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# A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action\*

*Christine Swanton*

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is a common view of virtue ethics that it emphasizes the evaluation of agents and downplays or ignores the evaluation of acts, especially their evaluation as right or wrong. Despite this view, some contemporary proponents of virtue ethics have explicitly offered a virtue ethical criterion of the right, contrasting that criterion with Kantian and consequentialist criteria.<sup>1</sup> I too believe that though the virtues themselves require excellence in affective and motivational states, they can also provide the basis of accounts of rightness of actions, where the criteria for rightness can deploy notions of success extending beyond such agent-centered excellences. They can do this, I shall claim, through the notion of the target or aim of a virtue. This notion can provide a distinctively virtue ethical notion of rightness of actions. In this article I make two basic assumptions: first, that a virtue ethical search for a virtue ethical criterion of rightness is an appropriate search, and second, since virtue ethics in modern guise is still in its infancy, relatively speaking, more work needs to be done in the exploration of virtue ethical criteria of the right.

I wish to show in particular that a virtue ethics can offer a criterion of rightness that has certain structural similarities with act consequentialism. These are (i) a criterion of rightness offers an account of success in action not entirely reducible to inner properties of a virtuous agent;

\* I wish to thank Marcia Baron, Jonathan Dancy, Vanya Kovach, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Linda Zagzebski, and especially Rosalind Hursthouse for helpful comments; and also the audiences of a symposium at the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, March 1998; the Australasian Association of Philosophy Conference, Brisbane, July 2000; a philosophy colloquium at Oklahoma University, Norman, October 2000; and the New Zealand Division Philosophy Conference, Wellington, December 2000, at which I presented earlier versions of this article. I am also very grateful to the editors and reviewers of *Ethics* for their useful criticisms.

1. Most self-consciously, Rosalind Hursthouse in *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

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(ii) such a criterion allows a virtue ethics to distinguish between rightness of acts and praiseworthiness of acts, wrongness of acts and blameworthiness of acts; and (iii) such a criterion is not tantamount to a decision procedure or a method of guiding actions.

My aim is not to defend the need for a criterion of rightness of this kind in virtue ethics. Rather, I appeal to those who share (as I do) commonly held intuitions of both consequentialists and W. D. Ross that moral goodness and rightness are not the same thing. I aim to show how a virtue ethicist, too often accused of being too “agent-centered,” can accommodate such intuitions.

This article offers a virtue ethical criterion of rightness of acts as an alternative to certain other virtue ethical criteria, which are discussed in Section II. Indeed, there are two types of explicit, developed, virtue ethical accounts of right action in modern virtue ethics. One I call a ‘qualified agent’ account of rightness;<sup>2</sup> the other is motive-centered. In “Virtue Theory and Abortion,” Rosalind Hursthouse proposed the following ‘qualified agent’ account, which has received widespread attention and which has often been thought canonical for a virtue ethical account of rightness: “An act is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances.”<sup>3</sup> In a later article, Hursthouse modified the above as follows: “An act is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e., acting in character) do in the circumstances.”<sup>4</sup>

A second kind of virtue ethical account of rightness is proposed in Michael Slote’s ‘agent-based virtue ethics,’ according to which an action is right if and only if it exhibits or expresses a virtuous (admirable)

2. I thank Linda Zagzebski for this terminological suggestion.

3. Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20 (1991): 223–46. An earlier ‘qualified judge’ account of rightness was offered by Yves R. Simon in *The Definition of Moral Virtue*, ed. Vukan Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986): “We say that an action will be the right action under the circumstances if the judgment about what to do is determined, is rendered, by a person of virtuous disposition” (p. 112). Compare also the qualified agent account of rightness proposed by Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski in *Virtues of Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): “A right act is what a person who is virtuously motivated, and who has the understanding of the particular situation that a virtuous person would have, might do in like circumstances. . . . A moral duty is what a person who is virtuously motivated, and who has the understanding of the particular situation that a virtuous person would have, would do in like circumstances” (p. 135).

4. Rosalind Hursthouse, “Normative Virtue Ethics,” in *How Should One Live? Essays in the Philosophy of Virtue*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

motive, or at least does not exhibit or express a vicious (deplorable) motive.<sup>5</sup>

In this article I propose a third account, whose central theses are (1) an action is virtuous in respect V (e.g., benevolent, generous) if and only if it hits the target of (realizes the end of) virtue V (e.g., benevolence, generosity); (2) an action is right if and only if it is overall virtuous.

In Section II, I consider difficulties in Hursthouse's and Slote's accounts. In Section III, I explain what it is for an act to be virtuous, by explaining what it is to hit the target of (realize the end of) the relevant virtue. In Section IV, I offer an account of what it is for an action to be overall virtuous, and thereby right.

## II. RIVAL ACCOUNTS

The following problem arises in Hursthouse's notion of rightness. The rightness of an act is criterially determined by a qualified agent, but how qualified is a virtuous agent? If 'virtue' is a threshold concept, then it is possible that you, I, and our friends are virtuous, but it is also possible (indeed likely) that others are yet more virtuous. The problem has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. On the latter dimension, a standardly temperate, courageous, just, generous individual does not have expertise in all areas of endeavor. She may be inexperienced in medicine, or law, or in child rearing. She may therefore lack practical wisdom in those areas. Even though we may call her virtuous *tout court*, she is not a qualified agent in the areas where she lacks practical wisdom. On the vertical dimension, our virtuous agents (you, I, and our friends) are surpassed in temperance, courage, generosity, and justice by greater moral paragons. So even though on a threshold concept of 'virtue', you, I, and our friends are virtuous, we are not as virtuous as we might be, let alone ideally so, and maybe we should defer to our betters in moral decision making.

