

Why Virtue Ethics?

Action and motivation in virtue ethics

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Abstract Contemporary virtue ethics, an agent-centred ethical theory, has been presented as a response to inadequacies in more traditional act-centred theories. In this paper, I argue that such a response is insufficient: contemporary virtue ethics fails to avoid the inadequacies that it purports to avoid, and brings with it problems of its own. This paper is divided into 5 sections, in the first of which I introduce contemporary virtue ethics as an agent-centred and pluralistic ethical theory. In section 2, I present inadequacies that virtue ethics claims to avoid: being too reductive, too algorithmic, too abstract, self-effacing, and self-other asymmetric. In section 3, I consider and analyse virtue ethics' account of right action and of motives in order to argue in section 4 that, if these inadequacies are indeed problems affecting traditional ethical theories, virtue ethics does not avoid these problems either—particularly because of its basis in the concept of virtues and its heavy reliance on *phronesis*. I show that another ethical theory, limited moral pluralism, has the same advantages of not being overly reductive, algorithmic, or abstract, and being self-other symmetric, and that virtue ethics does not avoid self-effacement as it claims to. I also question here whether self-effacement and self-other asymmetry should be considered problems when evaluating moral theories. Finally, I suggest in section 5 that virtue ethics is open to further criticisms of indeterminacy and lack of explanatory power.

1 Introduction

Contemporary virtue ethics has been presented as a response to inadequacies in more traditional theories. Virtue ethics claims that an action *A*, performed in certain circumstances, is *obligatory* if and only if *A* is an action that a virtuous person, acting in

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character, would not fail to perform in the circumstances in question (Timmons 2013, 280). Likewise, a wrong action is one the virtuous person would not do, and an optional action is one the virtuous person might do. Virtue ethics thus defines right action in terms of character, so it is agent-centred rather than act-centred. It is also a pluralistic moral theory rather than a monistic one: it posits more than one factor of intrinsic moral relevance that explains the rightness or wrongness of an action, where these factors are irreducible to any underlying principle.

In this paper, I argue that virtue ethics fails to avoid the inadequacies of traditional act-centred ethical theories, and brings with it problems of its own. To do so, I first present the main problems afflicting traditional act-centred ethical theories, which virtue ethicists claim their agent-centred approach avoids: being too reductive, algorithmic, and abstract; self-effacement; and self-other asymmetry (section 2). Having considered in further detail virtue ethics' account of right action and of motives (section 3), I argue that virtue ethics is *not* more promising than traditional theories. First, it cannot claim advantages over all other theories (section 4). Limited moral pluralism is also not too reductive, algorithmic, or abstract, and can be self-other symmetric, while virtue ethics is also subject to the same problem of self-effacement. Moreover, self-other asymmetry, and possibly self-effacement, do not have to be problematic for ethical theories. Second, virtue ethics is open to the additional criticisms of its indeterminacy and lack of explanatory power because of its basis in the concept of virtues and its heavy reliance on *phronesis* (section 5).

2 Problems with traditional act-centred ethical theories: motivating virtue ethics

The first reason why someone might turn away from contemporary non-virtue-based ethical theories is dissatisfaction with the attempt to make moral judgments by applying abstract principles to particular concrete cases (289–90). Hursthouse (1999) refers to this project as codifiability, and says that many ethicists have since dismissed the idea that ethics can be '*as* codifiable as used to be commonly supposed' because of the 'gap between the abstract principles and the complex particularity of concrete moral situations' (39–41). First, as a pluralistic theory, virtue ethics avoids the criticism of being too reductive to account for our complex moral lives, and thus seems to have an advantage over certain forms of consequentialism (Timmons 2013, 290). It also seems to have advantages over most deontological theories (excluding Rossian limited moral pluralism), as it avoids being too algorithmic, instead giving an essential role to moral judgment (moral wisdom, *phronesis*) (Hursthouse 1999; Timmons 2013). Finally, despite appealing to abstract principles making reference to what an ideal virtuous agent would do, it makes its principles more concrete by specifying particular virtues and is therefore not as abstract as many ethical theories (again, with the exception of lim-

