# Right Action: Development-Based Virtue Ethical Account

## HONDA Masaya

Adjunct Professor, Doane University

## Introduction

A virtue-ethical account of right action attempts to explain the rightness of an action by appealing to concepts such as goodness, excellence, and virtue. In this paper, I defend a version of the virtue-ethical account of right action that I call the "development-based account" (DBA): the rightness of an action is determined by the action's *conformity to the development*, wherein an agent manifests sympathy in ways relative to his/her nonmoral dispositions, stage of moral development, and final purpose. I develop this account based on Kitarō Nishida's account of the good[1] and, in so doing, I analyze the problem with virtue-ethical accounts as indicated by Robert Johnson. In "Virtue and Right", he argues that no virtue-ethical account of right action can sufficiently explain the idea that "we ought to become better people", [2] such that we (ordinary, nonvirtuous people) ought to pursue self-improvement, self-control, and advice from people in morally better positions. I demonstrate how the DBA resolves this problem.[3]

## 1. Overview: Development-Based Account of Right Action

In his book, *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida defends and develops an account of the good, saying, ". . . the good is the development and completion—the self-realization—of the self."[4] For Nishida, the good is not about merely achieving aspects of happiness, such as pleasure, well-being, and human flourishing, nor is it about fulfilling the will, through which decisions are wholly determined by moral demands. Instead, the good is the *whole process of development* through which

---

[1]  Kitarō Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990), 100–145.

[2]  Robert N. Johnson, "Virtue and Right", *Ethics* 113 (2003): 810–834, 810.

[3]  I thank an anonymous reviewer who provided me with fruitful suggestions for developing this paper.

[4]  Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 125.

agents manifest their dispositions in ways that allow them to become unique parts of a harmonious, well-coordinated whole.[5]

Nishida adopts this idea of the good from Plato, who holds that justice is a whole wherein each part works without impeding any other.[6] Like Plato, for Nishida, in a way, this is the final end of moral development, which is achievable only by manifesting virtues (though for Nishida, virtues are individualized, as seen below). However, Nishida's account of the good is quite different from Plato's (and, in fact, from that of Aristotle and his followers). Nishida initially characterizes the good as follows:

> Personality. . . which is the unifying power of consciousness. . . is first actualized in individuals. At the base of one's consciousness exists unanalyzable individuality. All activities of consciousness are an expression of this individuality: each person's knowledge, feeling, and volition possess qualities unique to the person.[7]

As this passage shows, for Nishida, reality itself does not have any structure. For him, the foundation of reality[8] is considered "pure experience:" the original experience based upon which we can come to be aware of, to make judgments about, and to know things at all.[9] Thus, we experience things without being aware of who we are and what is in front of us, that is, we simply experience things as they are—we sense, perceive, feel, will, understand, and know things, though, without being aware of any of those *distinctions*.[10] That is, at this level of experience, we do not distinguish ourselves from objects: in pure experience, there is no subjective–objective distinction.

Moreover, for Nishida, like Plato, moral development occurs along with our cognitive and emotional development. However, for Plato, moral development is primarily cognitive, wherein the mind comes to have an intelligible structure

---

[5] Masaya Honda, "Individualizing Virtues: Comparing Kitarō Nishida's Normative Naturalism with Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism", *International Philosophical Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2016): 70–75.

[6] Plato, *Republic*, 433a–c.

[7] Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 136–7.

[8] Joel W. Krueger, "The Varieties of Pure Experience: William James and Kitaro Nishida on Consciousness and Embodiment", *William James Studies* 1, no. 1, 12

[9] Robert Edgar Carter, *The Kyoto School: An Introduction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013), 28.

[10] Ibid., 29–30.

(justice) through contemplation, in which reason redirects the goals of our desires (from "money-lover" to "honor-lover" to "wisdom-lover").[11] In contrast, for Nishida, moral development occurs at the level of pure experience in which all mental activities are *individualized*—not given as distinctive "parts" (functions) but given *as a particular whole*, which we can analyze later. What consists of this "whole" using concepts such as "knowledge, feeling, and volition" is, for him, somehow artificial. Thus, moral development can be traced by observing how an agent develops his/her personality: how he/she develops (among other traits) his/her feelings, volitions, and knowledge, where ultimately, there is no subjective–objective distinction. Thus, Nishida's account of the good is initially characterized as follows:

(1) Reality (pure experience) has no intelligible structure (though, it is still intelligible).

(2) Moral development occurs at this level of reality.

Setting aside the truth of (1), it is a fact that pure experience is the terminal point of our experience, beyond which we have no experience at all. Moreover, it is plausible to say that our moral development occurs at this level of experience as a *whole-person* development rather than primarily occurring in one aspect of our lives, such as in cognitive development[12]—in how reason comes to redirect the goals of our desires. In the following sections, after I describe Robert Johnson's criticism of the virtue-ethical account of right action (section 2), I explore Nishida's theses, which I found to be interesting for the current purpose:

(3) Morality is characterized by a manifestation of sympathy (section 3).

