Virtue Ethics Notes

Action Guidance

'Virtue ethics fails to guide action.' Discuss.

Virtue ethics apparently fails to guide action because it treats virtue as fundamental, i.e. it does not explain virtue in terms of other moral concepts, and explains other moral concepts in terms of virtue. The virtue ethicist is moved, at least in part, by the thought that the sorts of persons we are is more morally important than precisely how we act in each situation. So virtue ethics issues judgements about a person's character, like "one should be kind" and "one should be just", But it seems quite unnatural for an ethicist concerned primarily with the sorts of persons we are to say "one should redirect the out-of-control trolley to kill only one person rather than five". So it seems virtue ethics will remain oddly silent on how an agent should act under some circumstances.

Virtue ethics treats virtue as fundamental, and considers the sorts of persons we are to be important, but it does not follow that virtue ethics will remain silent on right action. Virtue ethics can derive right action from virtue. Hursthouse, for example, argues that right action is action characteristic of a similarly situated completely virtuous person. So for example, if a hypothetical completely virtuous person would redirect the out-of-control trolley to kill only one person rather than five, then it is right for the actual agent to do this, by Hursthouse's lights. Hursthouse's claim about right action can be virtue ethically motivated. One motivation for virtue ethics is the intuitive idea that the person we are is more fundamental than how we ought to act under any one set of circumstances. Our actions appear to have “nested” motivations. Our reason for some particular action under some particular circumstance will refer to some broader concern. When we are diligent in work, for example, this is because we are concerned about our careers. Our reason for being so concerned will in turn refer to a yet broader concern. We are concerned with our careers going well perhaps because we are concerned with providing for our loved ones. Tracing our motivations upwards in this way, we eventually come to a conception of our lives as a whole, to which our actions are oriented. It is this conception of our lives as a whole which is fundamental, from which our narrower concerns and actions flow. It seems then that it is at this more fundamental level that we should frame our ethical questions. The task of an ethical theory would then be to describe how we ought to live our lives as a whole, or the kinds of persons that we ought to be. This places character and virtue at the foundation of ethical theory. So Hursthouse's claim about right action could be motivated by the thought that virtue ethics would require us to be completely virtuous, and actions flow from character, so virtue ethics would require us to act as the completely virtuous agent would.

One worry about Hursthouse's claim is that it is trivial. The opponent of virtue ethics will admit that right action is action characteristic of a similarly situated completely virtuous person, but that is simply because a completely virtuous person is a person who characteristically does right actions. For example, by consequentialist lights, a completely virtuous person is a person who characteristically acts to bring about the best consequences, and by deontological lights, a completely virtuous person is a person who characteristically acts in accord with some set of deontological rules. Then, by consequentialist lights, to say that right action is action characteristic of a completely virtuous agent is simply to say that right action is action that brings about the best consequences, and by deontological lights, this is to say that right action is action in accord with some set of rules. Without a prior conception of right action, upon which a conception of the completely virtuous agent is constructed, it seems, the claim that right action is action characteristic of a completely virtuous agent is entirely uninformative. So Hursthouse's definition of right action is circular, and fails to guide action.

It is simply not true that Hursthouse's definition of right action is circular. The virtue ethicist will accept that a completely virtuous person is one who characteristically does right actions, but reject that this is definitionally so. Virtue ethics would define the completely virtuous person as the kind, just, honest, etc. person (and will define these virtues independently of the concept of right action). So by virtue ethical lights, the concept of the completely virtuous agent is well-defined independently of a prior conception of right action. Then a definition of right action in terms of the completely virtuous agent is not circular, and Hursthouse's conception of right action can be action-guiding.

Another worry about Hursthouse's claim is that virtue ethics then fails to guide action for the less than virtuous, who most require action guidance. The less than virtuous, who are unfamiliar with the virtues and have a poor conception of what it is to be virtuous would struggle to identify a virtuous person, or imagine what a virtuous person would do. So the less than virtuous person cannot pick out a virtuous person to consult, or construct a hypothetical completely virtuous role model. Then, it is not clear how the less than virtuous could know which action of the actions available to him is one characteristic of a completely virtuous agent.

