from their "second-personal" demands on us. See Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 12-13.

<sup>20</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 42.

valuable work of philosophy. Furthermore, the same mode of moral responsiveness can be responsive to distinct bases of moral response. For example, one can promote value (e.g. valuable artworks) and one can also promote good or benefit (e.g. the welfare of disaster victims).

A final important point about the modes and bases of moral responsiveness is that bases of moral responsiveness do not always warrant or demand modes of moral response independently of facts about the responder. That an object would be valuable warrants creating it only if one can create it well (enough), and being able to create a valuable object well clearly depends on facts about the creator. The value of a valuable object may even depend on how or why it was created. This is true, for example, of love letters. If they are created for wrong reasons, they are not valuable and may even be disvaluable e.g. insulting. But not all valuable objects are like this, since some valuable objects e.g. human infants bear value independently of facts about their production or creation. Nonetheless, the value of a human infant does not warrant just anybody's creation of it; the creation is warranted only if the would-be-creators are in a position to see to it that the infant is adequately cared for.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, if grief is warranted by bonds rather than value, status, or good, then grieving for a stranger is unwarranted. The point is that what one is warranted in doing is dependent on both facts about what one is responding to and facts about the self.

How do the modes and bases of moral responsiveness relate to the virtues? Swanton claims that each virtue has a *profile* – a “constellation of modes of moral responsiveness which comprise the virtuous disposition.”<sup>22</sup> A virtue such as benevolence is a web of integrated dispositions. It involves a disposition to promote the good of others, but it also involves, among other things, dispositions to love and appreciate others (when appropriate bases of moral responsiveness are present).<sup>23</sup> Thus, the modes of promotion, loving, and appreciating are internal to the profile of benevolence, on Swanton's view.

Further, and most importantly, the dispositions to promote, love, and appreciate as they are found in the virtue of benevolence are not isolated – independent or separate – dispositions, on Swanton's view, but are more or less integrated into a whole.<sup>24</sup> Such integration implies that the *sort* of promotion of good that is incompatible with caring and appreciating others is not the sort of promotion of good to which being benevolent disposes one. This has

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<sup>21</sup> Compare *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 & 234.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23, 173, & 234.

implications for what it is to hit the target of benevolence. When we ask whether the target of benevolence has been hit, we do not ask independent questions about whether good has been promoted and, separately, whether others have been appreciated and loved. What we ask is whether good has been promoted well or adequately (relative to benevolence) when this depends on whether others are sufficiently loved and appreciated and also whether the other salient modes of benevolence are not neglected or violated.

The crucial point is that, on Swanton's view, a basis of moral responsiveness does not warrant or demand just any instance of a mode of moral responsiveness but rather a successful or correct instance of that mode.<sup>25</sup> That a piece of philosophy would be valuable does not warrant creating it in any way whatsoever but rather creating it well, correctly, successfully, or adequately. Creation is a mode of responsiveness constituting the profile of proper ambition, but whether creating a work of philosophy hits the target of proper ambition depends on what other modes of responsiveness constitute the profile of proper ambition. These other modes provide the standards by which to judge whether it was created well or adequately, relative to proper ambition. Whether someone hits the target of proper ambition in creating a valuable work of philosophy depends on whether they create the philosophy well (relative to proper ambition), and whether it is created well depends on whether the act of creation is sufficiently integrated with the other modes of responsiveness which make up the profile of proper ambition. Hence, if self-respect makes up part of the profile of proper ambition, then creating a valuable work of philosophy in a way that disrespects oneself can (and will, if salient) make it the case that one fails to hit the target of proper ambition.

Since responding successfully to items in the field of a virtue is the same as attaining the Aristotelian mean in regard to that virtue, we should expect the standards for judging whether an action is performed in the right circumstances (and so too for the other dimensions of the mean), relative to proper ambition, to be determined by the modes of responsiveness (and whether they are warranted or demanded by associated bases of moral responsiveness) which constitute the profile of proper ambition. Such profile-based standards are, in fact, implicit in Swanton's application of the Aristotelian mean.

As an illustration of the practicality of the mean, Swanton offers an example of failure to hit the target of proper ambition by an artist.<sup>26</sup> In the example, an artist is collecting sea shells in order to create a work of art depicting sacred Maori symbols. For the artist to fully hit the target of proper ambition, she must be collecting in the right circumstances, in the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>26</sup> Swanton, "Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement," 164-166.

right manner, at the right time, to the right extent, for the right (motivating) reasons, with respect to the right people, deploying the right instruments. Swanton points to a variety of ways that the artist could fail in attaining the mean, but I mention only the most interesting (because most puzzling) ones. Firstly, Swanton claims that the artist can fail to collect at the right time, relative to proper ambition, if she “has no time to pursue her artistic ambitions right now, for she has serious family responsibilities.”<sup>27</sup> Secondly, the artist can fail to make the artwork deploying the right instruments, relative to proper ambition, if “the shells currently collected are ‘tapu’ since there has recently been a drowning in the area.”<sup>28</sup>

Swanton thus claims that neglecting family responsibilities can be a way of failing to hit the target of proper ambition, but we should recognize that neglecting family responsibilities can seldom be a way of failing to act *ambitiously* and probably never a direct way of failing to act ambitiously as an artist. To illustrate the point, we can think of the possibility that the painter Gauguin was able to flourish as an artist only because he abandoned his family.<sup>29</sup> It would be incorrect to say that, in this case, Gauguin failed to act ambitiously by neglecting his family responsibilities. So if Swanton is correct in saying that her artist fails to hit the target of proper ambition in neglecting family responsibilities, then there must be something more to hitting the target of proper ambition than there is to acting ambitiously.

The same gap between acting ambitiously and hitting the target of proper ambition may be found (though with less certainty) in Swanton’s claim that using tapu shells can be a way of failing to hit the target of proper ambition in the creation of an artwork. One may reasonably think that one’s success as an artist depends only on the artistic value of one’s works and that the artistic value of one’s works is independent of whether the work is created respectfully (the philosophical debate about the relation or lack thereof between “aesthetic value” and “ethical value” indicates the controversial nature of this claim). If so, Swanton’s artist’s success in creating a valuable artwork does not depend on whether the artist has violated such taboos.<sup>30</sup> After all, a photographer would seemingly not be less artistically ambitious just

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>29</sup> This example is, of course, influenced by the one found in Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 50 (1976): 115-135, at 117-122.

<sup>30</sup> I have been told that the Maori concept of tapu is more nuanced than the concept of taboo. While violating a taboo need not involve profaning the sacred, performing a tapu act necessarily profanes the sacred. If this is correct about the concept of tapu, and the aesthetic value of this particular artwork depends on its not profaning the sacred, then considerable doubt is cast on the claim that the artistic success of the artist in this case does not depend on the work’s not being made of shells that were tapu to collect at the time.

because he chooses to photograph a person who has requested that he not be photographed.<sup>31</sup> Such an action may be disrespectful and inconsiderate, but it nonetheless seems perfectly capable of being ambitious, even ambitious towards a worthwhile aim. Such considerations illustrate the importance to the plausibility of TARGET of distinguishing claims such as that  $\phi$  is benevolent from claims such as that  $\phi$  is virtuous in respect to benevolence.

What more is there to hitting the target of proper ambition than performing an ambitious action? The answer to this question, in Swanton's framework, is determined by what modes of responsiveness, besides creation, are to be found in the profile of proper ambition. If we think of love and respect as constituting parts of the profile of proper ambition, then Swanton's claim – that one can fail to hit the target of proper ambition by neglecting family responsibilities or by using tapu instruments – is plausible, since the sort of ambition that allows for neglecting one's family is incompatible with (or at least is seldom compatible with) loving and respecting one's family.

As a matter of fact, Swanton claims that love (of self and others) and respect (of self and others) feature in the profiles of *all* virtues.<sup>32</sup> Swanton could argue that since all virtues “express fine inner states”<sup>33</sup> and since no disposition that is isolated from – wholly independent of – love or respect is a fine inner state, it follows that every virtue involves some integration with love and respect. While I am not prepared to claim that Swanton would accept this argument, it at least allows us to see what sort of claims she could make to defend the view that the profile of proper ambition includes love and respect and thereby defend her claim that one may fail to hit the target of proper ambition by neglecting one's family.

In §1.3, I have interpreted Swanton's substantive view of the targets of virtue by interpreting her view of the profiles of the virtues and showing how this view bears on the targets of virtue. In §1.4, I clarify Swanton's stance on the important issue of hitting the target of a virtue while acting for non-right reasons.

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<sup>31</sup> A similar example is discussed in Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 47.

<sup>32</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 99.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

## §1.4 Motivating Reasons and the Targets of Virtue

The metaphor of hitting the target of a virtue is taken from archery.<sup>34</sup> Since someone may hit an archer's target by accident and even while trying to miss it, it is suggested that someone may hit the target of a virtue by accident and even while having a contrary aim. Yet Swanton, in appropriating the Aristotelian mean, claims that one can miss the target of a virtue by acting for wrong reasons.

On Swanton's view, there are targets of virtue that are completely external to the agent, targets of virtue that are completely internal to the agent, and targets of virtue that are neither completely internal nor completely external to the agent.<sup>35</sup> Hitting a completely external target does not require or preclude having any specific kinds of inner states, and hitting a completely internal target requires nothing but (not) having specific kinds of inner states.

Swanton's claim that some targets are external, some internal, and others mixed is relevant to the issue of how one can hit targets of virtue while acting for wrong reasons, but this relevance can be exaggerated and is not straightforward. In §1.4, I first show that the claim that some targets of virtue are e.g. completely external should be taken as a contextualized claim – a claim about what items in the field of a virtue warrant or demand in a certain context. Secondly, I show that the vagueness and contextual salience in the targets of virtue allows that success in hitting the target of a virtue does not always require success along every dimension of the mean. Finally, I argue that hitting an internal target of virtue does not always require acting for right reasons and clarify the relation between internal targets and motivating reasons.

Giving an example of a completely external target, Swanton claims that “a just act is one that, for example, conforms to legitimate rules of procedure...”<sup>36</sup> If the target of justice is to conform to legitimate rules of procedure, then, given typical rules of procedure, hitting that target does not require or preclude having any specific kinds of inner states. But Swanton also claims that “we may call an act *wrong* because racist if the agent, in respecting a right, possessed racist motivation, even if that motivation was not displayed.”<sup>37</sup> If, as is plausible, racist acts *qua* racist miss the target of justice, then the latter claim suggests that the target of

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<sup>34</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a20.

<sup>35</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 235.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

justice is not completely external, since it precludes having specific kinds of inner states e.g. racist motivation or it demands respect for persons and not only their rights.

These two claims about the target of justice are consistent if the target of justice is contextually variable. If the target of justice is contextually variable, then it is possible that, in some contexts, the target of justice is completely external while, in other contexts, the target of justice is not completely external. This raises a question about the unity of the targets of virtue. If the target of justice is contextually variable, how is the target of justice in one context related to the target of justice in a different context?

In order to accommodate both the contextual variability and the unity of the target of a virtue, I suggest that the abstract (i.e. indeterminate or unspecified) target of a virtue is not contextually variable but that concrete (i.e. determinate or specified) targets of that virtue are.<sup>38</sup> To hit the abstract target of justice is to instantiate one or more modes of responsiveness internal to the profile of justice in such a way as to successfully respond to the bases of moral responsiveness present in the field of justice. Such success involves e.g. respecting the right people or objects, at the right time, for the right reasons. A concrete target of justice is the abstract target of justice as specified in or applied to a concrete situation. If, in a concrete situation, the right reason dimension of the mean simply does not apply, then a concrete target of justice can be completely external. Many if not all legal requirements, such as requirements derived from income tax regulations, demand compliance when such compliance is indifferent to one's motivation in complying. If so, one can hit the target of justice by filing one's taxes at the right time, sending it to the right place, deploying the right instruments e.g. the correct forms, regardless of one's motivating reasons. The general point is that some bases of moral responsiveness (e.g. legal requirements) do not demand motivation-dependent modes of moral responsiveness and if, in a situation, no basis of moral responsiveness is present which demands motivation-dependent modes of moral responsiveness, then hitting the target of a virtue will not require acting for right motivating reasons in that situation. (By a "motivation-dependent" mode of moral responsiveness, I mean a mode of moral responsiveness whose instantiation depends on facts about the motivation of the agent. Loving, respecting, honoring, appreciating, and caring are or can be motivation-dependent responses.)

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<sup>38</sup> Swanton does not draw this contrast. I am here drawing on my discussion in §1.3 of Chapter 4 of the present work, in which I discussed indeterminate (unspecified) and determinate (specified) aims as they feature in Aristotelian deliberation.



Swanton should also be understood as claiming that an agent can hit the target of a virtue while not acting for right motivating reasons even if the right reason dimension of the mean is applicable in the situation. On Swanton's view, not all dimensions of the mean are *salient* in all situations, even when those dimensions of the mean are applicable.<sup>39</sup> To *fully* hit the target of a virtue requires success in all applicable dimensions of the mean, but *merely* hitting the target requires success only in the salient dimensions of the mean. Consider again Ramon Das' case:

A man dating a woman with a young child dives into a swimming pool to save the child from drowning. He cares not at all for the child, and is motivated exclusively by a desire to impress the woman as a means, let us suppose, to sleeping with her.<sup>40</sup>

Swanton claims that Das' man hits the target of benevolence in saving the child.<sup>41</sup> He saves the right person, at the right time, in the right manner, deploying right instruments. The man is to be imagined as succeeding in regard to all dimensions of the mean except the right reason dimension. But the right reason dimension is arguably not salient in this context. To see this, contrast Das' case with a case in which the man is the child's father and the child is feigning drowning because the child rightfully feels neglected by him. What the child needs, in that situation, is not saving but caring and loving appreciation. In the first case, no item in the field of benevolence demands that the man express care for the child in that specific instance. In the second case, the man fails to respond to items in the field of parental bond-based loving virtue in that he is emotionally neglecting the child. Moreover, such neglect of the child is not successfully responded to merely by "saving" the child.

Salience in the targets of virtue is related to vagueness, especially to what Swanton calls combinatorial vagueness. According to Swanton, there are two significant kinds of vagueness in the targets of virtue. The first kind – degree vagueness – is vagueness concerning how successful a response must be in regard to a single dimension of the mean in order to count as a successful response. Consider the right extent dimension of the mean. How much or what proportion of their money does a person have to donate in order to give to the right extent? At what point does a donation become adequate? On Swanton's view,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 236-237; Swanton, "Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement," 172.

<sup>40</sup> Das, "Virtue Ethics and Right Action," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 324-339, at 326. Swanton discusses disagreement about this case in "Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement," at 172.

<sup>41</sup> Swanton made this claim to me in conversation; she has not made it in print.

“there is standardly no such point: the boundary between generous and stingy (and thus not generous by definition) is fuzzy.”<sup>42</sup> Degree vagueness is present in the right reason dimension of the mean in that one’s motivating reasons can range from e.g. deplorable to adequate to admirable. On Swanton’s view, there is often indeterminacy in what counts as adequate motivating reasons. Das’ man certainly does not have admirable motivating reasons in saving the child but neither does he have monstrous motivation.<sup>43</sup>

The second kind of vagueness present in the targets of virtue – combinatorial vagueness – is most relevant to the notion of salience. Combinatorial vagueness is vagueness concerning what combinations of the various dimensions of the mean are either necessary or sufficient for hitting the target of a virtue.<sup>44</sup> The idea is that since hitting the target of a virtue is multi-dimensional, cases like Das’ arise in which success in some dimensions is achieved but not in other dimensions. On Swanton’s view, it is often indeterminate whether such actions hit the target of the virtue or not. Das’ man fails to act for right reasons, but it is indeterminate or vague whether this is sufficient for his act to be an overall failure to hit the target of benevolence. To say that Das’ man’s failure to act for right reasons is not salient in the contexts is to make a judgment that that this failure does not amount to overall failure in regard to benevolence – that the success in regard to other dimensions of the mean outweighs, in this case, his failure to act for right reasons.<sup>45</sup>

Why not instead say that one hits the target of a virtue just in case one’s action is successful along all applicable dimensions of the mean? Aristotle, reflecting on the multi-dimensional nature of the mean, claims that “there are many ways to be in error...[b]ut there is only one way to be correct. That is why error is easy and correctness is difficult, since it is easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it.”<sup>46</sup> Aristotle might be claiming that an action or feeling is fully or unqualifiedly correct only if it succeeds in regard to all dimensions of the mean, but he might be making the stronger claim that all correct responses involve such unqualified success. One reason to deny the latter view is that, since it treats success in regard to every dimension of the mean as necessary conditions for hitting the target of a virtue, it fails to recognize that not all dimensions of the mean are equally important in every context. In Das’ case it is of the utmost importance that the man save the right person and at

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<sup>42</sup> Swanton, “Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement,” 172.

<sup>43</sup> For further evaluation of Das’ man’s motivation, see §2.2 of Chapter 3 of the present work.

<sup>44</sup> Compare Swanton, “Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement,” 171.

<sup>45</sup> Swanton connects combinatorial vagueness to the weighing of reasons in *ibid*, 171.

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Second Edition, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1106b30-1106b34.

the right time, but it is surely not as important that the man be decently motivated. Hence, to say that the targets of virtue involve salience and combinatorial vagueness is comparatively attractive in that it allows for recognition of the difference in import that dimensions of the mean can have.

Given the salience and vagueness in the targets of virtue, one can hit the target of a virtue without acting for right reasons. But it is equally possible that one can fail to hit the target of a virtue by acting for non-right reasons (recall Swanton's claim about racist motivation). In the remainder of this section, I relate the latter claim to Swanton's view that some targets of virtue are internal (completely or partially).

Hitting a completely external target of virtue never requires or precludes any specific kinds of inner states, including motivating reasons. Viewed in the light of the Aristotelian mean characterization of the targets of virtue, to claim that there are completely external targets of virtue is to imply that there are some targets of virtue in which the right reason dimension of the mean is either not applicable or not salient. Hence, in order to affirm that acting for wrong reasons can make one's act fail to hit the target of a virtue, a target-centered theorist must maintain that there are at least some targets of virtue that are not completely external.

But the existence of internal (i.e. non-completely-external) targets of virtue does not necessarily place a boundary on the kinds of motivating reasons the agent may have in hitting those targets, since not all inner states are motivating reasons. To illustrate, consider Swanton's claim that the target of determination as a virtue is "trying hard in a sustained way, and that target may be reached even if the agent fails rather consistently in her endeavors."<sup>47</sup> Trying hard in a sustained way may be accomplished through a great variety of motivating reasons, and some such motivating reasons are less virtuous than others. One graduate student hits the target of determination – perseveres in her research – from a sense of the importance of her discipline and a desire to develop her talents through making a contribution to that discipline. Another graduate student hits the target primarily through a desire to impress others which is rooted in elitism and low self-esteem. Given that both students try hard in a sustained way, both students hit the target of determination although the latter student does not try hard for right reasons (even if they are not deplorable reasons either). Since the target of determination, so construed, is an internal target of virtue, it follows that one may hit an internal target of virtue without acting for right reasons.

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<sup>47</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 235.

