

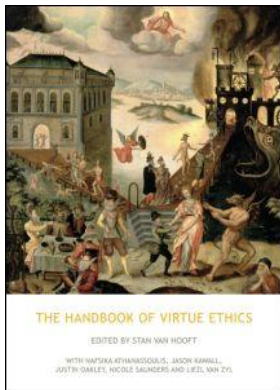
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## **The Handbook of Virtue Ethics**

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### **Virtue ethics and utilitarianism**

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## Virtue ethics and utilitarianism

Justin Oakley

A major stimulus for the emergence of contemporary virtue ethics was the growing philosophical consensus that standard forms of utilitarianism could not adequately recognize the moral significance of personal relationships, emotions and motives. By contrast, such phenomena are central features of the various forms of virtue ethics which have been developed in recent years. The most influential contributions to this critique were made by Michael Stocker (1976) and Bernard Williams (1981b), who argued that utilitarianism could not consistently allow us to have friendships and loving relationships. These arguments echoed Elizabeth Anscombe's (1958) plea for moral philosophy to draw on a more adequate philosophical psychology than that which utilitarian and consequentialist approaches (among others) were capable of providing. The critique initiated by Stocker and Williams influenced the rise and contours of contemporary virtue ethics, and it is intriguing to contemplate whether contemporary virtue ethics would have placed quite such an emphasis on friendship and partiality had it not been for the impartialist orientation of its major rivals. Much of this critique focused on the act-utilitarianism advocated by philosophers such as J. J. C. Smart (1973) and others, though it also targeted earlier forms of utilitarianism, such as those developed by G. E. Moore ([1903] 1988) and Henry Sidgwick ([1907] 1981), which explicitly acknowledged the importance of virtues in living a good life but generally as only instrumentally valuable.<sup>1</sup> Stocker (1976: 458–9), for example, objected that Moore's pluralistic "ideal utilitarian" account of the value of loving relationships makes one's beloved replaceable, since where developing a loving relationship with some other person instead would likely better instantiate the abstract good of such relationships, then on Moore's account it would seem that one ought to leave the former relationship for the latter.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I highlight some key differences between virtue ethics and various forms of utilitarianism, particularly in regard to the value of virtues and the relevance of motive to right action. I then discuss several major concerns that utilitarians and consequentialists more generally have recently raised about virtue ethics. Virtue ethicists such as Rosalind Hursthouse have responded to such criticisms and I demonstrate how their responses

illuminate some important aspects of the approach. I also highlight areas of common ground between virtue ethics and utilitarian perspectives, such as their consensus on the importance of doing “empirically informed ethics”. I then discuss in more detail how an agent’s motives can bear on the rightness of their actions and how this phenomenon is better accommodated by virtue ethics than by utilitarianism, despite some recent utilitarian attempts to recognize the moral significance of motives. In closing, I consider what implications the increasing overlap between virtue ethics and recent Kantian approaches on this and certain other issues might have for the plausibility of utilitarianism. I also raise a new challenge for approaches which link motive and character to right action and I discuss briefly how this issue might be best addressed.

### UTILITARIAN ACCOUNTS OF VIRTUE

Despite attributions of an impoverished moral psychology to utilitarianism by the critiques which paved the way for contemporary virtue ethics, a number of prominent utilitarians do provide accounts of how virtuous character traits can be valuable at least in certain respects. For example, Henry Sidgwick ([1907] 1981) argued that while character traits commonly regarded as virtues – like generosity, gratitude and courage – are not intrinsically valuable, such traits can nevertheless have instrumental value in so far as they help to bring about the pleasure and happiness of sentient beings, or a life of “desirable consciousness” (see Shaver 2008; Crisp 2011: 31–2; forthcoming (b): 15). Sidgwick ([1907] 1981: 227) believed that inculcating virtuous character traits can have a certain utility in producing right action (in terms of promoting happiness, or desirable consciousness), especially in situations where we have insufficient time to deliberate (see Crisp forthcoming (b): 14). Sidgwick’s utilitarianism is well known for not setting special stock in any particular disposition, motive or decision procedure, even a utilitarian “pure universal philanthropy”, apart from its consequences, as he argued that “if experience shows that the general happiness will be more satisfactorily attained if men frequently act from other motives than pure universal philanthropy, it is obvious that these other motives are reasonably to be preferred on Utilitarian principles” ([1907] 1981: 413). So, consistent with this general outlook, Sidgwick stated that “a faculty or disposition ... appears to me clearly not valuable in itself but for the acts and feelings in which it takes effect, or for the ulterior consequences of these” (*ibid.*: 393). Sidgwick (*ibid.*: 454, 334) thought that we realize on reflection how we commonly value a particular virtue, such as courage, in some contexts more than we do in others in accordance with how much utility that virtue has in those different contexts. Therefore, Sidgwick (*ibid.*: 402) held that “conduciveness to general happiness should be the criterion for deciding how far the cultivation of Virtue should be carried”. Similarly, G. E. Moore ([1903] 1988) argued that some routine habits which are ordinarily seen as virtues – such as habitual unthinking honesty – could count as instrumentally good, for, among other things, “a great economy of labour is effected when a useful action becomes habitual or instinctive” (*ibid.*: 225). But Moore also argued that where a virtuous disposition includes the contemplation of something intrinsically valuable – such as a conscious compassion, an appreciation of beauty or the admiration of a beloved’s appreciation of beauty – the virtue itself, or at least the contemplation or appreciation that it includes, can be intrinsically valuable (*ibid.*: 230–31; see also Hurka 2003).<sup>3</sup>

