Value Commitments and the Balanced Life

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According to critics such as Bernard Williams, traditional ethical theories render it impossible to lead good and meaningful lives because they emphasize moral duty or the promotion of external values at the expense of the personal commitments that make our lives worth living from our own perspective. Responses to this criticism have not addressed the fundamental question about the proper relationship between a person's commitments to moral values and her commitments to non-moral or personal values. In this article, I suggest that we think about this relationship by reflecting on the way that a prudentially virtuous person who has commitments to both moral and non-moral values would regard these commitments. I argue that people with the virtue of balance do have reasons to act in accordance with their moral commitments, but that whether or not these reasons are overriding depends on the type of commitment in question.

According to one recent strain of criticism, skilfully represented by Bernard Williams, traditional ethical theories (Kantianism and utilitarianism) render it impossible for people to lead good lives or to find their lives worth living.[1] This is so, according to the critics, because they emphasize moral duty or the promotion of external values at the expense of the personal commitments that make our lives worth living from our own perspective. Kantians and utilitarians have responded by arguing that their theories can recognize the value of personal projects and relationships and that subscribing to these theories does not prevent us from doing what is required by such values.[2] This debate has obscured an interesting and important question raised by the critics that can be addressed independently of any particular moral theory. The question is about the proper relationship between a person's commitments to moral values, causes and principles and her commitments to non-moral or personal values, projects and principles. This question is of particular interest in this age of globalization.

[1] See, for example, Bernard Williams, 'Morality, the Peculiar Institution', *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, 1985); Bernard Williams and J. J. C. Smart, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge, 1973); and Michael Stocker, 'The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories', *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976).

[2] See, for example, Peter Railton, 'Alienation, Consequentialism and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984) and Marcia Baron, 'The Alleged Moral Repugnance of Acting from Duty', *The Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984). Not all utilitarians have responded in this way. Elizabeth Ashford argues that utilitarianism does make objective integrity impossible in the current state of the world and that this is a virtue of utilitarianism. See her 'Utilitarianism, Integrity and Partiality', *The Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000). I will say more about Ashford's position later.

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As those of us in positions of relative privilege become aware of the many serious moral crises beyond our own backyards, the demands of morality become all the more obvious and arduous.[3] As we begin to take account of these demands in our theories, it is helpful to know what kind of response is compatible with finding our lives worth living.

According to Kant, the motive of duty is the only morally worthy motive. Critics charge that if we always act from the motive of duty as morality requires, then we will be alienated from the emotions we have towards the commitments that make our lives worthwhile from our own perspectives. According to utilitarianism, the value of general happiness is supreme and the promotion of one's own projects and goals is only justified in virtue of their contribution to this independent value. Critics charge that when individual agents conceive of the relationship between moral and non-moral values in this way they cannot maintain the commitments to the ground projects that make their lives worth living. But the critics have not clearly articulated an alternative way of thinking about this relationship. I suggest that we think about this relationship by reflecting on the way that a prudentially virtuous person, who has commitments to both moral and non-moral values, would regard them. A prudentially virtuous person is one who has character traits suited to achieving the good or worthwhile life that the critics think we all desire.[4] If we do this in the way that I suggest, we find that such virtuous people do have reasons to act in accordance with their moral commitments, despite the fact that they do not simply regard their moral commitments as occupying a superior position in a hierarchy of values.

Revealing the psychology of a prudentially virtuous agent (henceforth 'virtuous agent') as I am proposing to do has two main purposes. The first purpose is to give a particular shape to what needs to be accommodated by a moral theory if it is to be compatible with living a worthwhile life from one's own point of view. It is only once we have an idea of the way in which people need to regard their commitments in order to live prudentially good lives that we can discover whether traditional moral theories fail on this count. It might be that subtle versions of Kantianism or indirect utilitarianism could make use of

[3] For arguments that show the demandingness of morality see, for example, Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972) and Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (New York, 1996).

[4] I begin with a prudentially virtuous agent, by which I mean an agent who has the virtues necessary for deliberating about and pursuing her own good. To begin with, a morally virtuous agent would be a mistake since it might beg the question of what a morally virtuous agent is against Kantians and utilitarians. Moreover, if we start from a position according to which traditional moral virtues are constitutive of a person's own good, we risk describing the good itself as a goal from which people are alienated.

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the moral psychology I describe here by arguing that their theories are compatible with this psychology. But I will suggest that the psychology I describe fits most naturally with virtue ethics and that, therefore, the burden of proof is on other theories to show that they can do as well. Second, the argument that the virtuous agent would regard her moral and non-moral commitments in a particular way is one piece of a larger project that would establish the coincidence of morality and prudence by revealing the complexities of prudence.[5]

The article will proceed as follows. First, I focus on a virtue that I will call 'balance'. I argue that balance, as I define it, is a prudential virtue in so far as it conduces to the agent's pursuit of her own good. Second, I discuss the important differences between two types of value commitments we have. Third, I characterize the way in which the person with the virtue of balance will regard her commitments to moral and non-moral values. My discussion reveals, first, that we have different kinds of moral commitments corresponding roughly to perfect and imperfect duties; second, that our commitments are not necessarily arranged in a hierarchy; and third, that the agent with the virtue of balance, despite not regarding all of her moral commitments as superior, will be admirable. In the final section of the article I address the question of whether the foregoing analysis of balance favours virtue ethics. I argue that it does, but, surprisingly, that this is not because virtue ethics simply removes the current conflict we have between living well from our own point of view and meeting our moral obligations.

