



Pettigrove, G. (2018) Alternatives to neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. In: Snow, N. E. (ed.) The Oxford Handbook of Virtue. Series: Oxford handbooks. Oxford University Press: New York, pp. 359-376. ISBN 9780199385195.

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Deposited on: 29 August 2018

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Alternatives to Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, Glen Pettigrove

(For the final version see *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, Nancy Snow, ed. [Oxford 2018] 359-376.)

The revival of virtue ethics that began in the 1970s and '80s was led by a band of Aristotelians and Thomists. So it is not surprising that most variants of virtue ethics advanced in recent years have had a neo-Aristotelian timbre. However, standing alongside these neo-Aristotelians have been others playing similar tunes on different instruments. This chapter will highlight the four most important virtue ethical alternatives to the dominant neo-Aristotelian refrain. These are Michael Slote's agent-based approach, Linda Zagzebski's exemplarism, Christine Swanton's target-centered theory, and Robert Merrihew Adams's neo-Platonic account. What these four approaches highlight is the range of possible theoretical structures available to virtue ethicists.

I. Slote's Agent-Based Virtue Ethics

All virtue ethical theories are agent-focused: their central interest is in agents and their qualities. This is not to say that they cannot be interested in other things, too, such as actions, objects, events, or consequences. But a distinguishing mark of virtue ethics is the centrality it gives to agents and their qualities (Swanton 2013a). In particular it focuses on agents' character traits, which are taken to be dispositions to act, think, or feel certain ways. For example, an agent with the trait of benevolence is disposed to notice that another person is in need, feel concern for that person's welfare, and when possible take steps to address his need. An agent with the trait of ambition will have a yearning desire to improve herself or her station, will notice opportunities for making such improvements, and will take steps to turn those opportunities into achievements (Pettigrove 2007). The traits that are excellent or admirable will be the virtues from which the theory derives its name. But not all traits will satisfy this condition. Some, like being quick to anger, will be vices or qualities of which we

disapprove. Others, like the disposition to notice bookshops and take an interest in their contents, will be morally indifferent, neither virtues nor vices.

While all virtue ethical theories are agent-focused, some agent-focused theories may include the value of objects or states of affairs, for instance, alongside the qualities of agents, in the ‘ground-floor’ of their theories and use them in the evaluation of actions (Slote 1997: 210). Other theories, by contrast, will attempt to derive all of the evaluative qualities of actions from the qualities of agents. They will define the goodness, value, or rightness of actions in terms of virtues and vices. Michael Slote calls theories that attempt to derive the evaluative qualities of actions from agents’ excellent traits of character ‘agent-prior’ theories (2001: 6). Many of the virtue ethical theories that have been developed in recent years – including those developed by Philippa Foot (1978, 2001), Julia Annas (1993, 2011), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), and Linda Zagzebski (1996, 2004) – are agent-prior theories. Hursthouse, for example, defines *right action* as ‘what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances’ (Hursthouse 1999: 28). A *virtuous agent* is defined in terms of the possession of the virtues. And virtues are defined as ‘character trait[s] a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well’ (1999: 167). Each of these normative qualities, then, is explained in terms of agents and their qualities.

Like Foot, Annas, and Hursthouse, Slote develops an agent-prior view. What distinguishes his work from theirs is that he advances a theory that is not only agent-focused and agent-prior but also what he calls, ‘agent-based’. ‘An agent-based approach to virtue ethics treats the moral or ethical status of acts as entirely derivative from independent and fundamental aretaic (as opposed to deontic) characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals’ (Slote 2001: 5; 1997: 206). In contrast to Hursthouse, Annas, and Foot, who ground the excellence of virtuous traits in an account of human flourishing, Slote argues that the excellence of virtuous motives, traits, and individuals is not to be explained in terms of

some other quality. Rather, their excellence is fundamental, and the ethical status of actions is to be derived from these aretaic qualities of agents. Indeed, Slote goes so far as to ground not only the rightness and wrongness of actions but also the justice of institutions, laws, and customs, and the goodness of human well-being in excellent motives (2001: 99-100, 197; 2013: 110).

Slote considers three different forms an agent-based virtue ethic might take.¹ The first is built around the notions of health and strength. Good actions, on such a view, ‘express or reflect inner strength’ or health (2001: 21). The second is built around universal benevolence. According to it, good actions are those that express or reflect the motivation to promote universal human happiness (2001: 24-25). The third type is built around the notion of caring. Like universal benevolence, an ethic of caring is concerned to promote human happiness. However, an ethic of caring makes room for greater degrees of attachment to those who are near and dear to us than does an ethic of universal benevolence. As Slote is quick to point out, making room for a degree of partiality does not require indifference to those who are outside of one’s circle of relations. Humanitarian caring can still extend to all human beings; but in most day-to-day circumstances, it will play a less pronounced role than intimate caring. A *good action*, according to an agent-based ethic of caring, will be one that expresses or reflects a balance of self-concern, intimate caring, and humanitarian caring (2001: 77).

