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## **Virtue Ethics, Narrative, and Revisionary Accounts of Rightness**

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In response to prominent criticisms of virtue ethical accounts of right action, Daniel Russell (2008, 2009) has argued that these criticisms are misguided insofar as they rest on an incorrect understanding of what virtue ethicists mean by ‘right action’, drawing on Rosalind Hursthouse’s influential account of the term (1999). Liezl van Zyl (2011) has explored, though not fully-endorsed, a similar approach. The response holds that virtue ethicists do not embrace a strong connection between (i) right action and (ii) what any given agent ought to do in a given set of circumstances. Rather, ‘right action’ is a matter of action assessment, and indicates that a given action is morally excellent and praiseworthy. More generally, the proposed account of rightness emphasizes both (i) an agent’s past and how she came to be in certain circumstances - is it a result of her own vice or wrong actions? and (ii) the agent’s own future happiness and well-being - will an action be so terrible that her life is marred and ruined? The narrative structure of an agent’s life thus plays a significant role in determining whether an action is right. This revisionary conception of right action is the focus of the current chapter.

I first argue that the proposed change in the understanding of ‘right action’ is significant enough that virtue ethicists would be discussing an altogether different concept from other theorists. I further argue that, even when understood as an account of moral praiseworthiness or excellence, this revisionary account of right action faces significant obstacles. In particular, I argue that non-virtuous agents can perform actions that are far more praiseworthy and excellent than many of those characteristic of virtuous agents, even in circumstances that no virtuous agent would find herself in.

I then turn to cases where virtuous agents themselves must act while facing terrible circumstances, paying particular attention to the ongoing peace of mind and absence of sorrow that Hursthouse and Russell suggest are necessary accompaniments to right, excellent action. Drawing on work by van Zyl, I argue that emphasizing such peace of mind implausibly limits our scope for right action under difficult or oppressive conditions. I conclude by considering whether these worries may be grounded in Hursthouse and Russell's embrace of a eudaimonism that encourages a self-absorbed, egoistic account of rightness – a familiar worry for such theories.

## I

Rosalind Hursthouse has developed perhaps the most influential contemporary virtue ethical account of right action:

An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances, except for tragic dilemmas, in which a *decision* is right iff it is what such an agent would decide, but the action decided upon may be too terrible to be called 'right' or 'good' (1999, p. 79).

Given its prominence, we will refer to this account as the standard virtue ethical account of rightness (henceforth 'SVAR').<sup>1</sup> The first clause is well-known and generally treated as capturing the core of the account. The second clause, concerning tragic dilemmas, is intended by Hursthouse to capture scenarios where even virtuous agents are left with only terrible options; we will return to this clause in section V.

We can begin by considering two broad lines of objection to SVAR that have sparked van Zyl and Russell's responses, and the further articulation of their conception of rightness. First, there are cases that suggest that, *pace* Hursthouse, there can be right actions that no fully-virtuous agent would perform. Consider Robert Johnson's well-known case of a habitual liar trying to improve himself (2003). He might keep a journal of his lies with an eye towards improvement, he may pause

before he speaks to reflect on who would be hurt by his lying and why he is tempted to do so, and so on. These all seem to be right actions, ones the liar ought to perform, but also ones that no fully-virtuous agent would perform – after all, a virtuous agent would not have these temptations, and thus no need for such actions.

The second line of objection suggests that there are cases where a flawed agent ought not to try to do what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances; in other words, such agents should not try to do what is right. For example, suppose that a squash player with a foul temper has just lost a match. While the fully-virtuous agent in such circumstances would walk over to shake the victor's hand to congratulate her, it seems that our flawed agent should not do this – if she did, she would surely give in to her temptation to punch the victor in the face. Thus, the flawed agent should not try to do what is right (according to SVAR), and should instead perhaps force a smile and walk away before the situation escalates.<sup>2</sup>

The two lines of objection can be summarized as follows: if we apply SVAR, it seems there are right actions that non-virtuous agents *should not* try to perform (which suggests that these are not in fact right actions for them), and there are non-right actions that non-virtuous agents *should* perform (which in turn suggests these are in fact right actions for them).

## II

We can turn now to van Zyl and Russell's responses. As noted above, van Zyl herself is not committed to SVAR; instead, she simply explores what she takes to be promising lines of response to familiar objections to such accounts. Russell, on the other hand, embraces SVAR, embedded in his own richly-developed virtue ethics.

Hursthouse, van Zyl, and Russell all draw on the prominent strand in virtue-ethical thought that such deontic notions as rightness, obligation, and permission do not fit comfortably within such theories. Hursthouse suggests that virtue ethics *can* provide an account of right action,

But it does this under pressure, only in order to maintain a fruitful dialogue with the overwhelming majority of modern moral philosophers for whom ‘*right* action’ is the natural phrase. ‘*Right* action’, with its suggestion of uniqueness, its implication of ‘if not right then wrong’, and its associations with ‘required/obligatory’, ‘forbidden/prohibited’, and ‘permissible’, is not a term it is happy with. It favours talking in terms of *good* action (*eupraxia*), of acting *well* (or badly), rather than in terms of *right* action (1999, p. 55).

Consequentialists and deontologists typically think of right actions in terms of permissions or obligations. On such understandings, if an action is not right then it is not permissible to perform it; one should not perform an action if it is not right. On the other hand, if an action is right, it is at least permissible to perform it – and obligatory on some accounts.

Russell and van Zyl hold that virtue ethicists instead embrace a very different conception of right action, one where right action is a matter of moral excellence and praiseworthiness, having nothing to do with permissions or obligations. Furthermore, when this difference is recognized, the apparent counterexamples above are seen to fail. According to Russell, virtue ethics

offers not only a different account of right action but, indeed, a different conception of it.

Unless we appreciate what is different about it, we risk simply begging all sorts of questions against it, wondering why the new account does not fit the old conception. The assumption that “ought” implies “right” is a case in point, since to make that assumption is to fail to engage virtue ethics on its own terms (2008, p. 302).

The core of the alternative conception of rightness is captured by Hursthouse:

[A right act can be understood as] an act that merits praise rather than blame, an act that an agent can take pride in doing rather than feeling unhappy about, the sort of act that decent, virtuous agents do and seek out occasions for doing (Hursthouse 1999, p. 46; quoted by van Zyl 2011, p. 83).

Intuitively, the alternative conception holds that only certain actions warrant the status of ‘rightness’, of moral excellence. On the other hand, the mere fact that an action is not right does not mean that it is wrong or impermissible; rather, this simply shows that it does not yet reach the high standards demanded for rightness. As van Zyl puts it, “if we use ‘right action’ in the sense of a ‘good deed’, then it becomes obvious how there can be instances of actions that are not right and yet still ought to have been done” (2011, p. 84).