The analysis of balance as a virtue has value independently of its role in the argument about moral psychology and traditional moral theories. Balance is an intuitively compelling goal and something that many people think is part of a good life. Clear thinking about the nature of balance will help us to determine whether these intuitions are well founded, and, if they are, how they should direct the development of our character.

[5] I would argue that if we start with an unsophisticated view of prudence as preference satisfaction, for example, we end up with a conception of morality that is far too narrow. For this kind of strategy see David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford and New York, 1986). If, on the other hand, we start with an agent who is concerned to live a good life, where this is conceived as something non-moral, yet thicker than preference satisfaction, we will be better able to argue that anyone with an interest in living a worthwhile life from her own perspective will tend to be the kind of person who also lives well from the perspective of morality. For further work on this larger project see my 'Perspective: A Prudential Virtue', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (2002).

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I. BALANCE

Let us take a virtue to be an acquired set of abilities and dispositions to think, feel and act in certain ways that promote a desired end. To characterize balance as a virtue is to determine which set of abilities and dispositions are identified with this virtue. Now, if we listen to self-help gurus, advice columnists, friends, and family, we do hear a balanced life being recommended. The advice to be a balanced person or to get some balance in your life is not unfamiliar, nor is the corresponding criticism of those whose lives lack balance, for example, the workaholic. What people seem to be recommending when they praise balance is a life in which your attention and energy is divided among different goals and projects rather than concentrated on just one. Balance, then, has to do at least in part with the dispositions to divide and focus our attention.

If balance is a virtue, it cannot simply be the state of having our attentions divided between different goals. This would mean that the virtue of balance does not belong to the will.[6] We need to ask what are the abilities and acquirable dispositions that allow someone to achieve this balanced attention. It will be helpful to start with the two extremes between which balance is the mean. On the one hand, what helps a person to avoid becoming the kind of person who obsessively pursues one project to the exclusion of any other? First, we need the capacity to appreciate the value of different things. We also need to exercise this capacity and this requires the ability to disengage temporarily the motivations to further the goal we are currently pursuing. The ability to suspend or curb our motivations is often thought to be the mark of maturity when these motivations would lead us to do something bad or inappropriate. Even motivations toward good ends can be inappropriate if they are allowed to dominate the practical sphere and thereby preclude acting on motivations toward other worthy goals. The person with balance has enough control over the motivations towards particular goals that she can actively engage her capacities to appreciate the value of more than one thing.

On the other hand, what is it that helps a person to avoid becoming scattered, the kind of person whose attentions are spread too thinly among too many projects? Here the ability to appreciate the value of different things is also relevant because we do not truly appreciate the value of some goal by pursuing it in a slapdash manner. A person who is really committed to her goals, who really appreciates the value to be

[6] Philippa Foot emphasizes the importance of the connection between virtue and the will in her 'Virtues and Vices', *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford, 1978).

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attained in them, simply cannot spread herself too thin. So, to avoid both extremes we need the capacity to appreciate the value of a variety of different projects or goals and the ability to focus on a project long enough to achieve the value that it has to offer.

The capacity to appreciate the value of a variety of goals and the ability to spread our attention and energy among these different goals must be guided by practical reason or reflection.[7] First, some powers of instrumental reasoning are needed to determine which goals complement each other, which can be pursued together easily and which cannot. Second, reflection is necessary to ascertain which goals and projects do have value for our lives. A wide distribution of commitments to worthless projects is not virtuous. A balanced life is one in which our attention is to some extent appropriate to the real value of our projects for us. Finally, reflection on our own good is also needed to produce a commitment to balance itself; reflection helps us recognize the value of balance. Without this kind of commitment to balance as something that is good for us, as an ideal at which to aim, the capacities to appreciate the value of a variety of goals may lie idle.

II. WHY BALANCE IS A VIRTUE

To say that balance is a prudential virtue is to say that it is a quality we are better off with than without, a trait we have reason to develop in ourselves and encourage in others, in so far as we are concerned about our own good and the good of those others.[8] We would not say this about balance if it were simply the case that balance helps people to get what they happen to want at the moment. A complete case for thinking of balance as a virtue in the above sense would have to show that balance helps us to achieve a compelling and normatively significant goal and this would require a thorough defence of a conception of an individual's good as such a goal. This defence lies far beyond the scope of this article; instead, I will begin with some assumptions about a person's good that I hope will garner enough agreement to provide a decent starting point for the argument in favour of balance.

I will assume that the good for a person requires some meaningful relationships such as friendships, some measure of success or achievement in worthwhile projects, some amount of happiness where this would include pleasant experiences and the absence of painful ones

[7] I would argue that all prudential virtues require a capacity for practical reflection and that this fact provides for a limited unity of the prudential virtues. For a defence of a limited unity of the moral virtues see Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 153–7.

[8] Balance is, in Susan Wolf's sense, a non-moral ideal similar to what Wolf calls 'well-roundedness'. See her 'Moral Saints', *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982).

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such as boredom and suffering, and, in Hume's words, 'a satisfactory review of our own conduct'.[9] Finally, I assume that the good life for a person must be, at least to some degree, reflective.[10] This last assumption follows from the previous ones. Since there is room for choice in many of these areas (for example, we can choose with whom to be friends and what particular personal goals to adopt), reflection is needed to determine the particular shape of the good for ourselves. Further, the need for reflection comes from a person's concern to have a satisfactory review of her own conduct. A person cannot have a satisfactory review without having a review of her own conduct *simpliciter*, and such a review consists in a reflective survey of that conduct.

