Excessive particularity

To Aristotle’s list of virtues, generosity, justice, courage, etc., this paper proposes adding particularity. We begin to analyze it in a way that owes a great deal to Aristotle’s method for analyzing other virtues. Famously, it is in the nature of moral qualities that they are ‘destroyed by deficiency and excess’ or, in other words ‘virtue...is a mean condition, inasmuch as it aims at hitting the mean.’

We will begin by exploring our virtue’s excess, i.e. being too particular, with the help of a piece by noted theater critic, director, and producer, Robert Brustein. This is a mistake that he, in retrospect, accuses himself of, referring to it a being ‘a bit too snify.’ The occasion was a review he wrote fifty years ago of the original production of the musical Fiddler on the Roof, starring Zero Mostel and based on the Tevya stories of Sholem Aleichem. In that review, he ‘complained that gifted artists were wasting talent and time on a middle brow spectacle.’

Now, as part of his review of new and, according to Brustein ‘scholarly and painstaking study’ of the musical, Brustein regrets that he ‘was especially hard on Zero Mostel for wasting a major talent—recently devoted to Joyce (Ulysses in Nighttown) and Ionesco (Rhinoceros) on such lightweight entertainment.’ Since surely he does not have to be too particular to object to the waste of time or talent, what needs to be understood is why he would now be regretting his earlier judgement.

What Brustein says next begins to help us understand. It seems that exactly what is and what is not a waste is more ambiguous than Brustein once realized. He writes now

'It was, in retrospect, ungenerous of me to begrudge audiences their pleasures or to criticize Mostel’s wider success, since he never really compromised his talents in the show.'

We gather that there are at least two things that can confuse particular persons to the extent that they are likely to err by becoming too snify, success and pleasure. In the case of success, apparently the problem is that it can require compromising talent, in this case a compromise that Brustein eventually decides that Mostel did not make. In the case of pleasure, the problem is a tendency of the particular one to (unnecessarily) be grudge it.

With regard both to pleasure and success, the further question is what exactly might be so dangerous about them. What Brustein does not credit either with giving Mostel his ‘wider success’ or ‘audiences their pleasures’ are the play of Ionesco or adaptation of Joyce in which Mostel had recently starred. At the same time, clearly Brustein would never treat these as a waste of time or talent. To put it positively, according to the particular one, unlike pleasure and success there are certain things that do have a definite worth or value. The ability to be particular but not too particular, then, depends on not compromising these things without, at the same time, ending up being unnecessarily dismissive of either success or pleasure.

We have used Brustein’s self-criticism concerning his behavior 50 years ago to identify two ways in which one can be too particular. A question that still remains is how full blooded his self-reflection actually is. In beginning to explore this matter, some aspects of how he addresses his mistake are worth noting. He only admits that he may have been a bit too snify. Also, his apology only refers to the specific case of Zero Mostel rather than other
features of the show. Finally, he applies his lack of generosity only to begrudging audiences *their* pleasures.

In line with this limited nature of his apology, Brustein goes on to indicate what he actually thinks now is that he was not quite as fully mistaken as we have so far been led to believe. Explaining that he was not the only one who had reservations about *Fiddler on the Roof*

> My colleagues and I could argue that our criticism had a constructive intent in our efforts to defend Sholem Aleichem against the watering down of his writing...

Nor was this constructive criticism

> Only for him but for all those whose art was becoming subject to theatrical exploitation, disrespect, or disregard.

Clearly the thing of value that Brustein is seeking to defend here is art as a whole. The idea that *Fiddler on the Roof* could be a threat to this is developed at some length and in various ways. While Brustein is sufficiently realistic to accept that Broadway is ‘driven by the profit motive’ he notes that it ‘had once premiered the plays of...serious American dramatists.’ The popularity of musical comedy has meant that ‘these playwrights were now struggling to find a producer.’ Perhaps even worse, what *is* being produced are ‘musical adaptations’ of such serious work. He lists numerous examples of this trend and, of course, *Fiddler on the Roof* is undeniably an example. Brustein adds that it is also an example of ‘a movement toward brightly presented upbeat middle brow entertainment launched by Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma* in 1943.’ The main problem here is that such work did not just supplant serious art. It was also being confused with art, hailed, he says, as ‘America’s greatest art form’. Part of the confusion stems from this work, with again *Fiddler* as an example, being ‘the triumph of a kind of sentimental and superficial air of seriousness on the American stage’.

