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Moral Incompetence

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‘I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused.’
 Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*

1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I describe a family of ways in which well-intentioned people, well equipped with the standard moral virtues, can do wrong. It is no news that good people can make decisions that turn out badly, and we all recognize that a morally admirable person could lack some practical skill required for realizing some of her intentions. She could have a bad memory or be bad at scheduling actions. The phenomenon that I am discussing is different from both bad luck and impracticality. It concerns the *moral* failings of decent people. The claim is that there are ways in which good will and virtue are consistent with a tendency to make the wrong choices in some kinds of moral problems. Such tendencies are what I refer to as moral incompetence. I expect that most people will agree not just that decent people can make a mess of things, but that there can be systematic patterns in the moral disasters of even morally admirable individuals. This is a very weak version of the claim I am making. The main claim is that *there are widespread characteristics of agents which are consistent with their being kind, thoughtful, responsible, brave, and so on, and which lead specifically to their bungling moral situations.* (And what is it to bungle a moral situation? I’ll get to that.) I shall argue that there is at least a case for a stronger claim too, call it the extreme claim: *there are characteristics that lead agents to bungle moral situations and which are more likely to be manifested in morally ambitious—high-principled, admirable, un—complacent, morally uncompromising—people.*

There are two general difficulties in arguing for these claims. The first lies in distinguishing the effects of specifically moral incompetences from those of more general practical failings: social limitations, difficulties in planning and executing complex projects, and so on. The second lies in distinguishing competence from virtue, that is, in answering the question ‘If someone is prone to making

a mess of a class of moral situations, does this not just show that there is a moral virtue, perhaps one that we do not have a familiar name for, which the person lacks?' The solutions to both of these difficulties are clearest in the case of morally admirable agents, and therefore in the domain to which the extreme claim applies. Therefore, my strategy will not be to defend the less startling main claim first, and then move on cautiously to the extreme claim. Instead, I shall begin a defence of the main claim, with examples of everyday moral failure, and proceed to a point where considerations about the extreme claim, with examples of failure of great moral ambition, support points relevant to both.

2 EVERYDAY EXAMPLES

I begin with three examples. They are intended to show that an agent can fail to do the right thing by virtue of failing to think through the moral situation well, even though she applies the right moral principles and possesses at least some of the right virtues. (I say 'some of the right virtues' since, as remarked above, competence might itself be taken as a virtue, an issue to return to later.) Moreover, the failure in these examples is not one of general thinking power, but of the capacity to handle specifically moral aspects of problem-solving. I mean the examples throughout the chapter to give a picture of what it is like to wrestle with moral problems, a picture that suggests that asking 'what would a kind—just, generous, brave—person do?' leaves out something fundamental about what it takes to find a morally acceptable outcome.

Painful Truths

A professor, Ruth, has chaired an oral exam for a graduate student, Sam. The committee is prepared to pass Sam, but with some hesitation. In fact, there is a consensus that Sam, though intelligent and hard-working, is not well suited for advanced work in the subject. It would be in his interest if he would seriously consider dropping out. Sam meets Ruth in her office and she tells him he has passed. And then she says: 'There's something else you should know; most of us think you don't really have what it takes to do research.' Sam is visibly distressed, and so Ruth assures him that his intelligence and diligence are recognized and that the department will write strong letters for him if he decides to go to law school instead. She then realizes that she has a class to teach, and offers to discuss the matter further with Sam if he makes an appointment during the following week.

Sam is devastated. He had no idea that the faculty was not impressed with him, and all his plans centre on academic life. He leaves Ruth's office bewildered and upset, and soon spins into a dangerous depression. Suicide seems attractive, until another professor pushes him into the hands of the university health service, who help him through the first serious set-back of his life.

The best-intentioned plans can go wrong, and most of us would hesitate to condemn Ruth for saying what had to be said, one way or another. Suppose, though, that these things keep happening to Ruth: in interactions with students and colleagues the emotional message with which she intends to surround the content of what she says never gets transmitted. She does not know this, because she is too confident in the correctness of her intentions to take much note of the results. If she had known how little her attempts at being tactful succeed, she might have considered some alternatives. She could have first spoken to colleagues who knew Sam better, to get a sense of his vulnerabilities. She could have begun a long conversation about his future plans, waiting to get a sense of how bad her bad news was. But she does not consider any of these.

The example is not interesting unless we assume that it was right to tell Sam the faculty consensus, in a way that made it sink in, and unless we also assume that there was a duty, in telling him, to put it as kindly as possible. There is a tension between these two aims. Someone in Ruth's position has to get the truth across while doing minimal harm, and her way of doing this might have been a good one, if, in fact, she had just the right control over her manner. She would have to be able to pick up signs of distress and choose her words in response to them so that she would use the most direct formulation that didn't do major harm. Let us assume that Ruth knew how delicate it was to balance truth and kindness, and thought she could do it, showing a confidence that manifests itself particularly when she is in a position of responsibility. *It is particularly when she has an obligation to balance some person's interests against an institutional duty that she ventures beyond her social capacities.*

This incident does not reveal Ruth to be a bad person, in the sense of being unkind, unjust, cowardly, or lacking in any of the other standard virtues. It does reveal a fault, though, and it is a morally relevant fault. Ruth has a tendency to do the wrong thing, in a specific respect. When she is in a position of responsibility, she lets her awareness of that responsibility blunt her capacity for social delicacy. As a result, she blunders around doing harm. She may be more of a menace than someone who we would criticize for a slight lack of kindness or fairness. If we were wishing people to be different—*for the reasons that we wish people were kinder, fairer, and more courageous*—we would wish that Ruth took better stock of her actual social skills before embarking on what she takes to be right.

