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# Comments on *Intelligent Virtue*: Moral Education, Aspiration, and Altruism

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I am here to criticize a very good book. Julia Annas's *Intelligent Virtue* offers us "an account of virtue" that is manifestly indebted to Aristotle and the ancient Stoics, but is also modern and highly original, deeply and carefully thought through, with well-informed attention to contemporary issues and insights. She says "[this] account of virtue results from attending to two ideas" (1). I will discuss the first of them in parts 1 and 2 of my comments, and the second in part 3.

## 1 The Skill Analogy

The first of these two ideas "is that exercising a virtue involves practical reasoning of a kind that can illuminatingly be compared to the kind of reasoning we find in someone exercising a practical skill" (1). Professor Annas has said quite lot in her précis by way of explaining this idea. Her point that a practical "ability, though a habituated one, is constantly informed by the way the person is thinking" (14), does, I think, help us to understand how a sort of habituation can contribute to the development and possession of something that really is a virtue and not merely a routine. It is not that a virtue is just a habit, but that virtuous action, though activated and guided by present intelligence, need not involve thinking through each step of one's action all over again. This is an important contribution of Annas's account of virtue and its acquisition.

In learning a virtue as in learning a skill, Annas thinks, the learner must develop an understanding of what the skill or the virtue is that is being learned, and must want to learn it—must have a "*drive to aspire*," as she puts it (16). And what is

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learned is something practical and particular. Annas supposes that in its elementary stages at least, education in virtue involves teachers and learners who are quite intentional about the teaching and learning of particular virtues—especially those that might be considered "cardinal virtues." She says, "When we learn from our parents and other teachers, they guide us by giving us rules to follow which are stated in terms of the virtues." For instance, "Be honest" (36). And she imagines a young person who "may find that a friend is behaving bravely in the hospital with cancer," and may experience "confusion as to what bravery is" because the "situation is very unlike any glamorous warrior situation" (37). The learner needs then to focus on the concept of honesty or bravery with a view to coming to understand how very different responses to very different situations are all expressions of honesty, or all expressions of bravery.

We may doubt whether a program of educating for good character really needs to be so committed to traditional conceptions of particular virtues. It is not obvious that traditional taxonomies of virtues generate the most natural and useful sorting of tasks for moral learning. Are honesty and bravery really unified psychological natural kinds? Are the abilities and dispositions involved in being honest, or being brave, in different situations, really as unified as the skill of playing a piano in different musical styles and different performance venues? I doubt it.

The bravery of a warrior, for instance, is presumably a matter of accepting great dangers of death or physical injury for a cause that one values, rather than trying to run away; whereas the bravery of a cancer sufferer is rather a matter of dealing well with pain and danger of death when one cannot really run away. How would you "find" that someone's manner of dealing with cancer is brave (as Annas puts it)—how would that classification occur to you?—if you had previously encountered the terminology of bravery only in discussions of military courage? We do use the name 'bravery' for both types of behavior, but do we have good reason to suppose that an ability and disposition for one of them must come along with an ability and disposition for the other? Even with regard to warrior bravery, testimonies of military experience suggest it is not uncommon to be able to deal well with one type of physical danger and not with another. As moral learners (which we all should be in Annas's view, and mine too), perhaps it would be more profitable for us to think about what are the best ways to deal with fears and with pains, and with this and that type of each, than to concern ourselves with which phenomena should be considered expressions of bravery, and why. Not that the latter should be despised as a question in ethical theory, but is it really needed in moral education?

As for honesty, the largest study ever done on success or failure of moral education (and one of the most careful scientifically) focused heavily on issues of honesty, in children in grades 5–8, and found very little correlation between honesty in any one type of situation and honesty in others. Various explanations may be offered for this phenomenon, and more than one factor may be involved. But one that seems very plausible to me is that the reasons why the behavior called "dishonest" is bad are quite different in cases of lying, stealing, and cheating on a test; and quite different perceptions, motives, and habits might well be needed for a child to act well in such different cases. I see little reason to believe that conceptualizing all of these as cases of "dishonesty" would be of crucial value for

moral education. More important here, I would think, is understanding what's wrong about each of them; and the answers would be rather different in different types of cases.

In any event, Annas is not just interested in the classification of virtues one by one. In the well known controversy about the unity or separability of the virtues, Annas favors a conception of virtue as unified in such a way that one cannot have any one of the virtues without having all of them. She does not claim that such a conception yields a good description of the actual character of any of us. She proposes the conception of a unified virtue as an *ideal* to guide the aspiration that she sees as central to moral learning. I have argued elsewhere that we are likely to be better served, in moral understanding and moral development, by a taxonomy of virtues or good traits of character that are psychologically and causally actual, but that do not always go together. I will not repeat that argument here. Rather I want to question whether virtue should indeed be the chief object of aspiration in moral learning.

