Disunity of virtue

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The unity of the virtues thesis is among the more venerable standard features of ancient ethics. But its status in contemporary 'virtue ethics' is, at best, controversial: many writers follow the tendency of contemporary moral philosophy more generally to reject the thesis. In this essay, I shall also deny that the virtues are unified. However, my reasons for denying it are, so I believe, somewhat different from the ordinary ones. Moreover, I also accept that the unity thesis contains—and, indeed, is at least sometimes motivated by—important kernels of truth. I shall therefore attempt to sketch a position on the inter-relation of the virtues that avoids the falsity of the unity thesis, while still salvaging some of its more attractive aspects.[1]

I

§1. As many commentators have noted, there is in fact more than one thesis that parades, in ancient ethics, under the banner of 'the unity' of the virtues.[2] I shall only be concerned with one of them, namely, the thesis that one cannot have one virtue without having all of the others as well. In other words, if there is any one virtue that a person lacks, then it follows that this person does not have any of the other virtues. For what it is worth, this is the weaker, Aristotelian version of the unity of the

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[1] This mix and match strategy is by no means novel. See, e.g., N. Badhwar, "The Limited Unity of Virtue," Noûs 30 (1996): 306-29 and S. Wolf, "Moral Psychology and the Unity of the Virtues," online manuscript. While I shall not keep a running inventory, each of us actually defends a different composite position.

[2] See, e.g., T. Penner, "The Unity of Virtue," Philosophical Review 82 (1973): 35-68; T. Irwin, "Practical Reason Divided: Aquinas and his Critics" in G. Cullity and B. Gaut (eds.) Ethics and Practical Reason (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), ch. 7; and J. Cooper, "The Unity of Virtue" in his Reason and Emotion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), ch. 3.

virtues, as opposed (e.g.) to the stronger, Socratic version.[3] Of course, if the Aristotelian thesis is false, then its stronger relative(s) should also be rejected, although I shall not myself pursue that separate argument.

Let me frame the thesis that concerns me slightly more precisely. Henceforth, I shall refer to it simply as 'the' unity of the virtues thesis. It holds that, whatever an agent has on the score of a given virtue, if there is any other virtue that he or she lacks, then the agent does not truly or fully count as having the given virtue either. To illustrate the thesis, as well as to appreciate its merits, it helps to introduce Aristotle's distinction between natural virtue and full virtue.

By a natural virtue, Aristotle means a native, perhaps instinctive, propensity to behave in a manner associated with one of the several virtues. 'For each of us seems to possess his type of character to some extent by nature, since we are just, brave, prone to temperance, or have another feature, immediately from birth' (1144b4-6).[4] Thus, for example, someone who instinctively perseveres when faced with danger can be regarded as naturally courageous.

What distinguishes natural virtue from full virtue is that it is morally unreliable in various ways: natural virtue is liable, that is, to various kinds of moral error. For example, the platoon leader who steels himself to defend a piece of strategically expendable high ground against clearly superior fire makes a kind of moral mistake—a big one, if he also requires his platoon to dig themselves in with him. Hence, on Aristotle's view, the platoon leader is not truly courageous. Rather, he is stupid or obstinate, though he perseveres in the face of danger all the same.

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[3] To help keep the theses straight, Irwin dubs the Aristotelian thesis 'the reciprocity of the virtues.'

[4] Nicomachean Ethics, trans. T. Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985).

Alternatively, our naturally courageous platoon leader may be able to figure out that the high ground he occupies is strategically expendable, and so not worth defending against clearly superior fire. But now suppose that his conclusion that the ground is strategically expendable depends on his knowledge that it belongs to his family's business rivals, on whom the loss will weigh heavily, or that ceding this ground to the enemy will make it easier to defend the territory across the river, which belongs to his family. In that case, the retreating platoon leader makes a different kind of moral mistake—that of relying upon considerations that are excluded by justice (or so we may suppose). While not stupid, retreating on the basis of such considerations is not, on this view, consistent with true courage either (though, again, it may well be consistent with natural courage).

Now Aristotle's own notion of a 'natural' virtue combines three features, only two of which are actually important for the argument about the unity of virtue. As we have seen, a natural virtue (i) produces behaviour roughly like that produced by one of the virtues (e.g., courage); (ii) is liable to moral error; and (iii) is present from birth. But this third feature is not necessary for the present argument. Indeed, Aristotle himself is elsewhere at pains to insist that a person who lacks any propensity to behave in the manner associated with a given virtue can acquire it later.[5] As long as the virtue the person acquires is still (ii) liable to moral error, it (e.g., his acquired courage) will also fall short of full or true virtue, and hence remain subject to Aristotle's argument for the unity of the virtues. Unfortunately, the expression 'natural' virtue tends to suggest precisely the feature that we do not need. So let me introduce the expression 'proto virtue' to cover both strictly natural virtues and also their ersatz equivalents, which may be acquired after birth, but which remain similarly liable

[5] How someone might acquire a virtue from scratch, as it were, is discussed by M. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on learning to be good" in A. Rorty (ed.) Essays on Aristotle's Ethics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

to moral error. Proto virtues, then, have only the first two of the three features that define Aristotle's natural virtues.

