Virtue, Virtuous Activity, and Moral Self-Indulgence

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1. Introduction

One distinctive feature of virtue ethics is its emphasis on action's having roots in virtue, i.e., a stable state of character that incorporate proper motivational and emotional elements. Due to this emphasis, virtue ethics has been criticized for being too self-centered to be an ethical theory. Thomas Hurka, one of leading critics, argues that even the non-eudaimonist version of virtue ethics is self-centered as well, because it is *self-indulgent*.[1]. According to him, morally self-indulgent agent is one whose reasons for action ultimately come from concern for her own virtue, and care more about exercising or expressing her virtue than she does about realizing its intentional object. He suggests what he calls the recursive account of virtue as an alternative to the virtue-ethical account.

In this paper, I suggest a virtue-ethical characterization of virtue and virtuous activity that is not vulnerable to Hurka's criticism. First, I claim that virtue is better understood as a stable disposition to engage in virtuous activities in the given situations, rather than as a temporary attitude or mental state toward intrinsic goods and evils.[2] I argue that virtue, so understood, has mere potential intrinsic value until it is actualized in a virtuous activity, and that, even when it is actualized in a virtuous activity, it has an actual intrinsic value only as a part of that virtuous activity as a whole. Second, I argue that virtuous activity is to be understood as a sort of organic unity which includes the agent's virtue and its intentional object as its two

[1] By saying that a *theory* is self-indulgent, I mean that its *exemplar agent* is self-indulgent.
[2] In this paper, *intrinsic* value or goodness is to be contrasted to merely *instrumental* one.

relata. Based on this conception of virtue and virtuous activity, I reject Hurka's scheme of value comparison.

2. The Charge of Self-Indulgence

2.1. The Problem of Self-Indulgence

The critics, including Hurka, argue that virtue ethics, even its non-eudaimonist version that does not take the agent's flourishing as the main goal is self-centered because it is *self-indulgent*. According to non-eudaimonist virtue ethics, the virtuous person performs virtuous action (with the intention of cultivating, preserving, exercising, or expressing virtue) because she believes virtue or performing virtuous action to be admirable or intrinsically good. The problem is, the critics argue, that what is at the center of her practical thinking is the thought about *her* performing virtuous action, rather than its intentional object (e.g. promoting others' pleasure). In this framework, the importance of the object of the virtue is at best conditional on its being relevant to this project that the agent herself cares.

Consider the case of generosity, which is one of other-regarding virtues. If a person donates money to a homeless boy only or ultimately because of her concern for *her* performing a generous action, her motive does not seem to be that of a truly generous person. For, in this case, she would be caring more about *her* helping the boy than about his good's being improved. The trouble is that, although her generosity and its exercise may be something intrinsically good, it is basically something about *herself*, rather than *others*, that gives her reasons for action. It does not seem virtuous to act primarily from concern for one's performing virtuous action, at least when it comes to actions of other-regarding virtues like generosity.

The proponent of non-eudaimonist virtue ethics might try to avoid this charge by not allowing the virtuous agent to be consciously motivated by self-indulgent considerations—

e.g. 'I can exercise my generosity by donating money' or 'I can become more virtuous (here, more generous) by doing it.' Still, it is problematic if such self-indulgent considerations serve as the source of reasons for action. That is, if an ethical theory tells that the reasons for performing virtuous action ultimately come from the intrinsic goodness or admirability of *my* cultivating, preserving or exercising virtue, not some considerations outside herself, it seems self-centered in an objectionable way.

