

Character and Consequences

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In *The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick argued for the claim that virtue is not intrinsically good (Sidgwick 1907, 391-4). According to Sidgwick, since we explain what makes a character trait a virtue by appealing to its relation to the good, we cannot also attribute intrinsic goodness to virtue without circularity (Sidgwick 1907, 392). I will not attempt to elaborate on or defend Sidgwick's argument.¹ Rather, I will give an alternative argument for a similar conclusion. I will argue that if what makes a character trait a virtue is that it has good consequences, then virtue is not intrinsically good. Nor do facts about virtue help determine intrinsic goodness in more indirect ways; in fact, many roles for virtue in a moral theory are ruled out by the most plausible form of virtue consequentialism.

1. Virtue consequentialism and the role of virtue in moral theory

Suppose you are a consequentialist about morally right action. You think that the moral status of an action is determined by facts about the values of its consequences and the consequences of its alternatives. You might think that virtue can play a role in your theory, by partly determining the value of a consequence. Virtue might determine the value of a consequence in several ways.

Some have held that it is simply better if people are more virtuous; virtue is intrinsically good. For example, here is W.D. Ross: "The first thing for which I would claim that it is

¹ See Hurka 2001, 8-11 for a recent discussion of Sidgwick's argument.

intrinsically good is virtuous disposition and action” (Ross 1988, 134).² Thus, the existence of virtue would directly affect the value of a consequence.

A slightly more indirect way in which virtue might affect the value of a consequence is via well-being. If we think, with many of the ancients, that being virtuous makes one directly better off – that is, if virtue is a component of well-being – and we think the value of a consequence is determined partly by well-being facts, then virtue would indirectly affect the value of a consequence.

Some have held that it is a good thing when someone gets some deserved pleasure, and that virtue is a basis for desert. W.D. Ross and Shelly Kagan are two prominent examples. “Besides virtue and pleasure, we must recognize (3), as a third independent good, the apportionment of pleasure and pain to the virtuous and the vicious respectively” (Ross 1988, 138).³ “I will assume that the more deserving are more deserving by virtue of being more virtuous, and that the less deserving are so by virtue of being less virtuous—and that those who rank very low indeed in terms of how deserving they are do so by virtue of being vicious overall, rather than virtuous” (Kagan 2012, 6).

If you are a consequentialist about morally right action, you might also want to be a consequentialist about the virtues. Virtue consequentialism is roughly the view that virtues are character traits that have good consequences, and vices are character traits that have bad consequences. A defense of the view can be found in Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*: “Upon the whole, then, it seems undeniable, that nothing can bestow more merit on any human creature than the sentiment of benevolence in an eminent degree; and that a part, at

² Also see Hooker 2000, 36. Miller (2013) argues that Hooker undermines his rule-consequentialism by allowing that virtue is intrinsically good.

³ Feldman (2004) also holds that desert affects the value of pleasure; it is unclear whether he thinks virtue is a desert basis.

least, of its merit arises from its tendency to promote the interests of our species, and bestow happiness on human society.” (Hume 1975, 181) Such views can also be found in the work of G.E. Moore, G.H. Von Wright, Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Julia Driver, though of course there are important ways in which these philosophers differ on the nature of virtue.⁴

Virtue consequentialism is so plausible that, according to Brad Hooker, there is “no dispute among the main moral theories that the virtues are instrumentally valuable” (Hooker 2002, 22).

It stands to reason that if moral evaluations of actions are based on their consequences, then moral evaluations of character traits should be evaluated in the same way, since at least one main reason to care about character traits is because of the actions they produce. But you might want to be a consequentialist about the virtues even though you are not a consequentialist about morally right action. This is because certain sorts of considerations make virtue consequentialism an attractive view. For instance, in many parts of the world, at many times, homosexuality has been considered to be a vice (or perhaps a “sin,” and therefore a vice).⁵ This attitude has drastically changed in the last few decades in the U.S. One reason may be that in cases where the way a person is does not make anyone worse off, it becomes difficult to see why we should think that this is a bad way to be. And then we begin to think that the view that homosexuality is a vice is the result of some irrational thought process, or mere feelings of discomfort, or mere religious dogma. Virtue consequentialism, then, promises to be revisionary with respect to our attitudes

⁴ Moore 1903, Ch. V; Von Wright 1963, Ch. VII; Foot 1978, Ch. I; Hursthouse 1999; Driver 2001. One way in which they differ concerns whether the benefits of virtue accrue to the agent, or to humanity, or to the whole of creation. Such difference will not play a role in the arguments contained herein.