More recently, Robert Adams (1976) has outlined what he called “motive-utilitarianism”, according to which “one pattern of motivation is morally better than another to the extent that the former has more utility than the latter” (*ibid.*: 470). Adams explained how motive-utilitarianism differs from act-utilitarianism, since motive-utilitarianism judges the utility of motives directly, according to whether having a certain pattern of motivation – such as an interest in seeing everything in Chartres cathedral – itself maximizes utility in the context in question, even if that pattern of motivation results in one performing certain individual acts in that context which are themselves sub-optimal and thus wrong, by act-utilitarian standards.<sup>4</sup> And, embracing Sidgwick’s openness to motives and dispositions other than “pure universal philanthropy”, Roger Crisp (1992) has argued that there are good reasons for thinking that a utilitarian criterion of right action, when applied to one’s life overall, would dictate that one develop and act on various virtuous character traits, such as prudence, generosity and concern for others.<sup>5</sup> For given certain facts about human life and human psychology, an individual who has and acts on such virtues is, according to Crisp, more likely to live a life where “the total amount of utility in the history of the world is brought as close as possible to the maximum” (*ibid.*: 142).

A different way in which utilitarians have sought to accommodate the moral significance of character traits focuses on right action, but accords traits themselves an *essential* role in act evaluation, analogous to that played by rules in rule-utilitarianism. For instance, R. B. Brandt (1989) has developed an “indirect optimific utilitarian theory”, whereby “the morality of an act depends only on whether its moral motivation is up to par” (*ibid.*: 92). On this approach:

the idea is to order the acceptable level of aversion to various act-types in accordance with the damage to (one or more persons’) welfare that would likely be done if everyone *felt free* to indulge in the kind of behavior in question – not if everyone actually indulged. The worse the effect if everyone felt free, the higher the acceptable level of aversion to the act-type. (*Ibid.*: 95)

On this view, what actions are right cannot be determined without referring to the aversions in the character of the agent (see also Hooker 2000).<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Philippa Foot’s discussion in “Utilitarianism and the Virtues” suggests that utilitarianism could itself be understood as a form of virtue ethics, in so far as utilitarianism tells us that we should do what a person with a good utilitarian character would do. The character of such a person would be governed by a single disposition – the virtue of universal benevolence – and the rightness of their actions would be determined according to whether their behaviour conformed with what such a disposition would have them do (Foot 1985: 206).

Given these various utilitarian accounts of virtuous character, it is natural to ask what key differences remain between virtue ethics and these, or indeed any, forms of utilitarianism. To begin with, whether the utility of character traits is measured directly (as in approaches like those developed by Adams and Crisp), or indirectly, through the acts that such traits are expressed in (as with Railton’s and R. M. Hare’s views), the above forms of utilitarianism are distinct in holding that, contrary to virtue ethics, virtuous character traits cannot be intrinsically valuable but can at most have only instrumental value. (Moore indicates in certain places that he is willing to grant that a virtuous character trait may have intrinsic value and so Moore’s ideal utilitarianism would not differ from virtue ethics

in that respect – though it would in other ways, such as its commitment to maximization, which is not shared by virtue ethics.) More fundamentally, as theories of right action, all of the above forms of utilitarianism – apart from the “trait-consequentialism” advocated by Brandt (and sketched by Foot) – reject the claim made by contemporary virtue ethics that reference to virtue is *essential* in the justification of right action. For a common initial way of stating a virtue ethics criterion of right action, in broad terms, is as follows: V: An action is right if and only if “it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances” (Hursthouse 1999: 28). By contrast, utilitarianism can be characterized generally as holding that: X is right if and only if X can reasonably be expected to (or actually does) produce the most utility, of all the options available (to the agent). Thus, there is no essential reference to virtue in a utilitarian criterion of rightness. Of course, virtuous character traits can play an essential role in the justification of right action on a trait-consequentialist view such as that of Brandt outlined above, but the grounding of traits in utility maximization on such a view differs from the eudaimonistic grounding of the virtues in Aristotelian virtue ethics, and from the grounding of virtues in common-sense admirability judgements in agent-based non-eudaimonistic virtue ethics, such as that developed by Michael Slote (1992, 2001).<sup>7</sup>

