

What is Virtue? Using Philosophy to Refine Psychological Definition and Operationalization

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Abstract

We compare the definition of virtue in philosophy with the definition and operationalization of virtue in psychology. We articulate characteristics that virtue is presented as possessing in the perennial western philosophical tradition. Virtues are typically understood as (a) *dispositional* (b) *deep-seated* (c) *habits* (d) that *contribute to flourishing* and (e) that *produce activities* with the following three features: they are (f) *done well*, (g) *not done poorly*, and (h) *in accordance with the right motivation and reason*. We form a definition from these characteristics and defend our exclusion of some other characteristics from the definition. Using our definition as a rubric, we evaluate conceptions of virtue in psychology, showing how many fall short at operationalizing at least one component of the philosophical notion of virtue.

Keywords: virtue; character; positive psychology; philosophy; definition

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1. Introduction

Virtue has been a subject of inquiry for millennia in the field of philosophy but has only recently flourished as a topic of interest in the field of psychology. This is unsurprising given that psychological science, with its current methods, is relatively new as a standalone academic discipline. Although psychology is distinct in its use of empirical methods to study virtues and character strengths, it draws heavily from philosophical and theological sources (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). However, psychological definitions of constructs such as virtue and individual virtues are often fuzzy and imprecise, resulting in valid criticism toward the psychological study of virtues, especially regarding the positive psychology movement (see Kristjánsson, 2018; Miller, 2019; Wright et al., 2020).

The issue of construct definition is by no means limited to the study of virtue alone; the field of psychology struggles with imprecise, ever-changing constructs that reflect cultural shifts (Haslam, 2016). The field of philosophy, with its partial focus on meticulous definitions of concepts like virtue and particular virtues, offers solutions. Recent collaborations between philosophers and psychologists working on virtue measurement have yielded fruitful insights about how to make measurements of virtue and specific virtues more philosophically robust (e.g., Fowers et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2020); we need to take a step back and focus on definition rather than measurement. This paper is an interdisciplinary effort to argue for a clear and precise definition of virtue, evaluate current psychological characterizations of virtue, and offer viable avenues for future operationalization. The hope is to present a definition of virtue that can be utilized in both psychology and philosophy, and to provide arguments in support of

various contestable aspects of the definition (though space will not allow a comprehensive consideration of possible objections and replies).

2. On Definition & Operationalization

In the Socratic and Aristotelian philosophical traditions, which have inspired much contemporary work in virtue theory, a definition of a term must include two parts. First, there's the larger kind of thing that includes the type being defined. This is classically called the *genus*. Second, there is the distinguishing feature that, out of all the members of all the types of that genus, is only had by members of the type being defined. This is classically called the *differentia*. Just as in biological taxonomies, the specific term defined is often referred to as the *species*. In schematic format, a definition is specified as follows:

Species = Differentia + Genus

Two common examples will make this clearer. Consider the well-worn examples of definitions for "human" and "bachelor:"

A human is a rational animal;

A bachelor is an unmarried male.

What makes these definitions, in the philosophical sense (setting aside for a moment whether they are the correct definitions—that is, whether they get reality right)? Here "animal" and "male" each name a type under which "human" and "bachelor" fall, respectively. But not all animals are human, and not all males are bachelors. What differentiates humans (on this definition) from all other animals is their rationality. Likewise, what differentiates bachelors from all other males is their being unmarried.

Notice that merely listing characteristics of the things that fall under the term is insufficient for *defining* a term. Take the features "warm-blooded," "living," and "not feathered,"

for instance: they all describe both humans and bachelors, yet this list is of no help in *defining* either bachelors or humans. Similarly, merely listing examples of things that fall under the term will fail in defining the term. Tom, Diego, and Hassan might all be examples of humans and bachelors, but this list is no use in telling us *what it is to be* a human or a bachelor.

Plato knew this point well when writing the *Meno*, in which Socrates and Meno are discussing the very question of this article: What is virtue?

SOCRATES: How fortunate I am, Meno! When I ask you for one virtue, you present me with a swarm of them, which are in your keeping. Suppose that I carry on the figure of the swarm, and ask of you, What is the nature of the bee? and you answer that there are many kinds of bees, and I reply: But do bees differ as bees, because there are many and different kinds of them; or are they not rather to be distinguished by some other quality, as for example beauty, size, or shape? How would you answer me?

MENO: I should answer that bees do not differ from one another, as bees.

SOCRATES: And if I went on to say: That is what I desire to know, Meno; tell me what is the quality in which they do not differ, but are all alike;-would you be able to answer?

MENO: I should.

SOCRATES: And so of the virtues, however many and different they may be, they have all a common nature which makes them virtues; and on this he who would answer the question, "What is virtue?" would do well to have his eye fixed: Do you understand?

MENO: I am beginning to understand; but I do not as yet take hold of the question as I could wish (72a5-d1).

The lesson of Meno's and Socrates' exchange is this: to make progress in defining "virtue," we need to shift attention to what all the virtues have in common and what distinguishes them from

non-virtues, rather than focusing our attention on the many different examples of virtues or what distinguishes one virtue, like gratitude, from one another, like generosity.