ited moral pluralism) (Timmons 2013, 290–91). Virtue ethicists are also opposed to the usual focus on deontic categories of actions, believing that these are the wrong terms and objects of evaluation to be emphasising in moral theory. For instance, Stocker (1976) argues that, by focusing on abstract principles such as duty, obligation, and rightness, contemporary ethical theories limit their scope to ‘a dry and minimal part’ of ethics, and so fail as ethical theories by ignoring the inner realm of motives and how these relate to values (455). Virtue ethics concentrates on that inner realm, using people (their character traits and dispositions) as objects of assessment. In so doing, it uses aretaic terms (virtue- or vice-based terms) as the terms of assessment, rather than deontic ones. Virtue ethics is thus able to be less abstract and algorithmic than most other pluralist theories.

Traditional moral theories can also be criticised for being externality-ridden, as they do not examine our inner lives as virtue ethics does. Stocker claims that, since traditional theories are ‘externality-ridden’, they do not recognise ‘people-as-valuable’ (460). For Stocker, ethical theories that do not incorporate our motives are undesirable, because a person who adopts their values and principles as her own will either lack important phenomena in her life such as genuine love and friendship, or will suffer from ‘moral schizophrenia’ (455). On the one hand, if a person adopts the values of a traditional contemporary ethical theory as her own values and is motivated by these values (so that there is harmony between her values and motives), her motives will preclude genuine relationships like love and friendship (455). This is because Stocker thinks that in such relationships, the other person must be valued or loved for her own sake, as an end in herself (456–61). If love is motivated by values such as rightness, duty, or obligation, or even by love itself or happiness derived from love, then the beloved is ultimately loved for the sake of values, which precludes genuine love (456–57, 461). On the other hand, if a person adopts the values of a traditional ethical theory as her own values and is *not* motivated by them, then she suffers from moral schizophrenia: a lack of harmony in her moral life that comes from not being moved by what she values, and not actually valuing the values by which she is moved (453–54). Therefore, according to Stocker’s argument, traditional moral theories either preclude harmony between values and motives or preclude genuine relationships, both of which are necessary for a good life (455). Keller (2007) calls this problem self-effacement: a self-effacing theory is one that seems to require that what makes actions right (the values) is not what agents should be motivated by (the motives) (221). Virtue ethics seems to avoid this dilemma, because it explains right action ‘in terms of the virtues, and hence of motives’, so a virtue ethicist’s values should be in harmony with her motives (224).

Another principal problem of traditional moral theories for Slote (Slote 1997) is their self-other asymmetry, which also stems from their mistaken focus on deontic evaluations of actions rather than on our inner lives (175). Judgments we make about the deontic or specifically moral category of actions change depending on whether we are referring to others or to ourselves (for instance, saying that it is obligatory to benefit

others but not to benefit ourselves, or that it is morally better to benefit others than to benefit ourselves). Slote, however, points out that this self-other asymmetry is inconsistent with the partiality of our common sense morality as well as many deontological theories, because they judge that we have more obligations towards close ones than towards strangers (1997, 181–82, 185–86). Furthermore, self-other asymmetry is problematic for Slote as it devalues and degrades moral agents, treating the agent's 'pursuit of her own well-being as lacking the [...] positive moral value one assigns to her pursuit of others' happiness' (185–87). Consequentialism avoids this problem because it is impartial, but this impartiality makes it unfairly demanding and leads to an agent's interests being overwhelmed by those of others, similarly degrading or devaluing the moral agent (188–90). Slote suggests that a virtue-based ethical theory can remedy this problem, since it will not be based on fundamental deontic or specifically moral concepts, but on aretaic concepts instead (181, 186–88). In particular, he proposes a common-sense virtue ethics based on ordinary thinking about what is admirable and counts as a virtue, which would, for example, allow for finding self-benefiting traits to be admirable but not morally so (186–88).