This essential reference to virtue in justifications of right action by virtue ethics also brings out another difference between this approach and utilitarianism. That is, since acting from a particular virtue involves acting out of certain motives which are part of having that virtue, virtue ethics typically holds that an agent’s motive bears on the rightness of their actions, whereas standard forms of utilitarianism reject such a claim and hold that one can act rightly, whatever one’s motives. By “motive” here I mean what one acts *out of*, rather than the purposes one acts *for the sake of* (see Stocker 1981). (Indeed, Michael Slote’s [1992, 2001] agent-based virtue ethics holds that the motive one acts out of is the critical factor in determining the rightness of one’s actions, as Slote holds that an action is right if and only if it is done from a virtuous motive, such as benevolence.) So, for example, virtue ethics standardly holds that giving a gift to a friend counts as right only if one acts out of motives appropriate to the occasion, such as affection and friendly feeling, whereas utilitarianism would judge such an action right if and only if it maximizes actual or expected utility, regardless of one’s motives. (An exception here is the “target-centred” pluralistic form of virtue ethics developed by Christine Swanton [2003: 294, 245–6], which seems to allow that one can hit the target of a particular virtue from no relevant inner state at all, so Swanton seems to reject the idea that hitting the target of the contextually relevant virtue always requires acting from a particular virtuous motive or disposition<sup>8</sup> – though she thinks it usually requires at least the absence of *vicious* motives.) And, a further key difference between standard forms of utilitarianism and all of the above forms of virtue ethics centres on the value of personal relationships such as friendship, which virtue ethicists regard as intrinsically valuable, whereas utilitarians see such relationships as only instrumentally valuable.<sup>9</sup>

### UTILITARIAN AND CONSEQUENTIALIST CRITICISMS OF VIRTUE ETHICS

Several major concerns have recently been raised by utilitarians and consequentialists about virtue ethics. In particular, there are three key criticisms which focus on virtue ethics’

criterion of right action in V, alleging that it can justify actions which have disastrous consequences, that it is objectionably egoistic, and that it provides an implausibly primitive account of right-making features of actions. R. M. Hare (1996: 27) makes the first of these criticisms, expressing a worry shared by many utilitarians and others, in claiming that “it is possible for very virtuous people to do terrible things – and not necessarily by mistake or inadvertence” (see also Rachels & Rachels 2012: 171). To illustrate such a scenario, Hare gives the example of a devout Catholic missionary working in Africa who “does all he can” to undermine government efforts to provide oral contraceptives to the population in the country where he works, thereby “contributing to the population explosion and to the keeping of women in subjection, which, we may agree, are great evils” (R. M. Hare 1996: 27). If doing what the virtuous agent would do, on secular forms of virtue ethics, involves acting in ways that would foreseeably bring about such bad consequences, this would seem to seriously call into question the plausibility of the virtue ethics criterion of right action.

Second, an important and related consequentialist criticism, directed specifically at the Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics which have dominated the approach so far, objects to the egoistic basis of reasons for action it sees in such accounts, given their eudaimonistic grounding of the virtues in V. This criticism is forcefully put by Thomas Hurka (1999), who argues that Aristotelian virtue ethics’ ultimate grounding of reasons for action in the agent’s own flourishing cannot provide a plausible foundation for other-regarding duties, so is unable to correctly explain their force or give them “their proper weight and scope” (*ibid.*: 46).<sup>10</sup> Hurka argues that such an account overvalues virtuous character traits themselves (which he regards as “derivative and secondary good[s]”; *ibid.*: 62), compared with the value of the objects towards which particular virtues are directed – such as another’s good, the target of the virtue of benevolence. Hurka asks:

If one person has normative reason to benefit another, what is the ultimate explanation for this reason? The egoistic view says that the explanation is self-regarding: to make his own life better or more flourishing. But this is not, intuitively, the right explanation. The right explanation is other-regarding: to make the other person’s life better. Effects on the agent’s good may provide a secondary reason for other-regarding action, but the primary reason concerns the action’s effect on the other. That is, after all, the point of the action. (*Ibid.*: 69)

For example, Hurka describes a teacher acting from the virtue of benevolence and asks us to consider the value of the knowledge the teacher imparts:

