Michael Slote

_The Impossibility of Perfection: Aristotle, Feminism, and the Complexities of Ethics_  
Hardback/Paperback: £30.00/-.

In this new work, Michael Slote seeks to defend the view that perfection, whether of virtue or of personal happiness, is impossible. In the process of arguing for this conclusion, Slote discusses much that is of interest – including some suggestions for ways of categorising virtues and goods, and some possible ways forward for care ethics.

In chapter 1, Slote sets out the resources that he draws upon throughout the rest of the book. Several examples are discussed with the aim of highlighting an underlying tension between certain goods and certain virtues. Several of these examples stem from feminist thought, such as the difficulty of attaining both the good of personal achievement (e.g. through career success) and the good of close personal relationships. The main example given of a tension between values is the apparent conflict between the virtues of frankness/honesty and tact/kindness. Slote sets out an example where a friend is pleading with the agent to tell them the truth but where not doing so would appear to be the kinder option. Slote believes this to be a case where, no matter what choice the agent makes, something less than ideal will occur. Furthermore, the agent will reveal a failing in their own character – either a failure of tact or a failure of frankness. And Slote believes that there is more than one example of virtues which are in tension with each other in this way, such as the traits of prudence and boldness. With such examples in mind, the existence of a particular kind of value is proposed. Frankness and tact should be considered partial virtues – paired and opposing traits where having one lessens the likelihood of possessing the other. The goods of personal achievement and close personal relationships should be considered partial in the same way. By introducing the possibility of partial values, we can make sense of examples where there appears to be an underlying tension between certain goods or certain virtues.

Having proposed the concept of a partial value, Slote then (in Ch. 2) uses that concept to re-evaluate the traditional Aristotelian account of the virtues. If conflicting virtues exist then two important conclusions follow. Firstly, possessing one virtue cannot imply possessing them all, meaning that the unity of virtue thesis is incorrect. And secondly, it must not be possible to possess all of the virtues at the same time, meaning that ideal or perfect virtue is impossible. And the same general conclusions apply to perfect happiness. If an agent achieves one partial good (such as career success) then this will necessarily tell against how well they can achieve another partial good (such as rewarding...
close personal relationships). Therefore, perfection of either virtue or happiness is conceptually impossible.

Chapter 3 considers possible objections to Slote’s claims. Many of these objections suggest ways in which certain supposedly competing goods could actually be fully achieved at the same time or in the same life. Slote rejects all of these attempts, including the claim that personal achievement could be attained without sacrificing a level of closeness in one’s personal relationships. Slote states that this would only be possible where an agent is talented enough for career success to come very easily. In such a case the achievement will be less valuable (and so less than ideally valuable) because the agent has not struggled to achieve it. However, there are many possibilities for combining those two goods that Slote does not consider. While he considers that career success may come easily, he does not consider that close relationships may come easily. It is less plausible to claim that such relationships will be less valuable as a result of not requiring enough of a struggle. Also, Slote does not consider the possibility that the two goods can combine. It is not clear why skilfully raising children or maintaining a relationship cannot count both as an agent’s personal achievement and as increasing the likelihood of close relationships. Furthermore, the possibility that a career or project may be shared between two people who are also in a close relationship is not discussed. Husband and wife musicians, for example, are fairly common place, and it is not clear that it would be impossible for them to achieve maximum success while also cultivating their relationship to the full. If any of these ways of combining the two goods in question are possible then Slote will not have done enough to defend against potential objections.

Chapters 4 and 5 consider some possible connections and conflicts between what Slote has argued for here and some work in other areas. Chapter 4 investigates whether standard cases of moral dilemmas can provide yet more examples of underlying tensions between values that can be used to support the conclusions regarding perfection. However, Slote argues that such support is lacking as not every example of a moral dilemma reveals a necessary failing in the agent’s character. At this stage it becomes less clear why Slote’s intuitions differ regarding his own example (of a friend imploring the agent to tell a hurtful and unhelpful truth) and the examples of moral dilemmas discussed in this chapter. In the case of a mother having to select a child to send to a concentration camp or of Churchill having to decide whether to allow Coventry to be bombed rather than reveal the ability to de-code German messages, Slote argues that neither choice reveals anything deficient in the agent’s character. And yet, it is not then clear why having to choose a hurtful truth or a kind lie necessarily does reveal such a failure. Being in a position where doing both the