

## BOOK REVIEWS

Swanton, Christine. *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*.  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. 312. \$35.00 (cloth).

Christine Swanton's book is the latest in a distinguished lineup of recent contributions to the development of a systematic virtue-theoretic ethics. With its arrival, it is fair to say that contemporary virtue ethics has entered its "second wave." Swanton follows a first wave of writers—Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse most prominent among them—who took up a challenge that Elizabeth Anscombe issued in her 1958 watershed "Modern Moral Philosophy" (*Philosophy* 33 [1958]: 1–19). That challenge was to equip modern moral philosophy with an adequate philosophy of psychology, one that might eventually enable us to think profitably about ethics through an understanding of ethical virtue and its exercise. Swanton's book is likely to prove a watershed of its own, widening the predominantly neo-Aristotelian focus of contemporary work in virtue ethics, such as that of Foot and Hursthouse, to include the more pluralistic view of Swanton's title.

Swanton herself is hesitant to provide a potentially constraining definition of what qualifies a candidate ethical theory as a species of virtue ethics, as opposed to a species of consequentialism or Kantianism. Nonetheless, perhaps most ethical theories that embrace the name would align themselves with the kind of dissatisfaction with consequentialist and rule-based (among them, Kantian) ethical theories that helped fuel Anscombe's challenge (pp. 4–5). Swanton shares this dissatisfaction but expresses greater concern to develop her own views than to argue against consequentialist or Kantian alternatives (pp. 4–5). The result is a book that covers a comprehensive range of topics of concern to virtue ethics, from the moral psychology of virtue and the objectivity and demandingness of the ethical standpoint to a virtue-ethical account of right action. Overall, Swanton's work provides an important view of the prospects for a novel account of ethical virtue.

Swanton's species of virtue ethics owes much to Nietzschean depth psychology, as well as to empirical psychology. Its relationship to Swanton's neo-Aristotelian contemporaries is more complicated, representing both developments of and significant departures from the latter work. Among the primary desiderata noted in Anscombe's original challenge was an account of the type of characteristic a virtue is. Swanton agrees with Foot and Hursthouse in placing an answer to this challenge at the center of her virtue ethics. According to Swanton's definition, "a *virtue* is a . . . disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way" (p. 20). Items within the "field" of a virtue are those objects with which the virtue is concerned. According to Swanton, these objects demand certain responses from us. Agents who possess the virtue concerned with the relevant objects thereby possess a disposition to respond to the objects in the way that those objects (or, as Swanton

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alternatively puts it, the world) demand(s). The responses in question take different forms or modes, according to differences in the bases of the responses. For example, some objects (people, for one) demand the response of respect; others (another's good, say) the response of promotion. The requirement that the responses be excellent or good enough reflects Swanton's view that the concept of a virtue is a threshold concept. That is, depending on the circumstances, an agent need not always closely approach an ideal of perfection if the agent is to exhibit virtue. Considerations having to do with the agent's abilities and the state of the world (whether or not, e.g., one inhabits a just society), as well as considerations of self-love, may render perfection an implausible or overly stringent goal.

Evident in this account of virtue is Swanton's embrace of a genuinely pluralistic theory of action (in particular, of virtuous action) and her rejection of eudaemonism, two distinguishing features of her ethics of virtue that are likely to generate, and warrant, attention.

In the important chapter 2 of the book, "Normative Dimensions of Virtue," Swanton defends the account of action underlying her understanding of the virtues, an account first defended in her 1995 article "Profiles of the Virtues" (*Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 76 [1995]: 47–72). Central to Swanton's account is a rejection of the model of action as production that underwrites consequentialist theses that claim that virtues and vices should be understood as derivative from or instrumental to the promotion of independent goods or the minimization of independent evils ("the thesis of non-aretaic value" [p. 34]) and that the only relevant respects in which one option may be better than another concern the degree or strength of the value inherent in that option ("the thesis of value-centred monism" [p. 34]). Swanton's competing nonconsequentialist view understands the virtues and vices as heterogeneous with respect to the kinds (or "modes") of response that they are and in the range of things (people and pleasures, e.g., rather than simply states of affairs) to which they are responses. Rather than a picture of action as the production or avoidance of states of affairs that are good or evil in themselves, then, Swanton's picture of action is one of action comprising a plurality of modes of interaction with a plurality of things. Virtue, on this account, involves "being well-disposed in respect of reason, emotion, desires, motives, and actions" in regard to these things (p. 36). Swanton is correct to challenge the monolithic conception of action as production, and, if her 1995 article failed to win the converts it deserved, it is one of my hopes for the book that it finally pries philosophers from its grip.

