



Linköping University

Payam Moula

Virtue ethics and right action

Philosophy
Bachelor thesis
January 2010

Supervisor: Gunnar Björnsson

Abstract

This paper evaluates some arguments made against the conceptions of right action within virtue ethics. I argue that the different accounts of right action can meet the objections raised against them. Michael Slote's agent-based and Rosalind Hursthouse's agent-focused account of right action give different judgments of right action but there seems to be a lack of real disagreement between the two accounts. I also argue that the concept of right action often has two important parts, relating to action guidance and moral appraisal, respectively, and that virtue ethics can deal with both without a concept of right action.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my supervisor Gunnar for his support and help throughout writing this paper.

Content

Introduction.....	4
The concept of right action.....	5
An agent- based account of right action	6
Understanding <i>phronesis</i>	9
Hursthouses account.....	13
The role of experience in <i>phronesis</i>	13
Objection against virtue ethical accounts of right action from Cox	16
Objection against virtue ethical accounts of right action from Das.....	19
Discussion about the concept of right action and its need in virtue ethics	21
Conclusion	23
References.....	25

Introduction

The last decades have seen a resurgence of virtue ethics in moral philosophy. The interest in what virtue ethics has to say and its different features has grown. One aspect in which virtue ethics traditionally has differed from other ethical theories is in its relation to the notion of right action. Traditionally virtue ethics has not asked the question which action is right; the questions have rather been: How do I become a good person and what character traits ought I to pursue? Rosalind Hursthouse writes:

Virtue ethics has been characterized in a number of ways. It is described (1) as an ethics which is ‘agent-centered’ rather than ‘act-centered’; (2) as concerned with Being rather than Doing; (3) as addressing itself to the question, ‘What sort of person should I be?’ rather than the question, ‘What sort of action should I do?’; (4) as taking certain areteic concepts (good, excellence, virtue) as basic rather than deontic ones (right, duty, obligation); (5) as rejecting the idea that ethics is codifiable in rules or principles that can provide specific action guidance¹.

Hursthouse does not think this list is a good description, in fact she thinks it’s misleading, but the list is one often encountered when people describe virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics recognizes that the moral sphere has to do with action and it puts great energy into discussing how an agent ought to act. This has traditionally been done in terms of *the virtuous thing to do*, for example the courageous or generous thing to do, not in terms of *the right thing to do*. In later years, however, virtue ethics has been criticized for lacking a conception of right action; it has been said that a moral theory needs a conception of right action in order to be action guiding. Hursthouse describes this thought:

If Virtue ethics is ‘agent-centered rather than act-centered’, concerned with ‘What sort of person should I be?’ rather than ‘What sorts of action should I do?’ (with ‘Being rather than Doing’), if it concentrates on the *good* or *virtuous* agent rather than on *right* action and on what anyone, virtuous or not, has an *obligation* to do; how can it be a genuine rival to utilitarianism and deontology? Surely ethical theories are supposed to tell us right action, i.e. about what sorts of action we should do. Utilitarianism and deontology certainly do that; if virtue ethics does not, it cannot be a genuine rival to them²

Some philosophers have therefore tried to give an accurate account of right action within virtue ethics. We shall now look at these accounts of right action and its different objections.

¹ Hursthouse, R. 2001. p25.

² Hursthouse, R. 2001. p26.

Later on we will try to answer whether virtue ethics needs an account of right action alongside virtuous action in order to be action guiding. I argue that the different accounts of right action can meet the objections raised against them. Michael Slote's agent-based and Rosalind Hursthouse's agent-focused account of right action give different judgments of right action but I argue that there is no real disagreement between the two accounts. I also argue that the concept of right action has two important parts, relating to action guidance and moral appraisal, respectively, and that virtue ethics can deal with both without a concept of right action.

The concept of right action

There have been four quite recent attempts to give an account of right action by virtue ethicists. The first is given by Michael Slote, the second by Rosalind Hursthouse, the third by Michael Brady and the fourth by Christine Swanton.

(P1) An action is right if (and because) it exhibits or expresses a virtuous motive, or at least does not exhibit or express a vicious motive³

(P2) An action is right iff it is what a virtuous person would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstance.⁴

(P3) An agent S's performing act A in circumstances C is right if and only if a virtuous person would approve of S's performing act A in circumstances C.⁵

(P4) An action is right if and only if it is overall virtuous.⁶

I will mainly evaluate Slote's account which is called an agent-based account of right action and Hursthouse's account which I will call an agent-focused account of right action.

³ Van Zyl, 2009

⁴ Hursthouse, R. 2001.

⁵ Cox, 2006

⁶ Swanton, 2005

An agent- based account of right action

As we will see, (P1), the Agent-based account, is problematic that it pays no attention to the distinction between act from virtue and virtuous act and it might not satisfy the claim that virtue ethics needs an account of right action that is action guiding. But we will also see that these concerns can be met with a revised version of the agent-based account.

Michael Slote says about his account of right action that it:

[t]reats the moral or ethical status of actions as entirely derivative from independent and fundamental ethical/aretaic facts (or claims) about the motives, dispositions, or inner life of moral individuals.”