Hursthouse could resolve the above problem in the following ways. She may assume that 'virtue' is a threshold notion, but where the threshold is set depends on context. For example, in the field of medical ethics not any virtuous agent will be a qualified agent. A medical ethicist, for example, needs to be not merely benevolent, kind, and a respecter of autonomy, but also knowledgeable about medicine or, at the very least, in excellent communication with those who are. She needs to possess the full array of dialogical virtues. Another resolution is to drop the threshold concept of virtue in the definition of rightness. Perhaps

5. Michael Slote, "Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 20, *Moral Concepts*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), pp. 83–101.

'virtue' is an idealized notion. However, it seems clear that Hursthouse wants actual human agents to be qualified agents. In her later account of rightness, Hursthouse realizes the danger that actual virtuous agents may at times judge and act out of character, so she inserts into the definition a qualification to rule out this possibility.

However, the above resolutions do not completely resolve the problem of whether a virtuous agent is a qualified agent. Actual human agents, no matter how virtuous and wise, are not omniscient. As a result, an important end of a virtue may be something about which there is large scale ignorance and for which no blame can be attached to individuals or even cultures. To illustrate the point I am making, consider the relatively newly discovered virtue, that of environmental friendliness. As the debates in journals like *Scientific American* show, controversy rages about whether or not environmental friendliness requires various drastic measures to reduce a perceived threat—for example, global warming. The Aristotelian virtuous agent possesses phronesis, but phronesis, with its connotations of fine sensibilities and discriminatory powers, is impotent in the face of massive ignorance of the entire human species. No matter how well motivated and practically wise the virtuous policy maker, if her policies prove environmentally disastrous, one would think, they cannot be regarded as right. Here is another example. Wise, suitably cautious, and benevolent policy makers may decide to severely restrict genetically modified food on the grounds that large-scale ignorance about genetic modification still persists. But it may be that though the caution expresses practical wisdom, it does not exhibit knowledge. For though the possible dangers of genetically modified products of various kinds may not, in fact, be realized, reasonable people in the face of ignorance should guard against such possible dangers. The caution, even if wise, may have the result that important ends of the virtue of benevolence, such as the production of cheaper and more plentiful food, may be missed.

The above problem has a more general manifestation. Any virtuous agent is necessarily limited, and in a variety of ways. Janna Thompson puts the problem this way: "The belief that the right answer to an ethical problem is what the virtuous person judges is right is not compatible with the recognition that ethical judgments of individuals are limited and personal. It would be irrational for us to place our trust in what a single individual, however virtuous, thinks is right."<sup>6</sup>

The problems facing Slote's account are quite different from those facing Hursthouse's. Slote does not aspire to a "qualified agent" account of rightness, and so avoids the above difficulties. Rightness is tied firmly

6. Janna Thompson, *Discourse and Knowledge: A Defence of Collectivist Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 73.

to quality of motive, but this arguably leads to counterintuitive results. A foolish but well-motivated agent may not be blameworthy in her misguided actions, but should we call such actions morally right? Slote deals with this problem in the following way. The well-motivated agent is concerned to determine facts: an agent genuinely desirous of being helpful is concerned that her help reaches its target, in a suitable way.<sup>7</sup> To a reply that such an agent may not be aware of her ignorance, Slote would claim that a motive to help contaminated with intellectual arrogance is not an admirable motive. However, not all ignorance about one's expertise need be so contaminated.<sup>8</sup>

In general, it could be argued that Slote has failed to take account of a distinction between rightness and goodness of action. For W. D. Ross, quality of motive has nothing to do with rightness (although, as will be seen, my own view will not be so stark). Ross claims:

Suppose, for instance, that a man pays a particular debt simply from fear of the legal consequences of not doing so, some people would say he had done what was right, and others would deny this: they would say that no moral value attaches to such an act, and that since 'right' is meant to imply moral value, the act cannot be right. They might generalize and say that no act is right unless it is done from a sense of duty, or if they shrank from so rigorous a doctrine, they might at least say that no act is right unless done from *some* good motive, such as either sense of duty or benevolence.<sup>9</sup>

Ross distinguishes between a right act and a morally good act understood as one which is well motivated. Virtue ethicists are inclined to sidestep or belittle this distinction by speaking of acting well, but this idea does not obliterate, or even downgrade the importance of, the distinction Ross is trying to draw. Unsurprisingly, however, on my view, a virtue ethical employment of the distinction between right act and good act is not going to be quite the same as Ross's. First, on my view, quality of motive can sometimes make a difference to rightness,<sup>10</sup> and second, as Aristotle believes, goodness of motive is not the only inner state of the agent relevant to acting well. Since this article is about

7. Slote, "Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," and "The Justice of Caring," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1998): 171–95.

8. For further criticism of Slote's failure to incorporate notions of successful relation to the external world in his criterion of rightness, see Julia Driver, "Monkeying with Motives: Agent-Basing Virtue Ethics," *Utilitas* 7 (1995): 281–88.

9. W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 2.

10. Indeed, I agree with Stephen Sverdlik's view that sometimes the quality of a motive can change the deontic status of an action from right to wrong. See his "Motive and Rightness," *Ethics* 106 (1996): 327–49.

rightness and not about acting well generally, I shall not elaborate further on the latter point.

### III. A TARGET-CENTERED VIRTUE ETHICAL CONCEPTION OF RIGHTNESS

The first stage in the presentation of my virtue ethical account of rightness is the provision of an account of a virtuous act (or more precisely an act which is virtuous in respect V).<sup>11</sup> The basis of my account of such an act is Aristotle's distinction between virtuous act and action from (a state of) virtue. On my account, rightness (as opposed to full excellence) of action is tied not to action from virtue but to virtuous act.

