

The Role of Happiness in Moral Motivation. A Discussion in Contemporary Ethics

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<https://doi.org/10.5507/aither.2025.005>

ABSTRACT*

This paper analyses the role of happiness in moral motivation within the eudaimonistic tradition. It addresses the Aristotelian-Thomistic tension between choosing virtuous action for its own sake and for the sake of *eudaimonia*. Through a critical examination of Josef Seifert's two-motive theory, Jeff D'Souza's altruistic eudaimonism, and Chris Toner's excellence-prior eudaimonism, I argue that Seifert's phenomenological framework provides the most coherent account. It distinguishes between a primary, value-responsive motive directed toward morally relevant goods and a secondary, subordinate desire for true happiness. This dual structure retains the legitimacy of eudaimonistic motivation while avoiding both the self-referentiality characteristic of traditional eudaimonism and the excessive other-centredness of its modern revisions.

* This publication was produced as part of the grant IGA_CMTF_2025_004.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental issues of moral philosophy is the role of the agent's happiness in moral motivation. This issue is arguably left ambiguous by the greatest and most consequential thinkers of the Greek and Latin philosophical traditions: Aristotle and Aquinas. Aristotle repeatedly states that virtuous actions are chosen for their own sake or for the sake of *to kalon* (Aristotle 2019, 1094a18–22, 1097a30–35). However, he *also* lists virtue as a good worth choosing for the sake of *eudaimonia*. Similarly, Aquinas says that *bonum honestum* (that is, ultimately, moral virtue) is to be pursued both for its own sake *and* for the sake of “a more perfect good”, that is, for the sake of happiness (Aquinas 1895, q. 145, a. 1, response to obj. 1).

Over the centuries, many interpreters of Aristotle and Aquinas have tried to explain how it is possible for an X to be desired or pursued both for its own sake and for the sake of something else, and how virtue can be desired both for its own sake and for the sake of happiness as a more comprehensive good. Apparently, these explanations were not convincing enough to silence the critics who claim that pursuing virtue or virtuous action for the sake of the agent's own happiness illicitly instrumentalises the former for the latter. They contended that such an approach to moral motivation is insufficiently other-centred. In other words, it does not take the well-being of others – or any good other than the well-being of the agent – seriously enough as a good in its own right.

This paper addresses this longstanding objection to substantially eudaimonistic ethical theories, such as those of Aristotle and Aquinas, by presenting and critically discussing accounts of moral motivation developed by contemporary moral philosophers, including both neo-Aristotelians and non-neo-Aristotelians. Rather than offering an alternative interpretation of Aristotle's and Aquinas's arguably ambiguous assertions about choosing virtuous actions or a virtuous life, these accounts address the fundamental ethical issue of how to construct an account of moral motivation that avoids excessive self-concern. In fact, the paper's central discussion of moral motivation broadens the focus even further; how can an account of moral motivation be constructed in such a way as to avoid the dangers of both excessive self-centredness and excessive other-centredness? Thus, the paper relates to the Greek and Latin philosophical tradition by engaging with contemporary ethical discourse to find more satisfactory solutions to fundamental problems that traditional ethical teachings have arguably not always solved.

It starts with Josef Seifert's account of moral motivation. Seifert is known for his prolific philosophical output, spanning epistemology, anthropology, metaphysics, and ethics. While his contributions to epistemology (Seifert 1976a) and metaphysics (Seifert 1989) are more widely recognised, his account of moral motivation is less well-known. It is developed in his book *Was ist und was motiviert eine sittliche Handlung?* (Seifert 1976b), published in English as

The Moral Action: What is it and How is it Motivated? (Seifert 2017).

Seifert provides a phenomenological and value-realist account of moral action, building on the legacy of Dietrich von Hildebrand. He identifies six motives for moral action. This paper focuses on the first and sixth motives, referring to the first as "primary" and the second as "secondary". I will compare this dual account of moral action with two contemporary virtue ethics accounts of moral motivation: Jeff D'Souza's altruistic eudaimonism and Chris Toner's excellence-prior eudaimonism. Ultimately, the question is which of these three accounts offers the most convincing explanation of moral motivation, both in terms of the motivation behind individual actions and the motivation to lead a virtuous life.