Johnson attacks Hursthouse's definition of right action as action characteristic of a completely virtuous agent. It is right for the moral novice to strive for moral improvement and practice self control, but this would be entirely uncharacteristic of a completely virtuous person. For example, an unkind person would (morally) do well to pay close attention to instances of his being unkind, reflect on them to make the relevant moral considerations and their wrongness more vivid, and seek to remedy the psychological grounds of his being unkind. Similarly, an intemperate person would (morally) do well to avoid situations where he may be tempted by his appetites or put in place structures of support to make it easier to resist temptation. And we think it is right for moral novices to do exactly such things. But such actions would be entirely uncharacteristic of the completely virtuous agent. The completely virtuous agent would have no need to remedy or mitigate a lack of virtue because he is completely virtuous and so lacks no virtue. More generally, it seems there is a class of right actions that are (morally) right for an agent to perform in virtue of that agent's being less than completely virtuous. But according to Hursthouse's conception of right action, these are not right actions, so Hursthouse's conception of right action seems implausible.

One response to Johnson's objection is that we cultivate the virtues by acting as the completely virtuous person would, so a person who acts rightly, by Hursthouse's lights, improves morally. For example, even if the unkind person does not pay close attention to instances of his being unkind, reflect on these actions, and seek to remedy the psychological grounds of these actions, simply acting kindly habituates the unkind person to kind action, and makes him a kinder person. So even if there is an obligation to morally improve, we make good on this obligation simply by acting rightly by Hursthouse's lights. This response is inadequate because we think intuitively that moral improvement by means other than acting as the completely virtuous person would is still sometimes right or obligatory. For example, we think that the unkind person, and the especially unkind person especially, have an obligation not only to act kindly, but to reflect and remedy their characters. We would say to such persons "you really should think about what you have done and the hurt that you have caused, and consider seeking professional help if need be." So one's acting as the completely virtuous person would sometimes meets the obligation to morally improve or control oneself, but does not always do so. Then, there remains a class of right actions that are not so on Hursthouse's conception.

Another response to Johnson's objection is that striving for moral improvement and imposing self control are right actions in a second-best way. But intuitively, actions aimed at moral self-improvement or self-control do not appear to be in some way second best. For example, the unkind person's deep reflection and seeking professional help to remedy the psychological grounds of his unkind actions seems no less admirable or excellent (and maybe more) than the kind person's acting kindly in a natural, unreflective, and in some sense less effortful way. And there seems to be no reason to think moral improvement and self-control are second-best other than that they are not characteristic of the completely virtuous agent. If these actions are second best, it seems they are second-best in the sense that it is best of all or best in a more fundamental way to be a completely virtuous agent, and for this agent, it is best to simply act kindly etc., and it is less than the best to be less than completely virtuous, and for such agents, moral improvement and self-control are best. But this does not seem to be sufficient reason to think moral improvement and self-control are right or obligatory in a second-best way. Because then all actions of moral novices are right in only a second-best way. But we think that moral novices at least sometimes simply act rightly, for example, when they simply act kindly (and it is not the time for reflection), and Hursthouse would think the same. So there remains a class of "first-best" right actions that are not so on Hursthouse's conception.

Hursthouse's claim could be amended to read: "right action is action that would be endorsed by a completely virtuous person". Presumably, a completely virtuous agent would endorse a moral novice's simply acting rightly (kindly, justly, etc.) but also a moral novice's acts aimed at moral self-improvement and self-control. The amended claim then seems to align with our intuitions about right action.

This response is unattractive because it is not clear that rightness and wrongness, so understood, carries normative force. In other words, it is not clear what, by virtue ethical lights, lends authority to the endorsement of the completely virtuous person. We think intuitively that a person's being virtuous makes him act rightly, but do not think intuitively that a person's being virtuous makes him competent in advising others. There seems to be no reason to think that the virtues as such, defined independently of other moral concepts (not, for example, defined as love of some other good), are such that the virtuous person advises well.

