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INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE AND VICE: THE ORDER AND DISORDER OF THE PASSIONS

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I TRUST readers remember an important difference between the intellect's powers and its habits. Its powers are to be found in all human beings regardless of the circumstances of time and place and regardless of the use they make of these powers. The difference between habits and powers is that some human beings have habits others do not possess, resulting from the fact that some repeatedly 'perform actions that others do not perform at all or perform infrequently.' Since every virtue is a habit formed by repeated acts, some human beings have virtues not to be found in others.

In the preceding chapter, while discussing the conflict between the passions or emotions and the will, I had occasion to refer to moral

virtue as a good habit of both the passions and the will, good because it resulted from behavior in which rational deliberation and decision controlled our voluntary conduct. It is also good because, the habit being thus formed, it disposes us to act habitually in that way. The habitual disposition to act under the dominant influence of the passions is moral vice.

In that context I mentioned courage, temperance, and justice as if they were three distinct moral virtues, existentially separate so that it is possible to have one of these virtues without having another. I must now correct that impression. Courage, temperance, and justice are three aspects of moral virtue, analytically distinguishable from one another but not existentially separable. We are either morally virtuous or not; but if we are, to whatever degree, we have those three aspects of moral virtue to that degree.*

*I have explained elsewhere the reason why there is not a plurality of existentially separate moral virtues, but only moral virtue with analytically distinct aspects that cannot exist in separation from one another. See *Reforming Education* (1989), pp. 259-60.

The reason why I call attention to this point is that in this respect intellectual virtue differs from moral virtue. There are a number of distinct intellectual virtues that I shall enumerate presently. One can have one or more good intellectual habits without having all of them.

There is another respect in which moral and intellectual virtues differ. For every aspect of moral virtue, such as temperance, the person who lacks that aspect has in its place an aspect of moral vice. For example, the person who is *not* habitually temperate *is* habitually intemperate.

In addition, such intemperance takes one or another of two opposite forms. One is an excessive habitual indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh. The other is the opposite extreme of defect: abstinence or abstemiousness with regard to such pleasures. The virtuous habit with regard to sensual pleasures stands in the middle between the two extremes of excess and defect. It disposes the person having that habit to behave moderately, indulging in sensual pleasure neither too much nor too little.

In all of the foregoing respects, intellectual differs from moral virtue. There is a plurality of intellectual virtues—good habits in the use of the intellect. Intellectual virtue does not stand in the middle between the extreme of excess and the extreme of defect.

Before we attempt an enumeration of the various intellectual vir-

tues, let us consider the variety of ways in which we can put our intellects to good use.

One good use that should be mentioned at the outset is the use of the intellect's reflexivity to know and understand our own intellectual nature, which involves understanding the minds of others as well.

Another good use of the intellect is to understand our sensitive powers and to know their limits and defects.

A third is using the intellect for purposes that the senses do not serve: distinguishing between knowledge and opinion, judging the claims that are made with respect to the truth and falsity of assertions, and assessing the certitude or degree of probability that can be attached to assertions accepted as true.

Much of the knowledge that we attain is knowledge of reality—of the external physical world, of the social as well as the physical environment, and also of ourselves and other human beings. But these actual existences do not exhaust reality. Reality includes not only what actually exists now and what has actually existed in the past, but, also what may or may not exist in the future as well as what may never come into actual existence at all. It includes the realm of the possible as well as the realm of the actual. The intellect should be used to explore the realm of the possible—to know what possibilities there are and to understand them.

It almost goes without saying that the intellect should be used to communicate effectively, to engage in intelligent conversation about basic ideas and issues, and to solve problems, both theoretical and practical problems. Most of these things cannot be done at all by the use of our sensitive powers, or, if done at all, not without the cooperation of the intellect.

We should make good use of the intellect in its practical dimension by deliberating well about ends to be sought and means to be chosen, by making sound judgments about such matters, and reaching pragmatically good decisions about them, both in the sphere of *doing* (the private and public conduct of our lives) and in the sphere of *making* (the production of useful or beautiful things). In the latter respect, we should cultivate our intellectual imagination, for that is indispensable to all productive, or, as it is sometimes miscalled, creative activity.

In the theoretical or speculative dimensions of the intellect, we should make good use of it by reasoning cogently and validly, by

being able to argue well in defense of our fundamental convictions and beliefs, to engage in debate with others without being contentious or disputatious, to detect our own mistakes as well as to discern and criticize the mistakes of others. In doing this, it is most important to detect contradictions, whether apparent or real, and to discover on which side of the contradiction the truth lies, recognizing that it must lie on one side or the other.