Incompatible Promises:

Ruth's is a case in which it is clear what generally ought to be done, though it is not easy to do it. There are examples which turn on the fact that it is not clear what ought to be done. Consider George. His friend Michael asks him for a job recommendation, and he agrees. In fact, he says that he will write saying that Michael is the best person for the job. The job is one that Michael really needs to get, and in the period between applying and lining up his referees Michael

is going on a hiking holiday, to get into the right frame of mind for a possible interview. While Michael is away George is approached by a friend of another, younger, colleague, Wilma, who has also decided to apply for the job. Would he be willing to write for her? In fact, the request comes just as George is reviewing some work that Wilma has done, which is of the very highest quality. In his enthusiasm, George says ‘Yes, of course, I’d be delighted to write for her, in fact I would write that there couldn’t be a better person for the job.’

George is no fool, and it doesn’t take him long to realize what he has done. And in fact the situation is even more tangled, as George and Michael were once lovers, and George believes strongly in keeping a separation between the personal and the professional. He should not have agreed to write for Michael at all, he now thinks, and he should not have promised either candidate that he would give them top ranking. But, having promised to give Michael top ranking, he should not have also promised to rank Wilma top. He has a long hard think. Perhaps when one has made incompatible promises the first made takes precedence. Perhaps the fact that getting the job is crucial to Michael and less so to Wilma is relevant. Perhaps the fact that he should not have agreed to write for Michael means that he is less obliged to write in the strongest terms for him. Perhaps the fact that he didn’t make the second promise to Wilma but to her friend makes that promise less binding, even if he is sure that his words will be conveyed to Wilma. Perhaps if he writes more strongly for Wilma, then since he should not have agreed to write for Michael it would be OK to lie to him, saying that he did all that he could. Perhaps he ought to write to Michael apologizing and saying that he cannot write for him. Perhaps he ought to write to Wilma apologizing and saying that he cannot guarantee to give her top ranking. Eventually he decides what to do.

Some people will take George to have got himself into a dilemma from which all exits have high and incompatible prices. This might suggest that he can take any of a number of resolutions of the problem, as long as he acknowledges the force of the others.¹ Others will choose some particular solution as the right one. (An option that seems to me promising is to give the stronger recommendation to whoever he thinks is better for the job, and simultaneously write to both Michael and Wilma saying that he must retract his promise to give him or her top ranking, since such promises should not be made. This may harm his relations with both of them, but this may just be the price for doing the right thing in a mess of one’s own making.) Crucial to any option is George’s capacity to carry it out, leaving behind as little outrage and actual harm as possible.

[FN:1]

¹ The literature on moral dilemmas rarely faces directly up to the question ‘when both of two available courses are wrong, and neither is clearly more than the other, are both equally permissible?’ But an implicit consensus is that both are indeed permissible, as long as the appropriate retrospective emotions are experienced. See ‘Moral Luck’, in Williams 1981; and Stocker 1990. In Morton 1990 I explore the subsequent patterns of action that might be motivated by the retrospective emotions.

Suppose that there are better and worse ways out of the mess. Suppose that, though he does nothing awful or stupid, George takes one of the worse ones. One of many ways this can happen is that he does not consider options that he can in fact carry out satisfactorily. Either they do not occur to him, or in considering them he does not imagine very accurately how the play of his own attempts and others' reactions will develop.

George's failings are of anticipation and of imagination. Warning bells do not go off in his head when they should. This may be a sign of a generous, impulsive, optimistic nature, the down-side of real virtues. But although George's actions sometimes turn out well, they are often accompanied by a tendency to crisis. It may also be, though, that the warning bells particularly fail to tell him of likely moral problems. They do not warn him of the likelihood that he will later have reason to think that his action was unjust or ungenerous or inconsiderate. Then his failings are deficiencies of moral competence.

Pseudosupererogation

Moral philosophy is full of examples in which a person does a better thing than is required of them. Many such examples can be tweaked so that the act is *not* the best that the person could do. The person in the next example, Teresa, has applied for a promotion. She learns that someone else in her office, Sanjip, has also applied. Sanjip really wants the promotion, and Teresa knows that only one of them will get it. She is moved by sympathy for him and withdraws her application.

Teresa is kind and self-sacrificing. We have evidence that she is in conventional terms a good person. But has she made the best choice? It may be that it would be no better if Sanjip got the promotion; the cases are equal or incomparable in that there is no more value, all things considered, in either of them getting the promotion. So her choice is at most tied for best. An impartial observer would not have recommended that she make it. It may also be that it would be better if Teresa got it. She might have children to support; it might be her last chance and not Sanjip's. If so, then Teresa is making a mistake in withdrawing her application.

