Comment:
Unity of the Virtues

Discussing 'the things for which men, and especially princes, are praised or blamed', Machiavelli contended that 'it is not possible to observe *all* the moral qualities, particularly if one is a prince.

When faced with a moral dilemma, the question for most people is: 'What ought I to do?' Mostly, no doubt, people take the utilitarian line — do whatever has the happiest outcome. Many Christians, on the other hand, still prefer the divine command theory — do what the rules require, whatever the consequences.

For admirers of Thomas Aquinas, however, the question is rather: 'What kind of person should I be?' In philosophy, for years now, since Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch first wrote, there has been a steady rise of 'virtue ethics' — in effect, a retrieval of ancient Greek ethics, with the focus on the virtues (and vices) that shape a person's *character*. The question is, not whether what you do in a moral dilemma produces particular consequences, or conforms with a given rule, but what sort of character it shows you to have.

One question that arises, in this approach, is whether you can have *some* virtues without having them *all* — or rather, as Saint Thomas puts it (e.g. *Summa Theologiae* 1a 2ae 65, 1), whether the moral virtues entail one another. It might seem not. One can practise one virtue without practising others. Circumstances may be such that you could not practise, or even possess, a particular virtue, e.g., if you have nothing, how could you be generous? On the intellectual side we can be right in one subject-area and wrong in many others; why should we expect more consistency and integration in our moral reactions?

These are serious objections. Thomas, however, quoting Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory the Great and Cicero, insists that, if a man's moral judgment is lacking in *one* respect, it is vitiated in *all*. One who controls his irritability, for example, but easily yields to lust, is inclined to act in accordance with the virtue of patience — but he doesn't actually have the virtue. For no virtue is a virtue unless all your conduct is regulated by that habit of sound moral judgment which Thomas calls 'prudence'. It would be inconsistent, Thomas quotes Cicero as saying, 'for a man to be unbroken by fear, yet be shattered by cupidity, or that he would be conquered by lust, after showing himself unconquered by hardship'. To say that we are moral agents is to say that we are rational beings, required to conduct ourselves in

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accordance with reason; and if a person behaves reasonably in *some* respects but not *others*, then he or she is not really a reasonable *person* — which means, in turn, that even the apparently reasonable actions are not completely so. They do not issue from a person of sound judgment.

If you can't trust me to do *this*, why should you trust me to do *that*? This ancient doctrine of the interdependence of the virtues may seem highminded and academic — yet it is easily enough grounded in everyday life. When a man has a history of unreasonable behaviour in one respect, his judgment in other respects becomes suspect — understandably so.

Yet, as Peter Geach argued in his Stanton Lectures, the unity-of-the-virtues thesis is 'both odious and preposterous' (*The Virtues* , page 164). It holds only 'if men formed their judgments with rigorous consistency' — 'but notoriously they do nothing of the kind, and we may thank God that they do not'! Indeed, a degree of inconsistency and even of vice is highly desirable: 'How much more affliction tyrants would cause if their minions were sea-green incorruptibles, flawlessly efficient and indefatigably industrious'! It is well that people are lazy, incompetent and prone to take bribes. 'Nor', Professor Geach adds, 'is it only for the sake of his fellows that the bad man's worst vices are partly neutralized by his laziness, incompetence, and venality; in his own soul too these minor vices may prevent his major vices from coming to full development and obliterating what of good is left in him'.

Perhaps. The ancient philosophers recognized the complexity of human beings as clearly as we do. This virtuous person, with a character unified by his or her capacity to make wise and balanced moral judgments whatever the dilemmas, pressures and temptations that the world presents, is an ideal — not a denial of the kind of fragmented and tortuously self-deceiving beings that we mostly are. It is arguable how flawed a prince, or a pope, or the President of the United States, may be. People can compartmentalize their lives — with different standards in business and in at home, or as regards public and private commitments. Yet, if unity of the virtues is too demanding an ideal, we surely do wonder about the soundness of a person's moral judgment in other matters when he or she displays little self-control in one particular one. But we may be wrong to do so, in many cases.

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