Imagine that a teacher works to instill knowledge in a student from a benevolent desire for the student’s betterment and that as a result the student acquires knowledge. If you learn of these facts, what should you be more pleased by, the student’s knowledge or the teacher’s virtuous attempt to instill knowledge? Surely you should be more pleased by the former; it is the point of the exercise. But then assuming that it is in general best to care more about greater goods, the knowledge must be the greater good. (*Ibid.*: 61)

Thus, Hurka argues that there are non-derivative reasons to pursue the good of others, independent of how this might bear on our own virtue, but that Aristotelian virtue ethics

seems incapable of recognizing such reasons and justifications for action (see also Cordner 1994; Hurka 2001: 220–56; 2011b).<sup>11</sup>

The third key criticism is directed by consequentialists primarily at the agent-based form of virtue ethics developed by Michael Slote (1992, 2001), though it might also be thought applicable to Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics. For example, Philip Pettit (1997) raises concerns about whether agent-based forms of virtue ethics could provide a plausible account of non-primitive properties, such as rightness. Pettit (*ibid.*: 122–3, 136–40) argues that while appeals to idealized agents – such as ideal observers, idealized desirers or the virtuous person – might plausibly figure in analyses of primitive (or unmediated) properties like “red” and “good”, such appeals seem far less plausible as analyses of non-primitive (or mediated) properties such as “right” (compared with approaches which analyse rightness directly in terms of, say, maximizing utility). Defending a consequentialist perspective in his debate with virtue ethics and Kantian ethics, Pettit argues that:

The person of virtue does not just look and see that an option or kind of option is right, at least not if the literature and reportage of centuries is reliable. Nor do they generally come to identify an option as right on the basis that it is what this or that moral hero would choose. Rather they come to identify an option as right on the basis, explicit or implicit, of recognizing that it compares well with other options in regard to certain values. Certainly they refer to that basis in values as they answer the challenge to justify the choice which they make. They do not claim to see the rightness of the option neat, they claim to see it in the relative helpfulness or fairness or utility of taking that course. (*Ibid.*: 139)

By contrast, Pettit argues, consequentialism more plausibly treats rightness as a non-primitive property, as rightness and right action are understood on such an approach to be constructed out of goodness and value, which are more basic properties, and those more basic properties determine the rightness of a certain option or action rather than others, without the need for a virtuous agent as some sort of justificatory intermediary.

Virtue ethicists have responded to the above three criticisms in various ways. A common response to the sort of worry expressed by Hare regarding virtuous agents bringing about terrible consequences has been to argue that such actions indicate that the agent involved does not have the relevant virtue after all, or that the agent lacks another virtue which would be more important in this context. Thus, a doctor who takes themselves to be acting from the virtue of medical beneficence in withholding a truthful diagnosis of terminal cancer, but in so doing precludes any possibility of the patient reconciling with those from whom he has become estranged, demonstrates that they are not acting from the genuine virtue of medical beneficence here, however well intentioned they may be. For, as Rosalind Hursthouse (1999: 52) puts it, “No one thinks a doctor unkind or callous because she tells her patients the shattering truth that they have only six months to live” (see also Foot 1977; Hursthouse 1991: 231).<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, if we suppose that Hare’s missionary working to sabotage the distribution of oral contraceptives in a developing country is acting from a genuine virtue, such as a religious virtue of devoutness, they can nevertheless be thought to lack the broad-based virtue of justice in thereby foreseeably reinforcing the subjection of women in those countries. So, virtue ethics can evaluate actions ostensibly motivated by virtue but with disastrous consequences as contrary to what the virtuous agent would

do and so as wrong. In this context some virtue ethicists have emphasized how each virtue involves a “regulative ideal”, or an internalized normative standard of excellence, such that one is able to adjust one’s motivation and conduct so that they conform to that standard – as when a virtuous doctor regulates their relationships with patients according to an ideal of serving their patients’ health (see Oakley & Cocking 2001: 25–31; Oakley 2013a). This understanding of what it is to have a virtue allows for the possibility that an action from good motives or good intentions may fail to reach the appropriate standard of excellence that one is normatively disposed to uphold. As Christine Swanton (2003) puts it, each virtue has a target or goal and acting virtuously includes hitting the target of the virtue in question (see also Hursthouse 1999: 12). Of course, a virtuous person may, due to non-culpably false beliefs or bad luck, on a certain occasion fail to act as their regulative ideals would dictate, but such episodes would hardly count as an indictment of virtue ethics. After all, even standard forms of utilitarianism which consider expected utility rather than actual utility will not judge that an agent acted wrongly when they do something that was reasonably expected to maximize utility but which unforeseeably turns out badly. Moreover, many forms of “trait-consequentialism” and “trait-utilitarianism” (such as that of Brandt, discussed earlier), along with approaches (such as that of Railton (1984), mentioned above) which would have an agent inculcate whichever traits are most likely to lead them to produce the most beneficial overall sequence of acts over a lifetime, will also judge that an agent who acts on a trait that is admired – owing to its being optimistic when generally instantiated, or to its being the most reliable way in which the agent themselves can bring about the most beneficial sequence of acts over their lifetime – will *in certain cases* bring about very bad consequences, despite the agent acting “in character” (as Hare might put it), and yet such outcomes are not taken as any sort of indictment of those approaches, or of the character traits in question. So, if the possibility of acts with such consequences calls into question the plausibility of virtue ethics, such possibilities would also call into question those forms of utilitarianism and consequentialism.<sup>13</sup>

