

Consequentialist Theories of Virtue

§1 Introduction

The view that a character trait's consequences influence whether it is a virtue or vice has been around since David Hume and Jeremy Bentham,¹ but it has received increased attention since Julia Driver published *Uneasy Virtue* in 2001. In that book, Driver argues for a theory of virtue on which a character trait is a virtue if and only if it systematically produces more good than bad in the actual world.² This theory of virtue is a *consequentialist* one because a character trait's producing sufficiently good *consequences* is necessary and sufficient for its being a virtue, and it is an *actualist* one because the relevant consequences are the *actual* consequences rather than the *expectable* consequences. Hereafter, I will call this view, that a character trait's producing more good than bad is necessary and sufficient for its being a virtue, *actualism*.

In "Virtue Consequentialism," Ben Bradley presents three arguments against actualism, each of which reveals that a character trait's producing more good than bad is not necessary for its being a virtue. This leads Bradley to reject actualism in favor of *expectablism*, the view that a character trait's producing sufficiently good *expectable* consequences is necessary and sufficient for its being a virtue.

In this paper, I argue that there is no need for us to choose between actualism and expectablism. In arguing for that conclusion, I contend (i) that there are multiple senses of 'virtue' and 'vice,' (ii) that no actualist or expectablism consequentialist theory of virtue provides the correct criterion for every sense of 'virtue' and 'vice,' and therefore (iii) that,

¹ Hume 1978 and Bentham 1948.

² Driver 2001: 68.

contra Driver and Bradley, both actualist and expectablist consequentialist theories of virtue have a role to play in understanding virtue.

In §2, I motivate actualism and present Bradley's arguments against it, each of which reveals that a character trait's producing sufficiently good actual consequences is not necessary for its being a virtue. Following Bradley, I conclude that actualism is false, but unlike Bradley, I leave open the possibility that a character trait's producing a sufficient amount of actual good is sufficient for its being a virtue, at least in one sense of 'virtue.' In §3, I present Parfit's reasons for thinking that we can and should use multiple senses of 'right' and 'wrong,' and in §4, I argue that regardless of whether his argument works for 'right' and 'wrong,' the same sort of argument does give us a good reason to believe that we can and should use multiple senses of 'virtue' and 'vice.' Because both actualism and expectablism capture important senses in which we can and should use 'virtue' and 'vice,' I conclude that both actualism and expectablism have a role to play in understanding virtue.

§2 Actualism

To begin, let us get a sense for why we might be actualists. Imagine an individual named Helper who is more generous than the average person. Let us call her *fairly generous* and define this character trait as the disposition to sacrifice one's own wellbeing on behalf of others unless the sacrifice is particularly great. Presumably, this degree of generosity is a virtue, and the explanation for this, according to actualism, is, roughly, that this degree of generosity produces more good than bad.

Conversely, we can imagine an individual named Lucky who is more malicious than the average person. Let us call him *fairly malicious* and define this character trait as the disposition to seek and exact revenge for most perceived offenses. Presumably, this degree of malice is a vice, and the explanation for this, according to actualism, is, roughly, that this degree of malice produces more bad than good.

Given that actualism can explain why Helper's generosity is a virtue and Lucky's malice is a vice, we cannot rule it out as the correct criterion for virtue. At the same time, however, we cannot conclude that it is the correct criterion for virtue because there are other theories of virtue, including expectablism, that can also explain these things.

According to expectablism, a character trait is a virtue if and only if it produces a sufficient amount of expectable good, where the amount of expectable good a trait produces is equal to one of the following: (i) the amount of good its agent expects it to produce on average, (ii) the amount of good its agent's evidence suggests that it will produce on average. For my purposes, I'll remain neutral between these two analyses.³

According to expectablism, then, Helper's generosity is a virtue, not because it produces a sufficient amount of *actual* good, but because it produces a sufficient amount of *expectable* good. Similarly, on expectablism, Lucky's malice is a vice, not because it produces a sufficient amount of *actual* bad, but because it produces a sufficient amount of *expectable* bad.

Given that both actualism and expectablism are capable of explaining why Helper's generosity is a virtue and Lucky's malice is a vice, we must look elsewhere for a reason to

³ For the sake of illustration, let us imagine that the amount of expectable good a character trait produces is equal to the amount of good its agent expects it to produce on average. In that case, if a character trait, *t*'s, agent, *S*, believes that *t* is equally likely to have one of four outcomes, *O*₁, *O*₂, *O*₃, and *O*₄, and that the value of those outcomes is -10, 0, +30, and +60 units of goodness, respectively, then the amount of expectable good *t* produces is +20 units of goodness.

prefer one of them to the other. In hopes of doing that, Bradley provides three arguments against actualism.

