

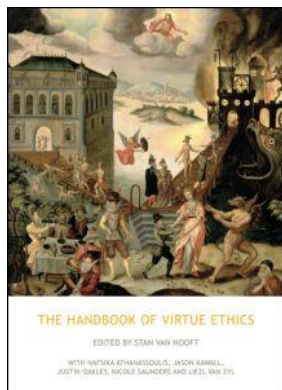
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Stan van Hooft, Nafsika Athanassoulis, Jason Kawall, Justin Oakley, Nicole Saunders, Liezl Van Zyl

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Liezl van Zyl

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Right action and the targets of virtue

Liezl van Zyl

One of the central questions in normative theory is the question of what makes an action right: which quality (or qualities) must an action possess in order for it to be right? Consequentialism and deontology answer this question by making reference to consequences and duty respectively, so it seems that if virtue ethics is to be taken seriously as an alternative normative theory, it should provide an account of right action that is distinctive in some way. The most popular virtue-ethical theory of right action is the qualified-agent account developed by neo-Aristotelians like Rosalind Hursthouse (1999: 28):

(V): An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

There is some disagreement over whether this criterion answers the question of what makes an action right: that is, whether it provides an explanatory account of right action as opposed to a merely substantive account (see Slote 2001: 4ff.; Sandler 2007: 91; Kawall 2009a; Crisp 2010). It is tempting to read (V) as stating (or implying) that it is the fact that an action would be done by a virtuous agent acting in character that makes it right. However, another interpretation of (V) is that it simply asserts that what all right actions *have in common* is that they are the kinds of actions that virtuous agents characteristically perform, and it does not necessarily follow that it is this feature that makes them right. It is fair to assume that the virtuous agent chooses an action for reasons that are independent of the fact that it is the kind of action that virtuous agents characteristically perform, and that it is these reasons that make the action right. Aristotle claims that what distinguishes the virtuous person (*phronimos*) from others is that he is the “standard or yardstick” of ethical truth (*NE* III 4.1113a29–33). As Sarah Broadie explains, there are two ways to interpret this claim:

Aristotle is occasionally thought to mean by this that the say-so of the *phronimos* determines, in the sense of actually constituting (or “constructing”), the truth about

particular ethical questions. I do not think that this is Aristotle's view. He of course sees the *phronimos* as a good guide for the rest of us ... To the *phronimos* in operation, considering how to respond in some particular situation, it seems as if he is looking for an answer which is in some sense "there"; or if he forms the judgment instantly, the discrimination, though obvious, presents itself as what would have been correct whether or not he had realised it ... Aristotle, then, does not explain ethical truth as what the *phronimos* reliably apprehends: he explains the *phronimos* as reliably apprehending ethical truth.

(Broadie 2007: 120–21, cited in Swanton 2010b)

If Broadie is correct then we can arrive at an explanation of what makes an action right by giving an account of the "ethical truth" that the virtuous person apprehends. At this point there will be an opportunity to slip into either consequentialism or deontology by claiming that what the virtuous person sees is that the action will have good consequences, or that it is in accordance with duty. For the account to remain distinctively virtue-ethical it would have to make reference to the virtues, which may lead to the following kind of answer: what the virtuous person sees is that the act is virtuous (kind, benevolent, just, etc.). And an account of what makes an action virtuous could then lead us to an explanation of what makes an action right.

One such explanation is the agent-based view provided by Michael Slote in *Morals from Motives* (2001): namely, that actions are virtuous if they exhibit, express or reflect admirable inner states (*ibid.*: 17, see also Kawall, this volume, Chapter 11). Christine Swanton provides an alternative (and competing) explanation: namely, that right action involves a successful response to the demands of the world. Somewhat surprisingly, Swanton's account has received very little attention. My aim in this chapter is therefore to highlight the most important features of a target-centred account of right action, as well as some of its strengths. In particular, I draw attention to Swanton's *conception* of right action, in particular her distinction between rightness and goodness (praiseworthiness, reasonableness or moral worth) of actions, for it has important implications for problems relating to moral conflict and action guidance.

