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	Abstract	<p>In this chapter I consider two questions about action evaluation: (1) Is it <i>the</i> central task of normative ethics to concern itself with action evaluation?, and (2) When it does concern itself with action evaluation, should its focus be on developing an account of <i>right</i> and <i>wrong</i> action, as opposed to, say, good and bad (or virtuous and vicious) action? I argue that for virtue ethicists, the task of providing an account of right action is not of central importance, and that the strength of virtue ethics lies in the fact that it allows us to evaluate actions in terms of a rich <i>aretaic</i> vocabulary. In the second half of the chapter I propose a “relaxed” virtue-ethical account of right action, which denies that rightness is a particular quality shared by all actions appropriately referred to as “right,” and acknowledges that the meaning of “right action” differs from one context to another.</p>
Keywords (separated by “-”)	Virtue ethics - Action evaluation - Right action - Virtuous action	

1 Virtuous and Right Action: A Relaxed View

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28 **1 Introduction**

29 During much of the twentieth century, the focus of modern moral philosophy was on
 30 the evaluation of actions as either right or wrong. Even now, it is not uncommon for
 31 normative ethics to be described solely in terms of the search for standards that
 32 regulate right and wrong conduct, and for individual normative theories to be defined
 33 in terms of their accounts of right action.¹ It is therefore not surprising that philos-
 34 ophers would be interested in the question: Can virtue ethics can give a satisfactory
 35 account of right action?

36 In recent years a number of moral philosophers have developed a distinctively
 37 virtue-ethical accounts of right action, but most of them have done so reluctantly. For
 38 instance, Julia Annas very briefly talks about right action in her book, *Intelligent*
 39 *Virtue* (2011, 41–51), and Christine Swanton only gets around to presenting her
 40 account of right action in Chapter 11 of her book, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*
 41 (2003). Rosalind Hursthouse spends the first chapter of *On Virtue Ethics* (1999)
 42 trying to show that virtue ethics can come up with an account of right action, but she
 43 notes that “it does this under pressure” (1999, 69).

44 Before taking on the task of developing a substantive virtue-ethical account of
 45 right action we need to begin by considering two more fundamental questions about
 46 the need and place of such an account:

- 47 1. Is it *the* central task of normative ethics to concern itself with action evaluation?
- 48 2. When it does concern itself with action evaluation, should the focus of normative
 49 ethics be on developing an account of *right* and *wrong* action, as opposed to, say,
 50 good and bad (or virtuous and vicious) action?

51 I will argue that the task of providing a virtue-ethical account of right action is not
 52 a very urgent or important matter. The strength of virtue ethics lies in the fact that it
 53 can evaluate actions in terms of a rich *aretaic* (virtue and vice) vocabulary. In the
 54 second half of the chapter I propose a “relaxed” virtue-ethical account of right action.

55 **2 Action Evaluation and Character Evaluation**

56 Consider the first question: Is it *the* central task of normative ethics to concern itself
 57 with action evaluation? It seems safe to say that it is certainly a central topic. Many
 58 of the judgements we make in everyday moral practice are of actions (e.g. “She did
 59 the right thing”, “He should do X in this situation”, etc.). However, it doesn’t seem
 60 obvious to me that it should be the central concern of normative ethics. In addition to

¹See, for example, the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*’s entry on Utilitarianism, which claims that “its core idea is that whether actions are morally right or wrong depends on their effects” (Nathanson 2014). Similarly, and despite Kant’s emphasis on virtue and “the good will,” Kantian ethics is often introduced as a form of deontology, and hence as primarily concerned with defining right action in terms of duty or adherence to the moral law (See Jankowiak 2014).

61 evaluating actions, we also, and perhaps just as frequently, make judgments of
62 people’s character. We use terms such as “kind”, “decent”, “reliable”, and “princi-
63 pled” to praise people, and we use terms such as “arrogant”, “greedy”, “dishonest”,
64 and “materialistic” to criticize aspects of their character. Although I don’t know of
65 any empirical research to support this claim, a quick glance at everyday moral
66 practice doesn’t give us reason to think that judgments of action are more important
67 or more fundamental than judgments of character. To take just one example, in the
68 week following the 2019 terrorist attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, Prime
69 Minister Jacinda Ardern was widely praised for her actions, including her clear
70 and outright condemnation of white supremacy, her promise that the government
71 would cover the victims’ funeral costs, and the initiatives she undertook to change
72 gun laws. But she was also praised for her extraordinary kindness, compassion, and
73 strength of character.²