We can now observe two important points about the unity of the virtues thesis. To begin with, the virtues that the thesis asserts to be unified are the full or true virtues, rather than the proto virtues. Thus, for example, the unity thesis asserts that whatever one has on the score of courage—that is, however much one is disposed to behave courageously—if there is some other virtue one lacks (e.g., one lacks even proto justice), then one's courage does not count as true or full courage. But the unity thesis does not in the least deny that one can have (e.g.) proto courage without having any of the other virtues. Hence, it does not deny that one can be disposed to behave in the manner associated with courage, despite lacking the other virtues.[6] It simply denies, in that case, that the disposition one has counts as true courage. This first point allows the unity thesis to accommodate a certain amount of the intuitive evidence that is usually presented against it—for example, it can accommodate plausible cases in which someone acts courageously or generously (perhaps even, reliably so), yet is also unjust or unkind.[7]

The second point represents the core intuition behind the unity thesis. It is that true virtue cannot be something that leads its possessor morally astray. The platoon leader whose 'courage' leads him to abandon high ground to the enemy in order to be better placed to defend his own family's property across the river may not be making a moral mistake as far as the demands of

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[6] Nor, for that matter, need it deny that one's resultant behaviour has moral value.

[7] Compare Irwin, p. 193. But it should also be acknowledged that there is, as Wolf observes, a residual tendency in everyday usage to resist the opportunity to downgrade the virtue attributed in these cases to a second-rate species. The unity thesis is simply inconsistent with this aspect of everyday usage.

courage, taken in isolation, are concerned. But he does make a moral mistake as far as the demands of justice are concerned. So it remains the case that his 'courage' leads him morally astray: at the very least, it fails to prevent him from going morally astray (i.e., from committing injustice). Hence, it cannot be true virtue. At most, it can be proto virtue. In order to be insulated against this particular kind of moral error (injustice), the platoon leader's proto courage has to be combined with the virtue of justice.

This argument is easily generalised. For any particular virtue the platoon leader lacks, there will be some kind of moral error to which his proto courage remains liable. But then, one way or the other, his proto courage may still lead him morally astray. If true courage cannot be something that leads its possessor morally astray, then to qualify the platoon leader's proto courage has to be insulated not simply against injustice, but against all the kinds of moral error there are. To qualify as 'true' courage, therefore, the platoon leader's proto courage has to be combined with all of the other virtues. It seems to me that there is something attractive in the fundamental premiss of this argument. However, before we examine it more closely, I want to consider an alternative means of framing the argument for the unity thesis.

§2. In Book VI of the Nichomachean Ethics, Aristotle bases his official argument for the unity of the virtues on the relation between full virtue and practical wisdom (phronesis) (1144b32-1145a2). According to Aristotle, this relation is one of material equivalence: a person has full virtue (e.g., full courage) if and only if he is practically wise. One way to understand this claim is that practical wisdom is supposed to be the remedy for the moral liabilities of proto virtue. If the proto courageous platoon leader were somehow to become practically wise, then his courage would qualify as full

courage. Fortunately, a minimal analysis of practical wisdom will suffice for our purposes.

Among other things, practical wisdom entails cleverness (deinotes), though cleverness does not entail practical wisdom (1144a28-30). By 'cleverness' here, we should understand a generic excellence in practical reasoning, broadly construed to include specificatory reasoning in addition to narrowly instrumental reasoning. Where instrumental reasoning is concerned with selecting the best means to a given end, specificatory reasoning is concerned with selecting the best specific instantiation of a more abstractly given end. The clever person excels at both. Cleverness is distinguished from practical wisdom by its indifference to the moral quality of the ends it promotes. In that sense, it is morally even less reliable than proto virtue, for each proto virtue is at least positively (albeit, imperfectly) orientated to a certain kind of moral consideration. By contrast, cleverness is simply morally inert and can serve immoral purposes as well as moral ones.

Nevertheless, cleverness still functions, all on its own, as a partial remedy for the moral liabilities of proto virtue. That is because some liabilities to moral error have nothing to do with a given proto virtue's insensitivity to the moral considerations characteristic of other virtues. Rather, they arise from the proto virtuous agent's imperfect sensitivity to the very considerations that characterise the moral perspective of the virtue in question. Recall our proto courageous platoon leader. In the first version of the example, he sought to defend a piece of strategically expendable ground in the face of clearly superior fire. While it counts as perseverance in the face of danger, this particular perseverance was manifestly not worthwhile. However, some assessment of which dangers are worth facing (and to what end) is partly constitutive of the moral perspective of the courageous agent.[8] Hence, insofar as the platoon leader is proto courageous, his decision to

[8] It is possible to describe the case as one in which no such assessment takes place, not even

persevere simply reflects a lack of cleverness, since it involves a poor assessment of the danger at hand as compared to what is at stake in the situation. That is to say, it involves a deficient implementation of his own commitments. Under the circumstances, an agent who was both clever and proto courageous would have opted to retreat.

