Virtue Ethics Reading

Hursthouse, 2002

Hursthouse, R. (2002) On Virtue Ethics. Oxford University Press, pp. 8-16, 25-42.

- Hursthouse confronts the objection that virtue ethics fails to guide action. Virtue ethics treats virtue as the fundamental concept in ethics, in the sense that such concepts as morally right action and morally good outcomes will be explained in terms of virtue and vice. In contrast, utilitarianism treats utility as the fundamental concept in ethics, and will explain such concepts as morally right action and virtue in terms of utility, and deontology treats rules as the fundamental concept in ethics, and will explain such concepts as virtue in terms of moral rules. Because virtue ethics treats virtue as the fundamental concept in ethics, it is not clear that it can offer action guidance. The worry is that virtue ethics would produce such judgements as "be benevolent", "be just", and "be truthful" but remain silent on questions about how we should act under specific circumstances.
- Hursthouse simply rejects that virtue ethics would remain silent on questions about how we should act under specific circumstances. That virtue ethics treats virtue as fundamental does not entail that virtue ethics will remain silent on such concepts as right action, and entails only that virtue ethical right action will be explained in terms of virtue and vice. Then, virtue ethical right action in some circumstances could be defined as action characteristic of a virtuous agent in such circumstances. And a virtuous agent is one who possesses and exercises the virtues.
- One worry about the virtue ethical definition of right action is that it fails to guide action because it is trivial. It seems uninformative to claim that right action is action characteristic of a virtuous agent because we tend to think that what it means to be a virtuous agent is to be an agent that characteristically acts rightly. Then, the virtue ethical definition of right action amounts to: right action is characteristic of a virtuous agent, who is an agent who characteristically acts rightly. This is circular, and fails to guide action.
- The worry that the virtue ethical definition of right action is circular and thus fails to guide action is grounded on a misunderstanding of virtue ethics. The virtue ethicist treats virtue as the fundamental concept in ethics, and would thus refuse to define the virtuous agent in terms of right action. Instead, the virtue ethicist would define the virtuous agent in terms of the virtues. The opponent of virtue ethics is liable to so misunderstand because competing theories tend to define the virtuous agent in terms of right action. So the virtue ethical definition of right action is action characteristic of a virtuous agent, who is an agent who possesses and exercises the virtues. This definition is non-circular, and provides action guidance.
- The opponent of virtue ethics could then argue that virtue ethics is action-guiding only for virtuous persons who least require action-guidance. The worry is that a less than virtuous person would not know what action is characteristic of a virtuous agent in some given circumstances, and so would not be able to determine what action is right in these circumstances. Then, the virtue ethical definition of right action is entirely unhelpful in guiding this person's action. But the less than virtuous person is exactly the sort of person we think an ethical theory is needed to guide. So if virtue ethics is not action-guiding for such persons, it seems inadequate as an ethical theory.
- Hursthouse simply rejects that virtue ethics is not action-guiding for less than virtuous persons. A less than virtuous person could guide his action by the advice of his moral betters. The less than virtuous person could also guide his action by "v-rules" such as "do what is honest", "do what is charitable", "avoid what is lazy". Action-guidance by such v-rules is consistent with the virtue-ethical definition of right action because, by definition of the virtuous agent, the virtuous agent would characteristically act in accordance with the v-rules.
- One worry about Hursthouse's strategy is that v-rules fail to guide action because they refer to "evaluative" or "thick" concepts such as justice, benevolence, and respectfulness that a less than virtuous person would struggle to apply. In contrast, for example, a form of utilitarianism under which an action is right iff it maximises the desire satisfaction apparently does not require agents to make "evaluative" judgements in determining which action is right. Similarly, the deontological rule "do not lie" apparently does not require such judgements either.
- But it is not clear that consequentialism and deontology do not require agents to make "evaluative" judgements. For example, forms of consequentialism that distinguish between higher and lower pleasures, and versions of deontology that include the rule "do not murder" require that agents, in determining which action is right, judge whether some pleasure is a higher pleasure or a lower pleasure, and whether an instance of killing is a murder respectively.

Johnson, 2003

Johnson, R. N. (2003) "Virtue and Right," Ethics 113(4), pp. 810-834.

- Johnson argues that the virtue ethical definition of right action as action characteristic of a completely virtuous agent is inconsistent with the commonsense idea that we ought to become better people. This claim leaves no room for a genuine moral obligation to improve one's character and to act in ways that are appropriate only because one could be a better person than one currently is.
- Johnson argues that moral improvement often involves concrete actions beyond the decision to do better such as self-monitoring, reflection to make the relevant moral considerations more vivid, and addressing the psychological grounds of moral failings. But these actions are entirely uncharacteristic of a similarly situated completely virtuous agent.
- Aristotle argues that we cultivate the virtues by acting virtuously. So if we act rightly by virtue ethical lights, we act virtuously, and this contributes to our moral improvement.
- Aristotle's argument is inadequate as a response because it establishes only that acting rightly by virtue ethical lights contributes to moral improvement, but not that this is all that is morally required for moral improvement.
- Johnson argues that moral novices are morally required to take account of their moral shortcomings and perform self-controlling acts. For example, an intemperate person, we think, morally should work to avoid situations where he is likely to face temptation and create social support for behaving well. Again these actions are entirely uncharacteristic of a similarly situated completely virtuous agent.
- Johnson argues that moral novices are also morally required to address their moral blind spots by, for example, seeking guidance from his moral betters. This is so even in cases where addressing one's moral blind spots is incompatible with complete virtue. A completely virtuous person could have moral blind spots, due for example to a recent death in the family, which can and should affect one so deeply that one lacks the emotional responsiveness required for accurate moral perception. But other sorts of moral blind spots are not so compatible. Moral blind spots due to cultural bias or the lack of virtue itself would not be shared with the similarly situated completely virtuous agent. We think there is a genuine obligation to address these blind spots, even if so doing is entirely uncharacteristic of the similarly situated completely virtuous agent.
- One strategy to defend Hursthouse's virtue ethical definition of right action is to argue that to morally improve, to work around moral shortcomings, and to address moral blind spots is in some sense morally "second-best" to action characteristic of a similarly situated completely virtuous agent. The obligation to morally improve or otherwise compensate for shortcomings is a regrettable necessity in the sense that it would be better if the agent were so virtuous that this was not required, but a moral necessity nonetheless.
- This strategy is unsuccessful because intuitively, moral improvement seems no less morally excellent than the acts characteristic of the similarly situated completely virtuous agent. There seems to be no reason to think the former sort of acts are in some way "second best" apart from their being uncharacteristic of the similarly situated completely virtuous agent. So to respond that they are second best is to beg the question against the opponent of Hursthouse's definition.
- Another strategy amends Hursthouse's virtue ethical definition of right action to: some agent acts rightly under some circumstances if he acts as a completely virtuous person would advise he acts. On this definition "a fully virtuous version of yourself should not be an example but a source of advice concerning what you are to do." Perhaps the fully virtuous advisor would advise the moral novice to morally improve or otherwise compensate for his moral shortcomings.
- This strategy is unattractive because it undermines the normative force of moral judgements of right and wrong. Virtues are in some sense dispositions to action, so the character of the completely virtuous person is such that certain actions flow from it in virtue of its being completely virtuous. Then, because by virtue ethical lights we should have such a character, we also should do the actions that flow from such a character. So on Hursthouse's definition of virtue ethical right action, the normative force of judgements about an action's being right or wrong is clear. On the amended definition, it is not clear why, by virtue ethical lights, we should act as the completely virtuous advisor advises.
    - We could be skeptical about the authority of the virtuous advisor's advice because "good people need not be therapists or rabbis". There seems to be no reason to think that, simply in virtue of his virtue, the virtuous advisor would correctly determine what is morally best for a moral novice.
- Further, the content of a completely virtuous advisor's advice seems entirely unclear, so this definition of right action apparently fails to guide action. If the advice is simply "do what is right", it is entirely uninformative. If the advice is some sort of "v-rule" such as "do what is just", then moral improvement does not come out as morally required. The deeper problem is that there seems to be no reason to think that a virtuous person, in virtue of his virtue, would have any thoughts on how another person should act.
- Johnson argues that Slote's and Swanton's definitions of right action are also unsuccessful.
- On Slote's view, an action is right if flows from right-making motivations, dispositions, or traits, such as the virtues. Then, moral improvement is right only if it flows from some motivation, disposition, or trait that makes moral improvement right. So a person without such motivations, dispositions, or traits, in acquiring them, by hypothesis, is not so moved, and so does not act rightly, as we think intuitively he does.

