

Virtues and Value: How Virtue Theory Plugs a Gap in Practice-Consequentialism

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Article Info

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received 23 November 2022

Received in revised 21
December 2022

Accepted 26 December 2022

Published online 1 January
2023

Keywords:

practice - consequentialism,
virtue ethics, optimific
practices, practical guidance,
green virtues.

ABSTRACT

What confers their value on genuine virtues, it is argued, consists in the intrinsic value that instantiating them in thought and action standardly brings about. This granted, virtue theory is argued to be capable of plugging a gap in consequentialist theories of the kind that make actions right which either exemplify optimific practices or are directly optimific. Compliance with optimific practices like truth-telling makes the relevant actions right, subject to certain exceptions. But even if such compliance is combined with the optimificity of beneficent actions, considered singly, that do not exemplify these practices, the resulting theory of rightness remains gap-ridden. The gap can be filled if it is granted that virtuous actions are generally optimific, and this knowledge is incorporated into consequentialist theories of rightness. Thus where no optimific practices are relevant, and no actions are manifestly directly optimific, dispositions of a generally optimific character (virtues) can rightly be adopted.

Cite this article: Attfield, R. (2023). Virtues and Value: How Virtue Theory Plugs a Gap in Practice-Consequentialism. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 16(41), 471-478. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2022.15860>



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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2022.15860>

Publisher: University of Tabriz.

Introduction

I begin with the question of what makes moral virtues like generosity, courage and fairness morally desirable. There is no self-evident answer to this question, and the answers offered by philosophers are various and often conflicting.

Thus Rosalind Hursthouse suggests the individual survival of the virtuous person, human survival, enjoyment and good group functioning (Hursthouse 2002). By contrast, Brad Hooker suggests wellbeing, implicitly including in this the wellbeing of nonhumans as well as that of humans (Hooker 2002). While I myself incline to Hooker's answer, what is most important here is that what makes virtues desirable is rightly assumed to be something intrinsically desirable; it is the intrinsic good that virtues either bring about or instantiate that makes them desirable. It is because the moral virtues largely promote wellbeing, and wellbeing is widely agreed to be intrinsically desirable, that I incline to Hooker's answer. Moral virtues are dispositions of which the characteristic exercise benefits the parties on which they impact; and often, albeit not always, virtuous activities embody the development of central human capacities, the ability to exercise which is itself a constituent of wellbeing. Hence they characteristically generate intrinsic value, and often but not always instantiate it. This, I suggest, granted that they also involve dispositions based on choices on the part of responsible agents, is what makes them morally desirable, or rather, morally desirable to a qualified extent; for there are, as we shall see, sometimes reasons to regard them as less than morally desirable.

If this account of the value of moral virtues is along the right lines, then there is a moral case for the pursuit of these virtues. But because being virtuous sometimes falls short of making the greatest available difference to the balance of good outcomes over bad ones (or of being optimific), and sometimes clashes with important optimific practices, I am reluctant to treat virtue ethics as providing a satisfactory account of right action or as the best action-guide in all circumstances. Some acts of courage, for example, could also be described as acts of suicide, without anyone being benefited, or without enough benefit arising to justify such acts. And some deeds of loyalty, itself usually regarded as among the moral virtues, also involve either breaking promises or telling lies, when there is insufficient reason to justify the infringement of the relevant overwhelmingly optimific practices, keeping promises, that is, and telling the truth.

In this paper I want to consider how theories of rightness that urge compliance with optimific practices might nevertheless be fortified by theories that advocate behaving (and feeling) in accordance with optimific virtues, and how such theories have the capacity to enable their adherents to respond to issues of global climate change. Others may take the view that it would be more promising to begin elsewhere, say with contractarianism or with Kantianism.

But contractarian theories suffer from a major problem, namely that the principles deriving from contracts exclude the interests of parties unable to share in contract-making, or at least have great difficulties in attempting to include them. These parties include future people, non-human creatures, and future generations of these creatures. While this may or may not be a definitive

problem, it at least makes more promising the enterprise of starting with theories that are not beset by so deep a problem.

Kantian theories profess to be unconcerned about the consequences of actions, and focus rather on the maxims of action, and thus on the intentions and attitudes of agents. But in face of global climate change, issues of what our actions bring about, and thus of the consequences of action, must be regarded as central ones within moral concern (Jamieson 2007, 161). Some of Kant's own examples appear to support his approach, but are open to interpretation as in fact examples of the strength of consequentialism; we shall return to such matters below.

