

## Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics\*

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These are boom years for the study of the virtues. Several new books have recently appeared that bring to the literature new ways of understanding virtue and new ways of developing virtue theoretical approaches to morality. This new work presents a richly interesting cluster of views, some of which take virtue to be the central or basic normative ethical notion, but some of which merely amend familiar consequentialist or deontological approaches by incorporating into them an articulated conception of the moral significance of virtue. We will focus on the more distinctive and ambitious recent theories of the former kind, theories that purport to exhibit virtue as the central or basic moral notion. This essay therefore focuses on Michael Slote's *Morals from Motives*, Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics*, and, to a lesser extent, Philippa Foot's *Natural Goodness*.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Other recent books in and around virtue ethics that we unfortunately cannot adequately consider here include Thomas Hurka's *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Julia Driver's *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Nomy Arpaly's *Unprincipled Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); John Doris's *Lack of Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Christine Swanton's *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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We do not aim to provide criteria that distinguish virtue theories from other kinds of moral theories. This, it seems to us, is not the centrally important philosophical issue. The important issue of course is the plausibility of the various theories, not whether they qualify as virtue theoretic. Furthermore, recent theories that take themselves to be instances of virtue ethics do not form a tight family. Nevertheless, the theories that we will study treat virtue, in one way or another, as the central or basic moral notion. This explains in part why we chose to study them rather than some of the other recent theories that focus on the virtues. We also chose to study them because they aim to provide an account of what a virtue is and to explain the moral significance of the virtues. We applaud them for attempting to do this.

There has never been any doubt that consequentialist theories could accord to the virtues a derivative or indirect moral significance. If we begin with a simple direct form of consequentialism, we could add to it the thesis that the virtues are the states of character such that, if people generally possessed them, more good would result than if people generally had other states of character. On such an account, the virtues would be instrumentally of value. But, of course, on such an account, it could be surprising which states of character turn out to qualify as virtues. One might want to add to this simple form of consequentialism the thesis that people ought to be disposed to act from virtue, so understood, rather than being disposed to take the maximization of the good as their conscious goal, provided that more good would result from their being so disposed. Julia Driver defends an indirect consequentialism of this kind in her recent book.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in a more radical departure from simple direct consequentialism, a kind of consequentialism could deny, not merely that it is desirable for people to take the maximization of the good as their goal, but that the maximization of the good is the criterion of right action. Hence, a “virtue consequentialism,” conceived as analogous to motive utilitarianism, would hold that right action is action that would be in character for a virtuous person, or action that would express the virtues, with the virtues being explained as before.<sup>3</sup> Theories of these kinds clearly have a place in the logical space of consequentialist theory.

In addition, Thomas Hurka has shown in detail how consequentialist theories can treat the virtues as intrinsically good. He develops a recursive theory of the intrinsic good, according to which there are certain base level goods, and it is intrinsically good to love anything intrinsically good, including of course any base level good. He combines

2. Driver.

3. Robert Merrihew Adams, “Motive Utilitarianism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 467–81.

this recursive theory with the view that the moral virtues are intrinsically good attitudes to goods and evils. Hence the virtues are states of loving things that are intrinsically good, “for themselves,” and hating things that are intrinsically evil, for themselves.<sup>4</sup> Deontological theories could incorporate a similar conception of virtue, holding that it is intrinsically good to love right actions and to hate wrong actions, for themselves. Such an account of the virtues, whatever strengths it might have, does not accord ethical primacy to virtue but, rather, requires a background conception of what morally matters already in place, prior to understanding virtue. Of course, any theory that does not take the virtues and their moral significance as primitive must treat something as more basic than the virtues.

Hurka’s theory takes the notions of right action and good states of affairs as fundamental to moral thought and takes the notion of virtue as secondary. The base goods in his theory would include such things as pleasure, knowledge, and achievement. In Hurka’s account, virtuous attitudes have intrinsic value, but their value is less than and derivative from the value of the base goods. Or at least the value of my virtuous loving of a good is always less than the value of that good. Given these features of his stance, Hurka does not see his view as a kind of virtue ethics even though he seeks to understand virtuousness and its moral importance. As he says, understanding the virtues, on his view, does not require “any new theory such as virtue ethics.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, although Hurka’s theory breaks new ground in the theory of intrinsic value, and although it nicely explains how a consequentialist or deontological theory can take virtue to be intrinsically good, it does not belong in the family of views we aim to explore.

#### THE KIND OF STATE THAT A VIRTUE IS

It is widely agreed that a virtue is a trait of character. Michael Slote says that an individual virtue is conceived as “an inner trait or disposition of the individual.”<sup>6</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse has attempted to articulate in detail what such a trait would consist in. The key point, in her view, seems to be that a virtue is not merely a disposition to act in certain characteristic ways. To be sure, a virtue does lead one to act in characteristic ways, but beyond this, it leads one to act in such ways for characteristic reasons and in a characteristic manner, to have certain characteristic attitudes and emotions, to be acute in detecting cases in which the virtue is at issue, and so on. Honesty, generosity, and benevolence are examples. So, for example, a person with the character trait

4. Hurka, pp. 11–23.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

6. Slote, p. 4.

of being honest tends to be honest for the right reasons, and scrupulously; she tends to deplore dishonesty, and, perhaps, to be “delighted when honesty triumphs”; she sees when honesty is an issue and what it requires.<sup>7</sup> This is Hursthouse’s characterization of a virtuous trait of character, and it appears that Slote shares a very similar view.<sup>8</sup>

In theories that take the virtues to be traits of character of this kind, it will be misleading to describe the virtues, as Hurka does, as “attitudes to goods and evils that are intrinsically good.” Hurka uses the term “attitude” very broadly, so it is plausible that the virtues involve attitudes in his sense, but in the theories we are investigating, virtues are not simply attitudes. Clearly a trait of character is not an attitude although it might involve a disposition to have attitudes of various kinds. Attitudes can be transient and isolated states of mind, and they have intentional objects, but, although virtues might be partly constituted by such things, they are complex states of persons’ characters. Despite this, however, Hurka’s recursive theory might help to explain the value of virtuous states of character on the basis that they include dispositions to have attitudes that his account would treat as intrinsically good.

There is a further point, however. In Hursthouse’s view, and also in the view of Julia Annas, who has discussed the virtues in many recent works,<sup>9</sup> it is crucial, and constitutive of virtue, that a person with a virtue reasons in relevant ways and takes characteristic kinds of considerations to be reasons for acting appropriately. Hurka could say, similarly, that it is virtuous to love the good because you believe it is good. But the important point is that Hursthouse and Annas see the virtues as shaping the virtuous person’s practical reasoning in characteristic ways, and not simply as shaping her actions or attitudes. An honest person, for example, does have a characteristic set of attitudes to truth telling and

7. Hursthouse, pp. 10–14.

8. Slote, pp. 4–7. Some recent work by Gilbert Harman and by John Doris has used psychological studies to suggest that we may be wrong to suppose that many people have broadly explanatory character traits in the neighborhood of the traditional virtues (see Gilbert Harman, “Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 [1998–99]: 315–31; and Doris, *Lack of Character*). Ruth Benedict, in *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934) had made similar claims. She writes, “Recent important experiments dealing with personality traits have shown that social determinants are crucial even in the traits of honesty and leadership. Honesty in one experimental situation gave almost no indication whether the child would cheat in another. There turned out to be not honest-dishonest persons, but honest-dishonest situations” (p. 236). She goes on to claim that the experimental evidence suggests that honesty and leadership are by no means the only traits for which this is the case. For a response to such views, see Gopal Sreenivasan, “Errors about Errors,” *Mind* 111 (2002): 47–68. See also Rachana Kamtekar, “Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character,” in this issue.

9. Julia Annas, “Virtue Theory,” in *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

lying, to honesty and dishonesty. But, for Hursthouse, it is part of her being honest that she tends to act for characteristic reasons and to see what honesty requires, and these characteristics of an honest person would not ordinarily be classified as “attitudes” to goods and evils.

A final point is that, for Hursthouse, and also for Slote, the explanation of why honesty is a virtue, if it is, does not depend, as it would for Hurka, on finding a basic intrinsic good such that honest persons love that good, or a basic intrinsic bad such that honest persons hate that bad. That is, these writers apparently would reject Hurka’s recursive approach. Rather, for them, the explanation of why honesty is a virtue, if it is to be found, lies in a different direction.

#### VIRTUES AS ADMIRABLE TRAITS OF CHARACTER

Slote’s account is simply that a virtue is an admirable state of character. Or, to be more exact, it is that the fundamental ethical notions are “aretaic” ones, such as the notion of the admirable, as they apply to motives, character traits, and individuals.<sup>10</sup> Hence, the virtues are the character traits that are “fundamentally admirable.” In Slote’s view, claims about which traits are fundamentally admirable, moreover, lie on the “ground floor” and are used “to explain or derive” other ethical judgments.<sup>11</sup> Because of this, Slote calls his view an “agent-based” theory.<sup>12</sup>

Slote isn’t content, however, to rest his account merely on intuitions about which traits are admirable. He holds that claims about the admirability of traits of character can be tested for plausibility in the familiar way by assessing the intuitive plausibility of the other ethical judgments that they support as well as the plausibility of the overall ethical view that would result from taking them as fundamental to all ethical judgment.<sup>13</sup> For example, Slote argues against the view that “inner strength” is the basic virtue on the ground that it treats benevolence, compassion, and kindness, as only *derivatively* admirable.<sup>14</sup> He finds this implication of the view implausible. In Slote’s approach, then, ethical judgments of a wide variety of kinds play a role in the defense and construction of his theory. We can criticize a theory on account of what it would imply about the permissibility of actions and the admirability of traits of character and also on account of considerations about its simplicity and overall plausibility. Nevertheless, in the structure of the theory that Slote wants to defend, judgments about the admirability of

10. Slote, pp. 4–5.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 21, 74–76.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

traits of character are fundamental. Ultimately, Slote defends a morality of caring, or of “partial benevolence,” according to which caring is “a fundamental form of moral excellence.” Indeed, he holds that, properly understood, it is *the* fundamental form of moral excellence.<sup>15</sup>

In explicating the structure of his view, Slote emphasizes the virtue of a kind of balanced caring between those with whom we are intimate—our friends and loved ones—and people in general.<sup>16</sup> At one point in his highly nuanced discussion of what this might amount to, he says that a caring person achieves a balanced concern among those for whom she cares in an intimate fashion as well as a balanced concern between “her intimates *considered as a class*” and “all (other) human beings *considered as a class*.”<sup>17</sup> This formulation obviously leaves many questions unanswered. In attempting to answer some of these questions, Slote appears to rely on intuitions about right and wrong action to direct his explication of balanced concern rather than relying on independent assessments of the admirability of states of character to help us decide among various proposed explications of balanced concern. This is fair enough to a point, given the methodology of theory construction as Slote understands it. We are prepared to allow that in constructing and explicating a theory, one can rely on the judgments one finally wants to use the theory to explain. A consequentialist, for example, can use intuitions about rightness to direct him toward a plausible conception of good consequences. But there must come a point where the theory is constructed and where we can test its ability to guide or explicate moral reasoning. We are not convinced that Slote’s theory is well enough developed to ground an explication of balanced concern in judgments of the admirability of states of character—an explication which we can then use to decide which actions in which circumstances would express balanced concern. We think that Slote must rely covertly on intuitions about right and wrong actions in order to figure out which states of character are admirable.