On this rival conception of rightness, then, rightness is an honorific that suggests praiseworthiness, and the absence of grounds for regret. An action could be permissible or even obligatory - and recommended to an ordinary agent - without yet being good enough to qualify as right. The putative counterexamples above thus fail. The liar should engage in his remedial actions, but these do not yet qualify as right – they are not sufficiently excellent. And while congratulating the winner after a tough loss might be praiseworthy and right, it does not follow that a sore loser with a foul temper should attempt to do so. She should instead smile and walk away, an action that is appropriate given her flaws, but not excellent enough to qualify as right.

### III

An initial worry is that with this revisionary conception of rightness, our virtue ethicists have actually changed the subject and are no longer engaging with their consequentialist and deontologist rivals; they may no longer be discussing the same concept. Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) and others have, of course, argued that virtue ethicists would be wise to avoid appealing to such deontic notions as right action, obligation, permissibility, and so on (at least in the absence of a divine lawgiver). But it is one thing to reject the notion of right action altogether (given its associations with obligation and permissibility), and quite another to use the very same term to identify an entirely different concept from that shared by other theorists. This latter approach would seem to muddy the waters and confuse discussion needlessly. If so, it would likely be best to introduce a new or

different term altogether. But as it stands, the current revisionary conception of right action risks describing a new, very different concept from that being discussed by others theorists.

One rather minor consideration supporting this worry is that typically praiseworthiness or excellence is treated as a matter of degree – an action can be more or less praiseworthy or excellent. On the other hand, obligatoriness and permissibility, the notions commonly at stake for consequentialists and deontologists, seem to be binary; it is unusual to speak of an act being more or less permissible. This may suggest that different concepts are at stake: one a matter of degree, the other not.

Notice next that permissibility and obligatoriness are, on standard deontic logics, interdefinable; to hold that an action is permissible is to hold that it is not obligatory not to perform it, and so on. Insofar as deontologists and consequentialists are treating right action in such terms, they are plausibly seen as analyzing and providing different conceptions of the same concept. But praiseworthiness is not related in the same ways to obligation or permission; indeed, van Zyl and Russell rely on this very fact. But to the extent that there is such a difference, we may well wonder whether different concepts are at stake. Similarly, deontologists, consequentialists, and commonsense morality would hold that we ought to attempt to perform right actions; a key function of rightness is to provide action guidance. For example, “One should always do the right thing” is a familiar platitude of commonsense morality. The proposed virtue ethical understanding of rightness would strip away this function, with ‘rightness’ serving only as a term of act assessment. Again, this suggests not merely different conceptions of a shared concept, but instead entirely different concepts.

Most importantly, as noted above, van Zyl and Russell suggest that virtue ethicists mean something like praiseworthy or excellent by “right”. But then why speak of right actions at all, rather than simply speaking of praiseworthy or excellent actions? After all, deontologists and

consequentialists recognize the concepts of praiseworthy and excellent actions; they simply treat these as distinct from rightness. Virtue ethicists muddy the waters by speaking of “right action” when the philosophical conversation among their rivals is in terms of permissibility and obligation, and with a concept of rightness that provides action-guidance. They could instead embrace a claim like the following:

An action is *morally praiseworthy or excellent* if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

By making this change, Hursthouse, van Zyl, and Russell could be understood as fully embracing the Anscombian thesis that we should eschew talk of permissibility, obligatoriness and related deontic notions (in the absence of a divine lawgiver). They could argue that we should instead focus on appraisals of praiseworthiness or moral excellence; certainly this would clarify their view significantly. On the other hand, to do so would be to abandon Hursthouse’s original attempt to engage fruitfully with deontologists and consequentialists with respect to right action.

#### IV

While Hursthouse, van Zyl, and Russell are perhaps correct to draw greater attention to morally excellent or praiseworthy action, it is worth assessing SVAR when understood on its own terms as an account of such actions. We can focus on instances where ordinary, flawed agents must act in circumstances that no virtuous agent could find herself in; all three authors would argue that such actions cannot be sufficiently or appropriately excellent to qualify as ‘right’. I will argue that such proposals ultimately lead to implausible assessments, even when treating rightness in terms of moral excellence.

Recall the actions of Johnson’s self-improving liar. Both van Zyl and Russell agree that there might be aspects of the liar’s actions that are truly morally excellent and praiseworthy – he is embracing a commitment to the virtues, he is demonstrating perseverance, prudence, and other

virtues in maintaining his efforts (at least to some degree), and so on. But they also hold that such actions are not yet right. Why not?

Van Zyl suggests that insofar as the habitual liar works on improving his character and strives to become more honest

he does what a virtuous — courageous, determined, persistent — person characteristically does in facing difficult challenges (which is to seek professional help when needed, to persist until the problem is resolved, to not give up hope, etc.), thus giving his action a tick of approval. However, it cannot be an unqualified tick, for we must also remember that the challenge he faces is that of overcoming his own flawed character (2011, p. 11).

There is something truly excellent about his behavior [...] his actions do reveal a certain amount of courage and determination. But the central virtue in question here is honesty, and by writing down his lies (and so on), the reforming liar does not act in a way that is characteristic of an honest person, at least not yet (2018, p. 107).

Thus, while there are virtuous and praiseworthy aspects to the liar's ameliorative actions, we cannot yet deem them *right* because they are made necessary by his own flaws and errors; they are not the sorts of actions a good person would seek out and desire to perform. Furthermore, the liar's actions express only such secondary virtues as determination, rather than the key virtue at stake, honesty.

Russell suggests that the liar's actions are indeed morally good, but do not qualify as right because this term is reserved for "central" cases of moral excellence, where an action qualifies as a central case of moral excellence if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

[W]e need to understand the excellence of unqualified cases of excellent action before we can understand why certain remedial actions count as improvements and, thus, as having any sort of excellence at all. However, we do not need a view about remedial actions in order to



understand why the unqualified excellent actions are excellent. Consequently, it seems clear both that the unqualified cases of morally excellent action are central cases of morally excellent action and that those cases are necessarily characteristic of the virtuous (2008, p. 310; see also Russell, 2009, p. 56).

Russell thus posits an explanatory priority to the actions characteristic of the fully virtuous, which in turn justifies restricting the term ‘right’ to morally excellent actions of this kind. Russell further defends this proposal, arguing that acts like those of Johnson’s habitual liar

have real moral merit, even though they are acts that no virtuous person would do. [...] to undertake remedial acts in good faith is admirable and praiseworthy—and even, in a sense, virtuous—because it is to (begin to) accept standards of virtue as standards of one’s own (2009, p. 129).