⁵ It might be wondered whether this is a category mistake – is homosexuality even the sort of thing that could be a virtue or vice? This will depend on whether virtues and vices are merely dispositions to have certain feelings and perform certain behaviors; but in any case there is no reason why we should not evaluate such dispositions.

about virtue and vice. In the case of homosexuality, it seems to be revisionary in a good way; it provides a corrective to past “commonsense” beliefs about virtue and vice that are unjustified.⁶

A virtue consequentialist can also account for the plausible idea that whether a character trait is a virtue may depend on the circumstances, and so may change over time (Moore 1903, 173; Driver 2001, 84-5). A trait might have good consequences given certain circumstances but not others, so as circumstances change, the status of a trait can change.⁷

Of course, some will find virtue consequentialism *too* revisionary. We might think that there are character traits such that no matter how good their consequences might be, they just are not virtues. I will not attempt to monger intuitions that bear directly on the truth of virtue consequentialism one way or the other. Rather, my concern in this paper is to determine what the place of virtue is in moral theory on the supposition that virtue consequentialism is true. I will argue that, perhaps surprisingly, the consequentialist about morally right action who seeks a place for virtue in her theory should *not* be a consequentialist about the virtues. If virtue consequentialism is true, then the value of the consequence of an action cannot be determined by facts about virtue; nor can virtue be a component of well-being; nor can it be a ground for deserving happiness. This leaves virtue consequentialism in an uncomfortable position, for it is unclear what sort of moral theorist would be motivated to hold this view.

2. Moore's Virtue Consequentialism

⁶ Hursthouse's view has been alleged to have difficulty accounting for the fact that homosexuality is not a vice (Hooker 2002, 36-38). But this criticism does not apply to all consequentialist theories of virtue- only, at most, those like Hursthouse's that require virtues to promote the survival of the species.

⁷ This is of course not to say that virtue consequentialism is the only view that can accommodate such relativity to circumstances.

I'll begin by focusing on G.E. Moore's discussion of virtue consequentialism, since his simple formulation clearly brings out some important problems the virtue consequentialist must face. Moore makes a first pass at formulating virtue consequentialism in the following passage from *Principia Ethica*: "Accordingly a virtue may be defined as an habitual disposition to perform certain actions, which generally produce the best possible results" (Moore 1903, 172).

Moore then notes that some dispositions have good consequences even though they are "interested" or selfish. It seems wrong to call such dispositions virtues. So he offers a qualification: "virtues are distinguished from other useful dispositions... by the fact that they are dispositions, which it is particularly useful to praise and to sanction, because there are strong and common temptations to neglect the actions to which they lead" (Moore 1903, 172). This is Moore's way of accounting for the notion that, as Philippa Foot says, virtues "are *corrective*, each one standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good" (Foot 1978, 8; see also Von Wright 1963, 147-150). According to Moore, there are two distinct criteria a disposition must meet in order to count as a virtue: the disposition must produce the best possible results – presumably when compared to alternative dispositions one might have instead – and praising the disposition must also have good results. This seems to be Moore's considered view about virtue. We might wonder whether it is really the case that, whenever a character trait has the best consequences and there are strong and common temptations to fail to perform actions that a character trait produces, it is useful to praise that character trait. And we might wonder whether there might be dispositions that it is useful to praise even though there are not strong or common temptations to neglect the actions to which they lead. I suspect there is not such a tight connection between praise and temptation. But I would like to focus on the basic virtue consequentialist thought that virtues are dispositions to

produce the best possible results, and put aside the qualification about the usefulness of praising a disposition.

Moore's formulation of virtue consequentialism has at least two problems. First, it entails that it is very difficult to be virtuous. In order to be virtuous, one must be disposed to produce the *best possible* results. Producing results that are very good, but not the best, would not count as being virtuous. This seems implausible.⁸ Secondly, Moore's view does not have anything to say about how to compare dispositions with respect to virtue unless one of them produces the best results. He gives us only a criterion for being fully virtuous, but intuitively two people might both be virtuous to a degree even though one is more virtuous than the other, and two vicious people might be vicious to different degrees.