A TARGET-CENTRED ACCOUNT OF RIGHT ACTION

Swanton's account of right action has two central theses:

- P1: An action is virtuous in respect V if and only if it hits the target of virtue V.
- P2: An action is right if and only if it is overall virtuous. (Swanton 2003: 228)

I will explain the account by focusing on the following terms: "virtue", "virtuous action", "right action" and "action from virtue". Swanton defines a *virtue* as "a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field in an excellent or good enough way" (*ibid.*: 19). The field of a virtue consists of those items that are the sphere(s) of concern of the virtue. So, for example, the items in the field of temperance are bodily pleasures, and courage is concerned with dangerous situations. These

items make demands on us, and a virtue is a disposition to respond to these demands in an excellent or good enough way. Thus, for example, courage is a disposition to respond well to dangerous situations, whereas cowardice and rashness are dispositions to respond poorly to dangerous situations (see *ibid.*: 20–23).

A *virtuous action* involves a successful response in a particular situation. Swanton follows Aristotle in this regard, who claims, for example, that a liberal person will give the right amounts to the right people and in the right circumstances; he will spend money on the right objects (rather than squandering it) and in the right way: namely, with pleasure rather than grudgingly (*NE IV* 1.1120a). Although it is tempting to think of a virtuous act as whatever a virtuous person would do, Aristotle accepts that an agent could possess a particular virtue but still fail to act virtuously. A courageous person may on occasion be so affected by tiredness or grief that he fails to respond well to a dangerous situation, thereby acting out of character. Qualified-agent accounts try to avoid this problem by defining virtuous action as what a virtuous person would *characteristically* do (see Hursthouse 1999: 28), but it can still be asked: what makes the action the kind of thing a virtuous person would characteristically do? Or: which feature(s) of his action alerts us to the fact that the virtuous agent is now acting in character?

Swanton's proposal is that the act in question involves a successful response to items in the field of a virtue: that is, a virtuous act in respect V is one that hits the target of virtue V. Each virtue has a distinctive aim or target. Thus, for example, hitting the target of benevolence involves successfully promoting human welfare, and honesty involves telling the truth appropriately, and not lying or misleading. These targets constitute what she calls V-reasons for action, where these are seen as features that make actions right (Swanton 2010b). Hitting the targets of virtue is what Aristotle calls hitting the "mean". The mean has various dimensions:

[B]oth fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. (*NE II* 6.1106b)

The relatively simple idea of hitting the target of a virtue is complicated by several features. (a) Hitting the target of a virtue may involve several modes of moral response.¹ For example, the target of benevolence is to promote someone's welfare, but also to value, honour and respect them. (b) The targets of some virtues are internal. For example, the target of determination is trying hard in a sustained way. (c) Some virtues have more than one target. Courage has an internal target (controlling one's fear) as well as an external target (handling a dangerous situation successfully). (d) What counts as the target of a virtue may depend on context. In some contexts the target of generosity is simply to alleviate need; in contexts that are more intimate, the target of generosity may be to alleviate need with the right attitude. (e) Some targets of virtue are to avoid things. For example, the target of modesty is to avoid drawing attention to oneself, talking about oneself excessively, boasting and so on (Swanton 2003: 234–8).

An action can be virtuous in one regard but fail to hit the targets of other virtues that are relevant in the context. For example, an action could be both just and malicious, or

assertive and hurtful (*ibid.*: 242). It is for this reason that Swanton includes (P2), which links rightness to overall virtuousness. Dan Russell interprets overall virtuousness as equivalent to “virtuous in *all* relevant respects” (2009: 108, emphasis in original), which would imply that whenever the demands of different virtues come into conflict, it would be impossible to perform a right action.² I will discuss the problem of moral conflict more fully below, but for now it is useful to note that Swanton herself does not favour this interpretation. Following Jonathan Dancy (2004), she subscribes to a form of moral particularism according to which it is a mistake to assume that certain features *always* contribute positively to the overall virtuousness of an act. Swanton discusses the example of lying to the Gestapo to save the Jew in the basement. Lying is normally a reason against, but in this case it functions as an “enabler” for benevolence, with the result that the action can be overall virtuous and therefore right (see Swanton 2003: 239–44; 2010b).