## 2 Commitment to Goodness

One of my personal reactions in reading *Intelligent Virtue* was a certain sense of cognitive dissonance. I have always thought, and I continue to think, that my parents did a good job of introducing me, and my sister, to their project of ethical (and religious) living. But they didn't do it in the way that Annas describes. The ethical viewpoint to which they introduced us was deeply, though not rigidly, Calvinist. We were certainly expected to be intelligent about ethics. There was much discussion of ethical issues in our house, and much giving and questioning of reasons regarding them, in which my sister and I participated more and more fully and vigorously as we grew older. But I don't remember much discussion at all about the traditional virtues, or about whether it was the same virtue that was manifested in this situation and in that. Most of the discussion was about right and wrong action, which were understood in terms of rights and obligations—that is, in terms of what we *owed* it to other people (or to God) to do and not to do. Ethical injunctions given to us were most often in terms of clearly identified actions or types of action; and where that was not the case, they were usually in terms of good and bad *motives* and *attitudes*. The main good motives and attitudes were forms of altruistic love or benevolence; the main bad ones, forms of selfishness or self-centeredness. And the worth of right action, though not its status as permissible or obligatory, was seen as depending to a large extent on its being done from a good motive. Good motives can of course be thought of as virtues (and I now do think of them as virtues). But I don't believe we did think of them as part of a more comprehensive virtue that depended on practical intelligence as much as on good motives, or that included anything that could be likened to a skill.

In the course of my adult life I have become very interested in virtue and virtues. I have even written a book on that subject. I would now say that more attention to it could have enriched my moral upbringing, and might have helped it to be more integrated. But I still believe the moral concerns that got the most emphasis from my

parents deserved the emphasis they got; and I have questions as to the adequacy of the attention they get in Annas's program.

She has an interesting discussion of "right action" (41–51), which resists summary in a sentence or a definition. What I take to be her central contention about it is that the word 'right' "gets its force from its connection with virtue, adjusted to the developmental account of virtue" (42). That is an appealing response to *one* of the questions one might have in mind in asking, 'What is the right thing to do?' I have no doubt, however, that often that question seeks an answer to the question, how one can best fulfill one's moral *obligations* to others. That question gets a lot of attention in most moral education, and rightly so, because it's very important to us. It gets rather little attention in Annas's book, and I would like to see more about the place that acting as one *owes* it to others to act has in her conception of virtue and her program of moral education. Perhaps in a longer version of her book a discussion of *justice* as a virtue would explain that.

I am more concerned about what I miss in Annas's account of virtue with regard to the other big emphasis in the moral upbringing that I received: the emphasis on *motivation*, and specifically on *altruistic* motivation. It's not that Annas has nothing to say about motivation. She gives us a whole chapter on "Virtue and Goodness," whose central thesis is that virtue essentially involves what she calls a "commitment to goodness" (100–118). And she insists at the outset that learning virtue requires a "*drive to aspire*" (16).

I wish Annas had more to say than she says in the book about what seems to me the very serious and difficult question, how moral motivation is to be developed—how we are to be led to *want* to be brave or just, or to help other people. But I won't say more about that problem here, and I don't claim to have a wonderful recipe for dealing with it either. I want to focus rather on the question, what is the goodness to which Annas thinks the virtuous person must be committed?

Her discussion of the commitment to goodness is nuanced in a way that suggests caution in summarizing it, but I take it that her view is indicated by her statement, near the end of the discussion, that "The kind of direction given to a life by virtue is a direction of overall aim *in the way the life is lived*—in the aim to live *well*, to live a *good* life" (117). In the context, I think that means that the commitment to good that she demands of virtue is a commitment to one's own virtue, a commitment to be virtuous. It is not a commitment to produce good outcomes distinct from one's own virtuous living; she makes that clear in contrasting her view with consequentialist views of the commitments of virtue (109–11).

It is at this point that I have my deepest misgivings about Annas's account of virtue. I agree that virtue is a great good, and intrinsically excellent, and that we ought to want very much to be virtuous ourselves. But I do not believe that that is the whole of the good to which the virtuous person should be committed—or, as I might rather say, devoted. I think the ideal of virtuous motivation should be understood as devotion to a good that includes one's own developing virtue but is much larger than any virtue of one's own. In devotion to such a good there is room for strong and central motives that are *altruistic* in a way that I think commitment to one's own virtue, as such, is not. And some such motives will aim at *outcomes* that

are distinct from one's own character and actions—will aim, for example, at the flourishing of other persons, and perhaps the flourishing of philosophy.

And this brings me to issues that I have about the second of the "two ideas" from which Annas says that her account of virtue results.

## 3 Virtue and Happiness

That second idea is "that virtue is part of the agent's happiness or flourishing, and that it is plausible to see virtue as actually constituting (wholly or in part) that happiness" (1). I would thoroughly agree with that, if only the phrase "wholly or in part" were shortened to speak of virtue simply as constituting "in part" the happiness. Annas says that she herself "tends to" the position that virtue is not only necessary but also *sufficient* for happiness (168*n*19). She does not commit herself to that view in the book, however, nor perhaps even to the thesis that virtue is *necessary* for happiness. She does set herself the task of arguing "that there is a latent incoherence in thinking of happiness as made up both of living virtuously and of items such as money and status, which belong with life's circumstances rather than with the living of it" (167–68).