I cannot argue for these assumptions about a person's good here, but it should be noted that in making them I am not assuming a particular philosophical theory of the good for a person. In fact, many theories of the good for a person, although they would disagree about the justification for these particular assumptions, would agree with the content of the assumptions I have made.[11] My hope is that these assumptions are broad and attractive enough to characterize, at least in part, a conception of the good that most people will recognize as a compelling and familiar goal.

The person with the virtue of balance chooses a variety of goals that complement each other and she divides her attention and energy

[9] David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd edn., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1975), p. 283.

[10] I should note that Williams's concern seems to be about our subjective sense of living a good life, or our *finding* our lives worth living. I take it that we are concerned to live lives that are actually good or worth living, but that Williams is right that finding them to be so is a necessary condition. The assumptions I have made about the good life are ones that could be accommodated by either a subjective or an objective conception of the goal in question. If the goal is living a good life, then the assumptions I have made simply specify constituents of the objectively good life. If the goal is taking your life to be good or worth living, then my assumptions are assumptions about what kinds of lives most people tend to find good or worthwhile.

[11] The assumption that the good life requires reflection sits nicely with informed or idealized desire accounts of a person's good. For such accounts see James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measure and Moral Importance* (Oxford, 1986); Peter Railton, 'Moral Realism', *Moral Discourse and Practice*, ed. Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton (Oxford and New York, 1997); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). It is also compatible with other subjective accounts such as L. W. Sumner's account of welfare in his *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics* (Oxford, 1996), and with Aristotelian accounts of a person's good such as Rosalind Hursthouse's in her *On Virtue Ethics*. This assumption will also find agreement among those who defend objective list theories that include autonomy or reflection as one of the objective goods that make up the good life for a person. For example, see Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York, 1993). The first three assumptions about particular components of the good for a person are also compatible with the theories above, although the informed desire accounts of a person's good would take these claims to be contingent on the fact that people desire happiness, friendship and achievement.

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between them. Given facts about human nature and our condition, this state of being conduces to a person's good in several ways. First, although it is possible to achieve success and a sense of accomplishment by pursuing a solitary goal, we often have a better chance of achieving these goods if we try to find them in more than one arena. The person without balance invests everything in one goal; thus she takes a risk that she will be unlucky in her pursuit, or that this goal will not be one for which she has a lot of talent. This point implies that the balanced person would pursue projects that use different skills and are subject to different kinds of luck.

Second, even for the person who does find success in one project, it is often the case that the sense of accomplishment and the feelings of satisfaction and enjoyment wane as one gets accustomed to succeeding. As we engage in one activity, which uses a particular set of talents and permits a particular kind of success, we get used to these challenges and successes and we get less pleasure or enjoyment from our engagement in it. This phenomenon is mitigated in projects in which there is room for the development of skills.[12] But even here there is a risk of boredom or loss of satisfaction. Striving for success in a single activity, even if we are successful, means developing the same set of skills, focusing our attention on the same type of goal and experiencing the same type of success. We can begin to find this pattern monotonous when it is not contrasted with any other pursuits. It is also true that some absorbing projects, for example, athletic endeavours, are such that we cannot continue to make fulfilling progress as we age. Pursuing one such project so exclusively that other skills and interests wither away may frustrate one's capacity for fulfilment and satisfaction in the long term.

There are apparent exceptions to the above claims about the benefits of balance. The brilliant scientist or the virtuoso violinist may find the most rewarding life to be one of single-minded pursuit of one goal. What particular set of pursuits counts as balanced depends on the value of the ends pursued,[13] one's chances of gaining a sense of accomplishment and purpose from them, and the long-term prognosis for one's commitments to these ends. For a brilliant scientist who reasonably believes she will

[12] Hence Rawls's Aristotelian Principle, which tells us that, other things being equal, we will prefer activities of greater complexity, is supported by this same phenomenon. My point is that increasing complexity in a single activity is not always sufficient; we may also need different activities that present new challenges. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 426–7.

[13] Claims about the value of a person's ends are open to subjective or objective interpretations. Even a subjective theory of the prudentially good life can allow for some room between the projects one happens to value and the projects that are really worth valuing by claiming that the latter depend on subjective attitudes that are informed, reflective, or otherwise idealized.

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help to find the cure for cancer, a life with few other pursuits may count as a balanced life. Of course, it would stretch the concept of 'balance' to admit that someone whose life is in single-minded pursuit of a single goal counts as having it. But we do not need to admit this. Even the brilliant scientist is better off with one or two close relationships and some way of relieving stress, fatigue or burnout. The point is that balance will come in different forms depending on the interests and talents of the agent and the value of her projects. If friendship, for example, is good for people, then the virtuous person finds some way of working friendship into her life, even if most of her life is devoted to curing cancer. If boredom and stress are bad, then the virtuous scientist will find some way to bring other goals into her life that alleviate these ills.

Now the objection may come back in a stronger form. Imagine a person who is so socially awkward that friendship is impossible, and so single-minded and determined that constant pursuit of a single goal never causes boredom or anxiety. Imagine that for such a person balance would increase his levels of misery and anxiety and decrease his sense of accomplishment. But such a person is very different from most of us and, therefore, he does not present a serious challenge to the claim that balance is a virtue. Virtues are traits that are good for us, given our nature. Human beings who do not share general features of human nature with the rest of us may not have reasons to develop their character in the same way that we do. The fact that there may be such people who are very unlike us does not remove the reason that we have, given what we are like, to develop our character in ways that make sense for us.