We might also be skeptical about the completely virtuous person's advice because there seems to be no reason in general to think that the best doers are the best teachers. One virtue ethical response appeals to the unity of virtues. According to this response, the completely virtuous person would have a completely adequate understanding of human psychology, and whatever else that is necessary to give competent moral advice. This is dubious because it seems to require an implausibly stretched conception of theoretical wisdom.

Virtue ethics can guide action by issuing v-rules such as "do what is kind", "do what is just", and "do what is honest". A less than virtuous agent with a poor understanding of what it means to be virtuous could apply the v-rules without needing to identify actual virtuous persons or imagine hypothetical ones. Action-guidance by v-rules is consistent with Hursthouse's

definition of right action as action of a similarly situated completely virtuous agent because a completely virtuous agent would characteristically act in accordance with the v-rules. Further, there is a vast number of potential v-rules which help narrow the option space of the less than virtuous agent quite considerably. v-rules include positive injunctions such as "do what is kind" but also negative injunctions such as "do not do what is lazy", "do not do what is inconsiderate" and "do not do what is base". The v-rules flesh out the rich concept of a virtuous person in a way that is sensible to a less than virtuous person. So the v-rules can go a long way in guiding the action of a less than virtuous person.

One worry about the strategy of guiding action by v-rules is that the less than virtuous person would still struggle to apply these rules because this requires such judgements as "it would be unfair to do that" that the less than virtuous person could not reliably make. In other words, we think that the less than virtuous agent struggles to apply Hursthouse's definition of right action because he does not have an adequate understanding of virtue and so cannot identify or imagine completely virtuous agents, but an inadequate understanding of virtue suggests also an inadequate understanding of such concepts as kindness, justice, honesty, etc., and an agent with an inadequate understanding of these would struggle to apply the v-rules. When we imagine a less than virtuous person with an inadequate understanding of virtue, we imagine, for example, someone who does not think it unkind to make unkind comments about others' appearances because he thinks "the kind thing to do is always to tell them the truth", or someone who does not think it unjust to discriminate against members of minority groups because he thinks "the majority have a right to privileged treatment". So a less than virtuous person who does not have an adequate understanding of virtue is (at least generally) a person who does not have an adequate understanding of the virtues and the things the virtues are about (the well-being, needs, and desert of others, for example), and thus would struggle to apply v-rules just as much as he would struggle to apply Hursthouse's definition of right action.

Competing theories of right action face the same difficulty. A version of utilitarianism which endorses a distinction between higher and lower pleasures would require agents to judge whether a certain pleasure is base or noble. A plausible version of deontology which includes the rule "do not murder" would require agents to judge whether an act of killing is a murder or not. A moral novice would struggle to make these distinctions. If virtue ethics does not struggle to guide the moral novice any more than competing theories do, it seems the requirement that an ethical theory be so action-guiding is unreasonable, and virtue ethics's failure to be so action-guiding should not count against it.

Virtue ethics still seems less able to guide action than competing theories because of the plurality and incommensurability of the virtues. So virtue ethics fails to guide action where action-guidance is most required. For example, suppose that some agent can either keep a promise to his friend or break this promise to aid a stranger. At least two v-rules are relevant to this situation "do the thing integrity requires" and "do the kind thing". It would be kind to aid the stranger but integrity requires promise-keeping, so the two v-rules conflict. There is no apparent way of resolving this conflict since the virtues are in a sense, incommensurable. In contrast, for example, simple act utilitarianism requires agents comply with only one rule: maximise utility. So there can be no conflict.

