Does Virtue Silence Happiness?
A Reply to McDowell and Korsgaard
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(for discussion at the Research Triangle Ethics Circle)

My concern in this paper is with how we should think about the relation between virtue and happiness, and more precisely, how we should think about the relation between the requirements of virtue and competing attractions. It’s common to suppose that extramoral considerations in conflict with right judgment or duty tempt those of us lacking in virtue and yet fail to tempt the person with a truly virtuous character—whereas the virtuous person does the right thing for the right reason and wants to do the right thing, the merely continent person does the right thing in spite of contrary emotions and appetites for things he shouldn’t choose; and the incontinent person acts on contrary emotions and appetites for things he shouldn’t choose; and the incontinent person acts on contrary emotions and appetites for things he shouldn’t choose in spite of his best judgment. But there’s a further question we can ask here about how things appear from the virtuous person’s perspective in circumstances where extramoral considerations are pitted against virtue’s demands. Does the brave person recognize that bravery has a cost, because bravery at times requires tremendous sacrifice? Or does the brave person feel no pain at the prospect of death when standing firm in the face of danger for a good cause? Favoring the latter account of how things look from the virtuous person’s point of view, John McDowell has argued that the truly virtuous person sees no conflict between the demands of virtue and other options. Virtue, on McDowell’s view, does not outweigh or override other reasons; instead, it silences them.

McDowell thinks that this silencing interpretation is the right view to hold about virtue, and that it’s Aristotle’s view. On Christine Korsgaard’s reading, it looks as if the notion that virtue silences happiness is Kant’s view. My aim in this paper is to show that neither Aristotle nor Kant holds McDowell’s silencing interpretation and to insist that this is obviously not what one wants to say about virtue. The correct view, I will suggest, is that virtue can have a cost and that a mark of the wise person is that she recognizes it.

1. McDowell’s “Silencing” Interpretation

One prominent view about how we should understand the relation between virtue and extramoral considerations is John McDowell’s view that virtue “silences” all competing options.1 This is the metaphor McDowell uses in describing what he takes to be Aristotle’s account of virtue; moreover, it’s a view McDowell wants to defend. Virtue, on this interpretation, does not outweigh or override other reasons; instead, it silences them altogether. Considerations that would otherwise provide an agent with reasons for action lack practical significance when pitted against the demands of virtue. Since virtue has no cost, the virtuous person never experiences conflict or regret. In the face of virtue’s dictates, any prospective enjoyment that the truly virtuous person might have found in other available opportunities is effaced by her clear perception of the requirements of virtue, which silence all competing attractions.

McDowell thinks that, if we can only try to see things the way the virtuous person sees them, by adopting his particular moral outlook, we’ll be motivated to reject what may be a common conception of virtue. According to that common conception, the virtuous person weighs the cost that virtue at times requires against counterbalancing gains, and decides that the sacrifices associated with virtue are always worth the price. In other words, this common view allows that competing options may present the virtuous person with pro tanto reasons for action, which are always trumped by the demands of virtue, recognized as all-things-considered reasons.2 But McDowell thinks that this common picture is mistaken. As he argues, what sets the virtuous person apart is not that she takes the requirements of virtue always to outweigh other reasons but rather that she does not balance the dictates of virtue against other reasons at all.3 For her, foregone opportunities that might have appeared in a favorable light in alternative circumstances no longer count or no longer have value when they compete with virtue:

If a situation in which virtue imposes a requirement is genuinely conceived as such, according to this view, then considerations which, in the absence of the requirement, would have constituted reasons for acting otherwise are silenced altogether—not overridden—by the requirement.4

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2 I understand these (and the relevant related) terms as follows. A reason is a prima facie reason to A iff there is a presumption that it is a reason to A, but this might be shown to be false. A reason is a pro tanto reason to A iff it is a genuine reason to A, which might be outweighed by other reasons. A reason is an all-things-considered reason iff it is a conclusive reason to A that cannot be outweighed by any other reasons. While McDowell doesn’t describe his view in these terms, in insisting that competing attractions in tension with virtue are silenced by the requirements of virtue, it appears that he is committed to the view that extramoral reasons at odds with virtue are merely prima facie reasons whose presumptions as reasons turn out to be false. That is, on the silencing view, avoiding harm is merely a prima facie, and not a genuine, reason to flee, because avoiding harm does not in fact give the virtuous person a reason to flee. Avoiding harm is only “at first sight” a reason that is silenced by the requirements of bravery.


In short, there is no scale for virtue, not even one rigged always to tip on its side.\(^5\)

It is helpful to keep in mind precisely what McDowell’s silencing view implies about how we ought to conceive of temperance—the mean concerned with bodily pleasures—and courage—the mean concerned with feelings of fear and confidence. The silencing interpretation does not require the temperate person to be insensible, for it allows that the temperate person is prone to enjoy physical pleasures and would enjoy some intertemperate action in suitable circumstances in which it were available to him. That is, if virtue did not require that Oscar refrain from sleeping with someone he ought not to sleep with, Oscar’s prospective pleasure in indulging his libido would constitute a reason for sleeping with Stella. But, further, this silencing interpretation maintains that Oscar’s vivid appreciation of virtue’s dictates silences his prospective pleasure in circumstances where Eros and virtue are at odds—Oscar’s desire for Stella is extinguished in situations where he recognizes that acting on appetite would be contrary to what correct reason prescribes.\(^6\) On McDowell’s view, Oscar’s missed opportunity for pleasure is not an admitted loss, one compensated for by the counterbalancing gains that Oscar rightly feels in acting temperately; rather, in circumstances where such physical pleasure could only be obtained by flouting a requirement of excellence, “missing the pleasure is no loss at all.”\(^7\)

