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# ARISTOTLE ON VIRTUOUS DISHARMONY: MIXED ACTIONS AND THE VIRTUE/ CONTINENCE DISTINCTION

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ARISTOTLE ON VIRTUOUS DISHARMONY: MIXED ACTIONS AND THE  
VIRTUE/CONTINENCE DISTINCTION

by

JAMES GILLARD

Under the Direction of Tim O'Keefe, PhD

ABSTRACT

According to many contemporary Aristotelian ethicists, virtuous action should be enjoyable for the virtuous person, and the virtuous life is characterised by pleasantly virtuous activity. In this paper, however, I will argue that Aristotle offers us a strikingly different view of the virtuous emotions, one which moreover fits far better with our ethical intuitions. On my interpretation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the virtuous person may have mixed feelings whenever virtue requires them to act against their ordinarily virtuous dispositions. I argue that such cases may occur rather frequently for certain kinds of virtuous persons, for example those who must cause pain to others in order to act virtuously. This more complex account of the virtuous emotions has the potential to offer more plausible responses to problems in, for instance, applied medical ethics. The better interpretation of Aristotle, I suggest, is also the more plausible ethical view.

INDEX WORDS: Aristotle, Virtue, Ethics, Emotions, Harmony thesis, Annas



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VIRTUE/CONTINENCE DISTINCTION

by

JAMES GILLARD

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VIRTUE/CONTINENCE DISTINCTION

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**DEDICATION**

To my parents, Martin and Carolynne,  
and to my friends, Mark Jones and Nick Zehner.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In Aristotelian ethical theory, there is an important distinction between virtuous and continent persons. As this distinction is generally understood, the virtuous person's feelings and inclinations are in harmony with reason when they act, and they feel no inner resistance to performing virtuous actions.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the virtuous person takes pleasure in virtuous actions, rather than feeling pained by them. (1099a23) By contrast, the continent person's feelings and inclinations "struggle and strain against the rational," causing them to feel conflicted about their action. (1102b18)<sup>2</sup> This view, prominent in recent virtue ethical literature, has often been referred to as the "harmony thesis."<sup>3</sup> If the harmony thesis is correct, then the virtuous life will necessarily be one that the virtuous person experiences as being, for the most part, fairly *easy*. The virtuous person does not find virtuous actions difficult, a stipulation that might seem to put virtue out of reach for even the best of us.

However, as Karen Stohr has pointed out, in at least some situations it seems to be "a condition of virtue that the agent performs the right action *not* gladly and with pleasure, but rather with a sense of pain and loss." (340) She asks us to imagine, for instance, a virtuous employer who is forced by an unexpected global economic downturn to lay off half of the loyal

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<sup>1</sup> See: Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 53–54; John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 55; Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," in *Virtue Ethics*, eds. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 92, 103–107, 186; Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the mind: an inquiry into the nature of virtue and the ethical foundations of knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 119; Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 14–15.

<sup>2</sup> All English quotations cite Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K Thomson, Hugh Tredennick, Jonathan Barnes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977) with some modifications. All Bekker numbers cite *Nicomachean Ethics* unless otherwise stated.

<sup>3</sup> Karen E. Stohr, "Moral Cacophony: When Continence is a Virtue," *Journal of Ethics* 7, no. 4 (2003): 339–363; Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 153–171; Nicholas Schroeder, "The Problem of Continence in Contemporary Virtue Ethics," *The Journal of Ethics* 19, no. 1. (2015): 85–104.

and capable employees of her small business. We shall assume that doing so is necessary in order to prevent the whole business from going under, to the detriment of her entire staff.<sup>4</sup>

According to the harmony thesis, such people should take pleasure in their actions if they are truly virtuous and not merely continent. They should certainly not feel pained or conflicted about doing the right thing. And yet, intuitively, most of us would not think particularly highly of a person who took pleasure in firing her loyal employees, or who did not find it hard to do so. We would sooner single such a person out for lacking an appropriate disposition to sympathy than we would praise them for their composure. Virtue seems to require that, even as she does the right thing, she feels a sense of pain at doing so—a kind of inner *disharmony*.

The harmony thesis currently forms an important part of many (if not most) contemporary virtue ethical theories. Julia Annas, for instance, has written of “the difference between the virtuous and the merely ‘enratic’ or continent person, who acts in the same way as the virtuous, but is not yet virtuous, because acting virtuously comes up against his feelings and attachments.” (2011, 67) John McDowell offers an equally stark version of this claim, writing that “[i]f someone needs to overcome an inclination to act otherwise, in getting himself to act as, say, temperance or courage demand, then he shows not virtue but (mere) continence.” (1979, 334) It would be easy to get the impression, having read quotations such as these, that the virtuous person’s life will necessarily be a rosy one and that they never (or seldom) find virtuous actions difficult to perform.

When we bring to mind the virtuous employer, however, claims such as the above seem incautious at best. It appears undeniable that the virtuous businesswoman comes up against her feelings and attachments when she acts. If she is truly concerned for her employees, then she is

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<sup>4</sup> See Stohr, “Moral Cacophony,” 342–346 for a full exploration of this example.

likely to need to overcome some inclination to act otherwise, perhaps in the form of a virtuous aversion to seeing her employees fearful of the future. Performing this action is difficult for her as opposed to pleasant and easy. An intuitively plausible picture of the virtuous life therefore does not match up to the account offered by the harmony thesis at all.

If we agree that the virtuous may sometimes experience disharmony, then what is needed is a clear account of when disharmony is virtuous and when it is not. It is my contention that Aristotle himself offers an outline of just such an account. In what follows, I will argue that according to the *Nicomachean Ethics* it is often appropriate for the virtuous person to feel disharmony. This is the case if (and perhaps only if) they are performing the kind of action that Aristotle calls a “mixed action.” Mixed actions occur when, in certain exceptional circumstances, someone chooses an undesirable means towards an end that is noble (κᾶλον) or in order to avoid something worse. They might (for instance) choose to do something that would not ordinarily be virtuous because, in this particular circumstance, they must do so in order to achieve some virtuous end.

