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Eudaimonistic versus Target Centred Virtue Ethics

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1. *What is Eudaimonistic Virtue Ethics?*

This paper undertakes to elucidate some core characteristics of two forms of virtue ethics; the dominant form, eudaimonistic virtue ethics, and what I call target centred virtue ethics¹. As part of the defence of target centredness, it briefly discusses possibly the most serious objection to eudaimonism, the self-centredness objection, and shows how target centred virtue ethics is not vulnerable to this objection.

Let us begin with the question: What is eudaimonistic virtue ethics? The dominant form of contemporary virtue ethics has been a form of eudaimonism, Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. The relative inability of other forms of virtue ethics to make traction is due to two features: virtue ethics has been virtually defined, explicitly or implicitly, in eudaimonistic, even Neo-Aristotelian terms, but even more seriously, there is imprecision not to mention confusion in the commitments of eudaimonism, and consequent expansion in what counts as eudaimonistic virtue ethics. This is the problem to be addressed in the present section.

In my *Virtue Ethics* following Hursthouse², I assumed a conception of eudaimonism which did justice to a distinctive feature of the ancient

¹ First developed by Christine Swanton in *A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action*, in «Ethics», 112 (2001), pp. 32–52, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, and further developed in particularly *A Particularist but Codifiable Virtue Ethics*, in Mark Timmons (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 5, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 38–63.

² *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

Greek tradition, namely that in order to be a virtue a trait of character needed to characteristically benefit its possessor.

Eudaimonistic virtue ethics as I understood the concept in 2003 then is committed to the following thesis:

(1) It is a necessary condition of a trait being a virtue that it characteristically benefits its possessor.

This thesis can of course be refined in various ways depending on how one understands ‘characteristically’. Crucially for my purposes according to Hursthouse a trait can be a virtue even if it does not benefit an agent because she has been unlucky³. A virtue just needs to be a ‘reliable bet’⁴ for flourishing. Putative counterexamples to (1) (such as those provided in my *Virtue Ethics*, pp. 80-81) relied on a certain conception of what counted as unlucky. Here I argued that virtuous lives may be lives dominated by virtues that are not reliable bets for flourishing: the life of a courageous freedom fighter; that of the charitable aid worker whose suffering is not mitigated by religious purpose, the virtuously creative and persevering artist whose work is unrecognized in his lifetime, and the persevering environmentalist who is ahead of his time in foreseeing environmental disaster but is not listened to. The assumption is that the lack of flourishing of these agents is not due to ill luck: one could not reasonably expect such admirable agents to flourish in worlds that are only to be expected, given the prevalence of vice, epistemic failings, scarcity and so forth. By contrast if one claims that these agents are unlucky, one is claiming that they are living in an unlucky world where virtues are as a result ‘burdened’⁵. One has relegated to ill luck standard conditions, for example what Tessman calls ‘systematic sources of adversity’ (159). Virtues are burdened in the sense that exercising those particular virtues in particular social contexts requires sacrifice of for example ‘physical or psychological health’ (159).

In defending eudaimonism against my counterexamples Badhwar argues that:

(2) Virtues cannot have an inherent tendency to make people unhappy⁶.

³ *On Virtue Ethics*, cit., p. 218, *passim*.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 172.

⁵ L. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtues for Liberatory Struggles*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

⁶ See for this requirement on virtue N. Badhwar, *Well-Being: Happiness in a Worthwhile Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

She claims that my counterexamples to (1) are not genuine counterexamples since it is false that the unhappiness of the virtuous agents of my examples 'is due to their virtue and not to bad luck'⁷, as I supposedly argue. But I do not argue that their unhappiness is due to the *inherent* qualities of the virtues manifested (whatever these may be and this is not clear) but to the fact that their virtue is exercised in a world with characteristic problematic features. Their unhappiness on my view is not due either to their virtue or to ill luck: rather it is due to the relation between their virtue and problematic all too characteristic features of the world in which they find themselves – bad people, lack of resources and so on. Virtue need not characteristically benefit its possessor.

