

Does Human Nature Conflict with Itself?: Human Form and the Harmony of the Virtues

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Abstract. Does possessing some human virtues make it impossible for a person to possess other human virtues? Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams both answered “yes” to this question, and they argued that to hold otherwise—to accept the harmony of the virtues—required a blinkered and unrealistic view of “what it is to be human.” In this essay, I have two goals: (1) to show how the harmony of the virtues is best interpreted, and what is at stake in affirming or denying it; and (2) to provide a partial defense of the harmony of the virtues. More specifically, I show how the harmony of the virtues can be interpreted and defended within the kind of Aristotelian naturalism developed by philosophers such as Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Michael Thompson. I argue that far from being an embarrassing liability for Aristotelianism—based in an “archaic metaphysical biology”—the harmony thesis is an interesting and plausible claim about human excellences, supported by a sophisticated account of the representation of life, and fully compatible with a realistic view of our human situation.

I.

I*ntroduction.* Few people would claim to possess all the human virtues. But setting aside our individual failings, is it even *possible* for all the virtues to be present in a single human being? This is the question of the harmony of the virtues, and we may state the affirmative answer as follows:

Harmony thesis: It is possible for the human virtues to fit together harmoniously in a single life. For none of the virtues is it true that possessing that virtue, as such, entails a lack of other virtues.¹

¹My focus will be primarily upon the moral virtues, but I mean the harmony thesis to include intellectual virtues as well. The harmony thesis should be distinguished from a thesis about the unity (or mutual entailment) of the virtues, which holds that you cannot possess one virtue without possessing them all.

The issue of harmony raises important questions: Is some form of moral lack or defect *inevitable* for us, on account of the kind of thing a human being is? Do some aspects of human excellence always come at the expense of other aspects? For what sort of harmony among her dispositions is it reasonable for a person to hope?

At the end of her essay “Moral Realism and Moral Dilemma,” Philippa Foot points to the question of harmony, referring to “the most difficult part of the thought about inevitable loss”:

I mean the thought that so far from forming a unity in the sense that Aristotle and Aquinas believed they did, the virtues actually conflict with each other: which is to say that if someone has one of them he inevitably fails to have some other. Many people do not see the difficulty of this idea because they interpret it rather superficially, as the thought that, e.g., the claims of justice and charity may conflict. But this is easy to accommodate. For in so far as a man’s charity is limited only by his justice—say the readiness to help someone by his recognition of this person’s right or the right of some other person to non-interference—he is *not* less than perfect in charity. The far more difficult thought is that he can only become good in one way by being bad in another.²

Foot says that “the subject seems a hard one which stands ready to be explored,” but she does not explore it herself. In this essay, I have two goals: (1) to show how the harmony of the virtues is best interpreted and what is at stake in affirming or denying it; and (2) to provide a partial defense of the harmony of the virtues. To accomplish both of these tasks, I articulate a series of four objections to the harmony thesis, and I reply on behalf of the harmony view.

In my defense of harmony, I set aside a potential objection, based in situationist psychology, that rejects the very existence of stable human virtues.³ Rather, what interests me here is the idea that *even if* humans possess genuine and stable virtues, the harmony of those virtues is ruled out by a realistic view of our human plight—a view that is available to any informed and reasonable human agent, and does not depend upon specific research in the psychological sciences. Influential proponents of this idea include Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams. For example, in a context that makes clear he has in mind both personal virtues and political values, Berlin states:

²Philippa Foot, “Moral Realism and Moral Dilemma,” in *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 57–8.

³For a set of essays related to situationist concerns, see *The Journal of Ethics* 13, nos. 2–3 (2009). See also Daniel Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. pt. III.

The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable—that is a truism—but conceptually incoherent; I do not know what is meant by a harmony of this kind. Some among the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss. Happy are those who live under a discipline which they accept without question, who freely obey the orders of leaders, spiritual or temporal, whose word is fully accepted as unbreakable law; or those who have, by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakeable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt. I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding what it is to be human.⁴

The objections I consider are all attempts to articulate the thought that the harmony thesis is incompatible with a realistic and non-blinkered assessment of “what it is to be human.”

Perhaps no approach to moral philosophy ties the concept of virtue more closely to “what it is to be human” than Aristotelianism. And Aristotelianism in particular has been accused of supporting the harmony thesis with “an archaic metaphysical biology, itself grounded in an atavistic cosmology of natural ends or a great chain of being.”⁵ However, Aristotelians such as Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse have recently breathed new life into the Aristotelian idea that virtue is a kind of *natural excellence* in human beings, and vice is a kind of *natural defect*. In this essay, I show how the harmony thesis can be interpreted and defended within such Aristotelian naturalism. Thus, before turning to objections to the harmony thesis, in the next section I explain why Aristotelian naturalism requires the harmony of the human virtues, and how the claim of *dis*-harmony represents a deep challenge to Aristotelianism.

While I defend the harmony thesis, I do not claim to have decisively refuted the no-harmony view. My hope, rather, is to demonstrate that far from being an embarrassing liability for Aristotelianism—based in “an archaic metaphysical biology”—the harmony thesis is rather an interesting and plausible claim about human excellences, supported by a sophisticated account of the representation of life, and fully compatible with a realistic view of our human situation. Moreover, I hope to show how concepts belonging to the natural goodness view—e.g.,

⁴Isaiah Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1998), 1–16, at 11.

⁵John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), 53.

“interruptions to a life-cycle”—can make distinctive and interesting contributions to our understanding of the virtues.

II.

Human Form, Moral Goodness, and the Harmony Thesis. An Aristotelian view of the sort proposed by Philippa Foot is both a formal account of the category of moral goodness, and a substantive account of human good and the human virtues. With respect to the former, the view claims that moral judgments share a conceptual structure with judgments of excellence and defect in other living things, including plants and animals.⁶ In each case, individual living things are understood *as living* by viewing them in light of the life-form that they bear. And the goodness of parts and activities in an individual is understood in relation to its good as defined by its life-form. Thus at the center of this approach to ethics is the notion of *human good*. Moral evaluation concerns the evaluation of the human rational will, and the moral virtues—whatever those turn out to be—are qualities necessary for human good—whatever that turns out to involve. Hence moral goodness is a kind of *natural goodness* in human beings, and vice a kind of *natural defect*.

With respect to the substantive account, Aristotelians like Foot hold that the virtues include such traditionally-revered traits as justice and charity. But it is possible to accept the formal account of moral goodness while rejecting this substantive view. Foot regards Nietzsche as someone who agrees with the formal framework of natural goodness, but has a dramatically different substantive conception of human good and the virtues.⁷

In this essay, I am interested in the *dis*-harmony of the virtues as a challenge to the basic, formal framework of natural goodness as applied to human beings. According to this challenge, the problem with the natural goodness view is that it takes human form to be a *teleological unity*—it takes the parts and operations of “the human” to fit together in a harmonious and mutually-supporting way in the human life-cycle. However, whatever may be true at the biological level, at the level of reason and the rational will, human form does not possess this sort of harmony. And the *evidence* for this lack of harmony (the challenge claims) is that the human virtues conflict with one another, such that possessing some

⁶For a statement of such an Aristotelian view, see Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and part I of Michael Thompson, *Life and Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). For a defense of natural norms in the case of plants and animals, see Micah Lott, “Have Elephant Seals Refuted Aristotle?,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 9 (2012): 353–75.

