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UNITY, COINCIDENCE, AND CONFLICT IN THE VIRTUES*

LAWRENCE C. BECKER

There are many putative virtues, and they often appear to conflict: courage against prudence, love against fidelity, honesty against kindness, loyalty against common decency. Such conflicts raise questions about the coherence of the list of traits called virtues. And even when those traits coincide rather than conflict, as when both love and prudence recommend marriage, coherence is a problem because the question of motive is almost always significant: Are mixed motives acceptable in love, or must we strive for purity of heart? If the ideal is pure love, can prudence be a virtue at all in that part of our lives?

Every account of the virtues raises such questions of coherence, and if any account is to be more than an annotated inventory of traits — if it is to be a moral theory in any significant sense — then it must answer at least some of those questions. Historically, they have been framed as questions about the “unity” of the virtues, and I shall follow that tradition. But since my object is to examine the general prospects for coherence in virtue theory, I want to take an equally general view of the unity problem.

Specifically, I shall assume that solutions to this problem can be of three general sorts, each of which may be described as an argument for the unity of the virtues.¹ (1) One of these is to argue for the *identity* of the virtues: to argue that they are, at bottom, all the very same thing — a perfectly seamless whole in which there are ultimately no separate elements, and hence no conflicts or overlaps. The classic version of this sort of argument is implicitly Socrates', in Plato's *Protagoras*.² (2) A second sort of proposal is to argue for the *organic unity* of the virtues: to argue that they are all mutually compatible and connected parts of a whole — a perfectly harmonious whole in which, though there are genuinely distinct elements, there are no genuine conflicts.³ (3) And a third strategy is to argue for the *ordinal unity* of the virtues: to argue that they are a perfectly ordered whole, unified in the sense that, given any conflict between traits, it will always be possible in theory to

determine which one is primary — which one is the “first virtue” in that circumstance.⁴

I will not consider, here, arguments for the identity of the virtues. The attempt to make sense of this idea has produced extraordinarily rich discussions, beginning with Plato and continuing at least through the Middle Ages.⁵ But it seems clear enough now that all of these discussions lead definitively away from any interesting version of the identity thesis.⁶ Specifically, it is agreed on all sides that many separate virtues are distinguishable, and to say that they are all simply distinct manifestations of the very same thing (say of practical wisdom or knowledge) does nothing to answer the coherence question, since it will immediately reappear as the question of how to resolve conflicts between the different manifestations. To reply that such conflicts will be resolved by practical wisdom in its conflict-resolution mode is not very helpful at all.

What is helpful, however, is to explore the idea that there might be some underlying trait or traits that generate all of the virtues, or that connect and regulate them. This idea leads to various instructive accounts of organic and ordinal unity, and eventually (I believe) to a particular sort of ordinal account.

My project in this paper is to argue for an ordinal account of the unity of the virtues in the following way: (1) by showing the importance of a neglected class of questions about coherence — questions I shall refer to as coincidence problems; (2) by organizing conventional accounts of the unity of the virtues in a perspicuous way, and showing that they fail to solve coincidence problems; and (3) by describing the sorts of ordinal accounts that are available, sketching the outlines of one organized around practical wisdom, and indicating how it would handle coherence questions of all sorts, including those of coincidence.

COINCIDENCE PROBLEMS

It is important to see that even if a virtue theory can eliminate conflicts between traits, a large class of difficult practical problems is very likely to remain: namely, the problems that arise when two or more traits give the same guidance for conduct, but when we think only one of the traits should be controlling. (“Yes of course I wanted you to keep the promise. But because you wanted to, not because it was your duty.”)

I’ll call these cases *coincidence problems*. Love and duty often coincide for practical purposes — as often, probably, as they conflict. And the same is true of prudence and duty, and prudence and love. An account of the unity of the virtues that solves all the conflict problems

but leaves these coincidence problems untouched is inadequate. Part of my agenda in this paper is to show that traditional accounts of the unity of the virtues are inadequate in just this way. To do this, however, I need to characterize coincidence problems a bit more fully — to show, for example, that they are not simply conflicts in disguise, and to show as well that they are pervasive enough to present a serious test for any account of the unity of the virtues.