While these remarks are insufficient to disqualify contractarian and Kantian theories from consideration altogether, the overwhelming optimific character of practices such as truth-telling and promise-keeping appears to require their inclusion in any satisfactory normative ethic, and precisely because of their overwhelmingly optimific character. But this suggests that a satisfactory theory of normative ethics should include the rightness of adherence to optimific practices such as these, whether grounded in virtuous dispositions or not. This is a stance that I have called 'practice-consequentialism' [Attfield 2019, 2021]. Of itself, this element does not form a comprehensive theory of rightness, because there are numerous situations where no such optimific practice is available or relevant; but that does not mean that its place in a satisfactory theory of normative ethics is in question, or that compliance is not obligatory, and therefore right, in all but highly exceptional circumstances.

Incidentally the rightness of compliance with such practices may well comprise the reason why some of Kant's examples of the Categorical Imperative appear so convincing; for making lying promises would be an instance of infringing not one but two such practices, much of the value of which turns on widespread compliance. We cannot generalise from examples such as this one and draw the Kantian conclusion that maxims that cannot be followed by everyone should be followed by no one, because there are many harmless deeds, many of them virtuous, that would be declared impermissible on this basis. An example would be spending one's life teaching philosophy. But Kant's choice of example happens to latch on to optimific practices which genuinely should figure in any satisfactory normative ethic, albeit not for the reasons that he supplies.

But how should normative ethicists proceed, so as to cover cases where no optimific practice is available or relevant? Cases where practices of this kind are not yet in place but are viable and increasing, such as abstention from bribery, should in my view be added to the set of right-making practices, even if participation in such not-yet-universal practices calls for some degree of self-sacrifice. Yet the addition of what might be called prospective optimific practices, an addition that I believe to be justified, is still insufficient to supply a complete theory either of permissibility or of obligation or of rightness.

The obvious way for a normative theorist to proceed beyond this point is to adopt some direct form of consequentialism, one which, actual and prospective optimific practices aside, takes to be right acts which, as far as the foreseeable impacts of action are concerned, are optimific. Despite all the problems of foreseeing the future, human agents can at least sometimes foresee actions and pathways for enhancing the world in ways in which, far from depending on actual or prospective optimific practices, the world around them can be positively transformed for the envisageable future. Examples might include the acts of founding Universities such as Queen's University, Belfast, over a hundred and fifty years ago, and the decision to form the British National Health Service seventy years ago. This granted, there must, I suggest, be a place in a satisfactory normative ethic for the rightness of actions of this kind, actions, that is, with a foreseeable balance of good consequences over bad ones.

However, the future is notoriously difficult to foresee, predict and calculate, and if we were obliged to rely on predictions of optimificity for all the situations where neither recognised nor prospective optimific practices are available and relevant, there would be insufficient time to perform the large number of calculations that would be needed. We would also sometimes miscalculate, as James Lenman has argued, although a theory based on foreseeable consequences may fare better than the kind of theory based on total consequences, the kind that Lenman (2000) targets. Besides, to the extent that decisions could be made at all, social life would become unstable to a high degree if this theory were widely adopted and acted upon, society being plunged into a plethora of well-intentioned but uncoordinated actions, many failing to exhibit the foresight which their authors might have believed them to embody.

Evidence of this can be snatched from an adjacent field, the attempts of horse-racing punters to predict the winners of races; for at least in this field, the majority fail and usually lose much of their money. The problems of predicting the actions of people we are well acquainted with are not quite as overwhelming as those of predicting which of a set of fairly evenly-matched horses will prove swifter than the others. Yet, the problems with predicting human actions are frequently severe, for the reactions of other agents to our own actions are often difficult to foresee, even when they are foreseeable; and the responses of people belonging to other cultures and of future people are usually even more unfathomable. Further, many actions, such as those which cause different people to be brought into being from those who would have been brought into being in the absence of these actions, will foreseeably have long-term impacts, but what these will be in coming generations is all the more difficult to foretell.

Hence there is a significant and serious gap in those consequentialist theories of rightness which seek to supplement actions made right by adherence to recognised or prospective optimific practices with actions made right by their foreseeable optimific consequences. Indeed, in view of the problems of predictability and co-ordination just mentioned, this gap does not disappear even

when there is agreement about which impacts have intrinsic value and should therefore be included in calculations of optimific impacts, and which should not.

