

**ACTING WITH GOOD INTENTIONS:
VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE PRINCIPLE THAT OUGHT IMPLIES CAN**

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ABSTRACT: In *Morals from Motives* (2001), Michael Slote proposed an agent-based approach to virtue ethics in which the morality of an action derives solely from the agent's motives. Among the many objections that have been raised against Slote's account, this article addresses two problems associated with the Kantian principle that ought implies can. These are the problems of "deficient" and "inferior" motivation. These problems arise because people cannot freely choose their motives. We cannot always choose to act from good motives; nor can we always avoid acting from bad ones. Given this, Slote's account implies that we sometimes *cannot* do what we *ought* to do, contrary to Kant's principle. In this article, I propose an alternative agent-based account which, I argue, circumvents these problems. While people cannot choose their motives, they can choose their intentions. By characterizing virtuous action, as I do, in terms of good intentions rather than in terms of good motives, the conflict between what people can do and what they ought to do is resolved.

KEYWORDS: Action Theory, Agent-based Virtue Ethics, Intentions, Motives, Ought Implies Can

I. INTRODUCTION

Agent-based virtue ethics grounds the rightness of an action in the moral goodness of certain inner features of the agent. Right action is virtuous action, but whether an action is virtuous depends entirely on the agent's motives, character traits, or other inner qualities. As Michael Slote explains it: "An agent-based approach to virtue ethics treats the moral or ethical status of acts as entirely derivative from independent and fundamental aretaic (as opposed to deontic) ethical considerations of motives, character traits, or individuals" (2001: 5). Slote's version of the account concentrates on an agent's motives. "[A]gent-based virtue ethics," he says, "understands rightness in terms of good motivations and wrongness in terms of the having of bad (or insufficiently good) motives" (2001: 14). In addition to Slote's important work in *Morals from Motives* (2001), variations on this approach to virtue ethics have been developed or defended by Liezl Van Zyl (2005), Daniel Doviak (2011), and Joseph Walsh (2016).

Slote's agent-based virtue ethics represents an important departure from traditional thinking about the moral importance of motives. Ethicists have traditionally distinguished right actions from virtuous, morally good, or praiseworthy actions—actions, which, in addition to being right, are well motivated. One such ethicist, W. D. Ross, explained the importance of this distinction as follows:

That action from a good motive is never morally obligatory follows . . . from the Kantian principle, that is generally admitted, that 'I ought' implies 'I can.' It is not the case that I can by choice produce a certain motive . . . in myself at a moment's notice, still less that I can at a moment's notice make it effective in stimulating me to act. I can act from a certain motive only if I have the motive; if not, the most I can do is to cultivate it by suitably directing my attention or by acting in certain appropriate ways so that on some future occasion it *will* be present in me, and I shall be able to act from it. My *present* duty, therefore, cannot be to act here and now from it. (Ross 1930: 4-5)

For example, if I see a child drowning in a swimming pool, I can choose to dive into the water and rescue the child, but I cannot choose to care about the child if I do not. If, in this situation, acting virtuously requires that I act from love or caring, then I cannot act virtuously if I lack this motive. And if doing the right thing requires that I act virtuously, then I cannot do the right thing. On Slote's account, then, it appears that people who are less than virtuous—an impressively large category—are often unable to do the right thing because they lack the good motives to act virtuously. This conflicts with the principle—often associated with Kant—that ought implies can.

This is one objection to Slote's account, which we may call the problem of "deficient" motivation. Related to this is the problem of "inferior" motivation. Ramon Das (2003) illustrates the problem with the following variation on the above example:

A man dating a woman with a young child dives into a swimming pool to save the child from drowning. He cares not at all for the child, and is motivated exclusively by a desire to impress the woman as a means, let us suppose, to sleeping with her. (Das 2003: 326)

Intuitively, the man in this example, though badly motivated, does the right thing in rescuing the child. But how can this be if the morality of an action derives entirely from the agent's motives? If people act rightly only when they act from good motives, or at least resist acting from bad ones, then Das's man does something wrong in rescuing the child because he acts from an inferior motive.

Perhaps most people can act from good motives when they need to, or at least resist acting from bad ones. But perhaps some people cannot. Daniel Doviak (2011) asks us to imagine the following case:

Imagine a wicked person who enjoys inflicting pain on other people and who cannot find it in himself to benefit others out of a caring motive. Suppose that on a particular occasion this wicked individual has the option of either harming or not harming an innocent person. Suppose that if the wicked agent were to harm the innocent person, he would harm out of malevolence, and that if he were *not* to harm the innocent person, he would do so only out of fear of being caught and imprisoned. (Doviak 2011: 262)

Either the wicked man will harm an innocent person or he will refrain from doing so. If he harms an innocent person, he will be acting from malice, and so committing a cruel act. If he refrains from doing so, he will be acting from fear—or, in Doviak’s words, “from a pathetic form of self-concern” (2011: 262)—and so committing a cowardly act. No matter what the wicked man does, then, he will be doing something wrong, at least according to Slote’s account. Given that it is obligatory to do no wrong, it follows that the wicked man cannot do what he is obligated to do, since no matter what he does, he will be doing something wrong. This, again, contravenes Kant’s principle.