If rightness of an action is determined by its success in hitting the targets of relevant virtues, it is possible for a virtuous agent to act in character and yet to fail to act rightly through no fault of her own. For instance, a benevolent person may through sheer bad luck end up harming the person she seeks to help. According to a target-centred account, such an agent fails to perform a virtuous action, and hence does not act rightly. Some people find this counterintuitive. “Surely”, they might protest, “the important thing in such a case is that the agent meant well, that she is a good person who tried her best. If she had good reason to believe that her action would have the desired result it seems inappropriate, even unfair, to criticize her for failing to do what is right”.

Swanton would respond to this kind of objection by drawing attention to Aristotle’s distinction between a *virtuous action* and an *action from virtue*. “Virtuous action” pertains to *what* is accomplished; it involves a form of success in responding to the demands of the world. By contrast, an agent acts from virtue when the source of the action is the agent’s virtue or good character. Acting from virtue involves “fine motivation (including having fine ends), fine emotions, practical wisdom, and the possession of a stable *disposition* of fine emotions, feelings, and other affective states” (Swanton 2003: 238). People who act from virtuous motives often succeed in performing virtuous actions. But because they do not fully control outcomes and circumstances, there are exceptions, and the example of the unlucky benefactor is a case in point. Here a target-centred account supports the view that although the act is not right, the agent is not blameworthy. A further implication of this distinction is that acting virtuously does not necessarily require virtuous motivation. For example, a person with selfish motives can still succeed in helping someone in need and thereby act rightly (assuming that beneficence is the only relevant virtue in the context).

Swanton thus appears to follow a well-established tradition in ethics, which includes philosophers such as W. D. Ross, J. S. Mill and H. A. Pritchard, that distinguishes between “right action” and “good action”. Ross ([1930] 2002: 156) notes that “[m]oral 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”. By contrast, virtue 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”.³ Since Swanton’s conservative stance sets her apart from other virtue ethicists it is worth discussing this issue in more detail.

Ross accepts that restricting “right act” to what may or ought to be done is inconsistent with everyday usage – we often use “right act” in the sense of a “good deed”. But he notes that this ambiguity has led to philosophers talking at “cross-purposes, because they [fail] to notice that they are talking about different things” (*ibid.*). Ross suggests that the distinction between rightness and goodness, though somewhat artificial, is useful for it captures the common-sense view that there is a difference between evaluating an action – the thing done – and evaluating the agent’s motive. Given that the distinction does not commit one to a particular account of rightness or goodness, it is somewhat puzzling why some virtue ethicists ignore or even actively oppose it. Russell claims, for instance, that virtue ethics is a sort of “protest” against traditional ways of thinking about rightness and ethical theory:

virtue ethics tries not so much to win at the old game as to find a new way of playing ... [It] offers not only a different account of right action, but indeed a different conception of it, and unless we appreciate what is different about it we risk simply begging all sorts of questions against it, wondering why the new account does not fit the old conception. (2009: 38)

Among Russell’s reasons for rejecting the old conception of rightness is that it does not capture everything that moral philosophers are interested in when it comes to assessing actions. He claims that we are interested in a theory of right action because we have serious practical concerns – deciding how to act, assessing what we do, thinking about outcomes, having good reasons and intentions, and so on – and because we believe that philosophical reflection can yield insights on these concerns (*ibid.*: 39–44). Now, although Swanton would agree that a normative theory should yield insights on these concerns, she would deny that they should all be crammed into an account of *right action* in order for them to be taken seriously. Expanding the meaning of “right action” is a sort of protest, as Russell puts it, but in a way it involves buying in to the traditional view that a criterion of rightness forms the centrepiece of any normative theory. The virtue ethicist could instead maintain the traditional conception of right action but still distinguish herself by giving a different account of it and by shifting the focus from right action to virtue and virtuous action. This appears to be Swanton’s strategy. Her account of right action forms a relatively small part of her overall normative theory, and she does not neglect any of the serious practical concerns mentioned by Russell. However, as we will discover later on, she does not leave the traditional conception of rightness completely unchanged.