For Aristotle, the virtuous person comes to take pleasure in acting virtuously, and pain in acting viciously only by getting in the habit of doing so, over time.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, when they choose something they would not ordinarily choose, the link between virtuous action and pleasure is interrupted. The result is often the kind of emotional turmoil that I call “virtuous disharmony.” Such cases are an exception to the general rule that “the good man is of one mind with himself,” (1166a1) because they require the virtuous person to act against their ordinarily virtuous dispositions.

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<sup>5</sup> “Moral goodness... is the result of habit, from which it has actually got its name, being a slight modification of the word *ethos*.” (1103a17-18) The virtuous person is therefore “trained in some way from infancy to feel joy and grief at the right things.” (1104b4) The first several chapters of Book II discuss these claims in depth.

On my account, therefore, some genuinely virtuous persons may live lives that are substantially characterised by the struggle to remain virtuous. If this claim seems like common sense, that is because it probably is. Yet, much of contemporary virtue ethics (as pointed out above) seems to either imply or directly state the contrary. As a result, strikingly little philosophical work has been done on the emotional difficulties that can come along with living a virtuous life. This paper is intended as a necessary corrective, clearing the way for future work on ethics and emotion: Aristotle's theory of the virtuous emotions is far more intuitive than is generally suggested, and more plausible than some of his own statements (taken in isolation) seem to imply.

Finally, as an example of how my account might yield useful insights in applied ethics, I will briefly discuss its relevance to the field of medical ethics. Medical ethicists have often acknowledged that there is a tension between the ability of a doctor to empathise with their patients while simultaneously performing the duties of their job.<sup>6</sup> Like the virtuous employer, the virtuous doctor must often witness and sometimes even be involved in causing severe physical and emotional pain in her patients. A doctor who is also an empathetic person, and who has a disposition to share (to some degree) in the emotions of their patients, will therefore likely experience many aspects of their job as painful and aversive.<sup>7</sup>

That a person's otherwise virtuous character might make it difficult for them to be a doctor is a concerning possibility for medical ethics, the full implications of which I will not explore here. However, a brief description of the ethical problems surrounding doctor empathy

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<sup>6</sup> “[I]t is difficult for physicians to find the right balance between being the technically skilled and objective professional, while being emotionally engaged, but not over-identifying with a patient's distress.” Kerasidou and Horn, “Making space for empathy: supporting doctors in the emotional labour of clinical care,” *BMC Medical Ethics*, 17, no. 8. (2016): 2.

<sup>7</sup> Some will claim that the virtuous doctor should be able to turn this kind of empathy on at home and off at work. This, I suggest below, is highly implausible.

will serve as a practical example of the fact that the interpretation of Aristotle offered in this paper is not solely a matter of historical interest. On the contrary, interpreting Aristotle in this more nuanced way could enable virtue ethics to offer more plausible solutions to real-world ethical problems. If my interpretation is correct, then Aristotle's account of the virtuous emotions is strikingly different than most contemporary descriptions of it would seem to imply, and the virtuous life is both more achievable and more intuitively satisfying than virtue ethics, and even some of Aristotle's own statements, might have us believe.

## 2 A PRELIMINARY OBJECTION

One common response to Stohr's example (mentioned above) is to claim that the virtuous employer does not genuinely experience disharmony.<sup>8</sup> Although she is distressed by the fact that she must fire her employees in order to save her company, she has clearly decided what she will do. Accordingly, even if one particular *aspect* of the action is painful to her, the action *itself* is not. She may regret having to take this particular means to a virtuous end, but this is not the same as feeling a sense of regret or doubt about the decision itself. The virtuous employer can therefore (or so the objection goes) feel the right amount of sympathy without being said to experience any inner disharmony. So, before I attempt to explain these kinds of cases, I will need to show that they really do constitute examples of virtuous disharmony in a way that is problematic for contemporary interpretations of Aristotle.

To do so, it will be worth looking at the example more closely. We shall assume that, in this particular situation, firing half of her employees is the right action for the virtuous businesswoman to take. It is an action which, if also chosen in the right way and issuing from a

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<sup>8</sup> This point has been made to me by various friends including Harrison Lee and Andrew Culbreth as well as an anonymous reviewer.

stable state of character, has the potential to be truly virtuous.<sup>9</sup> How is the virtuous person likely to feel as they perform this action?

Stohr describes one plausible version of the virtuous employer's psychology as follows:

[S]he wakes up that morning with an anxious feeling in her stomach, perhaps unable to eat breakfast. She drives to work with a sense of dread... She delivers the news as best she can, but she finds it extremely difficult. She is grieved at the sight of her employees' stress, sadness, and anxiety in response to the news. After the fact, she worries about whether they will be able to find new jobs, pay their mortgages, and take care of their children. [I]n such circumstances, being sympathetic to her employees makes it harder for her to perform the action required of her. She has deeply rooted inclinations to avoid causing pain to other people... These inclinations make the act of firing them hard for her to perform, despite the fact that it is the right thing to do. (343)

In short, the virtuous employer, as we might plausibly imagine her, is able to perform the action only with great difficulty.

However, some might claim that this difficulty does not amount to true disharmony because she can simultaneously reflect that, "I am glad to be doing the right thing as a boss, taking the tough decisions." Although she wishes that keeping the rest of her employees in jobs did not require such unfortunate actions, she knows what she must do and she does it decisively. She is not pained by the action *itself* so much as by some unfortunate *aspect* of the action, in this case a regrettable consequence of it.

