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Virtues and Values, Without Disproportion or Dysfunction

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ABSTRACT

Pettigrove advances a persuasive case against the proportionality principle. In my view, the moral respect that his modus operandi account of virtue affords to each person's 'characteristic way of being' is also to be applauded. While various philosophers have come to believe in the proportionality principle, it is something that presupposes a monistic account of value. Moreover, it is readily arguable that the kind of abstraction that this involves provides nothing more than an illusion of understanding, and that any supposed insights associated with it have no genuine or practical application. While Pettigrove presents the modus operandi account of virtue as something that competes with consequentialist accounts of virtue, his discussion of consequentialist considerations is both minimal and equivocal. With this in mind, I seek to challenge Pettigrove's apparent suggestion that the goodness of virtue is always 'fundamental'.

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1. Introduction

Glen Pettigrove [2022] puts proportionality into perspective. As he recognizes, there is a sense in which our moral responses should be proportional to the value of the person or object to which we're responding. So when a woman loves her cup of coffee 'in the same way and to the same degree' that she loves her child, it is clear that 'something is amiss' [2022: 120]. In fact such a response is so comically disproportionate that we're unlikely to ever encounter it, except perhaps in a coffee advertisement.

As Andrew Pinsent [2022] has emphasized, an issue that underlies all talk of a 'proportionality principle' concerns the assumption of a *monistic* or *univocal* account of value. And in harmony with both Pettigrove and Pinsent, I agree that we should reject monism with regard to value. But I think that the exact basis for rejecting it is worth explaining, and one of my aims is to identify what the errors involved appear to be.

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In my view, Pettigrove offers cogent critiques of both the recursive and the response-dependent accounts of the relationship between virtue and value. And perhaps of equal importance is his succinctly explained insistence upon the need to take into account each person's 'characteristic way of being'.

Nonetheless, I present certain reflections and suggestions with which I hope to challenge Pettigrove. For although he has distanced himself from consequentialist thinking, the extent to which he has done so is unclear, as is his rationale. With this in mind I seek to briefly present some thoughts in favour of consequentialist or functionalist considerations.

2. From Proportionality to Modi Operandi

Our talk of proportionality provides another way of saying that we should give people their due, that rewards should match contributions, or that the punishment should fit the crime. Similarly, it enables us to say that the child's tantrum was out of all proportion to the magnitude of the problem, or that a particular characterization of a problem 'blows it out of all proportion.' Of course there are times when we need to offer a little more detail in order to clarify what we mean by such talk. After first merely offering the rather abstract reminder that 'people should be given their due', for example, we may then need to point out what, say, the current commercial rate for a reputable plumber is. But talk of proportionality is a matter of common sense. It provides a useful way of indicating—albeit somewhat vaguely—what is required for emotional maturity and an ethically defensible perspective.

Almost any mention of proportionality sounds a little formal. Yet in discussions of ethical, legal, and political judgement, it seldom carries the kind of formal *precision* that such talk enjoys in a mathematical context. I suggest that if there is generally no prospect of such formal precision, talk of proportionality is never going to provide anything more insightful than a rough and ready expression of common sense.

Pettigrove [2022: 113] presents the *proportionality principle* as one according to which 'our actions and attitudes ought to be proportioned to the degree of value present in the object, action, or event to which they are a response'. As he says, it is something that 'has been endorsed either explicitly or implicitly by a number of theorists' [2022: 114], and perhaps it is worth briefly going over some of these endorsements.

Aristotle spoke of the just being a species of the proportionate, and said that a just distribution is one in which each person's reward is proportional to his or her merit (at least 'in some sense'), with the ratio of person A's reward over B's being equal to the ratio of person A's merit over B's [1980: 112–14].

John Stuart Mill [1863 (2000): 13] proposed that 'actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness'.¹

Robert Nozick [1981: 431], after acknowledging a great variety of concrete responses that we may have to diverse things of 'value and disvalue', suggested that '[s]omething is asked when the intensity of the response is not proportioned to the magnitude of the value'.

¹ Mill actually isn't mentioned by Pettigrove although this famous statement of utilitarianism does of course imply a clear endorsement of the proportionality principle.

Thomas Hurka [2001: 84], like Aristotle, invokes certain abstractions that are quasi-mathematical: ‘If x is n times as intrinsically good as y , loving x for itself any more or less than n times as intensely as y is intrinsically evil as a combination’.²

Pettigrove argues that the virtues of love, forgiveness, and ambition should not involve valuing or bestowing favour upon a person, object, or project in ways that are necessarily proportional to the value of that particular person, object, or project. To help illustrate this in relation to parental love he conjures up a scenario in which a mother takes the proportionality principle seriously: ‘As her child heads out the door for school (or steps onto the athletic field) [the] mother says, “Do your best today, darling, because if you don’t, Mummy will be obliged to love you less”’ [Pettigrove 2022: 116].

Pettigrove then presents an alternative account of how we value things, one that offers a little more ‘breathing room’ [2022: 120]. In what he aptly calls the modus operandi account of virtue, Pettigrove recognizes that we may each have our own characteristic way of being: ‘Different agents, even different virtuous agents, have their own personality profiles with different dispositions and distinctive ways of valuing and acting’ [2022: 125]. It’s an account of virtue designed ‘for creatures like us’ [2022: 126]. It accepts that practically all of us—virtuous people included—form attachments, bind together into communities, and develop our own ambitions. It recognizes the kind of love that one may have for a husband, wife, child, parent, or friend, and it accepts that in such cases, quite rightly, ‘the intensity of our love does not track a difference in value’ [2022: 126].

One feature of Pettigrove’s modus operandi account of virtue that is distinctive—though somewhat elusive—is that it takes virtue to be ‘an independent sort of value’ [2022: 123]. ‘At least sometimes,’ argues Pettigrove, ‘a virtuous action will not be explained by other goods the agent appreciates, pursues, or promotes. It will be explained by qualities of the agent’ [2022: 123–4].

3. What Makes the Proportionality Principle Attractive?

Pettigrove plausibly suggests that ‘the proportionality principle’s advocates may have been hoping for too much precision and too much parsimony’ [2022: 121]. The very idea of proportionality, if taken literally and precisely, requires us to adopt a monistic account of value, that is, one in which our moral and ethical considerations can somehow be reduced to considerations about one kind of thing, with that one kind of thing typically described as ‘goodness’, ‘value’, or ‘utility’. This is a point that Andrew Pinsent [2022] has noticed, and it’s safe to say that both he and Pettigrove share an antipathy towards such accounts.

Given that so many of us reject any genuinely monistic account of value, Pinsent understandably suggests that further analysis of this issue may not amount to much more than ‘flogging a very dead horse, or at least a horse that ought to be deceased by now, given cogent criticisms across so many centuries’ [Pinsent 2022: 150]. I certainly agree that ‘value monism’ should have been sent to the glue factory long ago. Yet I also think that its extraordinary resilience is something that we should give serious attention. While I can’t claim that the thoughts that I’m offering here on

² Pettigrove also sees the proportionality principle in Christine Tappolet’s work. I have mentioned only the work of Aristotle, Mill, Nozick, and Hurka above, however, because Tappolet’s work, as far as I can tell, is not squarely challenged by what I am suggesting about the dangers of abstraction.

this issue are especially original, my hope is that they do help to show that there is a good deal at stake in our understanding of these matters.

It's reasonable to suspect that monistic accounts of value have a particular appeal to those of a certain mentality, perhaps to those with Pascal's [1671: 119] *esprit de géométrie*, as opposed to those with an *esprit de finesse*. In other words, such an account does appeal to certain people, but that is merely because it appears to provide the kind of account that matches their own personal prejudices, biases, or strengths.

Similarly, I think it's reasonable in this context to raise concerns about 'scientism', that is, the assumption, implicit or otherwise, that scientific methods are applicable to all human problems, or that science provides the only genuine or authoritative form of understanding. In the 1750s Adam Smith [1980: 47] reflected upon:

the lucubrations of those who were acquainted with one art, but ignorant of the other; who therefore explained to themselves the phenomena, in that which was strange to them, by those in that which was familiar ...

Of course since Smith's time, scientific thinking in various branches has further distinguished itself for its clarity, rigour, and success. And given the kind of authority that science has thereby earned, we shouldn't be surprised if certain moral theorists attempt to lustre their lucubrations merely by trying to slavishly imitate its methods and language.³

Clearly enough, there are implications here for the ways in which we teach ethics. Even if monistic accounts of value are rather difficult to defend, these psychological or scientific factors may help to explain why it is that their pestilential presence persists.