Thus, on Russell’s view a crucial element to the praiseworthiness of the remedial actions of non-virtuous agents is that they reflect a broader acceptance of the standards of virtue by these agents.

A key question for van Zyl and Russell is whether non-right actions can ever be more morally excellent than morally right actions as they understand them. Notice how trivial are many of the characteristic actions of virtuous people, even when acting virtuously. They will honestly pay the correct bus fare, prudently brush their teeth, and justly refrain from taking exceptionally large slices of cake when others are yet to have any. These all seem to be decent, permissible, and in some cases obligatory actions. But do these truly strike us as central cases of moral excellence, worthy of moral praise?<sup>3</sup>

Compare such cases to the following. Imagine a troubled youth, Henri, becomes involved in a gang committing various petty crimes. Henri participates quite happily, working his way up within the group as a trusted member. Because of his trusted status he is now taken on-board a new project. Unbeknownst to Henri, the gang leaders have decided to escalate to truly heinous crimes;<sup>4</sup>

he is enlisted to guard a terrified kidnapped family that the gang plans to kill later, regardless of any ransom paid. He is shocked. He had no qualms about petty theft and vandalism, but would never participate in a kidnapping, let alone murdering innocent people. As such he risks his own life and helps the family to escape; he will now need to run from the gang with his own life in grave danger, and perhaps seek help from the police while facing prison time. He takes on enormous risk and sacrifice to help the family.

Of course, no virtuous persons would ever be in such circumstances, because they would never have been happily stealing from others, and would never come to be in a trusted position in such a gang. As such, Henri's actions do not qualify as right according to SVAR – there can be no characteristic action of a virtuous person in such a situation.<sup>5</sup> But surely this is a morally praiseworthy and excellent action. We may judge harshly his previous criminal actions, but saving the family at tremendous risk and cost to himself seems to warrant praise.

Is Henri's action less morally excellent and praiseworthy than a virtuous person refraining from taking too large a slice of cake? To say 'yes' would seem to require a rather unusual understanding of praiseworthiness and excellence. Many of the actions of virtuous agents could be more praiseworthy than Henri's action – but surely not *every* action where some minimal exercise of virtue is involved, no matter how trivial, must thereby be more admirable than these other actions simply because virtuous agents would characteristically perform them. True, Henri has made many mistakes in the past, and still has a flawed moral compass; he is no saint. But why should this so undermine the value of his action here and now, when in this moment his sense of justice, benevolence, and compassion all contribute to the extraordinary willpower and courage it takes to save the family? He is risking death at the hands of the gang, and probable lengthy prison time, but still he acts.

To press a bit further – compare Henri’s action and courage with that of a virtuous agent who exercises a modicum of courage by not panicking when confronted by a cute, but growling puppy. In which case is there a more demanding and admirable exercise of courage? For all the terrifying ferocity of angry puppies, presumably Henri’s action still demands rather more courage. The vast majority of people could, one hopes, muster the courage required to confront a growling puppy. On the other hand, we might expect most people to fall short when placed in Henri’s position – many would panic, others would obey the gang out of fear, and so on. The courage and cool-headedness demanded in Henri’s situation is exceptional. Consider also what is at stake. Henri is acting to save lives, while putting his own life at serious risk and facing years of imprisonment. The angry, growling puppy likely threatens a small bite on a finger. Thus both (i) the demands placed upon the virtues and (ii) the goods (and harms) at stake seem far more significant in the case of Henri’s actions.<sup>6</sup>

How might defenders of SVAR respond? They might argue that we could, in fact, imagine a virtuous agent in similar (though perhaps not identical) circumstances to Henri – where she could rescue a kidnapped family, though at great risk to herself; if so, we might then see Henri’s actions as right even on SVAR, assuming that a virtuous agent would act in a similar fashion. But compare the following two situations. In both an agent’s family is kidnapped, and the agent is able to rescue them herself, with no enduring physical or emotional harm done to them. Next, imagine that in one case the kidnapers have chosen the agent’s family largely at random, or simply based on their apparent wealth. In the other, the family is deliberately targeted as an act of vengeance against the agent who is a key figure in a powerful gang - someone who has engaged in brutal violence herself, and crossed many violent criminals over the years. At one level we could say both agents face similar circumstances of needing to save their kidnapped families. But I expect defenders of SVAR (and the revisionary account of rightness) would not want to treat the actions of both agents as right and

praiseworthy; indeed, they would presumably hold that the criminal agent deserves little or no credit at all for rescuing her family when it is her own activities which have led to them being kidnapped in the first place; they would presumably not see the criminal's rescue as worthy of being treated as right.

If the above is correct, it would in turn suggest that there would be a significant difference (in their eyes) between the case of Henri and the case of a virtuous agent in a situation where she could similarly save a kidnapped family, insofar as Henri (much like the criminal) arrived in this situation due to his own past bad actions – these are what led him to be in this position, and no virtuous agent would be in such a situation. On the other hand, I would argue that while both Henri and the violent criminal discussed above are led to their current situation by their past wrong actions, there is a tremendous difference in the badness of their past actions. Henri's past wrongdoings could still leave him in a position where he can perform an admirable, morally excellent action (even if no virtuous agent could be in a truly similar situation, and even if we should properly blame him for his past wrongdoings).

Perhaps Russell would claim that Henri's case is not a *central* case of moral excellence, and as such is not right; nor would it be as praiseworthy as a right action. But then do we really believe that standing up to a puppy *is* such a central case? As noted above, virtuous agents perform a wide variety of actions in their lives, from the morally extraordinary and excellent, to the quite mundane, where only a minimal exercise of virtue is required.<sup>7</sup> It seems a mistake to treat all of the characteristic actions of virtuous agents as exemplifying moral *excellence*, given such wide variation. Henri should feel guilt for his past pretty crimes. But surely this is not enough to render his *current* action less worthy than a virtuous agent's not being scared by a growling puppy.

Russell stresses that a theory of right action should answer to our practical interests:

[w]e are interested in a theory of right action in the first place because we have serious concerns of a very practical nature—deciding how to act, assessing what we do, thinking about outcomes, having good reasons, and so on (2009, p. 39).

But then most moral agents are flawed and still aspiring to virtue; apologies, remediation, and making amends would seem to be key aspects of moral life. The world is a difficult and often unjust place, and humans are flawed, finite beings. If we are attempting to inculcate the virtues in our children, would not amelioration, amends, and remediation be essential – and thus ‘central’?<sup>8</sup> Russell might claim that explanatory priority is crucial here, that we need ‘central’ cases of moral excellence in order understand the lesser excellence of actions like those of Henri. But notice that to correctly explain and understand apologies, making amends, and so on – central elements of real-life morality – we will require reference to errors, mistakes, and the like.

