



VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

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Part 2 of 3

Virtue and the Virtues: One or Many?

There is no question that there are many virtues if we consider both the intellectual and the moral virtues. Not only are these two kinds of virtues analytically distinct, but they are also existentially separable. We have recognized that a morally vicious person can have the intellectual virtues of art or science, or even of philosophical wisdom. It is equally clear that a person can be a scientist without being philosophically wise, a scientist without being an artist, or the reverse. Hence these different virtues can exist in complete separation from one another.

Is this true of the moral virtues when we differentiate the three principal or cardinal moral virtues as temperance, courage, and justice, and associate prudence with them? That they are analytically distinct from one another can be made as clear in their case as in the case of the intellectual virtues. But are they existentially separable in the way that intellectual virtues are from one another and from the moral virtues?

Before I try to answer this question, let me be sure that readers fully understand the difference between analytical distinction and existential separation. When bread and butter lie on separate plates they are existentially separate as well as analytically distinct. We recognize their analytical distinction by how they taste and other perceptible properties. Their existential separation is made manifest by the separate plates on which they lie. Now butter the bread and eat it. The bread and butter remain as analytically distinct as before, both to our eyes and to our palates. But when the bread is buttered, the two become existentially inseparable. We cannot take them apart any longer, no matter how we try.

To the question about the unity or plurality of virtue in the moral sphere (whether there are three existentially separate moral virtues, which are also existentially separate from prudence, or four analytically distinct virtues, none of which is existentially separate from the others) the answer given, both by the popular mind and in philosophical treatises dealing with the subject, almost universally favors the plurality of virtue. There are many virtues, existentially separate as well as analytically distinct.

It is well nigh impossible to remove this view from daily speech. We cannot resist thinking of this particular virtue as contrasted with that particular one. We find ourselves saying that an individual has certain moral virtues, but lacks others.

All of our inveterate habits of thought and speech adopt the notion that there are many moral virtues which exist in separation from one another and from prudence. This is as true of the philosophers who write about virtue as it is true of the rest of us—with one exception, Aristotle. Even Thomas Aquinas, a faithful student and follower of Aristotle, when he comes to this question and states the two opposite answers to it, adopts as the right answer the one that Aristotle rejects as wrong.

I reject it also and will try to explain why I think Aristotle was right. Before I do, let me make sure that there is no doubt about the

clear analytical distinction of temperance, courage, justice, and prudence. All involve tending toward the right end and choosing the right means for attaining it. That is what is common to all of them as analytically distinct aspects of moral virtue.

Temperance is analytically distinct from the others by reason of its being concerned with pleasure in relation to other goods, either resisting the seductions of pleasure when yielding to them stands in the way of achieving other real goods we need or moderating our emotional desire for pleasure by recognizing that pleasure is a limited, not an unlimited good—good only in a certain measure.

Courage is analytically distinct from the others by reason of its being concerned with pain in relation to other goods, suffering pain for the sake of other real goods we need, which cannot otherwise be attained. Courage may also involve a habitual disposition to overcome our emotional reluctance to suffer any degree of pain or other hardships.

Justice is analytically distinct from the others by reason of its being concerned with the good of others and the good or welfare of the community, not our own good. Yet it also involves the recognition that our own good may depend upon not injuring the community in which we live or our fellow human beings.

All three, as analytically distinct aspects of moral virtue, constitute the good habit of intending the right end. Without a will that habitually aims at or intends the right end, we would not be habitually disposed to resist the temptations of pleasure or moderate our pursuit of it; we would not be habitually disposed to suffer pains and hardships; we would not habitually refrain from injuring other individuals or the community in which we live.

Prudence is analytically distinct from the other three by reason of being a habitual disposition to judge aright concerning the means for attaining the right end, intended or aimed at by the other three. Being a habitual disposition to judge, it is formed by intellectual acts. Being habitual dispositions with respect to pleasure and pain, temperance and courage are formed by acts of will and reason resisting, moderating, or otherwise controlling our passions, our sensuous inclinations, our animal impulses and drives. Being a habitual disposition to act for the good of others, justice may consist entirely in acts of will and reason, though such acts may also involve our passions, our sensuous inclinations, and our animal drives.

All of the points so far made show clearly the respects in which the four habitual dispositions named by the words, “temperance,” “courage,” “justice,” and “prudence” are analytically distinct. But none of them provides any grounds whatsoever for asserting their existential separation.

On the contrary, when these points are carefully considered, it will, I think, be seen that the four habitual dispositions cannot exist in separation from one another.

Prudence cannot exist in separation from the other three because one cannot judge the right means for attaining the right end unless one intends or aims at that end.