In response to the second criticism, about Aristotelian virtue ethics providing fundamentally egoistic reasons for action, many virtue ethicists have argued that, in so far as the approach does involve egoistic reasons for action, it is not thereby objectionably egoistic. For example, Rosalind Hursthouse (1991: 170–91) explains how virtues normally benefit their possessor, in that they are ways in which we live in accordance with our nature as humans, but she argues that while a virtuous person’s individual flourishing can serve as an ultimate *justifying* reason for their actions, it would not normally be the *motivating* reason for their actions. This point can also be seen in regard to intrinsically valuable external goods such as friendship, which also partly constitute a person’s eudaimonia. In *Nicomachean Ethics* IX 9, Aristotle argues that a person cannot live a flourishing life without friends because self-knowledge itself is intrinsically good, and a solitary person’s knowledge of themselves would be importantly incomplete. Aristotle argues that over time close friends come to share overlapping ethically significant qualities, and that through observing our friends we come to learn about aspects of ourselves which we would otherwise fail to grasp. However, Aristotle is not suggesting that we should go and make friends as a kind of “learning experience”, but rather that we should develop genuine friendships where we care for another for their own sake and, as a by-product, such relationships will help us flourish. Perhaps the critic might still see this as providing a fundamentally egoistic account of reasons for action in the context of friendship, but if so, this again seems to be



of an innocuous and morally unobjectionable kind. After all, if a person with whom one has a loving relationship tells us that they would end the relationship were it to become deeply unfulfilling to them, it would clearly not follow that their reasons for acting in the relationship are fundamentally egoistic in any morally objectionable way. In any case, although Hursthouse (1991) holds that virtues generally benefit their possessor, she (e.g. *ibid.*: 185) also reminds us that having the virtues is no guarantee of eudaimonia, since not only do we need external goods such as friendship and health, but also some virtues – such as courage and loyalty – can involve taking considerable risks with one's safety and may even require us to act heroically, when we find ourselves in circumstances where acting virtuously necessitates sacrificing our lives for the sake of others (see also Foot 2001: 91–8).

Regarding Philip Pettit's criticism that appeals to virtuous agents provide implausible analyses of non-primitive properties such as rightness (whatever the promise of such analyses of primitive properties like goodness), virtue ethicists can reply by drawing an analogy with the justificatory structure of rule-utilitarianism. That is, virtues justify actions in a parallel way to how the rules of rule-utilitarianism justify actions. Yet clearly neither virtues nor rules are some sort of ethical primitive, without any further justificatory basis – in the manner, for example, of ideal observer theories. In Aristotelian virtue ethics, it is because they help one flourish *qua* human being that certain character traits count as virtues; similarly, in rule-utilitarianism, it is because a rule when generally followed in certain kinds of circumstances maximizes utility that it qualifies as a rule which we ought to follow when we are in those circumstances. So, on both approaches right action is constructed from a deeper justificatory basis in value, in a way that is comparable to the consequentialism described by Pettit. But in neither virtue ethics nor rule-utilitarianism can that deeper value basis be applied directly to actions, in a way that bypasses virtuous agents or rules (Oakley 2007: 90–1; see also Hooker 2000; Hursthouse 2002).

However, despite the differences the above debates reveal between virtue ethics and various forms of utilitarianism and consequentialism, it is clear that these approaches share some common ground. That is, both virtue ethics and utilitarianism offer broadly teleological accounts of right action, both approaches regard beneficence (and, it seems, benevolence) as a virtue or a good disposition to develop and both approaches agree on the importance of doing “empirically informed ethics”. While this last aspect has traditionally been a feature of utilitarianism, the extensive use of relevant empirical research is also apparent in, for example, Philippa Foot's (2001) work on natural goodness and in Dan Russell's (2009) and Nancy Snow's (2010) virtue-ethical responses to philosophers such as John Doris (2002), who advanced situationist critiques of virtue ethics using empirical research in social psychology.

