

A Feminist Defense of the Unity of the Virtues

Ben Bryan

Received: 11 January 2013 / Accepted: 21 February 2013 /
Published online: 5 March 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

Abstract In *The Impossibility of Perfection*, Michael Slote tries to show that the traditional Aristotelian doctrine of the unity of the virtues is mistaken. His argumentative strategy is to provide counterexamples to this doctrine, by showing that there are what he calls “partial virtues”—pairs of virtues that conflict with one another but both of which are ethically indispensable. Slote offers two lines of argument for the existence of partial virtues. The first is an argument for the partiality of a particular pair of virtues: frankness and tact. The second is a kind of feminist critique. I argue that both of these lines of argument fail. In both cases, Slote fails to ask whether the apparent conflict between putatively partial virtues has arisen from a misunderstanding of the demands of those virtues. From this error I suggest we can learn an important lesson: whether in our studies thinking about the virtues or in our everyday lives trying to practice them, it is a serious mistake to focus on the relationships among virtues without considering precisely what each of these virtues demands.

Keywords Feminism · Michael slote · Unity of the virtues · Virtue ethics

In *The Impossibility of Perfection* (Slote 2011), Michael Slote tries to show that the traditional Aristotelian doctrine of the unity of the virtues is mistaken. Slote’s argumentative strategy is essentially to provide counterexamples to this doctrine, by showing that there are what he calls “partial virtues”—pairs of virtues that conflict with one another but each of which is ethically indispensable. Slote offers two lines of argument for the existence of partial virtues. The first is an argument for the partiality of a particular pair of virtues: frankness and tact. There are cases, Slote claims, in which we ought to exercise both frankness and tact but it is impossible (not merely difficult) to do so perfectly. The second line of argument is a kind of feminist critique. Many of the virtues that Slote suggests are partial are virtues that traditional, patriarchal cultures took to be indexed to gender. Slote suggests that seriously

B. Bryan (✉)

Department of Philosophy, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH, USA
e-mail: ben.a.bryan@gmail.com

considering the implications of the idea that values like career and family are in fact not indexed to gender should lead us to the conclusion that these values are in fact partial.

I will argue that both of these lines of argument fail. Slote's argument for the partiality of frankness and tact depends on a problematic conception of frankness. His feminist critique fails to take seriously the degree to which we ought to rethink the content of traditionally gendered values. In both cases, Slote fails to ask whether the apparent conflict between putatively partial virtues has arisen from a misunderstanding of the demands of those virtues. From this error I will suggest we can learn an important lesson: whether in our studies thinking about the virtues or in our everyday lives trying to practice them, it is a serious mistake to focus on the relationships among virtues without considering precisely what each of these virtues demands.

Moral Complexity and Framing the Dispute

Before dealing with the particulars of Slote's arguments, it seems to me important to consider just what is at stake—rather, what is *not* at stake—in the dispute over the unity of the virtues. We should question the way Slote frames this dispute. Slote's challenge to the traditional, Aristotelian understanding of virtue seems to be motivated in large part by the worry that it is unable to cope with moral complexity. Slote takes himself to be offering an alternative picture of moral life “that emphasizes the complexity and tensions within our understanding of ethical phenomena in a way that Aristotle never did and perhaps was never in a position to do” (p. 124). Today we are aware, Slote suggests, of a kind of moral complexity that Aristotle never encountered in his homogeneous, patriarchal society. For this reason, he suggests, we should consider an alternative picture more suited to the complexity of our day and age.

This way of framing the choice between Aristotelian virtue ethics and Slote's brand of virtue ethics—as a choice between moral simplicity and moral complexity—fails to appreciate the fact that one of the most striking and central features of Aristotle's view is its ability to capture moral complexity. In fact, its sensitivity to moral complexity seems to me the fundamental attraction of virtue ethics in general, whether of the traditional Aristotelian sort or of the alternative sort Slote recommends. The very notion of a virtue is an acknowledgement of moral complexity. A virtue is not a one-size-fits all rule. The particular demands of justice, temperance, kindness, generosity, and the like will vary widely from context to context. Aristotle himself displayed an unusual awareness of the need for such context-sensitivity. In fact, such sensitivity is the aim of the Aristotelian idea of the mean that Slote is so eager to reject! In recognizing the complexities of moral life today, we should take care not to forget either that there are profound complexities involved in everyday life (and not just in the 21st century!) or that one of the primary aims and achievements of virtue ethics in general is to capture this complexity. Slote has no special claim to sensitivity to moral complexity.

