Is virtue ethics a self-effacing theory?

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to argue that virtue ethics can rebut Keller's (2007) objection that it is self-effacing by appealing to agent flourishing. First, I am going to provide a brief overview of virtue ethics and right action before exploring Keller's (2007) argument that virtue ethics is a self-effacing theory. I will then argue that Keller's (2007) objection can be reconciled by reconsidering the role agent flourishing ought to play in virtue ethics. Next, I will consider Hurka's (2001) claim that eudaimonia (or human flourishing) is egoistic and therefore incompatible with virtue. Lastly, I am going to suggest that Hurka's (2001) objection would not undermine my central argument as it is based on a misguided view of human nature and what it truly means to flourish.

Section one: Virtue ethics and right action

Virtue ethics can be described as a character-based normative theory of ethics that began with Socrates and was later developed by Aristotle, the latter stating that virtue shaped one's moral standing more than their actions (Dziak, 2020). Hurthouse (2001) defines virtue as an excellent trait of the character. Through possessing virtues, agents can reach what Aristotle referred to as eudaimonia (or human flourishing) (Dziak, 2020), making virtue the key to living a happy and fulfilling life. In simpler terms, by being a virtuous person, one masters the art of being a person and therefore flourishes as a human being. One objection the theory has faced is that, unlike other ethical theories, virtue ethics does not provide a clear prescriptive theory of right action. Hurthouse (2001) suggests that virtue ethics can provide a theory of right action by stating that:

> V1. "an action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances."

Consider the following example. A virtue ethicist, Kate, leaves homecooked meals at her COVID-positive friend, Hannah's, door every day until she makes a full recovery. Kate spends approximately an hour of her day cooking for Hannah and commuting to and from her house. Kate also spends a noticeably larger amount of money than she typically would on groceries and gas. Kate claims she does not mind spending her time and resources because helping Hannah is the right thing to do. As Kate is a virtue

ethicist, she knows that helping Hannah is the right action as it is the action she believes a truly virtuous agent would take. This example is going to be explored further in the following sections.

Section two: Keller's (2007) objection

Influenced by Stocker's (1996) critique of consequentialism and deontology, Keller (2007) argues that virtue ethics is a self-effacing theory. Unlike his predecessor Hurka (2001), Keller's (2007) argument does not depend on whether virtue ethics is egoistic; his argument stems from the criterion of right action. A self-effacing theory can be defined as one which advises agents against being motivated by the considerations that make their actions right (Keller, 2007). Keller (2007) goes as far as to claim that excluding justice, virtues should not be motivated by thoughts of virtue. One way of thinking about this is by comparing it to sleep anxiety. I find that I struggle to fall asleep when my mind is consumed with thoughts of having to get a good night's sleep. Similarly, if one thinks about being virtuous, they are unlikely to achieve virtue.

Consider Hurthouse's (2003) theory of right action:

> V1. "an action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances."

If virtues ought not to be motivated by thoughts of virtue, then the premise above falls apart. Under this view, if a virtue ethicist were to perform a virtuous act because it is what they believe a virtuous person would do, their action would not be viewed as right. This is because they would fail to achieve virtue as their motive prevents them from doing so.

One way of further illustrating this would be to apply Stocker's (1996) hospital example to the example I provided in section one. Suppose Kate were to tell Hannah that she has been helping her because it is what she believes a virtuous agent would characteristically do in that circumstance. How would Hannah react? Stocker (1996) and Keller (2007) are likely to argue that she would not be pleased with her friend. If anything, it would lessen the impact of Kate's good deed in Hanna's eyes and potentially make Hannah less appreciative of her friend's help. The fact that individuals are less likely to value actions motivated by thoughts of virtue than actions motivated by genuine generosity or friendship, for example, further suggests that when individuals are motivated by thoughts of virtue, they fail to achieve it. Thus far, it appears that virtue ethics is a self-effacing theory.

Section three: Eudaimonia

I argue that the right action does necessarily have to be understood in terms of what a virtuous agent would characteristically do. Pettigrove (2010) suggests that Keller's (2007) argument underestimates the role agent flourishing ought to play in virtue ethics, implying that the virtue ethicist is motivated by agent flourishing. In order to support Pettigrove's (2010) line of thought, let us consider Hurthouse's (2001) criterion of right action.