To solve the second problem, we might introduce an additional principle that tells us how to rank two sub-optimal dispositions. The obvious thing to say is that trait T1 ranks higher on the virtue/vice scale than trait T2 iff T1 leads to better results than T2. Here of course we will have to hold circumstances fixed, since one character trait in favorable circumstances might lead to good results and another character trait in unfavorable circumstances might lead to bad results; this would not be a fair comparison of the two traits.

While adding the comparative principle makes Moore's view more complete, the view as it stands still has implications that are hard to swallow, even supposing that we are sympathetic to virtue consequentialism. Adding the comparative principle does nothing to help with the first problem: only the *best* dispositions count as virtues. Besides just being very demanding, this idea leads to unpalatable results when we try to put virtue to work in other areas. Suppose we think that happiness is valuable only when experienced by the virtuous. If someone has a nearly but not quite maximally good set of dispositions, that person's happiness would not be a good thing,

⁸ Michael Slote makes this point about maximizing theories of character traits and motives (1984, 159).

but a neutral or bad thing. Suppose we think that virtue is a component of well-being; then we would have to say that that person's dispositions do not make her better off. We shouldn't saddle the virtue consequentialist with these implausible claims.

The problem, then, is to figure out a threshold above which a disposition is a virtue and below which it is a vice. This is a problem for which I see no solution; in the end, I'll argue in the next section, the virtue consequentialism is left with *only* a comparative principle.

3. Against thresholds

Julia Driver formulates virtue consequentialism in a non-maximizing way, precisely in order to avoid the demandingness of maximizing views such as Moore's. According to Driver, moral virtues are "character traits that systematically produce more actual good than not" (Driver 2001, 68). Here seems to be the idea: to determine whether a character trait is a virtue at some world, or in some set of circumstances, look at the value of what it causes there. If a trait causes events with overall positive intrinsic value, it is a virtue; if it causes events with overall negative intrinsic value, it is a vice. The more positive value a trait causes, the more of a virtue it is; the more negative value it causes, the more of a vice it is.

But Driver's view runs into problems when we consider scenarios in which there are different possibilities of bringing about positive or negative value.⁹ In Horribleland, resources are very scarce. Earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and volcano eruptions cause nearly constant suffering for the inhabitants. Furthermore there are dangerous monsters everywhere that attack and kill people. Even the best possible character trait fails to bring about positive value overall; the best one can do is mitigate people's suffering. In Wonderfultopia, there are chocolate

⁹ For further discussion of this problem for Driver's view, see Bradley 2005.

mountains, everyone is happy all the time and impervious to injury, and the average lifespan is 1000 years. There are no tornadoes or monsters. Even the worst character trait has overall positive results. We shouldn't say that everyone in Wonderfultopia is virtuous and everyone in Horribleland is vicious. If someone in Horribleland devotes her life to preventing suffering, and succeeds in preventing a lot of suffering (even if only a very tiny portion of the enormous suffering in that world), it would be very implausible to deny that she is virtuous even if she fails thereby to produce anything of positive intrinsic value. If someone in Wonderfultopia devotes his life to preventing others from enjoying themselves as much as possible, and he succeeds, we shouldn't deny that he is vicious merely because he fails to bring about anything intrinsically bad. What was originally thought to be a selling point for virtue consequentialism, that whether something is a virtue depends on the circumstances, turns out to be a serious problem for Driver's view; the circumstances can wholly drown out other factors.

To avoid this problem, we might instead look at how good things could possibly be, and how bad they could be, if people had different sorts of dispositions. We could say that to be virtuous is to meet some threshold between the best and worst, or to produce some sufficient percentage of available utility. Thus when circumstances are very favorable, one must produce more goodness than when they are very unfavorable. But where would such a threshold be located? There are two possibilities, but neither is attractive. (1) Perhaps there is a constant threshold of, say, 80% of available goodness that must be produced, whether circumstances are favorable or not, in order for a trait to count as virtuous. But any such view will seem horribly arbitrary.¹⁰ It will also entail that a character trait can go from being a virtue to being a vice merely by the elimination of some particularly awful possibilities, or can go from vice to virtue

¹⁰ The best way for the satisficer to reply to worries about arbitrariness is probably to adopt a contextualist view along the lines of Jenkins and Nolan (2010). But this is to adopt a view that is essentially identical to the contrastivist view described below.

by the addition of such possibilities. This kind of solution to the problem does not seem promising. (2) Perhaps the threshold changes depending on the circumstances, and there is just a brute fact about where the threshold is located given those circumstances. But this “particularist” move is not very consequentialist in spirit. Once we admit such brute facts into our theory of virtue, there seems little reason to focus only on consequences; we might as well just say that there are brute facts about which character traits are the virtues, which would be to reject the need for a theory of virtue at all.