Psychology has typically taken a different approach to constructs than philosophy. Psychologists tend to focus on operationalization rather than definition of constructs. Operationalization is the process of taking abstract concepts—like most of those studied in psychology (e.g., compassion; empathy)—and turning them into measurable observations. This operationalization typically involves the development and validation of a measurement instrument or procedure that seeks to capture the abstract construct in a concrete manner. Within positive psychology, this often involves the development and use of Likert scales that employ items seeking to capture the abstract concepts, in part due to the ease of this type of measure administration (e.g., Schnitker, 2012). The emphasis placed in psychology on empirical work partly explains why more attention is given to operationalization than to definition.

Indeed, operationalization tends to be substituted for definition of constructs, with psychologists often turning to the reliability and validity of measures before clearly defining the construct they are studying. Psychological constructs are characterized and operationalized in regard to how they relate with other existing constructs, often through correlation with those constructs in an effort to articulate the nomological network (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Krause, 2012). An approach that rushes to operationalization and restricts conceptualizations to relations among operationalized constructs misses out on richness that can be attained by theoretically grounded definitions. Furthermore, such an approach obfuscates the original aim of operationalization, which is to bridge an abstract definition with a concrete measurement approach. Murky or missing definitions of the abstract construct lead to fuzzy, imprecise measures.

The problem with substituting operationalization for definition is especially apparent with the construct of virtue. Consider, for instance, the influential Values in Action (VIA) measures of character strengths and virtues. Peterson and Seligman (2004) started with 24 character strengths which were supposed to embody six virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. But if the Socratic argument is right, then simply naming the different types of virtues and their myriad manifestations does not help us *define* virtue any more than cataloguing the 20,000 species of bees helps us define what it is to be a bee. The VIA and revised VIA, as Wright et al. (2020) recently argued, were “largely data-driven rather than the result of any coherent theory of virtue guiding their analysis” (p. 114).

Most people possess preconceived notions regarding what virtue is, in part because the construct is culturally embedded, unlike some constructs (e.g., basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness from self-determination theory). This cultural embeddedness and focus on operationalization contributes to the “bag of virtues” critique leveled against proponents of virtue theory (Kristjánsson, 2010). This “bag of virtues” critique suggests that researchers pick and choose virtues of vested interest, ranking virtues in an arbitrary manner. Given the push toward transparent, careful science practices (e.g., Foster & Deardorff, 2017), this oversight needs correcting.

If the definition of virtue is lacking, so too will be the operationalization. If entomologists do not know what differentiates a bee from a hornet, they will not be reliable at engineering a trap that removes the hornets but leaves the bees. If psychologists do not know what differentiates a virtue from other personality constructs, like Big Five traits, they will not be able to measure impacts of virtues or design interventions that cultivate virtues irrespective of more basic personality traits.

3. Virtue in Philosophy

Many recent discussions in psychology engaging the philosophical notion of virtue assume broadly Aristotelian definitions (Kristjánsson, 2018; Ng & Tay, 2020).¹ The Aristotelian view of virtue certainly has an impressive pedigree. But psychology should adopt a definition of virtue on the basis of its merits and not only its intellectual lineage. It is well worth exploring the arguments supporting various elements of a proposed definition before using it to inform a psychological construct. Not only are there disagreements about some definitional elements among contemporary Aristotelian philosophers, but there are also viable competitor definitions in contemporary philosophy (such as sentimentalist and Stoic views) that put pressure on Aristotelians to offer arguments for their definitions. Below, we take up the task of presenting a precise definition and defending each element of the Aristotelian definition we favor.

Specifically, we aim to show why it is most appropriate to define virtues as (a) *dispositional*, (b) *deep-seated* (c) *habits* (d) that *contribute to flourishing* and (e) *that produce activities* with the following three features: they are (f) *done well*, (g) *not done poorly*, and (h) *in accordance with the right motivation and reason*.

The claim that (a) virtues are dispositional enjoys widespread agreement in philosophy (Miller, 2014). An objector, especially in psychology, might question whether it is necessary to think of virtues as dispositions when they could instead hold the less metaphysically-loaded “summary” view. The summary view says character traits like virtues *merely summarize* patterns of behaviors (Buss & Craik, 1983). Since behaviors and behavioral patterns are scientifically observable phenomena, they are metaphysically respectable; but dispositions are not observable in the same way. At best, we can infer the existence of psychological dispositions from what

¹ The argumentative action here centers on which variety of Aristotelianism and what modifications we should adopt (see for instance Wright et al., 2020).

actually occurs. In fact, this objection is a version of the general Humean objection to countenancing dispositions: we only have good grounds to believe in regularities, not in dispositions or powers that underlie regularities (see Hildebrand 2020).

The Humean alternative in psychology, however, has been found wanting. Not only does it seem that people retain their virtues during seasons when the virtue is not relevant and thus behavior does not manifest it, but also first-personal reflection on the phenomenology of human action provides some evidence that there is something internal to our psychology that explains regular patterns of behavior. Consider Bree, a courageous activist. Bree experiences a wave of success for her cause and opposition wanes; she enjoys a season free of fearful threats with no occasion for courageous behavior. On the summary view, Bree does not have courage during this time because she is not behaving in courageous ways. The dispositional view better explains intuitions about such a case: so long as Bree is *disposed* to act courageously *in situations that call for courage*, she maintains her courage even when not facing those fearful situations (Miller, 2014, p. 19).