These criticisms of traditional ethical theories motivate virtue ethics, which is presumed not to be open to them – and if these are indeed problems for the other theories that virtue ethics can avoid, then it has significant points in its favour.

3 Virtue ethics as an alternative to traditional theories: right action and motivation

Virtue ethics characterises right and wrong action in terms of facts about a virtuous agent: the right act is what the virtuous agent would do. In its account of right action, then, virtue ethics appeals to the hypothetical choices of an ideal agent who possesses the virtues (relatively fixed character traits or dispositions, deemed aretaically good or admirable) and does not possess the vices (Timmons 2013, 270–71, 279–80). Virtue ethics thus relies fundamentally on aretaic concepts and defines rightness only in relation to them, if deontic concepts are used at all (Oakley 1996; Timmons 2013). The basis for saying that an act is morally good or right is the aretaic classification of a character trait as a virtue, so facts about virtues and virtuous agents are more basic than facts about right action (Timmons 2013, 278). For instance, if a virtuous agent would perform an act (in the circumstances), that means that it is aretaically good, which implies that choosing that act would be a morally good decision and its performance would be right. Deontic concepts are therefore fundamental neither to action assessment nor to action guidance, since they are derived from aretaic evaluations (Slote 1997, 2000).

Another key feature of virtue-ethical theories is that they must give an account of the virtuous agent to whom it appeals, by specifying the virtues and explaining how

the virtues are determined—that is, by giving content to its theory of value (or theory of the good) (Timmons 2013, 279–80). There are two general approaches for doing so. One is an Aristotelian approach wherein virtues are grounded in an intrinsically good, fundamental concept such as *eudaimonia*, so that virtues are determined by which traits further and constitute a concept like flourishing. The other is a non-Aristotelian approach that takes virtues to be themselves intrinsically valuable, such as Slote’s common-sense virtue ethics, which derives virtues from common-sense views about which traits are admirable (Oakley 1996; Timmons 2013).

Virtue-ethical theories can also vary on what their account of right action says about an agent’s inner life—her motives, traits, and dispositions. The virtue-ethical criterion of right action can be articulated as follows: an act *A* is right iff it is the act that a virtuous agent *V*, acting characteristically, would perform under the given circumstances *C*. This criterion can be interpreted in multiple ways. *Action-centric* accounts claim that a person who performs *A* (in *C*) performs the right action if *A* is what *V* would have done, regardless of her own motives and dispositions at the time (Oakley 1996, 135–36). Here, all the emphasis is placed on the act: a person performing *A* with disharmony between her motives and values would still be doing the right act. *Action-and motive-centric* accounts strengthen this criterion by claiming that a person who performs *A* (in *C*) performs the right action iff *A* is what *V* would have done and she has the same virtuous motives and dispositions as *V* would have in performing the action. Oakley argues that virtue ethics must be understood in this more demanding way: ‘acting out of the appropriate motives and dispositions is *necessary* for right action’ (136). Acting out of virtuous motives is not however *sufficient* for the *action-and motive-centric* account, because it ‘allows for the possibility that an action done out of good motives ... may fail to reach the appropriate standard of excellence which one is normatively disposed to uphold’ (138). Here, the nature of the act performed still matters for right action. Such is not the case for *motive-centric accounts*, which claim that a person who performs *A* (in *C*) performs the right action iff she has the same virtuous motives and dispositions that *V* does in performing *A*. Acting out of the appropriate motives is here *sufficient* for right action; the act itself is not considered, only the motive behind it. Motive-centric accounts are often used in agent-based theories, where moral judgments of acts come *only* from evaluations of traits and motives (Slote 1997, 209). No matter how virtue ethics qualifies its account of right action, the virtuous agent is presented as an ideal to be emulated, intending that we ‘seek to *be* virtuous agents’ (Keller 2007, 224).