(4) Sympathy is fully manifested if and only if this enables an agent to continuously be a unique part of a coordinate whole (section 3).[13]

---

[11] See C.D.C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, INC, 1988), 250–252.

[12] Plato's emphasis on cognitive development in moral education is criticized by, for instance, George Grote, *Plato, and the other companions of Sokrates* (London: John Murray, 1875), 399–400. Mark Jonas replies to this sort of objection in "Plato's Anti-Kohlbergian Program for Moral Education" (presentation, Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain Annual Conference, New College, Oxford, March 26–29, 2015, 2–8).

[13] In this paper, I interpret Nishida as a virtue ethicist because he is sympathetic to Plato and Aristotle rather than to Mill and Kant, and sympathy as an expression of whole character plays a central role in his account of the good.

(5) The final end of morality is to fully manifest sympathy (section 3).

(6) Thus, moral development (the good) is characterized by an agent developing sympathy in ways that allow him/her to constantly remain a unique part of a coordinate whole (section 3).

Based on these, I shall argue:

(7) The rightness of an action can be explained by the action's conformity to this moral development (section 4).

(8) This solves the difficulty of the virtue-ethical account of right action, which is mentioned by Robert Johnson, who holds that moral obligation includes actions that pursue moral improvement (section 4).

(7) is the thesis I call the "development-based account of right action" (DBA), which can be initially formulized as follows:

An agent's action is right for the agent at a given time (t), in given circumstances (C), if and only if it fits a segment of development (at t in C) wherein the agent realizes him- or herself.

In the DBA, each segment can be determined by analyzing an agent's pure experience in terms of *how* he/she manifests sympathy: whose and which needs he/she cares about and serves at a given time (t) and in given circumstances (C). Let us assume that developing sympathy requires *habituation*—constantly acting upon sympathy. Then, a moral development (for an agent per segment) can be explained as follows: (1) an agent fully and constantly manifests sympathy, though relative to his/her dispositions at t in C; and (2) manifesting sympathy thusly would enable him/her to achieve the final end of his/her moral development: to continuously be a unique "part" of the coordinated "whole" (though at the level of pure experience, the distinction between a "part" and a "whole" does not exist) (see section 3). I shall argue that the rightness of an action, for a given agent at t in C, can be explained based on whether the action could be performed by this agent's counterpart, who shares the same set of nonmoral dispositions, who is at the same level of development, yet who would successfully forward the moral development as (1) and (2) above describe (see section 4).

## 2. Johnson's Challenge

In "Virtue and Right", Robert Johnson argues that no virtue-ethical account of right action can sufficiently explain the idea that "we ought to become better people",[14] such that we (ordinary, nonvirtuous people) ought to pursue self-improvement, self-control, and advice from people in morally better positions.[15] As Johnson argues, there seems to be no significant and evident connection between being virtuous and pursuing these apparently morally permissible activities. Consider the following cases:

1. A person who habitually tells lies cannot help this behavior not because of vice but because of "insufficient appreciation of the value of truthfulness". He tells lies to please people but, based on a friend's advice, decides to change this habit. Based on a therapist's advice, he begins writing down his lies "to become more aware of his habits and to keep track of improvements".[16]

2. A person struggles to do what he should. His day-to-day life reveals a pattern of behavior characteristic of a person who is at war internally with his malicious and cowardly desires. This person takes measures to prevent the satisfaction of his vicious desires; after all, "in order to perform a just, brave, kind, or otherwise virtuous action, a nonvirtuous person will have to control himself in many ways".[17]

3. A person is morally insensitive in some area because of a moral blind spot; however, "he possesses enough self-awareness to know this, and when he has reason to doubt his perception, he asks for guidance from a friend who is in these respects more virtuous and whose vison is in these respects unhindered".[18]

In these circumstances, Johnson argues, we ought to do something a virtuous person would *not* do (or a virtuous person would not be motivated to do, or virtues would

---

[14] Johnson, "Virtue and Right", 810.
[15] Johnson later mentions that this criticism does not apply to virtue ethics that denies a theory of the right.
[16] Ibid., 816–817.
[17] Ibid., 820–821.
[18] Ibid., 822.

not aim to achieve[19]). Quoting Aristotle, Johnson argues that the not-yet-virtuous person must "develop the traits of taking the lesser evil, acting contrary to his natural tendencies, and avoiding what is pleasant", although virtue does not actually consist of any of these traits. Moreover, he argues, the aim of any virtue "does not include the acquisition of those self-same virtues, self-control, or the improvement in one's moral perception, nor could there be a special virtue of self-improvement".[20] Thus, even if we tend to believe that the activities involved in pursuing becoming a better person are somehow right or permissible, the virtue-ethical account cannot explain this.

