

# Comments on *Emotion and Virtue* by Gopal Sreenivasan

Julia Driver<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The University of Texas at Austin,  
Austin, Texas, USA

<sup>2</sup>CEPPA, University of St. Andrews, St.  
Andrews, UK

## Correspondence

Julia Driver, University of Texas at  
Austin, Austin, TX, USA.

Email: [julia.driver@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:julia.driver@austin.utexas.edu)

## Abstract

This essay provides a critical discussion of Gopal Sreenivasan's integral account of virtue in his book *Emotion and Virtue*. This discussion focuses on his account of the paradigm virtue of compassion, arguing that the view does not have most of the advantages Sreenivasan suggests it has when compared to competing models of virtue.

In *Emotion and Virtue*, Gopal Sreenivasan sets out to develop an account of virtue – or, at least, two prominent virtues, compassion and courage – that properly accounts for the centrality of emotion in virtue. Of course, many accounts of virtue have been developed which appeal to the emotions as either significant byproducts of virtue or as partly constitutive of virtue, but Sreenivasan's aim is to present an account in which the centrality of emotion to virtue is understood as the emotion in question being “a fully integrated constituent” of the corresponding virtue. His main targets in the book are those philosophers who treat emotion as irrelevant to virtue, or, as a kind of unnecessary, though possibly very nice, flourish. His arguments are rich and reward careful attention. Though I am in broad agreement with the view that emotion is crucial to virtue, my comments will focus on issues with which I disagree.

Again, his book focuses on two virtues, compassion and courage. In my comments, I will focus on compassion and its corresponding emotion of sympathy. However, many of the same worries I develop here can be transferred to the analysis of courage.

Sreenivasan's accounts of the virtues of compassion and courage are termed *integral* accounts. In the case of compassion, the integral view is the following:

(IV<sub>compassion</sub>) a morally rectified sympathy trait is a functionally integrated constituent of the virtue of compassion.

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Taking the example of compassion, then, the proper emotion is *sympathy*. Throughout the book, Sreenivasan has taken pains to distinguish what he means by “sympathy” from other emotions or states for which “sympathy” is sometimes used. Sympathy is affective and involves caring for others. This is in contrast to other states, such as empathy, which is perspectival, and from feelings that are simple emotional contagion. One cannot possess the virtue of compassion without also feeling sympathy. But not just any old sympathy. After all, sometimes sympathy seems to lead us astray, as when we act wrongly, out of compassion, in order to spare someone’s feelings. Perhaps, for example, concern for another person’s feelings leads one to lie to them when that is not the all-things-considered right thing to do. Thus, in the case of the virtue of compassion, the sympathetic element must be “morally rectified.”

As noted earlier, this morally rectified emotion is a “functionally integrated constituent” of compassion. To develop this idea further, he draws an analogy with the structure and make-up of a bento box: a bento box view of virtue identifies the psychological components of virtue, and at least one of those components, one of the boxes, so to speak, will be emotional. In the case of compassion, the *other* components are cleverness, which is excellence in practical reasoning, and supplementary moral knowledge.

The bento box is contrasted with a black box view, which holds that “...nonemotional constituents of an exemplar of virtue’s psychological makeup suffice to explain her ability to pass the central test of virtue” (26). There is little targeted discussion of specific blackbox views, an issue pursued later in these comments.

The central test of virtue (CTV) is a necessary though not sufficient condition for an agent’s possession of virtue. Further, Sreenivasan limits the account of virtue to *exemplars* of virtue. Exemplars are paragons of virtue who are highly or very highly consistent in their judgments.

(CTV) To qualify as virtuous<sub>n</sub>, an agent must consistently make correct judgements about what to do across a variety of situations that call for virtue.