### MOTIVE, RIGHT ACTION AND A NEW CHALLENGE FOR VIRTUE ETHICS

Nevertheless, among the remaining key differences between most forms of virtue ethics and standard versions of utilitarianism is the claim by the former that an agent's motive bears on the rightness of their actions, which is a claim that utilitarians typically reject. In closing, I want to consider briefly what might be said in favour of this claim, but I also want to raise an important challenge to it. Here, as before, I understand “motive” in terms of what one acts *out of*, as in acting out of friendship, which, as Michael Stocker (1981) has

influentially argued, is importantly distinct from and irreducible to one's purposes, or what one acts *for the sake of*, as in acting for the sake of a friendship (or for the sake of friendship generally).<sup>14</sup> The significance of motive for right action can be seen in various cases. For example, consider two whistleblowers at a hospital who each take steps to expose a seriously underperforming surgeon working there, but one acts out of a concern about the safety and welfare of patients, whereas the other acts from a desire for self-aggrandisement. If we suppose that the overall consequences in each case are the same for those affected by these whistleblowers' actions, calling these two actions equally right seems to miss something of moral significance about the actions of the self-aggrandising whistleblower. There is clearly something morally deficient, and not simply sub-optimal or less than ideal, about the actions of the self-aggrandising whistleblower, which need not be reflected in the overall consequences of their actions. We might call this a "mixed" action, as we are familiar with other sorts of examples of mixed actions which have a morally deficient quality that may not register in terms of their consequences (see also Van Zyl 2011a). For example, consider someone who acts from a racist motive, in refusing to shake another's hand (see Sverdlik 2011: 55–8). Or, to take a far less significant case, consider a young man who might be overly effusive in giving compliments to his prospective in-laws, when his fiancée takes him to dinner with them.

Indeed, the importance of motive for right action seems to be increasingly recognized in contemporary Kantian ethics, at least in the view of some philosophers who advocate such an approach (e.g. Korsgaard 2008; Herman 2011). And it seems that even Kant himself held that, at least in some cases, the motive of one's action helps to specify the action being evaluated and helps to generate the contradictions in the will he regards as a feature of impermissible actions. Thus, in Kant's ([1785] 1959: Ak 422) argument against suicide, he focuses specifically on a person who attempts suicide out of self-love, a motive which he emphasizes is clearly incompatible with self-annihilation (Wood 1999, 2011).<sup>15</sup> So, there seems to be something of an "overlapping consensus" developing here between Kantian ethics and virtue ethics on the importance of motive for right action, and contemporary utilitarianism might come to be seen as perhaps the "odd one out" among these three approaches, in so far as it advocates an entirely *motiveless* criterion of right action, and so as standing in need of further justification. Of course, in certain areas, such as discussions of the ethics of public policy, the motiveless approach of utilitarianism has been seen as a strength. But further work remains to be done here by virtue ethicists about how considerations of motive and character might have important roles to play in ethical evaluations of various public policy initiatives (Slote 2001: 100–103; Oakley 2014).

However, this overlapping consensus also highlights a difficulty, which would seem to be avoided by the exclusive focus on consequences in utilitarian act-evaluations. For Kant right action and moral worth are determined by the quality of one's will, and for Aristotle one's virtue is determined by one's character (including one's emotional dispositions), which many contemporary virtue ethicists use as a basis for right action. Both Aristotelian virtue ethics and Kantian ethics would seem to judge one's character partly on account of one's *latent* tendencies (that is, what one *would* do, in certain circumstances, but may not have done yet), along with the tendencies that one may have already exhibited. But then, does this make right action an unattainable ideal? For are such theories therefore, as Kant ([1785] 1959) puts it, concerned "with actions of which perhaps the world has never have had an example"?

One need not be an enemy of virtue, but only a cool observer who does not confuse even the liveliest aspiration for the good with its reality, to be doubtful sometimes whether true virtue can really be found anywhere in the world. This is especially true as one's years increase and one's power of judgment is made wiser by experience and more acute in observation. This being so, nothing can secure us against the complete abandonment of our ideas of duty and preserve in us a well-founded respect for its law except the clear conviction that, even if there never were actions springing from such pure sources, our concern is not whether this or that was done but that reason of itself and independently of all appearances commands what ought to be done. Our concern is with actions of which perhaps the world has never had an example, with actions whose feasibility might be seriously doubted by those who base everything on experience, and yet with actions inexorably commanded by reason. For example, pure sincerity in friendship can be demanded of every man and this demand is not in the least diminished if a sincere friend has never existed, because this duty, as duty in general, prior to all experience, lies in the idea of a reason which determines the will by a priori grounds.

