

On the Adequacy of Action Guidance in Virtue Ethics

Nevim Borçin

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1. Introduction

Although it has re-emerged in recent decades in contemporary philosophy, virtue ethics (henceforth VE) has a long history going back at least to the fifth century B.C. in western thought. Its re-appearance in moral philosophy has stimulated fruitful debates among philosophers on questions of rules and principles, character, moral education and so forth. While VE has attacked the foundational considerations and truisms of dominant deontological and utilitarian moral theories,¹ a continuous objection to it has been its alleged inadequacy in providing a distinctive account of right action and determinate action guidance. Contemporary philosophers such as Hursthouse, Swanton or Slote have tried to provide a virtue ethical criterion of right action that can provide guidance.² Moreover, there is a steadily growing mountain of debates on whether the proposed accounts are successful or not by both competitor theorists and virtue ethicists. Despite the abundance of virtue ethical responses to the inadequacy objection, the debate hasn't yet reached a so called "saturation point." This paper aims to be a contribution to that debate in favour of VE. My aim is not to propose entirely new notions or perspectives to the discussion but to try to lift the level of debate by fleshing out certain virtue ethical considerations and structural characteristics that are still in need of clarification and elaboration by means of which I hope to show that VE has a distinctive and adequate conception of right action which can provide distinctive action guidance.

In order to fulfil this aim, in section 2 I will introduce two major objections by contemporary philosophers who aim to show the inadequacy of the virtue ethical criterion (V1) "An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances." In the next section, I will propose that VE can respond to both objections satisfactorily if the distinction between "action assessment" and "action guidance" is taken into consideration. I will argue that (V1) functions as an action assessment rather than action guidance criterion. In section 4, I will demonstrate how adequate action guidance could be derived from (V1) by some additional premises of VE. In the following section, I will show that VE can provide indirect guidance and has some structural advantages which enables it to provide multiple guidance strategies to different agents with differential cognitive and moral developmental levels. Finally, in the last section, I will argue that theories that tell agents what to do by providing "exact," "determinate" and "narrow" answers affect

¹ VE since Aristotle has criticized approaches to ethical theories that aspire to make them scientific in the sense that they must be "strongly systematic," "clear," "precise," and also be able to seek a clear and precise answer to every moral question and have a definite method for providing answers to those questions. Today figures like Sidgwick and Rawls have been often subject to such criticisms. See Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Alan Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) for such criticism.

² See Liezl Van Zyl, 2013. "Virtue Ethics and Right Action" in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* ed. Daniel Russell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) for a discussion of right action in different versions of VE.

moral agency in negative ways by frustrating development of an integrated moral character. Thus, I hope to show that the guidance VE provides seems to be more helpful in becoming virtuous and good.

2. Two Major Objections

In this section, I will appeal to two specific objections to virtue ethical theory of right action. These objections have actually been posed to both agent-based and qualified-agent versions of VE. However, in order to respond to those objections, I will mostly refer to Hursthouse's agent-qualified account as she defends a *eudaimonistic* Neo-Aristotelian version of VE which I am more sympathetic to. And according to *eudaimonistic* versions of VE, human flourishing or *eudaimonia* is taken to be fundamental to the theory.

Virtue ethical accounts of such philosophers as Hursthouse, Slote, and Swanton who have tried to develop accounts of right action have been subject to several internal and external criticisms. Some philosophers defending VE have argued that trying to work out a criterion of morally right action is to renunciate some virtue ethical ideas inspired by Elisabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot with whom the revival of VE began in the first place. According to those critics, Anscombe, thought that deontic notions such as right, wrong, duty and so on presuppose the existence of a supreme lawgiver and that is why we must dispense with this vocabulary altogether. So, such philosophers as Taylor and Hacker-Wright think that it is useless to try to vindicate VE by trying to offer a defensible criterion of right action because, they claim, VE is already complete and sufficient without such an account of right action. The purpose of this paper is not to go into this debate to figure out how we must interpret the views of Anscombe or Foot or any other theorist. By defending a virtue ethical account of right action in this paper, I obviously deny what Taylor or Hacker-Wright think about right action.

In the paper I rather aim to discuss two major external objections about virtue ethical account of right action. In this section I will introduce them and in section 3 and 4 I will try to show in what ways Hursthouse's account can block the objections.

The first objection is by Ramon Das and the objection goes as follows: a theory of virtue is fundamentally concerned about the development of a good character and how a person ought to be. A theory of right action, on the other hand, is fundamentally about the provision of moral guidance and what a person ought to do. Whereas VE theoretically takes as basic an agent's internal states of character or motives, a plausible theory of action must take into account features of the external world and foreseeable consequences. Furthermore, a person's character, Das thinks, is hardly infallible and people occasionally act out of character. Sometimes, good people do the wrong thing and bad people do the right thing; also, it is a platitude that people 'do the right things for the wrong reason'. So, given the mismatch between action and character and the common platitude that people sometimes 'do the right thing with wrong reason', the objection goes, we have to sharply distinguish between people's inner moral character and the outwards acts. He adds that any strategies that have been developed by virtue ethicists to meet this objection result in depriving VE of its distinctive character as a theory.³

³ Ramon Das, "Virtue Ethics and Right Action: A Critique" in *Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Lorraine Besser-Jones and Michael Slote (New York: Routledge, 2015), 331-332.

For the sake of brevity, I will refer to this objection as the "moral platitudes objection." Consider the following example by Das:

'Doing the right thing with the wrong reason': A man dating a woman with a young child dives into a swimming pool to save the child from drowning. He cares not at all for the child and is motivated exclusively by a desire to impress the woman as a means, let us suppose, to sleeping with her.⁴

Das argues that despite the man's thoroughly bad motivation it seems clear that he did the right thing. At the very least, he did *what he ought to have done*. But when considered from a virtue ethical perspective, Das argues, there seems to be a problem here since that wouldn't be an action done from a virtuous character and thus must be assessed as "wrong". However, it is just an example of a moral platitude in which one 'does the right act with the wrong reason.'⁵

The second objection by Robert N. Johnson rests on the idea that right action cannot be defined as what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstances as there are some circumstances in which a non-virtuous agent can do things that are right, and that no virtuous agent would be found. He argues that it is not sensible to ask what a virtuous agent would do in such circumstances as no virtuous person would be in the circumstances of a non-virtuous person who is trying to improve his actions and make himself a better person. There can be actions that would be morally required of a person who is not virtuous, and that no virtuous agent would do precisely because he is already virtuous.

Consider the following example by Johnson:

Self-improving acts: A chronic liar who has decided to improve his character is trying to follow the advice of his therapist. He writes down all his lies, constantly reminds himself why telling the truth is important, tries to change the way he thinks about actions and the effects of his actions on others.⁶

Johnson gives two other examples which serve the same function in his argument. One is about self-controlling actions of an intemperate person who wants to improve himself. The other is about a person who has some moral blind spots about racism, sexism etc. in his character. Because he doesn't rely on his own judgement, he constantly seeks moral guidance from morally better people around him. Hence, Johnson argues that a novice in virtue is going to do a lot of self-controlling actions that no already temperate virtuous person would do, or the-not-yet virtuous person might seek moral guidance from better people around her, something that no virtuous person would do. All these are right actions but not actions that are characteristic of a virtuous agent. Thus, the argument goes, doing what the virtuous person would do cannot be a necessary condition of right action which implies it is false to analyze the right action in terms of the actions of a virtuous agent. Following Daniel Russell, I will call

⁴ Das, "Virtue Ethics", 326.