- On a weaker version of Slote's view, an action is wrong if it flows from wrong-making motivations, dispositions, or traits, such as the vices. Then, so long as moral improvement is not so motivated, it comes out as permissible. But we think intuitively that moral improvement is excellent and sometimes obligatory, not merely permissible.

Annas, 2004

Annas, J. (2004) "Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing," Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association 78(2), pp. 61-75.

- Annas seems to think that Hursthouse's v-rules are insufficient for virtue ethics to guide action in the sense required by objectors. Such v-rules as "be kind", "be just" and "be honest" are parochial, hence inappropriate to ethical thinking, and too vague to guide action, especially when such action-guidance is most required, when the right thing to do is not obvious, for example, when the only way to articulate an important truth is hurtful. The v-rules are parochial because we acquire our understanding of such terms as "kindness" and "justice" from our culture, so different cultures would understand the v-rules differently, and would be guided by the v-rules to act differently. Presumably, an ethical theory should yield fairly specific action-guidance, and should guide actions of different agents in the same way.
- The demand that an ethical theory should guide action in a specific and universal way seems to be motivated by the thought that our pre-theoretical unreflective ethical views are inadequate, because they are in part due to convention and prejudice, they are vague, and they sometimes conflict, so these views need to be refined. Conflicting unreflective ethical views yield indeterminate judgements, vague unreflective views yield vague judgements, and unreflective ethical views due to convention and prejudice do not explain the rightness of the actions they prescribe in a compelling, recognisably ethical way. It seems then that we require a theory of right action which yields determinate and specific judgements about right action, and explains why such actions are right in a compelling way.
- Annas rejects the technical manual model of ethics which is the model of a theory of right action.
  - Hursthouse argues that the technical manual model of ethics is implausible because if understanding right and wrong requires only technical understanding, then an "idiot savant", a teenager with little experience of the world and tremendous naivete who has a perfect technical understanding of the correct ethical theory, would be a reliable judge of right action, and an authoritative source of moral guidance. But this is ridiculous, a person with excellent technical understanding of right and wrong could still turn out to be a moral idiot.
  - Hursthouse's second objection is the objection from the loathsome advisor. If understanding right and wrong requires only technical understanding, then a person could have both perfect understanding of right and wrong and a morally loathsome character. Such a person would be a reliable judge of right action, and an authoritative source of moral guidance. But we do not think that there could be such a person. This suggests that divorcing right action from character is problematic.
- Annas argues that there is a deeper problem in the technical manual model of ethics that Hursthouse's objections hint at. Annas worries that an ethical theory should not be action-guiding in the sense of yielding determinate, specific, universal judgements of right action. If we are guided by a theory of right action that yields determinate and specific judgements about what is morally required, when we act immorally, it is because we believe a false theory or because we misunderstand a true theory, but never simply because we make a wrong decision. This seems to allow agents to shift praise and blame from themselves to the theory. For example, the person who revealed the location of another to a murderous official would be able to say "I did wrong, but this is entirely because the I believed a moral theory that categorically prohibited lying, and that was false". But we think such a person does wrong not solely because of some epistemic fault.
- We think our moral decisions should be our own in a sense that goes beyond our being responsible for them. For example, we think an adult should not simply do what his mother tells him to do. If he does so, he is immature, and his is a case of arrested development, because he "outsources" his moral decision-making to his mother. Similarly, if we are guided by a theory of right action that yields determinate and specific judgements, we "outsource" our moral decision making to this moral theory. While we would still be responsible for our decisions and actions, they would not belong to us in the more meaningful sense. If our moral decisions and actions do not belong to us in this more meaningful sense, they do not have the implications for our characters that we intuitively think they have. For example, if the adult who simply does what his mom tells him to tortures kittens, we could say that his action is cruel, and that he is responsible for a cruel action, and that he is reprehensibly deferential to his mother's authority, but we could not say that he is cruel, since he is simply doing what his mother instructs, and as such that is not cruel. Similarly, if the person so thoroughly guided by some moral theory tortures kittens because this is what that theory requires, we could not say that he is cruel, since he is simply doing what his ethical theory demands, and as such that is not cruel, though it may be unwise or reprehensible in other ways.
  - One response rejects that to guide our actions by a moral theory (in the allegedly problematic sense) is to "outsource" our moral decision making. According to this response, we do not consult a moral theory as some sort of external

