Virtues of Resentment

RAE LANGTON

University of Edinburgh

On a consequentialist account of virtue, a trait is virtuous if it has good consequences, vicious if it has bad. Clumsiness and dimness are therefore vices. Should I resent the clumsy and the dim? ‘Yes’, says the consequentialist, counterintuitively — at any rate, ‘Yes’ on an accuracy measure of resentment’s virtue: resentment should be an accurate response to consequentialist vice, and these are vices. On a usefulness measure of resentment’s virtue, the answer may be different: whether resentment is virtuous depends on whether resentment itself is useful. Equally counterintuitive, this answer divorces resentment from assessment of vice. Consequentialism is thus mistaken not only about when resentment is virtuous, but about what resentment is. Moreover it alienates the philosopher, for whom accuracy applies, from the agent, for whom usefulness applies. But abandoning this double standard would mean giving up philosophy.

Clumsy Kate has trodden on my toe again, something she does rather frequently, and not only to me. Irritated, I nurse my toe while she apologizes, but I’m not resentful. After all, she didn’t mean to tread on my toe; it’s not as if she’s vicious. Or is she?

Whether a trait is a vice depends on its effects alone, on a certain consequentialist view about the nature of virtue and vice. The view may have some historical roots in Hume, who said that virtue’s ‘sole purpose is to make her votaries and all mankind, during every instant of their existence, if possible, cheerful and happy’. But I shall be attending here to one contemporary version of it, argued with care and sophistication by Julia Driver.¹ On this view, mens rea is no guide to viciousness; intentions don’t matter. Your character trait is vicious just in case it produces bad consequences. Your character trait is virtuous just in case it produces good consequences. More precisely: your character trait is vicious just in case it is of a type that systematically produces bad consequences in your context. (For virtue, the same, mutatis mutandis.) It is an objective consequentialism: having good consequences is what makes for virtue (rather than aiming for them). Likewise having bad consequences is what makes for vice (rather than aiming for them).² My focus will be on this pure consequentialist view,


² I don’t do justice here to a vast and relevant literature, but see Peter Railton, ‘Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality’, Philosophy and Public Affairs,
which holds that the viciousness or virtue of a trait lies only in its consequences, and I shall not consider, much less criticize, the more moderate view that consequences are merely relevant.

Clumsiness systematically produces bad consequences in my context, so Kate is vicious after all. That is somewhat surprising.

Should I be resentful then?³ Resentment is a typical and appropriate response when one finds oneself at the receiving end of viciousness. To be sure, I may be a Nietzschean hero, haughty enough to be above all such responses; or his polar opposite, the Christian saint, humble enough to turn the other cheek. But such extremes leave standing our everyday expectation that resentment is an appropriate response to viciousness. The question could be extended to other reactive attitudes (such as blame), but I shall confine my attention to this first-personal question.

We need to be cautious in thinking about whether I should be resentful, for consequentialism gives us two possible measures of resentment's goodness, one of accuracy, the other of usefulness. One of my aims here is to illustrate the workings of these two measures with respect to the question of when resentment is virtuous. A second aim will be to show consequentialism's conflict with common sense, when it comes to the virtues of resentment: it diverges from common sense on the question of which sorts of resentment are virtuous; and also, more importantly, on the question of what resentment is. I shall explore, along the way, an apparent route to reconciliation—which will turn out, sadly, to be merely apparent. Moreover, it will lead to a more peculiar, but also more general, difficulty, which I gesture towards in my concluding remarks. When the two consequentialist measures are brought to bear not simply on dispositions of resentment, but on dispositions of making philosophical assessments of resentment, the consequentialist philosopher seems to land in a very odd sort of trouble, in which, to put it simply, consequentialist virtue appears to clash with philosophy itself.

In the meantime we return to Kate, with these two measures in hand. If the measure of resentment's goodness is its accuracy—

---

³ My discussion of reactive attitudes draws of course upon P. F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', Freedom and Resentment, London, 1974; and also on Christine Korsgaard, Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Responsibility and Reciprocity in Personal Relations, Philosophical Perspectives 6: Ethics, ed. James Tomberlin, Atascadero, CA, 1992; I discuss them further in 'Duty and Desolation', Philosophy, lxvii (1992). I have also learnt from Christopher Bennett, whose work on the retributive aspect of reactive attitudes emphasizes the painfulness of such attitudes to all parties ('Some Varieties of Retributive Experience', Philosophical Quarterly, forthcoming).
whether resentment is indeed responding to vice – then yes, Kate is vicious, by objective consequentialist lights, so resentment is appropriate.

