

Jennifer Cole Wright, Michael T. Warren, and Nancy E. Snow, *Understanding Virtue: Theory and Measurement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 342 pages. ISBN: 9780190655136. Hardback: \$74.00.

Over the last few decades, virtue has become increasingly important in philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, and education. However, as each of these disciplines approaches virtue from a decidedly different perspective, it has proven difficult to come up with an understanding of virtue that satisfies the standards of all four disciplines. In their book, Jennifer Wright, Michael Warren, and Nancy Snow attempt to put forward such an understanding.

Specifically, the book has two objectives. First, it proposes a definition of virtue that integrates Aristotelian Virtue Theory with the more modern Whole Trait Theory (Fleeson, W., & Jayawickreme, E. 2015. "Whole trait theory." *Journal of Research and Personality* 56 (June): 82–91). The hope is that such a definition will not only fulfill the rigorous conceptual standards of philosophy; it will also provide psychologists with an understanding of virtue that can be empirically measured. Second, the book offers a variety of strategies for operationalizing and measuring virtue in such a way that can be useful for empirical researchers.

In Chapter 1, the authors put forward their integrated understanding of virtue. In short, they define virtues as "entrenched dispositions of character (i.e., traits) which are consistently manifested in behavior across many different types of situations" (p. 15). In their explication of the Aristotelian foundations of their account, they delve into the particulars of Aristotelian virtue theory and explain how their view aligns with and diverges from Aristotle's own view. Overall, it is refreshing and encouraging to see such a nuanced discussion of Aristotelian theory (including an in-depth treatment of *phronēsis*, the Greek concept of practical wisdom), which is often left out in empirically oriented accounts of virtue. Indeed, I found that such a discussion went a long way towards fulfilling the authors' promise to outline a philosophically robust understanding of virtue.

Still, some additional development would have proven useful. For example, the authors acknowledge that human nature is fallible, and that the virtuous person cannot be perfectly virtuous all of the time (p. 18). With this in mind, they bring up an important philosophical question about virtuous behavior: when a person fails to act virtuously, how can we tell if it is an understandable and temporary failing on the part of a normally virtuous person, or if it is reflective of a broader failure of character such that we should now question the persons' status as a virtuous person?

Their answer is that as long the person has a *commitment* to being virtuous, expressed through virtue-oriented motivations to improve on their

deficiencies, their status as a virtuous person can remain intact, and their failure can be understood as an understandable symptom of human nature (pp. 19–20). This answer is intriguing, but many questions remain. For instance, we can easily imagine someone – Bumbling Brett – who is committed to being a virtuous person, yet fails to be virtuous in most situations (perhaps Brett is delusional, or has an especially weak character). On no plausible Aristotelian account is Brett a virtuous person, but Wright et al. can't seem to tell us why this is the case. Perhaps along with the commitment to being virtuous, a probability estimate of how likely virtuous actions will be performed needs to be taken into consideration. (The authors do mention probability estimates, but it's unclear if it is part of their view – and even if it is, there's no indication about their particular stance on probability estimates, and how it relates to one's commitment to being virtuous.) Or, perhaps not any commitment will do; maybe it needs to be a certain type of commitment, that has a particular kind of relation to virtue-oriented actions. Regardless of the direction the authors want to take, though, we do need more explanation. Generally, I am confident that Wright et al. could come up with answers to these questions, but the fact that they remain unanswered in the text reveals to us that their account of virtue isn't as philosophically robust as it could be.

After discussing these Aristotelian foundations, the authors fill out the rest of their view with Whole Trait Theory (WTT). According to WTT, there are a set of social-cognitive mechanisms that generate person-specific, trait-appropriate responses. For instance, the trait of conscientiousness is explained by a set of beliefs and desires about planning, impulse-control, and goal-directed behavior that result in a distribution of consistently conscientious behaviors over time. Importantly, WTT allows for a certain amount of situationally induced variation – thus acknowledging the historically underappreciated influence that situational factors can have on behavioral outcomes (Doris, J. *Lack of Character*. Cambridge University Press, 2002) – but nevertheless contends that one person can possess a certain trait to a greater or lesser degree than another.

With their understanding of virtue in hand, Wright et al. move on to Chapters 2 and 3, where they provide an overview of the empirical literature on virtue measurement, and then put forward their own integrated proposal for virtue measurement. In particular, they propose a multi-layered research program that measures (1) “the perception of virtue-relevant stimuli (the ‘inputs’),” (2) “the processing of those inputs by various social-cognitive systems (the ‘intermediates’), and (3) the “situation-specific virtue-appropriate behaviors (the ‘outputs’)” (p. 122).

Something interesting to note: this empirical model suggests that there are three ways that a person can fail to manifest a virtue (p. 124). First, they can fail to perceive the stimuli as virtue-relevant (e.g., they fail to perceive that the situation calls for a courageous response). Second, they can fail to understand the stimuli as a reason for virtue-appropriate action (e.g., they perceive the situation as courage-relevant, but they don't feel that it is their personal responsibility to act courageously). Third, they can fail to act in a virtue-appropriate way (e.g., they understand that there is a reason for them to act courageously, but they decide not to due to the potential repercussions for their career).

Chapters 4 and 5 expand the discussion by putting forward their conception of character. The authors view character as an integrated network of virtues within personality (p. 188). (Personality refers to a person's particular expressions of personality traits – such as their levels of openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness.) This “integration thesis” posits that “the distinctiveness of individual characters can be explained by investigating interrelations among the unique arrays of virtues that people possess and display” (p. 188). Such constellations of virtue develop as individuals respond to virtue-relevant situations over the course of their lives.

In this section of the book, Wright et al. make it clear that what counts as virtuous depends on the particular circumstances an individual is living in (pp. 205; 258). Due to this, “there are indefinitely many virtues, some of which are yet to be discovered and some of which are yet to be cultivated” (p. 225). Aristotle's account of virtue is notorious for its parochial complacency, so perhaps Wright et al. are making it clear that their own account doesn't suffer from the same problems. However, there is now a new worry: that of moral relativism. If the particular set of virtues one ought to cultivate depends on one's circumstances, how can we, as scientists and philosophers, say anything meaningful about *human* virtue? And what kind of argument can be made against a small, toxic culture that claims that dishonesty and indifference to suffering are virtues to be cultivated?

In response to this worry, the authors only have one sentence, in which they appeal to the shared spheres of human experience, inspired by Martha Nussbaum's work (p. 205). The idea, I take it, is that there will be some variability between cultures, but our shared human endowments will lead to many virtues – perhaps a set of *core virtues* – being common across cultures. There is certainly possibility here, but many questions remain. Which virtues are common to all? How do we come to acquire such knowledge, without being parochially complacent? How can we contend that certain toxic cultures are cultivating the wrong virtues (or perhaps that they are cultivating virtues in the wrong way, such as a culture that encourages the cultivation of courage for

the use of physical force against family members)? And what does all of this mean for how best to carry out cross-cultural studies of virtue? Answers to at least some of these questions would be helpful in assuaging lurking worries about moral relativism.

As readers have probably noticed, my concerns have been somewhat nit-picky. There is a reason for this: for the most part, I think the book is a success. The virtue literature needs more work that attempts to satisfy both the rigorous conceptual standards of philosophy and the empirical requirements of the sciences, and this book addresses this gap. True, there are places where I think more philosophical discussion would help, but that doesn't take away from Wright et al.'s commendable accomplishment. Indeed, I recommend this book to anyone working on the cutting edge of virtue, and I hope it inspires more work with a similarly conscientious multi-disciplinary approach.

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