(Kant [1785] 1959: Ak 408–9)

So, how global must I have demonstrated, for example, my benevolence to be in order for my acting on it here and now to count as virtuous? What if my benevolence has never been “tested” much, by – to take an example from the well-known “Good Samaritan experiment” at Princeton Theological Seminary (Darley & Batson 1973) – encountering strangers slumped in a doorway while I am in a hurry to give a talk on the famous parable? Should we think, as Nafsika Athanassoulis (2000: 220) puts it, that “most people appear to be acting morally, in the few occasions when they are called upon to do so, simply because they have been lucky enough not to be put into situations where external factors exert great pressures to the contrary” (see also Russell 2009)?

These are large and important questions, which I cannot hope to answer adequately here. Nevertheless, let me close by sketching how virtue ethics might begin to go about meeting this challenge. While it is common for people to wonder about how they might behave in confronting situations which are remote from their everyday experience, Robert Adams argues that speculating about how one might react in such contexts is not particularly instructive:

In thinking about the moral excellences and deficiencies of people who will never experience anything like Auschwitz, there is little moral illumination to be gained by speculating about how they would have responded to an extremely malignant environment of that sort. ... Human moral excellence cannot be an ability and readiness to respond well to every possible circumstance. ... Virtue is real and one of the most excellent things in human life. But it is a dependent and conditioned virtue. We are dependent creatures and dependent also in matters of virtue and vice.  
(2006: 161; see also Driver 2001: 82)

I think Adams is correct here. The character traits we might judge another's actions as expressing need not endure for a lifetime, nor be apparent across all domains, in order to be real and durable. Indeed, given how contrived the settings are in which people have

been placed in some of the most influential social psychology experiments (such as Stanley Milgram's (2010) infamous early 1960s studies of obedience to authority) and the lack of attention paid by researchers to subjects' different construals of the situations they found themselves in, it seems seriously misguided to regard these as any kind of definitive "moral tests" of subjects' character traits.<sup>16</sup> There are important issues here, which are beyond the scope of our current discussion. Nevertheless, I would suggest that, contrary to Kant's worry, plausible forms of virtue ethics are, we might say, concerned with actions of which it is clear that the world has had a great many examples.

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### NOTES

1. Some contemporary philosophers, such as Julia Driver (2001), have recently also offered consequentialist accounts of the virtues.
2. In an influential article, Gregory Vlastos (1973) raised a related concern about Platonic ideals of love, arguing that to justify one's love for another person by appealing to their properties suggests that one does not love that person for themselves, and creates the possibility that these properties may be instantiated by someone else who is similar to one's beloved in the relevant respects (see also Hurka 2003: 625–6).
3. Hurka (2003: 618–20) explains how Moore saw our appreciating or loving an intrinsically valuable state in another as conferring value on our appreciation or our love itself, in a recursive way (see also Hurka 2001; 2011a: 20). In Moore's later work, such as his 1912 book *Ethics*, he agreed with Sidgwick that only conscious states can be intrinsically valuable: "nothing can be an intrinsic good unless it contains *both* some feeling and *also* some other form of consciousness" (Moore [1912] 1966: 129).
4. Adams mentions Bentham ([1789] 1948) and Sidgwick ([1907] 1981) as precursors of this approach. Adams's approach can be contrasted with R. M. Hare's (1981) two-levels form of utilitarianism, and with Peter Railton's (1984) act-consequentialist argument in favour of developing, for example, the sorts of sturdy character traits necessary to sustain enduring personal relationships. Hare allows that utilitarians can recommend certain character traits in so far as they produce beneficial acts. Railton says he bases his arguments "entirely on act-consequentialism" (*ibid.*: 157) and so is looking for what sort of character would lead an individual "to perform the most beneficial overall sequence of acts" (*ibid.*: 160). By contrast, Adams does not measure the utility of motives in terms of optimific acts, but rather explicates this directly in terms of the happiness that such motives (like an interest in seeing everything in Chartres cathedral) themselves produce when one has them. Thus, in evaluating motives Adams is not looking for candidates that would provide the best chance of producing "the most beneficial overall sequence of acts" over a lifetime (see Railton 1984: 157–8, where he explicitly distinguishes his approach from that of Adams).
5. Crisp argues, *contra* Adams, that there is no reason to privilege *motives* here, since on what Crisp takes to be the most plausible form of utilitarianism, it is the utility of one's biographical *life* overall that should matter, taking into account one's motives, beliefs, virtuous character traits and so on. See also Kilcullen (1983), Railton (1988), Slote (1988), Jamieson (2007) and John Stuart Mill's ([1871] 1962: ch. 2, 150) reference, in *On Liberty*, to Aristotle's ethics as a "judicious utilitarianism". Also, Julia Driver (2001) has developed a consequentialist theory of virtue, according to which a character trait – such as benevolence, generosity and modesty – counts as a moral virtue when it produces more actual good overall than not, systematically (ie. even if it does not do so on every occasion), where this goodness is understood, broadly speaking, in terms of "the flourishing of social creatures, which does not always get cashed out in terms of pleasure" (*ibid.*: 91–2). Driver has in mind here primarily good consequences for others, though she

recognizes (without requiring this) that the outcomes of these virtuous character traits can include good consequences for oneself.