HOW MOTIVE AFFECTS RIGHTNESS

The standard view among consequentialists and deontologists is that rightness is conceptually distinct from goodness (moral worth, praiseworthiness and reasonableness), and that an agent’s motive does not in itself affect the rightness of their actions. By contrast, virtue ethicists like Hursthouse and Slote argue that motive does affect rightness, but this is mainly because they do not make a clear distinction between rightness and goodness. Swanton’s account differs from both these views in so far as it makes this distinction while also acknowledging that motive can affect rightness in situations where (some of) the targets of the relevant virtues are internal.

Swanton gives an account of right action in terms of success in hitting the targets of virtue, which seems to imply that a poorly motivated agent can perform a right action. So, for example, in a situation where beneficence is the only relevant virtue, a selfish agent can hit the target of beneficence and hence succeed in acting rightly. However, some virtues have targets that are internal. For example, the targets of determination and mental strength are entirely internal, whereas the targets of virtues such as generosity and racial toleration are a mixture of internal and external features (Swanton 2003: 234–5). In situations where these virtues are salient the agent has to be in a certain state (i.e. have a certain motive) in order to succeed in acting rightly.

Consider the case of a politician who is in charge of a public health campaign which can have a significant impact on many people. In this context the targets of the relevant virtues – beneficence and efficiency – are external, so that a selfish motive (such as a desire for status or money) does not affect the rightness of the action. But contrast this to a more intimate context, such as the role of a private nurse in charge of caring for a terminally ill patient. Consider the case of Nurse John, who takes excellent care of his patient, but secretly cannot stand her; were it not for the fact that she is rich and pays well, he would not try so hard to please her. In so far as he successfully promotes human welfare and displays the appropriate kind of behaviour and demeanour, John hits the targets of caring. However, he misses an important (internal) target of the virtue of care, which is to have genuine concern for another. Thus, it is not merely that John does what is right from an inferior motive. Rather, he fails to act rightly because he misses an important target of caring. Compare this to the case of Nurse Tessa, who takes excellent care of her patient, genuinely cares about her, but who makes a mistake that causes the patient great pain and discomfort (perhaps she accidentally administers the wrong dosage of a certain medication). Tessa fails to act rightly, despite her good motives, for she misses one of the targets of caring (namely, promoting human welfare).

This result may elicit the complaint that a target-centred account gives an identical verdict in both cases, namely that the agent fails to act rightly, and this is odd, given the important differences between the two cases (in the first, there is a bad motive but a good outcome, and in the second a good motive and a bad outcome). From what has been said so far it should already be clear how a supporter of a target-centred account of right action can respond to this. First, she would point out that assessing an action as right or wrong does not have implications for the praise- or blameworthiness of the agent. Second, she could argue that the fact that the agents failed to act rightly need not be the most significant evaluative judgement in a particular case. In Tessa's case, for example, we could begin by saying that she did not do the right thing when she administered the wrong dosage. But this is a very small part of the evaluative puzzle. Whether she is blameworthy and has reason to feel guilt or shame are separate issues.⁴ Arguably, responses involving blame, guilt and shame would be inappropriate; instead, she should acknowledge the mistake and try to learn from it. The most important part of our evaluation in this case would be to appreciate her character, as manifested in her behaviour over time. Turning to John's case, we find that although, like Tessa, he fails to act rightly, the rest of the story (whether he acts from virtue, whether he has reason to feel guilt or shame, and whether we should focus more on his successes than his failures) looks very different.