Finally, in the pursuit of truth, we should use our intellects to attain some grasp of what is most fundamental—first principles, both in the theoretic and the practical order of our understanding.

The intellect, and the mind of which it is the best part, is our most treasured human possession. Making good use of it is, therefore, indispensable to leading a morally good human life. Thinking well is prerequisite to living well. If, as I think is the case, we are under a moral obligation to try to make good lives for ourselves, and to enrich them by making the most of our innate potentialities, then making the best possible use of our intellects is essential to that effort.

The preceding enumeration of the ways in which the intellect should be put to good use prepares us for naming the intellectual virtues. If we could exhaustively name them, that would cover all the good uses just mentioned.

Aristotle tried to do this in the fourth century B.C. He named five intellectual virtues, three good habits of the speculative intellect, and two good habits of the intellect in its practical dimension.

The Greek words he used to name the three speculative virtues were *nous*, *epistemé*, *sophia*. Translated into English, they are understanding, knowledge, and speculative wisdom.

The Greek words Aristotle used for the two virtues of the practical intellect were *techne* and *phronesis*. The English equivalents here are art or skill and prudence or practical wisdom.

Aristotle's enumeration calls for some comment. Understanding involves insight concerning intelligible objects—the most important objects of thought, or basic ideas using that word in its objective sense. Knowledge includes all branches of learning—historical, scientific, mathematical, and philosophical knowledge, the latter in addition to the philosophical clarification of our understanding of basic ideas. Speculative wisdom can be attained only by carrying our philosophical thought as far as possible—to the knowledge and understanding of first principles. This may require

us to go from natural philosophy to metaphysics and to the conclusions it reaches in philosophical theology.

Art is the name for any skill or technique. It includes all the useful, liberal, and fine arts, or arts of the beautiful. When the word "art" is commonly used (I would say misused) for works of fine art, it obviously does not name an intellectual virtue—a habit that is possessed by human beings who are rightfully called artists, craftsmen, or skilled workers.

Prudence, or practical wisdom, is the name for sound thinking about particular means to be chosen here and now. It involves taking counsel, engaging in rational deliberation, and reaching pragmatically sound judgments about what decisions should be made.

Prudence, or practical wisdom, is a sound use of the intellect for the sake of morally good conduct. It is, therefore, the one intellectual virtue that is an inseparable aspect of moral virtue. One cannot be morally virtuous without being prudent also, and one cannot be prudent unless one is morally virtuous. The means one prudently chooses must be the means to the right end appointed by moral virtue. If the ends for such means chosen are themselves immoral, the skill employed in choosing them well is not prudence, but cunning, cleverness, or craft.*

*I must qualify something I said earlier. I said that, unlike the aspects of moral virtue, to each of which is attached two vices that are the extremes of excess and defect, the intellectual virtues do not have pairs of vices attached to them. This is true of all the intellectual virtues except prudence, which, because it is inseparable from moral virtue, does have a pair of vices attached to it. At one extreme is habitual rashness making decisions without the deliberation. At the other extreme is indecisiveness, which consists in being habitually unable to make decisions.

Thus understood, Aristotle's enumeration of the intellectual virtues would appear to be adequate. It is difficult to think of what more might be added. But the exhaustiveness of that enumeration is not what may be bothersome or troubling to twentieth century readers. Aristotle himself could be a specialist in almost all the empirical sciences of his day as well as a generalist in his philosophical thought.

In our age of intense specialization in all fields of science as well as in history and philosophy, that is impossible today for anyone. It may still be possible for one to be a generalist in one's philosophical understanding of history and in one's philosophical understanding of basic ideas and issues.

No one today can be a specialist in all fields of history, the whole range of mathematics, and in all the empirical sciences. No one can be a specialist in all the fine arts or all the useful arts. Only the liberal arts, which consist in a disciplined and skilled use of the intellect to read, write, speak, and listen well, should be in everyone's habitual possession.

A twentieth-century enumeration of the intellectual virtues, and one that is applicable to most human beings, not just the few who belong to an intellectual elite, is tantamount to saying what should be the good intellectual habits that a generally educated person should have acquired in the course of a lifetime of learning, especially in one's later and more mature years.

The attained intellectual virtues of the generally educated person in our society and in our century would include, first of all, a habitual possession of the liberal arts—the skills of thinking and learning so indispensable to knowing and understanding. Among the intellectual virtues would be a habitual understanding of the great ideas and issues, and a generalist's understanding of mathematics, the natural world, human history, and human society, acquired by a philosophical approach to the subjects named and accompanied by some knowledge in these fields of learning.

