

First draft – please do not cite without permission of the author

Moral Psychology and the Unity of the Virtues

The thesis of the Unity of Virtue is a well-known tenet of ancient Greek ethics. Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, all held that in some sense the virtues are unified. The strongest version of the thesis, held perhaps by Socrates and Plato, states that Virtue is One, and that our names for all the apparently different virtues – courage, temperance, generosity, justice, and so on – refer to different aspects of the same single property. A weaker but still very strong version claims rather that the virtues are so integrated with each other that a person cannot have one virtue without having all the others.¹ To have one virtue, in other words, is to have them all. One cannot be truly courageous unless one is also just; one cannot be truly just unless one is also generous, as well as temperate, magnanimous, truthful, friendly, witty and so on.

On the face of it, however, this thesis seems plainly false. Most people are a mixture of good and bad. They have some good traits but lack others. And we are all familiar with people whom we would describe as possessing some virtues as well as some vices. General Patton was courageous but impatient and intolerant. Bill Clinton is compassionate but intemperate and undisciplined when it comes to women. Gandhi was a paragon of courage, justice, and integrity, but he was a cold and unsympathetic husband. Mother Theresa was an exemplar of disciplined altruism but a harsh and difficult person. If we look among our own acquaintances, examples of mixed cases proliferate. My parents are among the kindest and most generous people I know, but they

¹ See Terry Penner, "The Unity of Virtue," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 82 (January, 1973), 35-68 for discussion of these theses.

lack temperance in the area of desserts and my mother is distinctly cowardly when it comes to facing physical pain. There is no obvious connection between generosity and honesty, between justice and patience, between courage and kindness. What, we might wonder, could those ancient Greeks have been thinking of?

Indeed, on most of the occasions in which I have heard the thesis of the Unity of the Virtues brought up, it is scornfully dismissed as one of the weakest aspects of ancient ethics. Perhaps, modern philosophers think, it would have been nice if the virtues were unified, if people did fall neatly into categories of black and white, good and bad, virtuous and vicious. But the facts – that is, the observable, empirical, psychological facts – simply don't support this thesis. In this case, critics might believe, the Greeks succumbed to wish fulfillment. A different hypothesis, more charitable to the Greeks but with little else to recommend it, is that people may have been different back then. Perhaps the most courageous leaders in ancient times *were* also generous and just; perhaps the most temperate *were* also friendly and kind. Perhaps, in other words, the virtues used to be unified, but no longer are. But this seems unlikely. What reason could there be for human psychology to have changed so dramatically in this way? Moreover, a rereading of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* suggests the contrary. The characters of those epics – including even the divine characters! – seem as much mixtures of virtue and vice (courage and arrogance, cleverness and jealousy, hospitality and an excess of anger) as we are.

Reference to these Homeric epics may suggest a different and somewhat more credible hypothesis – namely, that although people were not so different back then, what we value in people has changed. Many modern readers, including myself, find the

Odyssey challenging in part because the presentation of Odysseus as heroic clashes with some of our own evaluative sensibilities: Odysseus is brave, clever and disciplined, but he is also unfaithful, dishonest, and occasionally cruel. Yet there is no indication that Homer, or his audience would be in any way critical of his character. This suggests that some of the cases that I earlier mentioned as cases of a mixture of virtue and vice might appear differently to the ancients. Perhaps General Patton and Bill Clinton would seem to the Greeks to be altogether admirable; perhaps Mother Theresa would seem more peculiar than impressive.

Although ancient values, including ancient evaluations of character, do differ significantly from modern ones, I doubt that this has much to do with the explanation of the puzzle we are discussing. I find no reason to think that trying to assess people's characters from an ancient Greek evaluative perspective rather than a contemporary one would yield more unified judgments of their overall goodness or badness. Indeed, since ancient conceptions of virtue tend to take a broader view of the range of qualities that it is appropriate to assess than modern morality does, opportunities for disunity seem all the greater. It seems easy enough to find examples of people who possess one but not all of the virtues upon which we and the Greeks agree – to imagine, for example, a person who is just but not generous, or generous but not brave. How much easier to find examples of people who have some of these qualities but lack wit or friendliness, which are also included in Aristotle's list of virtues, or to think of people who possess the virtues of wit or friendliness but lack the more paradigmatic moral virtues. (Indeed, it is just this latter combination that accounts for many a con man's success.) Moreover, if there is anything to the interpretation of tragedy as involving the portrayal of a hero with a tragic flaw,

then Greek literature again gives us evidence that the ancient Greeks themselves were well aware that human psychology allows mixtures of good and bad, that people often exhibit combinations of virtue and vice.

Now, the ancient Greek philosophers may have been weird but they were not stupid. Yet, if I am right that they had roughly the same kind and amount of evidence that we do of the fact that the virtues do not all come in a package, it would have been stupid of them to insist that, as a matter of fact, they do. This suggests that we misunderstand the thesis of the unity of virtue if we take it to be an empirical claim, so easily disproved. Yet, if it is not an empirical claim what can it be - a normative claim? If so, what would the claim be? That there *ought* to be a unity of virtue? Alternatively, the claim might be that a person who has one virtue *ought* to have them all. But shouldn't all people try to have all the virtues, whether one possesses one of them to begin with or not?

A study of the texts and views of the Greeks makes clear that, although the thesis is not an empirical thesis, arrived at or supported by empirical evidence, neither is it a straightforwardly normative thesis of the kind just mentioned. Rather, the thesis is one that falls out of a broader normative view as a corollary. It may be understood as the conclusion of an argument that rests in part on normative premises. Moreover, it seems to me that the premises of the argument are quite plausible and that therefore the argument in favor of a qualified form of the thesis is quite strong.