Slote argues that an agent-based ethic of caring has a number of things going for it. One advantage is that it makes room for empathy. Identifying what another person is feeling (or might feel) in certain circumstances is an important part of our everyday ethical deliberation: ‘I can’t do that; it would disappoint him terribly,’ or ‘Is he heartless? Doesn’t he see how much he’s hurting her?’ In such cases we not only recognize what others are

¹ Roy Perrett and I discuss a fourth in Perrett and Pettigrove, 2015.

feeling but we are moved by similar feelings. A number of psychological studies have suggested that this sort of empathy ‘plays a crucial enabling role in the development of genuinely altruistic concern’ (2007: 13). They also suggest that a lack of the capacity for empathy is strongly correlated with psychopathy (2013: 42-43). Insofar as it makes empathy central to ethics, then, an agent-based ethic of caring is well positioned to make sense of these findings.

A second advantage is that an ethic of caring is able to accommodate a number of our common-sense moral judgments. We ordinarily think that people should care about the suffering of others and should care even more if the other who is suffering is a friend. Furthermore, we think this is true irrespective of whether they are in a position to alleviate the other’s suffering. And we ordinarily think that the people we love and to whom we are obligated are not fungible.

Given these, and other, advantages, Slote goes on to develop a caring, agent-based account of *rightness* and *wrongness*: ‘An action is morally wrong if and only if it expresses or exhibits a lack of full empathic concern for others. And rightness ... is simply something’s not being wrong’ (2013: 110). He articulates an agent-based theory of *justice*: ‘an agent-based account of social morality will treat customs, laws, and institutions as morally good (positively and admirably just) if they reflect virtuous (enough) motivation on the part of (enough of) those responsible for them and as morally bad (or unjust) if they reflect morally bad or deficient motivation’ (2001: 99-100). He defends an agent-based account of *practical rationality*, according to which rational actions are those that express or reflect the traits of moderation, strength of purpose, non-self-deceptiveness, and a concern for one’s own well-being (2001: 200). He even offers an agent-based account of *well-being*, according to which ‘every element of human well-being ... [is] compatible with or involve[s] at least some part of virtue or one or another particular virtue’ (2001: 154).

II. Zagzebski's Exemplarist Virtue Ethics

As in Slote's agent-based virtue ethics, so also in Linda Zagzebski's exemplarist approach, the agent's dispositions and motives play a significant role in defining other normative properties. And like Slote, Zagzebski takes emotions to be central to ethics: emotions are involved in both moral epistemology and moral metaphysics. However, Zagzebski's emotional palette includes more primary colours than Slote's: she does not try to make empathy do all of the work. And her appeal to exemplars enables her to capture features of common sense moral judgments that Slote's account is forced to rule out.

Zagzebski's approach to ethical theory has two main anchors: emotions and exemplars. The most significant point of origin for moral judgments can be found in our emotional responses to exemplars. We meet someone who treats another with kindness and we find ourselves liking them and wanting to be like them. We meet another person who treats someone cruelly and we dislike them and want not to resemble them. We have responses like these in early childhood, well before we acquire the concepts of goodness, right action, virtue, or vice. 'We do not have criteria for goodness in advance of identifying the exemplars of goodness' (2004: 41). Some of these exemplars will be widely recognised within a society or, perhaps, across societal boundaries. Many more will be known only by a local few. What both low-key and high-profile exemplars share is that we find ourselves admiring them. And that admiration, like all admiration, involves wanting to imitate them (2006: 60).

Moral concepts begin to take shape when we set positive exemplars alongside less positive cases. 'I surmise that the move from "I want to be like R and not like S" to "R is better than S" is not only genetically primitive, but also basic to moral thinking' (2004: 53).

It is out of comparative judgments like these that we begin to formulate our notions of better and worse ways of acting, feeling, and being.

In addition to admiration, we also experience other emotions that help orient us within normative space. A long-hoped-for event occurs and we experience joy. Someone treats us rudely and we are offended. We encounter something dangerous and we feel fear. We see a person in great need and are moved with pity. These emotions represent their objects in distinctive ways and give rise to what Zagzebski calls ‘thick affective concepts’ (2004: 62). Feeling pity involves seeing the object of that emotion as PITIFUL. Taking offense involves seeing something as RUDE. Feeling fear involves seeing a situation, object, or agent as FEARSOME. Feeling love involves seeing the beloved as LOVABLE.