74 Thus, if we want to consider the strengths and weaknesses of different normative
75 theories on more or less neutral grounds, we must begin with the assumption that it is
76 the task of normative theory to help us make better judgments, not only of actions,
77 but also of people’s character. We can certainly ask whether what virtue ethicists
78 have to say about action is more plausible than what deontologists and consequen-
79 tialist have to say on the matter. But we should also ask whether deontologists and
80 consequentialists can give a plausible account of good character. That is, can the
81 goodness of a good or virtuous human being be explained in terms of duties or
82 principles (e.g., as a disposition to act in accordance with duty, or to be motivated by
83 a sense of duty, etc.), or, instead, in terms of good consequences (e.g., as a
84 disposition to bring about good consequences, or to be motivated by a desire to
85 promote the good, etc.)? Virtue ethicists give different accounts of the nature and
86 grounds of virtuous character, but what they all have in common is a denial that
87 virtue is grounded solely in either moral duty or good consequences. Instead, the
88 virtues are defined, for example, as human excellences or traits that are necessary for
89 human flourishing or *eudaimonia* (see Hursthouse 1999), as inherently admirable
90 traits (see Slote 2001), or as dispositions to respond well to the demands of the world
91 (see Swanton 2003).

92 This brings us to the second question mentioned in the introduction: Do we have
93 to evaluate actions in terms of deontic language, such as “right” and “wrong,”
94 “permissible” and “impermissible,” “obligatory” and so on?

²See <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/111412903/after-the-christchurch-shooting-attacks-the-world-is-watching-jacinda-ardern>

https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12215143&fbclid=IwAR1sqel8Renc45yZK3bllD5uYPunITfEQrJ87XOCeAOiQg11rlPF1ohTI7U

95 3 Deontic and Aretaic Evaluations of Action

96 Generally speaking, an account of right action is meant to serve two closely related
 97 functions: to provide action guidance, that is, to help us decide what we (or someone
 98 else) should do in a given situation, and to allow for accurate assessment of actions
 99 that have already been undertaken. Hence, by saying that X is the right thing to do
 100 we are indicating that there is good practical reason in favour of doing X, and by
 101 saying that someone did the right thing we are indicating s/he was justified in doing
 102 X. Now, if we keep in mind that virtue ethics, unlike deontology and consequen-
 103 tialism, comes to the matter of action evaluation with a well-developed account of
 104 character firmly in place, then it becomes obvious that it *already* gives us the
 105 resources to evaluate actions. We can recommend or praise actions as virtuous
 106 (kind, honest, just, courageous, etc.), and discourage or condemn actions as vicious
 107 (cruel, dishonest, unjust, cowardly, etc). Here, again, the public's response to
 108 Ardern's actions following the Christchurch attacks are instructive: Hardly anyone
 109 judged her actions in terms of deontic language. Aretaic descriptions of her behav-
 110 iour as, for example, "compassionate", "courageous," and "respectful" were far
 111 more common. The question, then, is whether it is necessary for virtue ethicists to
 112 provide an account of right action, that is, *in addition* to an account of virtuous
 113 action.

114 In her very influential paper, "Modern Moral Philosophy," Elizabeth Anscombe
 115 argues that "the concepts of obligation, and duty – *moral* obligation and *moral* duty,
 116 that is to say – and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of
 117 'ought,' ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible" (1958, 1). The
 118 problem with deontic language, according to Anscombe, is that it presupposes the
 119 existence of a supreme lawgiver. As Richard Taylor explains,

120 Originally ... *right* meant permitted by this or that person or group (by the state, for
 121 example); *wrong* meant forbidden; and *obligatory* meant required. Later, with the spread
 122 of Christianity into the world where rational philosophy had flourished, these terms came to
 123 mean permitted, forbidden, and required by God. But then, as belief in God faded, at least
 124 among philosophers, the *terms* right and wrong and obligatory were kept, though now
 125 divorced from any connection with any lawgiver, such as the state or God, which had
 126 given them their original meaning. (2002, 83)

127 Anscombe notes that this problem is avoided by replacing deontic language with
 128 aretaic language. Instead of claiming that an action is "morally wrong," we can
 129 evaluate it as "untruthful," "unchaste," "unjust," etc. (1958, 8–9).

130 Apart from avoiding the metaphysical problem, using aretaic evaluations has two
 131 distinct advantages. The first is that they are not merely evaluative but also descrip-
 132 tive. For instance, by claiming that an action is honest, I am not only indicating that
 133 there is good practical reason to do X, I am also indicating what the reason is. By
 134 advising someone to do what is honest I am directing their attention to particular
 135 features of their situation. By contrast, describing an action as right, or advising
 136 someone to do what is right, is entirely uninformative. It doesn't give us any hint as
 137 to the reason the action ought to be done (See Annas 2011, 42).