In this paper, I shall present that argument and in so doing make a case for a qualified form of the thesis of the unity of virtue - although, as will be seen, by the time I get done with the argument, the qualified form in which I think the thesis can be

defended is so modest as to deprive the thesis of much interest on its own. The enterprise of defending the thesis in the face of empirical reasons to doubt it is interesting, rather, for two other reasons. First, it calls, or returns, our attention to the broader normative view with which the thesis is connected, asking us to take a stand on it, and, if we support it, perhaps, to integrate it into our ethical judgment and behavior more centrally than we currently do. Second, it serves as a useful case study of the enterprise of moral psychology, an area in which the descriptive and the prescriptive, the empirical and the normative, are deeply and confusingly intertwined.

I should say, before I begin to present the argument for the unity of virtue, that although the thesis and the view which I will present in support of it are inspired by the Greeks, and particularly by Aristotle, my aims are not at all interpretive. I can make no pretense of Greek scholarship. Therefore, although I will frequently refer to what I take to be Aristotle's views on virtue, the question of whether Aristotle actually held these views (interesting as that is, at least to me) should not affect the strength of the argument or the attractiveness of the position I shall be presenting.

An argument for the unity of virtue

Why, then, should anyone think that the virtues are unified? For all the ancients this claim was a consequence of a more central normative claim about the close connection between virtue and knowledge. The basic idea of the argument for the unity of virtue that I want to present I take from Aristotle. Let me present it roughly and informally before stepping back and examining it more carefully.

According to Aristotle, having a virtue is a matter of having a character that disposes you to do the right thing in the right way, at the right time, to the right person,

for the right reason. One can only have such a virtue if one has a sense of what the right thing and the right reason are. More specifically, to have virtues of this sort, one needs to have the right values, the right priorities. One needs to know what's important, for only then can one know what costs are worth suffering for what benefits. Thus, for example, courage is roughly the trait that leads a person to face certain dangers willingly and well – to risk one's life, for example, in the heat of battle in defense of one's country. A person who cannot face danger, or does so only grudgingly and with great emotional reluctance, is not courageous, and is perhaps even cowardly. However, a person who faces danger just for the fun of it – who performs risky stunts to get attention or who dares people to get into fights for the thrill - is not, by this evidence at least, shown to be courageous either. These sorts of actions do not count as courageous because these sorts of physical risks are not ones it is particularly *good* to face willingly. Some would argue that facing risks of this sort is bad, stupid, or, as Aristotle (or his translators) would say, rash. This brings out that a key feature in the idea of courage is that it disposes one to face *appropriate* dangers willingly and well. A courageous person recognizes that some goals or values are worth fighting for, even to the point of risking one's life, and it is for these goals and values that a courageous person faces danger willingly. A rash person by contrast does not face danger because the goals are morally worth the risk. She faces danger rather because she loves danger, because she is risk-prone. A courageous person is one who risks her life or limb when the stakes make it worth it, morally, to do so, when there's something worth fighting for; what risks she takes will be in proportion to the worth of what's at stake. A courageous person, then, must know how much, and how little, her life and limbs are worth.

We may understand the virtue of generosity along similar lines. Generosity, on this view, is the character trait that disposes one to give of one's wealth willingly and well. In other words, generosity is not a matter of being willing to give a lot rather than a little, but a matter of giving the right amount to the right people for the right reasons in the right way. A person who gives too little, or who gives only reluctantly, is stingy. But giving one's ten-year-old niece a \$300 Kate Spade purse is not generous but something else. As courage involves knowing the value of protecting one's life, generosity requires knowing the value of keeping or parting with one's wealth. One needs to know what's worth giving one's money for, and at what cost to one's own economic well-being.

These examples illustrate the sense in which, on Aristotle's view, the virtues require knowledge. Since different virtues concern different spheres of activity, the knowledge most centrally required for one virtue will differ from the knowledge most centrally required for another. Courage has to do with facing danger and risking physical harm to oneself. Generosity has to do with spending money and giving gifts. Accordingly, the knowledge that is most saliently required for courage is knowledge of the value of prolonging one's life and keeping one's limbs intact; the knowledge most relevant to generosity is the knowledge of the value of money and wealth.

However, knowledge of the value of one item is necessarily knowledge of that item's value *relative to* the values of everything else. Knowing the value of physical safety means knowing what's worth fighting for and what's not; knowing the value of money means knowing when it is and when it is not worth spending it or giving it away. This suggests that perfect and complete knowledge of the importance of, say, physical safety, may require knowledge of the importance of wealth, and vice versa. For one may

need to know when a certain amount of wealth is worth fighting for, or when giving money to assure another person's physical safety is appropriate.

The kind of knowledge that is required for the virtues, on this conception, is knowledge of what's important, knowledge of what matters. A person who has this kind of knowledge we may describe as 'having her priorities straight.' As the reference to "priorities" suggests, however, such knowledge of value seems to be essentially unified.

From this informal sketch of Aristotle's conception of virtue we can formulate a simple two-premise argument for the thesis that the virtues are unified in a certain qualified sense. Premise one states that *each virtue essentially involves knowledge*, in particular knowledge of what's important. Premise two states that *knowledge is essentially unified*. That is, the perfect and complete knowledge of the importance of one item requires knowledge of the importance of everything else against which it may in principle have to be balanced. The conclusion that follows is that *virtue is unified*, in the sense that the perfect and complete possession of one virtue requires at least the knowledge that is needed for the possession of every other.

It will be noted that this conclusion is considerably weaker than the thesis the Greeks are taken to support, in two respects.² First, the conclusion refers to the conditions of perfect and complete possession of a virtue, whereas, in ordinary circumstances, we do not hold our attributions of virtue to so high a standard. Second, the conclusion does not require that even perfect and complete possession of one virtue requires the actual possession of all the other virtues. Rather, the claim is that perfect and complete possession of one virtue requires the evaluative knowledge involved in the

² It is not clear to me that Aristotle ever actually indicated support for the strong theses discussed at the beginning of this paper, as opposed to the weaker thesis that, following Aristotle's conception of virtue, I defend here.

possession of the other virtues. Thus it leaves open the question of whether a person may have all the evaluative knowledge relevant to, say, the virtue of honesty, but still fail to possess the virtue of honesty itself.