Assuming that these difficulties are unavoidable, Johnson suggests three ways to modify the virtue-ethical account: (1) distinguishing two senses of "right"—as fully adequate and as morally excellent,[21] (2) adopting a version of the idealizing theory, wherein a right action is one that an ideal version of an agent would do (or would recommend or perceive to be right), and (3) focusing on "any completely virtuous person's history…about how she developed the virtues"—thus, right action is explained in relation to this development. While Johnson contends that none of these strategies work,[22] I nevertheless believe that to sufficiently explain the rightness of pursuing self-improvement, self-control, and advice from people in morally better positions, the concept of *moral development,* wherein one *becomes* virtuous (i.e., manifests sympathy), must be developed, and right action can be successfully explained based on this concept. For this, some sort of idealization must be made regarding how an agent manifests sympathy (see the following sections).

---

[19]  Ibid., 830–834. Johnson briefly discusses the difficulties of other prominent virtue-ethical accounts of right action, such as Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), Michael Slote, "Agent-Based Virtue Ethics" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20 (1995): 83–101, and Christine Swanton, "A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action" *Ethics*, 112.1 (2001). In these accounts, right action is explained in relation to the *manifestation of virtues*, have already been developed. Johnson's criticism properly applies to all these accounts.

[20]  Ibid., 833.

[21]  Ibid., 825.

[22]  Various scholars attempt to respond to Johnson's criticism of the virtue ethical account of right action. For this see, Varlerie Tiberius "How to Think about Virtue and Right", *Philosophical Papers* 35, no. 2 (2006): 247–265 and Sean McAleer, "Four Solutions to the Alleged Incompleteness of Virtue Ethics" *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (2010): 1–20.

## 3. Sympathy and the Coordinated Whole

Certainly, as Johnson indicates, a virtue-ethical account of right action that considers a concept of moral development needs further explanation. For this, let us discuss the moral status of pure experience. Apparently, this sort of experience does not characterize morality as a theory of right action must presuppose. Nishida says:

> Take, for example, a work of art. When does the true personality or originality of the painter appear? Insofar as the painter intends various things in his nature and the brush follows the will. The expression of personality in the moral realm is no different from this.[23]

Here, Nishida gives an example of one's actualizing personality. Previously, he agreed with Plato and Aristotle that "the satisfaction of reason [in the form of 'intellectual intuition'] is our highest good".[24] However, unlike Plato and Aristotle, Nishida claims this is a matter of love—a deep concern for the object's actualizing its own nature, regardless of whether it is a person or natural object.[25] He says, "each individual's true self is the system of independent, self-sufficient reality appearing before that person", and, in this way, "the sincerest demands of each and every person necessarily coincide at all times with the ideals of the objective world the person sees".[26]

Nishida's account of morality in this passage certainly sounds odd. For instance, the experience of an infant who indulges his/her appetite for milk or an artist who indulges him/herself in the ecstasy of creating an art piece, which might be counted as pure experience, does not appear to have any positive moral status. To clarify this, there are two key points: (1) the development in pure experience is characterized in terms of *sympathy*; and (2) sympathy is further characterized based on the final end of moral development: to constantly be a unique part of the coordinated whole. In this section, I shall discuss (1) and (2) to clarify Nishida's account of the good and the moral status of pure experience.

According to Nishida, an agent's moral purpose is to fully manifest his/her personality.[27] This is to manifest sympathy, wherein an agent has *immediate* access

---

[23] Ibid., 134.
[24] Ibid., 129.
[25] Ibid., 135.
[26] Ibid., 134.
[27] Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 125.

to the nature of an object (or objects) that he/she coexists with in the same environment. For Nishida, this means to manifest his/her mental traits, such as knowledge, feeling, and volition, in interacting with the objects of those traits such that all these traits and objects are unified in one "consciousness".[28] He states:

> Because our infinite spirit is never fundamentally satisfied by the unity constituted by an individual self, it inevitably seeks a larger unity, a great self that envelops both oneself and others. We come to express sympathy toward others and seek congruence and unity between oneself and others.[29]

Nishida seems to hold that an agent is capable of manifesting sympathy in pure experience because therein the distinction between "oneself" and "others" vanishes. That is, in manifesting sympathy, one is unsatisfied with being oneself and instead pursues a "larger unity" wherein one seeks "congruence and unity between oneself and others." Thus, an agent's moral purpose ("the good") is to undergo a development wherein his/she "is unified" with other objects and/or agents in fully manifested sympathy. For Nishida, sympathy is not just an awareness of others' needs as if they were one's own, as this understanding is too broad.