In the case of compassion, the agent must consistently make correct judgments about what to do in situations calling for compassion. So, what best explains a compassionate exemplar’s ability to pass CTV? On Sreenivasan’s view, the emotional component of the virtue must be part of that explanation. That is, the ability is best explained by the agent’s possession of the morally rectified sympathy trait, along with cleverness (excellence in practical deliberation) and the possession of supplementary moral knowledge. Cleverness and moral knowledge are needed as the exemplar is not subject to certain sorts of error. In Chapter 7, Sreenivasan goes into more detail about the integral view and passing (CTV). This discussion is set up by earlier discussion of the emotions, and how they function, in Chapter 3. For the purposes of passing (CTV), a major function of emotion is that it makes certain features of our environments *salient* or calls attention to those features. Without this narrowing of attention, we will have problems in effective practical deliberation. When we add this motivational element to our account of virtue, then for a virtue exemplar (CTV) obtains, and there is effective follow-through in virtuous action. Sreenivasan believes that his bento box view best explains the compassionate exemplar’s passing of (CTV) because morally rectified sympathy accounts both for the exemplar’s sensitivity to what is morally relevant which in turn informs their judgments about what to do.

However, he is clear that black box views *can* pass the (CTV), but not in the right way:

On my view, the virtue of compassion requires not simply that an exemplar of compassion pass the central test of virtue (for compassion), but also that she employ

particular equipment to pass it, equipment that includes a bento box. Hence, no one who employs a black box to pass (CTV) can qualify as an exemplar of compassion... (30)

First, back to the central test itself. Very many accounts of virtue are committed to something like (CTV), especially if we are restricting the account to exemplars of the given virtue. Clearly, great weight is put on what it is to “make correct judgments about what to do.” Sreenivasan makes clear that these judgments are all-things-considered judgments about what to do. He offers the following example, which we will call **Café**.

...imagine that an old man is somewhat erratically pulling his precariously laden shopping cart along in front of a sidewalk café. He brushes a parking meter with his cart and spills his shopping all over the sidewalk. It is plausible to suppose both that helping the old man to reassemble his shopping is the right thing for a patron in the café to do in this scenario; and that, here, the judgement “Let me help this old man to reassemble his shopping” picks out an action that is a paradigm example of compassion.

(25)

Thus, in this particular case, the all-things-considered judgment is:

(MJ) Let me help this old man to reassemble his shopping.

I have written elsewhere about how views committed to a (CTV) requirement in which making the correct judgement involves knowing what one is doing under the relevant description aren't able to handle certain virtues such as modesty, which on my view can involve a failure to judge on the basis of one's evidence (Driver). However, Sreenivasan can avoid this worry by pointing out that he is simply discussing the virtue of compassion, and it may well be that even if modesty is a virtue, it would require separate treatment. And this is fine, though his targets in the book – the black box theorists – are attempting to provide comprehensive accounts of virtue. In his argument against externalist accounts of virtue, in Chapter 1 of the book, Sreenivasan notes that some externalists (such as myself) fully grant that when it comes to particular virtues good intentions, motives, etc. may be necessary and that he is not intending to target those forms of externalism. On these sorts of views, one could hold that compassion, to be *compassion*, requires that an agent need to be concerned for the well-being of others, but that what makes it a morally good disposition is something more general – for example, that others tend to actually be helped. I think that blackbox theorists could argue that, since they are presenting comprehensive views of virtue they, too, are free to grant Sreenivasan that, in the case of compassion, for it to be compassion there must be sympathy directed at others as part of the agent's psychological make-up and that this is functionally integrated with the rest of the agent's psychology. However, compassion's status as a virtue is explained by something more general – and then the specific blackbox view fills in the relevant criterion.

Another requirement is the adverbial requirement on virtue, which he discusses in Chapter 6. Consider **Café** again. The adverbial requirement holds that in this case the compassionate person who helps the man with his shopping, who is an *exemplar* of compassion, would not simply help the man with his shopping but would also express sympathy in doing so: “...in order to be performed as an exemplar of compassion would perform it, any compassionate act must

sincerely express the agent's sympathy." (125). Clear examples of so acting would involve actually voicing concern, patting him kindly on the shoulder, etc. Sreenivasan notes that requiring overt expressions of this sort would be rather odd and counter-intuitive. To mitigate this concern, he distinguishes between weak expression of sympathy and strong expression of sympathy.

In the *weak* sense, an action expresses an emotion when its content and the manner of its performance are consistent with its being tied to that emotion.... In the strong sense, an action expresses an emotion when the manner of its performance overtly communicates that emotion (the communication need not be intentional).