In reply it could be argued that in the face of my counterexamples the truth of (1) is preserved via the truth of (2) since it is still true that in the worlds I describe, (call them W1-Wn), the virtues of the unhappy people do not have an *inherent* tendency to make them unhappy in those worlds. But how does this claim support thesis (1) against my counterexamples? To answer this question we need to see what is claimed by Thesis (2). What is it to say that a virtue cannot have an inherent tendency to make one unhappy? One option is:

(2*) Virtues cannot have a tendency to make people unhappy in any world W in which those virtues are manifested and exercised; if it has that tendency in W it is not a virtue in W.

What counts as a virtue according to (2*) is indexed to the particular world in which the virtue is possessed. What counts as a virtue in this world (for example a disposition to be trusting) may not be a virtue in what Vayrynen calls a 'Nasty World'⁸, for example a Nasty World (NW) where everyone is hopelessly untrustworthy, life is brutish and short, and so on. In that case being trusting could not be a virtue in NW. But (2*) does not help Badwhar's defence of (1) against my counterexamples since (W1-Wn) are not versions of NW. They are not Nasty Worlds. We cannot say that my counterexamples are not genuine counterexamples on the grounds that a putative virtue in W1 say (e.g. the perseverance of the environmentalist) is not after all a virtue in W1.

More probably, (2) should be read as

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 153.

⁸ P. Vayrynen, *Particularism and Default Reasons*, in «Ethical Theory and Moral Practice», 7 (2004), pp. 53-79.

(2**) Virtues cannot have a tendency to make one unhappy in normal worlds.

Normal worlds are worlds like W_1 - W_n , worlds which are not nasty but which are nonetheless far from utopian. In such worlds we are inclined to call traits such as justice, perseverance, kindness, charity, having a tendency to trust, (instead of being completely untrusting) virtues. For example Hume's circumstances of justice presuppose worlds in which there is scarcity and want of extensive generosity: without such worlds there would be no need of the personal virtue of justice, the acquisition of which presupposes a successful training in regarding violating the rules of justice as base and their maintenance as honourable. Similarly we would have no need of the virtue of intellectual perseverance if there were no obstacles to the pursuit of and dissemination of truth. Such non utopian worlds may be characterized by e.g. quite considerable vice, quite widespread lack of appreciation of many valuable properties, scarcity of resources, lack of cooperation (call these features $[F_1...F_n]$).

But (2**) does not help Badwhar's defence of eudaimonism against my counterexamples either. For my point is this: Though I am happy to agree that it is not virtue alone that is making one unhappy in normal worlds it is the characteristic features of those worlds which may cause the exercise of virtue to make one unhappy. In that case (1) is shown to be false since it is not true that it is a necessary condition of being a virtue that it characteristically benefit its possessor. Being negatively affected by $(F_1...F_n)$ is not a matter of ill luck which by definition is uncharacteristic. Rather some or all of $(F_1...F_n)$ are endemic features of W_1 - W_n . Partly because of (some or all of) $F_1...F_n$ an agent may characteristically be rendered unhappy while exercising a virtue in W , but that is not to say that she is rendered unhappy simply by her virtue, or simply by ill luck.

Turn now to other possible understandings of the eudaimonist thesis.

(3) What *makes* a trait of character a virtue is that it benefits its possessor at least characteristically.

This thesis is particularly hard to defend if one thinks as do standard eudaimonists that the point or rationale of at least most virtues is not agent benefit, but for example the protection and sustainability of the environment, the welfare of others, maintenance of rules that benefit society as a whole and so on. However on the assumption that the rationale or point of a virtue is expressed by (3), (3) has a decided advantage over (1), namely that the necessary conditions of being a virtue do not come apart from its

rationale or point. There is no disconnect between what a virtue is targeted at and its necessary conditions. However this advantage of (3) comes at a large cost. Agent benefit has to be moralized to the point where agent benefit, understood as *eudaimonia*, cannot come apart from virtue, even in the presence of ill luck⁹. Some features which make a trait of character a virtue (that it benefits its possessor) and other features which make a trait of character a virtue (that it benefits others, protects the environment and so on) turn out to be the same thing; or rather, benefiting others and so forth turn out at an ultimate level to characteristically benefit the agent after all. However, if agent benefit is what *makes* any trait a virtue how can the *target* of a virtue be other regarding?

