Virtue, Character, and Moral Responsibility: Against the Monolithic View

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Abstract

A traditional tenet of virtue ethics is that a proper moral assessment of an *action* needs to be informed by a view of the *agent*; in particular, a view of their virtues or vices, as exhibited in their action. This picture has been challenged on the grounds that it is revisionary and ill-motivated. The key claim is that we are ordinarily disposed to judge the moral merits of particular actions independently of any view of the character of the agent, and that there is nothing wrong with that practice. In this paper, we identify and criticize a certain view of the nature of character that (we argue) underpins the challenge. We call this a monolithic conception of character. We sketch an alternative, non-monolithic conception, and suggest that when combined with a non-monolithic conception, the traditional tenet can be seen to be neither revisionary nor ill-motivated.

Keywords: Virtues, Character, Moral responsibility, Reason, Explanation.

> *We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game.*
> (Montaigne 2003: 296)

1. Introduction

Virtue terms are used in two ways: they are applied both to people and to their actions. Suppose that you love inviting friends over for dinner and serve them delicious delicacies, promptly share your research insights with your colleagues, and typically think the best of everyone. In brief, you are a generous person, someone who sees the possibility of sharing as a good reason to do so. You display the property of being generous. Yet, generous is also what you do. Your hosting a sumptuous dinner or sharing your insights were generous actions. As Thomas Hurka puts it, "moral thought uses the concepts of virtue and vice at two different levels", a "global" and a "local" one (Hurka 2006: 69).

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How are the two kinds of uses of virtue terms related to one another? According to a venerable tradition, only actions that (in Aristotle's words) "proceed from a firm and unchangeable [virtuous] character" properly count as virtuous (Aristotle 1980: 1105[a]). A 'local' use of a virtue term in appraising what someone is doing or has done is not, according to this tradition, independent of a 'global' use of the relevant term in thinking about the agent's character. This view is widely seen as partly definitive of a 'virtue ethical' approach to moral philosophy. An assessment of the moral merit of an action is supposed to be *informed* by an assessment of the character traits exhibited by the action (see, for example, Hursthouse 1999, Annas 2007). Whether an action is generous depends on whether the agent is. Call this the Dependence thesis.

Despite (or possibly because of) its venerable pedigree, the dependence thesis can look like a piece of philosophical theorizing that is far removed from the way we ordinarily think about moral responsibility. Critics of the thesis often invoke cases in which an agent, for the first time or anyway 'out of character', performs an action that nevertheless merits the local use of a virtue term. We call the intuition that is supposed to be elicited by this style of reflection the 'single instance intuition'. We are particularly interested in two lessons that have been drawn from that intuition: first, that the Dependence thesis is *revisionary*;[1] second that it lacks a convincing *rationale*. Participants in our ordinary practice of holding each other morally responsible, the claim is, are happy to assess the merits of an action independently of reflection on the 'firm and unchangeable' character traits (if any) from which the action proceeds. And there is no good reason, it is argued, to impugn that practice.

Our aim in what follows is to develop a version of the Dependence thesis that is able to rebut both charges. We grant that the single instance intuition has considerable force, but its interpretation is a delicate matter. We suggest that the intuition only counts against overly rigid versions of the Dependence thesis, versions that assume what we will call a monolithic conception of character. We suggest that the central notion we should appeal to in defending the Dependence thesis is the notion of the agent's 'evaluative orientation', and that this leaves significant latitude regarding the nature of character traits (Section 3). We go on to argue that a (non-revisionary) rationale for the Dependence thesis emerges from reflection on the nature of ordinary reason-giving explanations of actions (Section 4).

2. The Single Instance Intuition

Let us start with some examples intended to elicit the single instance intuition. Here are two cases from Thomas Hurka:

[1] Not all theories of responsibility would deny the Dependence Thesis. Real self views for instance maintain that a person is responsible for an action insofar as it is attributable to their real self, display their values. As Susan Wolf puts it (to introduce the view, which she opposes) "an agent's behavior is attributable to the agent's real self…if she is at liberty (or able) both to govern her behavior on the basis of her will and to govern her will on the basis of her valuational system" (Wolf 1990: 33). However, note that the Real self views are in principle compatible with the monolithic view of character, which is our main point of contention in what follows: they can maintain that an action is attributable to an agent only if it displays *robust and stable* dispositions.