This objection, however, misunderstands the role that the harmony between one's feelings and right reason (*ὁρθὸς λόγος*) is supposed to play in the psychology of the virtuous. In a significant passage (1104b4-1105a16), Aristotle states that "[t]he pleasure or pain that accompanies people's acts should be taken as a sign of their dispositions." (1104b4) This is because "[p]leasure induces us to behave badly, and pain to shrink from fine actions." (1104b12)

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<sup>9</sup> We shall assume, as I think is plausible, that this action is done "with the right people, and also in the right way and at the right time and for the right length of time." (1125b33) We shall also assume that the virtuous business woman "knows what [she] is doing...[and] does it from a fixed and permanent disposition." (1105a29-35)

Either pleasure or pain can, in the wrong place, cause us to act less than perfectly or make it more difficult to act well. We should care about whether the virtuous person's feelings are in harmony with their actions because of the effect this has in enabling us to perform such actions.

Yet, pleasure and pain seem to have this kind of motivational effect regardless of whether they are attached to an action *in itself* or to some *aspect* of that action. This is easier to see in cases where the action must be performed more than once over an extended period of time. Imagine that an identically virtuous person has taken a job in the HR department of a large company. This job regularly involves laying off employees who themselves have done nothing wrong. According to one first-person account, this “isn't fun, but if you work for an organization that only terminates people who desperately need to go work somewhere else, then it's not so bad. There is a degree to which you're doing a person a favor...”<sup>10</sup>

Let's assume, once again, that whenever she fires someone it constitutes a virtuous action. No matter how much she feels that this is the right thing to do, the prospect of breaking the bad news to these people constitutes an obstacle to her performing this action rather than an aid to it. It's still “not fun” to put it mildly and, in fact, according to the same account “it's the worst thing you can be asked to do as a manager—it's horrible.” (ibid.) Even if she is thoroughly convinced that the action must be performed, the thought of breaking this news to someone has a certain affective quality for any sympathetic HR person: performing this action is always somewhat hard.

This affective quality, in turn, has a motivating effect: it makes me less likely to perform the action, even if in fact I do perform it. At the risk of stating the obvious, when we experience an action as being hard to perform there is something of an obstacle between us and performing

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<sup>10</sup> Liz Ryan, “How to Lay People Off (And Stay Human),” *Forbes*.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizryan/2014/05/29/how-to-lay-people-off-and-stay-human/#72ebdb0c6842>, accessed August 20, 2017.

it. Even if the HR person is perfectly virtuous, this motivational force remains in play. On a difficult day, when there is no ethical downside to sending someone else to break the news, we might imagine that she opts to avoid the task even if (strictly speaking) she has enough time available. “I would do it if I had to,” she might say, “but otherwise I just don’t have the emotional energy right now.”

Moreover, on an extremely difficult day, when other (severe) stresses pile up, even the virtuous person might become overwhelmed. Aristotle thinks that there are some actions which, though we do not praise them, are pardonable for the virtuous person. He explains that sometimes it is forgivable when a virtuous person “acts wrongly because the alternative is too much for human nature, and nobody could endure it.” (1110a26) If we think with Aristotle that there is a limit to the amount of emotional difficulty even a virtuous person can endure, and if we think that multiple emotional difficulties tend to add up to a bigger difficulty, then the difficulty of this task decreases the chance that even the perfectly virtuous person will perform it. On a day when a personal tragedy has occurred, for instance, the virtuous HR person might be unable to go through with firing an employee.

Finally, if she is anything less than perfectly virtuous, such aversive feelings contribute to the likelihood that one day her resolve will fail in less tragic circumstances. Maybe on that day a few other (less dramatic) aversive feelings pile up: she is at odds with her partner, her children have misbehaved on the way to school, and the pipes have burst at home. Could an almost-virtuous HR consultant simply become fed up with her job when she brings to mind that today that job involves watching a person’s life fall apart?

Regardless of whether she is pained by the action *itself* or by some *aspect* of the action, its aversive quality has a motivational force. It makes her less likely to perform a virtuous action.

But on Aristotle's account of virtuous emotion this constitutes a problem, and for good reason. The virtuous person should, by and large, be concerned with cultivating emotional responses that enable them to perform virtuous actions spontaneously and with ease.<sup>11</sup> Yet, in this case, the sympathetic character of the virtuous person means that this action will be accompanied by some pain. The emotions of this virtuous person "struggle and strain against the rational" decision to perform the action, meeting the definition of disharmony. (1102b18)

Another point against the aforementioned objection is that it ignores Aristotle's own account of how we should describe a virtuous action. Virtuous acts, he says, only count as such if the agent performs the action in a certain way, namely "if he knows what he is doing, if he chooses it and chooses it for its own sake, and if he does it from a fixed and permanent disposition." (1105a29-35) However, the word for "choice" here (προαίρεσις) is an Aristotelian term of art which he spends significant time clarifying in the *Ethics*. By taking note of some of the things Aristotle says about "choice," we can learn more about what Aristotle means when he says that our emotions should be in harmony with our actions.<sup>12</sup>

The thing that sets "chosen" actions apart from the broader category of "voluntary" actions is that "an object of choice is something within our power at which we aim after deliberation." (1113a9-12) However, Aristotle specifically states that "we deliberate not about ends but about means." (1112b16) He says, for example, that a doctor "does not deliberate whether to cure his patient, nor a speaker whether to persuade his audience." (1112b17-18) Similarly, a business woman does not debate whether to take the actions necessary to keep her business afloat. What she might deliberate, however, are the means she must take in order to do

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<sup>11</sup> "This is why it is thought to be a better proof of courage to remain calm and undismayed in sudden alarms than in those that are foreseen: the action proceeds more directly from the moral state, because it is less the result of preparation..." (1117a18-22)

<sup>12</sup> 1112b-1113b

so. Accordingly, “actions” are quite narrowly described in Aristotle’s ethical terminology. The virtuous action to be considered in Stohr’s example is that of laying off half of her loyal and competent workforce in order to prevent the company from going under. If, as Aristotle states, “virtuous actions must be pleasurable in themselves,” then it hardly seems possible that *this* action counts as virtuous. (1099a23) And yet everything else about this action would suggest that it is virtuous—it is a deliberate action being taken for the right reasons in order to realize an important good. It therefore seems plausible that the action is virtuous, but it forms an exception to the harmony thesis. It is an example of virtuous disharmony.

