

## **Integrity and Practical Wisdom**

**Jonathan Webber**

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> – Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> January 2017.

These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.



# Integrity and Practical Wisdom

Jonathan Webber

Cardiff University

Conference presentation only. **Not for citation.**

All comments welcome: [webberj1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:webberj1@cardiff.ac.uk)

Aristotle's ethical theory does not describe any virtue that obviously corresponds to our contemporary conception of ethical integrity. It might seem, therefore, that there is no place for the virtue of integrity in Aristotle's ethics. Once we have the full Aristotelian picture of the role of practical wisdom in reshaping basic virtues endowed by nature or by upbringing, it might seem that there is simply no normative or motivational role for a virtue of integrity to play. In which case, we would be left with the question of whether we should dispense with the idea that integrity is a virtue or whether we should rather conclude that Aristotle's ethical theory is deficient.

In this conference presentation, I argue that in fact the virtue of integrity is an integral aspect of Aristotle's ethical theory even though he does not explicitly identify it as such. That this might not be noticed is due in part to the prevalence in current moral philosophy of mistaken conceptual articulations of integrity that fail to identify its core commitment, and in part to that core commitment being a pre-requisite of the development of virtue that Aristotle mentions only briefly. I begin by outlining two influential ideas about integrity, then I argue that neither is essential to integrity but rather both are features of integrity that are caused by its essential features. Once we have the essence of integrity in view, I argue that it is not equivalent to Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom, then that Aristotle does briefly indicate a role for ethical integrity in the development of character. I conclude that integrity is an aspect of Aristotle's ethical theory even though he did not elaborate any conception of it.

## 1. Two Influential Ideas About Integrity

Philosophical analyses of ethical integrity are currently strongly influenced by two ideas. One is the conception of integrity advanced by Bernard Williams, according to which 'one who displays integrity acts from those dispositions and motivations that are most deeply his' (1981: 49). Where the virtue of honesty rests on a disposition towards truthfulness, for example, or kindness rests on a disposition towards protecting and promoting the interests and feelings of other people, integrity on this conception does not rest on a disposition towards acting on one's deepest commitments. For such a disposition, Williams argues, would seem objectionably self-indulgent. It would amount to positively valuing one's deepest commitments just because they are one's deepest commitments. Rather, argues Williams, integrity 'is not related to motivation as the virtues are' (1981: 49). It is the quality of acting on one's deepest commitments, not an evaluative commitment to doing so.

The second influential idea is the idea that integrity requires one's motivations to be at least mutually consistent and perhaps also mutually supporting. The strong version of this idea holds that integrity just is the integration or coherence of one's desires, evaluative attitudes, and commitments into a coherent whole. A weaker form is that such integration is an ingredient, perhaps an essential ingredient, in the overall state of integrity. (For an argument against the strong form and in favour of the weak form, see Cox, La Caze, and Levine 2014.) This idea does not require that integrity includes any specific motivation. One can have a coherent set of motivations without that set including any motivation towards making that set coherent, or indeed any other specific motivation. Unlike the conception of integrity advanced by Williams, however, this idea does not require that integrity exclude any particular motivation, so does not exclude desiring or valuing a well-integrated set of motivations.

Neither of these ideas explains why we should consider integrity itself to be a virtue. For in the absence of any specific motivation, the ethical evaluation of an instance of integrity can rest only on the ethical evaluation of those motivations that happen to comprise that instance. Somebody who acts on their deepest motivations will fit the conception that Williams articulates even if those motivations are ethically wrong. Somebody might have a well-integrated but consistently immoral set of motivations. In these cases, integrity would seem to be a vice rather than a virtue. For in the first case it would be better if they did not act on those deep motivations and in the second some incoherence among the motivations would exert some pressure towards reform. If we rest our

understanding of integrity entirely on either of these ideas or on their combination, then we can at best conclude that integrity is virtuous only when it contributes to the efficacy of virtuous motivations.

