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Aesop's fox: Consequentialist virtue meets egocentric bias

Dale L. Clark

*In her book *Uneasy Virtue*, Julia Driver presents an account of motive or trait utilitarianism, one that has been taken as “the most detailed and thoroughly defended recent formulation” of consequentialist virtue ethics. On Driver’s account character traits are morally virtuous if and only if they generally lead to good consequences for society. Various commentators have taken Driver to task over this account of virtue, which she terms “pure evaluational externalism.” They object that, on Driver’s account of virtue, it could turn out that traits traditionally understood as pernicious are actually virtuous. While many writers have speculated about the forms new ‘virtues’ might take in a hypothetical world, I will argue that at least one trait that is seemingly pernicious but would have to be counted as virtuous by Driver already exists.*

Keywords: Consequentialism; Empirical Psychology; Virtue Ethics

An enduring criticism of most virtue-based ethical systems is that while it is recommended that a person act from a virtuous character, it remains unclear how to identify which dispositions are virtuous and which ones are not. In her book *Uneasy Virtue*, Julia Driver presents an account of motive or trait utilitarianism, one that has been taken as “the most detailed and thoroughly defended recent formulation” of consequentialist virtue ethics (Bradley, 2005, p. 282).¹ On Driver’s account character traits are morally virtuous if and only if they generally lead to good consequences for society. Various commentators have taken Driver to task over this account of virtue, which she terms “pure evaluational externalism.” They object that, on Driver’s account of virtue, it could turn out that traits traditionally understood as pernicious are actually virtuous (O’Neill, 2004; Skorkupski, 2004; Slote, 2004). Nevertheless, the purpose of this essay is not to beg the question against consequentialist virtue ethics. While many writers have speculated about the forms new ‘virtues’ might take in a hypothetical world,² I will argue that at least

Dale L. Clark is currently both a graduate student in philosophy (ABD) at the University of Utah as well as a Lecturer at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Correspondence to: Dale L. Clark, University of Texas at San Antonio, College of Business, Management Department, One UTSA Circle, San Antonio, TX 78249, United States. Email: dale.clark@utsa.com

one trait that is seemingly pernicious but would have to be counted as virtuous by Driver already exists. Whether this counts against Driver's formulation of consequential virtue ethics, of course, depends strongly upon a theorist's willingness to re-evaluate our traditional list of the virtues. Finally, while I am interested in Driver as a representative of consequentialist virtue ethics, and my arguments will be directed to her formulation of it, I hope it will be clear that the problem is a general one.

Driver does admit that "we could well be mistaken in our conventional judgments of virtue" (2004, p. 34). If it turned out, for example, that "generosity to others actually undermined their character in some deep way" (Driver, 2004, p. 34), then on her view we would be forced to deem such a character trait vicious. While Driver agrees that on her account "there could in principle be a radical transformation of our list of virtues and vices," this possibility seems "unlikely" to her because she thinks that the good effects constituting a virtuous character trait must be "systematic," and the empirical claims necessary to establish such traits as virtuous seem "wildly implausible" (Driver, 2004, p. 34).

In fact, it turns out, that there is significant empirical data to support the claim that at least one commonly disdained character trait is highly beneficial to both individuals as well as society in general. Opposed to what Driver calls a "modest" person, i.e., one who "underestimates herself in some respect or other," (2004, p. 33) is the "self-aggrandizing person," namely, one who overestimates herself in some respect or other. Recent studies suggest that persons who tend toward "overly positive self-evaluations, exaggerated perceptions of control or mastery, and unrealistic optimism" do better in quite a number of ways than those who are "more balanced in self-perceptions" (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 196). Such erroneous self-evaluations are positively associated with various aspects of social bonding in children (Bohrstedt & Felson, 1983; Felson, 1981) as well as social functioning in college (Cutrona, 1982). Thinking that one is better than one really is also tends to put one in a good mood (Freedman, 1978). People in positive moods

are generally more likely to help others, to initiate conversations with others, to express liking for others and positive evaluations of people in general, and to reduce the use of contentious strategies and increase joint benefit in bargaining situations. Summarizing the research evidence, [one researcher] concluded [that such] positive affect is associated with increased sociability and benevolence. (see also Batson, Coke, Chard, Smith, and Taliaferro, 1979; Carnevale and Isen, 1986; Cialdini, Kenrick, and Baumann, 1982; Diener, 1984; Gouaux, 1971; Griffith, 1970; Isen, 1970, 1984; Moore, Underwood, and Rosenhan, 1973; Veitch and Griffith, 1976)

In other words, persons who overestimate their abilities and embrace illusory optimism not only fare better in terms of social functioning, overall feelings of well-being, higher levels of and success in activity, etc. (Greenwald, 1980; Seligman, 1975), they are also kinder to others, help more people more often, and in these respects generally contribute greater benefits to society than those persons who live with a more realistic view of themselves.

It is important to note just what level of vanity is beneficial according to the kind of studies I have been discussing. Driver distinguishes—and rightly I believe—between what she calls “modesty,” on the one hand, and cases of low self-esteem, or “self-deprecation,” on the other (Driver, 2001, p. 18). In the former, a certain level of epistemic defect may indeed have good consequences; too much, however, and the cost becomes too high, as in the later. In the case of what the research I have cited calls “positive illusion,” the degree to which one’s self-assessment may be out of line with reality is similarly limited. A person suffering from *extreme* delusions of grandeur will generally be less effective. Such a person will be unable to set goals even minimally consistent with his or her actual abilities. Likewise, the egomaniac is more often careless of others, and with odd exceptions such as the occasional successful industrialist, will do little to help other people. Since the kinds of good consequences suggested by the data are positively correlated with a limited and perhaps negligible amount of illusion, it seems empirically supported and consistent with Driver’s view to hold that a certain level of exaggerated, overly positive and self-aggrandizing perception of the self is not such a bad character trait after all. More strongly, Driver’s model of what constitutes a virtuous character trait, combined with extensive empirical data, suggests that a very real and well documented trait, vanity, as an exaggerated sense of worth, *is* a virtue, contrary to the common intuition that it is not.

Before considering how Driver and other like-minded thinkers could or should respond to the data that I have cited, there are further features of such “vanity” that are important to know. The significance of these features becomes apparent if we consider the following: “an attribute of many psychologically disturbed people is an inability to monitor reality effectively” (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 200). Given this understanding of pathology, the healthy individual is traditionally “portrayed as one that maintains very close contact with reality” (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 200). The evidence cited above “flies in the face of much clinical wisdom as well as commonsense notions that people must monitor reality accurately to survive” (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 200).³ How does this kind of systematic illusion consistently function in the face of reality?

As it turns out, various features of social as well as cognitive construction manage negative feedback to make this character trait possible (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 201). For one thing, people do not like to give feedback to others (Blumberg, 1972); however, when they do give feedback it is usually either positive, or euphemistically ambiguous (Blumberg, 1972; Goffman, 1955; Parducci, 1968; Tesser & Rosen, 1975). This makes it much easier for an individual to maintain an illusory sense of self-worth. Moreover, if people expect that others may disagree with them, they tend to amend their own opinions prior to engaging their audience, thereby avoiding negative feedback (Cialdini, Levy, Herman, & Evenbeck, 1973; McGuire, 1985; Snyder & Swann, 1976; Tetlock, 1983). Myriad strategies work together in order to protect an individual from the unpleasant reality that is himself or herself. Individuals primarily seek to confirm their own self-conceptions (Swann, 1983, 1984). We adopt “physical identity cues,” e.g., certain kinds of clothing, certain kinds

of social roles, as well as styles of communication, to express not only how we are to be viewed by others, but also to actively solicit self-confirming feedback (Swann & Hill, 1982; Swann & Read, 1981a, 1981b).

Furthermore, one's choice of friends seems affected by the need to protect one's illusory self. People tend to pick friends who do not threaten their own sense of self (Eckland, 1968; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Richardson, 1939; Spuhler, 1968; Swann, 1984), and they do so to such an extent that the traits for which they acknowledge their friends' superiority tend not to be the same traits that they themselves consider valuable. This allows them to "value their friends for exceptional qualities [that are quite] irrelevant to the self (thereby enhancing the self by means of association) without detracting from their own positive self-evaluation" (Tesser, 1980; Tesser & Campbell, 1980; Tesser, Campbell, & Smith, 1984; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983).

Perhaps even more damning is data suggesting severe "biases in [the] encoding, interpretation, and retrieval" of negative feedback (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 202). People tend to selectively interpret and recall information as "consistent with prior beliefs or theories" (see also Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Such a cognitive strategy actually "guide[s] perception[s] of information [with regard to] relevancy" (see also Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Howard & Rothbart, 1980; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Rothbart, Evans, & Fulero, 1979). Consequently, "if feedback is not positive, it may simply be ignored," and "ambiguous feedback... may be perceived as more favorable than it really is" (see also Jacobs, Berscheid, & Walster, 1971; Shrauger, 1982). Moreover, "discrepant feedback is more likely to be perceived as inaccurate or uninformative than is feedback that is consistent with the self" (see also Markus, 1977; Swann & Read, 1981a, 1981b). Such cognitive strategies even affect memory in general. "Information that is consistent with prior [beliefs]... [is] more likely to be recalled" so that "people are better able to remember information that fits their [positive] self-conceptions" (see also Anderson & Pichert, 1978; Owens, Bower, & Black, 1979; Shrauger, 1982; Silverman, 1964; Suinn, Osborne, & Page, 1962; Swann, 1984; Swann & Read, 1981a, 1981b; Zadny & Gerard, 1974). Such self-serving bias (termed 'cognitive drift' in the aforementioned research) is explicit in at least one study that found that "people [who] give a partner more credit for [a] joint product[ion] immediately following [a] task (an attribution that may have considerable social value)... later [give] themselves more credit [than before]" (Burger & Rodman, 1983, p. 1237).

Sometimes, of course, there is too much negative feedback for our social and cognitive filters to ignore successfully. When a person's overly positive self-evaluation is consistently challenged by the reality of his or her abilities, an ability that may once have been considered integral to one's sense of self is subsequently deemphasized with regard to its importance in the person as a whole (Campbell, 1986; Harackiewicz, Manderlink, & Sansone, 1984; Lewicki, 1984, 1985; Rosenberg, 1979).

This last litany of data is meant to make a simple point. On the surface, it seemed plausible (to Driver and other like-minded thinkers) to believe that positive consequences are a sufficient criterion for identifying character traits as virtuous. The cognitive structure that successfully supports certain character traits, however, may end up describing a character that most people just do not find virtuous at all. The self-aggrandizing person is happier and, more importantly, overall contributes more than the realistic person to the well-being of society. But such a person consistently avoids reality by surrounding himself or herself with ‘yes men’; by praising a person one minute, then silently retracting the praise in order to protect his or her own sense of worth; and by literally ignoring his or her faults. The self-aggrandizing person may take some trait or ability to be important only until it turns out that he or she is less than competent in regard to that trait. At that point, conveniently, this trait becomes unimportant, and is judged always to have been unimportant. This ‘virtuous’ person, on the consequentialist view, is like Aesop’s famous fox who decided that he no longer wanted the grapes, and convinced himself that they were sour.

On Driver’s account, it seems that we may have to admit the need for revising (perhaps radically) our list of virtues. Driver might resist by pointing out instead that while at first glance self-aggrandizement seemed a virtue, the data that paint an unflattering picture of a self-serving charlatan actually go to show that our initial assessment was wrong: the negative consequences outweigh the positive, and so such a trait is not a virtue after all. At this point, however, it is unclear how Driver could support this response. Vanity steeped in sour grapes seems to contribute greater benefits to society than a more realistic view of oneself.

Still, perhaps it is the case that a delusional sense of dignity contrived through avoidance behavior does, to use Driver’s phrase, “deeply undermine” a person’s character in some way or another. This line of response does not seem promising. For the pure evaluational externalist, a person’s character is only as deep as the consequences for which a trait makes a difference (Driver, 2004, p. 36). If a trait is not beneficial to the individual or the society of which that individual is a part, then that trait would undermine a person’s character. But here then “deeply undermine” simply means “produce a vicious character.” Notwithstanding circularity the data suggest that the benefits of self-aggrandizement are systematically advantageous not only to individuals but to society as well (Bohrstedt & Felson, 1983; Carnevale & Isen, 1986; Cutrona, 1982; Felson, 1981; Freedman, 1978). For the pure evaluational externalist, therefore, self-aggrandizement cannot be said to undermine a person’s character.