4 Virtue ethics versus more traditional theories: is it really preferable?

One of the apparent advantages of virtue ethics discussed earlier was that it seemed to avoid the problem of self-effacement. Keller (2007) argues that virtue ethics is actually

subject to this criticism as well. According to Keller, since the right act is that which a virtuous agent would do under the given circumstances, in doing that act one would be motivated by a thought like 'a fully virtuous person would [do this] ... And I want to do what the virtuous person would do' (Keller 2007, 226). For example, say that in aiming to be morally good, I perform an act that expresses the virtue of generosity (as it is what the virtuous agent, being generous, would do). My motivation to perform this act lies in the fact that it is what a virtuous agent would do, meaning I am not being moved by my own generosity (which would look something like, 'this person needs help, and this act would help them').

Such a criticism, however, applies only to virtue ethics as understood by the action-centric account (228). On the *action-and motive-centric* account of right action, virtue ethics is not self-effacing, as what it values (what rightness is based on) *does* include the person's motives: in acting how the virtuous agent would act, and so performing the act that expresses virtue, a person is motivated by the virtuous agent's motives (the virtues) (228). By an *action-and motive-centric* account, when someone is motivated from the X reasons by which the virtuous person would be motivated, then she is 'motivated as the [virtuous] person would be motivated' without being required 'to have any explicit thoughts of the virtue itself, or of the fully virtuous person' (228).¹ A virtuous person, possessing the virtue of generosity, need not think about what a virtuous agent would do in her circumstances; they would simply act out of generosity, thinking something like 'this person needs help, and this act would help them'. As Oakley says, possessing a virtue 'requires internalising a certain normative standard of excellence ... a virtuous agent will have certain ... normative dispositions, which need not always be consciously formulated or applied, but which will govern and shape their motivations and actions' (1996, 137). As such, the *action-and motive-centric* account of right action can avoid self-effacement. But this approach is also available to non-virtue ethical theories. For instance, a consequentialist theory could adopt a similar account of right action that includes motives: it could say that a person who performs a generous action, and thereby produces the best consequences, acts rightly if they are motivated by generosity, by their desire to help someone, which produces the best consequences (Keller 2007, 230). Since such a strategy for avoiding disharmony between actions and motives is available to any ethical theory, virtue ethics has no advantage over theories in this respect.

Another response to the objection of self-effacement that virtue ethicists could appeal to would be to argue that self-effacement is not a problem ethical theories need

1. What I am referring to as an *action-centric* account here corresponds with a *de dicto* reading of virtue ethics, while what I am referring to as an *action-and-motive-centric* account corresponds with a *de re* reading (Keller 2007, 228). Drawing on Bernard Williams for this distinction, Keller explains that reading 'what the virtuous person would do' *de re* means that we understand the virtuous person's actions to include their motives, i.e., the virtuous dispositions that motivate their actions (whereas a *de dicto* reading would allow for the same action to be right when it is not motivated by these virtuous dispositions) (228).

to avoid. One appealing feature of virtue ethics is the Aristotelian idea that ‘one who is learning to be virtuous may find it useful to have the explicit motive of emulating the virtuous person’ (227). If someone’s values are not in complete harmony with her motives, because she is a virtue ethicist motivated by the idea that ‘such an act is what a virtuous agent would do’, we do not need to see this as a problem for the theory—such people are working towards true virtue and moral harmony, and indeed the theory will not be self-effacing for virtuous people (227). The *action-centric* account of right action thus seems preferable: it allows an action which the virtuous agent would do, but performed out of motives the virtuous agent would not have, to be right—as it is the *same action* the virtuous agent would do. Nevertheless, virtue-ethical theories employing this account can still articulate through aretaic evaluation a difference between the inner states of the non-virtuous agent and the hypothetical virtuous one, as any account of right action is only derivative from the main focus of the virtue-ethical theory, the aretaic assessment of character. This approach also allows a vicious person to do the right action out of deplorable motives, rather than not distinguishing between the badness of the motives and the goodness of the action (it can recognise that such a case is different, as to outcomes but not as to virtues or vices involved, from when a vicious person does the *wrong* action out of deplorable motives).

