Is Agent-Based Virtue Ethics Self-Undermining?

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ABSTRACT. Agent-based virtue ethics strives to offer a viable account of both moral conduct and the source of moral value, independent of ‘deontic’ teleological and deontological characterizations. One of its chief proponents offers an agent-based virtue-ethical account that aspires to derive all moral value, including the moral status of actions, solely from the ‘aretaic’ concept of benevolence. I suggest that morality as benevolence fails to offer a viable account of either virtuous moral conduct or the source of moral value, because it is self-undermining in both respects. In order to solve this structural problem, it appears as if the theory may have to give up its agent-based status.

KEYWORDS. Virtue ethics, benevolence, agent-based, aretaic, deontic

I. INTRODUCTION

The recent revival of interest in the virtues has seen the emergence of a new dimension of normative ethical theory. Virtue ethicists see themselves as offering a viable stand-alone ‘aretaic’ approach to morality, which challenges the historical dominance of ‘deontic’ teleological and deontological systems. Virtue-ethical theories fall into two broad categories: ‘agent-focused’ theories, and their ‘agent-based’ counterparts. Although both versions agree that our moral evaluations ought to focus on traits of character rather than on actions, they can be distinguished by their divergent accounts of the ultimate source (or sources) of moral value. In agent-focused virtue-ethical theories – following Aristotle – although virtues of character are the primary focus of the ethical evaluation of action, the source of value is not located exclusively in the virtues.
themselves. One perceived weakness of agent-focused virtue-ethical theories, however, is that they are in danger of being reabsorbed by their deontic counterparts.¹ Agent-based virtue-ethical theorists, cognisant of such a danger, maintain a radical position: virtues are not only the appropriate focus of moral evaluation, they are also the exclusive source of moral value. One important consequence of this view is that the moral rightness or wrongness of an action is entirely derived from prior aretaic facts about its author. Examples of genuine agent-based views are exceedingly rare, but recently Michael Slote (1997 & 2001) has put forward such a theory. Slote’s theory offers a rare opportunity to evaluate the prospects of agent-based virtue ethics as a viable, independent third force in moral theory. I suggest, however, that Slote’s preferred ‘warm’ agent-based virtue ethics has at least one severe difficulty: its account of virtuous motivation appears to be self-undermining.

II. VIRTUE ETHICS AND RIGHT ACTION

The catalyst for the revival of the virtues as concepts of interest in moral philosophy was G.E.M. Anscombe’s seminal article “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958). As Leonard A. Kahn (2005, 532) notes, work on the virtues since has occurred largely in articles and collections of short pieces. Sustained book-length works – and fully fledged virtue-ethical theories – have been rare. In recent years, however, several book-length treatments of the virtues have appeared, including those by Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), Thomas Hurka (2001), Julia Driver (2001), Michael Slote (2001) and Christine Swanton (2003). The majority of virtue ethicists offer theories that are agent-focused rather than agent-based. Usually, again following Aristotle, the ethical value of the virtues in agent-focused theories is ultimately dependent on the nature of their connection with an overarching concept of human flourishing, or *eudaimonia*. 
There are subtle but significant variations in the way this connection can be articulated, and it is noteworthy that agent-focused virtue-ethical theories do not typically accord the virtues a straightforwardly derivative status; most agent-focused views, arguably including Aristotle’s own, regard the virtues themselves as components of and not just means to *eudaimonia*. Virtue-ethical theories reveal their fundamental disagreements on the value of the virtues most clearly in the development of divergent aretaic accounts of right action. According to Hursthouse’s pioneering definition, developed in response to the characteristic deontic complaint that virtue ethics provided no viable independent account of right action, “An action is right iff it is what the virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances” (1999, 28). According to Swanton, whose theory is also agent-focused, “An act is virtuous [i.e. right] (in respect of V) if and only if it hits the target of V” (2003, 233). However, neither of these well known agent-focused accounts links the rightness of action directly, let alone exclusively, with the inner states or motives of its author: the only prominent contemporary virtue ethicist to offer an agent-based account of right action appears to be Slote (1997 & 2001).