What differentiates virtues from other sorts of dispositions? One feature is that they are (b) deep-seated. Consider someone new to sobriety, such that the activities of sobriety are fragile – a bit of peer pressure can bring him back to the drink. Such fragility of disposition is not the stuff of which virtues are made. A “temperance” that breaks quickly, a temperance not deep-seated, is no temperance at all. As Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2018) claim,

A virtue is an excellent trait of character. It is a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor—something that, as we say, goes all the way down, unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker—to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways.

In other words, virtues are not lightly had or easily dislodged like the disposition to drink tea. They are deep-seated because they are a product of our agency, or what some call “the deep self” (Wolf, 2015).

Relatedly, many Aristotelian philosophers claim that (c) virtues are habits. But what various Aristotelians mean by “habit” is a matter of debate, so we ought to consider various candidates and arguments for each. Aristotle speaks of habits as dispositions that are hard to change and by which something or someone is disposed well or badly. Some philosophers and psychologists conceptualize habits as unreflective and automatic, and think of habituation as a process that does not involve choice on the part of the person being habituated (Curren, 2000; Douskos, 2017). Commenting on this trend, Bermúdez (2017) contrasts “habitual, everyday actions” with “skillful actions”: in skillful actions we see “continuous activation of my intention...modulate deeply automated behavioral routines,” whereas in habitual action we notice “complex routines that respond to environmental stimulations, but not an overarching intention” (p. 29). Within the psychology of automaticity, some take for granted this same account of habit as inflexible responses to a body of similar stimuli (Wood & Neal, 2007).

Thomistic Aristotelians understand habits as requiring rational control and voluntariness that affords flexibility in responding to circumstances. We think that insofar as virtues are habits, this is the right way to understand habit. One reason to adopt the view of virtues as habits in this Thomistic sense, rather than the automatic-routine sense, is articulated by Julia Annas. Annas explains that a person who merely learns to mimic or repeat a behavior or response does not internalize the same kind of understanding of what she is doing as someone who acquires a practical skill (Annas 1995, p. 231; 2011, p. 17). While the former can perform an act that is successful, in some sense, the latter can succeed and has the capacity to improve performance

precisely because she grasps the point of what she is doing (*ibid.*, p. 18). This provides the skilled person flexibility that the person with a routine or automatic response does not have. Practical skills require flexibility because the subject matter of those skills is unlike the subject matter of abstract mathematics—you cannot grasp the particulars through deduction from universal principles. But this is precisely the sort of feature we expect a virtuous person to have—the ability to respond flexibly to novel situations and to improve their performance. For ethics, like the practical arts of medicine or sport, cannot be captured in universal principles, and a grasp of the point of living well is acquired through experience (Annas 2011, p. 18; Stichter 2007, p. 190).

Imagine Pablo has developed an unconscious tendency to respond automatically to interpersonal conflict by conceding. One day Pablo's coworker uses a racial slur to describe another coworker, who happens to be Pablo's good friend. Pablo lets the comment slide, unthinkingly responding to the conflict rather than disagreeing with the coworker and standing up for his friend. Pablo is hardly exhibiting a virtue. The virtue required, perhaps peace, requires a flexibility of response—attunement to the content of disagreements, for instance—afforded by intentionally aiming at a goal (Annas, 2011). If a virtue like peace sometimes requires standing one's ground and other times demands backing down, then it is ill-described as a disposition to respond with routine behavior, however complex, absent intention and control. There is room for learned automaticity, so long as it is produced and ultimately governed by the sort of rational control that makes it intentional, flexible, and goal-directed (Gardner & Lally, 2018). A virtue's activation may involve a sort of automaticity, but it is importantly an automaticity that differs from routine. Crucially it embeds a grasp of the point of feeling, thinking, and behaving in

certain ways (e.g. peacefully or justly), and this grasp guides the virtuous person in applying generalizations about a good human life in a variety of circumstances.

A second reason to adopt the Thomistic-Aristotelian account of habit is that habit, on this picture, requires the “use of the will” (Kent, 2002). The will integrates emotions, desires, and rational cognition to enable an agent to form intentions and make voluntary decisions. The person’s agency must be involved, and this makes the habit acquired and the actions that result from it properly attributable to her. Someone could acquire a habit through training that involved a grasp of the point of the activity without that habit or its results being attributable to her if she were, for instance, brainwashed into adopting the goal (as in the case of the supervillain-turned-superhero Wolverine). When a habit is acquired by a free decision and results in free decisions, however, we take that habit to be a proper subject of moral appraisal. And moral virtues are supposed to be distinct from other characteristics in that they are properly subject to moral appraisal.

Consider, for example, someone who protests a voter suppression law and encounters resistance from a local official—call this person Bree. The official threatens her, and she might feel fear or pressure to back down to protect herself. An automatic response to something encoded as a threat would predict a single type of response to that stimulus— for instance, fighting or fleeing. But Bree has a choice. She can either respond in fear on the basis of judging the official as a threat, or she can draw on her judgment that the official is a threat but a threat to be resisted because he stands in the way of what she really cares about, namely making sure people in her community can register to vote. Her rational cognition about the official affords her multiple ways of viewing the situation. Bree can choose freely either to stand up to the official despite her fear on the basis of her judgment that he is an obstacle to achieving enfranchisement

for people she cares about, or she can back down to save her own skin. Moreover, plausibly earlier in Bree's life she was afforded the opportunity to see equality as a goal worth orienting her life around or not.