authority, but internalise it. So our moral decisions are determined "from within", and belong to us in the meaningful sense we think they should.
    - This response goes too fast because it is ultimately irrelevant whether a moral theory one so thoroughly guides one's actions by is internalised or not. If a person does wrong simply because this is what the decision procedure he has internalised requires, it seems we still could not judge him as cruel, or unjust, or dishonest, because following an internalised decision procedure, as such, is none of these things.
- So virtue ethics rejects that an adequate moral theory must offer action-guidance through universal, determinate, and specific judgements of right and wrong. Then what does virtue ethics have to say about right action?
- Annas attacks Hursthouse's attempt to derive right action from virtue through the claim that right action is action characteristic of a similarly situated completely virtuous agent, where what it is to be a virtuous agent is defined independently of right action, in order to escape circularity.
    - The common objections to this view are that the less than virtuous person could not know what the hypothetical similarly situated completely virtuous agent would do, that "v-rules" are too vague to guide action, and that there are clear counterexamples, such as Johnson's categories of self-improving and self-controlling actions.
    - Even if these objections fail, Hursthouse's solution amounts to replacing a technical manual with a technical expert. Annas's fundamental objection to the technical manual model still applies.
- Annas defends a developmental theory which involves three concepts: "the virtuous person, right action, and the relevant developmental process." On this account, learning to be moral is like acquiring a practical skill. A moral novice will begin by identifying role models, imitating their actions, and repeating this. By doing so, the moral novice acquires a piecemeal and derivative understanding of morality. In doing so, the moral novice aspires to moral expertise. This is what is right for the moral novice. Then, the importance of role models wanes as this person through engagement with the moral world constructs a more unified and explanatory understanding of his own. Upon achieving moral expertise, this person no longer relies on, and begins to deviate from, the role models that were necessary in the earlier stages. The moral expert will grasp right action more or less directly given his developed understanding of morality and his possession of the virtues. This is what is right for the moral expert. This is Annas's virtue-ethical account of the appropriate response to the gaps in our unreflective pre-theoretical moral beliefs. Instead of attempting to address the indeterminacy and vagueness of our unreflective pre-theoretical beliefs by trying to uncover a decision procedure beneath them or squeeze one out of them, we should continue to sharpen these beliefs by reflection and engagement with the moral world, and perhaps to a lesser degree by identifying and studying more suitable role models. A person does not become an expert carpenter by studying a manual, but by attentively practicing carpentry, and building an understanding of the craft that is uniquely his own. Plausibly, moral development is the same. This is also Annas's account of the relations between moral development, virtue, and right action.
    - What the moral expert acquires then, could be something like perception of morally relevant features, practical wisdom, a more sophisticated and finely-tuned understanding of rules and principles, etc.
    - On this account, when the moral novice acts rightly, he acts from a conventional understanding of virtue and morality, when the moral expert acts rightly, he acts from his own understanding of virtue and morality, and from his own possessing the virtues. The moral novice sees something as right because he sees it as what (conventionally understood) virtue requires. The moral expert sees something as right more or less directly, given his developed understanding of morality. Since an account of right action must describe both the right action of the moral expert, i.e. the virtuous person, and right action of the moral novice, it must be explained in terms of virtue. An account of right action that characterises right action independently of virtue captures only right action for the moral novice, and even then leaves out an important aspect of this, that the moral novice, in acting rightly, aspires to moral expertise.
    - This account is far from trivially circular because it specifies non-trivial, substantive relationships between the concepts of virtue, right action, and moral development.
- "Someone might say that, if we are going to distinguish the way the beginner does the right thing from the way the fully virtuous person does the right thing, then what the theory should say is that the right thing to do is what the fully virtuous person would do, and the beginning virtuous person is not doing the right thing."
    - This view is simply implausible because it would not consider any person except the perfectly virtuous to act rightly.
- "Another response might be to suggest that we have two senses of "right" here. But this is surely implausible, for the same kind of reason that it is implausible that we would have different senses of "right" when the apprentice carpenter and the skilled carpenter both fix the shelves in the right way."
- Annas's developmental account does not encounter the problems that Hursthouse's derivation of right action from virtue does.
    - We identify virtuous persons at first by their credentials, then by our own understanding of morality.
    - The vagueness of the completely virtuous person need not matter if we are not looking to the completely virtuous person for action guidance.

- The cases where right action is not action characteristic of a completely virtuous agent are simply cases of moral novices.

Hurka, 2001

Hurka, T. (2001) "Against Virtue Ethics," in T. Hurka (ed.) Virtue, Vice, and Value. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 219-256.

- Hurka illustrates a distinction between "rationality" virtue ethical theories and "morality" virtue ethical theories.
  - Anscombe's virtue ethics has the "rationality" structure. In the sense that, on this theory, agents' reasons for acting rightly are explained in terms of virtue, but actions' being right or wrong are not explained in terms of virtue. On Anscombe's theory, an action is right because it is truthful, just, kind, etc. and the truthfulness, justness, kindness, etc. of an action is not explained in terms of the virtues. Virtues are dispositions to act in such ways. For example, the virtue of honesty is a disposition to act truthfully. Anscombe claims that an action's truthfulness, justness, kindness, etc. does not supply agents with reason to so act. Instead, it is because the virtues are necessary to flourishing, and dispose agents to act rightly, and agents have reason to pursue their flourishing, that agents have reason to act rightly.
  - Hursthouse's virtue ethics has the "morality" structure. In the sense that, on this theory, both agents' reasons for acting rightly and actions' being right or wrong are explained in terms of virtue. Hursthouse's theory differs from Anscombe's in defining right action in terms of virtue rather than virtue in terms of right action.
- Hurka presents and attacks three "morality" virtue ethical theories that define right action in terms of virtue.
- According to Slote, right action is action (actually, not merely hypothetically) done from virtuous motives.
  - This view implies that there is no action (entirely) from duty by agents with only true beliefs about the ground of rightness and his own motives. Such a person's belief that some action of his would be right, according to Slote's view, is the belief that such action would be from virtuous motives, presumably other than the motive of duty. In other words, if right action is action from virtuous motives, then a person (with only true beliefs about the ground of rightness and his own motives) recognises some action as right iff he recognises some action as action from virtuous motives. So a person could be motivated by duty to act in some way only if he "first" recognises that his so acting would be from virtuous motives. Then, these latter virtuous motives cannot be the motive of duty. So a person who acts from duty acts from duty and some other virtuous motive, and no person with the relevant true beliefs ever acts entirely from duty. But we intuitively think that such persons do sometimes act entirely from duty.
  - On this view, the attention of a conscientious person is directed "self-indulgently inward". A conscientious person is a person motivated to act rightly. Such a person would, at least on occasions where the right action is not obvious, be motivated to determine what action is right. According to Slote's view, right action is virtuously motivated action. So presumably we determine whether an action is right by determining whether it would be virtuously motivated. In other words, we reflect on whether if we were to so act, we would so act from virtuous motives. But we think intuitively this is not how we ought to morally deliberate. Rather, our determining whether an action would be right essentially involves thinking about the action and its relation to others. For example, we think that torturing an innocent person for sadistic pleasure is wrong because this would hurt that person, not because if we do so we would do so out of malice.
  - Slote's view also threatens to collapse the distinction between rightness of actions and the moral goodness of acting in some way. We think intuitively that there are right actions done from wrong motives and wrong actions done from right motives. Slote's view denies these possibilities. For example, one class of wrong actions done from right motives are actions grounded on false beliefs.
    - Slote's view could be amended to: right action is action from virtuous motives that conforms with these virtuous motives. If some action flows from virtuous motives, it is selected by such motives in virtue of its having some properties. For example, offering a person some pain-killing medication flows from benevolent motives because so offering would apparently relieve the pain of this person. An action conforms to the virtuous motives it flows from if it actually has the properties in virtue of which it is selected by these virtuous motives. So offering a person some pain-killing medication conforms to the virtue of kindness only if the so offering actually relieves the pain of this person.
    - This amendment is unsuccessful at accommodating cases of right action from wrong motives.
  - More generally, Slote's view violates the principle that "ought" implies "can", i.e. what is morally required of a person must be something he is capable of doing. Since persons typically do not have complete control over their motives, then a person without sufficiently virtuous motives could not act rightly.
- According to Martineau, right actions are those done from the most virtuous motives available to a person.
  - This view has the advantage of accommodating the principle that "ought" implies "can".