⁷See the final chapter of *Natural Goodness*.

virtues entails lacking others—and this conflict is something we see *from the practical standpoint of ordinary human beings*.

I believe this challenge poses a serious problem to the Aristotelian view, and that Aristotelians have failed to respond adequately to it. The harmony thesis is indeed an expression of the core Aristotelian conviction that human good is a harmonious whole.⁸ The challenge is *correct* to suppose that: (1) the natural goodness view requires that human form is a teleological unity, and (2) this unity requires a harmony of the human virtues. The reason why the first point is true is that the natural goodness view takes the conception of the life-form to serve as a *standard* for excellence and defect in individual living things. Given that “the tiger has four legs,” and that *this* tiger has three legs, it follows that this tiger is missing a leg. Likewise, our conception of “the human” serves as a standard for excellence and defect in an individual. Given that justice is a virtue of the human being, injustice in *this* human being counts as human defect. And if human form is to be a standard for the evaluation of individuals in this way, then that standard cannot conflict with itself. For, in that case, it would not *be* a standard—it would issue inconsistent evaluations of individuals, and so would not produce a measure for judgments of excellence and defect. Put another way: the full account of “the human” includes everything that “belongs” to the human (in the sense that it “belongs” to tigers to have four legs), and only that which belongs to the human. This is so because the full account of “the human” is the standard for determining what “belongs” in the relevant sense. Thus the account itself cannot include anything that will count as human defect or lack, and so it must be consistent with itself.

This coherence of human form requires the harmony of the virtues. Moral goodness is *human* goodness—the goodness of human beings as such, in regards to the rational will. But if the moral virtues conflict with one another, or if the moral virtues conflict with intellectual virtues, then there is no coherent standard according to which moral goodness can claim the unique status of human goodness, the departure from which is characterized as vice and as human defect. For none of the conflicting forms of human development has more claim than the others to represent *the* realization of human goodness, against which individual humans might be measured. Rather, there simply is no form of life, morally virtuous or otherwise, that represents the realization of human goodness *as such*.

⁸When I refer to “the Aristotelian view,” I mean the natural goodness view, at least in its broad outlines. I grant that one might hold a view, inspired by Aristotle, that did not accept the harmony thesis. However, the harmony thesis is part of the central strand of Aristotelianism that interests me. This strand can be found in Foot and Thompson as well as Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999); and Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Bernard Williams saw correctly that Aristotelianism requires a conception of human nature as a teleological unity and the human virtues as harmonious. Williams, however, rejected the harmony view and made this central to his critique of contemporary Aristotelian moral philosophy.⁹ Thus Williams, like Isaiah Berlin, endorses what I call “the no-harmony thesis”:

No-harmony thesis: Some human virtues *as such* conflict with one another, so that it is not possible for a person to have them all. For some human virtues, possessing the virtue entails that one will not possess others.¹⁰

Both Berlin and Williams claim that we can discern conflicts among the ethical excellences as well as conflicts between ethical and non-ethical excellences. In the following sections, I develop four arguments in favor of the no-harmony thesis, drawn in part from remarks by Berlin and Williams, and I respond on behalf of the harmony thesis. Because I am interested in virtue understood within Aristotelian naturalism, my strategy is to begin with an Aristotelian conception of virtue, and to test that conception against objections. I am not defending the harmony thesis for *every* notion of “virtue.” At the same time, I also try not to beg important questions in the disagreement between the harmony and no-harmony views, or to settle interesting questions by controversial definitions. I allow Aristotelianism to draw on its own best resources, but without assuming the Aristotelian answer to contested questions in the debate over harmony.¹¹ In the penultimate section, I note some limitations of this argumentative strategy.

⁹Bernard Williams, *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). See also “Evolution, Ethics and the Representation Problem,” in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 100–10; and “Relativism, History and the Existence of Value,” in *The Practice of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 106–18.

¹⁰A.D.M. Walker has argued for a much more limited incompatibility, in his essay “The Incompatibility of the Virtues,” *Ratio* 6 (1993): 44–60. Walker grants that even in cases of incompatibility, the demands of the virtues qualify one another, such that the exercise of *either* of the conflicting virtues does not mean one is violating the *requirements* of the other virtue. He even grants that acting one way (e.g., truthfully) rather than another (e.g., tactfully) in a situation of “conflict” does not mean that one lacks the other virtue or that one is defective *in any way* with respect to the possession of either virtue (59). All that Walker insists upon is that there would still be a difference in the *degrees* to which each person possessed the respective virtues, depending on their typical responses in such situations. I reject this conclusion, since I reject Walker’s “Correlation Assumption,” which holds that the greater the range of a person’s exercise of a virtue, the greater degree to which the person possesses that virtue. In any case, Walker’s argument is not directly relevant to my focus here, since I am addressing a thesis that claims incompatibility between the *possession* of some virtues and that of others. For an excellent discussion of Walker’s position, see Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 339–55.

¹¹Of course, we could put forward a substantive view of the virtues that secures the truth of the harmony thesis—e.g., by holding that there is only one virtue. Or, we could assert a substantive view that secures the truth of the no-harmony thesis—e.g., by insisting that that honesty

III.

Evolution and Virtue: The Darwinian Objection. Bernard Williams has suggested that the harmony of the virtues found support in Aristotle's "teleological worldview," but has become untenable in light of the evolutionary understanding of human life and the related "disenchanted condition" of a modern worldview.¹² However, it is often unclear exactly *how* evolution is meant to support the no-harmony thesis. Williams puts the point thusly:

the most plausible stories now available about evolution, including its very recent date and also certain considerations about the physical characteristics of the species, suggests that human beings are to some degree a mess, and that the rapid and immense development of symbolic and cultural capacities has left humans as beings for whom no form of life is likely to prove entirely satisfactory, either individually or socially.¹³

Williams thinks evolution is relevant to the question of harmony because it supports the idea that "the historical story means much what it looks as though it means." The defender of the harmony thesis must "read beyond" the historical story in order to discern a harmonious human nature that is "partly hidden" and waiting to be revealed, but evolutionary theory suggests that no such harmonious human nature is there, waiting to be found.¹⁴

For Williams, Darwinism itself does not establish the no-harmony view. The evolutionary story becomes relevant to Williams's argument only *after* the recognition of apparent conflict among human excellences. Darwinism gives us reason to endorse the no-harmony view in further reflection, once we have already accepted it from a realistic reading of human history. That reading involves, presumably, the recognition that everywhere we look, we find humans who are failing to live flourishing lives—the recognition of what Rosalind Hursthouse calls the "dismal course of human history."¹⁵

and dishonesty are both virtues. My strategy is not to assume any highly specific substantive view of the virtues, but to focus on what I take to be paradigm cases of Aristotelian virtues, such as justice and benevolence.

¹²Williams, "Relativism, History and the Existence of Value," 115. And in another passage Williams claims support for the no-harmony thesis in the "first and hardest lesson of Darwinism, that there is no teleology at all, and that there is no orchestral score provided from anywhere according to which human beings have a special part to play" ("Evolution, Ethics and the Representation Problem," 109).