So suppose Bree stands up to the official. There is a marked difference between the "fight" response that would come from a disposition to respond to threats with fighting unthinkingly and automatically, on the one hand, and the response Bree has if she chooses to stand up to the official after weighing the costs and benefits to her and her community, or even if she stands up to the official nearly automatically due to a habit she acquired by choosing to prioritize justice and equality in her own pursuits. The latter type of behavior seems to fit with what people think of as *virtuous* behavior, whereas the former type does not. It is uniquely attributable to her because of how it was acquired voluntarily, or the extent to which its deployment was voluntary. Thus, when we say virtues are habits, we indicate that they are dispositions of the will (Foot 1978).

There is a way to model the voluntary acquisition of habit, in this Thomistic sense, that has currency with contemporary psychological theory. Matt Stichter explains in his recent article that the model of self-regulation proposed by Bandura can be utilized to explain how virtues are acquired (Stichter 2021). Because self-regulation originates with the voluntary adoption of some goal, which then becomes the point of one's activities in the goal-relevant domain; similarly, virtues come online when a person voluntarily internalizes a moral goal and allows the goal to govern their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Subsequently, self-regulation involves striving to meet the standards embedded by the goal. As both Annas and Stichter point out, virtue must involve a will or "drive" to aspire to achieve the moral goals (Annas 2011, Stichter 2021, p.

357). When someone's habit results from such value-laden decisions about goals, it has the earmark of a virtue.

One could object that virtue is a matter of having the right desires or concerns, and these are not acquired through a process that involves cognition or the will (Arpaly and Schroeder, 2014). But as some critics of this sort of view argue, even forming the right desire seems to require a process of conceptualization and assent that involves the reason and the will (Badhwar, 2016: p. 433-4; Tooming, 2019). So, it makes sense to say that virtues are habits in the sense that they are dispositions to make voluntary choices and flexibly respond to a variety of situations, rather than dispositions to respond automatically and inflexibly to a single group of stimuli.²

Related to this discussion of voluntariness, virtues seem to be morally praiseworthy—that is, it is appropriate to praise people for their virtues, other things being equal. And many people think someone can be praiseworthy for something only if they are morally responsible for it, and that we cannot be morally responsible for what is outside our voluntary control (Wolf, 2015). For instance, if Bree had been conditioned to respond aggressively to threats (perhaps through some paramilitary training, like Wolverine), we would not think of her standing up to the government official as something she is morally responsible for, and we would be less likely to praise her for her disposition to behave that way. We tend to assign moral praise or blame to people for

² It is worth noting that Thomistic Aristotelians part ways with various non-Aristotelian contemporary and historical philosophers on this point as well. The will, or what is sometimes called the “rational appetite,” does not play an important role in virtue in most versions of sentimentalism. Instead, virtues are deep-seated motives or emotions and are fundamentally valuable—they do not derive their value or admirability from how they are acquired or whether they are related to a person's rational cognition and choice. For example, on Slote's agent-based view, balanced caring is a fundamental virtue in that it is something we generally approve of and find pleasant in ourselves and others (Slote, 1997). Slote acknowledges that someone may form habits as a product of her virtue of caring, but it is not essential to virtue (*ibid*). Strands of Buddhist and Confucianist ethics share this feature of sentimentalism—dispositions like humaneness, according to Cheng Hao, are entirely affective and need not be tied to reason or be generated by a person's deliberate choices to be virtues (Marchal, 2013; Slote, 2013). According to Bonnie Kent, certain historical strands of Christian ethics reject the idea that virtue is a habit in the sense that it is a disposition of the will. Kent argues that, for Augustine, virtues like charity cannot be in the will because the will is notoriously liable to corruption. See Kent (2002) for discussion.

behaviors we assume they have control over, or that they choose. If we are right to connect virtue and praiseworthiness with moral responsibility, and moral responsibility requires some involvement of the will, then we have good reason to think that the sorts of dispositions that count as virtues involve the will.³

There are plenty of deep-seated habits that are not virtues, so we still need to provide additional elements to our definition. Another earmark of virtues on the Aristotelian definition is that they systematically (d) contribute to flourishing. In philosophy this claim goes by the name of eudaimonism, because Aristotle argues that the virtues are our surest bet for achieving *eudaimonia*, or the flourishing life (Annas, 2011; Hursthouse, 1999; Kraut, 1989).⁴ Flourishing is the fulfillment of one's potential, the development of one's best possible self.

To see that virtues lead to flourishing, begin with a case where a person lacks any virtuous qualities but has material success—say, Scrooge from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge may well have thought that he was flourishing, but every sensible reader knew otherwise. Now take Scrooge, keep his material successes the same, but suppose he has patience instead of impatience; gentleness instead of wrath; generosity instead of avarice, etc. As we move through the vicious dispositions, adding in virtues instead, we see that he becomes a better candidate for one who flourishes. What accounts for this change in our estimation? Not his

³ The Confucian views of Zhu Xi and arguably Confucius and Mencius, maintain that the central virtues of ren and yi (heart mind) involve making rational judgments about what is of value and how particular actions and goods will contribute to the good of the whole (Marchal, 2013; Wai-ying, 2013).