    - Like Slote's, Martineau's view implies that there is no action (entirely) from duty by agents with only true beliefs about the ground of rightness and his own motives.
    - The most serious problem with Martineau's view is that it would consider an action that causes significant avoidable harm and is done from significant malice right so long as this is the action of a sufficiently vicious agent who could act from no more virtuous motives.
    - If Martineau adds that right action must also conform to the (relatively) virtuous motives it is done from, the view is even more absurd. Then an action from vicious motives by an agent who could act from no more virtuous motives is right if it actually causes harm and wrong if it fails to do so.
- According to Hursthouse, right actions are actions characteristic of a similarly situated completely virtuous person.
    - One worry about this view is that it fails to guide action for the less than virtuous person. To determine whether some action is right, this person must determine if it is action characteristic of a similarly situated completely virtuous person. Suppose that there is no such virtuous person available for the agent to consult, then it is not clear how the agent could determine this. Even if the agent could consult such a virtuous person, it seems the agent could not know this person is so virtuous. So the less than virtuous person, it seems, receives no action-guidance from Hursthouse's theory.
    - This worry is met by supplying a list of virtues.
    - Hursthouse's view is attractive because it accommodates the principle that "ought" implies "can", recognises right actions from wrong motives and wrong actions from right motives, accommodates right action motivated entirely by duty, and does not direct the attention of those motivated to act rightly self-indulgently inward.
    - One difficulty with Hursthouse's view is that motives do not issue in actions by themselves. Motives need to be accompanied by beliefs, and can yield different actions given different beliefs. So if Hursthouse's view is to have determinate judgements of right and wrong, it must specify both the motives and the beliefs from which right actions spring. It is natural to specify the agent's actual beliefs as the relevant beliefs. But this yields counterintuitive judgements in cases where the agent has false beliefs due to thoughtlessness or inattention. Alternatively, it is attractive to specify the beliefs a virtuous person would have in the agent's situation as the relevant beliefs. But indeterminacy remains since two equally virtuous people can have very different beliefs in the same situation, depending, for example, on how each arrived in that situation. Further, if a situation contains sufficiently misleading evidence, the resulting view would still consider extremely harmful actions as right.
    - Then, it seems Hursthouse should retreat to the specification that the beliefs necessary are all relevant true beliefs, such that right action is action characteristic of a similarly situated completely virtuous agent with all relevant true beliefs. It follows from this hypothetical agent's acting from complete virtue and all relevant true beliefs that his actions conform to complete virtue. Then, it is not clear why right action should be specified in terms of virtuous motives rather than simply by reference to conformity to complete virtue. Hursthouse's view is then substantively equivalent to some sort of deontology with such rules as "act kindly", "act justly", "act truthfully", etc., i.e. both reach the same judgements about right action.
    - Another difficulty with Hursthouse's view is that it fails to explain why people have reason to act rightly. Action in accord with virtue but not from virtuous motivations, by Hursthouse's lights, are right, but do not contribute to the agent's flourishing. So it is not clear what reason the agent has for so acting. The worry is that agents could very well not care about the fact that a similarly situated completely virtuous agent would act in some way.
    - One response is to argue that agents have reason to act in accord with virtue because virtues are acquired by habituation and necessary for flourishing, so an agent's acting in accord with virtue is necessary to his flourishing.
    - This response is unsuccessful because we think that there are cases where acting in accord with virtue does not contribute at all to the agent's being or becoming virtuous, such as where the agent's character is beyond reform or the agent lacks the requisite time for habituation.
    - The problem afflicts versions of virtue ethics according to which the normative force of right action derives not from the relation of virtue to flourishing but the relation of virtue to admirableness or aretaic excellence. If right action is action characteristic of a similarly situated completely virtuous agent, then right action need not be virtuously motivated, and may well be from quite reprehensible motives. It is not clear that an action can inherit admirability from the virtues if it is only hypothetically and not actually motivated by the virtues.
- Hurka argues that virtue ethical theories of right action must give an account of what virtue is, and that such an account is either substantive or formal. Hurka then attacks both strategies.
- Hurka argues that virtue ethical theories of right action will be unintuitively self-effacing.
    - Suppose that a virtue ethical theory of right action claims that we have reason to act rightly ultimately because doing so will contribute to our flourishing. Then, if we believe this theory, when we act rightly, we must think "I act rightly ultimately because this contributes to my flourishing". It follows from this thought that "if I act kindly it is not simply because other people have such needs", "if I act justly it is not simply because other people deserve such things",

etc. But genuinely acting virtuously involves being so simply moved. For example, a person acts kindly only if he is moved by the thought of others' needs and well-being. So if we believe this virtue ethical theory, if we are ever to act virtuously, we must deceive ourselves about the reasons for our so acting. In other words, if we are ever to act virtuously, we are then simply moved by such thoughts as "he needs help", but cannot consistently think both that we are so simply moved and that we act rightly ultimately because this contributes to our flourishing. But if, plausibly, our reasons are transparent to us, we cannot be deceived about our reasons for so acting. So if we are ever to act virtuously, as the virtue ethicist certainly thinks we should, we cannot believe such a virtue ethical theory. A similar argument applies to virtue ethical theories which claim that we have reason to act rightly ultimately because doing so is admirable. So virtue ethics seems necessarily self-effacing.

- Hurka argues that virtue ethics is self-effacing in a more disturbing way than consequentialist theories are. Consequentialist theories are self-effacing in virtue of the contingent psychological fact that if people aim at the best outcomes they generally do not succeed. But virtue ethics is non-contingently self-effacing. Virtue ethics is self-effacing in virtue of the fact that acting virtuously requires virtuous motivation but virtuous motivation is inconsistent with being motivated by what virtue ethics claims is the source of our reasons for acting rightly.
    - This problem suggests that the virtue ethicist should argue that virtuous motivation is simply the source of our reasons for acting rightly. But virtue ethics then seems liable to collapse into some version of deontology.
- Hurka argues that virtue ethics cannot explain why self-indulgence is objectionable. Even the claim that self-indulgence is objectionable is costly to the virtue ethicist. This is because, by virtue ethical lights, an agent's flourishing or admirableness is more valuable than, for example, the prevention of another person's pain, since our reasons to care about the latter are merely derivative of our reasons to care about the former. But if self-indulgence is objectionable, then it is objectionable to care more about the former than the latter, it is objectionable to care more about what is more fundamental and valuable than what is less. But this is extremely counterintuitive.
- Hurka argues that virtue ethics is objectionably egoistic in identifying the philosophical ground of our reasons to act rightly as such goods as flourishing or admirableness which are good only for the agent. Intuitively, we think that our reasons for acting rightly are ultimately, at least in some cases, other-regarding considerations. Virtue ethicists tacitly recognise the intuition that the sources of our reasons for acting rightly should, at least in some cases, be external, in condemning moral self-indulgence. "Intuitively, ethics is thought to be about the good of others".

Annas, 2007

Annas, J. (2007) "Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism," in P. Bloomfield (ed.) Morality and Self-Interest. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 205-222.