Slote is familiar with examples like Doviak’s. In *Morals from Motives* (2001: 17), he argues that “a thoroughly malevolent individual who sees a person he can hurt may still have it within his power to refrain from hurting that person”—which is true, granting a sufficiently robust conception of free will. “And the act of refraining,” he continues, “would fail to express or reflect his malevolence and would therefore not count as wrong” (2001: 17). While Doviak’s wicked man would be acting from a bad motive if he hurt an innocent person, he would not be acting from such a motive if he simply refrained from this malicious act. If, as Slote maintains, wrong action is badly motivated action, then the wicked man is not forced to do something wrong since he can easily avoid wrongdoing by not acting from his bad motive. According to Slote, then, “agent-basing is consistent with ‘ought implies can’ and allows genuine moral standards to govern our actions” (2001: 17).

There are, however, at least two difficulties with this quick dismissal of the problem of inferior motivation. First, it is unclear that people, especially bad people, can always choose not to act from bad motives. In Doviak’s example, either the wicked man harms an innocent person or he refrains from doing so; and in either case, he will be acting from a bad motive. If situations like this can arise—situations in which someone can resist acting from one bad motive only by acting from another bad motive—then there are situations in which people cannot avoid acting from bad motives. Second, the suggestion that people ought to resist acting from bad motives (whenever possible) has counterintuitive implications. It implies, for instance, that the man in Das’s example ought to resist acting from his perverse motive for saving the drowning child. This is not in itself counterintuitive, of course, but since the man’s perverse motive is his *only* motive for rescuing the child, if he resists acting from it, he will let the child drown. The implication, then, is that Das’s man ought *not* to rescue the child (or ought not to rescue the child unless he can discover within himself a better motive for doing so).

The objections raised here are not problems for all forms of virtue ethics, but specifically for Slote’s motivational approach. The problem of deficient motivation concerns Slote’s understanding of right action. If to act rightly is to act from good motives, and if we cannot always choose to act from good motives, then we cannot always choose to act rightly. The problem of inferior motivation concerns Slote’s analysis of wrong action. If badly motivated actions are wrong

actions, and if we cannot always avoid acting from bad motives, then we cannot always avoid wrongdoing. My aim in this article to develop an agent-based approach to virtue ethics which circumvents both problems. Slote (2007; 2010) himself has modified his views in a way that may allow him to avoid these problems—see Liezl van Zyl (2019:114-115) for discussion of this modification and its implications, and Ramon Das (2015) for critical commentary—but my idea is different. I will argue that both problems can be solved by characterizing virtuous action not, as Slote does, in terms of good motives, but rather in terms of good intentions. I develop this idea in the second section and, in the third, apply it to the problem of deficient motivation. In the fourth section, I argue that the problem of inferior motivation can be dealt with in the same way. This problem, though, raises a separate issue about the relationship between people’s motives and their actions. Can people act with good intentions even if they are unmotivated to do so, or motivated *not* to do so? This is a difficult question, but I argue that an affirmative answer is consistent with certain theories of action and with the assignments of blame and moral responsibility that people ordinarily make. As I will argue, this permits us to say that even a badly motivated actor, like Doviak’s wicked man, can nonetheless act virtuously.

II. GOOD INTENTIONS AND ACTING VIRTUOUSLY

Michael Slote attempts to explain the morality of an action in terms of the agent’s motives. But an agent-based approach to virtue ethics need not concentrate on an agent’s motives; it can focus on other features of agency, such as an agent’s intentions. Later in this section, I will develop an account along these lines. But first we must appreciate the difference between motives and intentions.

A motive is something that *moves* us to act. (The word “motive” derives from *movere*, to move.) In English, we often use the construction “acting from” or “acting out of” to identify an agent’s motives, as when we say that someone acted from fear or out of love. Philosophers commonly equate motives with explanatory reasons for action, understood as basic desires (Sverdlik 2011: Ch. 2). Suppose I drink a cup of coffee. My reason might simply be that I want to drink coffee, as an end in itself, in which case I am acting from a basic desire to drink coffee. On the other hand, my reason might be that I want to stay awake so that I can finish a project I am working on. In this case, my motive is a basic desire to finish my work. My drinking coffee is just a means to this end. Those who equate motives with basic desires do not deny, of course, that emotions motivate actions; rather, they maintain that emotions cause desires or include them within their compositional structure (Sverdlik 2011: 21). The emotion of fear, for example, causes or includes a desire to avoid the object of fear; the emotion of love, a desire for the wellbeing of the beloved. Character traits also motivate actions and can be understood analogously. Thus, honest people desire to tell the truth; compassionate people desire to alleviate suffering ; greedy people desire material things. Some philosophers, such as Elizabeth Foreman (2014) and Grant Rozeboom (2017), have suggested that attitudes also play a motivational role in people’s behavior. There are ways in which we relate to others simply because we respect them, admire them, or blame them for something, and an analysis of such attitudes may well be important in giving a full account of moral motivation. In what follows, though, I will accept the common view that people are motivated by their basic desires.

