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MORAL CACOPHONY: WHEN CONTINENCE IS A VIRTUE

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ABSTRACT. Contemporary virtue ethicists widely accept the thesis that a virtuous agent's feelings should be in harmony with her judgments about what she should do and that she should find virtuous action easy and pleasant. Conflict between an agent's feelings and her actions, by contrast, is thought to indicate mere continence – a moral deficiency. This "harmony thesis" is generally taken to be a fundamental element of Aristotelian virtue ethics. I argue that the harmony thesis, understood this way, is mistaken, because there are occasions where a virtuous agent will find right action painful and difficult. What this means is that the generally accepted distinction between continence and virtue is unsupportable. This conclusion affects several well-known accounts of virtuous action, including those of Philippa Foot and John McDowell. A closer look at Aristotle, however, provides another way of distinguishing between continence and virtue, based in his categorization of goods as noble or base. I argue that virtue is exhibited when an agent's feelings harmonize with his correct judgments of value, while discrepancies between feelings and correct judgments of value indicate continence. This understanding of continence and virtue enables us to accommodate the problem cases I raise.

KEY WORDS: Aristotle, continence, Philippa Foot, John McDowell, temperance, virtue, virtue ethics

Contemporary virtue theorists typically subscribe to the thesis that an agent's feelings and inclinations should be in harmony with her considered judgments about what is good or right to do. The "harmony thesis," as I shall call it, is an ancient idea. Both Aristotle and the Stoics held versions of it, and the view has been almost universally adopted by their modern admirers. The contemporary version of it is expressed in this passage taken from a recent book by Julia Annas:

> It is important to respect in ethical theory the everyday contrast between someone who does the right thing, but has to battle with his feelings to do so, and thus acts reluctantly and with a sense of pain and loss, and the person who does the right thing and whose feelings endorse the action, and who thus acts gladly and with pleasure. . . . What the ancients stress is just the common thought that conflict and stress are signs of something's failing or going wrong, and that a state where these are absent is preferable to a state where they are present. Virtue is not just different from self-control; the harmony in the virtuous between action and feeling makes it preferable to self-control.[1]

[1] Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 53–54.

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The agent whose feelings endorse her action, who feels no conflict or stress at the performance of right action, is supposed to represent a kind of ideal insofar as her feelings are in harmony with what she does.

The harmony thesis is the basis of the distinction between continence and virtue – a distinction that is accepted as a standard element of virtue ethics. Broadly speaking, the continent person is someone who performs virtuous actions, but who is variously described as finding them unpleasant or difficult, or having to struggle with contrary inclinations.[2] By contrast, the fully virtuous person acts with ease and without a need to overcome competing inclinations. The distinction, of course, is present in Aristotle, and it has a central place in contemporary virtue ethics as well. It is especially evident in the writings of John McDowell, but is also espoused in various versions by Gregory Trianosky, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Philippa Foot.[3] The agent whose feelings are in harmony with her actions is understood to be virtuous, whereas the agent whose feelings conflict with her actions is merely continent. Following Aristotle, most virtue theorists see continence as praiseworthy insofar as it is better than incontinence or vice, but also indicative of a moral deficiency in the agent.

In this paper, I shall argue that the harmony thesis is untenable as it stands. The reason is that there are situations in which it is a condition of virtue that the agent performs the right action *not* gladly and with pleasure, but rather with a sense of pain and loss. In other words, there are situations in which it looks as though the harmony thesis has things exactly backwards. Harmony between feeling and actions is, I shall argue, sometimes appropriate and sometimes not.

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[2] There is a large philosophical literature on the problem of incontinence (*akrasia*), also known as weakness of will. The problem is formulated in various ways, but is more or less a problem of explaining whether and how an agent can do *X* when her reflective, all things considered judgment is that *Y* is the better course of action. Famously, Socrates thought that there could be no such thing as *akrasia* and Aristotle just as famously disagreed, at least with respect to the bodily appetites. My concern in this paper is not with how virtue ethicists should handle incontinence, though this is obviously an important matter.

[3] McDowell's account of virtuous agency is spread over several papers. See, especially, John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 52 (Suppl.) (1978), pp. 13–29, and "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62 (1979), pp. 331–350. Also, see Gregory Trianosky, "Rightly Ordered Appetites: How to Live Morally and Live Well," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988), pp. 1–12. Philippa Foot makes an important modification to the harmony thesis, which I will discuss below, but she accepts it on the whole; Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 1–18; Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

This problem with the harmony thesis means that the distinction between continence and virtue is much harder to establish than is generally assumed. In some cases, the state normally associated with continence is actually indicative of virtue. Likewise, it is possible that a lack of conflict between feeling and right action can indicate a moral deficiency. The result is that some important work in virtue ethics is either incomplete or incorrect, insofar as it relies on the distinction.

In this paper, I will provide a counterexample that shows the inadequacy of the harmony thesis and hence, casts doubt on the usual distinction between continence and virtue. The counterexample has important implications for well-known work in virtue ethics by Foot and McDowell, both of whom accept the harmony thesis in some form. Aristotle's own account of continence, by contrast, is not subject to the counterexample and indeed, sheds light on the difficulty of drawing the distinction. I will then offer a way of distinguishing between continence and virtue without relying on the harmony thesis.

I. THE VIRTUE/CONTINENCE DISTINCTION

The distinction between continence and virtue, along with the associated judgment that virtue is superior, is best known from Aristotle. (Aristotle himself contrasts continence with the virtue of temperance, not with virtue more broadly. This is an important point and I will return to it.) Contemporary virtue theorists, almost without exception, have followed Aristotle in drawing the continence/virtue distinction. Consider this passage from Gregory Trianosky:

> There is a familiar distinction between two sorts of morally good people. The first always does his duty, or more, without regret, and without even being tempted to do anything else. The second is highly self-controlled. He too always does what is right, whether this is required or perhaps even beyond duty; but he must constantly exert himself in deliberation and in choice to subjugate unruly, contrary inclinations. Following Aristotle, the first of these two may be called temperate, and the second *continent*.[4]

This is the opening paragraph in an article in which Trianosky argues that the temperate life is the best life, and accordingly, that it is generally better to be temperate than continent.