- Annas briefly introduces the objection that virtue ethics is objectionably egoistic. According to this objection, virtue ethics justifies ethical claims about how an agent should act or live in terms of what is good for the agent, where that is distinct from, and potentially in conflict with, the good of others. But we think that to be ethically moved is to be in some way moved by considerations of the good of others.
- Annas defends a specific conception of virtue. According to Annas, a virtue is a character trait, but not just a character trait, since such traits as forgetfulness and stubbornness are not virtues. So a virtue is at least a desirable character trait. But a virtue is not just a desirable character trait, since such desirable traits as tidiness and punctuality are not virtues. So a virtue is apparently a desirable character trait that embodies a commitment to some value. For example, benevolence is a desirable character trait that embodies a commitment to the well-being and needs of others, and honesty is a desirable character trait that embodies a commitment to the value of the truth.
    - Then, the virtues benefit agents, but do not essentially benefit agents, and also benefit others, in some cases more than they benefit agents.
    - A virtue is also not such a character trait which merely happens to or tends to promote value. Because virtues work through the practical reasoning of agents and issue in actions, the relationship between some virtue and the value it embodies is through the practical reasoning and actions of agents, so virtues are dispositions to do what is valuable. For example, benevolence is not simply a disposition that merely happens to or tends to have the result of promoting other persons' well-being and meeting their needs, but a disposition to do exactly that.
- A satisfactory virtue ethics explains the unity of the virtues and the normative force of the virtues.
- Annas claims that the virtues are valuable because a person's being virtuous, given the above understanding of virtue, consists in a persons character being a certain way and so contribute to this person's living a whole life in a certain way, which will be a eudaimon or flourishing way.
- Then it seems that the virtues are valuable to the agent only because they contribute to the agent's flourishing. In other words, we care about acquiring and exercising the virtues only because we care about our flourishing. We think that we ethically should acquire and exercise the virtues. And we are so ethically moved, intuitively, only if we are moved by

considerations about the good for others, since ethics is fundamentally about other persons. But an agent's flourishing seems to be a sort of good for this person, distinct from and potentially in conflict with the good of others. So if we are moved to acquire and exercise the virtues by considerations about our own flourishing, we are so moved in an objectionably egoistic, self-indulgent, unethical way.

- Annas responds by denying that to be moved by one's own flourishing is to be moved egoistically and self-indulgently. According to Annas, one's flourishing consists in possessing and exercising the virtues, which in turn consists in acting and living virtuously, i.e. committed to such values as the well-being and needs of others, justice, and truth. So to be moved by one's flourishing is to be moved by a desire to act and live committed to such values. To so act and live is also to act and live while attending to the well-being, needs, deserts, etc. of other persons. Aiming to so act and live does not turn one's attention inward on oneself, but outward to others. There seems to be no reason to think that being moved by one's flourishing, understood in this way, is objectionably egoistic or self-indulgent.
    - "If you point out that I am doing this as my way of flourishing not yours, the retort is that I am trying to be virtuous in living my life, not yours, because my life is the only life I can live."
- Hurka argues also that virtue ethics is self-effacing in a troubling way. According to virtue ethics, we care about acquiring and exercising the virtues because doing so contributes to our flourishing. In other words, the source of our reasons for acquiring and exercising the virtues is our flourishing, which is in some sense our own good. But if we are motivated by our own good, it seems that we are not motivated by the virtues themselves. In other words, we are not motivated by our dispositions to, for example, respond to the needs of others or give them their due. And we exercise the virtues only if we are motivated by the virtues. So virtue ethics would require that we not be motivated by, and in some sense blind ourselves to the source of our reasons for acquiring and exercising the virtues.
    - This seems to result in a split within the self, which "renders impossible an acceptable account of practical reasoning".
- Annas responds that "the way in which virtue ethics requires self-effacingness is perfectly harmless".
    - Virtue comes to efface itself from the virtuous person's motivation in the same way that conscious explicit thoughts about plumbing or playing the piano efface themselves from the minds of the skilled plumber or pianist. Such thoughts remain accessible to the virtuous person in that they can be recovered on such instances as when the expert has to convey expertise to a learner.
    - Annas rejects that thoughts about flourishing must be effaced from the mind of the agent in order for the agent to act virtuously. In fact, Annas argues, thoughts about flourishing are necessary for an agent to act virtuously. Virtue is necessary if not sufficient for flourishing because to possess the virtues is simply to act and live committed to the values that the virtues embody, and we describe so living as flourishing. Then, for example, a "brave" person who does not think that his "bravery" contributes to his flourishing does not think that his "bravery" structures his life in this way, and so does not think that his "bravery" is a virtue at all. Then if he acts "bravely", he is not motivated by a virtue, but by something like a habit. Thoughts about flourishing are necessary to, not incompatible with, being motivated by virtue.
    - Annas notes that the response to the egoism and self-effacingness objections turn on a conception of flourishing as constituted by virtuous action.
- "According to Hurka, either flourishing is defined in a substantive way, in which case virtue ethics is committed to implausible claims, or it is defined in a formal way, in which case virtue ethics will give an unsatisfactory account of the virtues."
    - "A substantive conception equates flourishing with some determinate state F of people or their lives, where both the nature and the goodness of F are defined independently of the virtues". Hurka argues that on such a conception, it will be very unlikely that a plausible list of virtues will lead to flourishing.
    - Annas rejects the strategy of adopting a substantive conception of flourishing. "Where success is defined independently of the virtues, it will always be hopeless to try to show that the virtues are a good way of achieving that". "[N]o sensible virtue ethics works with a conception of flourishing which is substantive in this sense." "[I]t is a fact about the world that the virtuous are not guaranteed to succeed in worldly terms, and that virtue may even prevent it".
    - A formal conception "does not equate flourishing with any independent good F but only with the general idea of the human good, whatever its content". Hurka argues that such an account fails to explain what unifies the virtues, what makes them good, and what distinguishes them from other goods.
        - It is not clear why a substantive definition of flourishing in terms of virtue is not an option. An account of flourishing so defined would not be equally acceptable to the virtue ethicist and his opponent alike. Hurka seems to think that virtue ethics must be constructed on neutral ground.
    - Annas rejects that such an explanation is required of an account of flourishing. That such an explanation is required of an account of flourishing seems to be motivated by the thought that an ethical theory requires a fundamental

concept that is substantive and independent, from which other concepts in the theory are derived.
    - Annas discusses the role of flourishing in virtue ethics if it is not to be understood as the "foundation" which the unity and goodness of the virtues is explained in terms of.
- One difficulty with tying virtue to flourishing is that it seems counterintuitive that the wicked are not leading flourishing lives, however wealthy and glamorous they are.
    - This intuition is apparently supported by Hooker's sympathy test.
    - Annas argues that it is not intuitively apparent which of the two we would feel greater sympathy for, and this depends very much on the perspective we adopt. Plausibly, if we take the perspective of Upright, we would feel more sorry for Unscrupulous.

Annas, 2007 v2

Annas, J. (2007) "Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism," in P. Bloomfield (ed.) Morality and Self-Interest. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 205-222.