Unlike the merely continent person whose undisciplined desires struggle against her will to be good, the person experiencing virtuous disharmony does so precisely because of her virtuous dispositions. Drawing the distinction between virtue and continence will therefore require a more nuanced account of the emotions of the virtuous person than is generally found in contemporary virtue ethics. We must answer the question: when, precisely, is it virtuous to feel disharmony, and when not? The answer, I think, is to be found in a closer reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

### 3 ARISTOTLE ON THE HARMONY THESIS

The *locus classicus* for discussions of the harmony thesis is the passage in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle first mentions continence and incontinence:

Take the types of man which we call continent and incontinent. They have a principle—a rational element in their souls — ...but there is also observable in them another element, by nature irrational, which struggles and strains against the rational... But this too, as we said, seems to be receptive of reason; at any rate in the continent man it is obedient to reason, and is presumably still more amenable in the temperate and in the brave man, because in them it is in complete harmony with the rational principle. (1102b15-30)

The passage builds upon Aristotle's earlier division of the soul into two parts, rational and irrational. (See: 1102b) The irrational part, which in the continent and incontinent person struggles against their reason, is the "the seat of the appetites and of desire in general."

(1102b33) Meanwhile, by contrast, the virtuous person's appetites and desires are "in complete harmony with" reason. (1102b27)

Earlier in Book I, Aristotle makes the related claim that "virtuous actions must be pleasurable in themselves." (1099a23) Moreover, "we may go further and assert that anyone who does not delight in noble (*καλόν*) actions is not even a good man." (1099a18) The reason for this is that "lovers of beauty find pleasure in things that are pleasant by nature, and virtuous actions are of this kind." (1099a15-17) Putting these passages together, it becomes apparent that the virtuous person experiences no disharmony when they act because they take pleasure in acting virtuously. On the contrary, they are naturally attracted to virtuous action because it is easy and enjoyable for them.

In the same chapter of Book I, however, Aristotle makes a comment that could easily be read as hedging his claims about virtue and inner harmony: "Just acts give pleasure to a lover of justice and virtuous conduct *generally* to the lover of virtue." (1098b11, emphasis mine) The Greek word being translated as "generally" is *ὅλως*, the adverbial form of the word for "whole." On one plausible reading of this sentence, then, the virtuous person takes pleasure in just and virtuous actions *on the whole* but, perhaps, not each and every time.<sup>13</sup>

Later on in Book III, Aristotle provides a much more explicit qualification of the harmony thesis. While discussing the relation between the virtue of courage and pleasure, he notes that "[p]eople are called courageous for enduring pain. Hence courage implies the presence

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<sup>13</sup> Given the flexibility of word order in Greek, it seems clear that the adverb "generally" applies both to justice and virtue in this sentence. Aristotle is, of course, not attempting to say that just acts always give pleasure to the lover of justice while virtuous acts only generally give pleasure to the lover of virtue.

of pain, and it is rightly praised because it is harder to bear pain than to abstain from pleasure.” (1117b1) It is clear that Aristotle is referring to both physical and emotional pain since “the more completely a man possesses virtue, and the happier he is, the more he will be distressed at the thought of death.” (1117b13) This is not merely the kind of distress that results directly from having been wounded in battle, but includes a genuine conflict among the desires. Such a man, therefore, “will not willingly (ἀκοντι) endure [pains]; but endure them he will, because that is the noble (κᾶλον) thing to do.” (1117b8) According to Aristotle, a virtuous (courageous) man may experience inner conflict, but he overcomes it for the sake of the κᾶλον.

In the same discussion of courage, Aristotle offers the additional example of the boxer:

The end or purpose of the boxers, the wreath and the honours, is pleasant; but it hurts to take punches if you are made of flesh and blood — it is painful, and so is all their laborious training. (1117b3)

Aristotle clearly states that the end of the boxers is pleasant but that the virtuous actions by means of which they achieve that end are not entirely pleasant in themselves. This is, after all, in line with common sense. Although the boxer enjoys aspects of their training, not least the thought that it is bringing them closer to the prize, even the most dedicated among them will be unable to deny that other aspects of it are a chore. As Muhammad Ali says, “I hated every minute of training, but I said, ‘Don’t quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.’”<sup>14</sup> Boxers are praised specifically for this struggle against inner disharmony—for the fact that their Olympic gold medal is the result of years of waking up before dawn to take a battering, something even the best of boxers will feel some resistance to doing. The impressive thing about this arduous training is that it is *not*, in itself, always a pleasant activity, even if it is a virtuous one.

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<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Ali, “I hated every minute of training,” Twitter Post, May 15, 2017, 16:30 UTC. <https://twitter.com/MuhammadAli/status/86415592592552128>.

Aristotle concludes that “it is not true, then, of every virtue that the exercise of it is pleasurable, except in so far as one attains the end.” (1117b20) This recalls his earlier claim that “virtuous actions must be pleasurable in themselves” (1099a23) and qualifies it by effectively taking it back, at least in its most literal form. Not all virtuous actions must be pleasurable in themselves, as a careful consideration of the courageous man shows.

Curiously, this also seems to mean that the actions of the boxer and the courageous warrior each lack one of the key features of a virtuous action, as Aristotle describes them earlier in Book 2. An action is virtuous only if the virtuous person “knows what he is doing, if he chooses it and *chooses it for its own sake*, and if he does it from a fixed and permanent disposition.” (1105a29-35, emphasis mine)

We cannot do more here than refer back to Aristotle’s description of his own methodology. Early in Book 1, he cautions us that on ethical and political subjects “we must be satisfied with a broad outline of the truth” because “the same degree of precision is not to be expected in all discussions.” (1094b22, 1094b13) In much of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, then, Aristotle is offering generalizations that are, at best, an approximation of the truth. (“When we are considering actions, although general statements have a wider application, particular statements are closer to the truth.” (1107a28-31)) Given the generality of any overall account of conduct, “agents are compelled at every step to think out for themselves what the circumstances demand, just as happens in the arts of medicine and navigation.” (1104a10) The actions of the virtuous boxer and warrior stand out in this connection as exceptions that make the broader rule.