It is a moral mistake to discount your own interest too much; you are one of the people whose life you ought to care about. You can indeed waive your own rights to some extent; you can give yourself permission to give someone else's rights or interests some priority over yours. But only up to a point. Sometimes permission should be ignored, as when one person permits you to favour another person's trivial interest over her own vital interest. So too when it is a matter of your own interests: sometimes you should resist your generous inclinations and treat what you need with the same seriousness with which, if you are a decent person, you treat the needs of others.

But it is very hard to know when these occasions are. It requires a lot of self-knowledge, a firm resolve, and a sense of the limits beyond which someone's

interests should be protected even if they are willing to see them eroded. These limits are different in the different cases of moral rights, fundamental needs, and general well-being. No wonder it is easier simply to give in to generosity. But to do so, on important matters, is just as much to bungle moral choice as it would be to act without enough thought on impulses that are fundamentally ungenerous.

3 MORAL CAPACITIES

In the cases I have described, people face situations that are too hard for them. There are many more such situations. Philosophical discussions of many moral topics—acts/omissions, trolleyology, the limits of obligation—will provide many examples that can be adapted to make the point. (Work through the examples in Kamm 1996 if you are convinced that you can grasp the essence of any moral problem without mental strain.) Many of these situations are too hard for anyone to find a perfect solution to them—I would argue that for nearly all complex situations there are better solutions than normal human beings will find—but for each type of situation there are some people who do conspicuously less well than others. Their failings can be due to many factors: lack of self-knowledge, inability to manage a complex body of information, lack of understanding of others. These factors will result in less-good choices with respect to the non-moral aspects of situations also. So perhaps the conclusion to draw is simply that moral decisions can be hard, so that a variety of cognitive failings can cause us to bungle them.

I don't think this is the whole story, and I have phrased the examples above so as to bring out ways in which it may not be. A person can be capable of performing reasonably well at thoughtful tasks in general, but be a persistent bungler of some particular aspect of moral problems. The claim is not that there is a specific moral faculty, failure of which can be dissociated from general intellectual failure. Rather, the claim is that among the large and varied bundle of competences that allow us to handle life's problems some specific combinations of them are particularly relevant to finding acceptable ways through moral problems.

Here is an analogy. Some people can ride unicycles and some cannot. Of the people who cannot, some have a weak sense of balance—but some who cannot ride unicycles can walk tightropes. Some of them are physically uncoordinated—but there are people who are physically co-ordinated and have a reasonable sense of balance who can only with great difficulty learn to ride the unicycle. And there are a few who have only average balance and co-ordination for whom after half an hour of falling off it suddenly clicks, and from then on they can jump on and go. The obvious explanation is that some combinations of balance, co-ordination, timing, strength, and, no doubt, other capacities make a potential unicyclist, and that a unicyclist needs to be able to make some one

of these combinations work. The unicyclist needs to be able to draw on these different capacities and combine them in ways that enable her to wobble ahead. There need be no unicycle-riding faculty.

Similarly, moral situations require that we mobilize our capacities to manage complex information, imagine the situation of others, steer between general principles and special factors, adjudicate incomparable objectives, assess our own future reactions, understand our own motives, predict consequences, and more. These are, of course, our common-sense labels for skills that may, in fact, be the result of a set of quite different fundamental human capacities by whose overlaps they are constituted. Someone could be quite well equipped with these capacities, as humans go, and not have the particular combinations of them, or not be able to make them combine, that are required to deal with moral issues.

What are specifically moral issues? We should not expect a definition in non-moral terms. Moral issues are about how to deal with one another fairly, decently, and honourably, and with respect for one another as individual bearers of value. I don't think there is a less loaded way of putting it. One can describe in non-moral terms some of the themes that run through such issues: love and hate; admiration and contempt; co-operation and cheating. Early in our evolutionary history we developed specific mental capacities for handling these themes: cheater-detection modules and fair-distribution procedures. Later, human civilizations linked these capacities to a special vocabulary and a body of lore and ways of thinking to back it up, concerning rights, interests, obligations, duties, and moral character. This vocabulary, with its many complex connections, maps out a domain of problems and solutions, which has a fragile conceptual unity and also a rough unity in terms of the capacities it requires. Some of the capacities it requires link the ancient innate moral sensibilities, a grasp of the culturally acquired lore, and an understanding of the human situation at hand. Someone who has these capacities in one part of the moral domain tends to have them in other parts. There are many exceptions to this, but the correlations are good enough that we have the concept of the wise, morally capable, person, a person whose decisions we take very seriously and whose advice we seek. The reason we have this concept is that we invented the domain to single out a class of problems that arise in the project of co-operative living, competence with which varies significantly from person to person.

There are many ways that individuals can augment their moral competence. I shall describe two, which I shall call the Aristotelian way, and the Kantian way. Each reveals a space for specifically moral incompetence and, in particular, moral incompetence consistent with good intentions and possession of the standard moral virtues.