Included also would be an understanding of human history, human nature, and human society through a thorough acquaintance with poetry, especially narrative and dramatic fiction. If possible for some, if not for all, the generally educated person might also be a well-trained specialist, in one or two of the productive arts, as well as in some phases of history, in one or another empirical science, and in one or another branch of mathematics.

So far I have not mentioned the attainment of wisdom in the speculative dimension of the intellect and of sagacity in its practical dimension. In both dimensions, the opposite is folly, which, if persistent and habitual, must be regarded as an intellectual vice. What about ignorance and error, readers may ask; and also what about the defect that William James in a revealing essay called a "certain blindness in human beings"? All three of these are intellectual defects rather than vicious habits.

Of these three, ignorance, being a privation of knowledge, is more easily remedied than error that, if obdurately resistant to correction, proves to be an obstacle to learning.

The most serious of these defects is the intellectual blindness about which William James wrote. It is caused by strong intellectual

prejudices that bar the reception of ideas contrary to the prejudices obstinately held. If irremediable, such blindness becomes an intellectual vice.

If a person suffers from the vice of folly and the vice of a closed mind, or intellectual blindness, the cause probably lies in what I regard as the most fundamental of all intellectual vices. That is the habitual tendency of a person to think emotionally—with his hips or his guts—instead of thinking rationally with his intellect.

Anyone who wishes to think rationally should have the habit of thinking coolly, with all affective feelings or sentiments and all emotions parked outside. The heat of the passions, especially if they are strong and violent bodily commotions, cannot help but cause a disturbance or even a distortion of all intellectual work.

William Wordsworth, in the preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, said that "poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility." No statement could be more significant about the role of the emotions in the work of the intellect. Emotion has its place in poetry, as well as in music and the visual arts, but that place is in the past, to be remembered, not in the present while the artist is engaged in the production of a poem, a musical composition, or a work of visual art.

What Wordsworth said about poetry applies not only to music, painting, and sculpture but also to mathematical and philosophical thought, to scientific research and reflection, and to historical inquiry. The less emotions cloud and bemuse the intellectual processes involved in all these pursuits, the better the results are likely to be.

I might add that the same thing is true of the intellect's involvement in political enterprises, especially with regard to international affairs, and also in business and industry. What Barbara Tuchman called "the march of folly" throughout history can be attributed mainly to the intellectual blindness that emotional prejudices cause.

Emotional thinking is, to use Freud's phrase, "wishful thinking"—controlled by the drive of subjective desires and passions rather than by the objective realities to which dispassionate thinking should respond. Paradoxically, and obviously not recognized by him, Freud is caught in self-contradiction at this point.

If psychoanalytic theory claims that its hypotheses can be empirically verified or falsified by the data obtained by scientifically

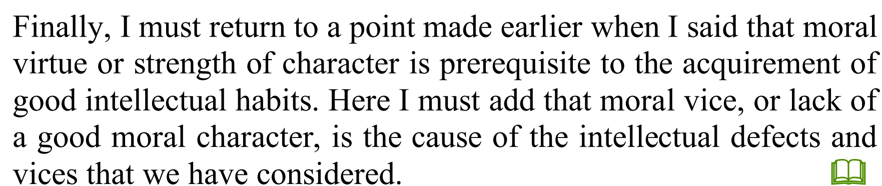
conducted, clinical research, then psychoanalytic theorizing is not wishful thinking. Yet Freudian psychology also claims that the passions control all human thinking, which is therefore wishful thinking throughout. Both claims cannot be true.

While thinking, to be done well, should be dispassionate in the sense of not being directed or controlled by emotions or other affects, it should also be passionate in the sense of enlisting emotional support for the conclusions reached.

One should have a passionate attachment to the conclusions of which one is convinced or persuaded, but emotions should not be involved in the ratiocinative process itself by which these conclusions have been reached. Nor should that passionate attachment cause one to be deaf to criticism and inhospitable to correction if the conclusions are not beyond the shadow of a doubt and so are open to challenge and question.

What I have just said about the conclusions of which we are convinced or persuaded is even more applicable to the assumptions, often hidden rather than acknowledged, with which we begin. It is here that an emotional investment in these assumptions is likely to prove an obstacle to an open examination of their truth or tenability. Nevertheless, from my long experience in teaching and lecturing, I know that the teacher or lecturer who does not express his convictions with passion or strong feeling is likely to be less effective than the one who does. It is in the expression of one's convictions, not in the thinking that produces them, that emotion can play a useful role.

Finally, I must return to a point made earlier when I said that moral virtue or strength of character is prerequisite to the acquirement of good intellectual habits. Here I must add that moral vice, or lack of a good moral character, is the cause of the intellectual defects and vices that we have considered.



Excerpted from his book, *Intellect: Mind Over Matter.*

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