Virtues for the Imperfect*

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Abstract: We suggest a new neo-Aristotelian account of right action: An action A is right for an agent S in a situation C just in case it is possible for A in C to result from a good practical inference. A practical inference is good if people must have a disposition to make such practical inferences where a society is to flourish. One advantage of this account is that it applies to non-ideal agents. It thus blocks the right-but-not-virtuous objection to virtue ethics. Our account furthermore suggests a new way of thinking about the concept of a fully virtuous agent. Ideal agents, we argue, necessarily have certain unmanifested dispositions, and failure is a real possibility for them.

1 Introduction

A common challenge for virtue ethics says that it cannot offer a plausible account of when an action is right. Virtue ethicists have responded by offering accounts of right action in terms of ideal, i.e., fully virtuous agents. Rosalind Hursthouse, e.g., says: "An act is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e., acting in character) do in the circumstances" (Hursthouse, 1996, p. 22).

Critics have pointed out that many right actions do not fit this account. According to this right-but-not-virtuous objection (Johnson, 2003; Harman,

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2001; Williams, 1995), the right action for an ordinary person is often one that a fully virtuous person wouldn't perform in the circumstances. It may be right for Ulysses to have himself tied to the mast, but a fully virtuous person wouldn't do that, since such a person wouldn't yield to temptation. Similarly, it is right for you to break the lesser of two conflicting rash promises. But a completely virtuous agent would have taken care not to give conflicting promises in the first place.

One way to understand this criticism is that virtue ethics is an ideal theory. Virtue ethics tells us how we should act when the difference between us and a fully virtues agent can be neglected for the purposes of deontic considerations. But it cannot tell us how we should act when what we should do depends crucially on us being imperfect. If that is correct, virtue ethics is of very limited relevance for real agents.

In this paper, we offer a neo-Aristotelian account of right action that applies to non-ideal agents. The account offers a reply to the right-but-not-virtuous objection that suggests that we should rethink the idea of flourishing. In particular, we will argue that a flourishing agent has dispositions that she never manifests. The flourishing and, hence, fully virtuous agent has dispositions to act in certain ways in situations in which she is no longer fully virtuous. This allows us to hold on to the idea that the right action in circumstances *C* is one a fully virtuous person would perform in *C*, keeping in mind that the fully virtuous person may not be fully virtuous in *C*.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 explains the right-but-not-virtuous objection. Section 3 briefly discusses extant responses. Section 4 argues that the objection equivocates on the phrase "what a fully virtuous agent would do." Section 5 argues that the objection presupposes a wrong understanding of the term "fully virtuous agent." Fully virtuous agents have dispositions to improve, to avoid temptations, etc., even though, in a fully virtuous agent, these dispositions don't manifest themselves in actions. Section 6 shows that our account of right action falls out of a general neo-Aristotelian view. Sections 7 and 8 consider objections, and Section 9 concludes.

2 The Right-But-Not-Virtuous Argument

Robert Johnson (2003) has presented a particularly clear version of the right-but-not-virtuous objection. Johnson holds that virtue ethicists do (and should) accept the following account of right action:[1]

V An action *A* is right for *S* in circumstances *C* if and only if a fully virtuous agent would characteristically *A* in *C*.[2]

Unfortunately, it seems that one can systematically produce counterexamples to *V*. Whenever circumstances, *C*, are such that being in these circumstances entails that one isn't fully virtuous but there is a right action, *A*, we seem to have a counterexample to *V*. In such cases, it is impossible that a fully virtuous agent do *A* in *C*.

Johnson discusses cases of self-improvement and cases of avoiding temptations. An example of the latter kind would be Ulysses, or a shopper with a sweet tooth who avoids the ice-cream aisle. The agent seems to do what is right in avoiding or defusing the temptation. A fully virtuous agent, however, wouldn't need to do that and, hence, cannot serve as a model for this action.

Johnson's example of self-improvement is a habitual liar, who aims to improve herself by writing down her lies in order to incentivize herself to stop lying (2003, pp. 816–818). A fully virtuous agent cannot be in a situation in which she could improve herself. So, it seems that Claim *V* implies that the action of writing down one's lies isn't right for a habitual liar. But intuitively the liar's action seems right. The agent has sufficient reason to do it, and the action even seems (to some extent) admirable and praiseworthy. Thus, Claim *V* seems hopelessly inadequate for actions whose rightness depends on the agent being less than fully virtuous.

[1] Johnson's targets are primarily Hursthouse, McDowell, and—with minor adjustments—also Swanton and Slote.

[2] Claim *V* is formulated in terms of what the fully virtuous agent would *characteristically* do in order to allow for the fact that even a completely virtuous person might do the wrong thing if, due to special circumstances, her actions don't flow from her virtues.

We can summarize the right-but-not-virtuous objection in the following argument:

Right-But-Not-Virtuous Argument

P1 There are some actions which a fully virtuous agent would not perform under any circumstances, but which are right, in some circumstances, for an agent who is not fully virtuous.

P2 If Claim V is true and some action is right for an agent, then a fully virtuous agent would perform this action under some circumstances.

C So, Claim V is false.[3]

Premise P1 is supported by the examples cited above. Premise P2 seems plausible because, at least under one reading, Claim V says that an action is right in C just in case a fully virtuous agent in C would perform the action.

There are, in principle, two ways to respond to the Right-But-Not-Virtuous Argument as a virtue ethicist. First, virtue ethicists may accept the argument and reject Claim V. In that case, they owe the opponent a new account of right action. Second, virtue ethicists can reject the argument as unsound. We will distinguish two interpretations of Claim V in Section 4; and we will argue that the argument is unsound on the interpretation under which Claim V is true.

Before turning to our view, however, a brief discussion of some recent responses to the right-but-not-virtuous objection is in order.

3 Recent Responses to the Right-But-Not-Virtuous Objection

Virtue ethicists have responded in various ways to the right-but-not-virtuous objection (Smith, 2017; Zagzebski, 2017; Swanton, 2015, 2001; Annas, 2014,

[3]We are here formulating the argument as attacking the left-to-right reading of V. The right-to-left direction is also under attack. A fully virtuous person might do things in our situation that would be wrong for us—such as the famous irascible squash player, who shouldn't shake hands with his opponent because he couldn't control his anger (Watson, 2003).