Thick affective concepts have two distinctive qualities. First, one acquires the concept through having the relevant emotional experience. In this respect thick affective concepts are like colour concepts in Frank Jackson’s paper, ‘What Mary Didn’t Know’ (1986). Jackson invites us to imagine that Mary is a scientist who has been raised in a room in which she encounters only black and white objects. In that context, even if Mary were to study the science of colour and understand all there is to know about the physical processes whereby human beings come to experience colour, Jackson argues, she would not yet understand the concepts of red or green. She would not obtain an understanding of these concepts until she left the black and white room and encountered red or green objects firsthand. Zagzebski argues that the same is true for a number of emotion-related concepts that play a central role in our moral thinking. ‘A person who has not experienced the emotion accompanying the concept could not understand the concept, just as a person who has never had the sensation of red could not understand the concept of red’ (2004: 65). One may still be able to say true things about love, for example, based upon the testimony of others even if

one has not experienced it oneself. But one will not yet understand the concept LOVE until one has felt love.

A second distinguishing feature of thick affective concepts is that their primary use ‘continues to be in the experience of that emotion’ (2004: 64). When one sees a situation as dangerous, one feels fear. When one sees a person as lovable, one loves her. This is not to deny that one can use the concept even when one is not presently feeling the associated emotion. Perhaps on this occasion I am too depressed to feel fear or love. Nevertheless, I can still recognize *that* this bull has a number of attributes commonly associated with being fearsome or *that* that person has attributes associated with being lovable. However, recognizing *that* something is fearsome or lovable is different than seeing it *as* fearsome or lovable. The recognizing-that usage of thick affective concepts is secondary and remains dependent on their use in experiences of emotions like pity where we see the object as possessing the associated property of being pitiful.

Thick affective concepts are important, on Zagzebski’s account, because emotions and their associated thick affective concepts pick out values: ‘Emotion is a type of value perception that feels a characteristic way’ (2004: 69). Joy, for example, has a positive valence. Feeling joy involves valuing the object of that joy. Joy presents its object as good; or more specifically it presents it as joyous, which is a species of goodness. Grief, by contrast, has a negative valence. Feeling grief involves taking someone’s death to be a loss. Grief presents its object as grievous, which is a distinctive species of badness. It is not that we see by some other means that the object of our joy is good and then we respond with joy or that the object of our grief is bad and then we respond with grief. Rather, grieving is the way we perceive the badness of our loss and joy is the way we perceive the goodness of our gain.

While our admiration and other emotions play a crucial role in valuing, they are not always consistent. When our concepts start to mature and we begin to look for systematic connections between different emotional responses, we notice certain inconsistencies between admirings. What we once admired we no longer do, or vice versa. What we admire, someone else does not. Experiences of disharmony between what we are inclined to admire or love from one moment to the next are both inconvenient and unsettling. They can lead to disruptive inconsistencies in behaviour. Similarly, the differences between our responses and our neighbours' can generate coordination problems. So we attempt to recalibrate our responses and revise our conception of the admirable in order to achieve greater consistency (2014: 170).

In the process of seeking harmony between our responses, both interpersonally and intrapersonally, we may find it useful for our admiring, for example, to follow rules. We may correct our tendency to admire individuals for certain sorts of behaviours when those individuals or behaviours fail to accord with these rules. We also begin to think not only in terms of what is *actually* admired but also in terms of what is *fittingly* admired, that is, in terms of what is admirable. We begin to think of admiration as something that can be accurate or inaccurate (2004: 52, 76; 2006: 60). And we may formulate theoretical criteria for what does or does not count as admirable. The same goes for other emotional perceptions of value. If carried out at a suitable level of abstraction and on a large enough scale, this will be part of the map-making exercise of constructing and using a moral theory (2010).

While we may correct individual feelings of admiration in light of the criteria of admirability we have formulated, we may also correct our criteria in light of strong and persistent experiences of admiration or other emotions. This, too, is an important part of theoretical map-making. A simple map may be attractive and easy to read, but if it buys these benefits at the cost of leaving out important features of the terrain, then it may fail to

help us get where we are going. Emotional perceptions that persist under critical scrutiny even though they are at odds with currently accepted rules are one way that we realise we have left something important out of our theoretical map. Within Zagzebski's account, exemplars and emotions are not superseded by moral rules and theoretical criteria. The rules are always ultimately grounded in exemplars and emotions (2004: 41).

Our admiration of exemplars can take as its object individual actions, longstanding habits, skills they have developed, or other ways of thinking, acting, feeling, or being. It can extend to any of the qualities that distinguish them from others. Many, perhaps most, exemplars will be exemplary in some areas but not others (2004: 54). They may be good at analysing arguments, for example, but not at reading people. Or they may stand out for their decisiveness but not their empathy. Sometimes that causes problems, if we confuse accidental qualities of an exemplar with essential ones. Nevertheless, with time, we become reasonably adept at picking out which qualities are the ones we admire and which are not.