Temperance, courage, and justice cannot exist in separation from prudence because one cannot be habitually disposed toward acting for the right end without judging aright the means for attaining it.

At one and the same time, an individual cannot be habitually disposed to aim at and act for the right end and also be habitually disposed to aim at and act for its opposite—one or another wrong end. Therefore, we cannot be temperate without being also courageous and just, courageous without also being just and temperate, or just without being also temperate and courageous.

The existential inseparability of aiming at the right end and selecting the right means for attaining it rests on the insight that the means are the end in the process of becoming. We move in the direction of any end, right or wrong, only to the extent that we resort to means effective for attaining it. The morally right end requires us to choose morally sound means for attaining it. No other means would be effective. Only in the case of morally wrong goals, or goals that are morally indifferent, does the end justify any means that are expedient, whether they are in themselves morally good or bad.

The existential impossibility of aiming at or intending the one right end and other wrong ends at the same time establishes the existential inseparability of temperance, courage, and justice.

The Aristotelian position with regard to the unity of moral virtue and its inseparability from prudence still permits us to refer to temperance, courage, justice, and prudence as four analytically distinct aspects of moral virtue. We can, therefore, persist in our inveterate habit of using the words that name these four aspects as

if they named four existentially separate as well as analytically distinct virtues.

When we do so, we are, for good reason, under the obligation to remember that such verbal habits of speech violate what should be a sound habit of thought; namely, that temperance, courage, justice, and prudence constitute a unity that cannot be broken up into existentially separable parts, each able to exist in separation from the others.

What are the good reasons that impose this obligation on us? I have already stated all the points about these four aspects of virtue that oblige us to acknowledge their existential inseparability. But there is one additional consideration that I must now mention.

Aristotle's position is the only one that provides an adequate and tenable solution of Plato's problem: Why should anyone be just to others—avoid injuring them or the community?

The oft-repeated golden rule fails completely as an answer. Why not do unto others what you wish no one would do unto you? Kant's categorical imperative, together with all the duties that he deduces from it, is merely a high-sounding and more elaborate statement of the golden rule. It is not much better. Nor is an appeal to conscience and the wish to avoid the pangs of remorse and guilt feelings.

The only categorical imperative that is a self-evident truth, which Kant's formulation is not, can be stated as follows: *One ought to seek everything that is really good for one's self and nothing else.* Since that categorical imperative imposes the obligation to pursue one's own happiness as the sum of all real goods, it heightens the point of the problem posed by Plato. It does not solve it.

Plato's problem once again: What reason is there for not being unjust to others if you can gain substantially by so doing, on condition, of course, that you can get away with it and go unpunished?

If we consider the difference between justice, on the one hand, and temperance or courage, on the other hand, it is easy to explain why we should be temperate and courageous. To be habitually intemperate or uncourageous is to ruin or seriously blemish our own lives. We injure ourselves by these vices. We cannot achieve happiness or make good lives for ourselves without being habitually temperate and courageous.

But being habitually just toward others serves their pursuit of happiness, not our own, just as injuring them may frustrate or impede it. How are we barred from our own ultimate good, our own happiness, by the injustice we do others?

The solution of the problem lies in the unity of moral virtue. If we cannot effectively pursue our own happiness without being temperate and courageous, and if we cannot be temperate and courageous without also being just (because these three are inseparable aspects of integral moral virtue), then it follows inexorably that we must be habitually just for the sake of attaining our own ultimate end as well as for the sake of facilitating others in their pursuit of happiness.

Virtue as an End and as a Means

The intellectual virtues—the goods of the mind—occupy a high rank, if not the highest, in the scale of real goods. Moral virtue, while involving no form of knowledge, has an intellectual aspect, for it manifests the role played by reason and will in the control and moderation of the passions.

Together these virtues represent the greatest human perfections that can be achieved by learning and personal growth. These are the goods of mind and character that the pursuits of leisure aim at. They constitute the ends for which leisuring is the means.

But while they are ends, desirable for their own sake, they are also means to a good life. They are among its most important ingredients or components. A life not enriched by these goods would be greatly deprived, just as a life devoid of leisuring would be a contracted one.

Only happiness itself—a whole good life—is an ultimate end, never a means to be sought for the sake of some other good. Happiness, being the sum of all real goods, leaves no other good to be desired. That is why happiness should never be referred to as the *summum bonum* (the highest good), but rather as the *totum bonum* (the complete good).

The virtues may be the highest of all human goods, but taken all together, they are certainly not the complete good. One can have all the virtues and still lack freedom, friendship, health, and moderate amounts of pleasure and of wealth. A virtuous person

deprived of all these things would certainly be prevented from living well or achieving happiness in the course of time.