In making this claim Slote’s account of right action then *makes* an act right because of the motives, dispositions, or inner life of moral individuals; the same act done with a vicious motive or bad inner state would not be a right action. To understand Slote we can use an example from Ramon Das and also discussed by L. van Zyl.

A man dating a woman with a young child dives into a swimming pool to save the child from drowning. He cares not at all for the child, and is motivated exclusively by a desire to impress the woman as a means, let us suppose, to sleeping with her.⁷

According to Slote the man saving the child did not act morally right since the fundamental focus in Slote’s account is its emphasis on the agent’s motive, and inner state, and in this case this would be a vicious motive.

This may seem strange and objections have been raised against Slote’s account of right action. One objection is that the account pays no attention to the distinction between act from virtue and virtuous act made by Aristotle and emphasized by Swanton⁸. This is how Aristotle introduces the distinction:

A difficulty, however, may be raised as to how we can say that people must perform just actions if they are to become just, and temperance ones if they are to become temperate; because if they do what is just and temperate, they are just and temperate already, in the same way what if they use words or play music correctly they are already literate or musical. But surely this is not true even of the arts. It is possible to

⁷ Das, 2003

⁸ Swanton, 2005

put a few words together correctly by accident, or at the prompting of another person; so the agent will only be literate if he does alliterate act in a literate way, viz. in virtue of his own literacy. Nor, again, is there an analogy between the arts and the virtues. Works of art have their merit in themselves; so it is enough for them to be turned out with a certain quality of their own. But virtuous acts are not done in a just or temperate way merely because *they* have a certain quality, but only if the agent also acts in a certain state, viz. (1) if he knows what he is doing, (2) if he chooses it for its own sake, and (2) if he does it from a fixed and permanent disposition⁹.

Slote's account seems to be problematic if the action made was the most reasonable one, the one that good deliberation points to and the good person, the fully virtuous person, would characteristically do, but still is labeled morally wrong. One might think Slote means that an action is blameworthy or that the agent ought not to have done that act; but this seems strange if the act itself, without the intention behind it, is a reasonable act and the best one possible. But does Slote mean that we ought to morally blame the agent who rescued the child? Yes, but I don't think Slote means that he should have acted differently. L. van Zyl argues that Slote ought to morally blame the agent; but not say that he ought to have acted differently. He means that an agent-based account of right action can be defended against objections like this by taking into account the important distinction made by Aristotle.

The distinction has been described by L. van Zyl as "the commonsense distinction between doing the right thing and doing it for the right reason, that is, between act-evaluation and agent appraisal"¹⁰. L. van Zyl suggests that the agent-based account of right action is to be understood as a criterion of morally right action; but not as a practical-tool of action guidance. When Slote says that the agent acted morally wrong what he then means is that he had a bad motive, the act was done from a bad inner state, which is the morally relevant feature. Even though the agent then acted morally wrong when saving the drowning child it does not mean that he should've acted differently. The *agent* might be morally blameworthy but still have made the right *decision*.

Is Slote wrong for limiting the domain of morally right action to appraisal of motives and inner states? One thing that seems to be missing in this narrow view of right action is its action guidance. Aren't we to get help from the concept of right action in difficult situations? Wouldn't we be better off making the right decision after deliberating about right action? It seems that Slote's account of right action, with or without the distinction made by L. van Zyl

⁹ Swanton, 2005. P.232

¹⁰ Van Zyl, 2009

fails to take these considerations into account. It seems to tell us what motives and fine inner states we ought to have when we act; but not what to do. It does not help the agent with a virtuous motive to figure out what to do. If an agent in a given situation truly wants to figure out what to do then act with a virtuous motive might not help him at all. Is this a problem for Slote's account? We have seen that one reason why critics claimed virtue ethics was not a serious alternative was that it lacked an action guiding concept of right action. But there seems to be a way to save Slote's account from this problem.

L. van Zyl takes these considerations into account in what he calls an action guiding principle. The action guiding principle, which will save Slote's account from the objection that it does not help agent to choose an *action*, says that: An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstance.¹¹ This is the same principle as Rosalind Hursthouse has for right action and we will evaluate it later. L. van Zyl says "there is no reason to suppose that a criterion of right action should also serve as a practical action-guiding tool."¹² Here van Zyl makes an important distinction between what a moral theory says and what its account of right action has to say. Certainly morality ought to include both an action-guiding tool and an element of evaluating moral actions by moral appraisal. But which one of these or if both should be included in the concept of right action seems more or less arbitrary and a matter of personal preference.

One objection made by Ramon Das claims that Slote's account is problematic in cases where an agent has no good motives to choose from in action. Imagine a case where an agent has no good motives to act from; it seems impossible for him to act right but more importantly to get any action guiding help. In usual cases one might try to act right by acting out of good motives; but where none are available Slote's account seems to say nothing about what we ought to do. One might think that an agent who has no good motives has no interest in acting right, but are there no good reasons for him to choose one action over another? I believe that there are and even though an agent has no good motives there should be a principle available to him for action guidance; even though he might not have any interest in following this principle. I believe this is one reason why L. van Zyl adds an action guiding principle to Slote's account.