138 A second advantage has to do with the essentially pluralistic nature of virtue
139 ethics. There is a long list of virtues, and an even longer list of vices, which allows
140 for evaluations that are precise, nuanced, and complex. The nature and requirements
141 of each virtue differ, such that it seems likely that different traits are virtues for
142 different reasons. The most prominent defender of a pluralistic virtue ethics is
143 Christine Swanton. She gives a broad or general definition of virtue as a disposition
144 to respond well to the demands of the world (2003, 19), but then goes on to argue
145 that what makes a trait a virtue can be any of a number of things. Some virtues
146 involve responding well to valuable things, such as beauty, knowledge, works of art,
147 and the environment, by promoting, enhancing, or maintaining them. Virtues such as
148 charity, benevolence, and generosity are aimed at the good of sentient beings.
149 Justice, deference, and politeness are virtues that involve recognizing and
150 responding appropriately to a person's status as a parent, teacher, leader, etc. And
151 virtues like friendship, love, and compassion involve responding well to relation-
152 ships or bonds (Swanton 2003, 34–48). In addition, Swanton notes that there are
153 many modes of moral responsiveness. We can respond well by *promoting* or
154 bringing about something of value. For example, the virtue of benevolence involves
155 responding to others' needs by promoting their good. But we can also respond well
156 by *appreciating* the value of an artwork, nature, or the efforts of others, *respecting* an
157 individual in virtue of her status, *creating* a work of art, and *honoring* rules of justice
158 (2003, 21–23). Eudaimonistic virtue ethicists try to unify the virtues by connecting
159 them to human flourishing. Hence, in this view, the virtues are traits needed to live
160 well or flourish as a human being (see Hursthouse 1999; Annas 2011; Russell 2012;
161 Badhwar 2014). However, their account of virtue remains pluralistic in the sense that
162 different virtues contribute to flourishing in different ways, such that the nature and
163 requirements of each virtue will differ. In short, then, although virtue ethicists
164 disagree among themselves about whether it is possible to unify the virtues, this
165 disagreement is largely irrelevant when it comes to action evaluation. The important
166 point in this regard, and one that all virtue ethicists will agree upon, is that virtue
167 ethics is pluralistic in the sense that there are many virtues, the nature and require-
168 ments of which are different, such that they can come into conflict in particular
169 situations. An action can be honest but not kind, compassionate but not courageous,
170 and so on. (We will return to this point shortly.)

171 A common objection to virtue-ethical evaluations of actions is that it blurs the
172 commonsense distinction between an action that is right and one that is well-
173 motivated. In his influential work, *The Right and the Good* (2002[1930]), W. D.
174 Ross warns against confusing the rightness of an act with its goodness. Ross
175 considers the case of a man who pays a debt from fear of the legal consequences
176 of not doing so. He notes that disagreement about whether the action is right is often
177 the result of an ambiguity. Whereas some use “This action is right” to mean “This
178 action is morally obligatory,” others take it to mean “The act proceeds from a good
179 motive.” Once this ambiguity is pointed out, Ross feels confident that everyone will
180 agree that the man did the right thing for the wrong reason. He then declares that,
181 henceforth, “right action” will be taken to mean “obligatory” (or “what ought to be
182 done”) while “good action” will mean an action that is well-motivated or

183 praiseworthy (2002[1930], 156). Ross's proposed usage has become fairly standard
 184 among modern moral philosophers, and lies behind the objection that the early virtue
 185 ethicists concern themselves with good (well-motivated or praiseworthy) action,
 186 while forgetting – or remaining silent – about whether the action itself is to be
 187 recommended as right.

188 Although there are certainly virtue ethicists who have blurred, in a bad way, the
 189 distinction between the evaluation of actions and motives, most virtue ethicists have
 190 been at pains not to make this mistake. Indeed, as Swanton (2003, 231–239) points
 191 out, Aristotle himself makes a distinction between *virtuous action* and *action from*
 192 *virtue*, which roughly coincides with Ross's distinction (See *The Nicomachean*
 193 *Ethics* 1105a30–1105b2; 1105a9–b2). Following Aristotle, Swanton claims that an
 194 action is virtuous (e.g. benevolent, honest, just, etc.) if it involves a form of success
 195 in responding to the demands of the world. By contrast, an agent acts from virtue
 196 when the source of the action is the agent's good character. Acting from virtue, in her
 197 view, requires not only good motivation but also practical wisdom, fine emotions,
 198 and a relatively stable disposition to respond well to the demands of the world
 199 (Swanton 2003, 238).

