

On Behalf of Biocentric Individualism: A Response to Davion

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Victoria Davion is not terribly fond of biocentric individualism, the position that all living things have at least some intrinsic value insofar as they are living. In her “Itch Scratching, Patio Building, and Pesky Flies: Biocentric Individualism Revisited”¹ she takes the position to task, focusing in particular on my paper, “Reverence for Life as a Viable Environmental Virtue”². Davion levels a wide-range of criticisms, and concludes that we would be better off putting biocentric individualism aside to focus on more important issues and positions.

In what follows I address the worries raised by Davion; in so doing, I further elaborate and defend the position laid out in my original paper. I focus to some extent on her arguments against biocentric individualism in general, as these are presumably of the widest interest. Still, I also address several of her specific objections to my particular proposal for understanding reverence for life, a proposal which draws upon a background normative theory appealing to hypothetical virtuous ideal observers. Finally, while I defend biocentric individualism, I should stress that I defend a quite modest form of the position, in the sense that I see it as only one, comparatively minor, component of an overall environmental ethic. I do not claim to speak for all those who would embrace the

¹ Victoria Davion, “Itch Scratching, Patio Building, and Pesky Flies: Biocentric Individualism Revisited,” *Environmental Ethics* 28 (2006): 115-28.

² Jason Kawall, “Reverence for Life as a Viable Environmental Virtue,” *Environmental Ethics* 25 (2003): 339-58.

position, particularly those, such as Nicholas Agar, or Paul Taylor, who would have the value of life playing a more substantial role in an environmental ethic.³

I

We can begin our discussion by considering certain claims from the abstract to Davion's paper. Davion here makes statements that go somewhat beyond what she explicitly argues for in the body of her paper - though there are clear connections to the claims she explicitly defends there. She suggests that

Examples commonly used in discussions of biocentric individualism are themselves alienating and threaten to make environmental philosophy appear irrelevant to policy decisions.⁴

Davion does not explain what she means by 'alienating', but the suggestion seems to be as follows: books and papers defending biocentric individualism typically include discussion of examples of building patios, swatting insects, or similar such things (which involve destroying non-sentient life) – and these seem quite trivial matters. The examples tend to suggest an implausibly demanding moral life, one requiring us to think morally about actions which most people would take to be quite unimportant. In considering my discussion of such a case, Davion asks rhetorically “Does it matter? Is this really an important and serious moral question?”⁵ There is a worry that if people

³ See Nicholas Agar, *Life's Intrinsic Value: Science, Ethics, and Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), and Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁴ Davion (2006), p. 115.

⁵ Davion (2006), p. 120.

come to think that this is what environmental ethics would require of them, then they would want nothing to do with it – it is too foreign and too extreme (as demonstrated by the consideration of trivial cases).

Three points should be made in response. First, that many people would be disturbed or be inclined to quickly dismiss a view that seems highly demanding does not yet show the view to be flawed. For example, many people might feel similarly alienated if asked to consider, morally, their choice of fruit to accompany their breakfast. “You’re seriously asking me to consider the moral status of eating bananas??” But of course there are significant differences in how various crops are raised (both for workers and the crops themselves), the distances they must travel to reach the end consumer, and so on. There are genuine moral issues here, even if we would expect many or even most people to roll their eyes at what they take to be trivial. What matters more is whether in further discussion they could at least come to see that there might be a genuine concern at stake. People may well not want to have to think about how the money they spend on small luxuries might be better given to a charitable organization; they may feel alienated from a position that would require them to give up eating meat or using animal products from creatures kept in factory-farm conditions. But again, none of this would show that these positions are necessarily mistaken, or that those who would feel ‘alienated’ could not be brought around to having greater respect for the position (and, indeed, possibly coming to embrace it). In my original paper I try to show that many people have intuitions that could be drawn upon in bringing them to a greater respect for, and possible embrace of, a virtue of reverence for life – even if their initial reaction might be highly sceptical.

More importantly, Davion seems to misconstrue the point of such discussions. In testing philosophical theories we often make use of thought experiments, particularly cases where it appears that a view might run into difficulties, or where we wish to see the full implications of a position. Thus discussions of utilitarianism often examine cases where, e.g., a sheriff can hang an innocent man to prevent a terrible riot. And there is a large literature devoted to discussion of runaway trolleys. These are often far-fetched cases, and hardly the sort of situation in which we find ourselves in ordinary life. But discussion of such cases can be helpful from a philosophical perspective as they can isolate significant features of a theory, and provide a good test for its implications and what can be said on its behalf by its proponents. A common worry raised for biocentric individualism is that it will be too demanding, and cases of patio-building (etc.) provide an opportunity to focus on this sort of question. It is not that defenders of biocentric individualism need to think of these cases as the most practically interesting themselves, anymore than a utilitarian is terribly concerned with providing advice to sheriffs in the wild west...⁶

⁶ Davion states that “Biocentric individualism also requires that we worry about patio building” (2006, p. 118); in context it is clear that she finds this problematic. But note that we could raise such issues using any moral theory – at the very least, we can consider whether the time and money spent on a patio a valid use of such resources (especially given potential alternative uses). Strictly speaking, consequentialist theories, deontological theories, and so on would all require us to consider this use of time and resources (or at least would provide assessments of our using resources in this way, even if not being used as decision-procedures). While biocentric individualism requires