None of this, of course, undermines Slote's arguments. For all I have said thus far, Slote could be right to reject the unity of the virtues. But what these considerations do suggest is that we should not frame the choice between Aristotle and Slote as a choice between moral simplicity and moral complexity. The choice is really between two

different conceptions of moral complexity. Both Aristotle and Slote acknowledge that the problem of morality is figuring out how to be a good person in a variety of morally complex situations to which there is no simple, one-size fits all solution. But where Aristotelians want to insist that in every such situation it is possible, if difficult, to act virtuously, Slote worries that there some areas of our lives in which is simply impossible, in principle, to avoid moral deficiency. Slote's claim, then, is that there is a particular *kind* of moral complexity that our moral theory should capture.

The Failure of Slote's Argument from Frankness and Tact

Slote's argument, then, is not so much *against* the unity of the virtues as *for* the existence of a particular kind of disunity in the virtues. This is why I have suggested that it is best to think of his argumentative strategy as offering counterexamples to the unity thesis. Slote's counterexamples are instances of what he calls "partial virtues." Partial virtues are pairs of virtues that have two features: the members of the pair conflict with one another and each member of the pair is ethically indispensable. The latter feature is especially important. Two virtues are not partial simply because they clash. For example, we might think that there is a kind of virtue in both gregariousness and soft-spokenness. But one cannot be both gregarious and soft-spoken. Yet the fact that these two are incompatible is neither surprising nor problematic. The reason that the conflict between gregariousness and soft-spokenness does not surprise or worry us is that these things are only valuable insofar as they promote other more unqualified values, perhaps friendliness and humility. While gregariousness and soft-spokenness may conflict, they are not partial, because neither is ethically indispensable. We can treat gregariousness and soft-spokenness pluralistically—while one cannot be both gregarious and soft-spoken at the same time, neither a gregarious person nor a soft-spoken one need be failing in any important way. "To call some trait a partial virtue," on the other hand, "is not only to make the relational claim that it conflicts with a certain other (partial) virtue or virtues, but to characterize it as being in itself so ethically important that no one can be entirely admirable or perfectly virtuous in its absence" (p. 49).

If such partial virtues exist, then there is a fundamental disunity in the virtues. If two virtues conflict with one another and are both necessary for perfect virtue, then in some cases where both virtues are demanded there will be no course of action that is above moral criticism. "In some situations where [partial virtues] clash," Slote writes, "acting on either one of them will be ethically less than ideal" (p. 31). If such conflict is possible then even weak formulations of the unity of the virtues are undermined—for if Slote can show us an example of a genuine partial virtue, he has not only shown us a virtue that does not require the possession of other virtues, but a of a virtue that sometimes *excludes* another virtue. This would be quite a discovery!

While Slote suggests several examples of partial virtues, he only gives an extended argument for the partiality of one pair of virtues—frankness and tact. This argument is built on a single case, in which Slote claims it is impossible to avoid failing with regard to one or both of these virtues. He takes this case to be unusually powerful, far more problematic than everyday struggles to balance frankness and tact. In fact, Slote goes out of his way to argue that such ordinary struggles present no problem for the

unity of the virtues. He argues, for example, that a similar case presented by Gary Watson—in which someone asks his colleagues what they think of his book—presents no challenge to the unity of the virtues. Slote argues that we should accept Watson’s claim about this case: our choice about how forward to be about our assessment of the book is, within certain boundaries, a matter of style—in such cases, we can be more or less forward without failing morally (p. 56–57). In Slote’s more complex case, in contrast, Slote insists that “whatever choice one makes will be less than ethically ideal” (p. 30). Since so much hinges on it, it is worth looking at Slote’s full description of the case:

Imagine that you have a friend who is always getting himself into abusive relationships that eventually turn sour and become intolerable for him. You have previously pointed this out to the friend; but he says he has no idea what you are talking about and enters into new and abusive relationships without seeming to have benefited in any way from what you or other friends have told him. (He also isn’t willing to talk to a therapist about his problems.) So imagine further that your friend comes to you after his latest relationship has broken up and deplors the awful bad luck (as he puts it) that has led him once again into an unhappy and unsuccessful relationship. But he has no idea how abusively he has been treated (in this relationship or the others) and simply asks you, implores you, to tell him why you think this sort of thing is always happening to him. “What am I doing wrong?” he asks. However, you have told him in the past that he has a tendency to accept abuse, and you don’t believe there is any chance he is going to change his ways or his thinking. (Assume he is an older man.) So what do you say to him?

Well, since he is imploring you to tell him what you think, you might (once again) be frank with him and explain the role he himself plays in bringing about these disasters (e.g., by accepting abuse, from the start, in the relationships he enters into). But you have every reason to believe (let’s assume) that if you say this to him, it won’t really register with him or make any difference to his future behavior; whereas, *if you just commiserate with him and say that you don’t understand how he can be so unlucky*, he will feel much relieved or consoled by what he takes (or would like to take) to be your understandingness and what is clearly your sympathy vis-à-vis his situation. So what do you do? I don’t think there is a right answer to this question (p. 30–31).

Slote’s case has two features that seem to make it stronger than more mundane cases: (1) your friend explicitly insists that you be honest with him and (2) he is psychologically incapable of benefitting from honest counsel, because he will only be discouraged by hearing the truth. These considerations pull in opposite directions. On one hand, since your friend has asked you to tell him frankly what he has done wrong, it seems you ought to tell him the truth. On the other hand, your telling him the truth will only hurt him: he will not change his behavior and will only be discouraged by being told the truth. This leads Slote to conclude that there is no way to act that is ethically acceptable:

If one is tactful, one will have compromised one’s frankness (or honesty) with a friend who is imploring one to be frank, and to that extent one is open to the (mildish) criticisms that what one has done is less than ideal and that, more

particularly, one has shown oneself to be somewhat lacking in the virtue of frankness. By the same token, if one is frank, one will have acted in a way that isn't entirely kind (or tactful), and, once again, what one has done will count as less than ethically ideal. Or so at least it seems to me. But if this take on the situation I have described is correct, the doctrine of the unity of the virtues is at the very least called into question; and, again more importantly for present purposes, we can see that—just as sadism and masochism war against one another as instincts according to Freudian theory—frankness and tact war against one another *as ethical virtues* (p. 31).

There is no question that it is difficult to decide what do in this case. Slote is right to recognize that this case is more difficult than everyday struggles to balance frankness and tact. When we consider why this is, however, I think we will see that we need not reach Slote's conclusion that there is no way to remain above reproach in the situation he describes.

At first glance, it may seem there is something rather obviously wrong with Slote's argument: it seems plausible that frankness and tact do not meet the second condition for partial virtues—ethical indispensability. We might think that frankness and tact, like gregariousness and soft-spokenness, are only valuable insofar as they contribute to other values, perhaps kindness and honesty. If this is right, then Slote has not shown that frankness and tact are partial virtues, only that they conflict. Slote, however, seems aware of this kind of worry. Notice that, in the above passage, he refers to frankness and tact interchangeably with honesty in kindness. For the sake of charity, then, we should frame Slote's argument in terms of the virtues of honesty and kindness. When we frame things this way, however, it is not so clear there is no way to avoid a moral failing.

One rather simplistic worry we might have about Slote's case is that it is not one in which we have to fail *morally*. We may be bound to fail to preserve our friend's feelings or even our friendship, but that does not show that we are bound to display deficient character. It is hard to decide what to do in advance, and we are unlikely to be satisfied with what we have done after we have done it. But this does not show that we cannot act in a way that is above reproach. There may be no way to avoid offending our friend or acting in a way we are less than satisfied with, but we should not expect otherwise when we encounter this sort of situation. Dealing with other people, especially irrational people, is bound to be messy, and the best among us is likely to be unsure whether he has acted as he should. We might worry that our judgment that we cannot succeed in the situation Slote describes is driven by the fact that we will likely be unhappy with the results, rather than by any judgments about what kind of character we would display. We might think Slote's argument is built on an equivocation: he argues we are bound to "fail" in this case. We might admit this without admitting we are bound to fail *morally*.