In order for a target-centered theory to claim that some action misses the target of a virtue in that an agent acts for non-right reasons, that theory must claim that there are some targets of virtue in which the right reason dimension of the mean is salient. On Swanton's view, there are such targets. Of Sverdlik's case<sup>48</sup> of refusing to sell a house for racist reasons, Swanton claims that the agent who refuses to sell the house misses the target of racial toleration.<sup>49</sup> Of Sverdlik's other cases, Swanton might claim, for instance, that the cruel hunter misses the target of prudence (because he supposes that cruel enjoyment benefits him and seeks enjoyment in wrong objects) and the target of the nameless virtue that consists in being well-disposed toward non-human animals. Hence, on Swanton's view, the right reason dimension of the mean is sometimes but not always salient, and so one can hit the target of a virtue independently of one's motivating reasons but not in all contexts.

## §2 Overall Virtuousness

In §1, my project was to give an adequate interpretation of how TARGET is developed in Swanton's work. In §2, I aim to do the same in regard to RIGHT – the claim that rightness of action is overall virtuousness of action.

RIGHT treats rightness as an overall concept – a concept that features only in “all things considered” judgments. Swanton describes the primary context of such judgments in the following way:

Assume that it is determined whether an act is properly describable as hitting the target of an individual virtue...Disagreement about overall virtuousness centres on the resolution of conflict when an action is said to be virtuous in respect V and non-virtuous and even vicious in respect W...Actions are, for example, both just and weak, or just and malicious, or friendly and unjust, or self-protective and non-beneficent...<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Steven Sverdlik, “Motive and Rightness,” *Ethics* 106 (1996): 327-349, at 341. See §1.3 of Chapter 3 of the present work for further discussion of this case.

<sup>49</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 235. I am unconvinced that racial toleration is a virtue. Plausibly, to tolerate something is to put up with something that one disapproves of or dislikes. If so, tolerating other races implies that one dislikes or disapproves of those races. Perhaps a better characterization of the virtue Swanton has in mind would be racial appreciation. Such a virtue would involve being disposed to respond excellently or adequately to diverse forms of human life, when such excellent or adequate responses include appreciation, love, and respect. Swanton, however, includes the latter modes of responsiveness into the profile of “full racial toleration”, and so the dispute is verbal.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

So, on Swanton's view, if an action is virtuous in respect to one virtue but vicious in respect to some other virtue, then there is conflict in regard to the overall virtuousness and thereby rightness of that action. Specifically, there is a feature of the action – its being virtuous in respect to some virtue – that favors the action or makes something of a case for regarding it as right, and there is a feature of the action – its being vicious in respect to some virtue – which disfavors the action or makes something of a case for regarding it as wrong.

The role of the concept of overall virtuousness in the target-centered account is to provide a bridge between the concept of hitting the target of a virtue and the concept of right action. The idea is that hitting the target of a virtue is insufficient for performing a right action, since one's action may miss the target of some other virtue. Hence, the concept of overall virtuousness gets its *raison d'être* from the existence of what I call *aretaically mixed* actions – actions that are virtuous in respect to some virtue but vicious in respect to some other virtue. In contrast, *simply virtuous* actions are actions that are virtuous in respect to some virtue and vicious in respect to no virtue, and *simply vicious* actions are actions that are vicious in respect to some virtue and virtuous in respect to no virtue. Without aretaically mixed actions, the concept of overall virtuousness of action would be superfluous insofar as RIGHT would be eliminable or replaceable by the claim that an action is right just in case it hits the target of a virtue.

## §2.1 Atomism and Holism About Overall Virtuousness

What is it for an action to be overall virtuous? Consider first the following characterization of overall virtuousness:

(ARV): An action is overall virtuous just in case it is virtuous in respect to all relevant virtues.<sup>51</sup>

“Relevant” features in (ARV), since it is implausible that an action that is virtuous in respect to kindness is not overall virtuous just because it is not virtuous in respect to *all* virtues e.g. honesty, politeness, justice, generosity, mercy, environmental friendliness, temperance, proper ambition, etc. But note that the predicate “not virtuous in respect to honesty” is not the same as the predicate “vicious in respect to honesty”. If TARGET is

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<sup>51</sup> ARV = All Relevant Virtues. Daniel C. Russell attributes a version of this claim to Swanton in *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, at 108.

correct, these are distinct predicates, since not hitting the target of a virtue is not the same as missing the target of a virtue. If the abstract target of a virtue does not apply to a situation, then one can neither miss nor hit the target of that virtue in that situation.

I take it that a virtue is relevant to some situation to the extent that it applies to that situation – to the extent that items in its field warrant or demand some mode of responsiveness by the agent in that situation. If so, then no action can be either virtuous or vicious in respect to an irrelevant virtue, since an irrelevant virtue is simply one that does not apply to the situation. Hence, if an action is virtuous or vicious in respect to a virtue  $v$ , then  $v$  is a relevant virtue.

So construed, (ARV), I argue, implies the following two claims:

(ARV1): An action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue always contributes to that action's being overall virtuous.

(ARV2): An action's being vicious in respect to a virtue is always a decisive or infeasible reason against that action's being overall virtuous.

(ARV1) and (ARV2) both affirm a claim that Jonathan Dancy labels atomism (or at least atomism in the domain of overall virtuousness). *Atomism* about reasons is the claim that:

A feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity [not shift from being a reason *for* to being a reason *against* or vice versa], in any other.<sup>52</sup>

The idea is that if e.g. the fact that  $\phi$  benefits someone is a reason for performing  $\phi$ , then any action that benefits someone will have some reason in its favor – the fact that it benefits someone. If so, then it can never be the case that  $\phi$  benefits someone and yet that  $\phi$ 's benefitting someone does not count in favor of performing  $\phi$ . Nor can it be the case that  $\phi$  benefits someone and yet that  $\phi$ 's benefitting someone is a reason against performing  $\phi$ .

Atomism concerning the present subject matter is the view that an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue always contributes to the overall virtuousness of that action and that an action's being vicious in respect to a virtue always counts against the action's being overall virtuous. If so, it can never be the case that an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue

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<sup>52</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

does not contribute to its overall virtuousness. Nor can it be the case that an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue counts against the action's being overall virtuous.

(ARV1) follows from (ARV). Suppose that (ARV1) is false. If so, then it is possible that an action is virtuous in respect to a virtue but that this feature of the action does not contribute to its overall virtuousness. If so, then the action could be overall virtuous without being virtuous in respect to that virtue. But if an action is virtuous in respect to a virtue, then that virtue is relevant in the sense of being applicable to the situation. Hence, contrary to (ARV), an action could be overall virtuous without being virtuous in respect to *all* relevant virtues, since if an action's being *F* does not contribute to the action's being *G*, then the action's being *G* cannot depend on its being *F*. Since the falsity of (ARV1) implies the falsity of (ARV), it follows that (ARV) implies (ARV1).

(ARV2)'s atomism is stronger than (ARV1)'s in that it claims not only that an action's being vicious in respect to a virtue always counts against the action's overall virtuousness but also that an action's being vicious in respect to a virtue is always decisive against the action's overall virtuousness. According to (ARV2), no aretaically mixed action is overall virtuous.

(ARV2) follows from (ARV), since if (ARV2) is false, then an action can be both vicious in respect to a virtue and overall virtuous. But if so, then an action can be overall virtuous without being virtuous in respect to all relevant virtues, since if an action is vicious in respect to a virtue *v*, then *v* is a relevant virtue in the sense of a virtue that applies in the context.

Since (ARV) implies (ARV1) and (ARV2), (ARV) is committed to atomism about overall virtuousness of action. Swanton argues against atomism about overall virtuousness of action and so should be interpreted as denying (ARV), so construed.<sup>53</sup> In the remainder of §2.1, I describe what holism about overall virtuousness involves and present one of Swanton's arguments in its favor.

Dancy defines *holism* about reasons as the following claim:

A feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.<sup>54</sup>

Holism is contrary to atomism. According to holism about reasons, it can be the case that there is a feature *F* such that *F* is a feature of actions *x*, *y*, and *z*, and *x*'s being *F* favors *x*, *y*'s being *F* neither favors nor disfavors *y*, and *z*'s being *F* disfavors *z*. But if atomism is true,

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<sup>53</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 242.

<sup>54</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 7.

this is not possible. According to atomism  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ 's being  $F$  will either favor each of them, disfavor each of them, or neither favor nor disfavor any of them.

According to Dancy's holism, features of action which characteristically favor actions – e.g. an action's benefitting someone – can be “undermined” or “disabled” as favorers by the presence of other features of or facts about the action. If a feature is undermined or disabled as a favorer, then, by definition, that feature does not in any way favor the action – is not in any way a reason for performing that action or for regarding it as e.g. right.<sup>55</sup>

Dancy constructs a sophisticated vocabulary for defending holism. According to this vocabulary, features of an action that are relevant to that action's rightness or choice-worthiness can be either *favorers* (reasons for), *disfavorers* (reasons against) *enablers* (features of an action that enable some other feature to favor an action), *disablers* (features of an action that disable some other feature from favoring an action), *intensifiers* (features of an action that intensify or strengthen the favoring of some other feature), or *attenuators* (features of an action that weaken the favoring of some other feature).

Consider the following reconstruction of an exercise of practical reasoning:

- (1): I promised to do it.
- (2): My promise was not given under duress.
- (3): I am able to do it.
- (4): There is no greater reason not to do it.
- So: I do it.<sup>56</sup>

On Dancy's view, (1) favors the action's rightness, but (2) and (3) do not. If so, then the fact that I am able to perform an action is not, in itself, a reason for performing that action. Rather, what (2) and (3) do is enable (1) to favor or contribute to the action's rightness. If (2) or (3) were false, then, according to Dancy, the action's being a promise-fulfillment would not contribute to the action's rightness because the fact that the action would be a promise-fulfillment would have been disabled or undermined as a reason by the falsity of (2) or (3). On Dancy's view, the vast majority of, if not all, features of actions that are characteristically reasons for performing an action are subject to being disabled as reasons by the presence of other features of the action.

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<sup>55</sup> Dancy distinguishes between atomism and holism about reasons for action and atomism and holism about right-making and wrong-making features of actions. See *ibid.*, 79. However, he and Swanton are holists about both reasons for action and right-making features of action.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



Now if we agree an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue characteristically contributes to that action's overall virtuousness, and we agree with Dancy that even virtue properties of action are subject to being undermined or disabled,<sup>57</sup> then we will have to reject (ARV1), since if a virtue property is disabled as a reason for an action's being overall virtuousness, then it is not the case that virtue properties of action always contribute to the overall virtuousness of an action. This is Swanton's position. According to her, an action's being virtuous in respect to kindness does not always contribute to the action's overall virtuousness and may even count against it. Consider the following argument from example:

We are at a conference where a stranger looks lonely. It turns out that he is a person from overseas with a poor command of English, and cannot participate in the scintillating and sophisticated discussion on moral theory. Our agent Tim performs a kind act, namely, going to talk to the stranger. However, let us look at further features of this situation. Tim is exceptionally keen to participate in the discussion, but leaves in order to talk to the stranger who could have made more effort to amuse himself in other ways and whose hangdog expression is expressive of a rather weak, spoilt approach to life. The conversation with the stranger is difficult, and Tim does not enjoy it. Furthermore, Tim is always doing this kind of thing, sacrificing his interests in the performance of such kind acts. He has resolved to be more self-protective and strong, and encourage others to do their share of burdensome tasks. But he consistently fails to abide by the resolution. In this context, the kindness of the act contributes negatively to the overall virtuousness of the act.<sup>58</sup>

It is interesting to analyze this passage using Dancy's terminology. We assume that talking to the stranger is a kind act (in this context, short for "an act that hits the target of kindness"). Adherents of (ARV1) are committed to saying that the kindness of the act contributes to its overall virtuousness. It is this claim that the rest of the passage is meant to cast doubt on. First, Swanton offers two considerations that attenuate the favoring power of the act's kindness. These are that the stranger is spoilt and does not take effort to amuse himself in some other way. Seemingly implicit then is that the stranger does not deserve the

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<sup>57</sup> Compare *ibid.*, 116 & 124-125.

<sup>58</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 243-244. It is unclear whether Swanton is here arguing that an action's being kind can count against the action's being overall virtuous or for the stronger claim that an action can be virtuous in respect to kindness or hit the target of kindness and yet that its being such can count against the action's overall virtuousness. Her own conclusion suggests the former claim but for it to show something significant about the relation between TARGET and RIGHT, it needs to be the latter claim. Accordingly, I take it as the latter, stronger claim.

kindness. This does not imply that the kindness does not favor the action (the two facts about the stranger are attenuators and not disablers), but it is meant to weaken its favoring. Next we are given features of the action that disfavor it: it is unpleasant, difficult, and it requires Tim to forego an enjoyable discussion of moral theory.

At this point, we have not been given any disablers for the action's kindness, but that is what is needed in order to reach the conclusion that the kindness of the act contributes negatively to (disfavors) the action's overall virtuousness. So we must take it that the intended disabler for the action's kindness is that Tim will be violating his resolution to stop being excessively self-sacrificial in performing the kind act because of the kindness of the act (or whatever makes the action kind). As Rebecca Stangl claims, we are to understand this argument as claiming that "it is precisely insofar as it is kind that it seriously fails to realize the end of some other virtue."<sup>59</sup> Finally, an intensifier for the violation of the resolution's disfavoring of the act is that Tim consistently fails to abide by the resolution.

Whether or not we agree with Swanton's conclusion that, in this context, the kindness of the act contributes negatively to the action's overall virtuousness, it is clear that her conclusion is incompatible with atomism and thereby (ARV). The question thus arises as to how Swanton understands the relation between virtuous qualities and overall virtuousness, given that she rejects (ARV).

## §2.2 Overall Virtuousness and Defaults

A holistic conception of overall virtuousness is compatible with a variety of views about how an action's hitting the target of a virtue relates to that action's overall virtuousness. A view taken seriously by Swanton is suggested by the logic of default reasoning as presented by John Horta.<sup>60</sup> As suggested by this framework, an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue contributes to the overall virtuousness of an action by default, and an action's being vicious in respect to a virtue contributes to the wrongness of that action by default.

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<sup>59</sup> Stangl, "Asymmetrical Virtue Particularism," 42.

<sup>60</sup> Horta, "Reasons as Defaults," *Philosophers' Imprint* 8 (2007): 1-28; Horta, *Reasons as Defaults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Swanton, "A Particularist but Codifiable Virtue Ethics," in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, Vol. 5, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Swanton distinguishes between "weak" and "strong" codifiability and intends the former in the title of this article. Dancy also discusses default reasons in *Ethics Without Principles*, at 111-117.

A default is a defeasible generalization,<sup>61</sup> when a generalization is a general claim - a claim that applies to more than one particular object, action, situation, or context. The following two claims are plausible candidates for relevant defaults:

(K): Actions virtuous in respect to kindness are overall virtuous.

(H): Actions vicious in respect to honesty are not overall virtuous.<sup>62</sup>

(K) and (H) are not to be interpreted as universally quantified claims. “Birds can fly” is a plausible default, although not all birds can fly.<sup>63</sup> To claim that (K) and (H) are defaults is to imply that they are defeasible, and a default is defeasible insofar as it is a generalization that can be outweighed, undermined, or excluded.<sup>64</sup> A default is *outweighed* in the case that the conclusion it supports is not to be drawn for the reason that a contrary conclusion is supported by a stronger default. Suppose that both (K) and (H) apply to  $\phi$ . In that case, there is reason to claim that  $\phi$  is overall virtuous and there is reason to claim that  $\phi$  is not overall virtuous. If so, whether  $\phi$  is or is not overall virtuous depends on whether (K) or (H) is stronger in the context. Plausibly, the relevant kind of defaults will standardly not admit of being ranked according to strength; sometimes (K) will be stronger than (H) and sometimes (H) will be stronger than (K).<sup>65</sup> Considerations of strength can also include considerations of salience. Moreover, it can be indeterminate whether (K) or (H) is stronger in the context. If so, it will be indeterminate or vague whether  $\phi$  is overall virtuous.

A default is *undermined* in the case that, in the vocabulary of Dancy, it is disabled by some other consideration or fact. If Swanton’s argument above is correct, then (K) is undermined in the case of Tim’s missing the target of resoluteness or determination precisely in his hitting the target of kindness. To say that (K) is undermined is to say that, although it applies to an action, it provides no reason at all for regarding that action as overall virtuous.

Finally, a default may be *excluded* in the case that there is reason not to consider it in deliberation or decision-making. A standard example is of a man who, in deciding which school to enroll his child in, promises his wife only to consider what school is in the child’s

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<sup>61</sup> Horty, “Reasons as Defaults,” 3.

<sup>62</sup> K = Kindness; H = Honesty.

<sup>63</sup> Compare *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Horty may think of excluded reasons as a species of undermined reasons. See “Reasons as Defaults,” 10. Swanton has claimed to me in conversation that excluded reasons are not thereby undermined reasons.

<sup>65</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse persuasively argues for an analogous point about the virtue- and vice-rules in *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), at 57. Indeed, it is plausible to view the virtue- and vice-rules as defaults.

best interest.<sup>66</sup> In this case, the man has reason not to consider the defaults about choiceworthy schools which have no bearing on the child's interest e.g. less expensive schools are choiceworthy. (K) will be excluded if one has reason not to consider the kindness of an action in deciding whether the action is overall virtuous or choiceworthy. Perhaps this could be the case if one occupied a certain role such as a military boot camp leader. If so, the military boot camp leader's acceptance of that role would give him reason to discount items in the field of kindness such as the comfort of the privates.

The general picture of overall virtuousness here suggested is the following:

(OVD): An action is overall virtuous just in case an undefeated default implies that the action is overall virtuous.<sup>67</sup>

The defaults to be paired with (OVD) are of the same kind as (K) and (H). (OVD) differs from (ARV) in its allowance for holism, its allowance for salience and vagueness in overall virtuousness itself and not only in hitting the targets of virtue, and in its allowance for overall virtuous but aretaically mixed actions. Since (OVD) allows for the overall virtuousness of aretaically mixed actions, (OVD) also has implications for irresolvable dilemmas.

In the present context, an irresolvable dilemma can be characterized as a choice-situation in which the agent has two actions open to him, but both actions are vicious in respect to some virtue, and there is no reason for choosing one action over the other. According to (ARV), there could be no overall virtuous actions in an irresolvable dilemma, so construed, since no such action would be virtuous in all relevant respects. By contrast, (OVD) allows for overall virtuous actions in irresolvable dilemmas, since although a default such as (H) may apply to the action, the action can be overall virtuous in the case that e.g. (K) applies to it and (K) is undefeated. The reason provided by (K) can be undefeated even if there is no reason to prefer that action over the other. A reason for visiting France can be provided by the good that it would do one to visit Europe. Such a reason is not defeated by the mere fact that it does not give reason to visit France over, say, Spain.

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<sup>66</sup> Horta, "Reasons as Defaults," 14-15.

<sup>67</sup> OVD = Overall Virtuousness Default. Swanton defends a related claim – that "[o]ne ought always, to act for an undefeated reason for action" – in *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, at 281ff.

## SEVEN

### RIGHTNESS AND OVERALL VIRTUOUSNESS

My evaluation of Swanton's version of the target-centered account is mixed. In the next chapter, I identify a significant problem in TARGET as paired with RIGHT, locate its source, and consider what must be done in order to modify the target-centered account in such a way as to avoid this problem while retaining what I argue are important advantages of target-centered accounts over both agent-based and qualified-agent accounts. The present chapter is devoted primarily to RIGHT – the claim that rightness of action is overall virtuousness of action. I accept RIGHT. My main aim in §1 of this chapter is to defend RIGHT from five objections. In §2, I consider the issue of whether holism regarding overall virtuousness and virtue properties of action is justified and whether the plausibility of the interpretation of overall virtuousness in terms of defaults depends on the plausibility of holism.

