The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics

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It is often objected that virtue ethics (and I focus on eudaimonistic and indeed broadly Aristotelian versions) is self-centred or egoistic: representative examples include Nagel's contention that what he calls 'Aristotle's position, more or less' fails to accord due value to the claims of others;[1] Prichard's claim that Aristotle's system implied that 'our only business in life was self-improvement';[2] and Kant's charge that 'the principle of one's own happiness is the most objectionable ... making a man happy is quite different from making him good and making him prudent and sharp-sighted for his own advantage quite different from making him virtuous.'[3]

Defenders of virtue ethics have not neglected to respond, but before turning to them we should first note that the phrase 'self-centred or egoistic' really should not be, as it often is,[4] left to speak for itself, as if one term merely echoed or perhaps coloured the other. In fact there is an important distinction between the two, and we can easily see this in these passages from Bernard Williams:

> The trouble with the egoist is not that it is *desires* that he expresses, nor that they are *his* desires—the trouble is that all his desires are for things *for him*.[5]

> Ground projects do not have to be **selfish**, in the sense that they are just concerned with things for the agent. Nor do they have to

[1] Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 195–197.

[2] H.A. Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?' in *Twentieth Century Ethical Theory*, Steven Cahn and Joram Haber (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995), 37–47, at 45–46.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, third edition, translated by James Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 4:442.

[4] See, e.g., Julia Annas's claim that virtue ethics is 'at most formally *self-centred or egoistic*', in *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 127; my emphasis.

[5] Bernard Williams, 'Egoism and Altruism', in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 250–265, at 260.

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> be **self-centred**, in the sense that the creative projects of a Romantic artist could be considered self-centred (where it has to be *him*, but not *for* him) ... A man devoted to the cause of curing injustice in a certain place, cannot just insist on his plan for doing that over others', if convinced that theirs will be as effective as his ... For if he does insist on that, then we learn that his concern is not merely that injustice be removed, but that *he* remove it—not necessarily a dishonorable concern, but a different one.[6]

By 'egoism' I shall mean a view counselling taking one's own welfare as one's primary and overriding goal in life—taking as one's ground project (to use Williams's language) the achievement of one's own satisfaction with a life going well *for oneself*. By 'self-centredness' I mean something broader: to a first approximation (to be sharpened in section II), a view counselling the placing of oneself and one's ambitions at the centre of one's life, such that all else (people, causes, things) are oriented to oneself and attain whatever importance they do from their role *vis-à-vis* one's antecedent ambitions. On this view, egoism is one especially distasteful form of self-centredness, but not the only. Such ground projects as being 'the hero' or 'the leader' are not egoistic, but are probably self-centred: egoism implies self-centredness, but the converse is not true.

It is fairly clear how the objection that virtue ethics is self-centred gets off the ground: according to virtue ethics, the final end of the agent is his own *eudaimonia* or flourishing. If we understand flourishing in terms of the agent's welfare, then the further case that virtue ethics is actually egoistic is made; but even failing this (if we understand flourishing in terms of excellence or perfection), it can seem obvious that it is at least self-centred. In the first section, I review some influential responses made by defenders of virtue ethics. Then, with reference to John Hare's powerful formulation of the self-centredness objection, I argue that none of these replies goes far enough. In the third and fourth sections I briefly defend two historical targets of Hare's argument, Aristotle and Aquinas, and touch on the trope of moral competition to explore whether eudaimonism is—or at least need be—susceptible to his version of the objection. In the final section I sketch the outlines of a clearly non-self-centred version of eudaimonistic

[6] Bernard Williams, 'Persons, Character and Morality', in *Twentieth Century Ethical Theory*, Steven Cahn & Joram Haber (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995), 634–646, at 642–3, bold emphasis mine.

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virtue ethics. My goal will not be to show that this or that species of virtue ethics is not self-centred, but only that the self-centredness objection cannot be used to indict the whole genus.

I. Standard Replies

David Solomon's 'Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics' is a seminal article in the field of virtue ethics apologetics, and the kind of replies he makes to the self-centredness and other objections have become standard. I will begin, then, by looking at Solomon, and then review more recent developments of this kind of defence of virtue ethics in Rosalind Hursthouse and Christine Swanton.

Solomon begins with what he calls a 'quick response' of the sort that is by now quite familiar: while agents do seek to develop their own character, the particular virtues (and he mentions justice, charity, and Jane Austen's 'amiability') 'may be as other regarding as one might wish ... [Such virtues] both restrict the attention I am allowed to pay to my own wants, needs and desires, and force me to attend to the wants, needs, and desires of others.'[7]

But Solomon allows that the objection may re-assert itself at a 'deeper level' where there appears to be an asymmetry between the virtuous agent's regard for his own character and for that of others. His example is that of a theory holding that charity is the primary virtue: according to such a theory, he writes, the virtuous agent will hold that having this virtue is the most important thing in life. And, while the virtue itself will lead the agent to attend to the needs and desires of others, it will not require bringing it about that others acquire this virtue.[8] That is, living in accordance with this theory seems to require the agent to seek the most important thing (charitable character) for herself, while seeking lesser things for others—in something like the way Aristotle can be read as counselling the virtuous agent to yield in lesser things so as to

[7] David Solomon, 'Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics', in P. French, T. Uehling, and H. Wettstein (eds.) *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue*, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XIII (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 428–441, at 434.

[8] Solomon, 435. The charity under discussion here is not quite Christian charity, which, at least as traditionally understood, does involve seeking the whole good of others, to include character (one example is Aquinas's inclusion of fraternal correction as part of charity).

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award to himself what is fine. Concern for others can seem secondary to or conditional upon achieving one's own central goals.