I shall return to a discussion of these qualifications to the thesis of the unity of virtue later in the paper. Even granting their significance, however, it seems to me that the dissonance between the conclusion that is supported by the argument and the apparently strong empirical evidence against it is striking. In part, this is because, as I shall try to argue in the sections to follow, the argument is a strong argument, making it puzzling that there should be reasons to think its conclusion must be wrong. The phenomenon becomes even more puzzling when one notes that the reasons to question it are empirical in nature. How can there be an empirical disproof of a normative and conceptual argument? What, exactly, is going on?

I should say up front that I do not see myself as providing a fully satisfactory answer to this question in the course of this paper. What I will do is try vividly to present my sense that the phenomenon of weighing a normative argument against empirical evidence is and should be puzzling, in the hopes that the discussion of an instance of the phenomenon will serve as a lesson urging us to deal sensitively with issues in this confusing intellectual terrain. To achieve this, I want to take a closer look at the argument in favor of the qualified unity thesis and argue for its plausibility, pointing out and addressing some reasons others might have to question it along the way.

Does virtue involve knowledge?

Let us return then to the first premise of the argument – that each virtue essentially involves knowledge, and in particular, evaluative knowledge, knowledge of

what's important. The earlier discussion of the distinctions between courage and rashness and between generosity and foolish extravagance has already given an indication of the position this premise is meant to represent. Its point is to insist that the characters traits we ought most to value and to which we ought to aspire are not dispositions to behave in ways that can be described in wholly nonevaluative terms. Courage is not simply a matter of finding it easier or less painful than most to put oneself in the line of physical danger; generosity is not a matter of being quicker than most to give one's money away. Rather, according to the view expressed by this premise, true courage, true generosity, and more generally, the possession of true virtue always involves an element of judgment – and of good judgment at that.

Again, looking at Aristotle's views will help to flesh this out. According to Aristotle, the possession of any virtue – or as I shall say for the sake of clarity, of any *true* virtue - involves a combination of two sort of qualities, which he calls “natural virtue” and “intelligence.” “Natural virtues”, as I understand them, are dispositions to feel and behave in ways that can be described nonevaluatively. Though these dispositions may be literally natural – that is, they may be unlearned personality traits determined by genetic makeup – the “natural virtues”, as I shall understand the term, are not restricted to traits of this heritage. A person who finds it easy to face physical risks, whether as a result of training or of biology, may have “natural courage”; a person who gets more pleasure or less pain than most in parting with her wealth has “natural generosity.” Similarly, perhaps, a person who is always disposed to tell the truth and would find it difficult to dissemble is naturally honest. One can see how to characterize the dispositions of natural patience, mildness, good-humor, hospitality, and kindness

along similar lines. We must have natural virtues in mind when we attribute virtues to lower animals – dogs are said to be loyal, lambs to be gentle, lions to be courageous (except of course the Cowardly Lion!). On the Aristotelian view, however, we should not understand these attributions literally if we wish to think of loyalty, gentleness, and so on, as *true* virtues. For, as we have already seen, to identify these animals' dispositions with true virtue would deprive us of the means to distinguish courage from rashness, generosity from extravagance, honesty from obsessive truth-telling. To make such distinctions, we need to invoke the other element that Aristotle takes to be essential to virtue, the element of intelligence or practical wisdom or good evaluative judgment.³

As a matter of linguistic practice, it seems to me that we vacillate between using virtue terms to refer to dispositions that might be regarded as natural virtues and using them to refer to essentially judgment-infused characteristics. The description of someone as “generous to a fault” would be unintelligible if we could not understand the attribution of generosity, in this utterance, as separable from the exercise of good judgment. In other contexts, however, we evidently do understand virtue terms in a way that builds good judgment in. Thus, for example, it would be odd to think that it is a mark of dishonesty for a person to lie on an occasion where lying is clearly in order (e.g., *pace* Kant, when there is a murderer at the door looking for your innocent friend).⁴ And we ourselves would not understand the difference between courage and rashness if we did not

³ Though we may describe lions as courageous, it is absurd to suggest that a lion could be rash. The fact that the distinction between rashness and courage seems unintelligible with respect to nonrational animals reinforces the idea that when we apply a virtue term to them, we are not using it in the fully refined sense that is appropriate for humans.

⁴ This, I take it, is closely related to Philippa Foot's discussion of the relation between justice and benevolence in “Utilitarianism and the Virtues,” *Mind* 94 (1985-209). For example, she writes “...someone who refuses to sacrifice an innocent life for the sake of increasing happiness is not to be counted as less benevolent than someone who is ready to do it.”

sometimes use the former word to refer to the disposition to face appropriate, and only appropriate, dangers well.

The question of whether true courage involves knowledge, or whether instead it is just a matter of being disposed to face danger more easily than most, might then seem like a linguistic question, a question about the correct usage of the word “courage” and other virtue terms. Here, however, the claim that the virtues essentially involve knowledge is meant to make a normative rather than a linguistic point. The claim is that the natural virtues are not truly admirable, or at least not *as* admirable or not admirable in the same way as the traits that Aristotle would recognize as true virtues. Though the “natural” traits associated with courage, generosity, kindness, and so on, may be useful either to the agent herself or to her community, they are not the traits to which one ought to aspire, or that one would want one’s children and best friends to possess.⁵

Once attention is called to the possibility of two different conceptions of virtue – one that associates virtues with “natural” qualities, with dispositions to behave in nonevaluatively describable ways, and the other that understands the virtues along Aristotelian lines as essentially infused with judgment, is there any reason to resist the normative claim that the latter conception is better? The first premise of the argument we are discussing essentially amounts to the claim that the latter conception *is* better. Two possible reasons for doubting it occur to me.