I have explained how the virtues are both ends, desirable for their own sake, and also means, desirable for the sake of a good life. I must now go further and explain how moral virtue, from which prudence is inseparable, differs from the intellectual virtues as means.

All the real goods are means to a good life in the sense that they are constitutive components of it. But moral virtue is more than that. It is one of the two operative factors—one of the two efficient causes—of our *becoming* happy. The other consists in such good fortune as befalls us and confers on us the real goods we cannot attain through free choice on our part and solely through the voluntary exercise of our powers.

In the light of all these considerations, we must finally face the question: Which is primary—the intellectual virtues or moral virtue? As constitutive components of good life, they are on a par as personal perfections. But if, with a view to *becoming* happy, one had to choose between strengthening one's moral virtue or increasing one's knowledge, one's skills, one's understanding, and even one's philosophical wisdom, there is in my mind little doubt as to what the answer should be.

It is better, in the long run and for the sake of a good life, to have strength of character than to have a richly cultivated mind. It is impossible to live without some knowledge and skill, but without moral virtue it is impossible to live well and to become happy. One can have all the intellectual virtues to the highest degree and for lack of moral virtue fail to lead a good life.

How Can One Individual Help Another to Become Morally Virtuous?

I am tempted to say, "Don't ask," because I am persuaded that no one has ever come up with the answer, and probably no one ever will. The fact that we know how moral virtue is acquired does not mean that we know how one person can help another to acquire it.

Had the question been about the acquisition of the intellectual virtues, all except prudence, the answer would have been by teaching and learning. We acquire knowledge with the aid of didactic teachers; we acquire all our arts or skills with the aid of teachers who function as coaches or trainers; we acquire such

understanding and wisdom as we come to have through experience and with the help of teachers who ask questions as Socrates did.

None of these methods of teaching, nor any form of learning that is aided by them, avails when we turn from the intellectual virtues to moral virtue, linked with prudence. Twenty-five centuries ago, Socrates asked, "Can moral virtue be taught?" He argued that it cannot be. To my knowledge, no one has successfully countered the arguments advanced by Socrates in Plato's dialogues.

His reasons boiled down to three things. First, moral virtue is a habit formed by free choice on our part. While it is also true that free choice enters into the formation of the habits that are intellectual virtues, it does so only to the extent that one must be voluntarily disposed to learn and to profit from teaching. In contrast, every action we perform that develops either a virtuous or vicious habit is itself a freely chosen act. Precisely because free choice operates at every stage in the development of moral virtue, no one attempting to inculcate moral virtue by teaching can succeed.

Consider in contrast the teaching and learning of mathematics. Granted that the learner must be motivated to learn, must voluntarily submit to instruction, and must voluntarily make the effort required to succeed. However, given all these prerequisites, free choice does not enter into the actual process of learning mathematics. When presented with the demonstration of a conclusion in geometry, the student is not free to accept or reject the conclusion. The reasoning presented necessitates the assent of his or her mind.

The individual's passions and predilections do not function as obstacles to learning mathematics, as they do, often overwhelmingly, when it comes to an individual's adopting the moral advice or injunctions offered by parents or other elders. Neither the carrot nor the stick can overcome an individual's obstinate resistance to moral instruction, whether that takes the form of wise counsel, eloquent exhortation, praise and blame, or setting forth examples of good conduct and the rewards it reaps.

Please note that I am not saying that ethics cannot be taught or that morality cannot be preached. Of course, they can be. But remember what was said earlier: There is a world of difference between (1) knowing and understanding the principles of ethics and the moral precepts that should be followed and (2) forming the habit of acting in accordance with those principles and precepts.

Being able to pass an examination in ethics does not carry with it having moral virtue or a good moral character.

A second point made by Socrates in his attempt to explain why moral virtue cannot be taught concerns the role of prudence as an inseparable aspect of moral virtue.

If moral virtue were identical with knowledge, it could be taught; but it is not identical with knowledge. We are acquainted with instances, in our own life and the lives of others, where individuals know what they ought to do and fail to do it, or do what they know they ought not to do.

However, it may be thought that prudence, like art, is a form of know-how. We certainly acknowledge that arts can be taught, by coaches or trainers. Why, then, cannot prudence be similarly taught?

The answer lies in the distinction between all the skills as forms of know-how and prudence as a very special form of know-how. The arts or skills consist in knowing how to perform something well or to produce something that turns out to be well-made. In every case, there are clearly formulated rules to be followed by an individual in the effort to develop skill.