200 There seems to be nothing stopping virtue ethicists from replacing the rather
 201 vague evaluations of actions as “right” or “wrong” with more informative evalua-
 202 tions of actions as “courageous,” “compassionate,” “considerate” and the like.
 203 Hence, where where Ross and his followers would say of an action that it is right
 204 but not good, virtue ethicists would say that it is an honest/just/generous action, but
 205 not done from honesty/justice/generosity.³ What this suggests, as far as action
 206 evaluation is concerned, the most important task for virtue ethics is to try to obtain
 207 a better understanding of the nature and requirements of specific virtues, and to
 208 consider how they apply in different circumstances.

209 4 Eliminativism

210 Do we have to eliminate deontic concepts from our moral discourse? Anscombe's
 211 paper has been enormously influential, and most contemporary virtue ethicists agree
 212 that the notions of moral duty, and of what is morally obligatory and permissible
 213 have become meaningless and should be discarded. However, very few of them have
 214 taken up her suggestion that we “jettison” the concepts of morally right and wrong.⁴
 215 The simple reason for this is that there are other ways in which these terms can be

³This might seem a bit more cumbersome, but perhaps not entirely out of touch with how we do speak in everyday situations. When we hear someone praised for acting generously in making a large donation to charity, we might respond: “His action was certainly generous, but his motives were entirely selfish.” We *could* also say, “He did the right thing for the wrong reason,” and mean roughly the same thing by this, but for now I'm trying to see how far we can go with aretaic language.

⁴Richard Taylor is one of the very few exceptions.

216 used. As Julia Annas argues, “right” is often just a vague way of indicating that
217 someone acted virtuously:

218 talking about right action is a generalized way of talking about virtuous action: a virtuous
219 action will be a right action and vice versa. The difference will be that the virtue terms are
220 richer in content and more informative about the action, whereas ‘right’ will just gather
221 together all the actions picked out by the virtue terms. (2011, 41).

222 It is interesting to note, in this regard, how often newspaper headlines state that
223 someone “did the right thing,” before using aretaic language to elaborate on this in
224 the body of the article. In some cases “He did the right thing” is used to defend
225 someone against unfair criticism, and means something like “He did not act selfishly
226 or callously”.⁵ In other cases it is used to indicate that someone acted with enormous
227 courage, for example, by risking his own life to save another. In yet other cases “He
228 did the right thing” is explained by noting that although someone found herself in a
229 situation where most people would be tempted to be dishonest, she managed to acted
230 honestly by, say, returning the lost wallet.⁶

231 This points to a modest form of eliminativism, which gives the following advice:
232 “Talk about right and wrong action if you really want to, but keep in mind that you
233 can give more nuanced and finely-grained evaluations by using the language of
234 virtue and vice. And be ready to explain that you’re not using ‘right’ to mean morally
235 permissible or obligatory.”

236 However, there is a set of cases in which the more general term, “right”
237 (or “wrong”) action is preferable to aretaic evaluations. As noted earlier, virtue
238 ethics is pluralistic in that it recognizes that there are many virtues and vices. The
239 implication of this is that the demands of different virtues can come into conflict.
240 Consider, for example, a situation where telling the truth will hurt someone’s
241 feelings, and so the act of telling the truth will be both honest and unkind. In such
242 a case, saying that x is an honest action (or a kind action) is not to recommend it as
243 “the thing to do” but only to give a (defeasible) reason in favour of doing x. We
244 therefore need a stronger term whereby to recommend the action, and here saying
245 that “x is the right thing to do” seems appropriate. Hence, one might claim that
246 telling the truth is the right thing to do, followed by an explanation in terms of virtue
247 and vice: “It is more important to be honest than kind, because the truth will come
248 out sooner or later, and it is best she hears it from you.”

249 **5 Right Action: A Relaxed View**

250 So far, I have been working my way towards presenting what one might call a
251 relaxed virtue-ethical account of right action. It makes the following key claims:

⁵<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-44381957>

⁶<https://www.wbrc.com/2018/10/21/bham-teen-going-viral-doing-right-thing/>

- 252 1. Action evaluation is important, but not the most important feature of a normative
253 theory. Character evaluation is at least as important as action evaluation.
- 254 2. The central concern for virtue ethics is to give a general account of what makes a
255 trait a virtue (or a vice) and then to analyse specific virtues and vices.
- 256 3. A virtue ethicist favours evaluating actions in terms of virtues and vices. In many
257 contexts “right” and “wrong” can be replaced with aretaic terms, which are richer
258 and more descriptive.
- 259 4. “Right action” is not equivalent to an action that is obligatory or permissible. It is
260 used to indicate that there is good reason or justification for the action.
- 261 5. These reasons should be formulated in terms of virtues and vices, rather than in
262 terms of duties or good consequences.
- 263 6. “Right action” is useful in contexts where the demands of different virtues
264 conflict. In these contexts, evaluating an action as virtuous in respect X merely
265 indicates that there is a defeasible reason to perform the action, rather than
266 recommending or approving of the action as the thing to do. By claiming that
267 an action is right we can indicate that it is the thing to do, the solution to the
268 dilemma, or the best of the available options.