Neither of these two ideas, however, captures the essence of integrity. For neither can explain a demand that is characteristic of ethical integrity. Faced with a sufficiently strong reason to believe that some deeply held commitment is wrong, integrity requires revising or even completely abandoning that commitment. Persisting in that commitment despite having sufficient reason to conclude that it is mistaken, that is to say, would demonstrate a lack of integrity. If the commitment in question is part of a coherent set of motivations, then revising it is likely to make that set less coherent, at least temporarily, as the revision might introduce a contradiction or at least remove a relation of logical support. To the extent that the revised or abandoned commitment was central to one's outlook, moreover, integrity can require substantial disintegration of one's set of motivations.

## 2. Integrity and Rational Sensitivity

Indeed, without this openness to the rational revision of one's motivations, the qualities of acting from one's deepest motivations or of having a well-integrated set of motivations seem not to be virtuous at all. Even if the motivations themselves are good, they need to be sensitive to further reasoning in order that retaining and acting on them is not simply intransigence or stubbornness. One's motivations themselves need to be open to rational revision, therefore, if they are to count as virtuous. We should not agree that integrity consists only in acting from one's deepest motivations or having a well-integrated motivational set, or both, and that it is virtuous so long as those motivations are good. Rather, we should accept that integrity requires one's motivations to be open to rational revision. For this reason, integrity essentially involves a commitment to respecting the results of reasoning about what is good or right.

This rational sensitivity helps to explain why integrity is often clearly displayed in acting from one's most deeply held motivations and yet can require acting against a deeply held commitment. For it is well established in contemporary social psychology that if one's reasoning about what to do regularly draws the same conclusion, then that conclusion becomes gradually more deeply embedded in one's cognitive system (Webber 2015, 2016). If one regularly decides that telling the truth would be better than lying or misleading in each situation where one is faced with these options, then one will strengthen one's commitment to truth-telling in general. Where one has

occasionally decided against truth-telling, but has done so explicitly because one holds those particular circumstances to justify this decision, one's commitment to truth-telling will be refined in content to allow for exceptions in relevantly similar circumstances.

Commitments that have become deeply held through this process of rational habituation are effectively repositories of one's own practical reasoning, so deserve one's own rational respect. Acting on a deeply held commitment because it is deeply held, therefore, need not be morally self-indulgent. It can be a manifestation of one's commitment to doing what is good or right using reasoning as a guide. But it remains that this same commitment can, in some circumstances, require a radical revision of a deeply held commitment, whether that commitment is the result of prior practical reasoning or has come about some other way. For a situation might present sufficient reason to conclude that one's existing commitment, however deeply held, however rationally formed and habituated, is in fact mistaken.

Similarly, the rational sensitivity of integrity can explain why our paragons of integrity often have well-integrated sets of motivations and yet integrity can require a change that reduces, at least temporarily, the coherence of one's overall evaluative outlook. Coherence or integration of motivations has, as mentioned above, two aspects. One is logical consistency, or the absence of contradiction. A commitment to respecting the results of reasoning about what is good or right is thereby a commitment not only to embody the conclusion of such reasoning in an attitude, but also a commitment not to hold attitudes contrary to that conclusion. The other aspect of coherence is mutual support. Since reasoning about what is good or right should respect those of one's existing attitudes that embody prior practical reasoning, it can and should draw on those attitudes in reaching new conclusions. Reason itself, therefore, inherently exerts pressure towards the development of a coherent set of motivations.

The commitment to respecting reasoning about what is good or right, moreover, requires one to be open to revising or even abandoning any existing commitment. Revision of an evaluative attitude can weaken the overall coherence of one's set of motivations, since the newly revised attitude might no longer provide rational support for some other commitment and might even contradict some other evaluative attitude. Abandoning a motivation altogether by replacing it with a contrary attitude is likely to have these effects on the coherence of overall motivational set more strongly than would be caused by merely revising that motivation. The more central the revised or abandoned motivation was to one's overall outlook, the more significant these effects would be. In

none of these cases, however, would integrity require simply accepting a less integrated set of motivations. Rather, the ongoing commitment to respecting reasoning about what is good or right would continue to exert pressure towards increasing the both aspects of the coherence of one's set of motivations.

### 3. The Essence of Integrity

Neither acting from one's most deeply held motivations nor possessing a well-integrated set of motivations is essential to ethical integrity, therefore, since integrity can sometimes demand that one act against one's most deeply held motivations and that one thereby reduce, or perhaps even shatter entirely, the coherence or integration of one's motivations overall. Such a demand is grounded in the respect for the deliverances of reasoning about what is right and good.

