

Virtue Ethics

A Pluralistic View

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with heavy responsibilities?) are expected to live up to its demands. But virtue ethicists who take seriously at least the spirit of Aristotle's remark, 'The mean is relative to the individual',¹ will find such a conception of demandingness deeply unhelpful if not pernicious. Given that the idea of objectivity as appropriate self-transcendence is understood in terms of expressing self-love, the following possibility arises. One individual who follows a very demanding morality in sense (1) may fail to express self-love, whereas another much stronger individual may follow that same morality and yet express self-love. Accordingly I shall advocate a sense of demandingness that is more agent-relative. Call this, sense (2). The precise way in which that sense is agent-relative will be explored in the remainder of this chapter.

Before we discuss the agent-relativity of demandingness, we need to conceptualize in more detail the issue of demandingness itself. I criticize prevailing modes of conceptualizing the problem before presenting my positive views in sections ii and iii.

A difficulty in speaking of demandingness within a virtue-ethical framework is the pervasive embedding of the problem within a consequentialist framework. Indeed, Shelley Kagan actually defines 'extremism' in these terms:

Extremism is the view that the agent at any time has a moral requirement to perform that act which can reasonably be expected to lead to the best consequences.²

However, there could be an extreme (very demanding) kind of virtue ethics, ethics of care, ethics of love, or ethics of creativity. The consequentialist notion of extremism seems natural however, for it seems to flow naturally from consequentialism-friendly notions of objectivity, via the notions of 'impersonality' and 'agent-neutrality'. Here is Kagan:

From this [personal] point of view persons access the world, weighing the relative benefits and disadvantages of various actual or potential changes. The evaluation is relative to the particular person, for it is relative to his particular personal perspective; it is a judgement of what is good from his point of view. Typically it will differ from the agent-neutral evaluation of the impersonal perspective, i.e. an evaluation of what is good objectively.³

The moral standpoint is identified with the objective standpoint,

¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a20–b9.

² *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 1.

³ *Ibid.* 258.

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Demandingness

(i) The Problem of Demandingness

Chapter 8 elaborated the view that objectivity is achieved when one exhibits self-love in meeting the demands of the world. This view may be thought to have the immediate consequence that morality is moderate as opposed to highly demanding or stringent. For if one thinks of morality as highly stringent, if one thinks that the demands of virtue are extremely difficult or uncomfortable or costly, then, surely, morality so conceived would demand hyperobjective vice. One would be excessively transcendent in meeting the demands of the world. However, this conclusion does not immediately follow. It may be the case that due to our imperilled status, having and exhibiting self-love is very difficult. The position on objectivity elaborated in Chapter 8, then, does not have obvious implications for the claims that morality is moderate or stringent. I shall argue, however, for the view that morality is moderate.

Like much else, the issue of demandingness has been driven by agendas embedded in moral-theoretic positions other than virtue ethics. So I shall begin by clarifying the problem of demandingness in ethics, and by arguing against certain prevailing conceptions of that problem. I then propose an understanding of the problem of demandingness more suited to virtue ethics, and conclude that morality is moderate in the sense that agents should not be 'virtuous beyond their strength' on a certain reading of that precept.

We need first to sort out several problems in understanding the claim that morality is 'moderate'. First, there are two notions of ease and difficulty applicable to the issue of the demandingness of morality. The first sense, which appears standard, is that insofar as morality is demanding, it is demanding because the *normal* agent would find it difficult to live up to its demands. Call this sense of demandingness, sense (1). It is then assumed that an adequate morality is more or less demanding in sense (1), and that all (13-year-olds? the old and infirm? the deeply neurotic? those

whereas the personal (subjective) standpoint is one 'in which an agent is inclined to give greater weight to his own interests than those interests might merit from the objective point of view'.⁴ The view that morality is moderate is then seen as the view that morality permits agents to give greater weight to their own interests than they merit from the objective point of view.

Much mayhem is caused by this conceptualization of the issue. In this section we need to reorient the problem of demandingness by reconceptualizing it. Let me illustrate by employing a useful example of Michael Stortz:

Consider a doctor who wants to help mankind but is for personal reasons particularly affected by the plight of people in India—perhaps he is attracted to Indian art or religion or is very knowledgeable about the history of India.⁵ Imagine that this doctor could save more lives in Africa, and knows this; yet he goes to India. Here is the standard way of conceptualizing the problem of demandingness in relation to this example. Pursuing my project of satisfying my interest in Indian art is a personal project. Saving lives is demanded from the impersonal perspective. Saving the extra lives has more value than pursuing my project, yet (intuitively) personal projects should be integrated with impersonal requirements in the moral point of view. If we reject this intuitively attractive view, morality becomes too demanding. Yet that intuitively attractive view is surely flawed, for it requires that we give disproportionate weight to our personal project (of pursuing a taste in Indian art) given that it has less value than fulfilling the impersonal requirement of saving (the extra) lives.