269 Two further points, which follow from the above, are worth emphasizing:

- 270 7. “Rightness” is not a singular quality that all right actions share, such as “a
271 tendency to maximize utility” or “being in accordance with duty”. I think Julia
272 Annas is correct when she argues that “[r]ight” is a ‘thin’ ethical concept, lacking
273 independent ethical content of its own, as opposed to ‘thick’ ethical concepts like
274 the virtues” (2011, 42). By claiming that an action is right we are simply
275 indicating that there is good overall reason to perform the action, or at least,
276 that there is no good overall reason not to perform it (e.g., when we say of an
277 action that it is “all right”). A right action can range from one that is barely
278 acceptable (as when we say, “At least she did the right thing”) to one that
279 deserves, as Hursthouse puts it, a “tick of approval” as an excellent action.
- 280 8. A virtue-ethical account of right action does not offer a decision-procedure that
281 can be applied to any particular situation to produce or reveal the correct answer
282 to the moral question or dilemma. Instead, it draws our attention to certain
283 features of the action, the agent, and the situation that are relevant when deter-
284 mining whether there is good overall reason or justification for the action.

285 There are three prominent virtue-ethical accounts of right action: an agent-based
286 account, a qualified-agent account, and a target-centred account. These offer differ-
287 ent ways of approaching the question: What counts as good overall reason or
288 justification for an action?

289 Agent-based accounts, such as the one developed by Michael Slote in *Morals*
290 *from Motives* (2001), focus on the agent’s motives. One formulation of this view
291 claims that an action is right if it expresses or proceeds from virtuous motives, and
292 wrong if it expresses or proceeds from bad (or insufficiently good) motives (see Slote
293 2001, 14, 33). A frequent objection to this view is that it fails to account for the

294 distinction between a right action and one that is well-motivated. As noted earlier,
295 there are certainly cases where a specific action was “the thing to do,” even though
296 the agent was poorly motivated. Likewise, it is possible (and indeed, not uncommon)
297 for a well-motivated person to act wrongly. In his more recent work Slote tries to
298 avoid this objection by holding that an action is right if it expresses or exhibits good
299 motivation, and noting that an action can express good motives without actually
300 proceeding from good motives (2010, 93). While this move allows Slote to avoid the
301 objection, it makes it very difficult to see how his view differs from a qualified-agent
302 account.

303 According to a target-centred account, as proposed by Christine Swanton (2003)
304 and developed by Nicholas Smith (2017, 2018), an action is overall virtuous (and
305 therefore right) if it succeeds in hitting the targets of the relevant virtues. To hit the
306 target of a virtue is to succeed in realizing the ends of that virtue. For example, the
307 end or target of benevolence is the good of others, and so an action hits the target of
308 benevolence if it actually promotes the good of others. As noted earlier, an advantage
309 of this approach is that it makes a clear distinction between a virtuous act (one that
310 succeeds in hitting the target of the virtue in question) and an action from virtue (one
311 that comes from good or virtuous motivation).

312 The third, and most popular approach is a qualified-agent view, developed by
313 Aristotelian virtue ethicists like Rosalind Hursthouse and Daniel Russell, which
314 defines right action in terms of a fully virtuous (or qualified) agent would do in the
315 circumstances. This approach has the advantage of being broader than an agent-
316 based and target-centred account, which single out motives and target-hitting as
317 right-making features. When we consider the ways in which a fully virtuous agent
318 characteristically acts, our attention is drawn to good motives as well as success in
319 realizing her virtuous ends. But it also leads us to consider the importance of
320 practical wisdom, which is an intellectual virtue that allows the agent to do the
321 right thing, from the right motives, and with the right feelings and attitude. It also
322 requires a set of practical skills (knowing how to bring about good ends) as well as
323 knowledge of what is worthwhile or important for human flourishing.

324 In the remainder of this chapter I will apply a relaxed version of a qualified-agent
325 account of right action to a number of difficult cases. In this view, the relevance of
326 the various features that are characteristic of the actions of a fully virtuous agent –
327 motivation, emotion, attitude, and success – will depend on various features of the
328 situation as well as the use or function to which the term “right action” is put. I begin
329 by discussing an example of a poorly motivated agent, where “right” can be replaced
330 with the appropriate virtue term, and then go on to discuss two examples of moral
331 dilemmas.