2004; van Zyl, 2013, 2011; McAleer, 2010; Russell, 2009, 2008; Tiberius, 2006). Unfortunately, there isn't any widespread agreement on what the best response is.[4] For reasons of space, we limit the discussion to a handful of responses that we find interesting and promising.[5] We will argue that, although these responses are interesting, none of them is entirely satisfactory.

Interestingly, none of the extant responses focuses on those features one would expect to be central to a neo-Aristotelian perspective, viz. flourishing and rationality (Foot, 2001; Müller, 2004; Hursthouse, 1999). We want to investigate whether a neo-Aristotelian account of right action that takes the fully flourishing agent as the ultimate standard of right action can be developed. None of the accounts discussed in this section does that.

Response 1: Right Action is Morally Excellent Action

The perhaps most interesting response to the right-but-not-virtuous objection points out that Hursthouse (1999) distinguishes between action assessment and action guidance (van Zyl, 2013, 2011; Russell, 2009, 2008). Her Claim *V* should be read as an account of actions that deserve a "tick of approval" (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 50) not as an account of what one ought to do. As Hursthouse points out, there are actions that one ought to perform but that don't deserve a tick of approval, e.g., in cases of tragic dilemmas. Now, according to this response, only actions that a fully virtuous person would perform in the circumstances deserve a tick of approval. The examples Johnson gives are examples of actions that the agent should perform but the assessment of which must be that they don't deserve a tick of approval; they are not right actions. Hence, P1 is false.

[4]Some neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists think that Anscombe's criticism of the "moral ought" implies that virtue ethics is better off without an account of right action (Hacker-Wright, 2010). We disagree, and we take ourselves to be spelling out one aspect of Anscombe's (1958, p. 6) following remark (made on behalf of Aristotle): "[T]hat is 'illicit' which, whether it is a thought or a consented-to passion or an action or an omission in thought or action, is something contrary to one of the virtues the lack of which shows a man to be bad *qua* man."

[5]Johnson has discussed some other responses in his "Virtue and Right Revisited" on the website *PEA Soup* (`http://peasoup.typepad.com/peasoup/2015/04/virtue-and-right-revisted-by-featured-philosopher-robert-n-johnson.html`, accessed on June 4th, 2017). We agree with a lot of his criticism of these responses.

REPLY: As van Zyl (2011) points out, this response leaves open the question whether virtue ethics can offer an account of action guidance that doesn't fall prey to the right-but-not-virtuous objection. And van Zyl wants to supplement Claim *V* with an account of action guidance that relies on Hursthouse's "v-rules" (van Zyl, 2011). Before we turn to v-rules, however, we want to say three things about this response.

First, in order to deny P1, advocates of this response must understand "right action" in a very restrictive sense. As Russell (2008, p. 309) puts it, only actions that are "central cases of morally excellent action" count as right actions, according to this response. That is not the notion of right action that philosophers like Johnson have in mind. Their complaint is that virtue ethics cannot offer an account of actions that one has sufficient, and sometimes conclusive, reason to perform and that are, perhaps with qualifications, praiseworthy but that no fully virtuous agent would perform. Hence, offering an account of "central cases of moral excellence" is not effective against the objection. As Zagzebski (2017, p. 198) puts it, to "identify a right act with a virtuous act" is merely a "duplication of terminology."

Second, the response gets many examples intuitively wrong. It may be plausible in Hursthouse's tragic dilemmas that there is no right action for the agent. Johnson's problem, however, is not specific to dilemmas. His self-improving agents (such as the liar) do things that we should assess as praiseworthy (Swanton, 2015, p. 121), although the actions are not "central cases of moral excellence." Russell and van Zyl are aware of this problem and aim to defuse it by acknowledging that "remedial actions" (Russell, 2008, pp. 308 seqq.) or "self-improving actions" (van Zyl, 2011, pp. 89-90) can be praiseworthy and excellent. However, these acknowledgments stay afterthoughts that don't fall out of their accounts in any natural way.

Third, while we acknowledge that the distinction between action assessment and action guidance is often useful, we doubt that it is helpful here. As will become clear below, we think that what should guide an agent in her practical deliberation are the agent's reasons; and those reasons only very rarely include

principles that are advocated by ethicists (Markovits, 2010). We should not think of ethical theories as offering premises of practical inferences but as offering claims *about* practical inferences (Silverstein, 2017).[6] These are controversial claims, but what matters for current purposes is just that even if we accept that ethical theories are under no requirement to offer any action guidance, that doesn't make the right-but-not-virtuous objection go away. After all, we still want an ethical theory that explains why the actions in Johnson's examples are admirable and done for good reasons. Therefore, distinguishing action assessment and action guidance cannot be the central ingredient in a response to the objection.

In light of the terminological plurality that this response has created, we should say that what we mean by "right action" are actions that the agent can reasonably be expected to perform and for which the agent has sufficient reason. Thus, our notion of right action should be understood in terms of reasons; it is directly tied neither to a "tick of approval" nor to guidance. We do not think of right actions as actions that we ought to do; it is closer to the mark to say that right actions are actions that we may perform.

Response 2: Fully Vicious Agents

A related proposal suggest that we focus on vicious agents instead of virtuous agents. The idea is that an action *A* is wrong for *S* in *C* iff a fully vicious agent would characteristically *A* in *C* (McAleer, 2010, pp. 4-5). And we could then explain right action as an action that is not wrong. Liezl van Zyl (2011, p. 87) advocates a similar idea in order to provide action guidance: "*S* ought not do what a wicked (dishonest, uncharitable, mean, etc.) agent would characteristically do in the circumstances." This proposal elegantly circumvents the problem that the fully virtuous agent cannot be in the relevant circumstances.

[6]Considering what the ideal agent would do can often be of help in the practical deliberations of imperfect agents, but to acknowledge that is not to say that an ethical theory must offer action guidance.