There are several problems with this conceptualization of the problem of demandingness. First, it assumes a value-centred approach to ethics. As a result, the moderate view is seen as requiring that we give disproportionate weight to a less valuable course of action. That seems irrational, and something in urgent need of explanation and defence. However, if we allow as fundamental bases of moral acknowledgement bonds and status as well as value, pursuing one's passion for art rather than saving the extra lives may well lose its paradoxical air from a moral perspective. The assignment of weight to pursuing one's passion for Indian art will not be based entirely on a value assignment. So the weight

⁴ Ibid. 333.

⁵ 'Satisfying Consequentialism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 58 (1984), 139–63.

given to one's own project in one's practical deliberations may not be the result of egocentric or irrational value assignments, or the result of inventing an arguably problematic category of agent-relative value. Rather, the assignment of weight will be based on considerations of bond rather than value, namely one's bond with oneself (self-love). One manifestation of this bond is one's bonding with one's (worthwhile) projects and interests.

Again, going the extra mile for one's friend or one's colleague when one could promote more value by going the extra mile for lots of strangers will be based on the fact that your friend or colleague has special status as a friend or colleague, and at least in the former case, there is in addition a special kind of bond. Understood thus, the weight given to one's passion for Indian art, or to the interests of one's friend or colleague in one's practical deliberations, will not be seen as 'disproportionate' or 'greater than is merited'. Rather, the weight given will be the result of integrating the demands of value with those of bonds and status. There is no assignment of value with those of bonds and status.

Second, in the orthodox conceptualization of the issue of demandingness, we are invited to contrast the personal point of view with the impersonal view, where, given value-centredness, we tend to assign disproportionate weight to the former. This way of understanding the personal versus the impersonal would not be so objectionable were it not for the slide from 'personal point of view' to 'personal' to 'self-interested'. But imagine the following situation. A mother devotes herself to the care and nurturing of her children in difficult conditions for raising children, thereby neglecting the interests of many strangers' children who are in even worse straits. Assume that she could promote most value if she attended more to the interests of strangers' children. She is then said to give 'disproportionate' weight to the personal point of view. But of course it is objectionable to claim that her point of view is the point of view of the personal understood as the point of view of self-interest. As the 'feminine' ethics of care reminds us, the case is not like the personal project of climbing Kilimanjaro (to use Nagel's example).

As a result of the slide from 'the personal point of view' to 'the personal' to 'the point of view of self-interest', we derive a misconstrual of the problem of demandingness. And this brings us to our third problem. The view that morality is moderate rather than extremely stringent may look unattractive because of the standard linkage between moderateness and a (perhaps) overly large place for self-interest. But the personal point of view, understood in the above way, need have nothing to do with

self-interest. It would be absurd to claim that the point of view of the mother of the previous example is the point of view of self-interest, as that idea is commonly understood—with its associations with egoism. Now if self-interest includes the interests of those in whom you have a stake,⁶ then the claim is no longer absurd, but it is seriously misleading. Furthermore, such a woman's bond-centred conception of morality may be extremely stringent. Perhaps she puts all projects dear to her heart, such as becoming an opera singer, completely on hold while she both makes herself available emotionally for her children and works extremely hard to feed them or to help them through medical school or law school. In short, the problem of demandingness should not be presented in terms of a false dichotomy between promoting (overall) good and furthering one's own interests. First, requirements of (partialistic) caring can be highly stringent, and second, a morality of care does not have the possibly unattractive flavour of a morality which allows a large place for self-interested pursuits such as climbing mountains, jet skiing, or perfecting the drag flick in field hockey.

How, in more detail, should we conceptualize the issue of demandingness? As I showed in Part I, moral demands come in a great variety of forms. In varying contexts, various virtues focus on value, benefit, status, and bonds; promoting, respecting, honouring, loving, appreciating, creating. However, the world out there is one of limitless possibility of creation and appreciation, there are limitless needs to be fulfilled, and there is limitless opportunity for loving and indeed for respecting. What attitudes should a single individual take towards these varying 'demands of the world'? At the limit, she could see herself as striving to emulate the mystic who appreciates in enormous depth and scope, she could follow Jesus in his capacity to love, she could strive to be a Nietzschean hero in the field of creativity, or a 'moral saint' in the field of helping others or promoting good.