III. AGENT-BASED VIRTUE ETHICS: INNER STRENGTH AND BENEVOLENCE

Michael Slote’s view (1997 & 2001) “treats the moral or ethical status of actions as entirely derivative from independent and fundamental ethical/aretaic facts (or claims) about the motives, dispositions, or inner life of the individuals who perform them” (1997, 240). Slote’s argument aims to show how basic characterisations of ‘the motives, dispositions, or inner life’ of people can wholly ground moral actions without having to be grounded, in turn, by an overarching principle or rule-based deontic theory of moral value.

Slote considers two kinds of moral theory that base the morality of actions *solely* on an overarching master virtue. The first, ‘cool’, agent-
based approach he sketches forms itself around a conception of inner strength, or self-reliance. Such a view considers self-reliant motivation as inherently admirable and its opposite, motivational parasitism, as inherently deplorable (1997, 247). Morality based on self-reliance judges conduct on the basis of the degree of motivational (as opposed to achieved) self-reliance exhibited by an agent. Motivational self-reliance exhibits inner strength and is therefore inherently admirable, whereas motivational parasitism demonstrates inner weakness and is therefore inherently deplorable. Slote claims that there is an obvious problem, however, with pursuing a cool agent-based morality: all other-regarding states, such as benevolence, compassion and kindness, only have derivative moral value, which, according to Slote, “seems highly implausible to the modern moral consciousness” (1997, 250). Even if the ‘warm’ other-regarding dispositions need to be limited or qualified by consideration of other moral values such as justice and inner strength, to require their justification in terms of cool aretaic ideals is to deny the ‘warm’ motives their “very important basic moral value” (1997, 251. Italics mine).

The second form of purely agent-based morality, favoured by Slote, is a morality based on these ethically ‘warm’ – other-regarding – virtues; specifically, those of universal and particularistic benevolence. An aretaic morality based solely on benevolence judges actions on how well their motive exemplifies or approximates the motive state of benevolence, “rather than in terms of whether those actions achieve or are likely to achieve certain goals that universal benevolence aims at” (1997, 252. Italics mine). Morality as universal benevolence, for instance, is an agent-based analogue of utilitarianism, “that morally judges everything, in unified or monistic fashion, by reference to universal benevolence as a motive that seeks certain ends rather than, in the utilitarian manner, by reference to the actual or probable occurrence of those ends” (1997, 253. Italics mine). The moral status of an action in a morality of universal benevolence does not depend on the consequences of the action but purely on the admirable motive states of the agent. This allows a morality
of universal benevolence to make some salient distinctions about actions
that utilitarian and other consequentialist systems cannot. If, for example,
the admirability of giving a donation to a charitable organisation relies on
the motivation to do good rather than on the consequences of doing
good, then those who have a less-than-admirable motivation for donating
to a worthy cause (to gain prestige for instance) can be morally distin-
guished from those who genuinely exhibit the admirable motive (Slote
1997, 253). On the other hand, if the moral status of the act relies solely
on its consequences, the (intuitively) undesirable result is that the badly
motivated agent, whose motivation in giving is to gain prestige, is no less
admirable than the agent whose sole motivation is to bring about the
good of others.

Slote thus shows how virtues might be used to ground moral theory
without recourse to deontic concepts, with some intuitively appealing
results. Whether a claim that benevolence suffices as the sole foundation
of morality turns out to be tenable or not, Slote puts forward a strong
case for the view that motivations can have moral worth not reducible to
the moral worth of actions and consequences. Under morality as inner
strength, self-sufficient motivation is admirable even when self-sufficiency
is not achieved, and dependent or parasitic motivation is deplorable
regardless of actions or consequences. Under morality as benevolence,
benevolent motivation is admirable in itself, whether or not it is accom-
panied by the capacity to act in a benevolent manner, and whether or not
it brings about the good of others in a particular case. Also, when a
benevolent motive is absent, an action is less admirable than it would
have been if benevolent motivation were present. This separation of the
evaluation of motives from the evaluation of actions allows these appeal-
ing moral distinctions to be made. A deontic morality, which derives the
evaluation of motivations from an evaluation of actions, cannot separate
the moral worth of an agent’s motivations from the primary moral worth
of his or her actions. If we agree that self-sufficient motivation is
admirable even when self-sufficiency is not achieved, or that the lack of
benevolent motivation makes an action less praiseworthy than it could have been, then we are taking the virtues as an independent and irreducible (non-derivative) set of moral concepts. In other words, if the agent-based moral distinctions Slote makes are justified, then the virtues are to be taken seriously as possessing independent, self-grounded moral value.