REPLY: The problem with this proposal is that there is no such thing as being fully vicious or wicked. For the moral virtues, this is impossible because they are the middle between two extremes. You cannot, e.g., be a coward *and* be rash regarding the same thing at the same time. For the intellectual virtues, complete vice would be a complete lack. But an agent who lacks even minimal prudence is inconceivable; we would stop to conceive of her behavior as intentional doings.

We cannot save the proposal by deleting "fully" or by talking about agents that are wicked in some respect. Someone who is vicious or wicked in some respect may nevertheless act in character while doing the right thing in many circumstances.

Response 3: Vice Rules, Virtue Rules

According to a third proposal, which may be combined with the first one, virtue ethics can offer rules of conduct (action guidance) that agents like those in Johnson's examples should follow. Every virtue gives rise to an injunction and every vice gives rise to a prohibition. Hursthouse calls such rules "v-rules." Examples are: "Do what is courageous," "Do what is honest," etc. and "Don't do what is cowardly," "Don't do what is cruel," etc. The idea is that we do not need a fully vicious or a fully virtuous model. We just need someone who exemplifies the specific vice or virtue pertinent to the circumstances or, alternatively, an account of particular virtues and vices that can be applied in the relevant circumstances.

REPLY: This proposal has at least two problems. First, while v-rules may offer guidance to people who wonder what to do, an appeal to v-rules is problematically circular in a philosophical account of the reasonableness and praiseworthiness of actions of imperfect agents. In order to use virtue and vice terms with reference to situations in which no fully virtuous person can be, we need an account of what is virtuous and vicious in such circumstances. According to Aristotle (EN 1106b36–1107a2), what is virtuous in a given situation is what a practically wise person would choose in that situation. The problem that the

right-but-not-virtuous objection is pointing out is that we cannot use this account to determine what is virtuous in a situation in which the practically wise person cannot find herself. And if we cannot give an account of what counts as, say, brave or benevolent in such situations, then we cannot give an account of what counts as acting cowardly or cruelly in such situations. Thus, the appeal to the v-rules strikes us as a *petitio principii*.

Second, it is unclear how v-rules would avoid the above problems. A less than fully virtuous agent cannot follow all the v-rules. Hence, we must single out particular v-rules as relevant in particular cases. The virtue pertinent to Ulysses' circumstance, e.g., is temperance. But it doesn't seem to matter whether we consider the fully virtuous agent or an agent who "only" is fully temperate: Neither of them can be in Ulysses' situation. Considering the excessive person, to then do the opposite, does not help either. The stipulation was that Ulysses is unable to act temperately.

Perhaps the idea is this: The virtue pertinent to Ulysses' circumstance is not temperance but prudence because the circumstance is best described as "facing the sirens and being unable to resist." The action of having himself tied up is right for Ulysses because it would be imprudent not to do so. For this proposal to work, we need accounts of which virtues are pertinent in a given situation and what these virtues amount to in those situations (in which the fully virtuous agent cannot be). As far as we can see, no one has provided such accounts. In any event, it seems to us that such an account, if offered, would collapse Response 3 into another proposal, to which we now turn: target-centered virtue ethics.

Response 4: Going Target-Centered

According to target-centered virtue ethics, an action A manifests virtue V in C iff doing A in C hits the target of V. To act rightly is to act virtuously overall, which requires that one hits the target of the virtue that is relevant in the circumstances. A fully virtuous agent facing the sirens, e.g., acts well because they hit the target of the virtue of temperance. But Ulysses, being unable to resist, also acts well

because his target is that of the virtue of prudence. This response by Swanton (2015; 2001) avoids Johnson's problem by letting the fully virtuous agent drop out of the account in favor of virtue-specific targets. Different virtues and, hence, different targets are relevant for imperfect versus perfect agents; among these targets can be self-improvement (Swanton, 2015, pp. 121-122).

REPLY: As an answer to Johnson's challenge, this proposal suffers from two problems. First, it requires an account of how to combine assessments in terms of individual virtues into assessments of overall virtuousness. Second, it requires an account of which virtues are relevant in what circumstances. Swanton offers neither, and it is far from obvious what such accounts would look like.

More important for us, however, is that Swanton's proposal radically diverges from the neo-Aristotelian framework. Swanton (2003, p. 1) is explicit on this. She replaces a species-specific function with virtue-specific targets. Now, the reader might regard this as a loss or not, but we can hardly count something as a reply to an objection that comes at the cost of replacing the whole theory.[7]

4 The Right-But-Not-Virtuous Argument Equivocates

Let us return to Johnson's argument. The Right-But-Not-Virtuous Argument, we claim, is unsound because its reading of V equivocates on "what a fully virtuous agent would do." Neglecting complications regarding virtuous agents acting in and out of character, we could reformulate V as the following nested conditional:

V' An action A is right for S in circumstances C if and only if (if a fully virtuous agent were in C, then she would do A).

[7] To realize how radical the break is, consider that we are now faced with questions like the following: Are there radically different kinds of good lives for different human agents?, or: What provides the unity of the targets across each such life? Some of these problems exist in a metaphysical as well as an epistemic variant. For instance, it seems unclear what *determines* Ulysses' target in any concrete situation, but also how he himself would *know* his specific targets. Hursthouse (1999, p. 53) notices the latter problem, when she asks how one is to know which v-rule wins out in cases of conflict. But her general remarks about the non-codifiability of moral reasoning are insufficient to address it, as are Swanton's remarks on indeterminacy (Swanton, 2003, Ch. 13).

One way to interpret V' is as follows:

V^* An action A is right for S in circumstances C if and only if (if an agent is actually fully virtuous, then (if she were in C, where she may not be fully virtuous in C, then she would do A)).

To see that this is an interpretation of V and to understand the alternative, let's distinguish what we will call a *de dicto* and a *de re* reading of the subjunctive conditional "If x were fully virtuous, then x would do A in C."

de dicto In some situations[8] that are closest to how things actually are and in which x is fully virtuous (Fx) and x is in C, x does A.
(in symbols: $Fx\&Cx \mathrel{\Box\!\!\rightarrow} Ax$)

de re If x is fully virtuous (Fx), then, in some situations that are closest to how things actually are and in which x is in C, x does A.
(in symbols: $Fx \rightarrow (Cx \mathrel{\Box\!\!\rightarrow} Ax)$)

Claim V^* is the *de re* interpretation of V; i.e., the subjunctive conditional on the right-hand side of V' is interpreted *de re*. The *de dicto* interpretation of V says that an action is right just in case in the closest possible situation of kind C in which there is a fully virtuous agent, this agent does A.[9] The *de dicto* interpretation of V implies that if it is impossible that a fully virtuous agent is in C, then there is no right action for anyone in C—just as the right-but-not-virtuous objection claims. The *de re* interpretation of V has no such implication.