In general, coincidence problems arise for acts that are defined in part by specific motives — motives that are constitutive of a virtue, and which come from that virtue. To explain:

Many acts are defined *without* reference to a specific motive that is constitutive of a virtue. Obedience to law is an example. One can obey the law from a very wide range of motives, including sheer perversity (where perversity is defined as doing the opposite of what people expect). Perverse obedience to the law is still obedience. But many other acts *are* defined in terms of specific motives. Benevolence is an example. One cannot act benevolently out of a wide range of motives, but only from one motive — roughly, the desire to do good for others. That motive is what makes an act a genuinely benevolent one, and it is a motive constitutive of the virtue of benevolence.

Now when an act is defined in part by reference to a specific motive, coming from a specific virtue, we can get the following sort of coincidence: Several virtues might prompt a person to do the same thing — say, give a gift. If the gift is given out of prudence, it will be a prudential gift; if given out of benevolence, a benevolent one; and so forth. There is no conflict in this, but there is a problem for a theory of the virtues. The problem is to decide which motive, and therefore which virtue, should be the controlling one. And more generally, the problem is to find an account of the unity of the virtues that explains how one can be both prudent and benevolent in cases where there is coincidence rather than conflict.

Such problems are pervasive. Noticing two general classes of them should make the point. Note first that prudence, in a reasonably just social order, is likely to coincide with virtually every other virtue at some point. That is, if social life is reasonably just, people will typically get what they deserve, and it will generally be prudent to do the things one ought to do — to do the fair thing, the generous thing, in short the virtuous thing. Second, note that the old conflicts between duty and inclination, and between duty and a concern for consequences, have their counterparts in these coincidence problems. If fidelity, love and benevolence all prompt me to be faithful, the problem is not one of

conflict but coincidence. I must decide not what to do but how to do it. And such problems are obviously numerous.

Now it may be objected that these so-called coincidence problems are really just disguised conflicts. The point may be put this way: No two virtues can ever recommend the same act if they require different motives for it. If prudence recommends a prudent gift, and benevolence recommends a benevolent gift, their recommendations do not coincide but rather conflict. Presumably, then, any account of the unity of the virtues which solved conflicts would solve these purported coincidences as well. If all coincidences are disguised conflicts, there is no point in distinguishing the two sorts of problems here.

This objection brings out a reply that illustrates the depth of coincidence problems. Assume a reasonably just, stable society (or institution, or relationship) in which frankly prudential gifts are regarded with contempt, and either refused or accepted without reciprocity. Genuinely benevolent gifts, however, are accepted warmly, reciprocated, and sustain valuable cooperative practices. What prudence recommends in such a setting is the cultivation of the *virtue* of benevolence, and hence the benevolent motive, rather than the simulation of it, or frankly prudential giving.⁷ (Simulation will sometimes *not* be prudent, since in a just setting it will often be discovered and then will never be rewarded as fully as the real thing.) So prudence will recommend not only the same overt act as benevolence but the same motive as well, and the coincidence will be a real one. The problem will lie in the fact that in one case prudence is the ultimate ground for the benevolence and in the other case it is not. The account of the unity of the virtues should tell us whether prudence should be such a ground. As noted above, I divide the attempts to give a unitary account into three sorts, of which only arguments for organic unity and for ordinal unity are plausible. I turn first to the organic versions.

ORGANIC UNITY

The fundamental problem with all accounts of organic unity is that they seem doomed to be too general to yield concrete moral guidance, and unable to handle at all the question of which virtue should be the leading one in cases of coincidence. These difficulties will ultimately prompt me to turn to an ordinal account, but it is worth explaining in a bit more detail the motivation for and problems with organic unity views.

Ideal Character. Following Aristotle, virtue theorists have often begun by sketching a description of human nature, or human agency, or

human flourishing from which at least a schematic picture of ideal moral character can be drawn. And it is tempting to hope that definitions of the several virtues can then be carved out of the picture like the pieces of a jig saw puzzle. Such pieces will by definition fit back together to form a unified conception of virtue. The task is presumably analogous to the one of defining the best body-type for a certain sort of athlete. We start with an account of what the athlete must be able to do, and what sort of strength, speed, agility, flexibility, endurance and so forth are required to do it. We can then decide, roughly, what an ideal athlete of that sort will look like, feature by feature — how tall, how heavy, and the like — assuming, perhaps, that when all this is put back together we do not want a picture that looks like committee work. The idea here is that perhaps we can do something similar in the case of ideal moral character.