Which brings us to a third point. Much of the work on biocentric individualism has focused on responding to various objections to it; and this tends to be theoretical, technical work. But why should this be troubling from a policy-perspective? There is certainly room for more directly applied scholarship (I agree with Davion that such work might be especially welcome); but is there not also a place for theoretical work? I quite agree that my earlier paper would itself provide very little direct guidance to a planning commission, for example. But it was never intended to do so! It is a paper describing and defending a possible *personal* virtue – it does not aim at providing a decision procedure for broad public policy. It is hard to believe that more technical, testing work of the viability of biocentric individualism would lead to a dismissal of the worth of environmental philosophy as a whole for policy-making – anymore than comparatively arcane theoretical work in economics (where there is often significant disagreement, and no immediate policy implications) would lead to a dismissal of the value of economics in general for use in policy decisions. Davion gives no evidence to support the claim that discussions of biocentric individualism have or will in fact lead actual policy makers to dismiss environmental philosophy. She instead seems to simply assume that technical discussion of such matters in academic books or journals will somehow lead to this result.

So what would a virtue of reverence for life require of us? We cannot give precise rules, but in this reverence for life is akin to other virtues. There are no plausible

consideration of factors not always treated by other theories, it is not the case that moral assessment of matters commonly taken to be trivial is distinctive to or a problem for biocentric individualism.

strict rules as to when, how much, and how frequently that one must give to be generous; there are no strict rules governing the affective attitudes that are essential to generosity. Still, generosity is a virtue. A reverence for life might demonstrate itself in small actions, such as sometimes attempting to shoo insects away rather than immediately swatting them. But much more importantly it might also call on us to donate time and money to the preservation of rainforests and coral reefs that are teeming with life. It would encourage a concern with the overall state of the biosphere, a concern that might manifest itself in a wide range of actions (reducing our ecological footprint, activity with local environmental groups, and so on). Davion mentions that many North Americans use pesticides to maintain a certain appearance to their lawns – a reverence for life would lead people to increasingly reject such actions (particularly given the broader impacts on living things through run-off, etc.). A reverence for life might lead us to not blindly cut down trees that have been alive for hundreds of years old without a second thought.

A reverence for life would also manifest itself in other attitudes. As Christine Swanton argues (with respect to the virtues in general),

[The virtues] recognize that we are not only agents who are active in changing the world by promoting good (often at the expense of causing harm), but also agents who love and respect (often at the expense of maximizing good). Finally, they accept that we are not only active beings hell-bent on change, but are also passive in a sense: in our openness to, receptivity to, and appreciation of value and things.⁷

⁷ Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 23.

Thus a reverence for life might lead us to sometimes spend time investigating and appreciating living things – to sit and marvel at the complex workings of an ant colony, to appreciate the beauty of a tree as a living thing, and so on. There would be a general concern with, and appreciation of our complex interactions and interdependencies with other living things. Here we might think of the actions and attitudes of a Thoreau, or an E.O. Wilson.⁸ Again, while there are not strict rules, such that a reverence for life can simply be reduced to a disposition to act in accordance with them, such a virtue certainly does not seem empty or without an impact on our attitudes and actions – even if in a somewhat circumscribed fashion relative to other, more prominent virtues.

II

One of Davion's primary concerns is to attempt to show that contemporary Western attitudes towards other living things are far from anything resembling reverence:

According to Webster's dictionary, reverence is defined as "A feeling or attitude of deep respect, love, and awe, as for something sacred." Frankly, I find the typical lack of concern for living nonhuman beings in contemporary American society, including obviously sentient beings, to be shockingly irreverent. [...]

Even if there is a common intuition that every living being has value, it clearly

⁸ For an excellent discussion of Thoreau through a virtue-theoretic lens, see Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue*, new ed. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006). For more on E. O. Wilson, see his autobiography, *Naturalist*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2006).

conflicts with other intuitions and common ideas about how we should treat living beings.⁹

A number of points are in order here. To begin with, I at no point deny the claim made by Davion in the last sentence of the above; that is, I only argue that many people have certain intuitions that reflect a valuing of living beings simply insofar as they are living. I indeed emphasize that we also possess a wide range of other, conflicting intuitions. My intention was simply to show that there are some widely-held intuitions as part of commonsense morality that could provide a basis for developing a broader reverence for life. Davion presents this as an objection to my view, but it is a point I explicitly accept.

Notice how common such conflict between professed values is – we often claim (sincerely, I believe) that human life is extremely valuable, yet this seems to equally conflict with common, everyday practice. We value human lives, yet people are willing to devote money to theatre tickets (or what have you) that could have been used to save human lives. Some might hold that people must earn their living, and not merely survive on handouts; others might hold that those who earn certain goods have the right to dispose of them as they please; others might hold that the good life of an individual must allow space for some indulgences; and still others may simply have never considered the issue. The point for our purposes is that even with commonly accepted values (such as the value of human life), there are intuitions and practices that seem to be in conflict with our embrace of this value; as such, we should hardly be surprised to find such conflicts in the case of valuing living things.

⁹ Davion (2006), pp. 116-7.