Let me first present Aristotle's distinction, before elaborating further on the notion of virtuous act. Aristotle introduces the distinction thus:

A difficulty, however, may be raised as to how we can say that people must perform just actions if they are to become just, and temperate ones if they are to become temperate; because if they do what is just and temperate, they are just and temperate already, in the same way that if they use words or play music correctly they are already literate or musical. But surely this is not true even of the arts. It is possible to put a few words together correctly by accident, or at the prompting of another person; so the agent will only be literate if he does a literate act in a literate way, viz. in virtue of his own literacy. Nor, again, is there an analogy between the arts and the virtues. Works of art have their merit in themselves; so it is enough for them to be turned out with a certain quality of their own. But virtuous acts are not done in a just or temperate way merely because *they* have a certain quality, but only if the agent also acts in a certain state, viz. (1) if he knows what he is doing, (2) if he chooses it, and chooses it for its own sake, and (3) if he does it from a fixed and permanent disposition.<sup>12</sup>

How can an action be just or temperate if it does not exhibit a just or temperate state? The answer I shall propose is this: an action can be just or temperate if it hits the target of the virtues of justice or temperance, and an action may hit those targets without exhibiting a just or temperate state. According to Robert Audi, one 'dimension' of virtue is "the characteristic targets it aims at."<sup>13</sup> This idea requires explication if it is to be employed in the service of an account of rightness. The

11. Henceforth, 'virtuous act'.

12. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (New York: Penguin Classics, 1976), p. 97, sec. 2 iv.

13. Robert Audi, *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 180.

task of the remainder of this article is precisely to offer what may be termed a 'target-centered' virtue ethical account of rightness.

It will first be noticed that a target-centered view will tolerate moral luck in the attainment of rightness, for rightness may depend in part on results not entirely within the control of the agent. This understanding sits well with Aristotle, one of whose strengths on my view is his distinction between character (virtue) which is concerned with choice (rather than the results of choice) and the target of a virtue which may be missed. He allows for the possibility that the target of choice (virtue) may be missed through no fault of the agent. For example, the aim of magnificence is a result: "The result must be worthy of the expense, and the expense worthy of the result, or even in excess of it."<sup>14</sup> Though of course the magnificent person has wisdom, are all results of largesse predictable by the wise? Aristotle seems to allow for the possibility that a choice from the virtue of magnificence may not be a magnificent act. And, indeed, that will be my position. To revert to an earlier example, choice from the virtue of environmental friendliness may not be an environmentally friendly act.

Let me now explicate the idea of hitting the target of a virtue. To understand the idea of hitting the target of a virtue it is necessary to propose a schematic definition of a virtue:

(V<sub>1</sub>): A virtue is a good quality or excellence of character. It is a disposition of acknowledging or responding to items in the field of a virtue in an excellent (or good enough) way.

Three points need to be made about this definition. The qualification 'good enough' is intended to accommodate the possibility that 'virtue', especially in worlds full of evil, catastrophe, neediness, and conflict, is a threshold concept. Second, the definition is intended to be neutral with respect to a variety of virtue theories and virtue ethics. In particular, it entails neither eudaemonistic nor noneudaemonistic virtue ethics. Third, the definition is neutral about the issue of how broadly or how narrowly we should understand the notion of (moral) virtue.

I can now present schematic definitions of an act from virtue and a virtuous act in the light of (V<sub>1</sub>). First, a definition of action from virtue:

(V<sub>2</sub>): An action from virtue is an action which displays, expresses, or exhibits all (or a sufficient number of) the excellences comprising virtue in sense (V<sub>1</sub>), to a sufficient degree.

In the light of (V<sub>1</sub>) also, we can understand what it is to hit the target of a virtue:

(V<sub>3</sub>): Hitting the target of a virtue is a form (or forms) of success

14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1122b1–21.



in the moral acknowledgment of or responsiveness to items in its field or fields, appropriate to the aim of the virtue in a given context.

A virtuous act can now be defined:

(V<sub>4</sub>): An act is virtuous (in respect V) if and only if it hits the target of V.

In the remainder of this section, I first elucidate the idea of hitting the target of a virtue, before showing how a virtuous act differs from an action from virtue.

Recall that to hit the target of a virtue is to respond successfully to items in its field according to the aim of a virtue. I need now to discuss this idea further in order to clarify the distinction between virtuous act and action from virtue. What counts as hitting the target of a virtue is relatively easy to grasp when the aim of a virtue is simply to promote the good of individuals and hitting that target is successfully promoting that good. However, this relatively simple paradigm is complicated by several features. I shall discuss five. These are: (1) there are several modes of moral response or acknowledgment appropriate to one kind of item in a virtue's field, so hitting the target of a virtue may involve several modes of moral response; (2) the target of a virtue may be internal to the agent; (3) the target of a virtue may be plural; (4) what counts as the target of a virtue may depend on context; (5) the target of a virtue may be to avoid things. Features 1–5 are discussed in turn.

1. *Hitting the targets of virtue may involve several modes of moral response.*—Given that hitting the target of a virtue is constituted by successful response to items in its field, according to the virtue's aim, I need briefly to explain the ideas of a virtue's field and the types of response to items in it.

The field of a virtue consists of the items which are the sphere of concern of the virtue. These items may be within the agent, for example, the bodily pleasures which are the focus of temperance, or outside the agent, for example, human beings, property, money, honors. They may be situations, for example, the dangerous situations which are the focus of courage; abstract items such as knowledge or beauty; physical objects, such as one's children, friends, sentient beings in general; art works or cultural icons; or the natural objects which are the focus of the environmental virtues.

What are the types of response to items in a virtue's field? That responsiveness to, or acknowledgment of, items in the field of a virtue required by a virtue may take several forms is at least suggested by an investigation of individual virtues. These forms I shall call modes of moral responsiveness or acknowledgment. They include not only promoting or bringing about (benefit or value) but also honoring value (roughly, not dirtying one's hands with respect to a value, e.g., by not

being unjust in promoting justice);<sup>15</sup> honoring things such as rules; producing; appreciating; loving; respecting; creating; being receptive or open to; using or handling. One may respect an individual in virtue of her status as an elder or one's boss; promote or enhance value; promote the good of a stranger or friend; appreciate the value of an artwork, nature, or the efforts of a colleague; create a valuable work of art; creatively solve a moral problem; love an individual in ways appropriate to various types of bonds; be open or receptive to situations and individuals; use money, or natural objects.