First, those who are morally committed to certain rigid rules of behavior may think that a person has no need to consult judgment with respect to the relevant realms of activity. If one thinks that honesty is *always* the best policy, for example, then the idea that honesty requires an appreciation of the *relative* importance of truth-telling will seem

⁵ Consider Mel Gibson’s character in the first *Lethal Weapon* movie. Is he courageous?

misleading at best. Moreover, appreciation of the importance of such values will be irrelevant to acting rightly – one should simply always tell the truth; there is no need to ask whether truth-telling is warranted in this case. Somewhat differently, a person may think that there are certain “natural” traits that cannot be overvalued - for example, one might think that there is no limit to the degree to which a person might commendably think about and try to satisfy the needs of others.⁶ Here again one might think that an Aristotelian conception of virtue, according to which true kindness involves a recognition of when it is and when it is not appropriate to attend to others, must be either misleading or irrelevant to admirable behavior.⁷

Second, one might think that an Aristotelian conception of virtue is overly intellectual. Such a conception may seem to reflect an overvaluing of thought and reflection. In fact, it might be pointed out that some people think *too* much, and this often interferes with their ability to act in ways that are best either for themselves or for others, making them indecisive or leading them astray by confusing them with puzzles they would have been better off never hearing of.⁸ Rather than embrace the position that insists that virtue essentially involves knowledge, we should advocate precisely the opposite, a position that urges us to act from the heart and not from the mind.

I do not have space in this paper to give these concerns the attention they deserve. I suspect that to some extent the first worry, and maybe even the second, reflect a difference in values that cannot be settled by further argument. One must simply reflect on the alternative evaluative perspectives, and decide which one to support. However,

⁶ We sometimes use the expression “you are too kind,” but I don’t think we ever mean it literally.

⁷ Thanks to Doug MacLean for pressing this objection.

⁸ I owe thanks to Linda Bedsaul for getting me to think about this objection, and for bringing out the power of Michael Oakeschott’s expression of a related point of view.

these concerns (and especially the second) also seem to me to reflect a misunderstanding of the Aristotelian conception that I find attractive. Aristotle, to be sure, refers to the two ingredients of true or complete virtue as “natural virtue” on the one hand and “intelligence” on the other. But just as “natural virtue,” as I understand it, need not have anything “natural” about it, “intelligence” as it seems most charitably interpreted here, has little to do with what gets measured by IQ tests or the SATs. The kind of knowledge that, on this view, is necessary for true virtue is knowledge of what is important or worthwhile. As I mentioned earlier, the kind of knowledge in question is the kind we have in mind when we describe someone as having her priorities straight. It requires consciousness and sophisticated mental faculties of a kind that only human beings seem to possess. (One cannot think of a dog as having his priorities straight.) Yet it is far from clear that this kind of knowledge is more appropriately assigned to the mind than to the heart. When we think of people we know who have this kind of knowledge, and those who lack it, we find no correlation between its possession and the possession of advanced degrees.⁹ Moreover, although such knowledge can only be acquired through a combination of experience and reflection, the exercise or application of such knowledge need not, in many circumstances, take time. A person who has her priorities straight may well see “in a flash” what needs to be done – whether it involves rushing into a burning building to try to save a child or stopping along the highway to help an accident victim.¹⁰ When we keep in mind that the point of the claim that the virtues essentially involve knowledge is to insist that the character traits that are most admirable and desirable are

⁹ There is a question, though, of how much intelligence is required for the possession of true virtue. Consider the range of views people have toward the character of Forest Gump.

¹⁰ John McDowell’s and Iris Murdoch’s conceptions of virtue and the role of perception in it are in much the same spirit as the view I am offering here. I profited from numerous discussions of these topics with Megan Hughes.

not blind or mechanical dispositions to behave in ways that a third party can recognize as good or worthwhile, but dispositions that integrate an appreciation of what is good and worthwhile into their very content, it seems to me the appeal of this claim speaks for itself.

I have been interpreting this first premise, that the virtues essentially involve knowledge, as a normative or ethical claim, and have tried to show it to be more attractive than alternative ethical views. But my reference to evaluative knowledge may also raise a metaethical worry that it is best to mention before proceeding, if only to get it out of the way. To a philosophical audience, a discussion of knowledge in connection with values is likely to raise a red flag. To say that the virtues essentially involve knowledge of values evidently implies that (if virtue is to be possible) knowledge of values is possible, that values, in other words, are the sort of thing that can be known. But this is a highly controversial position. Does attraction to the idea of the unity of virtue commit one to cognitivism and the objectivity of values? I do not think it does.

In the context at hand, the point of the claim that the virtues involve knowledge and that such knowledge is unified could be made without use of the “k” word. At an earlier point, I paraphrased the view that the virtues essentially involve knowledge in terms of the view that virtues involve judgment, and good judgment at that. Since it is a fact of life that we make judgments, that we engage, in other words, in evaluation, *any* conception of ethics must have some account of it. Therefore, any conception of ethics must be able to distinguish between normative views that take evaluation to be a part of virtue and those that do not. What of the fact that, on the view we are considering, virtues are required to involve *good* judgment? Evidently, if one did not think there was

such a thing as good judgment- if one thought that one set of value judgments is no better or worse than another – then one could not endorse a conception of virtue that requires that one’s judgments be especially good. But in that case, I do not see how one could endorse any conception of virtue at all. For if one thinks that one set of value judgments is no better or worse than another, what reason can there be for regarding one character trait as a virtue and another as a vice? Even an emotivist can ascribe to the position that virtues require good judgment. From an emotivist perspective, this amounts to the view that we only attribute a virtue to someone if her behavior reflects evaluations that the speaker would endorse.

Though I believe, therefore, that the appeal of the idea that the virtues are unified does not depend on a commitment to cognitivism, I shall continue to use the “k” word to discuss the view under consideration for the purpose of easy expression and hope that people are able to understand this in a way that leaves metaethical issues to one side. Not only did the Greeks talk about knowledge of values, but we do, too, in ordinary life. No eyebrows are raised when we say, in nonphilosophical contexts, that we want our children to “know” the value of a dollar, or the value of friendship, or more generally that we want them to “know” what is important in life. These expressions, indeed, seem to me to be the most natural ones to express the kind of concern that is fundamental to the conception of ethics and of virtue that is the topic of this paper, the view that central to living an ethically good and admirable life is an appreciation of the relative value or worth of the various things life has to offer, and of an integration of this evaluative perspective into one’s attitudes, emotions, and behavior.