#### §1. Defending RIGHT

RIGHT is an attractive claim. In treating rightness as an overall or all-things-considered concept, it captures the truth that good reasoning about whether and why an action is right includes identifying the features, if any, which count in favor of that action, and the features, if any, that count against it. Interpreted via defaults, it also recognizes important ways in which virtue properties of action can interact with respect both to one another and to rightness. Moreover, the idea that an action is made right by its being virtuous in respect to e.g. justice, kindness, or honesty and that an action is made wrong by its being e.g. unjust, unkind, or dishonest is intuitive. Finally, RIGHT accommodates what I argue is the plausible claim that an action can be virtuous in respect to e.g. kindness and still fail to be right and what I argue is the plausible claim that virtue and vice properties can be compresent in the same action. In §1, I thus take it that RIGHT is initially plausible and I defend it by replying to the following objections:

- (1): Overall virtuousness admits of degrees and is vague, but rightness neither admits of degrees nor is vague.

(2): Not all permissible actions are overall virtuous, since some permissible actions are not virtuous in respect to any virtue.

(3): Given that some virtues are not moral virtues, some features that contribute to overall virtuousness are not relevant to moral rightness.

(4): RIGHT implies the dubious claim that an action can be virtuous in respect to a virtue and yet not be right.

(5) RIGHT is circular if it is paired with any plausible view concerning what makes an action virtuous or virtuous in respect to a virtue.

### §1.1 Rightness, Degrees, and Vagueness

Objection (1) can be elucidated by considering the following passage from Liezl van Zyl:

One difficulty that virtue ethicists face when trying to present an account of right action is that “right” and “wrong” are commonly thought of as binary concepts: an action is either right or wrong; there are no degrees of rightness. By contrast, “virtue” and “virtuous action” are threshold (or “satis”) concepts: one can be virtuous without being perfectly virtuous. There are degrees of virtue, and to count as virtuous one’s responsiveness to the demands of the world need only be “good enough.”<sup>1</sup> Virtue terms are also vague concepts in so far as they lack sharp boundaries, with the result that there will be borderline cases where it remains unclear whether the virtue term applies. The important differences between these two sets of moral vocabulary make it difficult to see how an account of rightness can be given in terms of the language of virtue.<sup>2</sup>

It is plausible that rightness and wrongness are binary concepts in the relevant sense. “ $\phi$  is (not) permissible”, “ $\phi$  is (not) in accordance with duty”, “ $\phi$  should (not) be done”, “ $\phi$  is

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<sup>1</sup> Van Zyl here cites Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press), 24ff.

<sup>2</sup> Van Zyl, “Right Action and the Targets of Virtue,” in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft (Durham: Acumen, 2014), 118-129, at 124.

(in)appropriate”, and arguably “ $\phi$  (does not) merit(s) a tick of approval” all contain predicates that do not admit of degrees. It is true that one action can merit more approval than another action, but it does not follow that the former action is more fitting as an object of approval than the latter, if this claim is taken to mean anything other than that the former action merits more approval than the latter action.

Does overall virtuousness admit of degrees? If an action’s being overall virtuous consists in its being an adequate or correct *qua* successful enough response to items in the fields of the virtues, then, strictly speaking, an action’s being overall virtuous does not admit of degrees. Although responses can be more or less successful, they cannot be more or less *successful enough*.<sup>3</sup> Meeting the threshold of relevant successfulness is itself a property that does not admit of degrees, notwithstanding the fact that success admits of degrees. Hence, if an action’s being overall virtuous consists in its being a successful enough response to items in the fields of the virtues, then RIGHT generates a conception of right action that does not admit of degrees. Therefore, the plausible claim that rightness of action does not admit of degrees provides no reason to reject RIGHT.

It would, though, be pedantic to never accept talk of an action’s being more or less overall virtuous than another action. (Though it is not pedantic when this detail is important, as it is in considering objection (1)). To claim that one action is more overall virtuous than another action can be interpreted not as the claim that the former is “more successful enough” than the latter but rather as the claim that the former and latter are both successful enough responses to items in the fields of the virtues but that the former is more successful than the latter. In this way, the claim that one action is more overall virtuous than another can be a way of claiming that while both actions are right, the former is a better choice than the latter.

What of the vagueness present in overall virtuousness? If overall virtuousness is vague, and RIGHT is true, then rightness is vague. If rightness is vague, then it is possible that an action’s rightness-status is ontologically (as opposed to epistemically) indeterminate. I accept Swanton’s claim that overall virtuousness is vague in that there are borderline cases of overall virtuous action which result from the vagueness present in the notion of a response’s

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<sup>3</sup> There is an analogy here with satisficing act-consequentialism– the claim that an action is right just in case it has good enough consequences. Although one action can have more satisfactory and better consequences than another action, satisficing act-consequentialism does not imply that the former action is more right than the latter, since having good enough consequences does not admit of degrees although the goodness of an act’s consequences admits of degrees.

being good, adequate or successful enough to items in the fields of virtues.<sup>4</sup> The question, then, is whether there are also borderline cases of right action.

It is plausible that there are borderline cases of right action. Consider the Good Samaritan scenario.<sup>5</sup> A robbed, beaten, half-dead man is lying on the side of the road. A priest walks by the man and offers no help at all, while the Good Samaritan, acting from compassion, does the equivalent of taking the half-dead man to a hospital and paying in full for his treatment. Plausibly, the priest's conduct is wrong and the Good Samaritan's conduct is right. But there are responses to the half-dead man intermediate between the callous action of the priest and the kind and generous action of the Good Samaritan. We imagine the Good Samaritan as offering more help than is required and the priest as offering less help than is required. But just how much help is required, and just how competent that help must be, is vague. Borderline cases of such helping actions are naturally thought of as indeterminate in rightness-status: sort-of-right and sort-of-not-right.

Is there any reason for denying the appearances by claiming that rightness does not admit of borderline cases? Van Zyl observes that some might find accounts of right action which admit of indeterminacy "dissatisfying...for they assume that the very purpose of an account of rightness is to settle, once and for all, "for-and-against" disputes."<sup>6</sup> This is certainly the picture of accounts of right action that is presupposed in many accounts of the relation between applied ethics and normative ethics. Yet there is no reason to suppose that a conception of rightness which allows indeterminacy will be of less help in settling such disputes than conceptions of rightness which do not allow indeterminacy, since one way to settle such disputes is to argue persuasively that the rightness of a particular action is indeterminate. It is to beg the question to say that an adequate settling of a dispute in applied ethics must end in some agreement that an action is determinately right or wrong. Indeed, in considering actions in response to moral dilemmas such as Judith Jarvis Thomson's case of the woman who lets a dying violinist die by unhooking him from her body,<sup>7</sup> an interesting possibility that is almost never considered is that the woman's action is or could be in certain circumstances a borderline case of rightness. Why should this be a dissatisfying possibility?

Perhaps the thought is that such positions on issues in applied ethics are not satisfying in that they somehow take away from the objectivity of the issue or that they fail to adequately

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<sup>4</sup> See §1.4 of the previous chapter for my discussion of vagueness in the targets of virtue.

<sup>5</sup> *The Gospel According to Luke*, 10:30-37.

<sup>6</sup> Van Zyl, "Right Action and the Targets of Virtue," 124.

<sup>7</sup> Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47-66.



resolve disagreement. But since the relevant kind of indeterminacy is ontological, to say that an action's rightness-status is indeterminate is to make an objective claim, just as the claim that it is indeterminate whether it is now dusk or evening is an objective claim. Moreover, just as the settling of disputes over claims involving indeterminate properties such as baldness can be thwarted by failure to recognize that such properties admit of indeterminacy, the settling of disputes over rightness, if it admits of indeterminacy, can likewise be thwarted by failing to recognize that it admits of indeterminacy.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the claim that rightness admits of indeterminacy does not have unattractive implications regarding objectivity or the settlement of disagreement. Of course, on a conception of rightness that admits of indeterminacy, it might be that a dispute as to whether an action is right, wrong, or indeterminate is not resolvable to the satisfaction of all parties. But this possibility attaches to all conceptions of rightness, whether they admit of indeterminacy or not. There is, then, no apparent reason to deny the claim, naturally supported by reflecting on the variety of possible actions in the Good Samaritan scenario, that rightness admits of indeterminacy.

## §1.2 Rightness and the Breadth of Virtue

Objection (2) claims that not all permissible actions are overall virtuous, since not all permissible actions are virtuous in respect to a virtue. The thought behind (2) is that some permissible actions are ethically neutral, but no action that is virtuous in respect to a virtue is ethically neutral. Consider drinking a cup of coffee or going to sleep. Such actions are typically permissible, but, the argument claims, they are not typically virtuous in respect to any virtue. Advocates of RIGHT, I suggest, can adequately respond to this objection by pointing out that when such actions are permissible, they are virtuous in respect to a virtue.

In order to know whether an action correctly described as drinking a cup of coffee is permissible, more needs to be known about what is being done in drinking the cup of coffee. What is typically being done in drinking a cup of coffee is that the agent is doing something enjoyable and/or doing something that helps her to be more alert, focused, and productive. As such, the virtues of prudence, temperance, and proper ambition have bearing on typical cases of drinking cups of coffee. Insofar as drinking cups of coffee also relates straightforwardly to issues concerning property rights, fair trade, and the consumption of

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<sup>8</sup> For important defense of the claim that not all disputes over the application of vague predicates are pointless, see Swanton, "Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement," *Philosophical Topics* 38 (2010): 157-180, at 161ff.

paper goods, the virtues of justice and environmental friendliness also have bearing on such actions. A typical, permissible act of drinking a cup of coffee, then, is plausibly seen as an action that is virtuous in respect to virtues such as prudence, proper ambition, and environmental friendliness or at least as an act properly related to a practice that is virtuous in respect to such virtues, as when one's general practice of avoiding unnecessarily using paper goods is virtuous in respect to environmental friendliness and one's action of drinking a cup of coffee in one's thermos is an instance of participating in that practice.<sup>9</sup>

Consideration of this example illustrates that it is not difficult to find virtues that have bearing on what might have been thought of as aretaically neutral acts such as drinking cups of coffee. It is plausible that no act-token will be such that no virtue has bearing on it, since the fields of the virtues have great breadth – extending across all practical domains of human life. Yet it is this breadth that gives rise to the next objection.

Objection (3) complains that RIGHT allows non-morally-relevant features of an action to contribute to the rightness of that action. That an action is virtuous in respect to prudence, for example, contributes to its being overall virtuous, but, the argument maintains, such facts about the action do not contribute to the action's being *morally* right. There are at least three ways for an advocate of RIGHT to address this objection. The first is to claim that there is no interesting difference between morally right and non-morally right action, moral and non-moral virtue, and moral and non-moral reasons for action. The second is to claim that there are such interesting differences, but that just as “right” is commonly elliptical for “morally right”, “overall virtuous” in RIGHT is to be understood as “overall morally virtuous”. On this view, prudence, a non-moral (because non-other-regarding) virtue, should be excluded from consideration in evaluating an action's overall moral virtuousness. The third – my favored response – is to claim that “moral” in “moral rightness” should be interpreted broadly so as to be sensitive to all sorts of practical reasons, including those of prudence. If so, the objection is incorrect to claim that an action's hitting the target of prudence is non-morally-relevant. This is indeed a large and complex topic and I do not aim at a full treatment of the issue, but I do make what I regard as two strong points in favor of the position that rightness should be seen as sensitive to prudential considerations.

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<sup>9</sup> A target-centered account of right action need not be committed to the position that a discrete action of an individual is always the most appropriate locus of hitting the target of virtue in action. It is plausible that e.g. collective actions can hit targets of virtue in a way irreducible to their individual, component actions. A target-centered theorist does well to consider the virtuousness of e.g. eating a vegan dinner in relation to both the agent's extended practice of veganism and in relation to the worldwide vegan movement, when the latter involves collective action.

Firstly, important moral emotions such as pride and shame are just as responsive to our self-regarding successes and failures as they are to our other-regarding successes and failures. It is fitting to respond with pride both to one's helping a neighbor get back on his feet and to one's triumph over sloth and gluttony. It is fitting to respond with shame both to one's betrayal of a friend and to one's failure to quit smoking. These facts indicate that self-regarding successes and failures are morally significant.

It may be objected that some moral emotions are sensitive to other-regarding successes and failures but not self-regarding successes and failures. It is, for instance, fitting to be angry at someone for neglecting their child, but it is not appropriate to be angry at them for being slothful unless their sloth negatively impacts others. Although it might be doubted that one cannot be appropriately angry at another unless they in some way fail in their attitudes or acts in regard to others, it is, I think, plausible that anger towards others is at least typically more sensitive to other-regarding failures than self-regarding failures. In this sense, anger, when directed toward others, plausibly admits of a kind of asymmetry in regard to the object of anger's self-regarding and other-regarding failures.

My reply to this objection is that this feature of anger toward others results not from the content of that emotion but rather from standards of appropriateness for having that emotion *at someone else*. That the self-other asymmetry does not result from the content of anger is evidenced by the fact that anger towards oneself is not relevantly asymmetrical. It is fitting both to be angry at oneself for neglecting one's child and to be angry at oneself for smoking cigarettes again last night. The source of the self-other asymmetry in anger towards others thus likely results from something about the fact that the anger is directed at someone else. There are, after all, cases in which it would be appropriate to be angry at oneself for doing something and yet inappropriate to be angry at someone else for doing the same thing. It is appropriate for me to be angry at myself for smoking cigarettes last night but not toward just anyone else. Moreover, it is appropriate for me to feel anger at someone else for smoking cigarettes only if e.g. they promised me they would quit, they made my house smell bad, or they are my child. Otherwise, it is simply not my place to be angry; it is none of my business whether they smoked cigarettes last night. Hence, the claim that someone's smoking cigarettes last night is wrong *qua* imprudent is not challenged by the claim that anger towards them is inappropriate by us, since that anger may be inappropriate in that their performing that wrong action is not our business, since e.g. they may not be wronging us.

Secondly, it is a truism that we ought not perform any morally wrong actions. But if no self-regarding considerations are permitted to figure into an action's moral wrongness, then it

will turn out that there are morally wrong actions that we may or ought to do or that would be appropriate to do or that would warrant a tick of approval. The point is that narrowly morally wrong actions can be all-things-considered right.

Consider, for example, a case in which A's friend, B, needs help moving into his new apartment and has asked A for help. It is plausible that if A has no good reason not to help B, then A's not helping B will be wrong – a failure in friendship. But if the virtue of prudence is irrelevant to the moral rightness or wrongness of A's action, then considerations having to do with A's well-being cannot provide reasons for A's not helping B which bear on the moral rightness or wrongness of A's not helping. If so, then it will be morally wrong of A not to help B, if the only good reasons A has for not helping B are prudential reasons. Nonetheless, if A has strong prudential reasons not to help B – e.g. due to an injury, A will be risking his health in helping B – then he ought not help B. Hence, A ought not  $\phi$  even though A's not  $\phi$ -ing is morally wrong, if considerations of prudence have no bearing on moral rightness or wrongness. To avoid this violation of the truism that A ought not do (or omit) anything that it is morally wrong for him to do (or omit), it is sensible to reject the claim that considerations of prudence have no bearing on moral rightness or wrongness. Either moral rightness and wrongness are sensitive to items in the field of prudence or some right actions will be morally wrong. Since, as the truism suggests, no right actions are morally wrong, it follows that moral rightness and wrongness are sensitive to items in the field of prudence.

Interpreting “overall virtuousness” in RIGHT as sensitive to all the virtues and not only those virtues that have the well-being and rights of others in their fields thus avoids the implication that some morally wrong actions are all-things-considered right. Moreover, I have argued that such an interpretation fits better with the content of our moral emotions. These considerations suggest that objection (3) is unpersuasive, since they indicate that it is not the case that an action's being virtuous in respect to e.g. prudence is irrelevant to its moral rightness.

### §1.3 Virtuous in Respect to a Virtue and Not Right?

Objection (4) claims that RIGHT is implausible insofar as it implies what the objection regards as the dubious claim that an action can be virtuous in respect to a virtue and yet not right. I have argued that RIGHT should be taken to imply this latter claim, since if an action cannot be virtuous in respect to a virtue and yet not right, the concept of *overall* virtuousness

will be superfluous and eliminable in an account of right action.<sup>10</sup> Hence, my reply to objection (4) will be a defense of the claim that not all actions virtuous in respect to a virtue are right. For an objection to the latter claim, consider first the following case from Roger Crisp:

You are invigilating a test in a school classroom. You notice that one of the pupils taking the test is cheating, through consulting a crib sheet. She is clearly behaving dishonestly and unfairly, taking advantage of the other pupils' honesty. As an invigilator, it may be said, your duty is to confront her. But you know that this particular student is usually quite conscientious, and that her parents are in the process of breaking up. It is more than likely that this is what lies behind her having failed to prepare properly for the test. Surely, it may [be] asked, in this case it would be unkind to follow the requirements of justice? So here we appear to have a case of conflict between kindness and justice.<sup>11</sup>

Crisp considers the claim that if the invigilator does not confront the student, the invigilator's response will be virtuous in respect to kindness but vicious in respect to justice. If so, such an act will be aretaically mixed – virtuous in a way and vicious in a way. But it could also be a right action, as Crisp suggests. If so, it is plausible that an action vicious in respect to justice can be right, and an action virtuous in respect to justice can be wrong. Yet Crisp denies that this is correct. He claims:

If the right thing to do in this case is to keep quiet, then it would be wrong to speak out. Indeed speaking out, because it would be going wrong within the sphere governed by justice, would be a kind of injustice.<sup>12</sup>

The implicit assumption here is that if an action is wrong within the sphere of justice, then that action is vicious in respect to justice. In general, Crisp maintains the following view about the relation between rightness and virtuousness of action:

An action's being virtuous just is its being right (that is, obligatory), and an action's having some more particular virtue-property just is its being right in the sphere of that

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<sup>10</sup> See §2 of the previous chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Crisp, "Particularizing Particularism," in *Moral Particularism*, eds. Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (New York: Clarendon Press, 2003), 23-47, at 45.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

virtue—its being the right response to fear, in the case of courage, or the correct financial response to the circumstances one is in, in the case of generosity.<sup>13</sup>

This claim can be taken in two different ways. A weaker interpretation is that e.g. if an action is wrong or incorrect or unsuccessful in regard to items in the field of justice, then that action is vicious in respect to justice. A stronger interpretation is that e.g. if an action is both wrong and some items in the field of justice relate to that action, then that action is vicious in respect to justice. The stronger interpretation differs from the weaker in that it implies that an action's being wrong in any way – not only in respect to the items in the field of justice – is sufficient for its being vicious in respect to justice, as long as considerations of justice apply to that action.

Crisp's language in the last passage cited above suggests the weaker interpretation, but his evaluation of the case of the invigilator suggests the stronger interpretation, since if the invigilator's speaking out is wrong *qua* failure to respond adequately to items in the sphere of kindness, it will follow that the action is "a kind of injustice" only if either the action's being wrong in any way makes it vicious in respect to justice or the action also fails to respond adequately to items in the sphere of justice. But Crisp does not in any way argue that the action fails to respond adequately to items in the sphere of justice except by the claim that it fails to respond adequately to items in the sphere of kindness. Hence, it is not implausible that Crisp subscribes to the stronger interpretation. Yet it is not necessary for me to attribute this claim to Crisp. I discuss Crisp's work here because it allows for a formulation of an objection against RIGHT. But since it is unclear to me which view Crisp maintains, I now separate the claim I am interested in from the claim, whatever it is, that Crisp asserts.

