

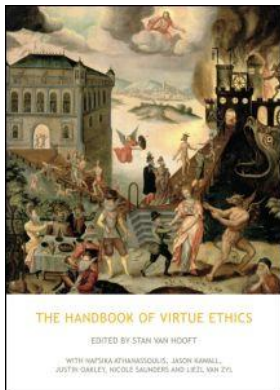
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Stan van Hooft, Nafsika Athanassoulis, Jason Kawall, Justin Oakley, Nicole Saunders, Liezl Van Zyl

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Jason Kawall

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11

Qualified agent and agent-based virtue ethics and the problems of right action

Jason Kawall

An ongoing question for virtue ethics is whether it stands as a truly distinctive approach to ethics. In particular, there has been much discussion of whether virtue ethics can provide a viable understanding of right action, one that is a genuine rival to familiar consequentialist and deontological accounts.

In this chapter I will examine two prominent approaches to virtue ethics, (a) qualified agent and (b) agent-based virtue ethics, and consider whether either can provide an adequate account of right action. I will begin with a presentation of their accounts of right action, including consideration of what is meant by the term “right action”. With this groundwork in place, I will turn to a series of important objections that have been raised against these accounts, and consider some of the more prominent and promising responses that these objections have inspired.

TWO ACCOUNTS OF RIGHT ACTION

According to qualified agent (QA) accounts of virtue ethics, right action is to be understood with reference to the actions or attitudes of virtuous agents. Such agents, given their good character, can be understood as moral experts and their judgements (as reflected in their actions) will correctly capture moral rightness and wrongness. The most influential such account is that of Rosalind Hursthouse. Hursthouse proposes that: “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances, except for tragic dilemmas, in which a *decision* is right iff it is what such an agent would decide, but the action decided upon may be too terrible to be called ‘right’ or ‘good’” (1999: 79).

The first clause of Hursthouse’s account provides the core of her proposal. The qualifier “characteristically” is intended to rule out cases where a virtuous agent, for whatever reason, is not acting in character (owing to extreme exhaustion, being drugged, etc.). The second clause is intended to capture certain more difficult cases, where all of the options

before a virtuous agent are quite terrible; imagine a Sophie's Choice scenario where a parent must either choose to have one of her children live, or have all of them be killed. In such cases Hursthouse holds that a virtuous agent can make a right *decision*, but given the horrible impacts of the agent's action (upon the agent herself, and quite possibly upon others), the action itself does not qualify as right.

Agent-based virtue ethics, as defended by Michael Slote and others, takes the virtues to be intrinsically valuable or admirable traits (rather than, for example, traits that are needed to lead a flourishing life); in turn, all other ethical concepts are to be understood in terms of the virtues or other aretaic notions. Slote suggests that agent-based virtue ethics "understands rightness in terms of good motivations and wrongness in terms of the having of bad (or insufficiently good) motives" (2001: 14). More precisely, he suggests that the "rightness of action is insured by having good overall or total motivation" (*ibid.*: 35); he intends this to capture both necessary and sufficient conditions for rightness or admirability. He also distinguishes a notion of moral acceptability and suggests that: "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" (*ibid.*: 38). Essentially, Slote treats right or admirable actions as those having good overall motivations, while actions are permissible or acceptable iff they have good, or at least not-bad overall motivations.

WHAT IS "RIGHT ACTION"?

Consequentialists and deontologists tend to treat right action in terms of either what is obligatory or permissible; this has been the standard usage in most modern moral philosophy. Thus if an action is not right, it is typically treated as wrong or impermissible, and should not be done. Further, for theorists who understand rightness in terms of the obligatory, if an action is right, then it is one any agent ought to perform.

At times Hursthouse seems to embrace a similar understanding of right action, writing (for example) that "both the obligatory and the supererogatory are right" (2006: 111). Such passages suggest that Hursthouse is treating right actions as those actions that are an agent's duty (the obligatory) or those that go beyond the call of duty (the supererogatory).

On the other hand, Hursthouse more frequently treats right action in terms of morally excellent action or praiseworthiness: "[A right act can be understood as] an act that merits praise rather than blame, an act that an agent can take pride in doing rather than feeling unhappy about, the sort of act that decent, virtuous agents do and seek out occasions for doing" (1999: 46).

Hursthouse is followed in this usage by other virtue ethicists. For example, Daniel Russell suggests that "What the virtue ethicist does [...] is to identify certain cases of morally excellent action as central cases, and restrict the account of right action to these" (2009: 54).