The point of the first premise, then, is to say that appreciation of the relative worth of at least some aspects of life must be an integrated part of any individual virtue. Every virtue, as I shall say, requires some knowledge of value. Courage requires knowing the importance – and unimportance – of saving, protecting, or risking one’s life; generosity requires knowing the importance – and unimportance – of material wealth. Let us now turn to a consideration of the second premise, the claim that such knowledge is essentially unified.

Is evaluative knowledge unified?

As those who are attracted to noncognitivist accounts of value may have been concerned about my references to evaluative knowledge, those who are attracted to value pluralism may worry about the claim that evaluative knowledge is unified. Since I myself am deeply attracted to value pluralism, I am especially interested in understanding its relation to the thesis of the unity of virtue. Indeed, there are two sorts of pluralism to which I am attracted, each of which poses a different problem for the thesis at issue. We may distinguish pluralism about individual ideals from pluralism about values.

A pluralist about individual ideals believes that there are a variety of admirable ways to live. A life of political activity and public service, a life of quiet scholarship or of devotion to artistic creation; a life in close communion with nature or one of intense engagement with cultural activities that only an urban environment can provide – to the pluralist, each of these sorts of lives may have corresponding ideals to which it would be appropriate, perhaps equally or incommensurably appropriate, to aspire. Can one endorse this kind of pluralism and still embrace the unity of the virtues? Certainly, one sees little

trace of this position in Greek ethics. Still, I do not think that the positions are incompatible. It will be useful to see why one might initially think that they are.

At a minimum, a pluralist about individual ideals must acknowledge that there are more worthwhile things to do and ways to be than can be captured or realized in a single life. One can live a virtuous life – perhaps, a completely virtuous life – as a stay-at-home parent, as a head of a company, as a philosophy professor or a basketball player or a concert violinist. As these different kinds of lives call for different talents and skills, so one may think they call for different virtues. If so, then even accepting the idea that the virtues essentially involve knowledge, one may question the idea that the knowledge required for one virtue is unified with the knowledge required of others. What need is there of courage, one might ask, and so of the knowledge required for courage, in the life of a quiet scholar? What need is there of generosity in the life of an arctic explorer, or of compassion in the life of a soldier? If we define our virtue terms in ways that tie them to relatively concrete spheres of activity, the answer may be “little or none.” That is, if we understand courage as a specifically military virtue, then a person who will never serve in the armed forces – whether because she is a pacifist or a paraplegic or a mother of twelve - will have no need of courage. If we define generosity as specifically tied to giving away money, then a person who *has* no money – again, whether through choice or necessity - will have no need of generosity. As the very mention of these examples might suggest, however, we do not typically use our terms so narrowly.¹¹ Firemen and policemen as well as soldiers may have their courage tested every day, and one can easily construct scenarios in which a mother of twelve may be called upon to display it.

¹¹ Though Aristotle uses them somewhat narrowly. For him, courage does seem tied to military contexts; and generosity is distinguished from magnificence depending on the scale of the expenditure involved.

Furthermore, even if the paradigm of courage involves a willingness to expose oneself to physical danger, we sometimes use the word more broadly still to refer to instances in which one risks other sorts of harm to oneself. Generosity, too, may be displayed even by those who have little to give. Indeed, stories of paupers who share their paltry meals or shelter with strangers who are even worse off than themselves are among the most moving depictions of generosity.¹² Moreover, generosity, though primarily displayed in one's willingness to share material goods, is continuous with a disposition to share or donate other things of value, such as time and emotional energy. It is plausible, then, to think that even though different sorts of admirable lives are likely to call upon different virtues to different degrees – any or almost any kind of life might have need of any of the most basic virtues, abstractly defined.

If the thesis of the unity of virtue is to be at all plausible, then, we must use the term “virtue” to refer to character traits of a fairly general kind, that determine dispositions to act in contexts that might arise in the course of almost any life. The kind of evaluative knowledge needed for such virtues will have to be understood as correspondingly general, having to do with the relative value of the basic elements of life. This is not, however, an implausible or *ad hoc* restriction – there is at least some basis for it in ordinary language, and, if we do restrict our understanding of virtue and of the relevant kinds of evaluative knowledge in this way, the claims of their respective unity may not be undermined by or in tension with a commitment to the plurality of individual ideals.

¹² This seems an especially common motif in Jewish folklore. Consider also the story of ... in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

If one holds a particularly strong form of ideal pluralism, there may be more tension with the unity thesis than I have so far acknowledged. I am thinking of a view according to which what makes one life admirable might essentially include evaluative judgments that are incompatible with judgments fundamental to what is admirable in another life. The deep and single-minded political commitment one admires in one person may make her oblivious to the power of works of art that express conflicting political visions or to the humor of comedians who take political values less seriously than she is willing to do. What is admirable in her character, one might think, makes it not only unnecessary but impossible to possess other sorts of virtues – she cannot, for example, possess the virtues one admires in the artist or comedian in question, or in the art critic who is able to suspend some kinds of evaluative belief enough to be open to appreciating different works of art on their own terms. Someone who ascribes to this strong form of pluralism might think that what is admirable in one life may essentially require its subject to have views of the form “*This is the only way to live; this is the most important value,*” incompatible with judgments essential to some other admirable way of life. Perhaps P.F. Strawson had this strong form of pluralism in mind in “Social Morality and the Individual Ideal,”¹³ when he wrote “This is an area where there are truths, but no truth.” If one endorses this view, then one cannot believe that the virtues, or the knowledge they require, are unified in any straightforward sense. According to this form of pluralism, the possession of one virtue not only does not require, it actually forbids the possession of the knowledge required for some of the rest.

¹³ P.F. Strawson, “Social Morality and the Individual Ideal,” *Philosophy*, 1961, pp. 1-17.