⁵ Das' "platitude objection" is actually an old criticism that has been addressed to virtue ethics. See. R. B. Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (1984):227 – 236, for similar objections.

⁶ Robert N. Johnson, "Virtue and Right" *Ethics* 113, no. 4 (2003):810-834. I have briefly summed the case.

this objection "right but not virtuous objection" for the sake of brevity.⁷

Now, let us see how VE can cope with these objections.

3. Right Action as Action Assessment

In order to understand how qualified-agent VE deals with these objections it must be noted that the critics ignore a distinction which, I believe underlies Hursthouse's account of right action. This distinction is between action guidance and action assessment.⁸ For instance, when one makes a statement such as "X is a (or the) right action," such dominant theories as deontology and consequentialism tend to grant that it has two functions: it plays both roles of action guidance and action assessment. "What A ought to do?" is ordinarily responded in statements like, "A ought to do X," because "X is the right thing." Thus, it is thought that "X is the right thing," both functions as "X is what ought to be done" in the sense of action guidance and as "X is the right thing," in the sense of action assessment. According to deontological and consequentialist theories these two functions are like two sides of the same coin and when one performs what she ought to do, she ends up doing the right thing.

What about this distinction in VE? I believe that the "moral platitudes" and "right but not virtuous" type of objections that are posed to VE can be blocked if the critics can see the underlying distinction that is at work in Hursthouse and VE. According to Hursthouse's version of VE, an action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances (henceforth V1). However, although Hursthouse doesn't distinguish it explicitly, she doesn't use "right action" in the traditional sense of "an act ought to be done" or "an act which is obligatory." A "right action" for Hursthouse rather must be understood as "a good or virtuous deed." When we say that "X is a right action," unlike other theories, Hursthouse wants to assess or evaluate the action and give it a "tick of approval" as a good or excellent action. That means that for VE action assessment and action guidance are not necessarily two sides of the same coin and they can come apart. Therefore, one mustn't assume that in Hursthouse or in VE "what one ought to do" necessarily issues in a "right action." It is in some situations possible for an agent to do what she ought to do without thereby doing a right action. If that significant point is well-taken, it will be more obvious, with the help of our discussion in the next section, how virtue ethical theory of right action succeeds in providing action guidance that doesn't go against (V1).

Consider a case by Hursthouse which is an example of a dilemma where the agent finds himself in a difficult situation because of some of his character defect or past wrongdoing:

The philanderer case: Suppose that a philanderer irresponsibly has impregnated two women convincing each that he intends to marry her. But now, he can marry only one of them. Suppose that one of the women luckily finds another suitor who is happy to support her and her child.

⁷ "Right but not virtuous objection," too, seems to be a common criticism that has been addressed to VE in the literature. See a parallel objection in David Copp, David Sobel, "Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics," *Ethics* 114 (2004):514-54 and Bernard Williams, "Replies" in *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* ed. J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 185-224.

⁸ In constructing my argument in this section and section 4 I owe much to Van Zyl (2013) and Russell (2008).

Now, it would obviously be worse and callous if the philanderer abandons the other woman. If he marries the second woman will he perform a right action?⁹

According to Hursthouse, in this case it is impossible for the philanderer to perform a "right action" which is a "good deed" and which warrants a "tick of approval. On the other hand, by deciding to marry the second woman, he might do "what he ought to do". "Marrying the second woman is not a right action" does not imply "He ought not to marry her." It simply means that he hasn't done "a good deed." He should feel shame and regret for what he has done, rather than enjoy the "satisfactory review of his conduct" in Hume's phrase.¹⁰

So, Hursthouse thinks that although in some cases the action can be the outcome of a right decision, and be the thing that ought to be done, it might still not be right, i.e. not an act that a virtuous agent would have done in the circumstances. Although the philanderer will make the right decision and do what he ought to do by marrying one of the women he has impregnated, he will still fail to do the right thing as he has only become lucky in that the other woman has now a suitor that will marry and support her. He makes the right decision in a case where because of his past wrongdoing, he should feel shame and regret for what he has done. Yet, his action doesn't deserve the "tick of approval" and isn't praiseworthy.

As we can infer from this case by Hursthouse, a right action is not equivalent to "what ought to be done" in VE. That means that for a virtue ethicist "ought" doesn't necessarily imply "right".¹¹ The right action is the one that is characteristic of the virtuous agent in the circumstances and the actions such as the action of the philanderer fail to be right when we assess what he does with the standards of the virtuous agent. Nevertheless, as virtue ethicists we don't want to say that such an act that is an outcome of an imperfection in the character of the agent or the past wrongdoing is not "what ought to be done" in terms of action guidance. If the philanderer decides "rightly" to marry the second woman, he will still do "what he ought to do". Then, when VE is evaluated in terms of its account of right action, the distinction between action guidance and action assessment and thus, the distinction between "ought" and "right" must be taken seriously. They mustn't be assumed to be identical as in the case of utilitarianism and deontology. If that distinction in VE is acknowledged by its critics, then it will be more obvious that "the moral platitudes objection" and "the right but not virtuous objection" fail in their conclusions.

How could we make use of this distinction in responding to the objections we introduced above? Consider Das' case of the womanizer who saves the drowning child. A virtue ethicist would accept that the man did "what he ought to do" because saving the child is the right decision in this case. However, she would still deny that he performed a right action which

⁹ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 50. I've paraphrased and shortened the more elaborate case which is careful to point out that we only assume that it would be worse to abandon one of the women than the other. We assume he has promised both to marry them.

¹⁰ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 46-47, 50-51.

¹¹ See Daniel Russell, "That 'ought' does not imply 'right': Why it matters for virtue ethics", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 299-315, for a comprehensive argument in favor of the view that 'right action' is not equivalent to 'the act that ought to be done'.

deserves an "unqualified approval" in Hursthouse's words. A virtue ethicist thinks that (V1) tells us that the man failed to do the morally right thing as in the same way as (V1) tells us that the philanderer that has to abandon one woman and marry the other failed to do the morally right thing. Both the actions of the philanderer and of the womanizer fail to be "good deeds" which warrant "a tick of approval."

Now consider Johnson's "right but not virtuous objection." His case was of a chronic liar who tries to improve his character and thus perform a host of remedial and reforming acts such as following the instructions of his therapist, reminding himself of the importance of truth telling and so forth. A virtue ethicist would respond that Johnson, too, assumes that assessing these types of actions as failing to be "right" necessarily entails that they "ought not to be done." However, that is a mistake. If he is more careful about the distinctive conception of right action that the virtue ethicist proposes, it should be clear that the virtue ethicist doesn't identify these actions as "wrong" actions that "ought not to be done." They are actions that "ought to be done" although they are not the actions that a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances. The remedial actions of a chronic liar are only not right in the praiseworthy and excellent sense. But note that no sane person would plausibly claim, for example, that the actions of a youngster who emulates his teachers in order to improve his character are things that "he ought not to do". After all, ordinarily learners of virtue will have to perform numerous such actions in order to improve an understanding of what is morally right or wrong or what is acceptable and admirable as opposed to what is shameful and unacceptable. However, what (V1) tells us is that we cannot "assess" the actions of a learner or a novice of virtue as "morally right", not that we can't denote them as actions that "ought to be done." Both the young learner who emulates his teachers and the self-improving liar of Johnson will be doing "what they ought to do" but fail still doing things in the right way as a virtuous would characteristically do.