Rather, sympathy is an experience through which an agent, in *interacting* with an object (or objects), is purely absorbed into the object(s) (which Nishida calls "self-effacing action") and in which the distinction between the subject and the object disappears for *both parties*. At this level of experience, *not only* an agent (x) refers to what he/she experiences as one*, a whole seamless reality prior to being either a subject or an object, *but also* other agents (y and z) *share* this experience with x, each from their own perspective (although x, y, and z have no recognition of the subject–object distinction).[30] Thus, at this level of experience, the needs of oneself (x) and others (y and z) should be experienced without any awareness of who, in particular, has those needs. For Nishida, this does not mean that no meaningful experience is possible at the level of pure experience (unlike, for instance, what William James holds[31]). Consider the following:

---

[28] Nishida assumes there is a psychic trait ("will") that unifies all particular psychic traits into one consciousness.

[29] Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 82–3.

[30] Ibid., 56.

[31] Nishida took the concept of "pure experience" from James, who claimed it is a chaotic whole. See Robert Edgar Carter, *The Kyoto School: An Introduction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013), 27–28.

> In the case of martial arts (e.g., Judo), the Judoka sometimes experiences a moment when he/she can flip down his/her opponent without all the might in conscious and doesn't have the awareness of flipping the opponent, nor the opponent has the awareness of having been flipped. What it seems that happens is that both bodies automatically move together. As they become nothing, their experiences are something they cannot express with words at that moment. But after having flipped the opponent decisively, they may try to articulate it or remember it.[32]

In such an experience, the needs of oneself and others are mutually accessible and therefore can be immediately and *mutually* satisfied (assuming that the agents involved need mutual flourishing).[33] Certainly, though, this does not make sense if we assume that the judoka and the opponent simply aim to win or to beat the other. Instead, as Jigoro Kano (1860–1938), the founder of judo, claims, judo should be practiced for the "mutual prosperity of the self and others".[34] In other words, the practice should be for promoting the practitioners' well-being (such as [though not limited to] promoting physical strength and mutual respect). Assuming this, at the very moment the judoka flipped the opponent, the needs of both were satisfied (assuming the opponent used a proper defense), that is, both practitioners fully exhibited their offensive and defensive skills spontaneously and simultaneously as the opportunity arose.

Nishida claims that a self-effacing action (occurring in pure experience) comes with an agent's "intellectual intuition" in which knowledge is evident in how the person immediately grasps how things should be developed and completed.[35] Thus, a skilled agent, such as an artist or a craftsman, can immediately see how to develop and complete their work. Notice that in the judoka example, the execution of skills presupposes the knowledge of judo—how to control one's body to suppress one's opponents' as well as the knowledge of the doctrines found in Confucianism,

---

[32] Koyo Fukasawa, "The Potentiality of Empathy with Others in Competitive Sport: A Suggestion from Nishida's 'Pure Experience' and 'I' and 'Thou'" *International Journal of Sport and Health Science* 12 (2014): 47–52.

[33] Involvement of awareness in "pure experience" seems to be controversial. See Robert Edgar Carter, *The Kyoto School: An Introduction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013), 29.

[34] Fukusawa, "The Potentiality of Empathy", 47.

[35] Ibid., 31–33.

Daoism, Buddhism, and Shintoism.[36]  In particular, Zen Buddhism (through Bushido, "the way of warriors") has influenced judo such that judokas are required to focus on mental and spiritual development for the good or value of a community.[37]  Thus, in judo training, judokas "know" (though without deliberation) what they are doing—how to mutually satisfy their needs as well as the community's. Let us say that Nishida's sympathy consists of a set of dispositions including (1) having immediate access to the needs of oneself and others, (2) recognizing which needs and in which way these needs should be cared for and served (for the good or value of a community), and (3) acting upon these needs such that this promotes the mutual flourishing of anyone involved in that action.

　　Furthermore, Nishida's account of sympathy presupposes the *final* end of moral development: a *certain* sort of mutual flourishing. As the previous examples of the infant and artist show, being a self-effacing action alone is not enough to characterize the morality found in sympathy. As the judoka example shows, sympathy requires that an agent fulfill the needs for mutual flourishing. However, an action promoting mutual flourishing still does not suffice to explain morality. For instance, apparently, gang members can mutually flourish when they mutually satisfy their needs.[38] Therefore, the idea of the coordinated whole must be investigated. Nishida claims:

> Clearly, a particular demand becomes good only when it is related to the whole. For example, the good of the body derives not from the health of one of its parts but from the harmony of the body as a whole. . . . The good is primarily a coordinated harmony.[39]

> The demands of the personality are the unifying power of consciousness and, at the same time, an expression of the infinite unifying power at the base of reality. And so, to actualize and fulfill our personality means to become one

---

[36] "Itsusu no Kata", United States Judo Association, accessed March 18, 2020, http://www.judomjcnarbonne.fr/pdf/itsutsu_no_kata_guide_lines.pdf

[37] Ibid.