The elucidation of a satisfactory conception of demandingness requires first that we distinguish various aspects of demandingness. Nelson Mandela may have found it harder to eschew the duties of a freedom fighter than to impose sacrifices on his family. But it does not follow from this that the costs of being a freedom fighter for Mandela were less great than the costs that would have befallen him had he been a good

⁶ In that sense, Nelson Mandela's self-interest includes the interests of all 'his people', namely, black South Africans.

family man and practising lawyer and never joined the ANC. Nor does it follow that the difficulty of bearing the actual costs of being a freedom fighter were for him less great than the difficulties he would have borne had he not been a freedom fighter. The issues of motivational difficulty in performing an action, costs of performing an action, and difficulty of bearing the costs of performing an action must all be distinguished. And it should be recognized that none of those notions is congruent with the self-interest/altruism distinction. Certain self-interested actions may be motivationally difficult while altruistic ones may be motivationally easy. Furthermore, costs to the agent are not just those which bear on her own interests (narrowly conceived) or even those which bear on near and dear. They may also be costs borne by those distant others in whose interests the agent has a stake. For example, seeing his people suffer was a great cost to Mandela.

Given what has been said so far, I prefer to couch the issue of demandingness in terms different from the 'personal' and the 'impersonal', or self-interest and altruism. I shall claim that a morality is demanding if it is demanding on the strength of the agent in three respects: she needs to be very strong to fully cultivate the virtues required in such a morality; she needs to be very strong to bear well the costs to her in exercising these virtues; and, given that she herself has not yet cultivated the virtues appropriate to the morality, she needs to be very strong to motivate herself to perform those acts that the virtues require.

(ii) A Virtue-Ethical Conception of Demandingness

In worlds marred by serious imperfection, what kinds of approach could a virtue ethicist take to the problem of demandingness? There are three possible basic approaches.

- (1) The standards required for a character trait to be a virtue are very demanding in the three ways identified at the end of the last section. Accordingly, generosity is positively saintly, courage heroic, perseverance tireless, and so on.
- (2) The standards required for a trait to be a virtue are such that their shape is less demanding than in (1). However, the agent is obligated to rise fairly regularly above her virtue. Obligatory action is fairly regularly action beyond the call of virtue. Just as a sorrowing philanthropist has to rise above her virtuously conducted and felt grief to perform philanthropic acts, so on

the present view, obligatory action is *standardly* demanding even though the standards for *virtue* as character trait are not so demanding. This view denies the standard virtue-ethical claim, derived from Aristotle, that obligatory action is *standardly* easy or pleasant for the virtuous agent. On the contrary, on this view, it is all too often difficult and unpleasant in an evil world.

(3) The third view, which is my own, is that morality is characteristically moderate, both at the level of virtue and at the level of action.

How might the third view be cashed out? How are we to understand the shape of the virtues in a moderate kind of virtue ethics? In general, as Nietzsche puts it, we should not be virtuous beyond our strength.⁷ But what does this mean? This question divides into two. What is the content of the injunction, and what is its formal nature? Consider now the content of the injunction. It does not mean that we should necessarily give a large place to self-interest. For a person in whom self-interest has 'wilted away', it may take strength to be self-protective in a virtuous way, and at a certain point we may say that certain further efforts to think of herself first, in constructive ways, may be overtaxing of her strength. On the other hand, virtuously strong altruism may not give a large place to 'self-interest' at all.

The injunction basically claims that virtue is tailored in some way to one's *strength* (rather than self-interest). This has both a self-regarding and an other-regarding aspect, and a dynamic and a non-dynamic aspect. Both these aspects are intertwined. Take the second aspect. When we say that virtue is tailored in some way to one's strength, we do not mean that there is or should be no progression towards greater strength, a progression which would, in the longer term, make for a greater level of, for example, temperance, benevolence, or perseverance in the pursuit of worthwhile goals. Perfectionistic tendencies in weak agents may be expressive of vice. But they may also be expressive of desirable efforts in the agent, which help her to greater strength and greater levels of virtue in the long haul. So the claim that virtue is tailored in some way to one's strength is not meant to entail that an agent should not strive for greater strength. However, such efforts should not have sufficiently bad other-regarding harmful effects. Efforts to be courageous and so on 'beyond one's strength' may backfire in various ways. For example, assume

⁷ Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 4, 'On the Higher Man', 13.