Second, we must be careful to distinguish a reverence for life as such, and a reverence for each individual living thing (I must admit that I do not develop this distinction in my original paper). Davion makes a great deal of the fact that our actions towards individual living things hardly seem to reflect any sort of awe or respect worthy of the term ‘reverence’. But compare: suppose that we attribute a great deal of aesthetic value to Bach’s Brandenburg concertos (perhaps even to the point of reverence...); suppose further that there millions of instantiations of them (concerts, compact discs, as files on computers, and so on). Notice that valuing the concertos a great deal does not require that one also values each cd or concert in the same way. We would not be required to run into a burning building to rescue a cd of the concertos, even if we were to attribute tremendous aesthetic value to the works as such. Similarly then, we are here concerned with a reverence for life, not a reverence for each individual instantiation of life. And just as each cd possesses some limited value insofar as it is an instantiation of the concertos, each living thing possesses some limited value insofar as it is an instantiation of life (this is still a form of biocentric *individualism*).¹⁰ Reverence for life

¹⁰ We might again worry that we are not adequately valuing individual living things. A cd of the concertos does not constantly hum with music - it needs to be placed in a suitable device to arrive at a performance of the music it houses. The cd thus might be seen as having only instrumental value, as an entity that we can use (when combined with suitable technology) to provide performances that do possess aesthetic value. Might living things similarly only house or contain life on the current proposal, and thus only possess instrumental value?

as such is not tantamount to reverence for each individual living thing; how a reverence for life applies to individual instances of life is more subtle and difficult than Davion suggests.

Still, can we make sense of a reverence for life as such, rather than a reverence for particular living things? Remarks by Paul Woodruff suggest that this is possible:

The principle object of reverence is Something that reminds us of human limitations. We speak of reverence to God, to nature, and to ideals such as justice and truth. Reverence towards objects like these yields primarily what I have called awe and it is usually inarticulate.¹¹

To the extent that we allow reverence for such abstract things as truth or justice, we can allow for a reverence for life. Compare the case of valuing a musical work. To say that

There is a significant disanalogy: unlike cds and music, living things fully instantiate life (not just potentially); they do not need to be placed in devices to unlock their life as cds need to be placed in devices to play music. Perhaps a better analogy for living things would be prints of a digital photograph. There is no one print of the photograph that has priority over the others – there isn't an original (in any interesting aesthetic sense), and the prints need not be placed in devices to instantiate the photographic work. Rather, each print will have aesthetic value as a full instantiation of the photographic work – each will share the same subject matter, the same formal features, and so on. Each individual has value, even if this value is limited.

¹¹ Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 65-6. It is worth noting that Woodruff argues that reverence does not require theism or a traditional faith; reverence is possible in a naturalistic world.

we value a given piece does not commit us to the existence of a Platonic form of the work, even if the work is not properly understood simply in terms of a list of all of its performances (including those on stereo systems, etc.).¹² We can value musical works in themselves, not simply their performances, even if we only come into contact with a work through performances of it. We value the performances precisely insofar as they instantiate the work. We value honesty, and not merely its instantiations, as such. We can value and revere life as such, and not only its instantiations. Such reverence might manifest itself in a sense of awe before life itself, and its myriad forms, or in a recognition of our good fortune in the existence of a planet like ours, rich with life. This is not to say that at every moment we are so enthralled; rather, there will be moments of reflection where we are struck with wonder at the existence of life. More generally, we will be led to actions and responses that reflect the value of individual living things as instantiations of life.

Finally, Davion stresses that even if we attribute some minimal intrinsic value to all living things, this would hardly qualify as reverence. Indeed this seems to be at the heart of many of her complaints – that a minimal valuation of individuals does not reflect awe or reverence. While I again believe this to confuse reverence for each individual instantiation of life for a reverence for life as such, it seems we could, in any case,

¹² I believe that we can make sense of a reverence for life as such, regardless of whether we treat life in terms of universals or tropes (of course the precise details of this understanding would depend on the particular stance taken). Only an implausibly stark predicate nominalism would seem to pose a difficulty here. It is beyond the scope of this paper – and, frankly, my ken – to properly defend a particular stance here.

address Davion's worry by simply changing terminology. If she does not believe that the position I defend qualifies as a *reverence* for life, we can call it something else. While I have argued that we can plausibly speak of revering life as such, this is not my primary concern. More fundamental is the claim that we can plausibly attribute some minimal level of intrinsic value to living things (regardless of whether we understand this in terms of revering life) – and she has done nothing to undermine this.

III

Davion next suggests that if we allow trivial human interests to so easily outweigh the nontrivial interests of living things, then biocentric individualism is quite far from common-sense morality:

The intuition that all life has some – possibly relatively little – value is far from awe. Complacency about cruelty to animals or massive destruction of weeds hardly exhibits “awe” for all living things. Thus, even if there is some intuition that life is valuable, if it does not play out in any meaningful practices, if people usually (almost always) allow trivial human interests to trump the nontrivial interests of other beings, the claim that common-sense morality is not far from reverence for life seems just plain false.¹³

I have addressed the claims made in the first part of the cited passage above; the crucial point is that a reverence for life as such is rather different than a reverence for each individual instantiation of life. As to the second half of the passage, I only suggest that there are common intuitions that could form a basis for developing a reverence for life; I do not suggest that reverence for life ‘is not far’ from commonsense morality, as if I

¹³ Davion (2006), p. 117.

expected a widespread embrace of this virtue to happen overnight... More importantly, notice that such trumping also occurs with many other, less controversial values. We value the lives of rational adult humans; yet wealthy people across the world allow such humans to suffer and die, while using the resources that could have saved them for trivial projects – an extra large popcorn at the multiplex for the latest blockbuster, or buying more pesticides for their lawn. I certainly do not endorse such behaviour on the whole, but the point here is that we allow trivial interests to trump even widely-accepted, important values on a regular basis. With respect to living things, we are attributing to them only a very small, minimal level of intrinsic value. So there will be a very wide range in which trivial or other interests can properly trump the interests of these beings. And certainly we should not be surprised if, as a descriptive fact, we allow our trivial interests to trump the interests of other living beings more than we ought to – after all, we already too often allow our trivial interests to trump the interests of other rational humans.

