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*

You can do a lot of harm without any ill will, in fact while being deeply committed to admirable moral ideals. In this paper I shall describe one broad category of action and thinking, moral incompetence, which is responsible for much of the harm that well-intentioned people do. I think that much moral philosophy directs our attention away from moral incompetence, in part by presenting a naïve image of the virtuous moral agent. It prevents us from seeing how well-intentioned, morally committed, sincere, intelligent people can also be deeply flawed as moral agents[1].

I begin with some 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 competence at moral thinking may itself be taken as a virtue. I shall return to this.) 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. The examples proceed from what I take to be pretty uncontroversial cases to cases that will be more contentious in several respects. I mean the examples throughout the paper 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.

examples 1

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 seriously dropping out. Sam meets Ruth in her office and she tells him he has passed. She also says "There's something else you should know; most of us think you don't really have what it takes to do research." She says somewhat more than these bare words, of course, though most of what she says repeats this same point. She is concerned that Sam be

[1] And as a result much of the misery in the world is not due to evil actions or agents. Well-intentioned people can however be participants in evil, see Morton (2004).

told this important truth, and she is concerned that it be presented to him in a kind way, but not so kindly that the truth is obscured.

Sam is devastated. He had no idea that the faculty was not impressed with him, and all his plans center 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. In choosing to speak to Sam in a very direct way, right after the exam, has Ruth made a moral mistake?

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'd have to be able to pick up signs of distress and choose her words in response to them so that she'd 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. She failed, and – one last assumption - her failure was not simply bad luck. The job was in fact too hard for her.

This incident does not reveal Ruth to be a bad person, in the sense of being unkind, unjust, irresponsible, 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 that it is not easy to pin down. She has a gap in her knowledge of her own capacities and as a result 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 responsible* – we would wish that Ruth took better stock of her actual social skills before embarking on what she takes to be right.

A similar example could be made in the opposite direction, with someone who out of kindness hesitated to tell people painful truths, underestimating his own capacities to get the message across kindly or to draw on others to do so. Like the Ruth example, it would illustrate the point that people can do the wrong thing, though their principles are fine and their intentions are admirable, because of a failure in their capacities to translate principles, intentions, and knowledge of what is morally relevant into action.

Incompatible promises Ruth's moral failure was based on a failure of self-knowledge linked to limited social skills. There are examples where the causes are rather different. 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 he 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 shouldn't have agreed to write for Michael at all, he now thinks, and he shouldn't have promised either candidate that he would give them top ranking. But having promised to give Michael top ranking he shouldn't have also promised to rank Wilma top. He has a long hard think. Perhaps when one has made incompatible promises the first 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 shouldn't 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 shouldn't 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 Michael to have got himself into a dilemma from which all exits have a high and incompatible price. 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[2]. Others will choose some particular solution as the right one. My own opinion is that Michael ought to give the strongest recommendation to whoever he thinks is best 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 shouldn't be made. To do this he would have to face the consequence that both will probably assume that he has not given them the top ranking; his relations with both will be harmed, and whichever one does not get the job will be extremely angry at him. But there is often a price for doing the right thing, especially when one has got oneself into a tangle one might have foreseen.

The important point is not what Michael ought to do. The situation is very complicated, there are several competing values at stake, and the plausible options are very sensitive to the details of the story. Suppose that there are better and worse ways out of the mess. Suppose that Michael takes one of the worse ones, not because he does something awful or stupid, but because he does not see the full argument for the best option. Perhaps the better options do not occur to him. Then he has made the wrong choice, but not because he wasn't trying very hard to do the right thing, but because he had got himself into a situation in which finding the right way out was too hard for him.

There are in fact two failings here, which often occur separately. The first is a failure to see trouble coming. Some people, even more than the rest of us, don't anticipate situations in which it will be very hard to do the right thing, or in which the right thing will have a very high price. The second is a failure to think through the ways out of the mess, and assess their comparative costs. Both of these failings can be aspects of more general cognitive lacks. Human beings vary in how well they anticipate the future and how well they handle complex decisions. But in the cases that interest me the failing is focused on moral cognition. I am interested in people who particularly fail to anticipate *morally* complicated situations, or people for whom it is particularly hard to find solutions to complex conflicts of *values*. The cognitive limitations of these people reveals themselves most vividly when the object of the cognition is moral.

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,

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[2] The literature on moral dilemmas rarely faces directly up to the question "when both available courses are wrong, and none clearly more than the others, are both equally permissible?" But an implicit consensus is that both are indeed permissible, as long as the appropriate retrospective emotions are experienced. See Williams (1981) and Stocker (1990). In my *Disasters and dilemmas* (Blackwell 1990) I explore the subsequent patterns of action that might be motivated by the retrospective emotions.

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's got the promotion; the cases are equal or incomparable in that there is no more value, all things considered, of either one getting the promotion. Then 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 may have children to support; it might be her last chance and not Sanjip's. In any of these cases 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 favor another person's trivial interest over their 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 case 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.

acquisition: 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, deontic logic) 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 a moral problem without mental strain.) Many of these situations are too hard for anyone to find a perfect solution – 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 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. I shall argue that a person can be capable of performing reasonably well at thoughtful tasks in general, but be a persistent bungler 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 these are physically uncoordinated. But there are people who are physically coordinated 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 coordination 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, coordination, timing, strength, and no doubt other capacities make a potential unicyclist, and that a unicyclist needs to be able to make these combinations work. The unicyclist needs to be able to draw on these different capacities and combine them in ways that enable him to wobble ahead. There is no unicycle-riding faculty.

