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Striving to be Better: Incomplete character and the unity of the virtues
Long Abstract

I first stumbled upon Aristotle's thesis of the unity of the virtues while writing a paper on giving gifts. For that project I was engaged in reading works by anthropologists and philosophers on various gift-giving practices. Amongst their concerns I found a dedication to the question of identifying just what it is that makes something a gift—and in particular, a good gift. At the same time, I was encountering a number of short stories and poems and films, as well as examples from people I knew and gifts I had given and received, all of which seemed to resist almost everything the theoretical accounts had to offer. None of the attempts to bring together gifts into a unified structure managed to rightly capture the good and bad moments of giving.

From this project on giving came a number of the features of my dissertation. Stylistically, my intuitions remain driven by examples from similar literary and visual and personal sources, and my interests remain targeted at structural understanding which captures the ordinary. Content-wise, it struck me in the final compiling of my dissertation how very many of my virtue examples are cases of giving, of generosity. In the end, generosity was the hero of that paper on gifts. In the midst of trying to explain what made a gift a good one, I discovered Aristotle, and the virtues, and the idea that features of the giver and the activity of giving were what made the gift good. Good gifts were gifts given generously.

The longer that I worked on the question of generosity, which turned into thoughts about how one could develop generosity, the more it seemed clear to me that giving well required a great deal of courage sometimes, or honesty about the relationship

in which one is giving, or a sense of appropriateness or justice of distribution. In short, I was intuitively drawn to the thesis of unity of the virtues, as I learned to call it, a thesis I went looking for and found support for in Aristotle. Yet when I began to search out secondary literature on the unity thesis, what I found was mostly historical work—what Aristotle, or Plato, or so on meant by the unity of the virtues—or references in ethics to how obviously false we, even we Aristotelians, all take that thesis to be. And so my question was: how are these ethicists reading unity such that they are determined to resist it so powerfully? As I pursued that question, I became interested in developing and presenting an account of how they ought to be reading it, and why such an alternative is both a better way to read Aristotle (and more, why they need to read Aristotle this way if they want the other things they want from him) and a better way to understand people. The final project looks like this:

In my dissertation I develop and defend the Aristotelian thesis of the unity of the virtues. Most contemporary ethicists whose work is deeply indebted to an Aristotelian framework reject this thesis for two reasons. First, they typically see the unity thesis, which credits someone for having one virtue only when she has all of them, as too demanding a measure for actual human beings. Second, they claim the unity thesis makes it impossible to account for our powerful intuition that some of the actual human beings we know are more virtuous than others, or are better with one virtue than they are with another (for example, they are more generous than courageous). The critics suggest that unity works against one of the main advantages of virtue thinking, that it is rich with resources to give ordinary goodness credit in all its various forms.

I argue that these problems arise only if we fail to take proper account of the way in which Aristotelian unity is a characteristic of complete virtue. Unity is a formal feature of virtue, namely its goal (telos), towards which incompletely virtuous people strive. Once we recognize the teleological character of the unity thesis, situating it as an aspirational destination anchored in the functioning of human form, it is possible to give incompletely virtuous people credit for doing better or worse, for being closer to or further from that goal, for reaching toward and moving nearer to that goal with increasingly unified activity. In short, I refocus the unity thesis from its common expression (having one means having them all) to a claim that in order to understand any of the virtues or our successes with them, we have to see them in the light of and aimed toward what holds them (and us) together. This version of the claim is both more Aristotelian and has the added advantage of making unity plausible.

The argument of the dissertation is as follows. I begin by arguing for the core of my account, in favor of the shift to the teleological perspective on virtues. Chapter 1 is a survey of the relevant background to the shift, showing how scholars have overvalued the "having or not having" formulation of unity and the trouble to which this has led. Though the having formulation is not false, it unfortunately gives us little to go on for understanding cases of incomplete virtue. It divides cases of virtue into two kinds—those in which one has all the virtues all the way, and all other cases. Too often extrapolating from having in the wrong ways has tended to land philosophers with the thought that virtue is all or nothing, that the unity thesis entails denying credit for any success with virtue to those who fall into the category of "other cases." I argue that though the having

formulation does not give us the resources to credit such successes, nor does it rule them out. The having formulation is not wrong, but it is incomplete.