Davion presents a further, slightly different claim against biocentric individualism, again focusing on what she takes to be its minimal demands:

If one doesn't have to consider the moral value of certain beings at all in deciding what to do, then I say that they have no value.¹⁴

But Davion is too quick with this. Consider: every action that you take potentially could eventually impact any human being on earth. For example, the money you spend on a coffee is money not given to your friends, your family, a neighbour, or a stranger in a refugee camp. You could choose to send this money to any of over six billion morally

¹⁴ Davion (2006), p. 120.

valuable humans at any time. You could send it to me. How might your having a bagel impact upon the citizens of Mumbai (assuming, especially, if you are not a resident of the city)? Surely you do not need to take into account all of these individuals in every deliberation about what to do next (you would be frozen in place, calculating...); but just as surely, this does not show that these humans have no value! True, you could potentially take any of these humans explicitly into account (perhaps if you were to become more fully aware of them); but then again, it would also be open to you to devote more attention to the interests of various non-sentient beings (if you were to become more fully aware of them).

The objection might be pressed further. Perhaps Davion worries that while there are circumstances under which, for any human person, we must take that person into account morally, there do not seem to be similar circumstances for all living things. For example, while you might not need to take Claire Kalamata of 123 Main St., Springfield into account in the vast majority of your deliberations, we can easily imagine circumstances where you would need to take her into account – perhaps if you were interacting with her on a street corner. But are there ever circumstances where you must take into account any particular *Beta thetaiotaomicron* bacterium in your digestive tract? Here we can imagine cases, if rather far-fetched – perhaps if this bacterium were placed on a microscope slide, and you were to have the option of squishing and killing it for no reason other than to kill it. To the extent that there such circumstances (even if highly unlikely), Davion’s worry does not strictly apply. More importantly, though, is the following: the mere fact that we, as humans, almost never take a certain entity into

account as we deliberate upon what to do (and are not required to), does not yet show the entity to entirely lack value, moral or otherwise.

Drawing upon an analogy with aesthetic value might be helpful here. Aesthetic value is often appealed to by environmentalists in explaining why we ought to protect species, ecosystems, individual creatures, and so on. But while we take aesthetic value to be relevant in making policy decisions, we often cannot help but destroy entities with aesthetic value with our actions – and for many instances of such value, we do not seem to be required to take the value explicitly into account in our practical deliberations. Consider snowflakes, sugar crystals, and various microorganisms: upon close examination we often find entities with just as much aesthetic value as many paintings, trees, or other large objects. These happen to be very small entities, and ones that we, as humans, cannot easily take into account in our actions and deliberations, and typically are not required to explicitly consider in our practical deliberations – but this does not show them to lack aesthetic value. It instead shows that it can be very difficult for humans to act on the value that these entities possess. Thus we do not find a problem unique to biocentric individualism; it emerges equally with respect to aesthetic value, a form of value that Davion seems willing to acknowledge.

Davion's view, if applied to the case of snowflakes and other small but apparently aesthetically valuable entities, would seem lead to the claim that there is no such thing as aesthetic value, given how easily and constantly we ignore it. Perhaps we could modify Davion's view, and instead claim that snowflakes and other small entities lack aesthetic value, while holding that aesthetic value is genuine (as we do appreciate it in paintings, landscapes, large creatures, and so on). But a denial of aesthetic value to small entities is

implausible – our problem is rather that there are beautiful entities that are small, extraordinarily plentiful, and fragile; snowflakes are often beautiful, even if we cannot act on this beauty as we might for larger entities.¹⁵ Put otherwise: it is more plausible to hold that here we have a case where there are limitations to the ways in which humans can acknowledge or act upon certain kinds of value in certain kinds of entity, rather than denying that these entities in fact have these values. If we were the size of insects we would have far fewer problems acknowledging this value... The current proposal is quite similar. We have living beings that have some small degree of intrinsic value insofar as they are living things. Given their size, fragility, and plenitude, we humans can only acknowledge their (limited) value in restricted ways, and typically are not required to explicitly take such value into account in our deliberations. But also notice how, as with aesthetic value, we more easily embrace this value with larger living things – 100 year old turtles, massive redwoods, and so on. Our interest in (and valuing of) these entities seems to be grounded, at least in part, by the very fact that they are *living* things.

IV

We can consider a final general worry raised by Davion, before turning to her arguments against my particular account of biocentric individualism:

I was under the impression that biocentric *individualism* is the position that each individual being has value. Hence, it would seem that in my encounter with each “pesky fly” I am either violating a duty not to harm *that* fly or I am not. In each

¹⁵ I do not mean to suggest in these passages that beauty is the only aesthetic value, or that the terms can be used interchangeably – I simply appeal to beauty as a property commonly accepted as aesthetically valuable.

situation I am either violating a duty or I am not. It is difficult to understand how my behaviour in some later situation (or an earlier one) with a different fly can impact on my duty in this situation. We cannot have it both ways. Either reverence for life requires that I refrain from killing flies in a series of identical situations or it doesn't¹⁶

