

Michael Slote

The Impossibility of Perfection: Aristotle, Feminism, and the Complexities of Ethics

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011

ISBN 978-0-19-934949-4

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Michael Slote has been an important voice on an ethics of care for quite some time, and *The Impossibility of Perfection* offers yet another set of carefully developed arguments contributing to that body of theory. The basic point Slote argues for in the book is that there is, and can be, no absolutely perfect human life. Certain versions of Aristotelian eudaimonism are committed to the notion that there is a single, perhaps difficult but not completely unattainable, ideal of human life at which virtue ultimately aims. Slote argues that there is no such ideal, and, further that there can be no such ideal.

Starting with this last claim first, Slote uses feminist criticisms of standard gender roles to argue that the pursuit of any particular way of life will require a choice against other ways of life that instantiate objective goods. Since the virtues are character traits that are directed toward goods in life, any life that is directed toward one set of goods, and thus instantiates one set of virtues will, of necessity, preclude other goods and other virtues. Feminist philosophers have analyzed the ways that rigid differentiation of tasks and opportunities by gender leads to lives for both men and women that are truncated and unsatisfying. Slote uses these analyses as the background for considering virtues that have traditionally been gendered: adventurousness, for example, has been seen as a virtue for men, whereas prudence is advocated for women (18). Similar sorts of tensions exist between the demands of career and family (19), and between the adventurous pursuit of sexual experiences and long-term committed sexual relationships (22). In all of these cases, Slote argues, the virtues that make one set of goods possible and attainable largely rule out the other set of goods, but both are clearly appropriate to fulfilling and flourishing lives. His conclusion, then, is that there are real and unresolvable conflicts between the sorts of goods that make life worth living, and that one cannot attain a life that incorporates them all (32). If this is correct, then there can be no single ideal life at which all humans should aim, since any single ideal will involve making choices against goods that could be part of a flourishing life and that it would be rational for humans to pursue.

Slote's project is in the spirit of Isaiah Berlin, arguing that human life necessarily involves choices for some goods and against others. Rather than the optimism of an Aristotelian notion of one single, unified, and absolutely superior good life, we are faced

with tragic choices among goods that cannot be integrated into a single, coherent whole (124). In arguing for this, Slote makes a number of other philosophically important points. One that occupies a good portion of the book concerns the very possibility of a unified account of the virtues. Classical Aristotelianism holds a unity of the virtues thesis, the thesis that one cannot be said to have any of the virtues (at least to a significant degree) without having all of the others as well. Merely facing danger on the battlefield, for example, is insufficient for demonstrating the virtue of courage. For the classic Aristotelian ethicist, possession of any of the moral virtues requires practical wisdom, a virtue that straddles the boundary between the intellectual and moral virtues. Practical wisdom is the character trait that allows someone to recognize, under specific conditions and in particular cases, just how much of an emotion (such as fear, in the example of courage) is appropriate to the case. Practical wisdom also allows the virtuous agent to recognize whether the purpose of a given war is one that justifies facing danger and so on. The character trait of feeling the right amount of fear, under the right circumstances, and toward the right objects, then, cannot properly exist without practical wisdom. For the classical Aristotelian, then, practical wisdom provides the unifying principle that allows all of the other virtues (courage, generosity, honesty, and so on) to be properly integrated into a unified and coherent whole. This unified whole represents the ideal character for a human being, for Aristotle, and as such represents the ideal, flourishing life at which the rational agent aims.

Against this Aristotelian unity of the virtues thesis, Slote argues that many (though not all) virtues are partial and in conflict with one another such that one can develop one or another virtue, but not all of them (44). His argument here relies heavily on the opposing (and partial) virtues of frankness and tactfulness in communication. One can either be perfectly tactful (but fail to be frank) or perfectly frank (and fail to be tactful.) If both of these are objective virtues (as Slote believes they are [50]), and lacking either one represents a failure to instantiate objective perfection, and if it is impossible to instantiate both at once, then perfection, as Slote's title declares, is impossible. And the point holds for other paired sets of partial virtues, such as adventurousness and prudence, as well (45).

The thesis that the virtues are partial and can come into conflict is then used to develop a point that is of particular interest for feminist theorists, namely that there are significant points at which an ethics of justice and an ethics of care do (and must) diverge (97). Slote also develops a number of subsidiary points concerning the interrelationships between goods and virtues, such as the ways that one person's virtues may depend upon other individuals' goods or virtues, or on social practices that are interrelated with the virtue in question (108).

Slote's arguments address issues long familiar to feminists. If the virtues necessary for developing close and enriching personal relationships are both partial and in conflict with the virtues needed to pursue challenging career goals, then feeling torn between career and family is (it would seem) an inevitable choice facing the reflective individual, and one that cannot be resolved in any ideal way. Although most people will choose to do a little of both of these, those who pursue one path to the exclusion of the other will

develop different and incompatible sets of virtues, and a reasonable account of virtue should recognize that each of those sets can be good lives that it would be rational to pursue. Further, and perhaps more controversially, Slote also argues that an ethics of care should be capable of recognizing both of these different (and traditionally) gendered sets of virtues as real virtues (92). An ethics that is adequate to the complexities and finitude of human existence must allow for a plurality of good lives, including some that fit better with one aspect of traditional gender roles, and others that fit better with other aspects. His advice to care ethicists, then, is to develop care ethics in such a way that they do not respond to traditional patriarchal ethics by inverting the value system, but instead develop an account of an ethics built on care but open to a wide array of ideals for human life.

