As his title indicates, the contemporary British philosopher Michael Slote argues that virtue ethics has certain advantages over other moral theories—mainly utilitarianism, but also Kantian morality and what Slote calls “common-sense” morality (our everyday prephilosophical moral intuitions). This alleged advantage is an interesting and perhaps surprising one: that virtue ethics, unlike other moral theories, seeks to benefit us rather than demanding sacrifices of us. A common criticism of utilitarianism is that it demands too much of us. If, as the theory demands, a utilitarian must always act to promote the greatest good for the greatest number, there will obviously be many instances in which she could do more good by denying her self-interest in favor of the greater good of others. (If she earns a six-figure salary, for example, she could easily give half of that to the poor, denying herself but increasing the overall well-being or happiness of the larger community.) Although this seems “a bit steep” according to “common-sense” morality (and the reason most of us wouldn’t think for a minute of actually practicing such a thorough-going utilitarianism), our ordinary moral intuitions do tend to praise those few individuals who do sacrifice their interests for the good of others. We don’t blame the person who keeps all their take-home pay, but we certainly don’t morally praise them. We don’t find any positive good in doing things that benefit only ourselves, and the Kantian morality is famous for pitting our moral duty against our personal inclinations. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, as Slote points out, has always (since Aristotle) emphasized the benefit which the possession of virtues affords the virtuous person.

As you read Slote ask yourself whether you agree that being virtuous (possessing the virtues) actually helps us. Is this true of all the virtues or only some of them, and if so, which ones? How, exactly, are they supposed to help us? If you agree that at least some of the virtues do indeed help us (in some sense), do you think this reduces virtue ethics to a kind of egoism—“look out for Number One; help yourself first and above everything else”? If you think it does, do you think this is an entirely bad outcome? Or do you
think this could be another advantage of virtue ethics, helping us answer the difficult question, why should I be moral? What’s in it for me?

A ct-utilitarianism and act-consequentialism more generally are frequently said to require too much of moral agents. Such views standardly demand that one produce the best overall results one can, and if they express a valid conception of morality, then in most individual cases, one will have to sacrifice one’s interests or one’s deepest personal concerns to comply with the demands of morality. Frequently, defenders of common-sense, intuitive moral thinking criticize consequentialism for making unreasonable demands on moral agents, and it has often been taken to be an advantage of common-sense morality that it treats our most fundamental, our most important form of act-evaluation as in most cases requiring nothing like the kind of self-sacrifice entailed by a utilitarian or consequentialist form of morality. To be sure, there are occasions when even common sense seems to require an agent to sacrifice her deepest concerns, even perhaps her life, but as a rule common-sense moral thinking seems to permit the individual to pursue her own good or well-being as long as she refrains from harming, and does a certain amount on behalf of, other people. And this is precisely what (act-) consequentialism, with its requirement that one always do what, in impersonal terms, is (considered) best (for mankind), seems not to allow.

However, I want to argue that, for reasons somewhat different from the familiar ones just mentioned, common-sense and Kantian morality can likewise be said to give insufficient weight to the interests or well-being of moral agents, and thus, in an important sense, to slight, devalue, or downgrade such agents. By contrast, a properly conceived virtue ethics does not slight us as moral agents in the way that consequentialism is commonly thought to do or in the less familiar way that ordinary and Kantian morality can, I think, be shown to do. And this constitutes a major advantage of virtue theory that may help to add impetus to the recent revival of virtue ethics. Much of the recent interest in virtue ethics has focused on the analysis and comparison of particular virtues and on the ways in which talk of virtue may importantly supplement what ethics needs to say about the rightness and wrongness of actions. But the virtue-theoretical advantages to be argued for

in what follows support virtue ethics in a deeper sense. If (utilitarian) consequentialism, Kantianism, and common-sense morality all give insufficient weight to the interests of the individual agent, then perhaps a virtue-theoretic approach that avoids this sort of difficulty may in fact turn out to offer the best way of *grounding* our ethical thinking.