4. Vicious Abstractionism

William James lamented the kind of 'vicious abstractionism' through which we 'reduce the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestions of that name abstractly taken' [1909: 249]. In fact he took it to be 'one of the great original sins of the rationalistic mind' [1909: 250]. Regardless of how sinful such abstractionism may be, anyone tempted to adopt a monistic account of value should at least think about whether such an account can serve us very well when it comes to the vital task of giving practical reasons to each other. To help bring this issue into focus it can be especially instructive to think about Mill's form of utilitarianism. In many respects, Mill's views are in harmony with common sense. He recognized, like Aristotle, that certain pleasures are 'higher', more dignified, or more desirable than others [Aristotle 1980: Book 10, Ch. 3; Mill 1863 (2000): Ch. 2], and Mill gave a well-known explanation as to how we are to tell the difference:

Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. [Mill 1863 (2000): 16]

He then assured us that:

it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties ... [ibid.]

³ As Hayek [1942: 269] pointed out, such attempts actually involve 'an attitude which is decidedly unscientific in the true sense of the word, since it involves a mechanical and uncritical application of habits of thought to fields different from those in which they have been formed'.

Mill recognized that this preference we tend to have for the higher forms of pleasure may be explained in various ways. He seems to have ultimately come to accept, however, that ‘the most appropriate’ appeals shall invoke ‘a sense of dignity’ [ibid.: 17]. So perhaps he could have argued that poetry, for example, is to be favoured over pornography on the basis that poetry is more dignified.

The trouble is, however, that if Mill admits that such judgements are to be justified through an appeal to a sense of dignity, it becomes very difficult to maintain that his account of value is genuinely monistic. He may continue to claim that ‘actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness’ [ibid.: 17]. And provided that this claim is interpreted in the way that Mill intends, it is far from absurd. The problem, however, is that if it is true, this is only because its correct interpretation is parasitic upon a prior understanding of which pleasures are dignified, which are base, what is right, and what is wrong. In other words, Mill does not provide an *explication* of concepts such as dignity, decency, or debasement. Insofar as he explains x , y , or z (e.g., dignity, decency, or debasement) through appeal to some ‘foundation’ concept or principle μ , he provides nothing that we did not already know given that μ can be correctly interpreted only through appeal to a prior understanding of x , y , and z .

The utilitarian idea that we ought to ‘promote happiness’ can appear to provide a wonderfully simple formula to be applied whenever we are called upon to share some practical moral advice. But as in any monistic account of value, the central idea is impoverished through abstraction. In and of themselves, such accounts cannot explain, for example, what it is that makes some pleasures dignified, and others debased. Accordingly, they cannot explain what it is that makes certain actions more dignified, respectable, ethical, or valuable than certain others.

5. Whither Consequentialist Considerations Within a Modus Operandi Account of Virtue?

In the process of articulating his modus operandi account of virtue, Pettigrove [2022] specifically distances himself from consequentialist accounts, such as that advanced by Julia Driver. But while he takes virtue to be ‘an independent sort of value’ [2022: 123], exactly *how independent* (of consequences) should our understanding of the virtues be? This is a question on which Pettigrove’s paper seems equivocal. At first, he accepts that:

Sometimes the goodness of [a loving or forgiving person’s] actions or attitudes can be explained by referring to a good outcome they produce. But at other times their goodness is to be accounted for simply by reference to a good way of being they instantiate. [2022: 125]

But as he then goes on to explain, the point of his account:

is that virtuousness is its own kind of goodness and its goodness is fundamental. In a complete normative ontology, we would find the goodness of virtue in the ground floor of the theory. It doesn’t need to be explained in terms of some other property from which it is derived. [2022: 126]

In this passage, Pettigrove makes no apparent concessions at all to consequentialist considerations. So ultimately I am simply unsure as to exactly what role, if any, consequentialist considerations have in Pettigrove’s modus operandi account of virtue.

6. Consequences and Functions of Virtue

David Hume [1990: 181] suggests that ‘The social virtues are never regarded without their beneficial tendencies’. Like Pinsent [2022: 152], I agree that we are not ‘making genuine progress with accounts of virtue that don’t derive anything from outcomes’. According to Julia Driver’s [2001: 74] avowedly consequentialist account, virtues are character traits that:

function in social contexts to contribute to human (or social) flourishing and happiness, often by alleviating interaction problems among people. The *type* of effect or consequence brought about by virtues is the type of effect conducive to the alleviation of these problems. Thus, virtue promotes social good.