Among the respects in which Swanton departs from her neo-Aristotelian contemporaries two especially deserve mention. First, Swanton rejects Hursthouse's eudaemonist thesis concerning the status of virtue, that is, the thesis that "it is a necessary condition of a trait being a virtue that it characteristically (partially) constitute (or contribute to) the flourishing of the possessor of the virtue" (p. 77). Swanton also rejects Foot's and Hursthouse's naturalism, that is, the view that "what makes a trait of character a virtue is its being partially constitutive of non-defectiveness in human beings" (p. 90). Swanton's rejection of eudaemonism centers on the discussion of three examples intended to illuminate three kinds of lives which demonstrate virtue in the absence of its

meeting the eudaemonist requirement: the lives of a morally saintly jungle martyr, a manic depressive with great passion for her art, and a devoted environmentalist (pp. 82–84). In each case, Swanton argues that the lives in question demonstrate the possession and exercise of virtues (moral sainthood, creative passion, and devotion, respectively) in the absence of the connection with their possessors' flourishing that the eudaemonist thesis demands as a criterion of virtue. Just as the particular virtues differ, on Swanton's account, with respect to their "spheres of concern" and the kinds of responsiveness that count as "good enough" or "excellent" responsiveness to items within those spheres of concern, the virtues likewise differ in their relation, if any, to the flourishing of the agent who exercises them. Moral sainthood, creative passion, and devotion as she understands them are virtues not because of some connection they share with agent flourishing but because they are "habits of appropriate responses to value, bonds, benefits, and so on" (p. 81).

While Swanton's examples certainly warrant further discussion, her case against the eudaemonist thesis ultimately is unpersuasive. Contributing to its failure is a reading of the eudaemonist thesis that takes the relevant connection between the exercise of virtue and flourishing to be one of a reliable connection. Hursthouse's talk of the virtues as being a "best bet" strategy for faring well perhaps helps motivate such a reading by employing a misleading metaphor. The view that the eudaemonist should defend, I suggest, is not that the virtues must confer reliability on their possessors—thereby making them more effective at attaining benefits—but that the virtues confer a particular normative status on their possessors, which status is itself arguably necessary if a human being is to flourish as such. If Swanton's devoted environmentalist (to take what I view as the most plausible of Swanton's three candidates for virtue) exercises virtue with respect to the objects of his devotion, the eudaemonist need find no problem—that is, no problem as concerns his virtue—in the fact that his virtue goes unrewarded in the way Swanton describes. What follows from that fact is not that his devotion is not a virtue but that his fellows fail to respond to him as his virtuous status merits. The fault lies with those fellows, not with our devotee.

Swanton appears to acknowledge such a eudaemonist line of reply when she writes, "One important argument for eudaimonism remains. According to this argument losses of the kind which mar flourishing are matters of ill luck; other deprivations such as those endured by the woman of my first example are endured at the highest level of virtue without loss of flourishing" (p. 89). Swanton suggests that my line of reply relies on a standard of virtue that is too high and which, therefore, one ought to reject. It remains unclear, however, just why Swanton supposes this eudaemonist reply to set too high a standard on the virtuous themselves. The eudaemonist does not, after all, suggest that the virtuous should simply "grin and bear it" when the world fails to behave as it should in response to their virtue. If anything, it is nonvirtuous people and an uncooperative world that the eudaemonist might be said to hold to high standards. To be sure, the eudaemonist owes accounts of how one might intelligibly be said to have a normative claim on the world for cooperation in the pursuit of virtuous ends, why the responses that one's virtue merits from others are justifiably demanded, and the way in which possessing a status that makes the

demand appropriate is itself of intrinsic value to the virtuous—but this eudaemonist line of reply is not so easily dismissed as Swanton suggests.

Although Swanton's embrace of a pluralistic theory of action (and, so, of a pluralistic account of virtuous action) and her rejection of the eudaemonist thesis are among the most valuable and intriguing aspects of the book, they also manifest one of the book's main problems: what strikes me as, for lack of a better description, theoretical messiness. Swanton's views understandably yield a degree of complexity that views that rely on the unifying effects of a more homogenous theory of action and/or thesis of eudaemonism might more readily avoid. Still, there remains in parts a degree of imprecision and lack of detail that at times proves distracting. Why, for example, go to such lengths to defend a virtue-ethical account of right action (as if rightness were clearly a concept that the virtue ethicists must take on board) when the resulting account breaks the conceptual ties between the rightness of an action and an obligation to perform it, as well as between the wrongness of an action and blameworthiness for performing it (chap. 11)? Swanton suggests that an answer lies in her view's antiperfectionism, but an alternative response is that the concepts of (overall) rightness and wrongness of action do not warrant from a virtue-centered moral theory the kind of role they serve in consequentialist and Kantian moral theories, especially if one doesn't thereby gain an illuminating account of obligation or blameworthiness for one's trouble.

It is no virtue in a moral philosopher, of course, to be an enemy of messiness when the phenomenon she takes as her object of study—namely, ethical life—is in fact much messier than other ethical traditions sometimes suggest. Indeed, it is a strength of Swanton's pluralistic virtue ethics that it rejects the kind of homogenizing tendencies that lend themselves to theoretical elegance at the expense of philosophical insight. Appeals to the complexity of the phenomena and to a defensible pluralism, however, fail to provide a compelling reply to the objection in Swanton's case. Nonetheless, the apparent promise of Swanton's agenda-setting contribution to the contemporary renaissance of virtue ethics fuels the hope that a more adequate reply merely awaits the next ripple in contemporary virtue ethics' much-welcomed second wave.

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