I suggest that 'it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do' can help the virtue ethicist describe what the right action is. In other words, 'it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do' is almost synonymous with 'it is what one ought to do'. Kate ought to help Hannah as it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do. That should, in turn, allow her to achieve virtue, making it the right action. An important question one might want to raise regarding the right action is 'why one ought to do it?'. Why should Kate aim to achieve virtue? I believe that by appealing to agent flourishing, we can explain why virtue ethicists ought to emulate truly virtuous agents.

If achieving virtue is the virtue ethicist's motive under the theory of right action, Eudaimonia can be seen as the virtue ethicist's ultimate motive. Therefore, it follows that virtuous actions need not merely be motivated by thoughts of virtue; they can also primarily be motivated by thoughts of human flourishing. If the virtuous action is not primarily motivated by thoughts of virtue, virtue ethics is not self-effacing in the manner Keller (2007) describes. This means that virtue ethics can avoid Keller's (2007) charge of self-effacement by reconsidering the role agent flourishing ought to play in the theory.

Section four: Eudaimonia and egoism

In section three, I argued that virtue ethics can overcome Keller's (2007) objection that virtue ethics is self-effacing by appealing to agent flourishing. One potential problem with my argument is that it allows for a revival of Hurka's (2001) objection. Suppose Kate were to tell Hannah that she has been helping her as it will contribute to her own flourishing. Under Hurka's (2001) view, Hannah would not be any more pleased than she would be with Hannah in section two. Kate's statement may still lessen the impact of her good deed in her friend's eyes. Hannah would potentially be less appreciative of Kate's help as she could believe that Kate was pursuing her own self-interest, not Hannah's. In other words, Hannah would view Kate's actions as egoistic.

Hurka (2001) argues that as a flourishing-based theory, virtue ethics is “foundationally egoistic”. This is because as the virtue ethicist is primarily motivated by their own well-being, they are always acting in their own self-interest. This leads to virtue ethic's self-effacement because Hurka (2001) believes that egoistic motivation is incompatible with genuine virtue as virtue is not meant to be predominantly occupied with the self. Therefore, it follows that when the virtue ethicist is motivated by thoughts of human flourishing, they fail to achieve genuine virtue. This means that while virtue ethics may have escaped Keller’s (2007) charge of self-effacement in section three, it now faces his predecessor’s objection instead. This suggests that virtue ethics cannot escape the claim that it is a self-effacing theory because even when it rebuts one objection, it faces another.

Section five: Eudaimonia, genuine virtue and human nature

I maintain that Hurka's (2001) objection does not necessarily undermine my main argument or prove that virtue ethics is, in fact, a self-effacing theory. This is because I believe that Eudaimonia (or human flourishing) is not incompatible with genuine virtue. In fact, I believe that eudaimonia is incompatible with egoism. This would entail that when the virtue ethicist is motivated by thoughts of human flourishing, they could still be able to achieve true virtue. This, in turn, would mean that the theory is not self-effacing in the sense Hurka (2001) describes either.

My argument begins with considering what it truly means to flourish, specifically what is needed for an individual to live a happy life. First, consider what the average human being needs to live a minimally decent life. The first things to come to mind would probably be food, clean water and shelter. Brownlee (2013) believes that in addition to food, water and shelter, individuals have non-contingent social needs. According to Brownlee (2013), this is because human beings are social creatures by nature. As social creatures, we need loving and caring relationships characterised by mutual care and investment (Brownlee, 2016). I believe that if we need genuine social connections marked by reciprocal care to live minimally decent lives, we need them to flourish. This line of thinking is supported by Pettigrove’ (2010) claim that thinking about the criterion of right action involves thinking about our relationships.