In the past few years, a great deal of energy has been expended on the critical evaluation of so-called common-sense morality, and much of what I have to say in criticism of ordinary and Kantian moral thinking is based on—though in important ways it seeks to go beyond—these recent discussions. It has frequently been pointed out, for example, that common-sense thinking about right and wrong is permissive in the personal sphere in ways and to a degree that act-consequentialism and, most familiarly, act-utilitarianism are not. (Henceforth I use “consequentialism” and “utilitarianism” in place of these longer designations.) Just above, I spoke of our common-sense permission(s) to pursue our own personal projects and concerns even at a cost to overall or impersonally reckoned good. And in recent work the distinction in this respect between consequentialism and ordinary morality has been expressed by saying that the latter grants agents a moral permission to pursue innocent projects and concerns in ways that are not optimific, not productive of the greatest overall balance of good. These moral permissions allow the agent to favor herself, to some extent, over other people: to seek her own good on some occasions when she could do more good by trying to help others, and this, of course, is precisely what standard utilitarianism does not allow one to do. In the present context I shall also refer to such permissions as *agent-favoring* permissions, because I would like to draw a contrast between this familiar category of common-sense moral permission and a less familiar form of moral permission that treats it as morally permissible for agents to neglect their own projects and concerns and even, in fact, to thwart them.

Our intuitive moral thinking seems to regard it as entirely permissible, though of course hardly advisable or rational, for an individual to deny herself the very things she most wants or to cause herself unnecessary pain or damage. (Here common sense diverges from Kantian ethics—criticism of the latter will come in later in our discussion.) Even if no one else stands to benefit from such self-sacrifice, even if there is no reason of moral deontology for it, such an act of self-sacrifice does not seem morally wrong, and it is appropriate to refer this new class of permissions as *agent sacrificing* in order to mark the contrast with the agent-favoring permissions that are already so well-known in the ethics literature. Both sorts of permission allow for non-opti-
mific action, but in addition the agent-sacrificing permissions allow for (non-optimific) behavior that doesn’t even serve the interests or concerns of the moral agent. So if, as we might put it, agent-favoring permissions allow the substitution of the agent's good for the larger overall good that consequentialism uses as the standard of right action, then agent-sacrificing permissions morally allow for action that cannot be justified by any appeal to what is good or best, allow, indeed, for action that must inevitably seem stupid, absurd, or irrational by comparison with agent-favoring behavior. However, we should not immediately assume that common-sense morality itself cannot sensibly make moral accommodation to behavior that itself is not sensible, and for the moment at least we need only focus on the fact that common-sense morality does seem to permit such senseless or stupid behavior.

Consider, then, what our ordinary moral thinking seems to allow and to forbid with regard to our treatment of other people. Negligently to hurt another person seems, intuitively, to be morally wrong in a way or to a degree that it does not seem wrong through negligence to hurt oneself. (It can be wrong to hurt oneself if one thereby makes it impossible for one to fulfill certain obligations, but I am speaking of less complex situations.) Similarly, if one could easily prevent pain to another person, it is typically thought wrong not to do so, but not to avoid similar pain to oneself seems crazy or irrational, not morally wrong. And so given the agent-sacrificing common-sense permissions we have described, we may now also speak of an agent-sacrificing (or other-favoring) self-other asymmetry that attaches to what is commonsensically permissible. Various ways one may permissibly act against one’s own interests or wellbeing are ways one is commonsensically not allowed to act against the interests or wellbeing of others.

However, there is a great deal more to be said about the agent-sacrificing self-other asymmetry we have located in common-sense morality. We have thus far largely concentrated on the asymmetry of our common-sense moral permissions, but we have also just briefly indicated that such symmetry is also to be found in our views of (positive or comparative) moral merit, and it is time now to focus our attention on the way self-other asymmetry of an agent-sacrificing kind applies outside the area of permissions. Moral theorists tend to assume that moral evaluation is our most fundamental and/or important form of ethical evaluation. But the aspects of self-other asymmetry we shall now focus on force us to question whether either common-sense or Kantian morality can properly fulfill such a role.
The point I wish to make about both these forms of morality is perhaps best approached by means of a contrast with a well-known aspect of (utilitarian) consequentialism. The latter allows neither for agent-sacrificing nor for agent-favoring permissions of the sort we have described, because it is entirely agent-neutral: no one person may be treated in any fundamentally different way from any other, and this uniformity of treatment crosses the boundary between self and other as well as that between different others. In consequentialism, if something is permitted with respect to one individual, it is acceptable with respect to any other individual as long as the causal-evaluative facts on which moral judgments are based remain otherwise the same. And if, for example, it is wrong for me to hurt another person when, by not doing so, I can create more overall good, then it is wrong for me to hurt myself in similar circumstances. Even if I hurt myself in order to help others, my act will count as wrong, if I could have done more overall good by favoring myself more and benefiting others less. Furthermore, if the agent’s sole choice is between helping herself and helping another person to exactly the same extent, the two possible acts are of equal moral value, are equally good morally, according to any recognizable form of consequentialism. But if the agent has to choose between helping herself more and helping another less, or between helping another person more and helping herself less, the morally better action, in consequentialist terms, will always be the one that does the most good. And this also holds for choices exclusively concerned with the good of the agent or exclusively concerned with the good of others. As a result, I think we may say that consequentialism treats the good of the agent and that of any given other as counting equally toward favorable moral assessment.