Now, it is possible that the virtue consequentialist could introduce other elements into the view that would help us to identify an objective threshold. It is unclear what those elements might be. In their absence, it seems that for the virtue consequentialist, all roads lead to what I call the “contrastivist” view of virtue.¹¹ According to this view, there is no fact of the matter concerning how instrumentally good some character trait is, and therefore no such thing as a virtue *simpliciter*; rather, the virtue facts are of the form *it is a virtue (i.e. it is instrumentally good) to have character trait T1 rather than T2*. The contrastivist view respects the idea that what makes a character trait a virtue is the difference it makes to the world, where this is determined by how much better or worse it is that people have that character trait than not. But there are many ways to lack a character trait, and there is no context-independent default character trait to which to compare the consequences of a trait. So we must just give up on the idea that a virtue is a character trait with “good consequences” – for we must immediately ask, “good compared to what?” *Conversational context* will normally tell us which character trait is serving as the comparison. Virtue is in this way like tallness. People can be sorted by the taller-than relation, but there is no unique way to divide people into tall and short; likewise they can be

¹¹ The contrastivist view of virtue is relevantly like contrastivist views of causation (Hitchcock 1996, Schaffer 2005), knowledge (Schaffer 2004) and good action (Norcross 1997).

sorted by the more-virtuous-than relation, but there is no unique way to divide them into the virtuous and the vicious. Just as we can truly say “Joan is tall,” we can truly say “trait T is a virtue”; in Joan’s case the context supplies a comparison class of heights, while in T’s case the context supplies an alternative trait. In neither case should we suppose that there is some objective threshold for being tall or virtuous.

Note that the context-sensitivity here is *conversational* context, not physical context. Given one and the same physical context, a character trait might count as a virtue or not depending on what we, in thinking about that context, take to be the relevant comparison trait. As noted above, one of the attractive features of virtue consequentialism is the relativity of virtue to physical context; changing circumstances affect the consequences of a trait, and therefore its status as a virtue (though I also argued that this relativity lays the seeds for a problem with locating the threshold between virtue and vice). These can include broader societal circumstances such as the scarcity of resources, or individual circumstances. For instance, a certain degree of honesty might be virtuous for a typical citizen but not a diplomat; ordinarily, we allow an individual’s job or other life situation to play some role, even if a limited one, in determining what traits a person should have, and virtue consequentialism is well equipped to explain this fact. However, the sort of context-relativity I have here claimed virtue consequentialism is committed to is *not* merely this relativity to physical context, for it entails that there is no objective fact of the matter, even relative to a physical context, about whether a character trait is a virtue or a vice. I turn now to the problems this relativity introduces.

4. Implications of contrastivism

Suppose the consequentialist about the virtues should accept a contrastivist account. Then there is no threshold above which character traits are really virtues, and below which they are really vices. What are the implications? There are potential theological implications. If your theology says that the virtuous go to heaven and the vicious go to hell, there will be no fact of the matter, for those not at the outermost extremes, about which direction they go. But let us focus on the implications for moral theory.

First, consider the question of whether virtue is a direct benefit to the agent, i.e. a constituent of well-being. If there is no threshold, then there is no fact of the matter about whether the contribution a particular character trait makes to the well-being of the agent is positive or negative. There are some facts in the neighborhood, such as that trait T1 is better for the agent than T2. That is a good thing to know, and if I am reasoning prudentially, I will prefer having T1 to T2 if it has better consequences, since T1 would then be better for me than T2. But without a fact of the matter about whether T1 is a virtue *simpliciter*, and hence no fact of the matter about whether T1 makes a positive or negative contribution to the value of my life for me, there are certain decisions that become impossible to make. For example, if there is no fact of the matter about whether T1 makes a positive or negative contribution to my welfare, there may be no fact of the matter concerning whether my own life is on balance good for me or not; hence there will be no fact of the matter concerning whether it would be beneficial for me to commit suicide or continue living. There will also be no fact of the matter concerning whether I benefit my children by bringing them into existence.