With the *de re / de dicto* distinction in hand, let us return to the Right-But-Not-Virtuous Argument. Its first premise says that there are some actions which a

[8] We talk about situations and not possible worlds because we don't want to assume that situations are maximal. We talk about some and not all situations because we want to leave room for the view that fully virtuous agents may do different things in different counterfactual situations that are tied in closeness, and that any of these actions is right. We are reluctant to capture this with "might" because it seems to us that "might" is naturally understood as not requiring maximal closeness.

[9] Recently, Bob Johnson and Rusty Jones have explicitly endorsed such a *de dicto* reading in their talk "What Good's a Good Example? A New Objection to Counterfactual Exemplar-Based Virtue Theories" at the 2017 *Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress* (see https://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/center/rome/papers/Bob Johnson_Rusty Jones_What%20Good%27s%20a%20Good%20Example_AnewobjectiontoC ounterfactual _exemplar-based_virtue.pdf). They don't consider the *de re* alternative, which would undermine their criticism of virtue ethics.

fully virtuous agent would not perform under any circumstances, but which are right for an agent who is not fully virtuous. P1 is clearly true if we interpret it *de dicto*, as saying: Some actions are right for some agent in some circumstances, but there are no circumstances (actual or counterfactual) in which an agent who is fully virtuous in those circumstances performs the action.

The second premise, P2, says that if Claim V is true and if some action is right for an agent, then a fully virtuous agent would perform this action under some circumstances. We hold that P2 is true if we interpret it *de re*, i.e., as saying: If V^* holds and an action is right for an agent in C, then an actually virtuous agent S' would perform the action in C, where this doesn't imply that S' is fully virtuous in C.

If we interpret the two premises in these ways respectively, however, we equivocate on "action that a fully virtuous agent would perform." We use the phrase in its *de dicto* sense in P1, but we use it in its *de re* sense in P2. So, under this reading, the Right-But-Not-Virtuous Argument is invalid.

In order to fix the equivocation, the advocate of the right-but-not-virtuous objection would have to do one of two things. One option is to interpret P1 as saying that there are right actions that a fully virtuous person would not perform, even if she lost some of her virtuousness. That is just a flat-out denial of V^*, and that denial cannot be motivated by the examples discussed above. The view we will defend below implies V^*; hence, we postpone further discussion of this option. The second option is to interpret P2 *de dicto*, i.e., as saying that if V^* is true and an action is right for an agent in C, then there is a situation of kind C in which a fully virtuous agent performs the action. A glance at V^* ensures us, however, that the latter option is a non-starter: V^* doesn't imply that every circumstance in which there is a right action for an agent is one in which fully virtuous agents can find themselves. Hence, the second option renders the Right-But-Not-Virtuous Argument unsound because it renders P2 false.

The upshot of the discussion so far is that if we read V as V^*, we neutralize the right-but-not-virtuous objection. However, that defense of virtue ethics works only if V^* is independently plausible. Hence, we must make it plausible

that a fully virtuous agent has not only a disposition[10] to do the right thing in circumstances in which she might find herself as a fully virtuous agent, but that she also has dispositions to do the right thing in circumstances in which she cannot find herself while still being fully virtuous. Indeed, we will argue that if an agent is fully virtuous, this does not only imply that she would perform certain actions under certain circumstances in which she can retain her virtuousness. It also implies that the agent has a disposition to perform certain actions, in certain circumstances, should she lose some of her virtuousness. In particular, we hold that a completely virtuous agent has a disposition to improve herself, to choose the lesser of the evils available to her, to avoid temptations, etc. We claim that having such dispositions is a necessary part of flourishing.

This formulation allows us to pinpoint our disagreement with Johnson. He writes:

> [V]irtues are excellences on [the Aristotelian view], in the sense that seeing well is the excellence of the eyes and cutting well is the excellence of the knife. That is, they are traits that constitute well-functioning in a human being. But self-improvement, self-control, advice seeking, and so on, do not themselves constitute well-functioning in a human being. (Johnson, 2003, p. 833)

We agree with the first two sentences of this quote, but we will argue that the last sentence is false when it is understood as a claim about dispositions to improve oneself, to control oneself, etc.

5 Unreal Aspects of Flourishing

Unmanifested dispositions for self-improvement, self-control, and advice seeking are constitutive of human flourishing. If someone lacks dispositions for self-improvement, self-control or advice-seeking, she is not functioning well as

[10] We will assume a conditional analysis of dispositions. The reader may add qualifiers about masks and finks to our conditionals where she thinks that this is necessary. None of this affects the point we want to make. If need be, we would translate everything (including V and V^*) into disposition talk, as this is suggested by the Aristotelian claim that a virtue is a disposition (*hexis*).

a human being. Nor could she serve as an ideal that serves as a standard for human actions. The current section defends this view. The next section situates it within a larger Aristotelian framework.

Let's begin with a worry. It can seem fanciful and *ad hoc* to posit dispositions that are necessary for flourishing but that are never manifested by flourishing agents. An opponent might ask: If one can live an entire life exactly like a flourishing agent without having a certain disposition, then why should we think that this disposition is necessary for flourishing? After all, it doesn't play any practical role in the life of a flourishing agent.

This worry is misguided because we are all committed to the existence of such dispositions when it comes to bodily aspects of flourishing. For instance, it is a necessary condition for being a fully flourishing human being that you have a well-functioning immune system. A fully flourishing human being has, e.g., a disposition to synthesize antibodies, were she to contract an infectious disease. That disposition, however, is never manifested by a fully flourishing human being. After all, if you contract an infectious disease, you are *eo ipso* no longer fully flourishing. So anyone who accepts that having a functioning immune system is necessary for flourishing and that flourishing and suffering from a disease are incompatible must admit that there are dispositions that are essential to flourishing but are never manifested by fully flourishing subjects.