VE offers us a rich conception of right action which involves not only "outward" actions but also right emotions, right reasons, right attitudes etc. which deserve unqualified approval. So, (V1) tells us that when we assess the actions of the philanderer, the self-reforming liar and the womanizer, we see that they haven't done the right thing, considering the virtuous agent as giving us the standard. But then the question is if (V1) gives us the standard to "assess" the actions as whether they are right or wrong in the sense of "action assessment", how do we come up with the right decisions; that is, how does VE provides us action guidance? Before I discuss the answer to this question in section 4, I want to make two important remarks about the objections.

Both objections make a second assumption which considers rightness and wrongness as dichotomic concepts; an action is either right or wrong and there are no degrees of rightness. They assume that, for example, once the actions of the reforming liar and the womanizer are denoted as "not right" by the virtue ethicist, they have to be assessed as "wrong". The assumption is that if an action is not right as an act that a virtuous agent would do, then it must inevitably be wrong as if for VE, 'an action is wrong if and only if it is an act that a virtuous agent would not characteristically do in the circumstances.' This is a totally mistaken assumption. The question is what is the criterion of a wrong action if "right" and "wrong" are

not binary oppositions in VE? Here is the answer:

(V1) An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.

A corollary of (V1) for the criterion of wrong action would rather be:

(W) An act is wrong if and only if it is what a vicious agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.¹²

VE allows that there is a range of actions that are neither right (characteristic of a virtuous person) nor wrong (characteristic of a vicious person) but somewhere in between. The virtue ethicist wouldn't want to denote the actions of Johnson's self-improving liar as "right," but she wouldn't denote them as "wrong", either. To call them wrong, they would have to be actions that "a vicious agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances." However, given that the reforming liar now does certain actions with the motivation to become more honest, restore his self-esteem and become a better person, they are not actions characteristic of a vicious agent. The self-improving agent or the self-controlling person who adopts the standards of virtue and acts accordingly in order to improve himself, avoid temptation and so on does the right thing in a "weaker" or "thinner" sense as Annas denotes it.¹³ His actions are better than were he to remain a chronic liar. Similarly, although a virtue ethicist cannot assess the action of Das' womanizer as morally right, she wouldn't say the man did something wrong, either. Although he doesn't perform his action with the right reasons and right motivation, with saving a drowning child he does something good. His action is better than were he not save the child.¹⁴

However, Johnson argues that acting to improve oneself, both morally and naturally, seems not to be merely acceptable. He insists that there is, or at least can be, something truly excellent in a moral respect about the reformation of the liar. He admits that the remedial or self-improving actions he mentions are not morally excellent actions characteristic of a virtuous person but still he sees no ground in holding that self-improving actions and the like are not "every bit as morally excellent as any actions that would be characteristic of the virtuous."¹⁵

The intuition behind Johnson's insistence on the moral excellence of self-improving actions might be about the hardship involved, for example in efforts of a non-virtuous person in controlling himself, avoiding temptations, strengthening his will and so forth. Philippa Foot discusses these sorts of actions in *Virtues and Vices* by making a distinction between hardship involved in actions that are due to circumstances and hardship due to a flaw in one's character.

¹² In formulating the criterion of wrong actions in VE in this way, I am indebted to Van Zyl, "Virtue Ethics", 175-176.

¹³ Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 42-50.

¹⁴ It should be noted that this is not to suggest relativism. In order to be assessed as right in full sense, there is only one standard or criterion of right action in VE, namely V1, which should be taken into consideration. However, an action which is not right in full sense as an action characteristic of a virtuous person, doesn't necessarily have to be assessed as wrong. To be wrong the action in question has to be characteristic of a vicious person.

¹⁵ Johnson, "Virtue and Right", 5.

If what makes it hard for a person to act virtuously is the circumstances, then if he acts well, he shows more virtue. On the other hand, if what makes it hard for a person to act virtuously is an imperfection of his character, then he shows less virtue when he acts well. Thus it makes a difference whether the hardship comes from one's immature or flawed character or from the fact that circumstances make it hard.¹⁶ Compare Johnson's self-improving liar's telling the truth with difficulty in a case with someone else who tells the truth despite the political threats she will face if she tells the truth. While the difficulty for the former person derives from his non-virtuous and mendacious character, for the latter it is the threatening political circumstances that creates the difficulty. Once they both tell the truth, intuitively the action of the latter would be more excellent than the action of the former contrary to what Johnson thinks.

Now, if (V1) rather functions as an action assessment criterion in VE, how could the self-improving liar or the womanizer that saves the child decide what is the right thing to do? To what extent can VE provide action guidance to non-virtuous agents? This will be the topic of the next section.

4. Right Action as Action Guidance

A virtue ethicist at this point has to respond to two closely related questions in order to show that VE is capable of providing action guidance. The first concerns epistemic problems a non-virtuous agent might confront while trying to figure out who is a virtuous agent or which actions are virtuous. Louden, another critic of VE, voices this worry in relation to (V1) and objects that if we are told that a right action is what a virtuous agent would do, there will be serious epistemic problems for non-virtuous agents. He writes:

We ought, of course, to do what the virtuous person would do, but it is not always easy to fathom what the hypothetical moral exemplar would do were he in our shoes, and sometimes even he will act out of character.¹⁷

The second related question follows this epistemic scepticism and asks how a non-virtuous agent can know what they ought to do in the particular cases. Remember that the point Johnson was trying to make by introducing three cases of a self-improving non-virtuous agents was to argue that all the actions of those agents are right but uncharacteristic of a virtuous agent. In a footnote he stresses that Hursthouse explicitly endorses the idea that seeking guidance in some cases from the virtuous is what we ought to do in certain situations, but she fails to notice the implications of this for (V1)¹⁸. He seems to be implying that although Hursthouse admits self-improving actions that are not characteristic of the virtuous agent are what one ought to do in some situations, she isn't aware that such actions are "wrong" according to (V1). Thus, he infers, (V1) fails to guide a non-virtuous agent in what he does and fails to tell such agents what they ought to do.

¹⁶ Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, second edition (first edition 1978), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 11.

¹⁷ Louden, "On Some Vices," 229.

¹⁸ Johnson, "Virtue and Right," 822.

These challenges to (V1) has led some defenders of VE to abandon Hursthouse's account of right action and offer instead modified version of (V1). They have suggested defining right action in terms of what the virtuous agent would *advise* one to do or would *approve* of one doing.¹⁹ In what follows in this section, I will argue that Hursthouse's account of right action has the resources to sufficiently meet the challenges and thus there are reasons to retain (V1).

As I have already discussed, right action in (V1) is not used in the sense of action guidance; that is, on its own (V1) doesn't tell us what one ought to do. It rather evaluates whether any action in question is right in the sense of a good and admirable deed. However, Hursthouse stresses that (V1) needs a supplement which specifies who counts as a virtuous agent. Without such a supplement, it would seem like a truism that everyone would agree, both a deontologist and a utilitarian.²⁰ Then, the supplement to (V1) is:

V.a. A virtuous agent is one who has, and exercises, certain character traits, namely the virtues.

