Lynne McFall Integrity

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Olaf (upon what were once knees) does almost ceaselessly repeat “there is some shit I will not eat”
—e. e. cummings

COHERENCE

Integrity is the state of being “undivided; an integral whole.” What sort of coherence is at issue here? I think there are several. One kind of coherence is simple consistency: con-sistency within one’s set of principles or commitments.

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One cannot maintain one’s integrity if one has un-conditional commitments that conflict, for example, justice and personal happiness, or conditional com-mitments that cannot be ranked, for example, truth telling and kindness. Another kind of coherence is coherence between principle and action. Integrity requires “sticking to one’s principles,” moral or otherwise, in the face of temptation, including the temptation to redescription. Take the case of a woman with a commitment to marital fidelity. She is attracted to a man who is not her husband, and she is tempted. Suppose, for the purity of the example, that he wants her too but will do nothing to further the affair; the choice is hers. Now imagine your own favorite scene of seduction.

After the fact, she has two options. (There are always these two options, which makes the distinc-tion between changing one’s mind and weakness of the will problematic, but assume that this is a clear case.) She can (1) admit to having lost the courage of her convictions (retaining the courage of her mis-takes) or (2) rewrite her principles in various ways (e.g., by making fidelity a general principle, with ex-ceptions, or by retroactively canceling her “subscrip-tion”). Suppose she chooses the latter. Whatever she may have gained, she has lost some integrity. Weak-ness of the will is one contrary of integrity. Self-deception is another. A person who admits to having succumbed to temptation has more integrity than the person who sells out, then fixes the books, but both suffer its loss. A different sort of incoherence is exhibited in the case where someone does the right thing for (what he takes to be) the wrong reason. For example, in Dostoevsky’s The Devils, Stepan Verkhovensky says, “All my life I’ve been lying. Even when I spoke the truth. I never spoke for the sake of the truth, but for my own sake.” Coherence between principle and action is necessary but not sufficient. One’s action might correspond with one’s principle, at some general level of description, but be incon-sistent with that principle more fully specified. If one values not just honesty but honesty for its own sake, then honesty motivated by self-interest is not enough for integrity.

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self-interest is not enough for integrity. So the requirement of coherence is fairly com-plicated. In addition to simple consistency, it puts constraints on the way in which one's principles may be held (the "first-person" requirement), on how one may act given one's principles (coherence between principle and action), and on how one may be moti-vated in acting on them (coherence between princi-ple and motivation). Call this internal coherence. . . . To summarize the argument so far: personal in-tegrity requires that an agent (1) subscribe to some consistent set of principles or commitments and (2), in the face of temptation or challenge, (3) uphold these principles or commitments, (4) for what the agent takes to be the right reasons. These conditions are rather formal. Are there no
constraints on the content of the principles or com-mitments a person of integrity may hold?

INTEGRITY AND IMPORTANCE

Consider the following statements: Sally is a person of principle: pleasure.
Harold demonstrates great integrity in his single-minded pursuit of approval.
John was a man of uncommon integrity. He let nothing—not friendship, not justice, not truth—stand in the way of his amassment of wealth.

That none of these claims can be made with a straight face suggests that integrity is inconsistent with such principles. A person of integrity is willing to bear the con-sequences of her convictions, even when this is dif-ficult, that is, when the consequences are unpleasant. A person whose only principle is "Seek my own pleasure" is not a candidate for integrity because there is no possibility of conflict—between plea-sure and principle—in which integrity could be lost. Where there is no possibility of its loss, integrity cannot exist. Similarly in the case of the approval seeker. The single-minded pursuit of approval is inconsistent with integrity. Someone who is describable as an egg sucker, brownnose, fawning flatterer cannot have integrity, whatever he may think of the merits of such behavior. A commitment to spinelessness does not vitiate its spinelessness—another of integrity's contraries.

The same may be said for the ruthless seeker
of wealth. A person whose only aim is to increase his bank balance is a person for whom nothing is ruled out: duplicity, theft, murder. Expedience is contrasted to a life of principle, so an ascription of integrity is out of place. Like the pleasure seeker and the approval seeker, he lacks a "core," the kind of commitments that give a person character and that makes a loss of integrity possible. In order to sell one's soul, one must have something to sell. . . . Most of us, when tempted to "sell out," are tempted by pleasure, approval, money, status, or per-sonal gain of some other sort. The political prisoner under the thumbscrew wants relief, however com-mitted he may be to the revolution. Less dramati-cally, most of us want the good opinion of others and a decent standard of living. Self-interest in these forms is a legitimate aim against which we weigh our other concerns. But most of us have other, "higher" commitments, and so those who honor most what we would resist are especially liable to scorn. This tendency to objectify our own values in the
name of personal integrity can best be seen, I think, in a more neutral case. Consider the following claim:

The connoisseur showed real integrity in preferring the Montrachet to the Mountain Dew.