¹³Ibid. In context, I think it is clear that by "satisfactory" Williams means something like satisfying a genuine need, and not a *feeling* of contentment.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 261. Hursthouse's response to Williams is one of the very few attempts to reply to what I am calling the "no-harmony" thesis. While I agree with much of

However, the dismal course as such does *nothing* to force the conclusion that human excellences are in conflict with each other. For the defender of harmony can reply that the dismal course is simply a record of human beings failing to realize human good. And the failure of individuals to realize their good does not unsettle the idea that these individuals are bearers of a coherent form. Of course, we can look at human life and history and say “what a mess.” In so doing, we register that *this* is not how things are supposed to go with human beings—these kinds of actions and structures corrupt human life, those humans are failing to flourish. But in saying this, we need not “read beyond” the historical record to a “partly hidden” human nature. Rather, we are *already* in possession of some conception of human nature—i.e., some notion of human form—in light of which we evaluate particular humans. On its own, then, the dismal record of human beings lends no support to the no-harmony thesis, and Williams’s references to evolution pose no problem for the harmony view.¹⁶

There is, however, another way of appealing to evolution to undermine the idea of harmonious human good—The Darwinian Objection. This objection goes as follows:

- (1) Evolution reveals various traits as belonging to human nature.
- (2) These traits conflict with each other—e.g., aggression with compassion, or honesty with deception, etc.
- (3) Therefore, human nature lacks harmony.

This argument fails because it trades on ambiguity in the notion of “trait.” By “trait” the objection can mean either *tendency* or *virtue*, and in either case the argument is unsuccessful. On the one hand, we can appeal to Darwinism to explain tendencies in human beings that conflict with certain virtues—e.g., tendencies toward aggression, selfishness, infidelity, etc. But the presence of such “non-ethical tendencies” does not undermine the Aristotelian account of harmonious human good, because the harmony that matters for the Aristotelian is not a harmony of tendencies but of *virtues*, of rational excellences. By “tendency” I mean, roughly, a frequent or widespread inclination to act or feel in certain ways. In recognizing a tendency in human beings, we do not thereby judge that tendency to be a good form of human action or emotional response. We may in fact judge it to be bad. So the fact that humans *tend* to act in ways that are ethically bad, combined with an evolutionary explanation of why this is so, does not show that human excellences are in conflict with each other. On

what Hursthouse says, I believe that Hursthouse’s response to Williams is insufficient, because it depends on the claim that Williams is a “moral nihilist” and Williams can avoid that charge.

¹⁶See Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 263–4.

the contrary, such tendencies are precisely what the virtues are supposed to correct in human life.¹⁷

On the other hand, if the appeal to evolution is intended to show that these non-ethical traits *are* human excellences, and not mere tendencies, then the argument rests on an error. For the fact that some tendency or trait has some evolutionary explanation does not show that the trait should be regarded as a virtue. Rather, we can always ask whether or not such a trait belongs to human good—whether we *ought* to follow this inclination—and the mere fact that humans have an inclination cannot tell us that we *should* follow it. The no-harmony theorist can argue that some counter-ethical trait is a human virtue, but this cannot be shown simply on the grounds that the trait has an evolutionary origin. Rather, it must be because we judge this trait to be a way of acting well for a human being—we find it excellent or praiseworthy for a human being to act in accordance with this tendency. Thus references to Darwinism are largely a distraction in this debate. And indeed, despite initial appearances, thinkers like Berlin and Williams do not appeal to Darwinism as providing either initial or independent support for the no-harmony thesis.

IV.

Human Form and Human Finitude: The One Life to Live Objection. A different objection to the harmony thesis focuses on a conflict of *excellences*, rather than mere tendencies, and in this respect it is an advance over the Darwinian Objection. The One Life to Live Objection appeals to familiar facts about human limitations:

Objection: It is impossible for a person to realize all the human excellences simply because of human *finitude*. It is a feature of *our* life that we must choose among various projects to which we can devote ourselves. And in devoting ourselves to some projects we inevitably develop some human excellences at the expense of others. Depending on one's life path, a person will develop different forms of rational excellence—different capacities for perception and response and “know how.” The painter's capacity for imaginative creativity differs from the chemist's capacity for analytic thinking. Each of these capacities, however, is an excellence, and a distinctly *human* one. After all, the way humans pursue these activities

¹⁷Certain bad tendencies may belong to human nature in one sense of “human nature.” But to the extent that we judge a tendency to be irrational or in need of correction, it does not belong to human nature in the Aristotelian sense of human form. For a different, non-Aristotelian sense of “human nature,” see Allen Buchanan, *Beyond Humanity?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. chap. 4, “Human Nature and the Natural,” 115–41.

is not found in the life of wolves or ants! And yet limitations of time and resources do not allow an individual to possess all these excellences.¹⁸

We can formulate the objection as follows:

- (1) On account of our finitude, there are some human excellences, the development and possession of which entail the inability to develop and possess other excellences.
- (2) If there are such excellences, then the harmony view is false.
- (3) Thus, the harmony view is false.

This objection points to an obvious truth about human limitations. The objection fails, however, because the idea of “excellence” in the first premise conflates the notions of “skill” and “virtue.” Taken as a point about skills, the first premise is true. Various human skills cannot all be realized in a single human life; they crowd each other out. However, as a point about skills, it is not a challenge to the harmony thesis, which concerns human virtues. So if the first premise is true, the second premise is false. On the other hand, taken as a point about virtues the first premise is false. Either way the objection fails.

To make good on this reply, I must spell out the difference between skills and virtues.¹⁹ A skill is a capacity defined in terms of some particular result or change that its possessor brings about, and the achievement of which is the characteristic goal of the skillful activity. What counts as skillful perception and movement in a potter is determined by what is required to bring about good pots. In contrast, a virtue is not defined by a specific result or change. To be sure, an action that springs from virtue will involve trying to achieve something in particular (in the extended sense of “achieve” that includes refraining from acting as a way of “achieving”). Thus an act of justice might include trying to get the money back to the lender, or an act of charity might include trying to get the medicine to the sick man. But there is no *particular* goal that defines these virtues. Rather, what distinguishes the virtues is a characteristic pattern of response in a distinctive situation—e.g., courage is a matter of steadfastness before fearful things, charity involves a willingness to help those in need, etc. In the case of courage

¹⁸An objection along these lines can be found at various places in Berlin’s writing. In his helpful re-construction of Berlin’s position, John Gray writes, “Within any complex culture, there will typically be a diversity of forms of life, each with its associated virtues and excellences, available to many people, but it will not be possible to combine these forms of life within the compass of a single biography. This may be because the virtues of a nun, say, constitutively exclude those of a lover, or it may be because, though different virtues can be combined in a single person, they tend to crowd one another out, or to be conjointly realizable only at the cost of each being achieved at a low level” (Gray, *Berlin*, 54).

¹⁹I am bringing out salient differences between skills and virtues, not providing a definition of either.

or charity, there is nothing comparable to a pot that the activity of the virtue per se aims to bring about. This is clear from the way that the virtues may be displayed across a variety of contexts. A person may be patient with her family, patient with a task at work, patient teaching a dog to sit, and so on.

Another distinction between skills and virtues concerns the way in which they engage the will.²⁰ One may possess a skill but not *want* to exercise it, whether on a particular occasion or in general. I may have great skill as a carpenter but no desire to be a carpenter, being totally indifferent or even antagonistic toward the activity of carpentry. In the case of virtue, however, it is impossible to possess a virtue while being similarly indifferent toward its exercise. To possess a virtue requires that one *wants* certain things connected with that virtue. This is because the pattern of response that defines a virtue includes caring about certain things and granting them practical relevance. For example, charity necessarily involves having some concern for the needs of others, and justice involves taking the rights of others as reasons for action. Thus it is impossible to possess a virtue while being indifferent to its exercise, since that would mean being indifferent to the things that the virtuous person *as such* cares about.