The claim I am interested in (i.e. the stronger interpretation above) is the following:

(RPV):  $\phi$  is virtuous in respect to a virtue  $v$  just in case  $\phi$  is a right action and  $\phi$  is in the sphere of  $v$ .<sup>14</sup>

(RPV) implies that no actions virtuous in respect to a virtue are non-right. (RPV) also implies that there are no aretaically mixed actions, since all aretaically mixed actions must be in the sphere of at least two virtues, and (RPV) would thus imply that, because right, the action is virtuous in respect to both virtues or else, because wrong, the action is vicious in

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<sup>13</sup> Crisp, "A Third Method of Ethics?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2012): 1-17, at 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> RPV = Right Prior Virtuous. The appropriateness of this label will become evident shortly.

respect to both virtues (assuming the advocate of (RPV) would make a similar claim about vice predicates and wrongness). Hence, if (RPV) is true, then RIGHT, in its reliance on the notion of *overall* virtuousness is at best superfluous in a plausible account of right action. (I am interested in (RPV) and not the weaker interpretation above, because the latter claim does not speak against either the existence of aretaically mixed action or the existence of non-right actions that are virtuous in respect to a virtue and is therefore unsuitable for grounding objection (4) to RIGHT.)

Is (RPV) plausible? First note that (RPV) is inconsistent with any virtue-ethical account of right action. Rebecca Stangl, responding to a claim similar to (RPV), correctly points out that such a claim “gets the order of explanation wrong...At least according to virtue ethics...the rightness or wrongness of actions is to be explained, in some way, by appeal to the virtues.”<sup>15</sup> Even if we expand the definition of virtue-ethical accounts of right action to include analyses of rightness that appeal to virtue notions and not necessarily virtues, Stangl’s point stands: (RPV) takes rightness to be prior to virtuousness in the sense that what it is for an action to be right is treated as an *analysans* in the analysis of what it is for an action to be virtuous or virtuous in some way. (Of course, the fact that some claim is contrary to virtue ethics is no reason, by itself, to reject that claim.)

Against claims such as (RPV), Stangl convincingly argues that it is simply false to claim that e.g. no courageous actions are wrong: criminals and terrorists can indeed perform courageous acts that are at the same time criminal or terrorist acts. Stangl aptly observes that the reason people are inclined to say otherwise is that they suppose that “in calling an action virtuous in some respect, we are suggesting that there was at least some justification for it.”<sup>16</sup> To this, Stangl responds that if holism about virtue predicates is true, then an action can be courageous and yet that its courageousness does not contribute to that action’s overall virtuousness. Hence, for a holist, to claim that an act is courageous is not to imply that the act has any right-making features.

But even for a non-holist, it is highly implausible to suggest that no courageous actions are wrong. To claim that no courageous acts are wrong, it is necessary not only to claim that there is at least some justification for all courageous acts, but to claim that there is sufficient justification for all courageous acts. It is entirely reasonable to respond to such a claim with an incredulous stare. It is as if one were to claim that all delicious foods must be good for eating, and hence that a meal laced with an untastable poison cannot be delicious. Just as we

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<sup>15</sup> Stangl, “Asymmetrical Virtue Particularism,” *Ethics* 121 (2010): 37-57, at 52.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

should doubt that the person who makes the latter claim is competent in using the term “delicious”, we should doubt that the person who makes the former claim is competent in using the term “courageous”.

Moreover, one could challenge (RPV) in a different direction by considering that some right actions that are within the sphere of honesty are not honest actions. As Christine Swanton points out, if an “act is a lie it cannot be called honest.”<sup>17</sup> To say otherwise is to fail to recognize that honesty is a thick concept – a concept that has substantive descriptive boundaries on its correct application. But since telling a lie can be right, and such an action can be within the sphere of honesty, it follows that some non-honest actions are within the sphere of honesty and are also right actions.

Are these considerations sufficient for rejecting (RPV)? What has been pointed out is that some courageous actions are not right and that some right actions are not honest actions although they are in the sphere of honesty. Yet, strictly speaking, these claims are not contrary to (RPV), since (RPV), like TARGET, is a thesis about actions virtuous in respect to a virtue. It is more difficult to present counter-examples to such claims, since they are best taken as refinements of ordinary language terms and as such are not intended to perfectly track the usage of such terms. Nonetheless, there is a limit to how much a concept can be legitimately refined. At some point, a refinement of a concept becomes an entirely different concept. If “being virtuous in respect to courage” is treated as a *purely* technical phrase, then the concept of courageous action will not even be employed in a claim that  $\phi$  is virtuous in respect to courage. It seems to me that this is true of (RPV) – it could be acceptable only if taken as a purely technical claim.

But be it a purely technical claim or a partially technical claim, given that (RPV) involves at least a refinement of ordinary language virtue predicates, the acceptability conditions of (RPV) depends on its role in a theory. For instance, TARGET can be judged as acceptable or not depending on whether it refines ordinary language virtue terms in such a way as to adequately capture the features of action that characteristically contribute to the rightness of action (and whether or not its refinement of ordinary language is excessive). This is because TARGET is presented as a claim in an account of right action and once we understand its purpose in that account, we can judge whether it is successful or not in fulfilling that purpose. The difficulty of evaluating (RPV) is that it is a technical claim that appears outside of any theoretical context, and so we have no other way to evaluate it except based on how it maps

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<sup>17</sup> Swanton, “Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement,” 167.



onto ordinary language. But since it is a technical claim, such evaluations do not decisively refute it, and so we are apparently at a loss. Of course, we could just reject (RPV) for the simple reason that it is a technical claim that is unmotivated. This is indeed a good reason to reject (RPV), but I want to further consider what I take to be an important challenge to the attempt to account for rightness in terms of overall virtuousness which (RPV) presents – a circularity challenge.

#### §1.4 Virtuousness, Rightness, and Circularity

Consider the following passage from Roger Crisp:

[A]ny action is virtuous to the extent that it is the performing of an action, within the sphere of a virtue, at the right time, in relation to the right things, and so on...This has the result that one cannot plausibly explain an action's being right by reference to its being virtuous, or indeed its being charitable, benevolent, courageous, or whatever. For these properties are non-ultimate and derivative.<sup>18</sup>

I read Crisp here as suggesting that if every plausible standard of virtuousness of action presupposes a standard of right action, then virtuousness of action cannot account for rightness of action. I accept this claim, since if every plausible standard of virtuousness of action presupposes a standard of right action, then it would be circular to account for rightness of action in terms of virtuousness of action. But Crisp also accepts (RPV) or something like it as the only plausible standard of virtuous action and so concludes that virtuousness of action, in fact, does presuppose a standard of right action. If this is correct, then virtuousness of action cannot account for rightness of action, because any attempt to do so will be circular.

The challenge for the virtue ethicist, then, is to show that virtuousness of action does not presuppose a standard of rightness. It is important that Crisp appeals to the Aristotelian mean in order to establish the claim that virtuousness of action presupposes a standard of right action. Given this, one could argue that a plausible standard of virtuousness of action need not employ the Aristotelian mean. This is a legitimate strategy but I take the more ambitious path of arguing that appropriating the Aristotelian mean into one's account of what it is for an action to be virtuous in respect to a virtue (and, by extension, overall virtuous) need not

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<sup>18</sup> Crisp, "A Third Method of Ethics?," 10.

presuppose a standard of right action, and that Swanton's appropriation of the Aristotelian mean in particular does not presuppose a standard of right action.

Swanton does, of course, use the term "right" in the formal account of what it is to hit the target of a virtue: she views (fully) hitting the target of a virtue  $v$  as acting (in respect to  $v$ ) at the right time, in relation to the right objects or people, deploying the right instruments, etc. Does this imply that what it is to hit the target of a virtue is partially explained by Swanton in terms of right action?

It is requisite to first ask what it would take for some criterion of virtue properties of action to presuppose a standard of right action. If such a criterion presupposes a standard of right action, it is only because that criterion cannot be applied without implicit or explicit appeal to a standard of right action. In this sense, (RPV) presupposes a standard of rightness, because if (RPV) is true, then  $\phi$  is virtuous in respect to a virtue only if  $\phi$  is right, when its being virtuous is partially constituted by its being right. Hence, if it is unknown whether  $\phi$  is right, then (RPV) is inapplicable to  $\phi$ .

Unlike (RPV), TARGET is applicable to actions even if it is unknown whether they are right. If TARGET and RIGHT are true, then it is possible that  $\phi$  is virtuous in respect to a virtue while  $\phi$  is right and it is possible that  $\phi$  is virtuous in respect to a virtue while  $\phi$  is not right. Hence, on the target-centered account, an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue is logically independent of – neither necessary nor sufficient for – its being right. But if an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue is logically independent of its being right, then the criterion for an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue cannot presuppose a standard of right action.

Applying the same sorts of considerations specifically to the Aristotelian mean, the idea is that an action's being e.g. directed at the right objects does not presuppose a standard of right action, since an action's being directed at the right objects is logically independent of its being a right action. Consider, for example, an instantiation of a mode of moral responsiveness internal to the profile of generosity – giving. One may give to the right people (i.e. those in need) even though one's action is not right. This could be the case if what one gives to the right people is not what they need or if one gives too much or too little of what they need. In general, since one may consider whether an action is successful enough in regard to each dimension of the mean independently of whether that action is right, it follows that an application of the Aristotelian mean does not presuppose a standard of right action. The criteria of success in regard to these dimensions, as I argued in §1.3 of the last chapter, can be provided by the profiles of the virtues, the rationales of the modes of moral

responsiveness, and associated modes of moral responsiveness, rather than a standard of right action. These considerations are sufficient to show that a Crisp-inspired circularity objection is unpersuasive. The standards for judging success in regard to the dimensions of the mean do not presuppose a standard of right action, since an action's success in regard to dimensions of the mean does not depend on the rightness of that action, much less is its success in regard to dimensions of the mean partly or wholly constituted by rightness of action.

Ramon Das provides a different kind of argument for the conclusion that the target-centered account is circular. He claims that, although the target-centered account purports to explain what right action is, it nonetheless “relies upon an unexplained concept of right action.”<sup>19</sup> Das makes his case by first offering an interpretation of Swanton's view. He claims that, on Swanton's view, an action is right just in case “it hits the target of the contextually appropriate virtue(s) in the best way possible.”<sup>20</sup> To this account, Das' “main question” is “what determines which target(s) of which virtue(s) is/are contextually appropriate?”<sup>21</sup> Das' own answer to this question, after rejecting alternatives, is that Swanton's “supposition that hitting the target(s) of certain virtues is appropriate in some contexts but not others appears to depend on an unexplained concept of rightness.”<sup>22</sup> The idea is that which targets of virtue are contextually appropriate is determined by which targets of virtue a right action would hit in the context. If so, then what it is to hit the contextually appropriate targets of virtue presupposes a standard of right action, and so the target-centered account is circular.

It is not initially clear what Das has in mind by “contextually appropriate” targets of virtue. This is important because, as I argue, it involves a misreading of Swanton. After introducing the aforementioned main question, Das hints at what he means by “contextually appropriate” targets by noting the following:

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<sup>19</sup> Das, “Virtue Ethics and Right Action,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 324-339, at 335.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 335. The qualification “in the best way possible” is justified as a reading of Swanton's earlier presentation of the target-centered account. See e.g. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 239-240. However, I read Swanton's recent work as claiming that an act can hit the target of a virtue even if it is not a best response to items in the field of that virtue. My discussion of salience and vagueness in §1.4 of the previous chapter is particularly relevant here.

<sup>21</sup> Das, “Virtue Ethics and Right Action,” 335.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

Although [Swanton] does say a number of times that the target of a virtue depends on the context, she says very little about *which* aspects of the context it depends on—about which aspects determine its appropriateness.<sup>23</sup>

This passage indicates that Das infers that some targets of virtue are appropriate to hit in a context and some are not from Swanton's claim that the targets of virtue are sensitive to context. I argued for a different interpretation of the ways in which targets of virtue are sensitive to context, on Swanton's view, in §1.4 of the last chapter. The targets of virtue are sensitive to context in that what is required to hit the target of a virtue is sensitive to context. The concrete or specified target of justice in one situation is not the same as in all others, and which dimensions of the target are salient depends on context.

But none of this implies that it is sometimes inappropriate to hit the target of a virtue. Indeed, the only way of reading this latter claim which latches on to anything in Swanton's view is to take it as referring to her holistic claim that e.g. an action's hitting the target of kindness is not always right-making. But even this reading would require an illegitimate inference, since although Swanton argues that the kindness of an action can be wrong-making, it does not follow from this that the kindness of all possible acts by the agent in the situation would be wrong-making. Typically, one can hit the target of a virtue in a variety of ways in a given situation. Consider again Swanton's example of an action that has kindness as a wrong-making feature: Tim's excusing himself from the group to talk to the lonely stranger. Even if Swanton is correct about this example, if Tim performed a different kind action in the situation – inviting the lonely stranger to join the group – then it may be that the kindness of that action is not wrong-making (and it plausibly would not be, given the details of Swanton's evaluation). If so, it is not true that hitting the target of kindness is inappropriate in that context.

Further, if Das' main question is modified so as to be concerned with what standard determines when hitting the target of a virtue is wrong-making, then the answer is provided by Rebecca Stangl (as I discuss below): e.g. an action's being kind is wrong-making when the target of some virtue is seriously missed precisely because the action is kind.<sup>24</sup> The latter standard does not presuppose a standard of right action, since an action can miss the target of a virtue and be right and an action can miss the target of a virtue and be wrong: the two sorts of facts are logically independent on the target-centered account. Hence, Das' objection

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>24</sup> Stangl, "Asymmetrical Virtue Particularism," 42.

misfires, since it is either directed at a misinterpretation of Swanton's view or it is directed at Swanton's view but is answerable.

## §2 Holism and Overall Virtuousness

In §1, I defended RIGHT independently of whether overall virtuousness is conceived of holistically or atomistically. In §2, I reconstruct Dancy's argument for holism from the favorer/enabler distinction, and I claim that it is persuasive. However, I argue that holism of the kind supported by this argument does not imply that virtue properties of action can be non-right-making. Further, I argue that arguments by example for this latter claim are unpersuasive. Nonetheless, I argue that overall virtuousness interpreted via defaults is unchallenged even if right-makers provided by such defaults cannot be defeated *qua* undermined.

Dancy argues for holism about reasons on the basis of the distinction between favorers and enablers. A *favorer* is a fact or feature of an action that makes something of a case for performing that action or for regarding it as right or choiceworthy or whatever. An *enabler* is a fact or feature of an action that enables or allows some feature of an action to favor that action; by definition, if an enabler or enabling condition were to not obtain, then the feature that it enables would not favor the action's rightness.<sup>25</sup> To say that a fact or feature has an enabler is to say that there are certain conditions that must be satisfied if that feature is to favor or disfavor anything. What follows is my reconstruction of Dancy's argument for holism:<sup>26</sup>

(P1): There is a feature of actions which favors at least some of those actions and which has enabling conditions.

(P2): If such a feature has enabling conditions, then it may be disabled or undermined.

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<sup>25</sup> Or rather, this is the only kind of enabler that is of interest to my discussion. Dancy acknowledges the existence of some enablers that do not enable some fact to favor an action but rather that enables the feature not to be outweighed. "There are no stronger reasons not to do the action" would be an example of this latter kind of enabler. Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40.

<sup>26</sup> This argument is an interpretation of how Dancy moves from the favouring/enabling distinction to holism in *Ethics Without Principles*, Chapters 3 and 5. It is unclear to me whether Dancy would accept this argument, but I attribute it to him because it is a persuasive argument and it makes sense of why he makes the favouring/enabling distinction central to his defense of holism.

(P3): If such a feature is disabled or undermined, then its presence in an action does not favor that action.

(C): There is a feature of actions which favors at least some of those actions, and this feature's presence in an action may not favor the latter action.

(P1) is established by example. That an action would fulfill a promise characteristically favors that action. But if a promise is made under duress, then an action's fulfilling that promise does not favor performing that action. A promise made under duress characteristically provides no reason at all for doing what one promised.<sup>27</sup> Hence, a promise's not being made under duress is an enabling condition for an action's being a fulfillment of that promise to favor that action. Thus, there are favorers that have enabling conditions and so (P1) is true.

(P2) and (P3) are both analytically true, and (C) follows from (P1)-(P3). So if one accepts that at least some favorers have enabling conditions, then one is compelled to accept (C). A standard way to resist such an argument is to deny (P1) by claiming that in the promising under duress case, nothing has been shown about the reasons that promises provide. When a promise provides a reason for action, the reason for performing that action is more complex than the fact that it would fulfill a promise. Rather, the reason is something like the fact that the action would fulfill a legitimate promise when what one has promised is not unethical or unreasonable. No promises made under duress are legitimate promises, and so the reasons for action that promises provide do not apply to such cases. If they do not apply to an action, they cannot be undermined or disabled as favorers for that action.

In general, opponents of holism see the content of reasons for action as including both favorers and enablers, as the latter concepts are construed by Dancy. (Although since anti-holists take reasons to be favorers, they may object to viewing what they take to be reasons as wholes composed of both favorers and enablers.) According to the most plausible anti-holist views, the fact that I would enjoy  $\phi$ -ing is never a reason for me to  $\phi$  or "I would enjoy  $\phi$ -ing" does not specify the whole reason. Rather it is the fact I would enjoy  $\phi$ -ing and my enjoyment of  $\phi$ -ing would not be vicious in any way e.g. sadistic which provides a reason for

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<sup>27</sup> Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 39.

me to  $\phi$ .<sup>28</sup> If the content of reasons includes what Dancy regards as enabling conditions, then it will not be true that reasons have enabling conditions.

I see the holist's view of the content of reasons as more attractive than the anti-holist's view. In particular, separating reasons i.e. favorers from enabling conditions is more attractive in that it allows one to discriminate between various roles that facts may have in an exercise of practical reasoning. "That I promised to  $\phi$ " does not have the same role in practical reasoning as "I can  $\phi$ ". To interpret the content of the reason one has for  $\phi$ -ing as including both of these facts is to obscure their distinctive roles.<sup>29</sup>

Given that I view Dancy's distinction between reasons and enabling conditions as persuasive, I view (C) as persuasive. However, my main point in §2 does not depend on this claim, since my main point is that overall virtuousness interpreted via defaults is not challenged even if holism about virtue predicates and overall virtuousness is false.

Does (C) establish that holism is true? That, of course, depends on what holism is. Dancy officially defines holism as the following claim:

(H): A feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.<sup>30</sup>

But he later redefines it, or further characterizes it, as the following claim:

(H\*): Reasons are variable *qua* reasons.<sup>31</sup>

Neither (H) nor (H\*) wear their quantification or modal interpretation on their sleeves. There are two plausible interpretations of (H), which correspond to what can be aptly labeled weak and strong holisms. Weak holism is the following claim:

(WH): It is not necessary that for all  $x$ , if  $x$  is a feature that is a reason on some occasion, then  $x$  is a reason on all occasions in which it is present.

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<sup>28</sup> Compare Garrett Cullity, "Particularism and Moral Theory: Particularism and Presumptive Reasons," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 76 (2002): 169-190, at 173-175; Brad Hooker, "Moral Particularism: Wrong and Bad," in *Moral Particularism*, eds. Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (New York: Clarendon Press, 2003), 1-22, at 14.