Slote holds, for example, that a person who has the right kind of balanced concern will often do things for her intimates when she could do more good for humanity as a whole.<sup>18</sup> The question then arises as to whether, for example, she might not kill one or more innocent strangers in order to save a person she loves. We certainly would not admire the character of a person who did this, but it seems that we are influenced here by our rejection of the action rather than by an independent assessment of the admirability of the agent’s state of character. We would

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30, 36–37, 63–73.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

not admire a person who would do such a thing, and we know this while knowing very little about the person's character other than that she is willing to perform morally prohibited actions of this kind. But as will be explained in more detail below, Slote wants to argue in reverse, that a person ought not to do such a thing because to do so would be to express a state of character that is not admirable. He says, "this kind of deontology grows out of our intuitive assessment(s) of certain kinds of partialistic feeling and concern."<sup>19</sup> To us, the reverse seems to be the case. A person who would kill two strangers, but no more than two, in order to save a loved one, but who would not kill two strangers to save a friend, has a kind of balanced concern. The issue should be whether this kind of balanced concern is more or less admirable than the kind that would lead a person to be willing to kill at most one stranger to save a loved one but who would not kill at all to save a friend. On Slote's theory, attention should be directed inward at the states of character in question rather than outward at the states of the world. But we think in fact that the aretaic assessment of the states of character is steered in such cases by the deontic assessment of the actions or outcomes that they would prompt.

We are not denying that people do have intuitions about the admirability of states of character. However, if admirability is at issue, then it seems to us that it is much more admirable to care for strangers than to care for intimates such as our children and friends. There would be something appalling about a person who did not care about the well-being of his children, but such caring is to be expected and is not especially admirable. This seems to us to create a difficulty for Slote, to the extent that he wants to claim that a balanced caring is the uniquely admirable state of character. Aretaic judgments can pull in opposite directions, and this can create tensions at the heart of Slote's approach. Caring for our children does not seem admirable, but it is good that we care for them. Caring for strangers does seem admirable. Because of this, the kind of balanced caring Slote recommends might seem good overall, given that it involves a balance between an admirable kind of caring for others and the good of caring for our intimates. But balanced caring does not seem especially admirable, not unless the balance is pressed outward, in the direction of caring more for others than we could ordinarily be expected to care.

Slote argued against a morality of inner strength on the ground that such a theory would view benevolence, compassion, and kindness as merely derivatively admirable. In his own theory they are not merely derivatively admirable since they are constituents of caring. Nevertheless, honesty and strength of purpose *are* only derivatively admirable in

19. *Ibid.*, p. 87; see pp. 85–87.

his view, and presumably they are only admirable to the extent that they are aspects of, or partly constitutive of, the right kind of balanced caring. Yet, intuitively, they are not merely derivatively admirable. Certainly their admirability seems not to be derivative from the admirability of balanced caring. Honesty despite a risk of personal embarrassment seems to be admirable in its own right, at least when important matters are at stake. And strength of purpose directed toward a good end is plausibly viewed as admirable in its own right.

It seems, moreover, that we admire people's characteristics for various reasons or on various grounds, not all of them especially concerned with moral assessment. For example, strength of purpose is admirable, but not merely on moral grounds. Perhaps, then, Slote ought to say that he is concerned with the moral admirability of traits of character. This clarification will help, but it would not be enough to deal with all of our worries.

Slote might view the remaining worries as unimportant, for he agrees that in the process of theory construction some intuitive judgments will need to be abandoned.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, it would be desirable to have a deeper explanation of why balanced caring is the fundamental virtue, if it is, than simply that the theory that treats things this way brings our moral judgments into a reflective equilibrium—indeed as should now be clear, we do not concede that Slote's theory does even that.

We think that Slote's book is important more for his defense of agent-based ethical theories generally than for his defense of his favored version of agent basing. Nevertheless, it is worth considering his favored version in a bit more detail.

To understand Slote's idea of balanced caring, it is helpful to start by considering his view within the sphere of intimates. He tells us that a father who has two children that he loves will tend to devote energy toward the two in a balanced way. That is, the father will not devote all or nearly all of his energy and attention toward just one of the two children, and he will certainly not care only for one, even if there is one child that needs him much more, or is much worse off than the other, or could be benefited much more by the father's attention than the other child. The father's concern for each child, if he truly loves each of them, will not "amalgamate into some overall larger concern for their aggregate well-being."<sup>21</sup> This, Slote tells us, is a psychological fact about how someone who genuinely loves more than one person will care for them. It is this sort of love that Slote finds to be the most admirable, and it is the basis of his version of agent basing. Slote's aim,

20. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.



then, is to show how a morally admirable caring could, in some sense, mimic the sort of love that we have for intimates.

What counts for Slote as striking a balance in concern between or among one's children is left somewhat vague. Slote says that the father has "substantial" concern for each child and that his care for one child does not "dwarf" that for the other or look "lopsided." Nonetheless, one might wonder what a father who loves both of his children is to do if keeping one child alive through to adulthood literally requires an amount of attention that will leave no time or only a little time for the other child. It seems in such a case that Slote's idea of balanced caring cannot give us much guidance. It is clear that the father would have to save the child whose life is threatened. To account for this, Slote must interpret balanced caring in such a way that the father will count as expressing a balanced caring even while taking care in a lopsided way. Slote could say of course that in this case the loving father cannot exhibit a morally appropriate balance of care between his children, or he could say that in such a situation it is literally impossible to love both children. Neither of these options seems plausible, however. For surely a lopsided devotion of time and attention is called for, and surely the father's actions and feelings might clearly indicate that he does love both children.

Slote therefore ought to say that although the loving father in such a situation will not actually be able to achieve a balance in the time and attention he devotes to caring for the children, he can nevertheless qualify as virtuous to the extent that, among other things, he actually cares in a balanced way for the children, understanding "care" here to refer to the attitude or emotion that motivates sincere caring behavior. Presumably a father with this kind of attitude in the situation we imagined would at least regret not being able to do more for the neglected child. This seems a more plausible thing for Slote to say. But unless he is to say, implausibly, that the father is acting inappropriately in our case, in providing lopsided care, he must say that the father's lopsided care would be appropriate if it expressed a virtuously balanced caring attitude. Yet if even highly lopsided caring behavior of this kind can be taken to "express" a balanced caring attitude, this places great pressure on the idea of an action's expressing a state of character.<sup>22</sup> We will return to this point.

Slote's notion of balance also plays a role in explaining how we should manage our care between our friends and intimates, on the one hand, and needy strangers, on the other. Slote tells us that in a person

22. As Slote says, actions "have to exhibit, express, or reflect [virtuous] states or be such that they *would* exhibit, etc., such states if they occurred, in order to count as admirable or virtuous" (p. 17).

with an appropriate kind of balanced concern, there will be a balance between “the concern she has for her intimates *considered as a class* and the concern she has for all (other) human beings *considered as a class*.”<sup>23</sup> Our concern should be balanced between these groups in something like the way that the father’s concern for his two children should be in balance. We are to strike the same sort of balance between our care for the class of near and dear and the class of all strangers that was recommended earlier for the father in his concern for his children. Also, a virtuous person would, or at least would be permitted to, treat herself as a third party and then to strike a balance in caring among the three categories: herself, the class of near and dear, and the class of all others.<sup>24</sup>

The problem here again is that idea of balanced caring is not helpful in many kinds of difficult cases in deciding what to do, and it is not helpful in seeing what kind of balance to strike in one’s caring. So, for example, should one save one’s drowning spouse or five strangers in a situation in which one cannot do both? On Slote’s view, the morally correct action will express a virtuous balanced caring. But the appropriate kind of balanced concern is again a matter of having an appropriate attitude of concern, an attitude that is presumably to be seen in the overall pattern of care exhibited by a person’s actions over the long run rather than in each situation considered by itself. So it appears that one could express balanced caring in rescuing one’s spouse, although, if one had an appropriately balanced attitude of concern, then presumably the overall pattern of one’s actions would express the other pillar of one’s concern, one’s concern for the class of strangers. But perhaps one could instead express balanced caring in rescuing the five strangers, although again, presumably, the overall pattern of one’s actions would express one’s concern for the class of intimates. After all, for people with children and close friends, their spouse is only one member of the class of intimates just as the five are only a fraction of the class of strangers.

The key point is that the overall pattern of a virtuous person’s actions would express an overall balance of concern. Thought of in this way, however, as we have illustrated, the idea of balanced caring does not fix what one is to do or how one is to feel in any particular case. Slote’s view seems to permit a wide range of actions by a person facing a moral predicament, since a wide range of actions could be fitted into a whole life that expressed balanced caring.

Moreover, viewed in this light, it doesn’t seem to matter to one’s decision in the case at hand whether one’s spouse is at risk or a friend. To be sure, the loss of a spouse is a greater blow than the loss of a

23. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.

friend. Because of this, if the person in our example had an appropriate balance in caring and chose to rescue the five strangers rather than her spouse, then she would want to do more later in her life to benefit the class of intimates in expressing the balance in her concern; that is, she would want to do more in this case for her remaining intimates than she would want to do for that class in the different case in which she rescued the strangers rather than a friend. Considered in this way, however, it also doesn't seem to matter to one's decision in the case at hand whether there are five strangers or five hundred at risk, since either way the virtuous pattern of concern for the whole class of strangers can be exhibited over the long run. To be sure, if we think of five strangers as a certain fraction of the class of all strangers, then five hundred strangers is a larger fraction of that class. The fact that five hundred strangers are at risk rather than five could matter to one's future expressions of concern in the way that it matters that one's spouse is at risk rather than a friend. A person with a balanced concern would want to do more later in life to express the balance in her concern when more is lost to the class of strangers or to the class of intimates than when less is lost. But should one be concerned for one's spouse in this kind of way as a fraction of the class of all intimates? Surely not. Perhaps this is not how Slote wants us to think of balanced caring in such cases, but if not, we do not have a clear idea what he has in mind.