According to Seifert's account of moral motivation, the primary motive for morally good action is the state of affairs that is intended to be realised by the action. For an action to be morally good, the state of affairs that is intended to be realised must have a specific type of importance. Seifert, following Hildebrand, calls it "moral relevance" (Seifert 2017, 54). The secondary motive of moral action is the desire for true happiness (Seifert 2017, 117). This motive is not mentioned by Hildebrand. However, a hint at this motive can be seen in Hildebrand's analysis of the so-called moral consciousness. This analysis entails the idea that to act morally well in the full sense, the agent must not be motivated only by the value at stake. He must also recognise the moral relevance of that value and the moral significance of his action. In

this context Hildebrand says that moral motivation also implies the awareness that to strive for moral goodness is in our ultimate interest, that it is “the real good for us” (Hildebrand 2020, 270–271). However, the move from this hint to the fully formed idea that the pursuit of one’s own happiness is a valid, albeit secondary, source of moral motivation is a very significant one. Seifert makes this move. He thus paves the way for an account of moral motivation that is closer to the traditional eudaimonist approach, and which, as I will try to show, can be used to rectify the eudaimonist approach without losing what is legitimate in it.

For the purposes of the following discussion, I will interpret true happiness, which Seifert recognises as a legitimate, albeit subordinate, motive for moral action, as either a superabundant consequence of the agent’s moral goodness or an eschatological reward for it. In other words, the secondary motive for morally good action is the realisation that leading a morally good life is the key to true happiness, whether here on earth or in the afterlife. All of the most influential moral philosophers of antiquity and the Middle Ages recognised that there was an intrinsic link between virtue and true happiness. While the Peripatetics and Academics believed that virtue was merely a *necessary* condition for true happiness, the Stoics and Epicureans believed that it was a *sufficient* condition (Reale 1991, 113). Spaemann notes that Augustine and Aquinas expressed more forcefully than the ancient Greeks the conviction that moral integrity need not guarantee a happy existence in this life

in the face of hostile external circumstances or even the possibility of losing rational self-control. As a result, they, like Plato before them, relegate perfect happiness to the afterlife. Nevertheless, even they recognised a more intimate connection between morality and perfect happiness than the former being the means to the latter. It was not until Luther’s theology and Kant’s moral philosophy that the link between morality and true happiness was made extrinsic (Spaemann 1989, 99–109).

The main contention of my paper is that once we understand that the volitional response to the moral relevance of the state of affairs to be realised by my action and my desire for true happiness through participation in moral goodness are the two essential components of moral motivation, we will be in a position to discern what is true and what is controversial in Jeff D’Souza’s altruistic eudaimonism and Chris Toner’s excellence-prior eudaimonism. As these labels indicate, both these accounts are eudaimonistic. What makes them particularly interesting is that they both attempt to avoid the excessive self-centredness of moral motivation that is typical of eudaimonistic ethics.

II. THE SELF-ABSORPTION OBJECTION AND ALTRUISTIC EUDAIMONISM

I will begin by looking at the altruistic eudaimonism of Jeff D’Souza. In his dissertation (D’Souza 2017) and subsequent articles (D’Souza 2018, D’Souza 2019, D’Souza 2020), he makes two fundamental claims. First, no contemporary

version of virtue ethics can successfully fend off the “self-absorption objection”, that is, the objection that its account of moral motivation is too self-centred. Second, only his own account of moral motivation, that is, altruistic eudaimonism, is able to fend off this objection.