We can imagine a human being whose immune system lacks the disposition to react adequately to the causes of a certain disease but who is lucky enough to never contract that disease. This, however, does not lead one to object: If somebody can live an entire life exactly like a flourishing agent without having the disposition to react with the production of antibodies to infectious diseases, then why should we think that this disposition is necessary for flourishing? The disposition to have healthy immune reactions clearly is a necessary part of being a flourishing human being, so the objection must be misguided.

What is true of the aspect of human flourishing that pertains to the immune system is also true, we hold, of the aspect of human flourishing that pertains to the will. The will of a flourishing and hence fully virtuous agent is disposed to

issue in certain intentions should the agent lose some of her virtuousness. This analogy will not be surprising to anyone who accepts Foot's (2001) view that ethical evaluations are evaluations of the will that work much like evaluations of other capacities and organs, such as memory, eyesight, or the immune system.[11] We will return to this below.

We have seen that there are dispositions which are necessary for flourishing but which are never manifested by flourishing agents. We may still wonder whether the dispositions discussed by Johnson, Williams and others are of this kind. Must a fully virtuous agent really have the disposition to write down her lies, given appropriate circumstances, e.g., if she finds that she has lost her honesty? Must a fully virtuous agent have a disposition to avoid the ice-cream aisle if she finds that she has lost some of her temperance? There are at least three reasons to think that the answer is positive.

First, a fully virtuous person has a character that cannot be improved. And having dispositions to act in certain ways should one lose one's virtuousness is a desirable feature. In particular, it is desirable to have dispositions that help one to restore one's virtues should one lose them. Hence, if we added these dispositions to the character traits of someone who already possessed all the other virtues, we would thereby improve her character. Therefore, possessing the dispositions in question is a necessary condition for being fully virtuous.

Second, even a fully virtuous agent must be able to fail. An agent who is never subject to temptation, motivational conflicts, deep fear etc. could hardly be admired for overcoming these. Take the following example: In prison, Socrates is being tempted by his friends to flee his execution. He overcomes this temptation and can, at least in this situation, be regarded as a fully virtuous agent. Could we say this about him—could we call him "courageous"—if there had not been a real temptation for him to flee? (It may help to notice here that it is important for Catholics that even Jesus could be tempted.) And wouldn't it diminish his achievement if failure had been impossible for him? It seems

[11] A defense of Foot's version of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is beyond the scope of this paper. We are using this view as the version of virtue ethics we want to defend against the right-but-not-virtuous objection.

that it would. In other words, it seems plausible that the conception of the fully virtuous agent as an agent for whom it is impossible to fail is incoherent: Those who cannot fail do not show virtue in not failing. But if failure is a real (but unrealized) possibility for fully virtuous agents, then it is implausible that they have no dispositions to cope in the best possible way with such failures.

Third, even if you don't agree with the last point, it is clear that Socrates could not serve as a model for ordinary human beings, if failure had been impossible for him. An agent who cannot fail cannot serve as a model for those who face a serious risk of failure. To take such an agent as your anchor would resemble the attempt to gather strength from watching a tightrope walker with a security harness, when you afterwards have to walk the rope without one. Only an agent who can (but won't) fall short of the ideal can serve as a model for those who are in serious danger of falling short of the ideal.

If the fully virtuous agent must be able to fall short of virtue, then it is implausible that she does not have contingency plans or dispositions for what to do in this case. After all, the fully virtuous agent is an ideal regarding our capacity to choose rationally. If the possibility of failure must be real for such an agent, the agent wouldn't be much of an ideal if she didn't have an ideal way to respond to this possibility. The possibility of failing to be fully virtuous is precisely the kind of danger that needs to be taken into account in fully rational choices. The idea that the ideal of full virtue has "blind spots" here seems misguided in the way in which the following examples seem misguided: The ideal football team doesn't have a goalie because it is impossible to break through its defense. The ideal car doesn't have a spare tire because it never has a flat. The ideal spam filter cannot be an adaptive system because it needs no training. Just as the ideal of health includes a "self-help mechanism" that kicks in if the organism falls away from the ideal, so the ideal of virtue should include a "self-help mechanism" that kicks in if an agent falls away from the ideal. Mechanisms for damage repair, improvement and emergencies seem to be part of many things that have a function—even or particularly of their ideal version.

Moral ideals in religions, philosophical traditions, world literature, and movies recognize the second and third point: Moral heroes and saints must face a genuine danger of failure, on pain of their achievements being unimpressive as well as being useless as a guide. If we think of complete virtuousness as a state in which there is no such danger, then it can neither be a reasonable standard of assessment nor action-guiding.

Examples from the history of philosophy are not far to seek. When imprisoned, Boethius wrote the *Consolations of Philosophy*. One of his motivations was to regain a virtue that he had lost, namely hope. We can assume that Boethius was not fully virtuous before imprisonment. His disposition to act in such a way as to regain hope if lost, however, doesn't seem to qualify as a pre-existing shortcoming of his character. Rather, that disposition seems to be something admirable and praiseworthy that Boethius shared with fully virtuous agents.

The right-but-not-virtuous objection hence rests on a wrong conception of the ideal agent. Ideal agents have dispositions to improve, to avoid temptations, to seek advise, or to alleviate the consequences of previous bad choices.