It seems to us that a person can appropriately have a direct concern for her spouse such that she would not feel that significant losses to her spouse could be counterbalanced by gains to others—whether these others are intimates or strangers. A direct concern of this kind does not seem to us to be merely an aspect of an overall state of balanced concern among intimates, since there is a kind of imbalance to the way a person with the kind of attitude we have in mind views the well-being of her spouse. Nor would the person's attitude look like an aspect of a balanced concern even if the person were to agree, as she should, that in some cases she would have to permit significant losses to her spouse, if necessary in order to avoid sufficiently greater losses to others, and not even if she would be motivated accordingly. Perhaps Slote would say that it is a morally inappropriate kind of concern.

It is not clear how Slote's notion of balance can be of help in dramatic end of life decisions that are the stuff of philosophical fiction. Cases could be imagined in which the only choices available starkly favor one's intimates or starkly favor numerous strangers, and in which there is no possibility of re-achieving balance later in life. Sometimes achieving Slote's kind of balance seems unavailable, unless, perhaps, he thinks one can express balanced caring while acting in ways that radically favor one group over another.

Given the problems we have illustrated, we think that Slote has not

developed his theory to the point where it enables us to reach deontic assessments of actions in complex or difficult cases from the aretaic assessments of states of character that his theory recommends. Moreover, and perhaps more to the point here, we think that he has not provided a sufficiently articulated account of balanced concern to give us a clear idea of what the appropriate balance amounts to. Slote's notion of balance is underdescribed in several important respects.

Slote mentions theories that follow an Aristotelian strategy of treating the virtues as grounded in a notion of *eudaimonia*. He turns aside from such a strategy, not because of substantive objections, but because the result would not be a theory that takes character evaluations as fundamental. It would not be an "agent-based" theory of the kind that Slote aims to develop.<sup>25</sup> We nevertheless will discuss a recent ambitious and stimulating attempt to provide such an account, which is found in part 3 of Rosalind Hursthouse's book *On Virtue Ethics*. Hursthouse's approach represents a marriage between an attempt to ground virtue in a notion of *eudaimonia* and an attempt to ground virtue in a notion of the human good. In the latter line of argument, Hursthouse has been influenced by Philippa Foot's work in her recent book, *Natural Goodness*. We will therefore be considering Foot's work as well as Hursthouse's.

#### THE VIRTUES AND A FLOURISHING LIFE

Hursthouse's program rests on the thesis that "a virtue is a character trait a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well." She says that this thesis, which she calls "Plato's requirement on the virtues," is the key to "the rational validation of beliefs about which character traits are the virtues." Suppose, for example, that we begin with Slote's proposal that balanced caring is the only basic virtue. Or suppose we begin with the proposal that strength of purpose, honesty, benevolence, and courage are virtues. She says we can assess the truth of such proposals by determining whether the character traits in question are ones that human beings need for *eudaimonia*.<sup>26</sup> The important point for our purposes is that Hursthouse appears to be saying that, in her view, the virtues are whatever character traits a human being needs for *eudaimonia*. For her, it is not merely that character traits that are independently established to be virtues also turn out to have the property of being needed for *eudaimonia*, so that we can use the property as a (perhaps fallible) sign of whether a trait of character is a virtue. Rather, her view seems to be that Plato's requirement on the virtues identifies the virtues with states of character that have the property of being

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

26. Hursthouse, pp. 166–67.

needed for eudaimonia. Her view appears to be that a character trait is constituted as a virtue by having this property.

For Hursthouse, when Plato's requirement on the virtues is fully spelled out, it is actually the conjunction of three theses: "(1) the virtues benefit their possessor. (They enable her to flourish, to be, and live a life that is, *eudaimon*.) [And] (2) the virtues make their possessor a good human being. (Human beings need the virtues in order to live well, to flourish *as* human beings, to live a characteristically good, *eudaimon*, human life. [And] (3) the above two features of the virtues are inter-related."<sup>27</sup> Hursthouse claims that, "not independently, but in combination, [these theses] provide us with the framework within which we can set about trying to validate our beliefs about which character traits are the virtues."<sup>28</sup>

Hursthouse's three "Platonic theses" do not carry their interpretation on their faces. Consider the first such thesis, that the virtues benefit their possessor or enable her to flourish or to live a life that is eudaimon. One issue here is that Hursthouse does not offer an explicit definition of the key concept of eudaimonia. She suggests that it can be translated as "happiness" or "flourishing," but she admits that each translation has its drawbacks. She proposes that the notion in question is close to the "notion of 'true (or real) happiness,' or 'the sort of happiness worth having.'"<sup>29</sup> It is the sort of happiness we would want for our children for their own sakes. A second issue is that Hursthouse seems to deny that the virtues are either necessary or sufficient for eudaimonia. She offers examples in which "doing what is courageous maims me for life" as counterexamples to the sufficiency claim, and the case of Nazis who escaped to South America with loot from their wicked endeavors and absent a guilty conscience as at least putative counterexamples to the necessity claim.<sup>30</sup>

Hursthouse's view seems to be that being virtuous is the most reliable path to flourishing, and she seems to think there is no other reliable path. No other strategy for living well is, she claims, as likely to succeed. Just as the doctor authoritatively recommends not smoking despite this being neither necessary nor sufficient for health, so virtue is claimed to be the best plan for flourishing in an uncertain world. Thus Hursthouse claims, in effect, that although some people might think that their children would be better off if they were raised to be less than fully virtuous, no one would be justified in believing this to be true of their child. One's child's being benefited by her lack of virtue

27. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

is like one's lottery number winning in a fair lottery. It is unlikely and impossible to predict with justification.

Hursthouse hopes to make this claim seem more plausible by arguing that, however skeptical we may be of such claims in theory, in practice we live as if we agreed with her, for, she claims, we try to raise our children to be virtuous. Now of course there are issues about who are the "we" in question here. Such issues will return. But for now let us grant that there is something correct about the claim that good parents aim to make their children virtuous. A parent might have many reasons for doing this. To take examples that Hursthouse mentions, perhaps virtuous children are less of a bother to the parent or perhaps virtuous parents bring up their children to be virtuous because it is good for the group that children be so raised. Or, to take an example she does not consider, a parent might think that children naturally err in the direction of excessive vice and if so, her desire to school her children in virtue might not reflect a belief that a purely virtuous life provides the best prospect for her child but might instead be viewed as a needed corrective, meant only to balance out the child's character. However, Hursthouse rejects such explanations and insists that good parents aim to make their children virtuous for the intrinsic benefit of the children.

Surely it is correct, for example, that our children need friends if they are to flourish, and if they were utterly without virtues such as trustworthiness, cooperativeness, and friendliness they would be unlikely to fare well in attracting real friends. Those who are not sincere, spontaneously affectionate, and respectful, at least toward an inner circle of confidants, are unlikely to be able to participate fully in the sorts of relationships that most of us find to be indispensable to our flourishing.

But presumably the question is not whether a life devoid of virtues is likely to be worse or less flourishing than a life not devoid of them (surely it is), but rather whether a fully virtuous life is predictably better than a life that is less than fully virtuous. After all, it could be true that a life devoid of virtue is likely to be worse than a life not devoid of virtue, yet also be the case that a life devoid of vice is similarly predictably worse than a life not so devoid. So, presumably, Hursthouse's claim, if it is to vindicate the virtues over the vices, must be the claim that a life of full virtue is the most reliable path to flourishing. And in discussing the aims of parents, she must mean to claim that good parents aim to raise their children to be fully virtuous. Perhaps she would respond that it is a mistake to focus on the idea of "full virtue." For perhaps she needs to show simply that a life tends to be better as it is more virtuous. If so, then her claim would be that good parents would want any child of theirs who is less than fully virtuous to become still more virtuous.

Now of course parental advice tends toward simplicity when children are young. But when they are a bit older, we would have thought

that most parents seeking to advise their children recommend a mixed virtuousness. Surely to the promising college student considering taking time off from school to do social work in a desperately needy but dangerous place, the paradigm of the concerned parent would recommend a little less virtue and a little more selfishness.

Further, in rougher times, being fully virtuous might be more costly than it seems here today. Imagine a time and place in which a person who goes along with a vicious aspect of society, say slavery, has full opportunities for a long life of privilege, enjoyment, love, and achievement, whereas speaking up against the viciousness in society promises hostility from the powers that be and worse. Hursthouse seems to consider such a case when she writes that "in evil times, life for most people is, or threatens to be, nasty, brutish, and short and eudaimonia is something that will be impossible until better times."<sup>31</sup> Hursthouse allows that in such circumstances good parents will try to raise their children to be more prudent, detached, and less trusting than they would in a better society. Hursthouse seems to concede that in some such cases even good parents do not raise their children to be fully virtuous. But she seems to think it sufficient to maintain her thesis if she can show that flourishing is impossible in such circumstances and that, even in such cases, good parents would not raise children to be completely lacking in virtue. Again, however, it is hard to see how this thought could vindicate Hursthouse's thesis. For even if flourishing is impossible in such circumstances, one can live a better or a worse life, and the question can therefore arise whether virtue is the best route to a better life. Unfortunately, it is not obvious that it is. The key cases are those in which a privileged person in a vicious society goes along with the viciousness and has opportunities she would not otherwise have for a long life of "enjoyment and satisfaction," lived with "zest and enthusiasm," as indicated by what Hursthouse calls the "smile factor."<sup>32</sup> To respond that such a person is not flourishing or enjoying a life of eudaimonia seems beside the point if the person's life is clearly better than it would otherwise be.

Hursthouse's best reply to this objection, it seems to us, is to point out that there can likewise be circumstances in which nonsmoking is not a good strategy for one who aims to be healthy. Imagine a time and place in which not to smoke would be viewed as counterrevolutionary and unpatriotic and would create a risk of imprisonment or worse. In such a society, we might say, smoking is good for your health, and good parents might encourage their children to take up smoking, so as to blend into the social woodwork. But this is no argument against the

31. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

proposition, understood as a generalization, that nonsmoking is of benefit to each person. It is a familiar point that generalizations can be true as generalizations even if the corresponding universally quantified statement is false. There is indeed a law-like connection between smoking and poor health yet there can still be circumstances in which smoking is better for one's health than nonsmoking. It would be worthwhile to attempt to make the idea of a law-like generalization more precise, but for our purposes, we can take it as a given. And so we take Hursthouse's first Platonic thesis to be a generalization; just in the way that it is a law-like generalization, and a true one, that nonsmoking benefits the nonsmoker, so, arguably, it is a true law-like generalization that (some) virtue is necessary for flourishing. As she says, her view is that "for the most part, by and large," the virtues benefit their possessor.<sup>33</sup>

But there are two problems. First, on this reading, Hursthouse's view does not seem to square with much of what she says. For in some passages, she seems to hold that aiming for full virtue is a wise plan for anyone in attaining a flourishing life. Yet one obviously could admit that it is true as a generalization that the virtues tend to benefit their possessor while denying that a life of full virtue is the best strategy for everyone in every circumstance. So long as one can accurately predict in which cases the generalization does not hold, one interested in flourishing should presumably not aim at full virtue in such situations, and good parents should not aim to raise their children to be fully virtuous in such situations. And it does seem to us, as we argued above, that there are kinds of situations where, predictably, being less than fully virtuous is the best route to flourishing, or at least, to living the best life for oneself.