- Annas briefly introduces the objection that virtue ethics is objectionably egoistic. According to this objection, virtue ethics justifies ethical claims about how an agent (ethically) should act or live in terms of what is good for the agent, where that is distinct from, and potentially in conflict with, the good of others. But we think that what we ethically (rather than prudentially, or eudaimonically, etc.) should do depends on the good of others, not our own good.
- Annas defends a specific conception of virtue. According to Annas, a virtue is a character trait, but not just a character trait, since such traits as forgetfulness and stubbornness are not virtues. So a virtue is at least a desirable character trait. But a virtue is not just a desirable character trait, since such desirable traits as tidiness and punctuality are not virtues. So a virtue is apparently a desirable character trait that embodies a commitment to some value. For example, benevolence is a desirable character trait that embodies a commitment to the well-being and needs of others, and honesty is a desirable character trait that embodies a commitment to the value of the truth. Then, the virtues benefit both the agent and other persons.
    - A virtue is also not such a character trait which merely happens to or tends to promote value. Because virtues work through the practical reasoning and actions of agents, the relationship between virtue and value is through the practical reasoning and actions of agents, so virtues are dispositions to do what is valuable. For example, benevolence is not simply a disposition that merely happens to or tends to have the result of promoting other persons' well-being and meeting their needs, but a disposition to do exactly that.
- A satisfactory virtue ethics must explain the unity of the virtues and the normative force of the virtues. One such explanation is the eudaimonist explanation. On this explanation, a person's being virtuous consists in this person's having a certain character trait, and character traits shape a person's life, so the virtues contribute to a person's living his life as a whole in a certain way. Then, we have reason to acquire, cultivate, and exercise the virtues because so doing constitutes living our lives as a whole in a certain way, and it is valuable to live this way.
- Hurka argues that virtue ethics is "foundationally egoistic" in the sense that our reasons for acting rightly (and presumably also for acquiring, cultivating, and exercising the virtues) ultimately derive from our own flourishing. In other words, it is because we care about our own flourishing, and virtue is necessary if not sufficient for our flourishing, that we care about virtue. This seems to be the wrong sort of explanation of our reasons for acting rightly or being virtuous, and creates a dilemma for virtue ethics.
    - Suppose that an agent is motivated by his flourishing, which virtue ethics claims is ultimately the source of his reasons for acting rightly. An agent's concern with his own flourishing seems to be in some way a concern about what is good for him or in his interests. So if we are moved to acquire, cultivate, and exercise virtue by concerns about our own good or our own interests, it seems we are not ethically or virtuously moved. To be ethically moved seems to require that we be moved by our concern for others. To be virtuously moved requires that we be moved by concerns about the values that our virtue embodies a commitment to. For example, to be moved by kindness is to be moved by concerns about the well-being and needs of others. So if we are moved by our concern with our own flourishing, we are not ethically moved, and do not act virtuously, even if we act in accord with virtue. Further, in being so moved, our attention is directed to our personal concerns, and seems to betray a self-indulgent lack of care for others.
        - Annas responds that the virtue ethicist will claim that flourishing simply is acting and living virtuously, which simply is to act and live while committed to such values as the well-being and needs of others, justice, and truth. So when we aim at our own flourishing, we aim at so act and live, which involves appropriate responsiveness to the well-being and needs of others, justice, truth, etc. Then, we are moved to act by exactly these, in a way that is neither egoistic, nor unethical, nor unvirtuous, nor self-indulgent.
        - "If you point out that I am doing this as my way of flourishing not yours, the retort is that I am trying to be virtuous in living my life, nor yours, because my life is the only life I can live."

- Suppose that an agent is not motivated by his flourishing, which virtue ethics claims is ultimately the source of his reasons for acting rightly. This seems to be required because to virtue ethics requires that we be virtuous, and being virtuous involves being moved by such considerations as "he needs help", "that would be unfair to him" and "that would be dishonest". Then, virtue ethics is self-effacing in the sense that it requires agents not to be motivated by or even blind themselves to what it claims is the true source of their reasons.
    - The self-effacingness of virtue ethics, according to Hurka, is especially troubling because it is not the result of a contingent psychological fact, but the result of the nature of virtue and flourishing, by virtue ethical lights.
    - Annas responds that virtue ethics is self-effacing only in the sense that explicit virtuous motivation is effaced from the mind of the moral expert. This is not troubling because it remains accessible and transparent to the agent in the sense that it can be recovered if needed. This sort of self-effacingness is unproblematic in the same way that an expert pianist's not consciously thinking about each keystroke is unproblematic. Unlike the sort of self-effacingness that troubles consequentialist accounts, this sort of self-effacingness does not entail a problematic split in practical reasoning.
    - Annas rejects that thoughts about flourishing must be effaced from the mind of the agent in order for the agent to act virtuously. In fact, Annas argues, thoughts about flourishing are necessary for an agent to act virtuously. Virtue is necessary if not sufficient for flourishing because to possess the virtues is simply to act and live committed to the values that the virtues embody, and we describe so living as flourishing. Then, for example, a "brave" person who does not think that his "bravery" contributes to his flourishing does not think that his "bravery" structures his life in this way, and so does not think that his "bravery" is a virtue at all. Then if he acts "bravely", he is not motivated by a virtue, but by something like a habit. Thoughts about flourishing are necessary to, not incompatible with, being motivated by virtue.
- Hurka argues that the foundational egoism of virtue ethics, in the sense that our reasons for being virtuous and acting rightly derive from our concern with our own flourishing, poses a second sort of dilemma for virtue ethics.
    - Suppose that flourishing is defined substantively, as some determinate state of people or their lives, where both the nature and goodness of this state are defined independently of virtue. Then, it seems any plausible list of virtues will be unlikely to achieve flourishing.
        - Annas responds that this is unsurprising and unproblematic. Where flourishing is defined independently of the virtues, there is no good reason to think the virtues will be a good way of achieving flourishing. "A virtue ethicist who defended such a substantive conception of flourishing would be committed to holding an unrealistic view of the extent to which the world will work in favour of the virtuous".
    - Suppose that flourishing is instead defined formally, which equates flourishing with the idea of the human good, whatever its content. Then, Hurka argues, such a formal conception of flourishing fails to explain the unity of the virtues and the goodness of the virtues. But if our reasons for being virtuous and acting rightly derive from our concern with our flourishing, it seems flourishing is in some sense the basic or foundational concept in terms of which the unity and special goodness of the virtues must be explained.
        - Annas rejects that the unity and special goodness of the virtues must be accounted for in this way. In particular, Annas argues that it is unfair to demand that the virtue ethicist identify flourishing as foundational. Virtue ethics does not aim to justify itself as a construction atop some ground that is common to other ethical theories, such as a common substantive conception of flourishing. Instead, virtue ethics could be attractive in light of its specifying plausible relations between such concepts as virtue, right action, and flourishing.
        - So the virtue ethicist need only defend a plausible virtue ethical relation between virtue and flourishing which grounds a derivation of the normative force of reasons to be virtuous and act rightly from our concern with our flourishing. In other words, the virtue ethicist need only answer "why think virtue necessary to flourishing?"
        - The virtue ethicist would argue that virtue is necessary to flourishing because the virtuous life is the best specification of flourishing. In other words, a life committed to such values as the well-being and needs of others, justice, and truth, is flourishing life in the sense that it satisfies the formal constraints of being complete, self-sufficient, etc.
        - The opponent of virtue ethics will reject this on the ground that this conception of flourishing seems simply counterintuitive. Hooker's sympathy test brings out this intuition.
        - The virtue ethicist will reject this counterintuitiveness. Our intuition in Hooker's sympathy test depends in large part on which standpoint we take. From the standpoint of Upright, it seems we would feel more sympathy for Unscrupulous. Annas argues that the virtue ethicist need not be concessive about this point.

LeBar, 2009

LeBar, M. (2009) "Virtue Ethics and Deontic Constraints," Ethics 119(4), pp. 642-671.

