

# Constancy, Fidelity, and Integrity

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## 1. Introduction

To possess the virtue of honesty or kindness, it is not enough to act sometimes in honest or kind ways. Virtues, like character traits in general, are standing properties of agents that explain their actions. Over the past decade or so, philosophers have debated whether the findings of experimental social psychology undermine the traditional confidence that people do indeed possess such dispositions. This debate has supposed that dispositions are states that generate a particular kind of output from a particular kind of input. The fragility of a vase, on this view, is the disposition to shatter when struck with a certain amount of force. Likewise, the virtue of compassion is, or includes, a disposition to respond to other people's suffering, or the prospect of it, with actions, or at least thoughts and feelings, that tend towards alleviating or averting that suffering. The disagreement has concerned whether people really can develop dispositions to respond appropriately to such a stimulus irrespective of the fine details of the context in which that stimulus occurs (see Miller, this volume).

However, there are many virtues and other character traits that are not properly understood in terms of stimulus and response. The virtues of constancy, fidelity, and integrity form one cluster of such traits. These traits may be displayed in behaviour in difficult circumstances, but what seems essential to them is not the way in which one responds to any particular kind of situation. They are rather matters of one's orientation towards one's own commitments. One of our aims in this chapter is to clarify exactly what this orientation is for each of these traits. In so doing, we develop accounts of the virtues of constancy, fidelity, integrity, and the relations between them. Our other aim is to clarify the sense in which these traits are dispositions of the agent, even though they are not matters of stimulus and response. We will argue that they are comprised of attitudes, as these are conceived of in experimental psychology, and that this means that they have the metaphysical structure of powers, as these are conceived of in the philosophical debate over the nature of dispositions.

## 2. Attitudes and Powers

Experimental psychologists have been studying attitudes for nearly a century. Over that time, the conception of attitudes generally accepted by psychologists has evolved under the pressures of new experimental findings and of the changing conception of the nature and appropriate methodologies of experimental psychology. Contemporary psychologists generally agree that attitudes consist in clusters of affective and non-affective mental states. These states are bound together by associative connections of varying strengths. The content of an attitude is a function of the contents of these constituent states. An attitude also has an overall strength, which is a function of the strengths of the associative connections between the constituent states.

It is important that this strength is distinct from the content of the attitude. For example, if you have a positive attitude towards bananas, this might be because you like the taste of bananas, think that bananas are healthy, have a desire to be healthy, and so on. These constituents determine the content of your attitude towards bananas, so in this case you are positive about bananas for reasons of enjoyment and health. The question of how positive you are about bananas is also a question of content. You might like the taste of bananas a little or a lot. You might think that they are moderately healthy or think they are very healthy. You might be barely, moderately, or extremely concerned about eating healthily. These are all aspects of the content of your attitude towards bananas. The strength of the attitude, that is to say, is not a matter of the degree to which you are positive about bananas.

Strength is rather a matter of the degree of influence your attitude has over your behavioural cognition. This is determined by the strengths of the associative connections between the constituent mental states. Behavioural cognition, on this model, is to be understood as a flow of activity across a network of interconnected mental states. The directions that this flow takes are determined by the strengths of the connections between the mental states: the stronger the connection, the more activity flows along it. If your various beliefs and desires about bananas are only weakly related to one another, then the attitude they comprise will exert only weak influence on the overall flow of activity. The stronger the connections are between these constituent states, the stronger the influence the attitude will have over behavioural cognition. (For a more detailed articulation of attitude psychology and its relation to virtue ethics, see Webber 2013.)

Attitudes are therefore states of the person that influence cognition. The kind of influence they have is determined by their contents, but the degree of influence they have is determined by their strengths. But since they are clusters of states in a

connectionist network, all of which are associated with many other states in that network, the influence an attitude can have is not dependent on its being activated in response to some particular kind of situational feature. An attitude can influence the activity within the system irrespective of the nature of the incoming information that initiated that activity. Since the attitude will involve many associative connections with other mental states in the system, moreover, there need be no unity to the range of events in the system that can be influenced by that attitude.