The third advantage of balance is that the person with balance is better off with respect to friendships and other important personal relationships. The person who focuses entirely on her work will not have the time for friendships. Friendships require shared activities, attention, and care, and the person who is single-mindedly pursuing success in her career will tend not to do what is demanded by the best friendships. If, on the other hand, we consider the person who devotes all of her attention to pursuing friendships, there are still difficulties. Friendships tend to begin and develop when two people meet in pursuit of a common goal. Our diverse projects and interests make us interesting to potential friends and common goals bond us together. A person who has no other goals besides the goal of friendship might find herself in something analogous to the paradox of hedonism. She may not be able to achieve her goal while aiming directly at it.

Fourth, balance encourages and informs the kind of reflection needed to discern what the good life is. It encourages reflection because the person who has several goals that require balancing must deliberate

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and reflect whenever these goals come into conflict. The process of balancing her goals and determining how (and whether) they can be pursued together will develop her skills of reflecting on her own values and give her a reassuring sense of confidence in the goals she maintains. Balance informs reflection by giving us the experience we need to make considered judgements about the good life. By cultivating our interests and skills in a variety of projects we become better informed about our opportunities and, therefore, better able to judge the components of a good life. Nor is being informed in this way something we can achieve once early in life and then abandon. Given the way in which human beings change over the course of a lifetime, and given that new opportunities almost always arise, it would be unwise to assume that the information we had when we were in our twenties would still provide an adequate basis for judgement about what constitutes a good life for us later in life.

Finally, if we are willing to go beyond the minimal assumptions I made about a person's good above (as many virtue ethicists will be inclined to do), there is another point we can make about the value of balance. The point is that the person whose life is unbalanced misses out on things that are of real value. If there are a variety of projects that are worthwhile such that one cannot be substituted for another, balance has an obvious place in the good life. For instance, we might think, as Thomas Hurka does,[14] that developing our minds and developing our bodies are each valuable for human life, but we cannot obtain the value of one by doing more of the other. A balanced set of commitments will include more of the various pursuits that are important for human life.

It might seem that the above benefits of balance are instrumental and that, therefore, a new challenge to balance's status as a virtue arises from the possibility that one may achieve the benefits without developing balance. But it is misleading to say that the value of balance is entirely as a means to an end; the separation imposed between balance and its benefits in our discussion was somewhat artificial. The virtue of balance consists in a capacity to appreciate the value of a wide range of projects and to spread our attention among them, guided by practical reason. This means that part of what it is to be the kind of person who can pursue meaningful personal projects while at the same time being a good friend is to be a person with balance. The capacities that make up balance are constitutive of the kind of life that is the goal of someone who is concerned to pursue friendships alongside other important goals under the guidance of reason.

[14] *Perfectionism*.

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III. COMMITMENTS

Before we begin, a word of caution is in order about what we can infer from the arguments of this section and the next. These arguments are about the character of a prudentially virtuous agent, given certain normal human commitments. The point is to give shape to the notion of a life that one finds worth living from one's own point of view. We cannot directly infer imperatives about what we ought to do or how we ought to develop our character. In order to get to such conclusions we need a more thorough account of the relevant commitments, a topic we will come to in Section V.

Our commitments to various values and goals – ground projects, in Williams's terms – are very important to us. They give us a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives, they provide us with an identity, a conception of the kind of person we are, and they furnish the standards we use to evaluate whether our lives are going well or badly. But different kinds of commitments do this in different ways. For the purpose of this article I want to focus on two different types of commitment. First, we have commitments to bringing about or promoting ends, what I will call 'positive commitments'. Second, we have 'negative commitments' to avoiding actions or ways of being that violate principles or that contribute to bringing about bad ends.

Commitments to bringing about an end would include commitments to ending world hunger, preserving the redwoods, or restoring an antique dining set to its original condition. In some cases the particular commitment will be justified in terms of a further commitment to some larger value, such as the value of happiness in the example of the commitment to ending world hunger. Such commitments give us a sense of meaning or worthwhileness in virtue of the value we take the end (or the ultimate end) to have. We evaluate our lives on the basis of standards imposed by these values, and hence we find worthwhileness, satisfaction or meaning in our lives when we uphold these standards by making some contribution towards the end in question. Here we find a spectrum of amounts of contribution and degrees of commitment. Various kinds of contribution to this end can support a favourable evaluation in this self-survey. Whether I think of myself as the kind of person for whom restoring the dining set is a hobby or a passion, whether I hold myself to the standards of a restoration expert or a dabbler in antiques, will depend, in part, on the amount of attention and energy I contribute to this project. But even a small contribution allows me to think of myself as the kind of person who contributes to a valuable project and can therefore give me a sense of worthwhileness or purpose.

On the other hand, some of our commitments are commitments not to cross certain lines, not to be a certain kind of person, or not to

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violate certain standards. In other words, some of our commitments are characterized negatively as commitments to avoid particular actions or ways of being, for example, commitments not to kill innocent people, not to eat meat, or never to drink alcohol.[15] Notice here that negative commitments can vary in at least two different ways. First, the contents of the commitments can be to avoid acting or being a certain way to various degrees. For example, one might have a commitment to avoid drinking alcohol altogether, or one might have a commitment to avoid drinking *too much* alcohol. Second, the strength of the commitment can vary. Either of the two alcohol cases could be examples of very strong commitments. The strength of a commitment varies with the role it plays in one's plans and one's sense of identity.

Negative commitments will often be underwritten by a basic value, say, the value of happiness or of certain forms of life, but the commitment in question here is not a commitment to producing or promoting something of value.[16] Rather, these are commitments not to be implicated in bringing about bad outcomes or violating principles or personal standards. Such commitments provide standards that constitute part of a reflective survey of one's life. For example, the commitment to being a moral person might impose a standard that one never intentionally harm an innocent person for the sake of personal gain. Even though such commitments may be very ordinary and easy to uphold, they still function as part of our self-survey.[17] If we endorse such a standard and yet fail to live up to it, we would see ourselves as failing in an important respect.