332 6 The Poorly Motivated Agent

333 An important part of what makes a person virtuous is that they have good motives.
334 For example, a kind person characteristically helps others because he cares about
335 their welfare, and not because he wants to impress someone else. But should we
336 consider an agent's motive when judging their actions? Consider the following case:

337 Roberto has a history of being selfish and tight-fisted, and as a result has become quite
338 unpopular with his co-workers. On one particular occasion a charity worker comes by the
339 office to ask for donations for the Cancer Society. Roberto, seeing this as an opportunity to
340 impress his co-workers with his generosity, makes a sizable donation. He regrets having to
341 make the financial sacrifice, but he thinks it will pay off in the form of increased popularity
342 and invitations to dinner parties, from which he is often excluded.

343 Does Roberto succeed in doing what a virtuous person would do in the circum-
344 stances? The answer to this question depends on what is involved in "doing what a
345 virtuous person would do" – does it require merely performing certain actions
346 (where actions are described simply as "rescuing a drowning child" or, in this
347 case, "giving to charity"), or does it also require acting from virtuous motives?

348 While recognizing the distinction between acting virtuously and acting from
349 virtue, a relaxed qualified-agent account can allow for an agent's motive to form
350 part of the description of their actions. Indeed, as Hursthouse (2006, 106–112)
351 herself notes, there are contexts in which we are not interested in people's attitudes,
352 feelings, reasons, and motives. As long as they do certain things, such as paying their
353 rent on time or telling the truth when we ask them for directions, we are confident in
354 describing their actions as right (or more specifically, as reliable or honest, respec-
355 tively). In these contexts, "right" is used in a fairly thin or undemanding sense, to
356 indicate that the action is the kind of thing that we need people to do in order for
357 society to function well. However, in contexts relating to moral improvement, we
358 use a richer, more demanding sense of "right," which requires the agent not merely to
359 perform a certain type of action but also to do so for the right reasons and with the
360 right attitude and emotions. In these contexts, Hursthouse says,

361 [w]hat you *do* does not count as right unless it is what the virtuous agent would *do*, say, "tell
362 the truth, after much painful thought, for the right reasons, feeling deep regret, having put in
363 place all that can be done to support the person on the receiving end afterwards." Only if you
364 get all of that right are you entitled to the satisfactory review of your own conduct, . . . simply
365 making the right decision, and telling the truth just [isn't] good enough to merit approval
366 (2006, 108–109).

367 Returning to Roberto's case, then, we can see how the charity worker herself
368 might describe his action as right (or generous). By making a sizable donation he
369 does what a generous person would do. However, Roberto's long-suffering
370 co-worker, who has borne the brunt of his tight-fistedness, will be interested in his
371 true motives. If she discovered that he is still acting from selfish motives she will not
372 be impressed by his behavior. From her perspective, a better description of what he

373 does is that he is trying to manipulate his co-workers by pretending to be generous.
 374 She will therefore have good reason to conclude that his action is not right
 375 (or generous), or at least, not right without qualification, as it doesn't merit unqual-
 376 ified approval.

377 7 Tragic Dilemmas

378 Another context in which motives, attitudes and emotions play a role in the assess-
 379 ment of an action is when an agent finds himself in a tragic dilemma, that is, a
 380 situation in which he is forced to make a choice between two or more terrible actions.
 381 The actions are “terrible” in the sense that they involve, for example, causing a great
 382 amount of suffering, breaking a significant promise, or killing someone – the types
 383 of action that a virtuous person would characteristically avoid. Consider the well-
 384 known case of Jim and Pedro:

385 Jim is an explorer who wanders into a village where he finds Pedro about to shoot twenty
 386 peasants. The captain, in an effort to honor the new guest, presents Jim with the opportunity
 387 to shoot one peasant whereupon the others will be released. But if he refuses, Pedro will
 388 carry on and shoot them all as originally planned. (See Williams 1973, 98ff)

389 The first thing any virtue ethicist would point out is that in forcing a choice
 390 between two actions the example is unduly artificial. One mark of a virtuous person
 391 is that they wouldn't be too quick to assume that they are, indeed, facing a tragic
 392 dilemma. Instead, they will try – and will often succeed – to find a way out, for
 393 instance, by negotiating with the captain, or by disarming Pedro and heroically
 394 saving all twenty people. But if we accept Williams's stipulation that it is impossible
 395 to escape the dilemma, then we can begin by making the following claim: Whether
 396 Jim kills one peasant or turns his back on all them (which leads to Pedro killing
 397 them), he would be doing something that can only be described as “terrible.” He
 398 cannot emerge from the situation feeling happy or satisfied with his conduct, and his
 399 life will always be affected by it. This is what makes it a *tragic* dilemma. The
 400 question, however, is whether Jim is forced, not only to do something *terrible*, but
 401 something terribly *wrong*?

402 Hursthouse argues – and I agree – that the agent is not forced to act wrongly in a
 403 tragic dilemma. In these cases the virtuous agent's motives, emotions, and attitude
 404 will differ significantly from the motives, emotions, and attitudes of the vicious
 405 person. If Jim is virtuous, he will not act indifferently or gladly, as the vicious do, but
 406 with immense regret and pain (See Hursthouse 1999, 73–74). In this kind of case,
 407 then, where the agent is forced to choose between two terrible actions, it is inappro-
 408 priate to assess an action as wrong – characteristic of a vicious person – if the agent's
 409 inner states do not resemble those of a vicious person.

410 Whether a virtuous agent perform a *right* action in a tragic dilemma is a more
 411 controversial question. The dilemma presents Jim with the following – conflicting –
 412 reasons for acting: “Turning my back on the peasants and hoping for the best would

413 be cowardly and lacking in proper regard or concern for their welfare. On the other
414 hand, killing one of them in an attempt to prevent the others from being killed is
415 enormously risky – I cannot be sure that the captain will honour his promise, and
416 even if he does, I would still be responsible for ending the life of an innocent human
417 being.” This dilemma could well be irresolvable, in which case we have to conclude
418 that a right decision is not possible in the situation. The dilemma will be resolvable, I
419 think, if Jim has good reason to believe that the captain will kill all of the men if Jim
420 refused to kill one. In that case, a qualified-agent account supports the conclusion
421 that if Jim has good overall reason to shoot one person and he does so in a way that is
422 characteristic of a virtuous agent (that is, with immense regret and pain), then it is
423 appropriate to say that he performs a right action.

424 Hursthouse doesn't fully support this conclusion. Although she allows that the
425 virtuous agent can make the right decision (that is, resolve the dilemma correctly),
426 she denies that he thereby performs a right action, for she thinks it is a mistake to
427 give “this terrible deed, the doing of which mars the virtuous agent's life, a tick of
428 approval, as a good deed” (1999, 78). I used to think it is worth arguing about this
429 point,⁷ but no longer hold this view. If we adopt a more relaxed qualified-agent
430 account, that is, if we reject the idea that rightness is a property that all right actions
431 share, and instead hold that “right action” is just a phrase we use to recommend or
432 approve of an action, then it doesn't really matter whether we feel comfortable with a
433 description of Jim's act of killing a peasant as “right.” Hursthouse uses “right action”
434 in the sense of “an act that merits praise rather than blame, an act that an agent can
435 take pride in doing rather than feeling unhappy about, the sort of act that decent,
436 virtuous agents do and seek out occasions for doing” (Hursthouse 1999, 46). But the
437 term can be used in different ways by different people and in different contexts, and I
438 don't think there is an obvious contradiction in someone stating that Jim did the right
439 thing (or acted well) in the circumstances, even though it is not the kind of action that
440 a good person will take pride in doing.

441 What I would say, however, is that it is inappropriate, or at least unwise, to reduce
442 our evaluation of Jim's action to a simple description of it as “a (or the) right
443 (or wrong) action.” Matters are more complicated, and we can, and should say
444 much more. To begin with, we might point out that Jim did the right thing (or did
445 the best he could) in the situation, given (say) that he had good reason to believe that
446 the captain would follow through on his threat to kill all twenty men. But we could
447 follow this up by noting, as the case may be, that he acted with courage, that he
448 remained calm and composed, that he was genuinely concerned with the plight of the
449 peasants, and so on. Finally, the virtue ethicist can make an important claim about
450 actions performed in the context of tragic dilemmas, namely that they leave a moral
451 scar on the virtuous agent. A virtuous agent is kind, compassionate, and benevolent,
452 which means that he is disposed to act in ways that relieve others' suffering and
453 deterred from acting in ways that harm them. Hence, by killing someone the virtuous
454 person does not act wrongly (in a manner characteristic of a vicious person), but he

⁷See Van Zyl 2007.

455 does do something that he is disposed by his very nature not to do, something that
456 goes against his moral fiber. He will therefore feel terrible, and the terrible feeling is
457 best characterized, not as remorse, guilt, or regret, but as a kind of frustration, a
458 frustration of a deeply moral kind. It is for this reason that he cannot emerge from the
459 dilemma with his life unmarred.

460 8 Non-virtuous Agents

461 A well-known objection to a qualified-agent account is that it doesn't allow us to deal
462 with cases, which are all too common, where the agent is faced with a difficult choice
463 due to their own character flaws or past wrongdoing. Hursthouse (1999, 50–51)
464 gives the following example:

465 A distinctly non-virtuous man impregnates two women, A and B, after convincing each that
466 he intends to marry her. B subsequently decides that she no longer wants to marry him, and
467 finds another suitor who is delighted to adopt the child. But A still wants to marry him. The
468 philanderer decides to marry A, for he realizes that it would be bad to abandon her.

469 Robert Johnson (2003, 816–818) discusses a few other examples, including the
470 following:

471 A chronic liar, having been called out for his lying on many occasions, finally decides to
472 improve his character. He decides simply to stop the lying, but when this fails he goes to see
473 a therapist to seek her advice. Her recommendation is to write down all his lies and to
474 consider the effects they have on others, and this strategy that proves to be useful.

475 The commonsense view in both these case is that after behaving deplorably in the
476 past, the agent finally does the right thing. But a qualified-agent account doesn't
477 seem to support this view. It asks us to consider what a virtuous agent would do in
478 these situations, and the answer is: A virtuous agent wouldn't find himself in these
479 situations in the first place. It follows, then, that a qualified-agent account simply
480 doesn't apply in these cases (see Harman 2001, 120–121).

481 In response, Hursthouse argues that a qualified-agent account does allow for
482 action assessment: it tells us that it is impossible to perform a right action in these
483 circumstances. She thinks this is exactly the result we want, that is, if we keep in
484 mind that a “right action” is an act that warrants a “tick of approval.” By claiming
485 that the philanderer does not perform a right action by marrying A, she does not
486 imply that he ought not to marry A. She simply means that he doesn't perform a good
487 deed; he cannot review his conduct with satisfaction (Hursthouse 1999, 50). Simi-
488 larly, the reforming liar's actions cannot be described as right, for he cannot feel
489 proud of the need to see a therapist to help him overcome his mendacity. We can
490 admit that there is a definite improvement in his behavior, and hence, that he
491 deserves some praise and encouragement. We can also account for the intuition
492 that there is “something truly excellent in a moral respect about the reformations of
493 the liar” (Johnson 2003, 825) by noting that his actions reveal a certain amount of

494 courage and determination. But the central virtue in question here is honesty, and by
495 writing down his lies (and so on), the reforming liar does not act in a way that is
496 characteristic of an honest person, at least not yet.

497 If we accept this response a qualified-agent account still faces a problem with
498 regards to action guidance. In deciding what to do in the situation, it seems, the
499 non-virtuous agent will get no guidance from thinking about what a virtuous agent
500 would do in his situation. As I've argued more fully elsewhere (Van Zyl 2011), I
501 think the non-virtuous agent can be guided by his desire not (or no longer) to act in
502 ways that are characteristic of a vicious person. To illustrate, consider the philan-
503 derer's situation. He has at least three options:

- 504 (a) He can turn his back on both women, and support neither of them.
- 505 (b) He can abandon A, and pursue B (who is no longer interested in him).
- 506 (c) He can support A and leave B alone.

507 All of these actions involve failing to support someone he has impregnated, and
508 so are not characteristic of a virtuous agent. Arguably, however, some of his options
509 are even worse than others. Abandoning both women, without offering any support,
510 would most certainly be selfish and cruel. The second option is even worse, because
511 in addition to being selfish and cruel, it will also manifest a remarkable degree of
512 insensitivity and disrespect towards B. The third option is the least bad, at least in
513 theory, for by supporting A and respecting B's wishes, it is the only one that does not
514 involve acting in a way that is selfish, cruel, insensitive and disrespectful.

515 We can now return to the question: Is it appropriate to describe the philanderer's
516 action as right? In response, I would begin by noting that we need not follow
517 Hursthouse by reserving the term "right action" for "the sort of act that decent,
518 virtuous agents do and seek out occasions for doing" (Hursthouse 1999, 46). We can
519 use it in a less demanding sense, as a way of indicating that there are good overall
520 reasons for acting in this way. The next thing to note is that a virtue ethicist is
521 primarily interested in character evaluation. When presented with an actual example
522 of a philanderer, let's call him Charles, who impregnated two women, Annie and
523 Betty, and then decides to marry Annie, we should ask the following sorts of
524 question: "Is any indication that Charles has changed his ways, and is becoming
525 the kind of person who would be a loving, supportive, and loyal husband and father?
526 Is he truly committed to Annie? Does he love and respect her? What are his true
527 reasons for wanting to marry her? etc." It is only when we are satisfied with the
528 answers to these questions that we can return to the matter of action evaluation, and
529 claim, that now, at long last, Charles is doing the right thing. The bottom line, then, is
530 that it is a mistake to pay too much attention to the question of whether the
531 philanderer's action is right or wrong. Describing his action as right or wrong is
532 uninformative and uninteresting.

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AU2

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