(127)

Thus, the adverbial requirement is limited to weak expression. I take it that this, for example, rules out things like *acting* impatiently with the man when helping him with his shopping, even when one's helping him is due to morally rectified sympathy, because acting impatiently does not seem consistent with morally rectified sympathy.

My worry about this requirement is that it risks being either implausible or almost trivial. I am reminded of the character of Rocky Sullivan, played by James Cagney, in *Angels With Dirty Faces*. Rocky Sullivan is a criminal who is sentenced to be executed. In order to discourage the children who idolize him, though he is not actually afraid, he acts as though he is terrified so that they will no longer have a high opinion of him – and this is a compassionate thing to do, and an expression of his concern for the well-being of the children. Even though behavior such as screaming and struggling to avoid execution is not characteristic of compassion at all, given the circumstances this behavior is what the exemplar of compassion would do in the circumstances. He is acting this way because he has very good moral reason to do so. Sreenivasan is likely to say this is in no way a counter-example, since this behavior is consistent with compassion, as the case demonstrates. However, this raises the question of what would count as a failure of the adverbial requirement as long as the behavior in question was justified by moral reasons. The examples that Sreenivasan mentions – e.g., a person whose facial expressions are “stiff and blank” whilst he is helping, don't seem controversial at all. I will have more to say on this below when discussing a black box alternative.

Granting the central test is necessary, and further granting the adverbial requirement, how might a black box theorist respond? There was little discussion of specific theorists who hold this view, though he does mention Nicholas Dent, Rosalind Hursthouse, as well as Terrance Irwin's interpretation of Aristotle.

Let's compare this bento box view with a black box view that Sreenivasan identified, that of Nicholas Dent. There is nothing in Dent that ties the compassionate act to a moral judgment that itself issues from a disposition that at least includes sympathy. According, then, to Sreenivasan, a sympathetic disposition can be “tacked-on” but not in such a way as to *explain* the judgment underlying the compassionate act. On Dent's view, this is because he allows that a truly compassionate person can *judge* that compassion is called for and act accordingly simply on the basis of rational argument, though acting wholeheartedly enhances virtue status and should be included in the paradigm.

Dent believes that one role of practical reason is to bring our passions in line with judgment. Thus, the *judgments* underlying virtue are independent of our emotions. This is very similar in function to the moral rectification of sympathy which is part of Sreenivasan's bento box model. Again, the advantage of his model over Dent's is that on his view, we can give a neat account of why the sympathy is important to the paradigm, whereas on Dent's model it seems to be

tacked-on just to make sure that we get the intuitively correct answers about cases. Sreenivasan rejects Dent's attempts at incorporating the adverbial requirement on pp.127–128. First of all, he believes that an agent can wholeheartedly try to help someone, and yet is clearly not being compassionate. For example, a stiff, awkward café patron can wholeheartedly help the man in Café. I'm not sure what to make of this case, since Sreenivasan goes on to write that strictly speaking this satisfies the weak expression condition. However, he discusses a case he takes to be a clear problem, which I will term **Insincere Café**:

Imagine that another patron in the same café is always being criticized by his girlfriend for being a “hard man,” for never helping anyone, and for lauding those who do not need help. She is at it again this morning in the café, ... Lo, along comes the old man and spills his shopping. Our patron might leap up, eager for the opportunity to spite his girlfriend.

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We can all agree this is not a nice guy, and certainly not truly compassionate. But here I will try channeling Dent a bit. He would disagree that he would be stuck with this problem. To use an example from Dent, which is generosity, he argues that “wholeheartedly” goes with the desire to help someone, and there is nothing in his account that would rule out including an expression of that desire in what makes that trait the virtue of kindness (Dent, 177). Further, we can easily add “desire *for its own sake*” to avoid the problem Sreenivasan raises for Dent. Again, Sreenivasan will hold that these are just tack-ons and not central to the account. But it does mean that Dent is not stuck with those particular problems.

Both Sreenivasan and Dent hold that passions need to be properly directed. Both also hold that the corrective mechanism is directed by reason in some sense.

It seems to me that the real contrast occurs when we consider the judgments underlying or constituting the virtue. I will keep things simple and just consider one such judgment operative in the compassion cases discussed:

(MJ) I ought (morally) to help this man with his packages.