The strategy Solomon employs here is a *tu quoque* or 'partners in crime' approach: he argues that both Kantian and utilitarian theories actually mirror this asymmetry. He begins by citing Kant's insistence in *The Metaphysics of Morals* that we have a duty to help others attain happiness while our duty to ourselves is to attain moral perfection, and goes on to point out that deontological theories in general require this sort of special focus on one's own moral life: for example, agents are typically forbidden to perform one morally bad action even in cases in which doing so would prevent others from performing morally bad actions of the same type.

Solomon next argues, more surprisingly, that we find something similar in consequentialist theories: the good consequentialist agent must be benevolent, and while in most circumstances he must seek to make others benevolent as well, he will regard their benevolent characters as instrumental to the end of maximizing happiness (or welfare, or the good however defined). But, Solomon contends, the consequentialist cannot view his own benevolence as instrumental, for that benevolence itself forms the perspective from which benevolence of others attains its instrumental significance: 'even for a utilitarian one's own character has a special status that is denied to others.'[9]

Solomon's general conclusion is that the self-centredness objection 'places demands on an EV [ethics of virtue] which neither deontological nor consequentialist normative theories can satisfy', and that while this alone does not show that such demands should not be made, it at least places those (deontologists and consequentialists) who usually make them in a 'rhetorically awkward position.'[10] While he uses the language of 'partners in crime', he also speculates that the sort of self-centredness (or perhaps

[9] Solomon, 436. He goes on to consider a case in which a utilitarian comes to believe that happiness is best maximized by everyone acting from self-interest (along laissez-faire capitalist lines), and concludes that for good utilitarian reasons he should work to discard his benevolent character. Admitting that this initially looks to show that the utilitarian's concern for his own benevolence is instrumental, he contends that 'this conclusion would be too hasty. What remains true is that there is never a moment at which the agent in question is both a utilitarian and such that he can regard his benevolence as a matter of merely instrumental concern.'

[10] Solomon, 434.

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self-focus would be a better term) at work here may not be a crime at all—which I believe to be both his real view, and correct.

But before turning to developing it, I want to look at the more recent work of Hursthouse and Swanton bearing on this issue. Solomon, we saw, distinguished between two levels of deliberation: roughly that at which the agent decides how to act (where many virtues are clearly other-regarding) and that at which she decides how to shape her life (where the self-centredness objection seems to rise again). This kind of distinction, formulated variously, is again quite familiar: perhaps it is Shelly Kagan who has drawn the brightest line between them with his terminology of normative factors and foundations; we will see that Christine Swanton distinguishes between foreground and background motivation; it is implicit in Aristotle and of course many others.

Now, this distinction may seem to afford a royal road to a defence of the 'quick response' to the self-centredness objection that Solomon considered and found inadequate: if you accept the quick response as far as it goes (and this much seems incontestable), *and* if you follow Sarah Broadie and others in rejecting the so-called 'Grand End theory' (according to which agents act in the light of a substantive and sophisticated conception of the good life), then it may seem as though you can flatly deny that the self-centredness objection arises at the 'deeper level' with which Solomon was concerned. Such important virtue theorists as Michael Slote, Julia Driver, and Rosalind Hursthouse have adopted views along these lines; here I will look briefly at Hursthouse (the only Aristotelian of the three).

The two levels discussed are present in Hursthouse. When she considers the reasons for which virtuous persons act, they are, in Solomon's phrase, 'as other regarding as one might wish': Hursthouse speaks of the virtuous acting for 'X reasons' such as 'I could probably save him if I climbed up there' or 'You need it more than I do.'[11] Virtuous actions and their objects are valued from the perspective of character informed by virtue, and require no further justification. But in the final part of the book she takes up questions of whether and how we can justify this or that view about which traits are in fact virtues. She believes that we can, but the details of her account need not concern us here, except to note that the justification is given ultimately in terms of the essential contribution the virtues make to their possessor's goodness as a human

[11] Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 128–129.

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being, and the benefit they bestow upon their possessor. This, combined with her claim that virtue ethics 'offers a distinctively unfamiliar version of the view that morality is a form of enlightened self-interest',[12] seems to open her account wide to the self-centredness objection.

But while Hursthouse is not explicitly concerned with the self-centredness objection (at least by that name), it is clear that concerns in this neighbourhood are in the forefront of her mind—much of the second part of the book is dedicated to showing that Aristotle and Kant are not so far apart as is often assumed, and that virtue ethics, like deontology, can give an account of 'moral motivation', acting from duty, and so forth. But the other-regarding character of virtuous motivation is hardly contested; the trouble seems to lie at the deeper level. Hursthouse's implied response seems clear, and it turns on her sharp rejection of Grand End thinking or, as she goes so far as to call it, 'the Platonic fantasy': 'Of *course* people can be virtuous, really virtuous, without having spent clockable hours thinking about *eudaimonia*, coming to the conclusion that it is a life lived in accordance with the virtues and working out an account of acting well';[13] this 'fancy' sort of thinking is only for philosophical theorists seeking to understand the moral life by means of some sort of rational reconstruction. But if this is so, then there appears to be no reason to think that agents act in the other-regarding way required by the virtues only, or ultimately, because doing so contributes to their own flourishing—and therefore no reason to consider them self-centred.

How satisfactory is this line of response to the self-centredness objection? It is a coherent response, and perhaps sufficient for those who accept such a sharp break between practical and theoretical moral thinking. But I must say I find it very unsatisfactory. To begin with, the language used by advocates of this response to characterize the position they reject ('Grand End theory' or 'Platonic fantasy') is hardly helpful: Hursthouse e.g. also repeatedly uses 'fancy' and 'ludicrous' in describing the views of her opponents on this issue. Suppose we instead refer to such thinkers as 'principled end theorists', who hold, not that the typical virtuous agent must have a sophisticated philosophical understanding of flourishing, but instead that the virtuous agent must, at least

[12] Hursthouse, 167–168; 190. In fairness, she continues on the latter page: '... a version *so* unfamiliar that probably, as things are at the moment, that is a dangerously misleading way to describe it.'