Hursthouse rejects that an ethical theory should be so thoroughly action-guiding in the sense that it yields determinate specific judgements of right action in all circumstances, i.e. it "tells us what to do". If there were such an ethical theory and it were true, then understanding right and wrong is a kind of technical understanding, in the sense that one could know whether some action is right simply by applying the ethical theory as a sort of technical manual. Hursthouse brings out the problems with this "technical manual" model of ethical theory with two thought experiments. First, in all technical domains, there are "prodigies" such as those children with a gift for mathematics or chess, who have an excellent understanding of these domains even at a young age. So if an ethical theory serves as a technical manual that yields determinate specific judgements of rightness and wrongness, then there could, in principle, be an ethical "prodigy", a child with an excellent understanding of a true ethical theory who could, by applying the true ethical theory, identify the right action in any circumstance. Such a child would then be an authoritative source of moral guidance. In other words, we should do as this child instructs because this child, by applying the true ethical theory that he understands excellently, has reliable knowledge of right and wrong. But this picture is absurd. Second, if knowledge of right and wrong merely required the application of a true ethical theory, then an evil person could have perfect knowledge of right and wrong if he has an excellent understanding of a true ethical theory. So this loathsome character too would be an authoritative source of moral guidance. But again this is absurd. We think children and villains could not have complete knowledge of right and wrong, but it is possible that they have an excellent understanding of a true ethical theory, so the latter is not sufficient for the former. Then, it is not only unproblematic but a merit of an ethical theory if it does not yield determinate specific judgements of right and wrong.

Annas rejects that an ethical theory should be so thoroughly action-guiding, in the sense that it yields determinate and specific judgements of rightness and wrongness. Such a thoroughly action guiding moral theory leaves no room for our simply acting wrongly, since if we act wrongly, it is because we fail to believe a true moral theory, fail to understand it, fail to apply it, etc.. In other words, if the purpose of an ethical theory is to "tell us what to do", then when we act wrongly, the failure is not entirely ours, some true ethical theory has also failed in its purpose, because it was not believed, understood, applied, etc.. But we

think there are at least some cases where we simply act wrongly, where the failure is entirely ours, where our wrongdoing attaches to us in a way that goes beyond our being responsible for it. Let me illustrate how an ethical theory that "tells us what to do" excludes this possibility. 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 a 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 mom-deferential adult 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. Then, because we think that we sometimes do simply act wrongly, that sometimes the fault is entirely our own, and that how a person acts speaks to his character, it cannot be that how we ought to act is entirely specified by a moral theory.

One objection to Annas's rejection of the demand that an ethical theory "tell us what to do" is that Annas's rejection is not consistent with what motivates us to construct ethical theories. We are motivated to construct ethical theories, in part because we find that our pre-theoretical, unreflective ethical views are inadequate. These views are due in part to prejudice and convention, they are vague, and they sometimes conflict. We should not act merely from prejudice and convention, and cannot act on vague and conflicting instructions, so it seems our pre-theoretical unreflective views must be refined. Then, an ethical theory can be understood as one way of refining our pre-theoretical views. A plausible, thoroughly action-guiding ethical theory seems to overcome the limitations in our pre-theoretical moral views. A plausible ethical theory will explain the rightness and wrongness of actions in a clearly moral (rather than merely prejudicial or conventional) way. If this theory also "tells us what to do", then its judgements of right and wrong are neither vague nor indeterminate. But according to Annas, an ethical theory should not "tell us what to do", i.e. it should not yield specific determinate judgements of right and wrong. Then it seems that ethical theory leaves us, in some sense, no better off than before we began theorising. We felt an ethical theory was necessary because our pre-theoretical moral views were vague and conflicting, and so were in need of refinement. According to Annas, an ethical theory need not straighten out our moral views to remove vagueness and potential conflict. So Annas's rejection seems inconsistent with what motivated us to construct ethical theories. More succinctly, one could ask "if ethical theory does not refine our pre-theoretical moral views by telling us what to do, what is the point of ethical theory?"

Annas defends a "developmental model" of right action, virtue, and moral development. So according to Annas, the point of ethical theory is that it makes clear how we ought to refine our pre-theoretical moral views. On this account, learning to be moral is like acquiring a practical skill. A moral novice will aspire to morally improve, and will begin by identifying role models, imitating their actions, and repeating this. By doing this, the moral novice acquires a piecemeal and derivative understanding of morality. This 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. 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. We are motivated to construct ethical theories by the apparent inadequacies of our pre-theoretical moral views. One response to this apparent inadequacy is to think that an ethical theory should itself refine our moral views. The alternative that Annas apparently favours is that an ethical theory should clarify how we ought to refine our moral views; this refining is up to us, it is hard work, and it has no straight and narrow path. So Annas's rejection of the demand that an ethical theory be thoroughly action guiding is not inconsistent with what motivated us to construct ethical theories, it is merely a different approach, and plausibly a more sophisticated and mature one.