<sup>29</sup> See Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 94-99.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

(WH) is equivalent to the claim that it is possible that there is some feature that is a reason on some occasion but not a reason on another occasion although it is present in both occasions. This claim is consistent with there being no actual cases of valence-shifting in features. (A feature or consideration shifts valence just in case it is a favorer in one case but not in another although present in both.) Indeed, (WH) requires only that at least one feature be capable of shifting valence. (WH) follows from (C). If Dancy's analysis of the promising under duress case is correct, (WH) follows, since if a feature of action (being a promise-fulfillment) *does* shift valence, then that feature is *capable* of shifting valence, and so it is not necessary that all features are incapable of valence-shifting.

Strong holism is the following claim:

(SH): It is necessary that for all  $x$ , if  $x$  is a feature that is a reason on some occasion, then it is possible that  $x$  is present on some occasion and yet is not a reason on that occasion.

(SH) implies that if a feature of an action e.g. being a promise-fulfillment is a reason for performing an action on some occasion, then there must be some possible situation in which an action is a promise-fulfillment and yet that its being a promise-fulfillment does not favor that action's rightness. This amounts to the claim that, necessarily, all reasons or favorers have enabling conditions. (SH) does not follow from (C), because (C) only establishes that some features that are reasons have enabling conditions and not that all necessarily do.

If (H\*) adequately expresses Dancy's view, then Dancy is committed only to (WH). I read (H\*) as claiming that for all  $x$ , if  $x$  is a feature that is a reason on some occasion, and we do not know anything else about  $x$ , then we are not entitled to infer that  $x$  is a reason on all occasions in which it is present. This is equivalent to (WH).

Expanding on (H\*), Dancy importantly claims that although reasons *qua* reasons are not invariable or incapable of valence-shifting, it still might be true that "some reasons are (necessarily, given their content) invariant."<sup>32</sup> Such a claim is consistent with (WH) but not (SH), since it allows for claims such as the following:

(N): It is necessary that an action's being virtuous in respect to benevolence favors that action's rightness.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 77.



(N) is consistent with weak holism because such necessity need not be attached to an action's being benevolent *qua* reason but rather to its content as a virtue property. So, we can conclude that weak holism about reasons – the sort of holism that is supported by the argument from the favoring/enabling distinction – does not rule out the possibility that virtue properties of actions necessarily favor those actions – the claim that virtue properties of action cannot be undermined as right-makers.<sup>33</sup>

However, both Swanton and Dancy provide arguments from example for the conclusion that at least some virtue properties of action do not always favor the actions of which they are properties. Swanton's arguments have the following form:

(P1):  $\phi$  hits the target of a virtue  $v$ .

(P2):  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of  $v$  does not favor  $\phi$ 's overall virtuousness.

(C): It is not the case that an action's hitting the target of  $v$  always favors that action's overall virtuousness.

We saw an instantiation of this form of argument in §2.1 of the last chapter. That argument seeks to show that an action can hit the target of kindness but that its hitting the target of kindness contributes negatively to the action's overall virtuousness.<sup>34</sup> Swanton argues that the action's kindness does not favor the action's overall virtuousness for the reason that the action's being kind is also what makes it the case that the action is irresolute, because the agent has resolved to stop being kind in such situations, and such a resolution is virtuous in that the agent's being kind in such situations is taking too heavy a toll on his life.

Rebecca Stangl, considering this argument by example and others, provides a general account of when an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue is wrong-making:

[T]he virtuousness of an action in some respect,  $X$ , is wrong-making when the action fails seriously to realize the end of some other relevant virtue in virtue of its virtuousness in respect  $X$ .<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Margaret Olivia Little accepts holism about reasons in general but denies that virtue predicates may fail to be right-making. See Little, "Moral Generalities Revisited," in *Moral Particularism*, eds. Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (New York: Clarendon Press, 2003), 276-304, at 289.

<sup>34</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 244.

<sup>35</sup> Stangl, "Asymmetrical Virtue Particularism," 42.

The idea is that, since an action's failing seriously to realize the end of a virtue is wrong-making,<sup>36</sup> the features of an action in virtue of which it fails seriously to realize the end of a virtue are wrong-making features. Hence, if an action fails seriously to realize the end of a virtue in virtue of its being kind, then the action's being kind is wrong-making. I accept that this conclusion follows, and I accept that the premises follow from the target-centered account. However, I argue that it is dubious that Swanton's argument from example provides a case in which an action seriously fails to miss the target of a virtue in virtue of that action's being kind.

Recall the basic facts of Swanton's example. Tim is at a conference engaging in interesting conversation with people he likes but sees a lonely stranger who looks like he could use some company. Tim has a bad habit of being excessively self-sacrificial and has resolved to remedy this, yet he consistently fails to act in accordance with this resolution. We assume that his excusing himself from the group to go to talk to the stranger is kind and that his doing so will be a case of failing to hit the target of resoluteness or determination.<sup>37</sup> Swanton's argument, if it is to successfully demonstrate that an action's kindness can be wrong-making, must maintain that Tim's act fails to hit the target of resoluteness in virtue of its being kind. My claim is that it is not implausible that the act fails to hit the target of resoluteness but not in virtue of its being kind. To establish this claim, I show that the example can be equally plausibly evaluated in such a way that the action's kindness is not what makes it fail to hit the target of resoluteness.

It is true that Tim's performing the kind act is contrary to his virtuous resolution. But what makes the action miss the target of resoluteness? An act that hits the target of resoluteness is, on Swanton's account, one that instantiates some mode of responsiveness internal to the profile of resoluteness (e.g. an act of standing firm) in the right circumstances, at the right time and place, in respect to the right objects, for the right reasons, to the right extent, etc. Tim's act fails to hit the target of resoluteness in that he does not e.g. stand firm at all; his act fails to hit the target of resolution in virtue of his act's failure to abide by the virtuous resolution in the face of his contrary inclinations.

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<sup>36</sup> Indeed, on Stangl's account, an action's failing seriously to realize the end of a virtue is *always* a wrong-making feature of that action. This is what makes her view relevantly asymmetrical. One of Stangl's main points in "Asymmetrical Virtue Particularism" is that if one accepts RIGHT and TARGET as accounting for rightness of action and one is a holist about overall virtuousness, then one ought also to have an asymmetrical view. I find her argument for this conclusion persuasive but do not evaluate it here.

<sup>37</sup> Compare Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 243-244.

In what way does the kindness of the action figure in this failure? If the content of the resolution is interpreted as the resolution to not perform acts that are both kind and excessively self-sacrificial, then the resolution will apply to Tim's act in virtue of its being kind (and excessively self-sacrificial). Because the content of the resolution determines what acts are (not) in accordance with it, the kindness of the action will play some role in that action's being contrary to the resolution, if the resolution is to not perform acts that are both kind and excessively self-sacrificial. If this is correct, then Tim's action's being both kind and self-sacrificial makes it such that the action is contrary to the resolution.

But an equally plausible and perhaps more plausible way to view Tim's resolution is as a resolution to avoid excessively self-sacrificial actions, whether such acts are kind or not. After all, the reason why this is a virtuous resolution is that it is not virtuous *qua* prudent to be excessively self-sacrificing and making and abiding by such a resolution, if successful, can hit the target of prudence. But if the resolution is interpreted in this way, then the action misses the target of resoluteness in virtue of its being excessively self-sacrificial, and the kindness of the action is besides the point.<sup>38</sup>

I believe that similar evaluations can be made concerning other arguments from example designed to establish the claim that an action's being virtuous in respect to kindness or justice need not be right-making and may even be wrong-making. But I do not pursue this. Instead, I want to show that an interpretation of overall virtuousness in terms of defaults is not challenged by the possibility that an action's being virtuous (vicious) in respect to a virtue always favors (disfavors) that action's overall virtuousness.

However, I do want to point out that it is not clear that Swanton is committed to the claim that an action's hitting the target of a virtue sometimes fails to be right-making. In her examples, such as the one discussed above, she describes Tim's act as *kind* but she does not explicitly claim that it *hits the target of kindness*. In my reconstruction of her argument, I have assumed that she was claiming that Tim's act hits the target of kindness, since if that assumption is not made, it is not clear how the argument has bearing on the target-centered account. But given Swanton's view that self-love features in the profiles of all virtues,<sup>39</sup> there are grounds to doubt that Tim's excessively self-sacrificial act would hit the target of kindness on Swanton's account. Rather, Swanton might claim that Tim's act is kind but is a saliently misguided case of kindness and so does not hit the target of kindness. If so, she

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<sup>38</sup> For other sorts of reasons why one may doubt Swanton's evaluation of this example, see Stangl, "Asymmetrical Virtue Particularism," 39.

<sup>39</sup> See Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 99ff.

would deny that Tim's act illustrates that an action's hitting the target of a virtue sometimes fails to be right-making.

Whether Swanton accepts or denies that an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue sometimes fails to be right-making, I now argue that the interpretation of overall virtuousness in terms of defaults is not challenged. Recall that one can interpret the notion overall virtuousness via defaults by making the following claim:

(OVD): An action is overall virtuous just in case an undefeated default implies that the action is overall virtuous.<sup>40</sup>

And we can pair (OVD) with defaults such as:

(K): Actions virtuous in respect to kindness are overall virtuous.

(R): Actions vicious in respect to resoluteness are not overall virtuous.

An attractive feature of (OVD), I suggest, is that it can accommodate holism about overall virtuousness and virtue properties and that it can also accommodate atomism about overall virtuousness and virtue properties of action. To take claims such as (K) and (R) as defaults is to take them as defeasible generalizations, when such generalizations can be defeated in a number of ways. Yet, even if e.g. (K) cannot be defeated *qua* undermined, since an action's being virtuous in respect to kindness necessarily contributes to that action's overall virtuousness, it is still usefully seen as a default, since it can be defeated in other ways – outweighed or excluded. Hence, (OVD)'s plausibility does not depend on holism about overall virtuousness.

One of the most important lessons to be taken from Dancy's work on holism and particularism is that reasons and right-makers can function perfectly well as reasons and right-makers even if they are not capturable in exceptionless, applicable principles.<sup>41</sup> The picture of reasoning about overall virtuousness suggested by the logic of defaults recognizes this truth but also the equally important, though perhaps less surprising, truth that reasons and right-makers can function perfectly well even if they *are* capturable in exceptionless, applicable principles, such as (N) above.

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<sup>40</sup> See §2.2 of the previous chapter.

<sup>41</sup> This point is a theme throughout Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*.

In this chapter, I have made the case that RIGHT is initially plausible and have defended it from important objections. Further, I have argued that while holism about overall virtuousness has, as of yet, not been successfully demonstrated, the interpretation of overall virtuousness in terms of defaults can be seen as neutral in regard to the issue of holism and atomism about overall virtuousness. The upshot is that virtue ethicists who are not also holists can accept both RIGHT and the interpretation of RIGHT here presented.

## EIGHT

### RIGHT-MAKERS AND THE TARGETS OF VIRTUE

In this chapter, I argue that target-centered accounts are superior to both qualified-agent and agent-based accounts. However, I present an important objection to Swanton's version of the target-centered account. In response to this objection, I consider how a target-centered account can avoid this objection while retaining attractive features of Swanton's view.

#### §1. The Superiority of the Target-Centered Account

There are a number of important ways in which the target-centered account is superior to both agent-based and qualified-agent accounts of right action. One such way is that the target-centered account is not challenged by powerful objections to Slote's and Hursthouse's views. Unlike a view that maintains that only facts about motives are rightness-relevant, the target-centered account allows that consequences of action and non-motive-reducible features of action – e.g. an action's breaking a promise – can be rightness-relevant.<sup>1</sup> Unlike (V),<sup>2</sup> the target-centered account can allow that a virtuous agent, acting in character, can, through inculpable ignorance, fail to perform a right action, and, unlike (V), the target-centered account is not challenged by Johnson-style counter-examples,<sup>3</sup> since it is plausible that Johnson's habitual liar hits targets of virtues e.g. prudence in his remedial actions, and that such remedial actions need not miss targets of virtues e.g. honesty.<sup>4</sup>

In §1, I focus on another important way that the target-centered account is superior to qualified-agent criteria including (V) and more resilient qualified-agent criteria such as the following:

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<sup>1</sup> See §2 of Chapter 3 of the present work.

<sup>2</sup> (V): An action is right just in case a virtuous agent, acting in character, would perform that action in the circumstances.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 5 of the present work.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of how a target-centered account can evaluate Johnson-style counter-examples to (V), see Christine Swanton, "Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Demandingness," in *The Problem of Moral Demandingness: New Philosophical Essays*, ed. Timothy Chappell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 104-122; Christine Swanton, "Two Problems for Virtue Ethics," in *Cultivating Virtue: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Snow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Forthcoming).

(O): An action is right just in case (and ultimately because) it would be approved by an omniscient and fully virtuous observer.<sup>5</sup>

(O) is more resilient than (V) in that it arguably allows for right action in Johnson-style counter-examples, and for non-right action, through inculpable ignorance, of virtuous agents, acting in character. The target-centered account is, I argue, superior to both (V) and (O) in virtue of the target-centered account's more satisfactory view of what *makes* actions right.

Consider first that (V) is implausible if interpreted as claiming that what makes an action right is that it would be characteristically performed by a virtuous agent. The facts that make an action right are the facts in virtue of which that action is right. Such facts may include, for example, that an action will help someone in need or that it will correct an injustice. While the fact that a virtuous agent would characteristically perform an action provides some *evidence* for believing that the action is right, it is not a fact in virtue of which the action is right. If it were a fact in virtue of which the action is right, then someone who knows that a virtuous agent would perform an action would thereby know *why* that action is right. But the fact that a virtuous agent would perform some action is not a fact that explains why the action is right, since the facts that explain why an action is right are the facts that justify an agent's performing that action, and no one, virtuous or not, is justified in performing some action simply by the fact that they would perform that action. Thus, no one knows why an action is right in knowing that the action would be performed by a virtuous agent, and so right actions are not made right by the fact that they would be characteristically performed by virtuous agents.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> O = Observer. I here assume that an observer is a kind of agent. For defense of criteria similar to (O), see Jason Kawall, "Virtue Theory and Ideal Observers," *Philosophical Studies* 109 (2002): 197-222; Jason Kawall, "Virtue Theory, Ideal Observers, and the Supererogatory," *Philosophical Studies* 146 (2009): 179-196; Jason Kawall, "Qualified Agent and Agent-Based Virtue Ethics and the Problems of Right Action," in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft (Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing, 2014), 130-140. Kawall favors speaking in terms of fully informed and unimpaired virtuous observers rather than in terms of omniscient, virtuous observers. This difference in terminology does not bear on any of my points.

<sup>6</sup> For similar objections or responses to similar objections, see Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7; Julia Driver, "Virtue Theory," in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, ed. James Dreier (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 113-124; Sarah Broadie, *Aristotle and Beyond: Essays on Metaphysics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 120; Jason Kawall, "In Defense of the Primacy of the Virtues," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 3 (2009): 1-21; Roger Crisp, "Virtue Ethics and Virtue Epistemology," *Metaphilosophy* 41 (2010): 23-40; Liezl van Zyl, "Qualified-Agent Virtue Ethics," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2011): 219-228; Glen Pettigrove, "Is Virtue Ethics Self-Effacing?," *The Journal of Ethics* 15 (2011): 191-207.

Not all interpreters of (V) interpret it as offering an account of what makes actions right. Liezl van Zyl, for instance, claims that (V) is best understood as an answer to the question, “What do all right actions have in common?”, rather than to the question, “What makes an action right?”.<sup>7</sup> The point is that each member making up the extension of the class of right actions may all share some feature, and this same feature may be absent in all non-right actions, yet that possessing this feature is not what makes an action right or explains why it is right. But if (V) is not intended to give an answer to the question, “What makes an action right?”, then virtue ethicists who accept (V) alone will lack an answer to what I assume is an important question in ethical theory.<sup>8</sup>

Similar objections can be made to (O). Plausibly, what makes the action right are the facts that such an observer would take to be reasons for approving it. The claim that such reasons are reasons in virtue of their being seen as reasons by such an observer is counter-intuitive and, I will argue, has unattractive implications for issues concerning what makes an agent virtuous.

Target-centered accounts, I will argue, avoid, or can avoid, these sorts of objections. Further, I suggest that the source of a target-centered account’s avoiding such objections is to be found in its treating actions as what I have called virtuous in their own right.<sup>9</sup> I first discuss what it is to treat actions as virtuous in their own right before showing how a target-centered account can avoid such objections.

One fact about virtue terms (e.g. “kind”, “courageous”, and “just”) which has interested many contemporary virtue ethicists is that virtue terms apply to many different types of objects: actions, agents, motives, intentions, and emotions, for example. Since virtue terms apply to a wide variety of objects (call all such objects “virtue bearers”), some philosophers have sought to introduce systematicity into their views by maintaining that some virtue bearers are more primary or basic than others in the sense that the secondary or derivative virtue bearers bear virtuousness only insofar as they are appropriately related to the primary virtue bearers.

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<sup>7</sup> Van Zyl, “Qualified-Agent Virtue Ethics,” 220-221.

<sup>8</sup> For critical reflection on one possible interpretation of the question, “What makes an action right?”, see Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47-51. I interpret Annas as arguing there that the question of what makes an action right *as opposed to virtuous* is a loaded question. In the course of this work, I make no assumption to the effect that right-making features are not features that make an action virtuous in some respect, and so I am not necessarily disagreeing with Annas in assuming that “What makes an action right?” is an important question in ethical theory.

<sup>9</sup> See §1.2 of Chapter 1 of the present work.



If, for example, actions are secondary virtue bearers and agents are primary virtue bearers, then a natural position to adopt is that  $\phi$  is virtuous in respect to benevolence just in case (and ultimately because)  $\phi$  would be performed (or approved, etc.) by a benevolent agent *qua* benevolent. If motives were primary virtue bearers and actions secondary virtue bearers, then a natural position to adopt is that  $\phi$  is virtuous in respect to benevolence just in case (and ultimately because)  $\phi$  expresses or displays the benevolent motives of the one who performs  $\phi$ .

To claim that actions are virtuous in their own right is to claim that actions are not secondary virtue bearers – that an action is not made virtuous (e.g. virtuous in respect to kindness) by its bearing some specified relation to some specified primary virtue bearer (e.g. kind agents or kind motives). (This does not imply that there are other sorts of virtue bearers which are made virtuous by their relation to virtuous actions, for these other sorts may be virtuous in their own right too; this is why I am not discussing the stronger claim that actions are primary or basic virtue bearers.) The idea, in other words, is that the standards embedded in the thick concepts of justice, generosity, and courage apply *directly* to actions, with the consequence that an action's being virtuous in respect to justice, for example, is a matter of that action's satisfying the requirements of justice on a given occasion rather than of being appropriately related to some other kind of thing (e.g. motive) that satisfies the requirements of justice.

Does the target-centered account affirm that actions are virtuous in their own right? If affirming both TARGET and RIGHT is sufficient for an account of right action to be target-centered, then some target-centered accounts will not treat actions as virtuous in their own right, since one might claim, for instance, that an action hits the target of a virtue  $v$  just in case (and ultimately because) that action would be approved by an omniscient and fully  $v$  observer *qua*  $v$ .

