

11. Must virtue ethics be objectionably self-effacing?

I argue that virtue ethics is not objectionably self-effacing. I begin by establishing what, precisely, self-effacingness means. I then consider why virtue ethics in particular might be susceptible to the self-effacingness objection. In response to this, I argue that, once an agent is in fact virtuous, the theory is not self-effacing at all—so the charge is misplaced. Insofar as the theory is a theory of the development of virtue, then the theory may be self-effacing, but not troublingly so. I then accept, only for the sake of argument, that virtue ethics might be significantly self-effacing. I argue that self-effacing theories are not in the main problematic, and that most ethical theories are self-effacing. That is, I first argue that virtue ethics is not self-effacing; and then, that even if it were, it would not be therefore objectionable.

So, what is a self-effacing theory? A theory is self-effacing if it implies (at least sometimes) that agents ought not to be motivated by that theory's justification. A non-virtue-ethics illustration may clarify. Utilitarianism is often said to be potentially self-effacing because, were everyone to believe in the correctness of utilitarianism, that belief might not lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number. For example, the best possible outcome might include absolute, unconditional love, so that children feel, say, that their parents would sacrifice hundreds of strangers for their safety and happiness. Parents would then be right to develop such strong love for their children, even though one or two of them may actually end up sacrificing a disproportionately high number of strangers for their child. Thus, potentially, if one is utilitarian, one perhaps ought to convince oneself (for the sake of achieving the best, utilitarian outcome) of some other ethical theory.

Now, how can one argue that virtue ethics is susceptible to the self-effacingness objection? And why do I think these arguments are unsuccessful? I shall give three potential arguments to show that it is self-effacing. The first two are entirely unsuccessful, and the third is successful only in a limited way.

Begin by considering Emily, the virtuous agent. Emily does what the virtuous agent would do (recall: she is such a virtuous agent). But, she does not do it 'because' the virtuous agent would do it. At first, this may seem to make virtue ethics a self-effacing theory: Emily, upon the realization of her virtue, may seem to have abandoned virtue ethics's decision-making procedure. But this *prima facie* reading of Emily's reasoning mistakes a central tenet of virtue ethics: the right action is identified by recourse to the virtuous agent—that is, its proof of rightness is that it is characteristically done by the virtuous agent—but nowhere in that thesis about identification is there a second thesis about the motivation of the virtuous agent. These theses need to be differentiated: (1) the right action can be picked out by recourse to the action characteristically taken by the virtuous agent; and (2) one should do the action because the virtuous agent does it. While the first thesis is obviously true of the relevant theories, the second is not necessarily true. In fact, at various points in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle gives explicit kinds of reasons why the virtuous person does what he does: for the 'fine' or the 'noble'.

Perhaps the self-effacingness objection comes from another side. If the point of being virtuous is to perform our function (i.e. characteristic activity) well and therefore achieve *eudaimonia*,

then—the argument might go—the ending reason for any of Emily’s virtuous decisions is ‘to achieve eudaimonia’. Against this objection, note first that—according to most virtue ethical theories—motivation is an integral part of what defines an act as virtuous. So: if Emily does an act simply for her own gain, to (say) increase her likelihood of achieving eudaimonia where eudaimonia is not defined synonymously with the fine and noble, then she would be failing to be virtuous at all. (Recall that, as a virtuous agent, Emily’s motivations are definitionally things like the ‘fine’ and the ‘noble’—not merely her own gain.) The objection from earlier in this paragraph can also be defanged in another way: by pointing out that Emily’s making the virtuous decision is not a means to eudaimonia; instead, it is part of eudaimonia itself. The virtuous choice itself constitutes eudaimonia, so saying that ‘no, my reason was not to be eudaimonic but just to do the virtuous thing’ would be odd, since one refers to a constitutive element of the other.

In response to the above paragraph, one might argue that Aristotle himself said that everyone agrees the end is eudaimonia, and all aim at that end. One might take Aristotle here to be refuting what I said above: aiming, like Emily, at the fine or noble is not the same as aiming at eudaimonia (as everyone, virtuous and non-virtuous) already does simply by eudaimonia’s definition as the final end. This objection mistakes two ways in which Aristotle discusses eudaimonia in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: on one hand, he discusses conceptual constraints on any concept of eudaimonia; and, on the other hand, he argues for one particular substantive conception of it. Giving this objection would be substituting the first way he discusses eudaimonia for the second: while everyone may aim at eudaimonia insofar as that term is simply the conceptual highest end, not everyone aims at eudaimonia defined substantively the same way the virtuous Emily defines it. So, it is perfectly plausible for a non-virtuous agent to say that ‘aiming at eudaimonia is not aiming at the virtuous’, since that agent would have the wrong substantive conception of eudaimonia, one which is not constituted by virtue. In this way, the argument in the previous paragraph still stands: to aim at eudaimonia, when it is properly substantively conceptualized, is constituted by aiming at the fine and noble, so to aim at one is to aim at the other. So, this second argument has not established that virtue ethics is self-effacing.

Let us consider the third argument—the one I said is partially successful. Recall that the right thing to do is picked out (identified) by what the virtuous agent would do; but I argued above that the right thing is not motivated by the fact the virtuous agent does it, but rather because it is noble, fine, etc. For agents not-yet virtuous, however, it seems they choose what to do because the virtuous agent would do it: their motivation is exactly what I argued Emily’s is not: ‘because the virtuous does it’. Is this self-effacing? Perhaps: since doing what the virtuous agent does is not the goal that virtue ethics actually aims at (the actual goal is doing the right things for the right reasons, not out of mimicry). So, the non-virtuous are to set aside the eventual goal and mimic their virtue-superiors: this may seem troublingly self-effacing.

Why do I not think this is a serious problem? Even setting aside whether or not self-effacement is a problem in general, this kind of self-effacement seems unproblematic. The agent, even as she mimics, knows that she is mimicking. Rather than (as in other theories) the agent having to delude herself, here, the agent simply recognizes her own limitations (which, moreover, may be temporary—as a child may mimic as she develops into a virtuous adult) and realizes that mimicking

the virtuous is the best way she can conform to her underlying reasons, which at all times she may recognize are to be virtuous and do the virtuous thing for the sake of the noble, etc. So, it seems to me that using a decision procedure that does not precisely rely on the agent's judgement, and the agent being aware of that decision making procedure and believing it will best help her conform with her underlying reasons, does not make a theory troubling. We see such mimicry frequently: I may mimic my athletic friend's workout routine, or my other friend's excellent cooking skills. I trust their judgement over mine in these things to help me best conform to my own reasons (to exercise and eat a nice meal). The case of the non-virtuous mimicking the virtuous is similar.

Now, you may have your own reasons to believe that virtue ethics is self-effacing, independent of the three I have given and rebutted above, and you may be unsatisfied that I have left unconsidered this other reason (I have not addressed, for example, the classic case of visiting a friend in hospital—since what I said above could easily address this case—but you may remain unsatisfied). In case this is true, I want to briefly talk about self-effacing theories more generally. Many theories are self-effacing, most obviously theories of utilitarianism (as discussed above) or self-interest. (If I were motivated entirely by self interest, I might see that it is in my interest for people to believe I keep my promises, therefore I should keep this particular promise even though it may seem to me, in the moment, that keeping this single promise is not actually good for my interests. Therefore, I should convince myself that, contra my interests, keeping promises is objectively good.) The examples are plentiful.

Self-effacingness is, all else equal, a factor counting against the attractiveness of a moral theory, as Martinez (2011) argues: having to brainwash (to put the point a bit crassly) oneself out of a correct moral belief is, all else equal, not ideal. But the weight of this objection to any theory does not seem overly great, particularly because it is a weight generally agreed to be shared among all three main moral theories as well as self-interest. A comparative weighing of the problems each theory has with self-effacingness is outside the scope of this essay, but however well or badly utilitarianism or Kantianism (or something else) does against virtue ethics in the domain of self-effacingness seems a secondary concern compared to other differences between the theories. It seems there are more important differences: utilitarianism's and Kantianism's basic assumption—unshared by virtue ethics—of intrinsic moral equality; or the problems had by various theories about non-derivative value to loved ones, all these things seem more significant than self-effacingness.

In this essay, I addressed three arguments for why virtue ethics is not in any significant way self-effacing. Then, I stipulated that it was self-effacing in some notable way, and argued that self-effacingness is a property shared by other moral theories, and thus it does not weigh particularly against virtue ethics insofar as virtue ethics is not especially self-effacing. In short, virtue ethics is not objectionably self-effacing.