Ramon Das forcefully captures a related worry:

I believe that severing the connection between rightness and action guidance is profoundly unsatisfying and a sign of theoretical desperation. In particular, it raises the following disturbing question [...] What is the point of an ethical theory that does not even pretend to be useful to a person trying to decide what he morally ought to do? (2015, p. 339).<sup>9</sup>

While our concern here is the concept of right action in particular, rather than virtue ethics as a whole, Das’s point seems apt: what are we to make of a narrow, non-action-guiding sense of “right action” – one that would apply only to a narrow range of actions where everything happens to go well, where the agent is left content and proud, and whose proponents stress is not intended to tell us what we ought to do?<sup>10</sup> The question is particularly pressing given Russell’s claim that a theory of right action should address a wide range of important practical interests, *including* deciding how to act.

An alternative response for Russell would be to hold that the characteristic actions of virtuous agents express a full commitment to the virtues, while remedial and other actions performed by more flawed agents merely express (at best) an aspiration towards, or the beginnings of such a commitment. Russell writes

for the virtue ethicist some cases of excellent action [i.e. those performed by virtuous agents acting in character] are actions that express a wholehearted or unqualified commitment to the standards of the virtues, such as honesty and charity, as standards of one's own.

Remedial actions, then, are assessed in terms of the extent to which they approximate to a commitment to such standards of the virtues (2009, p. 56).

[V]irtue ethics can take 'what a virtuous person would do' as a necessary feature of any central case of moral excellence, expressing full commitment to standards of virtues, and extend its analysis of excellent action based on such central cases to less central cases, such as remedial and other self-improving actions (2009, p. 57).<sup>11</sup>

We can focus on two concerns with such a proposal. First, it seems unlikely that all characteristic actions of virtuous agents express a full commitment to the standards of the virtues. When virtuous Claire prudently brushes her teeth does this truly – somehow – express a full commitment to the standards of prudence? Does she thereby brush in a particularly effective or heartfelt fashion, such that her toothbrushing better expresses prudence than Henri's rescue of the kidnapped family expresses courage? Such claims would require significant defense. Second, why should we hold that a broad, full commitment to the virtues (or even just relevant virtues) would be required for right action in any particular instance? That is, it is unclear why Claire's more general commitment to prudence and its demands across various situations would be required for the rightness of her particular toothbrushing here and now, and to render it a central case of moral excellence.

A rather different response would stress that while Henri's action (or that of the brutal criminal who saves her kidnapped family) may seem strikingly excellent when taken in isolation, we must also recognize the broader context of Henri's life, and how he came to be in this position. Concerning a similar case (where an individual makes a decent decision in a situation that no virtuous person would fall into), Hursthouse writes "In vain do I protest that now 'I want to do what is right', to undo past wrongdoing and start afresh with a clean slate. I should have thought of that before. The 'satisfactory review of my own conduct' is not for me, or at least, not yet; remorse and guilt are my portion." (1999, p. 50).

Certainly, there are cases where such an appraisal seems apt, as with the brutal criminal. Or suppose Javier is meant to be closely watching as several children play in the shallow end of a pool. He instead drinks too much, and dozes off. He is awoken at the last minute by the panicked screams of the children, and by sheer luck is able to save a child who strayed into the deep end. Javier would hardly be considered a praiseworthy hero for saving a drowning child – indeed, it seems he should be ashamed and held blameworthy for his reckless, negligent actions. The history and background of how an agent came to be in a given situation can be highly relevant to assessing an action's excellence (or lack thereof). Russell suggests that virtue ethics "views actions within the history of an agent", while other theories "tend to focus on actions one at a time" (2009, 40 ftnt. 3).

Still, even if we often need to place an agent's actions in the broader context and narrative of her life in order to properly assess them, we should not simply assume that if a virtuous agent could not find herself in certain circumstances, then there can be no right, morally excellent actions available. While a full discussion of this issue lies beyond the scope of this chapter, we can, for now, introduce two factors that would seem relevant to such assessments.

First, we can consider to what extent the non-virtuous agent is responsible for the particular circumstances in which she finds herself. If, like Javier, it is her own negligence, laziness, and

recklessness (or vice more generally) that puts her in a particular situation, it seems more likely that any actions she performs will be tainted, and simply making amends for the problems she herself has created. But in cases like that of Henri, even while a virtuous agent would never have ended up in his current circumstances, it is the gang leaders who create the circumstances at stake (*they* have kidnapped the family and established the gang's plans). In such cases, where the flawed agent is not directly responsible for the immediate circumstances in which she acts, it seems more likely that genuinely excellent actions are possible, even if a virtuous agent would not be in such circumstances.

Second, we might consider the proportionality (as it were) between an agent's past errors and her current circumstances. Suppose you were to make an insulting comment to a rude stranger in a shopping mall in the United States – a comment that a virtuous person would never make. The stranger turns out to be violent and vicious; he furiously threatens you and other shoppers with a concealed gun. Yes, you played a key role in bringing about this very situation, and it was your own short-temper that led you to make the triggering comment. But surely if you are then able to talk this person down, and to convince him to release the other shoppers before turning himself in to the police, your actions are both right and clearly morally excellent – even if no virtuous agent would be in such circumstances. Your own actions played a key role in creating the terrible circumstances you faced – but you were also extremely unlucky, and the goodness of what you then achieve seems easily to outweigh the minor peccadillo on your part that sparked the situation.

To summarize the preceding points: in considering the actions of agents in situations no virtuous person would be in, it is implausible to assume these must be lesser or non-central cases of moral excellence. The details of the cases will matter, but surely many of them would be more excellent than many of the quotidian, minimally virtuous actions of virtuous agents - contrary to the standard virtue ethical account of rightness and moral excellence. On the other hand, if Hursthouse, Russell and van Zyl were to accept that some actions performed by non-virtuous agents could be



more morally excellent than right actions (even if ‘tainted’ in some way), it becomes much harder to find a significant moral role for the proposed revisionary concept of “rightness”. This would be especially troubling given the central role played by notions of right action in everyday moral discourse.

## V

A difficult issue lurking in the background of our discussion is that of how to determine whether a virtuous agent might find herself in given circumstances. Relatedly, how do we determine whether two sets of circumstances are relevantly similar enough to qualify as the same circumstances for the purposes of SVAR?