Again, several points are in order. First, Davion presents us with a false dilemma – that either we have a duty in each particular case not to harm a given fly, or it is acceptable in each. But why could we not have a duty to occasionally not harm flies over the course of several instances? We might compare here Kantian imperfect duties – Davion seems to entirely overlook duties of this kind. Imagine a friend is going through a difficult time, and would like to meet to talk; assume that, as a friend, you ought to meet with her. Davion would have us examine each evening separately – either you have a duty to meet with your friend each and every evening, or you have no duty to do so. Surely this is implausible. Notice that your behaviour in one case can be relevant to what is required of you in other cases. If you have met with your friend for the past three nights, this is relevant to whether you are again obligated to meet with her this upcoming evening; similarly, you might not be failing to meet your general obligation here if you do not meet with your friend right away if you instead meet with her the following evening or the day after. It is much more plausible to hold that you ought to meet with your friend a few times over the next couple of weeks, rather than taking on an extraordinarily atomistic view which fails to take into account past or future behaviour. Davion assumes that each night of encounters with pesky flies is identical, but this is not so, just as

¹⁶ Davion (2006), p. 118.

whether you are obligated to meet with your friend tonight might depend on whether you met with her last night, or have made plans to meet with her tomorrow. We need not look at each evening in isolation.

Davion could point to a disanalogy here – in the friendship case, we are fulfilling a duty to the same friend with our various meetings, whereas in the case of pesky flies we are dealing with different flies. Simply put, it does not benefit fly A a great deal for a person to swat A, while sparing the life of fly B the following evening... But compare the following: suppose that each day over the course of a week a representative from a different reputable charity arrives at your doorstep requesting a donation. Assume further that those who would be helped in each case would be different – if you give to CARE certain people in one country will be helped, while if you give to OXFAM a different set of people in a different country would be helped. Surely your behaviour in “in some later situation (or an earlier one)” can impact upon your duty in each case, contrary to Davion’s claims. Assume we have a general duty of benevolence to help others (though this need not be an overriding duty). On Davion’s approach, it would not matter whether you have given every day during the week to various charities – this would be irrelevant to whether you must give on the last day. But could we not properly say on the last day “I would like to help, but I’ve already given substantial amounts to several other organizations this week”? And this seems to be so, even if different people would have been helped by our aid on this last evening. There are costs to giving to charitable organizations, and presumably there are limits to how much we are required to give. Similarly, there are costs in frustration (which may lead to other harms) to sparing flies.

Frustration may not be a significant cost, but then again, we are only attributing a minimal value to living things as such.

We might press her objection further. While we might excuse not giving to a charity by noting that we have given to others, it will not do to hit someone in the face, and justify this by saying “True, I hit you in the face – but I’ve already refrained from hitting several other people in the face this week”. Similarly, it might seem that we cannot justify swatting a particular fly on the basis that we have refrained from swatting several others this week.

But even if we were to accept such reasoning, we can again argue that a duty not to swat particular flies (as intrinsically valuable individuals) is a weak duty, often outweighed by other morally relevant concerns. Your interests as rational autonomous being (in reading, in completing a paper, avoiding severe frustration, etc.) could override those of a fly buzzing around to the extent that the fly has only little intrinsic value, and the presence of the fly is making it difficult to engage in valuable activities over a prolonged period of time, cannot be shooed away, and so on. Still, a reverence for life would encourage us to sometimes tolerate such pesky flies, even if they are nuisances (and again, we should not expect a strict rule here as to how often).

V

We can now turn to Davion’s critiques of my particular account of reverence for life, an account that makes use of a broader mixed ideal observer / virtue theory that I develop elsewhere.¹⁷ In fairness to Davion, I say little in my original paper about how we

¹⁷ See, for example, my “Virtue Theory and Ideal Observers,” *Philosophical Studies* 109 (2002): 197-222.

ought to go about determining what we should do when faced with a morally puzzling situation, and provide only a bare sketch of my overall view; but in fairness to myself, (i) the paper was already at the page limit of this journal, and providing a thorough moral epistemology would have been beyond the scope of the paper in any case, and (ii) while I say little on these subjects, Davion fails to acknowledge the suggestions that I do make, and instead often attributes to me positions that I explicitly reject.

Still, if we carefully filter through Davion's discussion of my position, we do find certain legitimate questions. I give the following account of right action in my original paper:

An action is morally right for an agent in a given set of circumstances if and only if a fully-informed, unimpaired, virtuous observer would deem the action to be morally right.¹⁸

I need to say more to clarify my position, as I omitted certain details that are relevant to Davion's worries. In particular, Davion focuses on the full-information requirement for virtuous ideal observers:

But, how is another human being going to have access to all of my motives, my past patterns of behaviour, and to top it off the ability to see into the future and know for sure what the consequences of my actions will be? Is this a human being I am seeking or is it God? It seems to be a human being if it can become mentally impaired by taking drugs, but the rest of its abilities seem clearly superhuman.¹⁹

¹⁸ Kawall (2003), p. 356.

¹⁹ Davion (2006), p. 122.

So, are the virtuous ideal observers human or not? I in fact agree with Davion that their abilities would presumably be beyond the capacities of a human – though this does not yet rule out the possibility that even with much greater cognitive capacity, that their reasoning could be impaired by various substances, or that they might be coerced, or otherwise be impaired (hence the requirement that they be unimpaired in these ways). To elaborate somewhat, my position is that what it is for an action to be right (or wrong, etc.) will be a matter of the attitudes of such virtuous ideal observers. That is, an action has its moral status precisely because virtuous ideal observers would have certain responses (such as various forms of approval or disapproval) towards it. These ideal observers would not be human (given the various capacities they would require), and are, of course, hypothetical entities.