[38] See, for example, Gary Watson, "On the Primacy of Character", in *Identity, Character and Morality*, eds. O. Flanagan and A.O. Rorty (London: MIT Press, 1990), 449–483, 462–3. Also see Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 192–3.

[39] Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 128.

with this underlying power. If we construe the good in this way, we can determine the nature of good conduct.[40]

In these passages, following the Platonic–Aristotelian notion of the good as *eudemonia* (or [human] flourishing), Nishida locates the end of a "unifying power" (found in sympathy) in achieving a coordinated harmony. For him, the good is a sort of proper relation (such as health and *eudaemonia*) exhibited in a "whole" (such as the body and a community) sustained by its properly functioning "parts" (such as body parts and community members) in which each "part" has its own history (though in pure experience, the "part–whole" distinction vanishes for all parties). Based on my previous discussion, coordinated harmony as the final end of moral development can be initially characterized as follows. (1) In sympathy which, as previously mentioned, is a unifying power, an agent seeks a "larger unity". As the above passage shows, Nishida sets no limit for this power: potentially, *anything* (living and nonliving things) and *anywhere* (a group, a community, an ecosystem, and a universe) could be a part of a coordinated whole. (2) As discussed in the first section, Nishida holds that the manifestation of this power is *agent*-relative: each and every agent has his/her *own* way to manifest sympathy (i.e., they play a *unique* role in the coordinated whole). (3) Sympathy can be understood as a *placeholder* for a set of dispositions (in the case of humans, "individualized virtues", that is, pure experience wherein a set of virtues is manifested as a particular whole) that enables each and every agent to play his/her unique role in the coordinated whole.[41] (4) This coordinated whole has its own *history* that encompasses all the histories of the members inside the whole. (5) All agents in a community share one reality (pure experience) by manifesting sympathy, though from their own perspectives, in the ways described in (1)–(4).

Consider the following community. (1) This is the *most comprehensive* community (hereafter, Community) in which each and every agent fully and constantly manifests sympathy with one another—no sympathy is manifested to impede anyone from mutually flourishing; any sympathy is manifested to promote someone in mutually flourishing. (2) In the Community, any sympathy is manifested in ways *relative to* each and every agent: relative to their nonmoral dispositions and to the segments of their developments. That is, for most people, given their nonmoral dispositions, there would be circumstances in which they could have

---

[40] Ibid., 132.
[41] Ibid., 22, 70.

behaved such that they mutually flourish with others. In the Community, these circumstances keep arising, so that no one fails to fully and constantly manifest sympathy. (3) Let us assume then that each (but not every) agent in the actual world has his/her counterpart who shares the same set of nonmoral dispositions: in addition to physical dispositions, each counterpart shares the same personality type—how he/she tends to react to the environment, whether he/she is introverted/extroverted, neurotic/stable,[42] etc.; nonetheless, each counterpart is capable of staying in the Community because the circumstances allow him/her to continue developing a set of virtues relative to his/her nonmoral dispositions. (4) Furthermore, consider the history of an agent (*A*) who has fully developed sympathy, as he/she has developed intelligence and emotion in such a way that he/she could live in the Community *throughout his/her life*.

Let us (roughly) sketch what it is like to live in the Community throughout one's life using Piaget–Kohlberg's theory of moral development.[43] Let us *not* assume that this theory explains the rightness of a moral development: how we *ought* to develop our morality.[44] Instead, for the sake of sketching the Community's membership, let us assume that along with our cognitive development, we typically undergo the following stages of development: (i) the preconventional, (ii) conventional, and (ii) postconventional stages. Based on how we reason against a set of hypothetical moral dilemmas (such as Heinz's dilemma[45]), it is shown that as we grow cognitively, we tend to shift how we deal with the needs of ourselves and others. That is, at stage (i), an agent tends to care for and serve only his/her own

---

[42]  For this, we might facilitate some theories of personality. For instance, see Hans Eysenck, *Dimensions of Personality* (Routledge, 1997).

[43]  Lawrence Kohlberg, "Moral Stages and Moralization", in *Moral Development And Behavior*, ed. Thomas Lickona (New York: Holt, Rinehart, And Winston, 1976), 31–53, 34–35.

[44]  For instance, see Carol Gilligan, *In different voice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), where Gillian provides a feminist criticism of Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Later, Kohlberg criticizes Aristotelian virtues as ineffective in moral education (see L. Kohlberg "Education for Justice – A Modern Statement of the Socratic view", in *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 30–31. However, recently, Aristotle's account of moral development is discussed by Albert Silverstein and Isabel Trombetti, "Aristotle's Account of Moral Development", *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 33, no. 4 (2013).

