

## IS EFFICIENCY A VICE?

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I do think a reasonable amount of efficiency is an aspect of morals. There's a sort of ordered completeness of life and an intelligent use of one's talents which is the mark of a man.

—Murdoch 1970a: 14

These words are spoken by a character in Iris Murdoch's novel, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. She is criticizing Tallis Browne, a man of almost saintly good intentions who is (until the climax of the book) notably ineffective in getting anything done. What are we to make of the inefficiency of this otherwise virtuous man? Perhaps it is, as the quote above suggests, a moral failing; perhaps efficiency should be seen as an ethical virtue Tallis lacks. But the novel complicates the point. For its anti-hero, Julius King, is a model of efficiency, in the pursuit of nasty ends. The plot is a sort of melodrama, built around his decision to destroy the marriage of his friends. He has no particular reason for this; it is simply to prove that it can be done. But he pursues his goal with a relentless (and often darkly comic) skill, alert to the moral vanity and suspicion of his prey, and quite without mercy. When he is done, the marriage is in ruins—the husband abandoned and finally drowned, his wife bereft. King is magnetic and disturbing throughout, callous but compelling, and a kind of genius in the

matching of means to ends. The novel taunts us with the question: can efficiency be a virtue in Julius King?

This paper is about the peculiar ethics of means-end efficiency. It can present itself as an aspect of good character, so that its absence is a defect in Tallis Browne. But it does not always do so. It is tempting to say about the efficiency of the nasty person what Kant says about the “coolness of a scoundrel,” that it “makes him not only far more dangerous but also immediately more abominable in our eyes” (Kant 1785, Ak. 4: 394). When Aristotle writes about cleverness (*deinotes*), “which is such as to be able to do the actions that tend to promote whatever end is assumed and to attain them,” he takes the middle ground: “[if], then, the goal is fine, cleverness is praiseworthy, and if the goal is base, cleverness is unscrupulousness.”<sup>1</sup> But is this right? After all, there is another kind of middle ground. We might argue, against the Aristotelian view, that efficiency in itself is neither good nor bad. It is valuable as a means, not as a virtue or a vice.

Questions about the ethics of efficiency have not been much discussed. Aristotle says nothing, or almost nothing, to defend his claims about it (assuming that efficiency and cleverness are more or less the same). But the issue is important, not only for its own

sake, but for the central place that efficiency has in the philosophy of practical reason. What is often thought of as the dominant or orthodox view—the “neo-Humean” conception of practical reason as purely instrumental—identifies *practical rationality* (or responsiveness to reasons) with means-end efficiency.

What follows is an argument against efficiency, as conceived by the instrumentalist. In being indifferent to the moral quality of our ends, efficiency not only makes the nasty person worse, but is a defect of character, in general. Since practical rationality (or responsiveness to reasons) cannot be a defect of character, instrumentalism about practical reason is false.

Before I present this argument, a word or two about its origins. This paper was inspired in part by Warren Quinn’s remarkable essay, “Rationality and the Human Good” (1992). He argues that efficiency (what he calls “neo-Humean rationality”) is a *nasty* quality, in that it “would recommend a nasty choice” (in the appropriate circumstance), and therefore cannot be identified with “human reason at its most excellent” (Quinn 1992: 220). I am arguing for the same conclusion, in something like the same way. But our arguments are crucially different. His depends on a dubious personification of practical reason as an inner advisor (Quinn 1992: 215–216), and on a controversial picture of its “normative authority,” in which practical rationality is seen as “*the* excellence of human beings *qua* agents.” (Quinn 1992: 213) In her recent defence of Quinn’s argument, Philippa Foot refers to this premise as “our taken-for-granted, barely noticed assumption that practical rationality has the status of a kind of master virtue” (Foot 2001: 62), so that it cannot be identified with mere efficiency. The problem is that Foot’s assumption (on behalf of Quinn) begs the question against the instrumentalist, who will simply deny it. For the “neo-Humean,” practical rationality (as efficiency) is not *the*

excellence of human beings *qua* agents, or a kind of “master virtue”; it is at most one virtue among others. This is perfectly clear in Bernard Williams’s classic expression of the “neo-Humean” view:

There are of course many things that a speaker may say to one who is not disposed to  $\phi$  when the speaker thinks that he should be, as that he is inconsiderate, or cruel, or selfish, or imprudent; or that things, and he, would be a lot nicer if he were so motivated. . . . But one who makes a great deal out of putting the criticism [in terms of a failure to respond to *reasons*] seems concerned to say that what is particularly wrong with the agent is that he is *irrational*. (Williams 1980: 110)

Part of Williams’s point in this passage is to contrast the particular excellence of practical reason with the other virtues of character. Even if practical reason has “normative authority” in determining what we should do, all things considered, it is not a master virtue—something that, all by itself, will make our character good. This makes it difficult to see how Quinn’s argument (as Foot interprets it) can work. The argument that follows does not assume that practical reason is a master virtue, only that it is not a *defect* of character, or a vice.

## I

In the present context, “efficiency” is a term of art: it is the disposition to be motivated towards the satisfaction of one’s final desires. (The reference to final desires here must be read *de dicto*, not *de re*: the efficient person has a general disposition to act so as to satisfy her desires, whatever they are, not just a disposition, with respect to her present array of final desires, to satisfy *them*.) This disposition is distinct from, and broader than, the tendency to conform to Kant’s hypothetical imperative (Kant 1785, 4: 414–417). His requirement is to will the *necessary* means to the ends that one *intends* to bring about. It does not apply to less-than-necessary means,

or to desires on which one does not (yet) intend to act. Nor does it deal with partial belief, if it mentions beliefs at all. It is therefore silent about the balancing of desires and probabilities in practical reasoning, and about the best way to achieve a plurality of potentially conflicting ends. By contrast, it is part of being *efficient* that one aim at the satisfaction of one's final desires, taken together, and balanced against one another. An adequate theory of efficiency, and thus an adequate expression of instrumentalism, would have to incorporate a story about this, an account of the proper trade-offs among desires one cannot be sure of satisfying all at once.<sup>2</sup>

This is not the only respect in which the instrumentalist's conception of practical reason as efficiency is richer than we might suppose. For instance, we should allow for an extended or inclusive concept of *means*, one that covers both *productive* and *constitutive* means to an end. The notion of a productive means is that of an efficient cause. A constitutive means is one that is an instance of, or part of, the relevant end. Thus, moving the brush against the canvas is a constitutive means to painting, in that it is an instance of painting; putting on my socks is a constitutive means to getting dressed, in that it is part of getting dressed. By way of a theory of balancing and by making room for the broader notion of a means, the instrumentalist can accommodate at least some cases of deliberation by imaginative "specification," as when I try to figure out not what would *cause* but what would *be* a fun holiday, or a satisfying profession.<sup>3</sup>

In each of these cases, efficiency can be understood as the disposition that governs the transition to new desires, ones that aim at the best causal or constitutive means to the overall satisfaction of one's final desires.<sup>4</sup> It is thus a kind of motivating state: not just a matter of knowing the means to one's ends, but of being motivated to take them. This is consistent with the common instrumentalist refrain that reason is motivationally inert,

since the role of efficiency is merely to transmit motivation from one's final desires to desires for the means to their satisfaction: it is not an *original* source of motivation. This picture of efficiency as a motivating trait is essential to the instrumentalist view; one would not be "instrumentally rational" if one merely knew, in a detached way, how to achieve one's ends, but had no tendency to do so.

## II

We can begin to see the problem with efficiency by asking an obvious question: how can one criticize efficiency without praising those who are *inefficient*? Understood as praise for its opposite, the claim that efficiency is a defect of character sounds patently absurd. But this ignores a crucial distinction. In section I, efficiency was defined as the disposition to be moved towards the satisfaction of one's final desires. The reference to "final desires" here must be read *de dicto*, not *de re*: the efficient person has a general disposition to act so as to satisfy her desires, whatever they are, not just a disposition, with respect to her present array of final desires, to satisfy *them*. This distinction is an instance of a broader contrast, between what we may call "general efficiency," which applies itself to *any* final desire an agent happens to acquire, and "specific efficiency" by which an agent is efficient only with respect to *some* desires—this particular set of desires, for instance, or desires with a certain content, or a certain moral character. It is *general* efficiency that counts as a vice, or a defect of character, and one may criticize it without advocating inefficiency, as such.