What, then, are we to make of actual good people on my account, the actual Gandhis and Thoreaus of the world? They would not qualify as virtuous idealized observers of the kind whose attitudes would determine the moral status of actions (as they may sometimes lack relevant information, have character flaws, be impaired in some way, and so on). On the other hand, we can expect that insofar as they are well-informed (even if not perfectly so), and have good characters (even if not flawless) that their attitudes will be reliable (though not perfect) guides to the attitudes of virtuous ideal observers. We can treat them as rough exemplars – we can draw upon their advice, and model their behaviour in developing our own characters, while bearing in mind that they can, on occasion, make mistakes.²⁰

²⁰ I develop this proposal further in recent work. See Jason Kawall, “On the Moral Epistemology of Ideal Observer Theories,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 9 (2006):

VI

Davion launches a further line of attack upon based upon the following passage from my original paper:

Ideal observers who possess the virtues need not appeal to the account of rightness to guide their actions or judgments, just as persons with good visual systems need not appeal to a theory of vision in order to see well. Similarly, we should not expect a virtue theory itself to provide us with wisdom or virtue, any more than familiarity with a theory of vision will in itself improve our eyesight. It is the virtues and the visual systems themselves which guide these agents, not the theories which are built upon their behaviour.²¹

Davion rather uncharitably takes the analogy between possessing vision and virtue to suggest that on my view a virtuous might be entirely unable to say anything at all about why they choose and react as they do – as a person might have excellent vision without being able to explain at all how their eyes (and visual system, more broadly) work. But I do not endorse such a foolish view. Of course virtuous agents can explain, to varying degrees, why they act and react as they do. My point might be put this way. Take a theory of the virtues: an account of what makes various traits virtues, whether they are unified, and so on. Suppose, for example that Rosalind Hursthouse is entirely correct

359-74. The position I develop bears important similarities to the ‘exemplarism’ defended in Linda Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²¹ Kawall (2003), p. 357; quoted in Davion, pp. 124-5.

about the virtues, their relationship to right actions, their nature, and so on.²² (We could equally well assume that Aristotle, Christine Swanton, or others are correct for current purposes.²³) Now notice: certain people will be virtuous according to these accounts – perhaps Albert Schweitzer, perhaps the Buddha, and so on. There are presumably many virtuous people across the world and throughout history according to any plausible theory of the virtues. But equally surely, the vast majority of them will never have even heard of Hursthouse, let alone read her books and articles. The point is quite simple: a person can meet the criteria for being a virtuous person given by Hursthouse, or Aristotle, or whoever, without having read or being aware of the technical theory of Hursthouse, or Aristotle, or whoever. A good person need not be a philosophy major. And, on the other hand, nor does simply reading a great deal of virtue theory make one become a virtuous person by the criteria of a theory. A person can be cruel, dishonest, and cowardly, even if she has read every article and book ever written on the topic of virtue ethics. People around the world can point to basic facts about honesty, and what sorts of features of situations would be relevant to honest people. A just person can give some indication as to why she would distribute goods in a certain way amongst a group of individuals (perhaps one individual has worked harder than the others, and so deserves a greater share). And she can do this without reading massive volumes in virtue ethics.

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²² See Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²³ See Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, or Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985).

Davion develops a related worry for my position, drawing on her misconstrual of the virtue – vision analogy. She argues that on my account we would be left simply blindly accepting the moral judgments of people who claim to be virtuous:

If someone came over to me and told me not to worry because they had perfect moral intuitions, I would run the other way. Mind you that on Kawall's version, this person would not have to have any knowledge of virtue theory itself; they would just have to be moved by the actual virtues. I suppose the person might not even be able to explain to me why I should trust them. Again, this is of no practical help. I call this virtuous observer a "moral visionary." It is extremely dangerous to trust people who believe they are visionaries. In fact, people who believe they are visionaries are often dangerous fanatics.²⁴

To be sure, there is a genuine question lurking in this paragraph: how, on a virtue theory, do we come to identify those with the virtues? There is also the important, related question of what makes various traits virtues or vices. With respect to both questions, different stories can be and have been told; it is beyond the scope of this paper to properly address these questions here. But one thing is certain: no one would claim that the mere fact that a person claims (or even believes) that they have 'perfect moral intuitions' would give us any reason at all to believe that they are actually moral exemplars. No person embracing a virtue ethics has ever defended this absurd position (to the best of my knowledge). Yet this is what Davion has chosen to argue against.

Davion's argument even against this strawman position is rather sloppy. She begins by stating that she will call those who are moved by actual virtues (but who are

²⁴ Davion (2006), p. 127.

unable to explain to others why they should trust them) “moral visionaries”. I might prefer the term “good people who did not happen to be philosophy majors in university”... I have noted above that this already misconstrues my position: I only hold that a person might be a good, exemplary person without a knowledge of technical virtue theory as such – this is not to say that she would be unable to provide some explanation of why she chooses and acts in the ways that she does in commonsense terms. In any event, Davion carelessly shifts from persons who are in fact actually moved by genuine virtues to discussing people who merely believe or claim that they are virtuous. Obviously there a staggering difference between a person who in fact is virtuous and a person who merely likes to think that she is. Yet Davion (apparently) overlooks this.