Now, we know that a virtuous agent is someone with some character traits, namely virtues. But that much still doesn't distinguish VE, say, from deontology as, the virtuous agent can be specified as an agent disposed to act in accordance with moral rules. So, VE needs a second premise that says what a virtue is.²¹ Also observe that the second premise gives us the reason *why* we should do actions that VE enjoins:

V.2. A virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well.

Despite Hursthouse's clear indication that (V1) on its own must not be considered in the case of action guidance, contenders of VE often object to the theory arguing against (V1). However, once we have the second premise which tells us a virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for *eudaimonia* or living well, we get a host of virtues that we should pursue and a host of vices that we must avoid in determining our actions. Now when one is not certain about what she should do, a straightforward way of determining what a virtuous person would do is simply to ask someone virtuous for guidance. Nevertheless, by and large, we don't need to seek for a virtuous person around because it is not great mystery to us what a virtuous person would do. All of us, even if not-yet-virtuous ourselves, have an idea about what a virtuous person does or would do.²² According to (V2) she would do what is virtuous, namely, what is honest, courageous, kind, charitable, generous, and so forth. She would not do what is vicious, that is, what is cowardly, unjust, dishonest, uncharitable, malevolent, unkind, and so forth. Hursthouse writes:

So, given such an enumeration of the virtues, I may well have a perfectly good idea of what the virtuous person would do in my circumstances, despite my own imperfection. Would she lie in

¹⁹ See, for example, Jason Kawall, "Virtue Theory and Ideal Observers," *Philosophical Studies* 109 (2002): 197-222, and Valerie Tiberius, "How to think about virtue and right," *Philosophical Papers* 35 (2006): 247-265.

²⁰ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 106.

her teeth to acquire an unmerited advantage? No, for that would be both dishonest and unjust. Would she help the wounded stranger by the roadside even though he had no right to her help, or pass by on the other side? The former, for that is charitable and the latter callous.²³

It seems that we have an action guiding criterion (G1) which tells us that "We ought to do what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances" which gives us positive prescriptions such as "Do what is courageous", "Do what is kind" etc. We also have another action guiding criterion (G2) which as a corollary of the former tells us "We ought not to do what a vicious agent would characteristically do in the circumstances." (G2) gives us prohibitions such as "Don't do what is cowardly," "Don't do what is unkind" and so on. Hursthouse calls those prescriptions and prohibitions that have been generated from virtue and vice terms as virtue and vice rules (v-rules) and suggests that VE comes up with an impressively long and helpful list of v-rules, longer than any lists of rules that can deontology and utilitarianism come up with.²⁴ By providing a remarkably long list of v-rules Hursthouse also rejects the complaints that VE does not produce codifiable principles.

Thus, all VE could offer is not to identify a moral exemplar and do what he do "as though the raped fifteen-year-old trying to decide whether or not to have an abortion was supposed to ask herself "Would Socrates have had an abortion if he were in my circumstances?"²⁵ A virtuous agent would perform actions that are in accordance with v-rules and ordinary agents have at least some knowledge of these rules. When we reflect about what to do, it is not true that we reflect in a void as if we have not already acquired certain character traits and have some background moral training. Even if we are not completely virtuous, we typically have at least partially developed some virtues which can aid us in evaluating our situations.

It is a commonplace that we start to guide the actions of our children with v-rules when they are still very young. Such rules as 'Don't be cruel,' 'Don't be so mean,' 'Be kind to your brother' are commonly used v-rules with toddlers, in addition to what Hursthouse calls "mother's knee rules"²⁶ such as 'Don't lie', 'Keep promises' and so on. This fact also challenges

²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁴ In introducing v-rules she has been inspired in by Anscombe's hint that a great deal of specific action guidance could be found in rules employing the virtue and vice terms. (Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, December 8, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>.)

²⁵ Hursthouse and Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics."

²⁶ It seems to me that Hursthouse uses the term "mother's knee rules" to refer to what is often called "deontic rules" or "rules of thumb". The question of "what an ethical rule is" is a very thorny issue. The distinction, if any, between a rule, a principle, a reason is currently hotly debated in the context of particularism and generalism in ethics. Although VE is commonly thought to employ a particularist approach to ethics in terms of "rules," "reasons," or "principles" and thus is uncodifiable, I believe that the generalist-particularist dichotomy overshadow the specific nature of "virtue" and "rules" in VE. The virtue ethicist thinks that there are a variety of possible rules that might be "positive or negative, defeasible or absolute, formal or substantive, vague or specific, justificatory or deliberative, definitive of right action or good action" (see Timothy Chappell, "The Varieties of Knowledge in Plato and Aristotle" in *Knowing What To Do: Imagination, Virtue, and Platonism in Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), for an informative discussion of rules in VE) and VE can accommodate adherence to instances of all these sorts of rules. Some virtues might demand following substantive, specific rules such as "Do not steal" and some may even demand adherence to absolute rules which are uncompromising such as a rule against rape or torture. What determines whether a rule is an absolute, or just *prima facie* or *ceteris paribus* will depend on the particular virtue. Different virtues might require different sorts

the contenders who claim virtue and vice vocabulary and the rules generated from them are too "thick" for children to grasp and respond properly. Although v-rules are applied heavily in giving guidance to actions of children and learners of virtue in ordinary life, there seems to be a bias on the side of dominant moral theories which set a secondary place to virtue, generally that of being an ideal to aspire to. However, VE doesn't have to exclude the "mother's-knee rules" or "rules of thumb" that provide guidance to children and learners of virtue. While according to deontology, I must not tell this lie because, applying the (correct) rule 'Do not lie' to this case, I find that lying is prohibited. According to VE, I must not tell this lie because it would be dishonest to do so, and dishonesty is a vice.²⁷

In the previous section recall that we saw that right and wrong actions are not thought to be exclusive but that VE allows for a range of actions that lie somewhere in a continuum between what is right (virtuous) and what is wrong (vicious) action. Hursthouse writes that "grammatically, 'virtue,' and the terms for the individual virtues, accept a whole range of qualifications — 'quite V, admirably V, for his age/for her time/in his society/given her disadvantages' — where the qualifications enable us both to give credit where credit is due but also to register the point that the ideal standard has not yet been met."²⁸ Accordingly in the case of action guidance, VE enjoins a range of right actions taking into consideration the age, the ethical competence level, the peculiarities of an agent and so on.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle provides some practical guidance to people who either by their (first) nature or later by habituation have acquired "bents" in their character. He advises that they should by counter-habituation correct or eliminate them by pulling themselves forcefully away in the contrary direction from the error in order to reach the intermediate; they should guard against pains and pleasures — "For moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones"²⁹ and so on. He argues that it is "right" for young people to be prone to shame. Since they live by their feelings, and thus frequently go astray, shame helps to restrain them from doing disgraceful acts. So, shame turns to be a feeling that "ought to be felt" at the young ages and thus deserve praise.³⁰ Also, the young person who learns to acquire virtue ought to develop a love of doing what is *kalon* (beautiful, admirable) and a strong aversion from its opposite, what is *aischron* (shameful and ugly). He also adds that doing what is *kalon* is difficult³¹ and because people typically averse embracing difficulties, that explains the scarcity of virtue.³² Even though none of these self-improving actions or emotions are characteristic of the virtuous agent, they are still actions and emotions that a learner of virtue ought to take heed of. The actions that will be performed by the re-forming agents such as Johnson's chronic liar

of rules. So, before investigating particular virtues, the particularistic or generalistic character of rules in VE cannot be decided *a priori* and if I am at least right to a certain extent about the status of rules in VE, that might be a reason to think that the particularistic and generalist debate is not of much help to VE.