Like positive commitments, negative commitments are to be taken seriously because they constitute a component of our self-survey. But negative commitments make different demands on us from the ones made by commitments to bringing about ends. We cannot easily

[15] I take this last to be, at least in some cases, a non-moral commitment. The distinction between negative and positive commitments, therefore, does not track the distinction between moral and non-moral commitments.

[16] So, the same basic value might underlie both negative and positive commitments. I am assuming here that the negative and positive commitments that provide the standards against which we evaluate our lives play a more direct role in our planning and reasoning than do these basic values. I think this is not an unreasonable claim to make about our psychology.

[17] Negative commitments, then, may not 'identify' us in the way that positive commitments are likely to do. Victoria Davion makes a persuasive case for the claim that unconditional commitments (such as the moral commitment not to kill innocent people) do not identify us at all, in the sense of defining our individual personalities. I agree with Davion on this point. The point here is that even if we do not take negative commitments to identify us as the individuals we are, such commitments can nevertheless furnish standards we think it is important to meet in our reflective surveys of our lives. See Victoria Davion, 'Integrity and Radical Change', *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence, Kan., 1991).

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continue to see ourselves as good, conscientious people who are not implicated in the production of bad outcomes or the violation of principles if we help to bring about the bad outcomes, or violate the principles, sometimes. If you see yourself as someone who does not participate in practices that cause harm to animals, this way of seeing yourself is undermined the first time you torture a cat. Whereas, if you are committed to being a person who contributes to the goal of ending world hunger, failing to end world hunger on some occasions does not immediately threaten this commitment, because you do not claim to be a person who does nothing but promote that goal.

Now, we must acknowledge that people do renege on their negative commitments and yet continue to see themselves as people who adhere to these standards. People tell lies and continue to see themselves as morally upright and honest. The point is that when we are committed to 'never lying' or to 'never harming animals', one lie, or one kicking of a cat, presents a problem for us because the behaviour is in direct conflict with the commitment. The problem is a psychological one. When we engage in behaviours that contradict our commitments, we have difficulty in convincing ourselves that we are still accurately described as someone who is committed. In other words, it is difficult for a person who tells an unjustified lie to reflect on her own conduct and maintain her confidence that she is a good person in virtue of her commitment not to lie. The same problem exists for commitments to bringing about good ends; however, in such cases the behaviour that conflicts with the commitment is different. For example, the commitment to bringing about better conditions for animals is not immediately threatened by an occasion of our not acting on this commitment; rather in this case the commitment conflicts either with a pattern of behaviour that reveals a tendency *never* to act on the commitment, or with behaviour that reveals indifference to the underlying value. In this case, the behaviour that conflicts with the commitment is not simply the failure to act on it in a particular circumstance.

We have these different types of commitment, in part, because the values that underwrite them make different sorts of demands. For example, as Kant argued, a person who values rational nature should develop a commitment to refraining from interfering with it as well as a commitment to promoting the ends of other rational agents.[18] To see the prudential value of having these different kinds of commitments we need to think about the role they play in our lives and in creating the good review of our conduct that is a constituent of a well-lived life.

[18] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York, 1964), pp. 96–8.

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Commitments to promoting some end give us 'something to live for' in a quite literal sense. The value that we help promote provides us with a reason to live because it shows that our existence does some good.[19] Negative commitments are important in a different way. These commitments provide standards below which we will not sink and in doing so they allow us to think of ourselves as principled, as having standards, as conscientious and dutiful people. Such self-descriptions can be an important part of our sense of the quality of our lives because they constitute a minimum standard; being a person who does not violate important principles may not be sufficient for a good life, but many take it to be necessary. Furthermore, the standards or principles to which we are committed can sustain us through periods when our commitments to promoting values are changing or in doubt. There are many different ways to promote the value of, for example, animal welfare. One can adopt and care for homeless animals, volunteer at a shelter, become a veterinarian, give money to animal welfare organizations, or reform zoos and circuses. But if one's commitment is to refraining from participating in practices that are cruel to animals, one simply must refrain from eating meat and doing any other activity one judges to be cruel.[20] This means that commitments to promoting values change shape in a way that negative commitments do not. Negative commitments can help to sustain a sense of living a worthwhile life through such changes by reinforcing the belief that we are committed, despite the changes, to the value that underlies both types of commitment.

The person with the virtue of balance has reason to foster both commitments to the promotion of values and commitments to principles or standards that demand that she refrain from certain behaviours or ways of being. These claims about what the person with balance would do are based, in part, on observations about human psychology and the conditions under which we are most able to obtain a satisfactory review of our own conduct. Whether we regard these features of our psychology as features that must be overcome by a morally good agent or as features that are compatible with moral agency depends, in part, on the way in which a person with the virtue of balance would regard her commitments to moral and non-moral values. In the next section of the article I will argue that although the way such a person would

[19] The good done here need not be a moral good. People can take their lives to have meaning in virtue of other kinds of value, for example aesthetic value.

[20] There are many ways to skin a cat, but only one way not to skin it. This means that in cases of conflict between one's negative commitments and one's commitments to bringing about an end, there will usually be ways of promoting the end one values in ways that still honour the negative commitment.

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regard her commitments is not necessarily as traditional moral theories would recommend, it is nevertheless not obviously in need of reform.

IV. HOW THE PERSON WITH BALANCE REGARDS HER COMMITMENTS

In examining the relationship between the prudential virtue of balance and morality we must first distinguish three different questions that might be asked about this relationship. First, we might ask whether there is a necessary connection between having the virtue of balance and having moral commitments. An affirmative answer to this question would be the strongest claim we could make about the relationship between prudence and morality; however, it seems very unlikely to be true. Unless we define balance in such a way that one cannot possess it unless one already has some moral commitments, which would require making quite controversial assumptions about the prudential good, we cannot rule out the possibility that there are moral monsters who live balanced lives. Nor would it make sense to define balance in this way if our goal is to retain a notion of prudence that is a compelling goal for as large a group of people as possible.

The next question we might ask is whether there is a contingent connection between possessing the virtue of balance and having moral commitments. Given the reasons for developing balance discussed in Section II, we can see that there are some grounds for a positive answer to this question. Moral goals do have a certain advantage in the deliberations of a virtuous agent. First, potential friends are attracted to people who are committed to moral principles. Given the choice, most people would prefer to befriend someone who is honest, just, generous and courageous than someone who is not. Of course people become friends for all sorts of reasons and someone who lacks moral commitments might find herself with friends. But if these friends are friends with her because of her money, power or reputation, then it is not clear that they are the kinds of friends we would wish for in the first place. And even if the vicious person can acquire friends who love her for her own sake, it still seems that the reasonable strategy for a person who aims to develop friendships is to be the kind of person who is a good friend, rather than to allow her vices to flourish in the hope that some unwitting dupe will fail to notice them.

Second, moral commitments are often not difficult to fulfil and they can therefore provide success and a sense of accomplishment with relative ease. This might seem an odd claim to make, but we can see its plausibility if we consider ordinary cases of moral action, rather than the moral dilemmas and cases of *akrasia* on which philosophers tend to focus. Consider the commitment to making the world a better place.

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Unfortunately, there are so many ways to make the world a better place that it is not very difficult to meet this goal. One can give money to a worthy charity, spend time volunteering for a good cause, choose a career in medicine, teaching, fire-fighting, or any number of occupations that help others. Or, consider commitments to principles such as truth telling. While it is surely very difficult for some people to tell the truth in certain circumstances, at least telling the truth is largely under our control. Unlike succeeding in climbing Mount Everest or playing the cello like Yo Yo Ma, succeeding in telling the truth is something most of us can do and feel good about doing.[21]

From the point of view of a person's own good, not all goals are created equal; moral goals are good ones to pursue for a variety of reasons. Of course, this does not establish that every prudentially virtuous agent has a reason to adopt moral goals, but it does go some way towards bridging the gap between prudence and morality by providing a more sophisticated account of prudence, and therefore it goes some way towards showing how this discussion of balance contributes to the larger project I mentioned at the beginning of this article.

There is a third question we might ask about the relationship between balance and morality: Given a person with a normal pattern of commitments, which would include personal and moral commitments, will the virtue of balance make this person better or worse off from the moral point of view? This is the crucial question for answering the challenge to traditional moral theories with which we began, namely, that these theories find a way to accommodate our deep need to pursue ground projects. This question is crucial because if balance makes us worse off, traditional moral theories are likely to say 'so much the worse for prudence and ground projects'. In other words, if cultivating the virtues that are conducive to prudence makes us less likely overall to maintain or act on the moral commitments we already have, then we will not have helped traditional moral theories to answer the challenge. Rather, we will only have succeeded in illustrating the incompatibility between morality and the personal projects that make life worthwhile.

Fortunately, I think we can show that far from making us worse off, morally speaking, prudential virtues actually make us more likely to maintain and act in accordance with the moral commitments that we have. I defend this claim in the remainder of this section.

A thorough analysis of how a prudentially virtuous agent regards her commitments would require a more complete description of the virtuous agent, which would include such virtues as self-knowledge

[21] Hume has a similar view about the ease with which we gain from virtue. See his discussion of the advantages of virtue in the *Enquiries*, pp. 281–4.

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and perspective.[22] Still, there are some things we can say about the virtuous agent, even if we focus just on the virtue of balance. First, the balanced person does not necessarily regard her commitments as forming a hierarchy according to which moral commitments are at the top and other commitments take places of lesser importance.[23] She divides her attention among various values, some moral and some not, which form a mutually achievable package of goals that use different skills and offer different challenges. A moral goal to bring about some end will be just one member of this set, but the fact that moral values do not necessarily have a higher ranking does not mean that the balanced person will sometimes murder for the sake of her personal projects. This is because many moral commitments are commitments to principles or standards that demand never doing a particular action if one is going to maintain that commitment.[24]

The balanced person will pursue her commitments to promote values (both moral and non-moral) within the constraints imposed by the negative commitments. Negative commitments have more strict fulfilment conditions than positive commitments; we have a good deal of discretion in how we uphold our positive commitments, but not in how we uphold our negative commitments. Because this is so, positive commitments must take shape around negative ones and, *ipso facto*, positive personal commitments will have to take shape around negative moral ones.

Notice that not every such limiting standard is a moral principle. People may have commitments never to perform certain actions or become a particular kind of person in virtue of their non-moral values. For example, we can imagine a person who honours her relationship with a deceased parent by her commitment never to forget to visit the grave.[25] This means that positive moral commitments must also take shape around negative personal ones. For example, if my morally worthy volunteer work conflicts with my commitment never to forget to visit my mother's grave on the anniversary of her death, then the volunteer work will have to be moved. The point here is not that negative commitments are more important than positive commitments, but that the fulfilment of negative commitments, being less flexible,

[22] For a discussion of the virtue of perspective see my 'Perspective'.