Many of the chief virtues of Slote's book (heh!) are classic analytic virtues: clear writing, clearly defined terms, careful analysis of key relationships, and multiple examples offered to support the various points made. This is a well-argued, important book, and deserves a space on the shelves of anyone interested in feminist theory, care ethics, or virtue ethics.

One can quibble with some points in the argument, of course. Although Slote is clearly cognizant of gender-based accounts of virtue, the book does not spend much time considering the way that class or race/ethnicity have also scripted certain traits as virtuous or vicious. He notes that adventurousness, for example, is treated as a characteristic traditionally seen as more virtuous in males than females; adventurousness, however, is generally treated as a virtue in white males (preferably middle- to upper-class). In black males, however, it is a more ambiguous trait. Likewise for the partial virtues of tactfulness and frankness in communication; tactfulness is far more likely to be considered a virtue in those with less power in any given social setting, frankness a virtue for those with more. But this tendency to perceive as virtues such traits as tact (or compliance, or other similar traits) for those living under conditions of oppression, though widespread, is deeply problematic. It also suggests that Slote's arguments against Aristotelian accounts of virtue may be more difficult to work out completely than he anticipates.

As noted earlier, Slote rejects both eudaimonism and any unity of the virtues thesis, and does so on the grounds of conflicts among some of the virtues he considers. He thus argues for a pluralism about the virtues and about the lives that can be considered happy. The danger of such a position, as history well illustrates, is that it has been precisely this sort of pluralism about good lives that also advocates separate and damaging ideals for various sexes and racial/ethnicities. Slote, of course, is well aware of the fact that different virtues have been held up as ideals for men and women in the past, and that these are virtues that are in deep tension with one another. And he is fully aware of the injustices done in the name of such damaging ideals. But he does not have much to say about how a pluralistic, noneudaimonistic virtue ethics can avoid supporting such views.

One of the complicating factors for developing a noneudaimonistic, virtue-based ethical theory is the problem of identifying what features of human life are likely to lead to various potential ideals of happiness. If one's ideals of happiness are diverse, then one's

lists of virtues will be diverse as well. But historically, that has been precisely the common-sense perspective that undergirds a Victorian set of (upper-middle-class) gender roles: men will find happiness, such a view supposes, only when they are doing heroic battle in the field of commerce (!), whereas women find their own sort of happiness nestled in their homes, tending their (figurative) hearths. One of the values of feminist theory is the way that it has made clear how neither of these lives is a really good one for any human to live, because both eliminate central and vital components of happiness for those who pursue them exclusively. But this feminist analysis relies, at least implicitly, on a sense that there are some limits to what can count as an ideal life, and neither of the options offered by Victorian ideals falls in the acceptable range.

Things get even more complicated when considering the ways that social structures of class and ethnicity have contributed to similarly truncated pictures of what sorts of lives should be seen as happy ones for certain types of people. Revisionist histories of American slavery offer particularly horrendous examples of this tendency, with their strange fantasies of "contented slaves," but one sees it as well in contemporary discussions of how difficult life became for the wealthy during the economic downturn, discussions that seem oblivious to the effects of the economy on those in the lower segments of the economic spectrum. Pluralism about happy lives can easily slide into complacency about radically unjust and oppressive social systems. As I noted earlier, oppressive social systems frequently coexist with pictures of virtues that allocate the submissive, compliant character traits to those without power. But a feminist account of the virtues must advocate a completely different picture of what constitutes virtue for those struggling against oppression. Studies such as Lisa Tessman's *Burdened Virtues* (Tessman 2005) have been invaluable in this regard, looking at the complexities of giving an account of what constitutes virtue under conditions of struggle and conflict.

So in the category of "things one wishes had been included in this book," I would include a fuller account of how Slote's Berlinesque virtue theory can address the problem of virtues in the context of oppressive social situations. I might also add a wish that Slote had been a bit more careful in his characterization of Aristotelian ethics. He attributes to Aristotle, for example, the view that if one acts virtuously over a lifetime one will inevitably flourish (128), ignoring Aristotle's recognition of the place of the vicissitudes of fortune in flourishing (Aristotle 1941, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099b). Likewise, his discussion of the partial virtues will not be convincing to the confirmed Aristotelian, since Aristotle's account of virtuous character traits (and his doctrine of the mean) already addresses the problem of finding the correct degree of (say) tactfulness and frankness in any given communicative situation; for Aristotle, the virtuous agent needs both characteristics, as well as the capacity to know when to lean in one direction or the other, depending on the circumstances of a particular situation.

Like Slote I am skeptical about the possibility of a single ideal of perfection. Given that, I can hardly quibble if his book itself instantiates one set of virtues at the expense of others. Although more may be said about virtues and oppressive social circumstances, and although Slote's treatment of Aristotelian virtue ethics is not as in depth as one might wish, the book is clear, carefully argued, and short enough to be used as part of a class on

ethics or feminist theory. These are all virtues I value quite highly, and make this a worthwhile addition to almost anyone's bookshelf.

References:

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Tessman, Lisa. 2005. *Burdened virtues: Virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*. New York: Oxford University Press.