Although some philosophers attempt to reduce intentions to desires (or to desire-belief complexes), there are reasons for thinking that intentions are irreducible features of agency (Bratman 1987). We do not act *from* or *out of* intentions; rather, we act *with* or *on* them.

Importantly, intentions, unlike desires, are subject to choice. Even though I may not want to stay awake and finish working on a project, I can still formulate the intention to do so and act on this intention. Intentions are amenable to rational deliberation in a way in which motives are not. (It is platitudinous to say that we sometimes make up our minds to do things that we do not *want* to do.) I will be arguing that this is important because if virtuous action relates to people's intentions rather than to their motives, then there is no conflict between what people *ought* to do (act virtuously) and what they *can* do (act with good intentions).

The term 'intention' has many shades of meaning. But understood in one way (McLaughlin 2013), what an agent intends to do in performing some action is what the agent tries, attempts, or wills to do. So, for example, if I make some remark with the intention of hurting your feelings, then in making that remark I am trying to hurt your feelings. If I am not trying to do this, I do not intend to do it. Again, if I wave my hand with the intention of getting your attention, then in waving my hand I am trying to get your attention. If I am not trying to do this, I do not intend to do it. Understood in this way (McLaughlin 2013: 114-117), intentions are not separate from actions, as motives are; rather, they are structural features of actions and serve to differentiate them.¹ Take the case of a speaker's intentions, for example. There is a difference between uttering some remark with the sole intention of informing someone about something and uttering the same remark with the ultimate intention of hurting someone's feelings. These are different actions, even if they are outwardly indistinguishable, because they are performed with different intentions. Trying to inform someone is obviously different from trying to hurt someone's feelings. Indeed, according to the volitional theory of action (Davis 1979; Hornsby 1980), all actions are ultimately acts of trying.

It is not difficult to demonstrate the moral importance of an agent's intentions, particularly from the standpoint of virtue ethics. Here are two examples.

First, let us imagine that you are an aspiring artist and that you ask for my opinion about your most recent painting. I think that it lacks originality, and I tell you as much. Now, in telling you this my intention may be to inform you of the truth and nothing more. This would be the honest thing to do and also the right thing to do if honesty is what the situation calls for. Suppose, however, that I am envious of your talent and I give you my opinion with the intention of hurting your feelings. Then even if what I am saying is true, there is a sense in which I am not acting honestly. To act honestly, I must tell you the truth as an end in itself. If I tell you the truth with the ultimate intention of bruising your fragile ego, then I am acting maliciously, not honestly, and what I am doing is wrong for that reason.

Second, consider a case in which a physician decides to withdraw life-support from a terminally ill patient. In one version of the case, the physician's intention is to spare the patient unnecessary suffering. In another version, her intention is to save the hospital money. Viewed from an external perspective, the two versions of the case are indistinguishable, but they are certainly not morally equivalent. To act with the intention of sparing the patient unnecessary suffering is to act compassionately, and it is the right act if compassion is what the situation calls for. However, to let the patient die with the aim of saving the hospital money is to act callously and is wrong for that reason.

These examples suggest that intentions play a key role in the aretaic description of actions. Whether someone acts honestly or cruelly, compassionately or callously, as in the above examples, does not depend upon the motives of the agent, but upon the agent's intentions. An honest act is the sort of act that honest people do; and honest people are truthful in their communications—not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself. When people act with this good intention, they are

‘acting honestly,’ as I am using that phrase, whether they are motivated by a basic desire to communicate the truth or by something else, such as a desire to do their duty, or to serve God, or to be a good person.

A compassionate act is the sort of act that compassionate people do. Compassionate people try to alleviate the suffering of others—again, not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself. If a physician acts with this good intention in removing a suffering patient from life-support, then she ‘acts compassionately,’ as I am using that phrase, whether or not she is motivated by compassion. The alternative version of the second case is also telling. Here the physician’s motive is to save the hospital money. This is not in itself a morally bad desire (and might even be considered a good one), and so the physician is not badly motivated when she acts from this desire in removing the patient from life-support. What she does is vicious—specifically callous—because of the intentional structure of her action, not because of her motive. She intends to save the hospital money *by means of* letting the patient die.

As these examples indicate, my understanding of virtuous action is importantly different from that of certain other virtue ethicists. Consider honesty. Understood in one way, the way in which neo-Aristotelians might understand it, people act honestly whenever they act *outwardly* as honest people act, regardless of their intentions. Obviously, this is not my understanding. I am suggesting, first of all, that people with the virtue of honesty are truthful *for the sake of being truthful*—that they communicate the truth *as an end in itself* and not as a means to an end, especially a bad end—and, second, that people act honestly only when their behavior conforms to this pattern. It is not, in short, mere *outward* conformity to the behavior of honest people that matters, but *inward* conformity as well. People need not have the virtue of honesty to act honestly, but they cannot ‘act honestly,’ as I am using the phrase, unless they act with the same good intentions with which honest people act.