(counterfactually) that Mandela was a poor negotiator and persuader. He should not be virtuous beyond his strength in taking on (as he in fact did) the underground running of the military arm of the ANC. Tailoring virtue to one's strength, provided that is compatible with making room for (gradually) improving one's strength, is basically a requirement that one's virtue be constrained by one's effectiveness, the desideratum of expressing self-love, and the availability of other agents who will do a job for which one is not very adequate. The Nietzschean injunction not to be virtuous beyond your strength is intended, then, to convey two things: first, one should not overreach oneself in ways which express and display self-contempt, and second, in emulating the virtuousness of the strong, one may cause more harm than good.

We should not confuse the Nietzschean injunction not to be virtuous beyond one's strength with an injunction not to be virtuous beyond what is compatible with one's health and flourishing. Indeed, as Richard Schacht points out, Nietzsche was far from holding that health is the highest value.⁸ We saw in Chapter 4 that it is possible for a trait of character to be a virtue in an agent, even where there is no guarantee that possession and exercise of the trait will conduce to the flourishing of the agent, and indeed there may be a high probability that it will not. Tenacity, perseverance, indefatigability are virtues in a freedom fighter fighting for justice, but may significantly reduce the prospects of personal flourishing of that fighter. And such a reduction is not just a matter of ill luck (unless one thinks it a matter of ill luck that we do not live in a perfect world unmarred by evil and conflict). Note also that this claim, as I showed above, is quite consistent with the claim that these virtues may give the life of a freedom fighter meaning. The injunction not to be virtuous beyond your strength, then, can apply to virtues inimical to personal flourishing.

(iii) Perfectionism as a Virtue

The view that one should not be virtuous beyond your strength suggests that there is (paradoxically) a virtue associated with self-improvement.⁹

⁸ *The City Science*, 120. See Richard Schacht, *Making Sense of Nietzsche* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1995), p. 219.

⁹ I discuss this virtue in 'Satisficing and Perfectionism in Virtue Ethics', in Michael Byron (ed.), *Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theoretic Perspectives on Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

To gain greater understanding of the content of the injunction 'Do not be virtuous beyond your strength', we need to investigate further the nature of this virtue, which I call (the virtue of) perfectionism. Let us first gain a schematic understanding.

Employing the useful distinction between the thin and thick conception of a virtue¹⁰ alluded to in Chapter 6 (where the thin conception simply states a virtue's field and understands the virtue as being well disposed in regard to that field, whereas the thick conception gives an account of what it is to be well disposed in regard to that field), I understand perfectionism as a virtue as follows. The virtue of perfectionism on the thin account is simply understood as the disposition of being well disposed with respect to striving for excellence. Rival conceptions of perfectionism as a virtue differ on what is the correct thick account.

Given a virtue-theoretic framework, a natural understanding of perfectionism as a virtue is that it is a disposition to strive to emulate the acts of supremely virtuous agents. But as a thick account of a *virtue* of perfectionism, this account is questionable. If perfectionism in this sense were a virtue, it would be natural to understand obligatory acts as ones performed by supremely virtuous agents, and it would not be permitted knowingly to fail to perform such acts when these were in one's power and known to be so. In this case, virtue ethics would be a very demanding moral theory.

I shall argue that this natural virtue-theoretic understanding of perfectionism is not a correct thick account of perfectionism as a virtue. Being well disposed with respect to striving for excellence need not involve emulating the acts of supremely virtuous agents, for two broad sorts of reason. First, one may be in various ways imperfect, and the striving by imperfect agents for excellence may be a dynamic process, where direct imitation of the supremely virtuous may be a flawed way of improving oneself, for one overreaches one's strength. Second, one may be 'ordinary' in another kind of way—leading a kind of life that is not the kind of life of the supremely virtuous. I shall argue that the features which make for *virtuous* perfectionism show such perfectionism not to be excessively demanding.

Like many similar terms referring to dispositions—'being trusting', 'loyal', 'honest', 'being laid back', 'being positive', 'being assertive'—'perfectionism' is not straightforwardly a name of a virtue or a vice.

¹⁰ See Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach'.