Similarly, while the silencing interpretation allows that the courageous person in principle values life and health and takes harm to be something that she has reason to avoid, it nonetheless requires that, in practice, or in actual circumstances where virtue requires standing firm in the face of danger for the sake of the fine, considerations about preserving life and health that she would otherwise care about are stilled by the demands of bravery. That is, when confronting danger for a good cause, the courageous person, eo ipso, renounces an interest in the security of life and limb on which she generally places a premium and sees no reason to remove herself from harm.\(^8\) As these examples of both temperance and courage make clear, on this silencing view, no sacrifice necessitated by virtue counts as a genuine loss—or indeed as a genuine sacrifice at all—because the virtuous person won’t miss foregone opportunities that she has no reason to want or to pursue.\(^9\)

McDowell thinks that this distinction between virtue silencing versus overriding other options is central to Aristotle’s account of virtue and continence and, further, that Aristotle’s distinction between virtue and continence actually requires the silencing view. For Aristotle, if one needs to overcome an inclination to act otherwise in getting oneself to act virtuously, then one’s action manifests mere continence rather than true virtue. While the continent person resembles the virtuous person, insofar as she makes the right judgment and acts as she should, she nonetheless differs from the virtuous person, insofar as she acts as reason exhorts her to in the face of inclinations that counter and oppose reason. As McDowell sees it, the only way to make intelligible this important distinction between virtue and continence on Aristotle’s taxonomy is to suppose that virtue silences considerations that would have constituted reasons for acting otherwise. For, if, by contrast, we allow (with the common view) that the virtuous person’s judgment as to what she should do might be arrived at by weighing some reason for acting in a way that manifests courage against a reason for doing something else—for instance, risking life and limb as a reason for running away—and deciding that, on balance, the former reason is the better one, then virtue and continence turn out to be indistinguishable states of character. In either case, McDowell reasons, the agent does the right thing for the right reason, in spite of feeling the weight of a reason to act otherwise, and thus virtue, on that common view, turns out to be nothing essentially different from mere continence.\(^10\) In order to mark the contrast between virtue and continence in a meaningful way, then, it must be the case that virtue silences other options:

The distinction becomes intelligible if we stop assuming that the virtuous person’s judgment is a balancing of reasons for and against. The view of a situation which he arrives at by exercising his sensitivity is one in which some aspect of the situation is seen as constituting a reason for acting in some way; this reason is apprehended, not as outweighing or overriding any reasons for the situation (the present danger, say) but as silencing them. Here and now the risk to life and limb is not seen as any reason for removing himself.\(^11\)

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\(^5\) Ibid., 26.

\(^6\) “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” 27. McDowell holds that competing courses could not ultimately satisfy the virtuous person, but denies that this is a result of the fact that the virtuous person judges such options to be on balance less desirable. On the contrary, she is incapable of taking satisfaction in competing options because for her “the attractions of the competing course count for nothing” (ibid., 27). On this silencing interpretation, then, Oscar’s inclination to sleep with Stella does not count for him as a reason for doing so in situations where he knows he shouldn’t, because his inclination disappears under the impact of the thought that he wouldn’t enjoy it, or that his enjoyment would be counterbalanced by remorse (ibid., 27).

\(^7\) “The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics,” 369.

\(^8\) “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” 27.

\(^9\) Ibid., 27.

\(^10\) McDowell assumes that, if the virtuous person allows himself to weight competing claims, this weighing entails that he must feel inclined to act contrary to right judgment and is thereby conflicted: “If the virtuous person allows himself to weigh the present danger, as a reason for running away, why should we not picture the weighing as his allowing himself to feel an inclination to run away, of a strength proportional to the weight which he allows to the reason?” (“Virtue and Reason,” 335). For a critique of this assumption, see note 20 and section 5 of this paper.

\(^11\) “Virtue and Reason,” 335.
There are three aspects of McDowell’s silencing interpretation that I wish to highlight. First, McDowell readily concedes that the view to which he is committed represents an exceptionally august standard of virtue. Virtue, on the silencing interpretation, possesses a certain sublimity, manifested in “a renunciation, without struggle, of something which in the abstract one would value highly.”12 In light of the fact that mere mortals can approximate this lofty ideal only partially and imperfectly, true virtue is seldom met with in the real world, where at best we are fortunate to encounter it mixed with continence.

Second, there is a mutually supporting relationship between the silencing interpretation and McDowell’s more general view that the virtuous person has a special conception of her circumstances that is not fully shared by anyone else.13 Since virtue silences, rather than overrides, considerations that could provide an agent with reasons for acting otherwise, the virtuous person possesses a clear perception of the requirements of virtue that is never obfuscated by temptation. McDowell reasons that both the continent and incontinent person’s inclinations are aroused, as the virtue person’s are not, by her awareness of competing attractions.14 Hence, for the continent and incontinent person, “a lively desire clouds or blurs the focus of [her] attention on ‘the noble.’” On the silencing view, then, the virtuous person not only feels things in a distinctive way, but sees things in a unique light—she neither feels conflicted or tempted, nor sees any reason to act contrary to the requirements of virtue, because extramoral considerations don’t appear to her as valuable.