6. This clearly differs from Railton's act-consequentialist approach to the value of standing dispositions: see Railton (1984: 157–8), where he explicitly distinguishes his approach from any such "trait-consequentialism".
7. For further discussion, see Oakley (1996).
8. In "Right Action and the Targets of Virtue" (this volume, Chapter 10), Liezl van Zyl demonstrates how Swanton's account could be understood as holding that particular motives are necessary for right action, in *certain contexts*. For example, "acting from care" might be (or be part of) a target of the virtue of benevolence for a carer whose helping actions have become somewhat routine and who therefore realizes s/he needs to become more caring.
9. We saw above that, in outlining his ideal utilitarianism, Moore indicates at times that he may be an exception to this (see also footnote 3 above). See also Oakley (2013b).
10. Hurka (1999: 45) explains the account of reasons for action in Aristotelian virtue ethics as follows: "The concept of flourishing is used as the central concept in a normative theory that is formally egoistic, deriving all of a person's normative reasons for action from a fundamental reason he has to pursue his own flourishing, or his own good. This theory may acknowledge derivative reasons to act that are other-regarding, such as reasons to benefit others or to refrain from harming them. But it insists that if these are reasons, it is only because they can be connected to each person's fundamental interest in his own achievement of flourishing."
11. Hurka (1999: 45–6) favours "a nonegoistic framework where virtue does not have priority over other goods and does not have the centrality for the evaluation of actions that Anscombe and others propose", that is, "a framework where each person has as fundamental a reason to pursue the good [or flourishing] of others as he has to pursue his own".
12. See also Barry Oakley's play *Music* (Melbourne Theatre Company 2012), where the central character, Jack, excoriates his wife and doctor upon discovering that they have "softened the blow" of his malignant glioma diagnosis by falsely assuring him he is likely to live for another three months, rather than letting him know that the more likely prognosis is six weeks or less: [www.mtc.com.au/interact/blog/2012/11/the-music-in-music/](http://www.mtc.com.au/interact/blog/2012/11/the-music-in-music/)
13. Note that this would remain the case, whether the traits being recommended were global (as in honesty generally), or were thought – perhaps in response to situationist critiques of character – to be more appropriately local (as in honesty-in-the-workplace).
14. Stocker (1981) uses friendship and friendly acts (among other things) to illustrate the importance of the "out of" vs. "for the sake of". Stocker argues that a friendly act is characterized not only by its purposes but must be done *out of* friendship, which is a distinct thing: "my claim is that to act out of friendship is, first, not reducible to acting for the sake of friendship and, second, is not reducible to acting for the sake of anything" (*ibid.*: 756). Nevertheless, Stocker does not deny that there are various "intimate connections" (*ibid.*: 762) between what we act out of and our purposes in acting. Stocker argues that if we consider only purposes and ignore the "out of" (e.g. motives, character), then we miss much of what is valuable about various (though not all) important values and activities (such as friendship and courage).
15. Another example of this is Kant's ([1797] 1994) discussion – and rejection – of the idea that one has a right to lie from altruistic motives. By contrast, however, in Kant's discussion of the two shopkeepers, where one gives inexperienced customers the correct change out of duty, whereas the other does so out of a desire for their continued custom, Kant describes *both* of these shopkeepers as acting rightly, despite their divergent motives ([1785] 1959: Ak 397).
16. I am indebted here to comments by Nancy Snow on a previous version of this chapter. Indeed, as Snow also suggested, it can be tragic when people who, for example, having shown courage in a variety of difficult situations, come to regard themselves as cowardly after all on account of "failing" some such contrived "test". The unfortunate temptation to reserve judgement of someone's character and actions until they have faced such a test is well illustrated in the film *Crash* (2004), where the racist police officer John Ryan warns his apparently virtuous colleague: "you have no idea who you are until you've been in this job as long as I have". Indeed, Peter Vranas (2005: 29) argues that "most people are indeterminate. ... character evaluations are epistemically unwarranted: we almost never have adequate evidence to evaluate with confidence particular people as good, bad, or intermediate". See also Russell (2009) and Annas (2011).