

An Agent-Centered Account of Rightness: The Importance of a Good Attitude

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Abstract This paper provides a sketch of an agent-centered way of understanding and answering the question, “What’s wrong with that?” On this view, what lies at the bottom of judgments of wrongness is a bad attitude; when someone does something wrong, she does something that expresses a bad, or inappropriate, attitude (where inappropriateness is understood, tentatively, as a failure to recognize the separateness of others). In order to motivate this account, a general Kantian agent-centered ethics is discussed, as well as Michael Slote’s agent-based ethics, in light of analysis of the grounding role of attitudes in the evaluation of two core cases. In light of these discussions, it is argued that there are advantages to preserving the grounding of the appropriateness of attitudes in facts about their objects (as opposed to Slote’s sentimentalism), while cutting such an agent-centered ethics away from a Kantian grounding.

Keywords Agent-centered ethics · Attitudes · Kant · Normative ethics · Slote

When it comes to morally evaluating our actions, there are a number of ways to frame an answer to a question of the form, “What’s wrong with that?” In this paper, a sketch of an agent-centered way of understanding and answering this question will be offered. On the view that will be advanced, what lies at the bottom of judgments of wrongness is a bad attitude; when someone does something that is wrong, she does something that expresses a bad, or inappropriate, attitude. This sort of view is agent-centered, locating wrongness in the attitudes of agents and not in actions defined independently from facts about what the agent thinks. However, the normative grounding of the evaluation of these attitudes is not facts about the agent, as some virtue theoretical accounts would hold (for example, attitudes are not wrong because they are the sorts of attitudes that are part of a non-flourishing human life, or contrary to the natural sentimental make-up of human beings); the normative grounding of the evaluation of these attitudes is facts about the objects of the attitudes in question. That is, facts about the objects of one’s attitude ground judgments of the appropriateness of that attitude; in this respect, the view draws a great deal on a Kantian understanding of the role of the value of certain kinds of things in ethical evaluation. Unlike traditional Kantian accounts, however, the view does not endorse the claim that it is the value of

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humanity that sets the moral agenda. Many things, other than human beings, are valuable in a way that sets the moral appropriateness of our attitudes towards them.

Because a canvass of the whole history of ethics is not possible here, what is offered is not a complete case for a unique ethical view. Instead, in order to motivate the account, the grounding role of attitudes in the evaluation of the core case of deception will be discussed, and a comparison with Kantian agent-centered ethics and Michael Slote's agent-based ethics will be made. Much more argument would be needed to make a case for a purely attitude-based view of moral evaluation, but the discussion in what follows is meant to outline the general shape such a view would take.

1 Agent-Centered Ethics in Kant

Kant's normative theory is a well-known example of an agent-centered ethical account. Central to its agent-centered character is its focus on the intentions of agents in determining the rightness or wrongness of acts. Although Kant's view is complex and there are many nuanced interpretations of his view, the hallmark of a Kantian view is the grounding of moral evaluation in the Categorical Imperative. Put crudely, what grounds a normative judgment, on Kant's account, is the intention embodied in the maxim on which the agent acts. If the maxim on which the agent acts is such that it cannot be universalized (or if it is such that it seeks to use rational nature as a mere means, etc.), then the agent's action is not permissible. Because one's maxim embodies one's intention, Kant's account is agent-centered, focusing on the agent's intentions, and explicitly ignoring the consequences that follow on the act (Kant 2003).

Attitudes can be understood to play a fundamental role in Kant's account as well; one way of understanding what makes an impermissible act impermissible is that the action treats rational nature as a mere means as opposed to as an end-in-itself. What that means is that an action that expresses a failure to respect rational nature as an end is an action it is always wrong to perform. This means that what makes a disrespectful action wrong is that it is the sort of thing that enacts an inappropriate view of the object in question. On Kant's view, what an act displays about how the agent engages with rational nature is always what grounds the wrongness of that action. In effect, then, the view grounds evaluation in the examination of the intention behind an action, and what makes intentions of the right or wrong sort has to do with facts about the objects to which one is related through that intention. To take a case that will be discussed in the next section, deceiving another is wrong on Kant's account because it is a way of treating another's rational nature as a mere means to one's own ends. Instead of respecting the autonomy of another (where autonomy is the feature of other human beings that must be respected, or treated appropriately, in one's actions concerning them), one manipulates it to serve one's own ends rather than the ends of the agent herself.¹

A view like this has great intuitive appeal; as the discussion in the next section will show, the different ways one might evaluate a case of deception show clearly the advantages of an agent-centered view, though the discussion departs from traditional Kantian evaluation of the way in which respect for others rules out deception. However, even if a Kantian were to accept the analysis as presented, a strictly Kantian view cannot accommodate a different kind of case

¹ Depending on how one reads Kant, one may prefer to explain this wrongness in terms of not being able to universalize one's maxim. However, since Kant viewed his formulations as equivalent, there should be no tension with the explanation given here. Specifically, explanation in terms of universalization still focuses on the intention embodied in the maxim (and so still counts as agent-centered), and the autonomous nature of human beings still plays a grounding role in ferreting out contradictions in the universalization of one's maxims.