Of course, the remedy that cleverness alone offers to proto virtue is very incomplete. Since cleverness is itself morally inert, it cannot counteract the insensitivity of (e.g.) proto courage to the moral considerations characteristic of the other virtues, and hence cannot remedy proto courage's corresponding liabilities to moral error. In some cases, the moral liabilities of cleverness may actually exacerbate those of the proto virtue in question. For example, if the platoon leader is both clever and proto courageous, he may find that his cleverness actually compels him to include the facts about his family's property across the river in his assessment of what is at stake in the situation, and so positively leads him to commit injustice.

To the extent that cleverness and a given proto virtue share many of the same moral liabilities, each stands in need of the remedy prescribed by the first version of the unity argument—namely, augmentation by the complete set of virtues. It is an interesting question whether a complete set of proto virtues would suffice to insulate a clever agent against all the kinds of moral error there are;[9] and we shall return to certain aspects of it below. But the important point for the moment is that a complete set of proto virtues is, in any case, necessary to insulate a clever

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implicitly. The platoon leader's perseverance would then reflect complete insensitivity (rather than incomplete sensitivity) to the evaluative dimension emphasised in the text. But, in that case, his disposition is not properly counted as any kind of courage, not even proto courage.

[9] If it would suffice, then the addition of a complete set of proto virtues is what turns mere cleverness into practical wisdom.

agent against all the kinds of moral error there are,[10] and hence necessary for him or her to qualify as practically wise.[11] Aristotle's requirement of practical wisdom as a condition of full virtue (e.g., of full courage) therefore trivially entails the unity of the full virtues, since it requires something that is itself partly constituted by a complete set of virtues. What this second version of the unity argument brings out, as a complement to the first, is that cleverness is in fact a separate necessary condition of full virtue.

§3. We should notice a final point here about the operation of cleverness, one that stands free of the question whether the full virtues are unified. It arises in contexts where a clever agent has more than one proto virtue, though not necessarily a complete set. For simplicity, we can focus on the case of the clever agent who has only two proto virtues.

Suppose, for example, that our platoon leader is actually clever, proto courageous, and proto just. Suppose, furthermore, that the high ground he occupies is strategically expendable if and only if some premium is placed on the territory across the river—a premium that is justified only if he may take account of the fact that the territory belongs to his family. If the platoon leader's present position is taken to be strategically expendable (as cleverness on its own recommends), then courage will permit him to retreat to defend the territory across the river. Moreover, it will not permit him to defend his present position, since that would not be worthwhile in the face of clearly superior fire.

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[10] To be precise, it is a necessary condition only when interpreted so that possession of a given full virtue satisfies the requirement to have the corresponding proto virtue (e.g., when being fully courageous satisfies the requirement to be proto courageous). Otherwise put, the necessary condition is to have a complete set of at least the proto virtues. The argument here reiterates the first version of the unity argument.

[11] Since practical wisdom entails full virtue, it cannot lead its possessor morally astray either.

On the other hand, if his present position is taken not to be expendable (as justice indirectly entails), then courage will permit the platoon leader to defend it.[12] Holding the description of his situation fixed, then, courage will issue different prescriptions to the platoon leader depending on whether it operates in isolation or rather in tandem with justice.

In narrow terms, the example illustrates how the prescriptions of one virtue (here, justice) can change the prescriptions of another virtue (here, courage) when the agent's situation is one to which the prescriptions of both virtues apply.[13] To generalise slightly, the individual virtues are not independent of one another, even when they are taken to be distinct—e.g., when each corresponds to a characteristic sensitivity to a different kind of moral consideration. Rather, the corresponding moral sensitivities are mutually porous: where more than one kind of moral consideration applies in a given situation, each virtue (i.e., sensitivity) coordinates its prescription (up to a point) with those issued by the other virtues.

The limits of this coordination vary from case to case; and sometimes they are asymmetrical as between virtues. But up to this limit point, the coordination is sanctioned within the perspectives of the several virtues themselves. What is more, and this is the advertised final point, an agent who has the relevant proto virtues, but does not adjust his or her practical reasoning accordingly, actually exhibits a failure of cleverness. Thus, it would be a failure of cleverness in our platoon leader not to conclude, in the previous example, that he is permitted (including by courage) to defend his present position. Under the supervision of cleverness, by contrast, his proto courage will defer here

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[12] We can leave open whether courage then actually requires him to defend it.

[13] The second virtue's prescriptions are changed, that is, from what they would be if that virtue were operating in isolation.

to his proto justice, and thereby conform more closely to the requirements of full courage.

Now two features of the example may appear to restrict the scope of its lesson. On the one hand, courage is an executive virtue and, on the other hand, there is no direct conflict between the requirements of courage and justice in this situation. While executive virtues are facilitative by nature, it may be thought that the propensity to coordinate does not extend to non-executive virtues. In addition, it may be thought that direct conflict between two virtues excludes the possibility of coordination between them. Let me briefly address each of these concerns.