¹¹ Van Zyl, 2009

¹² Van Zyl, 2009

The account of right action that Slote provides makes it possible for different agents to perform different acts which all will be labeled right. In a given situation different agents might all be virtuously motivated but make different decisions which all will be labeled right. I don't believe there is a problem with more than one action being a morally right action but I believe it is a problem when an agent does not deliberate, comprehend or apply discernment well but still acts right. Slote allows for agents to make choices without thinking them through enough, without the proper easy-got information or without performing the act well enough to still be right. The problem is not that many action will be called right; but that actions performed very poorly or actions that the agent would not choose had he given it more thought will be labeled right. This makes the requirements for right action implausibly low.

Slote's emphasis on motives and fine inner states is important for the concept of virtue but it only highlights one part of the virtuous person. Maybe a virtue ethical account of right action, maybe specially one that is agent-based, ought to take into account the full nature of the virtuous person; not only the inner life and motives of the virtuous.

To better understand my objection that Slote's account allows poorly and not well deliberated actions to be right; and to understand the full nature of the virtuous person we need to understand *phronesis* or practical wisdom as it is often translated. *Phronesis* is an important concept for virtue ethics and even though there are different understandings of it the disagreements are minor. I claim that with a shared understanding of *phronesis* and the distinction between natural virtue and matured/excellent virtue there will be agreement on major issues. The disagreement on right action becomes a disagreement about what part of virtue or the virtuous man that should be included in the concept of right action. The disagreement reveals no real conflict when it comes to action guidance and moral appraisal which the concept of right action deals with.

Understanding *phronesis*

By the following words Aristotle introduces *phronesis* in his Nicomachean Ethics:

Having stated in a former part of this treatise that men should choose the mean instead of either the excess or defect, and that the mean is according to the dictates of right reason; we will now proceed to explain this term¹³.

Right reason, and *phronesis*, includes several parts but deliberation is the most important. Aristotle writes “And so, in a general way of speaking, the man who is good at deliberation will be practically wise”. Apart from good deliberation the *phronimos*, the practically wise, must have good comprehension and good discernment. To understand *phronesis*, and how to be fully virtuous, we need to understand each of these parts. I start with deliberation.

Deliberation is only concerned with things that can be otherwise than they are and that are within the limits of an agent’s action; deliberation is then a matter of practical things. To reason about or consider ‘scientific knowledge’ is not to deliberate. Aristotle emphasizes that deliberation has “for its object those thing which are good or bad for Man”. An important task deliberation deals with is to consider and calculate whether certain ends are good or bad for man; and the *phronimos* that has good deliberation does this well. A second part of deliberation deals with a skill or ability to reach ones given end; whether they are good or bad. Aristotle talks about this, Cleverness, in book VI.

There is then a certain faculty, commonly named Cleverness, of such a nature as to be able to do and attain whatever conduces to *any* given purpose: now if that purpose be a good one the faculty is praiseworthy; if otherwise, it goes by a name which, denoting strictly the ability, implies the willingness to do *anything*; we accordingly call the Practically-Wise Clever, and those who can and will do anything.¹⁴

The *phronimos*, the practically wise, must be good at deliberation which means that he must deliberate well about what is good for him and how to achieve this good end well¹⁵.

Aristotle writes that comprehension deals with judging what others say about matters concerning the scope of practical wisdom. In a lot of cases our view of what the situation is comes from what others have told us; thus if we are unable to rightly judge what others tell us it might be the case that we make bad decisions no matter how well we deliberate or how well motivated we are. To judge rightly what others say includes several parts; the ability to judge when someone is lying, when someone is exaggerating, when someone is hiding something and what motive the person might have for saying what he is saying. Even if you are told the

¹³ Aristotle, 1998. P.98

¹⁴ Aristotle, 1998. P.111

¹⁵ Rosalind Hursthouse argues in her paper “Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account” that this ‘technical deliberation’ that deals with means towards an end is often important.

truth it might be given to you in a manipulating way; it might be told to you in order to do something which you would not do if you realized that you were being used.

The third capacity of Aristotle's *phronimos* is good discernment¹⁶. Discernment is described as dealing with adjusting universal laws to particular cases¹⁷. For Aristotle the particular is very important; the moral sphere and *phronesis* is concerned with particulars and the *phronimos* must be able to calculate well 'where there is no definite rule'.¹⁸

The concept of *phronesis*, with its deliberation and reasoning, and the concept of virtue together gives us tools for guiding our actions and a basis for moral appraisal. After explaining the distinction between natural virtue and full virtue I will use the distinction and *phronesis* in an argument against Slote's account when it isn't revised by L van Zyl.

Natural virtue and mature/full virtue

An important distinction Aristotle made which sometimes is neglected is the one between natural virtue and full virtue.

We must inquire again also about Virtue: for it may be divided into Natural Virtue and Mature, which bear to each other a relation similar to that which Practical Wisdom bears to Cleverness, one not of identity but resemblance.¹⁹

I believe that with this distinction we see how the fully virtuous person having *phronesis* differs from the well motivated and intended but not fully virtuous person.