Note the contrast with egoism. The latter presumably regards what helps the agent more as automatically morally better than what helps the agent less, but makes no similar comparative judgment about effects on other people. It is only when the agent’s good is (contingently) tied to that of other people, that effects on others can make a difference to egoistic moral evaluation, and so in respect to its comparative moral judgments, egoism is asymmetric in a way that consequentialism clearly is not. Where does common-sense morality fit into this picture?

Unlike egoism, our ordinary thinking tends to regard it, other things being equal, as morally better, or more meritorious, to give more, rather than less, to another person. But when we turn to situations in which the agent is in a position to affect himself in some way, a different picture emerges. We
earlier saw that common-sense morality allows or permits the agent to hurt or fail to help himself. But when comparative moral judgments are at issue, the agent’s own good also appears to be irrelevant. If I have to choose between helping myself a little or a great deal, the latter choice would not normally be regarded as morally better: wiser, more rational, more prudent perhaps, just not *morally* better. Here there is a marked contrast with both consequentialism and ethical egoism, but not just here. Where both the agent’s and another person’s good are at stake, our ordinary moral thinking seems to assign the former no positive weight whatever. It may be more rational to choose a great good for oneself in preference to a lesser good for another person, but in commonsense terms it is not morally preferable to choose one’s own greater good, and it even seems morally better to seek the lesser good of another in preference to a greater benefit for oneself. Here again, there is a contrast with both egoism and consequentialism.

In her ground-breaking article “Moral Beliefs” Philippa Foot assumes that if a trait of character does not benefit or serve the needs of its possessor, the trait cannot properly be regarded as a virtue. She notes that in the *Republic* Plato takes it for granted “that if justice is not a good to the just man, moralists who recommend it as a virtue are perpetrating a fraud” and she points out that Nietzsche, unlike present-day moral philosophers, seems to accept a similar view.

Foot herself, however, subsequently retracted this assumption. In some of her later work, she has separated the issue of what counts as a virtue from issues concerning what the agent has reason to do and treated it as intuitively unobjectionable to hold that traits that fail to benefit their possessors may properly be regarded as virtues. For present-day common-sense thinking it might be enough, for example, that a trait be one by which *other people* generally benefit. (As Foot herself notes, what counts as a virtue in functional objects like knives doesn’t benefit the knives themselves, only those who use them.)

To the extent that Foot’s retraction constitutes a concession to our ordinary thought about virtue and virtues, I think Foot was correct to retract her earlier assumption and recognize that virtues may not benefit their possessors. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that our ordinary thinking about the virtues is subject to self-other asymmetry similar to what we have found in common-sense morality. Our assessment of whether a given character trait counts as a virtue (and of whether a given act, in exemplifying a certain character trait, also exemplifies a virtue) is favorably affected by...
the consideration that the trait in question benefits people other than its possessor. But no less positively, or favorably, is it affected by the consideration that a given trait benefits, or is useful to, its possessor(s). In our ordinary thinking it may not be necessary to status as a virtue that a given trait be beneficial (more or less generally) to its possessors, but it certainly helps to qualify any given trait as a virtue that it is useful or beneficial to those who possess it, and in fact I think it is entirely in keeping with common-sense views to suppose that both helpfulness to its possessors and helpfulness to others are independently, and in fairly equal measure, capable of conferring virtue status. To consider the issue first on a fairly abstract level, if I hear that people generally need a given trait of character and benefit from possessing it, I will normally think I have been given excellent reason to regard that trait as a virtue. But by the same token if I learn that a certain character trait is generally useful to people other than its possessors, I will also naturally or normally think I have been given reason to regard that trait as a virtue.