6 Right Action from Good Practical Inference

In the previous section, we have argued that V^* is plausible because a fully virtuous agent has dispositions to cope with situations in which she is not fully virtuous. In this section, we want to fill in some of the details of an account that underwrites V^*. One can accept V^* without accepting the account we present in this section. We want to show, however, that V^* falls out of a neo-Aristotelian ethical outlook in a natural and plausible way. Unlike, e.g., target-centered versions of virtue ethics (Smith, 2017; Swanton, 2015), the view presented here retains a strong link between flourishing and virtue, and we take this to be an advantage. In the final analysis, we will not explain right action in terms of virtue but in terms of human flourishing. In fact, we will assume that the idea

of a virtue itself must be explained in terms of human flourishing, and we will sketch a version of such an explanation, drawing heavily on Foot (2001).[12]

According to Aristotle, virtues are dispositions to choose well (EN 1106b36). Choice is the result of practical reasoning (EN 1113a4). Hence, we can think of virtues, in the first instance, as dispositions to reason practically in certain ways (and not others), namely in ways that result in good choices. Of course, virtues also require dispositions to feel, desire, and (perhaps) perceive certain things in certain ways. But since we are here concerned with criteria for right action, we will ignore these additional aspects and think of virtues as dispositions to engage in good practical thought in a given domain (see Foot, 2001; Müller, 2004; Setiya, 2007). Courage is, in the first instance, a disposition to engage in good practical reasoning (issuing in good choice and action) regarding dangerous situations. Temperance is, in the first instance, a disposition to engage in good practical reasoning regarding pleasurable things. Etc.[13]

As already intimated, we think of right actions as actions that the agent can reasonably be expected to perform and for which the agent has sufficient reason. These are actions that the agent can do for good (all out) reasons in her circumstances, where these circumstances include the agent's attitudes and some of her dispositions. These may make some expectations unreasonable, e.g., the expectation that the agent does what the fully virtuous agent would do. What makes the action right are the reasons for which the action is done if it is done for good (all out) reasons (Markovits, 2010). Such "right-makers" or good reasons for actions are mundane facts like: *She needs my help*, or *He did a lot for me when I was in need*. Hence, the questions "Which actions are right for *S* in *C*?" and "Why are these actions right for *S* in *C*?" reduce to the following questions:

[12]In key aspects, the view presented here is close to those of Phillipa Foot, John McDowell, Michael Thompson, Anselm Müller, and, to a lesser degree, to those of Aquinas and Aristotle. If you find that such an account shouldn't be labeled "virtue ethics" because its central concept is 'flourishing' rather than 'virtue', we have no objection to dropping this label.

[13]We are ignoring some complex issues here, such as actions done for no particular reasons, cases in which acting well consists primarily in not doing something, and cases in which right actions must issue from quasi-automatic responses in order to get things done in time. See Setiya (2014); Markovits (2012); Müller (2004) for discussion of these.

"For which actions does *S* have good (all out) reasons in *C*?" and "Why are those reasons good reasons for those actions?" respectively.

Now, good (all out) reasons for an action are considerations that can serve as premises in good practical inferences that issue in the action (Way, 2017; Silverstein, 2017, 2016; Asarnow, 2017; Setiya, 2014). This links virtues, i.e. dispositions to reason practically in certain ways, to right action. For, putting things together yields the following claim: An action is right for *S* in *C* if and only if it can result from a good practical inference of *S* in *C*. We can unpack this by adding that an action can result from a practical inference of *S* in *C* just in case *S* has the appropriate attitudes towards the premises in *C*, i.e., if *S* holds the relevant beliefs, etc., and none of her attitudes is a defeater for the inference. Moreover, a practical inference is good in *C* just in case the disposition to make that inference, should the agent find herself in *C*, is a virtue or part of a virtue. And the disposition to reason practically in this way is a virtue or part of a virtue just in case, necessarily, a fully virtuous person has that disposition.

Before we turn to the link between good practical inference and human flourishing, seven clarifications are in order. First, our claim is that *S* acts well in *C* if *S* does what the fully virtuous agent would do in *C for those reasons for which* the fully virtuous agent would do this in *C*. That is not to be confused with the claim that *S* acts well in *C* if *S* does what the fully virtuous agent would do in *C for the reason that* the fully virtuous agent would do this in *C*. Our claim says: Do A, as the fully virtuous agent would, and do it *for those reasons*, $R_1 ... R_n$, for which the fully virtuous agent would do A. The competing claim says: Do A, and do it *because* the fully virtuous agent would do A. This competing claim is false, and it leads to a variety of problems.[14]

[14]Claims such as "Do A because the fully virtuous agent would do A" or "Do A because A will generate the best overall consequences" usually give the wrong reason for doing A. This problem comes up in various forms and has hence been discussed under various headings in metaethics, including: the charge that certain ethical theories are "self-effacing" (Stocker, 1976; Parfit, 1984, pp. 23-24; Pettigrove, 2010), the "wrong reason objection" against "practice views" (Scanlon, 1990; [omitted for blind review]), and Williams' famous "one thought too many" (Williams, 1981, pp. 17-18).

Second, let us alleviate the worry that our account doesn't leave room for right actions that are done for bad reasons.[15] Don't we say that right actions must be the result of good practical inferences and, hence, must always be done for good reasons? No, we do not. There are actions that could be the result of a good practical inference but which are sometimes done as the result of bad practical inferences. Those actions still count as right actions on our view. An action counts as right if it could be done for good reasons, even though in the case in question it is done for bad reasons.[16]

Third, a defense of the general account just sketched is beyond the scope of this paper. We put the account in place as the background from which we reply to the right-but-not-virtuous objection.

Fourth, we make no distinction between morally right actions and right actions *tout court*. If you want, you can think about morally right actions as those right actions which concern other people, but we don't think that this distinction tracks anything of deep ethical relevance.

Fifth, the account just outlined is not an account of how we know which actions are right. Epistemic relations don't neccessarily track the metaphysical relations of what makes an action right, and we are interested in metaphysical relations here.

Sixth, the question what practical inferences are good is not identical to the question what makes something a right action. What makes an action right are the reasons for which it is done when it is done for good reasons. What makes a practical inference good is what determines which considerations are good reasons to perform an action.

Finally, since we explain right action through good practical inference, some general remarks about good practical inference are in order. A practical inference is naturally expressed in utterances such as: "She needs my help, and I can help without much trouble. So, I'll help her," where the last part is the expression

[15] Brady (2004) raised this worry with respect to agent-centered virtue ethics.

