Julia Annas
Intelligent Virtue.
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When *il Sommo Poeta* was in the dark wood where the clear path was hidden, may we suppose that he stood in need of a decision-procedure? Peculiar as it is, we continue to teach our children to be virtuous (e.g., honest, friendly, courageous), yet invariably frame contemporary moral issues in terms other than virtue (e.g., rights, obligations, utility).   Why has virtue lost its capacity to capture the public imagination? Has Virgil abandoned us? And, more importantly, how do we relocate virtue in the frenetic *agoria* of contemporary life?

Intelligent Virtue, by Julia Annas, graciously suggests that the answers lie with our failure to understand virtue properly and our inability to appreciate fully its complex relation to practical intelligence.   With direct and simple prose, and a refreshingly unpretentious tone, Annas proposes a *developmental account of virtue* that rehabilitates the skill-analogy in order to more fully illuminate the intersections between *phronesis* and *arete*, the ultimate aim of which is to reveal the ways in which virtue is partly constitutive of *eudamonia*.

The basic idea behind the skill-analogy is that the acquisition of a virtue is analogous to the development of a skill. We begin by recognizing that different people have different natural dispositions and talents. With respect to dispositions, we obviously seek to identify those that we (those of us who are teaching the youth) judge to be good for their own sake, as well as for the learner, while at the same time helping the child recognize and let atrophy those dispositions that may be harmful to others or personally destructive.   This requires practical intelligence within learner and teacher alike. Learners must focus their intelligence on the underlying tread that connects different acts under the rubric of honesty, say, while teachers must be prepared to offer reasons as to why each instance so counts or how the performance must be done so that it is really does manifest honesty. As it is with learning a skill, we first acquire a virtue by practicing it; initial attempts are likely to be frustrating and difficult.   Further practice alleviates the frustration and improves upon the ease with which we activate the virtue.

Interestingly, the skill-analogy reveals why this early stage of practice and habituation does not lead us to the view that virtue is a simple routine. Suppose we are learning how to speak Italian.   We practice it, make mistakes, are corrected, and internalize the lessons. Assuming we advance, we begin to achieve fluency in the performance of the language when intelligence is no longer directed toward the localized application of constituent sub-skills. But, we may not suppose that fluency is achieved by dumb routine either: the skilled speaker must apply her intelligence so that she may now actively engage dialogic partners in free and open-ended discussion wherein the performances cannot be predicted in advance. Here, intelligence directs us to recognize appropriate responses, questions, assertions, comments, and so forth, in ever-changing and unique circumstances. So, as it is with learning a skill, intelligence is taught with the aim that the learner might eventually make use of the skill in contexts not anticipated by the teacher(s).

Earlier, we pointed out that the interactions between learner and teacher are mediated by reason-giving. For, among other things, if someone professes to be brave but cannot explain why they so acted, we are not inclined to think them brave. Annas, however, rightly observes that reason-giving is double-edged: precisely because we do advance reasons for thinking that this manner of acting manifests courage, for instance, we teach our understanding of virtue *and* expose our reasons to critical evaluation. Thus the learner may accept those reasons, evaluate them and find them wanting, or reject them altogether. In any case, the evaluation of reasons can stall-out or languish at the level of family, community, or culture, but there is no necessary reason why this should be so. Practices, like languages, are in some sense porous in relation to one another. The reasons people understand an action to be brave are not cross-culturally opaque; they merely require that we understand the cultural contexts in which they appear in order that they might be transplanted into the virgin soil of our own culture. The developmental character of Annas' account stresses the role that reason-giving plays in the acquisition and improvement of virtuous performances, while the skill-analogy helps to reveal the many ways in which practical intelligence can transcend the limited horizon of extant cultural interpretations of virtue-performances and, thus, adapt and improve upon those performances as circumstance dictates. *Phronesis* is not therefore trapped within the increasingly rigid conservation of extant virtue-paradigms as long as it remains actively engaged in the dynamic process of integrating hitherto unknown appearances of virtue into its own interpretative matrices.

Obviously, if practical intelligence is capable of transcending the torpid layers of routine and the sediment of culturally conserved practices, it can accomplish this more effectively if it is also capable of unifying the virtues within the performance of a specific virtue. Annas' account is not necessarily dependent on the 'unity of virtues', but the thesis complements her ideas and she offers a compelling defense of it. She observes that the practice of a virtue, generosity, for example, can be performed without attention to the needs and wants of those to whom it is directed, and this is what we might expect from the learner. But intelligence tells us, as it would with a skill, that we may improve upon our performance were we to conjoin our dispositions toward generosity with greater empathy. If we have co-feeling for the beneficiaries of our largess, then we are more apt to perform in the way a fully virtuous person would.

The connections Annas forges between virtue and happiness (*eudaimonia*) are fascinating in their own right. Here, we will focus on one of her ideas, namely, that happiness is a dynamically evolving, but ultimately indeterminate end. First, let us observe without comment that Annas shows that the alternative conceptions of happiness that have currency in the social sciences—pleasure, desire-satisfaction, or how well one's life appears to be going at any given time—are all deeply problematic in their own ways and wholly unsatisfactory to our purposes. In contradistinction, Annas proposes that we see happiness as something initially indeterminate that acquires greater determinacy and scope as we develop our virtuous characters. In other words, happiness takes shape in relation to how well we live our lives and, upon reflection, what values we judge to be worth pursuing. As our characters assume greater determinacy and our values become more explicit, so too does our conception of happiness. However, as that determinacy develops, the scope of our happiness is enlarged to include the interests, concerns, and projects of others with whom we now identify. It remains true of the vicious or under-developed character that happiness can have considerable determinacy and content—was

Dante's Satan not trapped in the lowest circle of Hell because he had no other end than to overturn the throne of God? For the virtuous, however, matters are different. As they learn to adapt their virtues to the varied circumstances of life, they learn to live well and meet new and difficult challenges with equanimity and resolve. They, unlike *il Poeta* himself, do not so much try to change their circumstances; rather, they seek responses to those circumstances that reflect what is valuable to them. In so doing, their conception of happiness dynamically aligns with their values but enlarges in scope and depth. It might be objected, and not without cause, that this makes happiness unattainable. But this objection has traction only if we assume that happiness is something the possession of which is valuable, rather than the pursuit of it. Assuming we are living actively, it is not unreasonable to think that happiness resides in something that is evolving and developing in much the way we are.

It is an appealing feature of Annas' account that reason-giving functions as it does in the refinement of virtuous performances, for reflection on practice informs us more fully as to the material content of virtuous performances in ways that are not culturally confined. But to what extent does theoretical cognition reciprocally inform practice? Initially, this might not appear problematic, since *theoria* can be of no aid in the discernment of values worthy of aspiration. Yet without a more developed account of the role played by theoretical cognition, it is unclear how Annas could show that the values to which we aspire practically are not already colonized by, and aligned with, existing relations of power. Without the aid of a theoretical cognition that is relatively freed from the constraints of power, a critique of practice is insufficient to reveal the ways in which systematic distortions can be introduced at multiple sites of social integration and interaction. On the other hand, *Intelligent Virtue* is all the more worth reading precisely because it does invite us to engage in a critical dialogue with the themes and ideas it proffers. Let us then recline in comfort, open a bottle of fine Italian and be part of the conversation. *Bene Vita!*

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