Notice, finally, that this silencing interpretation need not make Aristotle fully Socratic. For, while it implies, as Socrates claims, that virtue has no price, it can allow, as Socrates apparently cannot, that external-goods have value when not in competition with virtue. If this is correct, McDowell’s silencing view can allow, as Socrates cannot, that virtue is an incomplete good—it is incomplete because happiness requires external-goods in addition to virtue, even if such goods have no value when they conflict with virtue’s demands.

2. Is This the Best Way to Understand Aristotle?

McDowell’s silencing interpretation is promising because it provides one clear way explaining Aristotle’s contrast between virtue and mere continence; moreover, it might seem necessary to explain that contrast. According to Aristotle, with virtue, there’s agreement between the rational and nonrational parts of the soul, but with continence, the rational part of the soul wins the battle against countervailing appetite (1102b15-30). Whereas the merely continent person experiences temptation and conflict between the demands of virtue and other courses of action, the virtuous person is not supposed to be conflicted in this way. The notion that competing attractions are silenced by the requirements of virtue explains the difference. Indeed, Aristotle may seem to be drawing just these conclusions when discussing the pleasures and pains of the virtuous person. In matters of temperance and bravery, he argues, actions are not enough:

But we must take someone’s pleasure or pain following on his actions to be a sign of his state. For if someone who abstains from bodily pleasures enjoys the abstinenec itself, he is temperate; if he is grieved by it he is intemperate. Again, if he stands firm against terrifying situations and enjoys it, or at least does not find it painful, he is brave; if he finds it painful, he is cowardly. For virtue of character is about pleasures and pains. (EN 1104b7)

In spite of the fact that this isolated passages appears to support McDowell’s reading, on balance, this silencing interpretation is not compelling. It’s neither a philosophically promising account of virtue, nor an adequate reading of Aristotle. Bracketing for the moment an explicit discussion of why I take the silencing interpretation to provide an unappealing account of virtue on broader philosophical grounds, here I want to make three central points in arguing that this silencing view is not the best way to understand Aristotle.

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12 Ibid., 335.
13 In Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?, “The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics,” and “Virtue and Reason, McDowell denies that that the virtuous person’s conception of circumstances can be shared by someone who sees no reason to act as the virtuous person does. That denial is itself intimately connected with McDowell’s larger project of defending a cognitivist view of moral motivation, according to which purely cognitive states—moral beliefs—can be motivational. On McDowell’s purely rationalist view of motivation, in the case of moral (and prudential) motivation, ascription of a proximate pro-attitude is “merely consequential” on viewing the action as intentional. Or, at least this is true of the virtuous person. Since McDowell maintains that an unclouded perception of the requirements of virtue is sufficient on its own to constitute a reason for action, he accepts the idea that any appetitive state is necessary to move the virtuous person to act. As a result, he understands failure to see a reason to act as the virtuous person acts as stemming not from a lack of desire (on which the rational influence of moral requirements is conditional), but from “the lack of a distinctive way of seeing situations” (“Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” 23). In emphasizing this point that failure to act virtuously results from having contrary desires that disturb one’s perception of the requirements of virtue, McDowell explains: “This is to allow that someone who fails to act virtuously may, in a way, perceive what a virtuous person would do, so that his failure to do the right thing is not inadvertent; but to insist that his failure occurs only because his appreciation of what he perceives is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do otherwise” (“Virtue and Reason,” 334). Here again, McDowell thinks that this strategy of attenuating the degree to which the virtuous person’s perception of a situation can fully be shared by someone who acts otherwise than virtuously can be found in Aristotle’s texts.
14 On Aristotle’s taxonomy, both continence and incontinence involve conflict between the rational and nonrational parts of the soul, for, in both cases, the rational part chooses the right ends, and the nonrational part chooses the wrong ends. Whereas the rational part wins in the case of continence, and the agent acts as she should, the nonrational part wins in the case of incontinence, and the agent acts contrary to right judgment. Thus, in the case of virtue, continence, and incontinence, the agent makes the right judgment, whether or not she acts on it, while only the vicious person forms the wrong judgment.
First, Aristotle thinks that the life of virtue, although a closer approximation to the human good than the life of gratification or the life of honor, is still too incomplete for happiness, because someone virtuous can suffer the “worst evils and misfortunes” (1095b32-5). Aristotle claims that the function argument implies that happiness consists primarily, although not solely, in virtue, where virtues are conceived of as activities, rather than mere states that an agent may happen to possess or that he might possess without using (1098b30-1099a6, 1176a33-b1). The reason happiness does not consist solely in virtue is that it requires, in addition, external-goods, which are goods dependent on conditions outside of the agent.

Aristotle notes that this view about our final good fits a common classification of goods into external-goods and goods of the soul (actions or activities of the soul) and the common view that goods of the soul are most important (1098b13-15). Further, he explains that such a weighted, pluralistic conception of the final good satisfies the formal constraint that the final good be complete. Even if virtue is a very important good—indeed the dominating or controlling ingredient in happiness—we know that it cannot be an unconditionally complete good, because a life of virtue is not lacking in nothing. As Aristotle is keenly aware, there are external-goods that would make a virtuous life an even better life, and there are external-evils that can make a virtuous life worse than it would be otherwise. Having argued that virtue is the most important ingredient in happiness, Aristotle maintains:

Nonetheless, happiness also needs external goods to be added, as we saw, since we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources. For first of all, in many actions we use friends, wealth and political power just as we use instruments. Further, deprivation of certain [externals]-for instance, good birth, good children, beauty, mars our blessedness. For we do not altogether have the character of happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born, solitary, or childless; and we have it even less, presumably, if our children or friends are totally bad, or were good but died. (1099b2-5)