Slote, however, seems rather clearly to think we have failed morally—he insists we must have failed to display one of two virtues. Further, he constructs the case with two particular virtues in mind. He wants us to think that honesty demands one thing and kindness demands another. While we may think that our own judgment that we must "fail" has little to do with virtue, and while recognizing this fact about the basis of our judgment may undermine much of the initial force of Slote's case, it does not

address Slote's argument. Slote has argued that honesty and kindness produce conflicting demands in this case and that we cannot possibly meet both of those demands. The appropriate way to evaluate this argument is to ask whether the virtues in question really do produce conflicting demands.

The trouble is, when we carefully consider the details of Slote's case, and think about what the relevant virtues demand, there is good reason to question whether we ought to tell the truth. Consider the kind of person Slote describes. Our friend is not someone who will respond to our reasoning with him. No matter how kindly and compellingly we tell him the truth, he will not change his behavior. This is an important stipulation, for without it, Slote's claim that telling the truth would involve a failure of kindness would be called into question. If there is some hope that our friend will respond to the truth in a way that will be good for him, then it seems plausible to think that we ought to tell him the truth—doing so, of course, as carefully, kindly, and humbly as possible. After all, it is not unkind to be uncomfortably honest with someone in order to help to him to avoid more pain in the future. What is supposed to be unkind about telling the truth in Slote's case is that there is no hope that our telling the truth will do any good.

We can see the work Slote's stipulation is supposed to do: if our friend will not benefit from the truth, it then it would be unkind to tell him the truth. Slote does not seriously consider, however, the implications of this stipulation with regard to other virtue in play—honesty. At least with respect to his relationships, the friend is not engaged in the practice of trying to respond to reasons. On some plausible conceptions of the virtue of honesty this fact will undermine the case for telling the truth to our friend. We might think, for example, that the reason it is virtuous to be honest is because one ought to be the sort of person who gives truth to others who are engaged in the practice of properly responding to it—honesty is a disposition appropriate to a member of a community of people who are trying to live according to the truth. But when someone clearly is not engaged in this practice—consider, for example, the classic case of a murderer asking to know where his intended victim is—it is not unvirtuous to withhold the truth or even to lie. On this conception of honesty, Slote's case evaporates. We need not tell our friend the truth simply because he asks for it.

This, of course, is only one plausible conception of the virtue of honesty or frankness; we might have some other. The trouble is that Slote gives us no reason to reject this conception of the virtue of honesty, and his argument seems to depend on a much stronger and quite contentious conception. Slote emphasizes the fact that our friend has asked us for the truth. Surely, though, he does not mean to suggest that honesty demands that we tell the truth simply because we are asked for it. Beyond seeming intuitively implausible (you must tell the murderer where his victims are!), it seems to undermine a major attraction of thinking in terms of virtues to begin with. After all, perhaps the greatest virtue of thinking about honesty in terms of virtue is that doing so allows us to avoid a fanatical commitment to truth telling. Given Slote's own concern for capturing moral complexity, he seems unlikely to affirm such a strict conception of the virtue of honesty or frankness. Yet he needs something approaching this conception in order to insist that we must tell our friend the truth.

Given that the friend in Slote's case is, by Slote's own stipulation, beyond responding to reasons, it seems quite reasonable to think that Slote's case is one in which we need not tell the truth. When we take seriously just what kind of person

Slote has described, Slote's certainty that avoiding the truth would involve a moral failing seems unfounded. The argument that these virtues are partial would have to rest on a rather demanding conception of the virtue of honesty. I do not mean to deny the possibility of developing some plausible conception of honesty that would require telling the truth in Slote's case. The possible existence of such a conception, however, is not much help. The appropriate response to an argument that we ought to believe that a pair of virtues is partial, provided that we have an especially strong conception of one of them, is to demand a defense—or at least a statement—of the especially strong conception of that virtue. Given that Slote gives us no indication of what sort of conception of honesty his argument depends on, and there seems an attractive alternative conception that undermines his argument, we do not have much reason to think that frankness and tact are partial virtues.