An important subset of the qualities that distinguish people who are exemplary as people (as opposed to merely exemplary as butchers, bakers, or candlestick makers) from the rest of us will be the emotions they feel and the relations that exist between those emotions and the contexts in which they find themselves. Zagzebski argues that 'the psychologically most basic difference between exemplars and ordinary persons is the kind of perception they have in emotion The emotions of exemplars are trustworthy, and what makes them trustworthy is that they fit their intentional objects' (2004: 58-59). The notion of 'fitting' emotions is analogous to that of true beliefs. 'An emotion is good or right or fitting just in case a state of affairs has the thick property that the agent sees it as having in the emotional state' (2004: 76). And what distinguishes exemplary people is that their emotions characteristically represent the world in reliable ways. Consequently, in the process of refining our moral maps, we should expect to make frequent reference to the emotions of

exemplars. If our emotions characteristically part ways with theirs, that will provide us with reasons to try to educate our emotions to bring them more closely into line with those of recognised exemplars.

The education of our emotions is possible because they are not merely isolated, one-off occurrences. 'Emotions easily become dispositions. Human beings develop patterns of emotional response in similar situations' (2004: 71). I do not merely become sad on this one occasion at the news that the latest government budget prioritizes military over educational spending. I have encountered news like this before and have responded in similar ways. 'These circumstance/emotion pairs become part of the person's character. They express the way she emotionally fits into the world around her' (2004: 71). Just as these ways of fitting into the world take time to develop, so also they usually take time to change. Altering most emotional dispositions will be a lengthy and effortful process.

To this point I have emphasized the epistemic role Zagzebski assigns emotions. They are our way of perceiving response-dependent properties like the awesome, the adorable, the charming, the contemptible, and the shameful. However, their importance for morality is not merely epistemic. It is also motivational. Emotions combine a perception of a situation as having a certain value with an inclination to act in accordance with that appraisal (2004: 72). Fear's perception of a situation as fearsome is paired with an inclination to run. When we act upon that inclination, then we say that fear is our motive for acting as we did. And when we develop a tendency to act on a certain emotion in certain kinds of circumstances, we have what Zagzebski calls a 'motive-disposition': 'The disposition to be motivated to act in a characteristic way in response to an emotion is a motive disposition' (2004: 121).

Motive-dispositions are the building blocks for virtues and vices. Vices will be built out of bad motive-dispositions and virtues out of good ones. 'A virtue is a deep and enduring acquired excellence of the human person that has two components: (1) a motive disposition,

and (2) reliable success in bringing about the end (if any) of the motive' (2004: 121-122).

This way of putting things may invite one to think that it is the goodness of a motive's end that is prior to and determines the goodness of the motive and, by extension, the goodness of virtue. However, Zagzebski argues, the priority relation is the reverse: 'The goodness of the virtuous end is derivative from the goodness of the motive, not the other way around' (1998: 542). Good motives are the motives of exemplars and good ends are the ends at which exemplars aim.

From this foundation in exemplars and their motives, Zagzebski builds up an account of 'thinner' moral concepts like that of *good and bad states of affairs*: 'Roughly, a good state of affairs is one that is the end of a good motive. A bad state of affairs is one that is the end of a bad motive' (1998: 542-543). Her account of obligations and right and wrong acts is similarly grounded in thick moral concepts and the actions, motives, and character traits of exemplars: 'An *obligation* (duty) is a requirement of virtue (the virtuous self). It is appropriate to feel guilty for not doing it. A *right* (permissible) act is an act that is not contrary to virtue It is not appropriate to feel guilty for doing it. A *wrong* act is an act that is contrary to virtue The appropriate response to doing it is the emotion of guilt' (2004: 159-160). And, not surprisingly, the same is true of her account of a virtuous act and of an act which is good in every respect: 'A *virtuous* act is an act that expresses a virtue, that is to say, it is virtuously motivated and is an act that expresses the virtuous motivation.... An act is *good in every respect* when it is a virtuous (phronetic) act and is successful in bringing about the end of the virtuous motive because it is a virtuous (phronetic) act' (2004: 160).

Like Slote's theory, Zagzebski's is an agent-based version of virtue ethics. Or, to use her preferred terms, it is an exemplarist, motivation-based account. However, her account avoids one of the problems that has plagued Slote's agent-based account. We commonly think there is a difference between doing the right thing and doing the right thing for the right

reason or from the right motive. Slote's account is unable to draw this distinction (Brady 2004). On his account, what in fact motivates each act fully colours our assessment of that act. Zagzebski's definition of a right act, by contrast, is built around what a virtuous agent might do (2004: 179). This enables her to distinguish between the question of whether this is the type of action an exemplar might perform and the question of whether this token action expresses an exemplary motive-disposition.