For Sreenivasan this requires morally rectified sympathy as well as cleverness and supplementary moral knowledge. For Dent, such judgments do not require pre-existing desire or emotion, though they may very well characteristically give rise to them. Again, the patron in **Insincere Café** did not make the requisite judgment in the first place, so Dent needn't bite any bullets here.

So where can we get a case that illustrates the contrast best? Imagine the following, which I term **Café 2** [yes, not very imaginative]. The set-up is the same as in the earlier Café cases, but now the patron conforms to the following description: he has just found out that his partner of many years has left him and is at the café to ruminate on his future with a nice bottle of wine. He is finding it very hard to care about much of anything. Not that he was particularly caring about others prior to his misfortune. As he ruminates, he sees the old man's possessions go sprawling across the sidewalk and thinks to himself “I know that I should help him.” He feels disgusted with himself that it is so hard for him to care about others now. In spite of his emotional lethargy, he gets up, and in a friendly relaxed manner helps the man with his possessions and pays for some coffee and croissants for him at the café. Is this a paradigm of compassion? One can make a plausible case, I think. It isn't the caring, but the knowledge that he should care that moves him [or, less contentiously, caring about being the sort of person

who cares]. So, Dent would not neglect the role of emotion, but he thinks that we have certain desires that can be the product of what we believe about value, or what we believe that we ought to do (Dent, 93). I think that it is probably open to Dent, then, to say that when we analyze distinct virtues such as compassion 1. We see, that even on the opposing view, reason is important and further that 2. On his view, reason itself can give rise to desires of a certain sort and perhaps in the case of compassion the desire is to help those in need consistent with the dictates of morality. This would allow him to incorporate emotion into the explanation when it comes to analyzing specific virtues.

All I have done so far is offer a black box defense against the criticism Sreenivasan provides stemming from the Adverbial Requirement. Sreenivasan also believes that the bento box view is superior when it comes to accounting for the significance of *salience* and also in accounting for one justification for relying on the testimony of an exemplar – the exemplar will have *emotionally* appropriate reactions that are also *morally* appropriate. In the first case, we have a well-known problem for viewing virtues as simple dispositions. It isn't enough to want to help others, for example, one needs to be able to pick up on when others need help. One needs to be sensitive to the right sorts of things. With the second consideration, the idea is that the emotional responses of the exemplar improve on the naïf's, or at least are just as good. So, rectified emotions can "... provide a reliably good means of appreciating another person's needs, and so of responding adequately to them."

The black box theorist will tend to be someone who believes that all of the morally significant features of agency are within direct agential control, and guided by reason in such a way as to not be mediated by something that is essentially a rational, such as non-derivative desires or pro-attitudes and emotions. This is because, at least in Dent's case, one important *ethical* consideration is our capacity for rational self-determination. Dent believes that without reason at the bottom of things, not simply tagging along and exerting some influence over passion, we simply won't have that:

...not everything that is of value, indeed of great value, moves us, catches our feelings, either at all or to the degree to which it should. We are not, because of this, bound to be indifferent to these desiderata in the formation of our purposes and in undertaking our actions. We can, should and do take them into account and incorporate them into the direction of our lives by a deliberate election to make them our concern and by resolving upon acting for their own sakes. This giving of concern, rather than concern being drawn out from us, comes from the exercise of practical reason in self-determination.

(Nicholas Dent, *The Moral Psychology of the Virtues*, 1984, 90)

and

[It is] by our practically rational judgement and determination we endeavour to [give] our life that shape and direction we think it best it should possess, one which it would not, save by chance, assume if we simply acted as and when we were prompted to do by our aroused desires.

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Again, this is perfectly compatible with emotions reinforcing and motivating us. But these will follow from our views of what is good and valuable, and what our duties are.

Adjudicating between the views will depend upon what one is trying to accomplish within the theory along with certain background views about the nature of practical reason. I happen to be on Sreenivasan's side when it comes to where emotion enters into the picture. But then again, I am much less sanguine about the picture of practical reason that Dent is developing in his work. However, I believe that the problem with these approaches has to do with our wanting something to be the case which simply isn't possible: pure rational self-determination of the sort that allows us as agents to fully stand outside of ourselves.

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