By explaining his original critique in these ways, Brustein is implying that, really, apart from the limited exceptions of his view of Mostel and of the audience’s, i. e. theirs not his, right to pleasure, he was not being too particular after all. Assessing whether this view of himself is accurate does not require us denying either that serious art may be struggling to get a hearing or that the popularity of musicals may be to blame. Instead the test of whether he is still too sniffy depends on whether he is unable to make his case without implying that there is something necessarily wrong with success and/or pleasure.

Because he tries to avoid it, it is clear that Brustein himself is aware that he may be vulnerable to this criticism. Thus he claims that

> Certainly I am not arguing against popular entertainment, only against its increasing stranglehold on the theater, if not the culture as a whole.

However, the example of such entertainment that immediately occurs to him is more revealing than he imagines. He reminds us that

> Starting with the Elizabethans, high and low brow expression had lived very compatibly together, as for example in the way Hamlet’s inexorable progress toward death is lightened by the gravedigger’s graveside humor, or Macbeth’s bloody
murder of Duncan is brightened by a drunken porter puzzled by repeated knocks on the gate.

We can be forgiven for doubting the extent to which a writer understands the appeal of light entertainment when the first example that springs to his mind are a couple of scenes from Shakespearean tragedies.

To be fair to Brustein, he also comes up with at least somewhat more convincing examples of his willingness to leave a place for both unserious pleasure and commercial success. Thus, he reels off a list of several comedians including Bert Lahr, Phil Silvers, and Milton Berle who ‘were regarded as having an important place in serious playwriting’. The problem with this example is that surely he must be thinking primarily of Bert Lahr’s appearance in Waiting for Godot since, unless I am mistaken, the others most notable achievements were as comedians, not actors in serious works.

Brustein’s choice of examples just show that he is aware of ‘unserious’ and successful things, not that he can make a place for them in his scheme of what is valuable. Interestingly, there is a parallel here with those he is accusing of ‘watering down’ Sholem Aleichem and, by extension, art as a whole. It is not that these people are unaware of serious art because, of course, they need to be aware of it to, as Brustein puts it, exploit or disrespect it and even to (at least consciously) disregard it. Irrespective of whether his critique applies to his targets, what is clear is that, even if someone admits that a thing exists, if he is exploiting, disrespecting it, or disregarding it, he cannot be said to be sufficiently appreciative of it. If the thing so treated is lightweight or middlebrow or unserious, the person acting in these ways can be said to be too particular.

Since, as Brustein says, Solomon’s book is ‘scholarly and painstaking,’ information in it can help us work out whether or not Brustein is indeed acting in these ways and so is still too snippy about Fiddler on the Roof. Disregarding is probably the most extreme way in which one can fail to see the value of anything. In acting in this way, one is not even paying attention to a thing. A flagrant example of this form of action is how Brustein categorizes Fiddler on the Roof. He labels it part of

What Solomon and others would call the “golden age” of the “integrated book musical.” That is, what Rodgers and Hammerstein introduced first with Oklahoma and then with South Pacific and the Sound of Music.

But that Brustein disparages this development is actually beside the point since, in attending to Solomon we learn that Fiddler is part of a later development

One key to Fiddler’s success was its status as a transitional work. The era of Rogers and Hammerstein had ended with the Sound of Music in 1959. Stephen Sondheim’s groundbreaking concept musical Company, would debut in 1970. As deftly as its title character teetering on the roof, Fiddler balanced right on the pivot point between them. Without bidding adieu to the spectacular, sentimental, and storybook satisfactions that the old form provided...but gesturing toward the melancholy and irresolution that were to come...(220)

Solomon is careful to note to have found one key to Fiddler’s success because she is convinced there is another one. Whatever their era, most musicals are failures-flops as it is
said—and certainly not the enduring phenomenon that Fiddler has proven itself to be. She thinks the show only thrived and endured because of a certain defining moment in its development. The moment was produced by some insistent questioning by the show’s director, Jerome Robbins. As Solomon tells the story