(the case of the wanton destruction of natural environments, which will be discussed in the last section), and so a view that resists grounding the evaluation of intentions in facts about rational nature only can accommodate a broader range of cases.

2 The Case of Deception

Consider the case of Marta, a woman who deceives her partner about infidelity. Marta's partner, Mark, has told her that he would not be able to forgive infidelity, and that it would put an end to their marriage. Despite this fact, he insists that he wants Marta to tell him if she ever engages in an affair, because he cannot bear the thought of living with someone who had secretly betrayed him. Even so, Marta engages in an extra-marital affair, and feels absolutely terrible about it. She doesn't want to lose Mark, but knows that if she tells him about the affair he will leave her. On the other hand, she knows that secret betrayal is an abhorrent thought to him, and that keeping the affair secret is the thing he would hate the most. However, she is so upset about the prospect of her marriage ending that she keeps the affair secret, justifying this to herself with the thought that no matter what he wants, it is unreasonable for Mark to think it is better to know about infidelity than to be kept in the dark. And Marta, it turns out, is very good at deception; for the rest of their days, Mark is none the wiser.

What is wrong with what Marta does? One might be tempted to say that there is nothing wrong with what she does, because it is true that what you don't know can't hurt you, and actions can only be wrong if they hurt someone. However, even if one is tempted by this response, it is still the case that Marta is doing the one thing that Mark has told her he can't abide. It seems she is doing *something* wrong in expressly ignoring his wishes, even if that makes the situation turn out the best.

If one agrees that Marta has done *something* wrong, the question is *what* is wrong with what she does. Though there is not space to exhaust all possible answers, it is important to note that answers that appeal to how people feel about lying, or to the bad consequences of lying, don't cut to the heart of the issue. People don't like being deceived, and they are hurt by that deception; but people don't like knowing that they've been cheated on, either, and are hurt a great deal by being informed of infidelity. But it is not obvious that Marta's deception could be morally cleansed if it would actually hurt Mark more to learn of the infidelity than to be kept in the dark. Answers that appeal only to the harm that deception does don't fully engage with the fact that there is something *about* deception that hurts. It is not the mere fact that it hurts (or that we would prefer not to be deceived, or have an interest in not being deceived) that gets the moral evaluation going; the question that is left over is *why* it hurts. For deception is not like whacking someone with a baseball bat; it is a hurt of a more complex kind, and if it hurts to be deceived it is because deception is antecedently perceived to be bad.

So what hurts about deception? The Kantian idea that deception is wrong because it treats another as a means (that is, it circumvents another's autonomy in order to use another for ends she would not set for herself) cuts closer to the heart of the issue. It is wrong for Marta to deceive Mark because she is trying to avoid the consequences of his coming to know about her affair. Because she knows he would leave her if he knew about the affair, it is wrong for her to make him believe she has not had one; he is being tricked into a course of action he would not take if he had all the information. And so what hurts about the deception is the fact that one has been manipulated.

But that can't be all there is to it. It is not simply the case that one ought not to deceive another person because it is always wrong to attempt to alter another's course of action by not giving her all the information relevant to her decisions. Consider the case of Anna and Kristen.

Anna is getting ready to present a paper at a conference, and in order to look her best, she gets a new haircut. However, the haircut does not turn out that well, and Anna is distraught. She asks her partner Kristen if it is as bad as she thinks, and Kristen soothes her by convincing her that it looks much better than it actually does.

Is it wrong for Kristen to convince Anna that she looks better than she does? There may be cases in which it *is* wrong; for example, it could be that Anna has made it clear to Kristen that the worst thing that could ever happen to her is that people see her with a terrible haircut, and she would do almost anything to avoid being seen in such a state. In that case, it may be wrong to convince her that her hair does not look all that bad. But if it is the case that Anna's haircut has simply damaged her confidence, and she wants to believe that her hair looks fine so she can face the crowd, deception is part of what she has come to Kristen for, and Kristen may well do the right thing in concealing the fact that she believes Anna's hair looks dreadful.

So it may not be the case that we ought not to deceive others because it is always wrong to deceive; sometimes we ought to convince others of a lie. If Mark had told Marta that he could never forgive infidelity, but for that reason he would never want to know about it if it were to occur, it could actually be wrong for Marta *not* to withhold that information, and to tell him what she has done. If this is the case, then deception is not always wrong (or, more precisely, withholding information is not always wrong), and it is probably not wrong in itself simply because it is an attempt to affect one's behavior through false information. What seems wrong with Marta's deception is that it is not what Mark *wants*, and she knows it is not. And so the notion that deception is wrong because it circumvents another's autonomy is right, but it is not wrong simply as a form of lying. It is wrong because it is a way of thwarting another's will.