To allay the first concern, consider an example with justice and compassion, which is not an executive virtue. Suppose you encounter two homeless people on the street, who appear rather badly off and similarly so. Each asks you for money for something to eat and all you have on you are two $5 bills. Let us say you are fairly well off, so that if there had been only one homeless person before you, compassion would have required you to give him $5, but not all $10. Let us also say that justice requires you not to discriminate arbitrarily between them, so that it forbids you to give $5 to one and nothing to the other, although it permits you to give nothing to both. Here it seems plausible to suppose that compassion coordinates with justice by now requiring you to give each man $5 (i.e., to give a total of $10); and reasonable to expect—if you are clever, as well as proto compassionate and proto just—that you can figure this out.

Of course, there is no direct conflict between requirements in this example either. However, that does not really matter. The relevant division does not arise from the presence or absence of direct conflict between virtues in a given situation, but instead from the presence or absence of irresolvable conflict. If a conflict between the requirements of two virtues in a given situation is resolvable—e.g., if one of the requirements is outweighed, under the circumstances—there is no

reason why the all things considered verdict cannot serve as the point of coordination between the two virtues. As long as the requirement 'of' a particular virtue (i.e., based on a particular kind of moral consideration) really is defeated, all things considered, it should be regarded, in the final analysis, as having ultimately been withdrawn by that virtue itself (i.e., disavowed by the corresponding sensitivity).[14] After all, not to withdraw it would be to lead the agent morally astray.

Naturally, it may also be that some conflicts between virtues are simply not resolvable. In that case, there will be no point of coordination between them in the situation. Still, unless no conflict between virtues is resolvable, the appearance of conflict is not itself an indication of when the limits of coordination have been reached. In that sense, the absence of conflict in my examples does not matter.

§4. Let me summarise what, in my view, the unity of the virtues thesis has going for it. There are three main points (or perhaps, two and a half). First and foremost, there is the intuition that true virtue cannot be something that leads its possessor morally astray. As I have said, this strikes me as an attractive thought. Another way to put it would be to say that true virtue is a kind of moral perfection. Hence, whenever one can identify a moral defect in a trait (or a moral error in the behaviour in which it issues), there is evidence that the trait falls short of a true virtue. At least in cases where the moral error could have been identified by cleverness alone (i.e., without the assistance of any other virtue), it seems to me very difficult to deny that the trait in question falls short of a true virtue.

[14] This is not to deny that a 'residue' may remain and so on.

Next there is the observation that the several individual virtues have an inherent tendency to operate as a coordinated ensemble, i.e. a unity. That is to say, to the extent that a clever agent has more than one virtue (i.e., characteristic moral sensitivity) and to the extent that the corresponding kinds of moral consideration jointly apply to his or her situation, the agent's several virtues will coordinate their respective prescriptions, at least up to a point. I want to suggest that the unity of the virtues thesis can be seen as deriving, in part, from a robust two-pronged extension of this observation. The first extension removes all limits on cooperation between the virtues, while the second takes the counter-factual truth that an agent's existing virtue(s) would coordinate with any other virtues she may be missing (i.e., would if she were not missing them) as a licence to find moral fault with her existing virtue(s). Of course, it remains to be seen whether either extension is at all tenable. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the observation from which they begin is well-grounded.

Finally, there is the (half) point that defining the unity thesis in terms of full virtues, as distinct from proto virtues, accommodates the intuitive phenomenon of (e.g.) unkind or unjust people behaving courageously or generously. Since there are many situations in which only one kind of moral consideration saliently applies, someone who has (only) the corresponding proto virtue can still behave perfectly well in them. After all, in such situations, the moral liabilities of his or her proto virtue simply do not show up.

II

§1. The fundamental premiss that true virtue cannot lead its possessor morally astray serves to make insulation against all the kinds of moral error there are a necessary condition of any disposition's qualifying as a true virtue. Quite apart from whether one finds anything attractive about this premiss,

it manifestly presupposes that it is possible to be insulated against all such error—possible to be entirely free of liability to moral error.[15] But is it?

To examine this question, we need to distinguish three subsidiary theses, each of which is an independent component of the crucial presupposition. I shall call them, respectively, (i) no genuine virtue dilemmas; (ii) the empirical compatibility of the virtues; and (iii) the moral self-sufficiency of the virtues. Denying any one of them suffices to make insulation against all the kinds of moral error there are impossible, and thereby to reject either version of the argument we canvassed earlier for the unity of the virtues. The standard route to rejecting the unity of the virtues proceeds via a denial of (i) no genuine virtue dilemmas.[16] Myself, I suspect that all three subsidiary theses may be false. For present purposes, however, I shall concentrate on denying (iii) the moral self-sufficiency of the virtues.

