

Goods and Virtues. By Michael Slote. New York: Clarendon Press. 1983.

Michael Slote's *Goods and Virtues* does not offer a synoptic treatment of the virtues or of personal goods, but instead proposes a "corrective" to certain widely disseminated treatments of those topics. Surprisingly, his "fine-grained approach" makes no mention of Alasdair MacIntyre's work.

Slote avers that a good deal of philosophical writing on goods and the virtues is *a priori*, and as so restrictive, falls short of actual moral experience. Instead, he proposes a more worldly and realistic view of moral phenomena. Ultimately, he grounds his own views on "reflective commonsense judgements of value and ideas of the self and human life." (p. 13) Nonetheless, some of Slote's conclusions seem highly counter to such a perspective, as in his recognition of sadism and heroin addiction as possible personal goods: "the goodness of sadistic and addictive enjoyments may be obscured by a partial but perhaps inevitable other-minds problem. It may be our own limitations . . . that make it difficult for us to acknowledge the goodness of what sadists and addicts enjoy." (p. 129)

However, if such "limitations" are inherent in our "reflective commonsense judgements," then one wonders how reliable is recourse to "ordinary moral thinking?" And if we need to dispel such "limitations," then why recommend, as Slote does, an appeal to such indeterminate, pre-philosophical "everyday thinking?"

Moreover, inasmuch as Slote eschews a holistic accounting of goods and virtues—instead relying on "ordinary moral thinking" and a kind of pretheoretic "everyday thinking"—a critic can also appeal to such a framework to counter some of Slote's philosophic conclusions which seem amuck with this kind of grounding. And if Slote were to claim that such counterresponses were against the grain of "ordinary moral thinking," then he would need to provide some sort of theoretical support to show how that is the case. As far as I can ascertain, he doesn't.

Slote defends the temporal aspects of virtues and personal goods, holding that the very temporal occurrence of a personal good can determine that good's efficacy on a person's life; and the view that certain life periods are more important than others. If correct, Slote would claim to have shown that there is not always an internal relationship between virtue and the

good, and that reasons for action are not forceful transtemporally, with the result that temporal egalitarianism (à la Thomas Nagel) is mistaken. For Slote, not all periods of a person's life are equally relevant in providing reasons for action.

Slote also critiques the all-inclusiveness of rational "life-planfulness." He believes that having a general overall life plan can be genuinely counterproductive at times, since some basic goods are not always reasonable as goals within a life plan *per se*. For example: he asserts that life-planfulness is an anti-virtue in childhood.

Slote contends that even in a person's prime-of-life span, there are certain dependent goods and virtues that are such only given the presence of other more absolute goods or virtues. For instance, *conscientiousness* is a virtue only in the company of basic human decency. In marriage, *mutual trust* is a value only in the presence of mutual fidelity; and sex is a good only in the context of love. And the secularized excellence of *humility* is an "unspecifically dependent virtue," supervenient upon the presence of other desirable traits. Indeed, Slote holds "all the virtues of total societies are specifically and unilaterally dependent upon justice." (p. 71) The offshoot of all of this is that traditional thinking on intrinsic/instrumental goods needs to be rethought.

However, despite his views on the relativity and dependence of certain goods and virtues, Slote claims to be an ethical objectivist. "Relative virtues need not entail virtue-relativism." (p. 39) Since, for Slote, personal human goods are the result of basic needs or desires, they are not dependent on subjective choice or belief *per se*. They may not be absolute, but it hardly follows that they are subjective.

Also, for Slote, moral considerations and ideals of excellence are not as *overriding* as philosophers have traditionally held. Slote contends that there is no set, ideal moral perspective that demarcates the range of what can be virtuous or a personal good. He defends the thesis of "admirable immorality," wherein certain character traits that tend to wrongful action can be yet regarded as virtuous, even exclusive of any utilitarian justification. The virtuous life need not be self-denying, for such goods as wealth, power, and pleasure can be in one's best interest. He critiques the view of John McDowell, *et al.* that the virtuous individual has no reason for pursuing such (otherwise advantageous) goods if contrary to the requirements of morality; and that the virtuous individual in forgoing such personal goods suffers no loss or advantage.

Slote is anti-utilitarian, and throughout his book he seeks to emphasize the importance of time preference in the determination of virtue and personal good. He writes: "within a very wide range, the facts of childhood simply don't enter with any great weight into our estimation of the (relative) goodness of total lives." (p. 14) However, *pace* Slote, the situation of a seemingly content and successful, middle-aged, communist, totalitarian bureaucrat, who was raised as a youth only on Marxist indoctrination, would seem to offer a poignant counter to Slote's claim. Moreover, Slote somewhat inconsistently seems to agree, *mutatis mutandis*, when he writes "those who yield to, and succeed under, such pressure can hardly help being emotionally scarred by it as well!" (p. 47, note 9) Here we have an instance of the adage "if youth only knew, if old age only could" with a vengeance. Slote's views

are at loggerheads with the moral phenomenology of many middle-aged persons who are still (metaphorically) sitting on their biological, cultural, or ideological parents' laps.