A second strength of Zagzebski's theory lies in the way it accounts for moral disagreement. One of the features of moral life that a theory must accommodate is the fact that thoughtful, well-meaning people can disagree deeply about moral issues. Although there is considerable overlap between our moral judgments and our neighbours', there remain a number of points on which we differ – sometimes quite heatedly. It is an advantage if a theory can help us explain this fact. Zagzebski's does. There are two natural points at which the seeds of disagreement might be sown on Zagzebski's account. The first is in the interpretation of our responses to exemplars. We will each have cut our teeth with different exemplars who have different constellations of motive dispositions. Even when two people admire the same exemplar, their attempts to articulate what it is about that exemplar that they admire may lead them in different directions. So it is to be expected that, in spite of considerable overlap between the responses of thoughtful, well-meaning persons, both individuals and the communities of which they are a part may attend to or prioritise different features of the same situation. A second place in which no-fault disagreement might be introduced is in the process of seeking consistency between our past and present responses, or between our responses and our neighbours', or between our responses and the general rules. When it comes to making fine-grained distinctions between two attempts at formulating a rule, or deciding when an emotional response to a particular case warrants overriding a rule, or deciding which of two partially overlapping rules takes precedence in a given situation,

there are a number of opportunities for thoughtful people to go in slightly different directions. Hence, Zagzebski's story about the origins of our moral judgments both anticipates the possibility of moral disagreement and provides a resource for explaining how thoughtful well-meaning agents might have reached different conclusions.

III. Swanton's Target Centered Virtue Ethics

The third alternative to neo-Aristotelian approaches to virtue ethics we shall consider is Christine Swanton's target-centered view. Swanton has spent a number of years reminding ethicists that Aristotle's is not the only model for developing a virtue ethical theory. She has highlighted the resources that Hume, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, among others, offer (1997, 1998, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2013b, 2015). And she has outlined a number of alternative frameworks virtue ethicists might employ.

According to Swanton, 'a virtue is a disposition to respond well to the "demands of the world"' (2003: 21). There are various ways to make sense of the world's demands and Swanton sets up her target-centred view with an eye to accommodating a number of possible accounts of the world's demandingness. However, like Slote (2010) and Zagzebski (2004) her preferred view employs a sentimentalist framework built around response-dependent properties. As Swanton puts it, objects, persons, actions, or situations have 'a power ... to elicit relevant responses, notably emotional ones' from suitably constituted agents (2015: 47). Agents who respond reliably to these powers will experience emotions that 'fit' the object, person, action, or situation. They will, for example, suffer when they see another in pain, feel pride at a personal achievement, and love someone who helps those in need. Like Slote, Zagzebski, and numerous others, Swanton proposes that a readiness to feel fitting emotions is an important constituent of the virtues (2013a: 331).

Although there is considerable overlap, there are also a number of features that distinguish Swanton's view from the two we have already considered. The most important difference is to be found in the role played by what Swanton calls the complex profiles of the virtues. To understand a virtue, we must understand (1) its *field*, (2) its *mode* of responsiveness, (3) its *basis* of moral acknowledgment, and (4) its *target*. The *field* of a virtue is the area with which it is concerned. For example, temperance is concerned with bodily pleasures and objects of desire, courage with what might cause us harm, patience with obstacles to our pursuits, and meekness with anger and what might provoke it. The *basis* of acknowledgment is the kind of feature a virtue responds to within its field. Love is responsive to relational bonds, respect attends to status, and generosity is oriented toward benefits (2003: 24). How one responds to the bases of acknowledgment within the field of the virtue is what Swanton calls the *mode* of responsiveness. One might promote a worthwhile cause, honour a rule, appreciate beauty, respect an elder, nurture love, express creativity, defend justice, be open to countervailing arguments, welcome guests, etc. (2003: 21-22). The important thing to note is that different fields and bases call for different modes of responsiveness. Unlike some theories in which there is one basis of acknowledgment (for example, value) and one mode of responsiveness (such as promoting), Swanton is a pluralist both about what the virtues respond to and the ways in which one might respond well.

The first three components – the field, basis, and mode – provide us with what we need to define a virtue more precisely than we have heretofore. On Swanton's account, a *virtue* is 'a disposition of acknowledging or responding to items in the field of a virtue in an excellent (or good enough) way' (2003: 233). One could, of course, embed such an account of virtue into a eudaimonist or qualified agent framework. The uniquely qualified agent, such as the virtuous person, might be wheeled in to determine what counts as a good enough way. Or one might appeal to eudaimonia to identify the fields of the virtues. However, Swanton

contends, one need not appeal to either the uniquely qualified agent or eudaimonia. An account of response-dependent properties and the capacities of ordinary human agents is sufficient to enable us to identify the fields, bases, modes, and thresholds of virtue.