He justifies his first claim by identifying three basic approaches that contemporary proponents of virtue ethics take to the self-absorption objection and by arguing that no one is successful in countering it (D’Souza 2017, 38–67, D’Souza 2018). The strategy of the first approach is to distinguish between beginners on the path to virtue and fully virtuous agents and then to argue that while beginners cultivate moral virtues for reasons stemming from their own happiness, fully virtuous agents act spontaneously from their virtuous dispositions and act for other-centred reasons, such as the moral goodness of an action or the well-being of others.

The problem with this developmental approach is that selfless motives figure in it only on the level of the motivation of occurrent actions, not on the underlying level of the ultimate reasons why a person chooses to maintain a virtuous disposition (D’Souza 2018, 650–651). Therefore, D’Souza concludes that this approach cannot provide a sufficiently convincing response to the self-absorption objection. The pursuit of one’s own happiness remains the ultimate reason for acting morally. Although the moral decisions of a perfectly virtuous person are selfless, her ultimate motivation for being a morally good agent is still the regard for her own happiness.

The strategy the second approach uses for fending off the self-absorption objection has two steps. First, one distinguishes between what justifies the virtuous agent’s actions from a prudential point of view and what motivates them from a moral point of view. Second, it seeks to demonstrate not only that the moral and the prudential justification can come apart but also that the content of the prudential justification does not undermine the content of the moral justification, leaving the motivation of the virtuous agent intact (D’Souza 2018, 653). D’Souza’s objection to this approach is ultimately the same as his objection to the first one. He argues that while this account provides a non-egoistic account of the virtuous agent’s occurrent motivation, it fails to provide such an account for the moral motivation at the underlying level, as according to this account too the ultimate reason why the virtuous agent chooses to live and act virtuously is his own *eudaimonia* (the prudential perspective).

The third approach involves reinterpreting the virtuous agent’s understanding of *eudaimonia* as being different from self-interest. D’Souza focuses his analysis (and critique) on Chris Toner’s version of this approach. According to Toner, we must distinguish between *eudaimonia* in the sense of welfare and *eudaimonia* in the sense of moral perfection. Setting *eudaimonia* in the sense of welfare as the ultimate goal of moral motivation is a form of egoism. However, placing *eudaimonia* in the sense of moral perfection as the ultimate goal of moral striving is not egoistic. Therefore,

prioritising our own *eudaimonia* in the sense of virtuous activity as the ultimate reason for all our moral actions is a standpoint that counters the self-absorption objection.

D'Souza objects to this argument, contending that "when we act virtuously toward others ... we think that we ought, morally speaking, to do so primarily for the sake of others, or at the very least, not primarily because doing so is good for us, even if our good is understood in terms of our virtuous activity" (D'Souza 2018, 663). This is because "it appears, *prima facie*, that there is nothing about the virtuous agent's own *eudaimonia* that justifies making the ultimate end of all her actions her virtuous activity ... when the virtuous activity of others ... is just as valuable as serving as her ultimate end" (D'Souza 2018, 665).

In conclusion, D'Souza argues that the three strategies developed by the contemporary virtue ethicists to counter the self-absorption objection all ultimately fail. Despite this apparently devastating critique of contemporary virtue ethics in terms of its ability to counter the self-absorption objection, D'Souza still believes he can present a eudaimonistic account of moral motivation that withstands this objection. In order to highlight both of its central features – its eudaimonism and its altruism – he refers to it as altruistic eudaimonism.

Altruistic eudaimonism starts with the picture of a person who has some degree of moral virtue and who subsequently perfects this virtue by asking the Socratic question of how one should live (D'Souza 2017, 108). After serious

contemplation, this person realises that human good consists chiefly in a life of excellent moral activity. She then decides and is motivated to cultivate such a life for that very reason (D'Souza 2020, 484). Hence, while the motivation to become truly virtuous does arise from a reflection regarding what type of life one should lead, one does not cultivate or maintain a virtuous disposition because one thinks that doing so is good *for oneself*, but ultimately because one appreciates and understands that human good consists in a life of excellent moral activity.