In contrast, it is plausible that Swanton's version of the target-centered account treats actions as virtuous in their own right. Swanton is not explicit in regard to this issue in relation to the target-centered account, but since she claims, following Aristotle, that virtuous agents aim at hitting the targets of virtue in action,<sup>10</sup> she suggests that what it is to hit such a target is something to be *recognized* by virtuous agents rather than something that is *created*

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<sup>10</sup> Swanton, "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Daniel C. Russell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 315-338, at 330. Swanton also here follows Sarah Broadie in attributing to Aristotle the position that acts are not made virtuous by their relation to virtuous agents, choices, or motives.

or *constructed* by them in any act of recognition, willing, approving or aiming. Further, if the notion of hitting the targets of a virtue is fleshed out solely in terms of the profiles of virtues and the modes and bases of moral responsiveness, then there is no role, much less an essential role, for the notion of a virtuous agent or observer in the explanation of what it is to hit a virtue's target. Thus, TARGET can be interpreted as treating actions as virtuous in their own right.

Now we are in a position to see why the target-centered account (when interpreted as treating actions as virtuous in their own right) is to be preferred over qualified-agent criteria such as (O) – the claim that an action is right just in case (and ultimately because) it would be approved by an omniscient and fully virtuous observer/agent. The point of contrast will be that treating actions as virtuous in their own right allows for *recognitionalism* – the view that virtuous agents recognize right-making features of action or virtue properties of action, when such features and properties are not made right-making or virtuous by the responses of virtuous agents but rather are features or properties that merit or justify the responses of the virtuous. Qualified-agent criteria such as (O) deny recognitionalism, since they imply that an action is made virtuous by its relation to virtuous agents and that right-making features of action are right-making in virtue of their relation to virtuous agents.

First, I offer two considerations designed to cast doubt on the acceptability of criteria of rightness or virtuousness of action which imply the falsity of recognitionalism. The first is that, in general, we should accept such analyses only if it is first shown that there is a need for appealing to a primary virtue bearer in explaining what it is for an action to be virtuous or right. As an analogy, someone might claim that an argument is valid just in case (and ultimately because) an omniscient spectator would believe that there is no way its premises could be true while its conclusion is false. If the omniscient spectator plays no essential role in a good explanation of an argument's validity, then such an analysis can be reasonably rejected. We should only consider such an analysis after being shown that understanding an argument's validity without reference to such agents is problematic. Hence, *if* there is no difficulty in interpreting actions as virtuous in their own right which is removed by appealing to fully virtuous agents, then it is reasonable to reject an account of the virtuousness of action which appeals to some virtue bearer that is alleged to be more primary. I consider an objection to the antecedent of this conditional below: namely that there is a difficulty if ethical properties are response-dependent properties.

Secondly, if actions are not virtuous in their own right, and they get their virtuousness from virtuous agents or motivations or choices, then it is considerably more difficult to see why virtuous motivations, or virtuous choices, or the attitudes of virtuous agents are *merited* by the facts to which such attitudes are responsive. A virtuous agent, on my recognitionalist view, is virtuous partially on account of her excellence in reason recognition, including the reasons that are right-makers and wrong-makers of action. But if we do not view such reasons as having independent status as reasons or right-makers or wrong-makers, then we no longer have access to the plausible view that virtuous agents are virtuous partially because they have a reliable sensitivity to reasons and thereby characteristically have merited practical beliefs, emotions, aims, and states of approval.

The point is that, given the unidirectionality of explanatory relations,<sup>11</sup> if part of what it is to be a virtuous agent is to have a reliable sensitivity to reasons for action, then it cannot be the case that what it is for a fact or consideration to be a reason for action is even partially a matter of that fact's relation to virtuous agents. Or if part of what it is for an agent to be virtuous is for that agent to be excellent in recognizing the right-makers and wrong-makers of action, then what it is for something to be a right-maker or wrong-maker cannot be explained in terms of a virtuous agent's attitudes or choices.

It may be objected that ethical properties are response-dependent properties, and hence that an adequate understanding of virtue properties (of actions or agents) must view them as having some dependence on the attitudes or evaluations of virtuous agents. In response to this objection, I will remain neutral regarding whether ethical properties are response-dependent properties. Instead, I will show that recognitionalism is compatible with the view that ethical properties are response-dependent, given one way of understanding response-dependence.

One way that a property can be interpreted as response-dependent is if the referent of the predicate that corresponds to that property is fixed or determined by the responses of some observer or class of observers. Thus, if the referent of "yellow" is fixed by the visual responses of statistically normal humans, then the property of yellowness is response-dependent. Likewise, if the referent of "right action" is fixed by the responses of fully informed, unimpaired virtuous observers, then rightness of action is response-dependent in the relevant sense.

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<sup>11</sup> See §1 of Chapter 1 of the present work.

However, there is a difference between the claim that the referent of “right action” is fixed by responses of virtuous agents and the claim that an action is right in virtue of the responses of virtuous agents. The properties in virtue of which an action is right are, according to recognitionalism, those properties that merit or justify the responses of virtuous agents. But if virtuous agents are virtuous partially on account of their reliable sensitivity to such properties, then such agents will be disposed to respond appropriately to such properties by taking them as reasons for action or for approval. This is consistent with the view that the referent of “right action” is fixed by the responses of virtuous agents. If, for instance, a recognitionalist account of right action were to propose that *F* is a right-making property when fully informed and virtuous observers are not disposed to regard *F* as a right-making property, then significant doubt is cast on the claim that *F* is a right-making property, if the referent of “right action” is fixed by the responses of the virtuous. The point is that if the referent of “right action” is fixed by the responses of the virtuous, then there will be constraints set on an adequate account of the right-making features of action, but this does not imply that an action is right in virtue of such responses.

Analogously, an object is yellow in virtue of the properties that optical scientists know about, and this is consistent with the view that the referent of “yellow” is fixed by the visual responses of normal human beings. Even if yellowness is a response dependent property, it is not an adequate explanation of yellowness to claim that an object is yellow just in case (and ultimately because) normal human observers would see it as yellow in normal circumstances. What is desirable in an account of yellowness is an account of what it is about yellow objects that dispose such observers to see them as yellow.

Likewise, even if rightness is response-dependent, what is desirable in an account of right action is an account of what it is about right action that merits or justifies the responses of fully informed and virtuous observers/agents. When we claim that an action is right and are asked why it is right, it is not satisfactory to claim that Socrates claimed that it was right and that Socrates was virtuous and was fully informed about the action. Such a claim is besides the point. What is asked for is an explanation that illuminates why Socrates’ response was merited or justified – what right-making features of the action Socrates recognized.

Qualified-agent accounts such as (O) fail to offer such explanations. Target-centered accounts, in contrast, claim that what merits or justifies such responses is the fact that right actions hit the targets of virtue and so e.g. virtuously benefit, respect, or honor someone or something. Such accounts, insofar as they identify what merits the responses of virtuous

agents, allow for the plausible view that virtuous agents are virtuous partially on account of their sensitivity to right-making features of action.

In sum, we can ask the Euthyphro-dilemma-inspired questions, “Is it virtuous because approved or approved because it is virtuous?” about (O) and “Would virtuous agents do it because it is right or is it right because virtuous agents would do it?” about (V) only because (O) and (V) deny that actions are virtuous in their own right. If it is claimed that actions are virtuous in their own right, then an action is not virtuous because it would be approved or performed by a qualified agent. Rather, actions are virtuous ultimately because of facts about those actions – they hit the targets of virtue conceptually independently of what qualified-agents would do, approve, or advise and conceptually independently of what well-motivated agents would be motivated to do. On such an account, virtuous agents characteristically recognize what makes such actions virtuous and hence are not to be seen as conferring or projecting their virtuousness upon them.

## §2. A Problem in Swanton’s Version of the Target-Centered Account

In §1, I argued that a target-centered account can give a more satisfactory view than alternative virtue-ethical accounts of what makes actions right. In §2, I argue that Swanton’s version of the target-centered account is not fully successful in accounting for what makes actions right, since it does not capture all right-making features. I first prepare the way for this argument by interpreting what right-making features are on Swanton’s target-centered account.

A right-making feature of an action is any feature of an action that counts in favor of or provides a reason for regarding that action as right, as long as that feature is not mere evidence for regarding that action as right. If a sage says that  $\phi$  is right, then that is a reason for regarding  $\phi$  as right, but that  $\phi$  is said to be right by a sage is not a right-making feature of  $\phi$ , since it provides mere evidence for regarding  $\phi$  as right. (This is not to say that a speech-act can never make an action right; it is arguable that an action can be made right by the fact that an authority has ordered the agent to do it.)

Likewise, a wrong-making feature is any feature of an action that counts in favor of or provides a reason for regarding that action as wrong, as long as that feature is not mere evidence for regarding that action as wrong.

Different substantive accounts of right-makers take different views about the nature of the reasons that are right-makers or wrong-makers. On some possible view, such reasons are always *decisive* in the sense that the presence of a right-making feature (or absence of a wrong-making feature) in an action is sufficient for that action to be right. Alternative views allow that such reasons can be *contributory* in the sense that the presence of a right-making feature in an action provides some but not necessarily sufficient reason for regarding that action as right, since such reasons may be e.g. outweighed by wrong-making features present in the action.<sup>12</sup> On the latter kind of view, right-making and wrong-making features can be compresent in the same action. Swanton's view is of this latter kind.

Swanton claims that, on the target-centered account, "right-making features must be conceptualizable *at some level* in terms of virtue concepts."<sup>13</sup> The idea is that if a feature of an action – e.g. that it fulfills a promise – is to be a right-making feature, then it must either be subsumable under a virtue concept – the action's fulfilling a promise is loyal – or it must be significantly related to a virtue concept's application – e.g. the action's being a promise-fulfillment is (part of) what makes the action loyal. Put in terms of the target-centered account, I suggest that Swanton accepts the following claim:

(RM): A feature *F* of  $\phi$  is a right-making feature of  $\phi$  just in case both  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of a virtue *v* is not undermined as a right-maker and either *F* consists in  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of *v* or *F* significantly figures in  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of *v*.<sup>14</sup>

If (RM) is true, then an action's hitting the target of benevolence can be a right-making feature of that action. Also, an action's benefitting someone can be a right-making feature if it significantly figures in that action's hitting the target of e.g. benevolence, and an action's being a promise-fulfillment can be a right-making feature of that action if it significantly figures in that action's hitting the target of e.g. loyalty.

I use the qualification "significantly" in (RM) in order to rule out claims such as that  $\phi$ 's being an action is a right-making feature of  $\phi$ . It may be true that  $\phi$ 's being an action in some sense figures in  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of a virtue, but it is not typically a right-making feature, according to (RM). For some fact or feature to significantly figure in  $\phi$ 's hitting the

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<sup>12</sup> Compare Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Swanton, "Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement," *Philosophical Topics* 38 (2010): 157-180, at 167.

<sup>14</sup> RM = Right-Maker.

target of a virtue, that fact or feature must be something that makes it the case that  $\phi$  hits that target, and not be just any feature of  $\phi$  in some way implicated in  $\phi$ 's hitting the target. (Perhaps an action's being an action could significantly figure in its hitting the target of hope if, in a dire situation, the agent acts as opposed to passively awaiting her fate.)

Taking into account Rebecca Stangl's observation that "vices do not have their own characteristic targets...the viciousness of an action necessarily constitutes a failure to hit the target of some virtue,"<sup>15</sup> (RM) suggests the following criterion of wrong-makers:

(WM): A feature  $F$  of  $\phi$  is a wrong-making feature of  $\phi$  just in case both  $\phi$ 's missing the target of a virtue  $v$  is not undermined as a wrong-maker and either  $F$  consists in  $\phi$ 's missing the target of  $v$  or  $F$  significantly figures in  $\phi$ 's missing the target of  $v$ .<sup>16</sup>

I now argue that (RM), paired with Swanton's account of what it takes to hit the target of a virtue, does not capture all right-making features of action. I begin with an example. A struggling logic student, Adam, emails his tutor to get help constructing truth trees. In response, the tutor agrees to meet with Adam at a particular time and place. On the way to meet Adam, the tutor runs into another logic student, Bob, who also needs help constructing truth trees. Bob asks the tutor for help but instead of advising Bob to set up a meeting or inviting Bob to the meeting with Adam, the tutor sits down with Bob then and there and guides him through some examples. Through the discussion, Bob gains competence in constructing truth trees.

What is it reasonable to say regarding the tutor's action? Assuming no relevant details have been omitted, the action is clearly wrong. What makes it wrong? Surely it has something to do with the fact that the tutor agreed to meet with Adam but did not. The tutor has disrespected Adam insofar as the tutor, without excuse or justification, has evidently not seen the commitment to meet Adam as a reason for meeting Adam. Either that or the tutor had seen the commitment as a reason but didn't act on the reason or did not correctly weigh the reason. In any case, the tutor has disrespected Adam and this disrespect makes the tutor's action vicious in respect to justice.

In thinking about this case, it is also natural to ask why the tutor would choose to help Bob then and there, since the case seems psychologically implausible without further explanation. To make it more plausible, we could add that the tutor is repulsed by Adam for

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<sup>15</sup> Stangl, "Asymmetrical Virtue Particularism," *Ethics* 121 (2010): 37-57, at 44.

<sup>16</sup> WM = Wrong-Maker.

some reason (perhaps Adam always carries an unpleasant smell) or we could add that the tutor is particularly attracted to Bob for some reason (perhaps Bob always has amusing stories to tell). But none of these facts would alter anything about the fact that the tutor has performed an unjust action and that the action was made wrong at least partly by its being unjust.

Rather what these additional facts would do is to make intelligible why the tutor performed the action. Out of a liking or appreciation of Bob, the tutor wanted to help Bob and that's just what the tutor did. Bob was benefitted by the tutor's action at least insofar as he gained competence in constructing truth trees. Since Bob was benefitted by the action and the action was done in order to benefit Bob, the action could be further described as benevolent to Bob.

As I have said, the tutor's action is wrong, and a salient wrong-maker has been identified. But are any right-makers also present? It is natural to say that the fact that the action is benevolent to Bob is a right-maker of the action – that its benevolence to Bob speaks in its favor or makes something of a case for regarding the action as right – though this consideration is overridden by the countervailing consideration of the action's injustice. The action helps Bob gain a valuable skill, and so it does some good although it is unjust. But the injustice of the action does not negate – undermine – the right-making status of the benevolence, it merely overrides – outweighs – it. On this interpretation, the action is aretaically mixed – virtuous in a way and vicious in a way – in that it is benevolent to Bob but unjust to Adam.

Swanton's view, by contrast, arguably implies that the action is simply vicious – virtuous in no way but vicious in some way – since TARGET, as fleshed out by Swanton, arguably implies that the action does not hit the target of benevolence.<sup>17</sup> I say “arguably” here because, due to the target-centered account's incorporation of the concept of salience and various sorts of vagueness, applying it to particular cases is not straightforward. Why think that the tutor's action misses the target of benevolence in regard to Bob, given Swanton's account?

At the formal level, to hit the target of benevolence requires instantiating a mode of responsiveness internal to the profile of benevolence in the right circumstances, at the right time, in regard to the right people or objects, etc., when these dimensions of the mean are

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<sup>17</sup> It is, of course, not the case that if an action is vicious in respect to benevolence, then it is virtuous in no way, since the action may be virtuous in respect to prudence, for example. For the sake of clarity, however, I limit my discussion of this example to benevolence and justice.



salient. The tutor appears to satisfy some dimensions of the mean – e.g. Bob, insofar as he needs help with truth trees, is an appropriate person to help with truth trees – but the tutor fails to benefit Bob at the right time (or place or circumstance, depending on how these are individuated). Is the time dimension of the mean salient in this case? It seems fairly clear that the time dimension of the mean – the right time – is salient in this case, but if not, then the onus is on the defender of Swanton’s account to provide an explanation of why it should not be viewed as salient.

At the substantive level, since the profile of benevolence, on Swanton’s view, includes not only benefitting but also respecting,<sup>18</sup> and these modes of responsiveness are integrated in virtuous responses to items in the field of benevolence, there is reason to believe that the tutor’s benefitting of Bob does not hit the target of benevolence, since this case of benefitting is not integrated with respect for others, and its disrespect is arguably salient in this case. It is not integrated because the respect demanded in this case by the agreement with Adam precludes benefitting Bob at the time the tutor benefits him. Thus, on Swanton’s account of what it takes to hit the target of benevolence on a given occasion, the tutor’s action does not hit it.

So we have two contrary evaluations of the tutor’s action, and we can note that there are many other examples that fit the same pattern. There is the familiar example of the sheriff who arrests an innocent man to prevent a riot. Many think that the fact that the action prevents a riot is a right-making feature and that the fact that the action is unjust is a wrong-making feature, but by a similar analysis to the case of the tutor, Swanton’s view arguably implies that the action misses the target of benevolence and so is simply vicious. Or consider the case of a man who promises his dying aunt to use his inheritance for the purpose *p* but ends up donating it to a local library after deciding that he does not at all care about *p*. Many people would regard such an action as aretaically mixed but Swanton’s view arguably implies that it is simply vicious.

I want now to defend the claims that the benevolence of the tutor’s benefitting Bob, the benevolence of the sheriff’s preventing the riot, and the generosity of the nephew’s donating to the local library are all right-making features of these actions. It might be objected that, from the mere fact that the tutor’s action can be called benevolent by ordinary language

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<sup>18</sup> “The virtue of benevolence arguably involves not only the promotion of the good of individuals, but promotion of good with love (in some sense), and respect for status of human beings in general as inviolable.” Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 110. See also Swanton’s claim that respect features in the profiles of *all* virtue at pg. 99ff.

standards, it does not follow that the tutor's action's being benevolent is right-making. Ordinary language may allow us to call satisfying someone's sadistic desire benevolent, but that an action satisfies someone's sadistic desire is not right-making. I agree with the points made in this objection and now seek to show that the benevolence of e.g. the tutor's action is nonetheless right-making.

Since I take it that there is a right-maker having to do with benevolence in the tutor's helping Bob but not in the case of someone's satisfying a sadistic desire, I should be able to point to some relevant difference between the cases. The difference is not difficult to find: the tutor benefits Bob in teaching him a valuable skill but having a sadistic desire satisfied does not benefit a sadist. Of course there are advocates of desire-satisfaction and hedonist theories of well-being, and so some will deny that the sadist is not benefitted. I find these theories implausible, but since considering the nature of well-being would take me too far afield, I simply follow Philippa Foot and others in claiming that the sadist is not benefitted but that Bob is.<sup>19</sup>

Since the sadist is not benefitted by having a sadistic desire satisfied, someone's satisfying such a desire is performing an action of misguided benevolence – misguided insofar as it rests upon a misconception of what is good for the sadist. An action's being an instance of misguided benevolence is at least characteristically not right-making. But, by contrast, it really is good for Bob to gain competence in constructing truth trees, so the tutor's imparting that valuable skill is not misguided benevolence, not in the same way at least. Of course, it is misguided benevolence if unjust benevolence is misguided. But in that case, no unjust actions would be virtuous in respect to benevolence. Such a view of actions virtuous in respect to benevolence does not pair well with RIGHT, since, as I have argued, if *overall* virtuousness is not superfluous, it is only because actions can be virtuous in respect to one virtue but vicious in respect to another and an action that is virtuous in respect to a virtue can also be wrong.

Moreover, the claim that the tutor's action's benevolence is not right-making does not map on to a correct interpretation of what is defective and what is not in the tutor's practical reasoning. The tutor chose to work through examples with Bob in order to help Bob (and further because she likes being around Bob). In evaluating the tutor's practical reasoning, we should not say that *she thought that something was a reason which was not a reason*, rather we should say that *there was another reason that she failed to recognize or correctly weigh*.