This is the point at which to bring in the insight of Hooker, that rule-consequentialism and virtue ethics need not be regarded as too distantly related to one another, and have much in common (Hooker, 2002, 40), and also the insight of Jamieson, that the problems of calculation indicate that consequentialism should focus on the traits of character that tend to have beneficial consequences (Jamieson, 2007, 182), particularly in face of the problems of ‘global environmental change’. (Jamieson uses this phrase for ‘mass extinctions, climate change and ozone depletion’ (2007, 160). It is certainly desirable for theories of rightness to take account of impacts on the environment, and, even though such theories should not focus on environmental impacts alone, there are in any case grounds for theories of rightness to endorse actions that exhibit traits of character which tend to produce a benign balance of consequences across the board. (As Jamieson observes in a footnote, this view has also been defended by Roger Crisp (Crisp, 1992; Jamieson, 2007, 182).)

While Jamieson does not endorse all the traditional cardinal virtues, there is much to be said for including in a theory of rightness the virtues of courage, prudence, temperance and justice, rather as Aristotle did, not on the grounds that these virtues benefit the agent who exercises them, but on the different grounds that they are prone to benefit all the affected parties, including the agent, but also including others, not excluding non-human others. While there is a case for saying this about temperance, I will return shortly to issues of the interpretation of this cardinal virtue, for much will depend on how these virtues are interpreted. The extent to which these virtues benefit non-human others also depends on how justice is construed, for some philosophers deny that justice is due to non-humans at all, but more recently others, among whom I include myself, have taken the contrary view [Attfield and Humphreys 2016, 2017]. Since this is not the occasion to ventilate that controversy, let us assume for present purposes that the virtue of justice can be understood as focussing on the needs of non-human creatures as well as human beings, and proceed on this basis. Even so, the four traditional cardinal virtues are insufficient, and the list of virtues needs to be supplemented, so as to include other virtues which are also arguably optimific overall, such as generosity and mercy.

So the suggestion that I want to consider is that the gap in consequentialist theory can be plugged by inserting, alongside compliance with optimific practices and optimific prospective practices, and alongside single actions that are clearly optimific, adherence to a range of virtues. If so, it will be right, and not misguided, to ask whether a proposed action is the action of (say) a generous person or of a fair-minded person, agents, that is, who have developed dispositions to act generously and fair-mindedly. This being so, then agents should act in that manner, unless there are strong reasons to do otherwise. This is because there are good reasons to hold that compliance with the virtues, as well as with optimific established and prospective social practices, makes the

world a better place overall, particularly if a majority of people in a society comply with these virtues, and even more so if large numbers of people in every society do so.

But even if it is agreed that theories of rightness should include participation in and cultivation of the virtues, there remains the issue of which virtues should be embodied and cultivated. In this connection, Jamieson presents three examples of such virtues, humility, temperance and mindfulness. I shall suggest that it is varieties of these virtues rather than these virtues in general that we should cultivate.

Take humility. As Jamieson says, a humble person would not destroy redwood forests, even if utility might seem to encourage such destruction. But a humble person might also hold that his or her actions (or inaction) can make no difference to global problems, and are unlikely to be shared in by enough others for a significant difference to be made; and they might also suppose that their own influence on the behaviour of others is too slight to make a difference, and thus refrain from e.g. signing petitions or taking part in demonstrations. It looks, then, as if the kind of humility that should be cultivated combines the non-destructiveness and relative lack of egoism of traditional (Biblical) humility with a regard for collective action and solidarity, since in the absence of the latter, opportunities to change the world are liable to be missed.

When it comes to temperance, Jamieson recognises that this virtue needs to be rehabilitated, with an increased stress on self-restraint and moderation. This stance I can support, with the caveat that moderation may be in place where it concerns one's personal desires and ambitions, but not where it involves having a limited vision and prioritising compromise over trenchant policies. Temperance, I suggest, requires a stronger form of rehabilitation than Jamieson suggests; blinkered moderation is not really virtuous, and it is open-minded moderation that can be regarded as both virtuous and as optimific in general.

