

What Good's a Good Example? A New Objection to Counterfactual Exemplar-Based Virtue Theories

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In the last decade or so, a special class of virtue theories has been carefully articulated by at least two able philosophers: Rosalind Hursthouse and Linda Zagzebski. Hursthouse and Zagzebski defend different versions of what we call counterfactual exemplar-based virtue theory. These theories are exemplar-based because they define key concepts in terms of characteristics, motivations, and actions of exemplary agents. They are counterfactual because they define key concepts not only in terms of the *actual* actions, motivations, etc. of virtuous exemplars, but also in terms of the actions and motivations of exemplars in non-actual possible worlds.¹

To see just how these two features come into play in Hursthouse's and Zagzebski's theories, let us consider their definitions of right acts:

[RH] An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.²

[RZ] A right (permissible) act in some circumstances is an act the *phronimos* might do in like circumstances. That is, it is not the case that he characteristically would not do it. If he did it, he would not feel guilty.³

There are interesting differences between the two. Zagzebski's use of 'right action' is explicitly identified with permissible action (note the use of 'might'), while Hursthouse's use of the term seems more akin to obligatory action (note the use of 'would'). Zagzebski adds an emotional element (absence of guilty feeling) which is lacking in Hursthouse's definition. But for our purposes, the definitions are importantly similar. Both make fundamental reference to a virtuous agent, making them exemplar-based virtue theories. Both make fundamental reference to actions the virtuous agent might or would perform, making them counterfactual accounts. Both trade on

¹ For the categorization of these and similar theories, see Brady 2004. Brady classifies Zagzebski's and Hursthouse's theories as agent-based, though with some qualification.

² Hursthouse 1999, 28. This definition is qualified on p. 79, but in a way that does not affect our argument.

³ Zagzebski 2004, 140-1.

two other important notions. For the act to count as right the virtuous agent must be conceived of as acting: (a) "characteristically"; and (b) in "the circumstances", or "like circumstances" to those, which the agent whose acts are being evaluated is in. It is these four points of similarity which make Hursthouse's and Zagzebski's accounts interesting to consider together, and it is the consequences of these features which we shall attempt to illuminate below. Throughout this essay, we will primarily consider an account of right action which captures these similarities and can be spelled out as follows:

[R] A right act in some circumstances is_{def} an act a virtuous agent might characteristically do in like circumstances.

This definition does not capture everything about Hursthouse's and Zagzebski's definitions, but it does capture the central elements of each upon which the discussion to follow will turn.⁴ It is this definition that we have in mind throughout the essay.

Our central purpose in this essay is to evaluate counterfactual exemplar-based virtue theories of the sort proposed by Hursthouse and Zagzebski in light of two related objections. One of these, which we call the error objection, is familiar in the literature. According to this objection, theories of the sort we are considering often give bad advice to non-virtuous people. The second objection is not familiar in the literature; indeed, to our knowledge it has never been developed. The failure objection, as we shall call it, is that [R] often fails to give action guidance and evaluation for non-virtuous people. This is importantly different from the error objection. The error objection is that [R] often misfires and gives bad advice and mistaken evaluation, the failure objection that it often fails to fire and gives no advice or evaluation.

After spelling out these two objections, taking particular care to develop the less familiar failure objection, we will consider how the proponent of [R] might avoid both objections. The discussion will turn on developing the concept of like circumstances. The strength of the

⁴ Notice that this definition follows Zagzebski by using 'might'. The definition can be modified to give one something akin to obligatory act by replacing 'might' with 'would'. It can be modified to give one something akin to wrong or impermissible act by replacing 'might' with 'would not'.

objections depends on the conception of like circumstances adopted: Changing the conception of like circumstances may weaken the force of the objections. However, a serious problem for [R] remains, for it is important to Hursthouse and Zagzebski that counterfactual exemplar-based virtue ethics be practical. We will argue that adopting a conception of like circumstances which weakens the force of the error and failure objections against [R] results in an unacceptable loss of practicality.

1. The error objection

Bernard Williams has objected that [R] often gives bad advice and mistaken evaluation to non-virtuous people, for non-virtuous people often should not do what a virtuous person would do in their circumstances.⁵ This objection is perhaps best introduced through an example. Consider a squash player, White, who, having just suffered a humiliating loss to his opponent, wants to smash her in the face. White's non-virtuous character, and particularly his hot temper, seems clearly to affect what he should do. Upon finishing a game of squash, a virtuous person would shake his opponent's hand before leaving the court. White, however, lacking virtue and unlikely to control himself as he approaches his opponent, would do better to leave the court without shaking his opponent's hand. Because of his non-virtuous character, he should not do what a virtuous person would do after a game of squash. Yet according to [R], White should shake his opponent's hand, for that is what a virtuous person would do in the situation. [R], then, gives White the wrong advice; it says that he should do one thing, when in fact he should do another.⁶

We could generate case after case like the squash player and so, according to the error objection, it is clear that in many cases [R] generates the wrong answer concerning action

⁵ The objection has become familiar in the literature. See, e.g., Williams 1995, 190; Doris 1998, 518-519; Harman 2000, 224; Johnson 2003, 816-825.

⁶ This is a variation of an example used by Pettit and Smith 2006, who in turn borrow from Watson 2003, 342. Doris (1998, 518) uses the example as well.

guidance and evaluation for non-virtuous agents. Indeed, any time the intuitively right thing to do diverges from what a fully virtuous agent would do – whether in cases in which moral improvement is at issue or in cases in which the agent's non-virtuous character requires a different action than the virtuous person's – [R] will give the wrong guidance and evaluation. And this constitutes a significant class of human action.

2. The failure objection

There is a related but deeper objection which to our knowledge has not been picked up and developed elsewhere in the literature.⁷ The failure objection is deeper than the error objection because one way to respond to the error objection is to allow the consequences of the theory to correct our intuitions about the squash player and other cases, rather than allowing these intuitions to count against the theory. But this move is not an available response to the failure objection. Put simply, the failure objection is that there are some circumstances in which a non-virtuous person can be but a virtuous person cannot be. In such cases, [R] will fail to evaluate action at all; for an action to be either right or wrong in certain circumstances it must be possible for a virtuous person to be in those circumstances. Since non-virtuous people can be in circumstances in which virtuous people cannot, there will be cases in which the actions of non-virtuous people cannot be evaluated. Many of these will be cases in which we expect an ethical theory to guide and evaluate action. Because this objection is not well-developed, we will devote some space to it in this section.

2.1 An argument for the failure objection

⁷ Though it was hinted at in half a dozen lines in Harman 1983, 315. Williams (1995, 190) also makes a related point – again in the space of half a dozen lines – with respect to deliberation.

We take it as non-controversial that ethical theories should have the resources to evaluate and guide human action.⁸ An ethical theory that cannot evaluate or guide action on a large scale is therefore inadequate. According to the failure objection, counterfactual exemplar-based virtue theories which include some variation of the following definition of right action are in principle unable to evaluate a large class of human action:

[R] A right act in some circumstances is_{def} an act a virtuous agent might characteristically do in like circumstances.

The corollary of [R] is:

[W] A wrong act in some circumstances is_{def} an act a virtuous agent would not characteristically do in like circumstances.

In this context, by 'evaluate an act' we mean 'determine whether an act is right or wrong'. There are, of course, other ways to evaluate an act: An act may be justified, mean-spirited, obligatory, or misguided. But here we are concerned with right and wrong acts, since that is the focus of the definitions.

The *might* and *would* operators in [R] and [W] can be cashed out in terms of possible worlds. If a virtuous agent might characteristically do act *A* in circumstances *C*, then there is some possible world in which a virtuous person characteristically does *A* in *C*. If a virtuous agent would characteristically do *A* in *C*, then in every possible world in which a virtuous agent acts characteristically in *C*, the agent does *A*. It is in principle, then, a straightforward matter whether a virtuous agent would or might do *A* in *C*.⁹

One more locution in [R] that deserves explication is 'like circumstances'. The failure objection makes use of an intuitive understanding of like circumstances as follows: One

⁸ At any rate, Hursthouse (1995, *passim*; 1999, *passim* and especially ch. 1) and Zagzebski (2004, *passim* and especially ch. 4) both want their theories to evaluate and guide human action.

⁹ Again, Hursthouse uses 'would' where we use might, but the argument can easily be modified to address this difference, for the argument depends on the definition being counterfactual, but not on whether the counterfactual nature is expressed using 'might' rather than 'would', or vice versa. We take it to be an advantage of Zagzebski's definition over Hursthouse's that she uses 'might' rather than 'would', for in many cases there is not just one act which the virtuous person *would* do while acting in character, but a range of possible acts, any of which the virtuous person *might* do while acting in character. So we focus our attention on the more plausible formulation using 'might'.

circumstance is like to another just in case each has every morally relevant property of the other. A morally relevant property is one which affects the evaluation of possible acts in the circumstances. For example, if Brown, who is not engaged, is considering whether to propose to his girlfriend, he is in different circumstances from Smith, who is considering whether to propose to his girlfriend though he is engaged to another woman. There is a morally relevant feature of Smith's circumstances that is not a feature of Brown's circumstances, for his previous engagement will affect the evaluation of the acts available to Smith.

With these preliminaries out of the way, let us examine just how, according to the failure objection, [R] fails for a large class of actions in principle to provide guidance and evaluation. Hursthouse's and Zagzebski's theories are both perfectionistic, for they both in some way rely on notions of an ideal agent. The 'virtuous agent' of [R] is a perfectly virtuous agent. There are situations in which a virtuous person cannot be. To take an extreme example, a virtuous person cannot be in the situation of deciding, immediately after committing his twelfth murder in as many months, what to do next. It is the murderer's vice – just the kind of character trait lacking in a virtuous exemplar – which has gotten him into this situation. It is a situation which is arrived at only through vice, and therefore one in which a virtuous person in principle cannot be.¹⁰

But extreme circumstances are not the only sort of circumstances in which a virtuous person cannot be (henceforth *NVP-circumstances*). Mundane, everyday circumstances of all kinds are also NVP-circumstances. Consider again the example of the squash player, White, who, having just suffered a humiliating loss to his opponent, wants to smash her in the face. According to the failure objection, the error objection does not go far enough with this example. White's non-virtuous character, and particularly his hot temper, is clearly a morally relevant feature of this situation, making this an NVP-circumstance. A virtuous person upon finishing a game of squash would shake his opponent's hand before leaving the court. Remember that the

¹⁰ Hursthouse (1999, 46-47) provides another example of a situation arrived at only through wrongdoing: A man 'has induced two women to bear a child of his by promising marriage [and] can only marry one.' This example is discussed by Harman (2001, 2-3).

error objection is that White, lacking virtue and unlikely to control himself as he approaches his opponent, would do better to leave the court without shaking his opponent's hand. Because of his non-virtuous character, he should not do what a virtuous person would do after a game of squash. But the point of the failure objection is different: Because his non-virtuous character is a morally relevant feature of his circumstances, White is in circumstances in which a virtuous person could not be.

Another such example is a mother who has a tendency to go overboard berating her child when she is frustrated. Recognizing this non-virtuous tendency in herself, it is appropriate for the frustrated mother to take special care not to put herself in danger of going overboard berating her child. A virtuous mother need not take such special care. Again, the crucial point is that the virtuous mother could never be in the same situation as the non-virtuous mother because of their morally relevant difference in character. In brief, since any circumstance in which a virtuous agent could be will not be one in which that agent has non-virtuous character, any circumstance in which the agent's non-virtuous character is a morally relevant feature is a NVP-circumstance. Such circumstances abound in our everyday lives.

We take it to be a requirement of an adequate moral theory that the theory in principle can provide action guidance in the vast majority of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.¹¹ If this is correct, then an adequate moral theory must provide action guidance in many NVP-circumstances, for NVP-circumstances make up a large class of the circumstances in which most people find themselves.¹² For a theory to provide action guidance is for it to say that

¹¹ One class of actions for which a theory arguably need not provide action guidance is irresolvable dilemmas. On irresolvable dilemmas see Hursthouse 1999, ch. 2-3.

¹² While we take it to be obvious that an adequate moral theory should in principle provide action guidance for the serial murderer, the humiliated squash player, and the frustrated mother, it is possible that someone would deny this. Here it is sufficient to note that the denial of this claim is not available to Hursthouse and Zagzebski. Each wants her ethical theory in principle to guide action in most, if not all, of our circumstances. (See Hursthouse 1999, ch. 1; Zagzebski 2004, 47-48, ch. 4. To our knowledge, Zagzebski never explicitly commits to this position, but it is strongly suggested by her discussion of act evaluation and obligation. Notice that obligation and related concepts implicitly have an action-guiding force.) In addition, Hursthouse makes it clear that she wants her theory to be able to do everything we expect from consequentialism and deontology. Consequentialism and deontology are in principle able to guide action

action x is choiceworthy. In a non-dilemma NVP-circumstance,¹³ an action is choiceworthy just in case it is right. And indeed, in any non-dilemma NVP-circumstance, there is at least one available right action. So for any non-dilemma NVP-circumstance, there is at least one act that is both choiceworthy and right. It follows that in any non-dilemma NVP-circumstance, a theory can in principle guide action just in case it can in principle evaluate action. The failure objection makes use of the weaker conclusion that in such circumstances a theory is in principle action guiding only if it is in principle action evaluating.

Given [R] and [W], in NVP-circumstances alternative courses of action are not in principle evaluable. What a virtuous agent would, might, would not, or might not do in like circumstances is a necessary component of these definitions of right and wrong action. But NVP-circumstances are by definition just those circumstances in which a virtuous agent could not be. So, in NVP-circumstances it is not the case for any possible action that a virtuous agent would, might, would not, or might not perform that action. In principle, there is no action which satisfies either the definition of right action, [R], or the definition of wrong action, [W]. So given [R] and [W], in NVP-circumstances alternative courses of action are in principle unevaluable.

We are now in a position to sum up the argument in favor of the failure objection. There is a large class of NVP-circumstances and an adequate moral theory should in principle be able to provide action guidance and evaluation in such circumstances. If a theory is in principle to provide action guidance, it must in principle be able to evaluate the available courses of action. Since, given [R] and [W], alternative courses of action in NVP-circumstances are not in principle evaluable, it follows that a moral theory which includes [R] and [W] cannot provide action

for the murderer, the squash player, and the mother. If counterfactual exemplar-based virtue ethics is to be on a par with its competitors in this respect, it should be able to do so as well. (See Hursthouse 1995.)

¹³ We restrict this claim to non-dilemma NVP-circumstances because moral dilemmas raise a variety of issues which would complicate matters unnecessarily. Moral dilemmas in which both actions are wrong are, we believe, relatively rare. The class of non-dilemma NVP-circumstances is broad, and the argument depends only on there being a large class of actions which are unevaluable given [R].

guidance either in NVP-circumstances. So, [R] and [W] cannot be part of an adequate moral theory.

2.2 V-rules

Hursthouse claims that action evaluation is based on her definition of right action,¹⁴ while action guidance is based on v-rules¹⁵. V-rules are rules generated from the definition of right action. It is right to do what the virtuous agent might characteristically do in like circumstances. The virtuous agent is honest, charitable, etc., and so when acting in character would do what is honest, charitable, etc. From this we can generate a great number of rules, such as: Do what is honest; Do what is charitable; Don't do what is dishonest, etc.¹⁶ Some v-rules hold only for the most part, rather than in every case.¹⁷ So following a v-rule will not necessarily result in performing a right action. Nevertheless, the v-rules are reliable for the most part and are, according to Hursthouse, in principle always able to guide action. Even in NVP-circumstances, v-rules can provide action guidance.

But the failure objection is intended to show that Hursthouse's definition of right action cannot provide action evaluation in NVP-circumstances. If our argument is correct, then action evaluation is necessary for action guidance in non-dilemma NVP-circumstances. Since Hursthouse does not think that v-rules provide action evaluation, we are left with no account of action evaluation in NVP-circumstances. If there is no action evaluation in NVP-circumstances, we must conclude that in such circumstances there is no action guidance either. Yet both action

¹⁴ Hursthouse 1999, 30-31.

¹⁵ Ibid., 36, 38. For the points about both evaluation and guidance, see pp. 35, 39-40.

¹⁶ Ibid., 35-36.

¹⁷ Ibid., 58.

guidance and action evaluation in these circumstances are requirements of an adequate moral theory.¹⁸

2.3 Consequences of the failure objection

If the argument for the failure objection is sound, it shows that the counterfactual exemplar-based virtue theories proposed by Hursthouse and Zagzebski are deeply flawed. These moral theories in principle cannot guide or evaluate action in a large class of cases – non-dilemma NVP-circumstances – in which any moral theory should, at least in principle, be able to guide and evaluate action. This inability results directly from a central part of their moral theories: the definitions of right action. An adequate moral theory cannot include these definitions. The problems with Hursthouse's and Zagzebski's definitions arise particularly from three central and common elements: Both (a) make fundamental reference to virtuous exemplars; (b) are counterfactual; and (c) demand that the virtuous exemplar and the agent whose acts are being evaluated be in like circumstances. One or more of these elements must be adjusted if a counterfactual exemplar-based virtue account of right action is to be adequate.

3. *Like circumstances reconsidered*

It might be objected that the preceding argument passed too quickly over the concept of like circumstances. An adequate treatment requires more than the paragraph we allotted.¹⁹ The failure objection made use of the following understanding of 'like circumstances': One circumstance is like to another just in case each has every morally relevant property of the other.

¹⁸ Suppose one thinks that, despite this argument, one can observe the actions of the virtuous and build up v-rules, and that these v-rules can serve to guide action. That is, suppose one rejects our argument that action guidance requires evaluation. If we grant that this is possible, it nevertheless seems odd that in many circumstances (NVP-circumstances), following (or flouting) the v-rules will result in an action that is neither right nor wrong. That seems like a hollow sort of guidance.

¹⁹ Hursthouse and Zagzebski, to our knowledge, give almost no attention to refining the concept of like circumstances.

We defined a morally relevant property as one which affects the evaluation of possible acts in the circumstances. But this is not the only possible understanding of the concept: There is a range of possible specifications of 'like circumstances'. In this section, we offer a basic analysis of this range and consider where we should locate the use of 'like circumstances' in [R]. This will put us in a position to evaluate the consequences of different conceptions of like circumstances for [R], with respect to the failure and error objections.

Circumstances can be related to one another by varying degrees of similarity, and these similarity relations can be represented on a continuum. At one extreme of the continuum is the identity relation: Two identical circumstances are as like as can be. Every detail is precisely the same. At the other extreme of the continuum are circumstances with only the barest likeness to one another: perhaps they both involve human action or, even more extreme, perhaps they are two circumstances which are related merely by both being possible relative to a given world. In between these extremes are a great variety of degrees of similarity.

It is clear that by 'like circumstances' [R] cannot mean either of these extremes, for neither goes any way at all toward providing action evaluation or guidance. If identical circumstances are required, it will be impossible to compare two different agents in like circumstances, for two circumstances are not identical if one has a different agent than the other. Likewise, if two circumstances are similar in only the barest way, comparing them provides no resources to produce action evaluation and guidance. After all, every circumstance we encounter or could construct is related to every other in this barest possible way. We need much further specification of 'like circumstances' in order to pick out just those circumstances that are relevantly similar. But where on the continuum should we locate these?

We can start by taking the fairly intuitive specification of like circumstances at work in the failure objection. The suggestion was that like circumstances are those such that every morally relevant property of one is a morally relevant property of the other. The objection was that, given this specification, there is a large class of human action which cannot be evaluated by

[R], for a virtuous person in principle cannot be in the circumstances of the humiliated squash player, the frustrated mother, the serial murderer, and many other such cases.

But perhaps [R] is not subject to the failure and error objections if we change the specification of 'like circumstances'. It seems we need to loosen up the notion to allow more circumstances to be like. As an initial attempt, let's change the specification in the following way: Two circumstances are like just in case the available actions to the agent in one are available to the agent in the other, and for each agent the same consequences would result from the performance of the same action. Now it looks as if we can construct a case, though bizarre, in which the virtuous person could be in the circumstances of the humiliated squash player.

Remember that White, the squash player, after losing the game has two possible actions before him:²⁰ He can walk off the court without shaking his opponent's hand, or he can shake his opponent's hand, knowing that if he chooses this latter course, he likely will lose control of himself and hit his opponent in the head. The virtuous person may be in a like circumstance if he, after losing a game of squash, has two possible actions before him: He can walk off the court without shaking his opponent's hand, or he can shake his opponent's hand, knowing all the while that if he chooses this latter course, a neurochip implanted in his brain by Black will likely activate, taking control of his arm and causing him to hit his opponent in the head.²¹ In both cases, the likely consequence of shaking the opponent's hand is that the loser hits the winner. Though the causal chain of each event is different – one goes through White's character and decisions, the other through a neurochip – the consequences of each are the same and so fit the proposed specification of like circumstances. It might be that if we are imaginative enough (or just make consistent use of neurochips), we can construct cases in which a virtuous person could be in any of the circumstances that the failure objection identified as NVP-circumstances. Not

²⁰ For simplicity we can assume that these are his only two options.

²¹ Thanks to Sherri Irvin for the example and for helpful discussions on the topic.

only would that avoid the failure objection, but also the error objection: In such a case, it is likely that what the virtuous person does and what White should do are the same.

But there are reasons to resist this specification of like circumstances, even if it allows evaluation of White's actions. This new specification of 'like circumstances' still leaves [R] incapable of evaluating and guiding action in cases where moral improvement is needed. Take Robert N. Johnson's case of the liar struggling to change his character.²² One thing it may be that he should do is "to begin writing down lies that he tells, no matter how insignificant, to become more aware of his habits and to keep track of improvements." The consequence of his action will be the improvement of his character. But it is not the case that the virtuous person will achieve the same outcome by performing the same action. Let us suppose that the virtuous person tells lies either because they are justified or because a neurochip causes the words to come out of his mouth against his will, for *ex hypothesi* the virtuous person is not telling lies because of a deficiency in his character. The consequence of his action will not be the improvement of his character, for the virtuous person's character is not capable of being improved.²³ So, there will still be cases where moral improvement is needed which are NVP-circumstances.²⁴

²² Johnson 2003.

²³ Remember that Hursthouse and Zagzebski both have perfectionistic accounts of the virtuous agent.

²⁴ There is another reason to reject the revised specification of like circumstances: It leaves [R] subject to the error objection in some cases of 'victimless crimes'. Consider the case of a person who gets a perverse pleasure watching films which depict horrific scenes from the Holocaust. He does not watch such scenes for educational or any other positive value, only for the pleasure he derives from them. He is now faced with making a decision whether to watch such a film, and we would like our theory to be able to guide and evaluate his action.²⁴ We begin by imagining a virtuous person in like circumstances, that is, a virtuous person who has the same range of actions available to her as our perverse agent, with the stipulation that if the two perform the same action, they get the same outcome. Since the virtuous person would not ordinarily get pleasure from watching horrific Holocaust scenes, we can suppose that she is aware that if she watches the film a meddling neuroscientist will produce pleasurable sensations in her by means of an implanted chip.

This example falls prey to the error objection. First, it seems clear that it is wrong for the perverse agent to watch Holocaust footage solely for the pleasure he experiences while watching. But the property that makes this act wrong is not the bare fact that he is experiencing pleasure while watching these scenes; rather, it is that his experience of pleasure is an expression of a vicious character. It is the connection between character, decision, and sensation that makes the act wrong. But in the case of the virtuous person the connection between character and sensation

4. Practicality v. completeness

None of the conceptions of like circumstances so far considered are satisfactory for counterfactual exemplar-based virtue ethics. While the accounts of like circumstances we have considered may not exhaust the possibilities, they do allow us to draw some conclusions. There is a relationship between the thickness of the conception of like circumstances and the practicality of the theory. A conception of like circumstances is thicker the nearer it is to the extreme of identity; it is thinner the nearer it is to the extreme of barest likeness. The theory is more practical the more it allows us to look to specific features of the actual world for evaluation and guidance; it is less practical the more we are forced to look to distant possible worlds and construct outlandish scenarios, or to make judgments based on very general similarities.

One of the advantages of virtue theory is that we are supposed to be able to identify the virtuous and observe their actions in various circumstances. This allows us to learn how we ought to behave in such circumstances. For practical evaluation and guidance, then, it is important that we are able to observe the virtuous in circumstances like ours. This suggests a thick conception of like circumstances, such as having the same morally relevant properties. If the squash player and the virtuous person (who is not controlled by a neurochip) are in like circumstances, the squash player need only observe the virtuous person to find out what he should do. Of course, this presents a problem, for the failure objection shows that the virtuous person's circumstances do not share all and only the morally relevant properties of the squash player's circumstances. If we thin out the conception of like circumstances, e.g. by requiring only that the available range of actions and their consequences be the same, the virtuous person may be able to

is severed. It is the chip which produces the pleasure, not the character of the virtuous person. Knowing that there is nothing wrong in themselves with either watching Holocaust footage or experiencing pleasure, and knowing that the connection between the two is entirely outside of her own character, the virtuous person might watch the film. But now the error objection raises its head again, for it seems that [R] in this case tells us that it is right for the perverse agent to watch the film, though this seems clearly to be the wrong evaluation.

be in the same circumstances as the squash player. But the theory then loses much of its practicality, for a virtuous person in those circumstances will not likely inhabit this or a nearby possible world, but rather one in which neurochips control the virtuous or seizures cause the predictable striking of opponents. And this is not something our squash player will be in a position to observe. In addition, it seems that even on this thinner conception, some circumstances involving moral improvement or 'victimless crimes' will still be such that [R] will fail to give correct evaluation and guidance.

This suggests that in general the thicker the conception of like circumstances the more practical the theory.²⁵ But the thicker the conception of like circumstances, the larger the class of actions which falls to the failure and error objections. There is a trade-off between practicality and completeness, i.e. between the applicability of the theory, and its ability to evaluate every action. Completeness demands a thin conception of like circumstances, practicality a thick conception. None of the conceptions of like circumstances which we have examined are both sufficiently practical and sufficiently complete. And if we are right that practicality and completeness move inversely to one another, it does not appear that a satisfactory account of like circumstances is forthcoming. At any rate, until a plausible account of like circumstances which strikes an appropriate balance between completeness and practicality appears, we must conclude that counterfactual exemplar-based virtue ethics is unsatisfactory.²⁶

²⁵ Though this seems to be the case only up to a point, perhaps to the point of the original conception of like circumstances described in §2.1. If the concept is thickened to the point of identity, it loses practicality.

²⁶ [Acknowledgements suppressed for blind review]

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