Now, agent-based virtue ethics grounds the rightness of an action in the moral goodness of certain inner qualities of the agent. Slote’s version of the account, we know, focuses on an agent’s motives. What the discussion of this section suggests, however, is that the focus should instead be on an agent’s intentions. If right action is virtuous action, and if the virtuous character of an action is determined by the agent’s intentions, then the right thing to do is to act with the same good intentions with which virtuous people act. The importance of this shift in focus is that people’s intentions, unlike their motives, are subject to their control. What I intend to do in performing some action is what I try, attempt, or will to do. And if anything is under my control, it is what I try, attempt, or will to do.

The revised analysis of right action can be formulated as follows. If (1) a situation calls for virtue *V*, and if (2) to do action *A* is to act *V*-ly, then it is right to do *A*. Importantly, acting *V*-ly is understood in terms of the intentional structure of the action. To illustrate, let us return to the case of the drowning child. The situation calls for benevolence (inasmuch as benevolence involves responding to someone else’s needs), and the benevolent thing to do in this situation is to try to meet the child’s needs as an end. To do this is to act with the ultimate intention of saving the child. This is the benevolent thing to do because this is what a benevolent person would do in the situation. It is also the right thing to do because (1) the situation calls for benevolence, and (2) to act with the ultimate intention of saving the child is to act benevolently.

Before going on, several points of clarification are in order. First, to act rightly is not just to act virtuously; it is to act in accordance with the specific virtues required by the situation (Hursthouse 1999: Ch. 1). Consider an earlier example. If you ask for my opinion about your most recent painting, the honest thing for me to do is to tell you exactly what I think. If the situation

calls for honesty, this would be the right thing to do. But maybe not. Maybe what the situation requires is sensitivity or tact. If so, then rather than telling you exactly what I think, I should choose my words carefully and try not to hurt your feelings, even if this involves deception.² Of course, the situation may call for sensitivity even though I am an insensitive boor. Clause (1) of my analysis should not be understood to entail that agents possess the virtues required by situations; for then only virtuous agents could act virtuously. This is something I wish to argue specifically against.

Second, it is not my claim that the right thing to do in a given situation is what the virtuous person would do in the same situation; or, at least, it is not my claim that this is what *makes* an action right. For example, in the case of the drowning child, I am not saying that it is right to save the child *because* this is what a benevolent person would do. Rather, my position is that saving the child—or, more precisely, acting with the ultimate intention of saving the child—is the benevolent thing to do because this is what a benevolent person would do. What makes it right to save the child, according to my account, is that the situation calls for benevolence and saving the child is the benevolent thing to do.

Third, according to the account sketched here, whether an action is virtuous is not determined by the agent's motives, but by the agent's intentions. An act of benevolence, for example, is one that aims at meeting someone else's needs (and aims at this as an end). And one can perform a benevolent act even if one does not have the same motive for doing so that benevolent people have. Benevolent people perform benevolent acts because they care about those in need and want to help them. But even uncaring people can perform the same benevolent acts, because what *makes* these acts benevolent acts is not what motivates them, but that benevolent people do them; and what benevolent people do is try to meet the needs of others.

Fourth, even though acting rightly, on my account, requires acting with good intentions, it is not my position that all that there is to acting rightly is acting with good intentions, for this is demonstrably false. To give a simple example: out of compassion for a failing student I might be tempted to give her a passing grade. If I did, I would be acting with the intention of sparing her the negative effects—both emotional and academic—of failure. This is a morally good intention, but that would not necessarily make it right to give the student an undeserved grade. If the situation calls for fairness rather than compassion, then the right thing to do would be to fail the student for the purpose of treating her fairly. (But notice the difference that intentions make. Suppose I have taken a disliking to the student and my intention in failing her is not to treat her fairly but to make her suffer. Then I would be doing something wrong in failing her despite the fact that I would be completely justified in doing so. I would be doing something wrong because I would be acting maliciously rather than fairly.) Virtuous action is always well intentioned; but right action is not simply well intentioned. To do the right thing one must act in accordance with the specific virtues required by the situation.

Finally, in characterizing virtuous action in terms of an agent's intentions, I am not suggesting that an agent's motives are unimportant. One cannot be a good person without having good motives, and one cannot be virtuous in one's actions without acting from good motives. But there is a difference between *being* virtuous in one's actions and simply *acting* virtuously. As noted earlier, character traits motivate actions because they give rise to desires or include them within their compositional structure. Thus, one cannot be a generous person without being motivated to benefit others, nor can one be a compassionate person without being moved to alleviate people's suffering. Still one can *act* generously even though one is not a generous person, and one can *act* compassionately even though one is not a compassionate person. In such cases, one is *acting*

virtuously even though one is not *being* virtuous in one's actions. To be virtuous in one's actions one must not only act virtuously; one must act virtuously *because* one is virtuous. The virtuous act must proceed from or express one's virtuous character. For example, it may be that donating money to charity is a generous deed regardless of one's motives; but one is not being generous in one's donation unless one gives from an altruistic motive. A generous act is the sort of act that generous people do, and generous people give with the ultimate intention of benefitting others with their gifts. We act generously whenever we give with the same good intention, whether or not we possess the virtue of generosity. However, we are not being generous in our giving unless our generous act is the external expression, product, or "fruit" of our generosity. In general, virtue possession is not necessary for *acting* virtuously, but it is necessary for *being* virtuous in one's actions.