In Bradley's first argument, he has his reader imagine a world in which Lucky's malice does not have any bad consequences. "[Lucky] is not incompetent, just continually unlucky. His murderous tendencies fail to bring about anything bad in the actual world. But if the bird had not flown just there, or if the wind had not blown just that way, he would have successfully killed many people."⁴ In this world, Lucky's malice does not produce any actual bad, and therefore actualism does not entail that Lucky's malice is a vice. But, of course, Lucky's malice does seem to be a vice, which suggests that character traits need not produce more bad than good in order to be vices.

In Bradley's second argument, he has his reader imagine a world in which Helper's generosity does not have any good consequences. "As it happens, [Helper] never encounters a single person who needs her help. (And not because she intentionally tries to avoid getting herself into such situations.) Thus her generosity never gets exercised."⁵ In this world, Helper's generosity does not produce any actual good, and therefore actualism does not entail that Helper's generosity is a virtue. But, of course, Helper's generosity does seem to be a virtue, which suggests that character traits need not produce more good than bad in order to be virtues.

Finally, in Bradley's third example, he describes a degree of benevolence exceeding that of Mother Teresa. He calls it *super-benevolence* and has his reader assume that it is uninstantiated.⁶ Because super-benevolence does not produce any actual good, actualism

⁴ Bradley 2005: 292.

⁵ Bradley 2005: 293.

⁶ Ibid.

does not entail that it is a virtue. But, of course, super-benevolence does seem to be a virtue, which again suggests that character traits need not produce more good than bad in order to be virtues.

Bradley's arguments against actualist consequentialist theories of virtue reveal that a character trait's producing a sufficient amount of actualist good is not necessary for its being a virtue. Thus, they reveal that actualism is false. It is not the case that a character trait's producing more good than bad is necessary and sufficient for its being a virtue. At the same time, however, Bradley's arguments do not show that a character trait's producing more good than bad is not sufficient for its being a virtue. Thus, it is possible that that element of actualism is correct. Whether a character trait's producing more good than bad is sufficient for its being a virtue remains an open question.

In what follows, I argue that there is a sense of virtue on which a character trait's producing more good than bad is sufficient for its being a virtue and therefore that that element of actualism is correct. To arrive at that conclusion, I argue that we can and should use multiple senses of the 'virtue' and 'vice.' Moreover, I argue that although there is a sense of 'virtue' on which a character trait's producing more good than bad is neither necessary nor sufficient for its being a virtue, there is another sense of 'virtue' on which a character trait's producing more good than bad is both necessary and sufficient for its being a virtue. If that is correct, the disagreement between actualists like Driver and expectablism like Bradley dissolves, thereby allowing consequentialists to better understand virtue.

§3 Multiple Senses of ‘Right’ and ‘Wrong’

Although some assume that ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ have a single moral sense, Derek Parfit argues in *On What Matters* that this assumption is plausible only if we are considering actions performed by agents who know all the morally relevant facts. Given that agents rarely, if ever, know all of the morally relevant facts, however, he concludes that we should use ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in several senses.⁷ “If we don’t draw these distinctions, or we use only some of these senses, we shall fail to recognize some important truths, and we and others may needlessly disagree.”⁸

Parfit discusses three senses of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ at length, the fact-relative sense, the belief-relative sense, and the evidence-relative senses. (Because Parfit focuses, in particular, on these three senses of ‘wrong,’ I will follow suit.) On Parfit’s view, each of these senses of ‘wrong’ is built on the indefinable sense of ‘wrong,’ where an action is wrong in the indefinable sense if and only if it “mustn’t-be-done.”⁹ Thus, an act is wrong in the fact-relative sense if and only if it mustn’t-be-done given the facts. An act is wrong in the belief-relative sense if and only if it mustn’t-be-done given the agent’s beliefs. And an act is wrong in the evidence-relative sense if and only if it mustn’t-be-done given the agent’s evidence.

To illustrate what he has in mind, Parfit has his reader imagine a series of cases in which a doctor is deciding how to treat her patient’s illness. For our purposes, let us begin by imagining a case in which the doctor justifiably believes that treatment A will cure her patient’s illness and it does. In this case, the doctor’s prescribing treatment A is right in all three senses. It is right relative to the facts, the doctor’s beliefs, and the doctor’s evidence.

⁷ Parfit 2011: 150.

⁸ Parfit 2011: 151.

⁹ Parfit 2011: 165.

But we can also imagine a case in which the doctor justifiably believes that treatment A will cure her patient's illness when, in fact, it will not. In this case, the doctor's prescribing treatment A is right relative to her beliefs and her evidence, but it is wrong relative to the facts. So, although there are senses in which the doctor's action is right, there is another sense in which the doctor's action is wrong.

We can also imagine a case in which the doctor would be justified in believing that treatment A will cure the patient's illness but in which she actually unjustifiably believes that it will kill the patient. Because she wants to kill the patient, she prescribes treatment A, but to her dismay, it cures her patient's illness. In this case, the doctor's action is right relative to the facts and her evidence, but it is wrong relative to her beliefs. So, again, we have a case in which the doctor's action is right in certain senses but wrong in another.

Finally, we can imagine a case in which the doctor would be justified in believing that treatment A will kill the patient but in which she unjustifiably believes that it will cure the patient's illness. Because she wants to cure the patient's illness, she prescribes treatment A, and against the odds, it does so. In this case, the doctor's action is right relative to the facts and her beliefs, but it is wrong relative to her evidence.

Parfit is certainly correct to think that we use 'right' and 'wrong' in all of these ways. Sometimes we describe an agent's action right simply in virtue of its having the right outcome. Other times we describe an agent's action as right simply in virtue of its being performed from the right motive. And still other times we describe an agent's action as right simply in virtue of its being right given the agent's evidence.

In fact, it is precisely the fact that we use right in these different ways that leads consequentialists to disagree over the correct criterion for right action. According to some, an action is right if and only if it maximizes the actual good. According to others, an action

is right if and only if it maximizes the expectable good. When a doctor prescribes a treatment that maximizes the expectable good but doesn't maximize the actual good (or vice versa), consequentialists can avoid needless disagreement by admitting that there is a sense in which the doctor has acted rightly and another sense in which the doctor has acted wrongly.

§4 Multiple Senses of 'Virtue' and 'Vice'

Even if there are multiple senses of 'right' and 'wrong,' it does not follow that there are multiple senses of 'virtue' and 'vice.' There might be some significant difference between the way we evaluate actions and the way we evaluate character traits such that we have multiple concepts for evaluating actions but we do not have multiple concepts for evaluating character traits. In what follows, however, I argue that just as the indefinable sense of 'wrong' means something like oughtn't-be-done, the indefinable sense of 'vice' means something like oughtn't-be-had, and just as the indefinable sense of 'right' means something like ought-be-done, the indefinable sense of 'virtue' means something like ought-be-had. Ultimately, therefore, just as the way we evaluate actions is context sensitive, the way we evaluate character traits is context sensitive as well.

Moreover, I argue that actualism and expectablism capture unique senses of 'virtue' and 'vice.' You will remember that in §2 I noted that Bradley's arguments against actualism reveal that a character trait's producing more good than bad is not necessary for its being a virtue. There are at least two explanations for why that would be. One explanation is that there is no sense of 'virtue' on which a character trait's producing more good than bad is necessary for its being a virtue. If that is correct, then actualism is not the correct account

of any sense of virtue. However, another explanation for why a character trait's producing more good than bad is not necessary for its being a virtue is that there is at least one sense of 'virtue' on which a character trait's more good than bad is not necessary for its being a virtue. If that is correct, then even though actualism is not the correct account of all the senses of virtue, it may be the correct account of one of them, in which case it is useful for understanding virtue. My view is that this second explanation is the better of the two.

Now, to determine whether there is a sense of virtue on which a character trait's producing more good than bad is necessary for its being a virtue, we can, like Parfit, set up a series of cases, each of which is subtly different from the others, and consider whether it seems appropriate to say that the character trait is a virtue in certain senses and not others.

Because I have suggested that 'virtue' and 'vice' are used to evaluate character traits in the same way that 'right' and 'wrong' are used to evaluate actions, I will suggest that 'virtue' and 'vice' have at least three senses, a fact-relative sense, a belief-relative sense, and an evidence-relative sense. A character trait is a virtue in the fact-relative sense when it ought-be-had given the facts. A character trait is a virtue in the belief-relative sense when it ought-be-had given the agent's beliefs. And a character trait is a virtue in the evidence-relative sense when it ought-be-had given the agent's evidence. If one of these senses of 'virtue' and 'vice' does not exist, then its use will not make sense, and if one of these senses of 'virtue' and 'vice' should not be used, then its use will not be useful.

To begin, I want to return to the example of Helper. Let us assume that Helper justifiably believes that her generosity will produce more good than bad and that it does. In this case, Helper's generosity is a virtue in all three senses. It is a virtue in the fact-relative sense because it ought-be-had given the facts. It is a virtue in the belief-relative sense because it ought-be-had given Helper's beliefs. And it is a virtue in the evidence-relative

sense because it ought-be-had given Helper's evidence. I think that this conclusion is intuitively plausible. In this example, there is no sense in which Helper's generosity oughtn't-be-had.

Next, let us assume that Helper justifiably believes that her generosity will produce more good than bad but that it does not. We can imagine, for instance, that Helper could not have anticipated that others would take advantage of her generosity or that she could not have anticipated that she would need to be a bit more generous in order to produce more good than bad. In this example, Helper's generosity is a virtue in the belief-relative sense because it ought-be-had given her beliefs. It is also a virtue in the evidence-relative sense because it ought-be-had given her evidence. It is not, however, a virtue in the fact-relative sense because it oughtn't-be-had given the facts. Again, this result seems intuitively plausible. There are senses in which Helper's generosity ought-be-had, but there is another sense in which Helper's generosity oughtn't-be-had. If this is correct, it suggests there is a sense of 'virtue,' namely the fact-relative sense, on which a character trait's producing a sufficient amount of actual good is necessary for its being a virtue.

For the third and final case, let us assume that Helper justifiably believes (i) that her generosity will not produce more good than bad, but (ii) that her being more generous would produce more good than bad. Let us also assume that both of Helper's beliefs are false. As it turns out, her generosity does produce more good than bad. Moreover, her being more generous would not have produced more good than bad. In this case, Helper's generosity is a virtue in the fact-relative sense because it ought-be-had given the facts,. It is not, however, a virtue in the belief-relative or evidence-relative sense because it oughtn't-be-had given her beliefs or given her evidence. If this is correct, it suggests that there is a

sense of ‘virtue,’ again the fact-relative sense, on which a character trait’s producing a sufficient amount of actual good is sufficient for its being a virtue.

I think it both makes sense and is useful to say that Helper’s generosity is a virtue in the second case, where it does not produce a significant amount of actual good, because she justifiably believes that it will. I also think it both makes sense and is useful to say that Helper’s generosity is not a virtue in the third case, where it does produce a significant amount of actual good, because she justifiably believes that it will not. Thus, I assume that there is at least one sense of ‘virtue’ other than the fact-relative sense. This is what Bradley’s examples show us.

What I want to argue, however, is that Bradley is wrong to think that there is no fact-relative sense of ‘virtue.’ The evidence for this is that it makes sense and is useful both to say that Helper’s generosity *is not* a virtue in the second case because it does not produce a significant amount of actual good and to say that Helper’s generosity *is* a virtue in the third case because it does produce a significant amount of actual good.

There are, of course, certain situations in which it does not make sense for us to use certain senses of ‘virtue’ and ‘vice.’ In particular, it does not make sense for us to use the fact-relative sense of ‘virtue’ and ‘vice’ to describe an agent’s character traits until later in that agent’s life, after we have seen the effects of those traits play out. But this should come as no surprise, for the same is true of the fact-relative sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ It makes no sense to use the fact-relative sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to describe an agent’s action until sometime after the action has been performed, after we have seen its effects play out.

Moreover, even if, in cases like the third one, we are more likely to say that Helper’s generosity was not a virtue than we are to say that it was, that alone is not evidence against there being a fact-relative sense of ‘virtue’ and ‘vice.’ It is only evidence for there being a

belief-relative or evidence-relative sense of virtue. Of course, we would want an explanation for why we are more likely to say that Helper's generosity was not a virtue than we are to say that it was, but I must leave that question for another time.

I take myself to have shown that it makes sense to use at least two senses of 'virtue,' but we might still wonder whether these senses are useful. I believe that we should answer that question in the affirmative. Just as our failure to distinguish between the various senses of 'right' and 'wrong' might prohibit us from recognizing important truths and lead us to disagree needlessly, our failure to distinguish between the various senses of 'virtue' and 'vice' may do the same. On my view, this is precisely what has happened. According to Driver, actualism is the correct theory of virtue; expectablism is not. According to Bradley, expectablism is the correct theory of virtue; actualism is not. On my view, both Driver and Bradley are incorrect. Actualism gives us the correct criterion of fact-relative virtue. Relative to the facts, one ought to have the character trait that produces a significant amount of *actual* good. Expectablism, however, gives us the correct criterion of evidence-relative virtue. Relative to one's evidence, one ought to have the character trait that produces a significant amount of *expectable* good. Thus, both actualism and expectablism have a role to play in understanding virtue.

§5 Conclusion

In this paper, I presented actualism and Bradley's three arguments against it. Although those arguments rule out the possibility that a character trait's producing more good than bad is necessary for its being a virtue, I pointed out that they do not rule out the possibility that a character trait's producing more good than bad is sufficient for its being a

virtue, at least in one sense of ‘virtue.’ Next, I presented Parfit’s reasons for thinking that we should use multiple senses of ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ and finally, I argued that we should do the same with ‘virtue’ and ‘vice.’ Because both actualism and expectablism capture useful senses of ‘virtue’ and ‘vice,’ I concluded that both actualism and expectablism have a role to play in understanding virtue.

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