One consequence of this kind of response, however, is that if self-effacement is not a problem for virtue ethics, then it is not a problem for other ethical theories either. Proponents of these theories can also say that being moved by thoughts such as ‘this act will produce the best consequences’ or ‘this act will respect others as ends in themselves’ is an acceptable way for people to think about their motivations, while learning how to fully and harmoniously embody what they value. This all shows that virtue ethics does not have the advantage of not being self-effacing while other theories are, and if in fact self-effacement is not a problem for virtue ethics, then it need not be a problem for other theories.

One main objection to virtue ethics is that it is indeterminate; that is, because it does not provide an algorithm for moral decision-making (which above was given as an advantage), it cannot ‘yield real guidance’ (Timmons 2013, 292). But, as we have seen, virtue ethics can provide both action assessment and guidance: A is the right act because it is what a virtuous agent would do, and deciding to do A is the ‘morally correct decision’ because it is what a virtuous agent would decide to do (Hursthouse 1999, 51). Hursthouse argues that each virtue generates a prescription and each vice a prohibition (for example, honesty generates the rule ‘be honest’ and dishonesty generates the rule ‘do not be dishonest’); she calls these rules, derived from our account of virtues, ‘v-rules’ (29, 37–39). Moreover, whichever way a virtue-ethical theory explains the virtues, it must give an important role to moral wisdom (*phronesis*) for ‘interpret[ing] the rules and ... determin[ing] which rule’ should be applied (41). We are expected to have some moral wisdom for identifying which traits are virtues and thereby generating our list of v-rules, and a significant amount of moral wisdom will be needed for apply-

ing them to particularly difficult situations (Hursthouse 1999). So virtue ethics does provide some kind of guidance here, in that a person with enough moral wisdom will be able to intuit what a virtuous person, who is morally wise, would do.

The claim that morality is not codifiable enough for there to be any kind of mechanical, general procedure for applying the v-rules can be taken as an advantage of the theory (as discussed above), because it recognises the ‘complexity of moral phenomena’ and so is not too algorithmic, reductive, or abstract (Hursthouse 1999; Rawls 2009; Timmons 2013). If that is true, then virtue ethics is not alone in recognising the complex texture of moral life in this way, as non-virtue-based theories such as limited moral pluralism may do so as well (Hursthouse 1999; Timmons 2013). Virtue ethics’ account of right action is also still open to the objection of indeterminacy, since it relies so heavily on moral wisdom. A virtue ethicist could argue that this is simply a necessary feature of an ethical theory and that ‘we cannot plausibly expect more determinacy from the principles of a plausible moral theory’ (Timmons 2013, 292).

But while all ethical theories rely on some measure of intuitive moral evaluations to some extent, the extensive reliance on *phronesis* and consequent indeterminacy that we see in virtue ethics (and in limited moral pluralism) poses a serious methodological problem (Hursthouse 1999, 33). This problem comes out in Rawls’ (2009) criticism of intuitionism, where he claims that our moral intuitions are ‘influenced by our own situation’ and ‘strongly colored by custom and current expectations’, and that intuitionist theories provide no criteria, other than cultural mores, for morally evaluating these (35–37). As is suggested by Aristotle’s concept of the vicious person’s ignorance of the universal (of what is good and bad), vicious people can believe that there is nothing bad about actions expressing vices (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1110b25-30, 1150b30-37). So although ‘there is nothing necessarily irrational in the appeal to intuition’, it is necessary that we try ‘to reduce direct appeal to our considered judgments’ so as to reduce the threat of moral relativism (41). Otherwise, as Heathwood (2007, 798) observes, our ethical theory ‘leaves bigots and zealots on their own to intuit their preferred answers’. So virtue ethics’ indeterminacy is actually one of its *disadvantages*, albeit one that limited moral pluralism has as well.²

Finally, the last claimed advantage of virtue ethics discussed earlier is that it can be self-other symmetric, while more traditional theories cannot be. According to Slote (1997), common-sense virtue ethics is self-other *symmetric*: non-moral virtues (traits outside of ‘the sphere of morality’ given aretaic value by common thinking) are included in common-sense virtue ethics in a symmetrical and balanced relation with moral virtues. However, given that some of the traits we find admirable are moral and some are non-moral (such as intellectual virtues), why can our ethical theory not say that some traits are morally relevant and some are not (Timmons 2013)? In distinguishing between moral and non-moral virtues, Slote (1997) refers to the former

2. This disadvantage could be accepted as unfortunately necessary due to the facts of moral reality, though, if virtue ethics were otherwise superior to other ethical theories.

as 'other-benefiting' and the latter as 'self-benefiting'; other-benefiting virtues are *ethically* relevant, whereas non-moral, self-benefiting virtues are *aretaically* relevant, but need not be considered within the sphere of morality. For instance, though we may aretaically admire a person who promotes her own self-interest, a person who sacrifices herself for someone else instead is more morally admirable. We do not need a virtue-ethical theory to recognize such a distinction—a consequentialist can find a person's commitment to a project aretaically admirable while recognising that she acted wrongly in pursuing it rather than sacrificing her life. So, while non-moral, self-benefiting virtues are undoubtedly an important part of our lives, and ethical theories would do well to incorporate them into their accounts for more nuance, this is not a reason to favour virtue ethics in particular over other ethical theories. Ethical theories that '*permit* us to seek our own well-being (within moral limits) ... as a mere *concession* to agents' well-being' may just be reflecting how some important areas of our lives are non-moral (187).

Moreover, Slote proposes a self-other symmetric theory because he believes that the self-other asymmetry of traditional ethical theories downgrades the moral agent. This criticism is a variation of the over-demandingness criticism used against consequentialism, applied to all non-virtue-ethical theories. But not all non-virtue-ethical theories are that demanding; for example, the limited moral pluralism of W. D. Ross (2002) includes a *prima facie* duty to improve our own condition in respect of virtue or of intelligence alongside that of beneficence, and other deontological theories could have the option to include such rules. Since limited moral pluralism can take self-benefiting seriously (as there are no absolute constraints to always outweigh it), if I object that it is still too demanding, it will seem like I just do not want to be concerned with benefiting others. Likewise, the agent's self-concern seems to be valued *too* highly in Slote's (Slote 1997, 193–94) suggestion that common-sense virtue ethics consider other people 'as a class or category', rather than one-on-one. Despite allowing for more balance between concern for ourselves and for others so as not to downgrade the agent, thinking of others as a class rather than as individuals downgrades *other agents*, whose individual interests also matter. While I am not claiming that ethical theories should be impartial, this is another area where we should question our intuitions; perhaps we should instead follow the conflicting intuition that Slote (1997) mentions, in which our common-sense *moral* thought treats permission to self-benefit as a *concession* to agents' well-being. Self-other asymmetry is thus not necessarily a problem, and since other ethical theories can also recognise non-moral virtues, virtue ethics cannot claim self-other symmetry as an advantage.

5 Additional disadvantages of virtue ethics as a moral theory

Another serious weakness of virtue ethics is its lack of explanatory power: what is it about virtues that make actions that express them right? Since a character trait's aretaic goodness (which makes it a virtue) 'bestows upon the action flowing from it the property of rightness,' virtue ethics needs to explain 'why this character trait is good' (Timmons 2013, 295). By the Aristotelian approach for grounding virtues, 'the goodness of certain character traits' is explained 'in terms of their contribution to human *eudaimonia* or flourishing' (Timmons 2013, 296). But if a trait's goodness is explained by its contribution to *eudaimonia*, and that goodness is what makes the act that flows from it right, then why not 'explain the rightness of an action ... directly in terms of its contribution to human flourishing?' (296). Moreover, virtue ethics is considered to be a pluralist theory, with the virtues being 'irreducibly plural intrinsic goods', but if traits are considered good because they promote *eudaimonia*, it seems that the virtues are reducible to the single, more fundamental intrinsic good of *eudaimonia* (from which the virtues are then derived) (Oakley 1996, 140).