The distinction I make here between *acting* virtuously and *being* virtuous in one's actions might be compared with Christine Swanton's (2001) distinction between acting *virtuously* and acting *from virtue*. As Swanton explains it, one acts from virtue whenever one's behavior "displays, expresses, or exhibits all (or a sufficient number of) the excellences comprising the virtue" (2001: 38). The "excellences" of a virtue include excellences in "affective and motivational states" (2001: 32). Thus, to act from generosity is to act in a way that expresses all the excellences comprising generosity, including an altruistic motive. This at least approximates what I have in mind by *being* virtuous in one's actions, although Swanton gives a more detailed account of it than I do here. What she has to say about *acting* virtuously, however, differs significantly from what I have in mind. According to her account, to act virtuously is to act in a way that "hits the target" of the virtue. Hence, if the target of generosity is the alleviation of need, then one acts generously by doing just that, regardless of one's motives and intentions. By giving money to charity, then, one acts generously—assuming that the charity makes good use of the funds it collects—even if one is not altruistically motivated.

To elaborate on my earlier remarks, my disagreement with this is twofold. First, I do not want to suggest that whether one acts virtuously depends upon the *consequences* of one's actions. It does not seem right to say, for example, that in making donations to charity, one is not acting generously unless one's donations do, in fact, help the poor. Even if a charitable organization mishandles or never receives one's donation, giving money with the *intention* of helping the poor still counts as a generous deed. Second, and more importantly, I would want to emphasize that one cannot act virtuously without acting with good intentions. To act virtuously is to act as virtuous people act, and the intentions with which people act are constitutive of the actions they perform. Thus, in making donations to charity, there is a difference between trying to benefit the poor with food and medicine and trying to benefit oneself with a tax deduction. These are different actions even if they have the same consequences. In the first case, one is trying to benefit others; in the second, one is trying to benefit oneself. Generous people act with the ultimate intention of benefitting others with their gifts. This is what they *do*, and unless one acts with the same good intention in making donations, one is not acting generously.

III. THE PROBLEM OF DEFICIENT MOTIVATION

Now to return to the problem of deficient motivation. Again, the problem arises from the fact that our motives are not entirely under our control. If I see a child drowning in a swimming pool, I can choose to dive into the water and save the child, but I cannot choose to care about the child if I do not. If acting virtuously in this situation requires not only that I try to save the child, but that I act

from a benevolent motive in so doing, it follows that I will not be able to act virtuously if I lack this motive. And if, as virtue ethicists maintain, my moral obligation is to act virtuously, it follows that I will not be able to do what I am obligated to do, which contravenes the principle that ‘ought implies can’. This, we know, is particularly a problem for Slote’s agent-based approach to virtue ethics; for according to Slote, the rightness of an action is ultimately grounded in the moral goodness of the agent’s motives. But agent-based virtue ethics need not analyze the concept of right action in terms of good motivation; it can, instead, as I have argued, analyze it in terms of good intentions.

The solution suggested by my alternative account turns on the distinction, discussed above, between *acting* virtuously and *being* virtuous in one’s actions. In the drowning child case, I cannot *be* virtuous in trying to rescue the child unless I act from a morally good motive; still I can *act* virtuously. To act virtuously is to act with the same good intentions (though not necessarily from the same good motives) with which virtuous people act. The virtue called for in this situation is benevolence, and the benevolent thing to do is to respond to the child’s needs by trying to rescue the child. Assuming that what I *try* to do, whether or not I am successful, is entirely up to me, it follows that whether I act virtuously in this instance is entirely up to me. While I cannot *be* benevolent in my efforts to save the child unless I am a benevolent person and act from a benevolent motive, I can nonetheless *act* benevolently or as a benevolent person would act in the situation. In this way—by characterizing virtuous action in terms of good intentions rather than in terms of good motives—an agent-based approach to virtue ethics can resolve the tension between what people *can* do and what they *ought* to do.

Before moving on to the problem of inferior motivation—the subject of the next section—let me consider one objection which might be raised against my account as it stands so far.³ I have argued that moral agents can act virtuously even if they do not have good motives, because what makes an act virtuous are the intentions of the agent rather than the agent’s motives. Benevolent people respond to the needs of others because they care about them, but I can act benevolently in trying to rescue a drowning child even if I do not actually care about the child. What matters is that I act with the same good intentions with which a benevolent person would act in the situation. Given that my intentions are under my control, so is whether I act benevolently. This, however, can be challenged. One might object that I can’t correctly be described as “acting benevolently” in rescuing the child unless I *do* care about the child and my act expresses that caring. How can I act benevolently in the situation—as, according to my account, I am morally required to do—if I lack a benevolent motive?