The Aristotelian way focuses on a person's exposure to other more experienced people navigating through moral situations. From early on in one's life, one is both a passive observer and a participant with others in situations involving delicate interaction and complex social thinking. One sees strategies and attitudes

that succeed and others that fail. One chooses some other individuals as models for forming one's own moral character. To some extent one internalizes the personalities of these models, and one learns their ways of coping with difficult situations. One builds up in one's mind a large collection of past situations and approaches to them that were or were not successful. It is like a chess player's collection of combinations; a jazz musician's collection of harmonic possibilities; a philosopher's or a lawyer's collection of argumentative moves. Eventually, when one is in a difficult situation oneself, with no wise older person to guide one, one can draw on one's training in two ways. The first is to ask what one's role models would have done or, more profoundly, how they would have approached the problem. The second is to compare the situation with one that one has seen handled before, and to work out an analogous solution. Neither of these is automatic, even if one has successfully internalized the role models and built up the database of model solutions. For the situation at hand is nearly always novel in important respects, so one has to see resemblances which engage them either with one's internalized models or with one's accumulation of past situations.

Moral competence, seen the Aristotelian way, is based on comparing the situation in hand to situations one has seen managed in the past. In hard situations it is not obvious which comparisons will lead to outcomes that are satisfactory to those concerned or which later reflection will endorse. Then the competent moral agent has to find the kinds of connections that will be clear in retrospect, though hard to make out until they are found. In really hard situations—those that are like riding a unicycle across a tightrope in a blizzard—the virtuoso moral agent will be able to make creative analogies between new and old, analogies that mean reorganizing the structure of the existing database.

Moral incompetence is inevitable on this picture. Some people will not have fastened on suitable role models; some will not have build up a rich collection of examples; some will not have an effective way of organizing the collection; and, most importantly, some will not be able to see plausible similarities between present situations and collected ones. In fact, for every person there will be novel situations whose links to previously digested ones are obscure. The links are easiest to see when there is some conspicuous theme linking them, in particular the themes associated with the virtues made prominent in one's culture. Given a novel situation, one may well be able to see how it connects with familiar ones in terms of courage, benevolence, or justice, but not be able to put all these together with another and with other facts, about obligations, risks, and other factors. So a person may be capable of acting bravely, kindly, and fairly, even in this new situation, but not be capable of acting in a way that later, looking back, she and others will accept as the right thing to have done.

The Kantian way of describing moral competence focuses on the relation between general rules and particular acts. A person picks up from her culture a battery of labels that pick out morally relevant features of situations: lying,

helping, killing, returning favours, resisting threats. In terms of these she can create much more complicated labels, such as ‘keeping a promise that one made under duress’, and in terms of both simple and complicated labels she can formulate general principles or maxims, such as ‘always keep promises unless they were made under duress’ or ‘always at least consider helping people who have helped you’. Then when faced with a situation requiring moral attention the first thing is to characterize it, to give it a suitably complex label that recognizes its morally relevant features. The next thing is to formulate a general principle to govern one’s behaviour in a situation so characterized. And then one must test this principle, to see if, in fact, it could represent the way a moral agent would act in situations like that. It is this last step that is the focus of Kantian moral philosophy, but it is not the most important element for present purposes. Moral competence, from this perspective, consists in having a good set of labels and principles and the capacity to construct new ones that fit the situation at hand. A general principle fits a situation when in that and future situations relevantly like it the results of acting in accordance with it will be acceptable to all concerned. (The creative aspect of the labelling, the way we make the labels, and the resemblances between situations is a theme of Christine Korsgaard’s reading of Kant (Korsgaard 1996). ‘Relevantly like’, ‘results’, and ‘acceptable’ are obviously going to be understood differently in different Kantian accounts.)

On this view also, moral competence is a special and delicate accomplishment, and the existence of moral incompetence is unsurprising. An agent needs to have accumulated a stock of action-labels and of general principles that can be elaborated to fit the current situation, and needs to be able to find or create a label and a principle that fit the situation in an illuminating way. (And, further, needs to be able to test how morally helpful the principle is; something that Kant may have thought was easy, but which most subsequent Kantian thinkers have seen as decidedly complicated and bungle-able.) All these things can be done more and less well. Doing them less well is clearly consistent with doing many other things very well, and with benevolence, honesty, and sincerity. And so, in spite of Kant’s famous assertion that nothing matters except a good will, it is clear that, from a Kantian perspective, there will be many qualities—moral qualities—in addition to a good will that we should encourage in one another.

