



DISCUSSION NOTE

**WHAT ABOUT OUGHT?
RESPONSE TO PRACTICAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE VIRTUES**

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What About Ought? Response to *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* Liezl Van Zyl

ACCORDING TO A QUALIFIED-AGENT account of right action, an action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances (V).¹ A frequent objection to this account is that it gives the wrong result in cases where the agent faces a dilemma because of previous wrongdoing. Robert Johnson gives the example of the chronic liar who undertakes a series of remedial actions to improve his character. Commonsense tells us that he acts rightly (or does what he ought to do), but (V) denies this, for no virtuous agent will find herself in these circumstances. Johnson concludes from this that virtue ethics fails to make room for a genuine moral obligation to improve your character.²

In *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, Daniel Russell responds to the “right but not virtuous” objection by drawing attention to Hursthouse’s distinction between action guidance (what ought to be done) and action assessment (what is right). Providing action guidance is a matter of helping people decide what to do, whereas an account of action assessment concerns what it is reasonable to approve and disapprove of.³ An account of right action is really an account of two things, he says, and virtue ethics must say something about both.⁴ To demonstrate how action guidance and action assessment can come apart, Russell refers to Hursthouse’s discussion of tragic dilemmas, where all courses of action open to the agent may be too terrible to be described as “right,” yet where there may still be something he ought to do. Russell explains that we do sometimes describe such an agent as having done “the right thing,” but here the focus is not on the *action* itself, but on the agent’s *decision* to act: “even though what he did was an awful thing for anyone to have to do, he successfully recognized that it did have to be done.”⁵ By contrast, when “right” is used to assess an action it is used in the sense of a praiseworthy action, one that warrants a satisfactory review of one’s conduct, or a tick of approval.⁶

In Russell’s view, Johnson’s mistake is to assume that the claim that the reforming liar ought to do X implies that his doing X would be right. If a right action is one that is fine, excellent or praiseworthy, then it is not necessarily one that ought to be done. Conversely, doing what one ought to do does not necessarily result in a right action.⁷ In a tragic dilemma the agent can do what he ought to do, yet fail to perform a right action. In

¹ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 28.

² Robert Johnson, “Virtue and Right,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 816-18.

³ Daniel Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

the same way, Russell suggests, in situations created by previous wrongdoing an agent can fail to act rightly even while doing what he ought to do. In this way he believes that the virtue ethicist can avoid Johnson's objection.

The problem with this response is that it only takes care of one side of Johnson's objection. It shows why the virtue ethicist's claim, namely that the chronic liar fails to act rightly, is not altogether implausible. However, it ignores the part of the objection that relates to moral obligation: Does virtue ethics provide adequate action guidance in dilemmas created by previous wrongdoing? One possibility, which is suggested by Hursthouse in her discussion of tragic dilemmas, is simply to say that one ought to do what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances (D).⁸ However, in dilemmas created by previous wrongdoing, (D) meets the same problem encountered by (V), namely that a virtuous agent would not find himself in these circumstances in the first place.

The question, then, is whether virtue ethics gives us any grounds for claiming that the chronic liar ought to undertake a series of remedial actions. Russell gives no indication that he is in favor of abandoning the language of obligation, but he has very little to say when it comes to providing an account of moral obligation.⁹ His proposed solution to the "right but not virtuous" objection requires a move away from thinking of action guidance in terms of the virtuous agent. He claims that "right" in (V) functions as an action-assessing concept, not an action-guiding one,¹⁰ and this suggests that we need a separate account of action guidance, one that does not make reference to the virtuous agent. However, when Russell briefly addresses the issue of action guidance later on, the virtuous agent reappears:

talk of "the virtuous person" models practical problems by focusing attention *away* from a decision procedure for solving the problem and onto an approach to the problem that takes as central the way in which one makes it, carries it through, etc., including the idea that virtuous action includes skilful practical reasoning on the part of the one facing the problem.¹¹

The idea, then, is not for the non-virtuous agent to do what a virtuous agent would do, but to attend to the reasons to which the virtuous person is appropriately responsive. This suggests an approach to decision-making that is similar to the one proposed by Valerie Tiberius, with which Russell says he is "broadly in agreement," namely:

(RD) A decision is right iff it is the decision in accordance with the reasons that would guide the actions of a virtuous agent.¹²

⁸ Hursthouse, p. 79.

⁹ On p. 52 Russell notes that he agrees with Johnson that virtue ethics "must make room for a genuine moral obligation to improve your character," and that steps so taken are what one "morally ought to do" in such circumstances.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 52.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 138.

¹² Valerie Tiberius, "How to Think About Virtue and Right," *Philosophical Papers* 37 (2006): 247-65. See Russell, p. 56.

Is this account plausible? The move from thinking of a right decision as one that a virtuous agent would make in the circumstances to thinking of it as one that is in accordance with the virtuous agent's reasons is a move towards greater abstraction. As such, in dilemmas created by previous wrongdoing, it has an important advantage, namely that the agent need not find himself in exactly the same circumstances that a virtuous person might find himself; the circumstances only need to be relevantly similar. For example, in his attempt to improve his character the chronic liar should attend to the same kinds of reasons that feature in the deliberations of virtuous agents, such as, "I must take responsibility for my actions" and "It is appropriate to ask for help when facing difficult challenges."