> Imagine that, walking down the street, you see someone kick a dog from an evident desire to hurt the dog just for the pleasure of doing so. Do you say, 'That was a vicious act' or 'That was a vicious act on condition that it issued from a stable disposition to give similar kicks in similar circumstances'? Surely you say the former. Or imagine that your companion stops to give $20 to a homeless person, apparently from concern for that person for her own sake. Do you say, 'That was generous of you' or 'That was generous of you on condition that it issued from a stable disposition to act from similar motives in similar circumstances'? Again surely you say the former (Hurka 2006: 71).

The examples are framed in such a way as to emphasize a contrast between the agent's *current motivation*—something that is supposedly "evident" or "apparent"—and their *stable dispositions* for acting in relevantly similar ways, of which we may be ignorant. The agent, in these examples, may well have a stable disposition to act viciously or generously; the important point is that whether they do seem to be completely irrelevant in the context of a local judgement regarding the moral merit of their action. We can put the lesson we are supposed to draw from such examples like this:

(1) We often take ourselves to be justified in judging an action to be generous, in the absence of any independent evidence that the action manifests a stable disposition for generous behaviour.
(2) We would not ordinarily take a single generous action to provide adequate evidence for crediting the agent with a stable disposition for generous behaviour.
(3) Therefore, we do not ordinarily take the moral merit of an action to depend on the character traits exhibited by the action.[2]

The upshot is that the Dependence thesis is revisionary. Or, as Hurka puts it, more bluntly: "too much attention to ancient philosophy can blind one to what I think are obvious facts about the everyday understanding of virtue" (Hurka 2006: 74).

Consider next an example of Rosalind Hursthouse's (one she discusses as a potential counterexample to the view she is defending): "Someone described as 'absolutely ordinary', 'not courageous at all', suddenly 'uncharacteristically' does something quite heroic" (Hursthouse 1999: 157). In this sort of case, it is not that we are ignorant of the agent's character. We know, or anyway think we know, that they are not courageous, yet we supposedly don't hesitate to contemplate the possibility that they may have acted courageously. The intuition can be pressed further by comparing two examples of a courageous action: one that manifests a stable character trait and one performed 'out of character'. Is there any reason to assume the former is more commendable than the latter? Straight off, it seems this would be akin to saying that the cake that you, a skilled baker, just baked is nicer than the one I just baked, which is the result of my first-ever attempt, just because your cake stems from more developed and reliable skills than mine. But if we followed the same recipe to the letter, used the same ingredients, tools and oven, there is surely no reason to think that my cake is any less delicious. My cake is no less good a cake *qua first attempt*. Seen in this light, the Dependence thesis can

[2] McCormick and Schleifer put the argument succinctly: "Can we really even assess whether someone possesses a particular virtue based on one instance? It seems not, but we can still blame him in this one instance" (McCormick and Schleifer 2006: 79).

seem bewildering. In our ordinary practice of treating each other as responsible agents, what seems to matter is the *motive* informing an action, not the long-lasting character traits the action may exhibit. What would be the rationale for withholding praise from an act, merely on the grounds that it was not 'characteristic'?

Our aim here is not so much to resist the single instance intuition as to probe and unpick the terms in which critics of the Dependence thesis interpret it. Once the intuition has been detached from its misleading interpretation, we suggest, it no longer looks like a challenge to the Dependence thesis: on the contrary, it can play a significant role in developing the thesis.

To see that there are grounds for suspicion about the standard way of framing the single instance intuition, consider Hurka's embellishment of Hursthouse's 'out of character' case. Hurka imagines a military committee entrusted with the decision whether to give a soldier a medal for bravery. He asks:

> Would they say, 'We know he threw himself on a grenade despite knowing it would cost him his life and in order to save the lives of his comrades. But we cannot give him a medal for bravery because we do not know whether his act issued from a stable disposition or was, on the contrary, out of character'? They would say no such thing, and they would be obnoxious if they did (Hurka 2006: 72).