Note that D'Souza's account of moral motivation is close to Toner's in that it interprets *eudaimonia* as moral perfection. However, unlike Toner, D'Souza claims that (a) there is no reason to consider one's own *eudaimonia* to be more valuable than that of others and (b) it is better to act virtuously than to promote one's own *eudaimonia* if one cannot do both.

— III. ALTRUISTIC EUDAIMONISM AND THE TWO-MOTIVE APPROACH: MORAL MOTIVATION AT THE LEVEL OF OCCURRENT ACTIONS

Let us grant to D'Souza that his account of moral motivation is sufficiently other-centred in terms of both the motivation of occurrent actions and the underlying motives for cultivating a virtuous disposition. But is fending off the self-absorption objection enough to provide an adequate account of moral motivation? Is this a sufficient condition or just a necessary one? It is unlikely to be a sufficient condition, not least because there are multiple other-centred accounts of moral motivation that

cannot be considered to converge. I will now compare the eudaimonistic altruist account of moral motivation with the two-motive account mentioned at the beginning in order to determine the respective merits of each. I will make this comparison at two levels: the level of occurrent motivation and the underlying level, that is, the motivation for cultivating one's virtue.

At the level of occurrent actions D'Souza argues in favour of what he calls "the recognition view" (D'Souza 2017, 69–77). According to this view, the virtuous agent acts virtuously because he recognises the intrinsic, non-relational goodness of the act itself. On the basis of contemporary Aristotelian scholarship and Aristotle's writings, D'Souza argues that this account can be attributed to Aristotle (D'Souza 2017, 83). Unfortunately, he never asks the question what makes an action morally good in itself, so as to motivate a virtuous agent to perform it. He argues only that, according to Aristotle, knowledge of the intrinsic goodness of an action is sufficient motivation for performing it.

By contrast, Hildebrand and Seifert try to explain what motivates one to act morally at the level of occurrent actions. This explanation entails the clarification of what constitutes a morally good action. Here is a brief outline of their approach; they begin with a phenomenological description of moral action as a particular kind of human behaviour. What distinguishes actions from other experiences and behaviours is that they lead to the realisation of states of affairs. States of affairs realised by actions are a

new reality with respect to the actions themselves. They have their own ontological status and usually outlast the actions themselves. Moreover, states of affairs are not only what *results* from actions but also what *motivates* them. It is the value of a particular state of affairs that motivates the agent. What is specific to the *moral* motivation of occurrent actions is that the values of the states of affairs to which the agent responds are not only intrinsically important but also "morally relevant".¹ So, according to Seifert and von Hildebrand, the primary moral motivation at the level of occurrent actions is to realise a morally relevant state of affairs. This contention simultaneously explains what constitutes "the non-relational goodness of the act itself". The moral goodness of an action is largely constituted by the presence of this motivation, although not entirely.

— IV. ALTRUISTIC EUDAIMONISM AND THE TWO-MOTIVE APPROACH: MORAL MOTIVATION AT THE UNDERLYING LEVEL

I will now turn to moral motivation at the underlying level, that is the level at

1 Morally relevant values are those with respect to which our actions become good or bad in a strictly moral sense; that is to say, they become morally good or evil. Failing to respond with enthusiasm to a great work of art, for example, or never opening any of Plato's dialogues, is regrettable, but it is not an omission that would make us morally evil. The paradigmatic example of a morally relevant value is the ontological value of the human person. Loving or hating other people, helping or harming them are classic examples of morally good or evil actions. For a more detailed explanation of this notion, see Cajthaml (2019, 29–30).

which we are motivated to cultivate our moral virtues. In D'Souza's altruistic eudaimonism, this underlying moral motivation of the virtuous agent is to lead a life aiming at morally excellent activity as its final goal. The ultimate justification for this approach is the realisation that the moral perfection of all humans is equally valuable, and therefore there is no legitimate reason to prioritise one's own moral perfection over that of others.