These two distinctions are related to a third: Whereas a virtue is available to any normal adult human being, given the environment and upbringing presupposed in our account of human good, a skill may require special training or talent, where “special” is a matter of going beyond what is required for living well as a human being.²¹ Thus if an individual does not possess a given skill, this need not be seen as a frustration, or defect, in the life of the individual *qua* human being. If it happens that a person is not an excellent carpenter or explorer or pianist, she is not thereby a defective human being! In the case of virtues, however, an individual who does not possess a virtue thereby *lacks* something that is proper to her *qua* human being. Given that justice is a human excellence, a lack of justice makes an action defective not only with respect to a given skill, but defective *qua* human action, no matter what specific skills might be involved.

So while both skills and virtues can be termed “human excellences,” they are so in different senses. For only virtues describe excellences that belong to “the human” as such. And it should now be clear that the mutual unrealizability of various skills in a single human life is not a problem for the notion of harmonious human good. For it is at the level of the virtues that we spell out what belongs to “the human” with respect to goodness of the will, and the argument for the no-harmony view must show a conflict of virtues. The One Life to Live Objection

²⁰Cf. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 9; Foot, “Virtues and Vices,” in *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7–8.

²¹I do not mean that *all* the virtues are by definition simultaneously available to *every* adult human. That claim would, of course, beg the question unfairly against the no-harmony view.

points to an obvious truth, but it is a truth about *skills*, not virtues. It applies to excellences that are capacities for bringing about specific change, which one could possess without wanting to exercise, and which (most importantly) are not necessary for being a good human being.

On the other hand, if we think about candidate virtues—benevolence, courage, justice, etc.—why should we think that these cannot all be realized in whatever projects or tasks one undertakes? Of course, depending on the projects one devotes oneself to, such excellences will require different actions. Patience in an astronaut will look different from patience in a father; fidelity in a nun will look different from fidelity in a romantic partner. The mere appeal to finitude, however, gives us no reason to think that the virtues must necessarily crowd each other out in a human life.

V.

Human Form and Bad Situations: The Cases of Inevitable Loss Objection. In my reply to the Darwinian Objection, I argued that the no-harmony thesis requires a conflict of human *excellences* rather than mere tendencies. In my reply to the One Life to Live Objection, I argued out that the conflict of excellences must involve human *virtues* rather than mere skills. A third objection, however, accommodates both of these replies and points to a conflict among human virtues. The support for this objection comes not merely from human finitude, but from the hard realities of human life, such as illustrated in the following case:

Suppose there is a promising young writer in a small village. He has talent and enthusiasm for philosophy and literature. He would like to leave his village to study at a university and develop his intellectual and creative abilities. However, his parents have come down with a crippling disease, and his younger sister is mentally disabled. He knows that if he leaves the village, life will be very difficult for his family; they will suffer and possibly die. If he remains in the village, he can care for his family. This will mean the realization of some ethical virtues: living up to one's familial obligations, being kind and generous and helpful, etc. But staying will also mean years of difficult labor as a farmer, with little or no opportunity to develop his intellectual and creative talents.

Such cases seem sadly common, and they lead to the Cases of Inevitable Loss Objection:

- (1) There are cases in which the pursuit of some virtues (e.g., intellectual excellence) entails the inability to develop and possess other virtues (e.g., loyalty).

(2) If there are such cases, then the harmony view is false.

(3) Thus, the harmony view is false (= the no-harmony view is true).

When we consider such cases of inevitable loss, the no-harmony view can seem to be required by a realistic view of human life, in comparison with which the harmony view appears naïve. A similar objection was made by Isaiah Berlin.²² However, while the Inevitable Loss Objection points to something real in human life, it fails because its second premise is false. Although cases of inevitable loss may be sadly common, they are compatible with the harmony view and do not undermine the notion of harmonious human good. This is because there are two ways of thinking about the *source* of the conflict between virtues in cases such as these. On one view, the source of the conflict lies not in human form, but in the *abnormal circumstances* that have befallen particular humans. On the other view, the source of the conflict is human form itself—developing one virtue entails missing others because of the *kind of thing* we are. Cases of inevitable loss pose a problem for the Aristotelian view only if we accept that they have their source within human form, for only then will it be shown that there is a conflict between human virtues as such and a lack of harmony within human good itself. But we have no reason to think that such cases of inevitable loss arise from human form itself, and thus such cases pose no problem for the harmony view.

In order to develop this reply, I need to make sense of the distinction between circumstances that are “normal” and “abnormal” for human beings. Fortunately this distinction is not *ad hoc*, and in fact follows from the nature of life-form judgments. As noted earlier, the Aristotelian maintains that the notion of human good plays a role in the evaluation of the human will that is analogous to the role played by species-specific plant-good and animal-good in the evaluation of other living things. This idea begins with a point about the representation of life: Whenever we represent an individual *as* living, we do so by drawing on an implicit understanding of the life-form or species to which that

²²“An artist, in order to create a masterpiece, may lead a life which plunges his family into misery and squalor to which he is indifferent. We may condemn him and declare that the masterpiece should be sacrificed to human needs, or we may take his side—but both attitudes embody values which for some men and women are ultimate, and which are intelligible to us all if we have any sympathy or imagination or understanding of human beings” (“The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 10). Berlin makes this point in a passage arguing against the compatibility of the Great Goods. I have altered the example so that it is not only a case in which a person *may* take a course that leads to hardship for his family for the sake of a single product (“masterpiece”), but instead a case in which he *must* take a course that leads to hardship for the sake of *excellence*, and taking that course will lead to the loss of other *excellences* (and not only hardship). In so changing the case, I believe I have provided the no-harmony theorist with a stronger objection to the harmony thesis.

individual belongs.²³ This understanding can be articulated in a set of statements that express the characteristic features and activities of the life-form—e.g., “the tiger has four legs,” “wolves hunt in packs.” Taken together these statements, known as “Aristotelian categoricals,” spell out the natural history of the life-form, which is “one’s *interpretation* or *understanding* of the life-form shared by the members of that class.”²⁴ The generality expressed in Aristotelian categoricals is neither universal nor statistical. From the fact that “tigers have four legs” it does not follow that a particular tiger has four legs, or even that *any* tiger now living does (a disease may have just taken a leg from every tiger).

Aristotelian categoricals express the function of different parts and activities in the life of the species: “they articulate the relations of dependence among the various elements and aspects and phases of a given kind of life.”²⁵ Because of this, Aristotelian categoricals also form the basis for evaluations of individual members of the species. How a life-form realizes its ends determines species-specific standards of goodness, which apply to individuals who bear that life-form. When an Aristotelian categorical fails to hold for a particular plant or animal—e.g., “*this* tiger has only three legs”—then there is an instance of natural defect. If a pigeon has no wings, then it is *missing* something, whereas a hedgehog without wings is not missing anything. We make such judgments about what *ought* to be there in an individual by drawing on a conception of the individual’s life-form. In the human case, the virtues (whatever they turn out to be) capture the characteristic way in which human beings realize their good. The practical virtues spell out the goodness of our rational will in different spheres of human life.