I confess that I am sometimes attracted to this view,¹⁴ but I want to leave the issue of whether to accept it for another day. It is not, at any rate, what fuels the more common dismissal of the unity of virtues thesis that I am concerned to address in this paper, a dismissal that comes from the apparently obvious illustrations of mixed cases of virtue and vice that we see all around us. When we call up the images of Patton or Clinton, or, for that matter, of Martha Stewart or Tony Soprano, and assess them, the challenge they pose to the unity of virtue has nothing to do with the plurality of individual ideals. The problem with Patton is not that he has the virtues of one kind of life but not those of another – it is rather that he has some but not all of the virtues that a person might have in a single life, and that, contrary to what the unity of virtue thesis would have us believe, his lack of virtue in one area seems to take nothing away from his possession of virtue in another.

Without even thinking about, much less embracing a strong thesis about the plurality of individual ideals, in other words, we seem to have strong empirical as well as imaginative evidence that the virtues are not necessarily unified.¹⁵ Yet the plausible-sounding argument I have presented would imply that they are. So let us return to an examination of that argument to see where the source of the conflict might lie. Let us return, more specifically, to the second premise of that argument that claims that the knowledge required for virtue is essentially unified. The reason I earlier gave for thinking this a plausible claim is that the relevant kind of knowledge is knowledge of

¹⁴See “Two Levels of Pluralism,” *Ethics* 102 (July 1992), pp. 785-798, in which I discuss a scene from the movie *Witness* in which, as I suggest, a homicide detective and an Amish farmer both act virtuously, each as demanded by their mutually inconsistent moral principles. Also, see Isaiah Berlin,...

¹⁵ It seems to me that even imaginative evidence is indirectly empirical, for what we can imagine, and particularly what we can imagine easily and without strain, and what strikes us as realistic, is strongly reflective of our experience of the empirical world.

value – of the value or importance or worth of such things as long life and material comfort – and that such knowledge is comparative by its very nature. To know the worth of material comfort is to know its worth relative to the value of everything else – relative, for example, to the value of friendship, of health, of security, relative also to the value of helping others to live in material comfort or at least of helping them to avoid deprivation. If this claim is understood in a certain way, however, it may suggest a theory of value that conflicts with a different kind of pluralism than the one discussed a moment ago.

What I have in mind may be suggested by the following train of thought: If we are to accept the first premise of the argument, then we must agree that to be courageous one must know the value (and the limits of the value) of preserving one's life and limb – that is, we must know what is worth risking one's life for, and what is not worth it. Similarly, to be generous, one must know the value of wealth. One must know, in other words, what is and what is not worth giving one's money to support. To say that the knowledge required for virtue is essentially unified is to say that one cannot know the value of protecting one's life without knowing its value relative to wealth, to friendship, to freedom, and so on. One must know, for example, whether it is worth risking one's life to keep or gain wealth (and if so, for how much wealth), and how much one should be willing to pay in order to avoid risk to one's life. The worry about this line of reasoning is that it suggests that all goods are convertible and exchangeable according to their ranking on a single scale.

There is reason, I think, to reject such a monistic conception of value. Being willing to fight for one's country is not morally equivalent to being willing to pay, even to pay quite a lot, for a mercenary who will fight on one's behalf. Being willing to read

to one's children is not morally equivalent to being willing to hire a nanny who will read to them. If the thesis of the unity of evaluative knowledge is understood to imply that all values are exchangeable, then the thesis should be rejected. But it does not seem to me that we need to understand the thesis in this way. The kind of knowledge of the relative worth of things that is required for virtue seems to me to be both more complex and less precise than the monistic conception of value suggests. It is more complex because the kind of knowledge that is necessary for virtue includes not only having a sense of how much of one good is worth risking or sacrificing for another, but also understanding when and for what kinds of goods different kinds of action are appropriate. It is less precise because it is not required that one have a detailed idea in advance of what ought to be done in all imaginable situations.

The idea that evaluative knowledge of the kind that is required for the virtues is unified, then, is not to be identified with the idea that knowledge of values is a matter of assigning them a place on a single comprehensive scale. The idea is rather that one's understanding of the place and importance of one basic ingredient of a good life must necessarily exist against a background of opinion about the place and importance of other ingredients, and that one's sense of the importance of one value is not fully, conceptually detachable from one's sense of the importance of the others. It follows from this that if one's views about one value are seriously mistaken (if, say, one radically overvalues material wealth or undervalues friendship) it will infect the content of one's other values, marring them to some degree. Knowledge of the values especially important to the possession of one virtue will thus necessarily involve knowledge of the values important for the possession of the others.

The argument for the claim that the kind of knowledge required for virtue is essentially unified is purely conceptual, and, as I have already mentioned, it strikes me as perfectly sensible. I can find nothing wrong with it. Yet if we accept it, we seem forced to a conclusion that conflicts with our knowledge of human psychology. For if we accept the idea that each virtue requires knowledge and that the relevant kind of knowledge is essentially unified, it follows that the virtues themselves are unified, at least in the sense that one cannot fully and perfectly possess one virtue unless one has the knowledge required for possession of all the others. Yet when we think of real or imagined characters to whom we would unhesitantly attribute one virtue, it is not at all clear that we require them to have the evaluative knowledge required for another. In order to feel justified in calling a soldier courageous, we do not seem to require that he will also be generous, or even that he have the evaluative knowledge needed for generosity. Indeed, we do not seem even to require that he have the evaluative knowledge necessary for justice, knowledge that would give him the ability to determine whether the war he is fighting for is a just one. What are we to make of the clash between our concrete assessments of individual characters, and the constraints on those assessments that our normative and conceptual argument would seem to imply?

The unity of virtue thesis – the weak version

Before addressing this question, let us be clear on what constraints our argument would imply. Let us be clear, that is, on the sense in which, according to our argument, the virtues are unified, for, as I said at the beginning of this paper, that sense is considerably weaker than the sense that is typically associated with the Greeks. Specifically, the classical Greek thesis of the unity of virtue is understood to imply that to

have one virtue is to have them all. If a person is courageous, according to this thesis, then he will also be generous, just, truthful, and temperate. (And similarly, if he is just, he will possess courage as well as all the rest of the virtues.) The conclusion of our argument is weaker than that in two important respects.