But let me first briefly describe the other two theses, even though I will not have anything further to say about them. As I suggested earlier, the possibility of irresolvable conflict between the requirements of two virtues in a given situation indicates a clear limit to any coordination in their prescriptions. Given such a conflict, there will be no course of action open to the agent in the situation that allows her to satisfy the requirements of both virtues. In that case, she makes a moral error no matter what she does. Moreover, this remains true even if the agent already has the relevant pair of virtues: From the perspective of each virtue, the other virtue is unavoidably liable, under the

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[15] For a wide ranging discussion of this theme in Greek ethics, see M. Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[16] The standard route, that is, apart from appealing to the intuitive phenomena that can be accommodated by distinguishing true virtues from proto virtues. Sometimes, the unity of the virtues is also rejected by denying (ii) the empirical compatibility of the virtues.

circumstances, to moral error. Hence, by the fundamental premiss, neither can possibly qualify as true virtue. To avoid this result, proponents of the unity of the virtues must claim that conflicts between virtues are always resolvable. That is to say, they must claim that (i) there are no genuine virtue dilemmas.

If individual virtues are thought of (even partly) as characteristic sensitivities to distinctive kinds of moral consideration, then there are in fact two independent levels on which conflicts between virtues may arise. On the one hand, conflicts might arise on the moral-theoretical level—between the 'contents' of the respective virtues, which is to say between the kinds of moral consideration to which they are characteristically sensitive.[17] On the other hand, conflicts may also arise between virtues on the empirical psychological level. In any actual human being, a characteristic sensitivity to a particular kind of moral consideration must be constituted out of certain psychological materials. Just what materials these might be is another interesting question, but not our present concern. Here the point is only that sensitivities to different kinds of moral consideration are constituted, so one naturally assumes, out of (at least, somewhat) different psychological materials. This raises the empirical question of whether these different psychological materials can be 'co-assembled' in the same human being. Impediments to co-assembly may impose an empirical limit on the combinations of virtues any one human being can possess. However, if there is some such limit, there will be certain liabilities to moral error from which even a maximally virtuous agent cannot be insulated. So, to make use of the fundamental premiss, proponents of the unity of the virtues must claim that it is possible to possess all of the virtues. In other words, they must claim that (ii) the several virtues are empirically compatible.

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[17] This is the prospect addressed, and contained, by the first subsidiary thesis.

Recall that the point of unifying the virtues is fully to insulate virtuous agents from liability to moral error. Suppose, then, that there are no conflicts between virtues, either on the moral-theoretical level or on the empirical psychological level. Empirically, it will be possible for one agent to have all the virtues, while morally the agent who has them all will be guaranteed, in every situation, to have a course of action available that jointly satisfies the requirements of all the virtues that apply there. It is worth noticing, I think, that even this rather heavy idealisation fails to secure a path to the promised land. Agents who have the complete set of virtues are only insulated against the kinds of moral error for which there is a characteristic sensitivity. Alas, it is a further assumption that these are all the kinds there are. Nothing that has been said so far excludes there being other kinds of (identifiable) moral error for which there is no characteristic sensitivity. Yet, if a complete set of virtues is to suffice to insulate an agent from all liability to moral error, there must be a virtue (i.e., characteristic sensitivity) corresponding to <u>every</u> identifiable kind of moral error (i.e., consideration). This is the claim I wish to label (iii) the moral self-sufficiency of the virtues.

§2. Despite the contemporary hostility to the unity of the virtues thesis, an important strand of contemporary 'virtue ethics' is utterly congenial to the claim that the virtues are morally self-sufficient—namely, the strand according to which 'virtue ethics' represents a complete and distinctive ethics (or moral theory).[18] It seems to me that this ambition is actually thoroughly misguided. But here I shall claim only that the virtues are <u>not</u> morally self-sufficient.

I accept, of course, that the virtues are an important and distinctive part of morality. Still, they are not the whole of morality. The most obvious candidate for what the remainder includes is

[18] See, e.g., R. Hursthouse, <u>On virtue ethics</u> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). I use the term 'theory' broadly here.

the category of rights. It seems indisputable that morality includes both a realm of virtues and a realm of rights.[19] Indeed, it plausibly includes still more besides. But the appeal to rights is adequate for my purposes. Now, for rights to serve as a counter-example to the moral self-sufficiency of the virtues, it must also be true that no virtue is characteristically sensitive to rights. While this further claim is disputable,[20] I believe it is nevertheless correct. However, in a departure from the traditional order of proceeding, I propose to examine its consequences before I attempt to establish its correctness.

If there is no virtue that is characteristically sensitive to rights, it follows that even a clever agent who has the complete set of virtues remains liable to a certain kind of moral error—namely, rights violations. We need not imagine that such an agent is liable to violate rights left and right, like the proverbial bull in a china shop. That is implausible if only because many actions that violate rights are countermanded under multiple descriptions and some of those descriptions (e.g., 'harm') will be ones to which some virtue is characteristically sensitive. Still, unless the realm of rights is entirely epiphenomenal, there will be other rights violations that a clever and completely virtuous agent is liable to commit—in the sense that nothing in her moral dispositions as described insulates her against committing them. What should we make of this fact?

I shall describe two somewhat extreme reactions to begin with. While I shall argue that one of them is a non-starter, I do not thereby mean to advocate the other. My principal ambition is rather to put a third, intermediate option on the table. Its advantage over the surviving extreme reaction

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[19] On this point, I agree with Judith Thomson, although she comes at it from the other direction. See her Realm of Rights (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 117.