Needless to say, we don’t have to agree with all of the particular things that Aristotle recognizes in this passage as external-goods or evils, nor do we have to agree with the significance that he attaches to different ones. (We might, for instance, disagree that beauty or some approximation of it is necessary ingredient in eudaimonia.) But the intuitive point is that there are some things—such as family, friends, and health—that are outside our control, and yet they affect my happiness and the completeness of my happiness. If my friends turn out to be evil, if I lose my family, if I suffer bad health, then I lack something of intrinsic worth; I lack some significant component of a perfectly happy life. This is to say that a perfectly happy human life, as Aristotle sees it, involves virtue as well as some measure of good fortune.16

Aristotle insists that only a philosopher concerned to defend a philosopher’s paradox would deny the value of external-goods (1096a1-3, 115b16-20). Presumably, he has in mind Socrates, who thought that virtue is sufficient for happiness and that virtue alone is a complete good. In sharply rejecting the Socratic (and Cynic) view that virtue alone is sufficient for a happy life, Aristotle, as the above passage makes clear, assigns two distinct kinds of value to external-goods. In the first place, he holds that some external-goods are proper parts of happiness and are therefore intrinsically valuable. They contribute to happiness and are constituent ingredients in happiness, or as he says, “necessary conditions of happiness” (1099b26-8). This seemed to be the claim about good birth, good children and friends, and health.17 In addition, some external-goods are necessary conditions for the realization of some virtues that are themselves constitutive of the happy life. They are resources for exercising some of the virtues, or are useful and cooperative as instruments for virtue, even if they are not proper parts of happiness. Aristotle thinks that health, apart from being good in itself, is a necessary condition for any virtue and that wealth is needed for the virtues of generosity and magnificence.

The fact that Aristotle conceives of at least some external-goods as constituent ingredients in happiness that possess intrinsic worth raises the first objection to McDowell’s silencing view that I want to foreground. To reiterate, the silencing interpretation need not make Aristotle fully Socratic, because it can grant that external-goods have value when not in competition with virtue and thus that virtue is not the complete good. Nonetheless, in assuming, as it does, that the very significance to the agent of all external-goods is wholly limited by,

15 In his discussion in EN 1, Aristotle insists that eudaimonia is the most complete of all ends or complete without qualification, that is, unconditionally complete (1097a27-b6). Whereas a complete good is chosen for its own sake, an unconditionally complete good is chosen only for its own sake alone. Happiness, Aristotle insists, is unconditionally complete, because we choose it for its own sake, and never for the sake of anything else, whereas other conditionally complete goods, like honor, pleasure, and the various virtues, we choose for their own sakes, but also for their constitutive contribution to happiness. This distinction between a complete and an unconditionally complete good suggests that some goods chosen for the sake of others are intrinsically, as opposed to merely instrumentally, good. They are intrinsically good, or good in themselves, because they have contributory value to happiness.

16 Because eudaimonia is an unconditionally complete good that is self-sufficient, or lacking in nothing that could make it more choiceworthy, it requires external-goods, which are not fully within our control. Aristotle thus notes that happiness needs “this sort of prosperity added also” (1099b5-7).

17 Aristotle at one point appeals to the example of King Priam of Troy to illustrate this point that virtue is not sufficient for happiness, because happiness needs good fortune, or some measure of external-goods:
It needs a complete life because life includes many reversals of fortune, good and bad, and the most prosperous person may fall into a terrible disaster in old age, as the Trojan stories tell us about Priam. If someone has suffered these sorts of misfortunes and comes to a miserable end, no one counts him as happy. (1100a6-8)
or conditional on, the silencing interpretation fails to accord external-goods the intrinsic value Aristotle grants them when he claims that some external-goods are themselves constituent components in eudaimonia. Because virtue alone is not sufficient for happiness, because happiness needs complete virtue and a complete life, it requires external-goods. Moreover, since external-goods are genuine goods that have independent value in our complete human good, McDowell is mistaken in claiming that Aristotle thinks that the value such goods represent for the agent is not merely diminished, but entirely eradicated, when set against the demands of virtue.

Second, Aristotle appears to agree with the common view that virtue can have a price, even if it turns out to be a price well worth paying. This certainly seems to be Aristotle’s view in his discussion of bravery. Aristotle holds that bravery is not about every fear and danger, but is concerned with fear of death, and primarily with fear of death in war. As Aristotle portrays him, the brave person has trained himself not to be excessively afraid and has also trained himself to have confidence in facing danger in a good cause. The brave person faces danger with the appropriate confidence on the right occasion. In distinguishing between bravery and other conditions resembling it, Aristotle insists that the brave person is different from both the coward, who fears the wrong things in the wrong way, as well as the fearless person, whom he portrays as a kind of madman incapable of feeling distress. The brave person, Aristotle explains, fears danger as it warrants, which is to say that he has the right degree of fear. Since fear is defined as an expectation of something bad, in acknowledging that the brave person, in contrast to both the coward and the madman, has the appropriate degree of fear at the right things, Aristotle concedes that the virtuous person recognizes that the life of virtue involves potential harms, even if he willing takes them on.