The fourth major component of Swanton's target-centered view is the one from which the view gets its name, namely, the targets of the virtues. Virtuous agents not only notice what is worth noticing and care about what is worth caring about, they are also prompted to do things as a result of this caring attention. The world demands more than just noting and emoting. It also demands action. This is where targets come into the account. The target of a virtue is that at which it is aimed. This will vary from one virtue to the next. Temperance is aimed at controlling desire, courage at controlling fear and handling danger. Generosity aims at sharing goods with others in ways that benefit them, toleration at respecting those who are taken to be different than oneself. Determination aims at 'trying hard in a sustained way,' and modesty at not drawing attention to oneself (2003: 234-8).

Introducing the targets of the virtues puts us in a position to see how Swanton's view differs from Slote's. According to the target-centered view, it is possible for an agent to have a virtue (i.e., a disposition to respond well to items within the field of the virtue) and act from that virtue but still miss the virtue's target. For example, a businesswoman in a first-world country might wish to benefit students in a third-world context by donating a number of surplus computers from her business to their school. But she might fail to recognise that electricity to the school is both unreliable and expensive. A less expensive gift of desks and chalkboards would be of greater benefit. So it would be more advantageous for the school if the benefactor sold the surplus computers at a marked discount and used the proceeds to purchase desks and chalkboards. In such a case, if the businesswoman chose to donate the computers, she would still be acting from generosity, but her action would fail to hit the target of generosity. In Swanton's terms, it would count as *an action from virtue*, but it

would not count as *a virtuous act*, since the latter succeeds in hitting the target of the virtue (2003: 233).

Alternatively, an agent might hit the target of a virtue even though he was not acting from that virtue.² A furniture wholesaler who needs to make space in his warehouse for a new shipment of chairs and desks might choose to get rid of some of his old stock. But rather than sending the old stock to a landfill, he might donate it to a third-world school, because he could then claim it as a charitable donation on his taxes. Although the wholesaler is not acting from a generous disposition, his action still hits the target of generosity, insofar as it shares goods with others in ways that benefit them.

By defining the targets of (some of) the virtues independently of the qualities of the agents who might hit those targets, and by defining a virtuous action in respect to generosity as one which hits the target of generosity, Swanton introduces the possibility of a gap between the excellent qualities of agents and the ethical qualities of actions. As a result, the theory Swanton develops is not an agent-based form of virtue ethics. The virtues are still ‘central in the sense that conceptions of rightness, conceptions of the good life, conceptions of “the moral point of view” and the appropriate demandingness of morality, cannot be understood without a conception of relevant virtues’ (2003: 5). Nevertheless, she does not try to derive all other major normative concepts from the traits or motives of virtuous agents.³

Finally, Swanton defines right and wrong actions by reference to virtuous (and vicious) actions. In order to do so, she first introduces the idea of ‘overall virtuousness’. This idea is needed because 1) virtues X and Y might respond to different bases within their

² Swanton calls this a ‘virtuous act’, whereas Zabzebski uses ‘virtuous act’ to pick out what Swanton calls ‘acting from virtue’.

³ In this respect, Swanton’s account resembles an earlier incarnation of Slote’s view in which he left room for other factors to play a role in an agent-based account. In particular, he allowed for the possibility that well-being might be defined independently of claims about virtue or rightness and that ‘aretaic evaluations of the inner life and claims about what constitutes human well-being [might] *both* count as fundamental and occupy the ground floor of ethics *together*’ (1997, emphasis original). But he quickly sets this possibility aside and it is not mentioned in subsequent developments of his view.

respective fields, 2) the fields of virtues X and Y might overlap, and 3) it might not be possible to exemplify both X and Y in a particular situation. For instance, the field of generosity can overlap with the field of prudence, insofar as both virtues are concerned with the distribution of benefits, and they both might make demands on precisely the same limited resources. The possibility of conflicts like this means that one cannot simply move from ‘Action A is virtuous with respect to generosity’ to ‘A is a (or the) right action.’ To deal with this possibility, Swanton appeals to the standard of ‘overall virtuousness’. According to her preferred account, an act is *overall virtuous* if and only if ‘it is the, or a, best action possible in the circumstances’ and ‘an act is *right* if and only if it is overall virtuous.’ An action is *wrong* if it is ‘overall vicious.’ And between these two poles are a range of actions which are ‘all right,’ which is to say they are ‘good enough even if not the (or a) best action’ (2003: 239-240).