However, the knowledge that the boxer and the soldier do not perform their actions for their own sake already undermines some of the most well-known contemporary defenses of the harmony thesis. For instance, in her 2011 book *Intelligent Virtue*, Julia Annas defends the

traditional understanding of the harmony thesis, writing that “virtue requires harmony of the person’s feelings with his reasoning and thinking. For *anything short of this* is the stage of the mere beginner...” (68, my emphasis) Moreover, in this connection, she states that “[t]he brave person values his brave activity for its own sake...,” directly contradicting Aristotle’s own account. (77))

To support these claims, she cites the work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on “flow states,” or pleasurable experiences that occur during complex, goal-directed activity. These pleasurable states occur when we are engaged in an activity that is too complex to be routine, but which is not so complex as to require us to self-consciously figure out what to do. This account, Annas claims, can help explain how virtue is always pleasant for the virtuous. By building virtuous habits over time, the virtuous person acquires the ability to act virtuously in a way that is spontaneous and automatic, rather than self-conscious and effortful.<sup>15</sup>

Citing Csikszentmihalyi, Annas mentions that flow states are produced by actions that are “autotelic,” meaning that “the activity is experienced as being its own end, and thus experienced as being enjoyable in itself.” (Annas, 2011, 72) However, as I have shown above, Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes that some virtuous activities (such as courageously doing one’s job as a soldier in a war) are *not* autotelic, using almost exactly those terms.<sup>16</sup> The virtuous person may be courageous for the sake of being courageous, but if they have any sense they do not perform the *action* of going to battle for its own sake.

Annas does, briefly, acknowledge that some virtuous actions might not be autotelic. Contrary to Aristotle, however, she seems to think this is not generally the case with the actions

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<sup>15</sup> “Virtue requires not just acting on reasons, but having the right feelings and attitudes, doing virtuous actions in an easy and unconflicted way that is characteristically enjoyed.” Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> “οὐ δὴ ἐν ἀπάσαις ταῖς ἀρεταῖς τὸ ἠδέως ἐνεργεῖν ὑπάρχει, πλὴν ἐφ’ ὅσον τοῦ τέλους ἐφάπτεται.” (1117b20)

of the courageous. (“The brave person values his brave activity for its own sake...” (77)) She restricts herself to examples in which the virtuous person must actually pause to deliberate between two seemingly irreconcilable goods. Some disharmony is acceptable, she seems to suggest, when it is important to debate what is to be done. She mentions two examples, in particular: a generous person having to choose between possible recipients of generosity, a brave person who can only rescue one of a number of victims of a flood. (78)

Of such examples she writes as follows:

“[S]urely we have to realize that there are many occasions when even the most virtuous person will find acting virtuously difficult or stressful, not because of internal obstacles to responding and acting but because of the circumstances in which he or she has to act. In these cases, it is important to realize that the sources of struggle and regret lie not in the virtuous way the agent deals with the situation, but in the circumstances in which he finds himself.” (77-78)

We are left wondering, however, what exactly it is *about* certain circumstances which makes it permissible for the virtuous person to experience disharmony during them? An account of when, exactly, this is permissible and why does not seem to have been made fully explicit in Annas’ published work.

In Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle seems to offer us a few hints. Even if virtuous actions are generally habitual responses to situations for which we have fully prepared in advance, he recognizes that this cannot be the case in certain exceptional circumstances. We cannot enter into a flow state for such situations, responding to them effortlessly and unselfconsciously, simply because we can never be perfectly prepared for them. Soldiers may train their combat skills, but there is a certain degree beyond which it is impossible for them to get used to facing death while remaining otherwise virtuous. There are good, practical reasons for wanting soldiers to experience the thought of death as something aversive; we need them to be in the habit of avoiding it, after all, and not seeking it out.

Being a virtuous soldier, therefore, may sometimes involve performing actions that are experienced as unpleasant and disharmonious. And yet, if Aristotle is willing to admit that there are certain, unusual cases in which the virtuous person experiences inner disharmony while acting, we still need a way of determining when inner disharmony is virtuous as opposed to merely contingent. Is courage a special case among the virtues, or are there other kinds of actions that are similar to those of the courageous in this regard? If so, how precisely do we pick apart the kinds of actions that the virtuous person may perform disharmoniously from those which they may not?

#### 4 VIRTUOUS DISHARMONY AND MIXED ACTIONS

In the passages from Book III mentioned above, Aristotle writes that the courageous man “will *not willingly* (ἀκοντί) endure [pains]; but endure them he will.” (emphasis mine, 1117b8) However, the term here translated “not willingly,” ἀκοντί, is the adverbial form of an Aristotelian technical term which he has elsewhere given quite a specific meaning (ἀκούσιον). By taking note of the precise sense in which the actions of the boxer and the courageous warrior are ἀκούσιον (unwilling or involuntary), we can begin to understand why and when virtuous disharmony is sometimes appropriate.

At the beginning of Book III, Aristotle distinguishes between voluntary (ἐκούσιον) and involuntary (ἀκούσιον) action. (1109b30-1111b30) When an agent acts under their own power (as opposed to being moved by an outside force) and is conscious of what they are doing, their action is voluntary.<sup>17</sup> When an action is performed under compulsion or through

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<sup>17</sup> “Now in cases like the above the agent acts voluntarily; because the movement of the limbs that are the instruments of action has its origin in the agent himself.” (1110a16-17)

ignorance it is involuntary.<sup>18</sup> Given these descriptions, the actions of the boxer and the courageous person seem to be clearly voluntary; the agents in these cases are acting under their own power while knowing what they are doing. Yet, for reasons that are not immediately clear, Aristotle describes the courageous person as enduring pains only “involuntarily” (ἀκοντί).