Driver does not talk at any length about any *functions per se* that particular virtues may be said to have. Although it is arguable that her account of virtue does lend itself to such ‘functionalist’ talk, and she acknowledges that on her account, ‘excellence’ or ‘virtue’ is analogous to the biologist’s sense of ‘fitness’ [2001: xvii].

In harmony with Philip Kitcher [2011], my view is that there are times when philosophers should think about the functions that particular virtues may be said to serve. Kitcher’s interest in these issues appears, at least in part, to be due to his desire for moral and social reform. Like many other consequentialists (e.g., Singer [2001]), Kitcher thinks that popular contemporary thinking on ethical matters should, in certain respects, be reformed so as to serve its functions more effectively. He has various ideas relating to religious faith, higher taxes, selective abortion, and euthanasia, for example [Kitcher 2011: Ch. 10]. But to mention an example that is commonly thought about specifically in terms of certain supposed virtues, an obvious one to mention is that of ‘honour’ (or *shame*) killings.⁴ Clearly enough, when a certain traditional conception of ‘honour’ is used to justify the killing of women accused of having engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage, a great many of us would like to see that conception reformed.⁵

Note also that campaigners for reform are not the only functionalists. G.K. Chesterton [1929 (2015): 26] wrote as follows:

nobody has any business to destroy a social institution until he has really seen it as an historical institution. If he knows how it arose, and what purposes it was supposed to serve, he may really be able to say that they were bad purposes, or that they have since become bad purposes, or that they are purposes which are no longer served. But if he simply stares at the thing as a senseless monstrosity that has somehow sprung up in his path, it is he and not the traditionalist who is suffering from an illusion.

So functionalist considerations can have conservative implications. And while reformist ideas are often especially controversial, some degree of controversy can be stirred even when commending certain traditional virtues. For example, as concerns about political polarization have grown in recent years, many of us have been keen to encourage a newfound appreciation for the traditional virtue of *civility* (e.g., National Public Radio [2019]).

Admittedly, not all of us are in perfect agreement about the importance of civility (e.g., Nichols [2018]; Sugrue [2018]). But without wishing to deny any of the subtleties

⁴ Kofi Annan [2000], as Secretary-General of the United Nations, preferred to call these murders ‘shame killings’. Anthony Kwame Appiah [2010] agrees, and has emphasized that conceptions of honour commonly need to be reformed in order for moral ‘revolutions’ to occur.

⁵ For discussion of this and other examples of ‘morally motivated’ forms of violence, see Fiske and Rai [2015].

associated with these particular debates about civility, my view is that functionalist considerations in relation to virtue are often invaluable. They put us to the question of what functions a particular virtue may have, what consequences are actually brought about by it, and what kinds of occasion call for it. With regard to civility, functionalist considerations can prompt us to think about the ways, for example, in which civility helps us to develop mutual respect, engage in constructive discussion, develop trust and good will, strengthen relationships, and find shared solutions. Similarly, a comparable range of questions may be worth considering in relation to the presumably dysfunctional results to expect from the purported vice of incivility.

7. Conclusion

In matters of ethical, legal, and political judgement, we commonly talk of proportionality. It is easy enough to make sense of such talk, and there is no reason to abandon it. But we shouldn't suppose that it commonly carries the kind of formal precision that such talk enjoys in a mathematical context. Pettigrove recognizes all this, and his paper serves us well by bringing such issues to light.

As Pinsent has recognized, those who take our talk of proportionality too seriously presuppose a monistic account of value. Taking up this point, I have suggested that such accounts of value have a certain psychological or 'scientistic' appeal to some people, and that this may help to explain their persistence. Regardless of whether this is so, we presumably want an account of value to be of assistance when it comes to the vital task of giving practical reasons to each other. Even with regard to that most basic of expectations, however, monistic accounts of value seem worthless. What they provide instead is merely a frivolous indulgence in pointless abstraction.

Something that is central to Pettigrove's *modus operandi* account of virtue—the idea that we may each have our own characteristic way of being—is beautifully presented and thoroughly compelling. What is not so clear to me, however, is that the goodness of virtue is *fundamental*. In fact given that Pettigrove's paper seems equivocal about the role of consequentialist considerations, it seems reasonable to wonder whether he himself is entirely convinced about it. In an effort to further advance the discussion of this issue I have simply outlined some basic examples to illustrate some practical—and perhaps ineliminable—consequentialist or functionalist considerations in relation to certain virtues.

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