IV. Adams’s Neo-Platonic Virtue Ethics

Both Slote and Zagzebski develop theories in which the other major normative concepts, like goodness, badness, rightness, wrongness, justice, well-being, and rationality, are defined in terms of virtue. To revert to Slote’s terminology, they offer agent-prior theories. Even Swanton, who does not offer an agent-prior theory, still defines right action in by reference to virtue. However, a number of theorists who are interested in virtue have resisted the attempt to make it the primary concept from which goodness, rightness, justice, and rationality are derived. Of course, one way to do this would be to reverse the order of explanation. Rather than defining goodness in terms of virtue, one might define a virtue as a trait that ‘generally produces good’ (Driver 2001: 67). Or, instead of explaining rightness in terms of virtue, one might define a virtuous person as one who reliably performs right

actions. Those who attempted to reverse the order of explanation in either of these ways might still be engaged in the project of developing a virtue theory, insofar as they were attempting to carve out an important role for virtue within their normative theory. But they would not be offering a form of virtue ethics, insofar as virtue, within their theory, would be entirely reducible to some other normative quality or concept.

However, these two options – reducing goodness or rightness to a function of virtue or vice versa – do not exhaust the range of possibilities. An important set of alternatives comes into view for those who resist the temptation to reduce all normative concepts to a single currency. One of the key surveyors of this intermediate logical space has been Robert Merrihew Adams. Of course, those who work within this logical space owe us a story about how apparently distinct normative concepts are related to one another. Adams, as we shall see, does a nice job of developing such a story.⁴

The starting point for Adams's story is goodness, in particular the sort of goodness he calls 'excellence'. The excellent is that which 'is worthy of love or admiration' (1999: 13-14). Already one can see how this way of characterizing excellence might make room for virtue. Individual virtues like generosity or patience taken on their own, the life of virtue taken as a whole, and particular exemplary agents might each be worthy of love or admiration. As such, virtuous persons, virtuous lives, and individual virtues would come into the ground floor of the theory, insofar as they are members of the excellence-set upon which the rest of the theory is built.

Adams's most succinct and best known definition of moral virtue is 'persisting excellence in being for the good' (2006: 14). However, this definition does not adequately convey his considered view. There are two ways in which this formulation is misleading. First, for those unacquainted with his earlier work, it makes it sound as though virtue

⁴ This sections draws upon Pettigrove (2014).

comes into the account at a different level than other sorts of goods: Other goods have primacy, and virtue has a secondary or subordinate kind of goodness, which it derives from its relationship to these more fundamental goods (that is, from being for them). However, interpreting it in this way would misrepresent the role of virtue in the metaethics Adams develops in *Finite and Infinite Goods*, which still underpins his more recent work (2006: 6). To explain that role, we shall need to say more about how Adams defines goodness.

Adams offers a neo-Platonic, or perhaps more accurately a neo-Augustinian, account of goodness. The quality that he suggests makes something excellent is that it resembles God: 'being excellent in the way that a finite thing can be consists in resembling God in a way that could serve God as a reason for loving the thing' (1999: 36). Thus God serves as the transcendent Good around which the realm of value is organized. Furthermore, he observes,

most of the excellences that are most important to us, and of whose value we are most confident, are excellences of persons or of qualities or actions or works or lives or stories of persons. So if excellence consists in resembling or imaging a being that is the Good itself, nothing is more important to the role of the Good itself than that persons and their properties should be able to resemble or image it (1999: 42).

Adams develops his account of goodness in terms of what God is *like* and what is like God. The God in question is a specifically Christian God, many of whose defining attributes are virtues like love, justice, wisdom, and faithfulness. Consequently, the goodness of virtues is to be explained in the same way as the goodness of other things, namely, in terms of resembling God (1999: 14).

The second way in which Adams's more recent definition of virtue is misleading also stems from the notion of 'being for the good.' Although 'being for the Good' or 'alliance with the Good' is one way of being excellent, it does not exhaust the possible forms of excellence. If excellence is defined in terms of what God is *like*, rather than what God is *for*, we should also consider ways of being excellent that are not readily characterized in terms of

being *for* the good. Creativity is one such excellence. This is not to say that creativity never involves being for the good. Sometimes the creative endeavor involves a vision of goodness that the creator labours to bring into existence. But often creativity involves the creator giving expression to her own way of being. Part of what we appreciate in great literature, for example, are qualities of the novelist's way of seeing the world that are expressed in how she tells the story. We not only appreciate the characters she has created or the yarn she has spun, we also love the author's distinctive voice that can be heard in these, and so many other, features of the novel. Within the Christian tradition, creativity is one of the defining qualities of God. It is not a peripheral attribute, in the way that an academic's tennis skills might be peripheral to his identity as a researcher and teacher. The Christian God's characteristic way of being is a creative one. And Adams argues that the goodness of God's creative activities is not (or not wholly) determined either by the qualities of the objects God brings into existence or by God's purposes in creating (1972, 1999).

This point about the excellence of creativity not being fully captured by the idea of 'excellence in being for the good' connects up with a recurring theme in Adams's work. He has repeatedly argued that moral evaluation should be concerned not only with that *for* which we act (whether in the sense of the outcome *to which* our actions are directed or in the sense of that *in favour of* which we act) but also with that *from* which we act (1976, 1984, 1985). Motives matter and the goodness of motives cannot always be captured by appealing to the goodness of other things (including the goodness of what we are for).

A less misleading way to represent Adams's understanding of virtue is as persisting excellence of character that 'could serve God as a reason for loving' the person who has it (1999: 36). Or, if we wished to render it useful to those who are not theists, we might define virtue as persisting excellence of character that could serve the good (i.e., those who are good) as a reason for loving the person who has it. Virtue, so defined, is 'a holistic property

of persons' (2006: 11). Individual virtues like benevolence and faithfulness will be excellent traits that together constitute virtue. Whether this definition is circular or not will depend upon whether one requires an account of virtue to identify either a) those who are good or b) the reasons of those who are good. Our discussion of Zagzebski's exemplarist theory shows us one way in which an account like this might avoid circularity.

To this point we have been exploring the relationship between goodness and virtue in Adams's theory. How does rightness or obligation come into the account? Obligations, Adams argues, are explained in terms of relationships. They pertain to the conditions that preserve harmony within or place 'a strain on one's relations with others' (1999: 239). In particular, a moral obligation is constituted by the expectations and demands that 'arise in a relationship or system of relationships that is good or valuable' (1999: 244). This way of putting things makes it clear that within Adams's account, the good is prior to the right. He underscores this priority relation in his discussion of the relative strength of moral obligations, which vary on the basis both of the content of the demand or expectation (how good it is) and on the basis of the character of the person who makes the demand or has the expectation (how virtuous they are): 'Where what people ask is not for their own well-being ... I think we normally have more reason to comply with the requests and demands of the knowledgeable, wise, or saintly' (1999: 245).

Thus, within Adams's account the logic of obligation is dependent upon the logic of goodness and virtue. Even so, the former remains distinct from the latter. For moral obligations to arise, one needs at least moderately good relationships. But those relationships bring with them a distinct set of constraints and success conditions that, while not independent of goodness and virtue, are not reducible to them either. Consequently, Adams offers an instructive model for developing an ethical theory in which rightness is governed by virtue but not wholly determined by it. Within this model some of what we should do will be

directly determined by considerations of virtue: Be patient and gracious, do the kind thing, the honest thing, etc. Other things we should do will be shaped indirectly by considerations of virtue but will be directly determined by the expectations of the relationships in which we stand.

Some of the relationships in which we stand will be structured by social roles or affiliations and the demands and expectations associated with them. Being a member of a religious or professional community often means that other people expect you to act in recognisable ways in certain kinds of situations. A medical doctor who is on a plane is expected to attend to the passenger in row three who begins to feel chest pains and is having trouble breathing. Similarly, a Quaker at a political summit is expected to advocate non-violent ways of resolving an international dispute. Many of these expectations will not just be directed toward a person from those around her, they will also be owned by the person herself. She will be motivated to act in accordance with the demands and expectations associated with her role. Furthermore, occupying a role or maintaining an affiliation for a long period of time can give rise to persisting dispositions to act in role-sustaining ways. If the role is a good one and the agent's identification with her role is well-motivated then, Adams argues, an enduring disposition to act in certain ways or care about certain things 'may reasonably be regarded as a virtue or a module of virtue' (2006: 142). Consequently, within Adams's theory, some of our virtues may arise out of some of our obligations.

Adams's theoretical framework provides a number of resources for developing a theory in which virtue has a kind of 'explanatory primacy'. As we have noted, he does not derive rightness or goodness from virtue. Nor does he make virtue serve or promote goodness or rightness. Adams builds virtue into the ground floor of the theory. Virtue is a type of goodness – the most important type – and plays an essential role in determining what we should do, what we should be, and why. Thus, he provides an example of how a virtue

ethic might be developed in which virtue has a certain kind of primacy even though it may not be alone in possessing this quality.

Conclusion

Although most advocates of virtue ethics in recent years have worked within a Neo-Aristotelian framework, there are a number of attractive alternatives for those wishing to develop a virtue ethical approach. Slote and Zagzebski illustrate two different ways in which one might develop an agent-based account. Swanton offers a target-centered view, built around the profiles of the virtues, each of which has its own characteristic field, basis, mode, and target. Finally, Adams indicates how one might develop a theory in which virtue plays a fundamental role, but in which other normative properties, such as goodness, might also play a fundamental role and where yet other properties, like obligation, might play a subordinate role that is dependent upon but not reducible to more fundamental properties. These theories highlight an exciting range of possibilities for future virtue ethicists to explore.

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