In meeting after meeting at his home, Robbins kept asking the authors a question that struck them as unnecessary for having such an obvious answer: “What is this show about?”. Every time, one of the creators gave the same answer: “The show is about a dairyman and his marriageable daughters.”... One summer day, Robbins snapped, “That’s not it. That’s not enough... No one remembers who uttered the words that finally provided the answer to Robbins’ persistent question, but they seemed to rearrange the molecules in the room.” “It’s about the dissolution of a way of life.” Robbins leaned forward. “That’s it! That’s it,” he said. (139-140)

Brustein cannot exactly be said to disregard this story because he does acknowledge in passing that Robbins was ‘central to the work’s success’ but instead of repeating the story what he focuses on are a series of damning facts about Robbins the person, namely that he informed on fellow communists before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, that he was a closeted gay and also a closeted Jew. Also, that, as a director he abused the cast, drove the set designer crazy...

The impression Brustein leaves us with is not just that we should have no respect for Jerome Robbins but, by a sort of guilt by association, we should also, because of by who and by how it was achieved, we should also disrespect success itself, at least as it applies to this case. An additional trouble here is that, if Solomon is believed, the key to how the success was achieved was not Robbins qua abuser but the Robbins who managed to ask the one key question.

To exploit is quite different from disregarding and disrespecting in that it is finding a use, indeed in one’s eyes even a good use, for a thing. The problem, though, is that the use to which one puts it is not a fair one. Brustein’s last point about Fiddler amounts to a kind of apology for the way he has been using the show. He writes that

The state of a country’s art is reflective of its deeper values. Judging by the condition of our culture today... we must ask if those values have any depth at all. It is no doubt unfair to single out Fiddler on the Roof for special blame in this regard...

While, as suggested, the tone is apologetic, what he is actually apologizing for is using Fiddler in a way that even he does not doubt is unfair and so there is a clear case of exploitation here.

Perhaps the worst form of exploitation is when the way a thing is used distorts or even destroys what it is. Brustein closes his review by accomplishing this sort of transformation on what is commonly seen as the most memorable moment, the show stopping song If I were a Rich Man. According to Brustein

In an age characterized by unregulated markets, luxury, and greed, “If I were a Rich Man” seems an all too appropriate American anthem for our times.
While this version of the song is useful for Brustein’s point, it is a plausible interpretation only of the song’s title, not the actual song. Particularly as sung by Zero Mostel, the song is a fantasy of how being wealthy rather than poor could enable him to live the ideal life of a religious Jew, and so a far cry from a paean to anything American. He is, then, clearly just exploiting what happens to be the song’s title.

While particularity is not on Aristotle’s list of virtues, it is noteworthy that, in the course of his review, Brustein has been concerned that he may be lacking two virtues that are on the list, generosity and fairness. There is a theory of the virtues that would use this fact to provide further evidence that Brustein is being too particular.

The doctrine of the unity of the virtues states that one cannot display a virtue while failing to display the other virtues at the same time. For example, it states that if one tries to be courageous without also being wise, not only will one not be wise. One will not even end up being courageous.

This idea was not developed by Aristotle but by his predecessor, Plato, and it has to be said that neither Aristotle nor most other theorists of virtue to this day have accepted it. In their defense, the idea seems counter-intuitive. For example, why does one need to be a wise person just because one is courageous?

While Plato defends the implausible in many of his early and middle dialogues, I would argue that he developed his most plausible argument for it only in The Republic. There it become clear or at least clearer that the reason one cannot have virtue A without the others is because without the support of other virtues, while one can have the makings of virtue A, one will have it only in a failed form.

In The Republic, this ability to see only a less than adequate version of any one virtue without seeing what the other virtues require is explained as due to the fact that one will only have a less than clear grasp of a virtue until one can see what is good about it and what is good about it only becomes clear when one can see it in a form that is consistent with what all the other virtues also recommend. An example would be coming to understand what is good about wisdom to help steer one away from a dim version of courage which would equate it with rashness and also using what is good about courage to steer one away from a dim version of wisdom which would equate it with cowardice.

Plato makes this purported role for what is good about the virtues even more plausible by saying what is good about them all works for the virtues rather like the sun works for material objects. As the sun helps us see material objects clearly, what is good about each of the virtues helps us see all of them more clearly.