The modes of moral acknowledgment of items are richly displayed in the virtues. The virtue of justice is primarily concerned with the honoring of rules of justice by adhering to those rules oneself and with respect for the status of individuals. The virtues of connoisseurship are concerned not with the promoting of, for example, art (by giving money to art foundations, say) but with the appreciation of valuable items such as art. Virtues of creativity require more than appreciation. Thrift is a virtue concerned with use of money; temperance, a virtue concerned with handling of and pursuit of pleasure; consideration, politeness, appropriate deference, virtues concerned with respect for others and their status. Many virtues, for example, that of friendship, exhibit many modes of moral acknowledgment. A good friend does not merely promote the good of her friend: she appreciates her friend, respects, and even loves her friend. Caring as a virtue involves receptivity, perhaps love in some sense, and to a large extent promotion of good.

What I shall call the profile of a virtue is that constellation of modes of moral responsiveness which comprise the virtuous disposition. On my view, not only do the virtues exhibit many modes of moral acknowledgment, but a single virtue, such as benevolence, friendship, or justice, may require that we acknowledge items in its field through several different modes. The plurality of modes of moral acknowledgment comprising the profiles of the virtues reflects the complexity of human responsiveness to the world. The virtues, with their complex profiles, recognize that we are beings who are not only agents of change in the attempt to promote good but also agents of change in the attempt to produce and to create. They also recognize that we are not only agents who are active in changing the world by promoting good (often at the expense of causing harm) but also agents who love and respect (often at the expense of maximizing good). And they recognize that we are not only active beings hell-bent on change but also are passive in a sense: in our openness, receptivity to, and appreciation of value and things. Not all ethics is "task-oriented." In short, attention to the profiles

15. The idea of honoring value is introduced by Philip Pettit in "Consequentialism," in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 230–40.

of the virtues reminds us of the complexity of our human nature and our modes of moral response. This complexity will feed into the account of rightness.

What counts as success in exhibiting modes of moral responsiveness appropriate to the aim of a virtue is a complex matter, requiring discussion of each mode. Of course, to give a full account of each mode of moral acknowledgment as it is manifested in the profiles of the virtues is a very large undertaking. I cannot, therefore, within the confines of this article provide such an account but shall instead be briefly illustrative in the service of my discussion of rightness.

2. *The targets of some virtues are internal.*—It is granted that the target of many virtues is external, for example, the target of beneficence, efficiency, justice. A just act is one that, for example, conforms to legitimate rules of procedure; an efficient act is timely and poses little cost for a worthwhile gain; a beneficent act successfully promotes human welfare. We sometimes speak too of a generous act of giving without any knowledge of, or even interest in, the motivation of the donor. The same point applies to wrongness. Consider the action of former Prime Minister Keating of Australia, who ushered the Queen to her place by putting his arm round her waist. Many considered this action wrong—even egregious, even outrageous—because it was disrespectful or impolite. He did not suitably keep his distance (as Kant puts it), and his action was therefore deemed wrong because disrespectful by many, regardless of his motivations. He may have been innocently operating within Australian mores of informality and egalitarianism, or he may have been striking another blow for turning Australia into a republic by subtly undermining the Queen’s prestige or mystique.

However, the supposition that the target of all virtue is external to the agent or is only external to the agent is false. Though the target of some virtues is external or is external in many contexts, the target of others seems to be entirely internal, for example, determination or (mental) strength. The target of the former virtue is trying hard in a sustained way, and that target may be reached even if the agent fails rather consistently in her endeavors. More commonly, the targets of virtues such as caring are a mixture of features within the agent’s mind, features of an agent’s behavior (her manner) and features external to the agent. Similarly, the target of the virtue of (racial) toleration is not merely external: the pro forma respecting of the rights of people in certain racial groups. We may call an act wrong because racist if the agent, in respecting a right, possessed racist motivation, even if that motivation was not displayed.<sup>16</sup> Notice, however, that the application of terms such as “racist” to acts is controversial, and what is required for

16. See Sverdlik.

an act not to be racist may be more or less demanding, depending on context. Though the full virtue of racial toleration may demand that we morally acknowledge those of other races through a variety of different modes (e.g., respect, promotion of good, appreciation, even a form of love), the conditions under which we call an act racist and thereby wrong may be more or less stringent.

3. *Some targets of virtue are plural.*—According to Robert Audi, the target of courage is the control of fear.<sup>17</sup> However, one may have thought that hitting the target of courage is to successfully handle dangerous or threatening situations. Perhaps then, the target of courage is plural, embracing both regulating certain inner states and handling certain sorts of external situations. On my view, regardless of what one wants to say about courage, there is no requirement for a virtue to have only one target, for a virtue may have more than one field. Even with respect to inner states, Aristotle thought that courage involved the regulation of both fear and confidence.

4. *Contextual variability of targets.*—One might wonder how the target of a virtue is to be determined if the profile of a virtue is complex. Part of the answer to this question lies in the contextual variability of the target of a virtue. What counts as a virtuous act is more heavily contextual than what counts as an action from virtue. In some contexts, for example, where there is considerable need, one may be said to have performed a generous act if one donates a large amount of money, say, even if that donation is made with bad grace. However, in other contexts, we may deny that an act of giving is generous on the grounds that it was not made in a generous spirit. Here the target of generosity is to alleviate need, in the right way, where “in the right way” makes reference to manner of giving and even motivation. Perhaps the context is a more personal one, and the hostility or ill grace noticed by the recipients. We may at other times mark the fact that the target of a virtue is reached, but only in a minimalist sense, by claiming of an action that it is all right but not right *tout court*. At yet other times we may mark the fact that the target of a virtue has been reached in its richest sense, by claiming of an action not merely that it was right but that it was splendid or admirable because lavish, nobly performed, or performed in the face of great difficulty or cost.