It may be that, according to common usage, to act “benevolently” is to act in a way that expresses an inner state of caring, just as to act “angrily”—e.g., “The frustrated driver angrily honked her horn”—is to act in a way that expresses anger, or to act “sorrowfully”—e.g., “The grieving husband sorrowfully placed flowers on his wife’s grave”—is to act in a way that expresses sorrow. Nevertheless, there is a way in which benevolent people act; and we can make sense of saying that people act in this way even if their behavior is not motivated by caring. To give a comparison: When people are hungry, they are motivated to eat food. But people can engage in this type of behavior and act “hungrily” for reasons other than hunger (such as a desire to gain weight) or for no reason at all (as in the case of someone absentmindedly eating snack food at a party). In the same way, I am suggesting, there is a way in which benevolent people act, or a type of behavior that is motivated by caring. Benevolent people try to meet the needs of others, particularly those who cannot meet their own needs; and they try to do this for the sake of these needy individuals, as an end in itself. But people can act in this way—as, I imagine, nurses and

other professional caregivers often do—even if they are not motivated by caring. Even if a nurse is not motivated to care for a patient by the same warm emotions that motivate a parent to care for a child but by a comparatively cool desire to earn a living or to act professionally, she can still try to meet the needs of the patient. As I would describe it, an uncaring nurse can *act benevolently* in meeting the needs of her patients, but she cannot *be benevolent* in meeting their needs because her benevolent behavior does not proceed from or express her inner state of caring.

Against this, it might be argued that in characterizing right action, as I have done, in terms of the agent's intentions, rather than in terms of the agent's motives or character traits, my account is not truly virtue-ethical, or at least not agent-based. According to Ramon Das (2015; 2017), virtue-ethical accounts of right action “face a dilemma: roughly, they are plausible to the extent that they lose their distinctively virtue-ethical character” (2017: 92). This is so, Das argues, because virtue-ethical accounts emphasize features of agency—motives and character traits—that are beyond the agent's control at the time of action and neglect the role played by volition in right action. “The implausibility of virtue-ethical accounts of right action,” writes Das, “stems largely from the negligible role they accord to the exercise of *will* or *volition* in their act-evaluations” (2017: 92). This is especially true in the case of agent-based virtue ethics insofar as this approach requires that agents have certain morally good inner qualities in order to act rightly rather than merely conform outwardly to standards of virtuous conduct. But if Das is right, because intention—understood as what an agent tries, attempts, or *wills* to do—plays a central role in my analysis of right action, I have essentially abandoned agent-based virtue ethics in favor of a fundamentally different kind of analysis.

In responding to this, I would suggest that there is more to virtuous agency than what Das seems to recognize. Virtuous agents act from good motives, and they act in ways that express good character traits; but they also act with good intentions. According to my account, we cannot *be* virtuous in our actions without acting from good motives; still we can *act* virtuously, because what makes an act virtuous is not what motivates it, but its intentional structure. The crucial difference between Slote's account and my own is that while we cannot always choose our motives, we can and do choose our intentions. Even if I cannot choose to care about a drowning child and act from this good motive in saving the child, I can still act in a benevolent way by acting as a benevolent person would act in the situation. Doing this requires not just that I act outwardly as a benevolent person would act, but that I act inwardly with the same good intentions with which a benevolent person would act. To act benevolently, in other words, it is not enough that I save the child; I must act with the intention of saving the child as an end in itself. This is something I *can* do, I have argued, because what I intend (try, attempt, or will) to do is entirely under my control. Because my account explains right action in terms of a characteristic feature of virtuous agency and, more specifically, grounds the rightness of an action in the moral goodness of some inner feature of the agent, it is virtue-ethical and agent-based.

IV. BAD MOTIVES AND THE PROBLEM OF INFERIOR MOTIVATION

The problem of inferior motivation arises from the fact, or so it is alleged, that people cannot always avoid acting from bad motives. If it is our moral obligation to resist acting from bad motives, it follows that we cannot always fulfill our moral obligations, which contravenes Kant's principle. Since Slote's brand of agent-basing has this implication, it is argued, this shows that his analysis must be mistaken. Among the many critics who have raised this objection to Slote's

account are Hurka (2001), Jacobson (2002), Das (2003), Copp and Sobel (2004), Doviak (2011), Van Zyl (2011), and Kawall (2014).

The problem of inferior motivation is related to another objection that is often raised against Slote's account. This is the "right action/wrong reason" objection, as it is sometimes called. Both objections concern agents that are poorly motivated; and both objections can be illustrated with the same imaginary cases, such as Das's example of the drowning child. Recall that in Das's version of the case, a man rescues a drowning child, not because he cares about the child, but because he wants to impress the child's mother as a means to sleeping with her. Intuitively, the man does the right thing in saving the child, but he does it for the wrong reason. Yet how can anyone do the right thing for the wrong reason if acting for the right reason (or having good motives) is what makes an action right? Obviously this is impossible, which, critics argue, shows that Slote's account must be mistaken. In addition to Das (2003), this objection has been raised by Hurka (2001), Swanton (2001), Jacobson (2002), Brady (2004), Doviak (2011), Foreman (2014), Kawall (2014), and Walsh (2016).