Consider two individuals who have both been in prison for several years, convicted of violent felonies. One is innocent and wrongly convicted, the other guilty and justly convicted. They both intervene one day to prevent an assault against a vulnerable new prisoner. In aiding the new prisoner, do they face the same circumstances? We might imagine an innocent virtuous agent being wrongly convicted and imprisoned, and thus in a position to aid a vulnerable prisoner. On the other hand, presumably no virtuous agent would be guilty of a violent felony, and would not end up in prison in this way. If these suggestions are correct, then the innocent prisoner could perform a right action, while the guilty prisoner, even while helping to prevent an assault in exactly the same fashion, could not perform a right action – his action would be tainted because we can directly trace his current circumstances to his own past misdeeds, ones that no virtuous agent would have committed.

Next consider the guilty felon following his release from prison. He struggles to find a job, can barely afford a cramped, dirty room in a rundown tenement, and his friends and family have largely abandoned him. Suppose that he still somehow manages to save money to visit his young son from a past relationship, tries to provide his son with needed school materials, etc. These actions require tremendous sacrifices on his part – he often goes without proper heating or meals in order

to provide for his son. But in the end, his circumstances are due to his own past actions – it is because of the violence he committed many years ago (that no virtuous agent would have committed) that he ended-up in prison, and it is because of this violent past that he struggles to find work now. Suppose, further, that he is not yet virtuous – he still struggles with his temper, occasional dishonesty, and other vices. Do we need to consider his current actions as less than right, because even while we might admire his sacrifices and dedication to his son, no virtuous agent would have found herself in this position? And are his sacrifices less morally excellent than a virtuous person’s prudent flossing of her teeth because it is ultimately his own fault that he is in these difficult circumstances? One could make such claims, but surely to do so would be holding an agent’s past actions against him in deeply troubling ways. Must this individual be forever trapped by his past, such that his many (seemingly) admirable actions for the sake of his son and their relationship are deemed tainted and less than right because we can trace his struggles back decades ago, to something a virtuous agent would not have done? Yes, he should feel guilt and remorse for his past violent actions – but should these past actions also continue to prevent him from performing a wide range of good, right actions for decades after?

The issues here are difficult, and it could well be that defenders of SVAR could develop plausible, fully-fledged accounts that provide clear guidance as to those instances where a virtuous agent could find herself in a given set of circumstances (and when not), and so on. But for now such work remains to be done. For example, recall van Zyl’s suggestion that Johnson’s habitual liar acts as a virtuous agent would when facing a difficult challenge (not giving up, seeking help as needed, etc.). This seems plausible enough, but at an abstract level we could describe almost any dilemma faced by a non-virtuous agent as “facing a difficult challenge” and thus circumstances a virtuous agent could face; presumably van Zyl would not want her proposal to extend so far. We may wonder whether the innocent and guilty convicts face the same circumstances when aiding the vulnerable new

prisoner, given the very different histories which led them to this point.<sup>12</sup> More generally, we require further elaboration on these and related issues from proponents of SVAR in order to be able to more fully assess the view and its prospects.

## VI

In preceding sections we have considered potential cases where the actions of non-virtuous agents seem both right and more morally excellent than many characteristic actions of virtuous agents, even if virtuous agents would never have followed such paths, or allowed themselves to fall into such circumstances. We have also noted the looming background questions concerning how to determine whether a virtuous agent could find herself in a given situation, and how long past vicious actions might constrain the rightness of current actions.

In this section we turn to cases in which virtuous agents act, but in terrible circumstances not of their own making - situations where virtuous agents would likely be left unhappy and haunted by what they must do. Hursthouse and Russell emphasize the impacts of such actions upon the agent's own life and her future well-being in determining the rightness of her actions. In particular, they suggest that no right actions are available in tragic dilemmas. Van Zyl departs from this view, and we will draw upon her work to argue that such actions are in fact often right or even supererogatory, despite (or even in virtue of) the great demands placed upon the agents involved.

To begin, consider the case of a military doctor working at the frontlines of a battlefield, needing to amputate both legs of a severely-injured young soldier without anaesthetic. One could well imagine the doctor being haunted and distressed by the horrors he witnesses and the actions he must perform. But recall Hursthouse's more general characterizations of right action. She holds that a right action is an

act that merits praise rather than blame, an act that an agent can take pride in doing rather than feeling unhappy about, the sort of act that decent, virtuous agents do and seek out occasions for doing (1999, 46).

She also holds that a right, morally excellent action is one that leaves an agent who performs it in those ‘circumstances (so) requisite to happiness’, namely ‘inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, (and) a satisfactory review of (her) own conduct’ as Hume so nicely puts it (1999, 47).

Consider again our battlefield doctor, horrified at the suffering he is witnessing, dismayed at the limits of what he can do to help and the further suffering he inflicts while treating the injured, and so on. While I think most of us would see the actions of the doctor as morally right and strikingly excellent, it is not clear that Hursthouse can do so. The doctor is not happy about the actions he is performing; he would not seek out occasions to perform them – he would far rather hope that they were never necessary again. He will likely lack peace of mind as he is haunted by the cries of those upon whom he has operated, and the limits of the help he could provide.

Or consider a veterinarian who euthanises an older dog that arrives at an animal shelter frail and severely-neglected. There is very little chance of the dog being adopted and the shelter’s meagre resources are already stretched far too thin. Her action may well be right, and require significant virtue to choose and to perform – but it hardly seems likely that she would eagerly seek out opportunities to perform such actions, or feel a serene inner peace and pride as a result.

I do not take cases like that of the battlefield doctor or the veterinarian to constitute clear counterexamples to Hursthouse or Russell’s claims concerning right actions. But they do raise significant questions concerning their more general understanding of right action and its grounding in the agent’s own well-being or flourishing. Hursthouse’s discussion of tragic dilemmas is relevant in this regard. Recall her account of right action:

An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances, except for tragic dilemmas, in which a *decision* is right iff it is what such an agent would decide, but the action decided upon may be too terrible to be called ‘right’ or ‘good’ (1999, 79).

For Hursthouse and Russell<sup>13</sup>, tragic dilemmas are cases in which an agent is faced with a choice between two truly dreadful options – perhaps as in Bernard Williams’ case of Jim and Pedro, where Jim must choose between shooting one innocent person himself thereby saving nineteen lives, or refusing to shoot, and having Pedro, a vicious army commander, shooting all twenty (Hursthouse 1999, 59-60). Even if we think this dilemma is resolvable – perhaps there are clear moral reasons in favour of shooting the one individual in order to save the other nineteen – Jim is still left taking the life of another human being. Note that while ordinary non-virtuous agents can find themselves in such tragic dilemmas as a result of their own past mistakes and ill-deeds, it is also possible for both them and virtuous agents to find themselves in such terrible circumstances through no fault of their own.<sup>14</sup>

Hursthouse holds that the lives of agents who face tragic dilemmas will be marred and filled with sorrow, even if they do what they should in the circumstances. Jim, as a virtuous agent, will be haunted by having killed an innocent human being – even if this was the best option available to him at the time (1999, 73-4). She writes

The actions a virtuous agent is forced to in tragic dilemmas fail to be good actions because the doing of them, no matter how unwillingly or involuntarily, mars or ruins a good life [...] simply in virtue of the fact that her life presented her with *this* choice, and was thereby marred, or perhaps even ruined (1999, 59).