'Perfectionism' as such normally just means a disposition to strive for perfection or excellence, but this notion should be distinguished from the thin account of perfectionism as a *virtue*, which is *being well disposed* with respect to striving for perfection or excellence. So it is perfectionism that has certain features which is the virtue. Similarly, 'improper' perfectionism is a vice, trust that has certain features is the virtue, 'proper' loyalty is the virtue, being positive in a way that does not involve suppression of the critical faculties is the virtue, a tendency to tell the truth appropriately, non-readiness to lie or mislead, is the virtue. What is required is a thick account of perfectionism as a virtue.

In questioning whether an act of doing good for someone manifests perfectionistic virtue, we need to ask, for example: does a putative exercise of benevolence constitute a sub-par effort manifesting (anti-perfectionistic) vice? Does a putative exercise of benevolence in which an agent strives to be as good as she can be manifest 'improper perfectionism' as a vice, or perfectionistic virtue? The virtue-ethical task, then, is to give a substantive account of such virtue and vice. One needs to ask: under what conditions should we praise a person for her virtue in her setting of, striving for, and adhering to, high standards, and when should we regard such strivings as in some way problematic? Under what conditions should we condemn a person's action as shoddy, lazy, self-indulgent, selfish; and under what conditions should we praise it as strong or self-protective?

In determining whether a striving for perfection is a mark of virtue, it is not enough simply to look at what is done, what is achieved, or what are the outcomes. In virtue ethics, virtue is also a matter of what is going on inside the individual, and once this is understood, we can see why psychologists do not necessarily regard perfectionism as a virtue. According to Karen Horney, perfectionism, as a trait, can be a vice, being a mark of the 'expansionist' type:

Such a person identifies himself with his standards. This type feels superior because of his high standards, moral and intellectual, and on this basis looks down on others. His arrogant contempt for others, though, is hidden—from himself as well—behind polished friendliness, because his standards prohibit such irregular feelings.¹¹

In such a type, according to Horney, perfectionist drives are expressive of 'self-condemnation', which can be externalized in the demand that

¹¹ *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 196

others live up to his standards. The failure to meet this demand provokes his hostility. The problem, of course (which is of a type that Horney recognizes generally in her work), is distinguishing the facts of perfectionistic vice from those of perfectionistic virtue, whose exercise is occasioned by states of the world which merit condemnation rather than by the neurotic needs of the individual. A person with high standards, which she trumpets and attempts to live by, may be living in an intellectual, philistine society where mediocrity flourishes. Or she may be living in a society full of corruption where virtues of integrity and decency are in abeyance. Or she may think that efforts to promote the interests of the worse off are compromising valued standards within the academic and other fields. Determining whether perfectionistic strivings are a mark of virtue or vice requires a sophisticated understanding of the relationships between the individual's own psyche, the facts of her behaviour in a specific context, the social milieu in which she operates, and her attitudes towards that milieu.

To illustrate this point, consider an example of Horney's. Having claimed that the demands for perfection of a self-effacing type may be just as high as those of the expansive types, she describes typical behaviours of the former type. 'Even after a good performance (perhaps in giving a party or delivering a lecture) they still will emphasise the fact that they forgot this or that, that they did not emphasise clearly what they meant to say, that they were too subdued or too offensive, etc.'¹² Whether or not such pieces of behaviour are manifestations of perfectionistic (self-effacing) vice depends on such facts as whether these behaviours are part of a pattern of self-battering behaviour where the objects of displeasure are non-existent or trivial, whether the failures in presentation are perceived to be important (because the material conveyed is perceived to be important), whether those perceptions are themselves well founded, and so on.

Even if it is clear that some perfectionistic strivings are expressive of a weak compensatory need to assert superiority, however, it may also be the case that hostility at, say, decline in standards and mediocrization is well warranted. It may be a matter of fine judgement whether such expression should be seen overall as a mark of integrity, courage, and respect for the value of excellence, or whether it bears too much the hallmark of weakness. It should also be noted that self-love is not the whole of virtue, and whether or not perfectionistic strivings are seen as a mark

¹² *Ibid.* 317.

of virtue in, for example, generosity, industriousness, integrity, courage, or justice depends in part on what is promoted by such strivings. If the manner of such striving is excessively hostile, for example, efforts at being a role model of excellence may backfire; on the other hand, a more judiciously displayed respect for excellence may shake complacency or compliant acceptance of prevailing norms. Given the complexities outlined, it is clear that perfectionistic strivings to emulate the acts of supremely virtuous agents are not necessarily expressive of virtue.