Deepening Slote's Feminist Critique

Slote sometimes appears to recognize that his argument for the partiality of frankness and tact may not be decisive, and often speaks of his project as a kind of gesture at a new and fruitful way of thinking about value, one that should be especially appealing in light of certain feminist concerns (p. 46, 123–125). I will argue, however, that the feminist worries Slote raises actually undermine his case for the partiality of the pairs of virtues connected to his feminist concerns.

Slote's project in *The Impossibility of Perfection* is motivated in large part by the question of how to think about virtues and goods that were traditionally indexed to gender (p. 12–38). Take career and family, for example. Patriarchal moral thinking treats devotion to career as a masculine good or virtue and devotion to family as a feminine good or virtue. Once we abandon the belief that such values are gendered, however, we have to figure out how to integrate both career and family into a single life. Slote does well to dwell on the problems that this raises. The familiar struggle to balance family and career is something about which our ethical theories should have something to say. Patriarchal moral thinking, of course, avoids this problem by a sort of division of labor—men aim at career success and women at a fulfilling family life. But once we shed the assumption that the value of these things is indexed to gender we have a problem to deal with, both in thinking about how to live and in the dirty business of actually living.

Slote suggests that an important step in making sense of the struggle to integrate both of a pair of traditionally gendered values into a single life is to admit that part of the problem is with value itself—the virtues or goods in play are partial. This means, for example, that there is simply no way to perfectly achieve a balance between career and family. Slote suggests that discovering this should provide a sort of relief:

The idea that those difficulties are not an artifact of particular social arrangements or of certain people's failings or inadequacies and that they indicate something very deep about our (or anyone else's) ethical condition, the idea that the best explanation or account of those difficulties leads us, if we take into account our own intuitive ethical understandings and sensitivities, to the thought that perfect happiness is in principle impossible, certainly represents

a radical break with traditional or Aristotelian understandings. And that is something that, other things being equal, we are and should be intellectually or philosophically reluctant to commit ourselves to. But our radical conclusion here also has something attractive about it, for it could be in some measure consoling to know that the heartache, handwringing, personal and family tension(s), and hardworking practical excogitation that have accompanied our thinking and worrying about how to balance career/creative fulfillment and relationships are not due to our own inadequacies or our society's but are basic to the condition of any set of intelligent beings who live in (what we would call) an advanced society (p. 124–125).

Acknowledging that values like career and family are partial allows us, Slote suggests, to stop beating ourselves up for failing to balance them.

Here Slote fails to consider the same possibility that he fails to consider with regard to frankness and tact—the possibility that genuine conflict between the values in question hinges on a misunderstanding of one of those values. In the case of frankness and tact, we discovered that the apparent conflict between them rests on a conception of frankness or honesty that is too strong. In the case of traditionally gendered values like career and family, we should consider the same possibility. Perhaps we have misunderstood what is valuable about career and family life. It would be remarkable if the moral thinking that wrongly indexed these values to gender managed to correctly understand the values themselves. Worries along these lines are quite familiar. The most obvious of such worries—about which it is remarkable that Slote has nothing to say—are feminist critiques of the traditional conception of family life. Some feminists might worry that the reason we struggle so much to balance family life and other concerns is that we simply cannot let go of the morally obsolete institution of the family. There are also plausible feminist reasons to worry that traditional thinking has left us with an overly ambitious conception of career success. After all, it emerged in a setting where those who had careers were expected to be sole providers for a family and were not expected to share in many responsibilities in the home. There are also non-feminist reasons we might reject current conceptions of career success. We can imagine anti-capitalist or agrarian critiques, for example, that argue that contemporary economic conditions have led us to place too much value on individual career success instead of on family and community life.