Natural virtue is dispositions towards good, for example justice, courage and self-mastery, shared by all men but without an intellectual element. The resemblance Aristotle talks about is that to have practical wisdom one must have cleverness and the intellectual capacity of setting good ends; to have full virtue I believe one must have natural virtue, dispositions towards good, and add to this an intellectual element so that one might understand what is good and how to reach it. The intellectual capacity is what makes a clever person practically wise and a person with natural virtue to have full virtue.

¹⁶ Discernment is mentioned briefly in Book VI, where it is described as the capacity to judge correctly what is reasonable, but throughout NE discernment it is described in more detail.

¹⁷ Hursthouse, 2006

¹⁸ Aristotle, 1998. P.102

¹⁹ Aristotle, 1998. P.111

Phronesis is absolutely crucial for full virtue according to Aristotle. He says this about the states of Natural virtue without *phronesis*:

[B]ut then they are plainly hurtful unless combines with an intellectual element: at least thus much is matter of actual experience and observation, that as a strong body destitute of sight must, if set in motion, fall violently because it has no sight, so it is also in the case we are considering: but if it can get the intellectual element it then excels in acting.²⁰

We may now remind ourselves of Slote's account. It seems that the requirements to act right are implausibly low. Anyone with a good motive and fine inner state will be acting right no matter how well he performs the act or on what basis he performs it so long as the motive is a virtuous one. If one believes, as I do, that *phronesis* is an important concept and should be relevant in an account of right action Slote's account doesn't become so favorable. We have seen that *phronesis* includes skills and abilities which are not included in Slote's account of right action.

One might defend Slote's position, and I think one comes some way doing it, by claiming that the motives and inner state of agent includes a good capacity for deliberation and other parts of *phronesis*. In fact Slote himself recognizes this in the complex nature of virtue:

Benevolence, for example, isn't benevolence in the fullest sense unless one cares about who exactly is needy and to what extent they are needy, and such care, in turn essentially involves wanting and making efforts to know relevant facts, so that one's benevolence can be really useful.²¹

It seems Slote has a good understanding of virtue; to be *truly* benevolent as he writes seems to include more than just a virtuous motive or disposition. It seems to involve a certain knowledge gaining skill where one is to know what knowledge to be useful to ones benevolence and how to best use it. But if one chooses this line of thinking I think the inner states and motives of an agent becomes blurred and includes skills and abilities of agents. Instead of trying to fit more complex matters into motive and inner states I believe it is preferable to broaden ones concept of right action.

This quotation by Slote shows us that when it comes down to the essentials, the concept of virtue and *phronesis*, there is often major agreement. This should make us question what the disagreement of right action really is about. I will now look at another account of right action which differs in its judgments of right and wrong.

²⁰ Aristotle, 1998. P.111

²¹ Van Zyl, 2009. P.64

Hursthouses account

I believe Hursthouse's (P2) is a better account of right action, though several concerns have been raised which we later will examine. The reason I think it's a better account of right action is that it seems to respect the distinction of doing the right thing and doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. I also think it integrates the complex nature of full virtue in a way that Slote's agent-based account doesn't and it seems to include both a tool for action-guiding and a principle of moral appraisal.

Hursthouses account says that that which the (fully) virtuous person characteristically would do is the right action. In the case of an agent saving a drowning child with the motive of sleeping with her mom the agent would be acting right given that the virtuous person would characteristically save the child. It is important to notice that an act is not right *because* a virtuous person would perform it—even virtuous people may do wrong sometimes—but because it is what the virtuous person would *characteristically* do. This means doing what there are best reasons for doing; what good deliberation and *phronesis* tells us to do. The concept of virtuous action, or right action, is then in some sense independent of the agent.

It has been a concern of Michael Brady that (P2) leaves no room for self-improvement²² and Robert N. Johnson makes a similar point²³. Even if a not yet fully virtuous agent knew what the fully virtuous agent would characteristically do in the situation, is this always the action he should choose? Might it not be that given his nature and situation there is an alternative action that would be the right action? It is said that actions of self-improvement would be of this kind since the fully virtuous would not characteristically perform that act but it seems right for the not fully virtuous. I believe this is a valid concern. By explaining the role of experience in *phronesis* I show that to become practically wise we need experience and so we will not, at least in our adolescence, be able to deliberate as well as the *phronimos*. To gain certain experience, even though the already practically wise would not, is important. Later we will see an attempt by Brady to take these considerations into an account of right action.

The role of experience in *phronesis*.