McDowell draws the same distinction, though using slightly different terminology: "If someone needs to overcome an inclination to act otherwise, in getting himself to act as, say, temperance or courage demand,

[4] Trianosky, "Rightly Ordered Appetites," p. 1.

then he shows not virtue but (mere) continence."[5] And Hursthouse cites Aristotle's distinction with apparent approbation:

> The continent character is the one who, typically, knowing what she should do, does it contrary to her desires, and the fully virtuous character is the one who, typically, knowing what she should do, does it, desiring to do it. Her desires are in 'complete harmony' with her reason. . . . So Aristotle draws a distinction between two sorts of people – the continent or self-controlled, and the fully virtuous – and he weights that distinction, as the phrases show, a particular way; the fully virtuous agent is morally superior to the merely self-controlled one.[6]

Hursthouse takes this distinction between continence and virtue for granted throughout the rest of her discussion.[7]

As I noted above, Aristotle contrasts continence with temperance, not with virtue more generally. For him, both continence and temperance are narrowly defined in terms of bodily pleasures. In contemporary virtue ethics, however, the contrast is nearly always between two states with a wider range of application. McDowell, for instance, contrasts continence with two different virtues – temperance and courage. And although Trianosky uses the word "temperance," he uses it more broadly than does Aristotle, covering all cases where an agent does his duty easily and without regret. Hursthouse takes note of the shift in usage, but follows contemporary convention in applying the distinction broadly in her own work.[8]

I believe that this nearly unnoticed move to terms with a broader scope is significant because it affects the plausibility of the claim that harmony between action and feeling is always preferable to conflict. It is true that sometimes harmony is preferable, but sometimes it is not. The claim that a virtuous agent exhibits this kind of harmony across the board (rather than within the narrow scope of temperance) is unsupportable.

II. A Counterexample to the Distinction

Imagine an agent who owns a small company.[9] She has a number of employees, all of whom have worked for her for years and all of whom

[5] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," p. 334.

[6] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 92–93.

[7] Her goal in the chapter from which the quote is taken is to argue that Immanuel Kant and Aristotle are more similar on the continence/virtue distinction than is generally thought. The discussion makes clear that she is assuming the correctness of the Aristotelian version.

[8] See Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 92, fn. 1.

[9] I am grateful to Kirk Davidson for help with this example.

are capable and dependable. Since the company is small, she has gotten to know her employees relatively well and she has developed genuine affection and concern for them. Due to a recent downturn in the economy, demand for the company's products has declined and the company is in financial trouble. After agonizing over the books, the owner of the company has decided that there is no alternative but to lay off several of her employees. She has already taken every other cost-cutting step possible and this is the last remaining option. If she does not perform any layoffs, the company will certainly go under and *all* her employees will lose their jobs. She knows that firing the employees is the right thing to do in these circumstances, and so she decides to go ahead with it.[10]

If we suppose the company owner is virtuous, we would expect her to be very sympathetic to the employees she is firing, as well as anguished by the knowledge that she will be causing them pain and distress. She will, of course, have applied all principles of fairness in determining whom to fire, provided them with the best severance package she can afford, and thought very carefully about the best way to break the news. She knows that she has done all she can to soften the blow, but that it will be a blow nevertheless. We can imagine that she wakes up that morning with an anxious feeling in her stomach, perhaps unable to eat breakfast. She drives to work with a sense of dread and with the fanciful wish that the targeted employees will come in with the news that they have found other employment. She delivers the news as best she can, but she finds it extremely difficult. She is grieved at the sight of her employees' stress, sadness, and anxiety in response to the news. After the fact, she worries about whether they will be able to find new jobs, pay their mortgages, and take care of their children.

This is the sort of behavior we would expect from a sympathetic person in these circumstances. Yet in such circumstances, being sympathetic to her employees makes it harder for her to perform the action required of her. She has deeply rooted inclinations to avoid causing pain to other people, especially those she knows and likes. These inclinations make the act of firing them hard for her to perform, despite the fact that it is the right thing to do.

The point is not simply that it would be understandable for the company owner to find such an action difficult and painful. Rather, the point is that it seems to be a requirement of virtue that she finds it hard.[11] If she does

[10] It could, of course, be contested that this is the right thing to do, but I will simply take it for granted.

[11] Hursthouse has pointed out that the fact that an agent dislikes performing an action or takes no pleasure in it does not necessarily count against the ascription of virtue to her. She argues that though an honest person will return a full purse to a profligate and

not, that is *prima facie* evidence that she lacks virtue. The person who can fire a deserving person without experiencing any difficulty or pain shows himself to be callous to the misfortunes of others. Kind and sympathetic people simply do find it hard to act in any way that gives pain to innocent people, even if the pain is an unavoidable consequence of a required action.[12]

The problem with the harmony thesis arises when we notice that according to the definitions of continence and virtue given above, the company owner is exhibiting continence rather than temperance or virtue. Her inclination to avoid causing her employees pain makes it harder for her to act as she should here, and on their views this indicates a moral deficiency in her. But the inclination that makes it hard for her to deliver the news is precisely what shows her to be sympathetic, warm, and caring – all of which are plausibly considered virtues. Thus, the trait that generates the "unruly" inclination here seems to be a virtue.

Such cases are actually quite common. There are many actions that, though required, seem to be of a sort that good people should find difficult. People should find it difficult to deliver bad news to their friends. Parents should find it hard to punish their children. Teachers should find it hard to give low grades to students who are genuinely trying to do well. Lovers should find it hard to break off relationships when doing so is likely to cause the other person to suffer. In each case, if an agent finds the action easy or painless, then she lacks virtue. Such cases give us reason to doubt the general claim that virtuous agents always want to do what they should do, or find it easy or pleasant, or feel no conflict. It is, therefore, essential to give an account of continence and virtue that is compatible with these cases.

First, however, we need to say more about what it means for an agent to find it hard to act well. I have followed general usage in claiming that the agent who finds it hard to act well finds it hard because she has competing desires and inclinations. But what is the content of those desires and

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wasteful person, she sees "no reason why any Aristotelian should deny to the fully honest the thought that it is a damned shame that this had to be done" (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 97). This is true, but the case at hand demonstrates a further point. In some situations, the virtuous person not only may, but *should* find the action painful and difficult.

[12] I leave open the possibility that there are people in whom a certain degree of coldness in such situations might not be a failing. I have in mind police officers, physicians, and military officers during wartime – all of whom are required to deliver terrible news on a regular basis. These cases pose interesting challenges for virtue ethics, because they imply that what counts as a virtue in a person is partially dependent on contingent features of that person's circumstances.

inclinations? One might say that the inclination is simply an inclination *not* to do the right thing. On this interpretation, the continent person would both want to do what is right and not want to do what is right. Continence would thus be a kind of wavering about whether to do a required action. But in what sense would the continent person not want to do what is right? If we understand that desire *de dicto*, it seems quite at odds with Aristotle's understanding of continence as a morally praiseworthy state. Surely the continent person wants to do the right action under the description "the right action." If, however, we understand it *de re*, then we need to consider why the continent person finds the right course of action so unappealing.