Why, then, is it wrong to thwart another's will through deception? The cases of Marta and Kristen highlight the notion that what the agent intends makes all the difference, but it is tricky to draw the line of difference between the two. Marta intends to trick her husband into living the kind of life he does not want to live, and Kristen intends to trick her partner into believing that she looks better than she does. Marta's deception is motivated by love for Mark, and Kristen's deception is motivated by love for Anna. But the way in which love motivates Marta is different from the way in which love motivates Kristen. Marta is motivated by love to ignore her partner's wishes and to do exactly what he does not want her to do, not because she thinks it is best for him, but because love moves her to do anything she can to hold on to the object of her love. Kristen is motivated by love to try to realize her partner's goals and do for her what she wants.

Does this mean that what makes the difference in these cases is that one partner wants to be deceived, and one does not? That may appear to be the case, but consider an alteration of the case of Marta and Mark. Suppose that Mark really does not want to know about Marta's infidelity, and really wants to be deceived. However, because he is a proud man and doesn't think it is seemly to want this, he insists that he would want to know of Marta's infidelity if it ever were to occur. If Marta does not know that this is not what Mark really wants, then it is just as bad for her to deceive him if he actually wants to be deceived, and not just if he does not.

The reason this is the case is that the difference between Marta and Kristen is that Marta's attitude towards Mark is defective, whereas Kristen's is not. Marta believes that Mark does not wish to be deceived, but decides that it is better (for herself most of all) if he doesn't get what he wants. The attitude that this reveals is inappropriate; it is inappropriate to take such an attitude towards someone who has a definite idea about how he wants his life to go, as Mark does. To see the strong, articulated desires of another person about how his life goes as less important than one's own desires about how his life should go is a bad way of viewing another person. And it is bad because the plans of creatures that care about how their lives go should

play a primary role in the decisions we make about how to act towards them. It is inappropriate, given that Mark is a person who cares about how his life goes and is capable of making decisions concerning it, to take a paternalistic attitude towards his view of what is best for him. It is even worse to take the attitude that Marta takes, since this attitude is motivated by knowledge that what he takes to be good for him is not good for her.

Kristen, on the other hand, has a good attitude towards Anna. She believes that what Anna really wants is to rebuild her shattered confidence, and the truth will not help with that. So, in an effort to make Anna feel better and help her do what she needs to do, Kristen attempts to deceive her. This attitude is not paternalistic, because she takes herself to be doing what Anna desires, although deception is essential for her to do what it is that Anna wants. If Kristen were to say, “Look Anna, I know you want to believe that your hair does not look that bad, so okay, it doesn’t look that bad”, Anna would probably *lose* more confidence as a result.

What is wrong with what Marta does, then, is not as simple as withholding information or doing something that might hurt Mark. What is wrong with what Marta does is that it displays a bad attitude towards Mark. It shows a disregard for what she believes he wants, a disregard fueled by a stronger regard for her own desires than for his. It is wrong because it is deceit motivated by the desire to trick another into living a life he does not want to live, and the heart of what is wrong with *that* is the attitude it displays.

One might wonder whether all this really shows is that what’s wrong with deception is that it thwarts another’s will, and not that it displays a bad attitude of disregard for another’s will. These two things are indeed very close, but consider one last alteration of the case of Marta and Mark. Suppose that Marta comes to believe that what Mark fears is not being secretly betrayed, but that he will *discover* that he has been secretly betrayed. She is wrong about this, but she comes to believe it, and to believe that Mark would actually prefer not to know about her infidelity. She believes that his assertions to the contrary are his way of insulating himself against unwanted knowledge. If he insists that he actually wants knowledge of the infidelity, he can feel more confident that he is not being secretly betrayed when Marta remains silent, even though he’d rather be secretly betrayed than discover the betrayal. In this altered case, Marta has come to believe that she is in a position similar to Kristen’s, and so the attitude with which she views Mark is similar to the attitude with which Kristen views Anna. In that case, it seems as if what Marta does is importantly different from the deception in which she engages in the original case, and no longer seems so wrong.

This last claim may seem controversial; in particular, it is clearly at odds with a traditional Kantian evaluation of deception. On such a view, deception *itself* is wrong because, as an act, it is ruled impermissible by the kind of intention it embodies (a warped attitude to the rational autonomy of others). However, as the case of Anna and Kristen suggests, the complex moral evaluation of deception rests in whether one’s action in *this particular case* displays an inappropriate attitude towards the deceived; deception itself is not wrong, though deception for certain kinds of reasons is. And the kinds of reasons that are permissible are a function of what those reasons say about how one views the object of deception.

3 Michael Slote’s Agent-Based Ethics

The analysis of deception above is reminiscent of Michael Slote’s discussion of agent-based ethics, though the view he endorses is different from the one that will be advanced here. On Slote’s view, motives are what make the moral difference; specifically, it is the motive from

which one acts that gives that act its moral valence. As the foregoing discussion is meant to suggest, it is promising to ground the rightness or wrongness of actions in what those actions say about the agent who performs them. However, contra Slote, it will be argued that what matters are not the motives with which one acts, but the appropriateness of the attitudes those acts express, where appropriateness is a function of normative facts about the object. The view that will be advanced shares some affinity with an agent-based view, because of its emphasis on the evaluative primacy of facts about the agent's psychological state; however, there are problems with the way in which a view like Slote's is based in the agent. In light of these problems, I will argue that despite the normative primacy of psychological facts about the agent in ethical *evaluation*, what grounds the normative status of those states is actually external to the agent. This will be explored more fully in the next section, but first a brief examination of Slote's agent-based ethics is in order.

As an alternative to Aristotelian virtue ethics, Michael Slote has developed what he calls a "warm agent-based" ethic that borrows to some degree from Hume and Hutcheson's accounts of morality. In *Morals from Motives*, Slote advances the position that moral evaluation is based in the aretaic features of the motives of the agent who acts, and not in some independent normative facts about the acts themselves (Slote 2001). In evaluating the morality of an agent's action, our evaluation is based in the motive behind the action, and it is that motive that gives the action its moral valence.

According to Slote, though some ethical views do focus moral evaluation to some degree on the agent (Aristotle's view, for example), most of these views are agent-focused rather than agent-based. If a view is agent-focused, it centers ethical evaluation on the traits and character of the agent performing the act, while downplaying the evaluation of actions considered in isolation from such facts about the agent. For example, a common interpretation takes Aristotle to focus ethical evaluation on the agent, maintaining that the virtuous agent is the measure of the fine or right; the fine or right action is the one performed by the virtuous agent. However, despite its focus on the agent, the normative evaluation is still grounded in the agent *performing the fine or noble action because it is perceived to be so*. That is, the virtuous agent is the one who correctly ascertains the fine or right, so the fine or right must be evaluable independently from evaluation of the agent who ascertains it (Slote 2001). That is, an agent's choosing to act in a particular way does not make the action right, since her choosing to act in that way is explained by her perception that it is the right way to act. However, this is not the case for an agent-based ethics. According to an agent-based view, good intentions and motives are reflected in a particular kind of choice, and it is the goodness reflected in that choice that is the fundamental ground of moral evaluation. As Slote argues, agent-based ethics are distinct from agent-focused ethics in that agent-based ethics derive the normativity of acts from the independent and fundamental aretaic (rather than deontic) character of the intentions, motives, or character-traits of individuals. Agent-focused ethics, while focusing evaluation on the motives or intentions of the actor, still maintain that those intentions and motives are evaluable as the right or fine ones in isolation from their having been chosen by the agent; that is, the agent chooses them because they can be independently identified as right or fine or good. However, an agent-based view takes the fact that a certain motivation is good or admirable to be the ground of the ethical evaluation of the particular act in question; that is, it is simply good to be motivated in a particular way, and the act that exhibits that motivation is right simply because the agent who performs it is so motivated.

The agent-based view for which Slote argues thus shares some characteristics with standard virtue ethical views, since its focus is not on actions as right or wrong but on the goodness of the agents who perform them. However, Slote's view is distinguished from a view like Aristotle's because the way in which motives and intentions ground moral evaluation is

different. On Slote's interpretation of Aristotle's view,² an act is right if it is the one performed by a virtuous agent, but the act is chosen by the virtuous agent because it can be evaluated as good, right, or fine independently of her choice. She *sees* that the action is right, and thus performs it. However, on Slote's view, actions are right because they reflect a particular kind of choice (grounded in a certain good, or at least not bad, motive), and it is *that* that gives the action its moral character. Choosing to help one's ailing mother because one cares for her is right because it reflects the morally good choice, because it exhibits a good motive. One's motives are reflected in how one chooses, and this is why right actions are not right simply because they settle on a right course of action; right actions are right because they reflect that one has *chosen* in a morally good way, and the action becomes the right one because of this choice. If one cares for one's ailing mother because one feels guilty for ignoring her, one has not done the right thing, because the motive of the action is not a morally good one.

The view Slote advances is a "warm" agent-based view because he grounds the moral valence of attitudes in "warm" attitudes towards others, particularly in caring.³ Acts that display caring are right because they embody a good moral motive, the desire to take care of others in ways that advance their well-being. This is contrasted with a view according to which the good motives are the ones that display some other moral character, such as inner strength⁴; such a ground is "cool" because the moral valence of the motive is not "warm" care for the well-being of others, but some other fundamental aretaic character of motives that isn't primarily a feature of our attitudes towards other people.

Though an agent-based ethic is suggested by the analysis of deception in the last section, the grounding role of caring bespeaks Slote's affinity with Humean virtue ethics, and thus with a broadly sentimentalist understanding of morality. That is, we all share a natural concern for others, and the right actions are the ones that express this concern. Though it is clear that care for others is important, the lingering question is *why* it is important. Those in the Humean tradition must say, "Because it's part of who we are"; the ultimate normative grounding of a view in this tradition is facts about how we are constituted (we have a sympathetic concern for others, and so benevolent motives are simply part of how we are constituted). However, it seems better for an ethical view to be able to offer resources for one to complain of one's treatment on the grounds that facts about *her* make it the case that it is wrong for another to treat her in certain ways. Locking someone in the basement and torturing her is not wrong simply because it displays a severe malevolence which is bad because malevolence is a bad motive for creatures like us; it is wrong because it is malevolent, and malevolence is bad because it is bad *for* a sentient creature if you wish to cause pain to it.⁵

² Slote discusses a third kind of view, based on Hursthouse's interpretation of Aristotle, which he calls an agent-prior view. Such a view is grounded in independent aretaic character evaluations, and so is not agent-focused; however, those character evaluations are in turn grounded in eudaimonia, and so are not fundamental. It is this failure to position the character evaluations as fundamental that makes it the case that the view is not agent-based. (Slote 2001) For simplicity's sake, I have focused on the agent-focused interpretation of Aristotle that Slote discusses, because it highlights most clearly the way in which Slote's view takes psychological facts about the agent to ground ethical evaluation, rather than independent judgments of "the right or good thing to do".

³ Slote discusses both universal benevolence and partialistic caring as the normative ground of his agent-based ethics; although he sees them as being theoretically close, he discusses the advantages of one over the other, and ultimately endorses partialistic caring as the ground (Slote 2001).

⁴ Slote offers Plato as an example (Slote 2001).

⁵ One might worry that this entails that in a world in which malevolence has good results for those at whom it is directed, malevolence is not morally wrong. However, the claim here is not that malevolent acts are only wrong if they have bad results for their objects. In what follows, it will be argued that being malevolent involves a way of seeing and engaging with sentient creatures that is inappropriate, because it fails to take them seriously as creatures with a good. One might end up doing beneficial things malevolently, but that does not make the actions that display that malevolence right. It is the attitude that makes the action wrong, even though the evaluation of the attitude is in *general* responsive to normative facts about its objects.

Slote addresses a concern similar to this when he defends his view against the objection that it entails ethical isolation. According to Slote, his view doesn't entail that ethical evaluation is completely disconnected from the world, since the evaluation of motives takes facts about the world into account. For example, whether one displays caring by taking care of one's ailing mother is in part a function of facts about the mother's illness.

However, in order to give the victim of torture standing to protest her treatment, facts about the world and about others need to *ground* the wrongness of the intentions involved, not simply take them into account. The victim needs to be able to say that it is some fact about *her* that explains why it is wrong to torture her, and this must involve more than the recognition that if she were not a sentient creature with a properly functioning nervous system, it would be impossible to display malevolence towards her. That is, while the sentimentalist grounding of ethical evaluation rightly centers that evaluation on the motives of the agent, its explanation of why the motives are good seems misplaced. Motives are not good simply because they are the kinds of motives that well-constituted individuals have, motives of which we are disposed to approve; they are good because they display an *appropriate attitude* towards the object, and the appropriate attitude is given by facts about its object. This grounding of the evaluation of attitudes must be external, must be in facts about the object, for the object to have such standing, and this is ultimately why one should reject Slote's view and opt for one that can ground normativity in facts about the objects of one's actions. Understanding ethical evaluation in terms of appropriate attitudes, rather than good motives, accomplishes this; while on Slote's view, the evaluation of a motive as good will bottom out in what makes us good, in what is admirable in our psychology, the evaluation of an attitude as appropriate links what is admirable in our psychology to its responsiveness to normative facts external to that psychology. This will help explain how our actions are evaluated in an agent-centered way (what attitude on the part of the agent does this act express?), while still ultimately grounding the normativity of the attitudes in something other than the basic (and fundamental) goodness, or admirable nature, of the agent, her traits, or her motives.

In addition to this basic worry about the grounding of Slote's account, one might also note that it doesn't seem to be the case that all wrong actions are grounded somehow in a lack of caring. Though there are many cases that suggest this, some non-standard cases of moral disquiet reflect a broader basis for moral evaluation than suggested by either Slote or Kant's analysis. In the next section, we turn to such a case.

4 Wanton Destruction of Natural Environments

Consider the case of Edward and his prairie.⁶ Edward inherits a beautiful tract of natural Iowa prairie land, but cares nothing for the beauty of the prairie, nor for the hundreds of rare grasses and flowers that are growing on it. In fact, he simply hates the prairie, and is resolved to destroy it. It is his prairie, he can do with it what he likes, and so he burns it, and turns the whole thing into a giant mud pit. Edward has no use for the giant mud pit, but assiduously maintains it, squelching any new prairie growth that dares to arise.

What's wrong with what Edward does with his prairie land? One might argue that there is nothing wrong with what Edward does with his prairie, because he owns it and thus is answerable to no one else concerning his use of it. Or, one could argue that if there's anything wrong with it, it would have to be that there is some disutility in destroying the prairie, but

⁶ This is a version of the kind of case discussed by Thomas E. Hill, Jr. in "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments" (Hill 1983).

barring that disutility, there can be nothing wrong with it. But even if one thinks there is nothing we can do to stop Edward, it seems hard to say that there isn't something morally unappealing about his wanton destruction of the prairie, destruction that is done purely for destruction's sake.

In discussing a similar case, Thomas E. Hill, Jr. argues that the question here shouldn't really be, "What's wrong with doing that?"; rather, the question should be, "What kind of person would do that?" On Hill's view, such wanton destruction of natural environments displays a lack of traits that are necessary in order to cultivate virtue (understood on a Kantian model of virtue). For example, such wanton destruction of the environment is not itself a vice, but displays a lack of a proper appreciation of nature, and this appreciation is psychologically necessary for proper humility. Proper humility before persons (although not before nature) is a virtue, and since appreciation of nature is a precondition for such humility, the wanton destruction of nature displays the absence of traits that are essential for virtue. So our revulsion at such destruction stems from what such behavior says about the person who engages in it (Hill 1983).

On Hill's view, what grounds the badness of the wanton destruction of nature is the attitude it displays; however, since Hill's view is Kantian at bottom, the attitude is a bad one because it displays a lack of something essential for virtue, where virtue is understood as manifesting itself in relationship to other *people*. The attitude is a bad one because of what it says about how likely the person is to be virtuous in his dealings with other people.

However, another way to understand the badness of this attitude is that it is simply inappropriate to view the natural environment in this way. It is bad to view a prairie as worthless in the face of your desires (or in the face of your revulsions, as the case may be). To view all other things as disposable at your whim is to fail to appreciate their worth, as well as to exaggerate your own. And this need not be cashed out in terms of the attitude's connection to virtuous or vicious engagement with other people. It's not inconceivable that Edward could be perfectly virtuous in his relationship with others, and simply believe that his land is his and he can do with it what he likes. If that's the case, an account that rests the badness of the attitude in facts about how the attitude informs the development of virtue rests on contentious psychological claims (Hill 1983). The insight that this sort of case is meant to capture is better accommodated by simply saying that Edward's attitude is an inappropriate attitude to take towards the prairie, and primarily because of what *it* is like, and not what Edward's other attitudes are like.

Why is it an inappropriate attitude to take towards the prairie? Although not a justification for the claim, the thought is that the desire to destroy something simply because it is there is an inappropriate attitude to take towards living things who maintain an existence that is independent from yours. That they are there is a bad reason to destroy them, because it manifests an attitude towards the existence of other things that is inappropriate. The destruction is wrong, but the underlying reason is that the attitude it displays is bad. The very same action of burning and clearing, if done in a conservation effort to help revive the prairieland, would display a very different attitude and might even be the right thing to do.

The thought is that the two questions that Hill separates may not need to be separated after all. One might think that the badness of attitudes is grounded in the relationship of those attitudes to traits of character, traits of character that have an important relationship to right action. But another way to understand the importance of a good attitude is that it has a direct bearing on the rightness or wrongness of actions. Attitudes are not wrong because they lead us to do the wrong thing; actions are wrong because they reveal a way of seeing others (or even ourselves) that is inappropriate.

5 Inappropriate Attitudes

What the foregoing discussion suggests is that the wrongness of these particular cases is best explained by appealing to the attitudes they express. More specifically, they express attitudes that are *inappropriate*; they express attitudes towards a particular object that, given facts about that object, are inappropriate.

The idea of “appropriateness” is admittedly somewhat vague, and is harder to cash out once a Kantian explanation for it is rejected. On Kant’s account, there is good reason to think that the wrongness of actions concerning others is grounded in something like an appropriate attitude. For Kant, rational beings are ends-in-themselves, and so treating them as mere means is treating them in a way inconsistent with what they are.⁷ However, one needn’t commit to the claim that rational beings, and rational beings alone, are the sorts of things which “demand” to be seen a certain way; the basic notion here is not that people actually make claims to certain treatment, but that facts about them are simply normatively salient. A person cares about how her life goes and makes plans for that life, a prairie is beautiful and alive, a non-human animal has preferences and acts in order to satisfy them – these are all facts about people, and prairies, and non-human animals that make it the case that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to view them. To view a person’s plans and cares as unimportant, or to want to destroy a living thing simply because it is alive, is to view that person or living thing in a way inconsistent with a right appreciation of what it is. That is to say, it is to view it in a way that ignores salient *normative facts* about it.

Of course, what those normative facts turn out to be will be the ultimate grounding claim for a view like this, and there are many ways in which one could fill out this idea. My suggestion is that the ultimate normative fact is the fact of *otherness*, where this means that the object with which one is engaged is something that is, or has, a good independent from one’s own. Other people, other living things, other creatures in general – these all have a normatively salient existence separate from one’s own, and inappropriate attitudes are largely a matter of seeing the lives, concerns, and good of others as secondary (or even only relative to) one’s own. Failure to appreciate the way in which other things have existence, ends, cares, desires, etc. that are separate from one’s own, and which have a value separate from oneself, is the basic character of inappropriateness. This can be displayed in any number of bad attitudes towards the object in question – malevolence, indifference to suffering, and disrespect, to name a few. Marta and Edward fail to see the existence of the objects of their actions in a way that recognizes and appreciates their separateness from their own fears, desires, frustrations, etc., and that is why what they do is wrong. But more standard cases of wrongness, such as torturing another, are also bad because they display an inappropriate attitude towards others. In the case of torturing another for fun, the inappropriateness of the attitude is grounded in a failure to appreciate important normative facts, specifically, the badness of suffering for the one who suffers.