Second, this reading is in tension with Hursthouse's treatment of Plato's requirement on the virtues as a thesis about what constitutes a character trait as a virtue. Her view, as we said, seems to be that character traits are constituted as virtues by having the property of being needed for eudaimonia. Given this, she clearly cannot defend the Platonic thesis as a generalization about states of character that are independently taken to be virtues. We can independently identify people who are nonsmokers, so we can support the generalization that nonsmoking is good for one's health by studying the health of nonsmokers. Nonsmoking obviously is not constituted as such by the truth of this generalization. But in Hursthouse's approach, we are not supposed to be able to identify those who are virtuous independently of the Platonic theses. The virtues are taken to be those character traits, whichever they are, the possession of which benefits (or tends to benefit) their possessors—and makes (or tends to make) them good human beings. On this view, the generali-

33. *Ibid.*, p. 185.



zation that the virtues tend to benefit their possessors would then be a necessary truth. If we are correct, however, there are familiar kinds of situations where being less than fully virtuous is the best route to flourishing. If Hursthouse agrees with us about this, it appears she must maintain that such situations necessarily are sufficiently rare or bizarre that it remains a necessarily true law-like generalization that the virtues tend to benefit their possessors. We find this implausible.

Hursthouse does hold, however, that there is a kind of nonempirical, conceptual tie between the concept of the virtues and the fact that, as she thinks, the virtues tend to benefit their possessors. In particular, she thinks, roughly, we would not have had our current concept of the virtues if this fact had not obtained.<sup>34</sup> She seems to think that this supports her thesis that it is partly constitutive of a virtue that it tends to benefit one who possesses it. If this is indeed an argument that she intends to give, it is not persuasive. Perhaps she is correct that we would not have had our concept of the virtues if the virtues had not tended to benefit us. It is not clear what one should think about this question. But even if she is correct, it does not follow that it is partly constitutive of a virtue that it tends to benefit its possessors. It does not even follow that the virtues necessarily tend to benefit their possessors. A condition on our having a concept is one thing. The content of the concept is another thing.

Hursthouse has given us no reason to think that traits of character that would ordinarily be considered as vices, or at least as not being virtues, are not equally plausible candidates for states that benefit their possessors. Perhaps it is true, despite our objections, that, “for the most part, by and large,” being honest and generous and kind and caring benefits a person. But for all we have seen, it might also be true that, “for the most part, by and large,” being selfish, detached, and cautious benefits a person. If so, then Hursthouse’s argument is on its way to implying that the latter traits of character are virtues. Perhaps there are different kinds of character, each incompatible with the other, each of which is such that, “for the most part, by and large,” having it benefits its possessor. If so, then Hursthouse’s argument is on its way to implying that virtue is multifarious and disunified. Or perhaps it is not the case that there are any traits of character such that, “for the most part, by and large,” their possession benefits their possessor. Maybe the circumstances of human life are too variable for any such generalization to be acceptable.

At this point Hursthouse might respond that virtue is at least partly constitutive of a flourishing life and that, moreover, virtue is necessary for even a minimally good life. In this way, as other virtue ethicists have

34. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

done, she could resort to a moralized conception of flourishing. And she could use this conception to explain why the privileged but corrupted people in our earlier example of the vicious society really do not live flourishing lives and do not even have minimally good lives. Julia Annas has claimed, for instance, that there is no adequate morally neutral conception of a eudaimon life, and that virtue is necessary for eudaimonia.<sup>35</sup> John McDowell has claimed that a virtuous person sees things aright and that such a person would hold that if an action was necessary for the life of virtue it necessarily could involve “no loss at all.”<sup>36</sup>

But one of the advantages of Hursthouse’s proposal, as we have been understanding it, is that it does not depend on a moralized conception of flourishing. She admits, for instance, that sacrifices required by virtue can count as losses in eudaimonia.<sup>37</sup> She says at one point that the issue, at least in part, is whether a life of virtue is “enjoyable and satisfying,” with the terms “enjoyable” and “satisfying” being understood in an ordinary way, such that the presence of what she calls the “smile factor” is an indication of enjoyment.<sup>38</sup> And she suggests that a life does not count as virtuous unless it includes an element of enjoyment as evidenced by the smile factor.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps, however, she only meant to allow that virtue is not sufficient for a flourishing life, even though it is necessary, for the smile factor is also necessary. And virtue might not be sufficient for flourishing even if combined with the smile factor, for, in the vicious society of our example, virtuous people who exhibit the smile factor nevertheless might face a horrible end. As Hursthouse re-

35. Annas.

36. John McDowell, “The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics,” in his *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 17. More recently, however, McDowell has argued that Aristotle’s notion of eudaimonia “marks out, rather, just one dimension of practical worthwhileness” (McDowell, “Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology,” p. 41 in his *Mind, Value, and Reality*). This makes room for the thought that actions that are required by virtue, while ideal with respect to eudaimonia, might yet cost the agent in other dimensions that matter. Yet about the eudaimonia dimension, McDowell claims that “when one sees an action as a case of doing well, the point one sees in it need not be independent of the delight one’s upbringing has taught one to take in noble actions just as such” (p. 44). Although McDowell’s words are not conclusive on this issue, we suspect that he means to employ a moralized conception of eudaimonia. He clearly claims that properly brought up people will see that other dimensions of worthwhileness cannot compete with eudaimonia over the question of what shape their lives should take. Notably, McDowell avoids claiming that the eudaimonia dimension will be seen by the virtuous person as trump with respect to benefit in the way he claims it is rightly seen by the virtuous person as trump when it comes to how one should live one’s life.

37. Hursthouse, p. 185.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

marks, it might not be possible to flourish in evil times. Because of this, as the example shows, there could be circumstances in which it is not true that the more virtuous one is, the better one's prospects for flourishing.

Nevertheless, Hursthouse does appear to propose what one might call a partially moralized conception of flourishing. She holds that "as things are," morality cannot be justified "from the outside," on the basis of "facts recognizable by the virtuous and the vicious alike," presumably including facts about flourishing. Yet she holds that things could have been otherwise.<sup>40</sup> It is a shame that we lack the space to consider this part of her view in adequate detail. We think, however, that the examples we have discussed show that it is not necessarily true, not even as a generalization, that being more virtuous tends to increase one's chances of flourishing. And if this is right, then Hursthouse's first Platonic thesis is not a good way to characterize the virtues. To be sure, if Hursthouse were to adopt a fully moralized conception of flourishing, she could maintain that since virtue is necessary for flourishing, a successful strategy for a flourishing life must take virtue on board. But this would be neither surprising nor interesting given a moralized conception of flourishing according to which virtue is necessary for flourishing. Moreover, if flourishing is understood in this sense, it is important to explain why we (who are perhaps not yet fully virtuous) should be especially interested in this kind of flourishing.<sup>41</sup>

#### ARISTOTELIAN NATURALISM

Hursthouse's second Platonic thesis is that the virtues make their possessor a good human being. In spelling out what this might mean, Hursthouse aims to vindicate an "ethical naturalism [that] hopes to validate beliefs about which character traits are virtues by appeal to human nature."<sup>42</sup> This ethical naturalism about humans is part of a larger story about virtue and defect in living things generally, with the story concerning virtue in humans comprising a special case of the broader story.

Hursthouse takes over this broader story from Phillipa Foot. When Hursthouse published her book, Foot's account was largely unpublished, but we now have Foot's *Natural Goodness*, which is principally devoted to developing the view. While our main concern here is not with Foot, we will sometimes rely on Foot's exposition of the view, and we will also

40. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

41. Foot seems content to establish only that "there is indeed a kind of happiness that only goodness can achieve" (Foot, p. 97). Foot, unlike McDowell, makes no claims about the unique importance of this kind of happiness.

42. Hursthouse, p. 193.

sometimes highlight differences between Hursthouse's and Foot's positions. Several of the criticisms we will offer below are intended solely against Hursthouse. Although Hursthouse's proposal is clearly and explicitly inspired by Foot's, in many ways it is significantly more specific in content than Foot's own work. Thus perhaps it is best to think of Hursthouse's view as but one way of completing Foot's general framework. We do not doubt that other ways of completing Foot's framework could avoid several of the problems we find in Hursthouse's proposal. Yet we admire Hursthouse's effort to put needed flesh on Foot's rather skeletal proposal.

The cornerstone of the view, which Foot attributes to Peter Geach, is that "good" is "in the class of attributive adjectives, to which, for example, 'large' and 'small' belong, contrasting such adjectives with 'predicative' adjectives such as 'red.' Such a color word operates in independence of any noun to which it is attached, but whether a particular F is a good F depends radically on what we substitute for 'F.' As 'large' must change to 'small' when we find that what we thought was a mouse was a rat, so 'bad' may change to 'good' when we consider a certain book of philosophy first as a book of philosophy and then as a soporific."<sup>43</sup> The idea is that we can make sense of the question whether a particular thing is red without knowing what kind of thing it is, but we cannot make sense of the issue whether a particular thing is good without thinking of it as a member of a certain kind. To understand what makes for a good F we must understand the nature of Fs.

Further, Foot says, "almost anything in the world can be said to be good or bad in a context that sufficiently relates it to some human concern or to the needs of a plant or animal. But features of plants and animals have what one might call an 'autonomous,' 'intrinsic,' or as I say 'natural' goodness and defect that may have nothing to do with the needs or wants of the members of any other species of living thing. . . . [It] is intrinsic or 'autonomous' goodness in that it depends directly on the relation of an individual to the 'life form' of its species."<sup>44</sup> That is, she is saying, it is one thing to assess various Fs as good or bad Fs for this or that purpose. But it is another thing to assess whether a member of a species F is good or bad as an F, and this, she holds, now going beyond the attributive point, is thought to centrally depend on what she calls the "life form" of the species F. Hursthouse's attempt to "validate beliefs about which character traits are [human] virtues by appeal to human nature" is, she thinks, just a special case of this more general story about the goodness of members of species considered as such.