When, furthermore, we look at the whole range of traits commonly recognized as virtues, we once again see that self-regarding and other-regarding considerations are both capable of underlying the kind of high regard that leads us to regard various traits as virtues. Justice, kindness, probity, and generosity are chiefly admired for what they lead those who possess these traits to do in their relations with other people, but prudence, sagacity, circumspection, equanimity, and fortitude are esteemed primarily under their self-regarding aspect, and still other traits—notably self-control, courage, and (perhaps) wisdom in practical affairs—are in substantial measure admired both for what they do for their possessors and for what they lead their possessors to do with regard to other people.

It is also worth noting that traits admired for other-regarding reasons do not have any sort of general precedence over predominantly self-regarding virtues that might be taken to entail a self-other asymmetry of the sort we have discussed in connection with common-sense morality. (I think the opposite problem of precedence for self-regarding virtues need not concern us.) The other-regarding traits mentioned above lack any (implicitly) recognized status as greater or more important virtues than the self-regarding traits also mentioned above, and neither does a “mixed” virtue like courage or self-control or wisdom seem inferior to, or less of a virtue than, such predominantly other-regarding virtues as justice and kindness. We greatly admire probity and fair dealing, but we also have enormous admiration for many self-regarding and mixed virtues, so I think our ordinary thinking in
this area gives rise to nothing like the marked or extreme self-other asymmetry that characterizes common-sense morality.

Yet consider the view of Hume, who says that “when a man is called virtuous, or is denominated a man of virtue, we chiefly regard his social qualities.” I have no wish to deny what Hume is saying here, but I think we must distinguish between virtue and virtuousness, on the one hand. and what constitutes something as a virtue, on the other. . . . Hume is certainly right if he assumes that our talk of virtuousness lays a special emphasis on social virtue, on other-regarding traits or dispositions. But that is because these notions are fundamentally moral, even if the word “moral” and its cognates do not always appear when they are employed. (As Ross points out, even “good man” is normally understood to mean “morally good man.”) By contrast, the notion of a virtue lacks such an automatic connection with morality and other-regarding considerations. When we say patience, circumspection, or prudence is a virtue, we are not committed to saying that it is morally better to have than to lack these traits. Of course, these traits can be useful to morally good individuals and so help such individuals do morally better things than they otherwise could have, but prudence and the other traits we have just mentioned can also be used for morally neutral or nefarious purposes, and (unlike Kant, as we will see) we commonly regard these character traits as virtues independently of any implicit judgment of how selfishly or altruistically they are likely to be used. It is enough that the person with patience or prudence (or fortitude or circumspection) have a trait people need to possess to get on well in life. . . .

Our ordinary thinking about virtues is symmetric in a way that ordinary thinking about morality is not. But we have also seen that other possibilities exist in the field of morality, with egoism embodying an agent-favoring self-other asymmetric conception of morality and consequentialism a strictly symmetric form of moral thinking. And it turns out that similar variation with respect to self-other symmetry is also possible in the sphere of the virtues. Even if most of us would intuitively reject the notion that there is no virtue in a fundamental concern for the well-being of other people, that assumption is arguably common to Stoicism and Epicureanism, and such a fundamentally egoistic understanding of virtue, like egoism about morality, is self-other asymmetric in an agent-favoring manner.

Furthermore, even if our ordinary thinking about virtue(s) fails to exemplify the agent-sacrificing (or other-favoring) asymmetry we find in common-sense morality, such self-other asymmetry is clearly possible in the
realm of virtue, and in fact I believe we have a good example of such asymmetry in Kant’s views about what counts as an estimable character trait. Kant’s doctrine of virtue is fundamentally a doctrine of moral virtue, but, more important, in the light of what we said above, his views about what counts as a virtue entail the same agent-sacrificing asymmetry we find in his view of morality. In the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant says that character traits like moderation, perseverance, judgment, self-control, courage, and the ability to deliberate calmly have value and are praiseworthy only conditionally. In the absence of a good will, these traits are not estimable and presumably do not count as virtues. Having a good will, in turn, is understood by Kant (roughly) as a form of conscientiousness, of doing one’s duty out of respect for the moral law, of doing one’s duty because it is one’s duty rather than from any other motivation. So the Kantian conception of virtue will turn out to be asymmetrical if Kantian morality is asymmetrical, and in fact Kantian morality is asymmetrical in some of the same ways that common-sense morality is. On Kant’s view, for example, we have an obligation to benefit or contribute to the happiness of other people, but no parallel obligation to seek our own well-being or happiness. We have a duty to develop our natural talents, a duty not to harm ourselves, and a duty of self-preservation that derives from our other duties, but except insofar as it is necessary to fulfill those other obligations, we have no moral reason to make ourselves happy or well-off. (Our obligation to seek others’ happiness is not derivative in this way.)