Another green virtue commended by Jamieson is mindfulness, which he considers a new virtue introduced to supplement traditional ones. In Jamieson's exposition of mindfulness, an awareness of the consequences of one's actions is prominent, including consequences remote in space and time, and including systemic consequences such as the impacts of the cultivation of such fibres as the cotton that one chooses to buy and wear. (It is notable that in such matters Jamieson holds that consequences, including distant ones, can be known and taken into account; but here, I suggest we can support his view.) Once again I would wish to endorse tendencies of this kind, but without necessarily endorsing the desirability of other varieties of mindfulness, such as self-awareness and meditation. While these varieties may also be desirable on occasion, they do not seem central to the green-virtue version of mindfulness that Jamieson commends.

In a footnote, Jamieson discusses whether or not cooperativeness should be regarded as a further green virtue, or just a quality which people with 'a particular constellation of virtues' would show (Jamieson, 2007, 182). As he also says, it is also needed for successfully addressing collective action problems. It could reasonably be held to form a corrective to some of the forms taken by

traditional humility and traditional temperance, and to mindfulness in the forms in which it is often recommended. So I incline to regard it as itself a virtue, here going beyond Jamieson's more tentative approach.

Other green virtues, such as care to save and recycle resources, and other general virtues, such as generosity, courage and fair-mindedness (virtues commended above), could reasonably be suggested. But here it is more appropriate to return to theories of rightness, and ask whether compliance with optimific practices (actual and prospective) and the cultivation of optimific virtues supplies a complete account of rightness.

There will, however, sometimes be strong reasons to diverge from these practices and, there again, from these virtues, as was mentioned close to the outset. Thus it may be right to infringe humility and moderation and explain to others that they are wrong to refuse to change lifestyles and reduce their carbon footprint. And it may be right to break a promise and donate the money saved to an environmental charity. In short, theories of rightness should include the qualification that normally optimific practices and virtues should be abandoned in cases where infringing them is clearly optimific.

Critics might at this stage claim that this provision re-introduces the need for constant calculation, rejected above. For, it might be said, we can never be sure that the current moment is not the one in which optimific practices or virtues should be infringed, and must therefore be continually checking whether or not we have landed in a situation that requires a divergence from these practices or virtues. Yet it has been acknowledged both that such calculation is frequently impossible, that no one would have enough time to carry out such a programme of calculation, and that if agents were to adopt plans to attempt this, social life would become disjointed.

There is, however, a reply. In standard daily situations, there is no reason to suppose that practices like promise-keeping and virtues like generosity are other than optimific. Occasions for infringing such practices and such virtues are likely to arise no more than occasionally, for example on occasions when there are general elections or referendums, or when one comes upon an accident in the street which suddenly calls for a life-saving initiative, which would justify being late for an appointment and thus breaking a promise. Granted that the occasions calling for reflection of consequences are unusual but make themselves apparent through their own unusual circumstances, it is quite feasible to stick to and comply with standard optimific practices and virtues for almost all the time, and to calculate which outcomes are best and which actions lead to them only on special occasions which are mostly conspicuous by their unexpected and life-changing nature.

Another objection to the stance that I have adopted comes from Jamieson's own text. 'In some cases and in some worlds,' he writes, 'it is best for us to focus as precisely as possible on individual acts. In other cases and worlds it is best for us to be concerned with character traits. Global environmental change', he continues, 'leads to concerns about character because the best results will be produced by largely uncoupling my behaviour from that of others.' The objection would be

that after flirting with this approach by introducing optimific virtues into my account of rightness, I have deserted it by reintroducing individual actions and calculations relating to the impacts of an agent's actions on others.

I would agree with Jamieson's case (in the context of global environmental change) against perpetual calculation and in favour of focussing for the most part on traits of character, regardless of the deliverances of reflection about the responses of others. However, I am unconvinced that the best results are always likely to come from 'uncoupling my behaviour from that of others'. Indeed, Jamieson seems unconvinced about this too, in view of his footnote reflecting on the possibility that cooperativeness is a virtue. My view is that collective action is sometimes required, and that reflection is needed to work out when this is the case, which collective action should be taken, and when it should be taken. If this view is correct, then there are bound to be cases where agents should not rest content with complying with virtues that are generally optimific, but should be willing to diverge from such virtues, sometimes in collaboration with others, and adopt acts which they judge to be for the best in their own situation.

Hence a theory of rightness can cogently require compliance with optimific practices (ones which are either already recognised or poised to become so) and in addition constantly cultivating and regularly behaving in line with optimific virtues, except in exceptional circumstances where opportunities for optimific actions open up which infringe both optimific practices and optimific virtues. In these cases, it is right to perform actions that agents judge to be optimific, regardless of relevant practices and relevant virtues, however green.

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