For these reasons, attitudes are properly thought of as dispositional, since they are standing properties that influence cognition and behaviour, but cannot be captured in terms of stimulus and response. Dispositions need not be understood as essentially reactive states that lie dormant until awakened by some stimulus and that then, once awakened, cause some outcome. Dispositions can instead be understood as powers that constitute continual tendencies towards some outcome. Such a tendency will bring about its outcome whenever countervailing pressures are not collectively stronger than the combined force of the tendency and other tendencies towards the same outcome. Understood as powers, then, tendencies can be represented mathematically as vectors towards some outcome (Mumford and Anjum 2011). Attitudes are tendencies of this kind. Your positive attitude towards bananas is a continual tendency towards pro-banana thoughts and actions, such as sourcing and eating bananas, one that is manifested in action only when not counteracted by situational features in conjunction with other personal dispositions. The pressure it exerts towards this outcome is a matter of its strength and thereby its influence over behavioural cognition.

Together, this psychological structure of attitudes and metaphysical structure of powers provide an architecture of personal traits that allows us to develop accounts of constancy, fidelity, and integrity as tendencies towards developing and maintaining one's commitments in various ways. We will begin by discussing constancy, then

consider two kinds of fidelity, then finally consider the nature of integrity. We will argue that constancy consists in a certain kind of attitude towards maintaining the commitments one considers to be especially important, one kind of fidelity consists in acting on the commitments one holds, the other consists in a commitment to getting one's commitments and actions right, and integrity consists in all three of these along with a further attitude concerned with the balance between them.

### 3. Constancy of Commitment

Constancy is the quality of being resolute, steadfast, or unwavering in some commitment despite the trials and tribulations of life that might threaten to undermine that commitment. In modern European thought, the most influential exponent of constancy was Justus Lipsius, whose *De Constantia* was first published in 1584. This treatise recommending firmness of mind as a prophylactic against unhappiness in a changing and often violent world was reprinted many times in Latin and translated into various European languages, remaining highly influential for well over a century (Sellars 2006).

Alistair MacIntyre finds constancy to be a central theme in the work of Jane Austen, over two hundred years later. He argues that it functions within Austen's ethics as a fundamental virtue, 'a virtue the possession of which is a pre-requisite of other virtues' (1981: 183). This seems uncontroversial if constancy is just firmness of commitment. For honesty, kindness, considerateness, and so on, require that one not merely act in the relevant ways for a short period of time or on occasions when it is easy to do so, but that one does so persistently and even in situations that might present pressure to do otherwise. In the language of attitude psychology, constancy in this thin sense consists in a high degree of attitude strength. If the attitudes in question underpin

honesty or kindness, for example, then one's constancy with respect to these virtues will consist in the strength of these attitudes.

However, a richer form of constancy requires recognition of the kinds of events and circumstances that might threaten to undermine one's commitments, so that one is well prepared to meet such events and circumstances with equanimity. This is the kind of constancy that MacIntyre finds in the works of Austen (1981: 242). It is also the kind recommended by Lipsius. 'Our minds must be so confirmed and conformed', he writes, 'that we may be at rest in troubles, and have peace even in the midst of war' ([1584]: 32). Constancy requires not only that our minds are confirmed, that our attitudes are strong, but also that our minds are conformed to include a full understanding of 'those things that do assault this castle of Constancy in us, false goods and false evils' in the world around us ([1584]: 42).

This richer constancy is a matter of attitude content as well as attitude strength. Were the problem merely one of possible temptation, it would seem that attitude strength would suffice. For the stronger your attitude towards honesty, for example, the less likely you are to experience some opportunity to lie, cheat, or steal as a temptation. Some possible action will simply not seem tempting to someone with a sufficiently strong attitude against doing it. However, temptation is not the only kind of threat to one's commitments that situations can present. Commitments can also be undermined by events that are not obviously related to them. The despair that might follow bereavement, for example, can make the value of fairness seem to pale in importance. In the panic of social unrest, it might seem that honesty is no longer important, or perhaps no longer even realistic. In these examples, the cause of the change in attitude is not temptation, even though the change might be manifested in finding some possible action tempting that would not previously have seemed so. This kind of threat to one's commitments comes rather from what we might call testing circumstances.