Along with the recognition that motivations can be deeply held precisely because they embody a wealth of prior practical reasoning, a strong commitment to respecting reasoning about what is good and right requires a strong respect for one's own such deeply held commitments in action. That same respect for reasoning about what is good and right, moreover, exerts significant pressure towards the integration of one's overall set of motivations. The essence of ethical integrity, therefore, combines that respect for reasoning about what is good or right with an appropriate respect for one's deeply held commitments as embodying prior reasoning about what is good or right. The integration or coherence of one's set of motivations, by contrast, is not part of the essence of integrity itself, but rather those essential features of integrity together exert considerable pressure towards such rational integration.

This combination of the two aspects of the essence of integrity poses a practical problem. For integrity thereby requires that one decide when to trust one's existing commitments and when to take into account fresh reasoning specifically about the situation one is confronted with. If one decides on fresh reasoning, one will need to gauge how much deliberation is worth engaging in and how significant the results of that deliberation are in relation to one's existing commitments. The person of integrity is therefore faced with striking the right balance between responding to the reasons that a situation most clearly presents and their respect for their own commitments as repositories of prior practical reasoning. A concern with exactly how this balance should be struck, therefore, is also essential to ethical integrity. Integrity requires a sense of the rational worth of

one's existing deep commitments, which is itself an evaluative commitment that should be sensitive to rational revision.

The essence of integrity, then, comprises a commitment to respecting reasoning about what is good or right in a given situation and an appropriate respect for one's own deeply held motivations as repositories of one's own prior reasoning about what is good or right, integrated together through a commitment to striking the right balance between respecting those commitments and responding to the reasons presented by the situation that might seem to require action contrary to one's commitments. To borrow an example from Williams (1973: 117), ethical integrity would require the anthropologist suddenly faced with the dilemma of killing one innocent person or allowing the killing of twenty innocent people to consider, as carefully as the situation allows, whether their prior firm commitments to not harming anyone or interfering in the life of the community being studied should be revised to allow exceptions in such an extreme case. (For a more detailed argument for this conception of integrity, see Rees and Webber 2014.)

On this conception, it is clear why ethical integrity should be considered a virtue. It is driven by a commitment to doing what is good or right, along with an appropriate understanding of how that commitment can be fulfilled and a commitment to fulfilling it in that way. This does not entail that the person of ethical integrity will always do what is best or what is right, of course. Their reasoning about what is good or right may be badly informed, either by ideas about what matters or by ideas about good reasoning. They may, as a result of either or both of these problems, have formed deeply held commitments that are profoundly mistaken. Less dramatically, someone may simply have had narrow experience or be prone to specific reasoning errors. Even so, ethical integrity seems to be a necessary condition for improvement from such a position. For one is not committed to respecting reasoning about what is good or right unless one is committed to reasoning well and to taking the relevant considerations into account. And without that commitment, one's ethical commitments and practical reasoning cannot improve.

#### 4. Integrity and Practical Wisdom

Ethical integrity is a virtue, therefore, not because it produces the right behaviour, but because it is a necessary condition of developing other virtues such as honesty, courage, fairness, and temperance and it exerts rational pressure towards developing these virtues. For whatever the specific detailed contents of these virtues may be, those contents are to be discovered by practical reasoning about

how to behave well across a range of situations. We should thus see integrity in a broadly Aristotelian light. It is not an ordinary character virtue alongside honesty, courage, fairness, temperance, and so forth, which are concerned with good or right action in relation to some specific domain of life. It is rather a more general virtue that encourages and governs the habituation of character traits across these domains of life. Its commitments to reasoning and to respecting commitments as repositories of prior reasoning, moreover, is a commitment to habituating the right character traits in these domains, the specific character virtues, and to doing so through rationally guided action.

Despite these clearly Aristotelian aspects, however, it can be difficult to see where this virtue fits in the overall Aristotelian picture. It cannot be reduced to the process of practical reasoning, regardless of whether we understand this to include reasoning about ends as well as means to those ends. For it includes an evaluative stance towards one's existing rationally formed and habituated commitments in relation to the deliverances of practical reasoning. And it involves a commitment to continually considering the right balance between those habituated commitments and the reasons presented in a specific situation. One can reason about means and ends without having these commitments.