Aristotle gives us a key when he talks about experience:

²² Cox, 2006

²³ Bülow, 2009

A corroboration of what I have said is the fact, that the young come to be geometricians, and mathematicians, and Scientific in such matters, but it is not thought that a young man can come to be possessed of Practical Wisdom: now the reason is, that this Wisdom has for its object particular facts, which come to be known from experience, which a young man has not because it is produced only by a length of time.²⁴

Aristotle mentions that in deliberation knowledge about the generals, for example that white meat is bad for man, is worthless without knowledge about particulars, what meat actually is white, and experience seems to be a very important part of gaining knowledge about particulars. One might read in a book about what meats are white, which fruits are sweet and so on; but this certainly seems like a waste of time and not how we gain knowledge of particulars in real life. We might also think about how experience plays a part in the both parts of deliberation; both in deliberating in what is good for man and in the technical deliberation; that which has to do with how to reach ones goals in the best way. I believe that experience is important to both parts. In many situations where we are inexperienced it might be difficult figuring out what we ought to do, what is the virtuous thing to do, what end shall we pursue; and it is certainly hard to know how best to achieve this end in a new situation and where some means might be new to us. Especially the technical deliberation seems very experience dependent. We know that we reach our ends faster, easier and better in situations where we are experienced and the means are well known to us.

As for comprehension, again, one might read all there is about how people behave, think and work but certainly most people never do but yet they gain knowledge about humans through experience. When it comes not to the general rules about how human beings work but to how the particular human beings in our surroundings work this knowledge seems almost impossible to get without experience.

Discernment, which has to do with how to correct general rules to the moral sphere of particulars, I believe have an important relationship to experience. The inexperienced might often be well-intended and apply generally good rules to a particular case but still act badly.

Knowing that experience is crucial for becoming practically wise allows us to make room for cases of self-improvement and experience gaining in right action. Michael Brady thus has a valid concern and his account of right action, (P3), takes this into account.

²⁴ Aristotle, 1998. P.106

(P3), which says that an agent S's performing act A in circumstances C is right if and only if a virtuous person would approve of S's performing act A in circumstances C, is said to improve (P2) in this respect. In cases of self-improvement, which might be the course of action with best reason for the not fully virtuous, the fully virtuous would not himself perform that act but he would approve the act. Thus (P3) seems to me an improved account of right action but I will discuss (P2) in the remaining of this paper since (P2) is the much discussed account of Hursthouse and also the suggestion to an action-guiding principle in L Van. Zyls revised agent-based account. Other than in these few cases of self-improvement there seems to be no difference between (P2) and (P3).

One might imagine situations in which no fully virtuous person would be. How can we then know what the fully virtuous would do? This has been one source of criticism of (P2). The not so virtuous person might find himself in many troubling situations which he got into because of his not so virtuous nature and it might be in this difficult case where he needs moral guidance the most. How can he get help by (P2)? I would say that even though we might discuss situations and scenarios in which fully virtuous persons hardly would be in we have an understanding of how they would act in them. It is not the case that we need to actually observe the actions of the fully virtuous in order to know how to act. In most cases what we do is reason about what the fully virtuous would do and I think in most cases we have a good idea. It is also in reasoning and deliberating in what the fully virtuous would do that we gain the crucial experience needed to become fully virtuous and practically wise.

Christine Swanton raises an objection that deals with *phronesis*. She writes following of someone who is a virtuous agent: "She may be inexperienced in medicine, or in law, or in child-rearing. She may therefore lack practical wisdom in those areas."²⁵ This would in my view be a complication of (P2). If experience in a given area is a requirement for practical wisdom then it would be really hard for us to be and act like the practical wise.

I think Swanton has a notion of practical wisdom that differs in some respect from Aristotle's. For Aristotle *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue which stands in relation to all the moral virtues. It is an excellence in the rational part of the soul. The writing of Swanton suggests that *phronesis* is something you can have or not have in each different area of life. I believe that she is right in that people might be inexperienced in some areas and experienced in

²⁵ Swanton, 2005. P.228

others; and so they will be able to act better in some areas than others. But I don't think they have practical wisdom in some areas and lack it in others. Rather I would say that the *phronimos* would, conscious as he is about his inexperience, take that into his deliberation and given the situation still act right. (P2) does not say that you have to be well experienced in every area where you make a choice; it says that if you are practically wise, i.e. you characteristically act according to good reason, your action will be right. The *phronimos* who is well experienced in the field of action might make a better choice than the *phronimos* who is inexperienced in the field of action but given his limited experience and understanding he will do the right thing.

I will evaluate two more objections made against (P2), but since these arguments are relevant to other virtue ethical account of right action as well I will look at the arguments separately. The first one made by Damian Cox has to do with deliberation and action guidance. The other argument from Ramon Das claims that several virtue ethical accounts of right action are circular; I will mostly consider this later argument in relation to (P2).

Objection against virtue ethical accounts of right action from Cox

Damian Cox has an interesting discussion of the relationship between deliberation and right act in a paper²⁶. In it he claims:

(Q) If it is morally right for S to §, then there are possible deliberations that, were S to undertake them, would conclusively recommend to S that they §. These deliberations must be:

- (1) accurate (i.e., pick out those features of S's §-ing that make it right), and
- (2) morally permissible.

He then goes on to criticize different accounts of right action within virtue ethics on the base that they do not satisfy Q.

Consider those situations in which being virtuous requires caring for another. On any reasonable conception of what is involved in genuinely caring for another, care for another requires directing your attention to their needs, not to your own virtue.²⁷

²⁶ Cox, 2006

²⁷ Cox, 2006

Imagine a parent deliberating over the rescue of their child in explicitly agent-based terms. In this case, they do not reason agent-neutrally that the attempt to rescue their child falls under a morally acceptable maxim. They reason agent-relatively by reflecting on whether an attempt to rescue the child would adequately reflect the fact that they are a caring parent!²⁸

The main criticism that Cox puts forward is that the different solutions to right action we have seen virtue ethicists put forward are self-undermining. In the case where an agent were to ask himself “How am I best to manifest my own virtue in this situation?” or “How should I act so that my virtue is shown best?” then certainly these attempts to right action seems to fail. As Cox himself says they might even lead an agent to manifesting some vices.

But how does Cox reach this result? The main reason seems to be that an agent according to these attempts of right action deliberates in terms of how to best manifest their virtue and Cox says “Deliberating in terms of what would manifest my virtue does not itself manifest my virtue, and in circumstances calling for the application of other regarding virtues, manifests the vice of moral narcissism.”²⁹

Cox seems to reason as follows: I ought to do what is right; and to do what is right is to act virtuously. Then I ought to deliberate about how to manifest my virtue. But this last thought, that one ought to deliberate about how to manifest one’s virtue might be one thought too many and one might question if it is right. If the right act is the virtuous act shouldn’t I then deliberate about what act is virtuous and how I perform that act rather than how I best manifest my own virtue? If the right act is the virtuous act then one ought to act virtuously, in its fullest meaning, not to deliberating about manifesting one’s own virtue.

I do think this argument has some strength against Slote when his account is not revised as L.van Zyl argues it should be. If the right act is the virtuously motivated one then when deliberating about how to act as most right as possible in life, or in a given situation, the answer seems to be that one should get a virtuous motive. And this answer might seem problematic since deliberating about ones motives might actually be a vice as Cox points out in certain situations.

²⁸ Cox, 2006

²⁹ Cox, 2006

In the case of P2 Cox means that deliberating about what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstance leads the agent to try simulating or merely mirroring the behavior of a virtuous person. Trying to mirror the virtuous person externally does not necessarily lead to mirroring the virtuous agent internally. One might then be trying to meet up to the standard of the virtuous person, the *phronimos*, but trying to do this might lead to failure in acting right. It is problematic that in deliberating in what the *phronimos* would do the agent seems to deliberate about the wrong thing. If we are in a situation where caring for another is crucial it seems wrong to ask oneself what would the *phronimos* do. The situation may require certain responsiveness through action and emotion and not that one deliberate about what the *phronimos* would do. The objection to (P3) is similar; if the agent searches to get the approval of a virtuous agent then in trying to achieving this he is deliberating about the wrong thing.

I see several answers to these objections made against (P2). First it is true that in behaving as the *phronimos* would one might seem to mirror the *phronimos* without having the proper internal states. But I believe that these will be cases where the agent does the right thing but for the wrong reasons. It might then be a problem that people who act right do so without fine inner states; but I don't think it is a problem for (P2).

The second response is to say that for an agent to himself become *phronimos* and then do the right thing for the right reasons is to understand what the *phronimos* would do. In deliberating in what he would do one is actually training the skills needed to become *phronimos*. And the third response, related to the second, is to say that in doing what the *phronimos* does one actually becomes practically wise. Aristotle himself said that the best way of becoming practically wise is to act as the practically wise would.

More generally these objections are a problem given that the agent ought to pursue what is labeled as right action. This I think is the key question, and problem, within virtue ethics. How are we to understand right action? I believe that virtue ethics is adequate when it comes to being action guiding and evaluative without a conception of right action as it is used today. With concepts as acting well and acting virtuously and with the distinction between act from virtue and virtuous act I believe we can guide our actions and in retrospective evaluate them. We have seen how the concept of *phronesis* gives us deliberation tools in order to guide our action. The problem that may arrive when adding to an adequate moral theory a concept of

right action is what we have seen in reading Cox. In adding the concept of right action we might change the theory's existing notion of action guidance. But more on this later. Let's now turn to the objection made by Ramon Das.

Objection against virtue ethical accounts of right action from Das

This objection against virtue ethical accounts of right action from Das deals with the issue of circularity. Some say that the term virtue and its related terms must come from somewhere; and isn't it so that they derive from a conception of right action? Ramon Das argues that (P1) and (P2) are circular in this way. They explain right action in terms such as virtue; but virtue cannot be explained by reference back to right action. Virtue is explained with reference to eudaimonia, which cannot be explained without referring to right action. Since I believe (P2) is a better account of right action let's look closer at Das's argument against it.

The main reason why Das seems to believe that (P2) is circular is that we cannot explain eudaimonia without a reference to right action. Hursthouse herself tries to show that her account of right action is not circular. She says of (P2) that it:

does not specify right action in terms of the virtuous agent and then immediately specify the virtuous agent in terms of right action. Rather, it specifies her in terms of the virtues and then specifies these, not merely as dispositions to right action, but as the character traits (which are dispositions to feel and react as well as to act in certain ways) required for eudaimonia.³⁰

A reason why Slote does not approve of agent-focused accounts of right action, such as Hursthouse's account, seems to be the objection that eudaimonia can't be explained without a concept of right action³¹. I believe that eudaimonia has to deal with a basic concept of human nature, humanity and human flourishing. I agree with Hursthouse that there is no problem of circularity if eudaimonia is understood as a flourishing life. If one were to explain eudaimonia with virtuous action there is a problem; but I believe the virtues are what leads us to eudaimonia.