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.

One objection to Annas's developmental model is that the moral novice's acting rightly is in some way second best.

But there seems to be no reason to think this is second best other than that it is the action of a moral novice. Intuitively, such action seems no less morally required or morally excellent than right action of the moral expert.

Primacy of Virtue

Can virtue ethicists make sense of the idea that the grounds of our duties to others are facts about those others? (180525 Q11 Or)

Virtue ethics requires that we be virtuous agents, so it seems committed to implausibly grounding our acting rightly, and in accord with our duties to others, in concerns for our own being virtuous. According to eudaimonist virtue ethics, for example, we have reason to act rightly because to act rightly is to act in accord with virtue, and our flourishing consists in our acting in accord with virtue. It seems then that, by eudaimonist virtue ethical lights, our reason for acting rightly is ultimately a concern for our own flourishing. But we think the grounds of our duties to others are facts about those others. For example, we have a duty to tell others the truth because they deserve the truth, not because of what telling the truth or lying would do to us. So the challenge for virtue ethics is to make sense of the intuitive idea that the grounds of our duties to others are facts about those others.

The virtue ethicist can accept that the grounds of our duties to others are facts about those others because being virtuous requires a responsiveness to such facts. These facts derive their moral significance from the fact that responding to them is a requirement of virtue. For example, the virtue of kindness requires a sensitivity to the well-being and needs of others. A kind person will see the fact that another person is in need, or that the well-being of another person is endangered, as reason to aid this other person. So the grounds of a duty to aid are facts about the persons in need of aid. The virtue of justice requires a sensitivity to the deserts and rights of others. A just person will see the fact that some action violates the rights of another person, or that some distribution of goods fails to give each person what he deserves as reason not to so act or distribute. So the grounds of a duty to respect the rights of others or treat others fairly are facts about those others. More generally, the virtues are more than dispositions to act in certain ways (since these are better described as habits or compulsions), and are instead rich inner states that involve many modes of moral responsiveness. So the strategy plausibly generalises.

This strategy is consistent with treating virtue as fundamental. The virtue ethicist need not recognise such concepts as well-being and need as independently morally significant in order to recognise that facts about well-being and need ground duties to others. Such facts ground duties because a certain sort of responsiveness to them is a requirement of virtue, not because such facts are in themselves morally significant, and in themselves supply reason to act in moral ways. Because facts about others can be reason-giving without being facts about independent moral properties (for example, the fact that a stranger needs aid can be reason-giving without need being an independent moral property) virtue ethics can make sense of the idea that duties to others are grounded in facts about those others.

One worry about this response is that it leaves our reasons for acting in accord with our duties to others hypothetical rather than categorical. Our reasons for acting in accord with our duty to others, on this virtue ethical account, is hypothetical in the sense that it seems a person could be both entirely rational and entirely unresponsive to such reasons, i.e. responsiveness to such reasons is a requirement of virtue but not a requirement of rationality. But we ordinarily think that our reasons for acting morally, in accord with our duties to others are categorical, i.e. in some sense inescapable, not contingent on our being virtuous agents or on our being concerned with being virtuous. In other words, we ordinarily think that we, in some sense, necessarily have reason to act morally and respond to our duties to others. The virtue ethical response is particularly troubling, because if responsiveness to facts about others that ground our duties to them is a requirement only of virtue, it seems that the vicious person has no reason to act in accord with such duties. But we think morality binds the virtuous and vicious equally. For example, a hateful person is not "off the hook" for murder simply because he is a hateful person.

That virtue ethics leaves our reasons for acting in accord with our duties to others hypothetical rather than categorical should not trouble us. It is important to note that a vicious person has reason to act in accord with his duties to others, even if he is vicious, as long as he has some concern with his being virtuous. For example, if a hateful person is concerned with his being virtuous, then since treating the rights of others to live as reason-giving, and not murdering are requirements of virtue, the hateful person has reason to respond to so treat as reason-giving and so not murder. Then, only agents who have no concern for their being virtuous have no moral reason to act in accord with their duties to others. This should not trouble us. This account of our reasons for acting in accord with our duties to others is not sufficient to persuade an amoralist to act in accord with his duties to others, but it is sufficient to vindicate a moralist's (who has some concern for his being virtuous) so acting.