[13] Hursthouse, 137.

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occasionally, deliberate not just about what to do but also about what to be, must, so to say, take stock of her life and think hard and critically about whether or not she should endorse her present character (the level of sophistication required will depend upon her situation in life, and may sometimes, although certainly not always, require some reflection that is philosophical, whether thought of that way or not). This sort of view does not seem to me ludicrous or fantastic. Indeed, in other passages Hursthouse herself seems to accept it: For example, she contends that most young adolescents cannot be properly said to act on principle or from duty because 'their moral beliefs, or their values, are still not entirely their own, but those of their mentors or their peer group.'[14] How do we make beliefs and values our own, if not by a critically thoughtful appropriation?

But notice that if we accept even a modest form of the principled end view (and I do) then we still must confront the self-centredness objection, especially if we think (and again, I do) the fundamental question the agent should ask herself in such 'cool hours' is something along the lines of, does this way of life constitute my flourishing, or perhaps more realistically, but more or less equivalently, is it the best way of life for me?

If we refuse to make the Broadien move that Hursthouse seems to endorse, is there any way we can do better than a partners in crime strategy? Christine Swanton, not herself a professed eudaimonist, nevertheless offers on our behalf an interesting response. Swanton too distinguishes two levels, in terms of foreground and background motivation.[15] She goes on to consider Thomas Hurka's claim that Aristotelian virtue ethics is 'foundationally egoistic' since, as she sums up his view, 'all of an agent's reasons for action derive ultimately from his or her own flourishing.'[16]

[14] Hursthouse, 143. *Cf.* also 237 where she allows that one might appeal to reasoning about the justification or this or that character trait 'with the intention of beefing up my [one's] own motivation in that area.' I think it may be that Hursthouse really wants to reject so sharply only views that require all truly virtuous agents to be academically-gifted philosophers—if so I certainly agree with her on this point.

[15] Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 29.

[16] Swanton, 78; she is reacting to Hurka's arguments in *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Although she and Hurka speak of egoism rather than self-centredness *per se*, first recall that egoism is a species of self-centredness; second, the ascription of egoism is

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Her initial response is to make the standard point that virtuous agents aim at a wide variety of ends according to the 'targets' of the virtues governing the situation at hand, targets that often have nothing to do with one's own flourishing. But she allows that, for the eudaimonist, one still in some sense seeks one's own goodness, which includes what she calls 'personal flourishing', so that the seeking of it may still seem to involve some 'troubling egoism'.[17] In response, she follows Julia Annas, contending that this 'concern for oneself is a concern "for oneself as a rational agent aiming at the fine." '[18] This echoes a point she made earlier, that virtuous moral responsiveness will express fine inner states, including 'a background motivation of acting from virtue.'[19] So, the seemingly troubling concern for oneself is revealed as a concern for being good, living and acting virtuously.

This response certainly seems to rule out any sort of egoism proper; the interpretation also seems to be no more self-centred than Kantian views holding that the agent's first concern is to act from duty (so that it seems quite able to avail itself of Solomon's 'partners in crime' strategy). But if it is self-centred in even this attenuated way, the question does remain as to whether it *is* a crime. In the next section we will look at John Hare's version of the self-centredness objection, which looks to show that it is. Hare's version is all the more threatening because it flows from a moral

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considered because of the virtuous agent's ultimate concern with his own flourishing, but as we shall see it is not entirely clear whether Swanton understands flourishing as synonymous with welfare, or as something more like excellence—for if the latter, the charge of egoism could not be made to stick, but the charge of self-centredness may still seem to threaten.

[17] Swanton, 79–80.

[18] Swanton, 80; citing Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 260. Although she seems here to endorse Annas's characterization, at other times Swanton's conceptions of eudaimonism and of *eudaimonia* appear largely Hursthousean in admitting a fairly sharp distinction between 'being good (morally meritorious) and having a flourishing life of personal satisfaction [well-being]' (Swanton, 84). (I do not mean that she (or Hursthouse) denies that these two components are related—either in eudaimonistic theory or in fact—just that she draws a brighter line between them than Annas seems to.)

[19] Swanton, 29.

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theory neither Kantian nor consequentialist, and which is thus immune to Solomon's *tu quoque*, at least as so far developed.

II. John Hare's Formulation: the Real Objection to Self-Centredness

In 'Scotus on Morality and Nature', Hare argues for a broadly Scotistic conception of morality that combines deontological and virtue theoretic elements. Our attention must focus on the final section of his article, in which he develops the clearest and most powerful version of the self-centredness objection I have seen. Hare defines (or at least identifies) eudaimonism as 'the view that makes all obligations derivative from an agent's own happiness',[20] and argues for two related theses that, if true (or at least, if true of eudaimonism generally rather than true of certain defective versions of it), would constitute a damning objection.

First, even though eudaimonism acknowledges the claims of others in some sense, it does not recognize the claims of others *as other*, but only as related to the agent via similarity or affinity: 'To make happiness central is to insist on the primacy of the relation of others to the self over what those others are in themselves, independently of the self, and this is unacceptably self-regarding.'[21] This he develops by looking at the Aristotelian idea of an 'elastic self' or 'we-self'. He points to Aristotle's failure to extend this elastic moral sphere to all human beings as indicative of what is wrong with this approach in principle, and argues that even though later eudaimonists may have expanded the sphere, they still did so based on the relations of affinity and similarity between the self and the 'other selves'. The view is too self-regarding—self-centred in our terms—because concern starts with the self, at the centre, and extends outward only to the extent that others are variously related to that self and its antecedent ambitions.