Further, on some theological views, God can directly infuse a virtue into a person. God can “zap it in” to the will so to speak. In such a case, the virtue would not be acquired by willful choice, but it would result in a disposition to make certain kinds of free choices for which the person would then be responsible. We are not claiming that this happens, but we want to leave the possibility open for non-cultivated virtue.

⁴ The closeness of the connection between flourishing and virtue varies between different strands of eudaimonism. Further, Aristotelian, Platonist, Stoic, and Thomistic eudaimonists differ with respect to what they take human flourishing to be and so what virtues end up looking like. For instance, human flourishing might consist in resembling God, as Platonist Robert Adams (2008) argues, or in exercising the best capacities natural to our kind, as Aristotelian naturalist Philippa Foot (2002) claims. Consequently, which traits foster flourishing may differ significantly according to the theory's conception of flourishing.

external goods like wealth, for we've supposed those stay the same throughout. The change in his flourishing is due to his gain in virtues. But then, it stands to reason that virtues promote flourishing, as (d) says.⁵

Someone might object that certain aspects of flourishing are promoted by traits that do not seem to be virtues. Marie might acquire an intellectual habit by concerted, intentional mental effort that makes her an excellent mathematician. Aristotelians would be reluctant to call that habit a virtue in the primary sense unless it disposes her to certain behaviors (Kent, 2002). One might have that excellence of mind and stand idly by, doing nothing at all good with it, say, memorizing numbers from a phone book. Such a disposition, too, seems unfit for the honorific "virtue." Thus, we need to add the qualification that virtue is a disposition (e) that produce activities, where these include emotional responses as well as receptive behaviors. At this juncture, an objector might say that a person can have virtues even after sustaining injuries that prevent them from enacting behavior from their virtues. A stroke victim who was racist before the stroke may no longer be able to say and do things that are racist, but retains the racist disposition; so too a just person retains justice (e.g. Bommarito, 2018: pp. 22-23). In fact, this is no objection to our account. For what distinguishes the just stroke victim from a person who was never just is that the stroke victim has the *disposition* to behave, think, and feel in ways fitting of justice. The other person both does not behave justly and does not have the disposition so to behave.

⁵ People might reject eudaimonism either by denying the necessary connection between virtue and flourishing, or by denying the direction of the connection, namely, that the virtues promote flourishing. Our argument does not directly address those versions of sentimentalism on which virtues are the ground of and constitute what is good in a human life, rather than being useful for something else, like flourishing (Bommarito, 2017; Slote, 1997, 2010). These theorists want to understand flourishing as a function of having virtues, rather than understand virtues as traits that lead to flourishing. But such views will have trouble accounting for the thought that virtues are tied to acting well and not poorly, as Slote acknowledges.

What sorts of actions are, in typical circumstances, precipitated by virtue? Virtues result in acts (*f*) *done well*. As Philippa Foot says, “It is in the concept of a virtue that in so far as someone possesses it, his actions are good; which is to say that he acts well” (2001, 12). Imagine the activist, Bree, succeeds in getting government officials to protect the voting rights of the citizens, promoting her and others’ flourishing, but she does it by bribery. Intuitively, Bree’s behavior is not virtuous, and her deep-seated disposition to fight for justice even at the cost of being dishonest is not a virtue. Her virtue must lead her to act not just in any way that will result in peoples’ flourishing, but in appropriate ways. We might think of Bree as especially virtuous when she campaigns for voting rights with great integrity and achieves her goals through actions done well.

One question philosophers ask is whether virtue is compatible with acting poorly on occasion. Some Aristotelians concede that there must be instances where a person’s virtue can lead to poor behavior (Fileva, 2016). Are not there cases where, say, someone's desire for justice leads him to act poorly by *over-punishing*? Maybe a father's impatience gets the better of him when punishing his daughter for biting his son. Or maybe a professor doesn't stop to think through the ramifications of a grade penalty for late assignments with respect to showing compassion to students in crisis. In such cases, it would appear a disposition to act for justice leads to acting poorly.

In reply, we claim that such cases are not cases where it is the disposition to act justly that leads to the badness of the action (though it largely motivates the action). Rather, the badness of the action derives from the impatience or the imprudence that, in addition to the justice, brings forth the activity. In short, in such cases, it isn't the disposition to justice itself that causes the badness of the act, but rather something working (or failing to work) in tandem with

justice that is the culprit. And similarly for other cases. Therefore, we claim that virtue occur in activities (g) *not done poorly*.

Finally, what is the measure to employ to determine whether a disposition leads to behavior that is deficient, at the mean, or excessive? The answer to this question is the last common characteristic of virtue: the measure is (h) *right motivation and reason*. A disposition that moves humans toward irrational activity or motivates through malice, envy, etc., is not rightly considered to be a virtue even if it seems to promote flourishing for the people with that disposition and others. A virtue consequentialist is committed to the idea that dispositions that tend to produce more value in the world are virtues (Driver, 2003). Suppose, though, Arjun has a disposition to detach emotionally when under pressure and this allows him to succeed in extracting information through psychologically torturous interrogations of prisoners of war in his country. His doing so benefits millions of people in his country but it seems his emotions and deliberations are out of tune in an unfortunate way. He is not acting with the right motives and according to right reason, since right reason would direct him to consider the human dignity even of prisoners of war. The common folk judgment about someone like Arjun is that he is not virtuous. The virtue consequentialist has to concede that Arjun is virtuous whereas, given this last condition on virtue, the Aristotelian does not since the reasons for which he acts from virtue make the action a virtuous (Driver, 2001, Asma, 2022).