Moreover, in his further discussion emphasizing the feelings appropriate to bravery, Aristotle explicitly claims that, because the brave person values life, bravery involves pain and loss, even if it also involves pleasure proper to virtue:

And so, if the same is true of bravery, the brave person will find death and wounds painful, and suffer them willingly, but he will endure them because that is fine or because failure is shameful. Indeed the true rite is that he has every virtue and the happier he is, the more pain he will feel at the prospect of death. For this sort of person, more than anyone, finds it worthwhile to be alive, and knows he is being deprived of the greatest goods, and this is painful. But he is no less brave for all that; presumably, indeed, he is all the braver, because he chooses what is fine in war at the cost of all these goods (EN 1117b8-16)

In indicating that the end pursued by the brave person is accompanied by evils that the brave person regrets (viz., death), Aristotle acknowledges that virtue can have a price and that, consequently, the virtuous person may at times be pained at the prospective losses associated with acting for the sake of the fine.

Finally, the only reason for supposing that Aristotle ought to deny the common view that virtue can have a price is the assumption that he must, in order to make out the distinction between the virtuous and the merely continent person. Yet that distinction requires only that the virtuous person have a sufficiently steady and unwavering commitment to act as he judges best, that he not seriously be tempted to act otherwise. But one can be steadfast in one’s
commitment to the virtuous course of action and not seriously tempted by competing attractions while still think that activities that one recognizes would be wrong to pursue have value, that is, that virtue has a cost. The virtuous person need only see that the cost is always and well worth paying, or, as Aristotle says, that virtue is the controlling ingredient in eudaimonia.  

3. Korsgaard on the Conditional Value of Happiness

Thus far I have attempted to argue that the silencing interpretation is not the best interpretation of Aristotle. But one might think that McDowell’s view that extramoral considerations have no value when they compete with virtue is one plausible interpretation of Kant’s view about the relation between virtue and happiness, given Kant’s account of the good will in the Groundwork and his discussion of the highest good in the Critique of Practical Reason. Indeed, I want to suggest that Christine Korsgaard’s reading of Kant makes it hard to resist the conclusion that Kant is in fact committed to the view that virtue silences happiness.

In the first section of the Groundwork, Kant claims that “It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation (ohne Einschränkung) except a good will” (Gr 4: 393; 49). After conceding that both talents of the mind, such as understanding, wit, and judgment, and qualities of temperament, such as courage, resolution, and perseverance, are good in many respects, or for many purposes (in mancher Absicht), Kant insists that their goodness is limited, because these qualities can be “extremely evil and harmful” without the presence of the good will (Gr 4: 393; 49). Some of these virtues extolled by the weighing “as his allowing himself to feel an inclination to run away, of a strength proportional to the weight that he allows to the reason” (“Virtue and Reason,” 335). As McDowell sees it, then, the view on which virtue overrides other considerations implies that the virtuous person has countervailing inclinations that he takes to constitute reasons to act contrary to virtue. Consequently, the overriding view leaves unintelligible the distinction between the virtuous and the continent person—both stand firm in the face of danger for the right reason in spite of feeling the inclination to run away. But, there is no reason to assume that the virtuous person has contrary inclinations that constitute temptations to act otherwise. The view merely entails that the virtuous person recognizes value in foregone opportunities, not that he is tempted to pursue them, or conflicted. One can recognize the value of, for example, the preservation of life and limb, without feeling tempted to flee, insofar as one has a sufficiently steadfast and unwavering commitment to act as correct reason prescribe, and one finds no pleasure at all in doing the wrong thing.

ancients might be conducive (beförderlich) to the good will, by making its work easier, and some qualities of temperament, especially moderation, self-control, and the capacity for calm reflection, may appear to “constitute a part of the inner worth of a person.” Nonetheless, Kant maintains that such traits have “no inner unconditional worth but always presuppose a good will, which limits the esteem one otherwise rightly has for them and does not permit their being taken as absolutely good” (Gr 4: 394; 50). He makes a similar claim about “gifts of nature,” which encompass power, wealth, honor, health, and happiness (conceived as the complete satisfaction with one’s condition), noting that these gifts are good only when combined with a good will. Happiness, Kant adds, is something that we cannot approve of unless its possessor has a good will, the very condition under which a person is worthy of being happy: “an impartial rational spectator can take no delight in seeing the uninterrupted prosperity of a being graced with no feature of a pure and good will” (Gr 4: 393; 49). In short, Kant’s position in the Groundwork is that the good will, whose distinctive constitution he refers to as “character” (Charakter), is the sole unlimited or unconditioned good. In relation to everything else that we value or pursue, only the good will is good in all respects and under any conditions.

Kant expresses precisely the same view about the unconditioned goodness of a morally good character in the Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason in the second Critique, where he sets out his account of the highest good. The highest good, for Kant, is the whole object of pure practical reason, or the ultimate end at which finite rational agents ought to aim. He understands our highest good to consist in virtue plus happiness in proportion to virtue. Kant takes care to emphasize that the highest good is our complete good, but not the supreme good, for the supreme good signifies that which is unconditioned, or not subordinate to any other condition. Virtue, as our worthiness to be happy, is the unconditioned element of the highest good, and is characterized as the

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22 We might, for instance, value and admire a sharp wit and a formidable intellect, and consider such talents to be useful for many purposes, at least some of which we deem good. Yet, if I use my wit and intellect to mock and humiliate anyone who disagrees with my philosophical and political views, these qualities in me are harmful. Since these various qualities can be good or bad depending on the character of their possessor and the use to which they are put, their goodness, according to Kant, is qualified, conditioned, or limited. On this view, the villain’s moderation in affects and passions, self-control, and calm reflection are something bad and make him more abominable than he would have otherwise been (Gr 4: 394; 50).