²⁷ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 39.

²⁸ Rosalind Hursthouse, "Are virtues the proper starting point for morality?" in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory* ed. James Dreier (MA: Blackwell, 2006), 105.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. T. Irwin (Indianapolis: IN, Hackett, 1985), 1104b4-1104b12.

³⁰ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1128b19-21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1106b28-33, 1109a24.

³² *Ibid.*, 1104b10-11.

or self-controlling person will enable them to distance themselves from the extreme ends which are vices and approximate the right mean which is virtue, given that for Aristotle, the right way of doing things lies between two corresponding and opposed wrong ways of doing them.

In this light, it becomes clear that most of the time a self-improving and non-virtuous agent will primarily has to avoid doing what would be characteristic of a vicious person in the circumstances (G2) by trying not to lie, controlling one's cowardly feelings, avoiding temptations and so on. While gradually refraining from what would be characteristic of the vicious person and tending towards the actions that would be characteristic of the virtuous person, a non-virtuous person adopts virtue terms as the standards of action for himself. Accepting virtues as standards as one's own is similar to a point that Donald Davidson makes when he mentions accepting standards of practical rationality as one's own. According to Davidson, "to accept such standards is to accept, say, the rationality of all-things-considered judgment as a principle of one's own."³³ Johnson's self-improving chronic liar adopts the standard of honesty when he decides to refrain from lying, improving his self-esteem and thus become a better person. Whenever he refrains from lying and observes the effects of his action on the other people, his actions gradually start to resemble to the actions of the honest person. So, a host of actions is enjoined by v-rules as the right actions that ought to be done. Note that it is the *virtues* that makes demands on us and guide us rather than VE as a theory. That is why Solomon says, "The task of an EV [Ethics of Virtue] is not determinately to guide action; that task is left to the virtues."³⁴

5. Further Objections about Action Guidance

It might be argued that although a non-virtuous agent has at least some knowledge of what virtuous and vicious actions are, they might be puzzled about how to apply the v-rules and determine what to do in some difficult situations. First, the virtue ethicist will respond that we must not assume a non-virtuous or ordinary person would readily decide what she should do in a highly demanding case. Why should we assume that ordinary agents who have limited wisdom and virtues will be able to apply v-rules easily? Additionally, this objection calls for a *tu quoque* response, as well. The application problem is common to other competing theories, too. For example, the rule, "Tell the truth," is not always easy to apply; to whom, to what extent and so on are questions we often grapple with. Leaving aside the difficulty of applying their rules by ordinary people, deontologist and utilitarian theorists themselves do not agree on how to apply those rules in difficult cases. For example, although Kantians or utilitarians might come to have theoretical agreement about certain principles and rules, they can still have practical disagreement about how to apply those rules and principles in such difficult and controversial cases as abortion, the use of nuclear weapons and so on.³⁵

Next, the virtue ethicist can also tell a positive story which is indeed closely related to the former response. Aristotle famously argued that one can become good and virtuous in the

³³ I borrow this analogy from Russell, "That ought does not," 314.

³⁴ David Solomon, "Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 no. 1 (1998): 437.

³⁵ Solomon, "Internal Objections," 438.

proper sense by a combination of three things: nature, habituation and reason.³⁶ He thought that although we are not good or virtuous by nature, we possess some capacities that push us towards being good or virtuous. The most fundamental of all that we are innately endowed with is our capacity to become rational. Virtues of character which are not capacities but dispositions³⁷ are acquired initially by habituation and training. However, in the person who is good *without qualification* the virtues of character and practical intelligence exist together as it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical intelligence nor practically intelligent without virtues of character.³⁸ And that is the contribution of reason in the trio to become virtuous in the proper sense. So, in order to be virtuous and develop competency in identifying what is right or wrong thing to do and be able to apply them in particular cases, there is no short cut answer or manual that helps. It is an ongoing process of learning which starts in childhood and continues all one's life.

As I already noted above, we are not raised in a complete void and when we start to reflect about ethical questions, we have already developed at least some knowledge of the content of virtue or vice terms due to our moral training. If one still contends that a yet non-virtuous person may not know which character traits are virtuous and what their specific contents or shapes are, Aristotle gives the answer with his trio of "nature, habituation and reason." It is true that we must act as the virtuous person acts and emulate her actions. However, as virtue is not a "single-track" disposition to act in certain ways, but a "multi-track" disposition which is "holistic and inclusive of judgement, emotion and manner as well as action,"³⁹ no merely behaviouristic endeavours to repeat the actions of the virtuous would be sufficient. The emotional and motivational make up of an agent that is constitutive of virtues will take a lot of work and effort that also involves reflection and understanding of reasons and requirements of particular virtues.

Yet, I can still hear the objector's complaining about the "habituation" part. "You are just evading the question and you don't tell us how specifically one can identify who is the virtuous person in the first place so that one can emulate his actions and perhaps more seriously why one should trust her."

Although I cannot discuss it in detail in the context of this paper, a virtuous person would be someone who possesses a "special moral knowledge"⁴⁰ that involves rules and principles.⁴¹ Thus, when we want to investigate whether one is a reliable moral advisor or not, the virtuous person in question cannot just reply with remarks such as "my phronesis tells me so, or I just intuitively know it." He would rather give us reasons and explanations as justification of his decisions or actions. On the other hand, there is a biased view which is held by opponents of VE about the knowledge of the virtuous person and the justification he can

³⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b31-1864.

³⁷ In Aristotle, natural capacities (*dynamis*) come prior to their active realization whereas states or dispositions (*hexis*) are result of habituation and training.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1144b30-1145a6.

³⁹ Kristjan Kristjánsson, "An Aristotelian Critique of Situationism," *Philosophy* 83, no. 1 (2008): 55-76.

⁴⁰ See Chappell, "The Varieties," and Rosalind Hursthouse, "What does the Aristotelian phronimos know?" in *Perfecting Virtue* ed. Lawrence Jost and Julian Wuerth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴¹ See the footnote 25 on the relation of rules to virtues.

provide for his decisions and actions. Johnson for instance, makes an analogy between a virtuous person and a native speaker of a language. Just, as a native speaker would lack explicit knowledge of the grammatical rules of her language, he argues a virtuous person would merely know intuitively how to act and respond but lack explicit moral knowledge of principles and rules.⁴²

The conception of virtue Johnson and many other have in mind could be what the virtue ethicists and Aristotle call natural virtue or perhaps is one of the pre-theoretical and common-sense conception of virtue according to which virtue is not to require knowledge or intellectual understanding but just require intuitive responses to particular situations.⁴³ However, virtue in the strict or proper sense is not possible without practical wisdom as I briefly mentioned above. Although a complete codification of all his reasons and principles may not be possible — then one could become virtuous simply by attending lectures and by arguments not by acting in virtuous acts — a virtuous person can justify his actions and decisions with reasons and principles. Virtue is not a blind habit, yet habituation is a mere aid to become virtuous. Recall Aristotle’s trio of “nature, habituation and reason” in the context of virtue proper. Hence, it would be too quick and biased to make an analogy between the virtuous and a native speaker who lacks any explicit knowledge of grammatical rules. The fact that the virtuous person possesses practical wisdom which involves reasons and understanding of why she decides or acts in such and such ways and can justify her decisions and acts accordingly, provides us another reason in believing that identifying who is virtuous, what character traits are virtuous is not an enigma.