If constancy requires understanding these threats, does this constitute an attitude in itself or does it form part of the attitudes with which one's constancy is concerned? Does constancy require that it be part of the content of the attitude of honesty, for example, that it should persist even in the face of testing circumstances? Or does constancy consist in an attitude of its own, one that relates honesty to testing circumstances? When this question is posed about a single commitment, such as honesty, there seems no reason to describe the structure in either way rather than the other. But where someone is constant with respect to a range of commitments, the attitude content concerning testing circumstances is the same with respect to each of those commitments. This unity is better captured in describing it as an attitude of constancy with respect to those commitments, rather than an aspect of the content of each of those commitments.

Constancy of this richer kind, therefore, involves a strong attitude towards maintaining commitments in the face of major difficulties. It is constancy of this richer kind, moreover, that can be seen to be required for the fullest forms of other virtues. For example, it does not seem essential to the virtues of honesty or kindness that they include thoughts about responding to bereavement, but it does seem that these virtues will be more stable in someone who does possess an attitude of constancy towards such testing circumstances.

#### 4. Fidelity to Commitment

Whereas constancy is concerned with retaining a commitment, there is a closely related virtue concerned with respecting that commitment in action. For having a commitment and acting on that commitment are not the same thing. Indeed, infidelity to a commitment requires that one continue to have that commitment. One cannot be

unfaithful to one's partner by ending the relationship. Likewise, one cannot be unfaithful to a commitment to honesty by abandoning that commitment. One can only be unfaithful to it by lying, or cheating, or stealing, while continuing to think that honesty is important.

Fidelity to a commitment, then, seems distinct from constancy with respect to that commitment. One is concerned with action, the other with retaining an attitude. But fidelity does seem to require the thin kind of constancy, which consists in strength of attitude. Fidelity to a commitment over time requires that one continue to possess that commitment over that time, which requires the attitude to have sufficient strength to persist for that time. Moreover, the stronger an attitude is, the more influence it has over behavioural cognition, so the more faithful one is likely to be to it in action. Fidelity, that is to say, resembles constancy in that the stronger an attitude is, the greater the degree of both fidelity and constancy with respect to it.

The richer kind of constancy, as we have argued, requires an attitude towards maintaining one's commitments in testing circumstances. It seems that fidelity requires a parallel attitude. For testing circumstances could equally lead to infidelity to a commitment without revising it. For example, during a time of social unrest one might lie, cheat, or steal, while continuing to think honesty important even at such a time. Testing circumstances, that is to say, might threaten one's ability to live up to a value that one normally lives up to. If this is right, then fidelity requires a strong attitude towards acting on one's commitments even in testing circumstances, which as with constancy would seem to require an understanding of the kinds of circumstances that can be testing in this way.

But the connection between constancy and fidelity runs deeper than this. For it is one of the most robust findings of attitude psychology that attitudes are sometimes



changed to fit the agent's behaviour. In some classic 'cognitive dissonance' studies, for example, the contents of the agent's attitudes towards each of a range of objects were measured, the agent was then asked to choose one of the objects to keep, then after a time interval their attitudes towards the objects were measured again. The findings were that people became more positive about the items that they had chosen and less positive about the ones they had not chosen (see Cooper 2007: 12-14; see also 163-4).

More recent work has linked this phenomenon to the dimension of attitude strength. One experiment tested both the contents and the strengths of participants' attitudes towards Greenpeace, within a very large questionnaire ranging over a wide variety of topics, then a week later gave those same participants a chance to donate money to Greenpeace, then subsequently measured the contents and strengths of their attitudes towards Greenpeace again. The experiment found that participants with strong attitudes towards Greenpeace were much more likely to act consistently with those attitudes than were those with weak attitudes towards Greenpeace. But it also found that those with weak attitudes towards Greenpeace were much more likely to have attitudes that were in line with their behaviour at the time of the second attitude measurement than at the time of the first. That is to say, they were not likely to act on their attitudes, but they were likely to subsequently align their attitudes with their behaviour (Holland et al 2002).