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<sup>19</sup> See Foot, *Natural Goodness*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Ch. 6.

That Bob will be helped (in his pursuit of a legitimate end) if the tutor performs  $\phi$  is a reason for the tutor to  $\phi$ . If  $\phi$ -ing is also unjust, this does not indicate that this reason has been undermined (i.e. that it is not really a reason), what it indicates is that there is some other reason against the tutor's  $\phi$ -ing.

As an objection, one might claim that the reason – that it will help Bob – is an *excluded* reason in the sense that it is a reason that the tutor has reason not to consider in deliberation. I can agree with this claim but still deny that it shows that the fact that the action will help Bob is not a reason. In the example discussed in chapter 6, a man promises his wife only to consider his child's quality of education in selecting which school the child will attend.<sup>20</sup> So the man has a reason not to consider the expensiveness of the schools. Nonetheless, that a school is expensive is a reason not to send the child there, although it is a reason that the man has reason not to consider. So an excluded reason is not thereby an undermined reason. Similarly, to deny that the tutor should be moved to sit down with Bob by considering the fact that she will help Bob is not to commit oneself to the view that helping Bob is not a right-making feature of the action.

The same points apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of the sheriff's preventing a riot and to the case of the man's donating to the local library. The sheriff really does, we may assume, prevent significant harms in the community, although he does so through unjust means. What is wrong with the sheriff's practical reasoning is not that he thinks that something is a reason although it is not; rather what is wrong is that he does not recognize the force of some countervailing reason. And the nephew donating the inheritance really does benefit the local library, although he at the same time breaks an important promise to his aunt. Likewise, this man's practical reasoning is defective not in acting on a merely apparent reason but rather in failing to recognize or act on overriding reasons. Hence, it is plausible that, contrary to Swanton's view, such features are right-making features of action, since to suggest otherwise is to misevaluate the reasons for those actions.

### §3. Muddying the Aretaic Waters

What are the sources of the above problem in Swanton's view? The main aim of the rest of this chapter is to identify these sources and to consider how they can be remedied. I argue that there are two important sources of the problem in Swanton's view. The first source is

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<sup>20</sup> John Harty, "Reasons as Defaults," *Philosophers' Imprint* 8 (2007): 1-28, at 14-15.

that TARGET allows what I call muddying the aretaic waters. I describe what this involves in §3, and I show how a target-centered theory can avoid it in §4. The second source involves problems deriving from the complexity of hitting the targets of virtue; I discuss and resolve such problems in §5.

Recall that the tutor's action misses the target of benevolence, on Swanton's view, because it is performed at the wrong time, since the tutor has a commitment with another student at that time. The sort of benefitting that the tutor engages in is insufficiently integrated with another mode of responsiveness – respect – which makes up the profile of benevolence. The respect is demanded in this case by the commitment with Adam, and the tutor's helping Bob fails to respond adequately to this demand.

What I propose should be denied in this evaluation is that the tutor's disrespect toward Adam (i.e. the tutor's neglect of her commitment to Adam) is a reason for denying that the tutor's action hits the target of benevolence. That the tutor disrespects Adam in performing  $\phi$  is a reason for regarding  $\phi$  as vicious in respect to justice but it is not a reason for regarding  $\phi$  as failing or vicious in respect to benevolence. If this is so, then, at least sometimes, TARGET, as construed by Swanton, confuses the reasons that are relevant to an action's being virtuous in respect to some virtue  $v$  with the reasons that are relevant to its being virtuous in respect to some distinct virtue. I call such confusion *muddying the aretaic waters*. To muddy the aretaic waters is to claim that some reason  $r$  is a reason for/against an action's being virtuous in respect to a virtue  $v$ , when  $r$  is not a reason for/against an action's being virtuous in respect to  $v$ , although  $r$  is a reason for/against the action's being virtuous in respect to some distinct virtue.<sup>21</sup>

It is arguable that TARGET, as construed by Swanton, muddies the aretaic waters not only in the case of the tutor but also in the case of the sheriff preventing a riot, in the case of the nephew donating to a local library, and in the case of the artist collecting shells while neglecting family responsibilities.<sup>22</sup> That the sheriff knowingly arrests an innocent man in  $\phi$ -ing is a reason for regarding  $\phi$  as vicious in respect to justice, but it is not a reason for regarding  $\phi$  as vicious in respect to benevolence. That the nephew breaks his promise and

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<sup>21</sup> I am not claiming that if one holds that a reason  $r$  is relevant to an action's success in regard to virtue  $v$  and that  $r$  is a reason relevant to an action's success in regard to virtue  $w$ , then one is necessarily muddying the aretaic waters. That an action  $\phi$  does more harm than good to Jones is a reason relevant to  $\phi$ 's success in benevolence and generosity, but that is because generosity is a form of benevolence. Further, I allow that there could be reasons that are relevant to the success of distinct virtues that are not related as genus and species. This is further discussed in §4.

<sup>22</sup> For the case of the artist collecting shells, see §1.3 of Chapter 6 of the present work; Swanton, "Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Moral Disagreement," 164-166.

donates to a local library in  $\phi$ -ing is a reason to regard  $\phi$  as vicious in respect to justice but it is not a reason to regard it as vicious in respect to generosity. That the artist neglects family responsibilities while collecting shells in  $\phi$ -ing is a reason for regarding it as vicious in respect to filial piety, but it is not a reason for regarding  $\phi$  as vicious in respect to proper ambition.

I thus propose that an important source of the failure of Swanton's TARGET to capture all right-making features is that it allows for muddying the aretaic waters. But, as a point of caution, we should note that Swanton is not alone in muddying the aretaic waters. Julia Annas, for instance, writes that "[g]enerosity involves considerations of fairness and justice. For, as Aristotle points out, generosity requires taking from the right sources as well as giving to the right people in the right way".<sup>23</sup> On this account, the aforementioned nephew who donates to a local library does not perform an action that is virtuous in respect to generosity, because his use of the inheritance involves breaking an important promise. Although it is true that the nephew does not donate from just sources, I believe that this is not a reason for regarding the action as vicious in respect to generosity. It is rather a reason for regarding the action as vicious in respect to justice. Annas' appeal to "right sources" is ambiguous between the right sources full stop and the right sources relative to generosity. If we take the right sources, right people and so on to be the right sources and right people full stop, then it is difficult to imagine there being generous actions that are not right. Such an account of generous action does not pair well with RIGHT, since if there is such a thing as overall virtuousness of action and it is rightness of action, then there must be non-right actions that are virtuous in respect to some virtue, and it must be possible for there to be actions that are virtuous in respect  $v$  and vicious in respect  $w$ . There is no reason to regard generosity as an exception to this general constraint. Note however that Swanton does maintain that one can hit the target of some virtue and also miss the target of another virtue. This possibility, in her framework, has to do with the salience of modes of responsiveness and with the scope of the fields of virtues. It is my claim that TARGET, as construed by Swanton, does not allow for enough aretaically mixed action, not that it does not allow for it at all.

It is plausible that muddying the aretaic waters is an instance of the more general "wrong kind of reasons" problem. Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson have argued in regard to claims such as, "X is funny just in case it is appropriate to be amused by  $x$ ", that there are

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<sup>23</sup> Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 84. Although Annas is there focusing on generosity as a virtue rather than as a property of actions, she illustrates her claim by examples of actions.

reasons for it being inappropriate to be amused by  $x$  which do not have anything to do with the funniness of  $x$ . For instance, it is inappropriate to be amused by a cruel joke, but as D'Arms and Jacobson plausibly claim, that  $x$  is cruel is characteristically not a reason for regarding  $x$  as not funny.<sup>24</sup> To say otherwise is to give a “reason of the wrong kind” for regarding something as not funny. I believe that giving reasons of the wrong kind in this sense is going on in any claim that one fails to act virtuously in respect to generosity in the case that one donates from unjust sources. There are, of course, appropriate and inappropriate sources or instruments of generous action but inappropriate instruments, *relative to generosity*, are things like Monopoly™ “money”, the giving of which seldom meets the need of the patient, or the giving of external goods that do not provide long-term benefit for the patient. *Unjust* instruments like the nephew’s inheritance differ in that the giving of them can make a real contribution to effectively meeting the need of the patient, a local library in this case.<sup>25</sup>

Viewing muddying the aretaic waters as an instance of the wrong kind of reasons problem can also potentially explain why philosophers such as Swanton and Annas have been inclined to muddy the aretaic waters. In accordance with Martha Nussbaum’s influential use of the term,<sup>26</sup> we can *thinly* define, for instance, generous action as action that responds well to whatever is in the sphere/field of generosity. This thin definition of generous action is similar to Swanton’s formal account of what it is for an action to hit the target of a virtue. My point is that such thin definitions of virtue concepts, like the definition of funniness as whatever it is appropriate to be amused by, allow for the wrong kind of reasons problem, which is what allows for muddying the aretaic waters.

I am claiming, then, that there are ways of responding poorly to whatever is in the sphere/field of generosity which are not ways of acting contrary to generosity. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the field of generosity consists of the needs of others, when these needs cannot be met without help from others.<sup>27</sup> Now suppose my friend is in need of some help moving in during the weekend. There are many ways that I could respond

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<sup>24</sup> Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson, “Sentiment and Value,” *Ethics* 110 (2000): 722-748, at 731.

<sup>25</sup> I have heard someone present the claim, “One can’t be generous with someone else’s money”, as an old saw. This claim does not apply to the case at hand because the inheritance belongs to the nephew, but even if it did, the claim is refuted by the case of Robin Hood.

<sup>26</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 14 (1988): 32-53, at 37-39.

<sup>27</sup> One reason why this is an oversimplification is that we do not regard employers as performing generous actions in paying employees their due, even though paying employees their due helps employees meet their needs, when these needs cannot be met without the help of others.

poorly to this need. If I just do not care that my friend needs help, then I respond in a way contrary to generosity because I do not care about that to which generosity is responsive (i.e. the needs of others). But I can also respond poorly in this kind of case even if I do care (and I care adequately) about that to which generosity is responsive. For instance, if I am supposed to go away to a philosophy conference this weekend, then I can poorly respond to my friend's need if I cancel the trip to the philosophy conference in order to help my friend move in. Such a response should hardly be thought of as contrary to generosity. It should be thought of, rather, as contrary to e.g. proper ambition.

So there are ways of poorly responding to whatever is in the sphere of some virtue which are not ways of responding incorrectly in regard to that virtue (i.e. contrary to that virtue). The problem is that "responding well" and "responding poorly" to items in the field of a virtue can be taken as all-things-considered notions, but e.g. "responding generously" is not an all-things-considered notion. It is this fact which I think potentially explains why some virtue ethicists have been led to say, for instance, that one can fail in respect to generosity in taking from unjust sources or that one can fail in respect to benevolence by breaking a promise. I view these claims as offering reasons of the wrong kind for failing in regard to these virtues.

In light of this diagnosis of Swanton's TARGET's failure, I suggest the following constraint on a successful complement to RIGHT: a theory of virtue properties of action which is a well suited pair for RIGHT will not allow muddying the aretaic waters or, what is the same, the giving of reasons of the wrong kind for being virtuous or vicious in respect to some virtue. Only if a theory meets this constraint will it capture all right-making features of action.

#### §4. Clearing the Aretaic Waters

I have argued that e.g. benevolent actions that have benevolence as a right-making feature need not hit the target of benevolence, as construed by Swanton. In arguing for that claim, I relied on her view of the target of benevolence as substantiated by her view of the profile of benevolence, and specifically the claim that respect is a mode of responsiveness internal to the profile of benevolence. Since Swanton maintains that modes of responsiveness must be integrated in the profiles of virtues, it turns out that the sort of promotion of someone's good that is at the same time disrespectful will fail to hit the target of benevolence, unless the

disrespect is not salient. From this, it follows that an action can promote someone's good and that that action's promotion of good will not be right-making, according to (RM). I then argued that, in at least some such cases, this implication is incorrect.

A target-centered theory can avoid my objection if it accepts an alternative view of the targets of virtue. Swanton's target-centered view can also avoid my objection if it modifies (RM) – my interpretation of right-makers in Swanton's target-centered view (more on this in §5). In §4, my aim is to provide target-centered theorists with some general resources for clearing the aretaic waters in an account of the targets of virtue which retains attractive features of Swanton's basic framework. Such attractive features include the idea that the targets of virtue are to be understood through the fields and profiles of virtue and the idea that the profiles of virtue are to be understood through modes of responsiveness. In doing so, I thus retain Swanton's terminology but I wish to be read as appropriating it, since I make no claim that how I understand the profiles, fields, and targets of virtue, and how they relate to one another, is an understanding shared by Swanton.

My discussion proceeds as follows. I begin by presenting a monadic view of the profile, target, and field of a specific virtue. I call this view "monadic" since it views that virtue as having only one mode of responsiveness internal to its profile. I consider such a view to simplify my initial discussion so that non-essential features of a view of the targets of virtue do not obscure some sources of muddying the aretaic waters. After showing that monadic views of the targets of virtue can muddy the aretaic waters, I suggest what claim such views can be paired with in order to clear the aretaic waters in those views, and I argue for the desirability of this claim in a target-centered account. I then consider a dyadic view of the target of a virtue in order to make some points about complications present in relevantly pluralistic views which are not present in monadic views. Overall, my discussion will show that muddying the aretaic waters has more than one source – some formal and some content-related. In regard to the latter, my aim is not to defend a specific view of the content of hitting the target of a virtue, but rather to illuminate what is at stake in such views in relation to the problem of muddying the aretaic waters. My achievement of this aim will also importantly clarify the meaning of relevant claims such as that respect does or does not belong to the profile of benevolence, and it will also show that a view that does not muddy the aretaic waters can allow in some cases that an action's failure in respect is relevant to that action's missing the target of benevolence. As such, my discussion further clarifies what is and is not involved in muddying the aretaic waters.



Consider the following monadic view of the target of benevolence:

(MTB): An action hits the target of benevolence just in case it successfully enough promotes another's good.<sup>28</sup>

(MTB) is naturally paired with the following views of the profile and field of benevolence:

(MPB): The profile of benevolence consists only of promotion.<sup>29</sup>

(MFB): The field of benevolence consists only of others considered as capable of being benefitted and harmed.<sup>30</sup>

(MTB) is naturally paired with (MPB) and (MFB) because to hit the target of a virtue  $v$  just is to successfully instantiate a mode of responsiveness internal to the profile of  $v$  in response to items in the field of  $v$ . Hence, if (MTB) is true, then (MPB) is true. If the profile of benevolence contained some mode of responsiveness other than promotion of good, then there could be acts that hit the target of benevolence which are not acts of promoting good or at least there could be acts that hit the target of benevolence but whose hitting the target of benevolence is not reducible to their being successful acts of promotion. A claim about the profile of a virtue relates to a claim about the target of that virtue insofar as the modes of responsiveness internal to the profile of a virtue are modes of responsiveness whose successful instantiation is what (ultimately) makes an action hit the target of that virtue.

(MTB) and (MPB) also suggest (MFB). If the point of promoting A's good is simply to benefit A or to reduce or prevent A's harm, then promotion of good is responsive to A only insofar as A is capable of being benefitted or harmed. In general, the field of a virtue consists of those items to which modes in the profile of that virtue are responsive and to which acts that hit the target of that virtue successfully respond (*qua* acts that hit the target of that virtue). Hence, if the field of benevolence consists only of others considered as beings capable of being benefitted and harmed, and the profile of benevolence consists only of promotion of good, then to hit the target of benevolence is to perform an act that successfully

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<sup>28</sup> MTB = Monadic Target Benevolence. My choice of "another's good" over "the good of others" is an intentional oversimplification. I discuss this issue in §5.

<sup>29</sup> MPB = Monadic Profile Benevolence.

<sup>30</sup> MFB = Monadic Field Benevolence.

enough promotes the good of others by benefitting them or preventing or reducing their harm.

I now refer to the conjunction of (MTB), (MPB), and (MFB) as the monadic view of benevolence (though it is not the only possible monadic view of benevolence). Does the monadic view of benevolence avoid muddying the aretaic waters? That depends on what sorts of considerations are taken to have bearing on the successfulness of an act of promotion. If an act of promotion can be rendered unsuccessful simply by its being e.g. unjust, then the monadic view will not avoid muddying the aretaic waters. Hence, the potential to muddy the aretaic waters is not a feature of pluralistic views of the targets of virtue alone.

The monadic view can avoid muddying the aretaic waters if paired with the following claim:

(SR): The standards of success in an instantiation of a mode of responsiveness are provided exclusively by the rationale or point of that mode of responsiveness.<sup>31</sup>

If the rationale or point of promoting the good of another is simply to bring it about or allow it to happen that she is benefitted and/or not harmed, then considerations of justice have bearing on the successfulness of promoting another's good only to the extent that they have bearing on whether that individual is benefitted or harmed, according to (SR). Accordingly, if  $\phi$  consists of pirating some software and installing it on a colleague's computer with the result that the colleague is benefitted, and  $\phi$ 's violation of intellectual property rights does not bear on the promotion of the colleague's good, then  $\phi$ 's being a violation of intellectual property rights has no bearing on whether  $\phi$  hits the target of benevolence (in regard to the colleague; more on this in §5), if (MTB) and (SR) are true.

I regard (SR) as an attractive claim in the context of a target-centered account of right action. To see its attractiveness, consider first how it focuses or narrows an application of the Aristotelian mean. Suppose that  $\phi$  instantiates promoting another's good and that  $\phi$  involves giving a medication to someone. If  $\phi$  is successful as an act of such promotion, then  $\phi$  will be performed, relative to the rationale of promoting good, at the right time, in regard to the right persons or objects, deploying the right instruments, to the right extent, for the right motivating reasons, etc. If (SR) is true, then some dimensions of the mean may be

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<sup>31</sup> SR = Success Rationale.

inapplicable. For instance, if the agent's motivating reasons have no bearing on whether the other is benefitted or harmed, then the agent's being motivated by e.g. a desire to harm the other does not make  $\phi$  unsuccessful in promoting the other's good. If we accept (SR), then, relative to the rationale of promotion, a right time will be a time that the other is benefitted by receiving the medication, a right person will be a person that is benefitted by receiving the medication, the right instruments will be those instruments that conduce to the benefit of the other (e.g. the correct medication for her illness), a right extent will be an amount or dosage of medicine that benefits the other, etc.

What will not be considered in such an application of the mean is e.g. whether it is legal to give the medicine to the other, whether giving the medicine to the other is to give away medicine that the agent needs, whether the agent is well-motivated, and whether the agent stole the medicine. Rather, if we accept (SR), we should see such failures of  $\phi$  not as failures of  $\phi$  as an act of promoting the other's good but rather as failures in e.g. respecting the law, self-love, or caring for the other. Only if giving a person stolen medicine has bearing on whether that person's good is promoted will it have bearing on the successfulness of that act, considered as an act of promoting that person's good, according to (SR).

Why should such a focused or narrow understanding of an act's being successful as an act of promoting another's good be seen as desirable in a target-centered account? Firstly, insofar as it excludes considerations of e.g. respect for the law and respect for the other's autonomy, when such considerations do not bear on the promotion of good, it avoids muddying the aretaic waters. If  $\phi$  involves successfully promoting A's good by deploying unjust instruments, then the present view will imply that  $\phi$  hits the target of benevolence (at least in regard to A) but misses the target of justice. Given my argument in §2 and §3, this is a desirable implication. Secondly, such a focused application of the mean makes it undeniable that one is not appealing to a prior standard of right action in applying the mean and thus makes it easy to fend off circularity objections. Thirdly, in making it clear that an act can hit the target of benevolence without being remotely e.g. just, the existence of aretaically mixed actions is obvious and so the role of the concept of overall virtuousness is secure. Views that muddy the aretaic waters risk making the existence of aretaically mixed actions dubious or at least risk making e.g. actions that both hit the target of benevolence and miss the target of justice dubious.