- LeBar argues that eudaimonist virtue ethics appear objectionably egoistic in the sense that they seem committed to the claim that it is the effects of wrong action on the agent rather than the effects on the victim that make wrong actions wrong. On some such virtue ethics, we have reason to act rightly because to act rightly is to act in accord with virtue, and we have reason to act in accord with virtue because this contributes to our flourishing. Then, our reason for acting rightly is ultimately that so acting contributes to our flourishing. But we have a strong intuition that this is the wrong kind of reason for acting rightly. For example, our reason for not murdering should be largely to do with the effect of murdering on the person murdered, not the effect of murdering on our own flourishing. Intuitively, the reason an agent has for not acting in ways that violate deontic constraints must be largely if not entirely to do with the effect of such actions on victims.
- LeBar argues that, by eudaimonist virtue ethical lights, we have strong reason to take up the "second-person standpoint", this is an important part of being virtuous, and to take up this standpoint is to be responsive to "second-personal" reasons of the exact sort we think we should be responding to when we respect deontic constraints. An important part of being virtuous is being responsive to categories of reasons that one otherwise would not be responsive to. For example, part of the virtue of courage is seeing the fact that one is in danger as reason to act courageously, and part of the virtue of friendship is seeing the fact that it is a friend's birthday as reason to wish him well. Virtues involve such reason responsiveness because acting virtuously involves acting from virtuous motivations, hence involves seeing certain facts as (sometimes sufficient) reason to act in certain ways. For example, the virtue of kindness involves not only meeting the needs and promoting the well-being of others, but involves intentionally doing so, which in turn involves being moved by concerns about the needs and well-being of others, which is to see and respond to the needs and well-being of others as reasons. Plausibly, being virtuous requires being responsive to such "second-personal" reasons as "this will hurt Smith". Further, it seems we have exactly the same sort of reason to be so responsive as we have to be virtuous more generally: that doing so contributes to our flourishing. A life in which one fails to recognise such second-personal reasons is simply unimaginable, and would quite resemble Hobbe's state of nature. Such a life would, for example, involve a sort of blindness to the well-being, needs, pain, rights, and expectations of others. Such a life would scarcely resemble any sort of life we think we have reason to lead. So, by eudaimonist virtue ethical lights, being responsive to such reasons is an important part of being virtuous, and we have compelling reason to be so responsive. Then, when we refrain from violating deontic constraints, our reasons for doing so would be such as "this will hurt Smith", "this will violate Smith's rights", and "this will deceive Smith", which are entirely to do with the effects of our actions on victims. Eudaimonist virtue ethics, then is not committed to attributing to us objectionably egoistic reasons for acting within deontic constraints.
- One worry about LeBar's response is that his treatment of second-personal reasons leaves such reasons in some sense hypothetical rather than categorical. Second-personal reasons, on LeBar's account, are hypothetical, in the sense that it seems a person could be both rational and entirely unresponsive to second-personal reasons, i.e. such reasons are not a requirement of rationality. On LeBar's account, we need only respond to second-personal reasons if we recognise the moral standing of others, and it seems theoretically possible (even if practically impossible) for a rational being to fail to recognise this. But we think our reasons for acting as is morally required are categorical, i.e. in some sense inescapable, i.e. not contingent on such things as our desires, our cares, and what is good for us. In other words, it seems that our responding to such reasons is in some sense necessary. We have a strong intuition that second-personal reasons are categorical in this sense. For example, we think a person would not be "off the hook" for murder if and simply because this person did not care at all for his victim. The claim of the victim against the murderer does not lose its force simply because of that.
  - LeBar argues that flourishing is adequately robust ground for responsiveness to second-personal reasons. The eudaimonist conception of flourishing is "a quintessentially moralised conception of our good". So being responsive to second-personal reasons does not merely contingently contribute to flourishing, it is in fact necessary to flourishing.
  - The objector could LeBar's solution simply relocates the contingency. On LeBar's account, whether some person is moved by this moralised flourishing is a merely contingent fact.
  - LeBar responds that the contingency of being so motivated is unproblematic. LeBar does not intend to justify responsivity to second-personal reasons to the amoralist who rejects the moral standing of others, but to vindicate it for moralists who recognise this moral standing. It is sufficient for such vindication to argue that such recognition entails a moralised flourishing, which moves us to be responsive to second-personal reasons.
  - LeBar responds also that this contingency should not trouble us, and that we in fact seem to recognise this contingency when we treat the insane and psychopaths as persons we do not stand in relations of mutual recognition to and as not accountable to deontic constraints.
- One worry about LeBar's response is that it merely relocates the egoism. The initial worry was that by eudaimonist virtue ethical lights, our reasons for acting within such deontic constraints as "do not murder" and "tell the truth" are objectionably egoistic, because our reason for acting so constrained is that so acting contributes to our flourishing. LeBar's response is that our reasons for acting so constrained are instead "second-personal" reasons such as "this will hurt Smith", "this will violate Smith's rights", and "this will deceive Smith", since responding to such "second-personal" reasons is an important part of being virtuous. But if our reason to be virtuous is that being virtuous contributes to our

flourishing, our reason for being responsive to "second-personal" reasons is also this. It seems this is again a wrong kind of reason for seeing and responding to such things as the needs and well-being of others, their pain, and their rights, as reasons. It seems our reasons for acting within deontic constraints needs to be "second-personal" "all the way down". After all, being moral involves not only doing morally required actions, but also involves responding to moral reasons. And a concern with our own flourishing seems to be the wrong kind of reason for being moral.

- LeBar rejects that this is the wrong kind of reason for being so responsive. Our reasons for acting within deontic constraints simply cannot be "second-personal" all the way down because it is reasonable to demand an explanation of why we should be responsive to second-personal reasons, and this demand will not be satisfied by offering a second-personal reason for being so responsive. When we demand a reason for being so responsive, we are asking something like "what about us is such that it makes sense for us to care about the moral standing of others?". It is then reasonable to answer in terms of the sort of beings we are. We are rational agents, social and political creatures, and members in a moral community. Our flourishing is, in some sense, a specification of what we should care about, or what reasons we should be moved by, in light of our being such things. Then, that our flourishing requires it seems to be exactly the right sort of reason for responding to second-personal reasons.

Kawall, 2009

Kawall, J. (2009) "In Defense of the Primacy of the Virtues," Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy 3(2), pp. 1-21.