If the measure of resentment's goodness is its usefulness – whether resentment produces good consequences – we face the different question of resentment's effects. Perhaps the consequences will be bad: perhaps my resentment will merely increase the misery Kate already suffers, knowing how clumsy she is. If that were so, the accuracy measure and the usefulness measure would diverge: resentment would be justified in terms of accuracy, but not in terms of usefulness. Perhaps, on the other hand, the consequences will be good: faced with a higher social cost to her clumsy habits, Kate may try harder not to be clumsy, and in the long run there will be fewer squashed toes and more social confidence. If resentment's effects are typically good then I should be resentful: a disposition to resentment in response to clumsiness is virtuous. On this description, the accuracy measure, and the usefulness measure, coincide in indicating resentment to be appropriate. So I should try to work up a disposition to resentment. Kate, how dare you be so clumsy!

My chief concern is with the objective consequentialist, but we can note in passing how the two measures might apply for the subjective consequentialist. Kate is not vicious by subjective consequentialist lights, since she is not aiming to harm; so on the accuracy measure of resentment's goodness, resentment is inappropriate. However, on the usefulness measure we get a different answer. While Kate is not vicious by subjective consequentialist lights, resentment may be appropriate all the same – if it is has good consequences. Resentment may be a virtuous response (in terms of usefulness) to acts that are not vicious, by consequentialist lights. I merely note this oddity (which will have its parallel for the objective consequentialist in other cases), before leaving the subjective consequentialist aside for this paper's remainder.\(^4\)

My holiday with Dan has come to an abrupt and melancholy end. Dan is hopeless at arithmetic. His finances are always a mess, and he often underpays (and overpays) shopkeepers, when counting out his change. Now our holiday has ended in disaster, because his Sterling-Drachma conversions have gone wrong by two decimal places without his noticing. He doesn’t mean badly. On the flight home, two weeks

\(^4\) A parallel for the objective consequentialist would be a case where resentment is inappropriate on the accuracy measure, but appropriate on the usefulness measure: suppose Kate were to have a harmless, even mildly virtuous, habit of giving me small presents; but if I were to resent this habit, she would spend the money more usefully on aid to the hungry. This is a version of consequentialism’s traditional problem about punishing the innocent when it is useful.
earlier than planned, he is very sorry. That’s all right, Dan, you’re not
clever, but you’re not vicious either. Or is he?

Being hopeless at arithmetic is no fun for Dan or his friends; it
has bad consequences everywhere. So he is vicious after all, on this
consequentialist understanding of vice; which is again somewhat
surprising.

Should I be resentful then? Again, on the accuracy measure of
resentment’s goodness, the answer is, ‘Yes’: Dan is vicious, by con-
sequentialist lights, so resentment is appropriate. But on the useful-
ness measure of resentment’s goodness, we face the question of
resentment’s effects. If improvement is impossible, then (absent other
good consequences) resentment would be futile. The accuracy measure
and the usefulness measure would yield different answers to the ques-
tion of whether I should be resentful. If, on the other hand, improve-
ment is merely difficult (he is not literally hopeless), resentment may
be an effective spur, and the usefulness measure will yield the same
answer as the accuracy measure: resentment is appropriate, and a
disposition to resentment virtuous. So I should try to work up some
indignation. Dan, how dare you be so dim!

Mary has maliciously trodden on my toe, a thing she hardly ever
does, to me or anyone. She is basically kind and good-natured, not to
mention careful, and clever, and self-controlled. But a small under-
lying streak of envy surfaces — rarely — in little malefactions that aim
to hurt. Irritated and resentful, I nurse my toe while she apologizes.
She trod on my toe — on purpose!

Should I be resentful? On the accuracy measure of resentment’s
goodness, yes. Mary is vicious, by consequentialist lights: her under-
lying disposition yields, albeit infrequently, bad consequences for toes,
so resentment is appropriate, and a disposition to manifest resent-
ment in such circumstances virtuous, just as common sense declares.

But wait. Surely, on the accuracy measure, I should be matching my
indignation to the severity of the vice? And now we are in a position to
make some comparisons. Mary has a trait that rarely has bad con-
sequences. Mary’s vice hardly ever leads to trodden toes. Kate’s vice
is always leading to trodden toes. Who is the more vicious? For the
consequentialist, the answer seems to be, ‘Kate’. And who is the more
vicious of Mary and Dan? The answer seems to be, ‘Dan’. In short,
Mary is the most virtuous of the three. So to the extent that my re-
active attitude is an assessment of viciousness I should be more
resentful of Kate’s clumsiness, of Dan’s dimness, than of Mary’s
malice. This consequentialist answer conflicts with common sense.

Wait again. It may well be that on the accuracy measure, I should be
less resentful towards Mary than towards the others, but we are
forgetting the usefulness measure. Surely I should be projecting my
indignation, not backward, assessing the severity of vice, but forward, aiming for good consequences. I have said nothing so far about how to rank the two consequentialist measures, should they conflict; but whether they conflict or not, I suspect it is going to be the usefulness measure that matters, in the end, to the virtue of resentment. Dispositions to resentment are virtuous, not by being accurately proportioned to vice, but by being useful. If this suspicion is right, it was an exaggeration to say, as I said above, that the consequentialist gives us two measures of the goodness of resentment; what matters is not, ultimately, the accuracy of resentment’s match to vice (conceived in consequentialist terms), but rather resentment’s own consequences.

This has implications for consequentialism’s account of the nature of resentment itself, for it means that assessments of vice are divorced from our reactions of resentment. Reactive attitudes are no longer, even in part, assessments of vice. This, I take it, is a different conflict with the common sense, not simply a conflict about which patterns of resentment are virtuous, but about what resentment is. The picture for the consequentialist is like this. When, as consequentialist philosophers — not as ordinary moral agents — we are in the business of assessing vice, we will indeed be interested in accuracy, and can then say: Kate is more vicious, since her clumsiness has worse consequences than Mary’s malice. But when, in the field of action, we are in the business of responding with blame or indignation, the degree of vice is irrelevant — what matters are the consequences of response.

And what will they be? Suppose that with Kate, it is as we imagined: resentment is the best policy, since it will help Kate become less clumsy. Suppose that with Mary, a blind eye is the best policy. She has her envy nearly under control, and it would be better for all concerned if we were to pretend it completely so. Given that my reactive attitudes are instruments of policy, I should be more resentful of Kate’s clumsiness than of Mary’s malice. On the usefulness measure, as on the accuracy measure, the answer is still that I should be less resentful of Mary than of the others. The conflict with common sense is as sharp as it was before.

But wait yet again. Let us apply the usefulness measure with greater care. Let us, on the consequentialist’s behalf, take a closer look at the consequences. Clumsiness may well produce worse consequences than does modest and well-concealed envy, on a simple computation of squashed toes. But we all know that deliberately hurtful actions produce an entirely separate raft of bad consequences. When Kate clumsily steps on my toe, she hurts my toe — and that’s it. When Mary maliciously steps on my toe, she hurts my toe — and makes me angry, and makes herself angry, and I hold a grudge, and she holds a grudge, and I am miserable, and she is miserable ... In counting
consequences before, we counted squashed toes, and forgot to count the other costs of Mary's hidden envy. When we compute more carefully, we may find a defence for the consequentialist, a reconciliation between consequentialism and common sense. We may find that Mary is, after all, more vicious than Kate, as common sense affirms, because her character trait has worse consequences: well-concealed envy produces worse consequences than does clumsiness, once we look beyond toes to a broader pattern of sorrow.

This thought suggests that when I said intentions don't matter, for the consequentialist, that too was an exaggeration: intentions do matter, because bad intentions usually yield bad consequences. And we should be weighing up typical reactive responses just like any other sorts of consequences. Patterns of resentful response very often make all parties miserable. If character traits involving bad intentions tend to produce more resentful responses, they *ipso facto* have more bad consequences. This is what yields the potential reconciliation between common sense and consequentialism which enables them to come to the same verdict about which patterns of resentment are virtuous. But is it really possible to put my anger, Mary's anger, my grudge, her grudge, my misery, her misery, all into the consequentialist balance along with the squashed toes?

Surely the consequentialist has it topsy turvy, and the envisaged reconciliation is an illusion? Even if there is potential for reconciliation on the question of which sorts of resentment are virtuous, there is no reconciliation on the question of resentment's nature. The consequentialist proposes that bad intentions are bad because they have bad consequences, pointing to the anger, the grudges, the misery. The badness of the intention depends on the badness of the consequences; the reason the intention is bad is that its consequences are bad. But it is the other way around. The badness of the consequences depends on the badness of the intention; the reason the consequences are bad is that the intention is bad. Resentment, blame, indignation – these reactive attitudes are responses to badness of intention. Dispositions to respond resentfully are not, contrary to the stories entertained above, dispositions to respond accurately to consequentialist vice; nor are they themselves consequentialist virtues. One does not look to the typical effects of clumsiness or malice before deciding whether to feel resentful – one does not try to be an accurate matcher of consequentialist vice. Nor does one look to the typical effects of resentment before deciding to feel resentful – one does not try to be a useful agent of consequentialist virtue. In the typical case dispositions to resentment are as Strawson described, namely, dispositions for unrehearsed responses to deliberate ill-doing to oneself. The anger, the grudges, the misery, depend on the badness of Mary's intention. The consequential-
ist would have us say the reverse: the badness of Mary’s intention depends on the anger, the grudges, the misery.

This is an aspect of consequentialism’s distortion of resentment’s nature: in making resentment an instrument of policy, rather than (in part) a responsive assessment of vice, consequentialism takes away the reason for the resentment. In considering the question, ‘Why be resentful?, consequentialism’s answer will never be resentment’s answer.

Can we conclude that the envisaged reconciliation with common sense is an illusion? I think so. But it might be too hasty to conclude that a consequentialist account of virtue is thereby in serious theoretical difficulty. Perhaps what has been described is one more aspect of the familiar alienation, or schizophrenia, of consequentialist moral theory, which prevents the moral agent and the consequentialist philosopher from being one and the same. Perhaps the consequentialist should say that things really are topsy-turvy; and that common sense is mistaken in taking badness of intention to be the reason for anger, indignation, misery, rather than the reverse. (I have certainly done little to defend common sense here.)

Perhaps the consequentialist should concede to common sense that resentment itself is not guided by consequentialist measures of goodness (whether of accuracy or of usefulness) – but maintain that resentment is none the less rightly assessed by the twin consequentialist measures of accuracy and usefulness, via the following interesting double standard:

(1) The agent’s resentment is appropriate just in case it is useful.
(2) The philosopher’s assessment of the agent’s resentment is appropriate just in case it is accurate.

I don’t suggest this answer is indefensible, but its price, it seems to me, is high.

As a footnote to this conclusion, only partly in lightheart, I want to consider now the philosopher herself. Those who speak of alienation and schizophrenia are usually concerned about the untoward impact of consequentialist philosophy on moral agents, in the field of ordinary action. I want to suggest there are like worries about the untoward impact of consequentialist philosophy on the theorist, doing philosophy. These suggestions are preliminary ones, whose further exploration belongs elsewhere, but they seem to flow on rather naturally from the preceding arguments.

Consider the philosopher’s own dispositions to make theoretical

---

assessments about (for example) which patterns of resentment are virtuous. She cleaves to the accuracy measure herself (2 above): she regards her dispositions to make theoretical assessments as appropriate just in case the assessments are accurate. She should assess resentment to be virtuous just in case it is virtuous. Her assessments should be accurate judgements of resentment’s usefulness. But why does she maintain this double standard? Why not abandon the accuracy measure, in favour of the usefulness measure, in her own philosophical activities? After all, that is just what she has forced upon the ordinary moral agent, whose everyday resentment is held to be virtuous not to the extent that it is accurate (by any lights, consequentialist or not), but only to the extent that it is useful (1 above).

Imagine a philosopher who gives up on the accuracy measure, in her own theoretical activities: she does not care whether the resentment she is called to assess is itself useful, but only whether her assessment of the resentment is useful. Just as a disposition to accurate resentment will not always be the most useful (there will be contexts in which it systematically has bad consequences), likewise a disposition to accurate philosophical assessment of resentment will not always be the most useful (there will be contexts in which it, too, systematically has bad consequences). Our imaginary philosopher gives up the accuracy measure in favour of the usefulness measure. In doing so, it seems she has effectively given up on the business of assessment, and given up on philosophy. Still, the alternative looks bad: a philosopher who abides by the accuracy measure, and cares nothing for the usefulness of her philosophical assessments, will sometimes be vicious, in consequentialist terms. Our conclusion seems to be that the consequentialist philosopher faces an unhappy choice, with respect to her own dispositions to make philosophical assessments of resentment (or anything else): cleave to accuracy, and risk vice; cleave to usefulness, and give up philosophy.