Here is another example illustrating the contextual nature of the target of a virtue and thereby of a virtuous act. I am an aid worker, working ceaselessly saving lives. Are my actions benevolent because successful in saving lives or not benevolent since they do not manifest caring or loving attitudes? People at this point may not worry about whether my actions manifest love for others. The target of benevolence here is

17. Audi, p. 180.

simply to alleviate need. My actions are deemed benevolent and right—indeed admirable. However, after several years of tireless activity in famine stricken areas I come home in a state of deep depression. I feel burdened by an inability to love or be creative. I am filled with resentment and rush to an analyst. She is worried about my tendencies to promote good. She tries to teach me that truly benevolent actions flow from love of humanity (in a particularized form) and inner strength. My continued knee-jerk “beneficent” actions are wrong. In this context the aim or target of benevolence is richer. It is no longer mere promotion of others’ good.

Contextual variation and disagreement about salience occurs also with the attribution of vice terms to acts. A term such as ‘cruel’ may, when applied to acts, sometimes make reference to inner states of agents and sometimes not. Sometimes one will say of an act of poisoning opossums of Australian origin with cyanide bait in New Zealand forests overrun with these pests, “That’s cruel.” The action is said to be cruel simply because of its effects on the opossums. Another person, knowing the mental anguish suffered by the poisoner (who is nonetheless determined to save coastline pohutukawa trees) says, “Sure, the act hurts the opossums, but it’s not a cruel act.”

5. *Some targets of virtue are to avoid things.*—Talk of “hitting the target” of a virtue suggests that the aim of a virtue is always positive, as opposed to the avoiding of certain things. However, some virtues seem to be targeted at the avoidance of certain states, and to illustrate this, let me briefly discuss the controversial virtue of modesty. There is disagreement about the targets aimed at by the virtue of modesty, and such disagreement may be explained by differing views about what makes a trait a virtue. On a consequentialist view, such as Julia Driver’s, a trait is a virtue if and only if its exercise tends to bring about valuable states of affairs.<sup>18</sup> According to Driver, what makes modesty a virtue is that it “stops problems from arising in social situations,” such problems as jealousy.<sup>19</sup> It does not follow that this is the aim of the virtue, but a consequentialist view of what makes a trait of virtue may drive the account of its aim, and this is the case with Driver’s account of modesty.

On Driver’s view, the modest agent avoids spending time ranking herself and avoids seeking information to enable her to have a correct estimation of her worth. But so far, modesty as a virtue has not been distinguished from laziness as a vice. Driver goes further. The target of modesty is not just to avoid these things, it is to attain something positive: the ignorance of underestimation. The agent need not directly aim at

18. Julia Driver, “The Virtues and Human Nature,” in *How Should One Live? Essays in the Philosophy of Virtue*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 111–29.

19. Julia Driver, “Modesty and Ignorance,” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 827–34, p. 828.

this but must achieve it if the target of the virtue of modesty is to be reached. And it is the hitting of this target which leads to the valuable social consequences of absence of jealousy.

On my view, by contrast, the target of modesty is simply to avoid certain things. The modest agent avoids certain behaviors, including those mentioned by Driver, but it is also the case (if modesty is to be distinguished from laziness) that the modest agent avoids drawing attention to herself, talking about herself excessively, boasting, and so forth. One might accept all this without buying into the consequentialist justification of modesty as a virtue and without buying into an account of its target as something positive: the ignorance of underestimation. One may reject that account because one may believe (as I do) that what makes modesty a virtue is not its tendency to promote valuable states of affairs (absence of jealousy, etc.) but its being the expression of a valuable or flourishing state of the agent—namely, an agent who has self-love and who does not need therefore to get a sense of self-worth from comparisons with others. Though this is what makes modesty a virtue on my view, that is not its target, however. Its target is simply to avoid certain things—the kinds of behavior mentioned above.

I am now in a position to give an account of the distinction between an action from (a state of) virtue and a virtuous act. The requirements for hitting the target of a virtue and for action from virtue are demanding in different kinds of ways. We have seen already that an act from virtue may fail to hit the target of a virtue if the virtuous agent's practical wisdom does not amount to complete knowledge. So an agent with virtues of benevolence or environmental friendliness may act out of those virtues and miss the targets of those virtues.

Second, for an action to be from a state of virtue, in an ideal case, all modes of acknowledgment of items in a virtue's field, constituting the profile of the relevant virtue, must be displayed. However, this is not always, or even standardly, a requirement for virtuous action, even in an ideal case. Furthermore, for an act to be from a state of virtue (in an ideal case), not only must all modes of moral acknowledgment comprising the virtuous disposition be displayed, they must be displayed in an excellent way, in a way which expresses fine inner states. For Aristotle, this 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. But even though the targets of some virtues are internal (at least in part), it is not generally the case that they involve the expression of all those fine inner states required for action from virtue. For example, we might say that obedience (to legitimate authority) as a virtue requires the existence of fine depth states: not only the practical wisdom which distinguishes obedience as a virtue from related vices such as blind obedience but

also the absence of deep-seated hostile resentment of all authority figures, whether legitimate or not. However, the end or target of that virtue is compliance with legitimate rules and instructions, not the elimination of such deep-seated feelings.

I now summarize the key differences between action from virtue and virtuous act.

1. An action from a state of virtue may not be a virtuous act because it misses the target of (the relevant) virtue.
2. A virtuous act may fail to be an action from virtue because it fails to manifest aspects of the profile of the relevant virtue at all.
3. A virtuous act may fail to be an action from virtue because it fails to manifest the profile of a virtue in a good enough way, namely, it fails to express sufficiently fine inner states (such as practical wisdom, fine motivation, or dispositions of fine emotion).
4. What counts as a virtuous act is more heavily contextual than what counts as an act from virtue.