Because this will also shed light on the problem of inferior motivation, let us consider whether Das's example shows what it is supposed to show. Initially, we want to say that Das's agent does the right thing in rescuing the child, but on reflection this judgment is problematic. After all, he does not just rescue the child; he rescues the child *as a means* to seducing the child's mother. This is not the same as rescuing the child *as an end*, which is what the man ought to do. Again, the intentions with which we act are constitutive of the actions we perform. And Das's agent not only acts from a bad motive; he acts with a bad intention. If, as argued in the previous section, doing the right thing requires that we act with good intentions, then Das's agent does not do the right thing for the wrong reason; he does the wrong thing for the wrong reason. What he ought to do is rescue the child as an end, not as a means to an end, especially a bad end; and he ought to do this out of love or caring for the child, not out of a desire to have sex with the child's mother.

The important lesson to be learned from this is that we cannot fully describe what an agent does without taking into account the agent's intentions. As we shall see, this lesson will also help us solve the problem of inferior motivation. But first we must address a difficult issue in the theory of action.

There are examples, such as Doviak's example of the wicked man, which suggest that sometimes people cannot avoid acting from bad motives. This is problematic for Slote's account, of course, but also for my own. Even if, as argued in the previous section, people can act virtuously without acting from good motives, it is at least doubtful whether badly motivated actors can act virtuously. Can someone motivated by hatred, or by envy, or by "a pathetic form of self-concern" nonetheless act with good intentions? If Steven Sverdlik is right, the answer is 'no.' According to Sverdlik, even if motives and intentions "belong to distinct psychological categories, the content of motives and ultimate intentions will be the same" (2011: 34). If this is true, then when people act from bad motives, they also act with bad intentions. And if so, then, even on my account, people will not be able to avoid wrongdoing when they cannot avoid acting from bad motives. Before going on, then, it is important to examine the relationship between people's motives and their actions. Let's briefly canvass three basic possibilities.

One possibility is that people's motives strictly determine their actions. On this view, not only are there no unmotivated actions, but people are *compelled* to act by their strongest, most powerful motives. Friedrich Nietzsche apparently held this view. "What the individual calls his 'will'," explains Michel Haar (1977), is for Nietzsche "a plurality of instincts and impulses in constant battle with one another to gain the upper hand" (1977: 9). When one desire triumphs over its

competitors and moves an individual to act, this is experienced as a volitional act. In reality, though, an act of will “is the distant echo of a battle that has already been fought out, the aftermath coming to the surface, or the ‘code language’ of a subterranean struggle of impulses” (1977: 10). If this is correct, then we are never free to choose among competing motives; the strongest motive always triumphs.⁴

A second possibility is that, while people cannot make unmotivated choices, they can at least choose among competing motives. On this view, free will is not illusory, because people are not compelled to act by their strongest motives; but it is constrained, because people must act from some motive or other. This seems to have been W. D. Ross’s view, for instance. Ross writes that an unmotivated action would be “an event without a cause,” which was “refuted by reflection on the universality of the law of causation” (1930: 45). Ross’s thinking about the causal connection between motives and actions is supported by the standard causal theory of action (Davidson 1980; Goldman 1976). According to this, what distinguishes actions from other events is that actions are caused by desires (or by desires combined with beliefs). For example, if my arm goes up because of a muscle spasm, this is an event but not an action; it is not something I do but something that happens to me. On the other hand, if my arm goes up because I *want* it to go up, or because I *want* to get someone’s attention by raising my arm (and I *believe* that I can do this by raising my arm), then it is an action. Actions, unlike other events, are the effects of desires (or desire-belief complexes). If this is true, there can be no unmotivated actions because what makes an event an action is precisely that it *is* motivated. But, according to this possibility, I can still choose among my competing motives.

The remaining possibility is that people are free to make unmotivated choices. On this view—which we might associate with existentialist thinker Jean-Paul Sartre—free will is neither illusory nor constrained. “[M]an,” says Sartre, “is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (1957: 23). If, as Sartre insists, we are responsible for everything we do, including, presumably, the things we *let* happen, then we must be free to make unmotivated choices. To see this, return to the case of the drowning child. Suppose that, even though I am a capable swimmer, I remain on the sidelines while the child drowns because I have no motive, not even a bad one, for helping the child. If I am not free to perform unmotivated actions, then I would not be responsible for letting the child drown, because I would not be free to help. But for Sartre, I am responsible for *everything* I do. If I let the child drown, this is my choice and I am responsible for it, regardless of my motives.

What is the upshot? On the first view, Nietzsche’s view, whether or not Doviak’s wicked man harms an innocent person is strictly determined by his motives. If his strongest motive is malice, then he will commit a malicious act; if his strongest motive is fear (of being arrested and imprisoned), then he will commit a cowardly act. But, whatever he does, he has no choice in the matter. On the second view, Ross’s view, the wicked man *can* choose to act either from malice or from fear, but he *must* act from one of these two bad motives. His choice is not determined, but it is constrained. On the third view, Sartre’s view, the wicked man’s freedom is not restricted by his motives. He is free to act cruelly; he is free to act cowardly; but he is also free to act virtuously—if, as I have argued, the virtuous character of an action is determined, not by the agent’s motives, but by the agent’s intentions.