But there is a notorious problem with this: the only plausible accounts of ideal character available (or ever likely to be available) are too schematic to yield the sort of definitions of particular virtues that tell us much, *in detail*, about how we are to resolve conflict and coincidence problems. Assume, for example, that we take the necessities for human flourishing as the guide for constructing a description of ideal character. The question, then, is this: Given the general limits of human nature and the human condition, what sort of human being would flourish best *as* a human being? The answer seems to be that many identifiable types are able to flourish equally well. And each type appears to have generosity, say, and courage and prudence of somewhat different sorts and amounts. So we will get no guidance at all, on such an account, for theoretical questions about conflicts and coincidences. Or rather, the best we will be able to do is to produce some feeble advice relative to each person: "Well, if you want to go on in roughly this way, then you'll need more courage than I've seen so far. But of course if you'd rather try a slightly different way of life, which many people have pursued with success, then more courage won't be needed. Just more discretion."

This is enough to suggest that the attempt to get a unified account of the virtues from a highly schematic picture of ideal character will fail to solve the unity problem. And as long as human nature is as protean as it is, and the human condition as various as it is, the prospect of having more than a schematic account is nil.

Reciprocal interdependence. Another tack is to try to establish that the virtues — at least a few fundamental ones — are mutually interdependent, so much so that it is not possible to have any one of them without having them all. This, in fact, is what a long line of

commentators have taken Socrates' position in the *Protagoras* to have been, and Aristotle held it explicitly. (See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1145a.) Such a view is now commonly referred to as an equivalence thesis, and expressed as a set of biconditionals: One has the virtue of justice if and only if one also has the virtues of wisdom, temperance, courage, and all the others.

This is an initially baffling position, since many pairs of virtues seem either mutually exclusive or thoroughly independent: wit and humility, humility and magnanimity, justice and mercy, chastity and conjugal fidelity. And then there is the question of explaining the equivalence. Even if the material biconditionals happen to be true, we need to understand why they are true. Accidental equivalence is not enough to establish that the virtues are a unity.

Attempts to argue for the reciprocal interdependence of the virtues, then, tend to restrict their attention to a short list of fundamental virtues — say justice, wisdom, courage and temperance — and then to offer either causal or conceptual analyses of the connections between them. An example of an argument for a causal connection is the argument that all the virtues on the list have a common source — say, in the workings of practical intelligence over the course of normal human development. This is a plausible reading of Aristotle's contentions in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144b–1145a. And if the list is restricted to the fundamental virtues (as Aristotle did not do), the argument is convincing enough. Anyone who has the necessary good sense, prudence, and intelligence to cope successfully with a reasonably full life — i.e., has practical wisdom — is certainly going to develop traits that can be called courage, temperance, wisdom and justice. And it may even be plausible to suppose that those traits would all have to arise together, even though they might develop at different rates or to different degrees. If so, then it would follow that to have any one of them would be to have all of them, and the biconditionals linking them would be true. But it does *not* follow from this sort of causal argument alone that the traits so generated would be free of conflicts and coincidences in a way that handles the coherence problem. To get that result — even for a restricted list of the virtues — we would need to add the sort of regulative principle discussed below. So the mere causal interdependence of the virtues is not enough.

Similarly for attempts to trace conceptual connections, at least insofar as I understand them. Here the idea is to show that all the virtues are connected to one or more central, or focal, or nodal traits (and thus, "through" those traits, to each other). The fundamental virtues are

often candidates for this role, and the argument runs something like this: To possess a virtue is to have a given trait in the proper degree and manner. It is possible, for example, to be generous, or courageous, or prudent "to a fault," or in a way that is self-defeating. To have such inappropriate traits is not to have the *virtues* of generosity, courage, and so forth, but rather some closely related vices.⁸ Now if we look closely, the argument continues, we will see that the "proper degree and manner" for each trait is defined by reference to a central set of reciprocally interdependent traits — the fundamental virtues. So exercising the *virtue* of courage (that is, courage of the proper degree and manner) necessarily involves conduct that is not only courageous but also temperate, wise and just; the virtue of temperance similarly involves courage, wisdom and justice; and so on for wisdom and justice. Thus it is true, for those virtues at least that to have one is to have them all. Other traits, such as modesty or generosity may be connected to the central virtues, so that "through" the central ones all the virtues are connected or unified. But the relationship between peripheral and central virtues is presumably not always biconditional. Having a peripheral virtue may always entail being courageous, then, and wise, just and temperate as well; but presumably it is possible to be temperate without being chaste.

But the conceptual equivalence of the virtues leaves coherence problems untouched. If we accept the equivalence, all we know is that we cannot have one virtue without the other. That does nothing to insure against conflicts, for perhaps a conflict will simply mean that we can have neither one, or that the one we give priority to will simply damage but not eliminate the other. And it does nothing to insure against coincidences, either. Again we seem drawn toward the idea of an underlying regulative principle that could coordinate things.