We have seen how it is possible to draw a distinction between virtuous act and action from virtue. We have also seen that the drawing of this distinction in particular cases is by no means easy, for there is a constellation of modes of moral acknowledgment constituting the profiles of the virtues, and it is often a matter of context which aspects of the profile of a virtue are salient in determining the target of a virtue. It is time now to discuss rightness as the overall virtuousness of an act.

#### IV. OVERALL VIRTUOUSNESS

According to my account, an act is right if and only if it is overall virtuous. There is much ambiguity about the idea of rightness. In particular, a target-centered virtue ethical view is compatible with three possible accounts which are now discussed. I illustrate with the virtue of generosity.

1. An act is right if and only if it is overall virtuous, and that entails that it is the (or a) best action possible in the circumstances. Assuming that no other virtues or vices are involved, we could say that a given act is right insofar as it was the most generous possible. The target of generosity on this view is very stringent: there is no large penumbra such that any act which falls within it is deemed right.

2. An act is right if and only if it is overall virtuous, and that entails that it is good enough even if not the (or a) best action. Here it is assumed that there is much latitude in hitting the target of virtues such as generosity. Right acts range from the truly splendid and admirable to acts which are "all right."

3. An act is right if and only if it is not overall vicious. Here it is assumed that not being overall vicious does not entail being overall virtuous. An act may avoid the vices of meanness or stinginess, for ex-

ample, without hitting the target of generosity, which demands more than mere avoidance of stingy, mean acts. This may be true even if the target of generosity is interpreted as in 2, rather than 1.

My own target-centered view rules out 3, since rightness is understood in terms of overall virtuousness rather than the avoidance of overall viciousness. This leaves open a choice between 1 and 2. I prefer 1. Provided a distinction is made between rightness and praiseworthiness, and wrongness and blameworthiness, it seems natural to think of the targets of a virtue as best acts (relative to the virtue) though it does not follow that a rational agent should always aim at such a target directly or should necessarily deliberate about reaching that target.

It should also be noted that a belief in 1 is compatible with considerable indeterminacy about what is best. "What is best" may not be a single action but any of a number of actions, none of which are ruled out by reasons that could be defeated.

Finally, the distinction between 1, 2, and 3 raises the issue of what should be called wrong. Should wrong actions include or exclude actions which fall short of rightness in sense 1 but are "all right" in the sense of "good enough"? My own preference is to employ three categories: right actions (conforming to 1), "all right" actions (which exclude actions which are overall vicious), and wrong actions (actions which are overall vicious).

We turn now to the account of rightness as overall virtuousness. Assume that it is determined whether an act is properly describable as hitting the target of an individual virtue, such as justice, generosity, friendship, and so forth. Disagreement about overall virtuousness centers on the resolution of conflict when an action is said to be virtuous in respect V and nonvirtuous or even vicious in respect W. Given that an act can be virtuous in respect V if merely certain aspects of the profile of V are displayed, it is not necessary that such an act is in all ways excellent. It is possible for vice terms to also apply. Actions, for example, can be both just and weak, or just and malicious, or friendly and unjust, or self-protective and nonbeneficent, or independent and unkind, or cruel and environmentally sound, or assertive and hurtful, or efficient and uncaring. Of course, it is possible for an action to be right (overall) simply because it is friendly, or generous.

How is overall virtuousness determined? Like Jonathan Dancy, I wish to highlight the holism of right-making features of action.<sup>20</sup> Dancy subscribes to a form of particularism according to which "the behaviour of a reason (or of a consideration which serves as a reason) in a new

20. Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).



case cannot be predicted from its behaviour elsewhere.”<sup>21</sup> The point is this. We cannot claim that certain features always contribute positively (or negatively) to the overall virtuousness of an act, even if those kinds of feature characteristically contribute positively (or negatively).

A strong version of particularism should be distinguished from a weaker version. According to the strong version, there are no moral principles at all. According to the weaker version, though there may be a very few moral principles, characteristically reasons relevant to rightness or wrongness function holistically. I do not want to commit myself to the strong version but merely wish to emphasize that even virtue-based reasons can function holistically.

Though it is beyond the scope of this article to write at length about the moral view labeled ‘particularism’, it is important to clear away one misunderstanding. Particularism, even in its strong version, does not deny the existence of moral ‘principles’ in a weak sense described thus by Tom Sorrell: “By a ‘principle’ I mean a reason for doing or committing something, a reason that is, in the first place, general. It must apply in a wide range of situations.”<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, what Hursthouse calls virtue rules are principles in exactly this sense. What is denied in the strong version of particularism is the existence of any universal moral principles in the sense that reasons (which may constitute principles in the above sense) always have negative or positive valence (as opposed to operating holistically).<sup>23</sup> Dancy makes it clear that principles of the form “characteristically thus and so” or “normally thus and so” are perfectly acceptable to the particularist.<sup>24</sup> This fact undermines the objection that moral life under particularism would be unpredictable.

Let us now see how virtue-based reasons function holistically in the assessment of actions as overall virtuous. Say that we have a bunch of virtues, such as kindness, generosity, frankness, tactfulness, assertiveness, justice. Remember that for an action to be described as virtuous (insofar

21. *Ibid.*, p. 60. Dancy does not mean to imply that we cannot make reasonable estimates on the basis of characteristic (as opposed to universal) properties of things, e.g., the characteristic badness of pain.

22. Tom Sorrell, *Moral Theory and Capital Punishment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 3.

23. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong thinks that such principles can be turned into universal form provided they are formulated thus: do (or don’t do) thus and so provided there are no underminers, reversers, exclusions, and overrides. See his “Some Varieties of Particularism,” *Metaphilosophy* 30 (1999): 1–12, p. 6. For Dancy, however, an ‘underminer’ is the absence of a background (‘enabling’) condition and not a reason (a fact accepted by Sinnott-Armstrong). Since moral principles state reasons and not all enabling conditions, the above cannot be a principle (even if a defender of universalizability can appeal to it [as Sinnott-Armstrong claims]). This is made clear in Jonathan Dancy, “Defending Particularism,” *Metaphilosophy* 30 (1999): 25–32, p. 26.

24. Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, p. 60.

as it is frank, tactful, kind, generous, just, etc.), it has to hit the target of the relevant virtue, but it does not characteristically have to display all the excellences which would make it an act from the relevant virtuous state. Indeed, the agent who performs a tactful action on an occasion may not possess the virtue of tact at all. It is possible even for such terms as 'tactful' and 'kind', which normally contribute positively to the rightness of actions, to contribute neutrally or even negatively on occasion. I want now to show how this can be possible, using two illustrations.

Consider an act which hits the target of the virtue of kindness. We are at a conference where a stranger looks lonely. It turns out he is a person from overseas with a poor command of English and cannot participate in the scintillating and sophisticated discussion on moral theory. Our agent Tim performs a kind act, namely, going to talk to the stranger. However, let us look at further features of this situation. Tim is exceptionally keen to participate in the discussion but leaves in order to talk to the stranger who could have made more effort to amuse himself in other ways and whose hangdog expression is expressive of a rather weak, spoiled approach to life. The conversation with the stranger is difficult, and Tim does not enjoy it. Furthermore, Tim is always doing this kind of thing, sacrificing his interests in the performance of such kind acts. He has resolved to be more self-protective and strong, and encourage others to do their share of burdensome tasks. But he consistently fails to abide by the resolution. In this context, the kindness of the act contributes negatively to the overall virtuousness of the act.

The second example concerns intrafamilial justice. I have been training my children not to be obsessive about justice or fairness, particularly in an intrafamily context and where the stakes are not high. I want them to be more caring, magnanimous, generous. Despite my personal tendencies to be overly concerned with justice, I resolve to drive the lesson home at the next opportunity. An opportunity soon arises. A family tradition of "fair shares" requires that the person making the division has last choice. There is a cake to be cut. I allow my older son to cut the cake. I notice that he has cut carelessly, but in a state of unawareness takes the biggest piece. The target of (procedural) justice has not been reached. My younger son, apparently unnoticing and uncaring, looks delightedly at the smaller piece that he has been left with. Instead of praising my younger son, I make my older son swap pieces telling him that the division, and his action in going first, having cut, is unjust. My intervention is just, but in the circumstances that is a wrong-making feature of the situation. The justice of the intervention is in this context expressive of the obsessive, weak quality of my behavior.

My point in the above examples is that the virtuousness of an act in a given respect (e.g., its friendliness, justice, kindness) can be wrong making (i.e., can contribute negatively to the rightness of an act). My

point is not that the virtuousness of an act is not characteristically right making. Indeed, if the virtuousness of acts were not characteristically right making, we could not subsume features under virtue concepts.

## V. OBJECTIONS

A number of objections to my target-centered virtue ethical notion of rightness might be raised. The first objection is that virtuousness (or viciousness) may not feature at all in the list of right-making properties. In the claim “it’s wrong because it is distasteful,” it may be thought that ‘distasteful’ is not a vice term.<sup>25</sup> In reply one should note the following. It should first be determined how properties such as being distasteful are to be understood as relevant to rightness. The notion of distastefulness, for example, needs to be unpacked. One would need to say, for example, “it is distasteful because indecent.” Ideally, the vice term ‘indecent’ needs itself to be further unpacked into such notions as ‘manipulative’, ‘dishonest’, ‘disrespectful’, ‘lacking integrity’.

Another example is “it’s right to stop considering this problem because there isn’t enough time.” It may be supposed that “because there is not enough time” is a right-making property not involving virtue. However, to know the impact of “lack of time” on rightness, we need to see how it affects virtues and vices. The sense that there is no time may reflect laziness. Or it may involve self-indulgence or lack of temperance. Perhaps we are wanting to rush off to a party. On the other hand, the reason may implicate the virtues of courage, self-protection, or parental virtue. Virtues such as these need to operate in the face of a pressuring administration which thinks that we have limitless capacities to cope with stress or no families to go back to.

Second, it may be objected that my account of rightness is too agent centered. Rightness, it may be claimed, has nothing to do with an agent’s motives or reasons but has entirely to do with success in the external realm. However, my target-centered virtue ethical view (by comparison with some virtue ethical and Kantian views) does accommodate this consequentialist intuition about rightness. My problem with consequentialism is that it has too narrow a conception of modes of moral acknowledgment or response that are relevant to rightness. Once the plurality of modes of moral response is accepted, it can be appreciated that the target of some virtues, such as caring, can include the internal.

Indeed, the fact that my account allows for some agent centeredness overcomes an objection that can be leveled at some versions of qualified agent accounts. The objection is this: an action which is one that a virtuous agent would perform could be one that merely mimics an action of a virtuous agent. It seems possible therefore that a nonvirtuous agent

25. An example suggested to me in conversation by Jonathan Dancy.

could perform an act describable as, for example, uncaring, even though it is an act which a virtuous agent would perform and which would therefore be right on a qualified agent account of rightness. The act is uncaring because, though mimicking a virtuous agent's act, it nonetheless fails to exhibit the internal qualities that would be exhibited by a virtuous agent's caring act. We may wish to say therefore that such an act was unvirtuous, even though mimicking the act of a virtuous agent. Indeed, on my view, an act which mimics the action of a virtuous agent may be wrong, because in the hands of the actor it is unvirtuous. It is uncaring, for example, or racist because it is expressive of racist attitudes.