The critics' suspicion is that this version of virtue ethics would render the agent *morally self-indulgent*. Bernard Williams writes that a morally self-indulgent person's thought "focuses disproportionately upon the expression of his own disposition and…he derives pleasure from the thought that his disposition will have been expressed".[3] He says that such self-indulgence reverses the order of self-concern and other-concern, and that it involves "a misdirection not just of *attention*, though that is true too, but genuinely of *concern*[.]"[4] In other words, a morally self-indulgent person puts herself at the center of practical concern, instead of what actually deserves that concern, i.e. the good of others. If the agent concerns more about one's own virtue rather than the objects of virtue, we can say that the agent displays a *possessive attitude* toward her own virtue.[5]

2.2. Hurka's Recursive Account

Hurka criticizes that virtue ethics cannot explain *why* such a self-indulgent attitude is objectionable, and suggests his *recursive account* of virtue as an alternative, which goes as follows:[6]

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[3] Williams (1981) p. 47
[4] Williams (1981) p. 47 (emphasis added)
[5] Cf. Williams (1981) p.40
[6] Hurka (2001) pp. 11-23

(LG) If *x* is intrinsically good, loving *x* (desiring, pursuing, or taking pleasure in *x*) for itself is also intrinsically good.[7]

(HE) If *x* is intrinsically evil, hating *x* for itself is intrinsically good.[8]

Hurka defines the virtues, based on (LG) and (HE), as appropriate attitudes to intrinsic goods and evils, that is, loving the former and hating the latter for themselves. Understood in this way, every instance of virtue is specially connected to some other good or evil that is its intentional object (e.g. other's pleasure). He adds on this what he calls the *comparative principle* (CP):

(CP) The degree of intrinsic goodness or evil of an attitude to *x* is always less than the degree of goodness or evil of *x*.

Combined with his definition of virtue, it implies that the value of virtue toward an object is always less than the value—either positive or negative—of that object. For example, Julie's benevolent attitude toward the pleasure of her friend, Chan, is less good than Chan's pleasure itself.

Hurka claims that his recursive account can explain why self-indulgence is objectionable, while virtue ethics cannot.[9] He argues that the recursive account can say that a self-indulgent person is objectionable because, on his account, she cares more about the lesser good of her own virtue rather than about the greater good of its intentional object. His point is that the recursive account can say that this attitude is disproportionate to the value of objects, and thus a failure of virtue. In contrast, such an explanation is not available to virtue ethics, says

[7] Hurka (2001) p. 13
[8] Hurka (2001) p. 16
[9] Cf. Hurka (2001) p.247-8

Hurka, since it does allow greater value to the agent's virtue or its expression than the virtue's object. The merit of recursive account is, according to him, that it sticks to the general principle that, if X is *more valuable* than Y, we should *care more about* X than Y, while virtue-ethical theory cannot provide a deeper explanation for why self-indulgence is objectionable, than to simply state that it is.

If we assume that Hurka's characterization of virtue ethics is right, his criticism seems to be a serious attack against virtue ethics. Imagine that Julie is contemplating giving Chan pleasure. According to Hurka's version of virtue ethics, Chan's having pleasure is not itself of fundamental importance from the Julie's point of view. Since what is of primary significance for Julie is only her performing virtuous action from her desire for Chan's pleasure, or her performing them virtuously, at best. Thus, it seems that virtue ethics should either admit that it ends up with claiming that a self-indulgent person can be truly virtuous, or, in order to ward off the charge of self-indulgence, tell its agent to care more about what it claims to be of less significance (here, Chan's pleasure).

3. Reconsidering Virtue and Virtuous Activity

3.1. Virtue as a Disposition

I believe the Hurka's charge of self-indulgence against virtue ethics can be addressed by reconsidering the concepts of virtue and virtuous activity. Unlike Hurka, I believe that virtue is to be understood as a *disposition* to engage in virtuous activity that is appropriate in the given situation, rather than as a temporary attitude or mental state toward intrinsic goods and evils. On my understanding, to say a person has virtue is no more than to say that the person is disposed to act or be motivated in a virtuous way in the given situation. Thus understood, virtue has intrinsic value only in the sense of *potentiality*; that is, virtue is not yet of actual intrinsic value until it is expressed in virtuous activity. Compare the potential intrinsic value

of virtue with some other things that have *actual* value, say, pleasure. Pleasure, roughly defined as an enjoyable mental state, has actual intrinsic value. In contrast, mere possession of virtue is not yet good, both in itself and for the agent. What actually retains the intrinsic value assigned should be *virtuous activity*, not the virtue itself. Virtue is the disposition to make the most value out of the given situation, by enabling the virtuous person to engage in the most virtuous activity possible in that situation.