[20] Some may object, in particular, that the virtue of justice is characteristically sensitive to rights. I reject this objection below.

is to allow us to salvage something from the fundamental premiss. This is not a decisive advantage, but it does commend the third option to our attention.

The first extreme reaction is to conclude that there is no such thing as 'true' virtue; and the second is to add 'respect for rights' as a further necessary condition on true virtue. Let us consider these reactions in reverse order. The second reaction hews steadfastly to the logic of the argument for the unity of the virtues. Faced with the fact that an agent's (e.g.) proto courage was consistent with her (e.g.) committing injustice, that logic insisted that the agent acquire the virtue of justice before her proto courage could qualify as true courage. Likewise, faced with the fact that an agent's proto courage—or, indeed, her complete set of proto virtues—is consistent with her violating rights, that same logic might insist that the agent acquire something like 'respect for rights' before her proto virtues can qualify as true virtues.

A reasonable preliminary question to ask would be what 'respect for rights' could possibly mean (as a disposition an agent might acquire), once it has been distinguished from a characteristic sensitivity to rights. But I want to set this issue to one side. Let us grant—pretend, if need be—that an agent might acquire 'respect for rights' and that acquiring 'it' will insulate her against violating rights. To simplify matters, let us also say, finally, that rights and virtues constitute the whole of morality. In that case, the clever agent who has both the complete set of virtues and 'respect for rights' will indeed be insulated from all liability to moral error.

Unfortunately, this does not actually help the argument for the unity of the virtues. The trouble is that it is now the agent herself, as opposed to her virtue(s), that has been insulated against all moral error. Her virtues themselves are still at least consistent with her violating rights; and, in that sense, they can still lead her morally astray. All that saves the agent from going astray is that,

having now acquired 'respect for rights,' she will not follow that lead, and so will not in fact violate any rights. But this bit of moral behaviour on her part occurs despite her virtues, and not because of them. Hence, by the fundamental premiss, this agent's virtues are not 'true' virtues, even though she has a complete set.

Notice that when one (proto) virtue comes to the rescue of another, as the original argument envisages, no such trouble arises from distinguishing between an agent and her virtue(s). When a clever agent's proto justice insulates her against her proto courage's liability to injustice, her proto courage itself (as distinct from the agent) is still liable to commit injustice. Yet, in this scenario, that does not matter because the credit for the agent's nevertheless behaving justly remains with (some part of) her virtue.[21] By contrast, in the previous scenario, what comes to the rescue of the agent's virtues (i.e., 'respect for rights') is, ex hypothesi, not itself a virtue. As a result, the credit for the agent's nevertheless behaving morally cannot be assigned to her virtues, however complete and unified they may be. Once we distinguish, therefore, between virtues and something else within an agent's moral dispositions, the mere fact that the agent always behaves morally no longer suffices to satisfy the fundamental premiss.

Alternatively, once we admit a distinction between moral perfection and the perfection of virtue, the test imposed by the fundamental premiss becomes impossible to satisfy, since it identifies moral perfection with the perfection of virtue. However, if no virtue is characteristically sensitive to rights, and rights are part of morality, then moral perfection is distinct from the perfection of virtue. Thus, I conclude that the second extreme reaction is simply hopeless.

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[21] That is why, strictly speaking, it is the truly virtuous agent's complete and unified virtues, rather than any one virtue, that is meant to satisfy the test imposed by the fundamental premiss.

This brings us back to the first extreme reaction, which is happily to accept the consequence that there is no such thing as 'true' virtue. The argument for this position simply appeals to the fact we have just established, namely, that the test for true virtue imposed by the fundamental premiss is impossible to satisfy. If that test defines true virtue, the case is open and shut. Of course, without true virtue, there can be no contrast between true virtue and proto virtue either. There can only be one species of virtue, plain virtue. Presumably, plain virtue can still come in degrees—depending on how reliable one's disposition is, one can be more or less courageous, more or less just, and so on. But there is no basis for requiring any unity in the plain virtues. In this crucial respect, plain virtues are like proto virtues. Someone can have one plain virtue without having them all.

I shall not offer any concerted argument against this position. Whether one is content to adopt it depends, I think, on whether one finds anything at all attractive about the fundamental premiss in the first place. On this point, it helps to consider cases in which an agent's disposition to behave virtuously in one dimension is combined with an utter lack of virtue in some other dimension.[22] Conventional examples include the 'courageous' murderer, the 'honest' thief, the 'generous' embezzler, the 'compassionate' traitor, and so on. If one has no hesitation in crediting these characters with (at least occurrent expressions of) a moral virtue—respectively, of courage, of honesty, of generosity, and of compassion—then one presumably finds nothing attractive about the fundamental premiss in the argument for the unity of the virtues. In that case, one has no need of an alternative to the first extreme reaction.

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[22] Cf. P. Vranas, "The Indeterminacy Paradox: Character Evaluations and Human Psychology," Noûs 39 (2005), pp. 16-20.

§3. If the fundamental premiss has anything going for it, it is the idea that an agent must satisfy a certain minimum standard of general moral performance before any specific disposition of hers is dignified with the title of 'virtue.' Now the fundamental premiss runs this idea together with the ambition to achieve a maximal standard of moral performance (i.e., perfection), reserving the title 'true virtue' for dispositions that satisfy both standards. As we have seen, the maximal standard cannot be achieved within the realm of virtue alone. But that is no reason to discard the minimum standard.

The third option I should like to suggest is simply to adopt some such minimum standard as a qualification requirement on individual plain virtues. Let me refer to this standard as one of 'minimal moral decency.' So, for example, an agent who reliably performs courageous acts, but who otherwise (or in certain other respects) fails to exhibit minimal moral decency, will not count as having the moral virtue of courage. There may be no reason to deny that various of his individual actions are indeed courageous.[23] But the disposition that produced them will not qualify as a moral virtue. A fortiori, it will not qualify as a particular moral virtue, courage.[24]

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[23] In certain cases, however, there may be some reason to deny this as well. These are cases in which one and the same action is (or would otherwise be) courageous, yet also flouts minimal moral decency in some other respect. While such actions are at best mixed, a case can be made that they are not, in fact, courageous after all. But to pursue it would take us too far afield.

[24] There is plainly no inconsistency between accepting that a given action is courageous and denying that it is an occurrent expression of 'courage,' understood as a reliable disposition. If the agent does not have a reliable disposition to behave courageously, then his actions cannot possibly express that disposition. More surprisingly, there is not even an inconsistency between accepting that an agent reliably acts courageously and denying that his courageous actions express the moral virtue of courage (again, understood dispositionally). All that is required to make these consistent is for the 'moral virtue of [courage]' to have some content in addition to 'reliable disposition to behave [courageously].' But, on the present proposal, 'moral virtue' does have such additional content, since it entails that its possessor is minimally decent.

Naturally, there are various questions about how to define 'minimal moral decency.' Here I shall confine myself to expressing an opinion about three of them. First, with respect to specific virtues, there is a question of where the bar of minimal decency should be set. In particular, should it be set at some level of positive performance? Or is it enough to require avoidance of notably negative performance? Take generosity for example. Should minimal decency with respect to generosity be defined in terms of being (at least) minimally generous or rather in terms of not being horribly stingy? It seems to me that the weaker standard will do.

Second, there is the question of whether minimal decency should be defined only in terms of (other) virtues. In the present context, I hope this question answers itself. Minimal decency is a necessary condition for any one of an agent's specific dispositions to qualify as a virtue, but the standard it represents is one of general moral performance. Since the virtues are not morally self-sufficient, minimal decency is not restricted to the realm of virtue: it also extends to the realm of rights. In particular, following the model of the first answer, minimal decency requires an agent not to violate notably important rights. This is enough to exclude courageous murderers, though perhaps it permits compassionate pick-pockets.

Finally, there is a question of how to accommodate the interaction between degrees of plain virtue and degrees of minimal decency. It may seem unduly harsh to allow someone's highly reliable disposition to behave (e.g.) compassionately to be disqualified as 'virtuous' by a single (or even, the occasional) flouting of minimal decency, even though our weak standard of minimal decency implies that flouting it requires a notably vicious act or important rights violation. It seems to me that while some observations are safe here, precision is otherwise hard to come by. Thus, regular flouting of minimal decency disqualifies even the most robust disposition to behave (e.g.) compassionately from

counting as a moral virtue; scrupulous observance of minimal decency allows even a fairly weak disposition to behave (e.g.) compassionately to qualify as a (weak) instance of virtue; and very occasional flouting of minimal decency does not, I agree, disqualify a highly reliable disposition to behave (e.g.) compassionately from counting as a moral virtue. Beyond that, things get murky.

I have described this third option as intermediate between the two extreme reactions to the fact that unifying the virtues does not suffice to insulate a given virtue from all liability to moral error.[25] But it is also true that my proposal is much closer to the first reaction. (That is one reason I have not tried very hard to adjudicate between them). Among other similarities, my third option does not support any requirement of unity in the plain virtues either. Its chief difference from the first reaction is that an agent's reliable disposition to behave (e.g.) courageously or justly is no longer treated as a sufficient condition of her having the virtue of courage or justice, respectively. Rather, to qualify as (e.g.) courageous or just, an agent must also be minimally morally decent.[26] Minimal moral decency, however, does not require one to have even a single virtue, since one can avoid notably vicious acts (of all kinds) and notably important rights violations (of all kinds) without having a single virtue. Hence, this qualification requirement on having a given individual virtue does not imply that one has any other virtues.

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[25] It does not suffice, that is, given that the virtues are not morally self-sufficient.

[26] In the text, I have discussed minimal moral decency in terms that implicitly assume that there can be no genuine moral dilemmas. But I neither need nor wish to rely on that assumption. To accommodate the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas, we could reformulate the additional requirement on moral virtue as one of 'minimal uncontroversial moral decency.' Unlike the old standard, the new one is not flouted by acting in situations where, because of a genuine moral dilemma, there is no minimally morally decent course of action available to the agent. (At least, it is not flouted if the agent sticks to one of the horns of the dilemma: a dilemma does not result in a free moral pass).