23 Kant does not technically use the term “unconditioned” (unbedingt) in these opening remarks in Groundwork I, but he evidently thinks the good will is an unconditioned good. To claim that the good will is an unconditioned good it to say that it has a conditioning relation to other goods – its goodness conditions the goodness of other goods, which have a qualified worth in relation to the absolute value of the good will. The term Kant does use in describing the goodness of the good will in Groundwork I is “without limitation” indicating that there is no limit or boundary to its goodness, or that it is good in all respects. While it is unclear whether Kant conceives the terms “unconditioned” and “unlimited” to be intentionally distinct, it is clear that he wants to insist that the good will, in contrast to all other things we value or pursue, is good in all respects, in all contexts, and under any circumstances.
“supreme condition of whatever can even seem to us desirable and hence of all of our pursuit of happiness” (KprV 5: 110). By contrast, happiness, as the second and subordinate component of our complete good, is described as “something that, though always pleasant to the possessor of it, is not of itself absolutely and in all respects good but always presupposes morally lawful conduct as its condition” (KprV 5: 111).

At least partly on the basis of these claims about the good will or virtue and its relation to happiness, Korsgaard has set out a reconstruction of Kant’s conception of value involving the following claims about how we ought to think of happiness in relation to virtue on a Kantian view. Kant evidently holds that the only thing that has unconditional value is the good will, and, as Korsgaard correctly points out, in emphasizing the unconditioned nature of the good will in relation to all other things, Kant highlights the fact that the good will has a conditioning relation with respect to other goods. As Korsgaard puts it, the good will, for Kant, is “the unconditioned condition of the goodness of other things.” Something has unconditional value if it has its value in itself and so has it under all conditions, whereas something has conditional value if its value depends on whether certain other conditions are met. Thus, when Kant says that talents of mind, qualities of temperament, gifts of fortune, and happiness are conditionally good, he means that those talents and qualities must be directed, the advantages used, and the happiness possessed by a person with a good will in order for them to be good. Kant argues, further, that it follows from the fact that even happiness is included among conditional goods that Kant conceives of the good will as the only thing whose value is intrinsic. This is not to deny that happiness is valuable as an end, for, as we have just seen, Kant stipulates that the highest good, as our ultimate end, consists in virtue and happiness in proportion to virtue. Happiness is something we all desire, and we choose it for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. Still, as a conditional good, happiness is only good if certain conditions are met, that is, when it is combined with the good will, or consonant with virtue.

In sum, according to the theory of value that she finds at work in Kant, the good will is the sole unconditioned good, which is to say that it and it alone possesses intrinsic value, or has its value within itself. Happiness, by contrast, is as an extrinsic good whose value is dependent on an external source, namely the good will, as the ultimate source of all value.

Korsgaard’s views about value are complicated, and notice that she never appeals explicitly to McDowell’s metaphor that virtue silences happiness on the Kantian view. Nonetheless, her reading of Kant seems to imply this very idea. That is, if happiness is a conditional good whose very value depends upon the good will, whether or not happiness is good or not depends upon whether happiness is accompanied by a good will or, in terms of the language of second Critique, whether it is consonant with virtue, as its supreme condition. But this might suggest that happiness, as Kant sees it, only has value for the agent when not in competition with virtue, in other words, that virtue silences happiness.

4. Is This the Best Way to Understand Kant?

While there may be grounds for supposing that Kant thinks virtue silences happiness, I want to insist that this is not the best interpretation of Kant’s considered view. There are, I think, three main considerations indicating that the silencing interpretation, on balance, is ultimately hard to square with the Kantian texts.

In the first place, Kant’s conception of virtue as moral self strength of will in relation to an internal obstacle that must constantly be resisted cuts against the idea that he thinks that extramoral considerations have no practical significance in the face of the requirements of virtue. Indeed, the very characterization of virtue as “a struggle against the influence of the evil principle in a human being” (MS 6: 440; 562) indicates that Kant believes that even the virtuous person is never altogether immune from temptation and conflict, precisely because she is never beyond feeling the attraction competing options at times provide.

Kant’s most extended discussion of virtue as a character trait appears in The Doctrine of Virtue. He understands virtue as moral strength of will or moral self-governance, and defines virtue in terms of the autocracy of pure practical

24 For this reconstruction, see “An introduction to the ethical, political, religious thought of Kant” in Creating the Kingdom of Ends (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 16-17; “Formula of Humanity” in Creating the Kingdom of Ends, 117-19; “Aristotle and Kant on the source of value” in Creating the Kingdom of Ends, 239-41; and “Two distinctions in goodness” in Creating the Kingdom of Ends, 256-62.

25 Korsgaard, “Kant’s Formula of Humanity,” 118.

26 Because happiness on Kant’s theory has the status of being something conditionally good and also chosen for its own sake, Korsgaard wants to introduce two distinctions concerning goodness in place of what she believes to be a misleading traditional single distinction. It’s common to distinguish what is valued as a means from the goodness of what is valued for its own sake, where the latter sort of value is called “intrinsic.” But Korsgaard thinks that we should instead use “intrinsic” to pick out the goodness something has “in itself.” In her words, the term refers “to the location or source of the goodness rather than the way we value the thing” (250). The proper contrast to intrinsic goodness is, consequently, extrinsic goodness, or goodness whose source of value is external; and the proper contrast to what is good as a means is what is good as an end, or valued for its own sake. As Korsgaard explains, if we conflate the two-fold distinction she aims to draw, identifying goodness as means with extrinsic goodness, then we are precluded from thinking that something extrinsically valuable might still be valued as an end and non-instrumentally. Yet, this, as Korsgaard sees it, is precisely Kant’s view about happiness. A reasonable account of value ought, therefore, to account for this possibility.