With this background in place, I use Chapter 2 to introduce the more robust teleological landscape. Here I develop an account of how unity will look if we treat it as a goal and a mean in Aristotle's sense of these terms. Relying heavily on examples of skill, I show that when we get the formal features into perspective as that at which we are aiming, we can then clear away the objections to unity's ability to give partial and relative credit for virtue. Most importantly, we see that the one who aspires (the one who most properly aims) has potential to improve her position relative to the end. Unity is highlighted best in the one who is striving to be better than she is.

In Chapter 3 I offer my alternative to the having formulation of unity, which I call the formulation of striving: striving for one virtue just is striving for all the virtues. The striving formulation presents both complete virtue and each individual virtue as targets we can aim toward by aiming for any single of the virtues aright. The central questions of the chapter concern developing an account of Aristotelian moral progress with unity as a normative ideal, approachable by striving. In short, I consider the possibilities and obstacles for an incompletely virtuous individual to be the motor of her own improvement.

Given the fact that the partially virtuous person is limited by what she does not know, including not being in possession of a definitive list of virtues, we might worry she is thus unable to reliably aim for something better. I offer three possibilities for progress which do not demand knowledge of full virtue. The first is an individual's attuned and educated response to *disunity*. Trained as we are, even incompletely virtuous individuals

can often recognize pockets of uneasy fit, particularly when we are getting worse at something—for example, as in the way one might notice she has been less than generous with a particular friend lately. I mark a process in which recognition of uneasy fit sets off on an undertaking to unify one's character. Second, I develop an account of how we get better not by noticing what is going badly but by working from the things we already do particularly well. I introduce a concept of virtue style not unlike what it would be to have a specialty within skill (as when we say someone is an emotional dancer, or technical one, for example). I argue that success and style of even incomplete characters can be robust enough to serve as a foundation for virtue progress. This is the case because whatever successes are present already maintain a kind of unity—style is itself a concept with internal fit, and is a way of thinking from which one can move to expand success. Finally, I outsource the eyes for progress onto our teachers, friends, and fellow citizens. Where we are unable to see our own failings, virtuous others can be our guides.

This chapter concludes with remarks on how to understand apparent conflict between virtues, and on worries about the difficulty, narrowness, and intentionality of striving for all the virtues.

The final chapter of the dissertation returns to unity's critics, this time in the form of those who deny the possibility and stability of character, the situationists. Here I respond to the situationist / virtue ethics debate with an argument that neither party has a properly calibrated account of the unity of the virtues, and this, to some extent, is causing them to both (1) talk past one another and (2) in most cases, to make mistakes about the virtues and characters and disunities and possibilities for flawed human beings. I argue for unity partly by pulling together the account from striving developed in Chapters 2 and

3. Mostly, however, the defense of unity in this chapter is presented as anchored in my second offering from Aristotelian formal thought (the first was teleology): the unified virtues as inextricably tied to excellent human functioning. They are, in other words, the completion of the essentially human form. This is a theme that runs throughout the dissertation, but only comes under the spotlight it deserves in the argument of Chapter 4.

In the end, the goals of the dissertation are these. I aim to offer a structural account of virtue unity, one which can illuminate and draw together the Aristotelian concepts of teleology, human form, the mean, stability, and character. I aim to show why virtue unity is not only about assigning quantities of the virtues to humans but also about understanding how virtue works. "How virtue works" includes understanding the successes humans come into by way of coming up amongst one another, as well as the possibilities for unevenness of those successes, and the possibilities for progress with virtue, beginning from whatever distance one is with respect to completion. I aim to demonstrate why the unity thesis is not so demanding as to be irrelevant to us, or so narrow as to tyrannically limit the diversity of ways of being good we—especially we virtue ethicists—so value for human beings. More than anything, my aim is to reopen the question of whether the unity thesis might be worth taking seriously, by contrast with the easy dismissals so many have granted it.