Tragic dilemmas, for Hursthouse and Russell, present further cases in which no right, morally good action is possible.

Van Zyl has argued - highly effectively to my mind – that Hursthouse and Russell are wrong to hold that agents in tragic dilemmas cannot act rightly, and that they in fact have the resources to treat the virtuous agent's actions in such dilemmas as right, even excellent actions. Consider the following passage from Hursthouse:

The charitable, honest, just agent, even when faced with a tragic dilemma, does not act callously, dishonestly, that is 'as (in the manner) the callous, dishonest, unjust agent does'. She acts with immense regret and pain instead of indifferently or gladly, as the callous or dishonest or unjust one does. So we are not forced to say that virtuous agents faced with tragic dilemmas act badly. (Hursthouse, 1999, pp. 73-4; as cited by van Zyl, 2007, p. 53)

Hursthouse goes further. We might be tempted to think that a virtuous agent who acts in a tragic dilemma cannot be acting in character (and thus her action would not be right). But Hursthouse writes

it would not be correct to describe a virtuous agent who resolved a tragic dilemma rightly as thereby 'not herself'. If anything, she might have to have been quite especially herself, calling on all her virtue and moral wisdom in order to resolve the dilemma rightly in the first place (1999, p. 62).

But then, as van Zyl observes,

The difficulty for Hursthouse's account is to explain the sense in which the act is 'terrible', given that she does not think it is morally wrong or blameworthy. If it is true that the agent is a virtuous person, that she finds herself in this situation through no fault of her own, and that she is blameless of wrongdoing, then we seem to have a strong case for assessing the act in question as right or virtuous, as warranting a tick of approval, regardless of the fact that the doing of the act will fill the agent with sorrow and could ruin her life (2007, p. 54).

Indeed, given the above claims from Hursthouse, we might expect a virtuous agent in a tragic dilemma to act in an especially praiseworthy fashion, drawing on “all her virtue and moral wisdom”.

In a 2006 paper, Hursthouse provides a potentially attractive account of supererogation for her virtue ethics:

If what makes it hard (on a particular occasion) for an agent to act virtuously is the *circumstances*, then the more virtue he shows if he acts well [...] But: if what makes it hard (on a particular occasion) for an agent to act virtuously is (not the circumstances but) a flaw or imperfection of his character, then the *less* virtue he shows if he acts well.

And this distinction between right action where virtue is not severely tested and right action where virtue *is* severely tested and comes through, is the virtue ethics account of the distinction between ‘the obligatory’ and ‘the supererogatory’, a distinction that no account of the right can ignore (2006, p. 111).

Hursthouse has us imagine a virtuous agent who finds a purse full of money. Suppose that the virtuous agent is reasonably well-off, and it is easy for her to return the purse to its owner – her virtue is not severely tested by the circumstances. In such a case the agent acts rightly and well, but has done nothing exceptional. Now imagine the virtuous agent to be living in significant poverty, and facing large, unexpected bills that she worries she cannot pay. Here when she returns the purse, it is a particularly praiseworthy and excellent action – it would qualify as supererogatory insofar as the agent’s virtue would be severely tested, and many ordinary individuals would succumb to the temptation to keep the purse.

This all seems quite plausible, but consider how it ought to apply to tragic dilemmas. As Hursthouse herself notes, to be able to deliberate and find the strength to do something one finds so terrible – and yet so necessary - reflects virtue that has been put to a severe test. That is, it seems that many of the most demanding situations, where an agent’s virtue is most severely tested, will

include tragic dilemmas and other cases where she might be haunted even by doing what is best; recall the battlefield surgeon and the veterinarian. Hursthouse (1999) holds that the actions in tragic dilemmas are not good enough to be deemed right. And she might say the same about the battlefield doctor and vet if their lives are sufficiently marred and haunted by the procedures they perform. But applying her proposed account of supererogation (2006) would instead suggest that these same actions are supererogatory; for the reasons discussed above, I believe this is the more appropriate appraisal.

Similarly, I would argue that the actions of Henri should also qualify as supererogatory, as an instance where a non-virtuous agent has gotten himself into a situation where extraordinary acts of virtue are now required. Recall the situation where you've insulted a rude individual who then threatens you and others with a gun. To stay calm and engage in dialogue to deescalate the situation would be very difficult and challenging even for very virtuous agents, let alone the rest of us. As such, it seems the door is open to agents performing supererogatory actions even in situations that no virtuous agents would have gotten themselves into.

To summarize: Hursthouse and Russell ought to treat many of the actions of virtuous agents in tragic dilemmas, and in circumstances like those of the battlefield doctor or veterinarian, as supererogatory. These are extraordinary, demanding circumstances where many would fail to act rightly, let alone act in a still more excellent fashion. Further, given the extreme demands of courage and other virtues required by Henri's actions in saving the kidnapped family, his actions - and ones like them - should also qualify as supererogatory, even if no virtuous agent would find herself in such circumstances.

## VII

As we have seen, Hursthouse and Russell hold that right, morally excellent actions are ones that would leave an agent with peace of mind and a sense of integrity; they are the sorts of actions



that they would be happy about, and would seek occasion to perform. It is this broader understanding of right action that leads them to claim that virtuous agents cannot act rightly in tragic dilemmas. What grounds this emphasis on the agent's own mental states and happiness in determining whether an action is right? One plausible answer would lie in their embrace of eudaimonism.<sup>15</sup> Hursthouse writes

‘Good action’ is so called advisedly, and although it is conceptually linked to morally correct (right) decision and to ‘action of the virtuous agent’, it is *also* conceptually linked to ‘good life’ and *eudaimonia* (1999, p. 59).

In the end, it seems that Hursthouse and Russell want to hold that good, right actions must ultimately contribute to the agent's own well-being and good life. Excellent action is grounded in the virtues – and in turn, the virtues are traits that reliably lead to the flourishing or *eudaimonia* of their possessors. As such, they may well hold that actions that leave an agent's life marred or even ruined cannot be right, excellent actions.

Still, notice that in cases where a virtuous agent would characteristically perform an action that might leave her unhappy or sorrowful, but not to the same extent as in tragic dilemmas, Hursthouse would hold that right action is still possible. She suggests that

a resolvable dilemma which arises in circumstances in which a virtuous agent might well find herself will be resolvable by a morally right decision, and what is *done*, such as ‘x, after much painful thought, feeling deep regret, and doing such-and-such by way of restitution’ will be assessed as morally right (1999, p. 41).