This begins to make sense, however, when we take note that, according to Aristotle, some otherwise voluntary actions can have certain involuntary features. Having drawn the basic distinction between voluntary and involuntary action he then introduces a new category of actions, called “mixed actions.” These are actions that are described as being “done through fear of something worse, or for some noble purpose (διὰ κάλον τι)” (1110a5) just as the actions of the courageous warrior are done “for a right and noble motive (καλοῦ ἕνεκα)” (1115b23) and those of the boxer are done not for their own sake but for “the wreath and the honors.” (1117b4)

Aristotle says at first of mixed actions that “they seem more like voluntary than involuntary ones; because at the time that they are performed they are matters of choice” (1110a10-13) and because “the movement of the limbs that are the instruments of actions has its origin in the agent himself.” (1110a18) The agent is moving themselves rather than being moved by something else. However, he then adds that, “considered absolutely they are presumably involuntary, *because nobody would choose to do anything of this sort in itself.*” (1110a18-19, my emphasis) This, it should be clear, is also the case for the actions of the courageous and the boxer. As Aristotle points out elsewhere, “nobody chooses to make war or provokes it for the sake of making war.” (1177b10) Moreover, Aristotle’s boxer submits himself to exceptionally painful training not because of a love of physical pain, but in order to obtain the honor that comes with winning.

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<sup>18</sup> “Actions are regarded as involuntary when they are performed under compulsion or through ignorance. An act is compulsory when it has an external origin of such a kind that the agent or patient contributes nothing to it.” (1110a4-6)

It would seem, therefore, that Aristotle should consider the actions of the courageous person and the boxer to be “mixed actions.” These actions seem to meet the conditions Aristotle gives us for these: no-one would choose these actions for their own sake (and an aspect of them is therefore “involuntary”), but the virtuous person nevertheless *does* choose them for the sake of the *κᾶλον*. (There may be still more conditions for what counts as a mixed action than those that Aristotle explicitly describes. These will be discussed below.)

This category of mixed actions enables him to accommodate the fact that “[s]ometimes people are actually praised... when they endure some disgrace or suffering as the price of great and noble results (μεγάλων καὶ καλῶν).” (1110a20-23) The actions of the boxer and the courageous person may require suffering and inner disharmony while remaining praiseworthy, even virtuous. In such cases, the rule of thumb about virtue and inner harmony given in earlier books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* does not apply. This, then, seems to be the best place to start when reconstructing Aristotle’s own account of when it can be virtuous to experience inner disharmony: when a virtuous person performs a mixed action, it may be appropriate for them to have mixed feelings about it.

## 5 VIRTUE IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

Unfortunately, there is little scholarly consensus about how to interpret Aristotle’s account of mixed actions, and the scholarship that exists does not seem to have considered the examples of the boxer and the courageous person. I will therefore sketch my own account of mixed actions in this section, taking on board this additional evidence. With this clearer account of mixed actions in hand, it will finally be possible to offer a principled way of picking out when exactly it is and is not virtuous to experience inner disharmony.

The two examples Aristotle gives when explaining mixed actions at the beginning of Book III are both actions performed under compulsion or duress: a man who does something dishonorable because a tyrant has his wife and children in his power, and someone who chooses to jettison cargo from a ship in bad weather in order to save the lives of those on board. Consequently, it has been all too easy for some commentators to think of mixed actions as being simply “actions performed under duress.” If I am right that the case of the boxer and the virtuous warrior count as mixed actions for Aristotle, however, then the category has to be broader than this.

On the other hand, Aristotle’s own explanation that mixed actions are simply actions performed when “nobody would choose to do anything of this sort in itself” is also unsatisfactory. As Karen Nielsen has pointed out, it would initially seem as though Aristotle’s account is unable to distinguish mixed actions from ordinary instrumental acts “such as taking bad-tasting medicine, tying one’s shoelaces, or carrying out a chamber pot.” (296) No-one performs these actions for their own sake, and yet it would be rather strange to suggest that, as a consequence, they are not entirely voluntary. Unless purely voluntary actions are exceedingly rare in everyday life, mixed actions must be something other than simply any and all instrumental actions.

The situation has puzzled interpreters such as C.C.W. Taylor. Opting for the interpretation that mixed actions are simply those performed under duress, he writes in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the phrase “or for some noble purpose” in lines 1110a4-5 constitutes a “complication” because “if [it] refers to actions done for some inducement, such as a monetary reward, they do not appear even plausible candidates for actions done under compulsion, and Aristotle appears to forget about them immediately.” (129)

However, the latter part of Taylor's claim is evidently false, given that Aristotle reiterates his point about mixed actions being done for a noble purpose later on in the same passage at line 22 (quoted above). Furthermore, the complication only occurs because Taylor's reading takes for granted that the distinctive thing about mixed actions is that they are performed under compulsion or duress. Although there is good textual evidence for the claim that such compulsive actions are good examples of mixed actions (as Aristotle's two main examples show), there is little textual evidence for thinking that *only* these kinds of coerced actions count as mixed actions. In fact, if the argument I have given above is correct and the actions of the courageous person and the boxer also constitute mixed actions, then we have good reason to think that mixed actions are *not* necessarily performed under duress.