That this account fails to persuade the amoralist is not a decisive objection since it is not clear that any moral theory could persuade the amoralist to act morally. It is also not clear why we think a moral theory should be able to persuade the amoralist to act morally, i.e. why this is a desideratum. Ordinarily, we are not troubled by the fact that psychopaths cannot be persuaded to act morally.

But if our ground for being so responsive to such facts about others is a concern for our flourishing or our being virtuous, then we seem to be moved to act rightly in an objectionably egoistic way. The initial worry about eudaimonist virtue ethics was that the reason, by eudaimonist virtue ethical lights, for acting in accord with our duties to others, that doing so contributes to an agent's flourishing, seemed to be the wrong sort of reason for acting in accord with duty. We think intuitively that we should act in accord with duty because of such reasons as "he deserves this" "he needs aid" and "his well-being is at stake". But then it seems that the virtue ethicist has simply relocated the problem. On the above virtue ethical account, our reasons for acting in accord with other-regarding duties are such reasons as "he deserves this" "he needs aid" and "his well-being is at stake", but our reason for treating such facts as reasons is that this is required by virtue, and we have reason to do what virtue requires because doing so contributes to our well-being. Then, again, this seems to be the wrong sort of reason for being so responsive to such facts as "he deserves this". It seems our reasons for acting in accord with other-regarding duties must be to do with facts about those others "all the way down". After all, being moral involves not only doing morally required actions, but also being responsive to moral reasons. And a concern for our own being virtuous or flourishing seems to be the wrong kind of reason for being moral.

The demand that our reasons for acting rightly be second-personal "all the way down" is unreasonable. Our reasons for acting in accord with other-regarding duties 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 at all, and this demand will not be met by supplying some second-personal reason to be 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 such things as other persons' needs, well-being, and deserts?" It is then reasonable to answer in terms of the sorts 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 responding to second-personal reasons is required for our flourishing seems to be exactly the right kind of reason for responding to second-personal reasons.

It is in fact quite reasonable to answer "why should I do this?" by reference to an agent's flourishing, because the question can be interpreted in different senses. 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 metaethical 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 such and such, 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.

Flourishing

The virtue ethicist would defend a conception of flourishing as a life of virtue.

This conception seems unintuitive. Hooker's Sympathy Test supports the unintuitiveness of this conception of flourishing.

Hooker's Sympathy Test is flawed, and our intuitive reactions depend greatly on whether and how much we take the perspective of Upright or Unscrupulous.

Self-effacingness

Virtue ethics seems to be self-effacing in the sense that the completely virtuous person will have few explicit moral thoughts, and be quite directly morally responsive.

This sort of self-effacingness is quite natural, and unproblematic, because moral thoughts, and thoughts about virtue remain transparent and accessible to the moral expert.

Hurka argues that eudaimonist virtue ethics are objectionably self-effacing because to act from a concern about one's own flourishing is self-indulgent and egoistic, so not virtuous. This is a product of virtue ethics' "foundational egoism". 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. 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.

Annas rejects that a concern for one's own flourishing is incompatible with one's acting virtuously. By virtue ethical lights, to flourish simply is to act and live virtuously, which involves directing one's attention toward others. To act without thinking that one's so acting contributes to one's flourishing is not 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.

But the conception of flourishing simply as a life of virtue seems entirely unintuitive.

Egoism

(This borrows from the discussions above.) Motivational egoism is the worry that a non-self-effacing virtue ethical person would be motivated by self-interested considerations, and so would not act virtuously or rightly. This objection is met by an appropriate conception of virtue not as some disposition but as rich modes of moral responsiveness. Foundational egoism is the worry that the virtue ethical reason for acting rightly is not the right sort of reason. Annas's response is that this misunderstands virtue ethical eudaimonia. LeBar's response rejects that the virtue ethical reason is not inappropriate.