Perhaps Hursthouse would hold that the cases of the battlefield doctor and veterinarian are of this kind – these individuals can act rightly, so long as they act with regret, after painful thought, and so forth. But this then raises several questions.

First, why is right action available in these cases, but not in tragic dilemmas – why can virtuous agents not act virtuously, with regret, and rightly in tragic dilemmas? Second, how awful must a required action be in order to qualify a situation as a tragic dilemma; how severely marred or ruined must the agent's life be, and what constitutes such ruining? Must the agent be constantly haunted and unable to think of anything else? Is a life sufficiently marred if the virtuous agent remembers the dreadful action every few days and is filled with sorrow for an hour or two, before bringing herself back to the present?

Third, we might think that the marring or ruining of a life following a tragic dilemma is simply a descriptive fact – something that will often or inevitably happen. But Hursthouse suggests, more strongly, that such ruining *should* occur:

For those who insisted on the appropriateness of guilt and remorse in these cases were surely right to insist that the mere fact that one had intentionally done *x* *should* haunt the rest of one's life if *x* were very terrible, even granted that one was blameless (1999, p. 61).

On one hand, this might seem appropriate – anyone with a decent character should surely be horrified and haunted if they were put into a position where they had to torture another human being, or perform an equally heinous act. But further questions arise: would Hursthouse allow that a virtuous agent might appropriately try to end such haunting - would it be wrong to try to move on with her life, or to consult with a therapist? Presumably Hursthouse would accept such steps, though this is not entirely clear.<sup>16</sup>

We might then say that in tragic dilemmas such sorrow would be justified or warranted, even if agents could properly take steps to help themselves move past what they've done. But what should we say of cases in which an agent's life is marred and ruined by a lesser dilemma? For example, suppose our battlefield doctor is in fact haunted and tormented by what he has had to do, to such an extent that his life is severely marred. Are his actions no longer right? Do they remain

right, even though his life is ruined, because the haunting and sorrow is excessive compared to what would be warranted, however this is established? That is, Hursthouse holds that a virtuous agent's life would be marred by acting in a tragic dilemma and thus the action would not be right. But what should we say about cases where virtuous agents have lives that in fact are marred or ruined by their actions, but where the situations faced by these agents are not yet *tragic* dilemmas by her standards?

More fundamentally still, why impose a concern with the agent's own happiness or sorrow, or her own warranted pride (or lack thereof) into our very conception of right or excellent action? There is a vast range of right actions with widely varying characteristics. Some are easy to perform, but warrant little pride. Others arise in difficult situations and tragic dilemmas, ones that may lead to great sorrow on the part of the agent. But as van Zyl (2007) has argued, they are still right, and quite possibly all the more admirable given the strength of character it would take to act rightly in such circumstances.

Hursthouse might suggest that it is not the virtuous agent's warranted pride or peace of mind that is fundamental to determining whether an action is right and excellent, but rather that these states reflect the nature of the actions that the agent has performed – and that those actions performed in tragic dilemmas are so terrible that they cannot be deemed right. The virtuous agent's sorrow would simply serve as an indicator of how terrible the action was.

But it is not clear that this response is open to her. Hursthouse explicitly focuses on how performing terrible actions would impact the *agent herself*; devastating outcomes and catastrophic failures are all filtered through their impact on the agent's own life. The following passages from Hursthouse are representative:

The actions a virtuous agent is forced to in tragic dilemmas fail to be good actions *because* the doing of them, no matter how unwillingly or involuntarily, mars or ruins a good life (1999, p. 59, emphasis added).

[Following acting in a tragic dilemma] a virtuous agent's life will be marred or even ruined, haunted by sorrow that she had done *x*. Here again, we arrive at a situation that deserves to be called 'tragic'—not because the dilemma was irresolvable, but because, resolving it correctly, a virtuous agent cannot emerge with her life unmarred (1999, p. 61).

It seems that what is crucial for Hursthouse in considering whether an action can be right in such circumstances is the impact upon the agent's own well-being or flourishing.

We may develop the current worry for Hursthouse and Russell in the form of a dilemma. On one hand, if the relevant object of the virtuous agent's regret and sorrow are the *circumstances* that made a certain action necessary, then many – perhaps even most – of the actions of virtuous agents would not be right or excellent by their standards. If right actions are the kinds of actions that virtuous agents seek out opportunities to perform and leave such agents happy and with an inner peace of mind, then only a narrow range of actions could be right. Consider our battlefield doctor – he surely wishes that he would never have to perform another surgery on horrifically injured young people, and may well be haunted by the terrible procedures he had to perform. A virtuous agent may give generously to Amnesty International or other groups – but only because there is so much injustice and oppression in the world. She would regret the existence of such states, and would wish her actions were not necessary. More generally, most morally right and excellent actions would seem to be made necessary by circumstances of suffering, injustice, dishonesty, oppression, and so on. Virtuous agents could feel truly happy, without a residue of sorrow or regret, only about a very narrow range of actions and circumstances – such things as providing gifts for friends, or spending time with loved ones – instances where one is not attempting to address bad or flawed circumstances. Surely this would restrict the range of right, excellent action too far, and on an implausible basis.

On the other hand, perhaps the locus of sorrow and haunting in tragic dilemmas and other difficult situations should be only the *agent's own actions*, rather than the broader circumstances which necessitated them. There is something attractive to this – we may think it inappropriate to focus on broader circumstances which are outside of the agent's control, and in the end, are not part of her action itself. Thus, the question would be whether *I* did something of which I could be proud and happy, regardless of the broader circumstances. The battlefield doctor might think “What I had to do was terrible... performing amputations without anaesthetic, trying to remove shrapnel while my patients screamed. They were pleading with me to stop and I had to listen to it all. This will haunt me forever. How will *my* life ever be the same?”. Presumably his actions would not leave him the peace of mind needed to be deemed right or excellent. But the worry is that such an approach to right action could well be highly self-absorbed and egoistic – charges that eudaimonism has long faced. Indeed, this approach might seem to confirm some of the worst worries of eudaimonism's critics.<sup>17</sup> The suffering of others, the terrible harms that may arise are not directly the reason why a given action would not be right in such circumstances – instead it is that the virtuous agent herself would now be haunted, that *her* life would be marred. We put aside the sorrow directed at the circumstances in which virtuous agents find themselves - the fact that soldiers are being injured or dying, that political prisoners are being tortured, and so on. All such sorrow and haunting would need to be filtered through their impacts on the agent herself. We would be concerned only with whether the agent should regret *her* own actions, or on the fact that things have gone so badly that *her* life is marred or ruined.<sup>18</sup> But it is not at all clear why this should be a criterion of morally right action.<sup>19</sup>

Doing what is right and morally excellent can require diminishing or even sacrificing our own flourishing or eudaimonia, leaving us haunted and scarred. Hursthouse is, of course, aware of

this – she herself draws attention to cases where the right action is to act with regret, after inner struggle, and so on. Van Zyl draws attention to the following passage from Hursthouse:

The claim is not that possession of the virtues guarantees that one will flourish. The claim is that they are the only reliable bet — even though, it is agreed, I might be unlucky and, precisely because of my virtue, wind up dying or with my life marred or ruined (1999, p. 172; as cited by van Zyl, 2007, p. 57).