Even if he was sorely tempted to guzzle the Moun-tain Dew and forbore only with the greatest diffi-culty, the connoisseur, we would say, did not show integrity in preferring the better wine. Why? Resist-ing temptation is not the only test of integrity; the challenge must be to something important. . . . One may die for beauty, truth, justice, the objec-tion might continue, but not for

Montrachet. Wine is not that important. . . . When we grant integrity to a person, we need not approve of his or her principles or commitments, but we must at least recognize them as ones a reasonable person might take to be of great importance and ones that a reasonable person might be tempted to sacrifice to some lesser yet still recognizable goods. It may not be possible to spell out these conditions without circu-larity, but that this is what underlies our judgments of integrity seems clear enough. Integrity is a personal virtue granted with social strings attached. By definition, it precludes "expediency, artificiality, or shal-lowness of any kind." The pleasure seeker is guilty of shallowness, the approval seeker of artificiality, and the profit seeker of expedience of the worst sort. . . .

TEGRITY, FRIENDSHIP, AND THE OLAF PRINCIPLE

An attitude essential to the notion of integrity is that there are some things that one is not prepared to do, or some things one must do. I shall call this the "Olaf Prin-ciple," in honor of e. e. cummings's poem about Olaf, the "conscientious objector." This principle requires that some of one's commitments be unconditional. In what sense? There are, in ordinary moral thought, expressions of the necessity or impossibility of certain actions or types of actions that do not neatly correspond to the notions of necessity and impossibility most often catalogued by moral theorists. "I must stand by my friend (or "I cannot let him down") may have no claim to logical, psychological, rational, or moral necessity in any familiar sense. There is nothing logically in-consistent in the betrayal of friendship, or one could never be guilty of it. It is not psychologically impos-sible, since many have in fact done it and survived to do it again. Rationality does not require unconditional allegiance, without some additional assumptions, for one may have better reason to do a conflicting action, for example, where the choice is between betraying a friend and betraying one's country (although I am sympathetic to E. M. Forster's famous statement to the contrary). Nor is the necessity expressed one that has a claim to universality, for different persons may have different unconditional commitments. Impartiality and absoluteness are not what is at stake, for the choice may be between a friend and ten innocent strangers, and one person may have different unconditional com-mitments at different times. It is not clear, then, what sense of unconditional commitment is at issue. Unless corrupted by philosophy, we all have
things we think we would never do, under any imaginable circumstances, whatever we may give to survival or pleasure, power and the approval of strangers; some part of ourselves beyond which we will not retreat, some weakness however prevalent in others that we will not tolerate in ourselves. And if we do that thing, betray that weakness, we are not the persons we thought; there is nothing left that we may even in spite refer to as I.

I think it is in this sense that some commitments
must be unconditional: they are conditions of con-tinuing as ourselves. Suppose, for example, that I take both friendship
and professional advancement to be great goods, and my best friend and I are candidates for a promotion. Suppose, too, that I know the person who has the final decision has an unreasoned hatred of people who drink more than is socially required, as my friend does. I let this be known, not directly of course, with the predictable result that I am given the promotion. Now in one sense I have not done anything dishon-est. My friend may be the first to admit the pleasure he takes in alcohol. It may even be one of the reasons I value his friendship. (Loyal drinking companions are not easy to come by.) But this is clearly a betrayal of friendship. Is it so obviously a failure of integrity? In any conflict between two great goods, I may

argue, one must be “betrayed.” And between you and me, I choose me. What is wrong with this defense? To beat someone out of a job by spreading vicious
truths is proof that I am no friend. It is in the nature of friendship that one cannot intentionally hurt a friend in order to further one’s own interests. So if I claim to be this person’s friend, then I am guilty of incoherence, and therefore lack integrity. Why does incoherence seem the wrong charge to make? The answer, I think, is that it is much too weak. Some of our principles or commitments are more
important to us than others. Those that can be sac-rificed without remorse may be called defeasible commitments. For many of us, professional success is an important but defeasible commitment. I would like to be a successful philosopher, esteemed by my colleagues and widely published, but neither success nor failure will change my sense of personal worth. Contrasted to defeasible commitments are identity-conferring commitments: they reflect what we take to be most important and so determine, to large extent, our (moral) identities. . . . For many of us, friendship is an identity-conferring
commitment. If we betrayed a friend in order to ad-vance our careers, we could not “live with” ourselves; we would not be the persons we thought we were. This is what it means to have a “core”: a set of principles or commitments that makes us who we are. Such prin-ciples cannot be justified by reference to other values, because they are the most fundamental commitments we have; they determine what, for us, is to count as a reason.