43. Foot, pp. 2–3.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

At this stage of the argument, both Hursthouse and Foot aim to set up what we call a “grand analogy.” They both claim that we can better understand goodness in humans by first understanding the easier case of goodness in simpler living things such as plants and animals that also have natural goodness. As Foot says, “I am therefore, quite seriously, likening the basis of moral evaluation to that of the evaluation of behaviour in animals.”<sup>45</sup>

Hursthouse sums up what we learn from thinking of how we, or at any rate animal specialists, evaluate sophisticated (nonhuman) animals: We evaluate their parts, operations/reactions, actions, and emotions/desires. And we evaluate these aspects of them with respect to how they contribute to three ends: (1) the individual’s survival, (2) the continuance of the species, and (3) the individual’s characteristic pleasure or enjoyment/characteristic freedom from pain. When we consider “social animals,” such as wolves, which hunt in packs, we add an additional end, (4) the good functioning of the social group. That is, the goodness or defectiveness of a social animal will be a function of how well those mentioned aspects of it serve the first three goals in the social group generally.<sup>46</sup>

The underlying aim of both Hursthouse and Foot is to apply the lessons learned in understanding goodness of this kind in the plant and animal world to goodness in humans. Their central project is to show that there is a common structure to the “evaluations of individual living things as or qua specimens of their natural kinds.”<sup>47</sup> Both Hursthouse and Foot stress that the differences between sophisticated animals and humans will make for important disanalogies between the evaluation of humans and the evaluation of other animals. Yet we have reservations about the project that arise independently of worries about the extension of the model to the case of humans.

First, it seems to us that there might be several competing standards for evaluating the natural goodness of members of a given kind of living thing, even taking into consideration that we seek a standard for evaluating them as members of that kind rather than in terms of how well they serve the interests of some other living thing. The key question then is why Hursthouse thinks that her list of the goals and criteria of natural evaluation has a privileged status.

Hursthouse suggests that her account of natural evaluation has a scientific status.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps she thinks that her list of goals and criteria of natural evaluation could be gleaned from the standards of evaluation

45. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

46. Hursthouse, pp. 200–202.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

used in the biological study of animals—by contrast with, for example, the standards used in agricultural science where the goal is to produce tender meat for humans. There are different ways of approaching the scientific study of animal kinds, however, and we think there can be correspondingly different conceptions of what makes an animal a good instance of its kind.

Evolutionary biologists, for example, have a solid claim to be trying to understand good functioning in animals in a scientific way. Yet the criteria of natural evaluation that an evolutionary biologist would recommend would differ significantly from Hursthouse's. Indeed, evolutionary biologists are likely to resist all of the items on Hursthouse's list on the ground that none of them is directly relevant to the good functioning of an animal. They are likely to say that the animal functions well when it does what maximizes its expected genetic contribution to future generations (or perhaps, what would have done so in the organism's traditional environment). And this might be, and often is, best served not by preserving the individual animal or by doing well at promoting the survival of the entire species but, rather, by caring for individuals that are especially closely related biologically to the animal.

A descriptive biologist working on the natural history of a species might use yet a different set of criteria for evaluating members of the species. She might be centrally interested in criteria that would be met by a paradigm member of the species as it is found in the environment that is at the heart of its historical range. Parrots in their historical habitat might have different standard characteristics in certain respects from parrots that have escaped into new habitats and survived there, for example, and our biologist might be interested in the former characteristics and treat them as virtues in Hursthouse's sense. Yet it might be that parrots with these characteristics do not thrive in the new habitats. Such a biologist would not then be evaluating aspects of parrots in the new habitats with respect to how well they contribute to the goals specified by Hursthouse, but with respect to how characteristic they are of parrots in historical habitats.

Further, if there were veterinarians who were concerned for animals in the way doctors are supposed to be concerned for humans (rather than being hired by humans to serve human aims) such veterinarians presumably might view in a negative light various behaviors that put the individual at risk, such as alarm calling. But Hursthouse would presumably view these behaviors as involving virtues of the animal on the ground that they contribute to the good functioning and survival of the group.

Thus it seems to us that Hursthouse cannot plausibly claim that her list is simply the list that any scientific investigation into animals would generate so long as it aimed to evaluate animals as members of their species rather than on the basis of how well they serve human (or

other species') wants or interests. It is therefore unclear where the authority of Hursthouse's list is supposed to come from. Hursthouse seems to think that the main problem is to show how to extend what we have learned in the case of animals to the case of humans. But we think this is misleading and that the case of animals is more controversial than she thinks. Because of this we think that the story she tells about other species does not provide significant momentum for the story that she wants to tell concerning humans. If the story is to be defensible it will have to explain better how the normative evaluations of nonhuman animals that Hursthouse makes can be vindicated as uniquely authoritative.

Second, even if we leave aside this worry, and even if we accept the "adjectival point" so that we take it as given that an animal must be evaluated as a member of some kind or other, it needs to be explained why the species is the kind to focus on. That is, it will have to be better explained why, even if we look for the normative in the natural, we should look especially to the evaluation of the individual as a member of the species, as Hursthouse recommends, rather than as the bearer of a specific genotype, as a member of the local herd or a local population, or as a member of a genus. We are frequently told that the sort of evaluation being looked for is "intrinsic" goodness, not usefulness for something else. But this narrowing of concern does not lead uniquely toward species membership.<sup>49</sup> The fundamental point is that Hursthouse and Foot need to explain why the evaluation of an individual as a member of a species is uniquely well suited to model the ethical evaluation of persons.

Foot actually is inclined to deny that the kind of natural evaluation she is concerned with is the evaluation of individuals as members of biological species. She does use the term "species," but she says it might be better to use the term "life form."<sup>50</sup> She says that, in talking of the function of a characteristic of an animal in the life of animals of that kind, she is not raising a historical question having to do with why the characteristic evolved, which would be the case if she were considering functions in the way that an evolutionary biologist would consider

49. This favoring of the species-level description seems to be built into the story right at the start. For example, Foot writes "plants and animals have what one might call an 'autonomous', 'intrinsic', or as I shall say, 'natural' goodness and defect that may have nothing to do with the needs or wants of the members of any *other species*" (Foot, p. 26, emphasis added). And "what distinguishes a [normative] Aristotelian categorical from a mere statistical proposition about some or most or all the members of a kind of living thing is the fact that it relates to the *teleology of the species*" (Foot, p. 33, emphasis added).

50. *Ibid.*, p. 15, n. 14, pp. 28–29. Here and elsewhere Foot acknowledges a significant debt to Michael Thompson's "The Representation of Life," in *Virtues and Reasons*, ed. R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, and W. Quinn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

them.<sup>51</sup> But this stratagem only serves to make the issue that concerns us all the more salient. Unfortunately it also introduces a new problem, since it is not clear what a “life form” is, as distinct from a species. But leaving this issue to one side, the key question is, if we are looking for an “intrinsic” evaluation of an individual organism, then why is the relevant kind the “life form” and not the biological species? The most likely answer, we suspect, is that Foot believes the evaluation of an individual as a member of a “life form” is uniquely well suited to model the ethical evaluation of humans.

Unfortunately this answer to our question places all the weight on the human side of the grand analogy rather than the nonhuman side. Foot’s strategy was to involve, first, showing how the natural evaluation of animals can be understood, and then arguing by analogy to a view about the natural evaluation of persons. Both Foot and Hursthouse agree the animal model would need to be modified and extended to suit the case of humans, but they both claimed that we can better understand goodness in humans by first understanding the case of goodness in plants and animals that also have natural goodness. As Foot said, “I am therefore, quite seriously, likening the basis of moral evaluation to that of the evaluation of behaviour in animals.”<sup>52</sup> But now the fear is that we must use our understanding of moral evaluation in order to determine which kind of evaluation of plants and animals is most nearly analogous to it.

In short, we are disputing the idea that Foot’s and Hursthouse’s claims about how properly to evaluate animals can be vindicated by a morally neutral investigation of animal nature, an investigation that is not guided by a prior understanding of the moral evaluation of humans.<sup>53</sup> Even if this worry is correct, Foot and Hursthouse might still

51. Foot, p. 40, n. 1.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

53. McDowell, “The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics,” considers an interpretation of Aristotle’s *ergon* argument very much along the lines of the views of Foot and Hursthouse. He writes, “What is the *ergon* of a thing? . . . If that phrase is understood merely statistically, the required connection with the notion of excellence is not plausible. To underwrite that connection, we had better understand the *ergon* of an F as something like: what it is the business of an F to do. This paraphrase leaves it open that, for different substitutions for ‘F’, different sorts of considerations may be appropriate in justifying a candidate specification of the *ergon* of an F” (p. 12). McDowell holds that Aristotle rightly thought of his *ergon* argument as not capable of adjudicating most disputes about the proper function of man. McDowell seems to lean toward a reading of Aristotle in which he invokes a “value-loaded” use of human nature.” “Such an explicit mention of human nature would be a sort of rhetorical flourish, added to a conclusion already complete without it.” McDowell’s rejected alternative, then, would be that “the business of human beings is to be found in an independent, ‘value-free’ investigation of human nature” (p. 19).



be thought to escape unscathed. For they might concede that their investigation is guided by an understanding of the moral evaluation of humans, but claim that what results from the investigation is the discovery of an analogy between the moral evaluation of humans and a particular kind of naturalistic evaluation of animals, an analogy that in turn helps us to understand the nature of moral evaluation.<sup>54</sup> But if so, then the existence of the analogy can carry no argumentative weight if Foot's and Hursthouse's understanding of the moral evaluation of humans is disputed. For there are other "natural" ways of evaluating animals, and these might point to a competing analogy that would have us evaluate humans differently. Hence, although it might be true that Foot's and Hursthouse's grand analogy helps to illuminate their understanding of the moral evaluation of humans, it does not support their understanding against alternatives.

There are reasons to question the approach shared by Foot and Hursthouse even if we waive the concerns we have been pressing so far. Both Foot and Hursthouse seem to come dangerously close to endorsing a "difference is defect" view. Hursthouse says that in natural evaluation we assess social animals in relation to the list of four goals mentioned above by considering whether they serve those goals in the way "characteristic of their species."<sup>55</sup> And Foot makes a similar claim in saying that we evaluate individual animals by applying "natural norms" that say how a particular aspect of the life cycle of its species is achieved in the species.<sup>56</sup> Of course both would argue that not just any difference entails defect. Foot, for example, notes that some aspects of an animal play no important role in the life cycle of such creatures. She says that what is characteristic of the species sets a normative standard only with respect to aspects of an animal that relate to self-maintenance and reproduction. Further, both she and Hursthouse imply that it is no defect in the snail to be as slow as it is, for the characteristic way a snail avoids being harmed or killed by predators is not by outrunning them but, rather, by hiding in its strong shell until the predator loses interest. It would be a defect in a snail to have a fragile shell as it would then be unable to protect itself in the snail's characteristic way. Thus the point of the shell is to be strong enough to resist predators. But suppose that one snail has a shell importantly stronger than the rest (and miraculously no heavier or cumbersome). Surely such a shell would be a wonderful snail shell. This example reveals that what is good in snail shells is not

54. Foot signals that this is not her understanding of her strategy. She appears to think her story about the evaluation of animals does not presuppose a story about the ethical evaluation of humans (see p. 36).

55. Hursthouse, p. 199.

56. Foot, pp. 33–34.

determined by what the textbooks tell us is characteristic but rather by the way in which the shell achieves the purpose of the snail's shell. Further, even if slowness in a snail is no defect, presumably a somewhat quicker snail that was able to outrun one of its predators would not thereby be defective. In short, deviation from the characteristic way that a species achieves survival and reproduction need not amount to a defect.

Let us now move on to the attempt to apply this picture to human beings. One thing that changes, Foot and Hursthouse tell us, when we move from evaluating plants and animals to evaluating humans qua human is that we focus on evaluating the will or practical reason of the human rather than an assessment of all aspects of the human. "In so far as we do speak of 'a good S' in these other cases [of plants and animals] . . . we are thinking about the plant or animal as a whole; whereas to call someone a good human being is to evaluate him . . . not in respect of his body, or the faculties such as sight and memory, but as concerns his rational will."<sup>57</sup> Whether or not this is what we always mean when we evaluate someone as an excellent example of the kind human, a move of this sort is clearly needed if we are to avoid treating physical defects as having the same kind of moral significance as rational defects. As Hursthouse and Foot conceive of matters, then, "good human" will be an evaluation of a human's practical reason and will be the same sort of evaluation we make of the peacock's display or the roots of an oak. Even so, there are different kinds of defect in human practical reason. Some, perhaps those associated with Down's syndrome, strike us as importantly different from the defects involved in being evil. Foot and Hursthouse agree. Thus, Foot's final view is that the relevant evaluation of humans is of our rational will and this centrally involves what is voluntary.<sup>58</sup>

Hursthouse allows that the fact that we are rational and other animals are not creates a "huge gap" between them and us. So great, in fact, that although "nature determines how they should be, . . . the idea that nature could be normative with respect to us, that it could determine how we should be, is one we will no longer accept."<sup>59</sup> She says that, unlike the other animals, humans live such diverse lives and have the capability to live in so many ways that we cannot determine what we ought to do from what humans characteristically do. Indeed, the only characteristic human way of going on, Hursthouse claims, is

57. *Ibid.*, p. 66. Hursthouse makes remarks that have the same upshot at pp. 206–7 of her book, but she merely claims that our ethical evaluations are focused on the human will or character rather than "physical aspects."

58. Foot, p. 79.

59. Hursthouse, p. 220.

“a rational way. A ‘rational way’ is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do. Correspondingly, our characteristic enjoyments are any enjoyments we can rightly see as good, as something we in fact enjoy *and* that reason can rightly endorse.”<sup>60</sup> The emphasis here is on the word “rightly.” Hursthouse tells us that this notion of a rational way is normative and not tied to any statistical notion of human tendency. Indeed she tells us that it might well be that very few humans are going on in the way that is characteristic of them in her sense, that is, in a rational way.

Thus, whereas a deer ought to be swift because this is how deer escape predators, we ought to do that which we can rightly see ourselves as having reason to do. This bit of advice might seem both to be less than helpful and to make little real use of the Footian naturalism that, we were promised, would be applied to humans.

Let us consider the latter worry first. Hursthouse claims that the Footian naturalism is still in place because “we have preserved the structure; it is still the case that human beings are ethically good in so far as their ethically relevant aspects foster the four ends appropriate to a social animal in the way characteristic of the species. And the structure—the appeal to those four ends—really does constrain, substantially, what I can reasonably maintain is a virtue in human beings.”<sup>61</sup> As an illustration Hursthouse wonders whether a benevolence that knows no species-boundaries, a benevolence for members of all species alike of the sort that Peter Singer recommends, could be a virtue. She hesitantly claims it could not be, because such benevolence seems unlikely to be able to serve the ends of continuance of the species and good functioning of the social group, at least it seems unlikely to be able to serve these ends as well as do current norms of benevolence. Her general point is that what counts as a virtue is still determined by what serves those four ends and this is a real constraint on the view and a real tie with Footian naturalism. But this is difficult to understand. The list of four ends that Hursthouse recommends we use to evaluate plants and animals was developed precisely by generalizing about how, according to Hursthouse, we evaluate the kind of creatures for whom it is the case that nature determines how they ought to be. How can Hursthouse reject the thought that nature determines how humans should be yet think that the same considerations that grounded the four ends in plants and animals also ground the normative status of the four ends for humans? She gives no new arguments to support such a status for the four ends in the case of humans.

Suppose, for example, she is correct that the sort of universal be-

60. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

nevolence that Singer recommends would not foster the four ends. It seems that Hursthouse faces a dilemma. For either it follows from this, given the Footian naturalism and the argument from the four ends, that we have no good moral reason to adopt Singer's universal benevolence, or it does not follow. If she concedes that it does not follow, then despite the Footian naturalism and the argument from the four ends, it seems she must concede that Singer's universal benevolence might well be ethically good. But she cannot accept this result without giving up Footian naturalism. Hence, it seems, she must claim that it follows from Footian naturalism and the argument from the four ends that we have no good moral reason to adopt Singer's universal benevolence. But in that case she seems committed to the idea she earlier rejected, "the idea that nature could be normative with respect to us, that it could determine how we should be." The dilemma is, in short, that she must either reject Footian naturalism or accept that nature can be normative with respect to us. If she rejects the idea that nature can be normative with respect to us, as she does, and if she concedes that, for humans, the normatively appropriate way of going on is to act in ways that we can rightly see ourselves as having reason to act, as she does, she must give up the Footian naturalism. One can see the tension easily by comparing Hursthouse's rejection of the idea that nature is normative for humans with her claim that her "ethical naturalism hopes to validate beliefs about which character traits are virtues by appeal to human nature."<sup>62</sup>

Let us now return to the worry about the emptiness of Hursthouse's view that the normatively appropriate way of going on is to act in ways that we can rightly see ourselves as having reason to act. Hursthouse does try to show how the constraint of the four ends could help restrict the content of the view. But, as we just saw, it is difficult to see as plausible a view that tells us to do what we have reason to do provided that doing so furthers the four ends. Perhaps we will be told that a proper account of reasons restricts them from the start so that there is never a good reason to do otherwise than to further the four ends. But this account is not found in Hursthouse, and we see no argument in Hursthouse that would incline us to be optimistic for such an account. Indeed, she explicitly rejects the one argumentative strategy we find in her writing that might have helped here—namely, the thought that in the ethical evaluation of humans we look for the normative in the natural in much the same way as we do with plants and animals. But without an account of why it is that good reasons are restricted in line with the four ends, Hursthouse seems to be left with the view that human beings ought to do what they can rightly see themselves as having reason to do. And

62. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

this is not a theory. It leaves us looking for convincing accounts of what we have reason to do.

Hursthouse says that, on her view, “we evaluate ourselves as a natural kind, a species which is part of the natural biological order of things, not as creatures with an immortal soul or ‘beings’ who are persons or rational agents.”<sup>63</sup> But as we saw earlier in the case of animals, there are concerns about how to justify the special focus on the species. Such worries, of course, translate to the case of human evaluation. One could accept that “good” is an attributive adjective and that to understand what makes for a good F one must think about the nature of Fs while being impressed that every individual belongs to importantly different kinds. We are human, but we—those to whom Hursthouse is addressing her argument—are also rational agents, sentient beings, philosophers, and mammals. Why should the species level description be thought to have priority in determining what our goodness consists in? We do not find an answer in Hursthouse.<sup>64</sup>

Foot addresses what is perhaps a version of this objection. She considers Gary Watson’s worry about how to show, even if it is granted that a good human does this or that, why I should especially care about being a good human.<sup>65</sup> Foot replies, in part, by rejecting Humean accounts of practical reason that would require answering such a question by finding something about being a good human that appeals to our contingent desires. We do not want to enter into that dispute here. But Foot goes on as if, once this anti-Humeanism is established, the only good sense to be made of Watson’s question is to take it as the question of whether or not we necessarily have a reason to be moral.<sup>66</sup> But one could ask Watson’s question not only as an immoralist might, but as someone who wonders why our moral obligations stem especially from our species membership. Why should the constituents of natural goodness for members of my species (or “life form”) determine what counts as morally good for me?

Applied to the virtues, the view is, in Foot’s words, that “virtues play a necessary part in the life of human beings as do stings in the life of

63. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

64. It might be thought that Michael Thompson’s paper, “The Representation of Life,” to which both Foot and Hursthouse approvingly refer, might provide help here. But it seems to us that Thompson is mainly there arguing for the conceptual necessity of seeing a thing as belonging to a species or life form in order to see that thing as counting as alive. We are not persuaded, but, more to the point, we do not yet see how to use Thompson’s claim as an argument for the normative importance of species membership.

65. Gary Watson, “On the Primacy of Character,” in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Daniel Stateman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 26.

66. Foot, pp. 62–64.

bees.”<sup>67</sup> In general terms, the view is that, plausibly, what counts as a virtue in a human is determined by what kind of thing a human is.<sup>68</sup> However, Hursthouse clearly accepts the very specific thought that humans morally ought to concern themselves especially with the continuance of human beings and the good functioning of our social group (recall her four ends). Indeed, on her view, concern for nonhumans that distracts us from best contributing to preserving the species or promoting the well functioning of the social group is a moral defect, as she illustrates with the example of Singerian universal benevolence, which she thought might get in the way of our best caring for humans. Thus, apparently on her view, even if a nonhuman creature were every bit as rational and nice as us, we would be morally defective to fail to fully exploit it, if exploiting it furthered the four ends and thereby made human life prosper and go better. This implication of her view makes the worry especially pressing. Why should we accord any normative significance whatsoever to our membership in the species or to the fact that we have a particular form of life?

Our overall assessment of Hursthouse’s program is not optimistic. Nor do we yet see much promise in the underlying strategy that she takes over from Foot. However, we want to be cautious in assessing Foot’s approach, because, although we find it intriguing, it is thus far a rather bare proposal that would need much elaboration (of the kind that Hursthouse tries to give) before one could confidently assess its prospects. We are inclined to be more hopeful for an approach along the lines that Slote pursues, despite the problems we noted before. Slote takes the virtues to be admirable states of character. Unfortunately, he provides no substantive criteria of admirability. Instead we consult our intuitions and attempt to bring all our intuitions about moral matters into a satisfactory reflective equilibrium.

#### RIGHT ACTION

Virtue theorists have argued persuasively that the assessment of character and persons is an important dimension of our ethical thought that needs to be incorporated into an adequate moral theory. Indeed, one of the chief motivations of virtue theory has been dissatisfaction with the way in which moral theories that emphasize the assessment of actions as right or wrong have tended to neglect the assessment of persons and their states of character. However, the assessment of action is also an important dimension of ethical thought, and it would be a

67. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

68. Philip Pettit maintains that something like the standard list of virtues applies to us because of certain very general capabilities we have. See his “Two Sources of Morality,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18 (2001): 102–28.

mistake to move from theories that neglect one dimension of our thought to theories that neglect or fail to deal adequately with another dimension of our thought.