Constancy therefore requires fidelity. For not only does fidelity increase the likelihood of the attitude persisting, but attitudes are eroded by infidelity to them in action. This erosion is especially clear in cases of quite weak attitudes. But the challenge posed to constancy by testing circumstances suggests that even very strong attitudes might be undermined by infidelity to them. Constancy, like fidelity, requires an understanding of the kinds of circumstances that might lead one to be unfaithful to one's commitments, and strategies for dealing with them. Moreover, it seems that constancy

must not only include an attitude towards facing testing circumstances, but where constancy concerns a commitment that is currently quite weak it must include an attitude towards acting on that commitment even in the face of temptation to do otherwise. The attitudes underlying constancy of commitment and fidelity to commitment, then, are the same. To put it another way, the two virtues rest on these same strong attitudes.

### 5. Fidelity and Getting It Right

A strong commitment to retaining and acting on one's commitments even through testing circumstances, however, is not necessarily virtuous. For such a commitment could equally well be involved in vices of excess. In the case of constancy, the relevant vice would be intransigence, stubbornness, or pertinacity. It would be the failure to see that one's commitments might be in need of revision. In the case of fidelity to commitment, the vice would be obstinacy. This is a failure to see that the mere fact of possessing a commitment is not itself sufficient reason to act on that commitment. These vices are closely bound up together, of course, since if a commitment ought not to be acted on in some situation, then that commitment is in need of some revision, even if the revision is only minor. These vices of excess both consist in a lack of openness to further considerations. At their core lies the failure to recognise the fallibility inherent in one's status as a finite creature (Rees forthcoming).

The antidote to this variety of hubris would seem to be a strong commitment to getting one's beliefs, opinions, preferences, attitudes, and actions right. Such a commitment would involve due regard for the complexity of life and one's own limitations as well as for the positive power of deliberation to reach the right conclusions. By characterising this as the aim of getting it right, we do not intend to commit to any particular theory in metaethics or normative ethics. Getting it right will involve

bringing one's attitudes and actions into line with what is ethically required, as well as gaining an accurate picture of the way the world is. But this point is independent of debates over what in fact is ethically required or over the metaphysical status of ethical requirement.

Getting it right is another sense of the word 'fidelity'. This is the way it is used in the term 'hi-fi': to call a sound system 'high-fidelity' is to claim that it reproduces sound with a high degree of accuracy. If one is committed to fidelity in this sense, one aims in general to get things right. The virtues of constancy of commitment and fidelity to commitment require that the agent possess the trait of fidelity as aiming to get it right, for this prevents the strong attitude towards maintaining and acting on one's existing commitments from resulting in the vices of intransigence and obstinacy.

Should this aim be considered a distinct attitude in its own right, or should it be considered part of the content of the attitude that underpins constancy of commitment and fidelity to commitment? The reason for thinking that the aims of maintaining commitments and acting on them constitute a single attitude was that these aims cannot be pursued independently of one another, since attitude psychology has shown that both are served by strengthening attitudes and that maintaining a commitment is undermined by a failure to act on it. Both aims can be frustrated by testing circumstances, whether through action in response to those circumstances or more directly through reevaluation of one's commitments. So these aims really have the same object: maintaining strong attitudes, even in testing circumstances. But the aim of getting it right does seem to have a distinct object. Whereas the persistence of an attitude and its manifestation in behaviour are intimately bound up together, the accuracy of its content seems an entirely different matter. For this reason, fidelity in this sense should be considered to consist in an attitude of its own, a strong positive attitude towards getting things right.

Whereas the attitude underlying constancy of commitment and fidelity to commitment does not count as virtuous in the absence of this second kind of fidelity, it might seem that the converse is not the case. Indeed, it might seem that this kind of fidelity should be considered a virtue irrespective of which other traits the agent possesses. After all, it is a commitment to getting things *right*. In which case, this kind of fidelity might be considered the fundamental virtue required for all the others. We will see, however, that because we are rational creatures of limited resources, the aim of getting it right can take the form of a vice of excess if it is not tempered in the right way by a further attitude.