I have suggested that in the case of the company owner, what makes the action unappealing is that it will cause her employees pain, and she has an inclination – stemming from her virtuous character – not to cause people pain. One might say, however, that the inclination that a virtuous person would possess is really an inclination not to cause *avoidable* pain.[13] By hypothesis, the employees' pain here is unavoidable; thus, a virtuous person would not have a conflicting inclination here. For my part, I do not find this account of the virtuous person's inclinations fully convincing. Certainly, the realization that the pain one is causing is unavoidable affects one's approach to the action. When the infliction of pain is avoidable, we would expect a virtuous person to avoid inflicting it. But the unavoidability of the pain does not necessarily eradicate the inclination not to cause it. No one who is virtuous enjoys inflicting pain on other people, however necessary the pain might be. A pediatric nurse administers vaccinations to young children as a routine, unavoidable part of her job. It should, however, be one of her least favorite tasks in her job. A nurse who can administer a vaccination as easily as she can measure a baby's head circumference is not as compassionate as we would hope her to be.

To summarize, continence seems to be a state in which the person is reasonably committed to doing what is right, and *does* what is right, yet finds it difficult to do what is right.[14] This difficulty is supposed to be the source of the moral deficiency. The harmony thesis implies that in order to be virtuous, a person's desires and inclinations should somehow fall in line with her judgment that an action is right. The question is what the presence

[13] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *The Journal of Ethics* for bringing this objection to my attention.

[14] One might say that the very fact that the continent person finds it difficult to act rightly is evidence that he is not in fact committed to doing what is right. I do not think that this is the case. Consider, for instance, a vegetarian who eschews meat on moral grounds. It is certainly easier for the vegetarian who is disgusted by the sight or smell of meat to bypass the barbecue on the table than it is for the one whose mouth still waters at the smell. That need not, however, imply that the latter agent is any less committed to being a vegetarian.

of contrary desires and inclinations indicate about the person's character. My claim is that in some cases, they indicate virtue.

III. Philippa Foot and the Harmony Thesis

A difficulty with the harmony thesis has been pointed out by Philippa Foot. She has tried to reconcile two competing, but intuitively compelling understandings of virtue. The first is a view following from the harmony thesis, that true virtue is expressed when an agent performs a virtuous action easily. The second is the view that, as she puts it, "it is for moral effort that moral praise is to be bestowed, and that in proportion as a man finds it easy to be virtuous so much the less is he to be morally admired for his good actions."[15] Foot resolves the conflict by pointing out that the difficulties people face in acting well are not all of the same kind. It is the nature of the difficulties faced that indicate the degree of the agent's virtue:

> The fact is that some kinds of difficulties do indeed provide an occasion for much virtue but that others rather show that virtue is incomplete. To illustrate this point I shall first consider an example of an honest action. We may suppose for instance that a man has an opportunity to steal, in circumstances where stealing is not morally permissible, but that he refrains. And now let us ask our old question. For one man it is hard to refrain from stealing and for another man it is not: which shows the greater virtue in acting as he should? It is not difficult to see in this case that it makes all the difference whether the difficulty comes from circumstances, as that a man is poor, or that his theft is unlikely to be detected, or whether it comes from something that belongs to his own character. The fact that a man is *tempted* to steal is something about him that shows a certain lack of honesty: of the thoroughly honest man we say that it 'never entered his head,' meaning that it was never a real possibility for him. But the fact that he is poor is something that makes the occasion more *tempting*, and difficulties of this kind make honest action all the more virtuous.[16]

I think that Foot's general point is correct, namely, that the extent to which an agent shows virtue in a given action depends on the nature of the difficulties he faces. Her way of characterizing those difficulties, however, is not correct, for her account gives what seems to be the wrong answer about the company owner.

Foot is more committed to the harmony thesis than her argument would suggest. She does say that the poor man who is tempted to steal but refrains is not as virtuous as he might be; he still shows a certain lack of honesty insofar as the thought of stealing even crosses his mind. Insofar as he wants to steal the object, he seems to be continent, rather than virtuous. But his

[15] Foot, "Virtues and Vices," p. 11.

[16] Foot, "Virtues and Vices," p. 11.

circumstances are such that when he resists temptation in this situation, he shows more virtue than a rich man who is not thus tempted.

The difficulty with this conclusion as it stands is that we do not know enough about the rich man's character. He is not tempted to steal – that much we know. But is that simply because he is not in need, or is it because he is not the sort of person who would steal? In this situation, the extent of his honesty comes out only counterfactually: if his circumstances were different, would he be tempted to steal? If the answer is "yes," then he is similar to the poor man in the relevant respects. But if the answer is "no," then why should we say that he shows less virtue than the poor man who resists temptation? After all, this is a man who *is* thoroughly honest – he would not be tempted to steal even if he needed the object. Why should his easy circumstances detract from his virtue?

Foot's answer, I think, must be that on the whole, the thoroughly honest rich man is more virtuous than the poor man who is tempted, but refrains. But what she might also say is that this is a situation in which the poor man has an opportunity to let his virtue shine forth. His mettle is tested in a way that the rich man's is not, and this is the reason why we say that in acting honestly here, he shows more virtue than does the rich man. This is, however, complicated, because the rich man also expresses his honesty by not stealing. He is not made less honest by being rich, and his behavior in this situation is indicative of his honesty. But the fact that he is not being put to the test here means that the extent of his virtue is not apparent in the same way as it is in the poor man. The rich man's situation is different for the reasons that Foot describes. The ease of his action is at least partially due to his circumstances, parallel to the way in which the difficulty of the poor man's action is at least partially due to *his* circumstances. In neither case is the ease or difficulty entirely the result of the agent's character.

All of this seems correct. If, as Foot argues, the poor man's difficulty in acting well is a result of his circumstances, then he may show great virtue in acting well. Where Foot goes wrong, however, is in making the further claim that if the cause of the difficulty is in the man's character or, as she puts it later, in his "choices and values," then that indicates a moral failing.[17] This is because in cases like the company owner, what makes it hard for the agent to act well *is* a feature of her character, but it is a feature that we think virtuous people ought to have. What makes it hard for a virtuous person to fire her employee is that she is sympathetic to his suffering, and values his well-being. These are features of her character, but she would be less virtuous if she lacked them.

[17] Foot, "Virtues and Vices," p. 12.

So Foot is right to say that the extent to which an agent shows virtue in a situation depends on the difficulties he faces, but she is wrong to say that if the source of the difficulties is in the agent's character, he lacks virtue. This complicates any account of virtuous agency, for it makes it harder to distinguish between the agent who finds it hard to act well because he *lacks* a virtuous character and the agent who finds it hard to act well because he *has* a virtuous character. In other words, it muddies the distinction between continence and virtue.