§4. It remains to see why the virtues are not morally self-sufficient. To see, that is, why there are some identifiable moral considerations (e.g., rights) to which no virtue is characteristically sensitive. I have saved this question for last not because it is the most significant, but rather because there is an important sense in which it is not actually very interesting. I shall assume that if any virtue is characteristically sensitive to rights, justice is. I therefore confine myself to asking whether the virtue of justice is characteristically sensitive to rights. It turns out that the answer largely depends on what one chooses to mean by 'justice' and 'virtue.'

Let me begin by acknowledging several traditional connections between 'justice' and 'rights.' First, 'justice' can be used in a very general sense to refer to the whole of virtue or even of morality. Since rights are part of morality, they automatically fall within the scope of justice, so understood. Second, both 'justice' and 'rights' are commonly taken to represent especially weighty moral considerations. Each is closely associated, for example, with 'duties,' which are often taken to mark moral considerations with a distinctive peremptory status. Third, 'justice' is intimately tied to law; and law is the first home of rights (even if, pace Bentham, it is not their only home).

So it is no surprise that justice is the obvious candidate for the virtue that is characteristically sensitive to rights. Still, what we are looking for here is justice as an individual virtue of character. In this sense, justice is one virtue among others, as opposed to the whole of either virtue or morality, let alone something that is not even a character trait. None of the adduced connections particularly supports the claim that justice in this specific dispositional sense is characteristically sensitive to rights. Nor, for that matter, do standard interpretations of (e.g.) Aristotle's account of the virtue of 'particular justice' analyse it in terms that have anything to do with rights.[27] A sufficient reason for

[27] See, e.g., B. Williams, "Justice as a Virtue" in his Moral Luck (Cambridge: Cambridge

this is provided by the common view that, like the ancient Greeks generally, Aristotle did not even have the concept of 'a right.'[28]

I concede, however, that variations in the notion of a 'virtue' afford the resources to circumvent this objection. 'Virtue' itself can also be used more or less interchangeably with 'morality.' Furthermore, there is a related dispositional usage according to which 'someone's virtue' can refer to 'whatever it is about her' that resulted in her behaving morally. The crucial feature of this particular dispositional usage is that 'virtue' functions as a post hoc label for the 'inner causes,' whatever they might be, of a person's moral behaviour. It has no independent content, but merely records, in effect, the fact that a person behaves a certain way with some regularity. In principle, then, one could attribute a specific 'virtue' in this sense to anyone who reliably honours rights. If one prefers one's post hoc label to be more descriptive, one could draw inspiration from the traditional connections canvassed earlier and call it 'justice.' In this way, one is always free to invent, if need be, a 'virtue of justice' that is characteristically sensitive to rights. If people insist on talking this way, what can one say?

A 'virtue of character' understood as a post hoc label for a certain kind of behaviour—call it a post hoc virtue—contrasts sharply with my own understanding, according to which a 'virtue of character' includes a characteristic sensitivity to a certain kind of moral consideration. I take it that a virtue in the latter sense has some independent content. It refers, inter alia, to a disposition that can

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University Press, 1981).

[28] For objections to this common view, see F. Miller, Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's 'Politics' (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Of course, one might also simply maintain that the concept of justice as a virtue of character has changed; and that ours differs from Aristotle's in precisely this respect.

be described in (at least partly) independent terms—i.e., independent of the behaviour (or output) in which it results. For example, it may refer to a disposition constituted at least partly out of independently describable psychological materials. It is therefore an open empirical question whether a given independently describable disposition is characteristically sensitive to a certain kind of moral consideration. What I doubt is that any such disposition is characteristically sensitive to (the requirements entailed by) rights. For my part, I am interested, more specifically, in a conception of individual virtues on which they are partly constituted out of emotional dispositions. I have even stronger doubts that there is any emotional disposition that is characteristically sensitive to rights.

In my sense of 'virtue,' then, it is fairly clear that the virtues are not morally self-sufficient. Of course, I cannot legislate the meaning of 'virtue.' It is therefore worth observing the effect of reliance on post hoc virtues. To begin with, it trivialises the moral self-sufficiency of the virtues and obliterates the question of their empirical compatibility. Since post hoc virtues are simply labels for bits of moral behaviour (and by extension, the moral considerations warranting the behaviour), a one-to-one correspondence between bits and labels is trivially guaranteed; and since they have no definite empirical psychological content, there is nothing to the question of their empirical compatibility. But then we are only left with the question of whether there are genuine virtue dilemmas, which is already a familiar question. The unity of the virtues thesis is thereby drained of independent interest, at least when it is defined in terms of 'true virtues.'

This is not to argue for my understanding of 'virtue.' But the observations do pose a dilemma for the unity of the virtues thesis. If virtues of character are understood to have independent content, the thesis is false. If they are not, the thesis is not independently interesting. In neither case is it both correct and independently interesting.