[45]  This dilemma describes that Heinz, whose wife is on her death bed and needs a drug to survive, must decide, after using all means to collect money for the drug but falling short by half, whether he steals the drug from a druggist who refuses to discount it, Kohlberg, "Moral Stages and Moralization", 44–46.

needs. At stage (ii), he/she comes to tend to care for and serve the needs of the individuals he/she encounters and of a specific group of people (such as his/her society and institute). At stage (iii), he/she comes to tend to care for and serve people's needs in general.[46]

Now consider how sympathy could be manifested at each stage of (i)–(iii) so that an agent (*A*) could stay in the Community. For instance, at stage (i), in a self-effacing action, sympathy could be manifested in such a way that only *A*'s own needs are focused on (as in the above infant and artist examples) yet *in ways that do not impede anyone from his/her mutual flourishing*. For this to be possible, known, and practiced, *A* would need to have some sort of *self*-regarding virtues, such as temperance, self-esteem, and prudence (where these virtues help *A* avoid conflicts with the needs of any others, and in which *A* is incapable of having other-regarding virtues [because his/her needs are self-centered]). At stage (ii), in a self-effacing action, sympathy could be manifested such that only *A*'s own needs and those of a specific group of people are focused on, yet so that *not only* does this not impede anyone from mutually flourishing *it also promotes someone* in mutually flourishing in that group. For this to be possible, known, and practiced, in addition to self-regarding virtues, *A* would need to have some sort of (nonuniversal) *other*-regarding virtues, such as kindness and generosity (where these virtues help *A* avoid conflict with the needs of people outside the group, and in which *A* is incapable of having universal virtues). Finally, at stage (iii), in a self-effacing action, sympathy could be manifested so that the needs of people in general (including those of *A* him/herself) are focused on so that not only does this not impede anyone from his/her mutual flourishing, it also promotes *anyone* mutually flourishing. For this to be possible, known, and practiced, in addition to self-regarding virtues and (nonuniversal) other-regarding virtues, *A* would need to have some sort of *universal* virtues, such as justice and benevolence.

Let us assume thus that the Community's history includes the histories of each and every agent who develops intelligence and emotion, where each and every agent fully and constantly manifests sympathy in ways relative to their nonmoral dispositions and to their segments of development. Moreover, the manifestation of sympathy for a given agent, at a given time, in given circumstances, could be analyzed (though only after deliberation) as a set of individualized virtues: pure

---

[46] Kohlberg, "Moral Stages and Moralization", 34–35. For the sake of argument, I limit my discussion about the Community membership to people, though Nishida's theory might allow much wider membership such as sentient beings in general (or even things in general), as he does not limit the object of sympathy.

experience from this agent's perspective analyzed as a manifestation of a combination of virtues, which enables the agent, who has a unique set of nonmoral dispositions, to stay in the Community.

## 4. Conformity as Moral Rightness: "Self-Realization"

In this section, based on Nishida's account of the good discussed so far, I shall argue that the rightness of an action, for a given agent, at a given time, in given circumstances can be explained based on whether the action *conforms* to the sympathy manifested by a virtuous version of this agent who shares the same set of nonmoral dispositions and who is in the same stage of moral development (see stages [i]–[iii]), though who successfully lives in the Community by constantly manifesting his/her individualized virtues.

Johnson criticized the type of approach that attempts to explain the rightness of an action based on a virtuous person's history: how a virtuous person comes to be virtuous. No virtuous person is virtuous by birth; he/she comes to be virtuous through moral education. Then, at earlier stages of moral development, he/she has moral obligations that indicate he/she ought to pursue self-improvement, self-control, and advice from people in morally better positions. Nonetheless, there seems to be innumerous ways to describe such development and, with some cases described below, this type of approach seems to fail.

Sean McAleer argues that there are four ways to solve the difficulties suggested by Johnson,[47] and one of these suggestions is somehow similar to the DBA. In this interesting suggestion, McAleer indicates that the rightness of an action could be explained based on the manifestation of some of the following Mengzian virtues: benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), appropriateness (*li*), and wisdom (*chi*).[48] Among those, McAleer interprets that Mengzi's righteousness can be understood as a sort of situational appropriateness, whose appropriateness is agent-relative.[49] That is, he mentions that "possessing the virtue of righteousness ensures that one's conduct conforms to the way", yet, this is also "a disposition to accord with agent-relative prohibitions involving the expression and preservation of one's own ethical character". With some other points, he suggests:

---

[47] Sean McAleer, "Four Solutions to the Alleged Incompleteness of Virtue Ethics", *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (2010): 1–20.
[48] Ibid., 10.
[49] Ibid., 13.