A radical form of virtue theory might claim that there is no substance to the evaluation of actions as right or wrong and that only “thicker” assessments of actions in virtue theoretic terms as, say, courageous or kind, honest or thoughtful, can be assigned any cognitive significance. This approach would be a mistake. It is a feature of the moral experience all of us share that we want to know what to do, and this calls for an overall moral assessment of our options, not merely an assessment in terms of this or that virtue. We might know that we could act courageously or in cowardice, we could be honest or dishonest, noble or base, but in some cases such evaluations pull in opposite directions, and in such cases the need for an overall assessment becomes pressing. Making do without action evaluation would be a radical alteration in our commonsense moral outlook, not a freeing of such an outlook from distinctively philosophical presuppositions. We would require the strongest grounds before abandoning hope for making sense of such assessment. Thus, the issue for virtue theory is whether it can cast any light on the overall moral assessment of action, or whether instead a theory of the virtues needs to be married with an independent free standing theory of right and wrong, in order to provide a comprehensive moral theory.

Foot seems to concede that a theory of the virtues, of good motives and traits of character, does not tell the whole story. She says that although “underlying attitudes and desires” have to be recognized as “an essential *part* of a virtue,” still, “given the horrors of the past century . . . today it would be especially strange not to see the ‘what’ of actions as even more important.” We are interested of course “to know what kind of a man can give the orders issued by Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, or Pinochet,” but that is only a part of what is of practical importance. Moreover, she says, “we do not need to know anything of the kind before branding the things that were and are still being done as utterly wicked.” Furthermore, she thinks, given the circumstances in which we live, people need to accept and to follow norms that are “formulated in terms of the prohibition of *actions* such as murder and theft.” She concludes that a doctrine that would deny the “intrinsic rightness or wrongness of kinds of actions” would be “totally false.”<sup>69</sup>

In this passage, Foot seems to be saying that the rightness and wrongness of actions is at least in some cases a matter of their “intrinsic” properties, or properties they have that are independent of any relation between them and the states of character of those who do or might do

69. Foot, pp. 113–15.

them. For example, Foot seems to think that the wrongness or wickedness of the atrocities of a Pol Pot is a matter simply of what the actions were. She seems to be denying that virtue theory has the resources to provide criteria for the rightness and wrongness of actions without invoking an independent account that views certain kinds of action as right and wrong independently of their relation to virtue or vice. Or at least she seems to be claiming that there is another route to such assessment than via the virtues. Both Slote and Hursthouse disagree. They think that we can properly account for rightness and wrongness only by invoking a conception of virtuous character. In this sense they think that virtue theory can be a comprehensive ethical doctrine, accounting not only for the assessments of traits of character, motives, and persons but also for the overall moral assessments of actions.

While we agree with Foot's position here, we do not think her arguments for it are decisive. A virtue theory that aspires to be comprehensive in the above sense can agree with Foot that norms that prohibit various kinds of action need to be accepted and followed by people who are not virtuous. It can agree that such norms need to be taught to young people who are just learning to be sensitive to moral concerns. A comprehensive virtue theory can agree, moreover, that the what of actions is of fundamental practical importance. Moreover, it can agree that we can know that certain kinds of action are morally precluded without reference to facts about the kinds of people who do or might perform them. But these points concern strategies for dealing with the lack of virtue, as well as styles of moral thinking. A virtue theory that aspires to be comprehensive can agree with all of this yet argue that actions are constituted as right or wrong in virtue of a relation they stand in to virtuous or vicious character.

Hursthouse's account is simple and direct. She proposes that an action is right just in case "it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances."<sup>70</sup> Hurka objects to such a view that if the circumstances include the lack of centrally important information, then even a virtuous person might do something horribly wrong.<sup>71</sup> He suggests saying instead that the right action is what a fully informed virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstances. A different problem is posed by the fact that there can be situations in which there is no moral ground for favoring one option over another. In such cases, there might be no action of which it is true that a virtuous agent would do it even though a virtuous agent could or might do it. Hursthouse suggests that such actions are good even if

70. Hursthouse, p. 28.

71. Hurka, p. 229. See also Christine Swanton, "A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action," *Ethics* 112 (2001): 32–52.



not right in the sense of being required.<sup>72</sup> One might object that it would be a mistake to say that what a virtuous agent would do in a tragic dilemma would be right or good, and Hursthouse suggests a qualification of her original account to deal with such cases. It seems to us, however, that she could have insisted instead that the tragic act would be right or good in the circumstances even if a virtuous agent would rightly thereafter be haunted by sorrow at what she did.<sup>73</sup>

Even if Hursthouse's proposal is amended in the ways suggested so far, it is still subject to objections. For one thing, something that an informed virtuous person would do, acting in character, might be morally trivial or even optional, such as carrying an umbrella when it is raining. It might be good to carry an umbrella, but it presumably would not be morally bad or wrong not to do so. Worse, there can be actions that would be morally good, or even morally required of a person who is not virtuous, that no virtuous agent would do precisely because she is already virtuous. A person with a tendency to lie to save herself embarrassment might need to remind herself of the importance of truth telling, but no virtuous person would need to do this.<sup>74</sup> To avoid at least the latter objection, we could amend the theory so that it says, not that right action is what an informed virtuous agent would do in the circumstances, but that right action is what an informed virtuous agent would want the agent to do in the circumstances.<sup>75</sup> Imagine an agent to have a fully informed and fully virtuous counterpart. The good or right thing to do is what that counterpart would want the agent to do in the agent's actual circumstances.

We do not deny that there might be a conceptual connection of this form between the concept of right or good action and the concept of a virtuous agent. For it seems part of the concept of virtue that no virtuous agent would knowingly act wrongly, nor would a virtuous agent want anyone else to act wrongly. The key question, however, is whether the rightness of an action, or whether an action's goodness, is constituted by the response that an informed and virtuous agent would have

72. Hursthouse, pp. 70–71.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79, 77.

74. This style of objection is due to Bernard Williams. See his reply to John McDowell in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also Robert Johnson, "Virtue and Right," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 810–34. Oddly, Williams seems not to notice that his own brand of internalism is subject to similar problems. See Robert Johnson, "Internal Reasons and the Conditional Fallacy," *Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (1999): 53–71. See also David Sobel, "Explanation, Internalism, and Reasons for Action," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18 (2001): 218–35.

75. This proposal follows Peter Railton's strategy in "Facts and Values," *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 5–29. Michael Smith adopts a similar approach in his *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 151–77.

to it, or whether, instead, the virtuous agent responds to a rightness or a goodness that is already there in the action to be detected and that is constituted by the what of the action. As we saw, Foot seems to take the latter view. Hursthouse seems to take the former view. She accepts “some sort of reductionism of the concept of the Right,” but she rejects a “wholesale reduction” of other moral concepts, including the concepts of benefit, of the human good, and of the worthwhile.<sup>76</sup> But it is not clear why she accepts a reductionism of the Right. It seems to us much more plausible that a virtuous person does the right thing or the good thing because it is right or good—rather than, as Hursthouse holds, that acts are right or good because virtuous persons would perform them.<sup>77</sup> Not that the virtuous person must consciously think, “This is right, so I’ll do it” but, rather, that the virtuous person is sensitive to the morally significant features of the world.

Slote describes his theory as “agent-based” in the sense that it treats the “ethical status of acts as entirely derivative from independent and fundamental aretaic (as opposed to deontic) ethical characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals.”<sup>78</sup> He therefore needs to respond to the above challenge just as much as does Hursthouse. How can he do this?

What Slote says is that on his view, actions do not count as admirable or virtuous “*merely because* they are or would be done by someone who is in fact admirable or possessed of admirable inner states; they have to exhibit, express, or reflect such states or be such that they *would* exhibit, etc., such states if they occurred, in order to count as admirable or virtuous.”<sup>79</sup> And perhaps he thinks that a virtuous person can see that an act is such that it would “exhibit, express, or reflect” virtue if it were performed and she can perform it because of this. For instance, we might see that to give a cool drink to a man who is desperately thirsty would be thoughtful and perhaps also compassionate in the sense that it would express thoughtfulness or compassion. And we might give the man a cool drink for this reason. Slote can deny that virtuous persons do the right thing or the virtuous thing because the things are right or virtuous but also deny that these things are right because virtuous persons would do them. Instead he can insist that virtuous persons do good things because they are such that doing them would express their compassion or kindness or the like.

Slote in fact distinguishes between acts that are virtuous or admirable and acts that are obligatory. Virtuous or admirable acts are acts

76. Hursthouse, p. 82.

77. This formulation is from Slote, p. 5.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

either that do express admirable inner states or that would express such states if they occurred. But it is not obligatory to express virtue. What is obligatory is “not to act in ways that express inferior motives.”<sup>80</sup> Hence, for Slote, we can say, it is obligatory to do something just in case not to do it would be to express an inferior inner state. It is virtuous or admirable to do something that expresses an admirable inner state.

To understand this view, we need to understand under what circumstances Slote would take an action to express a given inner state. Three things are important. First, Slote’s view is holistic. It evaluates an action based on the agent’s total motivation, including both states of character and general dispositions, rather than “single occurrent” motives.<sup>81</sup> Second, an agent’s total motivation can include a tendency to act out of character in some circumstances, and so, rightly understood, for Slote a person never acts contrary to her total motivation.<sup>82</sup> Third, it appears that, for Slote, an act “expresses” a given agent’s total motivation just in case the act is performed intentionally by the agent, the agent has this total motivation at the time of the action, and the act is caused in the standard way by this total motivation.<sup>83</sup> We will see, however, that there is room for other interpretations of Slote’s view and for amendments to address worrisome objections.

One consequence of his view is that Slote must say that everything done intentionally by a person whose overall motivation is vicious is wrong. Everything such a person does intentionally expresses his vicious overall motivation and it is obligatory not to express such a motivation. So for anything such a person might do, it is obligatory that he not do it. Marisa Coulter, in Philip Pullman’s *The Amber Spyglass*, is utterly corrupt and cruel, cold and malicious, yet she loves her daughter, and she sacrifices her life to save her daughter. Slote must say not only that Coulter’s action was not admirable, since her total motivation was not admirable, but that her action was wrong, or at least that it was obligatory for her not to do it. Moreover, Slote must say that even if Coulter had done nothing to save her daughter, her action wouldn’t have been worse if her total motivation was not worse. So if Coulter had failed to save

80. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

83. *Ibid.*, pp. 32–37. Slote does not discuss what he means by “expressing” a total motivation, so we are speculating based on remarks in the text. We should explain the qualification that requires an act to be caused in the “standard way.” Consider an example, due to Donald Davidson, in which a rock climber releases his grip on a rope, causing his companion to fall, but does this as a result of nervousness caused by realizing that his total motivation includes, say, a strong love of his companion such that his life would be ruined if he let his companion fall. Presumably Slote would not view the climber’s releasing his grip as expressing this total motivation.

her daughter, that too would have been wrong, since that too would have expressed her overall vicious character.