Given these complexities, too, it is not easy to determine what it is to be virtuously perfectionistic. Consider the following cases:

- (1) An artist, highly talented, pursuing the highest values in his art, deserts his wife and family.
- (2) An artist, highly talented, unencumbered by dependents, has grandiose, highly narcissistic motivations and thoughts.
- (3) A hobby artist, of meagre talent, nonetheless strives to do the best she can in her art, neglecting her children rather seriously.
- (4) A career philosopher, talented, but whose work will not be widely read for a long period of time, works very hard at her research, neglects her family somewhat, but none are 'scarred for life'.
- (5) A career philosopher, highly talented, publishes very little, on the grounds that she is never satisfied with work in progress.

Hundreds of these kinds of cases could be given—I will spare the reader. At least some agents in the examples exhibit, at least on the surface, various perfectionistically oriented virtues—artistic passion, devotion (to worthwhile ideals and tasks), perseverance, determination, industriousness, (proper) humility, and possibly courage. None of these virtues should be belittled as 'non-moral', given that they are directed at worthwhile ends. Whether the perfectionist strivings should be seen as marks of virtuous perfectionism depends on hosts of factors, including depth of motivations, intentions, degree of wisdom, including self-knowledge such as knowledge of one's strength and talents, seriousness of effects on others and the extent to which one has responsibilities to those others, the worthwhileness of the ends to which one is devoted, and the likelihood of one's success in achieving them, even with effort.

I have shown how a proper understanding of perfectionism as a virtue, which gives content to Nietzsche's warning 'Do not be virtuous beyond your strength', is compatible with the idea that a virtue ethics can be moderate. To avoid confusion concerning the commitments of my

view on demandingness, we need now to consider the formal nature of the injunction 'Do not be virtuous beyond your strength'. The injunction is not a universal prescription: it is more in the nature of a warning, and a depiction of morality as a whole. It is not absolute, and certainly not so in imperfect worlds. A claim that morality is moderate is a claim about morality as a whole. It does not entail that the exercise of virtue beyond one's strength is never admirable, and never required in certain contexts. To infer, from the claim that morality as a whole is moderate, that morality never requires or finds admirable 'supererogatory' acts, is to commit the fallacy of division. This point takes care of Wolf's criticism of Scheffler's claim that morality is moderate:

If such an ideal [that morality is moderate] is to be understood to lie at the heart of morality, however, it is hard to see what sense is to be made of supererogation... whatever is admirable about a more selflessly altruistic life would on this view not be morally admirable. Indeed it might be morally inferior to a life in which mere personal interests are given greater weight.¹³

I agree with Wolf that it would be odd indeed to deny that highly altruistic acts that are very demanding on the agent are never morally admirable. The point is that a claim that 'morality' as a whole is moderate can allow for very demanding acts to be sometimes morally admirable and indeed required. There are two kinds of case. First, though the agent is 'virtuous beyond her strength' and has to act enkratically, her action is admirable because in various ways effective, or showing motivational excellence even if not excellence of character. In the second kind of case, the act of virtue beyond her strength may be effective, indeed highly so, but betrays the kinds of resentments and weakness displayed by Zarathustra when he decides to retreat into his cave. But unlike Zarathustra's ineffective attempts to discharge his gifts, we assume the act is effective. Indeed, we might find such an act admirable in an imperfect world, even if it betrays weakness. The assumption that such acts may be effective rejects the extreme pessimism apparently expressed by Wittingstein: 'Just improve yourself, that is the only thing you can do to better the world'.¹⁴ Such acts may be admirable in another way. They may be expressive of attempts in the agent to gain greater strength.

There are problems then with the idea that each action should be tailored to or be expressive of the current strength of the individual. Certainly, one's altruism is flawed if it exhibits the ills and weaknesses to which philosophers as apparently far apart as feminists and Nietzsche have drawn our attention, and for this reason morality as a whole should encapsulate the dictum 'Do not be virtuous beyond your strength'. As I have suggested, however, the general dictum does not translate into a universal requirement. We must make room for the appropriateness of supererogatory acts which may be effective, not damaging (or excessively so), and may be stepping stones to greater strength in the agent.

¹³ Susan Wolf, 'Moral Judges and Human Ideals: A Discussion of *Human Morality*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (1995), 957–62, at 960.

¹⁴ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Cape, 1990), 213 (see also 211, 228).