As to the question of the reliability of the virtuous person, a paradox can be posed here. One can argue that establishing the reliability of an agent often involves getting a “track record” for that agent which establishes that the agent has been successful in ethical issues in the past. However, in order to establish that one has been successful, one must already be able to detect the relevant moral truths. Either one cannot establish that, or one has no need to appeal to someone else’s wisdom.

First of all, it is not clear to me why one might not need advice if she can ascertain a track record for a virtuous person. After all, one might be a good moral judge with respect to certain ethical matters and values and develop track record based on that knowledge, and yet ask for guidance on a matter outside those matters and values. Second, one can come to know about an advisor and that she is reliable on the basis of testimony. Although it might not be a basic source of knowledge, we often appeal to testimony to expand our knowledge and answer our moral (and perhaps more, non-moral) questions. On the other hand, we don’t have to assume that we have to establish the reliability of a moral advisor fully before we ask for guidance. We often don’t require to establish the reliability of our sources. If knowing p by a source S required first that we establish the reliability of S, then that would in return require that we know of its sources that S’ that it was reliable and that would end in a vicious circle

⁴² Johnson, “Virtue and Right,” 823.

⁴³ See T. Irwin, “The Virtues: Theory and Common Sense in Greek Philosophy” in *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues* ed. Roger Crisp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

which would make knowledge impossible and lead us into scepticism.⁴⁴

In the rest of the paper I will try to argue that the virtue ethical conception of right action and action guidance makes VE more compelling as a normative theory due to some structural advantages built into it.

6. To be Realistic is a Virtue

In what follows I want to argue that the virtue ethical theory of right action and the distinction that it introduces between action guidance and action assessment is not a "sign of theoretical desperation"⁴⁵ and a concession on the part of virtue ethicist as some argue, but rather a merit of VE.

It is usually thought that we can distinguish two roles that ethical theories have: a theoretical one and a practical one.⁴⁶ The theoretical role is supposed to provide an account of rightness and wrongness of actions.⁴⁷ The practical role is thought to guide judgment or action.⁴⁸ However, it is thought that the theoretical and the practical roles are distinct and there isn't a necessary connection between them. According to this picture a theory can fulfil one of the roles without fulfilling the other. For example, according to many act consequentialists, this approach provides the best theory of right action, yet it doesn't offer action guidance. On the other hand, one can provide moral guidance or advice without committing oneself to a particular theory of right action. There are examples of this in applied ethics literature.⁴⁹ The idea is that "an explanation of what makes right acts right need not help us determine which acts to perform, and a statement of moral advice need not explain what makes right acts right."⁵⁰ Thus, it is not incoherent to ignore or discount the practical aim in evaluating ethical theories.

Moreover, one can argue that to treat the claim that an ethical theory gives insufficient guidance for doing what we ought to do as an objection is to rely on a norm for evaluating ethical theories which states that other things being equal, ethical theories are better to the extent that they provide moral guidance.⁵¹ Given that there is no necessary connection between

⁴⁴ I am indebted to Robert Howell, "Google Morals, Virtue, and the Asymmetry of Deference" *Noûs* 48, no. 3 (2014): 389-415, in forming what I say in this paragraph.

⁴⁵ Even after VE explicitly make it clear in what ways it provides action guidance, there are many writers like Das who find those explanations unsatisfying. The reason underlying their dissatisfaction might be based on an assumption which virtue ethicist doesn't share. Perhaps they assume that there is a single "right-making feature" which all right actions have in common as opposed to the pluralist view VE hold.

⁴⁶ See Uri D. Leibowitz, "Moral advice and moral theory," *Philosophical Studies* 146, no. 3 (2009): 349 – 359 and Pekka Väyrynen, "Ethical theories and moral guidance," *Utilitas* 18, no. 3 (2006): 291-309.

⁴⁷ VE actually finds this theoretical role quite narrow. Whereas the critics of virtue ethics are more rigorous about developing ambitious action guidance and problem resolving tools in their theories and focus on right action, VE is more rigorous about reflecting and developing ambitious action guidance and problem solving tools that pertain to specification of what is good, worthwhile in life and how they could be attained by such beings as human who have certain capacities, needs and limitations, both individually and socially. See E. Pincoffs, *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics*, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1986) for an influential discussion of different theoretical roles assigned to ethics by modern theories and VE.

⁴⁸ Leibowitz, "Moral Advice," 350.

⁴⁹ See Philip C. Hébert, *Doing right: A practical guide to ethics for medical trainees and physicians*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996)

⁵⁰ Leibowitz, "Moral Advice," 351.

⁵¹ I am much indebted with what I say in this and the following paragraph to Väyrynen, "Ethical Theories."

the practical and theoretical roles of ethical theories, an ethical theory may satisfy this guidance constraint even if its theory of right action does not directly provide useful direction. The criterion or standards of right action a theory provides might be complex or difficult to apply, yet the theory can satisfy the constraint by providing surrogate devices that can be followed in some ways. For example, utilitarians often think that since human beings are prone to make mistakes in utility calculations, following common sense moral precepts or rules such as "Don't lie," "Keep promises" etc. provide us with a more liable strategy to maximize utility as they approximate the principle of utility. So, it can be argued that while following utilitarian principles itself is not an available or feasible strategy for acting well, utilitarianism indirectly satisfies guidance constraint.

Concerning VE two things are relevant here. One is about the adequate indirect guidance it provides and the other concerns the diversity of strategies that come as a result of this indirectness in guidance. Given that action guidance and action assessment may come apart in some cases in VE, it might be thought that VE also provides action guidance indirectly. For example, as a self-improving liar when I want to perform some acts in order to become a better person, what I ought to do will not be actions that a characteristically virtuous person would do in the circumstances but still I will have done what I ought to do. By reminding myself about the importance of truth telling, by writing down the lies I have told or by asking for advice to a therapist I will do the right actions that will pull me away from dishonesty, which is a vice and drag myself on the direction of honesty which is a virtue. I will follow virtue-rules such as "Do what is honest" "Do what is kind" and adopt virtue terms as the standards by which to act. I will refrain from vices that are prohibited by vice-rules such "Don't do what is dishonest," "Don't do what is unkind," and so on. Also, recall that, in the case of children and learners of virtue, VE stresses the significance of appealing to "mother's knee rules" or "rules of thumb" such as "Don't lie," "Keep promises" etc. as much as v-rules.⁵² Moreover, in particular difficult cases one can consult the virtuous person. It seems that by making a distinction between the assessment of right action and action guidance VE provides indirect guidance and since providing indirect guidance can be an adequate way of fulfilling the guidance constraint, VE seems to be providing adequate guidance. So, as a theory in which action assessment and action guidance may come apart, VE doesn't lose anything from its strength but as I will shortly show it has a superiority, as well.