> The subvirtuous person is not doing what the virtuous person would do in those circumstances, but this is because the same virtue, righteousness, makes different demands on people at different stages or levels of moral development. What is righteous or appropriate depends not only upon the circumstances, but upon the nature of the agent, as well.[50]

In terms of this passage, McAleer mentions that if an agent has an upward disposition to become virtuous, he/she ought to challenge him-/herself toward virtue; if an agent has a downward disposition to vice, he/she ought to stop him/herself from being vicious. For instance, "if one steals a chicken every day from a neighbor, cutting down the thievery to one chicken a month would be a step in the right direction, but appropriateness requires that one stop stealing chickens altogether".[51] According to this interpretation, one ought not to steal a chicken *at all*. Nevertheless, given that an agent has a downward disposition to vice, it is right for one to reduce the frequency of stealing from daily to monthly. However, this seems to imply that it is morally *permissible* for this agent (who has certain degrees of downward dispositions to vice) to steal monthly, and this would still apply even this agent had a tendency to steal (or even kill) humans instead of chickens. Thus, it is unclear how this agent-relative obligation is consistent with the agent-neutral obligation of appropriateness: he/she ought not to steal chickens (or humans) at all.

More seriously, it is unclear what it is to have an upward disposition to virtue and a downward disposition to vice. Consider the case of Oskar Schindler, a member of the Nazi party who pursued material happiness for most of his life, but who during World War II saved more than a thousand Jews by sacrificing his fortune and risking his life. Suppose it were true that before his moral conversion, he went to Poland and made his fortune on the black market, building relationships with the local Gestapo. However, suppose that his character traits significantly changed in an altruistic way during/after the course of these activities. Suppose then that all his activities as a Nazi somehow affected him and caused him to experience a moral conversion (perhaps he regretted what he had done) so that, in the end, he came to manifest sympathy in an altruistic way. In this example, for Schindler to manifest downward dispositions to vice is somehow a part of his upward dispositions to virtue: when he was a Nazi, manifesting downward dispositions to

---

[50] Ibid., 12.
[51] *Mengzi*, 3B8.

vice disposed him to developing upward dispositions to virtue. Thus, in his case, using the above Mengzian account, it seems that Schindler ought to increase the number of vicious deeds to enable him to be a virtuous person.

This suggests that for any account of right action in favor of virtue ethics based on some sort of moral development, the alleged development enabled by virtues must be properly specified. With the understanding of Nishida's sympathy and the coordinated harmony in the previous section, the DBA will suffice for this. Let us analyze the case of an agent who has a disposition to steal a chicken daily. Consider whether it is morally permissible for this agent to reduce the frequency of stealing a chicken from daily to monthly. To evaluate this, we must first look at the stage of moral development this agent is in: either sympathy is manifested (1) only for satisfying his/her own needs, or (2) for satisfying the needs of a specific group of people, or (3) for satisfying the needs of people in general (namely whoever is involved in the action). Then, we must look at whether this action could be performed by an agent who shares the same set of nonmoral dispositions and who is in the same stage of moral development, though who manifests individualized virtues: either (a) self-regarding virtues or (b) (nonuniversal) other-regarding virtues or (c) universal virtues (where the manifestation of [a]–[c] must enable that agent to live in the Community). Thus, let us assume that stealing a chicken harms someone's property, and this is against the owner's needs to mutually flourish (unless, for instance, the owner wanted to allow another to steal his/her chicken if the stealer were starving to death). Then, this action could not be said to be, say, tempered, self-esteemed, and prudential so that this should be morally impermissible for all stages of development. Moreover, the stealer who tends to steal a chicken daily has an obligation to improve him/herself by developing self-regarding virtues suitable to his/her nonmoral dispositions. This would include pursuing self-improvement, self-control, and advice from people who share the same set of nonmoral dispositions, though who are successfully developing self-regarding virtues.

Notice that this would *not* imply that the above agent ought to reduce the frequency of stealing. This is precisely because cultivating virtues does not necessarily mean changing a course of action *in terms of* a single type of behavior.[52] There are quite different ways in which that agent could reduce the need to steal by reinforcing his/her (individualized) self-regarding virtues. For instance, his/her temperance, self-esteem, and prudence would have told him/her this: stealing would

---

[52] For instance, see Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 10–11.

cause him/her to gain a bad reputation so that to live comfortably, he/she would have to redirect his/her needs. Rather than stealing a chicken, if the agent needed a thrill, he/she could go on an adventure; if he/she needed some food, he/she could inquire about food aid. Moreover, any of these improvements, self-controls, or pieces of advice could be better provided by a counterpart who would share the same set of nonmoral dispositions (which would dispose him/her to steal a chicken if the opportunities that the above agent faced had arisen in the actual world), yet because of the lack of such opportunities, who could stay in the Community. This would be especially important because if an agent had an entirely different set of nonmoral dispositions, he/she would have proceeded on an entirely different course of moral development.