There is an asymmetry between our explanations of what is healthy or good in an individual and what is unhealthy or defective. The former are features that *belong* to the form of the thing, whereas the latter are *alien interruptions* of the form. And whereas a good feature can be explained in terms of the life-form, instances of defect must be explained in terms of something *accidental* in the life of the individual. Thus if someone, pointing at a giraffe, asks why *this* thing has four legs, we can appeal to the fact that it is a giraffe. And given that it is a giraffe, it is no accident that it has developed four legs and is using them to walk. But if someone, pointing at a different giraffe, asks why *that* thing has three legs, then some interruption in the form is needed to explain why it has only three legs—e.g., she’s missing a leg because she was attacked by a lion.²⁶

In addition, the understanding of a life-form brings with it some understanding of the conditions required to realize its characteristic life-cycle. For

²³See part I of Thompson, *Life and Action*. I use the terms “life-form” and “species” interchangeably.

²⁴Thompson, *Life and Action*, 73.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶For more on a life-form as a source of explanation, see *ibid.*, 192–210.

example, it is true of humans that “the human child learns to speak a language.” A human child who fails to learn a language is thereby *missing* something. However, a particular human will learn a language only if she is raised by other humans who are speaking a language. If *this* human is raised by wolves, she may not learn a language. However, being raised by other humans is *itself* not something accidental in the life of a human infant. It is not merely one circumstance among others that might befall the child. Rather, being raised by other humans is a condition presupposed by the natural historical account of the life-cycle of “the human.” The way “the human” rears its young is not by giving them away to be raised by wolves (though we could imagine a life-form that did this). Nor will humans carry out their characteristic vital activities if someone deposits all of them on the surface of the sun. But the fact that ours is a terrestrial life, and not a solar one, is already included within our understanding of the human form.²⁷

And this point is crucial, for the presupposing of certain conditions within a natural history gives sense to the idea of *normal* circumstances, as opposed to abnormal ones. Normal circumstances are those presupposed in our account of the life-form. These are conditions proper to the life-cycle of the life-form in question. Abnormal circumstances are those that qualify as alien interventions or disruptions in the life-cycle.

With these points in mind, we can return to the case of the young writer. The conflict of virtues here consists in the fact that he can realize some human excellences only at the expense of realizing others, and he must choose between them. However, the source of this conflict, and the inevitable loss associated with it, does *not* come from the nature of the excellences themselves but from the particular circumstances of the case. For there is nothing in the demands of these ethical virtues (loyalty, helpfulness, etc.) that leads them to conflict *per se* with the intellectual virtues of wisdom or creativity. The virtues here do not *rule out* each other in the way that a trait like justice rules out injustice, or courage rules out cowardice. Instead, they *crowd out* each other in the situation. Realizing some virtue simply “takes up space” in the individual’s life, such that nothing is “left over” for some other virtues. And crucially, this crowding out is explained by unfortunate circumstances. After all, it is *possible* that a human life filled with activities of helping one’s family could also include intellectual and creative development. And the writer’s unfortunate circumstances are themselves something that we can register as abnormal in light of human good. For why should we think these are the normal conditions of the human being—the way things are “supposed to go” in the life of the human? On the contrary, when we hear the story we quickly see it as a bad situation. In so doing, we register more

²⁷See *ibid.*, 78–9.

than the idea that there has been some loss. We register that some of the conditions presupposed in our account of human good are not present in this case.

The case of the young writer is analogous to a case in which a wolf has been caught in a hunter's trap, and the wolf must sever his own leg in order to escape the trap. In severing his own leg, the wolf further maims himself. And surely *under normal circumstances* this would be very defective wolf behavior. But given his circumstances, a kind of loss is inevitable for the wolf: either he will lose a leg or lose his life. Importantly, the inevitability of loss in this particular case does not have its source in wolf-form—when we describe the life of “the wolf” it is not part of that life to be caught in a hunter's trap. So the inevitability of loss comes into the life of this particular wolf not on account of the life-form that he bears, but on account of how circumstances have conspired against him—circumstances that we easily recognize as alien interventions in the life of the wolf. So the idea of wolf-good is not undermined by the fact that wolves are sometimes caught in traps. Likewise, the idea of human good is not undermined by cases like the young writer. What such cases show is not that human nature lacks harmony, but that human goodness is vulnerable.

And it is now clearer what the no-harmony thesis amounts to. In claiming that the virtues *as such* conflict with each other, and in presenting this as a deep challenge to Aristotelianism, no-harmony theorists like Berlin and Williams must hold that some virtue will be missing in every life and this *on account of human form itself*. For any individual human, there will be some human excellence that is unrealized. And the reason for this is not merely particular interruptions in an individual's life-history, but the nature of the life-form that the individual bears. So it makes sense that Bernard Williams, in putting forward a no-harmony view, claims that we no longer have reason to believe in “an order in relation to which there could be an existence which would satisfy all the most basic human needs at once.”²⁸ If there is no such order, then for any sort of human life—any set of commitments and dispositions, ethical or non-ethical—there will always be some basic human need that is left unsatisfied. There will be something *missing* in each case that would have to be present for a fully good human life. That is the force of rejecting the Aristotelian notion of harmonious human good. Hence Williams describes humans as “beings for whom no form of life is likely to prove entirely satisfactory, either individually or socially.”²⁹

On the no-harmony view, there is a variety of human excellences, each of which is a development of some aspect of human nature. But the requirements of some excellences rule out others: “the very nature of central human powers is such that they and their attendant goods are inherently competitive with each

²⁸Williams, “Evolution, Ethics and the Representation Problem,” 109.

²⁹Ibid., 110.

other.”³⁰ And that conflict is a feature of what “the human” is—a bricolage, rather than a unified whole. There is a lack of teleological organization among human needs and capacities, and thus it is impossible for a being with this life-form to live a fully satisfactory life *qua* being that it is.

VI.

Is Abnormal the New Normal? In response to my argument in the last section, the critic of Aristotelianism might protest: “But as a matter of fact, ‘abnormal’ circumstances will enter into just about every human life! In that sense, what is ‘abnormal’ (= an interruption of human-form) is ‘normal’ (= what we should expect to happen in the lives of human beings). We can grant that the lack of some virtue is not inevitable on account of a conflict within human form itself. Even so, the lack of some virtue is inevitable in a weaker but practically relevant sense: What is typical, statistically speaking, is that humans are faced with situations that force them to choose between some virtues or others.”

For my purposes, the important question is *not* whether this claim about the frequency of abnormal situations is true but whether this weaker sense of “inevitable loss” even poses a problem for the framework of Aristotelian naturalism. The answer is that it does not. The Aristotelian can allow that, as it happens, humans can expect to face situations in which, as a result of circumstances inimical to human good, they must choose to develop some virtue at the expense of another. The statistical likelihood of abnormal circumstances in no way undermines the Aristotelian account of life-form judgments, or the fact that certain conditions are presupposed within the natural history of a life-form. As noted earlier, the generality expressed in Aristotelian categoricals is not statistical. What is statistically speaking “typical” for mosquitos may differ from what belongs to the life of “the mosquito” as spelled out in the system of natural-historical judgments that describes the mosquito life-form.³¹ Out of hundreds of mosquito eggs laid, only a small percentage reach adulthood; for the vast majority, the mosquito life-cycle is cut short. But that does not undermine the distinction between what “belongs” to the life of the mosquito—as spelled out in a system of natural historical judgments about mosquito-form—and what is an interruption of the mosquito life-cycle in particular cases. Likewise, *every* conception of a life-form presupposes some conditions in which the life-cycle of the organism takes place. It is a myth to suppose that we could spell out condition-independent Aristotelian categoricals for any living thing. And thus every life-form conception includes within it the basis for the distinction between normal and abnormal

³⁰Gray, *Berlin*, 55. Gray is here summarizing, correctly in my view, the implications for philosophical anthropology of Berlin’s claim about the conflict of virtues.