One can argue a plausible condition that a theory which provides adequate action guidance must satisfy is that whether a strategy for acting well is available for use in an agent's practical thinking depends on her cognitive capacities. Since agents differ in their cognitive capacities, a guide that provides useful direction for one type of moral agent might not be useful for another, or useless in one kind of context but not in another for one and the same agent.⁵³

⁵² While utilitarianism applies common sense moral rules and principles as surrogate devices, VE uses "mother's knee rules" as an essential and indispensable source for action guidance with young children and learners of virtue. That points to a significant difference between VE and other moral theories. VE doesn't provide action guidance starting with adult clever agents but rather puts emphasis on the process of learning to be virtuous. It has a developmental conception of virtue and that is why the practical guidance it provides involves a variety of strategies starting with young children and learners of virtue. In this sense it is more realistic than other theories which merely provide guidance to adult and clever agents. See footnote 24 on rules.

⁵³ Väyrynen, "Ethical Theories," 295.

Michael Ridge writes that:

A given generalization can provide guidance in the relevant sense only if it contributes to a reliable strategy available to the agent for performing the right action for the right reasons. Of course, what is a useful heuristic for one moral agent might well be hopelessly complex for another agent. The principles that should guide a small child are likely very different from the principles that should guide a senator. It would therefore be unhelpful to debate whether there are principles qua guides *simpliciter*. We should instead consider whether there are guides for particular kinds of agents in particular contexts.⁵⁴

If Ridge's view is granted and what I argue is correct, the fact that action assessment and action guidance in right action comes apart in VE is not a point to be desperate about at all, but rather an advantage VE has. The fact that VE doesn't merely enjoin the criterion of right action (V) "qua a *guide simpliciter*" but rather also makes use of "mother's knee rules," or "rules of thumb" as much as a host of v-rules and enjoins to recourse to a moral exemplar if there be need, is an advantage rather than a weakness. In this way, VE can provide useful direction for agents with different cognitive capacities and at different stages of moral development. While v-rules and "mother's knee rules" can be helpful for toddlers, children and learners of virtue, application of v-rules and also recouring to a moral exemplar in the case of difficult cases might be more appropriate and useful for older and more competent agents in order to ascend to a more critical level. A fully virtuous person on the other hand, will know and perform the right action at particular cases which, of course, will comply with (V).

To conclude, the fact that action assessment and action guidance come apart in VE and the theory provides different strategies for agents with differential cognitive capacities is not something the virtue ethicist must be embarrassed of at all. If what I have argued so far is correct, it seems that VE can provide a diversity of strategies in action guidance which might be conceived as a merit of VE as a theory.

7. Should a Theory be a Moral GPS?

VE finds the expectation that there must be a single action guiding principle from which more specific rules can be derived problematical for another important reason. Just like asking for advice from others all the time, and relying on the advice they provide on deciding what one ought to do, is a sign of "arrested development", it is similarly problematical when it is an ethical theory which always tells one what she ought to do.⁵⁵ One can argue that following a decision procedure in deciding what to do might show lack of a virtuous character in the first place and on the other hand it might frustrate attempts to develop an integrated moral character.

To shed some light on this claim, let us look a bit more closely at the questions of agents that ask for action guidance and the answers that moral theories provide to those questions. Typically, the agents that seek guidance from an ethical theory ask questions in the form of 'Should I do A?' or 'Should I do A or B?' and the like. According to Leibowitz moral advice

⁵⁴ Michael Ridge, "The many moral particularisms" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2005):83 – 106.

⁵⁵ Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 34.

"minimally...should have the form-namely, perform A if and/or only if Ψ ",⁵⁶ whereas he also admits that there is more to *good* moral advice than having this form.

Consider the following version of act-utilitarianism:

(AU) An act, A, is morally right if and only if A maximizes utility.

So, we could supplement (AU) with the advice, "Perform action A if and only if A exemplifies the property of utility maximization."⁵⁷

It seems that moral theories that assume moral questions ask for such kind of narrow answers in the form of judgment miss something important about moral agency. One can argue that it is not clear or uncontroversial what the expectation of the agent who asks for moral guidance is, to what extent she wants to be told what she ought to do, or whether moral questions always require giving guidance in the form of moral judgments. Yet it seems that most moral theories that criticize VE pretend as if these are uncontroversial questions. The very beginning sentence of G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* points to such attempts in ethics to answer questions without first reflecting on questions themselves:

It appears to me that in Ethics, as in all other philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements, of which its history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer.⁵⁸

Benjamin De Mesel, in a recent work, deals with a question asked by an imaginary agent called Jonathan who asks for guidance in different scenarios from different people. His question is "Should I leave my wife or abandon my cancer research?". De Mesel argues that moral theories usually assume that questions such as Jonathan's require a narrow answer in such forms:

(1) An answer of the kind 'Jonathan should do x', 'Jonathan should do y', 'Jonathan should not do x', 'Jonathan should not do y', 'Jonathan should do both' or 'Jonathan should not do either';

(2) The conclusion that the right narrow answer has not yet been found;

(3) The conclusion that there is no such determinate answer, that Jonathan faces a moral dilemma, meaning that Jonathan's doing x would be equally right or wrong as his doing y.⁵⁹

Most moral theories, he thinks, not only give answers to moral guidance questions in the form of a moral judgement but they also give narrow answers which *exactly* says what the moral agent ought to do. In all three cases, De Mesel indicates, the ideal of a narrow answer is presupposed. The second case, in which no answer has yet been found is often seen as a failure and it is often thought to count against moral theories if they yield many conclusions as in three. That is why many philosophers such as Kant, Mill and Ross have assumed an adequate

⁵⁶ Leibowitz, "Moral Advice," 351.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁵⁸ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (New York: Dover Publications, 1903), 33.

⁵⁹ Benjamin De Mesel, *The Later Wittgenstein and Moral Philosophy*, (Switzerland: Springer, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97619-8>, 148.

moral theory should not allow for the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas⁶⁰ (something which VE allows for).

However, he suggests, moral questions don't always ask for narrow answers in the form of a moral judgement. While there might be questions in which it would be absurd to withhold a quick, straightforward narrow moral answer of the form, "you should do c," it is not always the case. For example, Jonathan might not want the advisor to bring him to the final destination but rather show him paths that he might take; he might want to be told an alternative and a deep understanding of the reasons behind the recommended option; he might want to achieve a deepened understanding of the meaning of the alternatives and so forth. In a realistic scenario, De Mesel thinks, the answer may not be limited to the alternatives John has in mind, "Should I leave my wife or abandon my cancer research?" A good advisor might invite him to reconsider the situation and the way in which he frames it. After all, the options might not be mutually exclusive. Very briefly put, De Mesel argues that answers that are given in such forms as "You should do x", are narrow and closed, in the sense that they leave the agent with no choice, are arrogant (lacks "moral modesty"), and do not respect the moral autonomy of the agent.⁶¹ It is as if the advisor has made the decision for the perplexed agent.

