

The Self-Absorption Objection and Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

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Abstract. This paper examines one of the central objections levied against neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics: the self-absorption objection. Proponents of this objection state that the main problem with neo-Aristotelian accounts of moral motivation is that they prescribe that our ultimate reason for acting virtuously is that doing so is for the sake of and/or is constitutive of our *own* eudaimonia. In this paper, I provide an overview of the various attempts made by neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists to address the self-absorption objection and argue that they all fall short for one reason or another. I contend that the way forward for neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists is to reject the view that the virtuous agent ought to organize her life in a way that is ultimately good for her, and instead adopt a more expansive conception of her ultimate end, one in which no special preference is given to her own good.

“The good man is a lover of good, not a lover of self; for he loves himself only, if at all, because he is good.”

—Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* 1212b18–20

This paper begins from a simple reflection on a short excerpt from one of the leading virtue ethicists of our time, Christine Swanton. In “Two Problems for Virtue Ethics,” she writes, “one would think that by now the self-centredness objection has been well and truly dealt with by virtue ethicists. But the objection never seems to go away. This suggests that it is more serious than virtue ethicists have taken it to be.”¹ In this paper, I examine whether it is actually the case that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists have been unable to adequately address what Swanton refers to as the “self-centredness objection”

¹Christine Swanton, “Two Problems for Virtue Ethics,” in *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology*, ed. Nancy Snow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111–34, at 112. The first articulation of the self-centredness objection since the revival of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics (in the late 1950s) is laid out in David Solomon’s “Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 428–41.

and I call the “self-absorption objection.” More specifically, I provide the first exhaustive overview of the various attempts made by neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists to address the objection, examining all three of the main approaches virtue ethicists have employed in order to respond to the self-absorption objection. I call these the “developmental approach,” the “two-standpoint approach,” and the “reconceptualization approach.” I suggest that so long as neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists insist that the virtuous agent’s own eudaimonia ought to serve as the ultimate end of all her actions, the self-absorption objection will stand. Fortunately for neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists, there is no need for insisting upon such a view, and there is good reason for thinking that the virtuous agent may go on to organize her life such that she ultimately pursues what is good because it is good, or for some other sort of reason, but *not* because doing so is ultimately good for her.²

I. The Self-Absorption Objection

In “Two Problems for Virtue Ethics” Swanton claims that “the standard self-centredness objection to virtue ethics is best described as a cluster of [three] problems.”³ For the sake of simplicity, however, I will focus only on the most potent of these problems—a variant of what Swanton refers to as the “narcissism objection”—and what I will call going forward the “self-absorption objection.” Roughly, proponents of this objection state that the main problem with neo-Aristotelian accounts of moral motivation is that they prescribe that our ultimate reason—i.e., the last and most important reason one can give—for

²It is important to note that for some—and perhaps John McDowell is one such example—the virtuous agent’s own eudaimonia ought to be understood essentially as what is good for humans. So, when the virtuous agent pursues her own eudaimonia or her own good, she may also be said to pursue the human good, and vice versa. On such an account, one could very well substitute the claim that the virtuous agent ultimately acts virtuously for the sake of her own eudaimonia, with the claim that the virtuous agent ultimately acts virtuously because doing so is good *qua* human goodness. On views such as this—where there is no meaningful difference between the good of the virtuous individual and the good for humans generally speaking—the self-absorption objection may not be able to get off the ground. This view, however, is not the view typically held by neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists. As Daniel Russell correctly emphasizes, “lastly, how far is this emphasis on human fulfillment to go? If we keep pushing this thought, we might end up characterizing happiness as ‘being a good specimen of humanity,’ for instance; but that sounds more like our goodness than like our good. The life of a good human specimen is obviously some sort of ‘good life,’ but recall that happiness is a good life for the one living it, and being a good specimen is not that sort of good.” Daniel Russell, “Virtue Ethics, Happiness, and the Good Life,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 7–28, at 19.

³She calls these the “narcissism objection,” the “self-effacing objection,” and the “disconnect objection.” Swanton, “Two Problems for Virtue Ethics,” 112.

acting virtuously is that doing so is for the sake of and/or is constitutive of our own eudaimonia.⁴

The basic idea here is that the extent to which our own eudaimonia features or plays a role in explaining why we act the way we do can vary. Presumably, there is some proper amount or range in which one's own eudaimonia ought to feature in motivating one to act virtuously. To hit such a target would be admirable or fine, while to miss it would be shameful or base. On one end of the spectrum we may be said to act virtuously *entirely* for the sake of our own eudaimonia, while on the other end of the spectrum we may be said to act virtuously without *any* regard for our own eudaimonia. And, somewhere on the spectrum is the correct amount of concern to have for one's own eudaimonia when acting virtuously. The self-absorption objection takes to be problematic all those accounts of motivation on which one's own eudaimonia plays too large a role in explaining why the virtuous agent acts virtuously. What this means is that the self-absorption objection has as its target not only those accounts of moral motivation on which one acts virtuously *solely* for the sake of one's own eudaimonia, but also all of those accounts of moral motivation on which concern for one's own eudaimonia plays too large a role in the virtuous agent's psyche.⁵ And, surely—so the objection goes—if the ultimate reason one can give for acting virtuously is that doing so furthers, or is constitutive of, one's own eudaimonia, the particular account of moral motivation in question may be accurately described as *too* self-absorbed.⁶

Here, one may wonder why it is that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists insist that the ultimate end of all of our actions ought to be understood in terms of our

⁴To be clear, the objection here is not that the virtuous agent primarily performs what we might call self-regarding actions and only cares about herself. Nor is it that neo-Aristotelian accounts of moral motivation cannot provide a reason to act virtuously that is not self-absorbed at the occurrent level of motivation of the virtuous agent. As we know all too well, Bernard Williams, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Julia Annas typically describe the virtuous agent as being motivated to act virtuously from reasons that stem from virtue, and these reasons are typically other-regarding. For examples, see Bernard Williams's "Acting as the Virtuous Person Acts," in *Aristotle and Moral Realism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), chapter 6 in Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and chapter 9 in Annas's *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵This is typically understood as those accounts of moral motivation on which the virtuous agent is described as acting virtuously *primarily* for the sake of her own eudaimonia. One ought to—proponents of the self-absorption objection insist—act virtuously primarily for non-self-regarding reasons. For example, see chapter 5 of Thomas Hurka's *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶While proponents of the self-absorption objection differ slightly in their understanding of "one's own eudaimonia," many (including Thomas Hurka) are happy to grant that one's own eudaimonia includes the eudaimonia of at least some others. This does not take away from the fact that reference to one's *own* eudaimonia is what really motivates the virtuous agent to act virtuously.

own eudaimonia, as opposed to, say, the eudaimonia of all or the general good. I believe an important part of the story as to why neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists adopt this view is because, generally speaking, this is held to be Aristotle's own view.⁷ That is, on the orthodox reading of Aristotle's account of moral motivation, it is said that Aristotle understood the virtuous agent as ultimately acting virtuously for the sake of her *own* eudaimonia.⁸ And, if neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is going to be said to be "neo-Aristotelian"—which must mean something akin to "inspired by Aristotle's own ethics"—then this provides neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists with at least a *prima facie* reason for insisting that the virtuous agent acts virtuously ultimately for the sake of her own eudaimonia.⁹

That contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists hold that the virtuous agent acts virtuously ultimately for the sake of her own eudaimonia is clear by the very way in which they define and discuss what is often referred to nowadays as "Aristotelian eudaimonism." As Daniel Russell puts it, "[eudaimonia in the Aristotelian tradition is] two things at once: it is the final end for practical reasoning, and it is a good human life *for the one living it*."¹⁰ On this view, eudaimonia is understood as (1) a final and comprehensive end (in the sense that it is for the sake of eudaimonia that we do all that we do), and (2) as something good for the agent. According to Russell, eudaimonia in the Aristotelian tradition must be understood as being good for me, where what counts as "good for me" is not merely something that aligns with a particular conception of living well that I happen to hold, but in the stronger sense that it promotes *my* flourishing or enables *me* to live well *qua* human. Put slightly differently, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists, generally speaking, endorse what Anne Baril has dubbed "eudaimonism's central recommendation" or "ECR." ECR states that what unites all eudaimonistic accounts of practical reasoning in the Aristotelian tradition is a commitment to the view that "a human being ought to organize his or her life so that it [his or her *own* life] realizes eudaimonia."¹¹

In what follows, I examine all three of the most prominent approaches adopted by virtue ethicists to address the self-absorption objection: the developmental approach, the two-standpoint approach, and the reconceptualization

⁷See, for example, book 1.7 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁸W. D. Ross famously wrote, "for the most part Aristotle's moral system is decidedly self-centred. It is at his own eudaimonia, we are told, that man aims and should aim." David Ross, *Aristotle* (New York: Routledge, 1964), 230.