³¹See Thompson, *Life and Action*, 71–3.

circumstances, and this distinction is *not* grounded in statistical generalizations about individual bearers of the life-form.

This is important, because it means that Aristotelianism does not require a Pollyannaish view of human prospects. Rather the Aristotelian account of human good can accommodate a realistic, and indeed a very pessimistic, view of the likelihood that individuals will face circumstances hostile to human flourishing and “abnormal” in terms of the natural-historical account of human beings. And one result of such circumstances may be that individuals are forced to pursue some human virtue in way that “crowds out” the pursuit of other human virtues.

Moreover, the Aristotelian distinction between normal and abnormal circumstances may have important consequences for political judgments. In asking whether or not a society serves the flourishing of its members, it matters a great deal if we suppose that hard choices are simply *inevitable* in human life, on account of human-form itself, or instead in principle *remediable*, perhaps through different social arrangements.

VII.

Admiration for Scoundrels: The Napoleon Objection. I have so far considered three objections to the harmony thesis, and in each case I have argued that the objection fails. I now turn to what I call the Napoleon Objection:

Objection: Surely we can and do *admire* traits in others that conflict with the virtues that we embrace for ourselves. For example, we can look at Napoleon and believe that there is something amazing about his way of acting. And we appreciate not merely his skills as a general, but qualities of his character. In some respects, we judge him an especially fine human being. And yet, he was also an immoral scoundrel. His astounding traits were also destructive, and in some respects awful. This is true of his marvelous will-to-power, according to which he strove to reshape society into his own image. This trait requires attitudes and actions that cannot be harmonized with moral virtues like cooperativeness, but we see it as a *human virtue* nonetheless. So we have a conflict among virtues.

We can represent this objection in the following argument:

- (1) Napoleonic will-to-power is a human virtue. (The evidence for this comes from our admiration of him.)
- (2) Cooperativeness is also a human virtue.
- (3) Napoleonic will-to-power and cooperativeness require incompatible practical responses, and so conflict with each other.
- (4) Therefore, human virtues can conflict with one another.

Unlike the earlier objections, the Napoleon Objection has both the right kind of *trait* and the right kind of *conflict* in view. Cooperativeness and will-to-power are not skills, and the source of their conflict is not an abnormal circumstance. Likewise, the objection appeals to the right kind of *support* for the claim of conflict—our admiration for these traits, which expresses our practical judgment, rather than observations about human tendencies.³²

One reply to the Napoleon Objection begins with the point that the virtues delimit each other in the actions they recommend and require. That is, what *counts* as the manifestation of a virtue is partly determined by the requirements of other virtues, such that no virtue will require an action that is forbidden by another virtue. For example, while it is part of charity to help the needy, it is not part of charity to violate the rights of others in order to do so. Thus a person who refused to kill the innocent in order to help someone would not be deficient with respect to charity, for what counts as charity is delimited by the norms of justice.³³ And for the same reason, whatever purportedly counter-ethical trait we select will not, if it truly is a virtue, conflict with ethical traits, if they are indeed virtues as well. For the requirements of these traits will delimit each other. Thus, if there is a virtue called “will-to-power,” its requirements will be partly determined by the other virtues (whatever those are) and vice versa. Reflection on figures like Napoleon, then, may require a revision in our substantive account of the virtues or what they require, just as reflection on the other virtues may require a revision in our appreciation of Napoleon. But in no case will reflection reveal that the requirements of the virtues conflict.

It is legitimate, I think, for the defender of harmony to appeal to the idea that the virtues delimit one another. This point has been invoked to support various formulations of the *unity* of the virtues.³⁴ However, in response to the

³²In rejecting the harmony of the virtues, Berlin puts forward a counterview, drawn from Machiavelli, Vico, and Herder, that he refers to as “pluralism.” According to Berlin’s pluralism, there is “a world of objective values”—of purposes and ways of life chosen by humans for their own sakes. These values, however, are not harmonious. Within the set of objective values that we recognize as *genuine* values—as fully rational and fully human—there are incompatibilities, such that it is impossible *in principle* to harmonize these values in a single life or a single human community. This does not mean, however, that relativism is true or that values are “subjective.” Rather, it simply means that genuine and objective values—including human virtues—are in conflict. For my purposes, the question is: Why should we *accept* Berlin’s pluralist view as it relates to human virtues? In Berlin’s essays, it is easier to discern the rough shape of pluralism as an outlook than it is to locate arguments in its favor, especially arguments that will carry weight with someone not already persuaded of pluralism. The line of thought in the Napoleon Objection is meant to capture the *support* for the no-harmony thesis, and it locates that support in the admiration we have for figures whose values are incompatible with our own.

³³For a statement of this point, see the quotation from Foot in the introduction to this essay.

³⁴John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 50–73; Gary Watson, “Virtues in Excess,” *Philosophical Studies*:

critic of the harmony of the virtues, appealing to the delimiting point risks begging the question. For the proponent of the no-harmony thesis can reply that the claim that the virtues fully delimit each other is itself a part of the picture of human nature as a coherent whole. And the point of the objection is to *unsettle* that picture by showing, on the basis of practical reflection on concrete cases, that the virtues *do* conflict. So saying that the virtues delimit each other might just reassert the view in question.

My reply, then, takes a different course. It begins with the following points about virtue: The virtue of something is that which makes a thing good, and that which is necessary and sufficient to do so.³⁵ Human practical virtues make good human action and life, including our emotional responses. Since goodness in human action is not only a matter of what we do but why we do it, the practical virtues make good our motivations and reasoning. To possess a virtue is to acknowledge certain considerations as reasons for acting, and to act on them. We distinguish one virtue from another by its characteristic pattern of response—which includes perception, evaluation, and practical inference—and by the domain of considerations to which this response relates—e.g., boldness in the face of fearful things (courage), readiness to tell the truth (honesty), slowness to anger and frustration (patience). So for each virtue, there is a distinctive type of consideration that the virtue relates to. The virtuous person acts and feels as she does *in light of* considerations present in the situation, and the characteristic response of the virtue sets a standard for acting well in situations of the relevant kind. Moreover, this response corrects or preserves this domain of human life from possible defect.³⁶

I will not offer a conclusive argument for the claim that the virtue of something is that which is necessary and sufficient to make something good. But the idea of “making good” seems to be part of even a minimal sense virtue. The notion of virtue has application where there is a possibility of going wrong or being defective. And if we were unable to see a disposition as embodying goodness, why would we ever call it a *human virtue* or suppose it to be something excellent for “the human”? Moreover, the idea that virtue is necessary and sufficient for goodness is supported by the following: If we grant that honesty is the virtue with respect to telling the truth, then what you need for goodness

An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition 46 (1984): 57–74. For an illuminating discussion of issues in this area, see Anselm Müller, “Aristotle’s Conception of Ethical and Natural Virtue: How the Unity Thesis Sheds Light on the Doctrine of the Mean,” in *Was ist das für den Menschen Gute? Menschliche Natur und Güterlehre*, ed. J. Szaif and M. Lutz-Bachmann (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 18–53.

³⁵Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a15–17.

³⁶A single situation, of course, will involve a range of considerations relevant to different virtues.

of the will in this area is *honesty*, nothing more and nothing less. If you lack honesty, then you do not have full goodness with respect to truth-telling; and if you are honest, you don't need anything else so far as goodness in truth-telling goes. And the same is true for the other virtues. (This is consistent with the idea that you need other virtues in order to be honest. I neither assume nor deny the unity of the virtues here.)

Let us consider, then, the sort of case of conflicting virtues that is required for the Napoleon Objection. At least two things must be true: (1) both traits must be virtues, and (2) the distinctive response required by one of them must rule out the response required by the other. If the second point is to be true, then the traits in question must be relevant to the same sort of consideration, otherwise their requirements will not come into contact with each other in such a way as to generate practical conflict. And if the traits are to be virtues, then they must lead their possessors to act well, since this is part of even a minimal sense of something as a virtue. The earlier example of will-to-power and cooperation meets both of these criteria. Thus, as a purported case of conflict, we can assert:

- (1) Will-to-power leads a human being to act well, with respect to the extension or limitation of one's power over others.
- (2) Cooperativeness leads a human being to act well, with respect to the extension or limitation of one's power over others.

This much is implied by the claim that these two are virtues, and that is the very claim the Napoleon Objection requires. However, from (1) and (2) it follows:

- (3) A human being is led to act well in this domain of practical concern by *either* will-to-power or cooperativeness.

And from this it follows that:

- (4) Neither will-to-power nor cooperativeness, *considered on its own*, is necessary for acting well with respect to these considerations (= for making good human action with respect to one's power over others).

However, we posited earlier that a human virtue is necessary and sufficient for making human action good in some area. Since *neither* will-to-power *nor* cooperativeness are necessary for making action good, it follows that:

- (5) Neither will-to-power nor cooperativeness, considered on its own, is a human virtue.

This does not mean that these traits cannot be ways of acting well, but whatever a human virtue is in this area will be what accounts for both of them—e.g., a disposition for having *either* will-to-power or cooperativeness. The notion of a virtue is not out of place here, since there may still be ways of going wrong—

e.g., a disposition to isolate yourself entirely from others. However, since neither will-to-power nor cooperativeness are human virtues, it follows that:

- (6) Will-to-power and cooperativeness do not give us a case of conflicting virtues.

And what is true of these two traits will be true of other cases thought to support the Napoleon Objection, since the relevant points must hold for any purportedly conflicting virtues.

We can illustrate this argument with an analogy to a person's virtue *qua* player of a certain game. Here the trait in question involves practical response, but it is not a human virtue since it pertains only to one's role as a player of the game. Suppose, then, that there is a game in which there are two equally good styles of playing. One can play either quick and aggressive, or slow and deceptive. One cannot play both ways, since the actions required by one style are incompatible with the actions required by the other. However, playing either quick/aggressive or slow/deceptive can make one good at the game. (And there are other ways of playing that count as playing poorly—e.g., playing quick/deceptive or slow/aggressive.) In this case, one can play well in virtue of playing quick/aggressive or in virtue of playing slow/deceptive, but neither of these styles considered on its own is *the* virtue of a player of the game. For the virtue of a player is that which is required to make good one's actions *qua* player, and it is possible to play well *without* being quick/aggressive and *without* being slow/deceptive. So if we consider each on its own, neither describes the virtue of a player of the game. Rather, the virtue of a player is to play either quick/aggressive or slow/deceptive.

At this point, a proponent of the Napoleon Objection might protest that the analogy with the game is unfair, since in that case there is a single end, or telos, to playing the game, and that telos (=winning) determines goodness for a player. And what is being rejected on the no-harmony view is the idea that human beings *have* a coherent telos. So imagine, instead, a tool whose purpose is both to prune the branches of a certain tree and also to measure the length of those branches. In order to be good for pruning, the tool must be curved. However, in order to be good for measuring, the tool must be straight, and being one way rules out being the other. And that tool, the no-harmony view claims, is what a human being is like. There is no single end or function to the human being, and thus no unified activity that counts as good human action.

However, if human life is like this, then once again we will not have a conflict of virtues. For suppose that one of the purported virtues, will-to-power, is like the curvedness of the tool, while the other purported virtue, cooperativeness, is like the straightness of the tool. In that case, *neither* will be sufficient to make good human action with respect to the domain of one's power over others. For by making good in one way it will be making bad in another. And thus *neither*

of these traits will be human virtues, and so again there can be no conflict of human virtues.

The Napoleon Objection appeals to concrete cases to support the claim that some human virtues are in conflict with one another. But the Napoleon Objection faces a dilemma: Either both traits in question are sufficient and neither is necessary to make good human action in this domain, and thus the true virtue is something else with a more complicated description (as in the game case). Or the lack of teleological unity means that neither trait is a virtue and nothing could count as a virtue in this domain, since nothing could be sufficient to make good human action here (as in the tool case). Either way the conflicting traits turn out not to be human virtues, and thus not a case of virtues in conflict.

VIII.

A Pyrrhic Victory for Aristotelianism? Are There Any Aristotelian Virtues? In this section and the next, I will consider two replies to my argument against the Napoleon Objection. The first reply accepts the account of virtue I have just given and embraces the first horn of the dilemma above. However, it levels the following counter-charge against Aristotelianism: “I now grant that cases like Napoleon do not show that human form is in conflict with itself, or that every human life must lack some of the human virtues. For while Napoleon must lack cooperativeness, and cooperativeness is *one way* of realizing the human virtue in this domain, cooperativeness *itself* is not necessary for virtue, and thus Napoleon need not be judged deficient in virtue because he lacks cooperativeness. And the same goes for the cooperative person who lacks will to power. However, this is a pyrrhic victory for Aristotelianism! For it means that when we come to the *substantive* question of the virtues, we are no longer justified in claiming that what is usually meant by ‘vice’ is actually human defect. For surely traits such as will-to-power, dishonesty, or infidelity are what is usually meant by ‘vice.’ And if we allow that these traits are actually modes of a higher-order virtue, then we are no longer justified in saying that the usual vices are natural human defects. And this reduces the interest of Aristotelianism as a position in moral philosophy, and also concedes the essence of the no-harmony position—that whatever unity there is to a human being, it is not sufficient to underwrite the claim that virtue and vice *as usually understood* are human excellence and defect, respectively.”

While there is something true in this objection, it is not a problem for Aristotelian moral philosophy, since there is no need for the Aristotelian to concede that will-to-power is actually one mode of virtue. That is, the defender of harmony can reject the first premise in the Napoleon Objection. This premise is a substantive and highly questionable claim about the status of a particular way of living and acting. Against it, we should assert that what is called “will-

to-power” is not a virtue but a vice, or a collection of vices, such as injustice, selfishness, and cruelty. Moreover, whatever admiration we may feel for Napoleon can be explained as admiration for traits other than his will-to-power—e.g., his determination, endurance, daring. Such traits are indeed virtues, or they are the kind of dispositions that *would* be virtues if ordered by the proper ends. And we have no reason for thinking that these traits cannot be harmonized with other virtues, such as cooperativeness. And the same points will hold true for other cases, be it Stalin’s persistence or Andrew Jackson’s boldness or whatever. Thus even if we feel some admiration for scoundrels, our admiration is not best interpreted as embodying the judgment that their distinctly counter-ethical traits are human virtues. In my view, the proper response to the “admirable” traits of such figures is to discern what is truly admirable from what is not, and that is sufficient to defend the harmony thesis.