Instead of denying that vanity is a virtue because it undermines a person’s character, Driver might instead try to deal with the objection that her view commits us to endorsing traits previously understood as pernicious by distinguishing among kinds of virtue. Driver might agree that the data does describe a person that is considerably challenged when it comes to self-assessment. Admitting that a trait is a moral virtue, however, does not commit one to admitting that it is an epistemic one. The data suggest that the self-aggrandizing person is far more likely to be

successfully benevolent. If so, then such a trait is, according to the pure evaluational externalist, a moral and perhaps even a prudential and personal virtue. Nevertheless, a person possessed of such a trait is just not the best person to ask if you want an accurate assessment of a great deal of their beliefs. While one might grant the distinction being made here, it is unclear whether it is available or helpful to Driver in trying to avoid re-casting self-aggrandizement as a virtue. What value could 'truth' have for the pure evaluational externalist? Either 'truth' is different than the mere benefit of an individual or society or 'truth' just *is* the benefit of an individual or society. If it is the latter, then there simply is no distinction between an epistemic virtue and a moral virtue.⁴ If it is the former, then the pure evaluational externalist must offer a clear principle upon which to delineate epistemic goods from moral and prudential ones. Furthermore, even if a consequentialist did this he or she would have to then argue that such epistemic goods sometimes outweigh the others.

Yet another avenue available to Driver to avoid endorsing "vanity" as a virtue is to maintain that self-aggrandizement is one kind of character trait, while "sour grapes syndrome" is another. Self-aggrandizement is highly beneficial to society and therefore virtuous. Whether sour grapes syndrome is a virtue or a vice is irrelevant, if one trait is distinct from the other. The slicing of character traits into ever thinner ones, however, is problematic for the pure evaluational externalist. In order to distinguish a virtuous trait from a vicious one, the consequentialist must again offer a clear defensible principle upon which to delineate good groups of consequences from bad ones.⁵

One way to delineate different groups of consequences in a principled fashion is to consider the different kinds of actions that might produce them. Much of what we try to evaluate both before and after taking action, after all, is what kind or group of consequences that action might produce. In fact, part of what one wants from a theory of virtue is to know how to act and, through inculcation, perhaps even become better. Here, then, a distinction between virtuous character traits and vicious ones accordingly is that the first can generally lead to actions that result in good consequences while the latter can generally lead to actions that produce bad ones. This seems a useful distinction for virtue theorists in general. A consequentialist virtue theorist should carve up the objects of assessment to match the actions one can take to bring them about. Unfortunately, in the case of self-aggrandizement and sour grapes syndrome, this is not only troublesome for the pure evaluational externalist, it might well be impossible; the data suggests that these traits tend to 'travel together,' that is, the positive consequences suggested by the data seem dependent upon one trait being supported by the other.

Consider an analogy with regard to certain medications. The drug Metoprolol, for example, is a beta blocker prescribed for the treatment of high blood pressure and heart attacks, as it can slow and stabilize a person's heart rate. Nonetheless, certain fluctuations in heart rate can be beneficial. In particular, it is normal in healthy adults for there to be a fluctuation when changing from a prone to standing position. Metoprolol, however, arrests such fluctuation and, therefore, a person taking this medication should not stand up very quickly because otherwise he or she

risks fainting. The relationship between Metoprolol and a stable heart is analogous to the relationship between sour grapes syndrome and self-aggrandizement. The positive consequences of self-aggrandizement are brought about by sour grapes syndrome much as the positive consequences of a stable heart are implemented by the taking of a medication that impedes fluctuations. More importantly, however, is that while many might want one without the other (especially after doing your first nose dive from the couch to the floor), this is simply not currently possible (and may never be so). In much the same way, the psychological data correlates self-aggrandizement with sour grapes syndrome. To possess the virtue of self-aggrandizement then is to exhibit sour grapes syndrome.

Remember that one reason to distinguish between different character traits and the various consequences of possessing them is so that one might choose, encourage, or even learn to emulate some traits rather than others. This capacity, however, is just not available here. Some actions, e.g., those that might lead to the inculcation of a would-be virtue (self-aggrandizement) without the accompanying vice (sour grapes syndrome), are just not possible. When we constrain the value of character traits⁶ with a consequentialist model, i.e., by “packages” of consequences, then some distinctions are of no consequence. A principled distinction, one perhaps necessary for the inculcation of a possible virtue instead of a possible vice, is simply not available.