David Bostock has also noticed these interpretative difficulties. He too understands mixed actions as "actions done under duress" but finds that Aristotle's own account cuts against this interpretation, choosing instead to imply that this is simply a result of a flaw in the argument. He notes that Aristotle gives his own explanation for why mixed actions are (in some sense) involuntary, namely because "nobody would choose to do anything of this sort in itself." (1110a21) This, however, he finds "wholly unconvincing" because: "the actions are chosen as the best response to the circumstances at the time, and *every* action is a response to the circumstances at the time." (105-6) On the basis of these comments from Bostock and others, it seems evident that Aristotle's own explanation of the distinction between mixed and voluntary actions is either flawed or unclear. If we are going to make philosophical use of this distinction, we will therefore have to clarify it in ways that go further than what is explicitly stated in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

However, it would seem that Aristotle's account provides us with a few hints that we can use to reconstruct a viable understanding of the concept. As well as being actions that nobody would choose in themselves, all of Aristotle's examples of mixed actions also have another feature in common: they all occur under exceptionally difficult circumstances. For the far majority of people, it is rare that one is stuck on a sinking ship, or that a tyrant orders one to do something dishonorable "or else." This remains the case if we consider the actions of the virtuous warrior or boxer to be mixed actions. For Aristotle, war is not supposed to be an ordinary state of life but the exception to a general rule: "we make war in order that we may live at peace." (1177b6) Finally, a boxer's daily exercise routine is not likely to be anywhere near as intense (and therefore physically painful) as when he or she is training to compete for an important prize. All of these examples of mixed actions or possible mixed actions occur in circumstances that make them far more challenging than most of the actions that make up day-to-day virtue.

Contrast these cases, for instance, against a few (for able-bodied people) thoroughly ordinary actions: tying my shoelaces, walking to the kitchen to make a sandwich, and driving a short journey to pick my children up from school. In each of these cases, it is true that "nobody would choose to do anything of this sort in itself," but these are quite clearly not what Aristotle is talking about when he describes mixed actions. (1110a21) These actions place no exceptional demands upon most virtuous people, and it is a part of my being reconciled to ordinary human life that I accept the difficulty involved in each. Most virtuous persons will be expected to perform such ordinary actions as a matter of course, and without any inner resistance. Unlike mixed actions, these actions are not exceptionally difficult.

It is important to note here, however, that what should be considered “exceptionally difficult” will vary between different individuals depending on personal circumstances, including but not limited to medically recognized physical and mental disabilities. Aristotle is explicit that the virtuous person acts not according to some inflexible general standard and that we should always attempt to figure out and act according to “the mean relative to us.” (1106b7) Some forms of disability could make what, to most people, are easy, everyday actions exceptionally difficult or painful in themselves. For some people with certain kinds of back trouble, for instance, sitting for a long time is exceptionally difficult even if, for the far majority of people, this activity is paradigmatically easy. Alternatively, individual differences that are not due to disability may make certain actions that are easy for most exceptionally difficult for some. Long-haul flights in economy class are not as difficult for a very short person to endure as they are for a very tall person, for instance. Certain seemingly “ordinary” actions can for certain people be “exceptionally difficult” mixed actions, in my terminology, if they have features even a virtuous human being would wish to avoid such as being intensely physically painful.

Part of what is distinctive about mixed actions, I would suggest, is that even a virtuous person, with well-trained dispositions, would be expected to find them hard. This is because the virtuous person actually cultivates a disposition *not* to choose certain aspects of these kinds of actions. The virtuous cargo hauler spends much of his time taking care over his cargo, and the virtuous father will deliberately avoid “disgraceful” actions in most situations. The virtuous boxer should not be disposed to seek out intense pain for its own sake, even if he must endure it for the sake of winning the honors. A disposition to find pain and disgrace aversive would seem to be a fundamental part of the virtuous life for almost any conceivable virtuous agent; living a long and active life of the rational part requires us to desire actions which preserve our bodily

integrity and social standing. Where a virtuous person's well-trained dispositions normally make an action feel easy, in cases such as these that same training makes them feel hard.

Mixed actions therefore need not be defined by their being performed under duress or compulsion, especially since Aristotle himself does not define them as such. Instead, it seems more plausible to suggest that they are actions performed under circumstances in which someone acts against their dispositions for some further purpose. For the virtuous person, this means acting against their ordinarily virtuous dispositions for a virtuous end. This may be under duress, as in the case of the virtuous man who is threatened by a tyrant, or not, as in the case of the virtuous boxer. Both are examples of actions that "nobody would [ordinarily] choose," even if they might sometimes do so for some specific purpose. Although the text itself is unclear, this interpretation makes good sense of the examples as well as what Aristotle says about them. They are actions we do not generally choose for their own sake, and so we possess a disposition to avoid them rather than seek them out.

Recalling that Aristotle understands virtuous dispositions as being built up by habituation helps make sense of the distinction.<sup>19</sup> This process of habituation works because "like activities produce like dispositions." (1103b23) The same process can be thought of in terms of pleasures and pains: "The pleasure or pain that accompanies people's acts should be taken as a sign of their dispositions," meaning the same dispositions formed by habit. (1104b3) The link between pleasure, pain, and our dispositions means that we need to have "been trained in some way from infancy to feel joy and grief at the right things." (1104b4) The virtuous person will train themselves to take pleasure in the kinds of actions that are generally virtuous, and feel pained by those that are generally not.

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<sup>19</sup> "The moral virtues, then, are engendered in us neither by nor contrary to nature; we are constitute by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit."(1103a7)

The virtuous take pleasure in ordinary virtuous actions because they have been trained to do so since childhood. However, when they do something that goes against their ordinary virtuous habits, the link between virtue and pleasure is broken. Mixed actions, as I believe Aristotle understands them, are always actions of this sort for the virtuous. Part of what makes the virtuous person virtuous is that they have cultivated a disposition to find the undesirable element of the action (physical pain, destroying one's valuables, performing disgraceful acts) aversive. It is worth recalling, here, Aristotle's claim that the point of acting virtuously is to fulfill the human function and achieve happiness, but this can only be done "in a complete lifetime" for "one swallow does not make a summer" and a too brief space of time cannot make a person happy. (1098a16-17) The virtuous person, therefore, cultivates dispositions to avoid physical harm, important material sacrifices, and death, even though certain virtues (such as courage) require them to act against those same dispositions. This is what makes mixed actions difficult: they cut against the dispositions that the virtuous person cultivates in the rest of their life.

