

# ***Help!***

## ***Virtue Profiles and Horses for Courses***

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### ABSTRACT

Glen Pettigrove addresses the proportionality principle in ethics, the principle that “our actions, attitudes, or emotions should be proportional to the degree of value present in the object or events to which they are responding” [p. 1]. He argues this is inconsistent with some familiar features of common-sense morality. In response, he brings virtuous character into the picture, a move we support but wish to modify. We show that certain helping actions should be guided by whether one has the virtue profile most suited to the situation from amongst a surrounding network of people.

KEYWORDS: Glen Pettigrove, virtue theory, virtue profiles, help, need

In “What Virtue Adds to Value,” Glen Pettigrove addresses the proportionality principle in ethics, the principle that “our actions, attitudes, or emotions should be proportional to the degree of value present in the object or events to which they are responding” [this volume: 1], which is derived from the work of Robert Hurka [2001], Robert Nozick [1981], and—in a different way—Christine Tappolet [2014, 2015]. While Pettigrove has shown that this principle has attractive features, there are ways in which it appears inconsistent with some familiar features of common-sense morality. He attempts to rectify the situation by bringing virtuous character to the moral table, a move we endorse. This commentary proposes to modify Pettigrove’s account by arguing that certain helping actions should be guided by whether one has the virtue profile most suitable to the situation from amongst a network of people connected with the matter.

Pettigrove argues that the proportionality principle overlooks the contribution of the character of the agent, which he articulates in terms of virtues, specifically love, forgiveness, and ambition. It is of the very nature of parents’ love for their children that it is *not* reflective of value; it does not discriminate between the lower achieving child and the higher achieving one or between the recalcitrant child and the compliant one. Moreover, the love applies to newborn or indeed unborn children, where there is no opportunity to display merit. Further, it is of the very nature of forgiveness that it sets aside negative value in a person, and it is of the very nature of ambition that it can be directed towards a number of goals, which may be of varying value.

Pettigrove's move can be seen as a case study in support of virtue ethics: to leave the virtues out of our moral considerations is to miss the essential nature of morality. Here, we see moral importance depending on the meritoriousness of those aspects of character rather than simply on the meritoriousness of what lies outside. This stance has significant bite as the role he sees for the virtues is a genuinely independent one. He opposes views of virtues that make them dependent on external values such as Julia Driver's [2001] consequentialist account and Hurka's [2001] "piggy-backing" view.

### **Help! I need somebody**

We are sympathetic with Pettigrove's introduction of virtues into the question of proportionality, but we wish to suggest a modification. Consider that we should help others relative to their need. We should help the person who has fallen and is struggling to get up, and we should give money or food to someone desperately hungry. Since they are not capable of helping themselves, they need assistance from those who can help them. We could say that need creates a form of value, namely the value of the help that would meet the need. So the proportionality principle could apply here. The principle would say that, faced with two people in need where we can help only one, we should help the one who is worse off.<sup>1</sup> This simple idea can lead us into familiar problems. Are we obliged to assess the whole world for degree of need? Is it wrong to help the somewhat needy nearby over the desperately needy far away?<sup>2</sup> Should the proportionality principle be modified by a principle of closeness? We shall not linger on this precise issue but wish to signal the broader moral that we often need to take account of the nature of the context of our moral thoughts, feelings, and actions in sometimes subtle ways.

Within society, we are well aware that a person with a particular skill set may be suitable for a particular task, job, or societal niche. We are, after all, hyperspecialisers [Lumsden & Ulatowski 2017, 2019; Lycan 2019; Millgram 2015], i.e., we specialise in a highly articulated way and so should exercise our particular expertise or skill when it is called for. For this reason, we may need to choose whether to intervene. Sometimes the context calls for a specialised skill set that we do not possess. In a traffic accident, you may choose not to assist a seriously injured person, knowing that you lack first aid skills and that people better equipped with relevant expertise are nearby or on their way to the scene. Here, we see how the general idea of helping people in need

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<sup>1</sup> We are not necessarily imagining how someone who endorses the proportionality principle may address the moral dilemma of 'Sophie's Choice' [Styron 1979]. That kind of scenario where a parent would be placed in the desperate situation of having to choose which one of her two children will live and which will die surely cannot be addressed by such a simplistic principle. No matter how the parent chooses, we do not see how the choice would be proportional, though the situation on the surface may seem like a candidate for the principle to resolve.

<sup>2</sup> We are reminded here of discussions that followed Peter Singer's [1971] famous article, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," on the question of our moral obligation to help those who are in need even if they are very distant from us. See also contributions in Chatterjee [2004].

should be modulated by the reality that different people have different skill sets, so we need to take a ‘horses for courses’ approach to realise who is in the best position to volunteer assistance in a particular setting. This point focuses on differences between people’s practical skills rather than differences between people’s virtues, though some form of virtue may be displayed.

It is not our intention to develop a comprehensive position on the moral importance of helping. We are simply utilizing a commonly felt intuition. We ought to help someone in need when we are in the best position to assist that person and especially when we can do so at little cost to ourselves. Consider how the value we have placed on helping is challenged by a popular trope among the socially conservative, a challenge best reflected in the proverb originating with Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie’s *Mrs Dymond* [1885: 342]: “[I]f you give a man a fish he is hungry in an hour. If you teach him to fish you do him a good turn.” There may be wisdom in that saying in some settings, but it would be an extreme position to say no one ever needs direct help. Our focus is on who is the best person to help in a particular situation where help *is* called for. Our point about help being provided by the most suitable person does not rely on any specific doctrine about whom to help and how.

### **Help! Not just anybody**

When health and social support professionals assess a person in need of help, they need to take account of the network of people around him or her. Take an infirm and cantankerous elderly man who lives alone and refuses to leave his home. He needs assistance but quarrels with any caregiver hired to assist. Of his children, just one daughter lives in the vicinity. It falls on her to help him in practical ways and she acts virtuously by responding to his needs. Basically she is the only one who can help. From one point of view, the father may not be the most worthy recipient of help in the vicinity; others are in a worse situation and would be more appreciative. But the family relationship and practical circumstances allot the task to this daughter and her virtuous disposition is to respond to that situation.

Now let us change the example so that this daughter has two siblings who also live in the vicinity. This provides a different example of the ‘horses for courses’ theme, one that concerns differences between people’s virtues. The previously mentioned daughter has the necessary patience, courage, or resolution to help her elderly and difficult father, more so than her siblings. Let us describe that by saying she has the most suitable ‘virtue profile’. We need to consider a person’s virtues not merely in relation to a particular situation but in comparison to the virtues found in the surrounding network of people. No longer can we plainly say that the circumstances put that task before her; the nature of her virtuousness in comparison with that of

others contributes to her suitability for the task. Of those with the relevant practical skills, she is most suitable for the task because she has cultivated a set of virtues that would help the infirm man. This thinking is in line with Pettigrove's view that an agent's virtues bring something to the moral table, independent of value in the patient or situation. In our view, though, an agent's virtuous character will not always sit in isolation, for there are occasions when its significance must be compared with the virtue profiles of other agents who are part of a network.

Clearly, the tendency of virtue ethics is to shift our focus inwards in a certain way. Our point, though, is that we need to consider the way in which the inner nature of a person's virtue profile fits into the broader context of the social network. In spite of Aristotle's remarks that suggest there is a unity of the virtues [Van Zyl 2019: 84-6], it is a common experience that different people have different strengths and weaknesses, including with respect to the virtues. One person may be strong on courage but weak on compassion, while another person may have those strengths and weaknesses reversed. The way that different members of society with different virtue profiles can suit different situations is like how different members of a sporting team can suit different roles by virtue of their skills and attributes in comparison with other teammates.

### **Help! You *know* I need someone: knowledge of who is the best helper**

In order to make the right choices in the kind of situation we describe, you not only need to be guided by aspects of your own virtue profile but also need to take into account the virtue profiles of others in the support network. On the face of it, you need to have a meta-level awareness of the virtue profiles of people within the network. You must not be too modest since you need to appreciate when you are the one who possesses the virtues for the job, but clearly you must not be too arrogant so that you can identify when someone else is better suited for the role. So, for example, you need to realise when your level of patience is the best available and your patience is what is required. On the other hand, if someone else has greater patience you need to be able to realise that they are the one for the job.

These remarks may make it sound as if you need perfect knowledge of the virtue profiles of all those suitable candidates in the network of people. In practice, however, the level of knowledge may be partial. We have considered a case in which one daughter has the requisite virtues such as patience, courage, and resolution such that there is no contest in comparison with others in the network. But there will be other cases in which various people in the network possess different mixes of the appropriate virtues and it would be hard to tell who would be most suitable. In that kind of case, you seem to need detailed knowledge of the virtue profiles of

yourself and others. Clearly one will not often have that ideal level of knowledge of others' virtue profiles. But there is reason to think we may be able to make reasonably good judgements, as will be explained later.

### **Help me if you can, I'm feeling down: Virtue profiles and ways of being**

In their commentaries, both Stangl [this volume] and Pinsent [this volume] have rightfully noted how Pettigrove has shifted the focus away from the object to the valuing agent. Stangl puts this nicely when she writes,

The good person is not always admirable because she responds accurately (or even excellently?) to some other valuable objects. At least sometimes, the fundamental explanation for the goodness of her actions and attitudes is simply that they instantiate her characteristic way of being, and not any other goods that agent appreciates, pursues, or promotes. [Stangl this volume: 8]

Our notion of virtue profiles connects up with that notion of a way of being, a 'modus operandi', a unique character that informs their actions.

At least sometimes, [...] a virtuous action will not be explained by other goods the agent appreciates, pursues, or promotes. It will be explained by qualities of the agent. [...] The qualities that make up an agent's characteristic way of being will include, among other things: what he notices and how he notices it, what he cares about and how he cares about it, what he thinks about and how he thinks about it, what he does and how he does it, his ongoing projects, and his personal style. [Pettigrove this volume: 19-20]

The idea that a person has their own virtue profile can be seen as one manifestation of this way of being or 'modus operandi'. A virtue profile is a moral component of a way of being. Thus, virtues are situated in a rich array of characteristics that compose a person's character. Our suggestion about particular virtue profiles suiting particular situations is consistent with Pettigrove's thesis about the importance of a person's character in the moral assessment of a situation. But we are refining the significance of that character, and treating it in relation to the characters of others, a move that appears consistent with his talk of different ways of being. We are not reinstating an approach to morality in which actions are judged simply on the basis of some external value, such as the consequences of an act or an agent's intention. Rather, the same moral about what character brings to the table is extended to a group and treated in a comparative way.

### **And I do appreciate you being 'round: where do the helpers come from?**

Note that in relying on the notion of a group whose virtue profiles need to be taken into consideration we would like to resist the following unrealistic caricature: whenever there is a person who needs assistance, we should scour the whole world for the person with the most suitable virtue profile. In this clearly unrealistic caricature, the agent would be called upon to check every other person's virtue profile for the best fit. The restriction to a network of people mitigates such labour-intensive searches. We believe that people are endowed with heuristics that enable them to readily identify agents in a network who have the most appropriate virtue profile for particular situations. It is within this network that comparisons can be made as to the most appropriate virtue profile.

In our original example of the cantankerous elderly man we suggested a daughter of his was best suited to help because of her virtue profile. Now the family relationship and familiarity with her father could very likely assist her suitability, which is something that complements the virtue profile. But in a variant of the situation it could be that a new neighbour has both the best virtue profile and practical skills to be able to help the old man. If so, then it makes sense for the neighbour to help. If the family members recognize that and are willing to have the new neighbour help their infirm patriarch, then they should respect the suitability of the new neighbour. That echoes the point made above concerning practical skills where you need to defer to a medical specialist following a traffic accident. Thus, the network around someone need not be defined by kinship or past acquaintance. Nor need it be defined by geography. On occasion, someone physically far removed from the subject may be the most suitable person to assist and can do so remotely by means of video calls. It does not follow that we should think of the network as the entire population of the earth.

The preference for a helper with a suitable virtue profile needs to be balanced against other considerations, such as issues of fairness. For example, tasks should be shared among available helpers, to the extent that it is possible, so that the person with the most suitable virtue profile is not overloaded. Similarly, it would be wrong for a class of people to be systematically overburdened. In many times and places, women have assumed caring roles and have developed the virtues appropriate to those roles. It would be wrong for women to be expected to sacrifice their lives in a significant way if it is possible for a particular burden to be more evenly shared with men. Thus the 'horses for courses' principle needs to be one component in assessing helping needs but should not be regarded as always settling the correct choice of carer.<sup>3</sup> Considering differences among virtue profiles is significant not because it applies universally but

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<sup>3</sup> We are grateful to Matheson Russell who brought this point to our attention.

because it tends to broaden our focus from purely individual virtues to include the relationship of our virtue profile with others' virtue profiles.

In general, a person with a particular virtue profile should help someone in need because not to do so would be to act counter to their own character.<sup>4</sup> This doesn't mean we should help others if, by doing so, it puts ourselves in a worse position so we need help ourselves.<sup>5</sup> Should we worry that there may be unanticipated consequences of our actions that could not have been foreseen by even the most astute observer? A virtue theoretic approach does not depend on determining consequences. The truly virtuous helper has an instinct to help to a reasonable extent in the way they judge best.

### **Help me get my feet back on the ground: the relevance of practical wisdom**

We have discussed how a person will not always have complete information about which virtue profile is most suited to the situation and what understanding there is may be largely intuitive. This is in the spirit of virtue ethics and is consistent with Pettigrove's position. Our judgement on this matter is not completely settled by some external rule, and it falls to the virtuous character to sense when to intervene and when to defer. A virtuous spirit needs to be complemented by appropriate perception of situations. Recall that Pettigrove situates a person's virtues in a way of being, which includes what an agent notices. The truly generous person will very likely have an eye for occasions when generosity is appropriate. This should not be thought of as a merely accidental correlation. Seeing the need and wishing to respond to it go together in an important way. Compare this with situations that call for practical expertise. An orthopaedic surgeon can often tell at a glance that a person walking has a degraded hip and is in need of her particular skills. Similarly, it is likely that someone who has sympathy for the anxious is good at noticing anxiety.

This is not to say that anyone who notices need, and is able to help, does so. A vicious person may be able to detect need and then exploit that vulnerability, mocking a disabled person who is unable to access a building, or worse. Also there are people who would normally be considered reasonably virtuous who fail to act on the need they see, perhaps responding to external situational factors. Consider Zimbardo's [2007] Stanford prison experiments, Darley and Batson's [1973] seminary study, and Milgram's [1974] obedience studies.<sup>6</sup> We may say that the virtue profiles of study participants have not yet fully formed. There also may be some cases where a virtuous person fails to take notice of the need. In general, though, a helping virtue is

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<sup>4</sup> This character is expressed through their own inner sense as explained by Van Zyl in connection with Aristotelian virtue ethics [2019: 21].

<sup>5</sup> We believe that the view we offer here is consistent with that of Elizabeth Anscombe's [1958].

<sup>6</sup> For a critical examination of these studies see Kamtekar [2004] or Miller [2014].

likely to go hand in hand with sensitivity to presence of the corresponding need. We should also apply this kind of thinking to the issue of which virtue profile is the best fit for a situation. The truly virtuous helper is likely to have a feel for the situations in which they can help and similarly has a sense of when another person who is available would be more suitable.

This makes us think of the Aristotelian conception of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which involves knowing how to help and indeed knowing what help is appropriate in a particular situation [See Van Zyl 2019: 78-84]. The Aristotelian position is that practical wisdom is part and parcel with the virtues. The way that Pettigrove looks at character and way of being in a rich and broad way is in line with that integration. A preliminary exposition of our theme may make it seem to divide into three discrete parts: 1) who needs help? 2) what are the virtue profiles of all those in the network around that person (including oneself)? and 3) which virtue profile is the best fit for the situation? A deeper articulation of the theme links those tasks with the possession of the virtues. The virtuous person senses who needs help, senses the virtue profiles of those in the surrounding network, and senses who would be most suitable. Thus the virtuous person will know when to help and when to defer to others. This at least is the ideal situation. Suppose a person who is generous and compassionate but is not so patient and diplomatic volunteers their help or perhaps even imposes their help when someone more suitable is available. How should we regard them? We should certainly wish to fully recognize their virtuous standpoint but it would be right to fault them as overly keen. There is a particular failing of practical wisdom.

### **Won't you please, please help me?**

We have not challenged Pettigrove's criticism of the principle of proportionality. Rather, we have sought to modify the contribution that virtuous character brings to the moral table. Specifically, we have proposed that certain helping actions should be guided by whether one has the virtue profile most suited to a situation from amongst the network of people connected with the matter. We need to take a 'horses for courses' approach because we recognise that there are many types of virtue profiles in this world. "Not all gentlemen can be courtiers, nor can all courtiers be nor should they be walking knights" [Cervantes 1615/2001: II.4]. Virtue profiles do not appear in Pettigrove's treatment of his topic but they can find a place in his notion of a person's 'modus operandi', their way of being. A significant feature of the differences between virtue profiles and how that affects morally worthy action is that it shifts our treatment of virtues from their having a largely individual significance to their having more of a social significance, in that we need to consider comparisons among virtue profiles.



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