Regulative Principles. So another line to take toward an organic view of unity is to try to develop the suggestion that all the virtues exhibit a regulative principle which effectively coordinates them. One obvious candidate is some version of an Aristotelian principle of moderation, derived from the observation that many of the virtues stand between disreputable extremes — courage, for example, being somewhere between cowardice and foolhardiness. And it may be that all of them involve a sort of prudence, or moderation, or sweet reasonableness that makes them self-adjusting in situations of potential conflict.⁹ This would certainly justify the label of organic unity, for it is analogous to the homeostatic mechanisms (e.g., with respect to respiration, body temperature, fluid balance) found in complex organisms. The thought

is that each of the virtues is sensitive to the operation of the others, and reacts reciprocally to them. Honesty, for example, is merely brutal candor unless it is sensitive to circumstance, and coordinated with kindness and tact as well as with fidelity (consider testimony given under oath), and with justice (consider cases in which telling the truth will cause the wicked to prosper), and on and on.

Such reflection reinforces the contention that an ununified bundle of virtues account is theoretically insupportable, and that some theory of organic unity will best reflect both the diversity we see in the virtues and the dynamic process of adjustment they appear to go through with respect to each other. But it also reinforces the desirability of finding a fairly simple regulative principle at the bottom of all of this. If we cannot do that, but instead must pick apart each of the virtues to find its own regulative principles, we will have a very long project. (An indefinitely long one, in fact, since there seems to be no limit, in principle, to the various ways of cutting up ideal character into separate virtues.)

I believe, however, that this approach to organic unity, long or short, should be abandoned. Or rather, I believe that when pursued, it will inevitably collapse into either an unappealing argument for the identity of the virtues or an argument for their ordinal unity. My reasons are these:

Think about conflicts, and the way a regulative principle would have to work to insure that the virtue of honesty, say, was always compatible with prudence, justice, kindness, loyalty and the rest. (1) It could work by *dissolving* conflicts as they arise (as opposed to settling them); by modulating each virtue until it fits with the other, similarly modulated ones. This sort of conflict resolution is essentially the process of turning down the contrast between conflicting elements. That is an instructive metaphor, in fact, because the limiting result of turning down the contrast is a blank screen: identity; a perfectly seamless whole in which there are no contrasting elements at all.¹⁰ And this seems to be what happens to the separate virtues (on some accounts) when we press persistently for the dissolution of conflicts between them; they dissolve into one another — into one featureless thing called virtue. Honesty isn't simply the disposition to tell the truth, then. Rather, it is essentially a certain region of an otherwise undifferentiated form of wisdom, or knowledge, or ideal character — the region that concerns truth-telling. And the same, *mutatis mutandis*, then happens to every other virtue. Each is dissolved into an account of the same one thing. When this happens, the notion of organic unity collapses by stages into identity.

(2) The other way a regulative principle could work is by *avoiding* conflicts as they arise — by stopping each disposition short of conflict, leaving the contrast between them intact. Now if each of the virtues has this sort of collision avoidance system, *and nothing else*, we will instantly get a four-way stop problem: each stops short of collision, and then no one makes the first move. The obvious solution to such deadlocks is to have some right-of-way rules — some priority rules — about who goes first. But when those sorts of rules are added, this account of organic unity has collapsed into ordinal unity. That is, at this point we have view of the virtues that holds them to be a heterogeneous but ordered unity.

One further remark about all these organic views of unity: It seems to me that none of them can do anything to help resolve the coincidence problems — without, again, collapsing into either an identity view or an ordinal one. Organic unity is, after all, a thesis about the harmony of the virtues — about the absence of conflict between them. It is not a thesis about what is to be done about conflict-free cases in which we want a particular virtue to be the leading one. If the virtues are not distinct enough to admit this problem, then we have gone back to an identity doctrine. If they are distinct enough to admit it, then no matter how good an account of organic unity we have, we will need an ordinal one in addition.