First, the argument I have presented supports the thesis that to have one virtue, one must have the knowledge required for the possession of the others, but this is not the same as the requirement that one possess the other virtues themselves. We can get a firmer grasp of this point by recalling the Aristotelian idea that each virtue involves a combination of a so-called “natural virtue” and intelligence (or practical wisdom or good judgment). Courage, for example, requires the ability to face physical danger readily, as well as the knowledge of what ends merit the facing of danger; generosity requires the ability to part with one’s money easily as well as the knowledge of what ends merit the spending of money. Since the unity I have been arguing for is a unity of knowledge, it follows that one who accepts that unity will believe that at the limit the knowledge that is a part of courage is the same knowledge as the knowledge that is a part of generosity - it is a holistic kind of knowledge that may be roughly characterized as knowledge of what matters. But having the knowledge that is required for generosity or for courage does not guarantee that one has the “natural abilities” required for these traits.¹⁶ One may know that one should risk one’s life for a certain cause, or that one should give a large percentage of one’s money to help others, but still be unable or unwilling or strongly reluctant to do so. Unlike those Greeks who believed that a courageous person will also

¹⁶ At least most of us do not think so. Plato, and others who deny the possibility of *akrasia* or weakness of the will, do seem to believe that if you truly and fully know that something is worth doing then you will be able to do it with relative ease. Thus, for Plato we need not distinguish two ingredients to virtue. Virtue simply *is* knowledge. If one accepts this thesis, as well as the thesis that the relevant kind of knowledge is unified, the stronger thesis of the unity of virtue will follow.

necessarily be generous and just, our argument only supports the idea that a courageous person will have the knowledge relevant to generosity and justice. A courageous person, in other words, will know what he ought to do in order to be generous and just. But it does not follow that he will actually be generous and just.

Even this more qualified thesis – that to possess one virtue one must have the knowledge that is relevant for the possession of all the others – is supported by our argument only in a weak or further qualified form. In particular, although that argument implies that full and complete or perfect possession of a virtue requires knowledge that is relevant to the possession of all the other virtues, it should be noted that in ordinary life, we rarely worry about whether a person is fully, completely and perfectly virtuous, as opposed to just (plain old, or pretty) virtuous. Indeed, in most contexts, the question of whether a person whom we have reason to regard as courageous (or just or generous) is perfectly and completely courageous (or just or generous) will seem to be pedantic if not downright churlish.

The thesis that the knowledge of value is unified implies that one cannot have full and perfect knowledge of, say, the value of protecting one's life unless one has knowledge of its value relative to that of all other important goods. One must know the value of protecting one's life relative to the value of keeping one's friends and relative to the value of keeping one's honor and relative to the value of preserving one's wealth and so on. But we do not and should not wait to rule on a person's virtue or vice until we have checked that the person would behave or judge virtuously in all possible circumstances. We may call a soldier courageous if he behaves courageously in the circumstances in which his courage is tested, and need not qualify this statement because

we are uncertain that he would behave courageously in other situations, which would involve a balancing of different values than the ones his military duty has required. Being courageous does not require being *perfectly* courageous, nor does it require having the knowledge necessary for courage in every possible context.

The sense in which our argument justifies the claim that the virtues are unified, then, falls far short of the claim that to have one virtue is to have them all. What is justified by our argument is rather the claim that in order for a person to possess one virtue perfectly and completely, she must possess the knowledge - the holistic knowledge of what matters - that is necessary for them all. Because we rarely care whether a person possesses a virtue perfectly and completely, this claim is of little practical interest in itself.

Reconciling the weak unity of virtue thesis with our concrete assessments

In light of the highly qualified form in which I have tried to defend a unity of virtue thesis, should we conclude that there is no tension after all between that thesis and the empirical and fictional case studies of character to which I have frequently referred? Can we reconcile a commitment to the normative view that underlies the weak unity of virtue thesis with our concrete assessments of individual characters by concluding, for example, that Patton's intolerance shows that though he was courageous he was not perfectly and completely courageous, and that Clinton's intemperance shows that though he may be compassionate he cannot be perfectly compassionate?

I must confess that even after reflection on the attractions of the normative conception of virtue and value that lead to the weak version of the unity thesis, these qualified concrete reassessments do not strike me as obviously correct. There are a

number of different options that would reconcile the normative views with our concrete assessments in other ways. For example, in the case of Clinton, we may wonder whether his intemperance with women bespeaks a flaw in his evaluative judgment or whether it simply reflects a lack of self-control. If the latter, the unity of knowledge required even for full and perfect compassion could be intact, and so one need not qualify his possession of the one virtue in order to recognize his lack of others. Alternatively, one may question the intelligibility of the idea of “perfect and complete” possession of individual virtues, rejecting the idea, for example that Patton is either imperfectly courageous or perfectly so. If we understand this as a primarily linguistic claim – a claim that there is no useful way of understanding the perfection of one virtue as distinct from all the others – it seems to me compatible with the idea that virtue as a whole is still unified in some significant way. (So that, with respect to this example, we might say that Patton, though neither perfectly nor imperfectly courageous, *is* imperfectly virtuous, where this does not reduce simply to the fact that he has some virtues but lacks others.)

Others, however, may be inclined to insist that Patton is, or at least conceivably could be, *perfectly* courageous despite his recognized lack of other virtues, and that more generally, the absence of knowledge required for one virtue does not prevent a person from possessing another virtue perfectly and completely. Such a position is in conflict with the normative position I have been trying to defend, and so would call for a reconsideration of the apparently plausible premises of the previous argument. Though I believe there are reasons to resist this position, I will not pursue the argument further here.