But (roughly speaking) if the status of moderation or perseverance as a virtue depends on its being accompanied by a Kantian good will and such a will is fundamentally directed toward concern with the well-being of others rather than toward the well-being of the moral agent, then the agent-sacrificing asymmetry of Kantian moral obligation will translate into similar asymmetry in Kantian views about what properly counts as a good trait of character, as a virtue. Our common-sense views of what counts as a virtue escape this asymmetry, despite the self-other asymmetry of common-sense moral obligation, because, unlike Kant, we ordinarily regard some of the character traits mentioned above as admirable or estimable independently of their accompaniment by moral goodness or virtue. We may have an unfavorable moral opinion of a colleague who mistreats his friends and his family, yet have a high regard for that colleague’s devotion to some academic subject, or his coolheadedness, or his fortitude in the face of (deserved or undeserved) personal tragedy.
And so in the area of virtue, the same three possibilities exist as exist in morality, but we find common-sense views occupying a different position among these possibilities. With regard to personal happiness or well-being, common-sense and Kantian morality are agent-sacrificingly self-other asymmetric by contrast with the agent-favoring (other-sacrificing) asymmetry of egoism and the self-other symmetry of (utilitarian) consequentialism. But in the field of the virtues it is common sense that occupies the symmetric position; ... whereas egoism, once again, is agent-favoringly asymmetric, and only the Kantian view, among those we have mentioned, is agent-sacrificingly asymmetric.

Of course, we have not yet explored the significance, the theoretical implications, of these varying symmetries and asymmetries. To the extent symmetry is a favorable characteristic of an ethical view, we could perhaps on that basis alone argue for the superiority of either consequentialism or a common-sense ethics of the virtues over a common-sense or Kantian ethics of right, wrong, and obligation. But in fact the symmetry in consequentialism and in common-sense virtue ethics has a significance that far outstrips the widely assumed theoretical desirability of symmetry as such. However desirable symmetrical consequentialism may be, it still is subject to the complaint of being too demanding, of requiring too much individual sacrifice. And we are now in a position to show that the agent-sacrificing asymmetry of common-sense and Kantian morality subjects them to the rather similar complaint that they downgrade or deprecate the importance of the moral agent, a charge which, as we will also see, the particular symmetry of our ordinary view of virtue allows the latter to escape.

How can common-sense morality be guilty of devaluing or deprecating the importance of the moral agent? After all, it is itself the source of the criticism that consequentialism and utilitarianism ride roughshod over the particular concerns and projects of the individual by demanding that she sacrifice them whenever they interfere with her production of impersonally reckoned best results. Is common-sense, or Kantian, morality perhaps more demanding than its adherents have realized? Is that the basis for the objection I wish to make to such morality?

I do want to claim that these forms of morality downgrade the (actual) importance of moral agents and their individual concerns, projects, even desires. But the argument for this claim will not be that, like consequentialism, the ordinary and/or the Kantian standard of right and wrong make an insufficient concession to the moral agent’s welfare. On the contrary, it will
involve, rather, the claim that common-sense and Kantian morality do make concessions to the well-being and happiness of agents, but make them only as concessions.

Common-sense and Kantian ethics permit the moral agent to seek and find her own happiness at the expense, at least to some extent, of overall, or impersonally judged, optimality. But this does not mean that they treat such usefulness to the agent as a source of positive moral value. Other things being equal, if an agent has to choose between two actions and one of these would (probably) be more helpful to the agent, then the more helpful action would typically be regarded as one that it is more rational for the agent to perform and, in the appropriate, reasons-related sense, as a better option from the standpoint of the agent. But from the ordinary or Kantian point of view such an act would usually not be considered morally better or morally more praiseworthy or meritorious than the act that would do less good for the agent. The point simply recaptures some of what we were saying earlier: for ordinary or Kantian moral thinking, how morally good or meritorious an act is will depend in part (and especially in the absence of deontological factors) on whether it is directed toward the well-being of other people, but not on whether it is directed toward that of the agent.