Hursthouse thus readily acknowledges that the virtues do not guarantee a good life; instead they only typically or reliably contribute to such a life. But if so, and as van Zyl stresses, this allows us to accept that some right, virtuous actions may detract from an agent's own personal well-being, leaving her exhausted and sorrowful, while remaining right, excellent actions. Indeed, such actions may be all the more admirable, precisely insofar as they demand such strength and sacrifice.

### VIII

Virtue ethics, particularly in its eudaimonistic forms, would have us situate and understand the actions of an agent within the broader course and context of her life. This understanding is taken to be essential to properly assessing her actions, and determining what she ought to do. How did she come to face the circumstances she does? How will her actions influence the future course of her life? The revisionary account of rightness embraced by Hursthouse and Russell, and carefully explored by van Zyl, embodies this concern. Is the agent acting in circumstances a virtuous agent could find herself in, or has the agent, through her own activities, placed herself in a situation the virtuous would avoid? When the agent acts, will she be left doing something that will leave the rest of her life marred or ruined by sorrow, or is it an action that will leave her with peace of mind, the kind of action that she would want to perform?

I have attempted to show that this revisionary account of rightness requires significant refinement and fleshing-out; indeed, we might do well to instead consider alternative virtue ethical

positions. The revisionary account risks developing a concept of rightness entirely different from that at stake in other ethical theories; virtue ethicists would thus fail to engage with these others. Furthermore, the revisionary account assumes that if a virtuous agent could not find herself in certain circumstances, then no right, truly excellent action would be available. But we have considered a range of cases where the actions done in such circumstances seem both right, and more morally excellent than many characteristic actions of virtuous agents. Finally, and following work by van Zyl, the revisionary virtue ethical account of rightness risks being excessively and implausibly egoistic by focusing on the peace of mind and flourishing of the agent herself in assessing the impacts of her actions, and more generally risks failing to acknowledge that many of our most admirable, excellent actions may leave us sorrowful and haunted.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, other prominent virtue ethical approaches to right action have been developed, such as Christine Swanton's important target-centered theory (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Variations of the squash player example have appeared in several papers by different authors. Van Zyl has traced the original example back to Watson (1975, p. 210).

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of such cases in the context of supererogation, see Kawall (2009). Note that there can be significant value to ongoing acts of maintenance and caring – cleaning, cooking for one's loved ones and so on. Here we can focus on merely prudent or other less significant actions. Thanks to Kate Norlock for helpful discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it could be in part due to Henri's own great success in committing various petty crimes, his loyalty and ingenuity, that the gang has grown larger and more successful, such that the leaders now feel emboldened to attempt far more ambitious crimes.

<sup>5</sup> Svensson and Johansson (2018) argue that on the most plausible version of SVAR, and given a plausible understanding of the relevant conditionals, the problem in such instances is instead that *all* actions would be right. Very roughly: if no virtuous agent could be in a given set of circumstances, then anything follows.



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<sup>6</sup> Recall van Zyl's suggestion that the habitual liar's remedial actions express secondary virtues, but not honesty, where this is the central virtue at stake (2018, p. 107). Notice this does not apply to Henri. When saving the family he is acting just as a courageous, benevolent agent would, where these are the central virtues at stake.

<sup>7</sup> Many will require no virtue at all, though these are not relevant here.

<sup>8</sup> See Das (2017, pp. 103-4) for further worries concerning Russell's proposal.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that Das' critique applies most clearly to Russell's particular approach; one could sever the link between rightness and action guidance without neglecting the latter (as Russell seems to do).

<sup>10</sup> Van Zyl (2011; 2019, pp. 107-8) presents an alternative proposal for action guidance for proponents of SVAR, in part suggesting that we ought not to act as a vicious person would. The approach is promising, but would still leave unclear the role and value of the virtue ethical concept of 'right'.

<sup>11</sup> Strictly, Russell suggests only a *necessary* condition for central cases of moral excellence in this passage. But SVAR itself makes clear that being what a virtuous person would characteristically do would also constitute a sufficient condition for such excellence.

<sup>12</sup> Svensson and Johansson (2018, p. 497) suggest, on behalf of virtue ethicists, that a virtuous agent could face almost any set of circumstances, no matter how awful or reflective of vice, if we assume that she faces these circumstances due to actions performed prior to her becoming virtuous. It is a clever proposal, though not one that they themselves endorse. It raises difficult questions concerning whether agents could be virtuous moments after committing a heinous crime, and so on.

<sup>13</sup> Russell embraces Hursthouse's approach to these issues, drawing extensively on her work in his own discussion (2009, pp. 49-57); the concerns raised here should apply to both.

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<sup>14</sup> While there is a distinction between resolvable and irresolvable dilemmas (where in the latter case there is no rational basis for preferring one option to the other), this will not be relevant for our purposes. Hursthouse treats tragic dilemmas, whether or resolvable or not, in the same fashion.

<sup>15</sup> Van Zyl (2007) explores the possibility that Hursthouse's approach to tragic dilemmas is driven by the belief that certain actions – perhaps killing innocents for pleasure – are *always* prohibited. These actions would remain prohibited even when a virtuous agent must perform one of them when facing a tragic dilemma. But as van Zyl notes, it seems clear that what virtuous agents would do (particularly in terms of their motives and reasons) would never be the same as any vicious, prohibited action. As such there seems no need for Hursthouse not to allow for right action in tragic dilemmas.

<sup>16</sup> Van Zyl (2007, p. 58) raises similar questions.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Solomon (1988).

<sup>18</sup> It seems unlikely that we can so neatly distinguish between sorrow over one's own actions and the situation that led to them. Can we truly separate the battlefield doctor's sorrow and despair over the suffering he has caused while operating, or the limits to the help he could provide, from his sorrow and despair at what he has witnessed more generally?

<sup>19</sup> Similarly, imagine the doctor reacted differently to his actions, such that he would not be haunted by his actions. It would seem strange that this difference, in particular, could change the status of his actions to being right, and that his own well-being should play such a key role in determining whether his actions were right and excellent.

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