On both the Kantian and the Aristotelian account, moral incompetence is to be expected, in the weak sense that we can expect that moral problems will often defeat even intelligent, well-intentioned people. But they also support a stronger conclusion, that we can expect there to be specific deficits of competence arising in moral thinking. They do this because they both describe moral thinking in terms of a sensitivity to a certain class of subtle patterns, the choices in particular circumstances characteristic of the virtues and the maxims appropriate to those circumstances, which are hard to describe in non-moral terms but which run through a wide range of decision-making situations. The important point is that moral sensitivity is a distinct sensitivity, with a fair amount of

independence from the other sensitivities required in a complex life. Since it is distinct, the conceptual capacities that are recruited and combined to serve it will be selected for their capacity to serve that particular sensitivity. (Think of the combinations of capacities that can serve the sensitivity to three-dimensional moving disequilibrium required for unicycling.) So the exact combination available to one person will very often not be found in another, and two people who have the same capacities for, say, risk-management, salesmanship, and oratory, may have very different capacities for sensing when courage is called for, or when an act is best described as deception rather than persuasion.²

FN2

The three examples earlier in the chapter can easily be fitted into this framework. Ruth's difficulties in sensing when other people are likely to be hurt *in ways that she has an obligation to anticipate* may not be linked to any above-average incapacity to know how people will react to unexpected situations. George's difficulties in anticipating situations *in which he will incur obligations*, and in imagining the details of situations *where different people's interests are delicately balanced*, may not be linked to any above-average incapacity to anticipate or imagine. And Teresa's tendency not to allow herself *what she deserves* may not be linked to any above-average incapacity to compare her wants to those of others. In all these cases, and countless others, a person can perform at below-average competence in morally relevant aspects of her life while performing with normal competence in very similar, less morally relevant aspects.

The conclusion to draw is that it is not hard to see how specifically moral incompetence can come about. In most real cases, however, it will be almost impossible to tell how specifically moral a person's problem-solving difficulties are. Perhaps paradoxically, the cases that reveal a gap between moral and general competence most clearly involve high-principled or morally ambitious people. I turn to these cases next.

4 MORAL INCOMPETENCE IN TWO MEN OF HIGH PRINCIPLE: CATO AND WILSON

In my examples so far the field of moral incompetence has been personal life, and the theme has been the compatibility of incompetence and good will. This compatibility is an important point, since we misjudge many situations by ignoring it. But moral incompetence also emerges on a larger, more public, canvas, where the stakes are higher and the moral demands on people are higher.

² Though this argument is based on Kantian and Aristotelian premisses, neither Kant's nor Aristotle's account of thought would support it right to the end. Kant or Aristotle could get to the weaker conclusion at the beginning of the paragraph. To get to the stronger conclusion at the end you need a contemporary conception of thought as the selective recruitment of capacities from a large biologically given pool.

My examples of people with the confidence and ambition to accept these higher stakes are Cato the younger and Woodrow Wilson.

Cato: Choosing the Wrong Moment

Marcus Porcius Cato was a leader of the Roman Senate in the last years of the Republic. He exemplified the Roman public virtues. According to the standard contemporary work on that period:

Cato extolled the virtues that won empire for Rome in ancient days, denounced the undeserving rich, and strove to recall the aristocracy to the duties of their station. This was not convention, pretence or delusion. Upright and austere, a ferocious defender of his own class, a hard drinker and an astute politician, the authentic Cato, so far from being a visionary, claimed to be a realist of traditional Roman temper and tenacity, not inferior to the great ancestor whom he emulated almost to a parody, Cato the Censor. But it was not character and integrity only that gave Cato the primacy before consulars: he controlled a nexus of political alliances among the *nobiles*. (Syme 1960: 26)

A man of principle, then, incorruptible, brave, and honest, with an agenda of preserving the traditional values and political structure of Rome. (And a student of Hellenistic philosophy.) Yet by the time of his suicide his cause had utterly failed. The Republic was in ruins and a new cynical and autocratic state, the Rome of the Caesars, could be seen approaching. Moreover, this transition had occurred in large part *because* of Cato's principled uncompromising defence of the values of the old order. How can this be?

It wasn't just bad luck. Cato's defence of traditional senatorial rule extended to a blindness to its shortcomings. He tended to ignore how political conditions had changed since the old days, in particular how armies had to be appeased. In opposing individual threats to the Republic, he failed to think of how his opposition could make these threats combine. His principled objections to types of people whose power threatened the Republic—generals, non-Romans—led him to value the humiliation of individuals of these types, for its own sake. So he persuaded the Senate not to reward the successful general Pompey (a provincial, too) with rewards for his troops and ratification of his treaties; he sabotaged attempts to get support from the wealthy middle class for the aristocratic Senate; and he refused Julius Caesar acknowledgement (a triumph) for his good work in Spain. The result was that the wealthy, the generals, and the troops combined to force the Senate to grant what he had refused. From that moment on, it was obvious where the real power lay, and that the Senate was a device that could be used by whoever had enough real power.

Cato's failing was this: he chose disastrous moments to stand on principle. In particular, he ignored the effects of the combinations of stands he was committed to. To see his actions as misjudged we do not have to speculate about what would have happened had he acted differently. We need only see him as facing difficult

situations, requiring both firm principle and the ability to accommodate social realities, both of which he possessed, but which he combined in such a way as to produce the collapse of his deepest aims. The Cato honoured by later ages as 'the last of the Romans' was so in part because of his own moral incompetence.