IV. Continence and Choiceworthiness in Aristotle

Aristotle's own discussion of continence sheds considerable light on cases like the company owner. For that reason, it is worth taking a closer look at what he says about continence and why he says it. His reason for restricting the scope of continence to the bodily pleasures has to do with the value of the objects of the agent's choice, and understanding this is the key to giving a correct account of cases like the company owner.

The bulk of Aristotle's discussion of continence is in Book VII of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, although his concern there is primarily with the possibility of incontinence, not continence. The continent person, however, resembles the incontinent person in feeling and desire; the difference is that the continent person actually performs the right action, whereas the incontinent person does not. Unlike the intemperate person (*akolastos*), both the continent and the incontinent persons correctly judge that they should do the action that would be virtuous in that situation.[18] The difference between them is in the extent to which reason exercises control over their feelings and appetites. The continent person, though in possession of base appetites, adheres to the dictates of reason in doing what he should. The incontinent person, by contrast, follows his appetites and does what he should not.

Throughout the discussion, Aristotle is clearly concerned to limit the scope of continence and incontinence, for he takes pains to distinguish genuine incontinence from other cases that might be confused with it. He points out that incontinence about choiceworthy things, such as we find in a person who is excessively concerned with honor, is not really incontinence. It is an excess, insofar as the person's concern with honor is inappropriate,

[18] This is, of course, a very complex issue. Aristotle thought that the incontinent person has both knowledge and ignorance. So there is probably some sense in which the incontinent person does not judge correctly. But the point here is just that the incontinent person, unlike the intemperate person, really believes that he is acting badly.

but the excess is not vicious, because the thing in question is choiceworthy in the first place:

> Some people are overcome by, or pursue, some of these naturally fine and good things to an extent that conflicts with reason, e.g., they take honor or children or parents more seriously than is right. . . . There is no vice here, for the reason we have given, since each of these things is naturally choiceworthy for itself, though excess about them is bad and to be avoided. Similarly, there is no incontinence here either, since incontinence is not merely to be avoided, but also blameworthy [and these conditions are not].[19]

He goes on to argue that bestial and diseased states are also not cases of genuine incontinence. The stated reason here is that they are caused by nature, and presumably the reason why states caused by nature do not count as incontinence also has to do with blameworthiness. If the agent is not to blame for the state, he or she cannot properly be considered incontinent.

Aristotle then distinguishes between incontinence about appetites and incontinence about emotions.[20] While he calls both states types of incontinence, he also observes that only incontinence about the appetites is properly called "simple incontinence." Incontinence about the emotions is called so with qualification.[21] He claims that incontinence about emotions is less base or shameful than incontinence about appetites. This is because the person who is incontinent about emotion follows reason to some extent, but he fails to hear its dictates correctly. The analogy is with an overeager servant who runs out to do his master's bidding before he has been given all his instructions. The person who demonstrates incontinence about emotion, such as someone who becomes excessively angered at an insult, judges correctly that he has reason to be angry, but his anger is disproportionate to the offense. As a result of this anger, he ends up doing what he should not.[22] In doing so, however, he follows reason in a sense, because he correctly judges that he should be angry. The emotion itself is appropriate; the agent simply has it to an excessive degree, and that leads him to act badly.

By contrast, the person who is incontinent about appetites sees only that something is pleasant before he goes for it; he does not follow reason's judgment about whether this thing is good to have. When he acts as he

[19] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1148a30-b7. The addition in brackets is Irwin's.

[20] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1149a24-35.

[21] Though Aristotle does not explain what the qualification is, the distinction itself is clear when he says, "It is clear, then, . . . that continence and incontinence are about bodily appetites and pleasures" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1149b24-26).

[22] Aristotle does not exactly *write* this, but if the man is supposed to be incontinent, he must fail to perform the right action.

should not because of his appetites, then, his action is not shaped by reason at all. Reason has not directed him to follow his appetites here, as it directed the man who was insulted to be angry. Thus on Aristotle's view, incontinence about appetites is more shameful than incontinence about emotions, because it lacks this connection with reason.

Aristotle is probably wrong when he says that emotions follow reason in a way that appetites do not. There are certainly situations in which appetites do seem to "listen" to reason. For instance, a pregnant woman may convince herself to develop an appetite for yogurt, which she usually does not eat, in order to get enough calcium.[23] Aristotle's general point, however, is that the less amenable to the influences of reason an inclination or feeling is, the more shameful or base it is. If the bodily appetites cannot easily be influenced or directed by reason, then the inclinations they produce are, he thinks, base. We might just add that the same could be true for inclinations and desires produced by other sources.

Aristotle bases his subsequent discussion on incontinence about appetites, and when he does distinguish continence from temperance, it is clear that he is talking about continence only with respect to bodily appetites:

> For the continent and the temperate person are both the sort to do nothing in conflict with reason because of bodily pleasures; but the continent person has base appetites, and the temperate person lacks them. The temperate person is the sort to find nothing pleasant that conflicts with reason: the continent is the sort to find such things pleasant but not to be led by them.[24]

The temperate person, unlike the continent person, need not conquer those pleasures, for if they conflict with reason, they are not pleasures for her.

Thus, when Aristotle gives this definition of "continence," he has restricted it to the ability to conquer one's desires for bodily pleasures, the same sphere to which the virtue of temperance applies:

> It is clear, then, that incontinence and continence apply only to the concerns of intemperance and temperance, and for other things there is another form of incontinence, so called by transference of the name, and not simply.[25]

All other forms of incontinence and continence can be called so only with qualification.

The important lesson to be drawn from this discussion is that on Aristotle's view, it is only with respect to things that are not themselves noble (*kalon*) that we can be incontinent. Something that is *kalon* is thereby

[23] I am grateful to Howard Curzer for help with this example.

[24] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1151b35–1152a4.

[25] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1149a20.

choiceworthy, and choiceworthy in itself.[26] We cannot be incontinent about honor, because honor is *kalon*. We can have excesses about honor, insofar as we can care about it more (or less) than we should, but this is not incontinence.

Aristotle thinks that by contrast, bodily pleasures are not *kalon*, which implies that they are not choiceworthy. It is not clear whether he thinks that the bodily pleasures are not choiceworthy at all, or just not on all occasions. To say that they are not *kalon* leaves either possibility open. He does say that the sources of those pleasures are natural and necessary, implying that on many occasions, there is nothing wrong with finding them appealing.[27] This might mean that they are actually choiceworthy on occasion, or it might just mean that an agent does nothing base by choosing them on occasion. If the former, they would be choiceworthy only on those occasions in which they do not interfere with the pursuit of another good. If the latter, they are not choiceworthy at all. Regardless, the fact that unlike honor, the bodily appetites are not *kalon* explains why the person who *does* choose them in the wrong circumstances is considered incontinent.