[23] Here I am in agreement with one of Susan Wolf's conclusions in 'Moral Saints' that 'our values cannot be fully comprehended on the model of a hierarchical system with morality at the top' (p. 97).

[24] Nor is it arbitrary that moral commitments are like this, given the social importance of following rules.

[25] Bernard Williams makes a similar point in *Ethics and the Limits*, pp. 188–9. Williams argues that practical necessity is not identical with moral obligation because people can experience the sense of 'I must' with respect to their non-moral commitments.

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constrains the way in which positive commitments can be met.[26] Nevertheless, because the moral values and principles we endorse express themselves in negative commitments, the person with balance will not be likely to murder, cheat and steal for the sake of her personal projects.

Furthermore, certain features of balance will serve the agent well when it comes to maintaining and acting in accordance with her moral commitments. Because balance encourages a person to reflect on her values and priorities, the balanced person will be more likely to avoid moral transgressions that are the result of inattention or lack of forethought. The balanced agent will also have a greater tendency to keep up her positive moral commitments even when competing positive commitments make heavy demands. The appreciation of the value of a balanced life will give the agent with balance reason to continue to act on these positive moral commitments even when this becomes more difficult. Finally, the capacity to appreciate value in a variety of pursuits that is an element of the virtue of balance will help the balanced agent to maintain her negative and positive moral commitments. Cultivating the skills necessary to an appreciation of what is good and important in a variety of activities is likely to yield conviction about the values one has discovered through experience.

A further way in which the virtue of balance might make us better off, morally speaking, comes to light when we see that balance would include the capacity that allows a fully virtuous person to balance the considerations of various virtues.[27] We might think that a person with balance will be able to deal with the apparently competing claims of different virtues, such as justice and compassion, because she will be able to reflect on these demands and to divide her attention between them without sacrificing either entirely.

An agent with the virtue of balance, then, does have reasons to regard her (reasonable) negative commitments as imposing constraints on how she can pursue her other projects, reasons that derive from her interest in having and meeting the standards that derive from these commitments. Of course, it also seems likely that such an agent would have reasons not to promote her positive moral goals to the exclusion of other goals she deems (non-morally) valuable. The prudentially

[26] Of course, it is possible that there will be people whose negative personal commitments cause them to act immorally, but this is not an objection to the current line of argument. We are now considering whether a person with a typical pattern of moral and non-moral commitments would be made worse off, morally speaking, by the prudential virtue of balance. The fact that there are people without this typical pattern to begin with is irrelevant to the claim that balance does not make the usual person worse off.

[27] I thank Scott Gelfand for this suggestion.

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virtuous agent pursues the ground projects needed to live a life she finds worth living, while not abandoning the moral commitments that constitute part of her self-survey.

V. VIRTUE ETHICS

The balanced agent I have described is certainly unlike the stereotypes of a perfect act utilitarian agent who sees promoting the general happiness as her only goal or the perfect Kantian agent whose life is dominated by moral duty. But it is possible that a utilitarian could argue that the virtuous agent's conduct is quite similar to that of an indirect utilitarian agent who realizes that her ability to promote happiness will be undermined if she does not pursue her own personal goals. Or, one could argue that the virtuous agent's conduct is very much like the conduct of a more sophisticated version of the Kantian agent who takes herself to have both perfect and imperfect moral duties, as well as important commitments to her own personal values.

Although it may not be difficult for the utilitarian and the Kantian to argue that balance is permitted, neither is as well positioned as virtue ethics to explain the value of balance. Virtue ethics very naturally accommodates balance and the reasons we have to develop it because virtue ethics begins with a conception of the human good and the character that sustains it. Moreover, a virtue ethical theory that begins with a conception of an individual's good has an obvious place for virtues such as balance that are, from the point of view of other theories, non-moral. If our question is about what reasons we have to develop the virtue of balance given the structure of the theory, virtue ethics looks quite good. It is easy for virtue ethics to assign a place for balance and to recommend, other things being equal, that we develop it. This is an advantage of virtue ethics in so far as we expect a moral theory to give us guidance not only in our actual circumstances, but also in other possible circumstances.

But what happens if we ask whether virtue ethics give us all things considered reasons to develop balance, given our actual circumstances?[28] There is a tendency to think that virtue ethics is the answer to the demandingness of morality because it highlights the importance of personal projects in a way that other theories do not. I think that this tendency is wrong-headed and that virtue ethics should not provide an easy solution to the problem of the actual demandingness of morality. It is indeed an advantage of virtue ethics that it can explain the value

[28] Elizabeth Ashford very helpfully distinguishes these questions in her 'Utilitarianism' with respect to her discussion of utilitarianism's ability to accommodate ground projects.

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of a balanced life, but it is not so obviously an advantage for virtue ethics that it would sanction developing the virtue of balance at the price of ignoring extreme human suffering. In this section I defend virtue ethics by showing that the way in which virtue ethics instructs us to develop our character is much more complicated than it may have at first appeared. In sketching the more complex and subtle picture of the relationship between virtue ethics, balance and the demands of morality, I hope the advantages of virtue ethics in accommodating human psychology in a reasonable way will be revealed.