ORDINAL UNITY

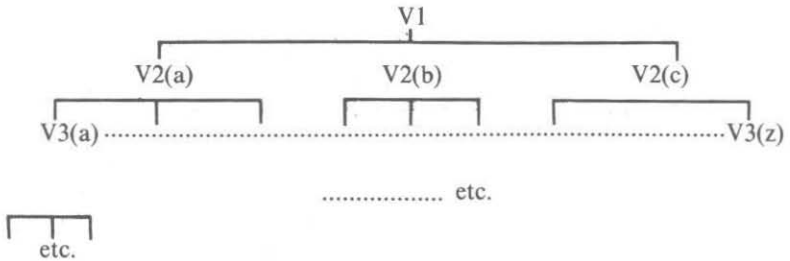
It thus seems reasonable to move away from an organic conception of the virtues, except insofar as it can be incorporated into an ordinal one. What I want to do in this final portion of the paper is show which sort of ordinal account is most promising.

Types of Ordinal Accounts

Unique ordering. There are at least three ways to get a completely ordered set of the virtues. One is a strict numerical order in which each virtue has a unique ordinal status: There is exactly one virtue in first place, exactly one other virtue in second, and so on. There are not ties for *n*th place. The first virtue then dominates all the rest, the second dominates all but the first, etc. Since every conflict or coincidence necessarily pits a higher against a lower virtue, every case will be decidable. The first virtue will be the controlling one whenever it conflicts or coincides with anything below it; the second will be controlling only in cases when the first virtue is indifferent to it (that is, neither conflicts nor coincides with it); and so on down the line. The

only way that a little trait like tact will ever be expressed, then, is when *all* the traits above it are indifferent to it and, so to speak, pass it through. The proposal I will sketch below involves arguing for a unique first virtue. But the idea that we might be able to justify a unique ordering all the way from first to last seems too improbable to pursue.

Branching structures. That leaves two other possibilities. One is a pyramidal or downwardly branching structure in which two or more secondary virtues are dominated by the first, each secondary virtue dominates its own set of tertiary ones, and so forth.



The difficulty here is obviously that conflicts and coincidences between secondary virtues or between any others at the same ordinal level, might proliferate. For conflicts, we might try (!) to argue for the additivity of virtues (that is, for the thesis that the virtuous act is whatever is recommended by the greater number of traits on a given level), and then put up with the few remaining ties. *But notice that this does nothing to resolve coincidence problems.* And the prospect of trying to arrange an intricate branching structure in which no such problems could arise is a baffling one. So I put this aside as well, except to note that my proposal below will involve a very simple, two-level branching structure.

Decision procedures. The remaining alternative is to try to find a decision procedure — a set of considerations that will decide any conflict or coincidence that arises, not in terms of a rigid, fixed, overall ordinal structure but rather in terms of a method for coming to conclusions. This, it seems to me, is the only hope (faint as it may be) for resolving priority problems for the virtues.

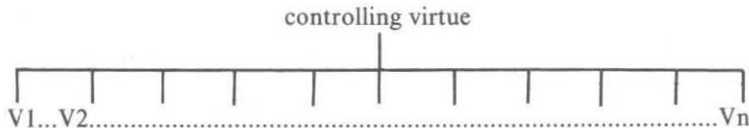
The idea of a decision procedure in this context is simply this: there is a decision procedure for a given conflict or coincidence if and only if there is a series of deliberative steps which will necessarily identify one virtue as the one that ought to be dominant in that case. The virtues are completely ordered by such a procedure if it will decide any arbitrarily

selected conflict or coincidence. Of course it would be a trivial and pointless exercise to construct either an arbitrary procedure (like a coin flip), or one contrived to yield predetermined results (like an algorithm for generating a predetermined unique ordering). And it would be vain to expect the procedure to be a "clerical routine" that could be applied mechanically to a problem, or that would reach a definitive rather than a provisional conclusion. Those expectations are appropriate to mathematics but not to ethics. What is appropriate to ethics is rather a procedure which (1) is controlled by ordering principles constructed from reasoned moral deliberation about the proper ordinal relationships between various subsets of the virtues, (2) is applicable to all ordinal questions about the virtues (i.e., is complete), and (3) has a non-arbitrary mechanism for getting provisional closure on such questions when the ordering principles are inconclusive.¹¹

PRACTICAL WISDOM AS A CONTROLLING VIRTUE

The foregoing analysis suggests a way in which practical wisdom, in the Aristotelian sense, could provide the necessary unity for the virtues — and a type of ordinal unity that resolves both conflict and coincidence problems. Accounts of organic unity have often made practical wisdom the central element. Since I believe the idea of organic unity should be abandoned here, I reject those accounts. But I think the Aristotelian conception of practical wisdom fits very well into an ordinal scheme.¹²

What I have in mind borrows a good deal from three notions involved in the accounts previously discussed: One is the concept of a central, regulative virtue. Another is the idea of a downwardly branching ordinal structure — a very flat one in this case, with the controlling or regulative virtue as the only one of the first order, and all the other virtues as second-order ones. And the third notion is that of a decision procedure — that is, a process through which any given conflict or coincidence will be resolved. This idea may be represented as a two-level branching structure:



What these three notions suggest is the following possibility.