Given the restrictions that Aristotle imposes on the scope of continence, it is somewhat puzzling that contemporary virtue theorists apply the concept more broadly. I suspect that it is due in part to Aristotle's well-known claim that the virtuous person always takes pleasure in virtuous action.[28] He says in several places that virtuous activity is pleasant for the virtuous person and indeed, that if someone does not take pleasure in virtuous action, that gives us reason to think that he is not genuinely virtuous:

> . . . someone who does not enjoy fine actions is not good; for no one would call him just, e.g., if he did not enjoy doing just actions, or generous if he did not enjoy generous actions, and similarly for the other virtues. If this is so, then actions expressing the virtues are pleasant in themselves.[29]

If we define continence as the state of finding virtuous actions unpleasant, we can see why someone might be tempted to say, in an Aristotelian fashion, that continence is always a moral deficiency of some kind, because it involves finding unpleasant what a virtuous person would find pleasant.

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[26] For Aristotle, the concept of *to kalon* applies to people (those who are *kalos k'agathos*), as well as actions and goods of various sorts. To be *kalon* is a feature of a thing, and it seems that it is in virtue of a thing's being *kalon* that it is choiceworthy. Moreover, a virtuous person not only chooses things that are *kalon* – she also chooses them *because* they are *kalon*.

[27] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1149b28-30.

[28] See, for example, Foot, "Virtues and Vices," p. 10.

[29] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a16-20. See also 1120a26-27.

The view that it is always a moral failing to find virtuous action painful, however, is not especially plausible. It cannot be taken seriously with respect to physical pain, and the case of the company owner shows that the presence of psychological or emotional pain does not count against an agent's virtue either. In fact, it can be an indication of it. But this point did not escape Aristotle's notice, as is evident from what he says about courage in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There he claims that the courageous person will find the prospect of death painful:

> . . . the brave person will find death and wounds painful, and suffer them unwillingly, but he will stand firm against them because that is noble or because failure is shameful. Indeed, the more he has every virtue and the happier he is, the more pain he will feel at the prospect of death. For this sort of person, more than anyone, finds it worthwhile to be alive, and is knowingly deprived of the greatest goods, and this is painful. But he is no less brave for all that; presumably, indeed, he is all the braver, because he chooses what is fine in war at the cost of all these goods. Hence, it is not true that the active exercise of every virtue is pleasant; it is pleasant only insofar as we attain the end.[30]

The more virtuous someone is, and the happier she is, the more painful she will find this kind of virtuous action, because she of all people knows what life is worth. We can see, then, that Aristotle's view that virtuous action is always pleasant is subtler and more complicated than the earlier passage implied. Finding an action pleasant in the relevant respect must be compatible with finding it painful in other respects.

Sorting out Aristotle's account of pleasure is tricky, and beyond the scope of the present discussion. To modern ears, at least, it does not seem quite right to say that a virtuous person would take any sort of pleasure in an action like firing someone. How could she find it pleasant? Surely it is not accompanied by warm fuzzy feelings, or a sense of accomplishment.

We can, perhaps, account for Aristotle's intuition that the virtuous person would find pleasure in virtuous action by drawing a distinction between sensory and propositional (or attitudinal) pleasure.[31] It is clearly implausible to say that a virtuous person will always take sensory pleasure in her virtuous actions, as the example of courage on the battlefield makes clear. It is not, however, implausible to say that she takes propositional pleasure toward her action, meaning that she is pleased that she has done what she should.[32] Of course, this depends on the content of the proposi-

[30] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1117b8-16.

[31] I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for *The Journal of Ethics* for pointing out to me the relevance of this distinction here. The original distinction is from Fred Feldman, "Two Questions about Pleasure," in David Austin (ed.), *Philosophical Analysis* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), pp. 59–81.

[32] Something of this sort seems to be suggested in Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 90–95. Broadie interprets Aristotle as

tion. If the propositional content is, "caused that baby pain by giving it a shot in the leg," then no virtuous person would take propositional pleasure in having done that. If, on the other hand, the propositional content is "prevented that baby from getting an awful disease" or "doing what is in the best interest of that baby," then it seems reasonable that a virtuous person would take propositional pleasure in such an action. So we might say that it is true that all virtuous persons take propositional pleasure in having done what is right, understood under that description.[33]

If, however, the harmony thesis consists of the claim that virtuous people will always take propositional pleasure in having done what is right, then it cannot serve to distinguish continence from virtue. The reason is that continent people may well also take propositional pleasure in having done what is right. The continent person knows what is right and does what is right. We can therefore assume that he has at least some commitment to doing what is right, some appreciation for the value of a right action.[34] If this were not the case, continence would not be an especially praiseworthy state. The fact that the continent person finds it hard to act well need not mean that he is any less committed to doing what is right or less pleased by his right actions. Indeed, given that the difficulties the continent person faces, he may well take even greater propositional pleasure in having acted rightly than those who find it easier to act well. Both the virtuous person and the continent person take propositional pleasure in having performed the right action. Thus, the presence of propositional pleasure alone cannot distinguish virtuous action from merely continent action.

Aristotle does, I think, hold that the virtuous person will find nothing painful – either in terms of sensory pain or propositional pain – in actions that require forsaking bodily pleasures.[35] Such actions should be painless in all respects, not just in the sense that they give the agent satisfaction in having overcome his inclinations. An agent who finds it painful to give up such things is merely continent because he shows an attachment to

meaning that virtuous people take a kind of satisfaction in virtuous action, which would be compatible with experiencing painful emotions or physical pain. The idea that the virtuous agent should be understood as taking propositional pleasure in virtuous action is also defended in Erik Wielenberg, "Pleasure as a Sign of Moral Virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 34 (2000), pp. 439–449. Wielenberg takes himself to be disagreeing with Broadie, but I do not see a significant difference between their views. As Broadie interprets satisfaction, it would be a kind of propositional pleasure.

[33] There is a danger here that an agent who takes even propositional pleasure in having done what is right will turn out to be smug or self-congratulatory – neither of which seems like a virtue. I am grateful to Bill Lycan for bringing this point to my attention.

[34] I assume that if a person does what is right because he is coerced into doing so, he does not count as continent.

[35] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1152a1-5.

things that are not worthy of choice in those circumstances. In other terms, we might say that he values things in circumstances when they are not in fact valuable. To value something is, at minimum, to be disposed to feel pleasure at its promotion and pain at its loss or hindrance.[36] Thus, an agent who values the things that produce bodily pleasures will feel pain at the loss of the objects or the hindrance of the pleasure, but if he is wrong to value the object in those circumstances, then the pain is misplaced. This is not to say that it can never be consistent with virtue to choose to pursue the bodily pleasures and think them good. Much of the time there is nothing wrong with, say, enjoying a good meal. It is only in certain circumstances that those things become unworthy of choice.