There would appear to be rules that should be followed in order to develop prudence, which consists in knowing how to form a sound judgment and reach the right decision about the means to be chosen. These rules include taking counsel, deliberating about alternatives and weighing their pros and cons, and being neither precipitate or rash on the one hand, nor obstinately indecisive on the other hand.

But at each step of the way an individual's passions and predilections can intervene to prevent him or her from following these rules, as they do not intervene when one undertakes to acquire a skill. That is why no one can train or coach another person to become prudent, as one can train or coach another person to write well, play tennis well, play the violin well, and so on.

In the third place, Socrates calls our attention to facts of experience with which everyone is acquainted. If moral virtue could be taught, why do virtuous parents, who make every effort they know how to inculcate it in their offspring, succeed with some and fail with others?

Let us suppose, for the moment, that such parents bring their children up in substantially the same way, that they offer the same moral advice, that they mete out the same rewards and punishments, that they tell them what good consequences follow from one course of action and what bad consequences follow from another, that they hold up examples of virtuous persons who succeeded in living well and persons who came to grief, and that they do all this with manifest love and kindness.

Would anyone dare to say that children thus reared in the same way will inevitably turn out in the same way? Only someone who had no experience at all in the rearing of children could be so foolish. The rest of us, giving the opposite answer, have some sense of why we think different children, similarly reared, turn out differently.

The different results, we sense, stem from the differences of the children—differences of temperament, differences in their innate propensities, inner differences in the way they think and feel that no outsider can ever touch, and, most fundamental of all, differences in the way they exercise their free will. The similarity in the way two children are reared, even if all the outer conditions are identical, cannot overcome these innate and inner differences between them.

The free choice that enters at every step into the formation of moral character and does not enter into the development of excellent behavior on the part of domesticated animals is the crux of the matter. That is why we can train horses and dogs to behave well habitually, but not human beings.

To the three reasons offered by Socrates, I would add a fourth. The thinking that enters into the formation of moral virtue as the habit of making sound judgments and right decisions about how one should act here and now involves considering one's life as a whole, taking the long-term view of it, and judging what is for the best in the long run.

This is the very thing that the young simply cannot do. Their thinking tends to consider the immediate moment, the next day, or the next week, but not much beyond that. Most of them are motivated by present or imminent pleasures and pains. Since they are unable to think about what is best in the long run, they are also unable to forego immediate pleasures for the sake of a greater good in the long run, or to suffer immediate pains for the same long-term reason.

Unfortunately, one's moral character gets formed, one way or another, in youth. It can, of course, be changed later, but only by heroic effort and, without that, seldom successfully. Toward the end of our lives, when maturity enables us to take the long-term point of view and think about our lives as a whole, little time is left for judgments about what is best in the long run. The young who have ample time ahead of them, and so should profit from thinking about their life as a whole, are prevented by their immaturity from taking thought for the future.

Parents and elders often tell children about their own experiences. They point out the bad consequences they suffered from acting in a certain way and the good consequences that followed from another course of action. Children listen to such talk, but do not have the experiences that prompt it. They are also unable to profit from the experience of an older generation. To paraphrase a statement by George Santayana, those who cannot profit from the mistakes of others are condemned to repeat them. They are thus destined to find out everything for themselves by trial and error. How this enables some of them to grow up into adults of sound moral character and others to grow up into adults lacking moral virtue, no one knows.

Is there, then, no answer at all to the question of how human beings, especially the young, can be aided in the development of moral virtue? I said at the beginning that there is none. There is one exception, perhaps. Christian doctrine makes the acquisition of moral virtue dependent upon having the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity. It declares that these supernatural virtues are not acquired by human effort, but are a gift of God's grace. This leaves us with a theological mystery. Why does God bestow that gift upon some and not upon others, since all who are born with original sin are in need of it for their moral virtue in this life as well as for their salvation hereafter?

Does my conclusion, that there is no philosophical or scientific solution of the problem of how to rear children so that they become morally virtuous adults, carry with it the corollary that there is little or no point in explaining why moral virtue is so important in human life and how it is to be acquired by the choices individuals make and by their actions? A large part of this chapter has been devoted to just that. To no effect whatsoever? Has it all been a purely academic exercise, with no practical benefit conferred?

I wish I could promise that the elucidations offered in this chapter would definitely produce good effects. But I know this to be far from the truth. I know, as all of us do, individuals who have developed good moral characters without the benefit of being acquainted with and understanding what has been said in the foregoing pages about moral virtue and its development.

I am, therefore, left with the relatively feeble conclusion that those who are acquainted with and understand these matters are thereby just a little better off in regulating their own lives and in influencing the lives of others. Slight as the satisfaction may be that this gives the reader, it is the best I can do.

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