

Are virtue ethicists right to make virtue fundamental in ethical theory?

No, virtue ethicists are not right to make virtue fundamental in ethical theory. Doing so undermines the usefulness of their theory as a guide to practical action and leads to instances where the theory appears to be extensionally incorrect. In this essay, I first outline what it means for some object to be fundamental to a particular ethical theory, and why virtue satisfies these conditions under virtue ethics. Then, I outline **three compelling objections** to virtue ethics which arise because of the fundamental importance it affords to virtue. I conclude that an ethical theory **which** makes virtue fundamental is less plausible than one which does not.

Since one of the primary goals of an ethical theory is to provide an account of which actions are right and why, we can say that some object is fundamental to an ethical theory if nothing is explanatorily prior to it in that account. For instance, in act utilitarianism, **happiness** is fundamental because actions are right when and because they maximise total happiness. There is no appeal to any further principle required; promoting total happiness *just is* a right-making property (Crisp 2015). In virtue ethics, a theory of right action can be formulated as follows (Hursthouse 1999, p28):

VE1: An action is right when and because it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

Virtue is therefore fundamental to virtue ethics, since the rightness of actions is ultimately determined by their relationship with the behaviour of a virtuous agent. The explanation goes no deeper than this – **virtuous character is a non-instrumental good necessary for flourishing**, and the right action is that which is in accordance with virtue.

However, the fundamental importance afforded to virtue in virtue ethics makes **VE1** substantially less action-guiding than one would expect of an ethical theory. Specifically, less-than-fully-virtuous individuals are generally not in an epistemic position to make decisions based on virtue theory's criterion of rightness, because they lack the practical wisdom and moral mastery which is constitutive of being virtuous. As Hurka (2001, p228) notes, an unvirtuous individual ("Malorie") may not know what a virtuous one ("Angela") would do in their circumstances, **or even how to identify some such virtuous person to ask for advice**, since they have no access to a precisely specified standard to judge the rightness of actions by. Worse, even if one were to enumerate some list of virtues and associated simple rules of virtue ethics (or "v-rules"), an unvirtuous person would not be able to reliably apply these. Take, for example, the virtue of honesty, alongside its derivative rules to **do what is honest and to not do what is dishonest** (Hursthouse 1999, p36). Angela would not blindly follow these directives in all circumstances: sometimes the virtuous course of action may be to act kindly and thus withhold or distort parts of the truth, but Malorie would be unable to identify when this is the case. Without providing a set of highly specific v-rules for every conceivable situation, unvirtuous individuals cannot know what the right action to take is – but this would detract from the fundamental importance of individuals having a virtuous character and using their practical wisdom to reach decisions. By making virtue fundamental, virtue ethicists prevent unvirtuous individuals from using their theory as a guide to action, because of their poor epistemic position.

Furthermore, theories like **VE1** appear to sometimes be extensionally incorrect because of the emphasis they place on what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances. Consider the following **scenario**:

Malorie has the opportunity to pursue an enjoyable and highly paid career as an apple trader. If Angela were in this situation, she would accept the job, knowing that she'd behave well towards clients and donate most of her earnings to worthy causes. But Malorie's character is such that if she took up the offer, she would swindle customers, bully farmers, and spend money ostentatiously.

Commented [RS1]: Just a note so that I remember to ask about it in our tutorial: Hurka's claim says that virtue ethics is objectionably egoistic, and [Annas's reply](#).

Commented [RS2R1]: Hayden's example: situation where you could act callously etc in such a way that creates virtue in others

Commented [RS3R1]: Even a non-Aristotelian view (which takes out the motivation of your own flourishing) can't get away from the fact that virtue ethics is about maximising virtue *within yourself* rather than in the world as a whole

Commented [HW4]: *that

Commented [RS5]: (Or perhaps "aggregate happiness" is fundamental.)

Commented [RS6R5]: I spent some time thinking about what is fundamental in Kantianism – I think I'd say "rationality" but was having a hard time explaining why. Kant believes that any rational agent would be moral, and you can derive morality from rationality. Maybe that is a good enough explanation, but it does leave out the good will, which Kant says is the only intrinsically good thing

Commented [HW7]: Not just not required but not possible

Commented [RS8]: An observation: if I claimed that donating all your money to charity & living an ascetic life is what is necessary for flourishing, you would justifiably be quite suspicious. I don't think my protestation that "ah, well yes your new life is less pleasurable than before but that doesn't matter because now you're *flourishing!*" would convince you much. Similarly, it seems awfully convenient that what virtue ethicists claim to be necessary for your flourishing just happens to be the kinds of behaviours that are good for other people.

(This seems a bit like Kant's argument that to be rational is to be moral, or Mill's attempt to derive the Greatest Happiness Principle from self-interest. Possibly people just really want a way to show that you have good prudential reasons to follow their favoured theory, but I don't think anybody has provided a convincing argument along these lines against amorism.)

Commented [HW9R8]: I guess it'd be especially suspect if you said that it would *lead to* a good life. But it seems at least a bit less suspect if you're *defining* the good life as one that's ascetic.

Commented [RS10]: (Plus, a virtuous person wouldn't need to ask for advice, so by **VE1** this can't ever be the right action to take anyway.)

Commented [HW11R10]: Nice point! They'd also never need to further develop their virtuous character.

Commented [HW12]: Sounds like a category mistake to say that an action is honest, as against a person. Should probably say "what an honest person would do"

Commented [HW13]: Nice case!

Commented [HW14R13]: Although, since greengrocers don't usually make a lot of money in real life, might be better to use a different career.

What the virtuous Angela would do in Malorie's circumstances seems wholly irrelevant in this case, since it is *Malorie* who is in the circumstances and whose unvirtuous character will determine her later actions. More generally, **VE1** fails to account for the rightness of moral improvement (Johnson 2003).

An agent like Angela would not spend time reflecting on her moral flaws and take steps towards becoming more virtuous, since she has no need to, but surely someone like Malorie ought to engage in self-improvement – particularly by a virtue ethicist's lights! As Svensen (2010) notes, it is difficult to formulate a plausible alternative virtue-centric theory of right action which does not fall victim to similar counterexamples. Take the following attempt to refine the virtue ethicist's criterion of rightness:

VE2: An action is right for an agent *S* when and because it is what a virtuous agent would advise *S* to do in the circumstances.

One might think that changing to an advice-based formulation like **VE2** helps to accommodate instances where the right action for an unvirtuous agent is different to that of a virtuous one. But suppose that Angela is advising an unvirtuous agent Jack who reliably does the opposite of what he is told to. In this case, she would tell him to do whichever are the wrong actions – so **VE2** fails as a criterion of rightness. It is the importance given to virtue which leads to these extensional failures of a virtue ethicist's criterion of rightness, suggesting that they are wrong to have virtue as a fundamental concept.

Placing fundamental importance on virtue also creates either a shallowness or circularity in explanations of why a particular course of action is right. Imagine I have made a promise which it would be expedient for me to break. A virtue ethicist would say that it is right for me to honour the promise because that is what a virtuous person would do. When pressed on the question of why the virtuous person would do that, though, they would have little to add beyond asserting that being faithful is simply virtuous. Intuitively, this answer seems lacking – Angela would surely not claim that being faithful is right because she is doing it, but rather because it shows proper respect to other humans (or because it leads to greater wellbeing, and so on), with the fact that she is disposed towards faithfulness comprising part of what makes her virtuous. Perhaps Angela would say that being faithful is right because it leads to her flourishing, but this circular reasoning brings us back to the start: we were in search of an answer to why it is right to act as someone virtuous would, yet virtue ethicists take as a premiss that flourishing consists of acting virtuously. So, making virtue fundamental in our theory is a redundant move that causes us to fail to capture the true right-making properties of actions.

To conclude, virtue ethicists are not right to make virtue fundamental in ethical theory. We want ethical theories which provide both an evaluative standard and a guide to right action, but the centrality of virtue in virtue ethics works against both these goals, by leading to extensional failures and impracticalities in application by unvirtuous agents. In addition, attempts to make virtue fundamental lead to deficiencies in the theory's explanatory account of rightness. For these reasons, we should look to ethical theories which do not make virtue fundamental, but instead accommodate its importance as a means to some other end.

Bibliography

- Crisp (2015): <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2012.00607.x>
- Johnson (2003): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.1086/373952.pdf>
- Hurka (2001): <https://academic.oup.com/book/3343/chapter/144416917>
- Hursthouse (1999): <https://academic.oup.com/book/2302/chapter/142429247>
- Svensen (2010): <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10677-009-9201-7>
- Svensen (2011): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41486935>

Commented [RS15]: Another example: Malorie making a promise that she'd be unlikely to keep but Angela certainly would.

Commented [RS16R15]: There's a separate class of objections where we say that a virtuous agent would never have got into such a situation, and so the answer to what they would do is indeterminate. But I don't think this is a particularly strong objection. You might imagine that a virtuous agent has a complete, contingent plan of action of what they'd do in any situation. (This week has been game theory in economics and there's some kind of analogy you could draw here with subgame perfect equilibria being a Nash equilibrium even in subgames where the history was not rational.)

Perhaps I'm really only making this weaker objection here though, because the actions open to Malorie are not {take the job, don't take the job} but rather {take the job and be unvirtuous in it; don't take the job and do something less negatively impactful} – and Angela would never be in a situation where she has to choose between these two actions.

Commented [HW17R15]: Here's another one. I offer you a decision between something unambiguously good (e.g., saving 1 life) and a second action whose outcomes are determined like this: if you're not a virtuous person, I've rigged it to save 100 lives; if you are a virtuous person, I've rigged it to kill 100 people. In that situation, Angela would take the first option. But, plausibly, Malorie should take the second.

Commented [RS18R15]: Actualism vs possibilism - Frank Jackson and Professor Procrastinate case

Commented [RS19R15]: (See the marriage case in Svensen 2010).

One could object to the claim that "This man seems to have got himself into circumstances that no fully virtuous agent could ever be in. His circumstances are the result of behaviour during an extended period of time of a sort that would disqualify anyone from counting as fully virtuous."

Commented [RS20]: He also suggests **VE3:** *An action is right for an agent S when and because it is what a virtuous agent would endorse S doing in the circumstances*, which he rules out because

- it may not leave any room for the supererogatory, as the virtuous agent might endorse only the most virtuous action

Commented [RS21R20]: "Buridan's Ass" in theory of action - if an agent is perfectly indifferent between two how do they decide what to do?

Commented [RS22]: Practically every critique of virtue ethics includes some version of this objection (I've pasted in some quotes below that I've got some questions about to discuss in our tutorial). But I don't quite get why people raise it as a problem with virtue ethics in particular. The utilitarian, for example, can't really say why happiness is the thing to

Commented [HW23R22]: Yeah, it's not obvious why this objection should convince us. Let's discuss.

Commented [RS24]: I didn't read the section of Hurka on anti-theory very closely, but one thing I could've talked about more in the essay is anti-codifiability of morality and McDowell's arguments in favour of it, i.e., some meta-ethical discussion about the proper uses of ethical theories.

Notes on redundancy / circularity

Lecture slides pp33-34

- Does virtue ethics have anything distinctive to say about morality?
- Virtue ethics may even depend not only on an independent theory of justice but on an independent theory of *all* right action (Crisp 2015)
- According to virtue ethics, an act is right iff it is what the virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.
 - But what makes the act virtuous? That it hits the mark in the field of the relevant virtue, that it answers to the demands of the situation, that it's done in the right way at the right time, in relation to the right things (Crisp 2015: 10; cf. Swanton 2003)
 - But then it would seem that the right theory of right action is presupposed by virtue ethics, not given by it
- Can't the virtue ethicist simply appeal to flourishing as the basis for her theory of rightness?
 - But what constitutes flourishing? Acting virtuously!

Moral Theory: An Introduction

- "Consider, for instance, the virtue of benevolence (or compassion) that includes a sensitivity to the needs of others. It seems plausible that when someone is in need, this fact (their need) constitutes a reason for anyone who can do so to help them. This same fact plausibly figures in an explanation of why benevolence is a virtue—in part, it disposes one to respond appropriately to the plight of others. Thus, appealing to the virtue of benevolence to explain the rightness of helping others in need is redundant because the rightness is already explained by the fact that others' needs are reasons that explain the rightness of helping."

Eudaimonist Virtue Ethics and Right Action: A Reassessment (Svensen 2011)

- "A virtuous person would ground her decisions about how she should act on what she, due to her possession of practical wisdom, correctly appreciates as the ethically salient features of her circumstances, and she would reasonably consider those features to be what makes her actions right. What this strongly suggests is that the proposed account of right action gets the order of explanation the wrong way around. The virtuous person's actions are not right because she would do them; rather, she is virtuous, at least in part, because she is disposed to do what is right (as well as to recognise why she is right)."