We need not adopt any of these particular lines of critique, of course, to share their basic worry that our current thinking about what is valuable about family life and career success is simply confused. A large part of our everyday struggle to balance family life and career success is trying to understand what it means to succeed with respect to each of them. Does career success require that I come in to the office first, leave last, get every promotion, and become the best at what I do? Or should I just try to make a living and get by? Am I missing out on something valuable, or failing to excel at work if I just make a living and leave it at that? And what about family life? How important is it to make my children's activities and projects a higher priority than my own? Should I have children? Should I get married? These questions are not just about the thing that Slote is concerned about—balancing different values like family and career. They are also questions about what each

of these values amounts to—what it means to be a good employee, a good parent, a good spouse, and so on.

Perhaps the root of our struggle to integrate values like career and family into the same life is not the partiality of the objectively correct values, but the partiality of *our conceptions* of these values. That is, many of us have conceptions of family life and career success that make them partial—we think both are indispensable, but understand them in ways that make them impossible to achieve together. Perhaps, then, Slote's notion of partial values is a helpful way of diagnosing a problem—*our* problem. Slote's arguments that various values are partial all depend on the assumption that our values are basically correct and the only question up for discussion is what relationship these values have to one another. This assumption is unwarranted. Before we conclude that there is deep conflict between family and career, we should ask ourselves whether we are confident that we correctly understand what is valuable about these things. And we have excellent reason to question this assumption. Given his feminist concerns, Slote has especially strong reason to question it. If we worry about patriarchal thinking preventing us from correctly understanding the relationship between values like career and family, we should also be worried about it confusing our thinking about the content of these values.

Conclusion

Both of Slote's arguments involve the same oversight: they ignore the possibility that apparent conflict between putatively partial virtues is a result of a misunderstanding of the content of one of those virtues. Of course, if this were only a general possibility, it would serve as little more than a word of caution. It would not do to object to arguments for the existence of partial virtues by expressing the concern that we *might have* misunderstood one of the putatively partial virtues. In Slote's case, however, we can do more than express such a general concern, for we have good reason to believe that we *have* misunderstood the specific virtues in question. Slote's argument that frankness and tact are partial seems to depend on a conception of frankness that is too strong. We also have strong reasons to think we have misunderstood the traditionally gendered virtues Slote suggests are partial. Worse, one of the reasons that we are likely to have misunderstood them is that they grew in the same patriarchal climate that Slote suggests led us to misunderstand the relationships among them. Slote has given us little reason, then, to doubt the unity of the virtues.

Though his arguments fail to undermine the unity of the virtues, Slote is concerned with a worthwhile question: how should we think about the struggle to integrate apparently conflicting virtues—especially those that were once thought to be indexed to gender—into a single life? While Slote's answer is problematic, understanding where he goes wrong teaches us something important—both theoretically and practically—about how we should think about this question. Slote's arguments focus almost exclusively on the relationships between virtues, and thus fail to consider important questions about the content of these virtues. We have seen the theoretical importance of this mistake: when revising our thinking about virtues in light of feminist concerns, we should attend as much to the content of these virtues as to the relationships between them. Understanding Slote's mistakes also has an important

practical upshot. Seeing the trouble with Slote's arguments draws our attention to an important challenge for our everyday deliberations: when we face situations where we are unsure how to balance apparently competing ethical demands, we ought to examine our conceptions of the values that give rise to these demands. When I struggle to balance career and family, I should not only ask how to balance being a good family member and a good employee, but also what it means to be a good family member and good employee. I may discover that part of my struggle to balance career and family is that I have been unsure what I am aiming at in my career or in my family. Perhaps I will discover I have been focusing too much on how much time to spend at home instead of on how I spend that time, or that I have been too worried about being successful instead of being a good worker. To be sure, we will never eliminate the need to balance virtues that appear to pull in different directions. It could even turn out that there is some other pair of partial virtues that Slote does not consider, or that there are better arguments for the partiality of the pairs of virtues he does consider. Even so, when virtues appear to pull in opposite directions, we would do well to begin by thinking carefully about what each of those virtues amounts to, and not only about what it means to balance them and whether balancing them is possible.

Acknowledgments For comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I'm grateful to Michael Weber, Tim Walsh, Tait Szabo, and audiences at the Bowling Green Graduate Colloquium Series and the Fall 2012 meeting of the Indiana Philosophical Association.

References

- Slote, M. (2011). *The impossibility of perfection: Aristotle, feminism, and the complexities of ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.