In the face of this apparent incoherence eudaimonists are thrown back to the weaker thesis (1). But now the disconnect between necessary conditions of virtue and what *makes* traits virtues creates another cluster of problems, much canvassed in the literature. These are the problems of indirection and egoism at an ultimate level. If the *point* of a virtue such as benevolence is other regarding, how can it be that in order to be a virtue at all benevolence must somehow characteristically benefit the benevolent agent? To these problems I shall return.

Whether or not various weakenings and expansionist meanings of 'eudaimonism' have been due to the intransigent nature of problems thrown up by (1) to (3) it is undoubtedly true that eudaimonism has been associated with a number of weaker theses which deniers of (1) and (3) could easily accept. Let us now briefly consider a number of such weaker versions.

First we can reject (1) while still accepting the following Constraint on Virtue:

(4) What counts as a virtue is constrained by an adequate conception of human development and flourishing¹⁰.

The point of (4) is to ensure that virtue is understood as a properly *human* excellence relative to human modes of cognition, characteristic human needs and modes of development. (4) is a potent thesis in the face of current developments in idealized versions of virtue ethics which toss aside its core strength: its strong connection between ethics and a properly human form of virtue answerable to numerous important developments in

⁹ See further B. Hooker, *Does Moral Virtue Constitute a Benefit to the Agent?*, in R. Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live: Essays on the Virtues* Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996, pp. 141-155.

¹⁰ C. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, cit., p. 15.

psychology, such as attachment theory, developmental psychology and studies of pathological altruism. (4) neither entails that all virtue is targeted at the flourishing of the agent nor that it is a necessary condition of being a virtue that it characteristically benefit its possessor.

A fifth thesis is this:

(5) Agents need virtue to flourish.

Thesis (5) is rather routinely confused with thesis (1). (5) is a completely different thesis from (1)¹¹. A person may need virtue to flourish but this does not imply that unless a trait contributes to or is partially constitutive of the flourishing of the agent it is not a virtue. Consider a virtue whose point is to contribute to the well-being of others such as benevolence. Let us assume that a flourishing person needs to be benevolent. Let us also assume that people exercise the virtue; many are benefited, but the benevolent people do not flourish for reasons that cannot be laid at the door of ill luck, but for reasons that are to do with the characteristic conditions in which the virtue is exercised. For example there is corruption, the beneficiaries are very ungrateful, there is considerable scarcity, and the benevolent agents are exhausted fighting these obstacles in order to do some good. But let us say that giving up on benevolence would make these agents very unhappy. We would not say that benevolence ceases to be a virtue because its possessors are not flourishing in a world containing characteristic problematic features such as (F1-Fn); rather benevolence remains a virtue because its characteristic point (benefiting others) is still able to be served by benevolent agents in the (unhospitable) conditions in which they find themselves.

Thesis (5) is of course highly imprecise and its plausibility depends on what is the scope of 'virtue' in the thesis. A thorough going Aristotelian who believes in a strong version of the Unity of the Virtues thesis will be happy to accept that by 'virtue' should be understood 'all virtues' but for those who find the Unity doctrine implausible in our actual imperfect world weaker versions of (5) need to be canvassed. One may believe that a person needs the core virtues to flourish, most virtues, most core virtues, specified virtues, and so on.

Non-eudaimonists such as myself need not sever all links between virtue and flourishing: after all the idea that one needs some virtue to flourish is plausible and cogently argued by many including Hursthouse,

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 77.

Russell¹², Badwhar¹³, LeBar¹⁴. Thesis (1) specifies a necessary condition on virtue, while Thesis (5) specifies a necessary condition on flourishing.

Weaker versions of eudaimonism also specify connections between features and virtue that are weaker and arguably more plausible than that specified by (1) and (4). For example consider:

(6) To be a virtue, a virtue must be conducive to human flourishing¹⁵.

Or consider:

(7) Virtues are those qualities that further the flourishing of life as whole¹⁶.

These further weakenings of the eudaimonist position are endemic, but I do not have space to discuss them here.