VII

The main point of the analogy I draw between vision and virtue (in my original paper) is to help to avoid precisely the sort of mistake in interpretation made by Davion: I never intended the criterion of rightness that I describe in my original paper as an exclusive decision-procedure!²⁵ I explicitly state:

The crucial point in response [to worries that the account of right action I give provides inadequate decision-making guidance] is that we – and the virtuous ideal

²⁵ Compare: most utilitarians will claim that individuals typically should not deliberately attempt to maximize happiness in their actions (as this will be time-consuming, perhaps inaccurate, and so on), even though actions are right on such a position to the extent that they maximize happiness. The utilitarian criterion of rightness need not be treated as a decision-procedure.

observers – need not appeal to the present account as a decision procedure. Rather it is the virtues themselves that shape our attitudes²⁶

Davion even acknowledges that I state this: “Kawall argues that his account [of right action] is not offered as a decision procedure.”²⁷ Still she devotes several pages of her article to attacking the position that I explicitly reject, and writes as if I endorse it...

If I am understanding this point correctly, the proposal is that when I am unsure whether a particular action is correct, I can seek out a virtuous observer to tell me. Importantly, this is not a thought experiment in which I try to imagine what I would do if I were a virtuous observer. Rather, I am to seek out an actual flesh-and-blood person to judge for me.²⁸

I am worried about Kawall’s suggestion that we seek the opinion of ideal observers in morally puzzling situations. [...] Even if such people did exist, I find the suggestion that I should go looking for one when I am morally puzzled to be highly problematic.²⁹

Once again, this is not my proposal, and Davion explicitly acknowledges this elsewhere in her paper. I do not recommend that people simply seek out ‘visionaries’ who claim to have moral knowledge.

VIII

²⁶ Kawall (2003), p. 357.

²⁷ Davion (2006), p. 124.

²⁸ Davion (2006), p. 122.

²⁹ Davion (2006), p. 127.

We can now consider what Davion thinks an appropriate approach to moral decision-making (and moral epistemology) would be like, and examine my actual theory and recommendations in light of her suggestions. Davion holds that

We need to teach people to think and feel for themselves, while taking note of good (but most likely non-ideal) examples. We certainly don't want to encourage people to stop thinking and to just take the word of a so-called "visionaries" who "just know" what is right but cannot even explain why! That we are to rely upon such "visionaries" is in my mind perhaps the most dangerous suggestion at all.³⁰

Of course I never make the "visionary" suggestion that Davion attributes to me.

Consider what I actually state in my original paper:

As an agent develops virtues (particularly, the virtue of reverence for life) and gains knowledge of particular situations her judgments will match those of a virtuous ideal observer. We must strive to imitate those who are virtuous, and gain knowledge. [...] Furthermore, notice that we can still make use of various rules of thumb in guiding our behaviour, particularly when we are first developing the virtues [...] We simply need to bear in mind that these rules are not basic, and can be overridden. Thus, even if we have not yet developed the virtue of reverence for life, we can still make use of advice from the virtuous and apply *prima facie* rules. In this way, we will be guided in our actions.³¹

I explicitly emphasize that agents need to develop the virtues for themselves (obviously involving thinking and feeling for themselves), become informed, draw upon rules of

³⁰ Davion (2006), pp. 127-8.

³¹ Kawall (2003), p. 358.

thumb, and take note of good exemplars (and their advice). In so doing we will be guided in our actions. Yet Davion says nothing about these, the proposals I do in fact make (and which capture what she seems to be seeking in the passage from her paper given above), and instead attributes a wholly implausible position to me, the foolish suggestion that we stop thinking and simply blindly follow the commands of self-proclaimed ‘visionaries’.

Davion further develops the same basic worry in the following passage, where she suggests that in order to identify the virtuous, we would require a fairly sophisticated virtue theory:

It seems to me that in order to responsibly choose one of these visionaries, I would have to have a fairly sophisticated virtue theory, and also a picture of what kinds of behaviour a virtuous person would engage in. [...] I have argued that in order to find a visionary I could responsibly trust, I would have to have such a sophisticated understanding of both virtue theory and virtuous behaviour in particular circumstances that it would no longer become necessary to seek out a guide. To my way of thinking this is a very good thing.

Notice first, that the issue for my position is to identify suitable, non-ideal exemplars (who approximate – but are not yet – virtuous *ideal* observers of the kind discussed in V above), exemplars whose advice and judgments can be taken as reliable, but not perfect guides, to the judgments of ideal observers. Note also that this is not a necessary step when faced with a morally puzzling situation – that is, it might sometimes be helpful to seek out an exemplar, or attempt to think in such terms (“What would Jesus do?”), but not always. When you see a drowning child, hopefully you will be courageous and

benevolent enough to simply save the child, rather than needing to puzzle through the issue. And of course, in genuinely puzzling situations, we can think for ourselves, and feel for ourselves, beyond simply seeking the advice of exemplars. We need to develop our own characters.

There is a distinction between a person who is seeking to discover an exemplar and a person who is, in fact, an exemplar. To find a person with exceptional vision might require a knowledge of ordinary visual capacities, some knowledge of the physiology and psychology of vision might help, and so on. But to have exceptional vision would not require such knowledge. Davion shifts from what exemplars would need to know to what a person searching for an exemplar would need to know, with no acknowledgement of the distinction. Things are more complicated in the case of virtues, because (as noted above) the exemplars themselves will be able to make judgements about what is cruel, kind, honest, and so on. But even so, it would not follow that the sorts of information a person searching for a virtuous exemplar would need would be identical to the sorts of information that would be possessed by such an exemplar.