Hursthouse is aware that for Aristotle attainment of eudaimonia involves being taught things such as 'decent people do this sort of thing, not that 'and 'to do such and such is the mark of a depraved character'. In a crucial part of his paper Das writes:

³⁰ Das, 2003. P.331

³¹ Van Zyl, 2009. P.53

If, for instance, understandings of 'decent people do this sort of thing, not that' doesn't rely upon the concept of right action, then what *does* it rely upon? It certainly makes an evaluative claim with respect to certain acts. Where does its evaluative force come from if not an independent concept of right action?³²

I believe that an understanding of 'decent people do this sort of thing, not that' can rely upon the concept of eudaimonia without a concept of right action. If we understand being decent as a character trait leading to eudaimonia and eudaimonia being a flourishing life then we don't need a concept of right action. I don't see why the concept of right action has to be introduced because 'decent people do this sort of thing, not that' is an evaluative claim. Are all evaluative claims to be thought of in terms of right and wrong? If I as an adult wish to lead an adolescent to a flourishing life and say to him 'decent people do this sort of thing, not that' yes my claim is evaluative; but it is an evaluative claim about what sort of actions will lead a person to a flourishing life rather than an evaluative claim about some independent concept of right action.

(P3) can be defended for in the same way. If right action is to be understood as an action which the virtuous would approve; can we then understand this approval other than from an independent account of right action? Again I believe that we can be by referring to eudaimonia.

If a mechanic was to approve of an act made by his trainee trying to repair a vehicle I would say this approval was made with reference to the conception of 'good mechanic skills' or 'good repairing skill'; not that it was made by reference to an independent notion of right act. In the same way I would interpret the virtuous man approving an act. By reference to whether it was a virtuous act or not and a virtuous act being understood with reference to eudaimonia.

There are objections to this line of thought. First, one might object that this seems to be an absurd view of the 'moral' domain. It can't and should not be reduced to the level of a mechanic approving an act by his trainee. What if the trainee said that he wasn't interested in acquiring 'good mechanic skills'? If he did something that went against this concept then in some way his action might be explained as wrong by the mechanic; but this don't seem to be wrong in the same sense it is wrong to kill an innocent life. If an agent was to say that he was not interested in eudaimonia and went on to do something horrible the virtuous person would give this act a negative evaluation. But there seems to be something more here. The badness

³² Das, 2003. P.332

of the act is not just that he is not interested in a flourishing life; we would argue that killing an innocent life is much worse than not wanting to be a good mechanic. The reason for this, and why I think the moral domain is so powerful, is that it deals with the basic purpose and root of humanity. I would certainly be skeptical if someone claimed not to be interested in a flourishing human life; but if this was so then I would be upset and claim that it was in human nature to strive for a flourishing life and that a life filled with good deliberation is what makes an excellent human. If someone said he didn't want to be a mechanic I would not react in the same way.

Discussion about the concept of right action and its need in virtue ethics

When we form a concept of what is the best thing to do, what ought to be done, what there is best reason to do or any other alternative we tend to call this the right action; but if someone was to call this virtuous action instead of right why would he be wrong? If someone then was to say that the fact of the matter is that the concept of right comes from the understanding of virtue, given virtue having to do with best reason, why would he be wrong? My experience tells me we would do ourselves a favor if we stopped concentrating so much about the concepts of right and wrong and instead replaced them with words that does not differ enormously from different moral philosophers. Certainly there is disagreement between philosophers about the concepts of virtue, duty, happiness and so on, but this disagreement seems more of a disagreement of significance and philosophical importance than that of which one of these concepts ought to be included in the concept of right action. I do not propose that we ought to change the nature of discussion and debate between philosophers; just that these might be more giving were we to not put so much focus on right action.

A good example is the situation Das uses where a man saves a drowning child with the motive to sleep with the child's mother³³. There is much debate whether the man saving the child acted right or not. We must ask what the debate really is about, what is the real issue between Slote and Hursthouse, in what aspects do they differ? It seems to me that there is little or no *real* disagreement between the two; it seems to be a mere linguistic disagreement.

³³ Das, 2003

Both agree that the agent should not have acted differently and both agree on that he had vicious motive.

In some ways the debate about right action is about pointing out the feature that is morally relevant. Slote would deny that the agent acted right given that he acted out of a bad inner state or if he had a vicious motive, a Kantian would probably deny that the act was right given that it was not out of any sense of duty and a utilitarian would probably say that it is right given that the consequences of the action was the morally relevant feature. A general way in which virtue ethics seems to differ from, and in my view speaks for virtue ethics, is that it does not seem to point out *one* feature as morally relevant; rather it points out several. It does not view the field of morality as one field with clear boundaries. Morality cannot be built without knowledge from the fields of psychology, sociology and biology. I believe that the complexity of morally relevant features and the nature of morality are reasons why right action historically has not been given the same focus that it has today.