I have claimed that (SR) is attractive, but I do not claim that the monadic view of benevolence is attractive (nor do I claim that it is unattractive). If the monadic view of

benevolence is correct, then no action can hit the target of benevolence unless it promotes another's good. A pluralistic view of benevolence, in contrast, allows that an action can hit the target of benevolence without being an act of promotion. I now consider a pluralistic view to consider some other sources of muddying the aretaic waters. Consider the following dyadic view of the target of benevolence:

(DTB):  $\phi$  hits the target of benevolence just in case its instantiation of a mode of responsiveness internal to the profile of benevolence is successful enough, when there are two modes of responsiveness internal to the profile of benevolence – universal love and promotion of good.<sup>32</sup>

(DTB) implies the following view of the profile of benevolence:

(DPB): The profile of benevolence consists only of universal love and promotion of good.<sup>33</sup>

(DTB) and (DPB) suggest the following view of the field of benevolence:

(DFB): The field of benevolence consists of others considered as capable of being benefitted and harmed and others considered as objects of universal love.<sup>34</sup>

I now refer to the conjunction of (DTB), (DPB), and (DFB) as the dyadic view of benevolence. If the dyadic view is to be truly dyadic, it must be paired with the claim that universal love and promotion of good are distinct modes of responsiveness. Otherwise, the two names of modes of responsiveness would refer to a single mode of responsiveness.

Modes of responsiveness are distinct modes of responsiveness, on my view, just in case they have distinct rationales or points. The point of promoting A's good is roughly to bring it about or let it happen that A is benefitted and/or not harmed. That e.g. respect for A's autonomy does not have the same point as promoting A's good can be seen by considering that respect for A's autonomy can be at odds with the promotion of A's good. This can be the case, for instance, when a doctor respects the autonomy of a patient by fully informing a

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<sup>32</sup> DTB = Dyadic Target Benevolence. There is an intentional oversimplification in (DTB): it allows that an act hits the target of benevolence if it succeeds as a loving act and wildly fails as an act of promotion. This might be an attractive view but it needs defense. I discuss this issue in §5.

<sup>33</sup> DPB = Dyadic Profile Benevolence.

<sup>34</sup> DFB = Dyadic Field Benevolence.

patient about the dire consequences of foregoing a surgery and leaving the decision up to the patient whether to forego that surgery. If promotion of good and respect for autonomy were not distinct modes of responsiveness, then the doctor's (or institution's or state's) letting the patient decide to forego the surgery would be a failure to respect her autonomy, since it does not promote her good. Since this is not the case, promotion of good and respect for autonomy are distinct modes of responsiveness.

Considering the dyadic view of benevolence, we can suppose, for the sake of argument, that universal love is appreciation of human beings considered as human beings, and that the rationale or point of a loving action is to express such appreciation. If this is the point of acts of universal love, then one may promote the good of another without thereby expressing universal love for that other, since one may benefit another while not loving them and even while despising them. This is sufficient to show that universal love and promotion of good are distinct and that promotion of good is not a species<sup>35</sup> of universal love. In addition, it is plausible that universal love is not a species of promotion of good. One may successfully express appreciation for a human being by drawing their portrait and without doing anything that has the point of promoting the good of that human being. If so, what has been shown is that universal love and promotion of good as modes of responsiveness are not necessarily conjoined. But since one can express appreciation of a human being by promoting their good, it is not the case that these modes of responsiveness are always instantiated in separate responses.

On the dyadic view of benevolence,  $\phi$  can hit the target of benevolence through successful appreciation of another, even if  $\phi$  is not an act of promotion. Can the dyadic view of benevolence avoid muddying the aretaic waters? I focus on two complications. One is that, in maintaining that the profile of benevolence is composed of a plurality of modes of responsiveness, the dyadic view implies that the target of a virtue is complex in the sense that the point of hitting the target of benevolence is not reducible to a single rationale. Issues related to complexity in the targets of virtue are not discussed until §5. The other complication arises specifically from the content of the dyadic view. Unlike promotion of good, the rationale of loving appreciation is not at all clear.

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<sup>35</sup> I conceive of the genus-species relation in this context as follow: if one mode of responsiveness is a species of another, then the point of the former includes the point of the latter. Hence, if universal love is a species of promotion of good, then the point of loving A includes the point of promoting A's good.

As my discussion will illustrate, pairing (SR) with the dyadic view is not sufficient for the dyadic view to avoid muddying the aretaic waters. Implausibly, one might claim that the point of lovingly appreciating someone is to respect that person's rights. But whether this claim is implausible or not, the point is that the content of an account of universal love has some bearing on whether the dyadic view avoids muddying the aretaic waters. The same is true of the content of accounts of all modes of responsiveness as they feature in accounts of the targets and profiles of virtues. (SR) will allow a view to avoid muddying the aretaic waters only if paired with a view of modes of responsiveness which do not themselves muddy the aretaic waters, as would arguably be done in the case of the claim that the point of promoting good is to benefit someone in a respectful, non-paternalistic way. In short, (SR) is a formal claim but muddying the aretaic waters can have content-based sources.

The content of the dyadic view, insofar as it includes universal love, may appear more vulnerable to muddying the aretaic waters than the monadic view. Consider, for instance, whether the successfulness of an act of loving appreciation (characteristically) depends on whether that act does not disrespect the beloved. Can an act fail as an act of loving A if and because A is disrespected? It is plausible that a photographer may express loving appreciation of A in photographing A even if A has not consented to being photographed. But the question is whether such appreciation is successful as an act of loving appreciation. This question can be adequately answered only by appeal to a substantive account of what loving appreciation is. If it turns out that successfully appreciative acts toward A do not characteristically depend on not disrespecting A, then the dyadic view, paired with (SR), will likely avoid muddying the aretaic waters.

But, importantly, even if it turns out that successfully appreciating A characteristically depends on not failing in respecting A, it is not at all clear that the resultant dyadic view will muddy the aretaic waters. There is no reason to think that whether  $\phi$  succeeds or fails in regard to respecting A is never relevant to whether  $\phi$  hits the target of benevolence. Rather, a view muddies the aretaic waters only if it takes some fact as relevant when it is not relevant to an action's hitting or missing the target of a specific virtue. If the monadic view of benevolence is correct and if e.g.  $\phi$  involves a violation of rights and this fact does not bear on the promotion of good, then to claim that the action misses the target of benevolence on account of its violation of these rights is to muddy the aretaic waters. But even on the monadic view, and as paired with (SR), an action's failing to respect someone or their rights

can be relevant to whether that action hits the target of benevolence. This would be the case if an action harms A by failing to respect their property rights.

The point is that a view that denies that respect belongs to the profile of benevolence does not thereby imply that a failure in respect is never relevant to hitting the target of benevolence. What such views deny is that e.g.  $\phi$ 's disrespecting A can be an *ultimate* reason why  $\phi$  misses the target of benevolence. On the dyadic view, the only ultimate reason why an action misses the target of benevolence is that it is unsuccessful as an act of promotion or as an act of universal love. An action's disrespecting someone will have, on the dyadic view, at most indirect bearing on whether that action hits the target of benevolence. That is,  $\phi$ 's failure in respecting A will have bearing on whether  $\phi$  hits the target of benevolence only insofar as  $\phi$ 's failure in respecting A has bearing on  $\phi$ 's success in loving A or in promoting A's good. If so, an action will not fail to hit the target of benevolence ultimately on account of its failure in respecting A but rather ultimately on account of its failure in e.g. loving A.

Although failures in respect can figure in what makes an action miss the target of benevolence on such accounts, these accounts arguably do not muddy the aretaic waters in allowing this. We should be skeptical of appeals to respect and disrespect in claims about whether an action hits the target of benevolence only when they are appeals to instances of respect and disrespect which are not appropriately related to the modes of responsiveness internal to the profile of benevolence. While a view of benevolence that includes respect in the profile of benevolence arguably muddies the aretaic waters, a view that denies that respect belongs to the profile of benevolence is not thereby denying that a failure in respect can have bearing on an act's missing the target of benevolence.

In my discussion of the dyadic view so far, I have made general points about how a view of the content of the profile and target of benevolence can bear on whether that view muddies the aretaic waters. I now introduce a non-content based complication in the dyadic view (and indeed in all pluralistic views of the targets of virtue), a complication that arises from the fact that the profile of the virtue involves more than one mode of response.

Whatever is true of the relation between successful loving and successful respecting, the dyadic view (and the monadic view) avoid(s) muddying the waters in the cases I mentioned in §2 and §3. Given that successful promotion of good does not depend on respect for Adam, the innocent man, and the dead aunt in the cases of the tutor, the sheriff and the nephew, the dyadic view still allows that those acts hit the target of benevolence, since (DTB), as I have

formulated it, implies that if an act is successful as an act of promoting good, then it will hit the target of benevolence, regardless of whether the act fails in regard to universal love.

We are able to discount the nature of universal love in applying (DTB) to these cases only because (DTB) does not require integration of universal love and promotion of good in an act that hits the target of benevolence. However, this lack of an integrative requirement is problematic. It implies, for instance, that an action will hit the target of benevolence if it is successful in regard to universal love, even if the action is wildly unsuccessful in regard to promotion of good. Yet an integrative requirement is also problematic. If there is such a requirement then there will be at least some cases in which an action fails to hit the target of benevolence although it succeeds as an act of promotion. But if (RM) is true, then that act's promoting someone's good will not be a right-making feature of that action. I now resolve this problem and another problem that has the same source.

## §5. Right-Makers and Complexity in Hitting the Targets of Virtue

Two right-maker related problems remain for views of the targets of virtue which accept (SR) and avoid muddying the aretaic waters. These problems derive from the complexity present in hitting the target of a virtue – the fact that hitting the target of a virtue is or can be complex. Consider that  $\phi$  may successfully promote A's good but fail in promoting B's good (when these are both salient in the situation). What are we to say regarding whether  $\phi$  hits the target of benevolence? If we say that  $\phi$  fails to hit the target of benevolence and we accept (RM),<sup>36</sup> then it will turn out that  $\phi$ 's promoting A's good is not a right-making feature of  $\phi$  – an implication that I take to be incorrect in typical cases. This is one kind of problem with the complexity in hitting the target of a virtue – the problem of a single action's hitting that target in relation to one item in the field of that virtue and missing that target in relation to some other item in the field of that virtue.

Consider also that if the profile of a virtue contains two or more modes of responsiveness, then if  $\phi$  instantiates two such modes,  $\phi$ 's instantiation of the first mode could be successful while its instantiation of the second mode is unsuccessful. So, for instance, what are we to say if an action is successful as an act of promoting A's good but unsuccessful as an act of lovingly appreciating A? If we deny that it hits the target of benevolence and we accept

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<sup>36</sup> (RM): A feature  $F$  of  $\phi$  is a right-making feature of  $\phi$  just in case both  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of a virtue  $v$  is not undermined as a right-maker and either  $F$  consists in  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of  $v$  or  $F$  significantly figures in  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of  $v$ .



(RM), then  $\phi$ 's promoting A's good is not right-making. Again, I think such an implication is implausible in typical cases. This is the second kind of problem in the complexity of hitting the target of a virtue – the problem of a single action's successfully instantiating one mode of responsiveness internal to a virtue and unsuccessfully instantiating another mode of responsiveness internal to that virtue.

There are at least two (compatible) ways to respond to such problems. Consider again the case that  $\phi$  successfully promotes A's good and unsuccessfully promotes B's good. One way to respond to this case is to claim that  $\phi$  hits the target of benevolence in regard to A but misses the target of benevolence in regard to B. Such a response, in effect, allows for indexing the target of a virtue to a single item in the field of that virtue. Ordinary language virtue concepts as applied to action can be indexed, since e.g. the same action may be respectful of the authority of A but disrespectful of the authority of B or it may be generous to A and stingy to B. The present response seeks to retain this feature of ordinary language virtue predicates.

If we accept that the targets can be indexed in the above sense, then the question arises as to how hitting the target of a virtue in regard to A is linked to that action's overall virtuousness. Recall that viewing overall virtuousness in terms of defaults in a target-centered theory would involve accepting defaults such as the following:

(B): Actions that hit the target of benevolence are overall virtuous actions.<sup>37</sup>

If it is merely the case that  $\phi$  hits the target of benevolence *in regard to A*, then (B) does not apply to  $\phi$ . Hence, if  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of benevolence in regard to A (and not full stop) is to contribute to the rightness of  $\phi$ , and we accept (RM), then we could introduce defaults that allow for indexing such as the following:

(IB): Actions that hit the target of benevolence in regard to at least one item in the field of benevolence are overall virtuous.<sup>38</sup>

(IB) is consistent with the claim that  $\phi$  does not hit the target of benevolence although it hits the target of benevolence in regard to A, since it could be that the default's application to  $\phi$  is defeated, because  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of benevolence in regard to A is outweighed by

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<sup>37</sup> B = Benevolence.

<sup>38</sup> IB = Indexed Benevolence.

its missing the target of benevolence in regard to B. I see no compelling reason to deny defaults such as (IB), but introducing such defaults is neither necessary nor sufficient for resolving the right-maker related problems arising from complexity in the targets of virtue.

Indexing the targets of virtue does not resolve *all* the right-maker problems arising from complexity in the targets of virtue, since it does not bear on the problem arising from an action's being successful in regard to one mode of responsiveness in the profile of a virtue while being unsuccessful in regard to another. Moreover, indexing the targets of virtue is not necessary for resolving *any* of the right-maker related problems arising from complexity in the targets of virtue. As I will argue, if we alter (RM) so as to resolve the problem of e.g.  $\phi$ 's being successful in promoting A's good while also failing in loving A, then the same alteration of (RM) will be sufficient to resolve the problem of e.g.  $\phi$ 's success in promoting A's good but failure in promoting B's good. Since indexing the targets of virtue, although an important issue in its own right, is not necessary or sufficient for resolving these problems, I focus on the modification of (RM) in the remainder of this section.

(RM) maintains that no feature of an action is right-making unless that feature consists in hitting the target of a virtue or it significantly figures in hitting the target of a virtue. The unattractive feature of (RM) is its position regarding the possibility that a feature  $F$  of  $\phi$  may contribute to  $\phi$ 's success in regard to a virtue even though  $\phi$  does not hit the target of that virtue.

Essentially, the problem with (RM) is that it requires right-making features to pass through the medium of hitting the target of a virtue in order to contribute to an action's overall virtuousness.<sup>39</sup> Hitting the target of a virtue, like overall virtuousness, is a feature of actions to which other features can contribute.  $\phi$ 's promoting A's good characteristically contributes to  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of benevolence, and  $\phi$ 's harming B characteristically counts against or negatively contributes to  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of benevolence. To require that right-making features of action pass through the medium of hitting the target of a virtue, then, is to miss out on the right-making features of  $\phi$  which contribute to e.g.  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of benevolence in the case that  $\phi$  does not hit the target of benevolence.

To remove this unattractive feature from (RM), I suggest the following modification of (RM):

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<sup>39</sup> I thank Garrett Cullity for this insightful suggestion, though he is, of course, not to be held responsible for any defects in my formulation or development of it.

(RM\*): A feature *F* of  $\phi$  is a right-making feature of  $\phi$  just in case (i) *F* consists in  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of  $v$  or *F* significantly contributes to  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of  $v$ , when *F* can significantly contribute to  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of  $v$  even if  $\phi$  does not hit the target of  $v$ , and (ii) *F* is not undermined as a right-maker.

(RM\*) differs from (RM) in its allowance that a feature that contributes to e.g.  $\phi$ 's hitting the target of benevolence – e.g.  $\phi$ 's promoting A's good – can contribute to  $\phi$ 's overall virtuousness (rightness) even in the case that  $\phi$  does not hit the target of benevolence, as could be the case if  $\phi$  significantly harms B or if  $\phi$  involves a significant failure in loving some item in the field of benevolence.

As such, (RM\*) resolves both right-maker related problems arising from the complexity in the targets of virtue. If  $\phi$  benefits A and harms B and it fails to hit the target of benevolence on account of its harming B, (RM\*) still allows that  $\phi$ 's benefitting A is a right-making feature. And if  $\phi$  benefits A but fails in loving A, (RM\*) still allows that  $\phi$ 's benefitting A is right-making.

In fact, (RM\*), if paired with Swanton's view of the targets of virtue, allows that view to capture the right-making features in the cases discussed in §2. The tutor's benefitting Bob plausibly contributes to its hitting the target of benevolence, as viewed by Swanton, even if that target is not hit due to the action's lack of sufficient integration with respect for the commitment to Adam.

However, the problem of muddying the aretaic waters is not rendered insignificant just because a view that muddies the aretaic waters can account for the right-making features of such actions. To claim that the sheriff fails to hit the target of benevolence is deeply counter-intuitive, and I do not share Swanton's intuition that respect belongs to the profile of benevolence or to generosity. On my view, to consider whether an action hits the target of benevolence is to bracket out considerations having to do with respect unless and only to the extent that such considerations bear on the promotion of good and possibly universal love.

It may be objected that a view such as mine also has counter-intuitive results. For instance, if my friend is in need and I pickpocket twenty dollars to give to my friend, then it may be said that it is counter-intuitive to regard such an action as generous or as hitting the target of generosity. In ordinary language, for instance, no one would claim that such an action is generous except perhaps ironically. My response to this objection is to identify and criticize what I take to be its sources.

Firstly, the action under consideration is actually two different actions. There is the pickpocketing, and there is the helping the friend in need by giving him the money. The pickpocketing does not hit the target of generosity, since it does not successfully respond to anyone's needs. The giving away of the money, it is to be assumed, significantly helps the friend in need which, on my view, counts in favor of its hitting the target of generosity. Is there any reason to regard the second action as failing in regard to generosity? Certainly, there is reason to regard the action as failing in regard to justice, but unless the action fails in some way to help the needy or to appreciate the plight of those in need, then I do not see any reason to regard it as failing in regard to generosity.

Secondly, no one would call such an action generous (without saying anything else) because its generosity is not what is salient in the case. The generosity involved is apparently trivial and the injustice involved is less trivial. Given this, it would be unnatural to consider the case, and then to claim that the action is generous without mentioning anything about its injustice, but it would not be unnatural to consider the case, and then to claim only that it is unjust without mentioning anything regarding its generosity. But if someone were to claim of the case that it involved someone performing an unjust act and then a generous act, I would not regard this as an unnatural use of language. One might justify such a claim by pointing out the difference between this case and a case in which I stole the money but then wasted it. There is something to be said in favor of my conduct in the former case that is absent in the latter case (although the pickpocketing is presumably wrong in both cases). It is natural to explain this difference by characterizing the former case as involving generous action while denying that the latter case involves generous action.

In this chapter, I have argued that target-centered accounts are superior to both qualified-agent and agent-based accounts. One significant source of the target-centered account's superiority is the kind of account of right-making features of action that it provides. I also identified and developed an important objection to Swanton's version of the target-centered account. In response to this objection, I have shown how a target-centered theory can retain attractive features of Swanton's view and avoid this objection. My conclusion is that a target-centered account that (i) avoids muddying the aretaic waters and (ii) accepts (RM\*) is the most plausible type of virtue-ethical account of right action.

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