Suppose we think of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as the trait that controls all the others, at every moment of reflective conduct. At the

moment of choice, its function is to elicit the appropriate act and motivation by invoking the appropriate second-order virtue (prudence, benevolence or whatever). And as long as only one trait is invoked, there will be no conflict or coincidence problems here. Reflective choice, for the virtuous person, is a univalent response. That is practical wisdom at the moment of choice.

In deliberation, the function of practical wisdom is to order the whole range of possibilities for conduct in such a way that the appropriate act and motivation will stand out as such, and as constitutive of a particular virtue — the virtue that will be the dominant one in that context. Again, as long as only one trait is selected, there will be no conflict or coincidence problems here. Deliberation, for the virtuous person, ends in a univalent response. That is practical wisdom in deliberation.

And finally, for the full-scale rational assessment of conduct (either retrospective or hypothetical), the function of practical wisdom is to produce a coherent, context-sensitive general picture of the appropriateness of various acts and motives, as constitutive of various virtues. Conflict and coincidence problems will be avoided here as long as all other virtues are subordinate to practical wisdom, and none of them has priority over any other.

This conception of practical wisdom is of a purely instrumental virtue — one completely empty of its own ends, as it were, except the instrumental one of finding the means to the various ends given to it in situations of choice, deliberation, or rational assessment. Practical wisdom must handle every given end impartially, on (initially) equal terms. In itself, then, it is thus neither egoistic or altruistic, competitive or cooperative, benevolent or miserly, merciful or just.

Now the plausibility of this sort of solution to the priority problem — this controlling virtue version of an ordinal account of the unity of the virtues — rests squarely on the possibility of describing and justifying a decision procedure (as a part of practical wisdom) that will nonarbitrarily select one and only one trait in any given choice or deliberative situation. And that seems to me to be a much less daunting task than that of getting a unique and complete ordering, or a long branching structure.

In general terms, what we need to do is describe a way to find, in a given situation, what counts as *the* appropriate trait to invoke. And there is a familiar description we can give. A highly compressed sketch of it would go something like this.

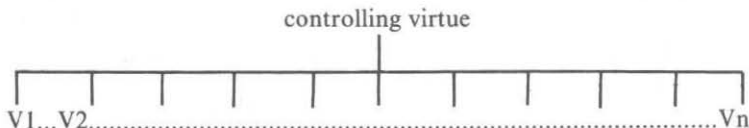
A trait is the appropriate one for a given situation if that trait is the one best suited (instrumentally)

selected conflict or coincidence. Of course it would be a trivial and pointless exercise to construct either an arbitrary procedure (like a coin flip), or one contrived to yield predetermined results (like an algorithm for generating a predetermined unique ordering). And it would be vain to expect the procedure to be a "clerical routine" that could be applied mechanically to a problem, or that would reach a definitive rather than a provisional conclusion. Those expectations are appropriate to mathematics but not to ethics. What is appropriate to ethics is rather a procedure which (1) is controlled by ordering principles constructed from reasoned moral deliberation about the proper ordinal relationships between various subsets of the virtues, (2) is applicable to all ordinal questions about the virtues (i.e., is complete), and (3) has a non-arbitrary mechanism for getting provisional closure on such questions when the ordering principles are inconclusive.¹¹

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UNITY, COINCIDENCE, AND CONFLICT IN THE VIRTUES

- (a) to elicit the conduct which will achieve the greatest sum of one's immediate ends,
- (b) assessed in terms of their compatibility with and effectiveness as means for achieving the greatest sum of one's intermediate ends,
- (c) assessed in terms of their compatibility with and effectiveness as means for achieving the greatest sum of one's ultimate ends,
- (d) assessed in terms of their compability with and effectiveness in sustaining social relationships and associations,
- (e) assessed in terms of their ability to engender and sustain the satisfaction of (a') the sorts of immediate ends characteristic of people whose actual immediate ends are appropriate, given existing conditions, for (b') those intermediate ends appropriate for... etc.

