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Complex Harmony: Rethinking the Virtue-Continence Distinction

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Abstract
In the Aristotelian tradition, the psychological difference between virtue and continence is commonly understood in terms of inner harmony versus inner conflict. Virtuous agents experience inner harmony between feeling and action because they do not care to do other than what their circumstances call for, whereas continent agents feel conflicted about doing what is called for because of competing concerns. Critics of this view argue, however, that when the circumstances require sacrificing something of genuine value, virtuous agents can indeed feel conflicted about acting well. But if this is so, what differentiates virtuous from merely continent agency? This essay argues that the traditional distinction conflates two aspects of virtue as well as two species of continence. And distinguishing between them provides resources for making sense of the complex relationship between inner conflict and good moral agency.

Keywords Virtue · Continence · Inner conflict · Moral agency · Moral psychology

1 Introduction

Virtue theorists in the Aristotelian tradition distinguish virtue, the best moral state, from continence, a good but inferior state. Both virtuous and continent agents are good because both act for the right reasons. But virtuous agents also feel the right way about acting well, while continent agents do not. A common explanation of this difference goes as follows. Practical concerns that compete with the called-for course of action do not matter to virtuous agents, as long as acting on them would be wrong, and so they enjoy a distinctive inner harmony between feeling and action. By contrast, competing concerns cause inner conflict for continent agents, making it difficult for them to act well. Thus, virtue is essentially a state of inner harmony,

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while continence is a state of inner conflict.[1] Critics of this view argue, however, that where acting well requires sacrificing something of genuine value, the best sort of moral agent may indeed feel conflicted about doing what the situation calls for.[2] If so, virtue can be compatible with inner conflict, in at least some cases. But if this is right, then it is no longer clear what distinguishes virtuous from continent agency.

This essay presents a rethinking of how inner conflict factors into the virtue-continence distinction. It remains anchored in the Aristotelian insight that virtuous agents feel as they should about acting well, while continent agents do not. But it grants the objection that, in acting well, a conflicted agent can be as good as, or even better than, an unconflicted one. The project, then, is to make systematic sense of the evidently complex relationship between inner conflict and good moral agency. §2 clarifies what it means to be conflicted about acting well and draws an initial distinction between the mode of inner conflict, on the one hand, and its object, on the other. §3 then argues for a further distinction between two modes of inner conflict, one motivational and the other evaluative. Finally, §4 uses this second distinction to show that there are two independent psychological aspects of virtue which contrast with two independent species of continence. And these final distinctions provide the resources needed to make systematic sense of the complex relationship between inner conflict and good moral agency. A brief conclusion follows.

2 Inner Conflict and Good Moral Agency

Inner conflict, as it pertains to the virtue-continence distinction, is conflict about doing what one's circumstances call for. Such conflict is caused by competing practical concerns, things which the agent values, and for the sake of which she would act under different circumstances.[3] In cases of inner conflict, doing what is called for is therefore inseparable, practically speaking, from forgoing something else one values. Whatever a conflicted agent ends up doing, then, she cannot univocally endorse her own action.[4] She will, at best, endorse her action under one relevant description but not the other. And this lack of wholeheartedness, if nothing else, makes acting well difficult for any conflicted agent.

What inner conflict reveals about moral agency, however, is no simple matter, as the following examples collectively illustrate:

[1] Prominent works that understand the virtue-continence distinction in essentially this way include Foot (1978), McDowell (1978) and McDowell (1979), Trianosky (1988), Annas (1993), Hursthouse (1999), and Russell (2009).

[2] E.g. Stohr (2003), Seidman (2005), and Baxley (2007) all argue that virtuous agents can find acting well difficult under such circumstances (though only Stohr frames her critique explicitly in terms of inner conflict).

[3] Such concerns are not, of course, the only things that pose challenges to acting well. External obstacles as well as some internal ones, such as phobias, can too. But these things do not reflect upon moral agency in the way that the agent's own attachments do.

[4] Trianosky (1988: 4) makes the same point but maintains that only continent agents are conflicted in this way.

Veronica: Veronica is asked to serve on a panel of judges for an art competition in which her daughter, Daria, is a contestant. (Veronica would normally avoid such a conflict of interests, but she is among the only qualified people available.) Veronica knows how much this contest means to Daria, who struggles with self-esteem. Unfortunately, Daria's entry is simply not good enough to warrant a prize. Veronica does the fair thing without hesitation and is in no way tempted to cheat in order to spare her daughter's feelings. Still, she feels conflicted about acting fairly here, since this means harming her own child's sense of self-worth.[5]

Connie: Connie is in the same situation as Veronica, except Connie *is* tempted to cheat in order to spare her daughter's feelings. She too recognizes, however, that this would be wrong, and she ultimately manages to overcome her temptation and do the fair thing.

Consuela: Consuela is in the same position as Veronica and Connie, but she manages to compartmentalize her concern for her child such that she is unaffected by it as long as she serves as a judge. She therefore does the fair thing with no inner conflict whatsoever, despite recognizing that this requires damaging her child's fragile self-esteem.

Connor: Connor is in a committed relationship with his partner, Pavel. The honeymoon period of their relationship, however, has recently been supplanted by the monotony of domestic life, and Connor now finds himself thinking about going to a local nightclub when Pavel is away and pursuing an affair. It is not that he is sexually dissatisfied in his relationship. Rather, the excitement of infidelity itself is what he finds appealing in his current state of ennui. Connor is not, however, moved to do anything about this fantasy, vivid as it is, and he dismisses the whole idea with a twinge of self-approbation. Nonetheless, having to forgo this forbidden thrill makes it difficult for him to be the wholeheartedly committed partner he strives to be.

Conrad: Conrad has promised his best friend, Frances, that he will accompany her to her father's wake, knowing that she will need his support to get through this difficult day. The morning of the wake, however, another friend invites Conrad to go to a baseball game, which is just how he would love to unwind after a stressful week. Still, he does not think twice about following through with his commitment to Frances, though he does find it hard to be attentive and supportive, because he keeps thinking about where he would rather be.

One feature is common to all these cases: all the agents act well, doing the right things and doing them for the right reasons. Though most of them find it hard to do what their respective situations call for, they all end up acting just as they should. Beyond this commonality, however, these cases differ in ways that demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between inner conflict and good moral agency. Apparently, feeling conflicted about acting well does not necessarily count against one's virtue, while a *lack* of such conflict can make one *less* than virtuous. And even

[5] This case is similar to Stohr's (2003) case of a business owner who feels conflicted about firing several beloved employees in order to keep her company afloat in hard economic times. The key difference, the significance of which will become clear in the following section, is the presentation of how the agent conceives of the problematic course of action in each case.

where inner conflict does make one merely continent, it can do so in qualitatively different ways.

To begin sorting things out, the *way in which* one is conflicted can be distinguished, in any given case, from *what* one is conflicted about. That is, the *mode* of inner conflict can be distinguished from its *object*. And either one, on its own, can evidently make the difference between virtue and continence. The parallel cases of Veronica and Connie illustrate how the mode of conflict alone can determine whether one is virtuous or merely continent, while the contrast between Veronica and Connor shows how the object can also, by itself, make all the difference.

Veronica and Connie are conflicted about the same thing: each parent, like any good parent, values the wellbeing of her child and so is loath to do anything that would jeopardize it. What differs, then, is just the way in which each is conflicted: Veronica is not *tempted* or otherwise *moved* to do what is necessary here to promote her child's wellbeing, while Connie is.[6] Connie is tempted to cheat, meaning that the unfair and dishonest course of action is a live option for her in a way that it is not for Veronica. Thus, though both feel conflicted about doing what is called for, only Connie must hold back an errant impulse in order to act well. And so, because Veronica is not conflicted *in this way*, the mode of her inner conflict seems compatible with virtue, whereas Connie's makes her merely continent.

In fact, as the case of Consuela suggests, there is something suspect about a parent who can do what is called for under such circumstances with no inner conflict at all. Consuela employs a coping technique to insulate herself from competing concerns while serving as a judge. And though this is certainly not the worst way for a person to operate, it would seem better, all else being equal, to maintain an appropriate balance of concerns all the way through, and so not to find it quite so easy to do the fair, but damaging, thing. If so, then inner conflict can actually be indicative of virtue rather than continence, under certain circumstances.

In any case, holding constant the object of inner conflict—the concern which tells against doing what is called for—here suggests that the difference between virtue and continence can depend solely on the mode of conflict. Now, if the mode is instead held constant, it becomes apparent that the object might also, by itself, make the difference. Compare Veronica to Connor. While both have concerns that tell against doing what their respective situations call for, neither is moved to do what is necessary to promote those concerns. Thus, the mode of conflict is the same in both cases. Yet the concerns in question are very different. Veronica values her daughter's wellbeing, whereas Connor values the thrill of infidelity. Any good parent would share Veronica's concern. But a partner who shares Connor's is far from ideal.

If this is right, then there are evidently two independent ways in which inner conflict can make an agent less than virtuous. First, if she is tempted or otherwise moved by a competing concern to do other than what her circumstances call for, this mode of conflict makes her merely continent, even if the competing concern

[6] I am supposing here that being tempted is a way of being moved. The phenomenology of temptation, in any case, is commonly described in terms of inner movement, such as being pulled, drawn, or attracted to something.

does not itself reflect poorly on her. And second, if an agent just has a competing concern which she should not have in the first place, then the object of her inner conflict makes her merely continent, even if she is in not moved to act for its sake in the circumstances.[7] Nonetheless, if an agent has a concern which tells against doing what is called for, but which does not reflect poorly on her by itself, and if she is not moved to act on it as long as doing so would be wrong, then she may be virtuous despite feeling conflicted about acting well.

3 Value and Motivation

Again, this last claim is meant to apply to the case of Veronica. Her concern for her daughter's wellbeing tells against judging the art contest fairly, and so she feels conflicted about doing so. But this competing concern is one that any good parent, so situated, would have. And so, because Veronica is not moved to act on it under the circumstances, her inner conflict is compatible with virtue. As it stands, however, this characterization of Veronica is contentious, both descriptively and normatively. Descriptively, it is unclear how she could fail to be moved to protect her child's wellbeing where it is threatened, if she truly values it. And even if she could, it is normatively questionable whether this is the best way for a person to respond to such a situation.

One might instead think that an agent who properly values her child's wellbeing will necessarily be moved to protect it wherever it is threatened; and if she is virtuous, she will be so moved even when the circumstances require doing otherwise. Stohr (2003), for one, develops a view of virtuous agency along these lines.[8] But she clarifies, "Of course, when we consider the action under the description 'doing what is right,' then the virtuous person would experience motivational unity. She certainly has no desire to do what is wrong, under that description" (p. 361). Rather, the virtuous person is moved to competing courses of action only under certain descriptions, on this view. In the case of Veronica, these would be "to judge the contest fairly" and "to protect Daria's self-esteem." If she is indeed virtuous, then, she must value both fairness and her daughter's wellbeing such that she is moved by both concerns under the circumstances and thus experiences motivation conflict.

Before challenging this alternative view of virtuous agency, it will help to begin by defending the merely descriptive claim that agents *can* fail to be moved to act for the sake of things they value when those things are at stake, which some are sure to find dubious as well. On the one hand, it seems there must be a deep conceptual link between evaluation and motivation. But on the other, not being moved to act for the sake of things one values is a familiar feature of practical life, one which has

[7] Aristotle draws a similar distinction with respect to the vice of intemperance: some are intemperate because they have appetites for the same things as temperate people but in the wrong way, while others just have appetites for the wrong things (*NE* 1118b25-27). But he does not extend this insight to continence.

[8] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify how I take my own view to be different from, and preferable to, Stohr's.

not escaped the notice of philosophers. For instance, in an influential essay, Watson (1975) notes that "an agent's evaluative system and motivational system may not completely coincide" (p. 215).[9]

When choosing food off a menu, for instance, one might value various things that direct one to consider various items. One may value one's health, say; but it does not follow from this alone that one will be moved to select a healthy item. Or, put the other way around, the mere fact that one is not moved to select a healthy item does not imply that one does not value one's health. Given the diversity of values at play in such situations—health, pleasure, frugality, and so forth—some concerns often have to be forgone in favor of others. But ordering food typically is not the fraught experience one would expect if every relevant value necessarily exerted motivational force. A health nut need not feel the sting of regret every time she orders dessert, much less the magnetic pull of another helping of raw kale. It is clear from ordinary cases like this, then, that valuation does not simply entail motivation.

Still, valuation must involve at least the potential for motivation. If one would not, under any circumstances, choose to do something for the sake of one's health, then there can be no intelligible sense in which one values one's health.[10] So, let us suppose that valuing something entails, at minimum, being potentially motivated to act for its sake, but not necessarily being motivated to do whatever this requires in any given case. This allows that one may value, say, good food and drink, and thus be moved to acquire and enjoy them in many situations, and yet not be tempted to, say, steal or otherwise act dishonestly in order to do so. If this is plausible, then in at least some cases, concerns that tell against the called-for course of action need not exert motivational force; and if they do not, one can be morally better for it.

General skepticism, then, about both the possibility and the moral goodness of not being moved to act on concerns that tell against acting well is evidently misplaced. Even so, in situations where what is at stake is not so trivial, it is not yet clear that an agent could help but be moved to act for the sake of values which must be sacrificed, or that such a lack of motivation, if possible, would in fact be virtuous. Returning to the case of Veronica, then, it may still seem that she should be moved to protect her daughter from heartbreaking disappointment in the situation at hand. The problem is, under an equally relevant description, this course of action amounts to abusing her authority and giving her child an unfair advantage. Simply put, protecting her daughter requires cheating, which a virtuous agent surely would not be tempted to do.

[9] Watson goes on, "Those systems harmonize to the extent that what determines the agent's all-things-considered judgments also determines his actions" (1975: 215). He later rejected this conception of evaluation as "altogether too rationalistic" (1987: 150). As I employ the notion of valuing in the present essay, however, it need not involve more than being attached to something such that one is generally disposed to promote it. And this comes up short of an all-things-considered judgment about what is worthwhile.

[10] One might *want* to value one's health. But this sort of second-order value is distinct from the first-order value at issue here, and it would be connected to different motives—to educate oneself about the long-term consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle, for instance.

A virtuous agent will no doubt be alive to both of these considerations. And so, she must conceive of the action under both descriptions at once, as a single, unified action which she must either do or avoid. This amounts to no more, and no less, that understanding the situation for what it is. For Veronica, the action in question is therefore "to cheat in order to spare my child's feelings." And conceived of in these terms, where the wrong-making feature is explicitly and inescapably tied to the competing concern, the best sort of person simply would not be moved to do such a thing. Views like Stohr's (2003), then, which deny the motivational unity of virtue, apparently overlook the unity of problematic actions as virtuous agents must conceive of them.[11] In circumstances that require forgoing something else of value, virtuous agents will recognize that acting to preserve the competing value is inseparable from acting badly: unfairly, intemperately, cowardly, and the like. If this were not the case, after all, they would not be so conflicted in the first place.

Once this much is clear, the view that virtue is compatible with being moved to competing courses of action is no longer tenable. The proper motivational response for Veronica is therefore to *not* be moved to cheat in order to shield her daughter from disappointment.[12] Moreover, insisting otherwise construes the situation in such a way that it would seem to be impossible for Veronica to respond virtuously. If virtue requires her to be moved to act for the sake of her daughter's wellbeing wherever it is at stake, then she will lack virtue if she is not so moved here. But being moved to cheat would also surely indicate a lack of virtue. And since she must recognize these two descriptions to be of one and the same action under the circumstances, she must appreciate the fact that to protect her daughter's self-esteem here *just is* to cheat. Whether or not she is moved to do what is forbidden in this situation, then, she must come up short of virtue, either on the one count or on the other. But surely, virtuous agency is entirely possible, even common, in such ordinary situations.

For this reason too, then, it cannot be maintained that if one has a concern that tells against acting well, one will necessarily be moved to promote it; much less that if one is so moved, this is indicative of virtue. Rather, a virtuous agent can and will be moved only to the virtuous course of action. Importantly, however, this is not a complete account of how virtuous agents should react to situations that require

[11] In Stohr's case in particular, it is possible that she overlooks this point because, in her central example of a business owner who must fire several beloved employees in order to keep her company afloat, the wrong course of action is never described in a way that makes its unity explicit. If the business owner understands the situation for what it is, then she must realize that the alternative to firing some of her employees is to sink the whole company, and everyone's livelihood along with it, in order to (temporarily) spare them. And surely, a virtuous agent would not be moved to undertake such a rash and irresponsible course of action. By contrast, in my central example, Veronica clearly understands the problematic action as "to cheat in order to spare my child's feelings." Though the two cases are structurally similar, then, they are presented differently such that they suggest different accounts of how virtuous agents should be motivated. I hope to have convinced the reader that, because virtuous agents cannot conceive of the competing course of action apart from the description under which it is wrong, they will not be moved to do it.

[12] As Seidman (2005) eloquently puts it, her "concern with living honestly will prevent this end from transferring any of its magnetic power onto these unacceptable means…Or, to switch from a metaphor of pull to one of hydraulic push, it is plausible that [her] other concerns will shunt the flow of [her] motivational energies away from these unacceptable channels" (p. 76).

sacrificing competing concerns. For, they must conceive of the called-for course of action in a unified way as well. In Veronica's case, she must realize that to judge fairly is to damage her daughter's already-fragile self-esteem. And how could a virtuous agent be moved to do such a thing?

The answer is, with *non-motivational* inner conflict. For Veronica, it is equally important that she not be moved to do other than what is called for *and* that she feel the right way about doing so. In such circumstances, the proper way to register forgone values is through feelings like sadness, regret, frustration, disappointment, even anger. And importantly, such feelings, even if motivationally inert, are more than enough to make acting well a painful and difficult experience.[13]

If this is right, then there are two distinct modes of inner conflict an agent might experience: *motivational conflict* involves being moved to multiple incompatible courses of action at once, while *evaluative conflict* involves valuing multiple things which cannot all be preserved or promoted in the circumstances such that one feels badly about giving up some things for the sake of others. The case of Connie illustrates motivational conflict, which is incompatible with virtue. She is moved both to judge the contest fairly and to give her daughter an unfair advantage, and so she must exercise self-restraint to overcome temptation and do what is called for. While this is a good way for a person to be, it is surely not the best.[14]

Veronica, by contrast, demonstrates only evaluative conflict, which can be compatible with virtue. She feels conflicted about judging fairly, too. But, for her, acting unfairly is simply out of the question, however much it pains her to do the fair and honest thing.[15] It bears emphasizing that Veronica's felt inner conflict is real and may be quite intense. After all, acting fairly in this situation involves delivering a direct blow to her own child's frail self-esteem, and this is enough by itself to make

[13] In this respect, my view of virtuous inner conflict is close to Stark's (2001), on which a value "necessarily generates…either reasons for action or reasons for emotion" (p. 453). I think Stark's view is in need of emendation, however, on at least two points. First, even where values do not motivate action and are instead registered only in emotion, it still seems true that they have the *potential* to motivate action, as I have suggested. For instance, if one hears about a fatal earthquake that has already been addressed as far as possible, one might respond only emotionally to the loss of life, since there is nothing left to do. But if one *could* reverse time and avert the disaster, surely one would. As it stands, Stark's radical thesis, though it rightly notes that values need not *actually* motivate action, apparently overlooks this weaker, but still seemingly necessary, connection between value and motivation. Second, at least in mundane cases, like ordering food, certain relevant values apparently need not generate reasons either for action or emotion, contrary to what Stark's thesis implies. Of course, one might think that such values still provide some reasons for action or emotion, just not sufficient ones. But this option is not open to Stark, since she endorses "reasons holism" whereby a virtuous agent "has one and only one reason for action" in any given situation (p. 443). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for directing me to Stark's helpful paper.

[14] Even Kant, who often describes virtue in terms of self-control (see, e.g., *The metaphysics of morals* 6:380 in Kant 1996), thinks virtue is marked by "inner freedom" from competing incentives, which allows the virtuous to act well without having to overcome countervailing motives (see *Critique of practical reason* 5:161 in Kant 1996). For a helpful discussion, see Baxley (2010: 79–84).

[15] Broadie (1991) argues for a reading of Aristotle on which the virtuous person can have "sensations and emotions often identical with those felt by the merely continent individual…But in the virtuous person such feelings appear only as feelings and not as incipient actions" (p. 66). However, since she still insists that "virtue is a harmony of right reason and desire," while continence involves "desire at odds with reason," it is unclear how a virtuous agent could feel conflicted about acting well, even on this nuanced Aristotelian view.

her honest action less than wholehearted, indeed regrettable.[16] But it is one thing to regret having to do what is called for, to lament sacrificing something of genuine value, to wish the situation had been different, to feel sad, frustrated, and angry about what one must do; and it is quite another to be tempted to do what one clearly recognizes, by one's own lights, to be wrong.[17]

4 Rethinking Virtue and Continence

So, there are two distinct modes of inner conflict, motivational and evaluative, and the latter can be compatible with virtue while the former cannot. Importantly, though, either mode can make one merely continent. Connie demonstrates this for motivational conflict. And Connor does the same for evaluative conflict. Though Connor is not moved to pursue an affair, and even chastises himself for thinking of it, he is nevertheless preoccupied with this prospect.

To be clear, this is not some idle fantasy, such as might come upon one in a dream, or a vivid daydream a lá Walter Mitty.[18] The thrill of infidelity is truly worth something to Connor, which is why it is a source of real inner conflict for him. Despite his unwavering commitment to being a faithful partner, then, he finds doing so difficult, since this requires forgoing what would be a satisfying experience for him. Because he is not moved to act on this concern, though, the difficulty he faces is not the struggle to overcome temptation, as it is for Connie. Instead, like Veronica, Connor finds acting well difficult only because doing so is inseparable from sacrificing something he genuinely cares about. What makes Connor less than virtuous, then, is just that he values something a virtuous person would not value at all.

[16] This may be regarded as a case of what Bernard Williams calls "agent-regret," where a person regrets not only what her action brings about but also the fact that *she* brings it about through her own agency (1981: 27–30).

[17] Notably, if tragic dilemmas, where the circumstances demand doing multiple incompatible things, are possible, then they constitute one exception to the generality of this claim. There are also tragic non-dilemmas, which require agents to do things which would not be called for under any but extraordinary circumstances. For instance, a general might have to send many soldiers to certain death in order to prevent some great evil. And since a good general will, even in most combat scenarios, do all she reasonably can to protect her soldiers, being moved to do so where it would be wrong might not make her less than virtuous. Perhaps, however, this intuition is not really about human ideals but arises instead from worries about human limitations. If a mere mortal could register the immense loss in such a situation without thereby being tempted to act wrongly to avert it, she would arguably be a better moral agent. In any case, the possibility of a small number of extraordinary exceptions does not count against the general applicability of the conclusion defended in this section.

[18] The title character in James Thurber's short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" (1939), Walter frequently gets lost in vivid fantasies, usually involving heroic acts. In real life, however, he is a very timid person, and so the things he imagines doing are not things he would ever really be moved to do. Similarly, one could daydream about, say, robbing a bank while waiting in line to deposit a check without being the sort of person who would ever be moved to do such a thing. Idle fantasies of this kind, then, generally do not reflect one way or the other on moral agents.

Now, if there are two distinct modes of inner conflict, either of which can make an agent continent rather than virtuous, then there are two psychologically distinct species of continence. One can be *motivationally continent*, like Connie, because one acts well in spite of being moved to act otherwise. Or one can be *evaluatively continent*, like Connor, acting well despite having a competing concern which one should not have in the first place. Of course, one could exhibit both types of continence simultaneously, being moved to act on a concern which one simply should not have. But either is sufficient on its own for continence.[19] And so, virtue requires lacking both.

Virtue, therefore, has two distinct psychological aspects corresponding to the two species of continence. Due to the *motivational aspect of virtue*, virtuous agents are not moved by concerns that tell against doing what is called for. And due to the *evaluative aspect of virtue*, virtuous agents simply do not have certain concerns. As with the two species of continence, the two aspects of virtue are practically as well as analytically independent, since an agent may exercise one without thereby exercising the other. Connie, who is appropriately concerned for her child's wellbeing but is moved to act on this concern when doing so would be wrong, exercises the evaluative aspect of virtue without the motivational. Whereas Connor, who is concerned about satisfying his adulterous inclinations but is not actually moved to do so, exercises the motivational aspect of virtue without the evaluative.

Conrad and Consuela demonstrate further sub-speciation of evaluative continence. Neither is moved to do other than what their circumstances call for. Thus, they both exhibit the motivational aspect of virtue. But unlike Connor, neither Conrad nor Consuela has a competing concern that is inherently immoral. Conrad's is perfectly innocent: he just wishes he were at a baseball game, which would not typically make him less than virtuous. The situation in which he happens to be, however, is one where such petty concerns have no place. On what is perhaps the worst day of his best friend's life, he should not be preoccupied with missing out on a relatively trivial diversion. One can be evaluatively continent, then, because one has a concern which, though innocent in itself, is inappropriate under the given circumstances.[20] Consuela, on the other hand, insulates herself from concerns that tell against doing what her situation calls for. As a consequence, she finds it too *easy* to do the fair

[19] Cf. Stark (2001): "The merely continent person, on my view, neither experiences emotions properly nor perceives the considerations for action fully accurately. He is pulled this way and that, torn both about how to feel and about what to do. But the virtuous person, by my account, is unified motivationally: by reasons holism, she has one and only one reason for action. And regarding her emotions, she needn't be univocal…" (p. 453). Though Stark rightly notes that virtuous agents, who are moved only to do what their circumstances call for, may nevertheless emotionally register a variety of competing values, she evidently overlooks how a failure of *either* motivation *or* evaluation, on its own, makes one less than virtuous. Continent agents seem capable of evaluating situations such that they, like the virtuous, only have reason to do what is called for; but they might nevertheless register inappropriate competing values, making them evaluatively continent. Or, they might evaluate situations such that they only register appropriate values but nevertheless see multiple reasons for action, making them motivationally continent instead.

[20] Trianosky (1988: 8) makes a similar point, though his examples of "circumstantially bad" desires—fame, money, and power—suggest a narrower range of competing concerns that can make one continent.

thing, where this involves dealing a blow to her child's frail self-esteem. This, too, is a failure of valuation, even if only momentary.

Moreover, the *degree* to which one is concerned about things that tell against doing what is called for can make one evaluatively continent as well. For instance, even if Conrad is in a situation where being concerned about missing a baseball game is not wholly inappropriate (perhaps he is accompanying his friend to a wedding instead of a wake), he might be *too* concerned about it and so find it more difficult than he should to be a good friend. Likewise, even if Consuela does not fully shut out her concern for her daughter while serving as a judge, she may not be concerned *enough* and so still find it too easy to do the fair, but damaging, thing. In either case, failure to register competing values to an appropriate degree makes the agent less than fully virtuous.

And importantly, just as motivational and evaluative continence are independent flaws, all these sub-species of evaluative continence are likewise independent, since exhibiting one does not entail exhibiting any of the others. Exhibiting any one of them on its own, however, is enough to make one merely continent. Thus, to be fully virtuous, one must avoid all of these various shortcomings.[21]

Note, then, that if the virtue-continence distinction is understood as a simple contrast between inner harmony and inner conflict, then the two aspects of virtue tend to get conflated, as do the various species and subspecies of continence. Insofar as distinguishing them provides resources for making sense of the complex relationship

[21] No doubt, some will worry here that virtue, so understood, is impossible for human beings to achieve, since people simply cannot act and feel just as they should all the time. For instance, in a recent article that helpfully engages with relevant findings in experimental psychology, Miller (2017) argues that "Because our psychological life is so complex, we will regularly display behavior that, in at least some given instances, might be virtuous, or continent, or incontinent, or whatever" but that "there is no one psychological disposition or bundle of dispositions that governs all of our…behavior" even in specific domains of moral life (p. 153). So, he advances an alternative scheme on which virtue and vice have thresholds, while continence and incontinence are combined (along with other states between vice and virtue) into a single "mixed" category (p. 157). This alternative taxonomy of character types therefore does justice to the complexity of human moral psychology and conceives of virtue as an ideal we can more or less approximate.

I agree with Miller that no one has a purely virtuous or continent (or incontinent or vicious) moral character, understood as a state that expresses itself consistently over time and across situations. But we can nevertheless draw sharp lines between kinds of agency, understood as combinations of action, reason, and feeling that express themselves in single instances. There are facts of the matter as to the reason for which an agent performs a particular act and how she feels about doing so, and these facts define what kind of agency she exhibits in particular moments. (Whether standard experimental methods can bear out the difference between virtuous and continent agency—which are identical in terms of both action and reason and differ only in terms of the agent's feelings about acting as she does—is a separate and rather difficult question.) Such moments then combine to form patterns, over time and across situations, that define her moral character, which is bound to be complex in the ways Miller suggests.

So, I fully agree with Miller that, understood as a taxonomy of character types, the Aristotelian framework belies the complexity of human moral psychology. But we need not jettison the taxonomy altogether. Instead, we can understand it as describing distinct types of momentary moral agency, which in turn provide the data points necessary to make sense of the complex characters of individual moral agents. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to Miller's contribution to this debate.

between inner conflict and good moral agency, an alternative approach that takes account of these distinctions is preferable.

To demonstrate the utility of such an approach, consider a well-known puzzle about inner conflict, discussed by Philippa Foot in her seminal essay "Virtues and Vices."

> …many people feel strongly inclined to say that it is for moral effort that moral praise is to be bestowed, and that in proportion as a man finds it easy to be virtuous so much the less is he to be morally admired for his good actions. The dilemma can be resolved only when we stop talking about difficulties standing in the way of virtuous action as if they were of only one kind. The fact is that some kinds of difficulties do indeed provide an occasion for much virtue, but that others rather show that virtue is incomplete. (1978: 11)

Foot then contrasts two cases, one in which a man is tempted to steal and another in which he is not tempted despite the fact that he is in a very tempting situation (specifically, he is poor, and he could get away with it). She concludes that if he must overcome temptation, he is merely continent. And if he is not tempted, he is virtuous, all the more so if the situation is very tempting. But this does not answer the stated question of whether finding it hard to act well ever makes one more admirable than finding it easy.

Indeed, Foot is right that if the man is tempted to steal, he is continent at best. This affirms the motivational aspect of virtue. Once the motivational aspect is distinguished from the evaluative, however, it becomes clear that temptation is not the only thing that can make acting well hard. If a poor man wants to, say, feed his family something besides expired hotdogs, this concern, by itself, could make him feel less than wholehearted about doing the honest thing. After all, conducting himself honestly is inseparable here from forgoing things that would make his family better off. And since improving the circumstance of one's family is the sort of competing concern a virtuous agent might well have in such a situation, the inner conflict it causes can be compatible with virtue. Thus, virtue can involve finding it hard to act well here, since one should care to spare one's family from the burdens of poverty, and appropriately registering such a concern does not require being tempted to do otherwise.[22]

Moreover, if the man were not poor, he would not face such a conflict. His poverty therefore makes acting well harder for him, as Foot suggests, but not in the way that she suggests. It is because of the distressing concerns that accompany poverty themselves, not the fact that these concerns make him more susceptible to

[22] Cf. Stohr (2003): "So Foot is right to say that the extent to which an agent shows virtue in a situation depends on the difficulties he faces, but she is wrong to say that if the source of the difficulties is in the agent's character, he lacks virtue. This complicates any account of virtuous agency, for it makes it harder to distinguish between the agent who finds it hard to act well because he lacks a virtuous character and the agent who finds it hard to act well because he has a virtuous character. In other words, it muddies the distinction between continence and virtue" (p. 348). I agree with Stohr that virtue itself can make it hard for virtuous agents to act well. But once the evaluative aspect of virtue is distinguished from the motivational, the virtue-continence distinction is not so muddy. It is the evaluative aspect that can make it hard to act well. And where it does, the motivational aspect still distinguishes virtue from continence.

temptation (they need not). Acting well despite finding it hard to do so can therefore make the poor man morally admirable,[23] as long as he is not moved to do otherwise and his competing concerns are appropriate to the circumstances. He must not be conflicted about acting honestly because of concerns that are inherently immoral (like the thrill of stealing) or relatively trivial (such as a desire for fine wine). And he must be concerned about his family's interests to an appropriate degree (virtuous feeling seems to admit of some range here).

All of these factors must be taken into consideration to arrive at a full and fair assessment of the individual agent. And this holds not only for honesty, but indeed for seemingly every virtue. Every sphere of moral life requires one to have the right values as well as to be properly motivated. And so, every virtue has an evaluative aspect that can potentially come apart from its motivational aspect. Aristotle himself seems to have recognized this in the case of courage:

> …the brave person will find death and wounds painful, and suffer them unwillingly, but he will endure them because that is fine or because failure is shameful. Indeed, the truer it is that he has every virtue and the happier he is, the more pain he will feel at the prospect of death. For this sort of person, more than anyone, finds it worthwhile to be alive, and knows he is being deprived of the greatest goods, and this is painful. But he is no less brave for all that; presumably, indeed, he is all the braver, because he chooses what is fine in war at the cost of all these goods. (*NE* 1117b8-16). Quoted text is from Irwin's (1999) translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

Indeed, the brave person is concerned about the right things, some of which may tell against doing the brave thing. Thus, one can feel conflicted about acting bravely, and this does not necessarily make one less than virtuous.[24] If one is, it will be for some more specific reason, such as that one's competing concerns are trivial or one's attachment to them is excessive.

Even temperance, which, according to Aristotle, is flatly incompatible with inner conflict,[25] is amenable to this kind of analysis. In the domain of bodily pleasures, there are many things a good agent might value. In fact, along with things like an appreciation for art and humor, enjoyment of a variety of physical pleasures has a

[23] A full treatment of Foot's puzzle would also have to distinguish between praiseworthiness/admirability and virtue. The man's honest action may be more praiseworthy because he is poor, but this does not necessarily mean it is more virtuous (note the oddity of calling his action "more honest"). Insofar as he is equally free of temptation to steal in either condition, as well as concerned about the right things and to the right degree, his virtuousness does not vary with his wealth. If poverty makes his honesty more praiseworthy, then, it is not because he is *more* honest, but perhaps instead because honesty is harder to acquire or warrants more encouragement for someone in his situation.

[24] Aristotle's discussion of courage poses no special problem, then, for the virtue-continence distinction, as many have supposed. Thus, there is no need to opt for a "sublime" ideal of courage like the one developed by McDowell (1978), on which its "proper manifestation is a renunciation, without struggle, of something which in the abstract one would value highly" (p. 27). One need not renounce, in any sense, the value one places on one's own life and health, or whatever else one risks in acting bravely. A virtuous agent may indeed emotionally register such concerns, and so feel conflicted about acting well, as opposed to just recognizing their value "in the abstract."

[25] "The temperate person is the sort to find nothing pleasant against reason, but the continent is the sort to find such things pleasant but not to be led by them" (*NE* 1152a1-4).

central place in the lives of the best sort of people, the sort most of us would like to be and to spend our lives among.[26] Surely, one need not be a simple hedonist to recognize the non-trivial value of bodily pleasure in the good human life. So, a good agent might be concerned to pursue certain pleasures, which will cause her to feel conflicted about acting well where doing so means forgoing those pleasures. And yet, if she is not moved to act on such concerns when doing so would be wrong, her inner conflict need not make her less than virtuous.[27] Whether or not it does depends, again, on further considerations about the nature and degree of her competing concerns.[28]

5 Conclusion: The Complex Harmony of Virtuous Agency

The approach to the virtue-continence distinction advanced in this essay has theoretical as well as practical advantages over the traditional Aristotelian approach, which identifies virtue with inner harmony, and continence with inner conflict, between feeling and action. First, while both approaches give general psychological accounts of the distinction, the one developed here systematically explains how conflicted agents can be as good as, and perhaps even better than, unconflicted ones, while the alternative lacks the resources to do the same. The approach on offer therefore provides a more complete theoretical understanding of the relationship between inner conflict and good moral agency.

Second, by distinguishing between the different aspects of virtue and the various species and sub-species of continence, this approach provides resources for more precise assessment of individual moral agents. After all, one who is motivated by competing concerns does not have the same defect as one who just has the wrong concerns to begin with; and one may fail to have the right concerns in qualitatively different ways. Moreover, if an agent is tempted to act on concerns which she should not have in the first place, then she has two moral shortcomings, not just one. "Every virtuous agent is alike," we might say, "but each continent agent is continent in her own way." It is an advantage of the approach on offer, then, that it accounts for the variety of ways in which otherwise good agents can come up short of virtue.

Finally, it stands to reason that each defect that makes one less than virtuous warrants different strategies for management and improvement. An agent who needs to reevaluate her practical concerns would seem to require a different kind of intervention than one whose values are fine but who struggles with errant impulses. Though

[26] See Wolf (1982) for a well-known argument to this effect.

[27] Cf. Schroeder (2015), who argues that continence has specifically to do with managing appetites for pleasure and that the virtue of endurance, instead, has to do with managing pain. So, if one is conflicted because of a competing appetite, one is necessarily continent, whereas if one is merely pained at giving up some valuable pleasure, then one might be virtuous, depending on how one manages that pain. One problem with restricting the scope of continence in this way is that an agent who does the temperate thing for the right reason, but who is pained to an excessive or deficient degree about doing so, will turn out to be *vicious*, as opposed to merely continent. But this sort of agent still seems basically good.

[28] It is possible that concern for bodily pleasure is always incompatible with virtue, if it is inherently immoral, or if the value of pleasure is so trivial that being concerned about it is inappropriate in any circumstances where it must not be pursued. Both suggestions seem implausible, though I will not press this point any further here.

both conditions fall under the overarching diagnosis of "continence," it is hard to imagine that they would respond to the same therapy. And this sort of practical upshot is no small matter. For, the virtue-continence distinction first suggests itself through our ordinary experience of inner conflict in moral action and the self-assessment that naturally follows. Its theoretical interest cannot, then, be entirely divorced from its practical import. Thus, for practical as well as theoretical purposes, we need an approach that accounts for all the ways in which a good agent can fail to be fully virtuous; and for this, the simple contrast between inner harmony and inner conflict simply will not do.

If all this is right, then the traditional metaphor of "harmony" no longer seems to be an apt description of the psychology of virtue versus continence. But the spirit of this venerable metaphor can be salvaged yet. If we grant that the best kind of person has a wide array of practical concerns—personal projects and intimate relationships as well as a broader commitment to treating others with due respect—then living well involves bringing a wide variety of disparate elements into harmony with each other. The experience of virtuous agency is therefore less analogous to the music of Bach, where no discordant note ever spoils the mathematical precision of the harmony, and more like the music of Gershwin, where blue notes feature prominently. Yet these complex harmonies are, nonetheless, truly harmonious. Not just any discord will do. In fact, only certain combinations of notes, at appropriate volumes and durations, are required to produce richly layered music as opposed to incoherent noise. In practical life as well, neither harmony nor discord is a simple matter.

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