This insight made by virtue ethics and its view on morality might make us question the use of the concept of right action and if it is needed for virtue ethics as it is in other moral traditions. I believe that these insights speak against any virtue ethical attempt of right action that simplifies the nature of virtue, *phronesis* or the question of which features in the world are morally relevant.

In any case we have different accounts of right action from different virtue ethicists. What seems to be the difference between them is how right act stand in relation to virtuous act. Is right action to be action performed by all who possess natural virtue but not full virtue? Or is right action to be action that is characteristically done by the fully virtuous agent? Or is right action perhaps to be that which is done by a fully virtuous person and has the external consequences which are dependent on luck going his way. Viewing it this way I believe that arguing for an account of right action within virtue ethics might become unnecessary. It seems that the notion of right action plays two major roles. The first is that it is action guiding: an agent who wishes to make a good choice ought to be helped by reasoning about right action. We have seen that this is unnecessary – we have seen that one might use a version of the agent-based account that separates right action and action guidance – but it is a common concept in right action. The second role is that we might afterwards be able to judge the value of an action in terms of right action. I believe that both of these roles can be served within virtue ethics without an account of right action. We have seen that virtue ethics is rich

in concepts and distinctions. With the concept of *phronesis*, which includes deliberation, comprehension and discernment, and the concept of virtue and with the distinctions natural/full virtue and virtuous act/ act from virtue we come a great way in guiding our actions and giving moral agents praise or blame for their actions. We might ask ourselves if the argument about right action within virtue ethics is worth the time and effort.

Maybe virtue ethics needs a concept of right action, not mainly because it provides anything new of use for itself, but because other moral philosophers need a concept of right action in order to understand virtue ethics. If successful then fine; but I see a danger in that changing the content of the ethical theory changes when adapting new words and concepts. I do believe that virtue ethics has much to learn from other moral theories and from modern thought. But I know how important words and terminology is; in trying to adapt to others without others adapting to virtue ethics the theory might lose more than it gains.

Conclusion

Any moral or ethical theory must have at least two crucial parts. It must be action guiding and able to give moral appraisal. We have seen that in forming the concept of right action there is sometimes a struggle about which of these parts, or if both, are to be included in the concept. The agent-based account limits the definition of morally right action to motives and inner states and thus focuses on moral appraisal. The theory might still give a principle of action guidance and give accounts of good decisions or doing one's duty but these will not be included in the concept of morally right action. The account from Hursthouse emphasizes right action as the action done by the *phronimos*, the practically wise, and includes both an action guiding principle and a principle of moral appraisal. We have seen that in forming a concept of right action virtue ethicists emphasize different parts of the virtuous person.

The agent-based account of right action provided by Slote lacked the ability to guide agents in certain situations towards action. L. van Zyl therefore suggests that the agent-based account adds a practical action-guiding tool to the account to solve this problem. Hursthouse's account is claimed to have the problem of circularity but I think this objection can be met with a clear understanding of eudaimonia. An account must be given of eudaimonia where it is not

explained in virtuous action but rather in terms of an end of human life which is reached through virtuous action. Both accounts have been criticized for not allowing agents to deliberate in action guiding terms but I have shown that this objection can be met if the agent based account follows L van Zyls suggestion and Hurtshouses account is to be understood in terms of 'what would the *phronimos* do' rather than 'how do I best manifest my virtue'. We have seen that there seems to be a lack of real disagreement between some virtue ethical accounts of right action. Even though they disagree about whether an act is right or not they seem to agree in whether the act ought to be done and if the act was a morally praiseworthy act or not.

We must also ask us what an account of right action adds to virtue ethics and why we are in need of right action. It has been said that virtue ethics need a conception of right action in order to be action guiding. If virtue ethics can meet the demands of action guidance and moral appraise without right action, as I believe it can, we must consider how adding a concept of right action will affect virtue ethics and if we ought to use right action. My belief is that no matter what ethical theory one is a follower of we ought to reduce the use of concept of right action where it can be replaced with less problematic concepts.

References

- Aristotle. (1998). *Nicomachean Ethics*. New York. Dover publication. Translated by D.P. Chase.
- Bülow, William. (2009). *Den Neo-Aristoteliska dygdetiken och den rätta handlingen*. Bachelor thesis. Linköping University.
- Cox, D. (2006). Agent-based Theories of Right Action. *Ethical Theory & Moral Practice*. 9: pp. 505–515
- Das, R. (2003). Virtue Ethics and Right Action. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. 81: 3, pp. 324 — 339
- Hursthouse, R. (2001). *On virtue ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hursthouse, R. (2006). Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. 106: Pp 285-309.
- Slote, M. (2007). Agent-Based Virtue Ethics. In Shafer-Landau, R. (ed.) *Ethical Theory*. Pp. 710-721 MA: Blackwell publishing.
- Swanton, C. (2005) *Virtue ethics: a pluralistic view*. New York. Oxford University Press.
- Zyl, L.V. (2009). Agent-based Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Action. Guidance. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* V.6 Pp 50-69