## 6. The Structure of Integrity

We are now in a position to articulate an account of the virtue of integrity. We have argued that constancy of commitment and fidelity to commitment essentially consist in a single strong attitude in favour of maintaining and acting on certain commitments. We have also argued that these cannot count as virtues unless they are combined with a distinct strong attitude in favour of getting things right, which underpins the trait of fidelity in a different sense of that word. Our account of integrity builds on these accounts of constancy and two kinds of fidelity. It is our view that integrity comprises these same attitudes. The person of integrity is committed to maintaining and acting on those of their commitments that they consider most important, but also to getting it right.

This leaves open the question of whether integrity involves anything more, or whether it is just the set of these traits being present together. One might think that there is no need for any more. The commitment towards getting it right should not be understood as a commitment to responding to whatever reasons we happen to be faced with in any

given circumstance, irrespective of the conclusions of prior practical reasoning encoded in our attitudes. Getting it right, ideally, means responding to the complete set of relevant reasons. Commitment to getting it right therefore involves responding to all relevant reasons to which we have access, those facing us in this situation and others that we have considered previously. What more could be required for the virtue of integrity, or indeed any virtue?

Such a commitment to respecting the reasons we have considered in the past, and to respecting the outcome of our reasoning about those reasons, presents a challenge for finite rational beings such as ourselves. There are two aspects to this challenge. One is that those reasons will not all be easily accessible. The outcomes of previous decisions may be encoded in our attitudes, but it does not follow from this that we can recall the reasons that led to those decisions. The other is that we seldom have the luxury of sufficient time to work through the complete set of reasons that we can recall for and against some course of action. If our minds operated like very high speed processors attached to massive data storage units, a commitment to getting things right might be sufficient for virtue. But they do not.

This is why we need to accord our standing attitudes a certain degree of respect even if we have neither the time nor even the ability to recall all of the deliberation that led to the formation and strengthening of those attitudes. In the absence of sufficient respect for one's own attitudes, the commitment to getting it right can take the form of a vice of excess. It can lead to acting against attitudes that embody good reasons that one cannot now recall. It can lead to prevarication when swift and decisive action is required. It can, in the extreme case, be so debilitating as to leave one unable to do much at all. The twin virtues of constancy of commitment and fidelity to commitment are therefore necessary for the commitment to getting it right to be virtuous rather than excessive.

We are therefore faced with the question of how the balance between these two attitudes, towards one's own commitments and towards getting it right, should be struck. Integrity requires the right balance between the conservatism of respecting one's own attitudes without examining the reasons behind them and the acceptance of one's own fallibility that drives the attitude towards getting it right. This balance might vary with such details of the situation as the possibilities for action, the significance of the outcomes of each possible action, the agent's personal and social circumstances, and the rest of the agent's attitudes. The person of integrity is someone who gets that balance right. If someone is to get this balance right reliably, then this must be due to a disposition towards doing so. Integrity, that is to say, requires a further strong attitude, one with sophisticated content concerning the balance between existing attitudes and considerations arising directly from the current situation. This is distinct from the attitude towards getting it right, since it concerns the balance between the content of that attitude and the content of the attitude underlying constancy of commitment and fidelity to commitment.

Integrity is therefore a virtue over and above the traits of constancy and two kinds of fidelity. It includes those traits, but binds them together through a further attitude towards their relative importance. This extra ingredient seems essential for constancy and the two kinds of fidelity to be virtuous, for without it each of them will tend to develop into its related vice of excess. The question remains, however, of why integrity should be considered virtuous.