I have never found the sufficiency thesis plausible, but I will not present a comprehensive argument against it here. I wish rather to focus on some particular points in Annas's discussion of happiness, beginning with an aspect of her conception of happiness that seems to me to aggravate the difficulty of finding a good place for altruism in her account. "Happiness," she says, "is what we all want as a general aim in life." In its broadest sense, it is "the final end, … the indeterminate notion of what I am aiming at in my life as a whole" (124–25). This identification of one's final end with happiness is what Annas calls *eudaimonism* (154).

Right at this point a red flag goes up for me in relation to the place of altruism in our lives. Annas's use of the word 'happiness', quite intentionally, is responsive less to its present-day use in ordinary English than to the use of '*eudaimonia*' by ancient Greek philosophers. I won't quibble here about that. The point I want to emphasize is that both the Greek word and its traditional English translation are monadic predicates of a person. Your *eudaimonia* or your happiness is your well-being, or your life's going well for *you*. To care about your *eudaimonia* is to care about *you* in particular. That being so, it would seem that your *eudaimonia* is an end of yours, or your parents', or your teacher's, or your friend's or partner's, precisely insofar you or they care benevolently about *you*. That is, I think, the most natural and appropriate perspective from which to think about your happiness.

It is not, I think, the best, the wisest, or the most appropriate perspective for you to take in thinking about your final end—about what you will aim at in your life as a whole. In your life as a whole, surely, you ought not to be caring just about you in particular. You ought to aim at many goods that cannot be squeezed into a monadic predicate of you. You ought to aim, for their own sake, at the good of other persons, and perhaps of institutions (such as universities) and practices (such as philosophy) that matter to you. You will probably be happier if you do have ends that are

altruistic in that way; but you will also be aiming at ends that are not part of what your family and friends care about for its own sake in caring about your happiness. They of course may also care about those ends, valuing them intrinsically, but in doing so they will be going beyond their love or benevolence for you in particular. So I believe that we need a conception of *eudaimonia*, and a *different* conception of what one aims at in one's life as a whole, and we should not confuse them by using the same name for them. This is of a piece with my belief that the good that one aims at in one's life as a whole should include more than one's own virtue.

Annas recognizes that it might be objected that eudaimonism is *egoistic* in holding that one's overall aim in living is one's own happiness (154), and she argues at length that one's own happiness as she conceives of, as constituted at least largely by one's virtue, is not an egoistic end (152–63). My objection is not exactly about egoism. It is rather that identifying one's "general aim in life" with one's own virtue, she seems not to have left room for purely altruistic motives. An adequate response to that objection would have to say more than I found in *Intelligent Virtue* about the place of altruistic motives in Annas's account of virtue.

One last issue, connected not particularly with altruism but with a distinction that figures prominently in Annas's discussion of the relation between virtue and happiness:

> It is the distinction between *the circumstances of a life* and *the living of a life*. The circumstances of your life are the factors whose existence in your life are not under your control… The living of your life is the way you deal with the circumstances of your life. (92–93; cf. 113, 128, 149–52)

Being in the circumstances is contrasted as *passive* with living the life as *active*. In this contrast, unsurprisingly, "The virtues are part of the way we *live* our lives, whatever the circumstances are" (94). Indeed, Annas claims, "Both living virtuously and living happily are ways of living my life, dealing with the materials I have to hand, making the best of the life I have led up to now" (150). And "Happiness is *active*; it is a matter of how you do whatever it is you do, how you live your life in whatever circumstances you find yourself as you start to reflect about your life" (130).

Arguing against taking "pleasant feelings or satisfaction" to be constituents of happiness, Annas relegates them to the status of "circumstances of a life … Pleasure thought of as feeling or satisfaction is essentially passive, part of the materials involved in making up my life but hardly part of actively living it" (149). "How could it be just the circumstances of our lives that make us happy, or not? How can stuff make you happy?… Stuff is irrelevant for happiness until you *do* something with it" (151).

I agree that stuff, in the sense of material possessions, does not make us happy—though it might be harder to say that if one were trapped in dire poverty. But I will not agree that everything in our lives with respect to which we are passive is merely "stuff." It is not merely *stuff* that I am not now in intense pain, or severely depressed. What we are given is not necessarily less part of the value, and even the meaning, of our lives than what we achieve. If somebody loves me, that is not *stuff*. If the color of a bluebird adds delight to my day, or if a phrase of music catches my

soul up toward heaven, that is not just *stuff*. No doubt I could spoil much of that by unvirtuous reactions. And I agree with Annas that enjoyment is often a matter of *how* we are *acting*. It seems clear to me, however, that if any fragments of virtue are totally within the power of my will, they are far less than the happiness that one who loves me should want for me.