27 Furthermore, on Korsgaard’s view, something is objectively good if it is an unconditional good or it is a conditional good and the conditions of its goodness are met. Happiness can thus be an objective good when combined with a good will or virtue.
reason. Virtue as autocracy on this view involves a rational ordering of the soul whereby reason has both legislative and executive authority over sensibility. While Kant portrays the virtuous person as one who does her duty from the motive of duty with a cheerful attitude, he consistently emphasizes that virtue, as the highest moral station that finite rational beings can attain, is distinct from holiness. Since a holy will has no sensible nature that could provide incentives to act contrary to the moral law, there is no possibility of conflict or temptation in its case, and thus it needs no constraint in order to act in accordance with the moral law. By contrast, finite rational beings have natural inclinations that provide a potential impediment to morality, and the very concept of virtue, Kant holds, reflects the idea that, in our case, possessing a morally good character involves struggling against a powerful internal opponent. In emphasizing this contrast between holiness and virtue, Kant explains:

Virtue signifies moral strength of will. But this does not exhaust the concept; for such strength could also belong to a holy (superhuman) being, in whom no hindering impulses would impede the law of its will and who would thus gladly do everything in conformity with the law. Virtue is, therefore, the moral strength of a human being’s will in fulfilling his duty, a moral constraint through his own lawgiving reason, insofar as this constitutes itself an authority executing the law. (MS 6: 405; 533)

As I have argued elsewhere, what Kant really objects to in the non-autocratic person is not the presence of emotions or inclination as such, but her tendency to treat them as sufficient reasons for action when they conflict with moral requirements. On his view, then, the obstacle that we must struggle to overcome in an effort to acquire a morally good character is not our sensible nature per se, but our volitional tendency to grant inclinations a deliberative weight that they do not merit. The relevant issue for our purposes here is that, in insisting that human virtue, in contrast to holiness of will, involves both a battle against an internal enemy and the real possibility of transgression of the moral law, Kant rejects any notion that the virtuous person finds no value at all in extramoral considerations when pitted against the demands of virtue. On the contrary, she is never totally above hearing the claims on the will that such considerations make, even though she has acquired the strength of will to resist choosing them when they conflict with moral requirements, and recognizes that they lack authority in relation to moral requirements, as categorical imperatives.

Second (and perhaps more directly to the point), Kant explicitly agrees with the common view that virtue has a cost, even if it is one worth paying. In the Doctrine of Virtue, in a section entitled “Ethical Ascetics,” Kant claims that, in our efforts to cultivate a virtuous character, we ought to take as our motto the Stoic saying: “acustom yourself to put up with the misfortunes of life that may happen and to do without its superfluous pleasures” (MS 6: 484; 597). The reason we ought to take this Stoic maxim to heart, Kant explains, is virtue involves sacrifice and loss:

For, virtue not only has to muster all its forces to overcome the obstacles it must contend with; it also involves sacrificing many of the joys of life, the loss of which can sometimes make one’s mind gloomy and sullen. (MS 6: 484; 597)

Here, in recommending that we cultivate a Stoic frame of mind that is valiant in the face of misfortune and loss, Kant concedes that virtue can have a price, for virtue sometimes requires foregoing options that one cares about, or that have value, even if such competing options provide merely pro tanto reasons for action that are trumped by the demands of duty or virtue.

Finally, I want to suggest that even Kant’s view about the conditional value of happiness does not require that virtue silences happiness, as it may have seemed to on Korsgaard’s reading. Kant maintains that the good will is the only thing that is good without limitation and that happiness is only good in a limited or conditional sense. But what exactly is Kant committed to when he says that happiness is a conditional good?

As Korsgaard (and others under her influence) have argued, to say that happiness is a conditional good is to say that its value lies in the good will, as the unconditioned source of all value. According to her particular constructivist theory of value, the only thing that has value in the world is the good will as the “value-conferring source of all value.” As the following extended passage suggests, on Korsgaard’s reading, happiness has no value apart from the good will:

The Groundwork opens with the claim that the only thing that can be found anywhere of unconditional value is a good will. As Kant envisions the structure of justification, the goodness of means is conditioned by the goodness of the ends which they serve; the goodness of those ends which are not morally obligatory is conditioned by their contribution to happiness, and the goodness of happiness is conditioned by the possession of a good will, which “seems to constitute the indispensable condition of even worthiness to be happy” (G 393). Since a good will is the only unconditionally good thing, everything else must ultimately trace its justification to this: virtues such as intelligenz or calmness must be directed by it, happiness must be deserved by it, particular

ends must be chosen in accordance with it. The good will is the source of value, and without it, nothing would have any real worth. (CKE, 239)

I submit, however, that in this passage, which is an instantiation of her more general constructivist view that there is no value in the world independently of rational choice, Korsgaard appears to conflate two senses of value, when she claims that, apart from the good will as the unconditioned condition of the goodness of other things, nothing else in the world “would have any real worth.” Korsgaard wants to say that the good will is the source of the value of happiness, in other words, that what makes happiness have value is that it is combined in the right way with the good will, or consonant with virtue. But here, I think, it seems necessary to distinguish between two senses of value. Kant clearly thinks that the value of happiness, in the sense of its being morally good or choiceworthy, is conditioned by virtue. And this implies two things. In the first place, Kant holds that we are worthy or deserving of happiness only if we possess a good will, or are virtuous, which is why an impartial rational spectator takes no pleasure in witnessing the happy criminal. In the second place, happiness, Kant maintains, is good in the sense of being something we are justified in pursuing only under certain conditions, that is, when happiness does not conflict with duty. But this is perfectly compatible with the claim that happiness, as an end that all finite rational beings share, has value for the agent, even when it conflicts with the claims of morality and is thereby something she ought not to pursue. In other words, the notion that an agent gives up something that matters to her when happiness and duty conflict and she chooses duty implies that happiness has value or practical significance independently of duty, even if its moral goodness is conditioned by the presence of the good will or virtue.