In comparing childhood misfortunes or successes to *dreams* (and finding a close logical linkage therein), Slote overlooks how dreams rarely affect our total (or even daily) waking lives, but clearly this is not the case with traumatic childhood/adolescent events. Nonetheless, Slote believes "an unhappy schoolboy career" followed by "happy mature years" is such that the latter "wipes the slate clean." This belief leads Slote to rank as superior the pleasures of anticipation over the pleasures of memory. However, *pace* Slote, many people are so constituted that given certain (bad) childhood/adolescent experiences, they are left scarred with not just painful memories but also stamped holding only the sorrows of anticipation. Their earlier and later lives, however unpleasant, are intertwined in a metaphysical unity that makes it difficult to speak of them as creatively forging a personal identity.

In addition, Slote holds that later success can compensate for earlier failure, but not vice versa. But this contention seems false, say in the case of a precocious mathematician who achieves early success, only to spend most of his "prime of life" career in the academic backwoods. Here, perhaps, earlier achievements can counterbalance later disappointments.

As previously said, Slote contends that rational life-planfulness is relative to certain periods of life, and is an anti-virtue in childhood and adolescence. Surprisingly, he illustrates the (alleged) anti-virtue of rational life-planfulness by the case of a tenure-track woman academic, who is delicately balancing her career with her marriage. Slote here recommends a type of passivity as she weighs what to do should she not be granted tenure. However, Slote speaks of *trustingness* as a child-relative virtue, but a decided anti-virtue for adults. But in recommending that the woman academic shun life-planfulness (as a nonapplicable "period-relative virtue") in favor of the *passivity* found in trustingness, Slote rather unwittingly seems to suggest that prime of lifehood (for her) surfaces only with tenure!

Again, some of Slote's (allegedly) commonsense evaluative claims seem highly suspect. He writes: "I cannot think of any example of childhood *prudence* that does not immediately seem odd, inappropriate, even pathological." (p. 49) (To my mind, the difference, for Slote, between prudence and practical wisdom is unclear. Despite this opacity, he wants to hold that wisdom is "always and essentially" a virtue, but prudence is a nonabsolute virtue.) *Pace* Slote, I can think of many such examples, i.e., learning various educational skills, watching out for one's health, striving for economic stability, forging moral autonomy, and so on. And one might also take issue with his claim that many basic goods of life are not under the control of our wills, such as intelligence, friendship, and love. To recommend a sort of passivity here—even for adults—as Slote does, strikes me as both counterproductive and antirational.

Slote darkly claims that childhood-relative *personal goods* do not transpose into adult anti-goods, but childhood-relative virtues do just that. Innocence and trustingness are appropriate for the child but not the adult, just as for the adult life-planfulness and prudence are excellences, but not for the child (whether the latter are vices is somewhat unclear).

However, the cardinal virtues are not, for Slote, time-relative, and neither is patience. But, given the time-relativity that Slote attributes to many virtues, he seems to suggest that if the world were constituted differently, some virtues would not be proper excellences *tout court*. That is, if persons had no temptations, temperance would not be needed; and given that virtues function as *correctives*, then their usefulness seems to depend on a kind of cosmic luck or worldly happenstance. But all of this renders Slote's distinction between relative and absolute virtues highly tenuous. That is, his possible-worlds ontology of goods and virtues, would appear to undercut his posture of ethical objectivity.

Consider the moral phenomena involved in sexual pursuit. Many people typically believe (at least by ordinary moral consensus) that the young have to sow their oats, and many consider it not imprudent or intemperant that pre-prime of lifers sexually involve themselves with sundry partners, so that when they decide to settle down, they can be fully committed to the right person. Yet few people share a similar view regarding middle-aged (married or not) persons, who act accordingly. Why the asymmetry? Suppose, to complicate matters somewhat, those middle-aged persons never sowed their wild oats before, but committed to their "first love" at an early age. To view the promiscuity of youth as admirable (im)morality, but similar conduct in prime of life as nonadmirably immoral suggest that Slote's thesis of relative virtues even affects the cardinal virtues (which he denies). One might note here that even to reject the asymmetry would be to castigate the *absoluteness* of the cardinal virtues; in this case, temperance or fortitude.

