

CLASSICAL SOURCES OF HUMAN STRENGTH: REVISITING AN OLD HOME AND BUILDING A NEW ONE

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A virtue is defined as any psychological process that enables a person to think and act so as to benefit both him- or herself and society. Character is a higher-order construct reflecting the possession of several of the component virtues. The process by which the topics of virtue and character fell out of favor in psychology is reviewed, with a call for a rebirth of interest in these concepts in the interface of clinical, counseling, social, and personality psychology.

When one asks, "What are the virtues?," the answer received depends very much on whom one has consulted. An Aristotelian might respond with a catalogue of virtues such as wisdom, justice, temperance, courage, prudence, magnanimity, munificence, liberality, and gentleness. A Victorian might respond with a list consisting of virtues such as work, thrift, cleanliness and self-reliance (Himmelfarb, 1996). People from other religious or cultural backgrounds might give different answers. Whatever these virtues are, throughout history and across the world, all societies have possessed a catalogue of traits that have been deemed morally good and worthy of cultivating (Snyder & Higgins, 1997). Moreover, the virtues—the desiderata of human psychology—have been the subject of scholarly inquiry for thousands of years.

Clearly, issues of morality have been an abiding interest for psycholo-

The articles in this special issue were written as stimulus papers for a three-day conference hosted by the National Institute for Healthcare Research (NIHR) called, "Classical Sources of Human Strength: Appraising the Evidence." This conference was generously sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation.

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gists for decades. Over the years, a great deal of attention has been given to the factors involved in behaving morally (see, e.g., Kurtines & Gewirtz, 1991). Many researchers, developmental psychologists in particular, also have continued to be interested in the nature of moral reasoning, usually in a Kohlbergian key (e.g., Kohlberg, 1984; cf. Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988). However, some (e.g., Walker & Pitts, 1998) have called recently for research on moral development that specifically examines the content of moral character and virtue.

To the ears of most social, personality, counseling, and clinical psychologists at the end of the 20th century, however, terms like “virtue,” and “character” are likely to sound strangely out of place—perhaps even Victorian or puritanical—for scholarly discourse about human nature. It is rare for psychologists today to be found discussing issues of character or virtue. Indeed, such “virtue talk” is not considered our turf.

Things have not always been this way, however. At the beginning of this century, many of the important figures in scientific psychology were intensely interested in issues of character and virtue. Perhaps the best exemplar of a “virtues psychologist” is Edward L. Thorndike. Thorndike, who was voted by his peers as the most important living psychologist in a 1921 survey for *American Men of Science*, was intensely interested in notions of character, virtue, and morality (Clifford, 1984). Amazingly, in his 1911 edition of the influential *Animal Intelligence* (Thorndike, 1911), Thorndike listed “intellect” and “character” as the major areas of inquiry for behavioristic psychology (Beatty, 1998). In addition to writing seminal volumes in animal learning, educational psychology, and intelligence (Beatty, 1998), Thorndike found time to work on the development of a quantitative scale for assessing the “goodness” of American cities. This goodness index went far beyond generic quality of life and had definite moral connotations (Thorndike, 1939). In addition, he proposed the development of a quantitative instrument for assessing morality that would be scaled similarly to measures of intelligence (Thorndike, 1940).

Any discussion of psychologists who had abiding interests in the nature of virtue, character, and moral goodness should include Hartshorne and May. Ironically, they are most remembered today for their major take-home message, which was that scores on global measures of moral attitudes and character had rather low validity for predicting people’s actual moral behavior in real-life circumstances (e.g., Hartshorne & May, 1928, 1929; Hartshorne, May, & Maller, 1929). That message was used as a strong argument by the “situationalists” in the 1960s and 1970s as they torpedoed the validity of self-report instruments. For their part, however, Hartshorne and May were far more charitable toward

self-reports, and their annual reviews of psychometric instruments for assessing individual differences (e.g., May, Hartshorne, & Welty, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930) actually endeavored to catalogue measures of both personality and character.

What must be emphasized here is that the interests of researchers such as Thorndike and Hartshorne and May in the topics of character and virtue were not marginalized from their other work in mainstream psychology. Their work in these areas figured prominently in the scientific discourse of their day, and these researchers conducted theoretical and empirical studies of character and virtue that were as serious, theoretically based, psychometrically intensive, and rigorous as was any of their other work on intelligence or personality.

VIRTUE AND CHARACTER DEFINED

VIRTUE

To Plato, virtue consisted in coordinating one's desires and actions in a harmonious way that produced personal and social good. For Aristotle, a virtue was an ideal mode of conduct, developed through exposure to life experiences that allowed one to steer one's own conduct between two extremes. For example, Aristotle understood the virtue of self-control as a successful negotiation between the extremes of indecisiveness and impulsiveness (Durant, 1926). The term "virtue" comes from the latin root *virtus*, which classically was used to refer to "strength" or "excellence."

We believe that it is not terribly meaningful to base understandings of Virtue (capitalized for emphasis) on top-down, global distinctions among persons. That view leads to the counterproductive approach of arguing that one given person has virtue, while another person does not. On the other hand, we think it is most psychologically meaningful to conceptualize virtue in terms of "virtues." Thus, our focus is not on "Virtue" (i.e., global judgments of a person's goodness or badness), but rather on "the virtues" (i.e., discrete, coordinated systems of thought, reason, emotion, motivation, and action). Thus, we define a virtue as any psychological process that consistently enables a person to think and act so as to yield benefits for him- or herself *and* society. Thus, we are in consensus with philosopher Robert Roberts' (1995) definition of virtues as "traits that fit us to live our life well in its distinctly human dimensions, and especially in its social ones" (p. 289). As such, the virtues are at once conducive to the betterment of "me" and the "we"—bringing happiness, productivity, and harmony to both the individual and the society more generally.

CHARACTER

The term "character" comes from a Greek root that is translated as "engraving." Aristotle referred to character as "the life of right conduct" (Lickona, 1991). Thus, character refers to the enduring effects of life experiences on the human psyche (Sperry, 1997) so as to promote the development of virtues within a person. We believe that character is best understood as a superordinate construct that subsumes the lower-order virtues. Furthermore, a person's character is evaluated on the basis of the extent to which the person manifests any particular virtues across time and situations.

VIRTUE AND CHARACTER DISTINGUISHED FROM PERSONALITY AND TEMPERAMENT

We do not have adequate space in the present article for an exhaustive differentiation of character and virtue from personality and temperament, but it is worthwhile to note briefly two important distinctions. First and foremost, virtue and character (and their absence) have a moral relevance that personality and temperament do not necessarily possess. While being an introvert has no particular moral valence, inhospitality most certainly does. Second, although temperament and personality are thought to be situationally consistent and difficult to change (see Leonard, 1997), virtue and character differ from personality and temperament, at least theoretically, in the fact that they are relatively *more* amenable to change as the result of environmental inputs (Hogan & Sinclair, 1997). Thus, while it would be (at least theoretically) quite difficult to change a person's temperament or personality (and behavior genetics is indeed revealing how much of personality and temperament appear to be genetically determined), virtue and character develop as a result of how people respond to morally relevant life experiences. A corollary of the hypothesis that character and the virtues are malleable is that education and other interventions should have the potential to shape a person's character and their possession of its underlying virtues.

WHY DID "VIRTUE" AND "CHARACTER" DISAPPEAR FROM THE SCIENTIFIC LEXICON?

The shift away from the language of virtue, morality, and character for describing people was not limited to psychologists. Many historians, including Himmelfarb (1996), have documented how the Victorian language of virtue gradually was transmuted into a less offensive, more

modern language of “values.” In psychology, the transition away from the language of virtue and character was even more severe. Nicholson (1998) has dramatized the shift from notions of character and virtue to an exclusive reliance on the language of “personality” for describing individual differences by reviewing the life and career of Gordon Allport. Allport, who initially was trained as a social worker, was a firm believer in virtue and character in his private life (and in the conduct of his own career). Prior to the time that Allport received his social work training (he received his doctoral degree in 1922), diagnosing and promoting “character” were among the most important goals of the social work discipline. However, because the language of character sounded distinctly Victorian to professional social workers and the lay public alike, they began to view the language of character and virtue as a liability in the modern, scientific age. The new language of “personality” had a more modern, scientific ring to the practitioners in the growing field of social work, and it was rapidly embraced as the new focus of their assessment and intervention.

Allport stepped into this transition in the midst of his professional training. In moving from social work to the field of psychology, he decided to focus his career around a singular project: building and promoting a science of personality—not one of character. In influential literature reviews published in *Psychological Bulletin* (Allport, 1921, 1927; Allport & Vernon, 1930), Allport consistently argued that the language of character needed to be expurgated from the lexicon of scientific psychology because of its moral connotations. Much of the shift apparently was simply a matter of semantic hygiene. According to Allport, “character is personality evaluated, and personality is character evaluated” (1937, pp. 50–52). Later figures in personality psychology would follow suit, arguing against the scientific utility of a virtues- or character-based lexicon (e.g., McClelland, 1951). It is important to note, however, that Allport remained personally committed to promoting a scientific psychology that would improve the moral goodness of society. For Allport, however, the flexible, scientific, and modern-sounding language of personality was less encumbered than was the Victorian-sounding language of character (Nicholson, 1998).

Exchanging the language of character for the language of personality, however, did not come without costs. As Nicholson (1998) and Cushman (1990) have articulated, by focusing on a nonevaluative, purely descriptive science of individual differences, personality psychology divorced notions of “the person” from social or cultural contexts that might be useful for prescribing ideals for what humans should strive to become. Thus, while nearly all people (including psychologists) probably agree that society works better when people do

not routinely engage in the vices of cheating, stealing, answering violence with more violence, and promoting their own interests at the expense of others' interests, we do not call on any taxonomy of *any* set of virtues (be they Aristotelian, Jewish, Christian, or whatever) that might have normative force for describing the kinds of traits that human beings should endeavor to develop.

Obviously, moving scientific psychology away from the normative bases of religion and tradition that provided ready descriptions of human nature (and prescriptions of what humans should strive to become) was probably necessary to allow the scientific practitioners of personality psychology to develop the appearance of scientific objectivity—an appearance that would be necessary to provide credibility for their work. In any case, in a pluralist society, it is a good thing that scientific authorities are skeptical of easy answers handed to them by religion or tradition. On the other hand, eschewing social or cultural bases for describing the desiderata of human personality has had an unfortunate by-product: traditional virtues (from anyone's virtues taxonomy) scarcely are examined at all within the context of scientific psychology. As a result, psychologists barely have scratched the surface of classical sources of human strength such as wisdom, prudence, hope, gratitude, humility, or forgiveness.

A second unfortunate by-product of the neglect of virtues is that scientific psychology has, to some extent, failed to shed light on the layperson's conceptualizations of human flourishing. Clearly, being free of mental illness, performing one's duties adequately, and having at least a few supportive human relationships are important aspects of human flourishing for most people. In addition to such aspects, however, might it be that being "good" is an equally important goal for many people? While notions of virtue and character might be generally derogated in public discourse (Himmelfarb, 1996), it is clear that laypersons do have a vision for what a "moral person" is: she or he is a person who is principled, dependable, loyal, caring/trustworthy, and fair (Walker & Pitts, 1998). These clusters are virtues—the components of a potential new psychology of character. We have yet to understand them (and other virtues) adequately, even though cultivating them is likely to be an important goal for many people.

A third unfortunate by-product of scientific psychology's neglect of the virtues as the subject matter for serious scientific investigation is that scientific psychologists have a difficult time recommending virtue-based solutions to life's problems. (This is perhaps the most relevant repercussion of the neglect of the virtues for the interface of clinical and social psychology.) Classical strengths like self-control, hope, forgive-

ness, and gratitude, which laypersons so frequently attempt to use in preventing or remediating their own malaises (such as lack of self-discipline, despair, proclivity toward retaliatory violence, and envy), are not frequently or explicitly used in educational or therapeutic interventions by most professional psychologists.

For example, when intentionally hurt by another person, most Americans try to forgive (Gorsuch & Hao, 1993). Other survey data shows that over 90% of American teens and adults find that expressing gratitude makes them “extremely happy” or “somewhat happy” (Gallup, 1998). Obviously, descriptive data about the virtues gleaned from telephone surveys is not ideal; however, it does illustrate the abiding importance of such virtues in the consciousness of nonpsychologists. Learning to speak the language of virtues in developing approaches to assessment, education, and treatment could be a marvelous boon not only for basic psychological research, but also, for educational, school, clinical, counseling, and consulting psychologists (see also Leonard, 1997). Studies on virtues such as self-control, hope, and forgiveness with clinical relevance might speak to the concerns of many consumers of psychological services. Eschewing the virtues as a legitimate area for scientific study has been particularly unfortunate for professional psychologists, because laypersons themselves attempt to exercise these virtues, and at least some would probably appreciate (or at least benefit from) some scientifically sound, research-based assistance in solving their virtue-related problems in living.

THE CLASSICAL SOURCES OF HUMAN STRENGTH

Having decried psychology’s turning away from the study of the virtues and character that has taken place over many decades, we now offer a beginning antidote—a series of articles on the “classical sources of human strength.” In the following pages, scholars and researchers in the fields of psychology, sociology, and medicine explore the existing research on virtues and propose directions for future research. Of particular interest in these articles are the potential links of particular virtues to health and well-being.

In the first article in this special issue, Solomon Schimmel discusses how the virtues were conceptualized in classical and religious understandings of human nature. He provides a helpful overview of the philosophical and historical considerations that are essential to any serious attempt to identify and study human virtues. Schimmel’s article also reminds us that contemporary researchers who are interested in the virtues are by no means “pioneers” in the history of ideas.

The eight articles that follow are centered around a particular “virtue” or “human strength.” In these, each author covers four issues: (a) the existing theoretical and conceptual developments related to the virtue they discussed; (b) the existing measurement technology for assessing the virtue; (c) the existing research on the links of the virtue with indices of health and well-being; and (d) the most promising avenues for future research.

Roy Baumeister and Julie Juola Exline review the existing research on self-control and make a case for why self-control might be rightly considered the “master virtue.” They also present some of their own recent experimental evidence that makes a compelling case that invoking a strength metaphor for understanding self-control is entirely appropriate. Rick Snyder describes the basics of his hope theory, reviews evidence on the relationships of hope with mental health and well-being, and recommends how hope could be most productively applied in future research on physical health, mental health, and well-being. Mike McCullough reviews the existing research on forgiveness, describes some of the most robust correlates of forgiveness, and speculates about the mechanisms by which forgiveness might be related to health.

Linda George and colleagues then focus on the existing research on the associations of religious involvement and spirituality with measures of mental and physical health. They argue that a sufficiently large number of high-quality, multivariate studies now exist for researchers to be confident that spiritual and religious variables do have some substantive relationships with various measures of mental and physical health. Robert Emmons and Cheryl Crumpler’s article is, to our knowledge, one of only very few scientific articles devoted to conceptualizing the nature of gratitude, and speculating about its connections to health and well-being. Emmons and Crumpler also briefly describes some preliminary work on the potential links of gratitude with mental health, physical health, and well-being. In her article on humility, June Tangney attempts to distinguish humility from “low self-esteem,” reviews some of the existing possibilities for assessing humility, and poses some potential directions for future research on this interesting but largely ignored construct. In a comprehensive review, Deirdre Kramer addresses the existing research on the nature of wisdom as a domain of cognitive functioning, and presents evidence linking the development of wisdom with well-being. Finally, using Pitirim Sorokin’s theory of psychosocial love as a conceptual starting point, Jeff Levin presents his own preliminary psychometric work on love, and provides imaginative theorizing on how love might be related to physical and mental health.

In the last article, we summarize and review the special issue in its entirety. We draw out what we see as the overarching themes that have been emphasized in the individual articles, and propose some crucial steps for future research on the human virtues.

CONCLUSION

We have found the articles in this special issue to be extremely exciting. For the social scientist who has had experience in researching one or more of the classical sources of human strength discussed here, the present articles may read very much like a refresher course. For the social scientist who has not devoted much professional energy to considering the classical sources of human strength, reading these articles might feel very much like learning a new vocabulary. In this latter regard, the interface of clinical, counseling, social, and personality psychology has focused much of its collective attention on the "dark side" of human beings during the last several decades. Regardless of whether one has examined these virtues professionally or not, our goal is that you will find the articles a stimulating invitation back to considering some of the human traits that several decades ago found a home in scientific psychology. Perhaps you will agree that the virtues are important enough to be invited back home. And perhaps that "old" home, with its emphasis on the "bright side" of human existence, will be where the interface will live as we move into the 21st century.

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