[16] What we say here is structurally identical to what Hanser (2005) says about the distinction between performing a permissible act and acting permissibly.

of an intention-in-action or an intention for the future that will become an intention-in-action when its time comes. The reasoner must have an attitude towards the contents that are the premises of a practical inference. We stay non-committal about the question whether practical inference must always have a conative premise. As a nominal definition, a practical inference is good in circumstance *C* iff, in *C*, the premises are good reasons to perform the action in which the inference (normally) issues (Way, 2017; Setiya, 2014). Practical inferences are highly non-monotonic; adding premises can turn a good practical inference into a bad one. In order to give a substantive explanation of when a practical inference is good, we must draw on the idea of flourishing.

With these clarifications out of the way, we can move on to the link between good practical inference and human flourishing. Flourishing has two roles in determining what we should do (see Watson, 1990; Hacker-Wright, 2009; Müller, 2004; Foot, 2001). First, human flourishing sets a standard for what counts as non-defective when it comes to the human ability to reason practically. A non-defective ability to reason practically is the kind of ability for practical inference that flourishing humans have. Dispositions to infer practically don't differ, in this respect, from abilities like sight and memory. Non-defective human eyesight is the kind of eyesight flourishing humans have. Non-defective human memory is the kind of memory flourishing humans have. Second, flourishing is a homeostatic state in that the features, abilities and dispositions that are constitutive of flourishing usually contribute to flourishing. Good eyesight allows us to get around safely and to look for things we need to flourish. Good memory allows us to plan our lives in such a way that we can flourish. Here again, dispositions to make certain practical inferences are not special. This suggests that a practical inference is good, in humans, just in case a disposition to make the inference is constitutive and productive of human flourishing. If a disposition to make a practical inference under certain circumstances is constitutive and productive of human flourishing, we say that the disposition is part of a virtue.

Four immediate clarifications are again in order. (a) In social animals what matters for the evaluation of features, dispositions and abilities as defective or non-defective will often be the flourishing of the group, not the flourishing of the individual. After all, a bee that cannot dance is defective even if her inability to dance doesn't prevent her from finding food or the like (Foot, 2001; Geach, 1977). We should hence think of virtues as dispositions necessarily possessed by flourishing individuals in a flourishing society.[17] (b) On our view, human flourishing is rarely itself a reason to do anything. That an action will contribute to our flourishing is usually not, and should not be, one's reason for performing the action. Rather, it is constitutive and productive of flourishing to do certain things only for certain reasons. That is why those reasons are good reasons to perform the action. And that is why these reasons, when they obtain, make the action right. (c) We take the notion of human flourishing as a primitive notion that meets the two constraints mentioned above: It is a standard of defectiveness, and it is a homeostatic state. Different types of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics have different ways of explaining this idea; we stay non-committal. (d) What makes a practical inference good is that the disposition to make this kind of inference is constitutive and productive of flourishing. It need not be the case that flourishing agents actually make inferences of this kind.

We are now ready to give an account of right action that entails *V**. We call it *RAGPI*, for *Right Action from Good Practical Inference*:

RAGPI Action *A* is right for *S* in *C* if and only if it is possible for *A* in *C* to result from (i.e. be the conclusion of) a good practical inference from *S*'s attitudes. A practical inference is good if people must have a disposition to make that kind of inference where a society of human beings is to flourish.

[17] We are not going to talk here about the difficult issues concerning the balancing of the interests of different members of society, potential conflicts between individual flourishing and that of society, and the like. Such issues must wait for another occasion. We see no reason to think, however, that they are intractable; they are just difficult.

According to *RAGPI*, *A* is right for *S* in circumstances *C* if and only if *S* could reason well to doing *A* in *C*, and that is the case if members of a society where human beings flourish would be disposed to draw such an inference.

We now prove that *V** follows from *RAGPI* if we assume that in a fully flourishing society every individual would be fully virtuous (since virtue is part of human flourishing). To derive the left-to-right direction of *V**, suppose for conditional proof that an action *A* is right for *S* in *C*. By *RAGPI*, it follows that it is possible for *A* in *C* to result from a good practical inference from *S*'s attitudes. And, moreover, people in a flourishing society necessarily have a disposition to make this inference. A fully virtuous person has all the dispositions to reason practically that people in a flourishing society have. Hence, a fully virtuous person has a disposition to make a practical inference that results in *A* in *C* (where this includes that she has *S*'s attitudes). Hence, discharging our assumption, if action *A* is right for *S* in *C*, then a fully virtuous agent would do *A* if she were in *C*. That is the left-to-right direction of *V**. For the right-to-left direction, assume, for conditional proof, that if a fully virtuous agent were in *C*, she would do *A*. This must be because she must have a disposition to make an inference from the attitudes she has in *C* to doing *A*. The only dispositions that she must have are those she shares with the people in a flourishing society. Hence, those people must have a disposition to make an inference from the attitudes the agent has in *C* to doing *A*. By *RAGPI*, this means that the inference from those attitudes to doing *A* is a good practical inference. Hence, it is possible for *A* to result from a good practical inference from *S*'s attitudes if *S* is in *C*. Discharging our assumption, we conclude that if it is the case that if a fully virtuous agent were in *C*, she would do *A*, then doing *A* is right for *S* in *C*. That is the right-to-left direction of *V**. This concludes the proof that *V** follows from *RAGPI* together with the assumption that people in a flourishing society are fully virtuous.

In Section 4, we argued that fully flourishing agents must have dispositions to act in situations in which they aren't fully virtuous. Here, we have now supplemented this justification with a derivation of *V** from an account of right action in terms of good practical reasoning and human flourishing. Thus,

our response to the right-but-not-virtuous objection isn't only independently plausible; it also fits organically into a general neo-Aristotelian framework.

In this section, we have presented a neo-Aristotelian account of right action that explains right action in terms of good practical inference and explains good practical inference, in turn, in terms of human flourishing. Note that this is the metaphysical order of explanation. It could be coupled with an epistemological order of explanation on which knowledge about which actions are right or which practical inferences are good comes first. Our own view is that epistemological connections run in both directions: we must aim at a reflective equilibrium among our views about human flourishing, good practical inference, and right action.

7 Objection 1: Can Virtue Be Lost?

One might raise the following worry against our account of ideal agents: Traditionally, virtue is conceived as indestructible. Cicero, e.g., says that "virtue cannot be lost" (*Tusculan Disputations*, 2.14).