Consider Harry the brave, who *would* act virtuously, say, courageously, if only he were given an appropriate opportunity. Harry is ready to throw his body if he finds, say, a woman bullied by gangsters. Alas, unfortunately, he has spent his whole life in a peaceful village where only virtuous people reside, and there has been no opportunity for him to *exercise* his courage, i.e. to engage in courageous activity. Or, suppose that Bella is fully benevolent but asleep for her entire lifetime. The sleeping benevolent possesses virtue but never exercises it, and thus engages in no virtuous activity. If so, the virtue she has does not yet have any value, or, only has *potential* value.

Some might still think, even though virtue is never exercised, there is at least *some* intrinsic value in just having it. But I think this belief lingers mainly due to the fact that it is very hard to imagine virtue that is *never* exercised. We usually find out whether a person is virtuous or not by observing their virtuous activities, especially, virtuous actions. For example, we can find a person courageous by seeing her standing up for a meaningful cause at the risk of her safety. This fact makes it harder for us to distinguish merely having virtue from exercising it. In our case of Harry, I used courage as an example of a virtue, for the sake of simplicity. Courage is a type of virtue that requires some specific kind of risky circumstances to exercise it. But if Harry was a fully virtuous person with all the virtues including courage, he would have exercised his virtues even in such a peaceful

environment.[10] For instance, although he never met a chance to exercise his courage, he would have faced opportunities in which he can exercise other virtues such as temperance, benevolence, and so on. I understand virtue, to repeat, as a disposition to respond appropriately to any given situation, thereby making the most value out of it. As we lead our lives, we constantly confront new situations that require us to respond in a certain way. Living as a human being amounts to facing the series of opportunities to exercise one's own character—either virtuous or non-virtuous. This explains why it is so hard to imagine the case of unexercised virtue.

A version of virtue ethics that assigns virtue actual intrinsic value would fall prey to Hurka's charge that virtue ethics cannot explain why self-indulgence is objectionable. For the actual value of virtue would render it important to care about one's own virtue. In my version, however, virtue has only potential value, and thus can explain why having concern about one's own virtue more than its intentional object is objectionable. What I think virtue ethics takes, or should take, to be the ultimate or final goal of the agent is to *engage in virtuous activity*. The reason it is important for us to cultivate the virtues is because virtuous activity is possible only when the agent herself becomes virtuous; an agent's reason for cultivating virtue comes from the intrinsic value of virtuous activity.

3.2. Virtuous Activity as Organic Unity

I also believe that Hurka's scheme of value comparison is itself misguided. To see this point, let me analyze Hurka's recursive account based on my understanding of virtue and virtuous activity. As we have seen above, in Hurka's recursive account of virtue, he understands virtue as an appropriate *attitude* (or *mental state*) to intrinsic goods and evils.

[10] Of course, if we assume the unity or reciprocity of virtues, having courage without having other virtues would be impossible from the beginning.

Under this conception of virtue, Hurka seems right to claim that virtue ethics cannot explain why self-indulgence is objectionable, while his recursive account can. But I have argued that virtue to be understood as the disposition to engage in virtuous activities in the given situations, not a certain kind of attitude. I believe Hurka is mistaken in taking virtue as some kind of attitude that has intrinsic value independently of the activity in which the virtue is exercised. This conception of virtue is what allows Hurka to compare the value of the agent's virtue and that of its intentional object, *in isolation from* the virtuous activity as a whole. Recall that Hurka's recursive account explains why self-indulgence is objectionable by combining his comparative principle—i.e. that the object of virtue is always more valuable than the agent's attitude toward that object—with the more general principle—i.e. that one should care more about what has more value. But this explanation is available to Hurka only because he understands virtue as an attitude rather than a disposition, the view which I do not share. I have a different conception of virtue and virtuous activity from Hurka's, which does not allow the scheme of value-comparison he suggests.

I understand virtuous activity as a sort of *organic unity* which has the agent's virtue (e.g. benevolence) and its intentional object (e.g. a friend's pleasure) as its two relata. In this sense, I take virtuous activity as essentially relational.[11] Thus, the intrinsic value of a virtuous activity is determined by two factors: the *virtuousness* of the agent's response and the *intrinsic value* of the virtue's intentional object.[12] [13] I have claimed previously that virtue,

[11] On this point, I was inspired by Christopher Toner's view that flourishing is essentially relational:

> [T]he agent seeks to live a life of virtue, where the virtues are simply those traits the possession and exercise of which constitute flourishing for a rational agent of that sort, where to flourish is to *stand in the right relation to 'objects'* according to their degrees and kinds of goodness, and where the right relation is that which acknowledges the nature or status of each relatum, in such a way that it is held in regard at least in part for its own sake. It is not self-centered to seek one's own flourishing because such flourishing is *essentially relational*" Toner (2006) p. 613 (emphasis added).

[12] For the sake of simplicity, I shall only mention positive aspects such as virtuousness and goodness, not viciousness and evilness. But, of course, my discussion can also be applied to those negative

understood as a disposition, does not have value in itself unless it is exercised in a virtuous activity. Even when it is actualized in a virtuous activity, it has an actual intrinsic value only *as the part of* that virtuous activity as a whole. For this reason, the value of the agent's virtue cannot simply be considered in isolation from that of the activity as a whole. This is why it is a mistake for Hurka to think that we can simply compare the value of virtue with that of its object. For example, we should not simply compare Julie's benevolent attitude toward Chan's pleasure with Chan's pleasure itself, in isolation from her benevolent activity as a whole.

Unlike virtue itself, the object of virtue can have actual intrinsic value independently, without being involved in any activity; that is, there are intrinsically good things other than virtuous activity, such as pleasure or knowledge. However, the kind of activity in which those good things are involved can affect their value. For example, the way how they are dealt with or how they are brought about can change their value. Let us consider the case of Julie's benevolently bringing about Chan's pleasure by giving him five hundred pounds. Chan's pleasure, taken by itself, is something intrinsically good. But its value is determined only within the context of the activity as a whole. This benevolent activity in question has two relata: benevolence in Julie's causing Chan's pleasure from genuine concern for him and the intrinsic goodness of Chan's pleasure. Compare this case with another case where Chan experiences the same amount of pleasure by finding five hundred pounds on the street. The value of this latter activity seems to be far smaller than that of the benevolent activity. The

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aspects.

[13] My idea of considering the value of virtuous activity as a whole, rather than each of part, is inspired by G. E. Moore's *the principle of organic whole*, according to which the value of a whole does not have to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts. Moore illustrates this relation between a whole and its parts with the example of consciousness of a beautiful object. Although the consciousness as such and the beautiful object as such each has relatively little, if any, intrinsic value, the consciousness of a beautiful object as a whole has great intrinsic value. (See Moore (1993) pp. 78-82) But note that my view of taking virtuous activity as organic unity does not follow Moore's idea in every detail. For example, I do not want to commit myself to what he calls the method of isolation for assessing value.

point gets clearer if we imagine another case where Chan experiences the same amount of pleasure by robbing five hundred pounds from a passerby. The value of this vicious activity seems to be, not just smaller than other cases, but even negative, despite Chan's pleasure. Rather, the activity might be all the more negative for that, in the sense that the whole activity would have been less vicious if Chan felt pain of guilt instead of pleasure.

In this sense, the value of intrinsically good things, such as pleasure, can change according to various factors such as how they are dealt with, where they came from, and so on. Sometimes they can even make *negative* contribution to the value of the whole activity. This is why the value of this kind of intrinsically good things is not determined until they get involved in a certain particular activity. So I call this kind of value *conditional* intrinsic value. In contrast, the value of virtuous activity is always positive. In other words, virtuous activity is always good whether the object of virtue it involves is good or evil. Suppose that Pat suffers from a severe headache. A virtuous person would feel compassion for Pat and try to stop her pain. Although the virtue's object (i.e. Pat's pain) is intrinsically evil, the value of this virtuous activity (i.e. feeling compassion for Pat and helping her) seems to be positive, since the virtuous person is responding appropriately to the situation. Although the value of virtuous activity might vary according to its object and the situation given, its value is always *positive*. Let us call this kind of value *unconditional* intrinsic value.[14]

Some might claim that we can imagine a person who creates some bad situation in order to engage in virtuous activity. For example, one may create war situation to exercise one's courage. However, creating such a situation itself is not virtuous or even vicious, and thus such an activity has a negative value from the beginning. When I say the value of virtuous activity is *always positive*, I assume the background situation is fixed already. Thus, for

[14] I believe the unconditional intrinsic value of virtuous activity is similar to the value of what Aristotle calls *the noble* (*to kalon*). But I will not argue for this point in this paper.

instance, *given* a person has a headache, which in itself has a negative value, the virtuous activity of trying to cure her or even of merely feeling compassion toward her has a positive value.

But I do not mean that the value of virtuous activity include a person's headache and her friend's compassion for her as its relata is always better than that of her having *no* headache from the beginning. I reject Hurka's value comparison scheme because I do not believe that conditional intrinsic value of things like pleasure is commensurable with unconditional intrinsic value of activity. According to my account, for example, the value of someone's headache is conditional value, and so cannot be simply compared with a virtuous activity, which has unconditional value. This is how the value of virtuous activity is different from that of things that are conditionally valuable, such as pleasure and knowledge. The value of an activity, in this sense, is different *in kind* from the value of other good things.

Thus, to engage in virtuous activity is to *create* the unconditional intrinsic value (e.g. the value of the benevolent activity as a whole) *by* responding appropriately to the conditional intrinsic value (e.g. the value of other's pleasure). Recall that Hurka adopted (CP), according to which the degree of second-order value (i.e. the value of virtue) is always less than that of first-order value (i.e. the value of the virtue's object). I believe the bearer of the second-order value should be virtuous activity as a whole, rather than the virtuous attitude. Hurka is mistaken, I submit, in assigning the actual second-order value to only one of two relata, i.e. the virtue of the agent. This second-order value of virtuous activity cannot simply be compared to the first-order value of its component. This is because the first-order value (or in my terms, conditional intrinsic value) of an activity's component is conditional on the kind of activity it belongs to. In any case, in this framework, we cannot say that the first-order value is greater than the second-order value.

I hope it is now clear how my understanding of virtue and virtuous activity enables virtue ethics to explain why a self-indulgent person is objectionable: a self-indulgent person is objectionable because the she cares about virtue itself, which, according to my account, has merely potential intrinsic value. Consider the example of Smith's visiting his friend, Cat, in the hospital. Assuming that the amount of the resulted consolation in her mind is the same, his visiting her from genuine friendship seems better than his visiting her from his concern for his own virtue. Since the former is a case of virtuous activity with appropriate motive and reason for action, while the latter is not, the former brings about more value than the latter.

Another advantage of my account is that it can give an account for what the problem is with a person who brings about conditional intrinsic good (e.g. a friend's pleasure) from inappropriate inner state or for inappropriate reason. In Smith's example, his visiting Cat in the hospital from his concern for maximizing general happiness or for fulfilling his duty is not a case of virtuous activity, because of its inappropriate motive or reason for action. Thus, even assuming the amount of resulted consolation in her is the same, his visit with this inner state is less good than his visit from genuine concern for her welfare.

3.2. 'I' and Agency

So far, I have tried to show that virtue has only potential intrinsic value and so mere possession of it is not good for the agent, and that what has actual intrinsic value is virtuous activity, or exercise of virtue. However, the critics might still object that virtue ethics is in some sense self-centered, because it puts too much attention and concern on *her* engaging in virtuous activity or on exercising virtue on her own part. That is, they might claim that it concerns *the agent's own* virtuous activities or virtuous activities *through the agency* of herself, that is, because it puts *the agent's own* project at the center of practical concern.

I think this criticism is misdirected. Above all, even if it seems that virtue ethics concerns

about *myself,* at least in some sense, this minimal feature is indispensable for any sensible ethical theory. An ethical theory is an attempt to answer the initial practical question, "How should *I* live?" Insofar as it is trying to answer this practical question asked from each agent's first-person's point of view, an ethical theory cannot dispense with the indexical "I" in the question.[15] It would surely be absurd to ask instead questions like "How should *you* live?" or "How should *he* (or *she*) live?" If one asks the latter kind of questions, it would be an objectionable form of paternalism.[16] Thus, insofar as an ethical theory is about the question, "How should *I* live?", it seems that virtue ethics' focusing on using one's agency is not self-centered, or at least not in any objectionable way.

Let me show how these considerations fit into the framework of non-self-centered virtue ethics. I have argued that virtuous activity has special kind of intrinsic value. I believe this is mainly because it involves *agency.*[17] Having agency is the first condition for a creature to be able to ask the practical question, 'How should I live?' In this sense, say, a palm tree, which lacks agency, would not be able to ask such a question, and it would be pointless even if it could. But we human beings do have agency. With agency, a practically rational agent would try to pursue what is good or what she believes to be good.[18] However, an agent cannot pursue all the things that are intrinsically good in the world, since there is a limitation in the power to exercise our agency. But if an agent only pursues things that are good *for* herself or

[15] This point should not be confused with the claim that the thought about "I" should be explicit in one's actual practical deliberation. Korsgaard effectively makes this point: "it is essential to the concept of action that an action is performed by an agent, rather in the same way that it is essential to a thought that it be thought by a thinker. One must be able to attach the "I do" to the action in the same way that, according to Kant, one must be able to attach the "I think" to a thought". (Korsgaard (2009) p. 18) As the thought "I think" is not explicit whenever we think, so the thought "I do" does not have to be explicit in all our practical thinking.

[16] The question "How should *we* live?" does not imply paternalism, since it asks how *each* of us (as a human being) should live, from the *first-person* point of view.

[17] I understand *agency* more broadly than it is usually understood, so that it include some disposition to show a certain emotional or motivational responses that are formed as a result of agency.

[18] For simplicity's sake, I shall ignore the cases of practical irrationality, such as *akrasia*.

what is intrinsically good *in* herself, she would be either egoistic or self-indulgent. It seems to be a too self-centered way of using our agency.

At this point, it is worth pointing out the difference between a *practical* question and an *evaluative* one. The former includes the questions asking how to use one's own agency: "How should I live (or act)?" The latter includes the questions asking the value of certain things states of affairs: "What state of affairs is the best?" The evaluative type of questions does not indicate, at least not directly, how one should act. These are two distinctive questions in that the agent in question might not have any reason or ability to bring about the best state of affairs. The good state of affairs has practical implication for the agent only when it holds some special relation to the agent's situation. I believe, following Aristotle, that virtuous activity is the best thing among the things achievable through human agency.[19] I suggest that the best way to use our agency, or our life, is to engage in virtuous activity.[20]

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to respond to Hurka's criticism that virtue ethics is self-indulgent, and thus self-centered in an objectionable way. I have tried to ward off his criticism by suggesting alternative conceptions of virtue and virtuous activity. I first claimed that virtue has potential intrinsic value, and thus merely having virtue is not beneficial to the agent. I then claimed that it is virtuous activity that is actual intrinsic value, and that virtuous activity is a sort of organic unity that includes the agent's virtue and its intentional object as its two relata. I then showed how the fact that each person's life is fundamentally up to the agency of each limits the role of each in bringing about the best state of affairs in the world.

[19] See *Nicomachean Ethics* book I.

[20] Note that what I have in mind is not *maximizing* the instance of virtuous activity. For example, even if a Mafioso can increase the overall incidence of virtuous activity by donating unjustly earned money to an educational institution, I do not think such an action is justified by the 'good consequence.'

Based on these analyses, I conclude that virtue ethics can avoid Hurka's charge of self-indulgence against virtue ethics. It is one thing to criticize a version of virtue ethics, and it is quite another to criticize virtue ethics in general. I do not think virtue ethics is inherently self-centered in any objectionable sense.

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