But neither is ethical integrity equivalent to what Aristotle describes as the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom. Aristotle is clear that 'it is impossible to practically wise without being good', since practical wisdom includes not merely the cleverness required to discern the means to an end, but includes also an understanding of what the right ends are (NE: 6.12). Indeed, practical wisdom, as Aristotle understands it, requires the presence of all of the character virtues. For in the strict sense of the term, a virtue requires having the right end, or the right value, and the practical wisdom to discern its correct situational applications. The virtue of honesty, for example, requires valuing truthfulness but also the wisdom to know how this value is best applied in given situations. Since practical wisdom requires having the right ends and there is no more to the character virtues than having the right ends and the practical wisdom to apply them, practical wisdom entails the possession of all the character virtues (NE: 6.13).

Practical wisdom as Aristotle understands it is therefore compatible with the virtue of integrity. Indeed, it is the perfection of the virtue of integrity. It is the perfection, that is to say, of the commitment to reason about what is good and right, of the ability to reason about what is good and right, of the commitment to respecting one's deeply held evaluative commitments as repositories of

prior practical reasoning, and of getting the balance right between this respect and further reasoning. Part of what makes it a perfection of all of this is that the deeply held evaluative commitments, or character virtues, are right ones to have. Aristotle does not see these as formed entirely by practical reasoning, but rather out of practical reasoning whose basic ends have first been set by evaluative commitments provided by nature or upbringing (NE: 6.12). Although this claim is not essential to the conception of integrity as outlined above, it is consistent with it.

For these reasons, ethical integrity is not the same as Aristotle's practical wisdom. One can possess the virtue of ethical integrity without having the right evaluative commitments, since all that is required is the commitment to respecting reasoning about what is good or right and so to striking the right balance between fresh reasoning in response to situations and respecting one's existing commitments. And one can possess the virtue of ethical integrity even if one's practical reasoning is importantly flawed, either in its reasoning itself or in the range of considerations it takes into account. Practical wisdom, then, is the perfection of ethical integrity, but one can possess and manifest ethical integrity without it being in this perfect form.

## 5. Aristotle's Pre-Requisites for Virtue Development

We should think of ethical integrity, therefore, as an inherently developmental virtue. It fosters good or right behaviour and it fosters the formulation, refinement, and embedding of evaluative attitudes that are good or right. It fosters both of these through a nuanced commitment to reasoning, however flawed, about what is good or right and a commitment to acting on the results of that reasoning. Moreover, since the character virtues such as honesty, courage, fairness, and temperance consist in rationally structured evaluative dispositions that are themselves open to further rational revision, it is the virtue required for the development of these traits. Integrity remains a quality of the perfectly virtuous person, who possesses Aristotelian practical wisdom, but perhaps more importantly is the trait required for progressing towards that ideal. If this virtue is to fit within Aristotle's ethical theory, therefore, we need to look not at Aristotle's analyses of the character and intellectual virtues themselves, but rather at his understanding of character development or virtue education.

The most salient passage of *Nicomachean Ethics* concerned with the development of virtues is the opening sequence of book 10 chapter 9. In his sophisticated and highly influential analysis of this passage, Myles Burnyeat claims that Aristotle here presents the same argument in two slightly

different forms, which he supposes is because 'Aristotle thought the material important enough to have had two goes at expressing it satisfactorily' (1980: 89 n9). It seems to me, however, that Aristotle here gives two slightly different arguments, each identifying a different pre-requisites of virtue development. The first argument echoes the earlier claim that practical reasoning forms virtues out of the evaluative commitments provided by nature or upbringing (NE: 6.12). But in this argument, Aristotle makes the further claim that having the right evaluative commitments is a necessary condition of responding in the right way to practical reasoning about good or right action.