The point of my argument in the last section was to show that *if* we grant that conflicting traits such as will-to-power and cooperativeness lead a human to act well, then we cannot conclude that either *on its own* is a human virtue in the domain to which they both pertain. However, it is the proponent of the no-harmony thesis, not the harmony view, who must insist in the first place that both these traits lead a person to act well. For that point is implied by the claim, necessary for the Napoleon Objection, that both of these traits are virtues.

Indeed, in the case of will-to-power and cooperativeness, it is hard to see how these could be two modes of the same virtue—two ways of acting well with respect to one’s power over others. For it is not clear, to say the least, what these traits have in common in the way of perception, evaluation, and action! Precisely what is regarded as good by one seems to be ruled out as erroneous by the other—not simply an alternative, acceptable “style” of living a human life (analogous to one’s “style” of playing a game). And that reflects how *strange* it would be to admire will-to-power as a virtue without revising one’s belief that cooperativeness is a virtue. And this is a difficulty for the proponent of the no-harmony thesis, not for the harmony view, for it is the Napoleon Objection that insists both traits are virtues.

Moreover, the claim that Aristotelianism has achieved only a pyrrhic victory in fact concedes that there is no special problem for the natural goodness framework arising from conflicts among the virtues. At the beginning of this essay, I distinguished two ways of objecting to an ethical naturalism like Philippa Foot’s. One kind of objection accepts the formal framework of natural goodness but rejects Foot’s own substantive conception of the virtues. A second kind of objection rejects the basic framework of natural goodness, on the grounds that “the human” lacks the teleological unity this framework requires. I have been considering the claim of *dis*-harmony as evidence for the second kind of objection to a natural goodness view. However, the charge of pyrrhic victory supposes

that the objection is of the first kind. We “reduce the interest” of Aristotelianism only if we grant what is actually an alternative substantive conception of human good and the virtues—a conception that allows for both cooperativeness and will-to-power to be two ways of realizing human good, two modes of manifesting human virtue. This, however, would be a very odd view of human good, and we have no good reason to accept it. Thus if we embrace the first horn of the dilemma, then what *seemed* to be an argument for the no-harmony thesis turns out to be the statement of an implausible substantive conception of human good.

Another reply to my argument embraces the second horn of the dilemma: “I now grant that *given* your initial points about virtue, it is wrong to maintain that will-to-power and cooperativeness are conflicting virtues. It is true that neither of the conflicting traits is necessary and sufficient to make action *unqualifiedly good*, where that implies no defect, although either of the traits will make good *in some respect*. However, it is the *Aristotelian* conception of virtue that includes the idea that a virtue is necessary and sufficient to make action unqualifiedly good! So your argument indeed shows that starting from an Aristotelian conception of virtue, we cannot appeal to concrete cases to show that two virtues are in conflict. But we must reject the Aristotelian conception of virtue, and in particular the notion of a virtue as necessary and sufficient for making unqualifiedly good—i.e., good without lack or defect. So it is true that the Napoleon Objection does not show that virtues *in the Aristotelian sense* conflict with one another, since neither trait is a virtue in the Aristotelian sense. But the proper conclusion to draw is that there *are no virtues in the Aristotelian sense*. Actual virtues are simply admirable states of character, and these conflict with one another, as the Napoleon Objection points out. With respect to what is admirable (=the virtues), humans are indeed similar to the pruning/measuring tool. And this is to be expected, given that human powers are in competition with one another.”

I do not know how to refute someone who adopts this position. But neither does this response represent a serious challenge to Aristotelianism. For this rejection of Aristotelian virtue rests on the claim that both will-to-power and cooperativeness are admirable *qua* rational excellences, and that claim is unconvincing. As I have argued, we have good reason to reject the claim that will-to-power is truly admirable. Rather, what are admirable are traits that should be disentangled from what is distinctive to will-to-power. Furthermore, if both will-to-power and cooperativeness are admirable *qua* forms of rational excellence, then it should be possible to discern what in their respective modes of practical response merits our admiration. But given their sharply conflicting patterns of response, it is hard to see both traits could merit admiration *qua* practical response—i.e., how both traits could be excellent ways of responding to a particular kind of consideration. Given this difficulty, plus the possibility of explaining our admiration *without* the judgment that both traits are virtues,

Aristotelians are hardly forced to accept that both traits are indeed virtues. And without the claim that both are virtues, we are left without an argument to show that the central human powers are indeed in competition with one another.

The lesson of this, as I see it, is that there are limits to the positive arguments an Aristotelian can make for the harmony thesis without assuming what may be contested aspects of Aristotelianism. For such positive arguments will draw on accounts both of what a virtue *is* and of which substantive character traits are actual human *virtues*. And it is always possible for the no-harmony theorists to insist that there are no virtues *in that sense*, or that certain conflicting traits simply *are both virtues*. Thus, to the extent that Aristotelians seek to go beyond answering objections and to provide positive arguments for harmony, the most convincing argument for the harmony thesis may ultimately be the role that the harmony thesis plays within a larger account of virtue and human form that is itself coherent and compelling.

IX.

Conclusion. While allowing that possessing any virtue might be a rare achievement, the harmony thesis holds that it is possible for the virtues to fit together in a single human life. For none of the virtues is it true that possessing that virtue, as such, entails a lack of other virtues. At the beginning of this essay, I explained why Aristotelian naturalism requires the harmony thesis. I then offered a partial defense of the harmony thesis, by articulating a series of four objections to the harmony thesis and responding to those objections. The Darwinian Objection and the One Life to Live Objection both fail because each misunderstands the kind of trait to which the harmony thesis applies—virtues, rather than mere tendencies or specific skills. The Cases of Inevitable Loss Objection has the right kind of trait in view, but it fails because it misconstrues the source of certain conflicts among the virtues. It does not distinguish between conflicts attributable to abnormal circumstances befalling particular humans (which the harmony view can accept) and conflicts attributable to human form itself (which pose the real challenge to the harmony view). The Napoleon Objection does not commit any of the mistakes of the first three objections, but it has other problems. It relies on an implausible interpretation of our admiration of certain scoundrels. And even granting its interpretation of our admiration, it does not identify an actual conflict among virtues.

There is an element of truth in each of these objections. It is true that acquiring the virtues requires a rational shaping of our impulses and a correcting of common tendencies; that because of human finitude, each of us will not be able to develop all of the skills that we might wish, and each of us will miss certain desirable abilities and experiences, no matter what path in life we choose; that

human good is vulnerable to misfortune, and developing the virtues requires conditions that are beyond an individual's control; that even scoundrels have aspects to their character that merit some admiration or respect. I have tried to show that the Aristotelian view can account for the truth in each of the objections, while preserving the harmony thesis and the core notion of human form as a teleological unity. In this way, Aristotelianism proves to be not a naïve position, resting on the comfortable beds of dogma or an atavistic cosmology, but instead a realistic view of what it is to be human, supported by our considered practical judgment and a sophisticated account of the representation of life.³⁷

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