This spiral process becomes, with each successive round, increasingly general — increasingly centered on the traits that can enrich any person's life, taken as a whole and considered in its circumstances. Yet the process never loses its rootedness in individual interest, or covertly imposes an end other than that of practical wisdom. This confirms the claim that we are dealing with a genuine decision procedure here, rather than a disguised substantive principle; and it helps to clarify the way in which such a procedure could be at once empty of its own ends and of use in unifying the virtues.

The familiarity of this process does not show, of course, that we will be able to get an adequate ordinal account of the unity of the virtues with it. But it does give some hope. The hope comes from three sources. First, as described, practical wisdom relies solely on instrumental reasoning, which we understand as well or better than any kind of reasoning we do. Second, there are familiar procedures for getting closure, for practical purposes, in such reasoning when it is inconclusive. And third, the notion that instrumental rationality must ultimately dominate all other traits is situated firmly in a long tradition of productive moral theorizing, from Plato onward.

It is worth pausing, here, to note two things: First, the dominance of the *trait* of practical wisdom does not entail the intrusive or pervasive use of instrumental reasoning in everyday life. Fluency in a language means having a good enough sense of the language — a good enough eye and ear for it — that grammatical analysis is seldom necessary. Likewise, practical wisdom seldom requires detailed instrumental

reasoning. Second, since practical wisdom is empty of its own substantive ends, and is obviously sensitive to circumstance, it can unify a wide range of character types. It is thus compatible with liberal ideals.

Whether the dominance of practical wisdom will also do more substantive work for virtue theory, by somehow ruling out the standard types of vicious character, is a subject for another essay. Here my aims were simply to argue that the account of the unity of the virtues should be an ordinal one, and that the ordinal account should be a two-tiered decision procedure with practical wisdom as the only first-order trait.

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NOTES

- * Earlier versions of this paper were discussed in the Faculty Writing Workshop and the Senior Seminar in Philosophy at Hollins College. I am grateful to the members of those groups, as well as to the Editor of this journal, for many useful comments. Nickolas Pappas, in particular, urged me to emphasize the problem of overlapping or coincident virtues, and to be less hasty in dismissing a two-tiered ordering. Alvord Beardslee had earlier provided important bibliographic advice.
- ¹ For a sketch of the complex early Western history of the unity-of-the-virtues debate, see James J. Walsh, "Buridan on the Connection of the Virtues," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24 (1986): 453–482, at 454–458. And for illuminating work on the way the problem arises in Confucian ethics, see Antonio S. Cua, "Hsün Tzu and the Unity of Virtues," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 14 (1987): 381–400.
- ² For illuminating defenses of the plausibility of Socrates' commitment to the identity view in the *Protagoras* (at 329 ff) and some other dialogues, see Terry Penner, "The Unity of Virtue," *The Philosophical Review* 82 (1973): 35–68, and Michael T. Ferejohn, "The Unity of Virtue and the Objects of Socratic Inquiry," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 20 (1982): 1–22. Both take the position (for somewhat different reasons) that Socrates could plausibly have been asserting the identity of the virtues with a common "state of the soul" which produces or grounds them all. And if two or more things are all identical with the same further thing, they are identical with each other as well. For a careful statement of the view most commentators have held — that Socrates could have been asserting only an equivalence relation rather than identity — see Gregory Vlastos, "The Unity of the Virtues," *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 221–269. It should also be remarked that one can find *denials* of both the identity and equivalence views in a number of Plato's dialogues. Penner

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asserts this about *Euthyphro*, *Meno*, and *Euthydemus*, and notes that in *Statesman* 305–308, it is argued that conflicts between the virtues are possible.

- ³ This seems to have been Aristotle's view, in the sense that he held the virtues to be generated and united by a kind of practical intelligence or wisdom (*phronesis*). See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144b38–1145a2, where he says that while it is possible to have some and not others of the "natural" virtues, this is not possible for the "virtues that someone must have to be called unconditionally good; for as soon as he has intelligence, which is a single state, he has all the virtues as well." This is Terence Irwin's translation (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1985). The term that Irwin translates here with the word intelligence is *phronesis*, which is more commonly translated now as practical wisdom. It is roughly equivalent to the Latin *prudentia* and has therefore sometimes been translated (misleadingly for modern eyes) as prudence. In any case, as Irwin points out on p. 412, Aristotle claims that *phronesis* "is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of complete VIRTUE of character (1107a, 1138b18–34, 1144b14–1145a, 1178a16–19).... [and that because *phronesis*] is practical, someone cannot both have it and fail to act correctly... (1145a4–9, 1152a6–14)." Given the enthusiasm with which commentators have taken up the challenge of explaining how it might be that this one trait could entail all the rest, and given the potential for misunderstanding Aristotle on this point, Ross's choice in the Oxford edition of Aristotle (preserved by Urmson in the 1984 revised edition, and used by Ostwald as well) seems the best one: they all translate *phronesis* as practical wisdom. Early Christian thinkers revised not only the list of virtues but the account of their organic unity. St. Jerome apparently endorsed the view that he who has one virtue has them all, but others followed St. Augustine in rejecting that idea. See Augustine's *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, Chapter XV, where the four fundamental virtues (temperance, courage or fortitude, justice, and prudence) are all considered as differing forms of the perfect love of God.

For some later medieval developments, see Walsh, *op. cit.*

- ⁴ Pluralism, in this context, either in the form of cheerful liberalism or in the form of a tragic view of life, is not a solution to the problem I am discussing, but rather the rejection of it. Pluralism is the acceptance of an account in which there are genuinely conflicting, equally fundamental virtues. And of course the various skeptical arguments that make so much of the significance of moral dilemmas are committed to saying that this problem about the virtues cannot legitimately be *either* solved or rejected.
- ⁵ Walsh, *op. cit.*
- ⁶ Ferejohn, *op. cit.*
- ⁷ Some attempts to solve prisoner's dilemmas and free rider problems take a similar line. See Lawrence C. Becker, "The Free Rider Problem," in Harlan Miller and William H. Williams (eds.), *The Limits of Utilitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), and David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). More generally, utilitarians have occasionally made arguments about the utility of developing certain traits that short-circuit the practice of making decisions based on the utilitarian principle.

And my argument in *Reciprocity* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), while not utilitarian, certainly argues for the cultivation of a disposition to reciprocate that preempts rational self-maximizing behavior in many circumstances.

- ⁸ See Gary Watson, "Virtues in Excess," *Philosophical Studies* 46 (1984): 57–74 for an illuminating review of these matters.
- ⁹ Moderation is not the only candidate for a regulative principle. See Walsh, *op. cit.*, pp. 455–456.

In the earlier [medieval] period, the major concern was for the relation of the virtues divinely infused through grace with the naturally acquired virtues. A common doctrine was that the infused virtue of charity drives out the vices and serves as the cause or from of all the virtues, thus uniting them. Occasionally the four cardinal virtues were treated as infused... A consequence of these views is that the acquired virtues, considered in themselves, are not connected, so that for them it is not true that he who has one must have them all.... (455)

He goes on, however, to illustrate the tendency to slip back into an equivalence account.

This independence of the acquired virtues was sometimes significantly qualified by the claim that the exercise of any virtue ought to be made with moderation, forcefulness, insight and adaption to the end, and thus temperately, courageously, prudently, and justly. This positing of a set of general cardinal conditions was taken to show the way that virtues can be connected, but it bequeathed the problem of clearly distinguishing between those general conditions and the associated virtues...

[Thomas Aquinas] Following Aristotle closely... distinguished between natural propensities and developed virtuous habits. The propensities are not necessarily connected. The habits develop through interaction with prudence, and since prudence has a single ultimate end, the moral virtues are connected through it. (455–456)

- ¹⁰ Consider this passage from John Buridan's *Questiones*..., translated by James J. Walsh and printed in "Buridan on the Connection of the Virtues," *op. cit.*, p. 480:

Therefore it seems to me that each of these habits is perfected through its connection with the other, and that one virtue, perfectly prepared for by acting well is constituted from them. For I think that the second habit, other things being equal, is stronger in one who has the first habit than in one who lacks it. It also seems to me that virtue complete in this way is single in species, or even numerically...(480)

- ¹¹ A procedure such as this may (or may not) produce an invariant ordering of the virtues. If it does, it will have the same practical result as a substantive principle for achieving ordinal unity. But "strictly speaking," as Asa Kasher has pointed out to me in correspondence, it will not yield "an ordinal structure in the class of virtues, but rather in the class of instances of application of virtues considerations." This may lead one to suspect the existence of an underlying,

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substantive element in the procedure, itself describable as a virtue. The account of practical wisdom introduced below is meant to deal with that suspicion.

- ¹² Asa Kasher has brought to my attention a book by Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Aristotle's Theory of Moral Insight* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), which bears on the material in this section of my paper. Engberg-Pedersen argues (Chapter 6) that *phronesis*, for Aristotle, is a sort of "cognitive grasp" of or "moral insight" into practical situations defined (in part) by desires that are independent of it.

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