Of course, it is difficult to say which of these three views is correct, and I won’t attempt to do that here. I note that Sartre’s view may have an advantage of accounting for the assignments of blame and moral responsibility that people ordinarily make. Surely, I would be blamed for my

negligence if, in the case described above, I let the child drown simply because I was unmotivated to help. Many philosophers accept some version of the standard causal theory, which, as remarked above, excludes the possibility of unmotivated actions and choices. Other accounts—such as the volitional theory (Davis 1979; Hornsby 1980), the theory of agency (Taylor 1992: 51-53), or a hybrid account (Lowe 2008)—allow for this possibility. There is, in short, a wide range of possibilities, and Sartre's view is consistent with some theories of action but not with others. Of course, we cannot hope to settle this issue here, and so I will simply acknowledge that my analysis of right action presupposes the Sartrean view.

We now turn to the problem of inferior motivation. As noted earlier, one aspect of the problem concerns cases in which one's only motive for doing the right thing is a bad one. This is illustrated by Das's variation on the case of the drowning child. If it is wrong to act from bad motives, then it is wrong for the man in Das's example to act from his bad motive for rescuing the child. But as this is the man's *only* motive, if he does not act from it, he will let the child drown. Now, we can agree with Slote that people ought not to act from bad motives and that Das's man, in particular, ought not to act from his bad motive for rescuing the child. We can also agree with Sverdlik that motives and ultimate intentions have the same content and, therefore, that Das's man cannot act with a good ultimate intention if he acts from a bad motive. But this doesn't mean that the man must let the child drown, or that if he rescues the child, he must act with a bad intention. The right thing for the man to do is to save the child, not *as a means* to sleeping with the child's mother, but *as an end*. This would be the benevolent thing to do, and benevolence is what is called for in the situation. True, the man does not have a motive for acting in a benevolent way. But in Sartre's view, the man is free to act in this way even if he is unmotivated to do so, because his freedom is not restricted by his motives. If he lets the child drown, or if he treats the child merely as a means to an end, this is his free choice and he is responsible for it.

The core of the problem of inferior motivation, though, concerns cases in which someone must choose between two bad motives, as illustrated by Doviak's example of the wicked man. Here a man must choose between harming an innocent person and refraining from doing so. Of course, the man should exercise self-restraint. But if he does, he will be acting from fear, and so committing a cowardly act. How, then, can the wicked man avoid wrongdoing? In responding to this, the virtue ethicist can point out that whether the man does the right thing in exercising self-restraint depends on his intentions.

Situations in which people are tempted by cruel impulses call for self-restraint, of course, but also for empathy. It matters what we *aim* at in exercising self-restraint, not just that we do restrain ourselves. If our intention is to spare ourselves some unfortunate outcome—such as being arrested and imprisoned—we fall short of the mark. To act virtuously we must also act with empathy, not in the sense that we are *motivated* by empathy, but in the sense that we refrain from cruelty with the *intention* of sparing other people (our potential victims) pain and suffering. In Doviak's example, the wicked man exercises the virtue of self-restraint if he resists the temptation to harm an innocent person, even if his only aim in so doing is to spare himself the misfortune of being arrested and imprisoned. But self-restraint is not the only virtue that the situation calls for; it also calls for empathy. And the wicked man 'acts with empathy' in the sense explained above only if his ultimate aim in restraining himself is to spare the innocent person pain and suffering. By hypothesis, he does not have a motive for doing this. But in Sartre's view, the wicked man's freedom is not restricted by his motives. Even if he is unmotivated to act empathetically, this is nevertheless something he can do. If he does not—if, instead, he acts maliciously or cowardly—this is his free choice.

In conclusion, I have tried to reconcile the ‘ought implies can’ principle with an agent-based approach to virtue ethics. Motives matter, according to the account developed here, because one cannot be a virtuous person without having good motives, and one cannot *be* virtuous in one’s actions without acting from good motives. But so far as the analysis of right action is concerned, it is not one’s motives that matter, but one’s intentions. To act rightly is to act virtuously; and to act virtuously is to act with the same good intentions with which virtuous people act. Although one cannot *be* virtuous in one’s actions without acting from good motives, one can nevertheless *act* virtuously without acting from good motives. This is important because intentions, unlike motives, are subject to our will. In fact, what we intend to do is precisely what we will to do. Thus, we *can* always act virtuously. Whether or not we do is a matter of choice.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The way in which McLaughlin makes this point is to argue that purposive explanations of actions, unlike causal explanations, do not appeal to states or events that are separate from actions; rather, they "explain actions by *re-describing* them as attempts to or as part of attempts to achieve a goal that the agent has" (McLaughlin 2013: 117).

² It will be noticed that there is a parallel between the decision-making process at work here and W. D. Ross's (1930: Ch. 2) system of prima facie duties. I will leave this aspect of my analysis undeveloped because it is irrelevant to how I approach the problems of deficient and inferior motivation.

³ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this problem to my attention.

⁴ It is not my intention to enter into the debate over free will. Rather, my concern is whether and to what extent intentions can be disentangled from motives. I note that compatibilists might agree with Nietzsche that our actions are "determined" by our strongest desires, and yet maintain that we are "free" in the sense that we are unimpeded from doing what we want to do.