As this idea applies to Brustein, the very facts that he is not generous or fair can serve as indicators that he has only a dim version of what it is to be particular. How could the need to be both generous and fair help one avoid being too particular? In terms of our material, no matter how high one standards, one should remember not to cease to be generous, e.g. by not being too restrictive as to where and how talent can effectively be displayed. One should also seek to be fair, e.g. by not being too quick to lump things together, perhaps by focusing more on what any given thing epitomizes rather than merely what it is an example of. One needs to remember to be generous and fair not just because these activities are
good in themselves but also because without their presence one will also end up being too particular.

**Insufficient particularity**

Writing just before Hillary Clinton’s official campaign begins, on the one hand Maureen Dowd feels ‘it would be thrilling’ if she gets elected because the United States would have its first female president’. On the other hand, Dowd is worried about ‘the trade off that will be exacted...for that yearned for moment’. The specific occasion for her unease is how Clinton conducts the news conference in which she reacts to the news that she has maintained a second, private e-mail account from which she deleted 30,000 e-mails and also the news that her family’s foundations accepted tens of millions of dollars from Saudi Arabia and other repressive regimes. Dowd’s concern is that we may get a female president only on the condition of neglecting ‘two features of our democracy: The importance of preserving historical records’ and the need to avoid ‘the ill-advised gluttony of an American feminist icon wallowing in regressive Middle Eastern states’ payola.’

What Joyce and Ionesco are to a serious literary critic such as Brustein, key features of its democracy should be to a would-be country’s president. But note that the equivalent things of value that Clinton is endangering are the things that Brustein was concerned-too concerned we suggested-to protect. She lacks the desire to preserve things of value that he has, albeit to excess. Brustein is too particular. Clinton is in danger of not being particular enough. Therefore we can use this material to consider the nature and causes of insufficient particularity.

We know that Hillary Clinton comes with considerable baggage. As Dowd puts it, she has her ‘own needs, desires, deceptions, marital bargains, and gremlins.’ As such, candidate Clinton offers plenty of material for her opponents to attack. There is nothing illegitimate about a candidate for president defending herself when attacked. However, erasing 40,000 emails on her own initiative is not accurately depicted as a matter of mounting a defence. Instead, as Dowd says, it reveals a person ‘suffused with paranoia and pre-emptive defensiveness.’

Given both her vulnerability to attack and her tendency to act defensively in the face of both real and imagined threats, it is clear why Clinton would be tempted to delete the emails. However, in contemplating actually going through with it, a glaring obstacle stands in her way. To act in this way would not be in keeping with the fundamental democratic ideal that the behavior of public figures and, not least, candidates for president, should be subject to scrutiny. Indeed such behavior may even be a violation of her country’s ‘constitutional system.’ While the action, then, clearly appears to Clinton to be in her interest, it cannot be said to be in the country’s interest.

In the case of too particular persons, principles that are basically valid are upheld so rigidly that they blind these persons to other goods. Persons who are not particular enough cannot manage to uphold anything that could credibly amount to a valid principle. Clinton’s behavior reveals a pattern that is the opposite of Brustein’s. She seems totally unperticular in how she decides what is good or, as Dowd puts it, it is as if ‘if it’s good for the Clintons, it’s good for the world.’

This absence of orienting to anything like a valid standard is not just displayed by Clinton disrespecting the norms of a democracy. She is also not particular about observing standards of taste and even standards as to what makes sense. As a case of the former,
Dowd cites her embarrassing attempt to ‘get sympathy for ill-advisedly deleting 30,000 emails’ by pleading that the sort of thing they were about was the planning for her mother’s funeral. As a case of the latter, Dowd mentions the fact that, as Clinton always had a personal assistant with her who could have carried her official phone for her, her attempted explanation that it was simply a matter of ‘convenience’ not to carry two phones, does not actually manage to make sense.

What differentiates those who are not particular enough from those who are too particular, then, is that the former do not display much, if any, interest in what a valid standard could be. However, what should unite both types of error, at least if Plato’s theory of the unity of the virtues is correct and if particularity is indeed a virtue, is that the unparticular too should be found lacking from the perspective of some other virtues. Therefore it provides some confirmation both of the necessary and desirable unity of the virtues and of our claim that particularity is one that Clinton is so eager to accept money from repressive regimes. In her doing so, we do not just see someone who is not particular. We also see, in Dowd’s word, ‘gluttony.’ And there is another virtue that Clinton is simultaneously flaunting, justice. An aspect of what Aristotle calls rectificatory justice is a willingness to be judged. This requires submitting oneself to evidence but that is rendered impossible if, like Clinton, one is destroying what could be evidence. As Dowd expresses this failing, Clinton ‘became judge and jury on what’s relevant.’

As unfortunate as Brustein’s and Clinton’s actions are, they are also instructive because they make visible the issues likely to confront anyone seeking to manage to achieve moderation with regard to particularity. The example of Brustein suggests that one must somehow maintain standards while not failing to appreciate ordinary human concerns such as pleasure and success. The example of Clinton suggests that one should not let one’s ordinary human concerns, e. g. her needs, desires, deceptions, and gremlins, cause one to abandon valid standards.

Is the necessary and desirable moderation in this area actually possible? While the subject of her article, Hillary Clinton, does not manage it, we will suggest Dowd’s article itself does.

**Particularity**

Though Dowd and Brustein share a concern that something is threatening the standards to which they are committed, there is a striking difference in their attitudes toward the threatening thing. Whereas Brustein can muster no enthusiasm whatsoever for Fiddler on the Roof, even as she notes how Clinton is violating democratic ideals and seems oblivious to the U. S. Constitution, Dowd still says that ‘to see a woman president of the United States of America...would be thrilling’. Furthermore, while it might lack the thrill factor, she also says that a Clinton presidency would have the further major benefit of ridding ‘the country of those epically awful Republicans who have vandalized Congress, marginalized the president, and jeopardized our Iran policy.’ With Clinton, Dowd says ‘you can get a more progressive American society.’

Unlike Brustein, then, Dowd manages to maintain a commitment to her standards without being so snippy about the event, i. e. a Clinton presidency, that is a threat to them. Dowd, we suggest, manages to be particular without becoming too particular.

It follows that if we can work out how it is that Dowd can avoid letting her worries about a behavior that violates her standards dampen her enthusiasm for an aspect, i. e. a female
president, of the very thing, i.e. Clinton, that constitutes the threat, we could be learning how one can be particular without becoming too particular.

While it is true that Dowd is no less disapproving of and even disgusted by Clinton’s behavior than Brustein is by the success of Fiddler on the Roof, yet there is a difference in the form the disapproval and disgust takes. Consider a key passage where Dowd is remarking on how Clinton strikes her. She writes, addressing herself to Clinton: ‘You seem like an annoyed queen, radiating irritation at anyone who tries to hold you accountable.’ Without denying that Dowd is angry with Clinton, there is something very significant about the form that anger takes. To put it succinctly, she is laughing at her. That she would act like a queen in what remains, after all and we can say in spite of Clinton’s best efforts, a democracy is a funny image.

I would suggest it is the ability to see violations of standards as comic that is enabling Dowd to continue to appreciate the potential significance of a female president while still respecting standards, thereby managing to be particular without becoming sniffy. Why does her ability to see the funny side of Clinton’s behavior have this effect?

What is funny about acting like a queen in a democracy is that it is a behavior that tries to overcome limits that simply cannot be overcome no matter how hard one tries. It is impossible for there to be queens in democracies. In comedy there is always a limit that remains perfectly intact even as someone tries to overcome it. There is a limit that the comic character cannot just inevitably but even obviously overcome even though she keeps trying. In this case the limit, at least for a would-be queen, is democracy.

This comic scenario can be compared with a roughly similar moment in the Brustein piece. Brustein is as angry with the view that the musical is America’s distinctive art form as Dowd is with Clinton for trying to subvert the Constitution. Yes, much as Brustein disagrees with this verdict, we cannot quite say he is laughing at it. His inability to laugh reflects the fact that he cannot think of the standard he is referring to as some implacable barrier, quite impervious to even the best, most determined efforts to overcome it. Instead, he is thinking of it as something that could be overcome unless he personally can defend it. He imagines the standard as a very fragile thing that, rather like Atlas, it is his job to uphold. We can see why, if he imagines his task like this, it would be no laughing matter.

References

Aristotle Ethics


Dowd, Maureen, ‘An open letter to hdr22@Clintonemail.com NY Times, March 14, 2015

Plato Republic

Solomon, Alisa Wonder of Wonders