⁹To be sure, Aristotle's virtuous agent acts virtuously, occurrently speaking, for the sake of the *kalon*. However, this is not the full picture. The full picture goes as follows: Aristotle's virtuous agent—on the orthodox view—acts virtuously for the sake of the *kalon*, and she acts this way and for this reason for the sake of her own eudaimonia.

¹⁰Russell, "Virtue Ethics, Happiness, and the Good Life," 19, emphasis added.

¹¹Anne Baril, "Eudaimonia in Contemporary Virtue Ethics," in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan Van Hooft (New York: Routledge, 2014), 17–27, at 23.

approach. To be clear, these approaches can be adopted in isolation of one another or can be combined. As we shall see, some of the more fruitful attempts to address the self-absorption objection adopt two or more of these strategies together. Unfortunately, regardless of the combination of the various strategies invoked to address the self-absorption objection, the objection still stands.

II. Developmental Approaches

Developmental approaches, generally speaking, appeal to the way in which moral virtue and one's conception of eudaimonia develop over the course of one's life in order to demonstrate that one's focus on one's own eudaimonia is not problematically self-centred or self-absorbed. The most famous proponent of this approach is Julia Annas, and in *Intelligent Virtue* she lays out two sophisticated developmental responses aimed at addressing the self-absorption objection.¹² Given that I simply do not have the space here to examine *all* the various developmental approaches aimed at addressing the self-absorption objection, I restrict my focus to Annas's more recent attempts.¹³ I hope to show that while developmental accounts, generally speaking, need not fall prey to the pitfalls of Annas's particular attempts, there are serious challenges that all developmental approaches face. And, until such challenges are met, the self-absorption objection still stands.

In chapter 9 of *Intelligent Virtue*, Annas states that the self-absorption objection may be understood as arising as a result of two seemingly conflicting claims that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists appear to hold: that virtuous actions ought to be performed for their good-making features (understood not in terms of one's own happiness), and that virtuous actions ought to be performed for the sake of one's own happiness. She writes,

¹²To be clear, it is only in Julia Annas's more recent work that she responds to the self-absorption objection by adopting a developmental approach. Annas first addressed this objection in "The Good Life and the Good Lives of Others," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9, no. 2 (1992): 133–48, and up until her response in *Intelligent Virtue* has adopted more of a reconceptualization approach. Annas has been trying to adequately address the self-absorption objection on and off for the past 25 years. In *On Virtue Ethics*, Rosalind Hursthouse addresses the self-absorption objection in part by laying out a developmental account of moral motivation. However, I contend that she is better understood as adopting what I call a two-standpoint approach. Recall, she claims that the virtuous agent is motivated to act virtuously for one set of reasons, while the acquisition of the moral virtues is justified in terms of another set of reasons.

¹³In particular, I focus on subsection 2 of chapter 9 of *Intelligent Virtue*, entitled "Happiness and Egoism," 152–63. For fruitful discussions of Annas's previous treatments of the self-absorption objection, see Dennis McKerlie's "Aristotle and Egoism," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 36, no. 4 (1998): 531–55, and Christopher Toner's "The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics," *The Royal Institute of Philosophy* 81, no. 4 (2006): 595–618.

The alleged objection, as articulated by contemporary critics, goes thus. If the account is eudaimonist, then happiness must be one's overall aim in living. And if the account is a virtue-centred account, then one is also aiming to be living virtuously. But one has to give some account of how these two aims fit together. In acting virtuously and aiming to become a virtuous person, my reasons for doing this are either aimed at achieving happiness or not. But either option is troublesome. However worthy may be my aim of acting virtuously and becoming a virtuous person (worthy as opposed to an aim of having a good time, or getting rich), I am still aiming at my happiness. And this, it is claimed, is inconsistent with a proper account of virtue; virtue implies a commitment to the good, and whatever account we give of what the good is, if I am virtuous my good surely can't be my own happiness.¹⁴

Here, Annas contends that the challenge put before the virtue ethicist is not only to demonstrate how the virtuous agent may be understood as acting from virtuous reasons and eudaimonistic ones, but to do so while fending off charges of egoism. She then goes on to offer us two arguments aimed at mitigating and eliminating the negative effects that the self-absorption objection might be said to have on neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics.¹⁵ Let us look at each of these arguments in turn.

First, Annas claims that a number of critics object to the neo-Aristotelian account of moral motivation because it seems to suggest that virtuous activity is essentially to be understood in terms of its *instrumental* value.¹⁶ On one variation of this view, it may be said that the person on the road to virtue begins to cultivate a virtuous disposition *knowingly*, because she recognizes that doing so will further her own happiness. Here, however, Annas argues that it is simply false that the person on the road to virtue cultivates a virtuous disposition and aims to act virtuously *knowing* that by doing so she will further her own happiness. According to Annas, such an objection "holds only against people who hold that being virtuous is a good (or possibly the best) way of achieving happiness where

¹⁴Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 153–5.

¹⁵To be sure, Annas also adopts what I call a "reconceptualization approach" to address the self-absorption objection in *Intelligent Virtue*. She writes, "We can by now see that this charge loses any force it appeared to have as soon as we clarify what happiness is here. Critics often assume that the only viable conceptions of happiness must be of the pleasure or desire or life satisfaction kinds, and clearly any of these would create a problem for the virtuous person. On this view, the objection fails as soon as we point out the difference between such conceptions and happiness in eudaimonist thinking" (155). I will deal with reconceptualization approaches in section four.

¹⁶She writes, "Even if happiness can be thought of as flourishing, for example, it's still an end that virtue appears to be a means to attaining, and virtue still seems threatened with merely instrumental status" (155).

happiness is *already* defined in a determinate and circumstantial way independently of whether you are virtuous or not.”¹⁷ She continues:

Happiness is the unspecific overall aim that we find that we have in some form in doing what we are doing. What we take it determinately to consist in is not given in advance of our becoming virtuous. (If it is, then becoming virtuous is likely to change it, as someone might be brought up to think happiness simply consists in being rich, but alters this view as he becomes a better person.) Our final end *becomes* more determinate as we live and develop our characters. . . . Virtue cannot be assessed as a means to an already agreed-upon and determinately formed end.¹⁸

Here, Annas argues that it is misleading to describe the person on the road to virtue as an individual who has a clear and correct conception of eudaimonia that she then simply puts into action in order to live well.¹⁹ Rather, the idea is that the person on the road to virtue is constantly refining her conception of what it means to live well and constantly grappling with what it means to act virtuously. On such a developmental approach, one cannot be said to act virtuously for the sake of achieving one’s own happiness, because (1) the content of one’s own happiness is imprecise and indeterminate, and (2) precisely what acting well is, or what virtue requires, is not fully known in advance. For how can such an individual be said to act for the sake of her own eudaimonia when she does not even know what her eudaimonia is? And so, those who argue that the person on the road to virtue simply takes a correct conception of eudaimonia and puts it into practice in order to live well wrongly presuppose that the beginner in virtue already has a correct and highly refined conception of what it means to be *eudaimon*.

In Annas’s second argument, she attempts to demonstrate how (1) acting virtuously for the act’s good-making features, and (2) acting virtuously for the sake of one’s own eudaimonia may be said to co-exist while keeping the self-absorption objection at bay.²⁰ She claims that in order to see this, we must first situate the virtuous agent within a developmental framework and acknowledge two important stages in the virtuous agent’s development. In the first stage—what

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 156.

¹⁹We may contrast this with a classical utilitarian who, say, from reading a bit of Bentham, may know well before reaching adulthood what happiness consists of and what it means to act well.

²⁰The second argument is surely needed because many of those who hold the self-absorption objection do not simply assert that the neo-Aristotelian account of moral motivation is too self-absorbed because virtue is understood just in terms of its instrumental value. See Thomas Hurka’s “Aristotle on Virtue: Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong,” in *Aristotelian Ethics in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Julia Peters (New York: Routledge, 2013), 9–26.

she calls the “beginner stage”—an individual (usually a young person) has to make an effort and think through what virtue requires in everyday situations. For example, she may think to herself “that *this* is what a virtuous (brave, etc.) person would do, or that *that* would be a virtuous (brave, etc.) action.”²¹ In the early part of this stage, virtue and happiness may or may not seem related.²² However, as we develop in the first stage—and learn, for example, “which aims are *worth* enduring hardship for, [or] what the differences between circumstances that do require you to stand up for an unpopular opinion and those in which it would be merely tactless or showing-off”—we come to see a particular relation between virtue and one’s own happiness: namely, that acting virtuously and cultivating a virtuous disposition is good *for me*.²³

However, in the second stage—where one is truly virtuous—the virtuous agent may be described as acting without any thoughts pertaining to his own happiness. This is because “by the time he has developed to being a truly virtuous person, he will not have to, and won’t, think explicitly about being brave or doing a brave action. Rather he will, as a result of experience, reflection, and habituation simply respond to the situation ‘from a disposition’, because he thinks that people are in danger and need help.”²⁴ Thus, while the beginner in virtue may need some type of egoistic or self-referential motivation for acting virtuously, the fully virtuous agent—on Annas’s developmental account of virtue—is not motivated at all by any egoistic thoughts. And so, if Annas’s account here is tenable, it appears that we have before us a neo-Aristotelian account of moral motivation that is immune from the self-absorption objection as the objection may be said to arise in relation to the fully virtuous agent.