Hildebrand's account of moral motivation at an underlying level is based on the idea that we owe a response not only to the morally relevant values of specific states of affairs, objects, or persons, but also to moral goodness itself. Moreover, according to von Hildebrand, in addition to value-responses of which the existence is limited to actual experience, there are also the so-called "superactual" responses. Love, for example, does not cease to exist the moment it ceases to be currently experienced. In contrast to love, which is a response to the unique and unrepeatable value of a given person, there are also superactual value-responses that are *general*; that is, they are responses to a basic type of value or to the sphere of moral and morally relevant values. According to Hildebrand, such a general response is the "backbone" of each virtue (Hildebrand 2020, 380–381). Like Aristotle's, Hildebrand's moral virtues are habitual dispositions that enable a virtuous person to perform certain types of actions and experience certain emotions. In contrast to Aristotle, however, these "basic moral attitudes", as

Hildebrand calls them, are themselves value-responses that predispose the one who possesses them to respond to the values of particular objects in specific situations, including the volitional value-responses that motivate the agent at the level of occurrent actions.

Hildebrand thus argues that, in moral motivation, every response to the value of a particular object, person, or state of affairs implies a general superactual value-response to moral goodness as such (or to the world of moral values). He writes, for example, that "the man who resists a pressure and endures suffering rather than betray someone responds not only to the value of a human being but also to the moral goodness of this attitude of loyalty or to the moral evil of a betrayal. The moral significance of responding to the value on the object side is present to his mind and plays a decisive role in the motivation of his act. We could say every morally good value-response implies in some way the *general will to be morally good*, to act and behave in a morally right manner" (Hildebrand 2020, 268). However, not every person is awakened to this call of moral goodness. The unconscious man, as Hildebrand calls him, "may in a certain situation accomplish a value-response, he may even act objectively according to the moral call but not because he has grasped the moral significance or because of his will to act morally right" (Hildebrand 2020, 280).

According to Hildebrand, this dependence of the recognition of a value as morally relevant on one's level of "moral consciousness" (or on one's will

to be morally good) does not mean that certain values are not (objectively) morally relevant while others are. It means only that it takes a morally conscious person to recognise the moral relevance of a value, not that the moral relevance of it is constituted by this recognition. He also highlights the unity of an act which is *simultaneously* a response to the morally relevant value and a response to the moral significance of the action for which the morally relevant value calls (Hildebrand 2020, 283).

In summary, according to Hildebrand, the value that motivates an agent to act in a given situation is perceived as morally relevant because the agent perceives it against the backdrop of a deeper, more general value-response: his volitional response to moral goodness as such and his general desire to be morally good. The agent's capacity to respond not only to the value of the intended state of affairs but also to grasp its moral relevance and the moral significance of the intended action is conditioned by his moral consciousness, expressed through his general will to be morally good.

Now let me compare the two accounts and ask which one is a more satisfactory account of moral motivation at the underlying level. One way to tackle this issue is to consider how the two accounts might be described from the viewpoint of the other.

How can we describe Hildebrand's account from D'Souza's perspective? From this perspective, Hildebrand's basic idea – that the moral goodness of the fundamental moral attitude stems from it being a superactual response to moral

goodness itself – cannot be described. D'Souza's account suggests that moral perfection, at the underlying level, can and should be striven for *directly*. According to this account, moral perfection should be the ultimate goal of our moral endeavours. By contrast, Hildebrand's account presupposes that moral goodness cannot be the direct object of our willing. The notion of a value-response implies that moral goodness comes into existence when we respond appropriately to the call of values. Therefore, the primary object of our moral striving, in terms of both occurrent actions and underlying attitudes, is the value itself: the valuable object, the valuable state of affairs, the human person as a bearer of values. From D'Souza's perspective, it seems that Hildebrand's account of moral motivation cannot be adequately described because the latter has no conceptual resources with which to express the idea that moral goodness arises from a value-response at an underlying level.