So in cases where someone helps herself at the expense of overall best results and of the potential good of other people, common-sense morality may maintain the moral permissibility of what the (utilitarian) consequentialist would standardly regard as a violation of moral obligation, but will nonetheless share with consequentialism the judgment that such action is morally less good than what would have achieved greater overall good and greater good for other people. And in such cases, therefore, common sense makes moral concessions to the agent’s personal good, but attributes positive moral value only on the basis of what the agent does for the well-being of others. . . . And if you wish to object that our ordinary thinking here accords positive moral value to what the agent does solely on her own behalf, but simply refuses to assign greater moral value to what is more self-beneficial, then consider what we think about purely self-regarding cases where someone has to choose between having or not having something nice. Intuitively speaking, if someone on purely prudential grounds decides to have lunch rather than not eating at all, then, other things being equal, what that person does is neither morally better than the alternative nor, intuitively, the sort of action we would praise as morally a good one. And Kant’s conception of morality likewise provides no basis for assigning positive moral value to
actions to the extent they are directed merely toward the happiness or well-being of their agents.

By contrast, the utilitarian and the consequentialist more generally (but remember we are talking about act-utilitarianism and act-consequentialism only) will treat the intended or probable preference-satisfaction or well-being of the agent as a basis for positive moral assessment. In self-regarding cases, the consequentialist holds not only that the agent has a moral obligation to do the best she can for herself but, in addition, that it is morally better for her to do so than for her to perform some less self-beneficial alternative action. Moreover, where an agent has to choose between (a) doing $x$ amount of good for others and $y$ amount for himself and (b) simply doing $x$ amount for others, consequentialism regards the former act as morally superior, but our ordinary thinking about morality seems to lack this tendency. We don’t normally regard someone who could have benefited himself at the same time he helped others, but who chose only to help the others, as morally less meritorious for having done nothing for himself—indeed there may be some tendency to regard such action as morally better or more praiseworthy precisely because the agent sought nothing for himself in the process.

In summary, it would appear that over a wide range of cases our ordinary thinking about morality assigns no positive value to the well-being or happiness of the moral agent of the sort it clearly assigns to the well-being or happiness of everyone other than the agent. The fact that an act helps or seeks to help its agent cannot for such thinking provide any sort of ground or basis for the favorable—as opposed to the merely non-unfavorable—evaluation of that action. And harm to the agent seems similarly irrelevant to an act’s unfavorable evaluation. I believe that this aspect of common-sense morality is and can be shown to be ethically objectionable.

Defenders, as well as opponents, of an intuitive or intuitionist approach to ethics typically regard morality as the central concern of ethics and treat the moral assessment of acts and agents as our most fundamental, our most important, form of act-evaluation and agent-evaluation. (This fact is reflected, for example, in the familiar use of the expression “moral philosophy” to refer to the area of philosophy people in ethics are interested in.) And I believe it is objectionable to suppose that our most central (or fundamental or important) mode of ethical evaluation treats facts about whether and how an act is (or is intended to be) helpful or harmful to its agent’s interests as (at best) irrelevant to favorable and unfavorable evaluation of that act. If at the most fundamental level or in its most central concerns, our ethics is
in this way indifferent to whether the agent is helped or hurt by his actions, then our ethics devalues the interests of the agent and the agent himself as agent and imposes or entails a kind of self-abnegation or selflessness in regard to the agent’s own assessment of the ethical value of what he is doing. And I believe such considerations give us as much reason to be suspicious of commonsense or Kantian morality, considered as our most central or fundamental form of ethical evaluation, as consequentialism’s supposedly exorbitant demands for self-sacrifice give us reason to question the validity of the consequentialism.

If morality is to function as the centrally important part of our ethical thinking that most of us think it is, then both common-sense and Kantian morality are unfitted for such a role because of the way they depreciate the interests of moral agents both from the standpoint of those agents’ evaluation of their own actions and more generally. They each require the agent to be valuationally selfless or self-abnegating with respect to her own actions—though not with respect to other people’s actions—and, in effect, they alienate the agent from her own self-interest or welfare when she evaluates the ethical significance of her own actions. But even from a more general standpoint of evaluation, both views regard all effects on the agent’s well-being as fundamentally irrelevant to the favorable or unfavorable evaluation of a given action, whereas that well-being is taken into account when anyone else’s actions are being evaluated. Clearly, common-sense and Kantian morality, if seen as concerning themselves with the most central or fundamental questions of ethics, can each be criticized for deprecating or devaluing the welfare interests of the moral agent as such.