In response to Annas’s first argument, it seems that regardless of precisely how definite, thorough, articulate, and correct the person on the road to virtue’s conception of happiness may be, so long as she pursues cultivating a virtuous

²¹Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 159.

²²Annas writes, “When we learn to be brave and to be fair, there seems little or no reason to connect the two; the areas of life in which they are displayed, and the feelings and attitudes which they deal, have little in common” (ibid., 160).

²³Ibid. Annas writes, “He is learning about the value of acting bravely and being a brave person. How is this compatible with his having *no* views about his overall happiness? How could he have learnt these points and about value, acting, responding, and feeling, and have had no thoughts at all about their implications for how he lives his life?”

²⁴Ibid., 159. For Annas, just as an expert, say, pianist, will not have to think about pressing a particular key in a particular way, a virtuous individual will not have to think about acting virtuously. She writes, “We have just seen that it is the fact that virtue is ‘self-effacing’ in the way that practical skills are (that is, that explicit reasons in terms of virtue cease to be explicitly present in the person’s deliberations) that enables us to see how virtue in a eudaimonist account is not egoistic in any way. It also enables us to see how natural it is for us to come to think of living virtuously as (at least partly) constituting living happily” (ibid., 163).

disposition *primarily* for the sake of her own eudaimonia, the self-absorption objection still stands.²⁵ An example may help to illuminate this point. Suppose an agent says to herself, “I must organize *my life* with respect to some end, and, while I do not know which end I ought to pursue, a life of excellent moral activity seems to be the best life for me, though I am not entirely sure. So, I will take up such an end, even though I do not know how to cultivate the moral virtues, whom to seek out for moral guidance, how to train my emotions, and so on, because doing so seems to be my best chance at achieving happiness.” While it is true that such a person’s end is indeterminate and still taking shape, this does not negate the fact that her ultimate motivation for cultivating a virtuous disposition is a desire for her *own* eudaimonia. Since the buck stops with her *own* eudaimonia—as opposed to, say, the eudaimonia of others or the general good—however indeterminate such an end might be, such an account, I contend, is still *too* self-absorbed.

To be fair to Annas, it seems that the central aim of her argument here is not to address the self-absorption objection *in toto*, but rather to soften the appearance of the way in which the person on the road to virtue’s focus on her own eudaimonia shapes her future actions. For Annas, this person is not a manipulative and calculative individual who possesses a highly refined conception of what it means to live well and then simply puts her conception or plan into action in order to achieve her own eudaimonia. Rather, the person on the road to virtue is presented as grappling with the question of what it means to live well, and how to achieve such an end in her own life, and as someone simply doing the best that she can. So, although Annas’s first argument may not vindicate neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics from the self-absorption objection, it does present the virtuous individual as less shrewd. For some—especially those who do not find formal egoism especially problematic—this may be enough to fend off some variations of the worry that her account is “too egoistic.”

With respect to Annas’s second argument, it seems that while it can fend off the self-absorption objection as it may be said to arise at the occurrent level of motivation of the virtuous agent, it cannot fend off the objection as it may be said to arise at the underlying level of motivation of the virtuous agent.²⁶ To see

²⁵For Annas, the virtuous agent’s conception of her own eudaimonia is not something defined independently of moral virtue. Rather, moral virtue plays an important role in her conception of what she takes to be her own objective good or what constitutes in large part her own flourishing. She writes, “What is a eudaimonist account? An account of how to live, one in which happiness, eudaimonia, is central. . . . Here happiness is a central concept (not, and this is important, the basic or foundational concept), but it is not the first concept that we encounter” (ibid., 120).

²⁶Roughly, as I am using these terms, the occurrent motivation of the virtuous agent is the reason why the virtuous agent acts the way that she does at the time that she acts. By “underlying motivation,” by contrast, I mean the deeper-seated motivation that explains both why an

that Annas's account can fend off the self-absorption objection at the occurrent level of motivation, we may simply turn to the passage mentioned above, in which Annas describes the fully virtuous agent acting virtuously from a virtuous disposition. What motivates this agent, occurrently speaking, is something like "people are in danger and need help."²⁷ Such a description of the virtuous agent's occurrent motivation does not appeal to one's own eudaimonia and thus cannot be said to be self-absorbed. However, Annas's account cannot fend off the objection as it may be said to arise at the *underlying* level of motivation. To see why not, we require a more in-depth analysis of Annas's developmental account of virtue.

Recall, the task before Annas is to demonstrate that virtue and happiness can both serve as goals of the virtuous agent, while fending off the charge that the virtuous agent's motivation is too egoistic. However, when we look at Annas's developmental account closely and examine its ability to meet such a challenge, the result is disappointing. Annas claims that the beginner in virtue (during the latter part of the first stage) "may begin to do so [i.e., cultivate the virtues] for reasons that come from happiness."²⁸ Now, while she does not explicitly state that the beginner in virtue in fact cultivates the moral virtues for reasons that come from *her* happiness or her eudaimonia, this is clearly what she has in mind. For Annas, if such thoughts could not connect to her own eudaimonia, then such an account could not be said to be eudaimonistic. Recall that Aristotelian eudaimonism, as Annas understands it, is committed to the following two theses: (1) that one's own eudaimonia serves as the last reason one can give for all that one does, and (2) that one's own eudaimonia must be good for the one living it. Regarding the former, Annas writes, "I may want to be healthy, to have a career, to have a family, as part of being happy, but I don't want to be happy as part of a means to something further. It's just what I want; a terminus to my other goals."²⁹ And, regarding the latter, Annas writes, "virtue constitutes (at least in part) *the person's* flourishing or happiness."³⁰ Thus, I take it to be clear that on Annas's account of virtue, the beginner in virtue (during the second part of the first stage) cultivates the moral virtues for the sake of her *own* eudaimonia or her *own* happiness.

What is more, when we turn to the underlying motivation of Annas's fully virtuous agent, and ask her *why* she chooses to maintain a virtuous disposition—and why she ultimately acts in accordance with the virtues for reasons

individual begins to cultivate a virtuous disposition, and also why an individual may be said to maintain that disposition.

²⁷Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 159.

²⁸Ibid., 162.

²⁹Ibid., 124.

³⁰Ibid., 118, emphasis added.

stemming from virtue—given Annas’s endorsement of both of the two theses mentioned above, her answer here must be given in terms of the agent’s own eudaimonia.³¹ This follows so long as the virtuous agent’s ultimate aim—i.e., the last reason one could give for all that one does—is her *own* eudaimonia. Thus, while Annas’s virtuous agent might be able to act virtuously, occurrently speaking, for non-egoistic reasons, if further pressed as to *why* she acts virtuously for non-egoistic reasons—that is, why she acts virtuously in general—eventually her answer must be because doing so either furthers, or is somehow constitutive of, her *own* eudaimonia.³² What follows from this is that Annas’s account of motivation is unable to adequately address the thrust of the self-absorption objection as it may be said to arise at the underlying level of the virtuous agent.³³

At this point, Annas might object that the egoistic thoughts that persist deep down in the fully virtuous agent are perfectly harmless so long as they are not what motivate her to act virtuously on particular occasions.³⁴ Such a response, however, is inadequate for two reasons. First, *prima facie*, it seems that if a motivation is objectionably egoistic at the occurrent level of motivation of the virtuous agent, then, for the sake of consistency and the integrity of the theory, it must also be said to be objectionably egoistic at the underlying level of motivation of the virtuous agent. That is, if “one’s own eudaimonia” is objectionable as the object of our occurrent motivation, then it seems that it ought to be objectionable as the object of our underlying motivation. For such different treatment of the same principle of motivation solely based on whether it is occurrent or

³¹This just follows if the last reason for all that one does is one’s *own* eudaimonia. Here, Annas might want to emphasize that such an explanation would be given in a “cool hour” and while the agent steps back and reflects on her life as a whole. It is also important to note that while the virtuous agent’s underlying motivation for acting virtuously at both stage one and stage two is “one’s own eudaimonia,” the content of the virtuous agent’s thoughts about her own eudaimonia might be very different. During the second stage, the virtuous agent understands the good of at least some others as constitutive of her own eudaimonia, whereas the person on the road to virtue may not have such an enlarged conception of her own eudaimonia.

³²Annas insists that the virtuous agent ought to be able to stand back and give an account for why she acts virtuously in terms of her *own* eudaimonia. This is necessary for her account to meet what she refers to as the “articulacy requirement.” For more on this, see chapter 3 of *Intelligent Virtue*.

³³As John McDowell stresses, any rationale given for why an agent cultivates a virtuous disposition must be seen against the agent’s background beliefs regarding how to live. See John McDowell’s “Virtue and Reason,” *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 331–50.

³⁴Annas writes, “But my happiness is my living happily, and what life can I live other than mine? It would be absurd as well as objectionable for me to try to live your life” (*Intelligent Virtue*, 156). Here, Annas seems to miss the point. While she is correct in suggesting that only I can live my own life, the ultimate end that I adopt—unless one is a psychological egoist—need not be my *own* eudaimonia. I *can* make the ultimate aim of *my* life promoting the eudaimonia of others, even at the expense of my own.

underlying calls for an explanation. And, until such an explanation is provided, Annas's account of moral motivation must be deemed inadequate, insofar as it cannot provide a satisfying rationale for why self-referential thoughts at the occurrent level of motivation are objectionable, while self-referential thoughts at the underlying level are not. This is particularly important given the important role that the last reason one can give for all that one does plays on eudaimonistic accounts of moral motivation in the Aristotelian tradition.³⁵

Second, downplaying the importance of the underlying motivation and focusing on evaluating the occurrent motivation of the virtuous agent is at odds with a widely shared view among virtue ethicists, including, it seems, Annas herself. On this view, evaluating moral motivation *necessarily* entails examining the inner life of individuals, and not just the occurrent motivation of individuals from time to time.³⁶ As Annas has argued, grasping *why* the virtuous agent acts the way that she does requires that we view her life as an integrated whole.³⁷ This, it seems, requires not only paying attention to, and limiting our moral evaluations to, the reasons why the virtuous agent acts the way she does at the particular time that she acts, but also evaluating why she adopts and maintains a general disposition to act in those very same ways.³⁸

I conclude that while Annas's developmental approach can fend off the self-absorption objection as it may be said to arise at the occurrent level of motivation of the virtuous agent, it cannot fend off this same objection as it may be said to arise at the underlying level. For so long as Annas maintains that the virtuous person first cultivates and then maintains a virtuous disposition for reasons that

³⁵Here, one might wonder whether the virtuous agent's underlying motivation might be cashed out in terms of something other than her own eudaimonia. On Annas's account, however, not only is this not possible, it is not desirable. This is because Annas insists that the virtuous agent ought to be able to stand back and give an account for why she acts virtuously in terms of her *own* eudaimonia. Once again, this is necessary for her account to meet what she refers to as the "articulacy requirement."

³⁶Hursthouse puts this point nicely. She writes, "'Because she thought it was right' is an ascription that goes far beyond the moment of action. It is not merely, as grammatically it may appear to be, a claim about how things are with the agent and her reasons at that moment. It is also a substantial claim about the future (with respect to reliability) and, most importantly, a claim about what sort of person the agent is — a claim that goes 'all the way down'" (*On Virtue Ethics*, 134).

³⁷She writes, "The notion of 'my life as a whole' is crucial here; the virtues make sense within a conception of living which takes the life I live to be a unity." Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism," in *Morality and Self-Interest*, ed. Paul Bloomfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 205–44, at 206.

³⁸Cf. Kelly Rogers: "But presumably the Aristotelian agent does not overlook or repress his awareness of the larger motivational context [viz., his own *eudaimonia*] in which his pursuit of the noble takes place." Rogers, "Aristotle on Loving Another for His Own Sake," *Phronesis* 39, no. 3 (1994): 291–302, at 300.

stem from her concern for her *own* eudaimonia, such an individual rightfully deserves the label “self-absorbed.”

Now, one might wonder whether other developmental accounts might fare better than Annas’s in terms of being able to adequately address the self-absorption objection. Here, it seems to me that so long as the developmental approaches invoked to address the self-absorption objection insist that the virtuous agent ultimately acts virtuously for the sake of her *own* eudaimonia, the objection will stand.³⁹ For even if thoughts concerning the agent’s own eudaimonia are effaced over time—as developmental approaches tend to maintain—they nonetheless still play an important part in explaining why the virtuous agent initially adopted a virtuous disposition and also why she continues to maintain one.

III. Two-Standpoint Approaches

The most popular approach adopted by virtue ethicists to defend neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics from the self-absorption objection is what I will call the “two-standpoint approach.”⁴⁰ This approach may be broken down into two steps. First, it draws a distinction between (1) what *justifies* the virtuous agent’s actions from a prudential point of view, and (2) what *motivates* the virtuous agent’s actions from a moral point of view.⁴¹ And, second, it seeks to demonstrate not only that (1) and (2) can come apart, but also that the content of (1) does not undermine the content of (2), leaving the motivation of the virtuous agent intact. While a number of variations of this approach exist within the virtue ethics literature, its strongest formulation is provided by Mark LeBar in “Virtue Ethics and Deontic Constraints.”

In “Virtue Ethics and Deontic Constraints” LeBar sets out to defend neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics against a variation of what I refer to as the self-absorption objection. This objection—which he calls simply “The Objection”—applies to

³⁹And, to be sure, there are no neo-Aristotelian developmental accounts present in the literature that do not insist on making the ultimate end of the virtuous agent’s actions her own eudaimonia.

⁴⁰This approach was first popularized by Terence Irwin in *Aristotle’s First Principles*. Irwin attempted to keep charges of egoism at bay by insisting that we interpret Aristotle’s ethical theory in terms of “eudaimonic virtues”—those that promote the agent’s self-realization—and “moral virtues”—those that promote the good of others. Terence Irwin, *Aristotle’s First Principles* (New York: Oxford Publishing Company, 1988), 439. Three of the leading neo-Aristotelians today—Rosalind Hursthouse, Daniel Russell, and Mark LeBar—all adopt variations of what I call the two-standpoint approach. See Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics* and Daniel Russell’s *Happiness for Humans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴¹This is put in slightly different ways by different philosophers. Some talk in terms of a “justification within a practice” in contrast with a “justification outside a practice” and others adopt a distinction between “moral reasoning” or “reasons from virtue” and “prudential reasoning” or “eudaimonistic reasoning.”

“any view which makes morality and self-interest coincide (as it is the point of eudaimonist virtue ethical theories to do) [and] gives the wrong explanation of other-regarding norms.”⁴² It goes as follows: “The objection . . . is then that eudaimonist virtue-ethical theories fail to accommodate ‘The Intuition’ insofar as they hold the reason for treating others with respect is *our own* eudaimonia, or happiness. The effects of our actions on others might be part of the content of such reasons, but they are at best a sideshow to the main focus on living well.”⁴³ Now, to clarify, by “the intuition,” LeBar has in mind the generally accepted idea that the moral reason we have for not acting in harmful ways toward others must be based on the well-being of others, and not our own. So, for example, my moral reason for not stealing something from someone ought to be cashed out in terms of, say, respecting a fellow moral agent’s property or the harm I would cause the victim, and not, say, that by partaking in such an act, my own character would be negatively affected. He goes on to claim that in order “to meet The Objection, we must be able to explain how, on a eudaimonist virtue-ethical theory, an agent has reason to respect deontic constraints, in a way which focuses on the effects of violations of those constraints on their victims.”⁴⁴ And, in his paper, he goes on to explore one possible way that a neo-Aristotelian might meet such an objection: by adopting a two-standpoint approach.

LeBar argues that in order to meet “The Objection” we need to recognize an important distinction in our moral reasoning between the second-person standpoint and the first-person standpoint. The second-person standpoint is “the [moral] perspective you and I take up when we make and acknowledge claims on one another’s conduct and will. . . . It is a standpoint that makes salient our relations with particular individual others and does so in a way which registers our mutual and reciprocal recognition of those others.”⁴⁵ From this standpoint, we have second-person reasons—what he also calls “reasons for deontic constraints”—to respect others, and these reasons ought to be understood as having the “real and non-derivative authority that all reasons do.”⁴⁶ He contrasts this with the first-person standpoint, or what we may call “the eudaimonistic standpoint.” The eudaimonistic standpoint is the one we take up when trying to make sense of our lives as a whole. Such a standpoint seeks to bring unity to the various standpoints that we adopt and is directed toward our *own* happiness.

After carefully laying out the distinction between the two standpoints, LeBar goes on to argue that neo-Aristotelians have good reason to adopt the

⁴²Mark LeBar, “Virtue Ethics and Deontic Constraints,” *Ethics* no. 119 (2009): 642–71, at 645.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 646, emphasis added.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 647.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 666.

second-person standpoint. He begins by noting—and all virtue ethicists will surely agree—that acting in accordance with the moral virtues is at the very least necessary for living well. From this, it follows that if one wants to live well, one ought to cultivate and maintain the moral virtues. And, *if* cultivating and maintaining the moral virtues necessarily entails adopting the second-person standpoint—as LeBar insists it does—then, so the argument goes, one has good reason for adopting the second-person standpoint as well. He writes, “We have the same reason for occupying the second-person standpoint that we do for being virtuous generally: doing so is crucially important for living well.”⁴⁷ LeBar concludes—and this is the most important part for our purposes here—that *if* we take the virtuous agent to have adopted the second-person standpoint, and *if* part of adopting such a standpoint entails being motivated to act virtuously for other-regarding reasons—and not self-regarding ones—then we have, in fact, adequately addressed “The Objection.”⁴⁸ That is, we have successfully shown how, on a eudaimonist virtue ethical theory, a virtuous agent may be said to act virtuously toward others for reasons that do not stem primarily from thoughts about her own happiness. All this requires, on LeBar’s view, is that the virtuous agent adopts, and acts virtuously from, the second-person standpoint.

Now, reflecting on his own response to “The Objection,” LeBar considers whether his solution provides the wrong kind of reason why the virtuous agent adopts the second-person standpoint. For, as we just saw, the virtuous agent may be described as adopting the second-person standpoint for reasons that stem from concern for her own happiness, and this may appear problematic to some. Here, LeBar insists that his account is not problematic, and that seeing this simply requires taking some time to get clear on the various senses of the “why be moral” question. Once we acknowledge, he argues, that this question has two distinct senses—one moral and the other prudential—and are careful about the sense in which the question is being asked (and the type of answer that is appropriate), the “objection” can be explained away. He writes:

Justifications are responses to questions or challenges; they are what we provide when we crave or demand reasons. There are two distinct questions or challenges relevant to the full story of why the virtuous person respects deontic constraints, and (correspondingly) there are two distinct justificatory responses. . . . The first is whether and why some particular form of respect for others is appropriate; the justificatory response to this is that such respect is the only appropriate response to the dignity of

⁴⁷Ibid., 650.

⁴⁸For LeBar, the fact that one adopts the second-person standpoint for the sake of one’s own happiness plays absolutely no role in the content of the virtuous agent’s moral motivation. Those who object to his account on such grounds wrongly attribute a view to him that he does not hold.

those with whom we are in moral community, as persons with whom we stand in second-personal relations. Eudaimonism enters as a response to a second and distinct question or challenge, which might be something like this: ‘why should we care about the dignity of others?’ Like the first challenge, it is a normative challenge requiring an answer to a practical question. But this challenge can be read in either of two ways. The first is a further question about dignity: what about it gives us reasons? This is just a variant of the first question, and the only appropriate response is to advert again to the account of second-personal reasons that articulates and explicates The Intuition reflected in The Objection in the first place. But here is another reading. If we mean something more in pressing the challenge, we must be asking something about us: what about us is such that it makes sense for us to care about dignity? And to this question, it is not only acceptable but appropriate that we advert to broader claims about ourselves as moral and rational agents in responding. The Intuition that drives The Objection does not extend to this issue. The response that eudaimonist virtue-ethical theory gives at this point is one that makes essential reference to the interests or good life of the agent as a practically rational member of the moral community. Eudaimonism fixes on the aim of living well to give unity, focus, and point to the wide array of things which we find reason-giving; conversely, the shape of the well-lived life is determined by the fact that we can respond to reasons — the very feature of us that grounds our dignity.⁴⁹

In this passage, LeBar demonstrates how his account is immune from the “Wrong-Kind-of-Reason” Objection. Here, there are two points worth illuminating. First, paying careful attention to the sense in which the “why be moral” question is asked—and the type of response that is required—puts us in a position to sidestep this objection and avoid the monumental mistake that H. A. Prichard (over a century ago) rightly warns us about. This mistake, in a nutshell, consists in trying to give a prudential answer to the “why be moral” question when one is really after a moral answer, or in giving a moral answer to the “why be moral” question when what one seeks is a prudential answer.⁵⁰ LeBar insists that both senses of the “why be moral” question can be adequately addressed on his account, so long as we come to terms with the type of question being asked and the type of response that it requires. The second point he makes—which is related to the first—is that the “Wrong-Kind-of-Reason” objection does *not* apply to the “why be moral” question when it is posed in a prudential or eudaimonistic sense. In such a case, one mistakenly seeks a moral

⁴⁹LeBar, “Virtue Ethics and Deontic Constraints,” 669–70.

⁵⁰This may very well be, in part, why it is so hard to convince a skeptic to be moral. For such an individual is seeking a prudential answer to a moral question.

answer to a prudential question, when the only appropriate way to respond to a prudential question is with a prudential answer.

Now, while it is clear that LeBar's account does provide a non-egoistic account of the virtuous agent's occurrent motivation, unfortunately, it cannot meet the self-absorption objection as it may be said to arise at the underlying level of motivation of the virtuous agent.⁵¹ Recall that according to the self-absorption objection, the main problem with neo-Aristotelian accounts of moral motivation is that they prescribe that our ultimate reason for acting virtuously is the fact that doing so furthers, or is constitutive of, our *own eudaimonia*. This objection—to adopt LeBar's approach and terminology—ought to be understood as a moral one, and one that requires a moral answer. However, when we turn to LeBar's account and inquire why his virtuous agent ultimately chooses to live a life of moral virtue—i.e., why she adopts and maintains a virtuous disposition—where we would like for LeBar to respond from the second-person standpoint, he in fact responds from the first-person standpoint.⁵² In other words, for LeBar, the ultimate reason (i.e., the last reason one could give) for adopting the second-person standpoint is because doing so is good *for* the virtuous individual—i.e., the virtuous agent adopts the second person-standpoint because it is good *for* the “life of the agent.”⁵³ And, so long as the last reason LeBar's virtuous agent gives for cultivating the virtuous disposition is provided in terms of the virtuous agent's own happiness, the self-absorption objection stands.

At this point, it is important to note that LeBar's virtuous agent must adopt the second-person standpoint for the sake of the good life because otherwise the virtuous agent would have no good reason for adopting the second-person standpoint in the first place. For LeBar, there must be some connection between the reason why the virtuous agent acts virtuously and the virtuous agent's own happiness. He writes, “One might be tempted to abandon the “formal” egoism here. . . . [However,] this way of proceeding offers no explanation of why it is that the wise agent would find this course of action (as opposed to alternatives) to be warranted — indeed, it claims that a demand for such an explanation is misguided. The line I take is necessary as against the concern that the standards of

⁵¹If LeBar's virtuous agent acts virtuously, occurrently speaking, for and is motivated by second-person reasons, I take it to be clear that such an agent does not act for reasons that stem from her own self-interest or from her own eudaimonia.

⁵²LeBar holds what Timothy Chappell calls “the prudentialistic presumption”: that the moral requires explanatory grounding in the prudential. If LeBar instead held what Chappell calls “the moralistic presumption”—i.e., that the prudential requires explanatory grounding in the moral—then his two-standpoint approach would be able to adequately address the self-absorption objection. For more on the prudentialistic and moralistic presumptions, see Chappell's “Kalou Heneka,” in *Aristotelian Ethics in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Julia Peters (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵³LeBar, “Virtue Ethics and Deontic Constraints,” 664.

the virtuous agent are arbitrary. The ancients thought the choices of the wise agent were not arbitrary but justifiable and defensible, in light of the ultimate end of living well.”⁵⁴ Here, while I agree with LeBar that the virtuous agent’s explanation for why she ought to cultivate a virtuous disposition must be defensible, I reject the idea that it must be defensible in terms of the virtuous agent’s *own* eudaimonia. Surely, there are other ways to avoid the “arbitrariness” that LeBar alludes to here, and in the fourth section of this paper, I suggest one alternative route.

Now, if my critique holds, it is clear that so long as LeBar insists that the virtuous agent adopts the second-person standpoint for the sake of first-person reasons, the last reason the virtuous agent gives for acting virtuously must be understood in terms of the virtuous agent’s own eudaimonia. This account cannot be said to adequately address the self-absorption objection because for proponents of the self-absorption objection, one’s motivations are understood in terms of one’s reasons for acting. And, if one’s ultimate reason for acting morally is concern for one’s own eudaimonia, one’s ultimate motivation for acting morally must be understood in terms of one’s own eudaimonia as well.⁵⁵

In addition, it seems to me that all two-standpoint approaches aimed at providing a neo-Aristotelian response to the self-absorption objection face three unique but related challenges: (1) they appear to be “un-Aristotelian,” (2) they give rise to the kind of “moral schizophrenia” that Michael Stocker and others urge us to avoid, and (3) they appear to be inimical to the framework that present day virtue ethicists argue we ought to adopt when trying to make sense of our lives as a whole. Allow me to elaborate on each in turn.

First, LeBar’s insistence on the virtuous agent keeping separate (1) the justificatory reasons for acquiring and maintaining a virtuous disposition and (2) the motivational state of the virtuous agent appears to be un-Aristotelian.⁵⁶ As Dennis McKerlie—I think correctly—notes, “it is hard to find this degree of complexity in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.”⁵⁷ That is, attributing to Aristotle “a theory of individual rationality, distinct from what he says about morality itself, which has the authority to determine the appropriateness of a person’s commitments to the moral virtues seems to conflict with the way in which Aristotle — and

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵However, on LeBar’s view—where one’s justifications and one’s motivations can come apart—it does not follow that just because the virtuous agent ultimately acts virtuously for the sake of her own eudaimonia that the virtuous agent is also ultimately motivated to act virtuously for the sake of her own eudaimonia. The discussion then turns to whether one’s reasons for acting well can and should come apart from one’s motivations for acting well.

⁵⁶LeBar notes that Stephen “Darwall himself is skeptical that this [a two-standpoint approach] could be of any help to a virtue ethical theory: he takes the forms of ‘evaluation of conduct and character’ in virtue-ethical theory and the second-person standpoint to be so radically different that they cannot be reconciled or united” (LeBar “Virtue Ethics and Deontic Constraints,” 649).

⁵⁷McKerlie, “Aristotle and Egoism,” 540.

the majority of ancient Greek philosophers — approached ethical inquiries.”⁵⁸ As Julia Annas (I think correctly) emphasizes, Aristotle is “committed to the unity of practical reasoning — not just in the weak sense demanded by any eudaimonist theory that takes practical reasoning to be aimed at a single overall goal, happiness, but in a stronger sense that brings together all kinds of factors in a single kind of unified deliberation.”⁵⁹ If Annas is correct that Aristotle’s virtuous agent adopts a unified deliberative approach when thinking about her life as a whole, as I think she is, then accounts such as LeBar’s mistakenly attribute to Aristotle’s virtuous agent *one standpoint too many*.

Second, not only does LeBar’s approach insist that the virtuous agent view her prospective actions from two standpoints, but these standpoints also seem to be in tension, and it is unclear whether they can coexist harmoniously. That is, the very content of these two standpoints seems to imply that the virtuous agent values, appreciates, understands, conceptualizes, etc., in different and potentially conflicting ways. An example might be helpful here. As we saw, on the eudaimonistic standpoint, one’s ultimate aim is one’s *own* eudaimonia. Yet, however enlarged to include the well-being of others one’s conception of one’s own eudaimonia may be, such a standpoint, *ex hypothesi*, takes one’s own eudaimonia to be in some sense *more important* or special than others. After all, for LeBar it is the virtuous person’s own eudaimonia that justifies the virtuous person’s acting virtuously for second-person reasons. And yet, on the second-person standpoint, one understands one’s own well-being or eudaimonia as possessing *equal moral worth* to the well-being and eudaimonia of others. On this standpoint, one’s actions are not cashed out in terms of what is good for oneself. Rather, we focus on our “relations with particular individual others . . . in a way which registers our mutual and reciprocal recognition of those others.”⁶⁰ Now, surely, either my own eudaimonia matters more than another’s or it does not. To suggest that it does from one standpoint, but does not from the other—as LeBar’s account appears to do—gives rise to the kind of “schizophrenia” that Michael Stocker urges us to avoid. Stocker writes, “One mark of a good life is a harmony between one’s motives and one’s reasons, values, justifications. Not to be moved by what one values — what one believes good, nice, right, beautiful,

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Julia Annas, “Aristotle and Kant on Morality and Practical Reasoning,” in *Aristotle, Kant and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, ed. S. Engstrom and J. Whiting (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 237–60, at 247. In *The Morality of Happiness*, Annas writes, “*Phronesis* has commonly been translated as “prudence” and this retains the idea that it is a developed and successful state, but introduces the modern idea, utterly foreign to ancient theories, of a distinct realm of prudence or self-interest, which may be different from that of morality.” Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 73.

⁶⁰LeBar, “Virtue Ethics and Deontic Constraints,” 647.

and so on — bespeaks of a malady of spirit. . . . At the very least, we should be moved by our major values and we should value what our major motives seek. . . . Any theory that ignores such harmony does so at great peril.”⁶¹ On LeBar’s two-standpoint approach, so long as one standpoint requires the virtuous agent to see an action in a particular light and the other standpoint precludes doing so, the virtuous agent’s psyche may accurately be described as possessing the kind of “schizophrenia” that Stocker and others implore us to avoid. If Stocker and others are correct here, then this is one more hurdle that two-standpoint approaches such as LeBar’s must clear.⁶²

Third, two-standpoint approaches in general are inimical to what I take to be a widely endorsed and highly attractive aspect of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. This is its insistence that the virtuous agent ought to view her life as a unified and integrated whole. Here, I take it that even if Aristotle’s virtuous agent—on various interpretations—may be understood as making sense of her life from two distinct standpoints, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists, generally speaking, insist that the virtuous agent ought to be able to come to terms with her commitments, values, projects, etc., from one unified standpoint. In fact, such a unified perspective seems to be one of the features that distinguish neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics from other normative ethical theories such as deontology — which, generally speaking, insists that we view ourselves from multiple points of view.⁶³

IV. Reconceptualization Approaches

The final type of response that neo-Aristotelians have employed to address the self-absorption objection is what I call the “reconceptualization approach.”

⁶¹Michael Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. R. Crisp and M. Slote (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 66–78, at 67.

⁶²Given the importance of a harmonious psyche to living well, flourishing, etc.,—both for ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle as well as for contemporary philosophers such as Michael Stocker, Peter Railton, and Rosalind Hursthouse—LeBar’s account has the unfortunate consequence of characterizing the virtuous agent as possessing (in some sense) a disharmonious soul. As Railton writes, “we must somehow give an account of practical reasoning that does not merely multiply points of view and divide the self — a more unified account is needed” (Peter Railton “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 [1984]: 134–71, at 139).

⁶³See, for example Kant’s “Two Standpoints,” in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. And, on some consequentialist accounts, we ought to understand our moral commitments by abstracting ourselves from our particular situation and seeing ourselves as acting from an impartial point of view. For example, Mill famously wrote that the “first of judicial virtues, impartiality is an obligation of justice . . . this is the highest abstract standard of social and distributive justice; towards which all institutions, and the efforts of all virtuous citizens, should be made in the utmost possible degree to converge” (John Mill, *Utilitarianism* in *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, 4th edition, ed. Michael Morgan [Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005], 995–1028, at 1026).

In a nutshell, reconceptualization approaches attempt to eliminate the sense in which the neo-Aristotelian account of moral motivation may be said to be “too self-absorbed” by appealing to the virtuous agent’s conception of eudaimonia itself.⁶⁴ Basically, the general strategy here is to show how the virtuous agent’s understanding of eudaimonia is incompatible with the view that the virtuous agent is ultimately motivated to act virtuously because of her own objective self-interest. And, given a choice between the two competing views, proponents of such an approach argue that the more plausible way to view the virtuous agent is not in terms of being self-absorbed, but rather as being appropriately concerned with others.

The strongest formulation of this general approach is presented by Christopher Toner in “Virtue Ethics and the Nature and Forms of Egoism.”⁶⁵ Discontented with the current state of the debate regarding whether the neo-Aristotelian account of moral motivation is or is not egoistic, Toner begins by offering what he takes to be “a clear, non-arbitrary definition of egoism often lacking in these exchanges.”⁶⁶ He defines egoism as “the doctrine that an agent does or should take as his primary goal the attainment of what is good *for him*, because it is good *for him*,” and goes on to distinguish four different types of egoism.⁶⁷ The type of egoism that is salient to our discussion here is what he calls “formal foundational egoism.” Formal foundational egoism shares with other kinds of egoism the doctrine that an agent ought to take as his primary goal the attainment of what is good *for him*, because it is good *for him*, but differs in that on it the agent’s own good—both at the “foundational level” and “factoral level”—is understood widely so as to include the well-being of others. This type of egoism, Toner claims, is the most plausible one to attribute to Aristotle—though, as we shall see, he does not himself attribute it to Aristotle—and he takes a number of prominent neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists to hold accounts

⁶⁴The most common strategy here is to give an account of eudaimonia in terms of excellence as opposed to one’s own welfare. This is often discussed in terms of “excellence prior” and “welfare prior.” For more on this distinction, see Anne Baril’s “The Role of Welfare in Eudaimonism,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51, no. 4 (2013): 511–35.

⁶⁵Julia Annas has also sometimes adopted such an approach, at least in her earlier attempts to address the self-absorption objection. She writes, “Similarly the good of others is introduced in ways which make it formally part of the agent’s own good; but we fail to grasp its place in ancient theories if we think of it as derived from or justified in terms of the agent’s own good — for if that were the case, we would be misconceiving what the good of others is” (*The Morality of Happiness*, 9). In this passage, Annas appeals to the virtuous agent’s conception of eudaimonia itself to show how it is incompatible with the virtuous agent being described as “self-absorbed.”

⁶⁶Christopher Toner, “Virtue Ethics and the Nature and Forms of Egoism,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 35 (2010): 275–303, at 275.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 279.

of moral motivation that fall under its purview.⁶⁸ Now, according to Toner, the main problem with formal foundational egoism, and with egoism in general, is that it “misrepresents the true standing of the agent in the world.”⁶⁹ Toner writes, “What is wrong with egoism is not that it necessarily gets the wrong results. Even substantive factoral egoism might prescribe the ‘right’ actions, given suitable circumstances. . . . Egoism in its essence is wrong . . . because in telling the agent how he should live, it pays no attention to who he really is.”⁷⁰ Here, the problem with such a view is that it incorrectly ascribes too much value to the virtuous agent’s own well-being and status in the world. As a result, the virtuous agent’s attitude, disposition, assessments of situations, etc., will be misguided. And, an agent in possession of a misguided view of the world cannot be said to, in Toner’s terms, “stand in the right relation to the good.”⁷¹

Having claimed that the objections to neo-Aristotelian accounts of motivation that are formally and foundationally egoistic are “damning,” Toner goes on to argue that we need not understand Aristotle’s virtuous agent as acting in such a light.⁷² That is, we need not understand such an agent as motivated to act virtuously by thoughts pertaining to her own eudaimonia, understood in terms of *her own welfare*. Instead, he argues, we would do better—both in terms of getting at Aristotle’s own view and also in terms of sidestepping charges of egoism—by understanding Aristotle’s ultimate end in a perfectionist sense.⁷³ He writes, “I believe that what Aristotle means by this [i.e., the ultimate end for man] *is* that each agent should pursue the life that is ‘best for him,’ not ‘best for him.’ The primary goal is not welfare, but perfection (being good, the second sense of ‘Well-being’). This goal of perfection is more consonant than that of welfare with Aristotle’s final definition of *eudaimonia* as a lifetime of virtuous activity, activity in accordance with excellence.”⁷⁴ According to Toner’s definition

⁶⁸For example, Toner also reads Hursthouse’s neo-Aristotelian account of moral motivation as falling into this category. He writes, “Rosalind Hursthouse argues that virtues are justified in part by the fact that they are beneficial to their possessor, but insists that their beneficial nature can often be seen only from within an ethical outlook” (*ibid.*, 285).

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 288.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 288–9.

⁷¹Toner, “The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics,” 611.

⁷²Toner, “Virtue Ethics and the Nature and Forms of Egoism,” 277.

⁷³Toner writes, “This, then, is the template for a non-self-centred eudaimonistic virtue ethics: the agent seeks to live a life of virtue, where virtues are simply those traits the possession and exercise of which constitute flourishing for a rational agent of that sort, where to flourish is to stand in the right relation to objects according to their degrees and kinds of goodness, and where the right relation is that which acknowledges the nature or status of each relatum in such a way that it is held in regard at least in part for its own sake. It is not self-centred to seek one’s own flourishing because such flourishing is essentially relational” (“The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics,” 613).

⁷⁴Toner, “Virtue Ethics and the Nature and Forms of Egoism,” 295.

of egoism, it is clear that so long as the virtuous agent acts virtuously because doing so is conducive to her own ultimate end—understood in a perfectionist sense—such an account cannot be said to be egoistic. This is because, for Toner, the egoism charge only applies to those accounts which take one's ultimate end to be one's own welfare. If, by contrast, the virtuous agent's ultimate end is her own perfection—understood in terms of *her* virtuous activity—the charge of egoism can find no footing. Toner's argument may be summarized as follows:

- (1) A doctrine is egoistic if and only if it holds that agents are to pursue their own *welfare* as their ultimate end.⁷⁵
- (2) Aristotle's doctrine does not hold that agents are to pursue their own welfare as their ultimate end. Rather, Aristotle's doctrine holds that agents are to pursue their own perfection, which is distinct in kind from their own welfare.
- (3) Therefore, Aristotle's doctrine is not egoistic.⁷⁶

Now, the problematic premise for some, I take it, will be premise (1). That is, it seems that some might insist that so long as the virtuous agent's ultimate reason for cultivating and maintaining a virtuous disposition is that doing so contributes to the agent's *own* eudaimonia—even if that is cashed out in a perfectionist sense where one ought to “relate himself in fitting fashion, through virtuous activity, to objects according to their goodness”—such an account is nonetheless *too* self-absorbed.⁷⁷ The idea here—as LeBar succinctly puts it above, in formulating what he calls “The Intuition”—is that when we act virtuously toward others (e.g., volunteer in our communities, give to charity, perform small acts of kindness, etc.) we think that we ought, morally speaking, to do so *primarily* for the sake of others, or at the very least, not primarily because doing so is good for us, even if our good is understood in terms of *our* virtuous activity.⁷⁸ If this is the case,

⁷⁵This first premise is laid out in Christopher Toner's “Was Aquinas an Egoist,” *The Thomist* 71, no.4 (2007): 577–608, at 592.

⁷⁶Now, to be sure, Toner does not take himself to have vindicated neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics from the self-absorption objection *in toto*, or to have provided a convincing argument that the most plausible interpretation of the conclusion of Aristotle's function argument is understood in a perfectionist sense. He does, however, claim to have offered us a “recipe” for adequately addressing the self-absorption objection. He writes, “But it is not my goal here to show that this or that philosopher is not an egoist, but to provide a recipe for non-egoistic virtue ethics. And the recipe is just this: *make eudaimonia* the primary goal, and define eudaimonia, not as the life *best for the agent* to live, but as the life *best* for the agent to live (being good in the way most appropriate to her situation in life), such that the primary goal is not welfare but perfection” (“Virtue Ethics and the Nature and Forms of Egoism,” 295).

⁷⁷Toner, “The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics,” 615.

⁷⁸As Hurka puts it, “if my ultimate goal is my own eudaimonia, shouldn't I, while relieving your pain, have the desire for my eudaimonia as my ultimate motive? But isn't helping you

then, it seems that regardless of how Toner claims we ought to understand Aristotle's conception of "eudaimonia," his account of moral motivation falls short of defending neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics against the self-absorption objection.

Now, Toner anticipates this rejoinder, and has a response ready. However, his response, I contend, is unsatisfactory. He argues that those who insist that his account is "egoistic"—an account on which one fundamentally seeks "to relate himself in fitting fashion . . . to objects according to their goodness"—overextend the use of the term.⁷⁹ Here, he adopts a surprising ally in Henry Sidgwick, who, according to Toner, also holds the view that we ought not call those accounts of motivation on which an agent makes the ultimate end of all her actions her own perfection "egoistic." He quotes Sidgwick, who says, "We must discard a common account of Egoism which describes its ultimate end as the 'good' of the individual; for the term 'good' may cover all possible views of the ultimate end for rational conduct."⁸⁰ Now, even if Sidgwick held that we ought not to count those normative ethical theories that take one's ultimate end to be one's own perfection "egoistic"—though I see no clear evidence that Sidgwick held such a view—the central problem here is that one cannot arbitrarily curtail the extent to which various accounts of moral motivation may be said to be egoistic simply because more accounts than one would likely qualify as egoistic.⁸¹ Recall, for Toner, egoistic accounts of moral motivation are problematic because they misrepresent the true standing of the agent in the world.⁸² On his view, agents with a misguided understanding of their place in the world cannot be said to "stand in the right relation to the good" and so cannot be said to be virtuous.⁸³ Now, if we take this explanation of why egoistic accounts of moral motivation are problematic and apply it to Toner's own account, it seems that his account is problematic as well. That is, it appears, *prima facie*, that there is nothing about the virtuous agent's own eudaimonia that justifies making the ultimate end of all her actions *her* virtuous activity—or *her* standing in the right relation to the good—when the virtuous activity of others or the ability of others

from concern for my good precisely not virtuous?" ("Aristotle on Virtue: Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong," 16).

⁷⁹Toner, "The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics," 615.

⁸⁰Toner, "Virtue Ethics and the Nature and Forms of Egoism," 300.

⁸¹On my reading of Sidgwick's passage above, he is only suggesting that we should not call those accounts in which an individual makes his ultimate aim his own good to be *substantively egoistic*. For, it might turn out that what one takes to be one's own good is a life of service toward others. Surely such an account cannot be said to be substantively egoistic. That said, it can still be formally egoistic.

⁸²Toner, "Virtue Ethics and the Nature and Forms of Egoism," 288.

⁸³Toner, "The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics," 611.

to stand in the right relation to the good is just as valuable as serving as her ultimate end.⁸⁴

No doubt, one may wish to push back a bit here and insist that the virtuous agent is justified in making the ultimate end of all her actions her own virtuous activity, while maintaining that the virtuous agent is not justified in making the ultimate end of all of her actions her own welfare. For example, one might contend that the virtuous agent is in, say, a privileged position with respect to bringing about her own virtuous activity, but not with respect to her own welfare.⁸⁵ And, as a result of this alleged privileged position, the virtuous agent may be said to be justified in making the ultimate end of all of her actions her own virtuous activity. Here, I think two things are worth noting. First, it is not at all clear that the virtuous agent, or any individual, is in a privileged position with respect to bringing about virtuous activity in her own life as opposed to bringing about virtuous activity in the lives of others. We are all embedded within a particular community, and whether it is in our role as, say, parent, guardian, teacher, brother, sister, or grandparent, we are all uniquely situated to help cultivate moral virtue in others, and can, at times, have a more meaningful impact in the lives of others than we can have in our own.

Second, I think that even if we are in a privileged position to bring about virtuous activity in our own lives, it does not follow that we are justified in taking the ultimate aim of all of our actions to be our own eudaimonia as opposed to—as a consequentialist virtue theorist might put it—the greatest amount of virtuous activity by “all humans everywhere.”⁸⁶ To insist that, simply because we are in a privileged position with respect to bringing about virtuous activity in our own lives, we are then justified in doing so is to too quickly equate (1) how we ought

⁸⁴Now, I do not have space in this paper to fully defend why I take the virtuous agent's eudaimonia—understood in terms of *her* virtuous activity—to be (roughly) equally valuable and worthy of pursuit as the eudaimonia of other virtuous agents. However, the basic idea here—following John Cooper, Jennifer Whiting, and Richard Kraut—is that the virtuous agent is justified in caring, loving, and being concerned about her own eudaimonia not *simply* because it is her own eudaimonia, but because of the goodness of her character. And, as Whiting argues, if the character of others is (roughly) just as good as the virtuous agent's own character, then it follows that she ought to care, love, and be concerned with the eudaimonia of other virtuous agents (roughly) to the same extent that she loves, cares, and is concerned about her own eudaimonia. On such an account, the mere fact that one's virtuous activity is one's own does not justify making one's ultimate end one's own virtuous activity, as opposed to the virtuous activity of others. For a full-defense of this view, see Jennifer Whiting's “The Nicomachean Account of *Philia*,” *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Kraut (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 276–304.

⁸⁵For instance, while it is easy for one to give money to, say, Oxfam, and further the welfare of many others, one cannot as easily or directly help cultivate moral virtue in others or encourage others to partake in virtuous activity.

⁸⁶Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 55.

to live our lives with (2) what we are in a privileged position to do. Surely, there are many factors that we must consider when deciding what type of life we should live, and the mere fact that we might stand in a unique position with respect to bringing about virtuous activity in our own lives does not, in and of itself, provide us with a sufficient rationale for taking our own virtuous activity—as opposed to the virtuous activity of others—as our ultimate aim.⁸⁷ Here, I contend, some explanation or argument is needed to establish such a link. For example, if—as Jennifer Whiting might argue—we ought to love, care, and be concerned about our own eudaimonia essentially in relation to our own goodness, just as we ought to love, care, and be concerned about others essentially in relation to their goodness, then the mere fact that I stand in a unique relationship with respect to my own eudaimonia should have absolutely no impact on whether I take my ultimate aim to be my own eudaimonia or the eudaimonia of others.

To conclude, if to count one's own welfare as more important than another's is to misrepresent one's standing in the world, then, it seems, so too is taking one's own standing in the right relation to the good to be more important than another's ability to stand in the right relation to the good: both seem to misrepresent one's place in the world. If the former precludes one from being able to stand in the right relation to the world, while the latter does not, then Toner owes us some further explanation as to why I am permitted to take my virtuous activity to be worthy as serving as my ultimate end but am not permitted in taking my ultimate end to be my own welfare. And until an adequate explanation is given, his response falls short in terms of adequately addressing the self-absorption objection.

Now, one may wonder how well reconceptualization approaches in general fare in terms of defending neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics against formal charges of egoism. Here, it seems to me that all approaches that attempt to address the self-absorption objection by reconceptualizing our ultimate end in terms of something admirable or noble—such as the pursuit of standing in the right relation to the good—are incapable of making any progress. For, as alluded to above, the crux of the self-absorption objection has to do with the formal structure of the virtuous agent's reasoning and is not based on how the virtuous agent construes her own eudaimonia. The fact that an agent takes as her ultimate goal “her own eudaimonia”—as opposed to, say, the eudaimonia of all, or, say, the general good—is what makes the self-absorption objection stick. And so long as reconceptualization approaches insist on taking the ultimate end of the virtuous agent's actions to be the agent's *own* eudaimonia, the objection stands.

⁸⁷Here, one can imagine a utilitarian insisting that what really matters is not the fact that one is in a privileged position to bring about virtuous activity in one's own life, but rather what will maximize net utility.

V. Neo-Aristotelian Eudaimonism Reconsidered

As we have seen, developmental approaches, two-standpoint approaches, and reconceptualization approaches all face serious difficulties in terms of being able to provide a non-egoistic account of why the virtuous agent ultimately acts virtuously. While all of these approaches fall short for different reasons, there is one shared commitment that these approaches have in common: namely, a commitment to the view that the virtuous agent ought to organize her life in a way that is ultimately good for her.⁸⁸ Gregory Vlastos famously dubbed this as “the Eudaemonist Axiom.” He writes, “I may now introduce the principle I shall call ‘the Eudaemonist Axiom,’ which once staked out by Socrates becomes foundational for virtually all subsequent moralists of classical antiquity. This is [the thesis] that happiness is desired by all human beings as the ultimate end (*telos*) of all their rational acts.”⁸⁹ While this axiom has been assumed to be the formal structure of reasoning of Aristotle’s virtuous agent for the overwhelming majority of the history of Western philosophy, it has come under attack. More recently, a number of Aristotelian scholars—e.g., Richard Kraut, Jennifer Whiting, Dennis McKerlie, Paula Gottlieb, and Sophia Grace—have argued that (1) there is very little textual support in favour of attributing such a structure of reasoning to Aristotle’s virtuous agent, and that (2) there is good reason to think that Aristotle himself did *not* insist that the last reason one could give for all of one’s actions is one’s *own* eudaimonia.⁹⁰ Now, *if*—and this, no doubt, is a huge *if*—Kraut, Whiting, McKerlie, and others are correct in asserting that we need not understand Aristotle’s virtuous agent as ultimately acting for reasons stemming from concern for her own eudaimonia, then, I argue, this creates the necessary conceptual space to offer a neo-Aristotelian account of the virtuous agent’s motivation on which the virtuous agent’s ultimate aim is something

⁸⁸Russell, “Virtue Ethics, Happiness, and the Good Life,” 19. Or, as Anne Baril puts it, what unites all eudaimonistic accounts of practical reasoning in the Aristotelian tradition is a commitment to the view that “a human being ought to organize his or her life so that it [i.e., his or her own life] realizes eudaimonia” (“Eudaimonia in Contemporary Virtue Ethics,” 23).

⁸⁹Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 203. He goes on to clarify, “To say that happiness is the *telos* of all our actions is not to say that this is what we are always, or often, thinking of when choosing what to do in our daily life, but only that this is the last of the reasons we could give if pressed to give our reason for choosing to do anything at all — the only one which, if given, would make it senseless to be asked for any further reason” (203).

⁹⁰See Richard Kraut’s *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Jennifer Whiting’s “The Nicomachean Account of *Philia*”; Dennis McKerlie’s “Aristotle and Egoism”; Paula Gottlieb’s “Aristotle’s Ethical Egoism,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (1996): 1–18; and Sophia Grace and Timothy Chappell’s “Eudaimonia, Happiness, and the Redemption of Unhappiness,” *Philosophical Topics* 41 (2013): 27–52.

other than her own eudaimonia. For recall, an important part of the story why neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists attribute the eudaemonist axiom as the formal structure of reasoning to Aristotle's virtuous agent is because this is assumed to be Aristotle's own view. However, if Aristotle did not hold such a view, then it seems neo-Aristotelians virtue ethicists need not either.

Rejecting the view that the virtuous agent ought to ultimately organize her life in a way that is good for her is, I suggest, the first step in terms of providing a way for neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists to adequately address the self-absorption objection. The second step would be to fill in precisely how the virtuous agent ought to then conceive of her ultimate end. Here, I think that Richard Kraut and Jennifer Whiting have a lot to offer neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists in terms of characterizing the virtuous agent's ultimate end, not in terms of her own eudaimonia, but in terms of human goodness, without any special or exclusive preference being given to one's own good.⁹¹ No doubt, a lot more needs to be said in order to demonstrate that this way forward will lead to neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists being able to provide a non-egoistic account of moral motivation. But, if I am correct, all of the approaches put forth previously have failed, and perhaps the best way forward is to push back on the assumption that the virtuous agent must ultimately organize her life in a way that is good for her.⁹²

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⁹¹A full defense is forthcoming.

⁹²A heartfelt thanks to Mark Johnstone, Violetta Igneski, and John Hacker-Wright for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.