2. Indirection and Target Centred Virtue Ethics

If we hold a view whose consequences are that what makes a trait a virtue and/or its necessary conditions (such as agent flourishing, human flourishing, life flourishing) are separable from its targets or aims (such as appreciating natural values or items for their own sake) then we become vulnerable to a problem which has plagued eudaimonistic virtue ethics, that of indirection. In the case of thesis (1) we have the further problem of alleged self-centredness or egoism, in the case of thesis (6) human centredness and anthropocentrism, and in the case of thesis (7) life centredness. Let us briefly explain the basic problem as it applies to traditional eudaimonism. According to David Solomon's¹⁷ "deeper level" version of the objection the *reason* for the alleged self-centredness of the agent's moral attention and motivation lies in the logic of (eudaimonist) virtue ethics' conception of the final end of the agent. Her ultimate motivation is having virtue: it is not crudely egoistic

¹² D.C. Russell, *Happiness For Humans*, Oxford University Press, New York 2012.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ M. LeBar, *The Value of Living Well*, Oxford University Press, New York 2013.

¹⁵ For example: 'the virtues in the main are those qualities that either constitute or contribute to human flourishing' (P. Cafaro, *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, in L. Besser-Jones, M. Slote (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, Routledge, New York 2015, pp. 424-444, p. 437.

¹⁶ Cafaro, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

¹⁷ D. Solomon, *Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics*, in D. Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1997, p. 172.

but it is self centred. For me as a virtuous agent “having... virtue is the most important thing for me; practically I must subordinate everything else to this”¹⁸. Call this ‘personal virtue motivation’. This “self-centred” feature, claims Solomon, is “ineliminable within virtue ethics”¹⁹.

In order to rebut the self-centredness objection as articulated by Solomon we show that even if his objection applies to eudaimonist virtue ethics it need not apply to virtue ethics in general. Virtue ethics as such need not subscribe to the view that having virtue is the most important thing for a virtuous agent. On the contrary if the point of a virtue is to meet its targets (which is the central claim of target centred virtue ethics to be explicated presently) then what is most important to a virtuous agent is not to possess virtue herself but to meet the targets of virtue. That indeed is what it is to live well. Certainly such an agent values possessing virtue above all other desirable and meritorious traits such as being a good athlete, but it does not follow that striving for personal virtue trumps realizing the ends of virtue (such as conserving nature, looking after her children and so forth). This assumption of personal virtue motivation may be ‘ineliminable’ within *eudaimonistic* virtue ethics, but it is eliminable within a target centred virtue ethics as I now show.

What is target centred virtue ethics? Its two most central claims are:

- (1) The features which *make* traits of character virtues are determined by their targets, aims, or point, as opposed to the flourishing of the possessor of the virtues (though of course that may be the target of some virtues). No one target is a necessary condition of all virtues such as the flourishing of the agent or broad social good. Virtues are targeted at all kinds of things for example environmental good, stability of (legitimately acquired) property, the good of others whether strangers one’s children and so on, preservation and appreciation of valued cultural and artistic items.
- (2) Acts are evaluated (as right) in terms of their hitting the targets of virtues in action. Hitting the targets of (relevant) virtues in action is what makes actions right.

We have seen how (1) resolves the problem of egoism and indirection, so to further explicate target centred virtue ethics the final section focuses on the second of these features.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

3. *Target Centredness and Rightness*

What counts as hitting the targets of the virtues in action? At the highest level of abstraction, hitting the targets of the virtues is what Aristotle calls hitting the ‘mean’ the targets of virtue: ‘virtue aims to hit the mean’²⁰. Virtue itself as an excellence of character is a mean *condition* (as a character trait), and persons of virtue have practical wisdom and fine motivation, including the *aim* of hitting the mean. On Aristotle’s account the mean is multi-dimensional. To fully meet the target of a virtue V and thereby the mean in relation to V involves acting (in respect of V) in the right circumstance, in the right manner, at the right time, to the right extent, for the right reasons, with respect to the right people, deploying the right instruments²¹.