By this account, then, virtue ethics looks like a form of monism. The account of what makes an action right would be that it promotes *eudaimonia*, with the virtues as intermediary stages that are instrumental to that promotion, and it would no longer be clear that the theory, which is supposed to be virtue-based, needs to include virtues at all in its account of right action. If this is the case, then we do not need, as Timmons (Timmons 2013, 296) says, 'to first explain the goodness of traits in terms of flourishing and then explain the rightness of action in terms of the goodness of traits; we can explain both the goodness of traits and the rightness of action directly in terms of flourishing'. Therefore, even without delving into the problems of defining a concept like *eudaimonia* and avoiding circularity in doing so, the Aristotelian approach cannot provide an acceptable—truly virtue-based—explanatory account of right action for virtue ethics (Slote 1997, 207; Timmons 2013, 295–96). Doing so would 'deprive virtue ethics of its distinctive character' (Timmons 2013, 209).

Alternatively, for virtue-ethical theories that take the non-Aristotelian approach, the goodness of character traits is 'an unexplained brute fact': 'certain character traits just are intrinsically good and ... their goodness need not be further explained' (296). Either the virtues are simply 'grasp[ed] through intuition' as 'self-evident truths', or we can reasonably suppose that a trait is a virtue when this claim is 'supported by the body of our considered moral beliefs'; that is, by internal support (296). While claims about *which* traits are virtues do have internal support, this explanation for *why* these traits are good is unsatisfactory. As Timmons notes, there are ways of plausibly explaining why a trait like benevolence is good: since we can come up with explanations for why a particular virtue is good (for example, benevolence moves one to help people in need,

showing respect for them as persons, and reduces suffering), it is unconvincing to claim that their goodness is a brute fact. Only relying on intuition is undesirable for the reasons discussed above, and here it is called into question by 'the sort of constructive criteria that are said not to exist' (Rawls 2009, 39). Virtue ethics therefore cannot give an adequate explanation of why acts are right or wrong.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that contemporary virtue ethics, as a response to perceived problems in more traditional ethical theories, does not in fact avoid such problems itself, and brings with it additional issues. Proponents of virtue ethics claim that deontological or consequentialist theories suffer from being too reductive, algorithmic, abstract, self-effacing, and self-other asymmetric, and that virtue ethics can avoid these problems and should therefore be preferred over the more act-centered ethical theories. These reasons, however, do not hold as satisfactory advantages for virtue ethics. If virtue ethics avoids being too reductive, algorithmic, or abstract, then Rossian limited moral pluralism does too, so these are not reasons to choose virtue ethics over other contemporary ethical theories. With respect to the other apparent advantages, either consequentialists or deontologists can make use of the same tools as virtue ethicists to avoid the problems of self-effacement and self-other asymmetry, such as including a person's motives in their account of right action or recognising self-benefitting as intrinsically valuable, or these need not be considered problematic for any ethical theory.

Moreover, in trying to be less reductive, less algorithmic, and less abstract than other ethical theories, virtue ethics relies too heavily on *phronesis* and intuition, causing it to be too indeterminate as an ethical theory. An additional problem to which virtue ethics is subject, and several more traditional ethical theories are not, is a lack of explanatory power: it is unable to explain what it is about virtues that makes actions expressing them right, without reducing the virtue-ethical theory to monism (and a monistic theory would not be *virtue*-based, but, e.g., *eudamonia*-based), or appealing to intuition and brute fact.

What were presented as advantages for virtue ethics are therefore not advantages for it after all, and so are not convincing reasons to prefer a virtue-ethical approach to a deontological or consequentialist one. Virtue ethics furthermore has additional disadvantages in its indeterminacy and lack of explanatory power. As such, although virtue ethics brings up valuable considerations about the inner lives of agents that could be used to supplement and refine consequentialist or deontological theories, a virtue-ethical approach to moral theory is not more promising than traditional act-centered moral theories.

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