- Kawall begins with a naive argument against the primacy of the virtues, from moral epistemology. We generally identify virtuous persons by their doing certain virtuous acts. For example, we identify a person as virtuous because we observe or learn that this person has done kind acts. We think, for example, "John was kind to Jane, so John seems like a kind person". This suggests that it is the qualities of acts which explain a person's virtue.
- The argument from moral epistemology is unsuccessful because the epistemic methods with which we judge a person's virtue do not necessarily reflect the explanatory relationships between moral concepts. The virtue ethicist can explain our so identifying virtuous persons while maintaining the explanatory primacy of virtue. By virtue ethical lights, virtues are dispositions to do virtuous acts, so virtuous acts are a good heuristic for virtue. So we identify virtuous persons by their virtuous actions because we have better epistemic access to a person's virtuous actions than to that person's virtue itself. Analogously, we doctors generally identify diseases by their symptoms, but we still think that it is diseases that explain symptoms not symptoms that explain diseases.
- Another objection to the primacy of virtues argues that virtues are no more than dispositions to do certain sorts of actions. For example, benevolence is no more than the disposition to perform actions which improve the well-being of others. Then, the virtues are explained in terms of such moral concepts as well-being.
- Kawall responds that there must be more to virtue than that it disposes agents to do certain sorts of acts. A mere disposition to do certain sorts of acts seems better described as a habit than a virtue. For example, a person who felt some irresistible compulsion to make charitable donations but felt no warmth or sympathy for the persons whose lives would be made better by his donations, would scarcely count as benevolent. What seems to go wrong in this case is that such actions flow from some odd psychological state, which is at best a weird habit, and not from the virtue of benevolence. Virtues are not merely dispositions to act in certain ways, but "complex" or "rich" inner states. A more ridiculous example better brings out the point. Consider the case of Monkey Man. Whenever Monkey Man entertains the idea of lying, an image of a cymbal-banging monkey screeching "Do not lie!" comes to his mind in an intrusive, unwelcome way. So Monkey Man is disposed to tell the truth. Surely Monkey Man's being so disposed is not what his virtue consists in.
- Swanton argues further that the virtues are not simply dispositions to act in certain ways, because they also involve other "modes of moral responsiveness". For example, the virtue of benevolence involves appreciating and being pleased by observing others' acts of benevolence, even if so appreciating is entirely passive.
- The opponent of virtue ethics could concede that the virtues are more than dispositions to act in certain ways, but maintain that the value of the virtues derive from, or are to be explained in terms of, their relation to other goods or values, and it is these that are foundational or basic. Hurka's recursive account of the virtues alleges exactly this. Hurka argues that pleasure, knowledge, and achievement are the foundational or basic goods, and that if something is good, desiring, pursuing, taking pleasure in, or otherwise loving this good is also good. Then, the virtue of benevolence, for example, supposing that well-being consists in pleasure, is good because it involves desiring, pursuing, and taking pleasure in the pleasure of others. So the value of benevolence is explained by the value of pleasure. On Hurka's view, virtue consists in an appropriate response to other moral considerations. It is these, then, that are explanatorily basic.
    - Kawall argues that the virtue ethicist can and should reject that such things as pleasure, knowledge, and achievement are independent values prior to virtue. That we quite directly see such things as valuable without reference to the virtues is not sufficient reason to think that they are in fact independently valuable. Kawall undermines this intuition below.

- Another objection to the primacy of virtue observes that we generally identify actions as right or wrong without reference to the idea of a virtuous person and his behaviour, this suggests that rightness and wrongness are explanatorily prior to virtue. For example, we see directly that torturing an innocent person for sadistic pleasure is wrong without thinking at all that "a virtuous person would not do that". When we see something as right or wrong so directly, we seem to see rightness and wrongness as genuine independent moral properties. So we have reason to think rightness and wrongness indeed are genuine independent moral properties. Then, rightness and wrongness are not explained in terms of virtue.
- Kawall concedes that we do see the rightness and wrongness of certain acts quite directly, as genuine independent moral properties, but this is not sufficient reason to think that rightness and wrongness are in fact independent moral properties. When we respond morally to situations, we do not do so as blank slates, but as at least somewhat virtuous agents. So we immediately see torturing innocent persons for sadistic pleasure as wrong because justice requires that we so respond to such acts. Plausibly, our responses are the function of natural tendencies, cultivation, socialisation, or other such forces. Kawall's flag analogy is useful to illustrate this point. A British person would see directly the Union Jack as a Union Jack and see immediately a Britishness in the Union Jack. But this by no means reveals a genuine independent property of Britishness that inheres in the Union Jack.
- The objector to the primacy of virtue could concede that our apparently grasping rightness and wrongness directly is the product of natural tendencies, cultivation, socialisation, or other such forces. The objector could maintain that virtue ethics gets the explanation of rightness and wrongness backwards. "Surely helping a drowning person is right because it prevents the suffering and potential death of the victim [...] it is not right simply because the virtuous agents would save the person." So it seems that independent value or disvalue lies in such things as suffering and death, and the virtuous person is the person who responds appropriately to these, and the virtues are no more than rich dispositions to so respond.
- Kawall argues that the virtue ethicist can and should maintain that virtuous agents concern themselves with such things as suffering and death, but reject that being so concerned involves recognising some value prior to and independent of virtue, because being so concerned is an essential part of being virtuous. The virtuous person responds to such things as suffering and death themselves, not some independent and prior value or disvalue in such things. "The benevolent person will be concerned that others fare well. But the moral significance of this concern stems from the fact that it is part of a virtue, not from the fact that misery and well-being are intrinsically or ultimately bad and good respectively." "The virtuous are responding directly to states of affairs, but there are not prior moral properties supervening on these states of affairs that are guiding the reactions of the virtuous."
- So, by virtue ethical lights, the virtuous person is moved to act rightly because being so moved is an essential part of being virtuous. Then the virtuous person acts rightly ultimately because doing so is an essential part of being virtuous. But this seems to be the wrong kind of reasons for acting rightly. We think that our reasons for acting rightly are such as "this is good for my friend" and "to do otherwise would cause great pain".
- Kawall argues that the virtue ethicist can and should agree that our reasons for acting rightly are such, and still maintain that we are moved to act rightly because being so moved is an essential part of virtue. We have different sorts of reasons for acting rightly. Kawall illustrates the case with a divine command theorist whose God commands us to act as act utilitarians. Torture is wrong because it is inconsistent with virtue, it is inconsistent with virtue because virtuous agents would not characteristically torture, and virtuous agents would not characteristically torture because this inflicts pain on others and is unfair to them. So "why is torture wrong?" can be answered in a number of different senses.
    - "The instantiation question can be understood as asking why a particular action is such that it fails to meet the criteria of rightness given at the normative level." The metaethics question presumably can be understood as asking what is fundamental in ethics, and how wrongness relates to this fundamental concept. Then the normative question can be understood as asking, given that ethics is fundamentally about this thing, what sort of criteria can we identify wrongness by?
    - The objector confuses the instantiation and the normative senses of the question "why is this right or wrong?" The same sort of objection could be levelled against utilitarianism or Kantian deontology, and it is more clearly without force there.
    - Such things as suffering and death take on a moral status insofar as virtuous individuals will have certain attitudes towards them.
- Another objection to the primacy of virtue takes the form of a dilemma. Either some action is in accord with virtue because of some features of that action or some action's being in accord with virtue is simply arbitrary. In the former case, it seems these such action is right in virtue of these features. In the latter case, virtue ethics is simply arbitrarily approving of some actions and disapproving of others, so it is not a plausible ethical theory.
- Kawall argues that virtue ethics's approval and disapproval of actions is not arbitrary because it is grounded in something like human nature. The reactions of virtuous agents are regular and consistent. For example, a benevolent agent will characteristically be moved by instances of pain and suffering.

    - A related worry is that virtue ethical moral reasoning is also either dependent on prior moral concepts or objectionably arbitrary.
- A final objection is that there seems to be no way of identifying the virtues without reference to some prior moral concept. Vices seem to have exactly the same form as virtues: rich dispositions to act or respond in certain ways.
    - Kawall believes that an independent account of the virtues is plausible, but none of the current accounts are.

Driver, 2009

Driver, J. (2009) Uneasy Virtue. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. pp. 16-62.

Crisp, 2015

Crisp, R. (2015) "A Third Method of Ethics?," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 90(2), pp. 257-273.