6 Worries and Responses

There are reasons to resist the sort of view presented here, and in this section two general worries will be addressed. There may be other worries, but the ones addressed here are representative of two major points of contention: (1) That the view on offer has counterintuitive

⁷ There are, of course, many ways to understand this claim; for Kant’s arguments, see pp. 229–230 of Kant’s *Groundwork* (Kant 2003).

consequences that alternative analyses of the core cases can avoid, and (2) That when the notion of “appropriate attitudes” is cashed out in the way suggested, it either widens the scope of moral evaluation too far or collapses into something indistinguishable from standard act-centered views.

The first point of contention can be summed up in the observation that on a view that grounds rightness in appropriate attitudes, it is impossible to say that one has done the right thing for the wrong reason; similarly, it is impossible to say that one has done the wrong thing for the right reason.⁸ If rightness is grounded in the attitude that is expressed by an action, then the “right thing” is not separable from the moral evaluation of the reasons one has for acting. It is conceivable that on a view like this, if one saves a life simply in order to impress someone, then one has not done the right thing.⁹ This will strike many as counterintuitive; one might argue that a more intuitive understanding of this case is that if one saves a life in order to impress someone, one does the right thing for the wrong reason. One’s action is right, although neither the agent nor the action is *praiseworthy*. One might argue that the last case of Marta and Mark, in which Marta deceives Mark because she wrongly believes that he wants to be deceived, is better understood in a parallel way; that is, one might argue that this case is an example of Marta doing the wrong thing for the right reason, rather than offering support for the view that her attitude towards Mark makes a crucial normative difference. One might argue that though she may not be *blameworthy*, she has done something wrong, and that the case simply brings out *this* distinction. If one maintains this distinction, as an act-centered moral view can do,¹⁰ one can avoid the counter-intuitive result of denying that someone like Marta acts rightly in the last case described.

There is an intuitive pull to the distinction between right/wrong actions and good/bad characters, and it is definitely the case that the view on offer collapses this distinction. However, it seems as if the commitment to this distinction is a result of being committed to an act-centered view of morality, and so is not a distinction that an agent-centered morality should be concerned to preserve. Commitment to this distinction just is commitment to the idea that acts can be judged as right or wrong in isolation from the reasons one has for acting. There is nothing inconsistent in an agent-centered moralist abandoning this commitment, so the real question is whether or not this is so counterintuitive that it renders the view untenable.

Once one considers the resources of a view that abandons such a commitment, however, I do not believe that it seems so counterintuitive. What would it mean to collapse the distinction? For example, what must one say about cases of saving a life to impress someone? If one takes the agent-centered view on offer here, one is committed to saying that one has done the wrong thing in this case, because one *can’t* do the right thing for the wrong reason. However, one *can* perform an action for the wrong reason in such a way that the action doesn’t have bad consequences, or in such a way that it has good consequences. The view is simply that it is still the wrong thing to do, good consequences aside.¹¹

⁸ This objection has been discussed in a number of ways in recent literature concerning the role of right action in virtue ethics; the discussion here is meant to generalize a kind of objection to various specific ways of understanding right action on a virtue ethical view (Das 2010; Jacobsen 2002; van Zyl 2009). Though the view advanced here is different from the kinds of agent-focused and agent-based understandings of right action discussed in the literature, it is open to the general worry.

⁹ For a nice elaboration of this kind of example, see Das’ discussion (Das 2010).

¹⁰ John Stuart Mill, for example, makes much of the distinction between the evaluation of motives and of acts (Mill 1979).

¹¹ van Zyl makes a similar point in defending Slote’s agent-based view against this objection (van Zyl 2009). Her discussion of Slote’s trouble with action-guidance is instructive, and her solution would be available here for any parallel objection.

That last sentence may strike many as extremely odd, but it seems to me that the oddness of it derives from excessive focus on the question “What is the right action to perform?”, a question that comes from legislative, act-centered moral theories. However, on an agent-centered view, the question should be, “What is the right thing for one to *do*?”, where the focus is on what the agent does, not what *happens when she acts*. On an agent-centered view, the moral evaluation of what one does is an evaluation of the attitude one takes to the objects with which one is concerned, not a function of what happens when one acts. Being overly concerned with what *happens* when one acts accounts for the oddness of collapsing the distinction between right/wrong actions and good/bad characters, but the cases discussed in earlier sections of this paper are meant to show that one way to understand the nuanced evaluation of certain core cases is simply to reject this distinction as wrong-headed.¹² Once one lets go of the idea that the rightness of an act is simply to be read off the act itself, it seems much less odd to insist that the evaluation of an action cannot come apart from evaluation of the attitude expressed in the action, and thus that it is inseparable from the reasons one has for acting.