Wilson: The Arrogance of Principle

Woodrow Wilson was a man of outstanding intelligence, with unusual gifts for administration and eloquence. Though his experience of public life was extremely limited before he became president of the United States in 1913, he was elected largely because he was seen for what he was: honest, capable, progressive. He aimed to provide America with democratic institutions equal to the complexity of twentieth-century life. Early in his first presidency he oversaw the introduction of a systematic tariff reduction, largely independent of special interests, the first progressive income tax, the formation of the federal reserve, and he successfully defended his nomination of Brandeis to the Supreme Court against an openly anti-semitic opposition. These all fitted his vision of an open, efficient, and meritocratic society. To other social issues, whose connection with this vision he did not see, he was less responsive. He did not support the extension of the suffrage to women, and during his presidency Washington became racially segregated by law.

The great failure of Wilson's career is the American failure to join the League of Nations. The League was largely Wilson's idea, and he had persuaded largely reluctant European allies at the end of the First World War to make it an integral part of the peace settlement. The price he paid with the allies was his acquiescence in the imposition of crippling reparations on Germany. These were to set the stage for the Second World War, and the Holocaust, which might have been prevented by a sufficiently powerful League, with America at its heart. But America did not join. Wilson could persuade neither the people nor Congress. The reasons lie in a failure of imagination and a failure to compromise. Wilson saw all opposition to the treaty as misguided or political. He could not understand the point of view of progressives who saw the treaty as enmeshing the United States with an incurably un-egalitarian Europe. Nor could he imagine the attitude of ordinary Americans who wanted to be left out of the troubles of the rest of the world. Still, there would have been support in the Senate for a treaty that embodied certain compromises. But he rejected any watering down of the League, and appealed directly for popular support. His campaign was extremely unsuccessful: he had lost touch with the mentality behind both progressive and conservative opposition to the League. To have persuaded the American people in 1919 to an uncompromising adherence to the League would have required overwhelming rhetorical and personal powers, and whether or not Wilson's powers were ever equal to the task, they certainly were not at this stage in his life.

There seem to me to be three core failings here. The first is a failure to see when it is better to compromise than to fail. An accommodation with the Senate could have been achieved, but Wilson's conviction that the project was too important to dilute prevented him from seriously considering it. The second is a blindness to the motives of others. Wilson's sense of the rightness of his cause made it impossible to see that others could have principled objections to it, so that, instead of arguing or persuading at this stage of his life he tended to elegant vituperation. The third is a mis-estimation of his own powers to make others see the rightness of his cause. Tired and ill, trying to convince people in a country with which he had lost touch, he could not hope to succeed, even if his course would have been what an ideally equipped moral agent would have undertaken.

All three failings have a common root. They all testify to the blinding effect of moral conviction. Knowing that one's cause is right can make one see all compromises, less than total realizations of it, as worthless. It can make one underestimate the depth and seriousness of the opposition. And it can make one think that once the point is put clearly any sensible person will be converted. A more cynical person would not have these problems; a more cynical person in the service of Wilson's principles might have achieved more. Not that cynical adherence to principle does not bring its own problems: the point is the extreme demands that real-life politics place on principled agents, and the moral requirement that they find a delicate path through the maze.

There are other ways of reading the histories of these two men. I may be wrong about their motives, their characters, and the causes of their failures. That doesn't really matter. What matters is the phenomena that my renditions of the histories highlight, and the fact that these phenomena are universals of human life. (Or, to put it differently, if you object to my diagnosis of Cato or Wilson, you are likely either to suggest different incompetences which had the same effects, or to contrast my stories with others in which the failures I describe are more plausibly found.) Everywhere in public life people have to decide when to stand on principle and when to compromise; how to grasp, morally and psychologically, the motives of the opposition; and when to take a chance on the effectiveness of one's powers to persuade. These are extremely demanding tasks. Only a very rare person gets it right when the stakes are high, and the consequences of getting it wrong can be catastrophic. One source of catastrophe is the fact that extremely capable, practically and socially competent, people, undertaking the tasks that their abilities make available to them, can easily get into situations where the moral complexities are too high for them. It is because they are intelligent, organized, diligent, and trustworthy that we can see more clearly that there are other basic capacities that they have to a less impressive degree.

My way of telling the two stories brings out reasons why moral incompetence can be most evident in the most admirable people. First of all, as I have just remarked, admirable and capable people are the ones we are likely to choose to

lead us when faced with questions of large-scale moral import. Besides this, there is the factor of moral ambition and confidence. To manage relatively simple low-stakes moral questions highly admirable people, like the rest of us, rely on the virtues, categorizations, and instincts that they have acquired throughout their life. These have their limits: they are likely to be treacherous when people suddenly find themselves out of their depth. In both the Cato story and the Wilson story we can see a man equipped with firm virtues but much less well equipped with the capacity to see their areas of unreliability. Cato and Wilson do not see when their sense of what is honourable or fair may be wrong, or when they should suspect that a pair of virtues—honour and prudence in Cato’s case; fairness and respect in Wilson’s case—may be in conflict in a way that requires a fundamental re-thinking. In fact, neither man would have achieved the eminence that they did had they had less confidence in their capacities. There is a kind of paradox here: we inevitably choose as leaders the kinds of morally confident people who are unlikely to know the boundaries of their competence.