Consider our virtue ethicist, Kate. In section one, Kate appears to display the virtue of helpfulness when she emulates the truly virtuous agent. However, upon taking a second glance at the example, one may identify other virtues that Kate appears to embody. I would like to draw attention to Kate’s display of the virtue of Philia (the virtue of friendship). As mentioned above, for our virtue ethicist Kate to live a minimally decent life, she must have particular non-contingent needs fulfilled, such as access to food,

shelter and clean water. Kate appears to be in a financial position to have these fundamental needs met as she is able to provide one of these basic needs for her friend, Hannah. In addition to the non-contingent necessities we have established Kate has fulfilled, Kate requires loving and caring relationships in which she is genuinely invested. If we suppose that Kate's ultimate motivation is her desire to flourish, we can assume that Kate at least lives a minimally decent life in which the second set of needs is also fulfilled. Similarly, if Kate hopes to flourish by helping Hannah, it seems reasonable to assume that at least some of these needs are fulfilled by that friendship in particular. Therefore, it follows that Kate must genuinely care about Hannah and be invested in her well-being to some degree in order for her to believe that aiding Hannah would allow her to achieve genuine virtue. This is because Kate understands that when she helps her friend, she is not only thinking about her own well-being, but her friend's as well. Furthermore, as established above helping Hannah is an inconvenience to Kate so may not necessarily be what is in Kate's best interest. There are far less time-consuming virtuous actions Kate could perform instead, however, she prioritises her friend's well-being at the expense of her own time and resources. Kate is not only acting out of a desire to flourish, but she is also acting out of friendship- a justification Hannah would probably be more pleased with. Kate's action is, therefore, not entirely egoistic. This leads me to reject Hurka's (2001) claim that virtue ethics, a flourishing-based theory, is foundationally egoistic.

Notice how I have assumed that the virtue ethicist is aware of the fact that their flourishing is contingent on their fulfilment of these social needs. A possible objection to my response could be tantamount to "Kate may not know that she ought to care about Hannah's well-being". I do not see it this way. If our social needs are truly on par with or at least similar to our other fundamental needs, then it follows that the agent is likely to not only notice but also be bothered by their absence. Similar to how in the absence of food and water, Kate's mind is expected to be consumed by thoughts of hunger and thirst, her mind would be consumed by the thoughts of loneliness in the absence of meaningful social connections. However, I recognise that this does not resolve possible objections that stem from disagreeing with Brownlee's (2013) view of human nature. That is a different matter entirely to which my response to Hurka (2001) is still vulnerable. Due to the word count and a weariness of straying too far off-topic, I will not attempt to provide an original argument in support of Brownlee (2013; 2016). I will, however, state that Brownlee's (2013; 2016) line of thought is supported by sufficient philosophical literature and psychological research, which can rebut this kind of objection. Therefore, I can still argue with confidence that Eudaimonia is compatible with genuine virtue.

Conclusion

This essay has concluded that virtue ethics can rebut Keller's (2007) objection that it is self-effacing by appealing to agent flourishing. While Keller's (2007) claim that virtues ought not to be motivated by thoughts of virtue may initially appear to cause Hurthouse's (2001) theory of right action to fall apart, that is not necessarily the case. Keller's (2007) critique of virtue ethics' theory of right action is based on a tendency to undervalue the role agent flourishing ought to play in the theory. As Pettigrove (2010) suggests, the virtue ethicist is motivated by thoughts of eudaimonia. I argued that the theory of right action merely describes what action the virtue ethicist ought to take; it does not state why the virtue ethicist should be motivated to do it. This means that the virtue ethicist ought not to be motivated by thoughts of virtue when attempting to behave as the virtuous agent would, suggesting that virtue ethics is not self-effacing in the sense Keller (2007) describes. An emphasis on human flourishing could revive Hurka's (2001) objection that the flourishing-based theory is "foundationally egoistic" and therefore incompatible with genuine virtue. I argued that a flourishing-based theory of virtue ethics is not self-effacing in this second sense either, as eudaimonia is not incompatible with true virtue; it is incompatible with egoism. This is because if we need genuine social connections marked by mutual care and investment in order to live minimally decent lives (Brownlee 2013; 2016), we need them to flourish. I believe that even when the virtue ethicist's seemingly altruistic action is motivated by a desire to flourish, their actions cannot entirely be self-interested. This is because the quality of their life is partly determined by their genuine care for others and investment in their well-being; the virtue ethicist is aware of this. Therefore, human flourishing is compatible with genuine virtue.

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