Finally, there is another reason why Driver should not maintain that self-aggrandizement is one kind of trait, while sour grapes syndrome is another. The data presented in this paper were meant to make a case for the positive benefits of self-aggrandizement. Much of the same data, however, supports the view that when these respective packages of effects are not yoked together, this tends to be detrimental to the overall well-being of the individual, as well as society. Without the cognitive filtering provided by sour grapes syndrome, people are forced to deal with reality and, as a result, self-aggrandizement is unsustainable, as are the positive benefits correlated with such a sense of self. Such people typically suffer from low self-esteem and moderate depression (see Coyne & Gotlieb, 1983; Ruchman, West, & Pasahow, 1985; Watson & Clark, 1984, for reviews). Moreover, consider a person who is “more balanced in self-perceptions” (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 196). Imagine that he or she nonetheless exhibits sour grapes syndrome. Without the emotional affect of self-aggrandizement, this person, much like Aesop’s fox, is merely a mild depressive, constantly running from reality and constantly failing.

Such data generates at least two additional difficulties. Grant, as is suggested, that self-aggrandizement systematically leads to greater benefits for society as well as the individual. It is therefore, according to the pure evaluational externalist, a virtue. If we further grant that sour-grapes syndrome is a separate character trait in those who are self-aggrandizing and that sour grapes syndrome is a vice, it would amount to a serious criticism of Driver’s view. To say that we are wrong regarding the status of some of our virtues and vices is one thing. The idea that a virtue (self-aggrandizement) *requires* viciousness (sour grape syndrome) for its deployment

seems a bit more counterintuitive.⁷ In effect, pure evaluational externalism would recommend virtue while simultaneously recommending vice.

Second, this discussion further suggests that peeling these traits apart, while facilitating the perhaps proper identification of sour grapes syndrome as vice, comes at a hefty price. What makes for a virtue is supposed to be the set of positive consequences systematically produced by certain character traits. To separate these traits, however, is to throw out the baby with the bath water. Self-aggrandizement without sour grapes syndrome is nothing more than a brief flirtation with fantasy that can and would be quickly corrected. It is implausible that such short-lived delusion would systematically lead to the general benefit of society and, according to the data that I have cited, it is clear that it does not lead to the general benefit of the individual.

To sum up: According to Driver, the way to distinguish between character traits that are virtuous and those that are vicious is to look to the effects such traits have on the individual as well as society. While she admits to the possibility of redefining certain vices as virtues and virtues as vices, she takes “the empirical claims necessary to” establish this possibility to be “wildly implausible” (Driver, 2004, p. 34). This is just not the case. It is in fact quite apparent that a delusional sense of dignity contrived through avoidance behavior is not only good for you and those around you; it might well be necessary for your mental health. I have also argued that the consequentialist motivations of pure evaluational externalism disarm attempts to practically identify the self-delusion and the avoidance behavior as different character traits. I take this to amount to a serious criticism of consequentialist virtue ethics for those theorists that are unwilling to re-evaluate our traditional list of virtues and vices. However, for those willing to bite the bullet, Driver’s account of virtue does entail embracing as virtuous some traits traditionally understood as vicious. The choice is yours.

Notes

- [1] For early discussions of motive and/or trait utilitarianism see Frankena (1963) and Adams (1976).
- [2] O’Neill references Ayn Rand’s position with regard to selfishness, while Skorupski develops a thought experiment concerning a planet ‘X’.
- [3] It should be noted that while the research of Taylor and Brown does demonstrate the existence of both unrealistic positive self-evaluation and illusions of control, the precise relationship between these illusions and a person’s mental health is still unclear. For further discussion see Colvin and Block (1994).
- [4] See Bishop and Trout, 2005 for an attempt to ‘naturalize’ epistemology in this way.
- [5] “A perennial problem for consequentialist[s]” (Driver, 2001, p. 85) is identifying a justified and principled method for assessing different groups of consequences. Driver’s response to this problem is to endorse the view that good consequences and, concomitantly, virtuous character traits are contextually dependent or, as she puts it, “that aggression might have been valued at prehistoric times doesn’t speak to *me* very much” (2001, p. 85). Absent some principled method this seems to invite gerrymandering.

- [6] It would be quite surprising if self-aggrandizement and sour grapes syndrome were the only traits that clustered in the way that they do.
- [7] This would commit Driver not only to the denial of the unity of the virtues thesis (which she concedes), but would actually commit her to the contrary of the thesis.

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