We do not find this view tempting. Coulter knew that, for reasons too complex to explain, if her daughter were to die, the result would be the destruction of all consciousness in the universe. Surely Coulter did the right thing even though she was decidedly an evil woman, and surely too she did an admirable thing, given that she decided after all to accept a frightening and terrible death in order to save her daughter.

Slote must also say that everything done intentionally by a person whose overall motivation is admirable is admirable, and that nothing done by such a person is wrong, even if it leads to unexpected and unintended horrible consequences. But although Coulter's daughter Lyra has an overall character that is highly admirable, she does have a tendency to lie and deceive. Slote must say that since Lyra's overall motivation is admirable, whatever she does is admirable, even when she lies on a whim because she thinks it will be fun, and he must also say that nothing she ever does is wrong. Lyra does not think that whatever she does will be admirable and that nothing she does will be wrong. She often needs to figure out what to do, and it would be useless, not to mention false, to tell her not to worry because nothing she does will be wrong or less than admirable. When she decided to go into the world of the dead, thereby risking her life and risking the important project she knew she had to complete, she did not know whether she was doing the right and admirable thing or whether she was being overly sentimental and romantic. Neither does the reader. The fact that her overall motivation was admirable could hardly settle the issue.

Slote might reply to part of this criticism by arguing that if Lyra has a tendency to lie and deceive, then for his purposes she does not count as having an overall motivation that is admirable. This response misses the main point, however, for we can change the example and imagine that Lyra does not have a tendency to lie and deceive. The main thrust of our worry remains in place. Moreover, the suggested response creates the risk for Slote that no one but a moral saint would qualify as having an overall motivation that is admirable. This would be implausible in itself, and it would have the implausible implication that nothing done by an ordinary person is admirable. Indeed, it might imply that, since ordinary persons have overall motivations that are "inferior," everything they do intentionally is wrong.

Slote considers an objection to the effect that, on an agent-based view, the admirable person is subject to no genuine moral requirements since everything she does will express an admirable overall motivation. His reply is that, if we assume a version of free-will compatibilism, even a person who is totally benevolent could refuse to help someone and would thereby presumably be less admirable, since her total motivation

would now include some departure from total benevolence, and she would also therefore act in a way that is less admirable.<sup>84</sup> This reply fails to go to the heart of the matter, however. For the person's action would still express an overall admirable motivation. We are prepared to concede both that there are degrees to which actions can be admirable and that people are free to decide to act contrary to an existing motivational set such that they thereby would have a different total motivation than they otherwise would have had. It remains the case, however, that if we imagine that Lyra's total motivation is admirable, then, as long as this remains the case, nothing she does will be wrong. Moreover, as long as the overall admirable character of a person's total motivation does not change so as to cease to be admirable, every action she performs will be admirable, whether it be lying on a whim or saving someone's life at great risk to herself.

Consider the objection that an agent-based theory must reject the maxim that "ought" implies "can."<sup>85</sup> Consider again the situation faced by Marisa Coulter in which, whatever she does intentionally, it is obligatory that she not do it, since it will be done from an overall vicious and vile state of total motivation. This includes, of course, intentionally refraining from action, which is also precluded. It appears that she is unable to do anything that would fulfill her obligation not to express her vile total motivation. Slote considers this objection and replies that a thoroughly malevolent individual might have it in his power to refrain from hurting someone and that, if he did refrain, "the act of refraining would fail to express or reflect his malevolence and would therefore not count as wrong."<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, unless we have misinterpreted his theory, he is not entitled to this response. Slote says that his view evaluates actions based on their total motivation,<sup>87</sup> and, since his official formulations of the view evaluate actions based on the motivational states they express,<sup>88</sup> we took him to be committed to treating the state of mind that is "expressed" by an action to be the total motivation that is (in the standard way) its causal antecedent.<sup>89</sup> In replying to the "ought" implies "can" challenge, however, he seems to abandon this position. For consider again Marisa Coulter. Her total motivation is malevolent although it includes the love of her daughter. If, then, her act of saving her daughter's life is to be evaluated on the basis of its total motivation,

84. Slote, pp. 15–16.

85. Hurka, p. 226.

86. Slote, p. 17.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

and if it expresses its total motivation, then it is wrong, and anything she did would be wrong as long as her total motivation did not change.

It is important to realize that Slote is not driven to adopt this highly implausible view by his goal to devise an agent-based theory. An agent-based theory could give up holism, for example, and this would allow Slote to deal with the objection from “ought” implies “can” in the way he suggests he might. Slote could say that what matters to the ethical evaluation of an action is the element in the agent’s total motivation that actually caused the action (in the standard way), such that the action might not otherwise have been done. Such a view could say that Lyra’s lying was wrong and inadmirable on occasions when it was motivated by her love of deception. It could say that Coulter’s sacrificing her life to save her daughter was admirable and right, since it was motivated by her love of her daughter and since in sacrificing herself she acted contrary to her cold and malicious nature.

Slote was led to embrace holism in order to escape an objection, the objection that even if an action is motivated by love for a specific individual, it might involve neglecting the welfare of others, and so “it may demonstrate an overall bad character and may count as wrongdoing.”<sup>90</sup> But he might be able to answer the objection without embracing holism. To do so Slote would need to develop a nuanced account of what is involved in the expression of motives and states of character. Suppose we say that an element of a person’s total motivation is expressed in an action just in case the element actually caused the action (in the standard way), or was a causal factor (in the standard way), such that the action might not otherwise have been done. An account along these lines would permit Slote to say that an act motivated by love would be wrong if it involved neglect of others since it would not have been done if the person had had a more benevolent overall nature. In such a case the person’s lack of benevolence would be a causal factor in the action, and so it would count as being “expressed” by the action. An account along these lines would also permit Slote to agree that Lyra’s lying was wrong on occasions when it was motivated by her love of deception and to say that Coulter’s sacrificing her life to save her daughter was admirable and right, since it was motivated by her love of her daughter. In neither case were the remaining elements of the person’s overall motivation such that the action would not have been done in their absence.

Three views are on the table: There is Foot’s account, according to which certain kinds of action are wrong in virtue of “what” they are, independently of issues about virtue. There is the amended version of Hursthouse’s account, according to which an action is right just in case

90. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

it is what a fully informed virtuous person, responding in character, would want the agent do. And there is the amended version of Slote's account, according to which a right action is one that is motivated by a set of motivational states that contains no vicious or reprehensible element that plays an effective role.

We think that Foot's view is clearly the most plausible. Slote points the way toward the central point in saying that a person with the kind of motivation that his theory treats as fundamentally admirable would decide what to do only after paying close attention to "what most of us would take to be the morally relevant realities," including especially how precisely to realize "the aims and hopes" that are characteristic of one with the relevant kind of motivation. A caring person, for example, pays close attention to the facts about people's needs.<sup>91</sup> This seems correct, for reasons that are evident in Hurka's view that a virtue is a state of loving a good or of hating a bad. The fundamental idea in Hurka is that whether our overall state of character is admirable or not admirable depends on our attitudes and dispositions toward the goods and bads that we face in the world. For Hursthouse and Slote, it seems, the alternatives we face are morally neutral in themselves and they only gain a moral color by reflecting the moral color of the states of character or the motivational states that we can turn toward them. This view does not make sense of our admiration for the virtues, it seems to us. We admire the fact that a virtuous person is attuned to and energized by the morally relevant facts that she detects in the world. We do not see her virtue as a searchlight penetrating a world that would otherwise have no moral features at all; we see it as a telescope and source of energy that detects and strives and is admirable for these reasons.

It is facts about the alternatives a person must decide among, including such things as the impact the alternatives will have on people's ability to meet their needs, that determine what the person ought to do. It is not facts about what a virtuous person would want her to do, or facts about the motives that the person would actually be acting from if she were to do the various alternatives. If someone is drowning, for example, and if you can save her at no risk and at negligible cost to yourself, you ought to save her because otherwise her life will be wasted. It is because a life would otherwise be wasted that a virtuous person would want you to save her. And it is because a life would otherwise be wasted that you ought to save her. And this fact is independent of facts about what would actually move you to save her. The virtuousness of those that stand ready to help in such situations, it seems to us, is explained by the moral importance of what is at stake here. Such people love the right things, as Hurka would perhaps say, and it is this that we

91. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

admire about them. According to Slote, you would be wrong to save the drowning person if you would in fact be moved by malice toward the person who threw her in the water. But although your action clearly would not be admirable if you were moved by malice, saving the person is still, quite clearly, what you ought to do.

For these reasons, then, we think that Slote is mistaken to seek an agent-based theory in which the ethical status of acts is treated as derivative from aretaic ethical characterizations of inner states of persons. And likewise we think that Hursthouse is mistaken to seek a reduction of the concept of right action to the concept of virtue.

#### CONCLUSION

If one's goal is to see whether a coherent virtue theory can be developed that is as simple as a monistic consequentialism and that does no more violence to our intuitions than a monistic consequentialism, then perhaps Slote's argument is successful. Of course, some will no doubt think that Slote's position does more violence to our intuitions than is done by a monistic consequentialism, but Slote's theory would at least be a contender. Hursthouse's position would not be a contender, but she does not have the goal of proposing a rival to simple monistic consequentialism. Her central goal, we think, is to articulate the complexities of the interplay between virtue and right action and between a virtuous life and a good and flourishing life for a human. She certainly has brought out the complexities, but we are not at all optimistic about the prospects of grounding the virtues in the idea that a life of virtue is a flourishing life of natural goodness.

We think that a much more plausible overall moral view is available, but it is less ambitious of unification than is either Hursthouse or Slote. This view would acknowledge a several-fold distinction among kinds of evaluations of actions. Actions can be right or wrong. But they can also be admirable or not admirable. The view would treat the conceptual connection between virtue and right action as nonreductive. Hence, understood in this way, it would agree with the revised version of Hursthouse's account, according to which, roughly, an action is right just in case a fully informed virtuous person, reflecting on it and on the agent's situation, and thinking in character, would want the agent to do it. The view would seek to explain why virtue is admirable on the basis of the value of the attitudes that are intrinsic to virtue, including attitudes to right action and to moral goods and bads, and it would explain the value of these attitudes on the basis of the values of their objects. In this sense it would take the goods and bads and rights and wrongs that are extrinsic to character as more basic than the admirability of character. This of course is the basic idea lying behind Hurka's approach. But although the view would not take the admirability of character to



be morally basic, it would not take this to mean that issues about character are any less important to our moral life on this account. We would not worry about whether the upshot deserves to be called "virtue theory." For the view would place the virtues in a central place in moral theory even though it would acknowledge that a theory of the virtues cannot tell the whole story of what we care about.