On my reading, then, when Kant says that happiness is a limited or conditional good, he means that whether we think it’s just that others are happy depends on whether they deserve it and that happiness is not worthy of pursuit by rational agents in all possible contexts but only when certain conditions obtain. That is, Kant’s claim that happiness is a conditional good amounts to the claim that there are moral constraints on the pursuit of happiness and on how we evaluates people’s possession of it. But, again, this is perfectly compatible with the idea that happiness has value or practical significance for the agent even when she shouldn’t choose it.

5. The Correct View About Virtue

Having argued that McDowell’s silencing interpretation is not the best way to understand Aristotle or Kant, I want to conclude with a brief discussion of what I take the correct view to entail and what I take to be its advantages over that silencing view. On the view I wish to endorse, the virtuous person can recognize that competing attractions have value, and even feel pain about the prospective loss of foregone options that virtue at times demands. This is not to say that she is conflicted about acting virtuously or seriously tempted to act contrary to what correct reason prescribes. On the contrary, what sets the virtuous person apart is that she’s not motivated to do otherwise and would take no pleasure acting contrary to right judgment, because she takes no pleasure in wrong things qua wrong, even when she recognizes other reasons for action. Thus, in circumstances where virtue requires standing firm in the face of danger in a good cause, the brave person can still see the value in preserving life and health, and regret that acting bravely might result in death, the greatest of harms, even if he is not tempted to flee. If truthfulness about oneself dictates that one divulge some fact about oneself whose revelation can have seriously deleterious consequences—for instance, the truth about one’s sexual orientation—the truthful person may see that integrity sometimes entails losing something else one cares about, even is she’s not motivated to dissimulate or lie. When friendship requires frankness in pointing out the beloved’s defects, the lover might recognize that being a true friend carries with it risks, for instance, hurting the beloved’s feelings or, worse, losing the companionship in which one takes tremendous pleasure. The loyal son may feel pained about the prospective loss to his career when he moves home to care for his ailing parent, though he wouldn’t act contrary to what he thinks virtue requires, by neglecting his father’s needs. And perhaps even Oscar sees value in satisfying his desire for Stella, even though he’s not conflicted about acting temperately, and knows that indulging his libido in this case would be shameful. In short, as all of these intuitive examples indicate, extramoral considerations can have value or practical significance for the virtuous person, even when pitted against the demands of virtue, because virtue can have a cost.

Notice, however, that my view is not that virtue always has a cost, but merely that it can. For, virtue does not always require foregoing competing attractions, nor are competing attractions always valuable.30

I suggest that the view that virtue can have a cost has the following distinct advantages over McDowell’s silencing view. First, it represents a human model of virtue, one appropriate for the kind of beings we are, whereas the silencing view presents virtue as ultimately a monkish, ascetic ideal that virtually no finite rational agent engaged in the world could attain. Second, it respects what I take to be the obvious fact that value cannot be reduced in our psychology to the moral kind, even if it agrees that moral considerations ought to take precedence over non-moral considerations when the two conflict. Third, it seems to me better at capturing the virtuous person’s special conception of her circumstances, because it allows that, for her, all the various ingredients in a

30 If temperance requires foregoing the second dessert or the third martini, one might think that those competing attractions aren’t valuable. By contrast, if bravery requires rushing to save someone from harm, one might suppose that the preservation of one’s own safety is a competing attraction that has value.
complete human life show us as perspicuous, instead of requiring that she turn a blind eye—or rather a deaf ear—to the attractions of goods agreed to be important for a fully happy life.

Finally, I want to return to one central issue that appeared to motivate McDowell’s silencing view, which is the distinction between virtue and continence. As we saw, McDowell thinks that this distinction between virtue and mere continence requires that virtue silences other reasons for action. As he explains, if we allow that virtue has a cost, this means that the virtuous person weighs virtue against other reasons for actions, and this, in turn, entails that the virtuous person, just like the continent person, feels the weight of countervailing inclinations and is tempted to act contrary to what correct reasons prescribes. I hope it’s now clear that, on the view I endorse, no such conclusion about blurring the distinction between virtue and continence follows, because it does not follow that the virtuous person is conflicted and tempted if she recognizes the value of extramoral considerations when they compete with virtue. As I have suggested, one can allow that extramoral considerations have practical significance when set against the demands of virtue without thinking that the virtuous person experiences conflict or temptation. The virtuous person does not experience conflict and temptation, because she has an unwavering and steadfast commitment to act as she judges best, and because her emotions and appetites have been trained to harmonize with right judgment. Moreover, she would not choose competing attractions when doing so required flouting the requirements of excellence, for wrong things qua wrong don’t appeal to her. If so, then virtue is distinct from mere continence even on the correct view that virtue can have a cost.