Similarly, moral situations require that a person mobilize their capacities to manage complex information, imagine the situation of others, steer between general principles and special factors, adjudicate incomparabilities, assess their own future reactions, understand their 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 whose overlaps constitute skills with these familiar labels. 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? In a way, the right answer is: those requiring this combination of human capacities. A more helpful answer begins with the general topics of conflicting interests and the project of living together in ways that give all of us satisfactory lives. Love and hate, cooperation and cheating. Some – not all – problems that arise in this domain are very challenging. Early in our evolutionary history we developed specific mental capacities for tackling them: 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, of rights, interests, obligations, duties, and moral character. This vocabulary with its many complex interactions 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 cooperative living, competence with which varies significantly from person to person.

There are many ways that an individual can acquire moral competence. I'll describe two, which I will call the Aristotelian way and the Kantian way. It will be helpful to see how each reveals a space for 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 or 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 gale – 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 one 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, you 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 favors, ... 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 behavior 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[3]. ("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

[3] The creative aspect of the labeling, the way we make the labels and the resemblances between situations, is a theme of Christine Korsgaard's reading of Kant. See the essays in Korsgaard (1996).

Kantian thinkers have seen as decidedly complicated and bungleable.) All these things can be done more and less well. And doing *them* less well is clearly consistent with doing many other things very well, and with benevolence, honesty, and sincerity.

It is interesting that moral incompetence follows naturally from a Kantian point of view, given Kant's famous assertion that nothing matters except a good will. And yet it is clear on a view congruent with his that there are many qualities – moral qualities - in addition to a good will that we should encourage in one another.

I am sure that a wide range of philosophical accounts of morality suggest ways that a person can learn how to think their way through moral problems, and that, on nearly all of these, the thinking is both variable in competence and independent of general intelligence and practical ability. (The least promising accounts for this purpose are the utilitarianisms. I think that even they fit the pattern, but that cannot be my topic here.) Inadequate though some of these accounts may be as philosophical explanations of morality, I would expect that the paths they suggest to the acquisition of moral skills are mostly real. For these accounts arise from the reflection of intelligent people on their own acquisition of these skills and the problems that arise with them. Each of them reflects an attempt to portray as the whole picture a particular way of thinking out the kinds of problems that demand our moral competence and exhibit our moral incompetence.

I have described moral problems as typically hard, so that it is not surprising that people often do not find the best solutions to them. But that is an understatement. Many moral problems are such that *no-one* finds best solutions to them, solutions which cannot be bettered. With such problems competence means performing no worse than average. Philosophers have traditionally not used such problems as core examples for their theories. One reason for this is that they want to confirm their theories by showing that the theories deliver what their readers will agree are the right answers. So the examples, the test cases, are ones to which the readers and the philosophers know what the answers are. Keeping simple promises, not murdering strangers, taking care of those close to one. Until recently, few philosophical expositions contained examples involving resolutions of multiple inconsistent promises, some of which shouldn't have been given, or reactions to unreasonable but deeply felt demands of others, or the like. The effect of this neglect was to give the impression that doing the right thing is fundamentally easy, and the only reason someone might not do what was right was that they had some fundamental failure of motivation or intellect. (Virtue ethics sometimes capitalizes on the fact that it can be easy to do the courageous or generous thing, though much harder to find the right thing to do.)

Cato and Wilson In my examples so far the field of moral incompetence has been personal life, and the central point 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 is also compatible with other important moral traits, where the field is public life. My examples 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*. (Sime 1960, p. 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 defense of the values of the old order. How can this be?

It wasn't just bad luck. Cato's defense 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 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 honored 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, 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 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 incompetencies 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, and only a very rare person gets it right when the stakes are high. But the consequences of getting it wrong can be catastrophic.

competences and 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 adequately. 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. 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.

Are moral competences virtues, then; are moral incompetences vices? I'm 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 paper 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.

incompetence is not vice Ruth, in the first example of this paper, is not a bad person. She's 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; it 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, not taking the mess to be the result of her intentions, 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; we admire that. We think his grasp of social and practical reality is flawed, in a way that makes his efforts largely counterproductive. If we are his contemporaries we wish for a moral capacity that is surely beyond our powers: of getting him to see how he is choosing the wrong times and places to resist his enemies.[4]

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 that would be a bad idea; generosity is wanting to help others when help is called for; prudence 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

[4] In this connection see section 8, 'On Moral Blindness', of Brewer (2002).

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" [5].

On the other hand there are precedents. Take prudence itself – moral prudence, 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 thing 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 moral risks. Surely that is a kind of moral incompetence, very similar to the others I have been discussing.

competences do not exhibit means An Aristotelian virtue typically entails a mean. That is, the virtues 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, softheartedness 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.

That is the argument that moral incompetence is not the lack of moral virtues. Again if we look more closely we can still assimilate competences to virtues. 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. (In other words, generosity and other virtues presuppose a level of moral competence.) They 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 paper. To know if this is the right moment to bravely stand one's ground against a bully requires thinking through the likelihood of loosing the confrontation and the consequences of 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

[5] See Swanton (2003) chapter 11 section (iii), Hursthouse (199) chapter 6.

up to the bully, doing so is not an exhibition of virtuous courage, even if it is a brave thing to do. So moral competence often involves the kind of thinking 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 a higher-order mean, much like the higher order mean of knowing when you have reflected enough on whether this is the moment for courage. There's a virtue of reflecting just the right amount.

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. 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 he 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 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 *Nichomachean Ethics*. I would then prefer to classify the intellectual qualities whose failures this paper 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 expect to find important differences between failures in handling moral complexity, failures of self-knowledge, failures in the assessment of others, failures in handling strategic choice, and others. And I expect these differences are worth exploring. The capacities to avoid any of these failures are like the standardly cited virtues in some ways and unlike in others; without them the standard virtues would be largely useless. Our lives depend on them. Call them what you will[6].

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