How can we describe D'Souza's account from the perspective of Hildebrand's account? First, one would distinguish between striving for one's own moral perfection and striving for the moral perfection of others. The former would be unacceptable because it fails to recognise that moral goodness can only arise through actions and attitudes that respond to values. My own moral goodness can never be a legitimate primary motive for my actions or underlying attitudes. Conversely, striving for the moral perfection of others would be recognised as a legitimate and noble motive for both actions and underlying attitudes.

Consider, for example, Socrates' efforts to care for the souls of his fellow-citizens. From the perspective of Hildebrand's account of moral motivation, this is a profoundly different type of moral motivation from striving for one's own perfection, but from the perspective of D'Souza's account, it is two modifications of the same moral motivation, namely striving for moral perfection. While D'Souza's altruistic account suggests that one should not prioritise one's own moral perfection over that of others simply because it is one's own, Hildebrand's perspective points out the inability of D'Souza's account to articulate the fundamental moral difference between striving for one's own moral perfection and striving for the moral perfection of others. From Hildebrand's perspective, the former is ultimately impossible because one cannot directly intend one's own moral values as the goal of one's actions or attitudes. The latter, however, is possible and is one of the noblest types of moral motivation in terms of both occurrent actions and underlying attitudes. Therefore, it could be argued that Hildebrand's account of moral motivation at the underlying level is superior to D'Souza's because it can articulate its content adequately and highlight its strengths and weaknesses, while the opposite cannot be said of D'Souza's account.

— IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would like to emphasise the importance of the secondary motive in the two-motive account which I derived from Seifert's book on moral

motivation. As mentioned earlier, the desire for true happiness, that is, happiness based on moral excellence, is, according to most ancient and medieval philosophers, the primary motive of the virtuous agent. What makes Seifert's account of moral motivation unique and significant is that, unlike most modern philosophers, he recognises the full legitimacy of this motive. At the same time, however, by assigning to this motive a secondary, subordinate role, Seifert's account addresses what modern moral philosophers have always considered to be the main weakness of traditional eudaimonistic ethics' account of moral motivation: its insufficient other-centredness.

The merit of a theoretical explanation of *x* can often be determined by its ability to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative explanations of *x*. Seifert's two-motive account of moral motivation does this with respect to D'Souza's altruistic eudaimonism and Toner's excellence-prior eudaimonism. We saw that the latter is unable to fend off the self-absorption objection, while the former fails to appreciate that the desire for one's true happiness is a legitimate motive, even at the underlying level of moral motivation. Seifert's approach shows how both these deficiencies can be eliminated. The excessive self-centredness of excellence-prior eudaimonism can be eliminated by *relegating* the desire for moral self-perfection and happiness based on it to the rank of a *secondary*, subservient motive at both levels, while affirming the other-centred motive as primary at both levels.

The insufficient articulation of the desire for one's own true happiness as a distinct and legitimate motive in altruistic eudaimonism can be eliminated in the same way. By recognising its status as a secondary, subordinate motive, we can acknowledge it as a distinct motive separate from the desire for the moral perfection of others and still fend off the self-absorption objection, which was D'Souza's main concern.

From Seifert's viewpoint we can also understand what caused these deficiencies in the two eudaimonistic accounts. In both cases, the main concern was to interpret one's account of moral motivation as Aristotelian, and thus eudaimonistic. Despite correctly rejecting the interpretation of *eudaimonia* as welfare – as this would render a eudaimonistic

account of moral motivation egoistic – Toner could not see any way to remain within the Aristotelian framework other than to assert moral perfection as the ultimate goal of one's striving, even at the underlying level. Had he been primarily concerned with constructing an account of moral motivation that would be faithful to things themselves rather than to Aristotle's approach to ethics, he might have avoided the insufficient other-centredness of his account identified by D'Souza. Similarly, if D'Souza were not primarily concerned with presenting an Aristotelian account of moral motivation, but instead focused on things themselves, he might recognise that when the pursuit of one's own true happiness is made secondary, it does not render moral motivation overly self-centred.

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