The following reply could be made to this possible difficulty in a qualified agent formula of rightness. As Justin Oakley points out in "Varieties of Virtue Ethics," the formula that an action is right if and only if it is what an agent with a virtuous character would do in the circumstances is ambiguous between two interpretations.<sup>26</sup> The formula could furnish what Oakley calls an 'external criterion' of right action, or the idea of "doing what the virtuous person would do" is to be understood as requiring more than "merely the performance of certain acts." Acting rightly also "requires our acting out of the appropriate dispositions and motives."<sup>27</sup> However, the strong interpretation would tie rightness not to the virtuousness of action but to action out of virtue, and that is implausibly strong as a criterion of rightness. The point of connecting rightness to the former idea is to recognize a virtue ethical variant of a distinction between good and right act and to recognize that the latter notion is less agent-centered than the former.

Another objection to my account of rightness is this: if the claim that an act is virtuous in respect V is the claim that the act falls under a virtue term 'V', then, it may be argued, the idea of rightness does not track the truth but merely culturally dependent beliefs. For virtue terms reflect our culturally determined and possibly false beliefs about virtue.

Notice, however, that to say that an act is virtuous in respect V if and only if it hits the target of V is not quite the same as saying that an act is virtuous in respect V if and only if it falls under a virtue-term 'V'. This is so for two reasons. First, some virtue terms refer to states which only approximate to virtue. Take for example 'honest'. We are happy to say that 'honest' is a virtue term, but 'honesty' is arguably not an accurate description of a virtue. Honesty is a disposition to tell the truth, or at least a disposition to not lie. We do not describe an act of evasiveness or an act of telling a lie as honest acts. Yet such acts may hit the target of a virtue—namely, a virtue of a correct disposition with respect to the field of divulging information. Certainly, this disposition

26. Justin Oakley, "Varieties of Virtue Ethics," *Ratio* 9 (1996): 128–52.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

involves being a respecter of truth and is normally manifested in honest acts, but arguably practical wisdom in this area does not always mandate honest acts. Furthermore, some of our virtue terms may not refer even to states which approximate virtues, and a correct theory of virtue may demonstrate this. Nietzsche's "revaluation of values," for example, called into question pity as a virtue and (egalitarian conceptions of) justice as a virtue, on the assumption that 'justice' refers to egalitarian propensities expressive of resentment. Second, as Aristotle remarks, not all virtues have names. The fact that our language is insufficiently rich to capture all forms of virtue does not tell against (V<sub>4</sub>).

A slightly different accusation of relativism is this. According to Soran Reader, "we are told [by the particularist] that rationality is a matter of judgement anchored in a way of life (anthropology), and that we are all competent to recognize it even if we can never make it explicit (intuition)."<sup>28</sup> A particularism embedded within a virtue ethics need not be wedded to an intuitionistic epistemology. An epistemology suitable for a virtue ethical particularism is a completely open question. Particularism is a theory emphasizing the holism of reasons, it is not a theory about the basis of those reasons nor is it an epistemological theory.

Finally, it is sometimes claimed that since virtue ethical accounts of rightness are not rule-based, they lack resources for resolving moral dilemmas. In fact virtue ethics has more resources for determining overall rightness of acts in dilemmatic situations than may be appreciated.

The question is whether it is possible that an agent cannot do something which is virtuous overall and therefore right, when faced with alternatives, all of which are extremely repugnant. The richness of virtue and vice vocabulary allows us to admit the possibility of right action, even in such cases. For virtue-based act evaluations allow us to think of "actions" as embracing demeanor, motivation, processes of deliberation and thought, reactions and attitudes. We can describe demeanor, motivation, thought processes, and reactions as callous, arrogant, or light-minded, or as anguished. We can describe them as strong, or decisive, or courageous; or as cowardly, feeble, pathetic, vacillating. We can describe them as dignified or weak.<sup>29</sup> In short, the choice of a repugnant option can be understood as right (virtuous overall) when we take account of the full nature of the action, including the way it was done. In *Sophie's Choice*, for example, it is possible that Sophie acted virtuously overall.<sup>30</sup> One might argue that she acted virtuously because she acted

28. Soran Reader, "Principle Ethics, Particularism and Another Possibility," *Philosophy* 72 (1997): 269–96, p. 275.

29. For more on a virtue ethical understanding of "irresolvable dilemmas," see Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.

30. William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York: Random House, 1979).

as a good mother in that situation. Or (someone may argue) in such a tragic situation, Sophie had to rise above the normal traits of goodness in mothers, and virtuous action required a certain coolness and deliberateness. One might in that case say her choice was not overall virtuous because it failed to display virtuous calmness and strength in the process of choice. This kind of question (of how a good mother would react) cannot be answered from within the resources of the philosopher. For a start, research on the behavior of mothers required to make life and death decisions for their children, in different kinds of contexts of scarcity and evil, would be required.

Finally, the idea that virtue ethics is not rule-based should not be misunderstood. On my account, the determination of rightness is partly a matter of publicly accessible rules, rather than the essentially private deliberations and intuitions of a virtuous agent. For rightness depends on the applicability of terms like 'caring', 'efficient', 'kind', 'friendly', and their applicability is rule-governed.<sup>31</sup> But I do want to express an important caveat here. The correct applicability of virtue concepts in any sophisticated context is not a matter of the application of relatively perspicuous rules. When, for example, I praise an act as right because strong, or right because caring, or wrong because weak or uncaring, ensuing controversy may precipitate entire accounts of the concepts of strength, weakness, and caring. And good accounts will extend into terrain well beyond the expertise of the analytic philosopher.

31. It will have been noticed that I admit a large range of virtues, including efficiency. I cannot argue here for this view, but if we can think of a dithering, muddling, vacillating, pusillanimous person as having those features as part of character, we can surely think of efficiency as a virtue. For example, see a claim concerning the notoriously inefficient Tallis in Iris Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 13: "I do think a reasonable amount of efficiency is an aspect of morals. There's a sort of ordered completeness of life and an intelligent use of one's talents which is the mark of a man." For more on the rule-based aspect of virtue ethics, see Hursthouse, "Normative Virtue Ethics," pp. 19–36.