I agree with De Mesel's analysis; I further argue that performing a specific action as right because it is "commanded" or "prescribed" by another agent or a moral theory might have some bad effects on one's moral character. The virtue ethicist believes that the full Aristotelian concept of virtue is the concept of a complex character trait which is well entrenched in its possessor and as one might say "goes all the way down." It is not a single-track disposition to do just particular actions but is multi-track and involves other such actions as desires, emotions and emotional reactions, perceptions, attitudes, interests and so on.⁶² As I noted above Aristotle makes a distinction between natural virtue and virtue proper. According to a virtue ethicist inspired by Aristotle, it is not sufficient to have natural virtue but also one ought to develop an understanding, namely, practical wisdom in order to be virtuous in the proper sense. Once this is achieved, we get what is denoted as "the unity of virtue". So, it is not enough that one has certain virtues, but virtuous dispositions must also be integrated with one another and be unified by an underlying understanding and practical wisdom.

There are reasons to believe that by performing "right" actions on the basis of "what one is told to do" one would lack virtue proper that involves practical wisdom. Even when the action I perform on the basis of what I am told is right that may be sign of something wrong with me as a person. Instead of making my own decision, appropriating what I am told to do might show that I do not have appropriate emotions, and acting on that basis may not guarantee appropriate emotional reactions. That might also show that I already lack virtue. Even when I come to know that "Performing action A rather than B" is the right thing to do, I may fail to have the relevant motivation to act accordingly. So, the motivation is not guaranteed, too.

⁶⁰ De Mesel, "The Later Wittgenstein" 149.

⁶¹ The question of autonomy, too, is one of the most controversial questions in moral philosophy. So, one can object that as long as the agent accepts the decision by his own choice and acts upon it, he acts autonomously. See Howell, "Google Morals."

⁶² Hursthouse, "Are Virtues," 101.

Finally, one can argue that the resulting judgement might be cognitively isolated and not part of a coherent set of moral beliefs in which case developing a deeper understanding that underlies "virtue proper" might be imperiled. Consequently, while all that might show lack of a virtuous character in the first place, it might also frustrate attempts to develop an integrated moral character.⁶³

VE rather grants that the practical role of a theory is not to give "exact", "precise" answers to moral questions of agents. This is an ambitious task that cannot be fulfilled. A good moral theory must rather help the agents decide for themselves, make their own judgments. It mustn't be like a moral GPS or machine that answers every question with a narrow answer that leaves little room for moral agency and less hope in the possibility of developing "virtue proper," that is full virtue.

Hursthouse uses an example of a colleague whose plain-speaking at a departmental meeting is initially assumed to be simply motivated by honesty. But later it is discovered that the colleague is in fact evasive, manipulative in such meetings and his truth-telling on this occasion was motivated by spite. When we re-assess his action which previously struck us as right and admirable, it would now seem as wrong on discovery of his true motivation. She argues "if you press me on whether his action wasn't all the same, right in some way, because honest, I shall say (a) that it would have been right, because honest, coming from, for example, John, but (b) that it wasn't honest coming from him and he would have done better to hold his tongue."⁶⁴ I can use this case in order to point to at least four things I argued for in this paper:

1. Since the colleague does not tell the truth with right reasons, motivation and so forth, his action is not admirable and good and thus not right in terms of action assessment.
2. VE does not understand right action in behaviouristic terms, and because of his spiteful motivations just to upset so and so, the colleague would rather "hold his tongue" instead of "telling the truth." That would be the right thing to do in terms of "action guidance."
3. Suppose that the colleague is not well aware of his spiteful motivations and cannot "fathom the depth of his heart" as Kant would say. And suppose that he didn't know what would be the right thing to do on this occasion and thus wanted to appeal to ethical theories to find an answer. VE thinks that the theories which would simply enjoin the colleague "Tell the truth" on behaviouristic terms would fail to give the right sort of guidance as it seems that the colleague would rather have held his tongue on this occasion.
4. According to VE, after trying to scrutinize what would be the virtuous thing to do and looking through the list of v-rules available to him, if he still cannot decide what would be the right thing to do, he could appeal to a virtuous person. A virtuous person, however, would not tell him exactly what he ought to do and whether he should tell the truth or not. Recall that the virtuous person can be someone familiar to us or someone

⁶³ For a persuasive defense of this view see Howell, "Google Morals."

⁶⁴ Hursthouse, "Are Virtues," 109.

we know on the basis of testimony of others. In however way the colleague knows her, the virtuous person would rather try to help him think better about what to do, perhaps help him “fathom the depths of his heart,” and perceive the case from different aspects and eventually decide for himself.⁶⁵ That sounds very Socratic, doesn't it?

8. Conclusion

In section 3 we have seen that both objections from "moral platitudes" and "right but not virtuous" agent can be responded satisfactorily by VE if the distinction between "action assessment" and "action guidance", "right" and "ought" to be taken into consideration. Virtue ethical criterion of right action (V1) serves as an action assessing criterion and tells us that both actions of the womanizer and the self-improving liar fail to be assessed as right. However, the virtue ethicist doesn't also want to say that they are wrong actions, either. So, according to (W) which is the corollary of (V1) both actions of the womanizer and self-improving liar are assessed as being "not wrong", as they are not actions characteristic of a vicious agent. They fail to be "right" in terms of "action assessment" but that doesn't imply they are wrong, since right and wrong are not a binary opposition for the virtue ethicist.

In section 4 we have seen that the virtue ethical criterion of right action (V1) which serves as an action assessing criterion has to be supplemented with a further premise (V.1.a) that specifies who counts as a virtuous agent and a second premise (V.2) which says what a virtue is. So, a virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, or living well. From these premises we get a large vocabulary of virtues and vices out of which virtue ethicist can generate a long list of v-rules to guide actions. We formulated positive prescriptions and negative prohibitions in the form of (G1) which tells us that "We ought to do what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances" and (G2) which says "We ought not to do what a vicious agent would characteristically do in the circumstances." So, when a non-virtuous agent wonders whether he must write down his lies, go to a therapist for guidance and so on, he will go to (G2) which will tell him to avoid doing what is characteristic of a dishonest person. To avoid doing what is dishonest, all his efforts to pull himself away from dishonesty will thus be actions that he ought to do. Yet, since at the end of the day they are not characteristic actions of a virtuous agent, they will still not be right in terms of action assessment.

Next, in section 5, we argued that there is no much reason to be epistemically sceptical about whether we can identify who is virtuous and how we can know virtuous actions. We argued that moral agents are brought up with a virtue and vice vocabulary starting with very young ages and so they are always already familiar with what is virtuous and what is vicious due to moral education they receive. Also we argued that virtuous person has a special moral knowledge to give reasons and explanations as justification of his decisions and actions. I have argued that despite the reasons I provided, still choosing to be sceptical about the reliability of a virtuous advisor would make moral knowledge impossible and lead us into scepticism.

In section 6, we argued that VE is realistic and advantageous because it provides a variety

⁶⁵ As we admitted above, of course, there might be cases where the virtuous person will provide a quick and straightforward moral answer.

of strategies for guiding agents with differential cognitive and moral developmental levels. Although action assessment and action guidance may come apart in some actions, VE can provide adequate indirect guidance.

In section 7, we argued that providing narrow answers to moral questions that seek for guidance affects in negative ways the development of an integrated moral character. In this sense, by not providing a decision procedure which tells agent what they "exactly" must do, VE gains more point in terms of action guidance.⁶⁶

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