We doubt that this traditional view is correct. It strikes us as implausible that dire external circumstances, such as imprisonment or oppression, would not damage one's character, or that a fully virtuous agent could never have written the *Consolations.*

Even if you follow Cicero on virtue, however, this would not conflict with the solution suggested in Section 5. Nothing there hangs on the idea that the fully virtuous agent could actually lose her virtue. What we say is that the fully virtuous person has a disposition to restore her virtue should she ever, perhaps *per impossible*, lose it. Even if virtues cannot be lost, the ascription of this disposition is not pointless: First of all, because the very concept of virtue implies the possibility of failure. And second, because we want the fully virtuous person to serve as a standard against which we can measure the conduct of actual people. What matters is that the possibility of failures of character, at

least from the perspective of the agent, is an essential part of the idea of being virtuous.

8 Objection 2: An Infinite Hierarchy of Dispositions?

We claim that the disposition to reason in such a way as to improve oneself is part of a virtue. It is plausible (though not essential to our view) to assume that the relevant virtue is a virtue of self-improvement, which is possessed but never exercised by the fully virtuous agent. Johnson does not consider a view like ours, but he explicitly dismisses the idea of a virtue of self-improvement. And this dismissal points to a potential worry about our view. He writes:

> [E]ven if one successfully argues for a virtue of self-improvement, a regress problem might remain: for suppose there were a virtue whose aim is the acquisition of the other virtues. Surely one ought to acquire such a virtue if one lacks it. And if one ought, then we need a further virtue whose aim is to acquire the virtue of self-improvement, a virtue the lack of which would, moreover, in turn make it right to acquire it, and so on. (Johnson, 2003, p. 833)

Applied to our account of right action, the objection would go as follows: Suppose I lack a disposition, D_1, to reason practically in the way a fully virtuous agent does. Surely, I ought to acquire D_1. Hence, the fully virtues agent must have a disposition, D_2, to reason practically in such a way as to acquire D_1 if she lacks D_1. Now suppose I also lack D_2. Surely, I ought to acquire it. Hence, the fully virtues agent must have a disposition, D_3, to reason practically in such a way as to acquire D_2 if she lacks D_1 and D_2. And so on. An opponent might worry that it is implausible to attribute such an infinite hierarchy of dispositions to the fully virtuous agent.

We can avoid this attribution, however, if we hold that this hierarchy is finite. Suppose the fully virtuous agent doesn't have any disposition to reason in such a way as to acquire D_3 if she is lacking D_1, D_2, and D_3. There are two possible cases: either the fully virtuous agent has other dispositions to reason practically

in this situation or she does not. If she has dispositions to reason practically in this situation, then those dispositions will determine what is right for an agent who doesn't possess any of D_1, D_2, and D_3. That need not be implausible. Perhaps doing something else is more important in this situation. Perhaps one of D_1–D_3 will eventually spontaneously arise if the agent does something else. Perhaps, e.g., if you lack the disposition to think critically about your own character flaws, the right thing to do is not to get yourself to think about your character flaws but to do something that will boost your self-confidence enough to no longer feel threatened if you think about your character flaws.

If the fully virtuous agent has no dispositions to reason in particular ways if she finds herself without D_1–D_3, then *RAGPI* implies that there is no right action for an agent without D_1–D_3. In many cases, this is very plausible. If you have been brought up in an ethically deeply problematic world view, there may not be any good practical inference that is open to you in certain situations. Suppose, e.g., that sexist beliefs have been instilled in you and there is no way for you to get rid of them (perhaps you lack the intelligence and education to do that). Moreover, suppose that you have to make a decision about whom to hire to take care of your sick mother. If you hire the male person that is best qualified although you think (wrongly) that a man is likely to be aggressive and cold towards your mother, you wrong your mother by hiring someone who you deem unsuitable. Hence, the practical inference that leads to this action cannot be good. But if you hire a woman because of your prejudices against men regarding the ability to care for others, you are wronging the male applicant and you are sexist. Hence, the practical inference that leads to this action cannot be good. If you can reason to an action that allows you to be less sexist, that may be ideal. But there is no guarantee that there is any good practical inference of this kind available to you. In such a case, there may not be any action that is right for you. The dispositions of the fully virtuous agent simply give out at this point.

Since neither of the two cases that can arise if the hierarchy of dispositions to reason in self-improving ways comes to an end is particularly problematic,

the objection fails. Our account doesn't require that the fully virtuous agent has an infinite hierarchy of dispositions to improve herself. Her dispositions must reach exactly as far as our notion of right action has application to less than fully virtuous agents.

There may also be a more "externalist" sense of "right action" on which self-improvement would be right for non-ideal agents. One such "externalist" notion is the notion on which everyone ought to be fully virtuous, which, for most people, would constitute an improvement. In that sense, the habitual liar shouldn't write down her lies but simply be fully virtuous. Another sense in which the person with severely impaired practical reasoning skills should improve herself is that such an improvement would bring her closer to flourishing and is, hence, what people who care about her well-being should recommend. In some cases, this may even justify these other people to use coercive force. But these notions of right action can easily be captured in virtue ethics and are, hence, not our topic.

9 Conclusion

We have suggested a new, virtue-theoretic account of when actions are right. This account isn't threatened by the right-but-not-virtuous objection to virtue ethics. The key to the solution is that we must take into account not only what the fully virtuous agent does but also her dispositions, which may not be manifested as long as the agent remains fully virtuous. We have argued that dispositions to reason practically in ways that restore virtue are essential to being fully virtuous. And we have shown how our account of right action falls out of a general neo-Aristotelian view on virtues, practical reasoning, and flourishing.

On the view we are recommending, flourishing and being fully virtuous are not merely a matter of living a certain life, doing certain things, and feeling certain ways. Unmanifested dispositions are an essential part of flourishing and complete virtue. The reason why flourishing and virtue must have such "unreal"

aspects is that they must allow for the possibility of failure, for the danger of ceasing to flourish and losing one's virtues. The virtuous agent must do the right thing when facing these dangers. An agent whose practical thought is blissfully undisturbed by the possibility of such dangers does not act virtuously in overcoming them.[18]

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