It is hard to deny that the fully virtuous person must be *specifically* efficient, with respect to morally permissible desires. (That is why there is something wrong with Tallis Browne.) But once we make the distinction in the previous paragraph, we have room to deny that she is *generally* efficient. And

when this possibility is made clear, it ought to seem compelling. A fully virtuous person is not generally efficient because she is not disposed to give *any weight at all* to wicked desires, in deciding what to do—even if she comes to have them. To adapt an idea from John McDowell (1979), we should think of her as one in whom the deliberative weight of such desires would be *silenced* altogether, not merely outweighed by the presence of other, more virtuous desires.

Some clarifications are in order here. The claim is that a fully virtuous person would not be tempted to *act* on nasty desires, if she were to entertain them. She is prone to a kind of deliberative silencing in which such desires are “quarantined”; they do not figure in instrumental reasoning, through which she might otherwise aim at the means to their ends. This conception of silencing, as the failure of a final desire to generate derived desires (for the means to its satisfaction) is theoretically modest. It does not depend on McDowell’s (1979) *explanation* of silencing, in terms of the knowledge that constitutes ethical virtue. Nor does it rely on his examples of silencing, which are sometimes controversial. For a courageous person facing danger, he claims, “the risk to life and limb is not seen as any reason for removing himself.” (McDowell 1979: 56) That may not be so. The point we need is restricted to the role of *desires* in practical deliberation, and to the specific case at hand: we rightly consider it an aspect of virtue not be moved by the nasty impulses and base temptations that we sometimes have. They are not to be balanced along with other ends, but to be disregarded altogether. That is why the ethically virtuous person cannot be generally efficient.

This argument may be strengthened by considering two possible objections. First, one might insist that general efficiency is compatible with virtue, after all, because the fully virtuous person would not have, or be disposed to have, such nasty desires. It is thus

irrelevant how she is disposed to deal with them. But this argument rests on a mistake. It may be impossible for someone to count as fully virtuous while having nasty desires, and in that sense impossible for a virtuous person to have them. But it is not impossible for a virtuous person to *acquire* a defect or a vice, and it is part of good character to respond to this in the right way. This is one respect in which ethical virtue is more than a present disposition to act well. Consider, for instance, the “moral perfectionist,” who acts impeccably, but in whom a blemish of character—finding himself amused by malicious gossip, say—would trigger a moral collapse. “If I’m going to listen to rumors about others’ private lives,” the perfectionist thinks, “I might as well lie and cheat and steal whenever it would benefit me.” It is a defect in the perfectionist that he has such a fragile commitment to virtue, that only perfection will do.

This is an extreme case, but it illustrates the point. It matters to one’s character how one is disposed to respond to moral failure. For those of us who aspire to virtue and fall short, this is the focus of a great deal of moral energy—not just in relation to wrongdoing, but in relation to our thoughts and feelings about ourselves and others.<sup>5</sup> But it is also part of the character of the ethically virtuous person, who is disposed to remain as she is, not only in that she is not disposed to acquire moral defects, but because she would not be corrupted by them. In the case that interests us, she will not form derived desires for the means to nasty ends—even if she comes to have such ends. The defect of general efficiency is that it conflicts with this: it involves the positive disposition to give weight to nasty desires, a disposition that the fully virtuous person does not have. In the generally efficient person, the deliberative weight of nasty desires can only be outweighed, never silenced, and the silencing of such desires is part of ethical virtue.

This way of putting the point may prompt a second objection, that we have ignored the increasingly familiar distinction between *dispositions* and *counterfactuals*. The crucial observation here is that the ascription of a disposition to  $\phi$  in C does not entail the corresponding counterfactual claim. For instance, an object may be fragile—*disposed* to break when struck—without being such that it *would* break if it were struck, either because its disposition is “masked” (imagine a fragile glass stuffed with packing materials), or because on being struck it would altered so as to lose its disposition of fragility.<sup>6</sup> In each case, a disposition is reliably prevented from manifesting itself. Similarly, the thought may go, the ascription of general efficiency, as a *disposition* to give weight to any desire in practical reasoning, does not entail that one *would* give weight to just any desire. The disposition may be “masked” or “altered” in the presence of wicked desires, and so reliably prevented from producing desires for the means to wicked ends. Thus efficiency, understood in dispositional terms, may be consistent with silencing, after all.