However, the appeal to the virtuous agent's reasons also presents us with a number of problems. In the remainder of this paper I discuss what I consider to be the main difficulties for such an approach. The first concerns the question of whether (RD) still constitutes a distinctively virtue-ethical approach to action guidance. If one's decision-making is to be guided by general reasons such as, "I have made a promise," "They need my help," "I owe it to her," etc., then it appears to be very similar to the approach suggested by deontologists. Consider Hursthouse's example of the philanderer who has impregnated two women, A and B, after promising to marry each of them.¹³ According to the deontologist, the philanderer has a number of conflicting obligations: to keep his promise to A, to keep his promise to B, to support A and her child, and to support B and her child. So he finds himself in an irresolvable dilemma: he has reasons to marry A and not B, and he has reasons to marry B and not A. But consider, now, that B makes it clear that she no longer wants or needs his support. In this case he is "let off the hook"; the overriding (or actual) obligation – what he ought to do – is to marry and support A and her child. Principles provide the agent with reasons to act in certain ways, so the deontologist can agree with the proposed approach to decision-making (RD). What is needed, as Tiberius puts it, is for the virtue ethicist to show that there is a genuinely virtue-centered interpretation of (RD), in other words, that one cannot define the reasons of the virtuous independently of characterizations of virtuous agents.¹⁴

The second problem is whether talk of the virtuous agent, conceived as modeling practical problems, gives adequate guidance to non-virtuous agents. On a fairly general level, we can accept that the kinds of situations that non-virtuous agents face are not altogether different from those that virtuous people face, such as deciding whether to get married, keep a promise or help someone in need. In our example, the philanderer may consider the same kinds of reason, such as "I should keep my promises," "I should take responsibility for my actions," "B does not want to marry me" and "A is in more dire need than B." Of course, general reasons still need to be specified, and taking these reasons seriously will look very dif-

¹³ Hursthouse, p. 66ff.

¹⁴ Tiberius, pp. 258-59.

ferent in the case of the chronic liar than they would in the case of a virtuous agent. Nevertheless, the virtuous agent's reasons could well lead the philanderer in the wrong direction. Imagine, for example, that the philanderer is hopelessly addicted to drugs. The right decision in such a situation, I believe, is not to marry anyone, at least not until he has conquered his addiction, and the reasons that will guide him to this decision would be things like: "In my present state I will be a terrible husband and father," "I have no prospect of finding a good job," "They will be better off without me" and "I have to take care of myself first."

I would therefore suggest, *contra* Russell, that the non-virtuous will not always be guided towards good decision-making by the kinds of reasons that virtuous agents are responsive to. Instead, in some cases the best guidance will come from a desire to avoid acting in ways that are characteristic of vicious people. Consider Johnson's example of the man who is at war with malicious or cowardly desires¹⁵ and has to decide whether to accept an invitation to a party. A virtuous agent's reasons for acting, such as, "It would be so lovely to see everyone," could well point him in the wrong direction. Instead, we can imagine his reasons for acting being quite different from the virtuous agent's reasons, for example, "If I accept the invitation I will probably end up drinking too much," "I will be tempted to steal something" or "I will lose my temper if I see her with her new lover." When it is not possible to perform a right (excellent or virtuous) action, then, one may be best advised to focus one's efforts on avoiding actions that are wrong (characteristic of the vicious). Aristotle suggests this approach when he advises us to be aware of our own weaknesses: we should "drag ourselves in the contrary direction; for we shall arrive at the mean by pressing well away from our failing."¹⁶ It appears, then, that the non-virtuous agent does not obtain action guidance from (V) but from its corollary, (W): An action is wrong iff it is what a vicious person would characteristically do in the circumstances.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that for Russell's response to the "right but not virtuous" objection to be complete, it needs to include a virtue-ethical account of how one ought to act. If, in response to this objection, the virtue ethicist draws attention to the distinction between action assessment and action guidance, claiming that he uses "right action" in the sense of what is excellent or praiseworthy rather than what ought to be done, then the original objection gives way to a new one, namely that virtue ethics does not provide adequate action guidance in dilemmas created by previous wrongdoing. Russell suggests an approach to decision-making that takes the virtuous agent as modeling deliberation about ethical problems rather than solving them. This approach still has to be developed in more detail, but it faces at least two potential problems, namely that it no longer seems to be distinctively virtue ethical, and that it does not always provide

¹⁵ Johnson, p. 820ff.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109a20-b20.

the right kind of guidance to non-virtuous agents. I suggest an alternative approach, which is for the non-virtuous to focus on avoiding actions that are characteristic of the vicious.¹⁷

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¹⁷ I discuss this approach in more detail in Van Zyl, "Right Action and the Non-Virtuous Agent," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 28 (1) (2011): 80-92 and Van Zyl, "Qualified-Agent Virtue Ethics," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2) (2011): 219-28.