Consider, for example, a pediatric oncologist whose job might regularly involve informing parents that their children have terminal cancer.<sup>20</sup> When she does this, she will have to act against the basic tendency of a virtuous person to avoid causing other people emotional pain, and to feel distressed when she does so. Accordingly, even if the virtuous oncologist performs this action on a daily basis, she will hopefully never get used to it in the same way as she may be used to her (perhaps initially annoying) morning commute. The former, unlike the latter, conflicts with one of her important, virtuous dispositions—one that should be reaffirmed in many

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<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Tim O'Keefe for this example.

or most of their other virtuous actions.<sup>21</sup> Mixed actions are therefore “exceptional” even if they occur regularly insofar as they involve choosing to do things that the virtuous person will remain in the habit of avoiding.

Yet, if doctors involved in patient care might have to perform what would for the virtuous be mixed actions on a daily basis, it would seem that this makes it the kind of job in which it is hard to stay virtuous. It has been hypothesized that empathic engagement between healthcare professionals and patients can lead to “secondary trauma” or “vicarious traumatization”, where physicians begin to develop symptoms of traumatic stress as a consequence of working with traumatized patients.<sup>22</sup> The virtuous doctor must often witness and sometimes even be involved in causing severe physical and emotional pain in her patients and it seems possible that, over time, this would take a toll.<sup>23</sup>

In one recent study of the effects of trauma on paramedics, many participants described deliberately emotionally distancing themselves from their patients in order to cope with witnessing the pain of others.<sup>24</sup> However, some also mentioned that this affects them more broadly than they intended: “the coping mechanisms that I’ve developed for work unfortunately can have a slight negative impact at home because I’m utilizing a coping mechanism that

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<sup>21</sup> In the highly unlikely event that the oncologist’s life were to involve mostly or solely actions that caused other people pain, Aristotle’s psychology of habituation would suggest that this would eventually train them to take pleasure in causing other people pain. After all, “like activities produce like dispositions.” (1103b23) If they were to find themselves in this situation, the Aristotelian advice would be to find the time to interact with other human beings in a way that brings about mutual pleasure, as a matter of urgency. Otherwise, they risk losing the ability to live a virtuous life as the social animal that they are.

<sup>22</sup> C Figley, “Compassion fatigue: Towards a new understanding of the costs of caring,” in *Secondary traumatic stress: Self-care issues for clinicians, researchers, and educators*, ed. B. Stamm (Lutherville, MD: Sidran Press, 1995), 3–28; K Saakvitne and L Pearlman, *Transforming the pain: A workbook on vicarious traumatization* (New York: Norton, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Many medical interventions cause pain or discomfort in patients. For instance: replacing a nasogastric tube can cause extreme pain for the patient, chemotherapy is well-known to cause unpleasant side-effects such as nausea and cognitive problems (“chemo brain”) etc. However, some medical specialisms evidently involve more contact with patient pain than others.

<sup>24</sup> Cheryl Regehr, Gerald Goldberg and Judy Hughes, “Exposure to Human Tragedy, Empathy, and Trauma in Ambulance Paramedics,” *Am J Orthopsychiatry* 72, no. 4 (2002): 505–13.

probably shouldn't be utilized in that setting." (ibid.) Virtue at home, at least for some paramedics, seems to conflict with coping at work.

The account of Aristotle's harmony thesis I have given above seems to account for these phenomena far better than standard virtue ethical theories of the emotions. For those virtue ethicists who emphasize the importance of the harmony thesis, physician empathy poses a tricky case. Would they say that doctors should learn to enjoy the parts of their job that involve witnessing or, sometimes, causing pain in their patients?<sup>25</sup> This would seem to be impossible given the dispositions that virtuous people should ordinarily cultivate, namely an aversion to seeing others in pain. Or, would the harmony thesis recommend that doctors simply enjoy the fact of their being doctors, taking pleasure in the thought that they are helping the sick? This advice seems to disregard the strong link that Aristotle believes exists between emotion and action (as he defines the term). Perhaps *this* kind of emotional harmony prevents doctors from leaving the profession, but it does not guide their action day to day in the way that Aristotle would suggest the emotions are meant to guide virtuous action.

If my reading of Aristotle is correct then, from the perspective of Aristotelian virtue ethics, it would make far more sense to treat many of the actions included in patient care as virtuous exceptions to the harmony thesis. In this way, the virtuous doctor's empathy makes him like the virtuous warrior who "will not willingly endure [pains]; but endure them he will, because that is the noble thing to do." (1117b8) Moreover, it is perhaps also true of the doctor that "the more completely a man possesses virtue, and the happier he is, the more he will be distressed at

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<sup>25</sup> Much has been said, in recent years, about the ways in which character traits might be highly domain-specific. Why, for instance, can't doctors find witnessing pain easy at work, while being highly averse to it at home? See esp. John M Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005). This has been called the "situationist" objection to virtue ethics. Given that this is usually construed as a general objection to virtue ethics as a whole, it will be beyond the scope of my paper to respond to it here. Suffice to say, those who are sympathetic to virtue ethics will find the claim that doctors could switch their empathy off at work without broader consequences for their virtuousness to be suspect.

the thought of death” even if for very different reasons. (1117b13) The reality for a virtuous doctor seems to be the precise reverse of the harmony thesis: we know that we have found a doctor who is also a virtuous person only if he is somewhat pained by his day-to-day activities.

The consequences of this fact for healthcare policy, particularly discussions of physician burnout and its impact on patient care, could be highly significant. Only a nuanced account of the virtuous emotions, with the ability to permit exceptions to the harmony thesis on principled grounds, will enable virtue ethics to understand and offer potential solutions to problems such as those concerning physician empathy. Does it matter if the work of patient care makes one less empathetic? Should we take measures to ensure that doctors stay virtuous? Which measures should we take? The account in this paper, I hope, provides a more stable basis on which to proceed with such questions. When virtuous action conflicts with a virtuous disposition, even the best kind of person should feel conflicted. The virtuous person may be “of one mind with himself,” but when he is performing a mixed action, he is not to be blamed for having mixed feelings about it.

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