IV. APPLYING AGENT-BASED THEORIES

The attempt to apply an agent-based moral theory to practical moral decisions, however, generates an immediate, seemingly insurmountable difficulty. Whenever a virtuous agent is faced with a difficult circumstance that requires careful examination of what is fundamentally morally at stake, all that really matters morally in the situation is his or her own inner moral state. Usually, we would expect facts about states of affairs out in the world to be crucial – or at the very least relevant – to solving practical moral problems. Salient or decisive facts external to the moral agent – who is in most need? what avenues of action are available? what is the least harmful way of proceeding? etc. – would determine the thinking of a virtuous agent. Examining one’s own motivations seems to be an unenlightening process, Slote admits, when action-guidance is required in a difficult case:

If someone is faced with a perplexing moral problem, it somehow seems irrelevant and even objectionable for her to examine her own motives rather than facts about people and the world in order to solve it. Yet is not this what agent-basing allows for and even prescribes? [...] Looking inward at or for motives presumably will not help to solve that person’s problem, and so, where we most need moral guidance, it would seem that agent-basing not only is irrelevant but makes it impossible to find a solution to one’s moral difficulties (1997, 258-9).
If self-examination of agents’ inner states were considered irrelevant or objectionable in the attempt to resolve a perplexing practical moral problem, then it would seem that agent-based virtue ethics, whether or not it was “the correct theory or view of morality” (1997, 221) ought not to be applied by virtuous agents in practical circumstances. Indeed, it seems that to the extent that virtuous agents did explicitly attempt to resolve practical moral problems in terms of the correct view of morality, in ‘looking inward’ they would be acting contrary to virtue, and thus badly. Presumably, it is not a desirable feature of a moral theory to be unable to guide the practical moral agency of those it deems morally exemplary, let alone to actively undermine their otherwise-virtuous motivation in this unusual way.

However, Slote argues that the criticism can be answered, and that agent-based virtue ethics can overcome the accusation of being self-undermining in practice. Slote makes use of what he has said previously about the apparent ‘one-way fit’ between agent and world (1997, 245). The said criticism had been that the very idea of agent-basing was flawed because standards of conduct could only be determined from the point of view of virtuous agency: “the direction of fit between world and moral agent is all one way: from agent to world, and this too suggests a kind of autism or isolation from the world that makes one wonder how any such form of ethics can possibly be plausible or adequate” (1997, 244). The reply to this problem was that the admirable states of virtuous agents do not operate “in splendid causal/epistemic isolation from what most of us would take to be the morally relevant realities,” but “invariably wish and need to take the world into account” (1997, 245). Thus, it is an essential feature of the virtues themselves to direct their attention to the outside world. In the case of benevolence, Slote points out that a state is not really a state of benevolence “unless one cares about who exactly is needy and to what extent they are needy, and such care, in turn, criterially involves wanting and making efforts to know relevant facts…” (1997, 245).
The reflective world-directed nature of benevolent motivation furnishes, in Slote’s view, a plausible solution to the problem of practical application:

If one morally judges a certain course of action or decision by reference to, say, the benevolence of the motives of its agent, one is judging in relation to an inner factor that itself makes reference to and takes account of facts about people in the world. One’s inward gaze effectively ‘doubles back’ on the world and allows one […] to take facts about the world into account in one’s attempt to determine what is morally acceptable or best to do (1997, 259).

The ‘doubling back’ on the world of the virtuous agent’s inward gaze allows morally salient circumstances, events, states of affairs, and people to be taken into account in practical deliberation. When virtuous agents are faced with a particularly difficult or perplexing moral problem, which, due to their current ignorance of the circumstances, they cannot solve, their possession of the virtue in question motivates them to find out more before acting. The virtue does not tell them what the solution to the problem is, but does tell them to find out more about the particular circumstances before they act. It determines this course because to decide what to do in ignorance, without making further efforts to know the real circumstances, would exhibit a lack of virtue (Slote 1997, 260). Once the facts of the case have been ascertained, and assuming they are straightforward, the agent knows enough to fully exhibit the virtue.

V. A DEEPER PROBLEM

Slote’s appeal to virtuous agency’s capacity to ‘double-back’ on the world still fails to overcome the original complaint. Slote again briefly addresses the conflict in virtuous agency between theory and agency, but does not appear to see how destructive it is to his preferred theory – indeed, to the
prospect of ‘warm’ agent-based virtue ethics. When we reflect closely on
the source of virtuous motivation versus the source of moral value, Slote’s
preferred agent-based theory reveals itself (still) to be self-undermining in
practice.

To further illuminate the conflict in Slote’s argument, it may be use-
ful first to reconsider the ‘cool’ inner strength-based morality of self-
reliance. In this type of theory, self-reliance is the sole source of moral
value. All and any other moral values have worth solely in view of their
relation to self-reliant motivation; and morality is thus inherently and
ultimately a species of self-concern. This means that the preoccupation
with one’s own moral status is both justifiable and admirable under moral-
ity as self-reliance – after all, being a certain way oneself is what moral
goodness is ultimately all about. Concern for the welfare of others, on the
other hand, is only derivatively valuable; only if other-concern follows
somehow from – or supports – virtuous (i.e. self-reliant) motivation, then
it has moral value. Others’ welfare might be a good thing, but only if cul-
tivating it helps the virtuous agent towards the ideal of self-reliance – it
is not an independent source of value itself. The same applies to any
other feature of the world that might be thought morally salient: it is only
ever so instrumentally, and only then if it has some positive role to play
in promoting, maintaining, cultivating, or otherwise assisting in self-reliant
motivation. Morality as self-reliance is thus essentially a morality of self-
concern. This is Slote’s stated reason for abandoning it as a plausible
example of agent-based virtue ethics.

However, as far as Slote is concerned, the same spectre does not
loom over ‘warm’ views, based as they are on other-regarding inner moti-
vational states. We certainly tend to admire people whose basic moral
concern is for others more than we do those who are self-concerned. The
people in question, we think, have moral value the right way around –
morality must, whatever else it does, provide non-self-interested grounds
for other-regard. As Slote would have it, what we really value above all
else is benevolence, and since benevolence constitutes a concern for the
good of others rather than our own state, our overarching theory of moral value is in the clear, because concern for the welfare of others — not ourselves — grounds moral value. What we get with morality as benevolence is, it would seem, the value-primacy of other-regarding motives, which our moral intuition tells us is better than the value primacy of ultimately self-interested motives.

However, I would argue that if we look more carefully at Slote’s morality as benevolence, we find that it fails to escape from the same fundamental flaw that brings him to reject morality as self-reliance. The flaw — that, when applied, morality as self-reliance dictates an unpalatable species of narrow self-concern — is not overcome by switching to morality as benevolence. The fundamental concern with moral self-regard has only shuffled, as it were, from the foreground to the background of virtuous agency, where it can be partially obscured by a veneer of other-regard. Morality as benevolence, like morality as self-reliance — if it is to have any action-guiding role — directs moral attention inwards, towards the virtuous agent’s own moral motivation. It is important to remember that the good of others does not ground moral value under morality as benevolence; rather, the motivation of the agent who seeks it does. Morality as benevolence is thus also inherently and ultimately (perhaps perversely, given its ‘warm’ other-regard) a morality of self-concern.

VI. VIRTUOUS MOTIVATION AND ‘THE CORRECT VIEW’

Slote appears to have a ready answer for the self-concern objection against morality as benevolence. Where the advocate of morality as self-reliance will agree that morality is ultimately a matter of self-concern anyway and accept the consequences, advocates of morality as benevolence will argue the point. They will say — as Slote does — that morality as benevolence is not (or at least need not be for the benevolent agent) a matter of self-concern. Morality as benevolence is a matter of other-concern, they will
argue, and this is exemplified in the moral motivation of benevolent agents. Genuinely benevolent agents, the reply goes, are motivated by the good of others. One way of explaining this view of benevolent agency is to say that the reasons benevolent agents would typically use to explain their actions (were they to reflect on them) appeal to the good of others: others’ needs, relieving their suffering, helping them to pursue their own happiness, and so on. Moreover, the reply continues, there is no need for a benevolent person to have any reflective view about the source of moral worth; to expect such philosophical sophistication in everyday virtuous agency would be unreasonable.

Thus, the defender of Slote’s view could reply against the self-concern objection that, as far as benevolently motivated agents are concerned, morality’s source for them – what actually motivates benevolent action – is the good of other people in general (universal benevolence) or specific others (partialistic benevolence). Other-concern is intrinsically valuable for benevolent agents – indeed, this conviction defines benevolent motivation – but having correct views about the true source of moral value does not. Of course, if we were to discover somehow that apparently benevolent agents of our acquaintance were instead ultimately preoccupied with their own moral state, we would have reason to think them motivated in an inappropriate way for virtue attribution. We would have good reason to suspect them of a certain degree of blameworthy moral hypocrisy, despite their commendable conduct. We would certainly consider such people not to be genuinely benevolent, but only simulacra of virtuous agency (notwithstanding that we probably could not reliably distinguish them from the genuine article in practice). Still, as the defender of Slote’s theory would assert, benevolently motivated people need not, and usually do not, reflect at this kind of theoretical depth; and so the potential of this kind of conflict emerging is in reality quite remote.

What might benevolent agents have to say about the value of their own motivation, if they were put on the spot? As far as benevolent agents themselves are concerned, if we were to prompt them to reflect on the
moral value of their own motives, then we might expect most of them to answer that benevolent motivation is useful but not the main point—benevolent motives are valuable because they direct us towards others’ good, but if they don’t deliver, then they aren’t particularly valuable. Indeed, one can easily imagine that benevolent motivation itself might be valued by genuinely benevolent agents only insofar as it brought about the good of others. If one is genuinely convinced that the most morally important thing is that people are, for example, fed, clothed, housed, offered meaningful work and friendship, assisted in the pursuit of their own ends, and so on, then one might well think that the only value of benevolent motives is that they are likely to generate more effective results than would their absence.

Yet, when conceived in these terms, morality as benevolence generates a strange tension with benevolent agency. Slote’s own example of benevolent agency under morality as benevolence is both peculiar and instructive. A benevolent agent is told that her mother has suddenly been taken to hospital, and “flies from a distant city to be with her” (2001, 39-40). When she arrives, morality as benevolence does not tell her precisely what she ought to do for her mother in ignorance of her mother’s condition (2001, 40) However, her benevolent motivation does tell her one thing at least to do: “she morally ought (would be wrong not) to find out more about her mother’s condition and prospects, as regards quality and duration of life and certainty as regards future suffering and incapacity” (2001, 40).

Trying to decide what to do in a state of ignorance would exhibit a callous disregard for her mother rather than benevolent motivation. Her benevolent state thus tells our virtuous agent to find out the facts before she acts, by ‘doubling-back’ on the world. According to Slote, once the facts are known, morality as benevolence can then directly be applied to the situation, “and the proper moral decision can thus be reached by agent-based considerations” (2001, 40). What is noteworthy throughout this example is that Slote’s benevolent agent is clearly supposed to be motivated in the light of a full reflective grasp of what he (and moreover
she) believes to be the correct moral view: ‘warm’ agent-based morality as benevolence.

What must be kept in mind here is that what is novel about Slote’s theory to begin with is that it is exclusively agent-based – that it derives all moral value from virtuous motivational states, and none whatsoever from any other source. Thus Slote’s benevolent agent, apprised of the facts, morally ought to go about doing what it takes to maintain her benevolent motives in the situation at hand. On the other hand, the interests of the mother – who, in this case, benevolence recommends should be refused ‘heroic measures’ – have no intrinsic value, and ought to be ignored if they threaten to interfere with the cultivation of benevolent motives in the daughter. The mother is, and cannot be other than, a prop or instrument upon which the benevolent agent is morally obliged to sharpen and maintain what is of real value: her own benevolent motives. Thankfully, in this case the daughter’s moral interests coincide with the mother’s welfare, as they might be expected in general to do; the daughter cannot maintain her own benevolent motives without thoroughgoing benevolent thought and action.

It might seem clear to an observer who is not committed to agent-based morality as benevolence that the daughter’s making the best decision for her mother’s sake is what is of fundamental moral importance, rather than the maintenance of her own moral motives. Indeed, the defence of Slote’s view against the self-concern objection relies on this being the self-understood motivation of benevolent agency. However, if the daughter seeks in this especially serious case to act under the correct view of morality – which Slote has her doing – then she will know that her mother’s welfare is only morally significant in terms of its relation to her own moral motives. Yet, it seems that as soon as she thinks explicitly in such terms – that is, deliberates well using the correct moral theory – she is no longer benevolently motivated, but is inappropriately self-concerned. The self-concern objection returns a fortiori in Slote’s own example: the force of the objec-
tion goes not to whether or not benevolently motivated agents need think explicitly in agent-based terms, but to whether they can.

In replying to this formulation of the self-concern objection, morality as benevolence cannot be defended by simply denying the need for thoughts about the source of moral value. Slote makes it clear that thoughts about the source of moral value on the part of benevolent agents – explicitly using morality as benevolence as their guide – are central to his view of practical moral agency. Indeed, the elaboration of this feature seems to be central to Slote’s defence of his agent-based theory as a practical, action-guiding one (i.e. against one of the central criticisms of virtue ethics). In this context, Slote’s reply to the return of the self-concern objection – the objection that the daughter in the example is not benevolently motivated, but is inappropriately self-concerned – seems to miss the point badly:

Are you sure? Could she not morally justify her decision not to allow heroic measures *either* by reference simply to likely future sufferings if her mother were kept alive or by saying: it would be (have been) callous of me to try to keep her alive, given her prospects. Surely, there is nothing unusual or inappropriate about the latter as an expression of moral problem-solving (2001, 40-41).

*Contra* Slote, what is clearly unusual and inappropriate about the latter, ‘morally correct’ justification is that the prospects for her mother – horrendously painful and debilitating suffering, and impending death – register only derivatively for the daughter, who is instead preoccupied with cultivating her own benevolent motives. The daughter’s motivation is not benevolent, because – put baldly – genuinely benevolent motivation in the situation would direct moral concern exclusively toward what is best for her mother, and if at all only derivatively toward her own motives (e.g. ‘she needs me to be strong for her, to make the best decision for her sake’). Yet in Slote’s example the proper direction of benevolent concern, from daughter towards mother, has been completely reversed – indeed,
it has been perversely ‘doubled back’ into self-concern. While it would be wrong to deny that reflection on her own motives by the daughter is or might be morally relevant, the turn to self-concern as morally primary in the face of a loved one’s terminal suffering displays, if not a tragic and perhaps understandable human weakness, then a shabby and distasteful moral shallowness. Certainly it is not a display of benevolent motivation. The deeper problem for Slote’s morality as benevolence, I think, is that this self-induced short-circuiting of benevolent motives seems to be guaranteed to occur in every practical case in which difficult choices require careful reflection based on a sound grasp of the correct moral theory. Indeed, it seems as if self-consciously holding the correct view of morality may rule out genuinely benevolent agency altogether.

VII. CONCLUSION: A SOURCE OF DIFFICULTY FOR AGENT-BASED ETHICAL THEORIES

It is arguable that the self-undermining practical nature of morality as benevolence is symptomatic of a deeper structural malaise in Slote’s ‘warm’ agent-basing project, which is brought to the surface by the evaluative dimension of benevolent motivation itself. Benevolently motivated agents are motivated by a conception of value in which a deep and pervasive concern for others’ welfare and happiness defines and directs their moral lives – a concern that pervades their moral emotion, perception, judgment and conduct. In axiological terms, to have genuinely benevolent moral motives, whether one is self-conscious about them or not, indicates the intrinsic valuation of others’ good. That is, intrinsically valuing others’ good – whether in universal or particularistic terms – is the defining condition for the possession of genuinely benevolent motivation. The condition of intrinsic valuation of others’ good distinguishes benevolent motivation, for example, from the thinner concept of benevolent action, which need not be rendered in terms of its axiological origins. Benevolently
motivated agents might be value pluralists – holding any number of other intrinsic values alongside the intrinsic valuation of others’ good – or monists about the source of value.

On the other hand, Slote’s morality as benevolence is avowedly and inescapably monist about intrinsic value – in axiological terms, this is Slote’s central point in establishing the stand-alone status of agent-based theories. Moreover, morality as benevolence is monist with reference to a source of value that clashes with the intrinsic value of genuinely benevolent motivation. This means that the moral self-defeat that arises in Slote’s example is not just a peculiarity in some unusual cases of the theory’s practical application (that is, when the agent happens to have the correct view of morality, as in Slote’s example). The deeper problem for morality as benevolence is one of fundamentally conflicting value commitments – a kind of axiological schizophrenia – between the theory and its own exemplar. This axiological condition seems to afflict any attempt at ‘warm’ agent-basing, since what virtuous agents intrinsically value – insofar as it is (to the extent that it is ‘warm’) external to their own states – is guaranteed not to be exclusively their own moral motivation, which is the only thing that the theory values. The daughter in Slote’s example falls prey to precisely this axiological schism.

That we consider benevolent action to be morally right need not imply that we think the moral value of benevolent motivation is wholly derived from deontic sources. Nor need the fact that we intrinsically admire benevolent motivation mean that the moral worth of its consequences is wholly derived from those motives, as it does for agent-based virtue ethics. Slote marshals a convincing argument for the former. The problem, however, is that his preferred theory fails to accommodate the latter. This does not mean that different sources of moral value are inconsistent in any overarching value theory. In my own view, one of Slote’s unquestioned basic assumptions – that one source of moral value is primary or exclusive and all other kinds are derivative – is the source of the problem. It would resolve this problem if Slote held that benevolent
motivation is an intrinsic (but not exclusive) source of moral value, that what the benevolent agent values is an intrinsic source of moral value, and that an overarching theory of value ought to accommodate these sources without trying to reduce one to the other.\textsuperscript{2} Of course, a view of this kind could no longer be considered agent-based, and to that extent would not furnish us with the viable independent ‘third way’ to which Slote’s ‘warm’ agent-based virtue ethics aspires.

**WORKS CITED**


**NOTES**

1. See, for example, Julia Driver’s sustained attempt to (re)absorb virtue ethics into consequentialism (2001). On the issue of virtue primacy and its consequences for the status of virtue ethics in relation to deontic ethics, see, for example, David Elliott (1993).

2. On this type of view, see, for example, Christine Swanton (2003). Swanton presents a robust virtue ethics, which assumes pluralism in at least two relevant senses: Swanton has a pluralistic view of the “morally significant features” (2003, 2) of the world which can ground virtues; and of “rightness of action” (2003, 4). Swanton develops not an agent-based but what she calls a
‘target-centred’ virtue ethical account of right action (2003, 227-248). I do not mean to suggest, however, that value pluralism is the agent-based virtue theorist’s only live option.