We have now provided preliminary arguments that

virtues are (a) *dispositional*, (b) *deep-seated* (c) *habits* (d) *that contribute to flourishing* and (e) *that produce activities* with the following three features: they are (f) *done well*, (g) *not done poorly*, and (h) *in accordance with the right motivation and reason*.

Virtue is the species. It is in the *genus* of habits, and so has the essential features of habits – being dispositional and deep-seated. Its *differentia* are the remaining elements of the definition, which differentiate virtues from other varieties of habit, for instance vices.

The reader will notice that we did not include in our definition that virtues are *situated at the mean*. We do this deliberately. Virtue, in the history of philosophy, has been characterized as a mean between two extremes, and this idea has made its way into contemporary discussions in psychology of virtue (Ng & Tay, 2020). For very many types of activity or passivity, there is both a way of doing or undergoing it deficiently and a way of doing or undergoing it excessively. For example, someone is cowardly when she is deficient in standing strong against her fears. She is rash when she behaves foolheartedly with respect to her fears. This claim meets some resistance in contemporary literature (e.g., Miller, 2013; Wright et al., 2020). And we see no strong arguments to maintain it as a *defining* feature, even if it is a common feature; even Aristotle says that some activities admit of no mean (*Nichomachean Ethics, Book II*).

Additionally, we have not asserted that a virtue must be acquired through cultivation as a matter of definition. But Aristotle does differentiate the moral virtues from other dispositions (e.g. natural virtues) by claiming that they are acquired. A complication arises if we include this as an element of the definition, however. It is conceivable that a person could instantaneously possess a virtue by infusion through some advanced technology or divine source. Suppose Solomon is quite ordinary until one day, God zaps wisdom into his psyche; it genuinely changes his will and mind such that he now seems to meet the conditions for virtue on our definition. It is unclear how our definition would be improved if it entailed this was not an instance of a virtue. Aristotle also discusses natural virtues, which are not acquired by personal practice. So we might think that “acquired by cultivation” is a *differentia* for moral virtue but not virtue more generally.

Although we arrived at this definition through investigating a variety of sources, the content of the definition draws on perennial ideas from the western philosophical tradition. One can find all these elements, including the common characteristics that we do not include in our definition, in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, for instance.⁶

4. Convergence of Psychological Characterizations of Virtue with Philosophy

Now that we have argued for a workable definition of virtue derived from philosophy, we will compare it with current psychological characterizations as seen in Table 1.

4.1. Virtues from a Positive Psychology Perspective

The first and most prominent conceptualization of virtue that arose from positive psychology was Peterson and Seligman's (2004) taxonomy of virtues, the Values in Action (VIA) strengths. This taxonomy was initially developed to serve as a counterbalance to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and it seeks to categorize the flourishing of mental health as opposed to languishing. Peterson and Seligman (2004) characterize virtues as follows:

“[Virtues-V] are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These six broad characteristics emerge consistently from historical surveys... We argue that these are universal, perhaps grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence as means of solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species. We speculate that all these [virtues-V] must be

⁶ To see Aquinas' discussion that virtue is a habit, see *ST I-II* q.55 a.1; that it is acquired by cultivation, not had innately, and determined by right reason, see *ST I-II* q.63 aa.1&2; that it is dispositional and deep-seated, see *ST I-II* q.49, especially a.2 ad.3; that it is situated on the mean, see *ST I-II* q.64; that by virtue one acts well and through which one cannot act poorly, see *ST I-II* q.55 a.4 ob.1. See also his disputed question on the virtues (*Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*).

present at above-threshold values for an individual to be deemed of good character. Character strengths are the psychological ingredients—processes or mechanisms—that define the [virtues-V]. Said another way, they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the [virtues-V].” (p. 13).

This quotation further corroborates our previous claims about the state of definition in psychology in two ways. First, the authors list features not exclusive to virtues in attempt to offer a definition. We know, though, that to display a characteristic of a thing is not the same as to define it, just as noting the shape of a bee is not the same as defining it when the shape is common to non-bee insects. Second, they substitute examples for differentiating features of virtues. *Wisdom-V* is: creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, and perspective (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). We are left wondering what exactly it is that ties all these characteristic strengths together under the concept of “wisdom” as well as why wisdom, but not cleverness, qualifies as a virtue.

More recent publications attempt to make improvements that address this second problem. Peterson and Park (2004) further clarify the 24 character strengths with a criteria checklist, requiring each of their listed character strengths to meet 10 original criteria. As of current research, there are now 12 criteria that character strengths must meet to be considered as such. Character strengths must: (1) be ubiquitous, (2) be fulfilling, (3) be morally valued, (4) not diminish others, (5) have a nonfelicitous opposite, (6) be trait-like, (7) be measurable, (8) be distinctive, (9) have paragons, (10) have prodigies, (11) be selectively absent in some people, and (12) have institutions supporting them (Ruch & Stahlmann, 2019).