Now let us resume Schindler's example. Suppose that Schindler is in stage (ii) assuming that he is a dedicated Nazi member. Then, it is morally *im*permissible for him to act *only* for the sake of his own flourishing—at the same time, he ought to promote the needs of others in his group (say, the local Gestapos) as, say, his kindness and generosity would have disposed him to do (where he might have no such virtues). From this, nonetheless, it does *not* follow that it is morally *permissible* for him to join in any activities as the local Gestapos do *for the sake of the Nazis*. This is because Schindler is also under the obligation not to impede anyone (including Jews, as they are a part of the Community) from mutually flourishing as his self-regarding virtues could have told him (given that joining in any activities as the local Gestapos do harms his reputation among Jews). In the Community, by virtue of having individualized virtues relative to each and every agent, there is no such manifestation of sympathy that impedes anyone from mutual flourishing. Hence, even if an action would please the local Gestapos, it ought not to be done. This does not prevent Schindler from doing something kind and generous for the local Gestapos—on the contrary, he is obliged to promote their flourishing as a kind and generous version of him would do. Thus, he has the moral obligation to pursue self-improvement, self-control, and advice from a counterpart who is in a morally better position: who is developing (nonuniversal) other-regarding virtues (though, again, relative to his nonmoral dispositions). Furthermore, in stage (ii), it *may* be morally permissible for Schindler not to promote the flourishing of Jews (though, it is impermissible to impede Jews from mutually flourishing), depending on what kind of nonmoral dispositions he/she has.[53]

---

[53] As I have discussed above, Nishida's account of the good can provide us with an insight specific enough to sketch the DBA in favor of virtue ethics. The advantage of the DBA is in

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended a version of the virtue-ethical account of right action that I call the "development-based account" (DBA), in which the rightness of an action is determined by the action's conformity to the individual's development, wherein an agent manifests sympathy in ways relative to his/her nonmoral dispositions, stage of moral development, and final purpose. I developed this account based on Kitarō Nishida's virtue-ethical account of the good. For this, I analyzed the problem with virtue-ethical accounts, as presented by Robert Johnson. In "Virtue and Right", his critique is that no virtue-ethical account of right action can sufficiently explain the idea that "we ought to become better people" such that we (ordinary, nonvirtuous people) ought to pursue self-improvement, self-control, and advice from people in morally better positions. I demonstrated how the DBA addressed and resolved this problem.

## References

Carter, Robert E. (2013) *The Kyoto School: An Introduction*. (New York: State University of New York Press).

Eysenck, Hans (1997) *Dimensions of Personality*. (London: Routledge).

Fukasawa, Koyo (2014) The Potentiality of Empathy with Others in Competitive Sport: A Suggestion from Nishida's 'Pure Experience' and 'I' and 'Thou'. *International Journal of Sport and Health Science*, 12, 47–52.

Gilligan, Carol (1982) *In different voice*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).

Grote, George (1875) *Plato, and the other companions of Sokrates*. (London: John Murray).

---

its connectiveness to further researches in the fields of psychology, such as theories of moral development, of moral education, and of personality. For instance, in this paper, I discussed only three stages of moral development without articulating many traits that comprise personality. However, with further researches, various stages of moral development with detailed analyses of nonmoral dispositions could be discovered, and this could assist the DBA in overcoming one of the major difficulties usually ascribed to virtue ethics, namely, the lack of action-guidance (see Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 35–42).

Honda, Masaya (2016) Individualizing Virtues: Comparing Kitaro Nishida's Normative Naturalism with Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 56. 1, 57–76.

Hursthouse, Rosalind (2000) *On Virtue Ethics.* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Johnson, Robert N. (2003) Virtue and Right. *Ethics*, 113, 810–834.

Kohlberg, Lawrence (1976) Moral Stages and Moralization, in T. Lickona (ed.) *Moral Development And Behavior*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, And Winston), 31–53.

Kohlberg, Lawrence (1981) *The Philosophy of Moral Development.* (San Francisco: Harper and Row).

Krueger, Joel W. (2006) The Varieties of Pure Experience: William James and Kitaro Nishida on Consciousness and Embodiment. *William James Studies,*1, 1–37.

McAleer, Sean (2010) Four Solutions to the Alleged Incompleteness of Virtue Ethics. *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*, 4. 3, 1–20.

Nishida, Kitarō (1990) *An Inquiry into the Good.* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

Plato (1992), *Republic.* translated by G.M.A. Grube revised by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company).

Reeve, C. D. C. (1988) *Philosopher-Kings.* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company).

Silverstein, Albert and Trombetti, Isabel (2013) Aristotle's Account of Moral Development. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 33. 4, 233–252.

Slote, Michael (1995) Agent-Based Virtue Ethics. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 20, 83–101.

Swanton, Christine (2001) A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action, *Ethics*, 112. 1, 32–52.

Tiberius, Varlerie (2006) How to Think about Virtue and Right, *Philosophical Papers*, 35. 2, 247–265

Watson, Gary (1990) On the Primacy of Character, in O. Flanagan and A.O. Rorty (eds.) *Identity, Character and Morality*, (London: MIT Press), 449–483.