Finding courageous action painful, by contrast, shows an attachment to noble things, namely, the goods associated with a flourishing life. This is why the virtuous person finds it painful to give up her life – she finds it painful to forsake things that are *kalon*.[37] There is nothing shameful about feeling pain at the sacrifice of something that is truly *kalon*; indeed, a virtuous person will certainly feel pain, for she recognizes the value of what she is sacrificing. The person who does not find it painful thereby shows herself to lack understanding of what is worth having.

That Aristotle recognizes the complexities here is further shown in his discussion of mixed actions – those that are voluntary in some respects and involuntary in other respects.[38] His own example is that of throwing cargo overboard in a storm. Doing so is clearly choiceworthy in the circumstances, but it is not an action that one would choose in its own right. Aristotle correctly considers these actions to be voluntary, but he recognizes that there is something about the action, choiceworthy as it is, that is to be regretted and perhaps found painful.[39]

This enables us to explain why, in the problem cases I raised, it seems that a virtuous agent would find such actions painful and difficult. Like giving up one's life for a good cause, they all require the sacrifice of an important good – in these cases, the comfort and well-being of another person. The happiness of one's friends and compatriots is a central component of human flourishing, and someone with a correct conception of flourishing will value it. Moreover, the kind of value it has renders it choiceworthy even in circumstances where it cannot be pursued.

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[36] For an interesting account of modes of valuing in the context of virtue ethics, see Christine Swanton, "Profiles of the Virtues," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (1995), pp. 47–72.

[37] See Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, pp. 270–271.

[38] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1110a5-35.

[39] I am grateful to Rosalind Hursthouse for reminding me of this discussion.

Recall that on the Aristotelian picture, the virtuous agent has practical wisdom, and part of what it is to have practical wisdom is to know which ends are worth choosing, and I shall just add, to know the circumstances under which those ends are worth choosing. Whether an agent should find it painful or difficult to perform an action depends on the appropriateness of valuing the thing she forsakes in those circumstances. There are some goods that continue to be worth pursuing even in circumstances where they cannot be pursued. The happiness and well-being of other people count as such a good, but the things that produce bodily pleasures generally do not. So in some cases, the fact that an agent finds a required action painful or difficult shows that she values things appropriately, and as a result, her conflict and stress are a mark of her good judgment. In other cases, it shows that she values things when she should not.[40]

Aristotle's view of the bodily pleasures is relatively coarse-grained, and I suspect it is not true that pain at the sacrifice of bodily pleasures is necessarily a mark of poor judgment of value. Some bodily pleasures are probably more akin to aesthetic experiences and hence should be understood in different terms. But Aristotle's claim – that a virtuous person will not feel pain at the sacrifice of something that is not worth valuing in those circumstances – provides us with what seems like the right thing to say about, for instance, certain sacrifices associated with material objects. Suppose that you need my treasured Alfa Romeo convertible for a last visit to your dying mother. I have just finished rebuilding the engine, and have not yet driven it. I have been eagerly awaiting the first excursion in it, but if I lend you the car, you will drive it before I do. For me to feel conflicted about lending you the car because I want to be the first to drive it is a moral failing in me. I value being the first to drive my car to a degree I should not here. The experience is not choiceworthy in circumstances such as these, and to treat it as if it were would be to make an important mistake about the value of ends.

No doubt this is a matter of degree. It might not detract from my virtue much if I feel just a twinge at handing over the keys to my car, although I suspect that a thoroughly virtuous person would be able to hand them over without a thought for her lost opportunity. If, on the other hand, I go to great lengths to make excuses as to why you cannot take the car or while you are gone, spend the entire time wringing my hands and watching the clock, then there is something seriously amiss with my judgments of value.

[40] It is important to recognize that having good judgment in this respect is not simply being able to distinguish things with intrinsic value from those with merely instrumental value, though that is no doubt part of it.

But when what must be sacrificed is something that *is* choiceworthy in these circumstances, such a friend's well-being, then a virtuous person will react differently. She *will* feel pain and stress and conflict in giving it up, because she recognizes that its value persists in those circumstances. It continues to be an appropriate object of valuing, even when it is not an appropriate object of pursuit.

Keep in mind that we are not supposing the agent to be in a dilemma situation. It is widely recognized that dilemmas ought to generate the kind of emotional conflict that I have described. My point is that emotional conflict is often morally appropriate in non-dilemma situations as well. If there are cases, as there surely are, where acting rightly requires an agent to forsake something else that she nevertheless appropriately values in those circumstances, then she will find the sacrifice painful. This need not imply that she wavers in her determination to do what she should. The point is simply that there are occasions when doing what one should is correctly felt to be agonizing.

V. The Problem with Silencing

If this is the case, then John McDowell's influential account of virtuous agency is inadequate in important respects. He argues that virtue is constituted by the possession of a special sensitivity that enables an agent to perceive requirements imposed on her by features of situations. Clear perception of the requirement is sufficient to motivate the agent to act in the requisite way. It is also sufficient to silence considerations supporting competing courses of action:

> If a situation in which virtue imposes a requirement is genuinely conceived as such, according to this view, then considerations which, in the absence of the requirement, would have constituted reasons for acting otherwise are silenced altogether – not overridden – by the requirement.[41]

It is this silencing feature of virtue that, on McDowell's view, distinguishes virtue from continence and incontinence. If the considerations "make themselves heard by one's will," to use his phrase, then the agent lacks virtue.[42]

The concept of silencing is a metaphor, and so we need to look more closely at the phenomenon underlying it in order to understand what McDowell has in mind. His view seems to be that what goes wrong with the continent person is that he continues to feel inclinations for things that

[41] McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?," p. 26.

[42] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," p. 335.

he judges he should not have or do. Silencing consists at least in part in having these inclinations disengaged:

> In the absence of a requirement, the prospective enjoyment would constitute a reason for going ahead. But his clear perception of the requirement insulates the prospective enjoyment – of which, for a satisfying conception of the virtue, we should want him to have a vivid appreciation – from engaging his inclinations at all. Here and now, it does not count for him as any reason for acting in that way.[43]

The idea seems to be that if a virtuous person perceives a requirement to give up some prospective enjoyment, then the prospect of that enjoyment will no longer engage her inclinations or otherwise exert any influence on her will. The attraction that the object normally holds for her is somehow blocked in this situation. This interpretation is borne out when he says of the continent and incontinent persons that, "their inclinations are aroused, as the virtuous person's are not, by their awareness of competing attractions."[44] As we have seen, however, this claim runs into difficulties when it comes to the company owner, because in her it is a mark of virtue that she continues to have the competing inclinations.

Several paragraphs later, McDowell goes on to give a slightly different account of the distinction between virtue and continence:

> Virtues like temperance and courage involve steadfastness in the face of characteristic sorts of temptation, and it can seem impossible to register that fact without regarding them as cases of continence. Insisting nevertheless on the distinction between virtue and continence yields a view of these virtues which has a certain sublimity. Their proper manifestation is a renunciation, without struggle, of something which in the abstract one would value highly (physical pleasure, security of life and limb). The lack of struggle is ensured by keeping the attention firmly fixed on what Aristotle calls "the noble" . . .[45]

Here the silencing phenomenon is likened to the renunciation of something that, in other circumstances, the agent would value very much. The idea, I take it, is that the virtuous agent renounces whatever it is that would give rise to competing inclinations and in doing so, makes it possible to perform the action without struggle or conflict.

It is important for McDowell's account that the agent does see the things that she renounces as having value in other circumstances or, as he puts it, in the abstract. Otherwise, virtue would be a kind of asceticism, or an insensibility to various pleasures and pains, and this is not what McDowell intends. On his view, the person who never cares one way or the other about something shows no virtue in giving it up. A thoroughly virtuous person, by contrast, recognizes that the goods in question are worth having

[43] McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?," p. 27.
[44] McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?," p. 28.
[45] McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?," p. 27.

in other circumstances, but when their pursuit is in conflict with virtuous action, she will renounce them – their attractions will be silenced for her.

This picture has intuitive appeal in some cases, like the case of the Alfa Romeo. My inclination to be the first to drive my car should be silenced on that occasion. This is compatible with my recognizing that those inclinations may be appropriate in other circumstances, such as when a neighbor casually asks to drive it around the block. But the requirement to lend my friend the car under those circumstances should, if I have my priorities straight, silence the competing considerations.

But the intuitive appeal of the silencing picture is absent in other cases. This is true even in McDowell's own example of an agent who courageously gives up her life. As we saw above, he says of courage that its "proper manifestation is a renunciation, without struggle, of something which in the abstract one would value highly. . . ."[46] Surely, though, he is wrong to imply that a virtuous agent who gives up her life values it only in the abstract and that she renounces it when she is required to give it up. The person who risks her life to save the child from a burning house does not think, "My life means nothing here"; rather, she thinks, "This is worth doing, even though I might die." This is not to say that an agent would never be correct in thinking that her life means nothing; it is that she need not think that in order for her action to be virtuous, nor is it necessary for her to think that in order to keep her attention "firmly fixed" on the noble. Similarly, the company owner in no way renounces the happiness of her employees when she fires them. She continues to see their happiness as having value, even as she acts in a way that requires the sacrifice of that happiness.

The problem with the silencing requirement in McDowell's account, then, is that it is incompatible with recognizing that there are goods such that valuing them appropriately requires that one's disposition to promote them not come and go according to the circumstances. Some goods are worth having and worth wanting even in situations where it would be wrong to pursue them. If I value my employee's comfort as I should, then I will want to avoid causing her pain. Even if I cannot avoid it I will still be *inclined* to avoid it. The value of her comfort persists, though I cannot promote it, and in such cases my valuing it appropriately will give rise to apparently unruly inclinations. But the fact that I have such inclinations just shows that I value things as I should.

McDowell's account, unlike Aristotle's own, fails to recognize that there are some goods that continue to be choiceworthy in circumstances where they cannot be pursued. That is why, on Aristotle's view, the

[46] McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?," p. 27.

courageous person will feel pain at the prospect of giving up *kalon* things, for she continues to see them as choiceworthy even as she willingly gives them up. McDowell's account of courage in the face of death, by contrast, is rather different:

> Genuinely courageous behaviour, on this view, combines a lively awareness of risk, and a normal valuation of life and health (see *Nichomachean Ethics* III. 9), with a sort of serenity; taking harm to be, by definition, what one has reason to avoid, we can see the serenity as based on the belief, paradoxical in juxtaposition with the valuing of life and health, that no harm can come to one by acting thus.[47]

I am skeptical that Aristotle thinks that the courageous person giving up her life will be serene. She will be pained, and while ideally she should be unwavering and confident in her judgment that she is acting virtuously, that does not necessarily imply a serene state of mind. And although it is clear enough that Aristotle thinks that giving up one's life in battle is a noble way to die, believing that is compatible with believing that it *is* nevertheless a harm to lose one's opportunity for the goods of a flourishing life.

So it simply is not true that that a virtuous person will always silence conflicting inclinations and act from a serene state of mind, and insofar as McDowell's account of virtue implies this, it is mistaken. The world in which we live is one in which we cannot promote everything that we correctly take to be valuable. In some cases, this is no cause for great regret, but in others, it is. Agamemnon was forced to choose between his daughter's life and his duty as a king and commander. No doubt he chose badly, but had he chosen to save Iphigeneia, he would still have had something to mourn. One need not believe in the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas in order to accept this as a feature of our circumstances. One must only accept that there is such a thing as a hard choice.[48]

VI. Motivational Unity

Susan Stark has suggested that we might be able to preserve the intuition that the virtue requires a kind of motivational unity in action (a unity that distinguishes it from mere continence), while at the same time avoiding McDowell's stoic version of virtue.[49] According to Stark, McDowell goes

[47] McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?," pp. 27–28.

[48] A Kantian can and should hold that fulfilling a perfect duty at the expense of fulfilling an imperfect duty may be a cause of pain or regret. Likewise, if the utilitarian calculus dictates that I leave my family to do good works, there is no reason to suppose that I ought to find this easy, just because it is the right thing to do.

[49] Susan Stark, "Virtue and Emotion," *Nous* 33 (2001), pp. 440–455.

wrong by combining the thesis about the motivational unity of virtue with a common sense view of the emotions, according to which evaluative considerations always give rise to motivating reasons for action. The result is his position that things such as death, injury, and loss do not count as harms to the virtuous person. Because they do not give rise to motivating reasons for the virtuous person, they cannot count as evaluative. Stark rightly sees this position as implausible. Her suggestion is that we revise our view of the emotions such that evaluative considerations always give rise to motivating reasons for action *or* emotion. Thus, we can say that considerations of death, injury, and so forth produce in the virtuous person motivating reasons for *emotions*, but not necessarily for action.[50] So these considerations motivate an agent to feel pain and sorrow, but not to act other than she does.

On Stark's view, the virtuous person has neither normative nor motivating reasons to act other than she does. Though she may feel conflicted in her emotions, she is fully united when it comes to action. The continent person, by contrast, is not motivationally unified (I assume, as I think Stark does too, that the continent person can be normatively unified). Stark thinks that this way of distinguishing between virtue and continence is important for virtue ethics:

> Though I do not argue for this in depth, I believe that this idea of unity is a crucial one for virtue ethics. First, it allows the virtue theorist to maintain Aristotle's clear distinction between virtue and continence. The virtuous person is motivationally unified, while the continent person is not. Second, and more important, without this notion of unity, it is difficulty to explain why virtue represents a higher level of moral goodness than mere continence . . . [T]he virtuous person is not even tempted by considerations that do tempt the ordinary run of humanity. She does not have any motivating reasons to act against the requirements of virtue.[51]

I think that this last sentence is false. Consider the virtuous company owner again. Clearly, she will experience conflict at the level of her emotions. The recognition of the harm she is causing will produce pain, grief, and anxiety in her. The question is whether those emotions generate in her a desire (and hence, a motivating reason) not to fire the employees. On Stark's view, if there is such a desire, she would count as continent and not virtuous. Otherwise, we cannot maintain the unity of virtuous motivation. But in such cases, the unity of virtuous motivation is itself dubious. It is plausible to say of the company owner that she wishes she did not have to fire her employees, that she does not want to fire them. When she considers the action under the description "firing my employees," she has

[50] Stark, "Virtue and Emotion," p. 452.

[51] Stark, "Virtue and Emotion," p. 446.

a desire – a motivating reason – not to act. Indeed, it is possible that she has no desire whatsoever to do the action under that description. (Imagine someone asking her whether she wants to fire them. Naturally, she would say "Of course not!") So when we consider the action under the description "firing my employees," virtue does *not* demand a unity of motivation. Of course, when we consider the action under the description "doing what is right," then the virtuous person would experience motivational unity. She certainly has no desire to do what is wrong, under that description. But notice that this can just as easily be true of the continent agent. He too desires to do what is right, and we need not suppose that *he* has any desire to do what is wrong, under that description. The pull for him is not the glamour of evil itself; other considerations are what militate against him acting as he should here.

So in the case of the virtuous company owner, the unity of virtuous motivation can be preserved only when we are talking about the action under the description of "the right thing to do." That unity, however, may also be found in the continent person, and it is a rather thin sort of unity anyway. Under other descriptions of the action, virtue is compatible with a desire – and hence, a motivating reason – not to do the action. Thus, under those descriptions, there is no unity of virtuous motivation. Virtue and continence cannot reliably be distinguished by reference to the unity of motivation, despite Stark's attempt to preserve the separation.

VII. A Better Way to Draw the Virtue/Continence Distinction

I have argued that the harmony thesis, as it is generally understood, is unsupportable. The counterexamples to the harmony thesis I have offered are cases in which a virtuous agent will find it very difficult to do the right thing because she sees a conflict between several important human goods. The conflict arises out of her recognition that acting rightly here requires the sacrifice of something genuinely significant. In such cases, a lack of conflict would indicate that she is somehow missing the importance of what is at stake. It follows that the mere presence or absence of conflict in an agent cannot tell us whether she is virtuous or merely continent.

Does this mean that the distinction between virtue and continence is useless? Not necessarily, but it does mean that it is murkier and more opaque than we might have thought. I have argued that a virtuous agent is characterized by her recognition of the significance of various human goods. This is the substance of the virtue of *phronesis*, which Aristotle considers a necessary and sufficient condition of the possession of any

other virtue. The *phronimos* has a correct understanding of the goods of human life and hence knows what is worth giving up and at what price. She also knows what is to be held dear and how much to grieve its loss. She values things in correspondence to their actual value in human flourishing, and her feelings reflect those correct judgments of value.

In this, she is different than the continent person. The continent person also knows what is good, but her feelings do not necessarily correspond with her judgments. She *knows* that when her friend calls for help with a broken-down car, she ought to go help her, despite the fact that one of her favorite television programs is on. She does in fact go to help her friend, but she does not really *want* to go. She wants to stay at home and watch television, and she is annoyed that she has to go out. Because she knows that her friend's needs are more important than her television program, she berates herself for feeling annoyed. But she is annoyed all the same, and her annoyance, while perhaps understandable, is a moral failing in her. It shows a discrepancy between what she correctly judges to be valuable and her feelings and inclinations. She is pained by the loss of something that she recognizes as relatively unimportant and perhaps not sufficiently moved by something that she recognized as very important. Her feelings toward the objects are not consistent with her judgments; here, those feelings imply that the television show is more important than she judges it to be. Such discrepancies are, of course, quite common, but then that is what we should expect. Aristotle reminds us that like hitting a target, acting virtuously requires practice and careful aim, and few people can always do it well.

So even if we reject the harmony thesis, we can distinguish between continence and virtue *via* the relationship between the agent's feelings and inclinations and what she knows to be genuinely valuable. If the agent's feelings and inclinations reflect her correct judgments of value, then she is virtuous. If they do not, then she is merely continent. (People who do not recognize what is genuinely valuable are neither continent nor virtuous, so I leave them aside.) In establishing the difference between virtue and continence in a given situation, we will have to specify what is genuinely valuable in that situation. In the case of the company owner, the goods in question are fairly straightforward. A person who experiences conflicting feelings in such circumstances shows that she values things that most of us would recognize to be valuable, and so the idea that she should be conflicted in that situation is intuitively plausible. In other cases, however, it is not so easy to know how a virtuous person would feel.

We should expect considerable disagreement about how the appreciation of these various goods should express itself. Moreover, we should

expect that those who do not have a full appreciation for the goods in question in a given situation will likely fail to understand why the virtuous person finds it hard to act well in that situation.[52] This does not tell against the thesis, but it does make apparent one of the complexities of virtue ethics; namely, that we cannot fully specify the goods at stake unless we are in possession of the requisite virtues. Since there is no way to distinguish between continence and virtue without specifying the goods at stake, we will not always be capable of giving a full account of what counts as virtuous or continent behavior in a given situation. This does not, of course, mean that the distinction is useless, but it does make it more difficult to apply.

The harmony thesis, while theoretically attractive, is susceptible to counterexamples that should make us doubt its overall reliability, as well as the plausibility of accounts of virtue that rely on it. Continence and virtue cannot be so easily distinguished. The usefulness of the harmony thesis is limited to cases in which there is no conflict of genuine goods. Life, however, has a distressing tendency to present us with situations in which we cannot help but act against something that we rightly hold dear. In finding such actions agonizing, we simply prove that we see the world correctly.

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[52] Hursthouse has been a particular proponent of this point.