Our question, then, is what reasons virtue ethics gives us to develop the virtue of balance, given the world as it is and the extreme and pressing needs of millions of people whom we could help. It is in response to this question that one is tempted to see in virtue ethics a solution that lets us off the hook.[29] But this is a temptation that should be resisted. Assume for now that virtue ethics does recommend that we develop the virtue of balance, dividing our attention between our moral and non-moral commitments. Given that the world we live in is one which contains unspeakable atrocities that we could do something to prevent (such as the deaths of thousand of children every day of preventable diseases and starvation), the injunction to live a balanced life amounts to permission to ignore these atrocities. There is a very intuitive sense in which when I have the choice between spending $1,000 on a set of antique furniture to restore or spending that money providing clean drinking water to children in Africa, I ought to do the latter. At the very least it seems that I ought to feel remorseful or compromised when I buy the antiques knowing what good that money could have done. According to Elizabeth Ashford it is a virtue of utilitarianism that it can explain this fact:

> It is appropriate . . . that those of us who fail to do so [to live altruistic lives] feel to some extent morally compromised, by our awareness that we are pursuing our personal projects at the cost of our failing to do all that we can to help others' vital interests, and that from the moral point of view every person's interests are of equal weight.[30]

If virtue ethics tells us there is nothing at all wrong with buying the furniture as long as I sometimes act on my commitment to promote the good of others, then it misses an important fact about the gravity of our current situation with respect to the needs of others.

This problem assumes, of course, that virtue ethics recommends developing balance in our current circumstances. But this is not

[29] A notable exception to this tendency is Garrett Cullity's 'International Aid and the Scope of Kindness', *Ethics* 105 (1994).
[30] Ashford, 'Utilitarianism', p. 435.

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necessarily so. To see why, we need to fill out the picture of the virtuous agent. After all, no reasonable virtue ethics would say that we can understand how we ought to develop our character if we only think about one dimension of virtue. So, let us add to our agent commitments to standard virtues such as kindness and compassion and commitments to avoiding certain standard vices such as selfishness. The first thing we will notice is that commitments to developing character traits will include both negative and positive commitments. Seeing oneself as a kind person requires that we sometimes perform acts of kindness, but it also requires that we never do anything that is patently cruel. The question for us, then, is how would a person who is committed to being kind, compassionate and to avoiding being selfish regard the extreme suffering of distant others?

Here I think it is quite plausible to suppose that some of the virtuous person's commitments would entail that she should not pursue her personal projects if this requires failing to help others who are in desperate need. For example, we might say that the commitment to avoid being selfish implies a commitment never to satisfy a relatively trivial interest of one's own when the basic interests of another are at stake. If this is right, then a virtuous person could not continue to see herself as not selfish while buying a dining set to restore, given that this would be enough money to prevent a family from selling their daughter into slavery.[31] Or, if we think that a commitment to being compassionate includes the commitment never wilfully to turn a blind eye to the extreme suffering of others, then it would seem unlikely that a person could continue to see herself as a compassionate person while she pursues her personal projects in the midst of intense suffering going on around her.

A complete explanation of how virtue ethics would respond to the extreme suffering of distant others is beyond the scope of this article. The above discussion is meant only to suggest that the answer virtue ethics gives will not be simple. It is not obvious that virtue ethics entails all things considered reasons to live balanced lives given our current circumstances. That said, it may seem that virtue ethics is no better off than any other moral theory with respect to accommodating our ground projects in our current circumstances (and, sadly, the circumstances we are likely to be in for the foreseeable future). But this is incorrect. In the remainder of the article I will point out two virtues of the treatment

[31] In his op-ed piece detailing his experiences interviewing and trying to help Cambodian child prostitutes the journalist Nicholas Kristof reports paying significantly less than this amount for the freedom of two girls ('Loss of Innocence', *New York Times*, 28 Jan. 2004).

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by virtue ethics of balance and the moral demands imposed on us, given our current circumstances.

First, virtue ethics can acknowledge the real tragedy of the compromised position we are in because it attributes real value and importance to our personal projects. According to utilitarianism, a person who sacrifices her own good for the sake of promoting the good of others (the altruist) sacrifices a small amount of one good for the sake of more of the same good. Utilitarianism does not, therefore, do justice to what is lost for the individual who sacrifices her own non-moral commitments. According to virtue ethics, on the other hand, non-moral commitments are genuinely valuable and important. Virtue ethics can recognize a genuine conflict between our commitments to our personal projects and our commitments to being morally good people and this situation of conflict seems accurately to describe the compromised position that we are in.

Second, given that, as Ashford herself admits,[32] most people are unlikely to choose the life of altruistic self-sacrifice, it is an advantage of virtue ethics that it gives us guidance that goes beyond telling us what we ought to do but will not. Because virtue ethics recognizes the value of a variety of commitments we might have, and because it holds that we live better lives if our lives are balanced between a variety of commitments, it gives us a way to be better, even if we cannot be perfect. In other words, virtue ethics can take the position that the circumstances in which we live make it impossible for us to live excellently. Given our situation, we cannot be everything we would like to be; we cannot fulfil all of our commitments. The virtue of virtue ethics is that it gives us an ideal at which to aim while acknowledging the existence of conflicts that, owing to bad luck, make excellence impossible.

VI. CONCLUSION

If my argument is correct, normal people who have both moral and non-moral commitments and who have a concern to achieve their own good will also, other things equal, have a reason to develop the virtue of balance. Such agents, although probably not saintly, will be committed to taking very seriously the commitments that constitute the standards with which they evaluative their lives, and will at least make some efforts to promote morally good ends.

Whether we have all things considered reasons to develop balance depends on the details of our virtue ethical theory. In the last section of the article I have been concerned to argue that virtue ethics

[32] 'Utilitarianism', p. 435.

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is not an easy solution to the problem of morality's demands, but that this is a good thing for virtue ethics as a theory that tries to accommodate the true complexity of our moral lives. Virtue ethics has important resources for bridging the gap between morality and prudence, although a true bridge may remain out of reach while our circumstances are as dire as they are now.[33]

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