Perhaps Slote's most-contentious theme is that of "admirable immorality," wherein he tries to show that moral considerations are not always overriding, when there are admirable but immoral traits of character. He principally illustrates admirable immorality by the case of the artist Paul Gauguin. (Winston Churchill's single-minded passion to secure an allied victory is also an instance of admirable immorality.) As is well known, Gauguin deserted his family to paint in the South Seas, driven by his passionate devotion to aesthetics. Admirable immorality is also found in the problem of "dirty hands," where a person practices torture to learn certain vital pieces of information, a practice that looks more "moralific" as terrorism spreads.

But was Gauguin an admirable immoralist? Slote warns: "We also don't want the person passionately devoted to (his) art to overestimate his own talent. Otherwise, his single-minded behaviour will seem more an expression of pathetic delusion, or megalomania, than of admirable devotion to an artistic project." (p. 103. note 25) This caveat raises the issue as to whether, prior to the final result, Gauguin's behavior was really nonadmirable; and in the end wasn't he just plain lucky? And, *contra* Slote, why couldn't a utilitarian justification be given of Gauguin's successful results, as his passion brought about a publicly, impersonal project that benefited humanity? Or, from a different ethical perspective, it might be argued that the excellence of self-esteem requires that a person know his or her limitations as well as his or her abilities. And in Gauguin's case, as in similar cases, this in turn presupposes the virtue of wisdom. So, if Gauguin correctly perceived his situation, all things considered, he was really wise, and hence not admirably immoral.

Although Slote considers the case of Kierkegaard's "teleological suspen-

sion of the ethical” that dealt with the famous Abraham/Isaac problematic, he is forced to conclude that “there may indeed be no answer” as to whether Kierkegaard was an exponent of admirable immorality. Surprisingly, Slote doesn’t raise the issue as to whether Christ was such an exponent, as when Luke reports to him (*Luke* 14:26) saying: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his own life, he cannot be a disciple of mine.” (Also relevant here is *Matthew* 10:34-36: “you must not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. . . . I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother. . . .”) I don’t wish to pursue the idea that Christ was a harbinger of Slote’s thesis, for such biblical passages are probably best read with a figural interpretation that emasculates talk of “hatred” and “swords,” as in the analogical tradition that emphasizes love of God as primary and all else as secondary.

To be sure, virtue theories are not generally designed to offer decision procedures for moral quandaries, tending to emphasize instead long-term character assessment rather than discrete moral judgment. While Slote strives to heuristically unpack the complexity of virtues and personal goods, he seems, nonetheless, to underestimate the distinct possibility that there may be no correct moral (or admirably immoral) solutions in many cases of normative assessment. That is, his intriguing scenarios of admirable immorality might instead be utilized as correctives to complacent, smug, moral rationalism. They show how ineffectual not just virtue theory, but other moral perspectives—rights-based or duties-based—may prove.

Consider, for example, this intractable moral dilemma. An only child (now middle-aged) takes care of his septuagenarian mother, who while not terminally ill, is beset with various ailments of old age and very much set in her ways. If the son proposes any constructive solutions to his mother’s various infirmities, he will upset the mother (given her idiosyncratic personality) and worsen her condition thereby (by increasing her blood pressure, etc.); and if he doesn’t propose any helpful solutions, he will fail to assist her and as a result be a delinquent son. Hence he will either worsen her condition or do a moral evil by remaining silent. In either case, his action or inaction is harmful to the mother. Such cases offer no happy (moral) solution, regardless of one’s ethical framework. Of course, appeal to the deontic maxim “ought implies can” may be the answer here. But, even then, we would have a posture of admirable *amorality*, not admirable immorality.

Regarding Slote’s analysis of Walzer’s *les mains sales* torturer case, could not an act-utilitarian justification there be given, with the result that the “overridingness” thesis is not denied—at least from a consequentialist perspective?

Perhaps a more plausible candidate for admirable immorality, not used by Slote, would be that of a Catholic priest who is bound by the secrecy of the confessional. And suppose a penitent confesses guilt for committing several (unsolved) murders. Is it moralistic of the priest not to report the penitent to the legal authorities? Is the priest’s forbearance here a genuine instance of admirable immorality? Clearly there is a (rule) utilitarian justification available for the sacrament of penance and the necessity (inherent in it) not to report the confessant. But I think many people would find the priest not admirable (including some Catholics) in failing to report the criminal. And if we do

believe the priest to be admirably immoral here, it may be due to our failure to realize that the priest is not really immoral after all, for I suspect a priest in such trying circumstances absolves the penitent's sins only on condition that the penitent do an appropriate penance. And the penance here, so very jesuitically, might be to confess his crimes to the police. That is, no *confession*, no genuine confession (i.e., sacrament of reconciliation).

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