It seems intuitive that 'they would say no such thing', and it seems plausible, moreover, that the point tells us something about 'our everyday understanding of virtue'. Yet note that on Hurka's construal of the distinction between local and global uses of virtue terms, the committee could reasonably be expected to elucidate their decision as follows: 'We know he performed a brave act. That is why we are giving him a medal. We should like to put on record, however, that we are not implying that he is a brave person, or even just a brave soldier. The award reflects our local judgement about the act he performed; it should not be taken to reflect any global assessment of the sergeant himself'. Straight off, this seems no less strange than withholding the medal on the grounds of uncertainty about stable dispositions. And that observation also seems to tell us something about our everyday understanding of virtue. It is not just that it would be churlish to make the distinction between the two kinds of judgement explicit. Rather, we would ordinarily take it to be offkey to separate a local from a global judgement: an award of a medal for bravery is naturally interpreted as amounting to both. Consider the awardee's own reaction: he will be inclined to feel good, surely, not just about what he did but also, connectedly, about who he is.

Are the intuitions generated by Hurka's committee example and by our variation on that example in conflict with each other? We want to suggest that they are not. They can be seen to be mutually compatible by probing and dislodging an unargued assumption that informs Hurka's interpretation of the single instance intuition: the assumption that that the global use of a virtue term amounts to an attribution of a 'firm and unchangeable character trait' or a 'stable disposition'. We call this a monolithic conception of character. The suggestion we wish to explore is that the Dependence thesis is not in fact committed to the monolithic conception. If we discard the latter, we can interpret the single instance intuition in a way that makes it compatible with the Dependence thesis. The basic idea is this: *even if a single instance may not suffice to give us a complete portrait of who someone is and what values they have, it does suffice to tell us something about them as a person.* Thus, while the monolithic conception (we suggest) is indeed revisionary, the

Dependence thesis is not, or at least is not revealed to be so by the single instance intuition. We develop this diagnosis in the next section. In Section 4, we come back to the question of the rationale that might be offered for the Dependence thesis.

3. The Monolithic Conception of Character

Montaigne wrote: "Therefore one courageous deed must not be taken to prove a man valiant; a man who was really valiant would be so always and on all occasions" (Montaigne 2003: 294). Montaigne may have intended this as an expression of what is sometimes called the classical conception of virtue (Annas 2007). On that conception, virtues are dispositions to respond in certain ways to given kinds of situation. They are sometimes characterized as 'reliable' or 'robust' dispositions, but that seems to be a matter of emphasis. To say that courage is a disposition for valiant actions and emotions, on this view, just is to say that a courageous person is *reliably* valiant: that is, they show valiant behaviour whenever (or almost whenever) a situation affords or requires it. A familiar challenge to the classical conception comes from work in social psychology that allegedly supports a 'situationist' approach to action explanation. The central claim here is that an adequate explanation of our ethical or unethical behaviour makes no reference to character: our actions are supposed to be fully intelligible in the light of features of the situation we are placed in, showing character to be either epiphenomenal or even nonexistent (see Miller 2020). We want to set the situationist challenge to one side here. The view we are interested in is not that character plays no role in action explanation but that, consistently with acknowledging its explanatory role, we should resist a monolithic conception of character.

Montaigne himself is an eloquent advocate of that view:

> All contradictions can be found in me by some twist and in some fashion. Bashful, insolent; chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; liberal, miserly and prodigal: all this I see in myself to some extent according to how I turn, and whoever studies himself really attentively finds in himself, yes, even in his judgment, this gyration and discord (Montaigne 2003: 294).

There are two ways in which Montaignian character traits deviate from the classical conception. First, they are more fine-grained, or more context-dependent, than the classical conception allows. Montaigne observes that the same man "may be charging into the breach with brave assurance" while "later tormenting himself, like a woman, over the loss of a lawsuit" (294). That is to say, someone may have a disposition to behave valiantly *in a subset* of the situations that afford or call for valiant behaviour; they may have a disposition for (roughly speaking) cowardice in another such subset. Second, Montaigne denies that our ethical dispositions are consistent over time: "I give my soul now one face, now another, according to which direction I turn in" (293-94).

Now, if we conceive of virtues on the model of dispositional properties such as fragility or solubility, Montaigne's emendation of the classical conception will look puzzling. What could be the explanatory value of dispositions that are neither robust nor stable? What would be gained by describing an action as the exercise of a virtue conceived not only as highly context-dependent but also as fickle?

In turn, what could be the moral significance of the question whether a generous act was informed by Montaigne-style generosity (in effect, it might be said, the disposition to act generously, unless one doesn't)?

These are good questions, but they have, so we want to suggest, good answers. Put in general terms, our suggestion is that lack of robustness and stability does not have to make a virtue erratic or unintelligible. Montaignian virtues and vices come with their own distinctive sort of intelligibility. Commonsense psychology has rich resources to enable us to make such traits appear less erratic or irrational than they may initially seem. Admittedly, these resources are limited, and they often fail to secure full transparency. That, however, is no objection to the thesis that Montaignian character traits figure in our ordinary explanatory and evaluative practice. As Montaigne would be the first to agree: we are not fully transparent to each other, or to ourselves.

The starting point for developing this suggestion is a basic and familiar difference between properties such as fragility and properties such as generosity: viz. the latter involve a sensitivity to normative reasons. As Annas writes (expounding the classical conception of virtues): "A virtue, unlike a mere habit, is a disposition to act for reasons, and so a disposition that is exercised through the agent's practical reasoning; it is built up by making choices and exercised in the making of further choices" (2007: 516). More specifically, it has been suggested that to have a specific virtue is to be someone for whom certain kinds of facts count as reasons to do certain things (Schueler 2003: 81) or someone who is "sensitive" to relevant kinds of facts "as reasons for acting in certain ways" (McDowell 1998: 53). As a consequence, someone's virtues and vices may be said to reflect a person's values. The connection raises some delicate issues. Annas writes that "(t)o qualify as a virtue, a character trait must embody a commitment to some ethical value" (2007: 519). It would be a mistake, however, to equate generosity with a commitment to the value of generous behaviour, at least if such a commitment in turn is explicated as possession of a certain evaluative *belief*. A virtue is not a propositional attitude. We will use Gary Watson's notion of a person's 'evaluative orientation' to gesture towards the hard-to-articulate sense in which a virtue 'embodies' some ethical value (Watson 2004). To say that a person is generous is to say that they are apt to recognize, say, facts regarding others' needs or well-being as reasons for acting in certain ways, and that they are disposed to be responsive to such reasons. They have a character trait that amounts to taking up a certain position on what sorts of facts count as good reasons for action.[3]

A particularly helpful feature of Watson's notion is that it draws attention to the fact that no particular virtue *exhausts* an individual's evaluative orientation.

[3] An important question we cannot take up here is whether thinking of virtues and vices in this way should lead us to resist a dispositional account of character traits, or, instead, to insist on the distinctive nature of the relevant dispositions. A good starting point for consideration of that question would be the following passage from Nomy Arpaly's *Unprincipled Virtue*: "Why should Aristotle, or anyone else, believe that the praiseworthiness of an individual action depends on the character from which it stems? If one thinks of character as a stable disposition of some sort, the idea may seem strange. [...] The answer is that the mere frequency or predictability of an action does not matter at all to the moral worth of the actor, but these things may be signs of something relevant: *deep moral concern*. The pathologically fearless man or the well-trained soldier may have just as stable a disposition as the brave man to defend his city, but fearless or merely well-drilled actions do not express courage" (Arpaly 2003: 239).

No-one is simply or exclusively a generous person. You might be a person who is generous, honest and open-minded, among other things, whereas I may be honest, stingy and grumpy, and someone else may be generous, mildly corrupt, and open-minded. The various elements of someone's profile of virtues and vices inevitably (and intelligibly) affect each other. Someone who is generous and puritanically high-minded will have a different overall evaluative orientation—will be sensitive to different sorts of reason-giving facts—from someone who is generous and has imbibed a portion of what is sometimes called 'amoral familism'.[4] The way in which someone's generosity is embedded in their wider evaluative orientation will have implications for the range of situations in which they exercise their generosity. That a generous person fails to act generously in a situation that calls for generous behaviour does not necessarily mean their generosity is fickle or erratic. It may be intelligibly circumscribed or curbed by other virtues (or vices).

This provides the beginnings of a response to the charge of opacity directed against Montaignian virtues. What may initially look like an erratically context-dependent exercise of generosity may, on closer acquaintance, turn out to be intelligible in the light of the agent's wider evaluative orientation. The response can be further developed by noting another distinctive feature of the sort of explanation in which virtue terms pull their weight. There are two perspectives on someone's reasons that are relevant in the context of reason-giving explanations: the agent's own perspective and the interpreter's perspective. The agent's perspective, of course, is paramount. In trying to make sense of someone's intentional actions we must surely be interested in *their* conception of their reasons—in the considerations in the light of which they are acting. But our own view of what they have reason to do can affect our interpretation in a number of ways. Something that may strike us as a rationally unintelligible feature of their behaviour may in fact reflect a disagreement over their reasons.[5] The impression that someone's exercise of a certain virtue is erratic may be a case in point. We may find their reluctance to exercise a certain virtue in a situation which, we are convinced, calls for its exercise hard to understand, given that they *seem* to manifest the virtue in other kinds of situation. But the puzzle, of course, reflects our perception of the situation. Perhaps from the point of view of the agent's evaluative orientation, the two kinds of situations are relevantly different: one of them calls for the exercise of generosity, the other, say, for the exercise of justice. If we continue to think that their perception is mistaken, there will be work to be done for us in trying to understand their (as we see it, flawed) outlook. But it is not that we are confronted with a capricious disposition. Consider also the myriad ways in which commonsense psychology attempts to understand examples of apparent instability in someone's character traits. As Montaigne famously observed, "(t)he mayor and Montaigne have always been two, with a very clear separation" (2003: 941). Our professions or social roles may impose elements of an evaluative orientation on

[4] This raises familiar questions regarding the unity of the virtues. When operating in conjunction with 'amoral familism', it might be said, generosity is not (in Philippa Foot's phrase) "operating as a virtue" (Foot 2002: 16).
[5] Compare McDowell observation that "(f)inding an action or propositional attitude intelligible, after initial difficulty, may not only involve managing to articulate for oneself some hitherto merely implicit aspect of one's conception of rationality, but actually involve becoming convinced that one's conception of rationality needed correcting, so as to make room for this novel way of being intelligible" (1998: 332).

us from which, in our better moments, we manage to distance ourselves: "For all of being a lawyer or financier, we must not ignore the knavery there is in such callings" (ibid.). Again, there are familiar narrative structures that appear to enable us to make sense of the evolution of someone's character, as when an academic famed for his sharp tongue mellows into an avuncular figure. Finally, consider one way Montaigne himself appears to make sense of what he describes as the multiple 'contradictions' in his character: "irresolution seems to me the most common and apparent defect of our nature" (2003: 290). Whether or not it is the most common defect, it seems right that an apparent inconsistency in someone's evaluative orientation may reflect a genuine ambivalence.

Let us return to the single instance intuition. Suppose our ordinary conception of the virtues is not monolithic but allows for the various—complicated, but often intelligible—sorts of instability and context-dependence Montaigne highlights. Then the fact that a single generous act provides no adequate evidence of a *firm and unchangeable* disposition of generosity cannot be used to put pressure on the Dependence thesis, or on the idea that our ordinary practices of holding each other responsible are in keeping with the Dependence thesis. For the Dependence thesis may now be developed like this: in acting generously, a person shows themselves to be generous, in the sense that there is some generosity in them or, as we might say, they 'can be' generous. In effect, abandoning the monolithic conception of character amounts to lowering the requirements for the global use of virtue terms. That I am not always acting generously in any conceivable situation affording it does not mean that I am not generous or that my current action should not be interpreted as manifesting generosity. To lower the requirements is not to emasculate them, though. Advocates of the Dependence thesis are committed to the view that only if a given virtue term finds a foothold in an agent's evaluative orientation will it be appropriate to apply that term to a particular action of theirs. We want to suggest, though, that the single instance intuition, on careful consideration, does not challenge that commitment.

Recall the dog-kicker in Hurka's example. It seems right that when we see someone 'kick a dog from an evident desire to hurt the dog just for the pleasure of doing so', we would be inclined to judge the act to be vicious, even if we have no evidence of a firm disposition of vicious behaviour on the part of the agent. But would we take that local judgement to be wholly independent of questions about the agent's character? Consider the following variation on the story. Suppose we know the man who is kicking the dog, or at least think we know him; specifically, we think we know there is not a smidgen of viciousness in his character. On Hurka's account of our 'everyday understanding of virtue', that should not affect our local judgement. We should take our (presumed) background knowledge to be simply irrelevant when it comes to our judgement that he acted viciously. That seems implausible. A more lifelike description, surely, is that we would be puzzled and, at least initially, unsure what to think. Various kinds of questions would arise: was our impression correct that his act was intended to hurt (or did he perhaps feel threatened by the dog)? Was he in a normal state of mind? Do we know him as well as we think we do—or does his action possibly bring to light some hitherto hidden or repressed facet of his character? Were we wrong to take him to be a stranger to viciousness? That we should feel compelled to ask such questions suggests that we do not, as Hurka's interpretation of our 'everyday understanding of virtue' would suggest, take the local use of a virtue term to be wholly detached from a global use. It is not that the local use commits

us to the claim that the dock-kicking must have issued from a 'firm and unchangeable character trait'. Still, it would normally be taken to be somewhat revealing of what sort of person the dog-kicker is. That is why we would tend to be puzzled: pending answers to our questions, we would do well to suspend judgement as to how his action is to be understood and assessed.

How about the intuition that someone may coherently be described as having 'uncharacteristically' done 'something quite heroic'? If 'uncharacteristic' means that the act did not issue from a stable disposition, the point does seem intuitive but it is compatible with the Dependence thesis (on a non-monolithic conception of character). If 'uncharacteristic' means that the act tells us nothing whatsoever about what sort of person the agent is, the intuition arguably wanes. Recall the award for bravery. Even if the award was in recognition of a single heroic exploit, and even if the soldier had hitherto not shown much of a disposition for courageousness, we (and he) would tend to think that his valiant act revealed *something* about who he was (perhaps a recently acquired, and not wholly robust, streak of bravery).[6]

To summarize, we have tried to defend the Dependence thesis against the charge of revisionism, by suggesting that that charge is predicated on an implausible account of our ordinary conception of character. There is, we grant, an element of revisionism in the classical conception of the virtues. What is revisionary, however, is not the Dependence thesis but the monolithic conception of character—something critics of the thesis tend to grant. We now want to turn to the second lesson that has been drawn from the single instance intuition: the charge that the Dependence thesis lacks an intelligible rationale.

4. The Role of Character in Reason-Giving Explanations

As we saw, a natural way to press the question of the rationale is to ask why we should give preferential treatment, as it were, to one of two apparently identical acts. What makes a generous act that manifests a character trait of generosity better—more deserving of moral approbation—than a generous act that does not? It is agreed on all hands that the moral merit of an action turns on the agent's motives or, as Hurka puts it, on their "occurrent motivation" (2006: 70). But to ascertain whether an act was genuinely generous, rather than, say, actuated by the desire to impress others, it may seem, we only need to look at the agent's current attitudes—notably their beliefs and desires, and their role in leading the agent to act. We only need to consider their "current motives, apart from any

[6] But can we be justified in calling a person generous who keeps performing ungenerous acts? Is there a minimal condition that needs to be satisfied to warrant attributions of virtue, as conceived by the non-monolithic view? The question deserves more extensive discussion than we can offer here, but we would like to make two points. First, we would suggest that the idea of a 'minimal condition' may best be spelled out not in terms of a statistically relevant incidence of (e.g.) generous acts, but in terms of the demand for an account of how it is that a putatively generous person keeps performing ungenerous acts. As we illustrated earlier, commonsense psychology has a range of relevant resources at its disposal. Second, in practice it will often be hard to know whether some such account is available. Thus, we should (once again) heed Montaigne's advice: "a sound intellect will refuse to judge men simply by their outward actions; we must probe the inside and discover what springs set me in motion. But since this is an arduous and hazardous undertaking, I wish fewer people would meddle with it" (2003: 296).

connection to longer-lasting traits", traits that amount to "external features" of their act (Hurka 2006: 71).

Once again, the right response to this challenge, we suggest, is to probe the terms in which it is framed. If occurrent motivation is pitted against longer-lasting traits, it looks puzzling why the latter should matter to moral judgements. The question we want to press in response is whether occurrent motivation can generally be understood *in isolation* of aspects of the agent's 'evaluative orientation' and so of their character. Hurka does not argue for an affirmative answer to this question; he simply takes that answer for granted. We want to suggest that there is a case to be made for a negative answer, and that if correct, that argument would deliver a compelling rationale for the Dependence thesis. The argument we have in mind can be extracted from Fred Schueler's work on what he calls teleological explanations of actions. What he means by this is the utterly familiar sort of explanations we use when we make sense of our own and others' intentional actions as "inherently purposive" (Schueler 2003: 1). Central to such explanations are the considerations the agent takes to provide them with reasons for action, i.e. considerations that support or justify or count in favour of acting in a certain way. In Schueler's discussion, character emerges as the solution, or part of a solution, to a puzzle over the explanatory force of appeal to the agent's reasons. We briefly set out Schueler's suggestion, and then consider how it bears on our understanding of 'local' uses of virtue terms.

Here is the puzzle. We often have reasons for and against a certain course of action. Suppose you accept a job offer, and we explain your decision by reference to the relevant reasons. But you might have refused the offer, in which case we would have explained your decision by reference to the opposing reasons. Thomas Nagel uses this example to illustrate a completely general concern about reason-giving explanation: it can seem puzzling how such explanations can be genuinely illuminating. Nagel puts the matter like this:

> Intentional explanations, if there is such a thing, can explain either choice in terms of the appropriate reasons, since either choice would have been intelligible if it occurred. But for this very reason it cannot explain why the person accepted the job for the reasons in favor instead of refusing it for the reasons against (Nagel 1986: 116).

If either action is open to an equally illuminating explanation, we seem to lack an account of why the person accepted the job *rather than refusing it*. Now, it seems clear that in some cases, Nagel's worry is easy to dispel. The reasons against may be so obviously flawed or at least obviously less weighty that any remotely rational agent will recognize the greater force of the reasons in favour. But Nagel is surely right that not all situations are like that. Either decision may seem rational, and it may look as if an explanation of the person's accepting the offer in terms of the reasons in favour only appears illuminating so long as we do not ask 'Why did they not instead refuse it for the reasons against?'

Schueler's move is to suggest that our ordinary practice of reason-giving explanation has richer resources than Nagel allows. We may find the person's decision to accept the job intelligible in the light of the sort of person they are. Character traits are an important ingredient of such a conception, and they may bear on the sort of case Nagel highlights. Even in a scenario in which there are equally respectable reasons in favour and against, it may be the case that no-one who

knows the person will be surprised that they accepted the offer. Perhaps one of the respectable reasons for taking the job is that the job comes with a higher salary, though this, we may suppose, is counterbalanced by a higher teaching load. In view of a mildly avaricious streak in their outlook, it may come as no surprise that they were unable to resist the offer. The example is banal, but the proposal it illustrates seems suggestive. If being avaricious means, in part, being someone "for whom certain kinds of facts count as reasons to do certain things"—or, significantly, count as reasons "of a certain strength" (Schueler 2003: 81)—then someone's being avaricious will be precisely the sort of thing that can make it intelligible which of two finely balanced sets of reasons carries more weight with them. In this way, appeal to someone's character traits can play a crucial role in understanding their 'occurrent motivation'. Making sense of someone's action in the light of thei reasons may call for reflection on 'the sort of person they are, insofar as this sheds light on how it is that they are responsive, or gives a certain weight, to some reasons and not to others.

As Schueler remarks, this proposal about the explanatory role of character has an interesting bearing on how we should think about the nature of character. In particular, it would suggest that there is a certain explanatory depth to the way character traits help to make intentional actions intelligible, which would seem to count against a 'purely dispositional' view of character (or at least against the idea that our ordinary conception of character is adequately characterized by a purely dispositional view) (see Schueler 2003: 80f). We cannot pursue these important issues here, nor can we address the question whether Schueler's point about the explanatory role of character should be seen to hold as a matter of complete generality, or merely in certain special contexts (such as the ones highlighted by Nagel's puzzle). For current purposes, we can confine ourselves to two observations.

One is that if Schueler's proposal is on the right lines, the Dependence thesis can be seen to be rooted in our ordinary explanatory practice. The question of how an action reflects on the agent's character matters in the context of our practice of *evaluating* the action because it matters in the context of *understanding* what they are doing and why they are doing it—for example, whether they are doing the right thing for the right reasons. The baking analogy we drew earlier (would the Dependence thesis not encourage a differential assessment of actions that would be unfair and unmotivated in a way akin to awarding a lesser prize to a cake on the grounds that it was produced by a novice baker?) is flawed in just the way Aristotle tells us that analogies between the virtues and the arts tend to be flawed. While "the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves" (1980: 1105[a]), the goodness of an action depends on its motivation, which (often and possibly invariably) can only be adequately understood in the light of the agent's 'evaluative orientation' and so their character.

Our second observation is that while Schueler's move demands that character traits can play a substantive explanatory role, it does not require a monolithic conception of character. We may make sense of a generous action in the light of the agent's having a generous streak or our sense that they are someone who 'can be' (in certain, perhaps hard to codify, contexts) generous. What matters is not whether they have a stable disposition but whether their responsiveness to the reason for their action manifests some, however fragile and possibly short-lived, aspect of their 'evaluative orientation'. As indicated earlier, there are a range of ways in which the context-dependence and instability of such traits may be

rendered intelligible, though it is true that in this enterprise we more or less quickly come up against certain limits of intelligibility. It is not clear, though, that this counts against Schueler's proposal. As Strawson remarked: persons "may puzzle us at times" but that "is part of [...] reacting" to them as to persons (Strawson 1985: 21).

There is a certain irony in the dialectical position we have reached. On Hurka's view, the Dependence thesis amounts to a revisionary philosophical theory, since ordinary assessments of actions are centred on questions about the 'occurrent motivation' rather than 'long-lasting traits'. If Schueler is right, this diagnosis is itself premised on a revisionary view, viz. a 'belief-desire model' of action explanation that ignores or distorts the explanatory role we ordinarily assign to the agent's perception of their normative reasons for action. There is also, however, an important point of agreement with Hurka's approach. We should be clear about the distinction between 'descriptive' vs 'revisionary' ethics (to adapt Strawson's well-known distinction between two styles of doing metaphysics) (Strawson 1959), and virtue ethics had better be alive to the possibility that some of its traditional tenets may be revisionary.

5. Conclusion

In sections 3 and 4 we have outlined a version of the Dependence thesis that is not committed to the monolithic conception of character. The upshot is that understanding, explaining, and evaluating an action requires a reference to the character of the agent, which, however, need not be articulated in terms of fully stable and generalisable dispositions. But is it not true, someone might say, that evaluating someone's character—however we understand it—is precisely a matter of looking at what they *do*? And if so, how could the former ever impose a requirement on the latter?

Though compelling, we maintain that these questions do not pose a challenge to our main thesis. On the contrary, they help us clarify the nature of the Dependence thesis. For insisting that the 'local' use of virtue terms cannot be independent of their 'global' use does not commit us to the stronger claim that there is only one correct direction of explanation here, going from persons to actions. Rather, our thesis is compatible with the converse claim that an evaluation of someone's character cannot prescind from their conduct. This suggests an interesting diagnosis: perhaps we encounter difficulties in pigeonholing the way in which we use virtue terms in *either* their global *or* local usage precisely because this distinction is somewhat artificial to begin with. To assess whether a virtue is instantiated, we may need to consider actions and agents together. And once again, far from being revisionary, this seems to be in keeping with the way in which we ordinarily apply virtue terms.

A similar point is made by Kieran Setiya in *Reason without Rationalism*. Rather than discussing whether virtue terms apply primarily to actions or persons, he considers whether right action should be explained in terms of ethical virtue or vice versa, but we take the two questions to have a sufficiently similar structure. And Setiya concludes:

> [...] although I am arguing for a metaphysical connection between ethical virtue and practical reason, I do not claim that the connection is *asymmetric* in any interesting way. We can say what it is to be a reason for action in terms of ethical virtue,

> or so I will claim. But that is not to say that the virtues of character have explanatory primacy. The connection between reason and virtue runs in both directions: it is a matter of reciprocity, not priority (Setiya 2007: 5).

Similarly, we want to suggest that the connection between the global and the local use of virtue terms runs in both directions. Evaluating agents and actions is a matter of reciprocity rather than explanatory (or metaphysical) priority. And in effect it is not clear why it should be that *either* someone is generous because (independently) their actions is generous *or* their action is generous because (independently) they are generous. Drawing such a sharp distinction might only create an unnecessary ravine that, in fact, we need not bridge.

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