Similar problems will beset the idea that it is a good thing, *simpliciter*, for there to be virtuous people (Ross). We can say that it is better if people have one character trait rather than another. But there will be no fact of the matter concerning whether it is good that people with

some character trait exist, and thus no fact of the matter concerning whether we improve the world by bringing more people into existence.

Now consider the question of whether happiness in proportion to virtue is a good thing. If there is no fact about whether Agent A is virtuous, but only facts about whether A is more or less virtuous than other agents, then it is not determinate whether A deserves happiness or not; so it is not determinate whether it would be better for A to receive some happiness or some unhappiness, or neither.

These problems will in turn work their way throughout the rest of moral theory. They will cause problems for the view that there is even a mere *prima facie* obligation to make things better. For given a choice between bringing about some happiness for an agent or refraining from doing so, there is no fact of the matter about which alternative would make things better, and thus no fact of the matter about what *prima facie* obligations you have.

What are our options? If we accept the consequentialist account of virtue, then we must, it seems, deny that virtue plays any of these roles in moral theory. It does not make an agent's life go better; it does not make the world better; it is not a basis for the desert of happiness (or else desert of happiness itself fails to make the world better). And then we have to wonder: does virtue play any role at all in moral theory? Or is virtue otiose? The roles I have discussed here are not the only possible roles that virtue can play. Some have of course argued that what makes an act morally permissible is that it is an act that a fully virtuous person would characteristically perform in the circumstances (Hursthouse 1999, Ch. 1); since, on this view, we do not need to worry about ranking suboptimal character traits or locating a threshold between virtue and vice, the considerations raised in this paper do not undermine the possibility that virtue could play this

role. (Others have argued, to my mind convincingly, that virtue ethics of this sort is not plausible; see e.g. Johnson 2003.)

If we think virtue plays any role in the evaluation of lives or outcomes, we ought to reject a consequentialist account of virtue. But this is disappointing, for the thought that virtues must be beneficial was an intuitively plausible thought. It has been found plausible even by staunch anti-consequentialists such as Foot. And it is not just that we would have to reject a fully consequentialist account of virtue. If we think that the consequences of a character trait have any relevance at all to whether that trait is a virtue, we will encounter these same problems.

A final note. These considerations also bear on a more abstract debate about intrinsic goodness. The consequentialist view of virtue holds that virtues are *instrumentally* good. This is of course compatible with the virtues also being *intrinsically* good.¹² It has recently been argued that something can be intrinsically good *in virtue of* being instrumentally good (Kagan 1998; Dorsey 2012). But the considerations raised here show that this is impossible. When someone claims that character trait T1 is instrumentally good, context must supply some contrasting trait T2; the claim that T1 is instrumentally good is elliptical for the claim that the world is made better by T1 than it would be if people had T2. Thus if instrumental goodness is a ground for intrinsic goodness, then intrinsic goodness is relative to a contrast class too. It is one thing to say that something is intrinsically good in virtue of some non-intrinsic property it has; it is quite another thing to say that the truth of a claim about intrinsic goodness *depends on the context of utterance or evaluation*. For example, Kagan finds it plausible to say that the pen used by Abraham Lincoln to sign the emancipation proclamation has intrinsic value in virtue of this historical connection (Kagan 1998). Whether one can truly ascribe this historical property to the

¹² Some prefer the term “finally good” rather than “intrinsically good.” I intend to use the term “intrinsically good” in a broad way that picks out what is picked out by “finally good” if there is such a thing.

pen does not depend on the context of utterance. Whether one can ascribe instrumental value to the pen, however, does depend on the context of utterance; and it seems very implausible to say that ascriptions of intrinsic value could be context-dependent in this way. Thus if a virtue has intrinsic value, its intrinsic value cannot derive from its instrumental value, on pain of relativism. This lends support to the claim that a thing's intrinsic value depends solely on its intrinsic properties (Moore 1922). This claim is only partially supported, for we have shown only that there is one sort of non-intrinsic property, *being instrumentally good*, that cannot be a ground for intrinsic goodness.¹³

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