However, when we turn to our common-sense views about what counts as a virtue, we get an entirely different picture. Nothing in our usual understanding of (major) virtues like probity, generosity, prudence, benevolence, and courage requires us to assume that the person who has such virtues will invariably act for the greatest good of the greatest number whenever such action importantly conflicts with his own interests. And, furthermore, the fact that a certain trait of character enables its possessor to advance his own well-being is not treated as irrelevant to a positive evaluation of that trait; indeed many of our most significant common-sense virtues—for example, prudence, perseverance, foresight, caution, fortitude, courage, sagacity—are to a considerable extent admired for such usefulness to those who possess them. So our ordinary thinking about the virtues treats both self-regarding and other-regarding usefulness as bases for the favorable evaluation of traits.
of character and actions (or feelings or thoughts) that exemplify them. And the same, mutatis mutandis, holds for traits that harm either their possessors or people other than their possessors.

For some view or set of views to function adequately as our most fundamental or central form of ethical evaluation, it should not devalue agents by treating their happiness as irrelevant to the positive, or negative, ethical assessment of their own actions. And we have seen that Kantian and common-sense morality both fail to meet this condition of adequacy, in a way that common-sense virtue ethics does not. (By virtue ethics I here mean an ethics that deals with what counts as admirable or as a virtue, but does not speak of moral virtue as such. The latter is part of common-sense morality and shares its problems.) But none of this shows that common-sense or Kantian morality is mistaken or invalid: it may only show that neither can function on its own as the foundation or most central part of our ethical thinking, and this precisely leaves open the possibility that either common-sense or Kantian morality might function together with common-sense virtue ethics as the foundational, or most central, part of our substantive ethical thinking. And it also leaves open the alternative possibility that common-sense or Kantian morality might be a valid, but merely superficial part of ethics, with virtue ethics then exclusively taking on the central or foundational role that morality is often assumed to have.

Each of these results would demonstrate the importance of virtue theory and vindicate its recent claims to be taken seriously, rather than shunted to the side, as has so often happened in the past, in favor of an almost exclusive ethical preoccupation with moral right and wrong, with moral obligation, duty, and permission. But all of this fails to take into account another possibility that needs, at the very least, to be considered before we draw any conclusions in favor of virtue ethics.

We earlier saw that certain actions thwarting the well-being or interests of their agent can be regarded as stupid or irrational, even when, in common-sense terms, there seems to be nothing morally wrong with them. And this point surely suggests that our common-sense judgments about rationality lack the agent-sacrificing character of our common-sense moral judgments. In that cast, perhaps we can supplement common-sense morality, not with any form of virtue ethics, but with (the entire body of) our intuitive beliefs about rationality to arrive at an acceptable foundation for our ethical thinking. For if common-sense thinking about rationality treats what the agent does on his own behalf as having positive (rational) value, then a founda-
tional or central core of ethical thinking that combines common-sense (or Kantian) moral judgments with ordinary, intuitive rational judgments will be able to accord some sort of positive value to acts that help their agents, and our earlier criticism of common-sense morality will no longer be relevant.

Of course, by supplementing ordinary or Kantian moral thinking in this way, we treat such morality as less exclusively or preeminently important than we would if we regarded it as the single central and/or foundational component of our ethical thinking. But that is precisely the price we may have to—and even be willing to—pay in order to undercut the sorts of criticisms we have been directing here against both common-sense and Kantian morality. Earlier in this century and possibly as a result of lingering Victorian, and more generally Christian, high-mindedness, the selflessness of common-sense morality went largely unnoticed and entirely uncriticized. But in recent years many moral philosophers have advocated a healthy self-assertiveness on the part of moral agents. And although much of this recent thinking has been directed against Kantianism and consequentialism, rather than common-sense morality, a climate of opinion has nonetheless been created in which it is easier to make and perhaps sympathize with our earlier criticism of the agent-downgrading and evaluationally selfless character of common-sense (as well as of Kantian) morality. But these charges, as we now see, do not entail the rejection of common-sense or Kantian morality. They entail, rather, that we either reject these forms of morality or supplement one or the other of them with some other form of evaluation that can allow for agent-favoring ethical judgments and function in conjunction with such morality within the foundational or central core of (a) substantive ethical theory. And properly to canvass the possibilities, we must now, therefore, consider the merits of a foundational theoretical approach that combines moral judgments with judgments about rationality in an attempt to evade the difficulties that beset both common-sense morality and Kantian morality when each is taken on its own.