Finally, and most importantly, I quite agree that to identify suitable exemplars we would need some knowledge of common actions virtuous people characteristically engage in, and that a knowledge of virtue theory *might* help to some extent. But a sophisticated knowledge of virtue theory does not seem a *necessary* tool – presumably people have been able to pick out virtuous people for thousands of years, and most have done this without any sophisticated background theory in mind. Commonsense moral practice will serve as a reliable, if imperfect guide. Granted, people will sometimes make mistakes and consider some to be virtuous who are not (or overlook the goodness

of certain others) – but presumably our societies would not survive if we were generally prone to emulating mediocre or vicious individuals. And this certainly has not worked by blindly accepting the word of just anyone who states that she is a moral visionary.

IX

We can conclude with a consideration of a final, rather odd objection that Davion develops:

If the theory of biocentric individualism is meaningless as an action-guiding ethic, it may still “feel good” to say that one has “reverence for all life”. It may cause a superior attitude, and such attitudes are notoriously unhelpful. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt notices that whenever Eichmann seemed to be approaching the idea that he might have been involved in something horrible, he tended to repeat slogans that made him more comfortable. Arendt argues that one strategy of Nazism was to generate and disseminate phrases that gave followers a kind of feeling of elation and basically stopped moral thought. I am not claiming that the statement “all life has intrinsic value” stops moral thought, but rather that it sends it down the wrong track [...] It may feel good, even exhilarating to state it, but it seems of no practical use. It could also lead to practical irrelevance, and be at least somewhat dangerous.³²

It is hard to know where to begin with this. I’ve attempted above to show ways in which, while a virtue of reverence for life is not overly demanding, it does lead to certain patterns of behaviours and attitudes (see section I). Beyond this, at no point do I ever suggest any slogans for people to repeat over and over for themselves! I simply argue

³² Davion (2006), pp. 126-7.

that there could be a virtue of reverence for life that is neither overly-demanding, nor simply empty. It might also feel good or exhilarating to say that one is an act-utilitarian, even if one fails to act accordingly (“Look at me – I maximize happiness!”); I suspect some Kantians might be proud to state that they abide by the categorical imperative, whether they in fact do or not. Yet how on Earth is this supposed to be a problem with these theories? Stating that we can treat all life as possessing some degree of intrinsic value is no more a slogan than is stating that according to hedonistic forms of utilitarianism pleasure is the only state that possesses intrinsic value.

That people can be misguided with respect to a value (or in this case, virtue) does nothing to show that it is not a genuine value. For example, we are all familiar with people who delight in criticizing and undermining others, but who justify this to themselves and others with the claim, “I’m just being honest”. Young men might engage in foolish and dangerous acts designed to impress their peers, thinking “No guts, no glory” – regardless of whether there is a genuine virtue of courage. But what follows? Do we say that honesty is not a genuine virtue as people might misuse rules of thumb that endorse it? Is courage a dangerous illusion that should be rejected because certain individuals misconstrue what it involves? People who believe themselves to be honest, or just, or generous might feel superior to others. And notice that even if they are, in fact, honest, just, or generous, they still might develop an attitude of superiority over others. But again – how does this undermine the status of these traits as virtues? Are they also potentially dangerous in Davion’s mind? Should we worry that endorsing these virtues will lead to Nazism??

Beyond this, it is not exactly clear how endorsing the claim that all life has some degree of intrinsic value could be dangerous; Davion says little to explain what her worry is. Presumably it is something like the following: people might believe that they possess a virtue of reverence for life (and they might be especially prone to err here, as it is difficult to evaluate what is required by this virtue, given its comparatively weak demands), and because of this, and a resulting feeling of superiority, come to ignore more important moral / environmental projects. But obviously, even with traits like honesty, and justice, people can (and often do) believe themselves to have achieved a higher level of the virtue than they in fact have. In turn, this can lead to an attitude of superiority in some people. Again, a person might pride herself on her supposed “telling it like it is” (a misconstrual of honesty) and downplay the other importance of other virtues – failing miserably with respect to benevolence, justice, courage, and other virtues, and indeed failing to be genuinely honest. But what of it? Presumably the flaws lie in such persons - not in honesty, nor in the claim that honesty is a virtue. Similarly with a virtue of reverence for life – if someone is prone to having attitudes of superiority towards others, these can arise from any accomplishments, real or imagined. If anything, a virtue of reverence for life might be less dangerous by Davion’s standards, to the extent that it is quite clearly a minor, relatively non-demanding virtue - people would be hard-pressed to ground general attitudes of superiority on such a thin basis. That some people might still do so would say far more about them than about biocentric individualism. After all, we can equally well imagine a reverence for life encouraging a certain humility in many people – even if they feel they are succeeding with respect to other virtues, it may be humbling to recognize how one’s existence is dependent upon myriad other living beings.

X

I have attempted to show that Davion's critiques of biocentric individualism in general (and of my discussion in particular) are, for the most part, grounded in concerns which I was unable to directly or fully discuss in my original paper; I have attempted to expand on the relevant issues here. But beyond this, many of her criticisms appear to arise out of misreading or ignoring what I explicitly argue for, while attributing highly-implausible positions to me. When we correct these misconstruals I believe that we again find there to be space for a viable virtue of reverence for life.