Another, more serious objection that can be made at this point is that the complexity involved in hitting the targets of virtue allows for a significant amount of moral

disagreement, so that very often, we would not be able to assess an action as right or wrong with any degree of certainty.

VAGUENESS AND INDETERMINACY

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” (Swanton 2003: 24ff.). 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.⁵ 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. Either “virtue” must be made into a binary concept, or “rightness” must become vague.

Swanton takes the latter route. She employs three categories – right actions, “all right” actions, and wrong actions – but argues that these categories do not have sharp boundaries. Vagueness in the notion of hitting the targets of relevant virtues allows for reasonable and pervasive disagreement about whether a particular action is right. One kind of vagueness Swanton discusses is what she calls “degree vagueness”. For example, the two nursing cases give rise to the question, how bad must a nurse’s motive be before his act can be described as uncaring? Here some would argue that a nurse has to be motivated by genuine love and concern for the patient, nothing less will do. Others would argue that a neutral attitude towards the patient is good enough, as long as it is accompanied by the right kind of demeanour and manner. Virtue concepts are also “combinatorially vague”. For example, hitting the target of caring has multiple dimensions, and John’s actions are successful in some of these dimensions but unsuccessful in others. The question, then, is how these dimensions should be weighted. How important is his failure to act from a caring motive compared to his success in other dimensions? Is it important enough to make his actions uncaring?

Many people might find her acceptance of vagueness and indeterminacy a dissatisfying aspect of Swanton’s account, for they assume that the very purpose of an account of rightness is to settle, once and for all, “for-and-against” disputes. What Swanton demonstrates, I think, is that moral problems are complex, and that there is often no truth of the matter whether a virtue concept applies, and therefore whether an action is right or not. Here, of course, Swanton finds support in Aristotle, with his well-known claim that “we must not expect more precision than the subject-matter admits” (*NE* I 3). At the same time, however, her explanation of right action in terms of the targets and dimensions of the virtues allows us to have a discussion about the demands of morality. This discussion can be structured by considering the following questions: Which virtues are salient in this situation? What are the contextually relevant targets of each of these virtues? Whereas talk of what the virtuous person characteristically does or chooses allows right-making features to remain somewhat mysterious, a target-centred account encourages us to put these features on the table, so to speak, and to have an open dialogue about them (see

Swanton 2003: ch. 12). For example, the nursing cases give rise to important questions: Does care in this context require genuine concern for the patient? What degree of professional detachment is appropriate in the nursing context?, and so on.⁶ Instead of relying on the insights of the ideally virtuous person, an open discussion among ordinary people who occupy these roles and have first-hand experience of the difficulties they present is likely to shed more light on these issues.

MORAL CONFLICT

When there is more than one virtue that is salient in a particular situation it is possible for the targets of these virtues to come into conflict. Swanton claims that it is possible to do what is overall virtuous (and therefore right) even when faced with alternatives all of which are extremely repugnant. Getting it right in such cases is a matter of integrating these targets (see Swanton 2003: 247; 2010b). In this regard Swanton differs from Hursthouse, who argues that a virtuous person cannot emerge from tragic dilemmas having done what is right, for the actions they are forced to perform are too terrible to be given a tick of approval. Hursthouse nevertheless thinks that the virtuous person would make the right decision (i.e. resolve the dilemma correctly), but that a right decision is not the same as a right action (see Hursthouse 1999: chs 2 & 3; Van Zyl 2007).

Consider, by way of illustration, Williams's famous case of Jim and the Indians (B. Williams 1973a). Quite a few virtues are relevant here, including courage, justice and wisdom, but for the sake of simplicity I will focus on the virtues of benevolence and non-malevolence, for these seem to be the controversial ones in this case. Imagine Jim kills one of the Indians and that the outcome of this is that the captain spares the other nineteen. A target-centred account can support the view that the act is not malicious, for as Swanton notes, "virtue-based act evaluations allow us to think of 'actions' as embracing demeanour, motivation, processes of deliberation and thought, reactions and attitudes" (2003: 247). If Jim's demeanour, motivation and thought processes are not cruel or malicious then he does not act wrongly, even if he causes the death of an innocent person.

Demonstrating that Jim's action hits the targets of benevolence and non-malevolence is more difficult. Let us focus on benevolence. Russell argues that in this kind of case the agent's benevolence must be frustrated: "benevolence does not do in this case what one, *qua* benevolent, has a *pro tanto* reason to do" (2009: 69). Russell goes on to consider how the virtuous agent himself will assess his action in such an awful situation:

[She] does not count her action as right, because she recognizes that, among all the ways in which her benevolent *exercise of will* may extend into the world, there is none that is a really *benevolent thing* to do. She has not done the "wrong thing", since she has acted well, but the benevolent person may well hold that there simply was no benevolent thing, and therefore – precisely because of her benevolence – that there was no right thing to do in that situation. (*Ibid.*, original emphasis)

Now, part of the reason why Russell thinks that a virtuous person cannot do the right thing in a tragic dilemma is that, like Hursthouse, he uses "right action" in the sense of an act that gets a "tick of approval", "the sort of act that decent, virtuous agents do and seek

out occasions for doing” (Hursthouse 1999: 46). As we have seen, Swanton does not use the term in this sense, but even then, what are we to make of the claim that there simply is no truly benevolent thing to do in this situation? Russell’s definition of virtuous action in terms of what the virtuous agent would do leads him to conflate the targets of virtue with the aims of the virtuous agent, and this is a mistake. A target-centred account allows us to separate these two things. Swanton notes, for instance, that what counts as a virtuous act is more heavily contextual than what counts as an act from virtue (2003: 239). If Jim is benevolent he will want to save all twenty, but given that saving all twenty is not possible in this context the target of benevolence can only be to save nineteen. So, even though we have to agree with Russell that *Jim’s* benevolence must be frustrated, *his action* will count as benevolent if it succeeds in saving the nineteen.⁷

This view has another, rather attractive implication, namely that it provides an explanation of what is sometimes referred to as “moral remainder” in the context of moral dilemmas. Some philosophers hold that there are dilemmas that are resolvable only “with remainder”, that is, where there is a moral justification for a particular action, and a justification that outweighs the moral reasons against it, but still leaves the agent with a certain “uncancelled moral disagreeableness” (B. Williams 1981c: 61). One difficulty posed by this account of moral dilemmas is to give an accurate description of the appropriate emotional response in these cases. One possibility is to say that a virtuous agent would feel remorse, guilt or shame, but this seems inappropriate for it suggests that she has done something wrong. Another possibility is to say that even though she resolves the dilemma correctly she regrets finding herself in these terrible circumstances. The problem for this view is that it severs the connection between her feeling terrible and her performing a certain kind of action.⁸

As we have seen, Swanton thinks it is possible to perform a right action in tragic dilemmas. But what can she make of the fact that agents typically emerge from such dilemmas feeling terrible? Swanton does not address this issue, but a target-centred account allows the following kind of answer: people who are benevolent characteristically aim to make others’ lives better, to protect them from needless danger, to avoid causing suffering, and so on. In Jim’s case, if he is benevolent then what he desires and aims towards is to save all twenty. So, if he ends up shooting one to save the other nineteen he will feel terrible. And this is not simply because he realizes that he acted contrary to some abstract moral duty. Instead, he has done something that he is disposed by his very nature not to do, something that goes against his moral fibre. So we can agree with Russell that Jim’s benevolence must be frustrated in this case. The terrible feeling is best characterized, not as remorse or guilt, nor as regret, but as a kind of frustration, and a frustration of a deeply moral kind. Yet contrary to Russell and Hursthouse, a proponent of a target-centred account can claim that Jim nevertheless performs a right action if he manages to hit the contextually appropriate targets of benevolence (by preventing nineteen people from being killed) and non-malevolence (by inflicting as little harm as possible).

ACTION GUIDANCE

A final issue that needs to be addressed in regard to Swanton’s target-centred account of right action is that of action guidance: what should Jim do? Or, stated otherwise: is there a

solution to Jim's dilemma? Some people may find it odd that we are posing this as a separate question. We have just argued that Jim's killing the one can be a (if not the uniquely) right action in the circumstances, so does this not imply that he should kill the one? The answer to this question is: not necessarily. To be sure, deontologists and consequentialists tend to use "right action" to refer to actions that are either obligatory (that ought to be done) or permissible (that may be done). By contrast, virtue ethicists like Hursthouse make a distinction between an action-assessing and action-guiding sense of rightness. In her view, "right action" is sometimes used to assess an action, to give it a tick of approval, and at other times in an action-guiding sense, to answer the question of what one ought to do. To show how action guidance and action assessment can come apart, Hursthouse uses the case of the promiscuous man who has impregnated two women but can only marry one. She claims that there could be a correct solution to the dilemma (e.g. if one of the women still wants to marry him but the other does not), even though it is not possible to perform a right action: the agent does not do what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the situation, because a virtuous agent simply would not find himself in such a situation in the first place (Hursthouse 1999: 50–51; see also Van Zyl 2011a).

As we have seen, Swanton (2003: 231) follows Ross by distinguishing between "a right act and a morally good act understood as one which is well motivated". She also claims that some right actions are obligatory whereas others are desirable or admirable but too demanding to be obligatory (*ibid.*: 240–41), which suggests that "right action" for Swanton is simply what should or may be done. However, Swanton's discussion of the practical task of ethics (*ibid.*: ch. 12) makes it clear that, like Hursthouse, she treats the practical problem of seeking action guidance or solving moral problems as a separate issue from that of assessing actions. She claims, for example, that "it is not the case that whatever solution emerges from exercise of the virtues of practice is right" (*ibid.*: 253). However, her reasons for thinking that action guidance and action assessment can come apart are very different from Hursthouse's.

A target-centred account assesses an action as right if it succeeds in hitting the targets of the relevant virtues. Accordingly, the aim of constructing solutions to moral problems is to get things right, that is, to act in a way that is overall virtuous. Constructing solutions to moral problems requires the exercise of what Swanton calls the "virtues of practice".⁹ However, because hitting the targets of the relevant virtues is not completely within the control of the agent, it is not the case that whatever solution emerges from exercise of the virtues of practice necessarily issues in a right action: "what is reasonable may not be right, precisely because real agents are not idealized, and 'right' is not equivalent to 'done for good reason'" (*ibid.*).

Swanton's example of making policy decisions about genetically modified food illustrates this well. She notes that virtuous policy makers may decide to severely restrict genetically modified food on the grounds that large-scale ignorance about its dangers still exists. The cautious approach, even though wise, may still have the result that important ends of benevolence, such as the production of cheaper and more plentiful food, may be missed. The example is meant to show that rightness cannot be defined in terms of what the virtuous person would characteristically do, for even the wise are necessarily limited and can fail to get it right (*ibid.*: 229–30). But what it also shows is that a target-centred account allows action guidance and action assessment to come apart. Even though restricting genetically modified food may not be assessed as right (if it ends up missing important

targets of benevolence), Swanton suggests that it is still what ought to be done: that is, it is the right decision in the circumstances. She writes that “reasonable people in the face of ignorance should guard against such possible dangers” (*ibid.*: 230).

Interestingly, Swanton’s account does not necessarily imply that allowing genetically modified food to be produced would be right either. Even if we assume that the action ends up hitting the target of benevolence, concluding that it is also right (overall virtuous) would be too hasty. Besides benevolence, there are other virtues that are salient in this context, including prudence and reasonableness, and allowing GM food to be produced despite wide-spread uncertainty about its safety would be reckless and unreasonable. Of course, depending on the magnitude of the benefits involved there could be some disagreement about whether the failure to hit the targets of prudence and reasonableness prevents the action from being right. But this aside, what the example demonstrates is that there will be very few actual examples of bad (unreasonable) decisions that issue in right actions, because reasonableness is itself a virtue that will be salient in many (if not most) cases. So it appears that in cases where reasonableness is salient, a right action would also be reasonable, but a reasonable action may not be right (if it misses the target of another virtue that is salient in the circumstances).¹⁰

Early on in this chapter I emphasized that Swanton’s conception of right action differs from that of other virtue ethicists in so far as she uses it in the sense of a “correct” or “successful” action rather than one that is well motivated (excellent, praiseworthy or good). We are now in a position to summarize the ways in which Swanton differs from Ross when it comes to the distinction between rightness and goodness. These differences are significant in that they demonstrate the important role that virtue plays in her account. First, Swanton claims that an agent’s motive or inner state can affect rightness in those cases where the contextually relevant virtues have targets that are internal. One such virtue is reasonableness, the target of which is having good reasons in favour of a chosen option, and since it is a virtue that will often be salient in assessing actions it follows that rightness will often be affected by motive. Second, whereas rightness and wrongness have traditionally been thought of as binary concepts, the implication of a target-centred account is that these concepts are vague threshold concepts: there can be degrees of rightness and wrongness, and there can be reasonable and pervasive disagreement about the rightness or wrongness of a particular action. Finally, unlike Ross, Swanton does not equate right action with what ought to be done (and in terms of what is obligatory), but instead draws a distinction between a reasonable action and a right action, where a reasonable action is one that ought to be done in the sense of what is commended rather than obligatory.¹¹

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NOTES

1. As examples of modes of moral response Swanton mentions promoting, honouring, producing, appreciating, loving, respecting, creating, being receptive to, using and handling (2003: 21).
2. The notion of overall virtuousness also gives rise to the “enumeration problem”: namely, that a theory with infinitely many virtues cannot make sense of the notion of overall virtuousness (see Russell 2009: 143ff.).
3. I discuss this issue in more detail in Van Zyl (2011a, 2011b). Also see Kawall, this volume, Chapter 11.
4. Aristotle writes, for example, that “if [the liberal man] happens to spend in a manner contrary to what is right and noble, he will be pained, but moderately and as he ought” (*NE IV 1.1120b*).
5. See Hursthouse (1999: ch. 7) and Russell (2009: 112ff.).
6. For discussion of these kinds of issues, see Oakley & Cocking (2001: ch. 6).
7. Arguably, the same point can be made with regards to non-malevolence. A non-malevolent person would not want to harm anyone, but the target of non-malevolence in this context can only be to do as little harm as possible. Another way in which to reach the conclusion that the act is overall virtuous is to argue, in line with Swanton’s particularism briefly discussed earlier, that although killing someone is normally a reason against an action, in this case it functions as an “enabler” for benevolence, with the result that the action can be overall virtuous even though it does not hit the target of non-malevolence.
8. See Greenspan (1995) for a detailed discussion of moral dilemmas and emotion.
9. These include (a) virtues of focus, they allow the agent to identify and address problems; (b) moral and epistemic virtues, including creative virtues and virtues associated with “imaginative deliberation” (John Dewey) and (c) virtues of dialogue, that allow a variety of perspectives to bear on the process of constructing solutions (Swanton 2003: 258ff.).
10. Kawall’s case of the virtuous doctor who severely harms many people by giving them a treatment to which they have a previously unknown allergy can be used to illustrate this point. As Kawall (this volume, Chapter 11) points out, according to Slote’s agent-based view the doctor’s actions are right because they express good overall motivation. According to a target-centred account, by contrast, her actions are reasonable; given her good faith efforts to be careful she is not blameworthy, but since the action fails to hit the target of benevolence it is not right. A decision to withhold treatment would have been unreasonable and uncaring (given the belief that the treatment would be beneficial) and therefore not right either.
11. For critical discussions of Swanton’s account of right action, see Das (2003), Darwall (2005) and Russell (2009).