5 COMPETENCES, VIRTUES, META-VIRTUES

Incompetence is the absence of competence. The capacities I am discussing are directed at difficult situations, some so difficult that no person can handle them perfectly. So we cannot contrast the morally incompetent person with the morally capable, fully virtuous, person who can emerge with a good solution to all moral problems. There are no such people. I do not think that we can conceive of creatures anything like human beings that do not often encounter moral problems which exceed their capacities.³ So there are no fully competent people. Moral competence and incompetence come in degrees, and by ‘moral incompetence’ we must sometimes mean unusually incompetent, sometimes incompetent relative to the situation at hand, and sometimes incompetent in some interesting way. This is true of the individual competences that contribute to moral competence, too. The capacity to know when and how to stand on principle is never fully or perfectly exercised by anyone. Neither is the capacity to anticipate other people’s judgements of the character of one’s motives. But the same is true of many traditional virtues, such as courage. There are situations which would terrify any real human being from doing the right thing.

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³ Until recently, few philosophers have used examples involving resolutions of multiple inconsistent promises or reactions to unreasonable, but deeply felt, demands of others, or the like. One reason for this is that philosophers have wanted to show that their theories deliver what their readers will agree are the right answers. So the test cases are ones to which the readers and the philosophers know what the answers are. This makes it harder to see the existence of moral incompetence. It also makes it harder to see how easily decent people can become participants in atrocity. I have discussed this latter theme in Morton 2004a.

Are moral competences virtues, then? Are moral incompetences vices? I am not sure that it matters how we draw the demarcation lines, as long as we are clear that the capacities I am discussing, although vital to moral life, are in significant ways different from the usual examples of moral virtues. To end this chapter I shall list some of the differences, and for each one I shall give three reasons both for considering moral competence to be distinct from virtue, and for considering moral competences to be virtues, though of a special kind. They are moral meta-virtues. (For more on meta-virtues see the final section of Morton 2004b.)

Incompetence is not Vice

Ruth, in this chapter's first example, is not a bad person. She is trying, and making a mess of it. That alone does not prevent her social clumsiness from being a lack of moral virtue, since many people who fail to show courage or kindness when it is called for are not, all things considered, bad people. But there is a difference. When someone is cowardly or unkind we condemn them; we adopt a particular attitude whose full character is notoriously hard to describe, but which is definitely different from the kind of criticism we make when we point out that someone is misinformed or has not appreciated some distinction or has made a mistake in reasoning. We can condemn our friends: condemnation is consistent with affection, though it erodes it. Moral criticism has at least an edge of hostility to it; one of its aims is to change the direction its target is heading. If we understand Ruth, though, we want to take her aside and suggest she learn more about her social limitations, but we don't want to condemn her, to urge that she should have fundamentally different aims in life. Her judgement about what is a good eventual outcome is perfectly sound. The same is true of Cato. He is a man of principle and stubborn devotion to his values, and we admire that. We think his grasp of social and practical reality is flawed, in a way that makes his efforts largely counter-productive. If we are his contemporaries, we wish for a moral capacity that is surely beyond our powers: to get him to see how he is choosing the wrong times and places to resist his enemies. (In this connection, see section 8, 'On Moral Blindness', of Brewer 2002.)

Ruth's and Cato's failings are not matters of motivation; moral virtues are concerned with wanting the right thing at the right moment; therefore the capacities they lack are not virtues. Courage is not wanting to flee when flight would be a bad idea; generosity is wanting to help others when help is called for; prudence—in the familiar sense in which it is *not* a synonym for *phronesis*—is not wanting more danger than is called for. Moral competence is quite different from this. To put it in Christine Swanton's terms, it does not have a definite target. Or, in Rosalind Hursthouse's terms, acting competently does not consist in acting out of a sense of duty linked to that particular aspect of action: one does not think anything like 'this is what competence demands'. (See Swanton 2003: ch. 11 section (iii); Hursthouse 1999: ch. 6.)

On the other hand, there are precedents. Take prudence (in the same sense as the last paragraph's), where the dangers to be avoided are dangers to individual others and to one's own moral standing. It cannot consist just in wanting to avoid such dangers. It must also require one to think through what situations are dangerous, and how dangerous they are. This is hard; one can get it wrong, and as a result act imprudently, not by any flaw in one's motives but because of an incapacity to handle the complexity of risks, including moral risks. Surely that is a kind of moral incompetence, very similar to the others I have been discussing. Consider complex cases in which prudence involves adjudicating between higher and lower likelihoods of one's own benefit, one's own self-respect, respect to others, and benefit to others. Prudence then requires a capacity to know when one's rough estimates of danger and of the comparative weights to attach to all these competing factors are right. It requires the meta-virtue of knowing when one's sense of danger and one's sense of the value of things is accurate, and when instead of acting in accord with simple first order virtues one ought instead to reflect further. This is a virtue-like capacity to know the limits of one's standard armoury of virtues.

