**Silencing, Psychological Conflict, and the Distinction between Virtue and Self-Control**

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**Abstract**

According to many virtue ethicists, one of Aristotle’s important achievements was drawing a clear, qualitative distinction between the character traits of temperance (*sophrosyne*) and self-control (*enkrateia*). In an influential series of papers, John McDowell has argued that a clear distinction between temperance (or virtue, in general) and self-control can be maintained only if one claims that, for the virtuous individual (but not for the self-controlled), considerations in favor of actions that are contrary to virtue are “silenced.” Some virtue ethicists reject McDowell’s silencing view as offering an implausible or inappropriate picture of *human* virtue, but they argue that (contra McDowell) virtue can still be clearly distinguished from self-control by the absence of motivational conflict alone. In this paper, I argue that this criticism of McDowell is at most half right. If the silencing view is false, so that virtue can have a cost and the virtuous person can justifiably feel negative emotions in response to that cost, there is no principled reason why the virtuous person cannot also have motivational conflict. So, if one rejects the silencing view, then one must allow that the distinction between virtue and self-control is at most a matter of degree.

Aristotle famously drew a clear distinction between, on one hand, self-control (*enkrateia*, continence), and, on the other, temperance (*sophrosyne*, moderation) and (perhaps by extension or analogy; see note 1) virtue more generally.[[1]](#footnote-2) According to an Aristotelian view, self-control involves directly resisting desires that conflict with one’s evaluative assessments or judgments, whereas temperance (and virtue, in general) involves not having desires that conflict with one’s evaluative assessments in the first place.[[2]](#footnote-3) Aristotle was clearly correct in distinguishing between the concepts of *temperance* and *self-control*, and these concepts may be satisfied by distinct psychological *states* and by distinct kinds of *action*. It is one thing to refrain from eating a piece of chocolate because one overrides a strong occurrent desire to eat it and quite another to refrain from eating a piece of chocolate because one does not have an occurrent desire to do so in the first place. Aristotle and the many contemporary virtue ethicists who follow him also take temperance and self-control to be qualitatively distinct character *traits*.[[3]](#footnote-4)

According to one influential line of thought, Aristotle’s making this distinction between virtue and self-control “so clearly was a major achievement in the reflective study of human conduct” (Hardie 1968: 139).[[4]](#footnote-5) For, if it is correct, it not only shows that “there is more than one life governed by reason” and thus offers “a more nuanced picture … of the role of reason in human action” (Gould 1994: 186), it also raises the problem of which of these two “kinds of moral goodness” is ethically superior (Hardie 1968: 139).[[5]](#footnote-6) Further, it may also provide the resources to solve that problem, since, according to many (neo-)Aristotelians, the kind of psychological unity or harmony that virtuous people supposedly have, but self-controlled individuals lack, is itself ethically good.[[6]](#footnote-7)

The unity or harmony that, on the Aristotelian view, marks a clear, qualitative difference (and not merely a difference in degree) between virtue from self-control consists, at least in part, in the lack of motivation to act in ways that conflict with virtue.[[7]](#footnote-8) The self-controlled person tends to have *assessment-desire conflict* in certain situations but resists, overcomes, or inhibits this conflict. Virtue, by contrast, requires *assessment-desire conformity*—complete conformity of one’s motivational states to one’s rational, reflective judgments.[[8]](#footnote-9) As Al Mele expresses this view: “Self-controlled agents are typically successful in resisting temptation; temperate individuals are not even subject to temptation” (2016: 170). So, any traditional, Aristotelian view must accept:

*Motivating reasons silencing*: At least in situations where there is a clear requirement of virtue, the virtuous person can have no motivating reasons (e.g., desires) to act in a way that conflicts with the demands of virtue (where a motivating reason to ϕ is a psychological state that explains why a person ϕs).

In an influential series of papers (e.g., 1978; 1979; 1980; all reprinted in his 1998a[[9]](#footnote-10)), John McDowell has argued that a clear distinction between virtue and self-control requires more than *motivating reasons silencing*. According to McDowell, (when virtue clearly entails that one course of action is required) not only does the virtuous person not have any *motivating* reasons that conflict with the demands of virtue, there are also no *normative* reasons that conflict with virtue, where a normative reason to ϕ is a consideration that counts in favor of (e.g., justifies or requires) ϕing. (See Woods 1972 and Smith 1995 for the distinction between normative and motivating reasons; for an application of this distinction to McDowell’s view, see Stark 2001: 443-4.) Further, the virtuous person cannot even recognize or “weigh” considerations that, in other situations, would constitute reasons for action. On this view, the virtuous person’s perception of a situation, and her conception of how she ought to live, imply that considerations that would count as reasons in another situation are completely “silenced” or insulated “from engaging her inclinations at all” (1978: 91). The self-controlled person, by contrast, does not perceive the situation as clearly as the virtuous person, and her conception of how she ought to live is only somewhat similar to the virtuous person’s. Since she has a “lively desire [that] clouds or blurs the focus of her attention on ‘the noble’,” she is aware of and sensitive to “competing attractions”; they are not silenced for her, as McDowell claims they are for the virtuous person (1978: 92).

According to McDowell, if we allow that the virtuous person can have a normative reason to act contrary to virtue, which she weighs against (but takes to be overbalanced by) a reason to act in accordance with virtue, then “the distinction between virtue and [self-control] will seem unintelligible” (1979: 55). As McDowell writes: “If the virtuous person allows himself to weigh [say] the present danger, as a reason for running away, why should we not picture the weighing as allowing himself to feel an inclination to run away… ?” (1979: 55). If this “picture” of weighing reasons is accurate, then virtue will collapse into self-control, and any difference between these character traits will be a matter of degree—e.g., in how strong the motivation to act contrary to virtue is or in how easy it is to override or resist (see Baxley 2007: 407 and Vigani 2019: 233 for discussion of McDowell’s line of thought here). So, according to McDowell, this “silencing view” of virtue is required to draw a clear distinction between virtue and self-control.

In the years since McDowell developed the silencing view, many have argued that it is implausible or offers an ethical ideal that is inappropriate for humans (e.g., Blackburn 1998: 37; Seidman 2005; Baxley 2007; Scarre 2013). In particular, several philosophers have argued that, contra the silencing view, “virtue can have a cost” in some situations and the virtuous person’s emotions can (and perhaps should) reflect that cost (Baxley 2007: 403; see also, Stark 2001: 449). Yet, some who reject the silencing view on these grounds argue that a clear distinction between virtue and self-control can still be drawn, one that is both psychologically realistic and provides an account of virtue that is an appropriate ethical ideal for human beings. That is, these philosophers also reject McDowell’s claim that the silencing view is required for *any* clear distinction between virtue and self-control. In this paper, I argue that this two-pronged critique of McDowell is at most half right.[[10]](#footnote-11) Granting that the “inappropriate ideal” objection is sound and the silencing view is false, there is good reason to doubt that a clear, coherent distinction between virtue and self-control can still be drawn.

I argue that views that attempt to maintain a clear distinction between virtue and self-control while rejecting the silencing view are unstable. Once one grants that, contra the silencing view, acting virtuously can sometimes have a genuine cost, the virtuous person’s negative emotional state(s) and evaluative judgments (which accurately reflect that cost) threaten to undermine their *motivational* harmony (and thus threaten to undermine the clear distinction between virtue and self-control). The only principled way of blocking this threat is to reinstatethe silencing view’s austere and implausible claim that nothing forgone for the sake of virtue can be a genuine cost. So, accounts of virtue that reject the silencing view but seek to maintain a clear distinction between virtue and self-control are torn between, on one hand, allowing that the virtuous person can recognize and mourn the loss of genuine value that is sometimes demanded by virtue (and thus offering a more appropriate ethical ideal for humans) and, on the other hand, insisting that acting virtuously can never have a genuine cost for the virtuous person (and thus maintaining a clear distinction between virtue and self-control).

After presenting the core commitments of the silencing view in Section 1, in Section 2 I outline the “inappropriate ideal” objection to the silencing view, focusing on two related ideas: (i) that acting virtuously can sometimes have a genuine cost for the virtuous person, who can have negative emotions and evaluative judgments that reflect that cost and (ii) that the silencing view adopts an overly “action-centered” account of virtue (see Stark 2001: 446, 452), one that overemphasizes the role of practical rationality (and its connection to right action) in the virtuous life, while neglecting the contributions that our appetitive and emotional capacities make to human flourishing and excellence. Then, in Section 3, I illustrate how the instability discussed above appears in Louise Vigani’s recent (2019) discussion of McDowell’s account of virtue. Finally, in Section 4, I rebut what are, in effect, plausible responses to the inconsistency in Vigani’s interpretation of McDowell: Susan Stark’s (2001) and Anne Margaret Baxley’s (2007) attempts to show why the virtuous person’s emotional or judgmental conflict (in response to the costs of virtue) will not lead to motivational conflict. I argue that their views, too, are inherently unstable. For, once we allow (as they do) that the virtuous person can recognize (and experience a negative emotion in response to the loss of) the value of an option that is forgone for the sake of virtue, we have abandoned the only reason to think that the virtuous person cannot also experience motivational conflict. Stark and Baxley, respectively, note that rejecting (a form of) reasons internalism and rejecting judgment internalism are *required* by any view that attempts to hold onto *motivating reasons silencing* (thus maintaining a clear distinction between virtue and self-control) while rejecting the implausible implications of the silencing view. However, they are wrong to suggest that rejecting these forms of internalism is *sufficient* to defend such a view. For, they overlook the fact that, even if there is no *necessary* connection between, on one hand, emotional or judgmental conflict and, on the other, motivational conflict (as those forms of internalism would require, respectively), there is good reason to think that there is a strong *contingent* connection, in humans, between these kinds of conflict. I conclude, in Section 5, by briefly sketching the implications my argument has for future work on virtue and self-control.

***1. The Silencing View: Normative Reasons Silencing and Evaluative Assessment Silencing***

The following quotation states the core of what has come to be called the “silencing view” of virtue:

[T]he dictates of virtue, if properly appreciated, are not weighed with other reasons at all, not even on a scale which always tips on their side. If a situation in which virtue imposes a requirement is genuinely conceived as such, according to this view, then considerations which, in the absence of the requirement, would have constituted reasons for acting otherwise are silenced altogether—not overridden—by the requirement. (McDowell

1978: 90)

As discussed above, when McDowell claims that potential reasons to act in a non-virtuous way are silenced by the requirements of virtue, he is making a claim about both motivating reasons *and* normative reasons for action. Further, according to the silencing view, the virtuous person has a firm “conviction that in these circumstances the attractions of the competing course count for nothing” (McDowell 1978: 92). That is, considerations that conflict with the demands of virtue “lack practical significance” for the virtuous person; the virtuous person “*sees* no reason” for, and “*recognizes* no value in,” acting in ways that are contrary to virtue (Baxley 2007: 405, italics added). Finally, at least at times, McDowell endorses a claim that seems to follow from the above: that the virtuous person can have no emotions that conflict with the demands of virtue. That is, in addition to silencing reasons for *action*, the requirements of virtue also silence reasons for *feeling* negative emotions in response to having to make the apparent sacrifice that virtue requires in a given situation. Not only will the virtuous person’s perceptions, desires, and evaluative judgments be fully unified behind the virtuous action, she will have an emotional state that is “univocal” or “monolithic” as well (Stark 2001: 446).[[11]](#footnote-12)

Thus, (what I call) the silencing view attributes complete psychological harmony to the virtuous person. According to the silencing view, not only do the virtuous person’s desires perfectly conform to her evaluative assessments, but she has no psychological features—no beliefs, judgments, or assessments; no emotions—that conflict with the requirements of virtue. So, in addition to accepting *motivating reasons silencing*, the silencing view endorses the following two theses:

*Normative reasons silencing*: In situations in which there is a clear requirement of virtue, there can be no normative reasons for acting or feeling in ways that conflict what virtue requires.

*Evaluative judgment silencing*: In situations in which there is a clear requirement of virtue, the virtuous person cannot make any positive assessment of options that conflict with the demands of virtue: she cannot judge that there are reasons in favor of those options nor recognize that they have any value (in that situation).[[12]](#footnote-13)

***2. The “Inappropriate Ideal” Objection to the Silencing View: Virtue Can Have a Cost***

One might object that the silencing view’s account of virtue is overly idealized.[[13]](#footnote-14) Further, perhaps the degree of idealization involved in the silencing view is so high that no human could ever attain it. McDowell could grant this and concede that any account of the virtues “that successfully treats them as traits of actual human beings must allow for cognitive and motivational imperfections” (Mele 2016: 170).[[14]](#footnote-15) McDowell would insist, however, that he has a different aim: to provide “a view of what genuine virtue is,” and thus, in his view, “idealization is not something to be avoided or apologized for” (1978: 92). However, this does not avoid another common objection to the silencing view: that its conception of virtue not only “sets the bar too high in presenting an ideal account of character that we might never reach, but that it sets up the wrong ideal for *human* virtue” (Baxley 2007: 418, italics in original). In a footnote, Baxley writes that the point she is making here is parallel to one Susan Wolf makes about moral saints, in that the “silencing view fails to represent a model of good character toward which it would be rational or good or desirable to strive” (2007: 422 n.28).

According to this objection, the silencing view presents a view of virtue that would be appropriate only for a very different kind of being, such as a god, a “perfectly rational being,” or a being “who lack[s] feelings and non-rational appetites” (Baxley 2007: 418, 410-11; see also Blackburn 1998: 37 and Scarre 2013: 14 n.23, 15).[[15]](#footnote-16)Since humans have feelings and non-rational appetites, and our rational capacities are merely “finite,” the silencing view offers an inappropriate ideal for beings like us (Baxley 2007: 418). One way to formulate this general objection, which I’ll focus on below, denies the silencing view’s claim that the virtuous person can suffer no genuine loss or harm (if she remains virtuous).[[16]](#footnote-17) Rather, since we are beings who correctly “value a range of goods, activities, and projects,” which sometimes conflict with one another (“and not only in tragic circumstances”) (Baxley 2007: 418), an adequate account of virtue must recognize that “virtue can have a cost,” in some situations, and that the virtuous person’s emotions (if not her desires) can (and perhaps should) reflect that cost (Baxley 2007: 403; see also Stark 2001: 449).[[17]](#footnote-18) The virtuous person will, of course, recognize that this cost (or loss) can be avoided only by acting less-than-virtuously, thereby incurring a worse cost (or loss). “But the lesser of two losses is still a loss” (Seidman 2005: 73; cf. McDowell 1980: 17).

Baxley provides several examples (involving courage, truthfulness, loyalty, and temperance) that (in my view) convincingly show that reasons for(at least) feeling negative emotionsneed not be silenced for the virtuous person, even when virtue imposes clear demands on right action (2007: 415). For example, a loyal son who must turn down an attractive job offer to care for his ailing parent may “see that considerations about his career still provide him with a reason” to mourn, or feel frustrated about, the forgone job opportunity. Thus, the loyal son “may [justifiably] feel pained about the prospective loss to his career” (Baxley 2007: 415).[[18]](#footnote-19)

Or, consider a case from Marcia Baron (1988): suppose a man is at the scene of an accident and is forced to choose between (a) first helping his wife who is in pain but whose injuries are (known to him to be) non-life-threatening and (b) first helping a stranger who will die without immediate aid (which he can provide).[[19]](#footnote-20) Clearly, virtue requires that the man save the stranger before helping his wife.[[20]](#footnote-21) However, it seems that the husband’s acting virtuously in this case is compatible with (and perhaps requires) (i) there being a normative reason for him to feel a negative emotion (e.g., regret, sadness, anger, or frustration) about the fact that (virtue demands that) he must not immediately help his wife. (The fact that his wife’s well-being is genuinely valuable (and thus her suffering is a genuine cost) provides this normative reason.), and (ii) his recognizing this normative reason and thus justifiably regretting, lamenting, or being angry about the fact that he cannot immediately help his wife. In this situation, acting virtuously demands that the husband sacrifice something of genuine value (his wife’s well-being), and virtue is compatible with his emotions reflecting this sacrifice.[[21]](#footnote-22)

If (i) and (ii) are compatible with the husband acting virtuously in this example (as I will suppose they are), then the silencing view, as presented above, is false. For, (i) and (ii) (together with the claim that the husband in the example is virtuous) are inconsistent with (the emotional component of) *normative reasons silencing* and *evaluative assessment silencing*, respectively. Further, in accepting that forgoing the prohibited option is a genuine cost to the virtuous person (which the virtuous person can recognize and experience negative emotions in response to), we have allowed that there is more to *eudaimonia*—human flourishing—than *acting* rightly (i.e., acting in accordance with virtue, with what practical wisdom demands). We have thus abandoned the silencing view’s overly “action-centered” account of virtue. For, even if pursuing the forgone option would have resulted in a greater *net* cost to the virtuous person (since the value of acting virtuously is greater than the value of the forgone option), we have acknowledged that the forgone option has *some* value (i.e., contributes something to *eudaimonia*). Thus, the virtuous person’s life would have gone better if she did not have to sacrifice that value and did not have the negative emotion that accurately reflects that sacrifice. *Acting* in accordance with virtue does not exhaust the good-making features of an excellent human life.

***3. The View of Virtue that Vigani Attributes to McDowell is Inconsistent***

Critically examining Vigani’s recent (2019) defense of McDowell’s account of virtue will illustrate why views that accept the “inappropriate ideal” objection (and thus reject the silencing view, as defined above), while also attempting to maintain a clear distinction between virtue and self-control, are unstable.

Vigani claims that, rather than offering an ethical ideal that is inappropriate for humans, McDowell’s view provides a “picture of the virtuous” which, although idealized, remains a “decidedly human one” (2019: 230). At first glance, Vigani seems to be defending the silencing view (as presented above) from the “inappropriate ideal” objection. However, it turns out that she instead argues that McDowell should not be interpreted as accepting what *I* call the silencing view.[[22]](#footnote-23) Rather, she claims that he accepts a more moderate view of virtue that does not face the “inappropriate ideal” objection—a view that allows that the virtuous person can “mourn or feel frustration” about having to forgo options that conflict with virtue (2019: 237). In allowing that virtue can have a cost and the virtuous person can justifiably feel negative emotions in response to that cost, the view moves toward a more appropriate ethical ideal for humans. However, in trying to maintain a clear distinction between virtue and self-control, it ends up endorsing elements of the silencing view that *preclude* that more moderate view of virtue. That is,the view that Vigani attributes to McDowell appears to avoid the “inappropriate ideal” objection, while maintaining a clear distinction between virtue and self-control, only because it endorses logically incompatible claims.

The crucial part of Vigani’s argument is her assertion that McDowell’s “claim that something forgone for the sake of virtue cannot constitute a genuine loss for the virtuous” is not “as stark as his language and his critics sometimes suggest” (2019: 235). Rather, in her view this claim is compatible with the forgone option constituting a loss in a more “general” sense (2019: 235, 236). She argues that, on McDowell’s view, although the virtuous person cannot have or acknowledge a reason to *act* contrary to virtue, she can acknowledge the sacrifice of forgone options “in other ways” (2019: 237). In particular, according to Vigani’s interpretation of McDowell, the virtuous person can (and perhaps should) “mourn or feel frustration” about having to forgo an option that conflicts with virtue, but this negative emotional reaction “does not constitute a reason for the virtuous [person] to act contrary [to virtue]” and “is not evidence that the [virtuous person] acknowledges a reason to act otherwise than he did” (2019: 237). The loss (in the general sense), and the negative emotions it justifiably engenders, are not “something to be avoided” and thus are not reasons to act other than virtuously. That is, “[c]onsiderations [that are contrary to virtue] are silenced [only] *in one’s practical reasoning*” (2019: 236, italics in original).

This attempt to show that McDowell’s view avoids the “inappropriate ideal” objection crucially depends on Vigani’s claim that the phenomenon of silencing is “quite narrow in scope” (2019: 236).[[23]](#footnote-24) Importantly, she claims that silencing occurs only with respect to a narrow “McDowellian sense” or “employment” of the term “loss,” which the virtuous person (and only the virtuous person) uses in her practical reasoning about what to do and which the virtuous person takes to be only what is contrary to the “fine or noble” (2019: 235-7). McDowell claims that this special sense or “employment” of the term “loss” is “derivative” from the “typical notions of ‘prudential’ reasoning,” according to which a loss or harm is, by definition, something that one has reason to avoid (1980: 16-7; 1978: 92). Now, Aristotle distinguishes between three “dimensions of worthwhileness” (or objects of pursuit): the fine or noble (*kalon*), the expedient, and the pleasant (*NE* 1104b30; McDowell 1998b: 41-43). According to Vigani, McDowell “insists” that “the concept of *eudaimonia*—the ancient Greek notion of happiness or flourishing—marks out just one of those dimensions” (2019: 235). The virtuous person (and only the virtuous person) understands that the fine or noble “reigns supreme” (2019: 235); she recognizes it as the dimension of “worthwhileness, *par excellence*” (McDowell 1998b: 42-3). When reasoning about what to do, the virtuous person recognizes that *only* the fine or noble really matters. Hence, the virtuous person does not have a reason to avoid virtuous actions that are also inexpedient or unpleasant. Thus, those actions don’t count, for her, as a loss at all (at least in the special sense that is available only to those who adopt the virtuous person’s attitude toward the fine or noble). All of this is part of the silencing view, as defined above. However, according to Vigani, this is compatible with some virtuous actions (e.g., those that are also inexpedient or unpleasant) resulting in a loss in a more general sense, which makes the virtuous person’s life “less desirable along one dimension of worthwhileness” and warrants feeling sad or frustrated (2019: 236-7).

In order to avoid the “inappropriate ideal” objection, while preserving the above elements of the silencing view (and thus maintaining a clear distinction between virtue and self-control), Vigani must show that McDowell’s claim that “something forgone for the sake of virtue cannot constitute a genuine loss for the virtuous” person is compatible with the forgone option being a loss in a more “general” sense, which warrants a negative emotional reaction (2019: 235, 236). The key to Vigani’s argument is her assertion that, when McDowell makes the first of these claims he is concerned *only* with “the special McDowellian sense of [something] to-be-avoided” (2019: 237). That is, Vigani relies on the claim that, if a loss is “genuine,” then it is incurred with respect to this “special McDowellian sense” of loss. So, the virtuous person understands that *only* losses along the dimension of the fine or noble, which is marked out by eudaimonia, are genuine. But this implies that the other *apparent* “dimensions of worthwhileness” (the pleasant and the expedient) are *merely apparent* (at least in situations in which they must be forgone to act virtuously); they are not genuine dimensions of worthwhileness at all (in the given situation). Thus, Vigani cannot consistently say that the life of a virtuous person who seems to sacrifice something valuable for the sake of virtue *is* “now less desirable along one dimension of worthwhileness” (2019: 237).[[24]](#footnote-25) Rather, she can consistently say only that the virtuous person’s life is merely *apparently* (not genuinely) “less desirable along one dimension of worthwhileness.”

Thus, the view that Vigani attributes to McDowell cannot consistently accommodate the idea that virtue can have a *genuine* cost; it is consistent only with the idea that virtue can *seem* to have a cost, which turns out to be illusory. And, if the apparent cost is merely illusory, then there is no real reason to “mourn or feel frustration” about it; these emotions might be understandable (or excusable), but they are unwarranted or unreasonable. So, for example, the husband in Baron’s example cannot reasonably mourn or feel frustration about his (having to allow his) wife’s suffering; this is merely an apparent cost, not a genuine one, so it does not warrant sadness or frustration.

Thus, the view that Vigani attributes to McDowell is inconsistent. What is forgone for the sake of virtue cannot be both genuinely valuable and not genuinely valuable, and the virtuous person cannot both recognize that the forgone option is valuable and recognize that the forgone option is not valuable. However, Vigani’s interpretation of McDowell requires *each* claim in these pairs.[[25]](#footnote-26) On one hand, the view needs the forgone option to be genuinely valuable to accommodate the idea that virtue can have a genuine cost—e.g., that, in Baron’s example, the wife’s pain (and the husband’s subsequent negative feelings about it) make his life “less desirable along certain dimensions of worthwhileness, though not the dimension that matters most” (Vigani 2019: 237). McDowell’s view can be less “stark” than his critics allege only if the virtuous person can (in some cases) *justifiably* feel negative emotions as a result of acting virtuously, and these emotions will be justified only if they are felt in response to a genuine loss. To allow that the virtuous person can recognize that something of genuine value must sometimes be forgone for the sake of virtue, the view that Vigani attributes to McDowell must reject *evaluative assessment silencing*.

On the other hand, the view needs the forgone options *not* to be genuinely valuable to accommodate the core components of the silencing view and thus maintain a clear distinction between virtue and self-control. That is, the view needs the claim that only losses in the “special McDowellian sense” (involved in reasoning about what to do) are *genuine* and that all other considerations are silenced—e.g., that, in Baron’s example, the virtuous husband will be focused only on the fact that the stranger will die without his help and that “*nothing* else about the situation … matters” (Vigani 2019: 232, italics added). To maintain a clear distinction between virtue and self-control, the view that Vigani attributes to McDowell accepts *evaluative assessment silencing*. Otherwise, according to McDowell, if one claimed that the virtuous person recognizes value in the contrary-to-virtue option, this would imply that the virtuous person “feels an inclination” to pursue that option, just as the self-controlled person does (1979: 55).

In short, the view that Vigani attributes to McDowell needs the forgone option to be valuable so that (as she claims) it does *not* entail that that option “would not matter at all” to the virtuous person (2019: 237), but it needs the forgone option *not* to be valuable so that that option is silenced and the virtuous person recognizes that the fine or noble “is all that they *should* take as important” (2019: 232, italics in original). However, the view cannot consistently have things both ways.[[26]](#footnote-27)

***4. Internalism, Psychological Conflict, and the Distinction between Virtue and Self-control***

One response to the inconsistency discussed in the previous section is to claim that Vigani’s mistake was not fully abandoning *evaluative assessment silencing.* That is, one could claim that accepting *motivating reasons silencing* is compatible with denying *evaluative assessment silencing* (as well as denying, at least the emotional component of, *normative reasons silencing*)and claim that *motivating reasons silencing* alone is sufficient to maintain a clear distinction between virtue and self-control. Baxley (2001) and Stark (2007) have argued for versions of this kind of view, and they have correctly noted that it requires rejecting (some form of) internalism (as I discuss in more detail below). In fact, they both think that accepting a form of internalism is McDowell’s crucial mistake. (Stark claims that McDowell’s “most fundamental error” is that he accepts (what Stark calls) “reasons internalism” (2001: 454 n.18), the claim that: “it is a conceptual truth that evaluative considerations generate reasons for action” (2001: 452; see also 447). Baxley claims that McDowell’s basic mistake is that he denies the “key claim that one can see the attraction of competing options without having a desire to pursue them” (2007: 418).) Thus, Stark and Baxley suggest that accepting some form of internalism is the *only* obstacle to maintaining a clear distinction between virtue and self-control (i.e., endorsing *motivating reasons silencing*) while also adopting a model of virtue that is appropriate for humans (i.e., rejecting (at least the emotional component of) *normative reasons silencing* and *evaluative assessment silencing*). In this section, I argue that this is not the case. Even if internalism is false, there is overwhelming evidence for a strong contingent connection (in humans) between emotional (or accompanying judgmental) conflict and motivational conflict. So, once we grant that the virtuous person can justifiably feel emotional conflict, the only way to block the threat of motivational conflict is to fall back (inconsistently) into the silencing view.

***4.1. Even if Internalism is False, there is a Contingent Connection in Humans between Emotional Conflict and Motivational Conflict***

Stark thinks that McDowell is unable to draw a clear, humanly appropriate distinction between virtue and self-control because he accepts:

*Reasons internalism*Stark: necessarily, if a consideration C justifies or requires anything (e.g., having a certain emotion or acting in a certain way) for individual A, then C would motivate A to *act* in a certain way if A were a phronimos (i.e., perfectly virtuous and practically rational).[[27]](#footnote-28)

If *reasons internalism*Stark were true, then the virtuous person’s *lack* of motivation to pursue some forgone option φ (as required by *motivating reasons silencing*) would entail that there are no normative reasons in favor of φ, e.g., there would be no normative reason to mourn forgoing φ. That is, if *reasons internalism*Stark were true, then *motivating reasons silencing* would entail *normative reasons silencing.* However, if *reasons internalism*Stark is false (as Stark claims), then we can avoid this implication and consistently accept *motivating reasons silencing* while denying *normative reasons silencing*.

Baxley focuses on a different kind of internalism. Recall that McDowell suggests that “weighing” a reason in favor of a course of action amounts to allowing oneself to feel an inclination toward performing that action (1979: 55). Baxley notes that this amounts to:

*Judgment internalism*: necessarily, if an individual sincerely judges or recognizes that she has a reason to φ, then she has some motivation to φ.[[28]](#footnote-29)

If *judgment internalism* were true, then the virtuous person’s *lack* of motivation to pursue some forgone option (as required by *motivating reasons silencing*) would entail that she would not recognize or judge that there is a reason to pursue it (and thus would not judge that the forgone option is genuinely valuable). That is, if *judgment internalism* were true, then *motivating reasons silencing* would entail *evaluative assessment silencing*. However, if *judgment internalism* is false (as Baxley claims), then we can avoid this implication and consistently accept *motivating reasons silencing* while denying *evaluative assessment silencing*.

So, Stark and Baxley both reject the silencing view and instead allow that the virtuous person “may [justifiably] feel pain and regret about the prospective loss of foregone options that the life of virtue entails, when acting virtuously involves giving up something that she would – or should – otherwise choose” (Baxley 2007: 417). They both claim, that in some situations, options that are forgone for the sake of virtue are genuinely valuable, so forgoing them is a genuine loss, and the forgone value “generates” normative and motivating reasons to feel pain, sadness, or regret (Stark 2001: 449-52).[[29]](#footnote-30) So, they each reject (at least the emotional component of) *normative reasons silencing* since they claim that there are sometimes normative reasons for the virtuous person to feel emotions that conflict with what virtue requires.[[30]](#footnote-31) These normative reasons are provided (or constituted) by the valuable, forgone options that are precluded by virtue. Further, since both Stark and Baxley claim that the virtuous person can (and perhaps should) recognize that the forgone options are genuine valuable, they both reject *evaluative assessment silencing*.

However, both Stark and Baxley claim that the virtuous person’s having normative and motivating reasons for an emotion does not imply that the virtuous person has any motivating reason to *act* contrary to virtue. For example, applying their view to Baron’s example above, they would say that the virtuous husband has no motivating reason to help his wife first even though he does have normative and motivating reasons to feel anger, pain, sadness, or regret at the prospect of not helping her first. That is, they claim that *motivating reasons silencing* is still true and that the virtuous person’s motivational harmony still clearly distinguishes her from self-controlled individuals.

Stark and Baxley are right that denying *reasons internalism*Stark and *judgment internalism* is necessary to allow the virtuous person to have emotional conflict and judgmental conflict (respectively) (and thus adopt a humanly appropriate account of virtue) while still maintaining the virtuous person’s distinctive motivational harmony (and thus maintain a clear distinction between virtue and self-control). However, I’ll now argue that denying these forms of internalism is not sufficient to defend such a view. That is, these forms of internalism are *one* reason to think that emotional conflict and judgmental conflict (respectively) lead to motivational conflict, but they are not the *only* reason.[[31]](#footnote-32)

Suppose that *reasons internalism*Stark is false and there is no necessary (or conceptual) connection between normative reasons in general (what Stark calls “evaluative-ness”) and motivating reasons for action, and suppose that *judgment internalism* is false and there is no necessary connection between sincerely judging or recognizing a reason to φ and being motivated to φ. I think that there is still good reason to believe that the virtuous person’s emotional conflict will lead to motivational conflict. This is because we have good evidence for a strong *contingent* (or at least non-conceptual) connection between negative affective/emotional states (that accurately reflect some normative reasons and accompany, or result from, judgments that recognize those reasons) and motivation to counteract, remove, or avoid the external causes of those affective/emotional states. Further, having this contingent connection between emotional conflict and motivational conflict is at least consistent with being virtuous. So, the virtuous person’s being affectively/emotionally “mixed” (as Stark and Baxley claim she will be in some situations (Stark 2001: 452; Baxley 2007: 415-6) will very likely result in her having motivational conflict, just like the self-controlled person. So, if virtuous people can be emotionally conflicted, then *motivating reasons silencing* is false, and motivational harmony does not clearly distinguish virtue from self-control. There can now be at most a difference in degree between virtue and self-control, concerning how often assessment-desire conflictoccurs (or how strong it is, or in the variety of kinds of situation in which it occurs).

Decades of empirical research provides overwhelming evidence for a strong contingent (or at least non-conceptual) connection between negative affective/emotional states and motivating reasons for actions that counteract or remove the external causes of those states. (For reviews see LeDoux 2000; Wiech and Tracy 2013; Lerner et al. 2015.)So, for example, the anger or frustration that the husband in Baron’s example feels in response to his wife’s anticipated suffering (and his having to allow that suffering) is very likely to motivate him to take action to decrease or prevent her suffering—i.e., to immediately help her.[[32]](#footnote-33)

Now, a defender of Stark and Baxley might grant the descriptive point that humans’ negative affective/emotional states are *likely* to motivate actions that counteract or remove the external causes of those affective/emotional states but argue for the normative point that such motivation is not ethically virtuous *when removing the external causes of these emotional states conflicts with virtue*. According to this response, having this contingent connection between emotional conflict and motivational conflict may be *typical* of most ordinary humans, but it cannot be a feature of *virtuous* humans.

I’ll now argue that this response is ineffective. There is good reason to believe that having this contingent (or non-conceptual) connection between emotional conflict and motivational conflict is consistent with a distinctively human kind of virtue. For, even McDowell grants that the virtuous person will have normative and motivating reasons to pursue the forgone options when they do *not* conflict with virtue (1980: 18; 1979: 56; 1978: 91-2). For example, a good spouse will desire to immediately help their partner (when they are hurt) if they can do so in a way that is consistent with the requirements of virtue. Having this motivation to immediately help is part of having the kind of affective and motivational capacities and attitudes that contribute to being a good, loving spouse. These capacities and attitudes reflect a spouse’s concern and care for their partner and contribute to their having a flourishing, long-term, committed relationship with each other. As such, having these affective and motivational capacities and attitudes contributes to the well-being of both partners. We would rightly think less of a husband who did not feel sad, angry, or frustrated if some *nonmoral* obstacle prevented him from immediately helping his spouse (when they were hurt) and if those negative emotional reactions did not *also* result in his *desiring* to immediately help them (i.e., to remove the obstacle) in that situation.

However, if these emotional reactions (with their contingent, non-conceptual connection to motivating reasons for action) are to contribute to the couple’s flourishing in cases in which immediately helping *is* compatible with virtue, they cannot simply or immediately be “switched off” in cases in which immediately helping *conflicts* with what virtue demands.[[33]](#footnote-34) So, if (as Stark and Baxley allow), a virtuous husband in Baron’s example can feel anger or frustration at the prospect of his wife’s suffering (and his having to allow it), then virtue is *also* compatible with these negative emotions (contingently) resulting in his being *motivated* to immediately help her (even if he does not *act* on this desire, as virtue requires). But now, on Stark’s and Baxley’s accounts, there is at most a difference in degree between virtue and self-control (e.g., in how strong this desire to immediately help is or in how easy it is to resist).

***4.2. The Instability in Rejecting the Silencing View but Maintaining a Clear Distinction between Virtue and Self-control***

I think that Stark is right that McDowell’s view is mistaken because it relies on a false “tacit assumption”: “that virtue is a fundamentally action-centered notion” (2001: 446, 452).My discussion of Vigani in Section 3 clarifies the nature of this tacit assumption and *why* it is mistaken (if indeed it is). For, that tacit assumption implies(1) that the “special McDowellian sense” of loss, what we have reason to avoid, is connected *only* to action and reasons for action, and not to emotions or reasons for emotions, (2) that this is the only *genuine* kind of loss, and (3) that *eudaimonia* (human flourishing—*the* good for humans) “marks out” *only* the fine or noble and not the expedient or pleasant. Thus, the silencing view fails to accurately capture the roles that emotions, reasons for emotions, and recognition of conflicting values have in a virtuous human life. Attempts (like Vigani’s) to defend a view of virtue that maintains (1)-(3) while also being less “stark” or “austere” (and thus offering an appropriate ethical ideal for humans) are bound to fail because they are pulled in two, incompatible, directions, as I argued above.

However, I have argued that Stark is wrong to claim that McDowell fails to draw a clear, yet humanly appropriate, account of virtue *solely* because he accepts (what she calls) reasons internalism. Similarly, Baxley is wrong to claim that his failure is based solely on his (supposed) acceptance of judgment internalism. Rejecting these forms of internalism does not, by itself, open a path for a clear, humanly appropriate distinction between virtue and self-control. For, even if there is no necessary (or conceptual) connection between emotional (or accompanying judgmental) conflict and motivational conflict, there is a strong contingent (or at least non-conceptual) connection between these kinds of conflict in beings like us. Once we allow that virtuous individuals can recognize, and justifiably experience negative emotions in response to, the costs of virtue, there is no principled reason why they cannot experience motivational conflict, as well. So, views that reject the silencing view while maintaining a clear distinction between virtue and self-control are inherently unstable: allowing virtuous individuals to recognize (and mourn the loss of) the value of contrary-to-virtue options removes the only reason to think that motivational harmony clearly distinguishes virtue from self-control.

We can see this more clearly by examining a tension in Baxley’s discussion. Again, she grants, contra *evaluative assessment silencing*, that the virtuous person can “recognize” or “see” the value in options that are forgone for the sake of virtue. For instance, she claims that a temperate person can “see” a third “perfectly cold, dry martini” (which she judges she should not drink) “as in some sense good,” in that it “still appears delicious” (Baxley 2007: 418). On Baxley’s account, these appearances of value must be veridical if forgoing the martini is to be a genuine cost of acting temperately. Now, if *judgment internalism* is false, then the temperate person’s recognition of this value-that-conflicts-with-virtue does not *imply* that she is motivated to drink the martini. However, the empirical evidence discussed above also supports a strong contingent (or at least non-conceptual) connection in humans between sincere judgments that something is delicious and a desire to consume it.[[34]](#footnote-35) In the face of this contingent connection, the only way to guarantee that the temperate person exhibits motivational harmony (and is thus a different kind of person than the merely self-controlled) is to slip back, inconsistently, as Baxley does, into the silencing view: to claim that the virtuous person “does not experience [motivational] conflict and temptation [despite her judgmental and emotional conflict] because … she *knows* that ultimately there is *no* pleasure [or value, in general] to be found in acting in contrary to virtue ways” (Baxley 2007: 419, italics added).[[35]](#footnote-36) But, if there really is no pleasure or value in acting in those ways, then there is no genuine cost of *not* doing so, which contradicts Baxley’s (meritorious) attempt above to avoid the inappropriate ideal provided by the silencing view.[[36]](#footnote-37) (Another problem here is that if the virtuous person *knows* that there is no pleasure to be found in drinking the martini but still *sees* it as in some sense good (“registers” its value), then her perception of the situation is *not* accurate after all, which is inconsistent with her being virtuous.) The fact that Baxley herself falls back into the silencing view to explain the virtuous person’s supposedly distinctive motivational harmony (in the face of the virtuous person’s emotional conflict) illustrates the instability in the view she is trying to defend.

***5. Conclusion***

I have argued that, even if McDowell is wrong to endorse the silencing view, he is right to claim that the silencing view is required for any clear distinction between virtue and self-control. Once we allow that virtue does not “silence” reasons in favor of conflicting options, motivational harmony cannot be used to clearly distinguish virtue from self-control. Perhaps there is another feature that clearly distinguishes virtue from self-control, but, if so, the burden is on defenders of a clear distinction between these traits to tell us what it is.

Another option would be to insist that virtue is “legitimately distinguished” from self-control but claim that Aristotle was wrong to draw the line between them at *perfect* assessment-desire conformity (Mele 2016: 171). This would be to claim that virtuous individuals are “characterized by a remarkable but imperfect conformity of their … desires to their relevant evaluative judgments,” while self-controlled individuals are subject to assessment-desire conflict “significantly more often” (Mele 2016: 170).

By allowing that virtuous individuals may have cognitive and motivational conflict, this view makes the distinction between virtue and self-control more psychologically realistic. However, it calls into doubt the traditional idea that the difference between virtue and self-control is a clear distinction between two “fundamental psychic structures” since it allows for borderline cases that are indeterminate between virtue and self-control.[[37]](#footnote-38) Geoffrey Scarre defends this kind of view when he suggests that “rather than seeking to identify a sharp categorical difference between virtue and [self-control], we should see the contrast, rather, as one of degree, where virtue is [self-control] that has matured with practice and habit” (2013: 3). I suspect that this kind of view must depart more radically from a traditional, Aristotelian account than it may at first seem. Arguing for this in detail is a topic for another paper, but, very briefly, without a clear difference in motivational conflict to rely on, there is even less reason to think that virtue is distinguished from self-control in other traditional ways, e.g., by being “more stable, effective or self-aware” (Scarre 2013: 3) or by the supposed fact that only virtuous (but not self-controlled) individuals have a firm disposition to always act as they judge best (Baxley 2007: 417, 419).[[38]](#footnote-39)

If there is no way to draw a clear distinction between virtue and self-control while also providing an ethical ideal that is appropriate for humans, then philosophers who are interested in the capacities that allow actual humans to intelligently and effectively manage their desires should stop trying to map those capacities onto a clear, but humanly inappropriate, distinction between virtue and self-control. Instead, they should be open to the possibility that human excellence with respect to these capacities may not be accurately captured by either side of that distinction.

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1. According to Aristotle, temperance concerns only desires for “pleasures of touch,” ones that he claims we share with other animals and that are often called “appetitive” pleasures, like (some aspects of) the pleasures of food, drink, and sex. See Young (1988: 525-8). On Aristotle’s view, self-control also has a limited scope and is concerned, in the first instance, only with the pleasures of touch (*Nichomachean Ethics*: 1149a20-25; 1149b25-28). That is, self-control contrasts only with temperance and not with virtue more broadly. Contemporary virtue ethicists (such as John McDowell (1979: 55-6) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1999: 92), to name just two) tend to take self-control to have a broader range of application, so that self-control contrasts not merely with temperance but with other virtues as well (e.g., courage for McDowell and virtue in general for Hursthouse). Other contemporary work on self-control (taking it to be primarily a topic in philosophy of action, rather than ethical theory) also adopts a broad conception of self-control, e.g., as a capacity that “can be exhibited in the mastery of any sort of motivation that competes for the determination of behavior with the agent’s better judgment” (Mele 2016: 170). I adopt the contemporary “broad scope” understanding of self-control in this paper, but I don’t think that my arguments essentially depend on this.Even if self-control is narrow and properly contrasts only with temperance, we still have good reason to doubt whether a clear, qualitative distinction between temperance and self-control can be drawn if we reject the silencing view. (In this way, my argument differs from Karen Stohr’s critique of the traditional distinction between self-control and virtue, which targets only the “broad scope” interpretation (2003: 342). For more on the question of whether self-control should be understood narrowly or broadly, see Gould (1994: 177, and the references therein) and Baxley (2007: 421 n.17).) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. I follow Al Mele in using the term ‘desire’ to pick out a “generic, motivation-constituting attitude” (2016: 173). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Aristotle apparently claims that both temperance and self-control are mature, stable character traits—distinct “ingrained” and “deeply rooted” dispositions to act, perceive, and feel in certain ways (Gould 1994: 176). On this view, the trait of being self-controlled is not merely a “temporary condition” or a developmental stage that one passes through on the way to temperance (Gould 1994: 176). McDowell, by contrast, suggests that we should think of self-control as a “stage of moral development” on the way to acquiring virtue (1998b: 48-9). I am neutral on this issue in this paper; both views agree that there is a clear distinction between the traits of self-control and temperance (or virtue in general). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See also Gould, who claims that Aristotle’s distinction between temperate and self-controlled individuals is “of great philosophical moment” (1994: 186). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Hardie claims that Aristotle “does not formulate and face the problem” of which trait is better because he simply “takes it for granted” that self-control is “a second best to ‘temperance’ or virtue: it is better not to have bad or excessive desires” (1968: 139). However, Hardie praises Aristotle for bringing “the problem into the light” (1968: 139). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See, e.g., Stark, who claims that without the notion of “the unity in the virtuous person’s motivation and perception … it is difficult to explain why virtue represents a higher level of moral goodness than mere [self-control]” (2001: 446). See also Scarre 2013: 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. I often use the phrase ‘clear distinction’ as a shorthand for a clear or sharp qualitative difference (a difference in kind) between virtue and self-control. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. I use the phrase “motivational harmony” interchangeably with “assessment-desire conformity.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Page numbers are for the reprinted versions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. In fact, I think that it is *exactly* half right; I agree that the silencing view is false because it provides inappropriate ideal for humans. However, in this paper, I do not provide any additional argument for this beyond what is already in the literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. McDowell is most explicit about this when he claims that the courageous person will have a “sort of serenity” that is based on her belief (which, according to the silencing view is true) that “no harm can come to one by acting [in accordance with virtue]” (1978: 92). He notes, though, that this belief is “paradoxical in juxtaposition” with the virtuous person’s “normal valuation of life and health” (1978: 92). In effect, I return to this paradox below when I argue that the view that Vigani attributes to McDowell is inconsistent. See also note 24 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. *Normative reasons silencing* and *evaluative assessment silencing* roughly correspond to the two interpretations of silencing that Baxley identifies, where the first interpretation concerns “normative issues about what is true about [an individual’s] (objective) reasons” and the second interpretation is “an epistemic or motivational thesis about how the virtuous person should think or feel about her options.” Her second interpretation is compatible with a virtuous person having “a (weak) [normative] reason not to [act virtuously]” that nevertheless she “should not entertain or be moved [by]” (2007: 405-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. For a general argument against idealization in virtue ethics see Curzer 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. McDowell comes close to making this concession when he claims that “the best we *usually* encounter is [virtue] tainted with [self-control]” (1978: 92, italics added). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Accordingly, one way of stating this objection is that the silencing view provides us with an account of (the Aristotelian trait of) *divine* or *heroic* excellence, which is distinct from *human* virtue, and inconsistent with human capacities (Baxley 2007: 410-11; see also Scarre 2013: 14 n.23, 15). A closely related way of stating this objection is that the silencing view results in a view of virtue that is “detached, unfeeling, or unpalatably stoic” (Vigani 2019: 230). For similar comments to the effect that the silencing view results in a picture of virtue that is overly “harsh” or “cold,” see, e.g., Hursthouse 1999: 182 and Scarre 2013: 14-15. Finally, Howard Curzer (2012) remarks about (what he calls) the “emotional correlate of McDowell’s silencing view” that: “There is nothing admirable about not fearing the fearful, just as there is nothing admirable about not desiring the desirable. Both fearlessness and asceticism are impressive in their way, but not praiseworthy. Indeed, both raise the suspicion of mental illness” (p. 56). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. As McDowell writes: “no payoff from flouting a requirement of excellence … can count as a genuine advantage; and, conversely, no sacrifice necessitated by the life of excellence … can count as a genuine loss” (1980: 17; see also McDowell 1978: 91-92). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Similarly, Slote (1983) argues for the claim that forgoing pleasure, wealth, and power is a genuine loss even when they could be obtained only through unjust means. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Baxley claims that considerations in favor of options that conflict with virtue also provide (normative) reasons for action (as well as (normative) reasons for feeling certain ways). For example, she thinks that considerations about his career provide the loyal son with a “reason for accepting the new job” (2007: 415). She thinks that, for the virtuous person, these considerations are outweighed, not silenced, by the considerations in favor of acting virtuously. So, Baxley rejects both the action *and* emotion components of *normative reasons silencing*, whereas Stark, as we’ll see below (see note 30), rejects only the emotional component of *normative reasons silencing*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. This is a variant of the case that Bernard Williams (1976: 213-15) uses to raise the so-called “one thought too many” objection to impartial moral theories. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Baxley suggests that (clear) requirements of virtue silence only *nonmoral* considerations(2007: 405, 408, 414-6, 422 n.23) and cites McDowell’s “caveat” as evidence that he accepts this (1978: 93). If Baxley is right, then Baron’s example may need to be modified to make it clear that the husband has “nonmoral” (e.g., prudential but non-vicious) reasons for first helping his wife. However, I’m not certain that Baxley correctly interprets McDowell’s caveat. He writes that his “position is not that clear perception of any moral reason, however weak, silences any reasons of other sorts, however strong. The reasons that silence are those that mark out actions as required by virtue” (1978: 93). I take this to claim that moral reasons that “mark out actions as required by virtue” silence *all* other considerations, even weaker, competing moral considerations. So, when McDowell goes on to claim that “there can be less exigent moral reasons [that] may be overridden,” he is claiming that these “less exigent” moral reasons can be overridden by nonmoral or moral reasons when and only when there is no clear requirement of virtue. He is not claiming that moral reasons that mark out a clear requirement of virtue override (as opposed to silencing) weaker, competing moral reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Baron makes a stronger claim: that the morally superior trait in this case requires that the man “act contrary to [his] felt *inclination*” to first assist his wife (1988: 41, italics added). In her view, “[i]t is not the case that he ideally should, without any reflection or *without experiencing any conflict of desires*, feel like acting as he should” (1988: 41, italics added, underlining in original). I do not rely on this claim in this paper, however, since it amounts to claiming that self-control, rather than virtue, is ethically optimal in this situation. In other work [redacted], I have used the distinction between occurrent and standing desires to argue that Baron’s case actually supports the view that a trait distinct from both self-control and virtue is ethically optimal in this kind of situation. In Section 4 below, I argue only for the conditional claim that *if* emotional conflict is compatible with virtue in this case, then motivational conflict is compatible with virtue, too. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. I am not interested in what really deserves to be called the “silencing view.” If defenders of Vigani (and McDowell) want to argue that the view she defends is really the silencing view, I am fine with using another label to pick out the view I present in Section 1. The important point is that this view (whatever it is called) is distinct from the view that Vigani attributes to McDowell. I argue that the view Vigani attributes to McDowell is inconsistent. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Vigani claims that silencing is narrow in scope in two ways. I discuss only the second way in the main text. The first way in which Vigani claims that silencing is narrow in scope is that considerations in favor of contrary-to-virtue options are silenced (for the virtuous person) only “where there is a clear requirement of virtue” (2019: 234). However, if the discussion of Baxley’s and Baron’s examples above is correct, then this narrowing of scope does nothing to blunt or sidestep the force of the “inappropriate ideal” objection since those are cases in which considerations in favor of contrary-to-virtue options are *not* silenced *even though there is a single, clear requirement of virtue*. There still may be room for debate about whether those cases really show this (which I will not enter in this paper), but Vigani’s pointing out that acting virtuously is compatible with contrary-to-virtue considerations not being silenced in a *different* kind of case (when there is *no* clear requirement of virtue), does nothing to resolve that debate. Finally, Vigani has another (independent) main line of thought: that “subjective construal” provides a plausible model for silencing as a psychological phenomenon (2019: 238-242). I grant that this goes a long way toward responding to critics who have claimed that McDowell does not provide a “sufficiently clear analysis” of silencing (e.g., Scarre 2013: 14). But, as Vigani recognizes, this alone is not sufficient for a full defense of McDowell’s view. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Similarly, since McDowell claims that, in “circumstances in which the missed pleasure would involve flouting a requirement of excellence,” “missing the pleasure is no loss at all” (1980: 17), he cannot *also* consistently say that the “upshot [of forgoing the contrary-to-virtue option] is a life that *is* less desirable along other dimensions [e.g., the pleasant]” (1998b: 43, italics added), even if the latter claim is made in terms of a “more ordinary employment” of the prudential concept of ‘loss’ (1980: 18)). That is, even granting to McDowell that the “dimensions of practical worthwhileness” are incommensurable with one another (1998b: 41) and that the virtuous person’s special, “derivative employment” of ‘loss’ occurs “side by side” with “a more ordinary employment” (1980: 18), we still face two questions: (i) whether the dimensions of worthwhileness other than the fine or noble (i.e., the expedient and the pleasant) are *genuine* dimensions of worthwhileness and (ii) whether the “more ordinary” employment is a *genuine* notion of loss. McDowell cannot have things both ways with respect to these questions (as Vigani would have him do and as the first two passages quoted in this note apparently require). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Vigani slips between these two claims in her discussion of Aristotle’s “dimensions of worthwhileness.” On one hand, she writes that the virtuous person is concerned “*first and foremost* with the fine or noble, which is why that dimension of worthwhileness reigns supreme” (2019: 235, italics added). This is compatible with the expedient and the pleasant being genuinely valuable (even if neither is the dimension of value that, as she says, “matters most” (2019: 237). On the other hand, she claims that, on McDowell’s view, eudaimonia (or *the* good for humans) “marks out *just one*” of the three dimensions of worthwhileness—only the fine or the noble, not the expedient or the pleasant, reallymatters (2019: 235, italics added). This is inconsistent with the expedient and the pleasant being genuinely valuable (although they could merely *appear* to be so). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Another way to state the inconsistency in this view is to note that it slips between two mutually incompatible claims: (i) that losing one’s nobility is the most serious harm that can befall the virtuous person, even though she can be harmed in other ways and (ii) that the *only* way that the virtuous person can be harmed is to fail to act nobly (cf. Stark 2001: 447). Note also that, even setting aside the inconsistencies in Vigani’s response, it is not a complete defense of the view she attributes to McDowell. In order to show that this view presents a “decidedly human” picture of virtue—an account of virtue that ordinary humans can recognize as an ideal toward which they can and should strive—it is not enough to merely *identify* a “special McDowellian sense” of ‘loss’ (and ‘harm,’ ‘benefit,’ etc.). We need to be convinced that this “special sense” is one that we should (at least try to) adopt. However, Vigani explicitly does not attempt to do this (2019: 236). By declining to do so, she does not fully respond to the “inappropriate ideal” objection but merely restates it (albeit in a particularly revealing way). See Hursthouse (1999: 185) for an argument that virtue ethics need *not* rely on a “special employment of the terms ‘enjoyable’ and ‘satisfying’ that only the virtuous can understand.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. This is not a version of the thesis (or set of theses) that is commonly called “reasons internalism” (see Finlay and Schroeder 2017). Reasons internalism (as commonly understood) does not demand that *all* normative reasons generate motivating reasons for action (as *reasons internalism*Stark claims). Rather, it merely claims that *if* an individual has a normative reason toϕ (whether ϕ is an action, feeling, or whatever), then she has a motivating reason to ϕ (whether ϕ is an action, feeling, or whatever) or would have such a motivating reason if some conditions were met (e.g., if she were perfectly rational). In other words, *reasons internalism*Stark claims that all normative reasons “generate” motivating reasons for action, but reasons internalism (as commonly understood) is compatible with some normative reasons “generating” only motivating reasons for emotion. This point may be obscured by the fact that debates about reasons internalism (as commonly understood) are nearly always carried out with respect to reasons for action (not reasons for emotion). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. I agree that McDowell’s “picture” of weighing reasons commits him to *judgment internalism*. However, elsewhere he makes a claim that seems inconsistent with *judgment internalism*, for he claims that the temperate person “registers” that eating a fifth donut would be pleasant but is “unmoved by” this consideration (1998b: 47). Again, I am officially neutral on how to best interpret McDowell, but I tend to see this as evidence that McDowell does adopt the kind of inconsistent view I discuss in Section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. On Stark’s and Baxley’s views, the negative emotion is warranted or reasonable because it reflects the genuine value that is lost by acting virtuously in the given situation; “the pain or cost is merely an indication that something of value is at stake” (Stark 2001: 449). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Stark’s view claims that virtue requires a stronger form of unity than Baxley’s. For Stark, virtue requires unity among both motivating *and* normative reasons for *action* (but not emotion) (2001: 452). By contrast, Baxley claims that in cases “where the requirements of virtue are set against nonmoral interests and projects of the [virtuous] agent in which she has a stake, we should allow that there can be (objective) reasons [for action] that compete with the requirements of virtue” (2007: 416). See note 18 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Stark claims that negative emotions like fear and sadness “only appear to threaten the motivational unity of virtue when we assume that [what she calls] reasons internalism is true” (2001: 451). In the context of Stark’s argument, she is here claiming that rejecting *reasons internalism*Stark is sufficient to show that the virtuous person’s emotional conflict does not “threaten” their motivational unity. I argue against this below. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. It may be that different negative emotions tend to lead to different kinds of behavior. It is enough for my argument here that emotions, in general, “serve a coordination role, … triggering a set of concomitant responses … that enable the individual to address problems or opportunities quickly” and that emotions have “motivational properties that depend on both an emotion’s intensity and its qualitative character. That is, specific emotions carry specific ‘action tendencies’ … that signal the most adaptive response” (Lerner et al. 2015: 805). Importantly, emotions have these action tendencies as a matter of contingent or non-conceptual fact, grounded in natural, scientific laws or regularities. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. A defender of Stark and Baxley may insist on the Aristotelian point that one’s motivational capacities can be trained over time to conform to one’s rational, evaluative assessments. For example, if a virtuous person regularly finds herself in a kind of situation in which virtue has a genuine cost, perhaps virtue demands that she train her motivational capacities so that the negative emotions she feels in response to this cost do not lead to a desire to act contrary to virtue. I agree that this kind of training or habituation can result in motivational harmony (coupled with emotional conflict), but it would absurd to suggest that virtue requires this in Baron’s example. For, situations like this are (fortunately) so rare in any given individual’s life that it would be “inhuman” (i.e., would disregard the nature of our affective and motivational capacities) to expect the virtuous person to break the strong, contingent link between emotional conflict and motivational conflict in Baron’s “one off” case. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Arguably, this contingent connection is explained by what LeDoux calls “survival circuits,” ancient, evolutionarily conserved brain-pathways that coordinate behavioral interactions with the environment, and include, at least, circuits involved in “defense, maintenance of energy and nutritional supplies, fluid balance, thermoregulation, and reproduction” (2012: 655, 658). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Baxley may respond that by “ultimately” she means that there is no *net* pleasure in acting contrary to virtue—that the balance always tips in favor of virtue. I have two responses. First, it is not clear that virtue always “outweighs” other considerations when we are concerned only with pleasure (instead of a non-hedonistic account of well-being). Second, and more importantly, this interpretation would not help explain why the temperate person had *no conflicting desire at all* (rather than merely why, given that they may *have* a conflicting desire, it is outweighed by a virtue-concordant desire). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Baxley suggests two other reasons why the temperate person does not experience motivational conflict: “because she has a sufficiently steadfast and unwavering commitment to act as she judges best, [and] because her emotions and appetites have been trained to harmonize with right judgment” (2007: 419). However, these reasons abandon a clear, qualitative distinction between temperance and self-control since the self-controlled person will also be committed (to some extent) to acting as she judges best and will have trained her emotions and appetites to harmonize (to some degree) with right judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. One could avoid such borderline cases by imposing a strict cutoff for when one is subject to temptation “significantly more often” and adopting a related, but controversial, “epistemicist” approach to vagueness. Note that Mele characterizes cognitive and motivational conflict as “imperfections” in the virtuous person (2016: 170). So, even though this view arguably calls into doubt the supposed clear distinction between virtue and self-control, it still assumes that conflict is a sign of something-less-than-virtue. Above, I have agreed with suggestions to the contrary: that, e.g., in Baron’s example, at least emotional conflict is compatible with full-blown virtue. In other words, Mele’s view is still subject to the objection that it is more moderate along a dimension (psychological harmony) that *itself* sets an inappropriate standard for human virtue. See the beginning of Section 2 and [redacted] for further discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Even by the lights of a traditional view, a good case can be made that these features do not distinguish temperance from self-control, despite common claims to the contrary. See Gould (1994: 180-1) for a nice discussion of the fact that the self-controlled person “takes pleasure in acting from reason” and “incorporates such a value in his self-conception,” and that self-controlled and temperate people “stand as equals” regarding their *reliability* in acting in accordance with virtue. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)