The second worry can be summed up as the worry that if one can have an inappropriate attitude towards the otherness of natural environments, then it could turn out to be wrong to beat a Xerox machine. If actions are wrong because they display an inappropriate attitude towards the otherness of non-sentient objects, then surely one can display such an attitude towards something like a Xerox machine. It is going too far to say that one who kicks a Xerox machine in frustration does something wrong, so this result is counterintuitive. It might be further argued that any attempt to rule out Xerox machines as possible objects of morally inappropriate actions will probably collapse into some sort of standard act-centered view. If some objects can't get moral evaluation going, than surely moral evaluation is ultimately a matter of the *objects* and acts involving them, and not our attitudes towards them.¹³

There is something right about this objection, and something wrong about it. It seems right to say that there are cases in which our moral judgments derive less directly from consideration of the objects involved, and instead derive more from consideration of what the behavior indicates about how the agent would act in other situations. Although it may not be wrong for Fran to kick and curse the Xerox machine that keeps refusing to cooperate, it is disquieting to watch her lay into the machine with relish. And this is probably because of what that behavior indicates about how Fran might treat other things that frustrate her.

However, if Fran takes an axe to the Xerox machine in a fit of rage, that may well be wrong, and not simply because she has rendered the machine useless to others. Thinking that it is perfectly fine to wantonly destroy an object that upsets you displays a warped view of the object, and of what one has a right to demand of situations that involve it. Even if Fran is as sweet as can be to the file clerk sitting next to the Xerox machine, axing the machine in a fit of rage displays something wrong with her perception of the situation at hand. This is in part due

¹² For interesting discussion of some of these issues, see Steven Sverdlik's arguments in 'Motive and Rightness' (Sverdlik 1996). Sverdlik's discussion of racism in a real estate transaction seems supportive of the view that one's reasons make a critical moral difference in the performance of what are externally identical acts. However, Sverdlik argues that intentions can sometimes play a role, but not that they always do; his discussion is helpful for understanding what motivates the view on offer here, though he would not endorse the wholesale grounding of morality in facts about the agent.

¹³ In her recent book, Christine Swanton discusses consequentialist challenges to the virtue ethical view she endorses, specifically the attempt to derive “truisms” about moral action from “truisms” about value (Swanton 2003). Though her ultimate purposes are different from mine here, her response to the challenges appeals to various ways in which humans engage with value, and the importance of what that engagement says about the agent. I wish to emphasize the latter not in terms of virtuous engagement, but appropriate engagement, which means de-emphasizing traits and virtuous activities, and emphasizing ways of *seeing* others.

to an inappropriate prioritization of her own frustration, but also due to an inappropriate view of the object and her relationship to it, given that it is an object whose existence and value is distinct from her own.

The oddness of saying that it is wrong to ax the Xerox machine comes, I think, from recognition that the value of the Xerox machine is largely exhausted in its use to those who have made it, which is not true of prairies and people. It is a tool, and so doesn't seem to have independent desires, cares, or value. However, thinking that objects that frustrate you are expendable is an inappropriate attitude to take to anything whose existence is separate from yours, because it displays a warped understanding of your place in the world. And this is not simply because of facts about you (you are not humble, etc.) but because it is a bad way to view other objects in relationship to yourself. That is, a lack of humility isn't just *bad in itself*—the moral evaluation of self-importance doesn't end with the observation that it is a bad way to be. It is bad because of what it says about how you view the rest of the world in relationship to yourself, given that the rest of the world matters morally. If this were not the case, then a lack of humility wouldn't be bad at all.

7 Conclusion

Although not a full argument for the view that when actions are wrong, they are wrong because they display a bad or inappropriate attitude, the discussion above is meant to motivate such an account. Deception and the wanton destruction of natural environments are both cases in which the wrongness involved is hard to explain; in the former case, it is hard to explain because it is a case of wrongness with little or no harm, and in the latter case, it is hard to explain because it involves an object that is not typically thought to have moral status on its own. If it is true that these cases involve wrong action, that wrong action is best accounted for by appealing to the attitudes that such action displays, and this appeal is best grounded in the idea of appropriate ways of viewing the object at hand (where this is tentatively understood as a failure to see others as having existence and value separate from one's own). It may be that these cases are anomalies, but they may also suggest a different way to view more central cases of wrongness, such as killing, as well as offering a way to explain the exceptions to general prohibitions against such acts. If it is wrong to kill when it displays a bad attitude, then it may not be wrong to kill when it does not, and this might help explain our judgments of euthanasia, abortion,¹⁴ and certain cases of suicide.

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¹⁴ See Rosalind Hursthouse's discussion in "Virtue Theory and Abortion" for an Aristotelian account along similar (though differently grounded) lines (Hursthouse 1991).

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