## 7. The Importance of Integrity

Many accounts of integrity emphasise the idea of integration. It is often considered essential to integrity that the agent's beliefs, desires, attitudes, commitments, and

actions are at least consistent and perhaps also mutually supporting. (Damian Cox, Marguerite La Caze, and Michael Levine present and critique the idea that integrity consists in integration in their chapter 'Integrity' in this volume, where they argue for an account of integrity that includes integration as an ingredient.) The idea that such integration is identical with or at least essential to integrity overlooks the fact that integrity sometimes requires abandoning some commitment, perhaps even a deeply held commitment. Indeed, faced with sufficiently strong reason to believe that a central aspect of one's life has been organised around a mistake, it would be an act of great integrity to accept that reason, reject all of the commitments that need to be rejected, and consider one's outlook and commitments anew. Integrity, that is to say, can require disintegration.

Our account of integrity can explain why integrity sometimes demands the radical revision of one's outlook, while also explaining why so many have found the integration view of integrity attractive. The centrality to integrity of a strong commitment towards getting it right explains why integrity can demand the abandonment of commitments, perhaps even a whole range of commitments simultaneously, given sufficient reason to believe that doing so would be right, or would at least be required for getting it right. It explains, that is to say, how an act of great integrity can be one that shatters the integration of the agent's practical outlook. In so doing, it explains how a person can possess the virtue of integrity without any significant integration of their practical outlook.

On the other hand, integrity includes a strong attitude in favour of maintaining and acting on one's central commitments. This attitude exerts a pressure towards the integration of the agent's practical outlook, since the more this outlook can be brought into line with those central commitments the less any aspect of that outlook can threaten the project of maintaining and acting on those commitments. Constancy of

commitment and fidelity to commitment, that is to say, are essential ingredients in integrity and, subject to the commitment to getting it right, lead generally to greater integration. We should therefore expect our paragons of integrity to generally exhibit a high degree of integration, even though such integration is not itself essential to integrity.

The idea that integration is essential to integrity faces the objection that one could be a thoroughly integrated evildoer. Integration could not be virtuous in such a person, for surely it would be better if they were less integrated and so suffered the kinds of internal conflict that might lead them to a better life. The integrated evildoer has an ethical flaw in addition to that of having the wrong values: because these are the wrong values, holding them wholeheartedly is itself ethically problematic. Therefore, if integration is essential to integrity, then integrity can be a virtue only when the agent has the right kinds of commitments. But in this case, it seems that integrity does not add any significant value to the person having the right kinds of commitments, and acting on them, where these have already been identified independently of any talk of integrity. They might live a more enjoyable life for not being conflicted, but this is ethically less important than having the right commitments and these being strong enough to ensure they are acted upon.

On our view, integrity is a virtue because constancy and the two kinds of fidelity, regulated by an attitude towards the correct balance between them, mean that the agent has the right approach to practical reasoning and action. The person of integrity is committed to getting it right, is committed to an appropriate respect for the outcomes of their prior practical reasoning, and holds an appropriate attitude about the balance between these commitments. Integrity is therefore an excellence of imperfectly rational creatures like us. It is an appropriate orientation towards our own capacity for getting it right. Moreover, it has a positive effect on the agent's practical



outlook and behaviour more generally, because the commitments to getting it right and to striking the right balance between this and one's other attitudes together tend towards undermining one's vicious attitudes. It is because integrity is a power towards right practical reasoning and action that it can play this corrective role.

It might be tempting to conclude that it is integrity, rather than constancy or the commitment to getting it right, that is the fundamental virtue. For it might look as though all other virtues require this balance of commitment to maintaining the virtuous attitudes, commitment to acting on them, and commitment to revising one's outlook if that is what is required to get it right. However, this would be too quick. One reason is that these attitudes might not be required for some virtues. Another, closely related, is that there is no general agreement on what the virtues are. So one would need to consider whether, for example, modesty, patience, loyalty, or wit really are virtues, as well as whether they require integrity.

It does seem, however, that at least the cultivation of each virtue requires integrity. For the cultivation of a virtue requires the right balance between respecting the attitudes one has cultivated so far and respecting the need to continue to shape them in the light of reasons. This does not require integrity in its perfect form. One does not have to get the balance exactly right in order to be genuinely cultivating virtue. But one does need a concern with getting that balance right. If this is enough for imperfect integrity, then perhaps some of the value of integrity lies in its contribution to the cultivation of the other virtues.

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