Second, even though eudaimonism allows the agent to be concerned with the happiness of others, it does so through the device of making that happiness partly constitutive of the agent's own happiness, so that her attachments to others and their good is secondary: 'This conditionality is built into the structure of eudaimonism, and it is this conditionality that is unacceptably

[20] John Hare, 'Scotus on Morality and Nature', in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* **9** (2000), 15–38, at 34.
[21] Hare, 37.

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self-regarding.'[22] In developing this claim, Hare begins by in effect acknowledging the validity of the standard first line of defence of eudaimonism, that the aims of the virtuous agent are often thoroughly other-regarding: as he puts it—and here he seems to have Aquinas in mind more than Aristotle—'It may well be that self-concern has to be, so to speak, self-effacing, in order to reach its goal.'[23] He allows the familiar point that an agent worrying about a friend's good as a means to her own will frustrate herself by ruling out the kind of love constitutive of the best relationships: this would clearly be one thought too many. But, he goes on to argue, the fact that the virtuous agent does not have that thought in mind and is not motivated by concern for her own good from moment to moment, does not also mean that this knowledge and motivation are not present 'all along in the background.'[24] Hare is specifically targeting the sort of 'fine background motivation' of Swanton, the 'deeper level' of Solomon. If at that level the agent's flourishing is central—and eudaimonism is surely committed to this—then 'our attachment to other things in themselves must be secondary.' Nor does Hare make the mistake of charging eudaimonism with treating such secondary goods, even at this deeper level, as merely instrumental; he is happy to acknowledge that they may indeed be constitutive, for the problem remains: 'if another person's welfare is constitutive of my happiness, but my happiness is central, the commitment I have to that person's welfare is always conditional on its constituting my happiness.' This is the conditionality that he thinks built into eudaimonism's structure, and that he very plausibly finds objectionable.

The first point to notice is that although Hare uses 'welfare' and 'happiness' interchangeably, he does not claim that eudaimonism is actually egoistic: the phrase he uses is 'unacceptably self-regarding', and we can see how this fits our use of 'self-centred': Earlier I said that self-centredness is the placing of oneself and one's ambitions at the centre of one's life, such that all else (people, causes, things) are oriented to oneself and attain whatever importance they do from their role *vis-à-vis* one's ambitions. Hare's notion of the 'conditionality' of the concern for others in eudaimonism (in terms of both the closeness of their relationship

[22] Hare, 38.

[23] Hare, 37 and 37n61. But see his cautionary note at 34n50, to the effect that he is chiefly concerned with eudaimonism and not necessarily the historical Thomas.

[24] Hare, 38.

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to us and the contribution such concern makes to our own happiness) clarifies what is meant by 'placing oneself at the centre', and, further, portrays it so that it does indeed seem to be a 'crime': everything else, and everyone else, is treated as a means (perhaps a constitutive means) valued only on the conditions that they stand in a certain relationship to the agent and contribute to his happiness; nothing is loved truly for its own sake—except the agent himself.

Hare has been careful to give a nuanced reading of eudaimonism, and to allow a significant role for other-regard even at the background level—significant but secondary and indeed conditional. For this reason his formulation of the self-centredness objection cannot be turned aside by the standard responses in the literature, and indeed I am aware of no adequate response to this formulation at all. If Solomon's 'partners in crime' strategy works, then so much the worse for Kantian and consequentialist theories, rather than the better for eudaimonism. Hare is happy to advance a Scotistic account to take their place. [25]

At this point Kantians and consequentialists may protest that, even if Solomon has shown that they do share with virtue ethics the tendency to insist that agents worry about their own character in a special way, this tendency does not involve self-centredness in the strong sense implied by Hare: the concern is precisely to ensure that one characteristically respects others (individually or *en masse*) as others and not merely as means to one's own goals. That is, they might contend the sort of background concern Solomon has pointed out is better thought of as self-focus than as self-centredness. I think this is right: otherwise *any* theory that incorporates a principled end view (including Scotus's) could be labeled self-centred. But then we might ask, can eudaimonism avail itself of this move? The balance of the paper argues that it can. The next two sections look at Hare's primary 'foils', Aquinas and Aristotle, and at how they could turn aside his objection; the final section extrapolates these results to sketch the outlines of a non-self-centred eudaimonism.

[25] This is probably not quite how Hare would put it: Those familiar with Hare's work on Kant will know that he interprets him as being rather closer to Scotus than most Kant scholars would allow.

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III. The Theological Aspect of Hare's Argument

Although, as we have just seen, Hare's objection can be formulated without reference to theology, it certainly has theological connections: Hare's larger project is to revive a sophisticated divine command theory of the sort espoused by Duns Scotus. What Scotus stressed perhaps more clearly than any other medieval was the absolute centrality of loving others for their own sake—and especially God for His own sake—and not just as related to the agent's happiness. It is this feature that Hare thinks missing in Aquinas, and he cites some interpreters of Aquinas who seem to support his reading: thus is Aquinas's moral theory judged self-centred. Now we noted above that Hare is careful to say that he his not trying to interpret the 'historical Thomas' here—he is ruling only on the character of a plausible interpretation and not necessarily Aquinas's own moral theory. But, there is no need to remain agnostic on this point: Aquinas's moral theory, although eudaimonist, is *not* self-centred.

To see this, note first a pair of texts that simply do not fit well into any sort of self-centred scheme: first, Aquinas insists that rational agents naturally love God more than they love themselves.[26] There are difficulties with this claim, but the present point is not how Aquinas addresses them, but just that he does make this claim. Second, in addressing the topic of vocations, Aquinas considers the case of a man who feels called to the religious life but whose family falls into severe hardship prior to his taking vows. Such a man, he says, must turn away from the religious life, perhaps permanently, to care for his family.[27] Again, when we recall that Aquinas considered the religious life to be the best sort of human life available in this world, we must be struck by the incongruity of his teaching with any form of self-centredness. In both these cases the Thomistic agent allows himself to be ruled by something outside himself, submits his projects and dreams and ambitions to a superior moral source.

Now although striking, these texts are not at all aberrant: Aquinas elsewhere lays the theoretical grounds that show them to be perfectly consonant with his overall outlook. In his discussion of the virtue of justice, Aquinas portrays each individual as naturally part of a community (or set of nested communities): 'all who are

[26] See, e.g., *Summa theologiae*, Ia, 60.5: 'from natural love angel and man alike love God before themselves and with a greater love.'

[27] *Cf. Summa*, IIa-IIae, 189.6.

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included in a community, stand in relation to that community as parts to a whole; while a part, as such, belongs to a whole, so that whatever is the good of a part can be directed to the good of the whole.'[28] Aquinas does not place each self at the centre of its world: rather, each self is, and can recognize itself to be, a node in a web of relationships—the centre of which is God. His relationship to God is the most important thing for each person: that, and many other things (primarily various communities and their common goods) must come before his pursuit of any path we could reasonably construe as 'self-centred'. Gone is the 'conditionality' that marked Hare's eudaimonist: These things determine the shape of the agent's *eudaimonia*, have a value such that they 'merit' a place in his conception of the good. Aquinas allows—indeed insists—that each agent focus a good deal upon herself, and regard her own character as of very high importance. But his theory is no more self-focused than Kant's, and, I have argued, not in the least self-centred.

Now, some may find the theological aspect of this issue to be of only historical interest, and there is no doubt that for Aquinas's moral theory, as for Scotus's, God is the centrepiece. Of course much of Aquinas's teaching has to do with temporal communities (families, friendships, societies); but it will be profitable to look at a more naturalistic eudaimonist to see if this non-self-centredness can be found in eudaimonism more generally. And Hare's other target, Aristotle's ethics, is the obvious place to look.

IV. Moral Competition Revisited

Hare is far from alone in thinking Aristotle's ethics to be, in the last analysis, self-centred. Indeed, Aristotle himself in a number of passages gives us good *prima facie* reasons for thinking so; and ranking very high among such passages must be *Ethics* IX.8, in which Aristotle discusses what has become known as 'moral competition'. Here are a few lines to call to mind some of the feel of this chapter:

> Those who make self-love a matter of reproach ascribe it to those who award the biggest share in money, honours, and bodily

[28] *Summa*, IIa-IIae, 58.5. This is a recurrent theme: see also, e.g., Ia-IIae 19.10 and 90.2. These discussions of the individual as part of the political community should be read together with passages such as Ia-IIae 21.4ad3, which clarify that the individual is not *merely* part of any human community—Aquinas was no totalitarian.

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> pleasures to themselves ... [But] if someone is always eager to excel everyone in doing just or temperate actions or any others expressing the virtues, and in general always gains for himself what is fine, no one will call him a self-lover or blame him for it ... he will sacrifice money, honours, and contested goods in general, in achieving what is fine for himself ... [He will also] sacrifice actions to his friend, since it may be finer to be responsible for his friend's doing the action than to do it himself. In everything praiseworthy, then, the excellent person awards himself what is fine.[29]

Looking at such passages, Julia Annas wrote that 'we have Aristotle apparently endorsing a basically self-centred model of ethical action even in cases where the agent sacrifices his interests for others.'[30] Annas replies on Aristotle's behalf that his is a thesis not about what our aims should be, but about how our life should turn out: an invocation of the levels of deliberation we have identified. But since she goes on to write, 'It is in fact a kind of self-love that he is expressing',[31] it can seem that 'this still leaves Aristotle's theory self-centred, though at a different level. Even if the agent is not consciously aiming at his own good, still what he does is most deeply seen as an expression of his commitment to a certain conception of himself, what he is.'[32] Annas herself stresses that if Aristotle's account is self-centred, the question remains as to whether it is self-centred in any problematic way. In the terms we have used, granting that Aristotle's account is self-focused, is it self-centred in the surely problematic sense of ordering all things in light of their place in relation to the agent's ambitions? On Annas's reading here, Aristotle's theory is certainly not egoistic, since the focus is more on being good in some way than on well-being or satisfaction. But is it otherwise problematically self-centred?

Annas herself consigns this to further study, but she does refer with some sympathy to Marcia Homiak's reading, according to which the 'true lover of self loves his ability to reason practically, rather than any particular end that rational planning might

[29] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), IX.8 1168b17–18&25–28, and 1169a20–21&33–36.

[30] Julia Annas, 'Self-Love in Aristotle', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XXVII, Supplement (1988), 1–18, at 9–10.

[31] Annas 1988, 12.

[32] Annas 1988, 14.

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achieve.'[33] This has at least the ring of, 'I will live a certain way that I decide upon, and fit all else into that way', the ring of self-centredness. So it strikes me, at least.[34] And it may strike other readers that even this is a generous (though not implausibly so) reading of Aristotle.

I am instead going to put forward an alternate reading of these and related passages in Aristotle, but before I do let me carefully frame the nature of my exegetic claims in this context: I will only be offering a reading, which I try to render plausible without rigorously establishing it as correct or as the most probable, that points toward a coherent non-self-centred eudaimonism—it is the possibility of such a eudaimonism that is my object, rather than a definitive interpretation of the Philosopher on this point. I think I do have Aristotle right here, but my defence of virtue ethics does not essentially depend upon this.

I believe that for Aristotle *eudaimonia* consists in standing in the right relation to the good (take this as shorthand for the right relations to objects according to their degrees and kinds of goodness). That is just what virtuous activity is: activity has objects, and 'for each faculty the best activity is the activity of the subject in the best condition in relation to the best object of the faculty.'[35] The right relation will be determined by features of both relata—many of which will be completely independent of the ambitions of the agent. Some significant support for this claim is found in the difference between the accounts of the virtuous agent's relationship to the divine in the *Nicomachean* and the *Eudemian Ethics*. In the former, where Aristotle says that it would be 'vulgar praise' to attribute moral virtue to the gods, he stresses contemplation. In the latter, however, he countenances friendship between the human and the divine: 'the friendship of superiority to inferiority, e.g., as the excellence of a god is superior to that of a man (for this is another kind of friendship).'[36] In this work, then, we should perhaps expect to see friendship for the divine, as well as contemplation of it, being portrayed as part of the best human

[33] Annas 1988, 14; referring to Marcia Homiak, 'Virtue and Self-Love in Aristotle's Ethics', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* XI (1981), 633–651.

[34] I will not here try to settle whether Annas (or Homiak) would actually say that Aristotle was self-centred in the sense of the term important to this paper.

[35] EN X.4 1174b18–19.

[36] EN X.8 1178b15; and Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, translated by J. Solomon in *The Collected Works of Aristotle*, volume II, Jonathan Barnes (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), VII.3 1238b18–20.

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life—and indeed we do: Aristotle insists that the noblest standard of choice is the contemplation and *service* of god.[37] But I had promised not to focus on the theological.

To return then to the political, we should recall that however much he may stress the place of self-sufficiency in *eudaimonia*, what he means is 'not what suffices for a solitary person by himself, living an isolated life, but what suffices also for parents, children, wife and in general for friends and fellow-citizens, since a human being is a naturally political animal.' Aristotle takes human beings to be essentially in relation to others: even the philosopher does better among friends and colleagues.[38]

When the Aristotelian agent confronts goods of various kinds, she remains cognizant of this relational standing. She does not necessarily seek to possess and enjoy the goods, or even to exploit them in other ways in service of her ambitions. If the good is food, she may indeed eat it, or may offer it to a hungrier friend; if it is the writing of a philosophical work, she may write it herself or may urge a better-qualified friend to do so. In such cases, standing in the right relation to the good means standing aside, just as we earlier noted Aristotle saying: the virtuous agent may 'sacrifice actions to his friend, since it may be finer to be responsible for his friend's doing the action than to do it himself.' But of course as we saw, this very passage is sometimes cited against Aristotle, because he goes on to say that in thus acting he 'awards himself what is fine'.

Yet all Aristotle means by such a phrase is that he thereby acts finely or nobly, and in doing so lives as well as he can: 'when everyone competes to achieve what is fine and strains to do the finest actions, everything that is right will be done for the common good, and each person individually will receive the greatest of goods, since that is the character of virtue.'[39] Let me offer a liberal paraphrase of Aristotle's remark that sacrificing actions to friends is done because doing so is finer: suppose that you and I are friends and fellow members of a platoon engaged in a dangerous reconnaissance. The lieutenant calls for a volunteer to be the first to

[37] EE VII.15 (VIII.3) 1249b16–20. Here is the text: 'What choice, then, or possession of the natural goods ... will most produce the contemplation of god, that choice or possession is best; this is the noblest standard, but any that through deficiency or excess hinders one from the contemplation and *service of god* is bad' (emphasis mine).

[38] The quotation is from EN I.7 1097b8–12; for the point concerning philosophers, see X.7 1177a33–35.

[39] EN IX.8 1169a8–12.

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cross an open area. I am moved to volunteer, because doing so would further the mission and help the platoon, but I recall that you have fallen into some dishonour, having unfairly acquired a reputation for cowardice. Further, I notice that you hope to vindicate yourself by volunteering here. Accordingly, I remain silent, and you are chosen. Now, in doing this, I sacrifice to you a noble action, and at the same time perform the finest action that I could in the circumstances. If you wish, I award myself what is fine. And yet, I submit, there is not the least trace of self-centredness in my action. I have done my part in ensuring that what is best is done and done well, and put forward the friend to whom it was important that *he* be the one to do it in a way that it is not important to me that *I* be that one.[40] Your status as my friend, and my activity in relation to you, are not conditional upon their fitting into my antecedent ambitions in the way they would be if I were truly self-centred. The centrepiece lies instead in the relation between the agent and the good.

V. Non-Self-Centred Eudaimonism

I think we can find in these two seminal theorists the materials for constructing a template for a non-self-centred eudaimonistic virtue ethics, one susceptible of being variously filled in. The central premise of such a template will be that to flourish, for a rational animal, is simply to stand in the right relation to the good (the right relations to objects according to their degrees and kinds of goodness), where what the right relation is will depend upon the nature of both relata (or, upon the theorist's appraisal of them in terms of moral psychology, value theory, assessment of the moral environment, and so forth). Different virtue theories approach this matter in different ways: Christine Swanton argues for a pluralism of 'modes of acknowledgment' (love, respect, promotion, creativity) called for in response to a variety of 'bases of moral responsiveness'. Martha Nussbaum, following Aristotle, recognizes

[40] Earlier we followed Williams in characterizing selfishness or egoism in terms of concern for things *for* me, and self-centredness in terms of it having to be *me*, even if not *for* me. Here we have left both behind. I do not, of course, want to deny that there is something, perhaps problematic, in Aristotle of the Greek notion of the hero blazing brilliantly and burning out in noble death as the epitome of virtue—but his attachment to this ideal falls well short of a systematic self-centredness.

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a variety of responses to goods, as governed by the various virtues, which are themselves diversified by the several 'spheres of experience' (e.g., social affiliation, mortality, pleasure and pain) responsiveness to and action within which constitute human life. Plato diversifies the virtues by linking them to the various powers of the soul, and Aquinas follows him in this general approach, but further diversifies the virtues by reference to the various objects within the field of each power.[41] Perhaps, however, it is at least safe to say—none of those just mentioned would disagree, at least—that the nature of the rational agent certainly does involve the capacity and tendency to possess and enjoy, and to express self and pursue ambitions; but also to respect, to honour, to love, and to serve.

But of course, opponents of Aristotelian approaches to ethics need not deny this (Hare does not deny it). It is not enough to speak vaguely of the 'right relation to the good', or even to add that what that is depends upon the nature of both relata, for the self-centred eudaimonist portrayed by Hare could claim to meet this criterion: the right relation just is that which serves my ambitions, and I do pay attention to nature of the other, for if its nature is not suitable to my plans I shall not embrace it in the same way as if it were. This is the conditionality Hare objected to. The eudaimonist concerned to ward off the self-centredness objection must go one step further: the right relation is one that holds the object in fitting regard, according to its goodness, at least in part *for its own sake* (and here I mean 'regard' to be taken as a generic placeholder for a range of specific attitudes that may be appropriate in different instances, including love, respect, honour, deference, enjoyment).[42] The following remark from Julia Annas, made of ancient eudaimonistic theories generally (including Aristotle's) powerfully conveys much of what I am trying to express here:

[41] Swanton, see e.g. 1–3; Martha Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach', in P. French, T. Uehling, and H. Wettstein (eds.) *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue*, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XIII (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 32–53, at 35–36 and 48–49; Plato in the *Republic*; St. Thomas Aquinas, see e.g. his treatment of the parts of fortitude at *Summa*, IIa-IIae, q28.

[42] I should add, although this is not the chief concern of a paper seeking to ward off the self-centredness objection, that it also respects the agent or subject for his or her own sake, avoiding excessive self-effacement or neglect. For this point, see Swanton's discussion of, e.g., the 'hyperobjective' and 'hypersubjective' vices in Swanton, ch. 8: 'both are manifestations of a deficiency in self-love' (189).

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> Similarly the good of others is introduced in ways which make it formally part of the agent's own good; but we fail to grasp its place in ancient theories if we think of it as derived from or justified in terms of the agent's own good—for if that were the case, we would be misconceiving what the good of others is.[43]

On this model, objects (people, causes, things) *merit* a place within the agent's happiness—and not only in the sense of contributing to some antecedently conceived notion, but also in the sense that paying the appropriate regard to them and to their own good demands to (and does) become part of the agent's good, the agent's happiness or flourishing. In other words, this amounts to a rejection of the conditionality to which Hare rightly objects.

This, then, is the template for a non-self-centred eudaimonistic virtue ethics: the agent seeks to live a life of virtue, where the virtues are simply those traits the possession and exercise of which constitute flourishing for a rational agent of that sort, where to flourish is to stand in the right relation to 'objects' according to their degrees and kinds of goodness, and where the right relation is that which acknowledges the nature or status of each relatum, in such a way that it is held in regard at least in part for its own sake. It is not self-centred to seek one's own flourishing because such flourishing is essentially relational. Attachment to others is not secondary as Hare alleges, but is of the essence of flourishing. Or, as we noted in considering Aquinas, the self is not the centre, but a node in a web of relationships centred on the Good (God for Aquinas), a node from which the self, necessarily, deliberates and acts. Other nodes in this web insert themselves, via their own merit, into the agent's good in such a way that they are valued at least in part for their own sake (as suggested by the Annas passage just cited). One other example from Aristotle illustrates this well: Aristotle sees 'good will' toward another as one of the bases of friendship, a basis established on the grounds of that other's merit. Whether this good will remains merely itself (i.e., merely wishing the other well), or develops into a real friendship depends upon facts about the relationship between the self and the other (such as the closeness of the one 'node' to the other), but the 'eligibility' for friendship, as well as the character of it, is independent of the capacity of that other to serve the self's antecedent ambitions.[44] This template is obviously and intentionally quite skeletal, and susceptible of being fleshed out in a number of ways.

[43] Annas 1993, 9.
[44] See EN IX.5.

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Notice a few points. First, I say 'at least in part for its own sake'. Nothing I have said rules out my also holding a thing or person in regard because I find it, or his company, enjoyable: non-self-centred virtue ethics can retain, as a secondary part of *eudaimonia*, the agent's own well-being, understood e.g. as enjoyment of the excellent.[45] Second, neither should anything I have said be taken to imply that virtue ethics must become a form of 'impartialism' in order to sidestep the self-centredness objection. I can for example hold my brother in higher regard in many important ways than another man of equal or even greater virtue, and can do so just because he is my brother. Surely I am obliged to hold this other man in high regard in many ways, but to insist that, e.g., I prefer his good to that of my brother would be to ignore that flourishing is relational, and to disregard the other relatum, namely the subject, in this case myself.

This point itself points to a larger one concerning what I suspect is a background supposition seeming to render plausible or even obvious the charge that eudaimonism is egoistic or in some other way self-centred: in some recent writing, the spectrum of moral orientations toward the world has been taken to consist of just two positions, egoism and altruism—fix these toward the left and right ends of the spectrum. But the spectrum must be recognized to be rather more densely populated than that.[46] We have noted Williams's distinction between egoism or selfishness and (non-egoistic) self-centredness on the left, and of course impartialism is strictly different from altruism, because it counts the self as one among many whereas altruism is purely other-regarding. But none of these positions houses eudaimonistic virtue ethics of the sort I am trying to portray, the sort advocated, I believe, by Aristotle and Aquinas. We require the recognition of a fifth position on the spectrum, one which for lack of a better name we may call 'activity-centred', in an attempt to capture the idea of an agent

[45] This last phrase is borrowed from Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93ff.; the idea is Aristotelian.

[46] Perhaps indeed the 'spectrum' should be reconceived as a 'field' with two or more axes—but none of my claims in this paper hinge on this issue.

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fundamentally seeking to relate himself in fitting fashion, through virtuous activity, to objects according to their goodness.[47]

Yet it might seem, if I may attempt to head off one last objection, that in admitting that the agent's fundamental focus is on his own activity, I may have at last, after all the hand waving, admitted that eudaimonism is self-centred. Why think that 'activity-centredness' is really different from self-centredness? Let us first note, following Bernard Williams,[48] that of course any agent must be fundamentally concerned with his own activity, for whose else might he directly influence? With what else could he be effectively concerned, except by means of his own activity? And this suggests the second thing to note, namely that activity always has an object, and that object may often be, indeed typically will be, something quite other than the self—activity is relational.

And yet some suspicion may remain since, while we speak of eudaimonism, the agent seeks in the end to perfect his activity (i.e., to flourish), and it may appear that all the objects of this activity are in some way instrumental, serving this perfection; or that their status as objects of regard *vis-à-vis* this activity is, in Hare's terms, conditional upon their satisfying the requirements of the agent's ambitions for his own perfect activity. Everyone else seems to be regarded only secondarily because regarded in relation to a goal that makes no mention of any particular others. In Thomistic terms, the formality under which all is willed is the good (or the right relation of the self to the good), and all particulars are regarded by the will in ways dictated by the extent to which their goodness helps the agent toward his goal.

The first point in response is simply to recall that objects can merit a place in the agent's happiness, a place in which they are valued for their own sake. The second point is that the objection seems unreasonable. One of the chief tasks of moral philosophy, at

[47] Calling this approach 'activity-centred' may seem to be in tension with the earlier claim that the Good is the centre (as we said that, in the case of Aquinas, God is the centre). This tension can be dissipated by availing ourselves of the distinction Aquinas makes between the final end as object (where it is the Good) and as attainment (where it is activity in relation to that object). Thus in Aquinas's case, God is the final end of all creatures in the sense of object, but the final end in the sense of its attainment is the activity of imaging God in the way fitting for that creature—in the case of rational creatures, such activity takes the form of loving contemplation (*cf.* e.g. *Summa*, Ia-IIae, 3.1).

[48] *Cf.* his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 68–69.

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least as ordinarily conceived, is to articulate formal principles under which *any* agent should act (not just you or me or any specially named individual), formal principles which of their nature cannot refer to particular others. (Here we could re-introduce Solomon's 'partners in crime' strategy: principles of acting from duty or for the sake of the best possible state of affairs make no reference to particular others either, nor could they. The fact that such principles make no reference to particular others does not render the importance of these others 'secondary' or 'conditional' upon the agent's antecedent ambitions.) And this formality holds even of the practical reasoning of moral agents: not in the 'foreground' of practical reason where virtuous agents are directly concerned with the good of particular others, but in the 'background' or at Solomon's 'deeper level', where agents step back and reflect upon the course of their lives. There, the agent notes that she cares directly for the good or autonomy of John or Joan, but critically examines this, and asks if she should care, or care so much, or express her care in the ways she has been, and so forth. John, Joan, and indeed each particular must always be, at the deeper level, cared for or held in regard *as* something (as an instance of something)[49]—the agent must appeal to formal principles (note that principles need not be rules, and certainly need not be best expressed as imperatives; and recall my earlier point that there is no requirement on the ordinary agent to express these principles with anything like philosophical precision). According to eudaimonistic virtue ethics, the most adequate appeal will take some such form as, 'Caring and acting in these ways does indeed partly constitute a good life for me to live, in that it helps move me into the right relation to the good [as described above].'

Yet, what a formal principle can do, and what the basic principle of eudaimonistic virtue ethics does do, is entail reference to the other (to the Good; and to particulars, not precisely as particulars, but as good). It will not name particular others—no basic principle

[49] Does this imply that my regard for an other is conditional after all? In some sense, I suppose it does: At the deeper level I must justify my regard for an other in terms of his being, not just himself, but in some relevant way good or worthy of that regard. But the regard certainly need not be conditional upon its congruence with my antecedent personal ambitions or anything at all along those lines. And, I do not see how any theory that involves principled-end reflection could avoid this attenuated conditionality in some form. See also n50.

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of practical reason could do that[50]—but it will, together with the recognition of salient facts, bring the agent into relations of direct, non-instrumental regard for particular others: it can follow from an agent's grasp of a principle and of salient facts about himself and a particular other that he should regard her (directly, non-instrumentally) with respect, say, or sympathy or admiration. This is enough to move the 'centre' out of the self and into the world, into relations with (and activity regarding) others, in accordance with their goodness and for their own sake.

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[50] Barring appeal to innate ideas, at least. Of course it may be that an agent is essentially related to particular others, such that the relation is simply part of who he is. E.g., I essentially bear the relation 'son of' to my parents. But this remains a fact about the world that I must discover (presumably very early on), and not one to be captured in a basic principle of practical reason. Eudaimonism can easily accommodate this: in seeking to flourish, I must seek to do so *as* (in part) son of my parents. Flourishing for one who is a son involves being a good one (where what that entails will vary across persons and situations).

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