This objection is undermined by the fact that masking and altering necessarily depend on interference from outside. An object’s disposition to  $\phi$  in C cannot be masked or altered by its own dispositions. If an object is disposed to  $\phi$  in C, but would not do so, it must be prevented by something other than its own nature—as the breaking of the fragile glass is prevented by the packing materials inside it. The closest we can get to cases in which one disposition is masked or altered by another disposition of the same object are those in which the dispositions of one *part* of an object mask or alter those of another part.

This is how we should understand Johnston’s (1992: 231–232) examples of the surface color of an object (conceived as a disposition to look a certain way) being masked by radiant light from within, or altered by its tendency to change color when viewed (as with a “shy but powerfully intuitive chameleon”). In each case it is crucial that the masked or altered disposition (to look a certain way) belongs to the *surface*, and the masking or altering that prevents its manifestation is done by (properties of) something else. That does not apply in the present case. The ethically virtuous person would not be moved by nasty desires, and the grounds of this counterfactual lie in her *character*, and thus in her own dispositions. Since one disposition cannot be masked or altered by another disposition of precisely the same thing, it follows that she is not *disposed* to give weight to such desires (not just that she would not do so), and this conflicts with general efficiency.

The moral of these arguments is that general efficiency, if not a vice, is at least a defect of character. It is a trait that the fully virtuous person does not have. How can we then identify it with the best condition of practical reason? It is one thing to deny that practical rationality is a virtue of character, or to insist that it is ethically neutral. It is quite another to propose a view on which it is ethically wrong to be fully responsive to reasons, so that a virtuous person is disposed to reason badly, or not always to reason well, in deciding what to do. Practical rationality must be at least *compatible* with ethical virtue, as general efficiency is not. Instrumentalism about practical reason, at least in its unqualified form, is false.<sup>7</sup>

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## NOTES

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1. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a25–29; the translation is by Irwin (1999).
2. It is in the context of this demand that the technical apparatus of decision theory may have some appeal—see, especially, Hampton (1998, chap. 7)—though its success in this role is controversial. On the distinction between the hypothetical imperative and the idea of balancing among desires in general, see Korsgaard (1997: 215–217 and 1999 *passim*).
3. On deliberation by specification, see Wiggins (1975/1976: 225 and *passim*), Kolnai (1977) and Richardson (1994).
4. If we add the broadest possible conception of desire, as anything that belongs to an agent’s “subjective motivational set,” we are close to Williams’s (1980) theory of “internal reasons.” There are some complications here, for instance in Williams’s later suggestion that the theory of internal reasons should be identified with a weaker claim about the necessary (but not sufficient) conditions of having a reason to act (see Williams 1989: 35). Still, he seems to accept the claim of sufficiency, even if he does not argue for it. I return to this in the final footnote.
5. See Murdoch (1964) for descriptions of moral struggle that focus on the “inner life.”
6. In describing these possibilities, I follow Johnston (1992: 232–233), whose terminology I adopt. The case of altering is discussed in a seminal paper by Martin (1994: 2–4), which dates from the 1960s. Shope (1978) attacks “conditional analyses” in philosophy on similar grounds, without making an explicit connection with dispositions.
7. I say “in its unqualified form” because the silencing argument does not directly touch the weaker claim that reasons for action are always derived from final desires (see Williams 1989: 35, cited in note 5). Sliding over the connection between practical reason as a trait of character and particular reasons to act, what the argument shows is that there is *no reason* to act on one’s nasty ends. It is not *sufficient* for having a reason to do something that doing it would help to satisfy a final desire. It may still be said, however, that this condition is *necessary*; and in saying this, we preserve the core of the instrumentalist view—its rejection of reasons that are wholly independent of desire. The problem with this qualified view is that, once we accept that practical reason is not morally neutral, a commitment to the derivation of reasons from final desires begins to look ad hoc. I think this problem can be made decisive; but I do not have space to argue for it here.

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