Competences do not Exhibit Means

An Aristotelian virtue of character typically entails a mean. That is, the virtuous person cannot identify some quality of outcome or motive and simply go for it. That results in imprudence rather than courage; cowardice rather than prudence; soft-heartedness rather than generosity. Instead, famously, the virtuous person must exercise a very delicate capacity to know how much and when. This capacity cannot consist in knowing a graspable set of truths; if it could be the virtue would be redundant given simply intelligence and good intentions. Contrast this with the capacities that fail in moral incompetence. You cannot have too much grasp of others' likely reactions, or of others' construal of your own motives, or of techniques for balancing between principle and expediency. You never need an inner voice whispering 'this is the wrong moment to see that the other guy has principles too.' Instead, since moral competence is engaged in an unequal struggle with the complexity of moral life we simply need as much of it as we can get. No means.

Again, if we look more closely, we can still assimilate competences to more standard-issue virtues of character. Suppose we accept that moral competence is usually more a matter of knowing how than knowing when. It is not as if virtues on the traditional lists do not also require a lot of knowing how. Generosity, for example, often requires that one know how to benefit people without making them feel demeaned. Traditional virtues of character also involve means, of course, but finding the mean often involves just the kind of wrestling with complexity and unpredictability that is the focus of this chapter. To know if this is the right moment to stand one's ground courageously against a bully

requires thinking through the likelihood of losing the confrontation, and the consequences this might have. And, more subtly, it requires considering the possible adverse consequences of winning (the bully might turn his anger on someone more vulnerable; his loss of face might allow some yet more malign force an opportunity). If all things considered this is the wrong moment to stand up to the bully, doing so is not an exhibition of virtuous courage, even if it is a brave thing to do. So part of the thinking involved in moral competence is also needed to negotiate the mean of a traditional virtue.

Add to this fact another consideration. There *are* means with respect to, for example, knowing when to stand on principle. Sometimes though you could think more about whether this is the right moment, and as a result know better whether it is, more thinking is not what is called for. You just have to use the little understanding you have and jump in, or hold back. This is the mean of a higher-order virtue, much like the higher-order mean of knowing when you have reflected enough on whether this is the moment for courage. There is a virtue of reflecting just the right amount. And, as with the complex cases of prudence I discussed above, it can be reasonably described as a meta-virtue governing the limits and applications of the moral capacities that are used in more routine cases.

Moral Competence is not Learned by Imitation

An Aristotelian virtue is acquired by absorbing the manner of others who are in various ways admirable. One way this can work is by providing a great number of examples of right action, from which the learner can generalize, usually in a pattern-recognizing rather than a principle-formulating way. Another way is by a kind of empathetic identification with the admired model, which fine-tunes many subtle psychological factors.⁴ But moral incompetence can be exhibited by highly admirable people, when they face situations that are too subtle or too complex for them. So a young Roman who had hung around Cato would acquire courage, respect for principled action, resoluteness, and sociability. But this would not guarantee that he would not fail as Cato did, when faced with the same challenges. In fact, there are no exemplars of moral competence to imitate. There are exemplars of various kinds of incompetence, and individuals who handle many situations competently and then fail when things get too hard.

On the other hand, something similar is true for all virtues. You can learn something about courage from the company of a wise and brave person, and, all going well, you will absorb something of what she has. But in situations that test your and her courage you may still do less well than she, or it may turn out that she fails the test and you do not. The contrast between, for example, knowing how to steer between competing obligations and knowing when to stand up to an aggressor is not that either can be learned perfectly, because neither can

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⁴ On imitation cp. Fossheim's chapter in this collection.

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ever be acquired perfectly, but that the former much more than the latter can be demonstrated in simple paradigm situations, from which something can be learned that is of some use in more messy and challenging ones. Most of the competences whose absence makes for moral incompetence are not like that. So if they are virtues they are rather special ones. But, still, they are acquired and the presence of role models may often be important when they are.

A conclusion? I don't think it is very important whether we classify the capacities whose absence or insufficiency results in moral incompetence as virtues. My own preference would be to restrict 'virtue' to those moral traits which involve a definite pattern of motivation and action governed by an Aristotelian mean, the character traits discussed in books 2 to 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I would then prefer to classify the qualities of intellect and self-control whose failures this chapter focuses on as just that, intellectual qualities for handling the morally relevant aspects of social complexity, inadequacy of information, conflict of obligation, and the like. Within these qualities I would make a basic distinction between failures in handling the kinds of complex thinking demanded by hard moral problems, and failures in understanding and negotiating the limits of the simple virtues that get one through run-of-the-mill situations. The latter are what I am calling meta-virtues. Their failure is particularly associated with the moral incompetence of high-principled morally ambitious people. But the morally over-extended situations of such people simply make more visible the delicacy of tasks that we all undertake, sometimes successfully and sometimes disastrously, as part of shared human life.⁵

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⁵ I have had extremely helpful comments on drafts of this chapter from Timothy Chappell, Susan Dwyer, Glen Koehn, and Holly Smith. The audience at the Dundee Values and Virtues conference in May 2004 gave me an amiably hard time, which resulted in a number of changes.