Michael Slote (2001) also seems to understand right action in this way, often treating "right" as interchangeable with "admirable" or "noble" (as discussed in Van Zyl 2011b). On the other hand, as noted above, Slote also provides an account of acceptable or permissible action – which requires only a satisfactory or better motive.

While Hursthouse seems to embrace both senses of “right action”, there is some tension here. According to Hursthouse there is a loose sense in which we may say someone acts rightly even if not well motivated, but paradigmatically rightness requires right motivation and reason, and then the action is praiseworthy or good (2006: 108–9). The tension arises as there will be many obligatory actions that are not morally excellent or praiseworthy. We might imagine an agent who, through his own poor choices and viciousness, has arrived at a choice between killing one innocent or allowing twenty such to be killed; imagine Jim had foolishly provoked the brutal captain in Williams’s famous case. It could well be obligatory for Jim to kill one innocent in such a case, but surely we’d hesitate to call such an action praiseworthy or excellent. Hursthouse states that such actions are not good enough to be right, but if she also holds that right actions include both the obligatory and the supererogatory, then Jim’s action should be seen as right (because obligatory, given the terrible situation he has helped to create).

Virtue ethicists might do well to more explicitly distinguish these different notions, providing two distinct accounts of them, and speaking of “morally excellent action” instead of “right action” for most of their discussions, and reserving the term “right” for discussions where they are focusing on the obligatory or permissible.

THREE SETS OF PROBLEMS FOR QUALIFIED AGENT AND AGENT-BASED VIRTUE ETHICS

Problems of action-guidance

There is a long-standing objection to virtue ethics: if we are told only that a right action is what a virtuous agent would do, it seems that there will be significant epistemic problems for ordinary or vicious agents. As Robert Louden puts it,

We ought, of course, to do what the virtuous person would do, but it is not always easy to fathom what the hypothetical moral exemplar would do were he in our shoes, and sometimes even he will act out of character. Furthermore, if one asks him why he did what he did, or how he knew what to do, the answer – if one is offered – might not be very enlightening. One would not necessarily expect him to appeal to any rules or principles which might be of use to others. (1984: 229)

How can ordinary individuals come to know or even have justified beliefs about what a virtuous agent would do in their position, let alone why they would so act?

Hursthouse (1999: ch. 1) provides a thorough response to this objection. First, she stresses that when we are uncertain as to what we should do, we can often simply ask someone who is virtuous for guidance; this is a straightforward way of determining what a virtuous agent would do. Second, the objection overstates the problem. All of us, even if not virtuous ourselves, know that honest agents do not readily deceive others, that benevolent agents try to benefit others, and so on. The virtuous also avoid being cruel, unjust or impatient; there is no great mystery here. Hursthouse suggests that there are familiar “v-rules” that tell us both to do what is virtuous (be honest, be just, be kind) and to avoid what is vicious (don’t be cruel, don’t be dishonest). These v-rules allow the virtue ethicist to address Louden’s worry that there would be little or no explanation for the way virtuous

agents act, or that there would be little generalizable advice: the acts of the virtuous are in accordance with the v-rules, and ordinary agents have at least some knowledge of these rules, even if their application can be difficult to ascertain in some cases.

It is worth noting that we ourselves, as ordinary adults, have some background moral training, and at least some development of the virtues that aid us as we attempt to determine what we ought to do. That is, even if we are not fully virtuous, we typically have at least some partially developed virtues, and these traits can help us to correctly morally assess situations we face; our own reactions will come to be like those of virtuous agents to the extent that we develop the virtues ourselves (Kawall 2006).

Finally, we might turn the entire question on its head. As we have seen, in typical cases we have reliable methods to form accurate beliefs about what we ought to do in given circumstances, and about what a virtuous agent would do. But suppose we grant that there are cases where we would be unable to determine what a virtuous agent would do. The existence of such cases should not be surprising: why assume that even the most ordinary agent should be able to readily pick out right actions in highly demanding, complex situations? Virtue ethics provides a plausible position: we can often figure out what is right but there are also difficult cases where ordinary agents, with only limited virtues and wisdom, will struggle to see what is right.

A related problem of action guidance arises for Slote's account of right action. On his view an action is right only if it is performed with a good overall motive. The worry is that an ordinary or vicious agent would need to have an overall good motive that would be expressed in her action. But then it seems there would be actions agents ought to perform, but cannot because they do not have the correct motives; Slote's view seems to reject the familiar principle that "ought" implies "can".

This is a significant worry, as Hurka (2001: 225–6), Jacobson (2002: 53–67) and Copp and Sobel (2004: 550–51) have argued. Doviak (2011) presents the example of a malicious, cruel agent, incapable of acting out of care for others, who wants to harm an innocent person; his only motive for refraining from doing so would be a cowardly fear to avoid being caught or harmed himself. If the cruel agent harms the innocent, it expresses cruelty, and if he refrains, this expresses cowardice. Presumably the cruel agent ought not to harm the innocent person, yet on Slote's account this restraint would not be right because of its poor overall motivation.

Slote could stress that the cruel agent has a duty to refrain from harming the innocent, but that acting rightly would also require the cruel agent to have good motivations. As such, this particular agent, given his flawed character, does not act rightly in this case, although another person with the correct motivations could act rightly; Slote holds that "when the reasons [for acting] aren't right, the action itself is actually *wrong*" (2001: 15, emphasis in original). Daniel Russell might, on behalf of Slote, instead suggest that rightness here is a matter of praiseworthiness, and seen in this light, it is not at all implausible to hold that a cruel agent who acts out of cowardice in not harming another does not perform a right (admirable) action. This does not yet mean that he acts wrongly (contrary to what Slote suggests), it is simply that his action is not praiseworthy (2009: 57–9).

Still, the problem runs deeper: not only would there be no admirable course of action available to the agent, there would not even be a permissible action on Slote's account because the cruel agent's motives are not neutral or good – they would be bad overall motivations, regardless of what the agent does. Yet presumably it must be morally permissible,

at the very least, for the cruel agent to refrain from harming the innocent person, even if this is motivated by cowardice. Notice that Russell's proposal would not help here. It is not merely that we must say that the cruel agent is not praiseworthy in refraining from harming (which is plausible enough); rather, we are forced to say that such restraint is not even morally acceptable because of its bad motivation. Surely, contrary to Slote's view, we can and should distinguish between our assessment of the action as acceptable, and our assessment of the agent's motive as bad (see Jacobson 2002).

Relatedly, there are also actions that express a good overall motivation but that we would not consider to be right or admirable. Suppose a benevolent doctor carefully assesses a situation, and provides the best available treatment for a mild disease in an isolated village, an action that she very reasonably expects to help a hundred people. Unfortunately, it turns out that many of the villagers have a severe allergy, unique to the village, one that was previously unknown, and which the doctor had no reason to suspect existed. Her action in fact severely and permanently harms the hundred people. We might say that her action is justified, and that the doctor is not blameworthy given her good faith efforts to be careful. But it is much less plausible to deem this an admirable, praiseworthy action – yet this is what Slote's account would hold, in so far as the action expresses a good overall motivation. There is a significant difference between merely being justified or not blameworthy, and being positively praiseworthy (see Kawall 2002; Van Zyl 2011b). For all that we respect the doctor's motives, her action itself, given the devastation it causes, cannot plausibly be considered admirable.

More generally, as noted above, Slote does not allow for the commonly accepted possibility of doing the right thing for the wrong reason (see Brady 2004). A person who jumps into a river to save a drowning child in order to receive a reward no longer performs a right action; the cruel agent's restraint is not even morally acceptable. Common-sense morality would hold that such individuals perform right actions, albeit for the wrong reason. Slote argues that common-sense morality can be inconsistent, and that we may need to reject some of its claims as we refine our moral theory (2001: 10–3). This seems correct, but on the other hand we should not be too quick to simply drop such a widely held principle as that “ought” implies “can”, or that one can perform a right action for the wrong reason; we can rightly worry that Slote's theory rejects too much, too easily.

Problems of circularity and establishing the basis of rightness

Ramon Das (2003) has noted that if we claim that actions are right iff virtuous agents would perform them then we need, of course, to provide an account of the virtues. But he worries that in order to explain the virtues we would need to appeal to right actions, and thus the account would become circular. For example, it seems that benevolence is a virtue precisely because it leads us to perform such right actions as alleviating suffering. But then we cannot define right action in terms of what a virtuous agent would do without a vicious circularity. We would first need to identify various right actions (such as alleviating suffering) and then define the virtues (at least in part) as dispositions to perform such antecedently right actions.

Hursthouse (1999: 81–3) provides one potential response to this worry: we need not treat qualified agent virtue ethics as trying to reduce all other moral concepts to aretaic ones (see also Russell 2009). Hursthouse suggests that her virtue ethics relies “on the concept(s) of the *good* of human beings, what (truly) *benefits* them, by means of which we define

charity, [and also], for example, the *worthwhile*, the *advantageous*, and the *pleasant* which are inseparably related to them” (1999: 82). Intuitively, she holds that a virtue ethics can appeal to the good and other moral concepts in understanding the virtues (and, in turn, right action). Thus we can explain why the virtues include dispositions to care about and act on various features of situations owing to their connection to the good of human beings and other related factors, without needing to enter into the circular reasoning that worries Das.

Copp and Sobel (2004) and Driver (2006) raise a further issue concerning the explanation of right action for qualified agent virtue ethics. Suppose, plausibly enough, that it is right to save a drowning person. It may seem that on a qualified agent virtue ethics that this is the right action *because* it is what a virtuous agent would do, and similarly with other cases of right action; the actions would be right because they are the actions that virtuous agents would perform. But surely this cannot be correct: presumably it is right because it would save a life, prevent suffering, and so on. It seems that virtue ethics provides the wrong explanation for what makes right actions right.

Hursthouse’s response to Das also comes into play here. She could readily allow that saving a drowning person is right because it benefits the drowning person; there is no need to claim that doing so is right *because* virtuous agents would do so. Still, we can now ask why various actions would be right on Hursthouse’s account; presumably for her this will typically be a matter of benefiting humans, increasing their well-being, aiding them in what is worthwhile, and so on. But she would not endorse a simple consequentialism where acting rightly is simply a matter of maximizing human flourishing. There is thus perhaps a need for further explanation here. Rightness will be intimately linked to the good and to human flourishing, but not in a maximizing fashion. So what is it that virtuous agents are doing? One possibility is that we could shift to speaking of the virtues having targets (related to human well-being), and treating right action in terms of hitting the targets of the virtues. This, of course, would be to embrace something like Christine Swanton’s target-centred account of the virtues (see Swanton 2003; Van Zyl, this volume, Chapter 10). Alternatively, there may be reasons of some further kind – still grounded in human well-being – and virtuous agents would act in accordance with these reasons; perhaps Hursthouse’s “v-rules” could be understood as capturing such reasons (see also Tiberius 2006).

While there are thus ways of further explaining what makes actions right for Hursthouse, additional questions arise. On Hursthouse’s account, it may seem that virtuous agents are merely playing an epistemic role, serving as guides to what is antecedently right or good. Johan Brännmark writes that on such an epistemic reading, we use the virtuous or decent person:

to discover which actions are already wrong [or right] on account of other things. Yet, while such a reading is certainly possible, it is doubtful whether we have a clear instance of a virtue-ethical theory if we abandon an ontological understanding of the role of the decent person [i.e., an understanding whereby the approval of the decent person *constitutes* the rightness of an action]. (2006: 597)

Brännmark perhaps overstates his case in claiming that we may no longer have a clear instance of a virtue-ethical theory on such an approach; after all, Aristotle’s theory is probably best understood in this way, and is taken to be a paradigmatic virtue-ethical theory. On the other hand, Brännmark does draw attention to a further worry: if such theories

count as virtue ethics, then virtue ethics may differ much less from consequentialist and deontological theories than is commonly believed (see also Crisp forthcoming [a]). It seems that virtuous agents are simply guides to prior goodness; rightness is ultimately explained in terms of goodness (or reasons ultimately grounded in goodness) and other moral concepts, not in terms of the judgements of virtuous agents.

Hursthouse, at least, might be happy to concede that virtue ethics is not so distinctive; she stresses that she is not now interested in defending virtue ethics as an entirely distinct, third way of doing ethics where goodness and rightness are reduced to aretaic concepts. Rather, she sees different points of emphasis in different theories, but notes that they will share much common ground; see Hursthouse (2006: 100–101).

Slote (2001) provides an alternative response to Copp and Sobel. According to Slote, what makes actions right is that they express intrinsically admirable character traits; rightness is explained in terms of good character and motivations. Such an approach would satisfy Brännmark's desire for a more fully virtue-grounded ethics. Slote suggests that benevolence, for example, is properly seen as an admirable character trait (in part) because treating it as admirable has plausible implications for what actions are thereby deemed right, in its being appropriately related to other admirable traits, and so on. But our worry may remain: even if benevolence, and perhaps other traits, are appropriately treated as admirable, and even if actions motivated by them are typically right, is it plausible to claim that saving a person from drowning is right *because* it would express an admirable character trait (and related good motivation)? Once again many would reject such a view, and instead hold that it is right because it would save a life and prevent suffering.

One way forward for the virtue ethicist here is to more closely examine the claim that, for example, saving a drowning person is right because it prevents suffering and saves a life. It might seem that preventing suffering is obviously and antecedently right, and this explains why virtuous agents perform and approve of such acts. But notice: even we ordinary agents have developed the virtues to at least some extent. I would propose that it is because we are at least somewhat benevolent that it seems so obvious that alleviating suffering is right (other things being equal). Our character and psychologies shape and influence the way we see and interpret the world. It is this that leads us to approve of alleviating suffering; we do not need to posit a prior rightness or value in the world that we are detecting and to which we are responding. This allows us an alternative way to understand the case. We can agree with Driver and with Copp and Sobel that in one sense it is right to save a drowning person because it prevents suffering and saves a life; it is these aspects of the action that lead virtuous agents to approve of it. But we can also hold that the moral rightness of saving a life or preventing suffering is a matter of the attitudes and approvals of virtuous agents (see Kawall 2009a).

Bridging the gap between ordinary and virtuous agents

Robert Johnson has argued against qualified agent virtue ethics that there are actions that seem clearly right for certain ordinary agents, but which no virtuous agent would perform (Johnson 2003), and thus these actions could not be right on Hursthouse's account. For example, it could well be that an ordinary agent with a tendency to lie ought to keep a log of her lies, pay careful attention to when and why she is tempted to lie, and so on. These seem to be right actions for her to engage in. But no fully virtuous agent would engage

in such activities; after all, they would not be so inclined towards dishonesty. It seems Hursthouse's account would fail to capture these apparently right actions.

Similarly, we might worry that some actions that would be performed by virtuous agents are ones that many ordinary agents ought not to perform, and would not be right for these agents. For example, a virtuous agent who has lost a tennis match would walk over to congratulate the victor. But suppose we have an ordinary agent who is a sore loser, one who would almost certainly start an altercation if he went to congratulate the victor; it seems this agent should instead perhaps politely smile and walk away to avoid causing trouble. He should not do what a virtuous agent would do; it would not be a right action for him, given his character (see Van Zyl 2011a).

In response, Valerie Tiberius has proposed the following account of right action:

An action *A* is right for *S* in circumstances *C* iff it is the action in accordance with the reasons that would guide the action of a completely virtuous person acting in *C*.
(2006: 248)

This account would avoid the worries raised above in the following fashion. If, as seems plausible, there were a virtue of self-improvement, then fully virtuous agents would possess this virtue (they would never become complacent). If so, if we consider the liar who keeps track of her lies, she is acting on the reasons (of self-improvement) that would guide the actions of a fully virtuous person. The virtuous tennis player might be acting on reasons of respect for his opponent, politeness, and so on. As such, if the angry tennis player smiles and walks away out of politeness and respect for the victor, then he would be acting on the reasons that would guide virtuous agents in the circumstances.

Svensson (2010: 262–3) worries that Tiberius's account is no longer a virtue-ethical one. What makes an action right on her account is that it is in accord with the correct reasons, and virtuous agents are simply agents who are able to act reliably in accordance with these more fundamental moral reasons. He also worries that the fully virtuous would have reasons, not of self-improvement, but rather of maintaining their virtue. There is a difference between maintaining and exercising one's virtue, and striving to improve and acquire the virtue. As such, it is not clear that the reforming liar is acting on the same reasons that would guide a fully virtuous agent. In response to this latter worry, Tiberius could stress that other virtues would also be relevant. The habitual liar, in logging her lies, is acting on reasons of honesty, even if in a different fashion from that in which a fully virtuous person would act on these reasons; her actions would still be right. There can be different ways of acting on the same underlying reasons.

Daniel Russell (2009) and Liezl van Zyl (2011a) have suggested an alternative line of response to Johnson, one that emphasizes that virtue ethicists intend "right action" in the sense of praiseworthy or excellent action, rather than permissible or obligatory. On this view the self-improving liar does what he ought to, but this does not yet entail that the action is right. Similarly, the angry tennis player should smile and walk away, but this action is not good enough to qualify as right and praiseworthy. There is thus a gap between what agents ought to do, and what is right; there is no strict entailment either way, and Hursthouse's account of right action emerges unscathed.

Still, even if we accept this sense of right action, there are issues that remain. First, there are worries that virtuous agents might perform wrong actions out of non-culpable

ignorance or impairment (Hurka 2001; Swanton 2001; Kawall 2002). For example, recall the earlier example of a virtuous doctor who unwittingly severely harms one hundred people by giving them a treatment to which they all have a previously unknown allergy. Whether in the sense of permissible, obligatory or praiseworthy, it does not seem correct to hold that such an action is right. At best, we might think that such an action is morally justified, or not blameworthy, given the virtuous agent's appropriate efforts and non-culpable lack of knowledge; but this is quite different from holding that the action is praiseworthy or excellent.

With respect to Tiberius's account, notice that the reasons that would guide the actions even of the fully virtuous might be problematic if these agents (through non-culpable ignorance) do not realize that they should be reasoning differently. For example, a virtuous agent could have excellent but misleading evidence to believe a stranger is a wanted murderer, when in fact the stranger is simply an innocent traveller. The evidence may lead the agent to attempt to subdue the stranger. The virtuous agent would mistakenly act on reasons of civic duty or courage, when it seems instead she should act on reasons of etiquette or basic respect for others. We might argue that the virtuous agent is not blameworthy here because of, to her, misleading evidence, but this is a far cry from holding the action as such to be obligatory, permissible or praiseworthy; it is not right to assault innocent strangers.

A further potential problem arises for the Russell and Van Zyl response with the recognition that virtuous agents perform a wide range of actions even when acting in character, and that grouping all such actions together may not be sufficiently fine-grained for moral purposes. Virtuous agents will characteristically pay the correct bus fare, prudently brush their teeth, and so on. These actions may well be permissible or even obligatory, but surely not all of them deserve to be considered morally excellent or praiseworthy.

One way forward for proponents of the Russell and Van Zyl response would be to draw on Hursthouse's recent suggestions concerning the supererogatory. Hursthouse (2006: 111) proposes, roughly, that an action is supererogatory (and admirable) to the extent that it is one where virtue is severely tested – where it is hard even for a virtuous agent to perform the action owing to the circumstances. These actions would demand tremendous courage, honesty or other virtues. By treating this as an account of praiseworthiness, proponents of the response could hold that merely brushing one's teeth, even if prudent, is not particularly praiseworthy because it is not something overly difficult for the virtuous. They would thus be able to more readily distinguish degrees of moral excellence or praiseworthiness, rather than simply lumping together all of the characteristic actions of virtuous agents (outside of tragic dilemmas) as praiseworthy ("right"), no matter how trivial.

Still, questions would remain. We often admire the virtuous precisely because they find many extraordinary actions to be easy, even if ordinary people would find them difficult. Are such actions admirable (and potentially supererogatory) even if the virtuous don't struggle? There would also remain problems in accounting for misguided actions performed out of non-culpable ignorance. Suppose that through non-culpable ignorance a virtuous agent finds some action to be a difficult test of his virtue, while if he had been aware of further important details of the situation, he would have easily acted differently; there was an obvious solution. Is his original, misguided action admirable?

Slote's agent-based virtue ethics also faces worries grounded in the differences between ordinary and virtuous agents. For example, ordinary agents are prone to mixed motives in their actions, and this may raise problems for Slote's approach. Suppose there is a wealthy

philanthropist who wishes to fund a hospital (see Doviak 2011). In part she is motivated by a concern for helping others and her community; to this extent her action seems right. But she is equally motivated by a vain desire to impress people with her generosity; this motive seems problematic, and would seem to render her action wrong. Suppose also that each motive is sufficiently strong to produce her action. The moral status of the action thus seems indeterminate or incoherent (Jacobson 2002): is it right, wrong or (incoherently) both?

Daniel Doviak (2011) suggests an alternative agent-based account of rightness, one that he argues can address this issue:

An action, x , is morally right for S at t iff x maximizes net-IVV [intrinsic virtue value] for S at t . (*Ibid.*: 268)

Simplifying significantly, Doviak's proposal is that actions typically express various virtues to some degree, but perhaps also some vices to some degree. An action is right (permissible) on his account if and only if it is one of those that maximizes the net balance of total expression of virtue over the total expression of vice. In the case of the wealthy philanthropist, the action will likely be right because it maximizes the expression of virtue over vice (the value of the generosity displayed is greater than the mild vanity expressed), even if motives are mixed, and even if either motive would have been sufficient to produce the action.

There are, of course, some potential worries for this approach. For example, consider a case where Claire gives Webster a glass of water, where she cares just a little whether Webster enjoys it. It seems she could be still more virtuous by caring a little more about whether Webster enjoys the water, an extra bit of concern for his well-being. It seems, counterintuitively, that Claire's action will be *wrong* if she gives the glass of water to Webster without the added concern on Doviak's account because she is not maximizing net intrinsic virtue value. Furthermore, Doviak's proposal may retain some problems by focusing solely on how an action maximizes the net expression of virtue over vice; this is a matter of an agent's motives, but surely through culpable ignorance or other factors an action might express good motives but end up being wrong (see also Cuirria 2012).

A rather different approach would be to shift to an idealized virtuous observer account of right action, a form of qualified agent virtue ethics (see Kawall 2002, 2009b). Consider the following:

An action is *permissible* for an agent in a given set of circumstances iff it would be deemed so by at least one unimpaired, fully informed, virtuous observer.

An action is *obligatory/required* for an agent in a given set of circumstances iff it would be deemed so by all unimpaired, fully informed, virtuous observers.

An action is *praiseworthy* for an agent in a given set of circumstances to the extent that it would be deemed so by unimpaired, fully informed, virtuous observers.

In each case, to deem an action permissible (or praiseworthy, etc.) would be a matter of approving of the action, although with a different form of approval in each case, thus allowing that one could approve of an action as permissible, without yet deeming it to

be praiseworthy, for example. The approach readily allows virtue ethicists to engage with deontologists and consequentialists concerning permissible and obligatory actions, while also providing an account of praiseworthy actions.

The approach captures important intuitions behind both qualified agent and agent based virtue ethics. In both cases it seems we are drawing on the good judgement and attitudes of fully virtuous agents as expressed in their actions. But notice that their judgement can presumably be applied to other cases, including situations where they would not find themselves. They can approve of the actions of the liar and the tennis player; such actions can be permissible and some could be praiseworthy, even if virtuous observers would not be in these situations. Their good judgement and virtues would allow them to assess such scenarios and approve of certain courses of action.

By requiring the virtuous observers to be fully-informed we overcome worries about non-culpable ignorance. We appeal to the judgement of the virtuous doctor when she is fully informed about the allergies of the villagers, not when she acts out of ignorance. This provides an assessment worth trusting, unlike the flawed assessments that even virtuous agents can make through impairment, or lack of knowledge. Notice also that the mere fact that virtuous agents would brush their teeth does not make this praiseworthy or admirable. Virtuous agents themselves would judge some of their actions to be quite banal; permissible, or even obligatory, but not admirable. On the other hand, they could well deem the actions of many ordinary individuals (including those in situations virtuous agents would never be in) to be highly praiseworthy.

Svensson (2010) has argued that this approach cannot distinguish between right action, the supererogatory, and other positive evaluations of actions as these would all involve virtuous agents approving of the actions in some way; as such the actions would all be lumped together. But notice that there can be a wide range of approvals and disapprovals, varying in such things as (i) their objects (e.g. approving of motives versus approving of consequences), (ii) their strength or intensity, (iii) their phenomenological “feels”, and (iv) their content (compare approving of a piece of music for a party versus approving of it for a memorial service). Given the wide range of potential approvals and disapprovals, there is ample scope to make fine-grained moral assessments of agents and actions.

Svensson also worries about cases where an agent chooses between trivial actions, e.g. between tying one’s left shoe or right shoe first. Would virtuous agents have positive attitudes of approval here? Would they even care? In response, notice that there can be quite trivial, mild approvals: the virtuous agents could easily agree to either action. There need not be an intensely felt attitude on the part of the virtuous agents in assessing all actions.

While qualified agent and agent-based virtue ethics thus both face important, challenging objections in accounting for right action (and related concepts), I have also tried to indicate that there are promising paths ahead for these approaches. A great deal of creative, insightful work is being done in these areas, and we have reason to be confident these efforts will continue to be fruitful and illuminating.

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