I have claimed that the account of rightness understood in terms of hitting the mean of the virtues is a schematic framework only. What needs to be done in order to gain a clearer idea in concrete cases of what counts as hitting the targets of the virtues? First of all how demanding is this requirement if an action is to be deemed right? Given that the mean is multi-dimensional there could be two broad views about what is required for an action to be right on the target centred view. On one interpretation, Aristotle favours the highly demanding view: there is only one right action (or more only if there is a tie) namely the one that optimally hits the mean on all dimensions. This view is suggested by a familiar passage:

Again, failure is possible in many ways (for evil, as the Pythagoreans represented it, is a form of the Unlimited, and good of the Limited), but success is only one. That is why the one is easy and the other difficult; it is easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it. Here, then, is another reason why excess and deficiency fall under evil, and the mean state under good;

For men are bad in countless ways, but good only in one²².

This passage appears to claim that there are many ways to be in error and only one way to be correct, which suggests the demanding interpretation of rightness. However the passage describes what it is to be right at a high level of abstraction: there is only one way to be right, hitting the

²⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson, revised H. Tredennick, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1976, 1106b16-24.

²¹ *Ivi*, e.g. 1106b 18-23.

²² *Ivi*, 1106b 29-33.

mean, but there are several ways of missing the mean, and thereby being wrong. Once however we realize that the mean is multidimensional we can appreciate the importance of context in weighing success on various dimensions of the mean. Hitting the target may be a matter of actions being within an acceptable range to be right²³. A permissible but not highly desirable act can be judged right (in the sense of “all right”) but is to be distinguished from an act which is also right but highly admirable. The latter hits the targets of the relevant virtues in a way that metaphorically speaking is closer to the bullseye than a less stellar performance. On many views on supererogation, an action may hit the bullseye – optimal in that sense – but may not necessarily be required. Less than optimal actions may even be meritorious, better than “all right”. In short, a non-required suboptimal performance may be right, even meritorious. This variation in our conception of the rightness of actions is captured in virtue language: patient, generous, courageous actions can be meritorious without being optimal; and at the lower end of the scale we might even say that a generous enough action can be “all right”, but it cannot be stingy in which case it would be prohibited.

Second, assuming that actions which do not optimally hit the mean on all dimensions may be right – at least permissible – how do we determine rightness? In particular which dimensions of the mean are salient in that determination? Which dimensions of the mean are salient depends on context and the nature of the virtue – indeed some dimensions of the mean may in certain contexts be deemed irrelevant. Both these features are illustrated in the following example owed to Das:

A dives into a swimming pool to save a child, but is motivated exclusively by a desire to impress the mother as a means to sleeping with her²⁴.

On the target centred account of rightness, the act clearly misses the target of a virtue of benevolence on one dimension of the mean (acting from reasons of benevolence as a virtue) but hits the target of that virtue on other dimensions that are more important in this context. The act of diving and saving is an act performed at the right time (delay may have been fatal)

²³ This is an interpretation of the quoted text favoured by P. Losin, *Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean*, in «History of Philosophy Quarterly», 4: 3 (1987), pp. 329-342. Cited in H. Curzer, *Aristotle and the Virtues*, Oxford University Press Oxford 2012, p. 141.

²⁴ L. van Zyl, *Agent-based Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Action Guidance*, in «Journal of Moral Philosophy», 6 (2009), pp. 50-69, p. 50, citing R. Das, *Virtue Ethics and Right Action*, in «Australasian Journal of Philosophy», 81 (2003), pp. 330-334.

with respect to the right person (the child in danger of drowning) in the right manner (with alacrity and competently). It is possible on target centred views to have a very demanding view of rightness according to which the rescuer acts wrongly. But this is counterintuitive on common sense views. Nonetheless, there is no general agreement as to how success in relation to various dimensions of the mean bear on rightness. Some such as W.D. Ross claim a distinction between the right and the good arguing that rightness does not depend on quality of motive, while others disagree.

Abstract

There is much debate about what virtue ethics is as a type of contemporary moral theory. This question is addressed by distinguishing eudaimonistic virtue ethics (in contemporary forms) in terms of which virtue ethics as such is often defined, from Target Centred Virtue Ethics. This form comprises two main theses: a target centred account of what makes a trait of character a virtue and a target centred account of right action. Target centred virtue ethics is given a partial defence in this paper. Part of this defence involves getting clear on what are the presuppositions of contemporary eudaimonistic virtue ethics, for these may be more or less controversial. Another part discusses the problems of indirection and egoism faced by eudaimonism, and the target centred virtue ethical response.

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