This conceptualization of virtue aligns with several defining characteristics offered in the philosophical tradition we have drawn on above, but it falls short regarding others. Peterson and

Seligman's (2004) conceptualization, for instance, involves elements such as *dispositional, deep-seated*, and produces activities *done well*. The other elements – *habit, contributing to flourishing, not done poorly*, and *in accordance with right motivation and reason*– are not present in this conceptualization. Of the 12 criteria, the closest to the tenet *not done poorly* is (4)—not diminishing others. However, not diminishing others is not enough to avoid acting poorly. A person could engage in behaviors that are harmful to the self without necessarily diminishing others, and the disposition to engage in such behaviors would not constitute virtue. Criterion (3)—be morally valued—partially aligns with *in accordance with right motivation and reason* in that it addresses “right reason.” However, nowhere in this conceptualization is motivation mentioned as an essential component of virtue. Most later conceptualizations of virtue in psychology such as this one involve a moral component, as essential elements of virtue are grounded in morality as virtue is concerned with what is good (Fowers et al., 2021).

Peterson and Seligman's (2004) conceptualization diverges from the other common characteristics that are included in some definitions. It does not align with the common characteristic that virtues are *situated at the mean*. Rather than positioning virtue as a mean, Peterson and Seligman (2004) seemingly place virtue as directly opposite a single vice, situating the two as opposing poles on a single dimension under their criteria for a (5) nonfelicitous opposite, which requires that virtue “...has obvious antonyms that are ‘negative’” (as cited in Ruch & Stahlmann, 2019, p. 47). Further critiques of this conceptualization of virtue are numerous and addressed in several prominent papers (e.g., Snow, 2020).

4.2. Virtues from a Personality Psychology Perspective

Characterizations of virtue have shifted in the years since Peterson and Seligman (2004) first published their VIA taxonomy, perhaps, in part, due to the advances made in personality

psychology. One of the key advances was the development of Whole Trait Theory, which blends both descriptive and explanatory aspects into a clearer understanding of traits (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015). The descriptive side of traits involves density distributions of states, the consistencies that emerge across various situations (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015). These density distributions are the parameters within which a person acts, in a sense describing the boundaries of their behaviors across diverse contexts. The explanatory elements of traits are the social-cognitive mechanisms engaged by the individual (Jayawickreme et al., 2019). Social-cognitive mechanisms are more sensitive to situational effects because they encompass an individual's encoding of the situation, competencies, motivations, goals, and self-regulation (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015). With this more dynamic understanding of traits, understandings of virtue as a type of trait have shifted as well. Fleeson et al. (2014) characterized virtue as “those characteristics that are descriptive of actions, cognitions, emotions, and motivations that are considered to be relevant to right and wrong according to a relevant moral standard” (p. 181).⁷

To better evaluate what it means for virtue to be moral, the authors suggest three iterative and progressive steps for researchers in the field to follow: 1) select virtues that are commonly considered moral (e.g., compassion; honesty); 2) test for reliable individual differences in a person's tendency to act in such ways (e.g., acting compassionately or honestly); and 3) hone the conceptualization and assessment of these moral virtues with the evaluation of behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and motivations in tandem (Fleeson et al., 2014). The third step importantly

⁷ The other major personality approach to virtue is the HEXACO, which proposes Honesty-Humility as a sixth dispositional trait of personality (Lee & Ashton, 2004). We do not address this approach for several reasons. First, this approach conceptualizes virtue in a similar manner as Peterson and Seligman (2004). Additionally, this approach only captures a blend of virtues, Honesty-Humility, rather than virtue broadly. Finally, the Honesty-Humility trait has been criticized as being an extension of the trait Agreeableness, rather than unique (Lynam et al., in press).

focuses attention on a person's intentions. If a person does not possess moral intentions in enacting a virtue-like behavior, that behavior should not be characterized as produced by virtue (Fleeson et al., 2014, p. 182). Fleeson et al.'s (2014) third step also requires that the behavior be aimed at a moral good and not aimed toward harming others.

Fleeson et al.'s (2014) conceptualization comes closer to our philosophical definition of virtue in that it imposes several of the same conditions on something's being a virtue: it must be *dispositional, deep-seated, in accordance with right motivation and reason*, and potentially *producing activities done well and not done poorly*—that is, insofar as the moral standard differentiates between activities done well and poorly. However, this conceptualization of virtue does not address whether virtue is a *habit* or *contributing to flourishing*, and it does not align with the common characteristic of *activity is situated at the mean*, though the exclusion of the common characteristics may well be intentional. Though this characterization comes closer still to the philosophical definition we have argued for, but still differs on key points.