It is only those who love what is noble, according to this argument, who respond to reasoning about what it is noble to do, since only they are governed by a sense of shame at behaving in a way that was less than noble, while other people can be brought to do what is noble only by the threat of punishment. But to love what is noble, according to Aristotle, is not simply to have an abstract commitment to doing whatever is noble, but is rather to have come through practice to enjoy the pleasures of behaving in accordance with the particular character virtues. To love what is noble is to enjoy behaving honestly, bravely, temperately, and fairly. It is a pre-requisite of moral education through practical reasoning about what to do and critical reflection on what has been done, therefore, that one has already come to enjoy the pleasures of acting in accordance with the virtues (Burnyeat 1980: 75-79).

In the second argument, however, Aristotle makes a different point. Here he argues that 'he who lives as passion directs will not hear argument that dissuades him, nor understand it if he does' because 'passion seems to yield not to argument but to force' (NE: 1179b27-29). This is not a repetition of the claim that the content of the argument will fail to move someone who does not already possess the relevant character virtue in at least a raw form, so that someone who does not already love behaving honestly, for example, will not be concerned by any reasoning showing that they have failed to do what honesty required in the situation. Rather, the point here is that someone moved only by the pursuit of pleasure will not respond to argument about what one ought to do. Somebody who has the relevant character virtues in their basic natural form will find the relevant behaviour pleasant (NE: 1099a13-15). But if they are moved only by the pursuit of pleasure, then they will be unable to develop beyond this basic 'natural virtue' and instead continue to stumble around like 'a strong body which moves without sight' (NE: 1144b10-12).

## 6. Integrity in Aristotle's Ethical System

This second argument, therefore, identifies a second necessary condition of the development of virtue. In addition to having the right character virtues, one needs a respect for practical reasoning. Aristotle does not analyse this respect for reasoning elsewhere in his ethical theory. It may be that he thinks of it as an aspect of the love of the noble. As well as taking pleasure in behaving honestly, bravely, temperately, fairly, and so forth, on this reading, the lover of what is noble also takes pleasure in responding appropriately to practical reasoning about what one ought to do. That would explain why his comments on this respect for reasoning are embedded among comments on the importance of the love of the noble. Or it may be that this respect is a distinct attitude, simply a recognition of the importance of reasoning rather than taking pleasure in responding appropriately.

Either way, we can see that in its absence the person who rightly takes pleasure even in all (other) noble actions might arrogantly refuse to consider any practical reasoning about what they should do. Such a person would simply trust their intuitive responses grounded in the dispositions endowed by their nature or upbringing, perhaps bolstered in this attitude by the occasional praise for having acted well. As a result, we can now see where the virtue of ethical integrity fits into Aristotle's ethical theory. For this virtue fulfils the role that Aristotle briefly indicates as the second pre-requisite of virtue development. It is the attitude required for hearing, understanding, and responding to practical reasoning. Since responding to practical reasoning in this way is essential to the habituation of virtues as Aristotle understands it, moreover, we can add that respect for reasoning about the considerations presented by a situation needs to be balanced with a respect for one's own deeply held commitments where these are repositories of prior practical reasoning.

The analysis of ethical integrity given in this talk, therefore, provides some more detail of the second pre-requisite of virtue development that Aristotle identifies in the opening passages on NE 10.9. Its role in his ethical theory is to facilitate the development of virtue. Indeed, for that it is a necessary condition. It is a further question, however, whether the other purported pre-requisite that Aristotle identifies is indeed required, or whether the right attitude towards practical reasoning is in fact sufficient. But that is for another time.

## Bibliography

- Aristotle. NE. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated with an Introduction by David Ross. Revised by J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Burnyeat, Myles F. 1980. Aristotle on Learning to be Good. In *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, edited by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cox, Damian, Marguerite La Caze, and Michael Levine. 2014. Integrity. *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft. Durham: Acumen.
- Rees, Clea F. and Jonathan Webber. 2014. Constancy, Fidelity, and Integrity. *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft. Durham: Acumen.
- Webber, Jonathan. 2015. Character, Attitude and Disposition. *European Journal of Philosophy* 23: 1082-1096.
- Webber, Jonathan. 2016. Instilling Virtue. *From Personality to Virtue: Essays in the Philosophy of Character*, ed. Alberto Masala and Jonathan Webber. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Williams, Bernard. 1973. A Critique of Utilitarianism. *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, by J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1981. Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence'. *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*, by Bernard Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.