The point of this paper is not, in any event, to settle the question of the unity of virtue once and for all. Indeed, in light of the contempt that is typically expressed for that thesis in contemporary moral philosophical discussion, it would be less misleading to say that I have wanted to open (or reopen) that question. More specifically, however, I have had two other goals in mind in the course of discussing and at least tentatively defending that thesis.

The first is to recommend a self-conscious consideration if not outright embrace of the normative view from which the unity thesis derives, the thesis that knowledge (or good evaluative judgment) is an essential and important ingredient in true virtue. It seems to me that the merits of this view are self-evident as soon as one considers it. Even if we accept the view, however, we seem to have allowed it to recede into the background of our discussions of individual virtues. Our public discourse emphasizes nonjudgmental aspects of the virtues to such a degree that we are in danger of failing to notice the importance of good judgment as an ingredient in virtue entirely. We fail to notice the difference between courage and rashness, generosity and extravagance, and so on, and we fail to give the faculties of moral reflection and judgment their due in our efforts at moral education and public debate. This, I think, is at least part of what explains the confidence we show in our individual assessments of character on the basis of which we so readily dismiss claims about the unity of virtue.

My second goal is more methodological, having less to do with the ethical content of the view I have tried to defend than with the way I have tried to defend an ethical view against what appear to be empirical observations that contradict it. The very idea that an ethical view can be challenged by empirical observation is puzzling. In trying to defend

the unity of virtue thesis, I have not meant to reject that idea, but rather to suggest by way of example that such challenges must be treated with delicacy.

Empirical observations and hypotheses have always played a role in ethical theory. It is hard to give sense to debates about the value of friendship, for example, in the absence of considerations about what features of life give people joy and comfort and keep depression and despair at bay; it is hard to sensibly discuss the importance of equality without reference to empirical claims about what kinds of societies are more likely to be stable. With the development of the social sciences, the range of empirical issues relating to the sources of and obstacles to human flourishing that can be articulated, debated, and tested has grown exponentially, and the authority of science with its appeal to hard data and its sometimes surprising results make us eager to assimilate its lessons into our moral theories. If there is a lesson to be drawn from the exercise I have led you through in this paper, however, it is that we should be wary of this. What sounds like an empirical observation may not be purely empirical; what sounds like a wholly descriptive claim may have a prescriptive element as well. Nor can we assume that the prescriptive and descriptive elements can be easily distinguished and separated once they have been called to our attention. If the ethical view I have been defending in this paper is right, for example, we cannot understand “courage” as a conjunction of a descriptive quality, such as “a disposition to face physical danger easily” and a positive evaluation of that disposition. On this view, the admirable quality of courage is not just a disposition to face physical danger easily but a disposition to face physical danger easily *when the situation merits*. That is, the prescriptive element in

courage is inextricable from the description of the content of the disposition; the prescriptive element goes all the way down, as it were.

To take another example: How much loyalty *is* there among thieves? Surely, this sounds like an empirical question, on which research can be done and results reported. Indeed, one can easily imagine a study that would be conducted, not misleadingly, under that description and I at least would find the results of such a study of considerable interest. But if the arguments of this paper are right, then no possible results of that study could, in the absence of specifically normative and conceptual inquiry, settle the matter of the unity of virtue. Even if it turned out that there was lots of loyalty among thieves, it wouldn't show that the virtues were not unified, and even if it turned out that loyalty among thieves was exceedingly rare, it would not prove that the virtues were unified after all. On the other hand, no purely normative and conceptual inquiry should dismiss the data out of hand as irrelevant. If the results of a philosophical argument lead to conclusions that seem to be out of line with empirical observation, this calls out for explanation. Perhaps the argument is confused, or the terminology ambiguous, or the normative position at its basis at greater odds with common opinion than had previously been noticed.

In the last decade or so, moral psychology has become an increasingly popular field of inquiry – but what that field is and how research in it should proceed are matters of considerable confusion. To one group of people, moral psychology is a branch of the social science of psychology, one that studies emotions, motives, judgments and patterns of thought that are associated with (what people take to be) morality. To another group, moral psychology is a branch of moral philosophy, that aims to give a

philosophical and perhaps normative account of psychological concepts that are relevant to the moral life and that asks what kinds of motivation and character deserve praise or criticism. Obviously, these groups have a lot to learn from each other. But, as I hope the consideration of the unity of virtue thesis has illustrated, one cannot say in advance who will teach whom. There is not, at this point at least, a formula for how work in this interdisciplinary area is to proceed.

I wanted to use the exploration of the unity of virtue thesis as a case study to urge that we should not too quickly let apparently empirical observations or studies hold sway over or dominate philosophically motivated ethical positions. But I do not mean to urge the opposite direction of dominance either. In exploring the question of the unity of the virtue, I have moved back and forth between a consideration of normative and conceptual arguments and a consideration of apparently empirical claims. This seems as it should be. Our philosophical positions are refined and improved by subjecting them to the demand that they be reconciled with the observations of ordinary life as well as social science, and our descriptions and interpretations of daily life and empirical studies are refined and improved by requiring them to consider the challenges that come from ethical and other philosophical argument.

The methodological moral here is oddly parallel to the thesis of the unity of virtue. In defending the unity of virtue, I depended on the idea that evaluative knowledge is essentially unified, so that having the knowledge necessary for generosity improves or perfects one's courage and having the knowledge necessary for courage improves or perfects one's generosity. My methodological point may be put in similar form: Being a good moral philosopher makes one a better psychologist about moral

matters, and being a good psychologist about moral matters makes one a better moral philosopher.

This may suggest that the unity of knowledge and its implications are even more far-reaching than I have argued in this paper. Perhaps there is unity not just in the realm of evaluative knowledge but in the realm of scientific and philosophical knowledge as well. But we should not get carried away by this thought. Surely, being a good moral philosopher is not necessary for being even a fully and perfectly morally good person, and being a morally good person is not necessary for being a fully and perfectly good moral philosopher – or is it? Empirical observation does not suggest that it is. But, as I have argued, empirical observation does not settle the matter.

Susan Wolf

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill