

## SUFFERING AND THE PRIMACY OF VIRTUE

Some people think that each and every instance of suffering is intrinsically bad in an impersonal way. They believe that suffering is in this sense bad from the point of view of the universe.<sup>1</sup> Others contend that suffering need not be intrinsically and impersonally bad when it is deserved. Nonetheless, all the people in the first group and many of those in the second would endorse the following proposition:

(A) Some instances of suffering are in themselves (that is, intrinsically) impersonally bad.

Take William Rowe's memorable example of the fawn left alive though horribly burned after a forest fire (1979: 337). The fawn's suffering seems in itself to be impersonally bad.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, a world in which the poor creature did not experience that suffering would seem, all things being equal, to be a better place.

So (A) is on the face of it plausible. If, however, it is not merely plausible but *true*, then the virtue ethicist would seem to be faced with a problem.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Nagel 1987: 67 (compare Nagel 1986: 161-2), Parfit 2011b: 569 and Mayerfeld 1999: 87. Two brief remarks on these sorts of claims: (i) Those who make them are referring to the sort of suffering that is experienced rather than to non-experiential cases of suffering, as when, say, a political campaign suffers a setback. I, too, will restrict my attention to experiential suffering. (ii) Note the reference to *suffering* rather than to *pain*. The question of whether pain is intrinsically bad is the subject of much debate. As Parfit (2011a: 455-6) notes, this is partly due to the fact that the word 'pain' 'can be used to refer to certain kinds of sensation either (1) only when they are disliked, or (2) whether or not they are disliked.'

<sup>2</sup> This seems to be the case if the claim 'x is in itself bad' is taken to mean 'x is bad independently of x's relations to anything else'. However, it also seems to be the case if that claim is taken to mean 'x's badness does not derive from anything else' (such as the badness of some end to which it provides the means or the badness of some whole of which it is part). On this distinction, see Brady 2018: 81.

The reason is as follows. Suppose that some instances of suffering really are in themselves impersonally bad. The mere fact that they are in this sense bad seems to tell us something about what morality demands. For where there is such suffering, there seems necessarily to exist what Jamie Mayerfeld calls ‘a demand or an appeal for the prevention of that suffering.’ (1999: 111) It seems that the suffering ‘cries out for its own abolition or cancellation.’ (Mayerfeld 1999: 111) This is not because a virtuous person would characteristically hear it as crying out. Neither virtue nor vice appears to come into it. On the contrary, as William J. Talbott claims,

the most compelling explanation of a general duty to prevent and relieve suffering would seem to be a consequentialist one: The duty derives from the badness of suffering. (Talbott 2013: 1037)

It would seem, then, that we are morally obliged to prevent suffering of the sort the poor fawn experienced simply because the presence of such suffering makes the world a worse place. Indeed, that consequentialist verdict might ‘seem almost inevitable.’<sup>3</sup> By the same token, a virtue ethical account of the moral significance of suffering might seem rather precarious.

Call this the Objection from Suffering. In what follows, I present three ways a virtue ethicist could respond to it. In the first two sections I set out two broadly virtue-ethical arguments against (A). In Section 1, I consider the argument that no instance of suffering is intrinsically bad in an impersonal way because whenever suffering is bad in this sense, it is made bad by the fact that unimpaired and fully-informed virtuous persons would disapprove

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<sup>3</sup> Darwall 1986: 41. To be precise, Darwall claims that ‘If the fundamental truths of ethics concern what is intrinsically valuable’, then ‘a consequentialist theory of the right will seem almost inevitable.’ However, his reasoning implies that the consequent would remain true if the fundamental truths of ethics were to concern what is intrinsically *dis*valuable.

of it. In Section 2, I discuss the Nietzsche-inspired argument that no instance of suffering is intrinsically bad because the valence of any particular instance of suffering – roughly, its goodness or its badness – depends on the character of the sufferer. In Section 3, I present some objections to the arguments set out in sections 1 and 2. In Section 4, however, I argue that *even if* (A) is true, the virtue ethicist need only concede that it militates against her chosen virtue ethical theory if she is committed to the view that the virtues are what Julia Annas calls ‘basic’. If she holds the virtues to be merely ‘primary’, then her theory can be reconciled with the truth of (A). I conclude that the Objection from Suffering fails. Having presented that conclusion, I close the paper by giving some reasons for adopting a virtue ethical, as opposed to consequentialist, account of the moral significance of suffering.

1.

A virtue ethicist could challenge the truth of (A) by arguing that whenever anything is impersonally bad, it is made impersonally bad by aretaic considerations. For example, they could defend the claim that for any impersonally bad *x*, what makes *x* impersonally bad is the fact that it would elicit certain negative reactions from an unimpaired and fully-informed virtuous person.

Jason Kawall defends that claim by appealing to a hypothetical scenario involving the torturing of puppies. Though he does not say so, he would, I presume, accept that the puppies’ suffering is bad for the puppies. However, he denies that their suffering, or indeed anything else, is in itself impersonally bad (2009: 7). Though he grants that it might very well be a ‘descriptive fact about most humans that they care about the suffering involved in puppy-torturing’, there is, he maintains,

a gap between the descriptive and the normative here... [W]hat changes things – what turns a mere disapproval common among many humans – into *moral wrongness* (or *badness*) is the fact that particular kinds of agents under particular conditions would share a disapproval of this sort. It is the fact that *virtuous* agents in particular... would have negative reactions that makes such... pains [or sufferings – Kawall uses the words interchangeably] *morally bad*. (Kawall 2009: 15, 16; compare Garcia 2003: 91)

We will consider whether Kawall's account is correct in Section 3. For now, let us simply note that Kawall's work indicates one way to challenge (A) on virtue ethical grounds.

2.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche has the following to say on the topic of suffering:

In most cases of beneficence toward those in distress there is something offensive in the intellectual frivolity with which the one who feels compassion plays the role of fate: he knows nothing of the whole inner sequence and interconnection that spells misfortune for *me* or for *you*! The entire economy of my soul and the balance effected by 'misfortune', the breaking open of new springs and needs, the healing of old wounds, the shedding of entire periods of the past – all such things that can be involved in misfortune do not concern the dear compassionate one: they want to *help* and have no thought that there is a personal necessity of misfortune; that terrors, deprivations, impoverishments, midnights, adventures, risks, and blunders are as necessary for me and you as their opposites... (Nietzsche [1882] 2001: §338)

According to Christopher Janaway, Nietzsche is not suggesting that particular instances of suffering, though bad in themselves for the sufferer, can nonetheless contribute to some greater good, such as the sufferer's personal growth (2017: 89). Janaway argues that Nietzsche is making the more radical proposal that suffering is not good, bad or neutral in itself, that – to adapt the psychologist's idiom – its *valence* is always context-dependent.<sup>4</sup> On this reading, a 'sickly' person's suffering has neither 'meaning' nor 'purpose' for them and is therefore bad (Nietzsche [1887] 1997: §28). But for a strong and spirited individual it can be good to suffer.<sup>5</sup>

On this interpretation of Nietzsche's work, then, the valence of suffering for the sufferer – its status as good, for instance, or as bad – is a function of its context. Christine Swanton suggests that this context can be aretaic. After all, she notes, Aristotle holds that pleasure's goodness is 'dependent on virtue', in the sense that pleasure is 'good without qualification' only when it is 'handled excellently' (2003: 40; 2006: 182; see Aristotle 2002: Book 10, Chapter 5). Similarly, she proposes that 'there is no reason not to incorporate a virtue concerned with an excellent attitude towards suffering, and the excellent handling of suffering.' (2006: 182) Such a virtue, she adds, would be exhibited in 'the kind of embracing of meaningful suffering of which Nietzsche speaks' (2006: 182). The implication is that just as the presence of vice can make pleasure bad, so the presence of virtue can make suffering good – that, in this sense, the badness of suffering for the sufferer can be redeemed by the

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<sup>4</sup> Janaway's careful assessment is that it is 'plausible to regard Nietzsche's position at least as congenial' to the Dancy-esque view that the valence of suffering 'varies according to the context it is in.' (2017: 91)

<sup>5</sup> There is some dispute about how Nietzsche's statements on this issue should be interpreted. Michael Brady reads him as claiming that the strong individual embraces the meaninglessness of his own suffering (2018: 97). By contrast, Alexander Nehamas argues that Nietzsche's position (in the *Genealogy* at least) is that such an individual bestows meaning – and presumably goodness – on their suffering (1994: 280-1).

presence of virtue.<sup>6</sup> This is not merely to say that one's own suffering might become good were one to say 'Yes' to it, like Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. It is to say that one should not presume that others' suffering is bad for them. By playing 'the dear compassionate one' and rushing in to remove it, one might be robbing them of something good.

Swanton makes these claims tentatively; nonetheless, for the sake of convenience, let us refer to this position on suffering as 'Swanton's account'. Suppose that it is correct. Suppose that suffering really isn't intrinsically bad for the sufferer. If it is not intrinsically bad for the sufferer, then it is hard to see how it could be intrinsically bad in some impersonal way. After all, it seems reasonable to suppose that suffering is in itself impersonally bad precisely *because* it is bad for the sufferer. It seems reasonable to think, with L. W. Sumner, that 'it is the fact that suffering is bad for the one who experiences it that makes it intrinsically bad and thereby gives us all an ethical reason for wanting to prevent or relieve it.' (2011: 88) So if – for instance – Eva is a strong and spirited individual whose suffering is intrinsically good for her, then it is not at all clear why her suffering would be a bad thing from (so to speak) the point of view of the universe. It would seem, rather, that if it isn't bad for her, then it isn't impersonally bad either. So it seems that Nietzsche's arguments do not just have force against the claim that suffering is intrinsically bad for the sufferer. They also seem to militate against the claim that suffering is in itself impersonally bad.

3.

Though both Kawall and Swanton claim that the badness of suffering is virtue-dependent, they appeal to distinct conceptions of virtue-dependence. For Kawall, suffering's badness is virtue-dependent in the sense that suffering is made impersonally bad by the hypothetical

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<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Michael Slote maintains that 'nothing counts as intrinsically bad for a person unless it involves some degree of vice (or an absence of total virtue).' (2001: 165)

reactions of a particular sort of ideal observer – namely, the virtuous person. For Swanton, suffering’s badness is virtue-dependent in the sense that the valence of any particular instance of suffering depends on the character of the sufferer. Nonetheless, if either Kawall or Swanton is correct, then (A) is false and the Objection from Suffering, therefore, fails.

But *is* either of them correct? Kawall’s theory, for its part, will strike many as implausible. Take David Copp and David Sobel, for instance. They discuss the Kawall-esque view that when we make morally-charged decisions, ‘the alternatives we face are morally neutral in themselves and... only gain a moral color by reflecting the moral color of the states of character or the motivational states that we can turn toward them.’ That view, they contend, is unsatisfactory. Virtue is not like ‘a searchlight penetrating a world that would otherwise have no moral features at all...’ It is, they suggest, more like a ‘telescope’ through which the virtuous person discovers features that were there all along. (Copp and Sobel 2004: 552)

Swanton’s account is also open to question. It is easy to see how a particular instance of suffering, though bad in itself for the sufferer, might contribute to some greater good, such as the development of the sufferer’s character. But it is very difficult to make sense of the notion that suffering might be anything other than intrinsically bad for the sufferer. Picture the *Übermensch* grieving the death of a friend. Are we to suppose that that suffering is *in itself* a good thing for the *Übermensch*? I can’t see how it could be (though perhaps that indicates merely that I am no *Übermensch*). In any case, even if we concede that the suffering of a strong and spirited individual may indeed be intrinsically good, it is clear that there exist some other cases, *many* other cases, in which suffering cannot be in this sense redeemed. Perhaps, for example, some instances of suffering are so horrendous that they would devastate even the strongest and most spirited person (Brady 2018: 4).

The suffering of children and animals also seems to provide a counterexample for Swanton's account. For although Swanton admits that both children and animals are 'valuable independent of virtue' (2003: 38), her Nietzsche-inspired account might be taken to imply that the valence of their suffering is virtue-dependent. But is it? So far as I know, Nietzsche did not address the moral significance of children's suffering in any of his published works. In *Untimely Meditations*, however, he claims that animal suffering is bad because the animal is 'incapable of any kind of reflection on the nature of this life' and unable, therefore, to redeem its own suffering through the exercise of virtue ([1876] 1997: 157). Should we say that the valence of the animal's suffering remains virtue-dependent since it *could* be rendered un-bad if, *per impossibile*, the animal were to become virtuous? And, extrapolating, should we say the same of the suffering of children too young to develop suffering-focused virtues such as forbearance? It is not clear that we could justifiably say either of those things.

4.

So there are reasons to reject Kawall's account and reasons to reject Swanton's. It is of course a further question whether any of those reasons are decisive; but suppose that some of them are. Suppose, indeed, that neither Kawall's account nor Swanton's gives us good reason to reject the truth of (A). For the reasons presented in the opening section of this paper, that result might seem to militate against virtue ethics. For if (A) is true, then the Objection from Suffering would seem to have force. That is to say: if (A) is true, then some things – namely, some instances of suffering – are in themselves impersonally bad, and the mere fact that they are bad in this way seems to tip the scales away from virtue ethics and towards consequentialism.



To assess whether the truth of (A) really would tip the scales in this way, it may help to consider Julia Annas's distinction between taking the virtues to be *basic* and taking them to be *primary*.

For ancient virtue ethicists such as Aristotle, she writes, the virtues are 'primary' in the sense that we 'introduce and understand' other ethical notions, such as justice, in terms of them. However, she continues, the virtues 'are not basic in the modern sense: other concepts are not derived from them, still less reduced to them.' (2003: 9; see further, Hursthouse 2006)

Kawall, for instance, takes the virtues to be basic. He holds that rightness and goodness (as well as wrongness and badness) metaphysically depend upon 'the virtues or virtuous agents' (2009: 1-2). Accordingly, as we saw, he would reject (A).

By contrast, someone who takes the virtues to be primary, but not basic, need not be so restricted. Such a person need not deny that some instances of suffering are in themselves impersonally bad.

Michael Brady's work is a case in point. In *Suffering and Virtue*, he concedes that suffering is always 'in a strict sense intrinsically bad' (2018: 82). But he then proceeds to argue that some instances of suffering are bad because the sufferers are 'pained' by what they take to be of disvalue (2018: 7). So, for instance,

physical pain is a way in which we are pained by bodily damage and disorder, whilst remorse is a way in which we are pained by or hate our own wrongdoing. As a result, pain and remorse [both of which are, in Brady's view, kinds of suffering] can be regarded as both intrinsically bad (as kinds of negative attitude) and nevertheless virtuous (as negative attitudes directed towards disvalue). (Brady 2018: 7; see further, Chapter 3)

The details of Brady's account need not concern us here; what is significant, for our purposes, is the fact that he (i) implies that some instances of suffering can in themselves be impersonally bad and (ii) takes the virtues to be primary.

The consequentialist critic will see such virtue ethical attempts to accommodate the intrinsic badness of suffering as dubious. To admit that some instances of suffering are in themselves impersonally bad is, they will say, to tip the scales away from virtue ethics and towards consequentialism. Indeed, it may seem to them – as it seems to Darwall – that admitting that point makes consequentialism seem ‘almost inevitable’ (1986: 41).

For these reasons, then, the Objection from Suffering might seem to count against virtue ethics and in favour of consequentialism. Yet that impression is false. When faced with a fawn that has been horribly burned, we will, it is true, hear the familiar consequentialist call to bring about a certain state of affairs. We will be called upon to reduce the poor creature's suffering. But we will be called upon to do other things, too. We will be called to act for the right reasons (for the sake of the fawn, for instance) and with the right feelings (without resentment, say). We will also be called to attend to the creature's suffering in an appropriate way, neither revelling in it nor seeking squeamishly to flee from it (see further, Sandler 2017: 228). To give such considerations their due, one must approach ethics in a way that allows one to appraise, not just the means by which to produce certain states of affairs, but also such things as the cogency of an agent's reasons for action, the appropriateness of their attendant feelings and the clarity of their moral vision. To do this, one need not suppose that the virtues are basic. But one must, I believe, take them to be primary.<sup>7</sup>

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