4.3. Virtues from a Developmental Psychology-Informed Perspective

Developmental psychology may offer an alternative conceptualization that comes closer to our definition in some respects but departs from it in others. Much of the work regarding virtue in psychology has been conducted from developmental perspectives because of interest in virtue development among children and adolescents. Lapsley and Narvaez (2014) characterize virtue by situating it within a bio-psycho-social model and suggesting that virtue is enacted, rather than merely possessed. Lapsley and Narvaez (2014) further clarify the construct of virtue by stating that it involves attentional and intentional habits, emotional dispositions, and self-regulatory capacities (Hogarth, 2000; Narvaez, 2014). Lapsley and Narvaez's (2014) conceptualization of virtue places emphasis on personality coherence, which maintains

personality processes are not independent of each other; rather they are organized into integrated and coherent systems such that patterns of interconnection within a person across different settings and over time emerge. This self-coherence drives the organization of a person's goals, preferences, values, and meaning-making system.

This conceptualization of virtue addresses most of the elements in our definition. Lapsley and Narvaez are explicit that virtue is *dispositional*, and their description of the self-coherent system shows it is both *deep-seated* and a *habit* in the sense we argued for. Further, that these dispositions occur in situationally-appropriate behavior can be understood as equivalent to *producing activities done well* on a certain reading of the standard of "appropriateness". However, they do not conceive of virtue as *contributing to flourishing*, and *producing activities not done poorly* and *in accordance with right motivation and reason*. Likewise, although it aligns with the common characteristic of *acquired by cultivation*, it is worth noting that the characterization omits discussion of whether virtues produce *activity is situated at the mean*.

Moreover, there are other elements of this understanding that fail to satisfy an intuitive understanding of virtue. For instance, one can have habitual access to moral constructs yet use them for immoral ends.⁸ Consider those who live lives of deception, always needing to ask themselves what the moral onlookers will think in order to form a plan for deceiving them. Such prolonged deception could become habitual, but we would not call it a virtue.

Schnitker et al.'s (2019) conceptualization of virtue builds upon this work and constrains what constitutes a virtue, including a component regarding motivation specifically:

⁸ Most likely the authors made intuitive judgments regarding virtues addressing the tenets *in accordance with right motivation and reason* and *not done poorly*. However, this was not explicitly laid out in their conceptualization, so we treat it as failure to address those tenets.

“...characteristic adaptations are better suited for structuring virtue as they involve agency, motivation, and at least some choice. Whereas other dispositional units of personality might lead people to adopt particular recurring patterns of prosocial behaviors (i.e., socio-emotional performance trends captured in conscientiousness or agreeableness), virtues require intentionality and motivation that are dependent upon the cognitive and emotional infrastructure provided by characteristic adaptations” (p. 279).

Schnitker and colleagues (2019) determine that for an action or behavior to be considered virtuous, is not enough to engage in a behavior that benefits the self and others; that behavior must come from a moral intention. Further, they determine that virtues are “habits acquired across time through intentional practices that involve moral beliefs, emotions, and behaviors” (Schnitker et al., 2019, p. 279).

This conceptualization of virtue meets six of the elements and a common characteristic of our definition: *dispositional*, *deep-seated*, *habit*, *produce activities done well*, and *in accordance with right motivation and reason*. It also includes the common characteristic of *acquired by cultivation*. However, it does not integrate the eudaimonist element of *contributing to flourishing* and the claim that virtues produce activities *not done poorly*, nor does it specify the common characteristic that virtuous *activity is situated at the mean*. This conceptualization does well in addressing the motivational components of virtue, but it does not include important differentia that serve to distinguish virtue from vice. As with the other developmental conceptualizations, Schnitker et al.’s (2019) conceptualization does not include all elements we argued for in our definition.

4.4 Recent Developments in the Psychological Study of Virtue

STRIVE-4 Model of Virtue. Fowers et al. (2021) recently published an article on the burgeoning science of virtue and presented a framework of virtue to help unify the patchwork nature of the empirical study of virtue. This framework, the STRIVE-4 model, suggests that virtue should be operationalized as “Scalar Traits that are **R**ole sensitive, include Situation x Trait **I**nteractions, and are related to important **V**alues that help to constitute **E**udaimonia” (Fowers et al., 2021, p. 119). Additionally, Fowers et al. (2021) conceptualize virtue as “a stable, well-motivated disposition to act in self- and other-benefitting ways on the basis of knowledge about those actions” (p. 118).

This conceptualization of virtue maps onto our definition well, incorporating elements such as *dispositional, deep-seated, habit, contributing to flourishing, and produce activities done well*. Fowers et al.’s (2021) view of virtue partially captures the idea that activities produced by virtue must be *in accordance with right motivation and reason* in that their conceptualization requires the virtue to be “well-motivated...to act in self- and other-benefitting ways.” Even though motivation is a key component of virtue, on their conceptualization motivation need not be grounded in *right reason*. Whether virtue is compatible with bad action or action *done poorly* is not directly addressed by Fowers et al.’s (2021) conceptualization.⁹ Within this conceptualization it would be possible for a disposition “to act in self- and other-benefitting ways” that also sometimes causes harm to self and/or others to qualify as a virtue.

Understanding Virtue. Wright et al.’s (2020) book *Understanding Virtue* tackles virtue definition and measurement. The authors take the view that virtues are dispositional, must be properly motivated, guided by *phronesis*, and developed over time by habituation and

⁹ Much like Lapsley and Narvaez (2014), Fowers et al. (2021) probably made intuitive judgments regarding virtues addressing the elements *in accordance with right motivation and reason* and *not done poorly*. However, this is an implicit assumption that we felt needed to be made explicit in the definition.

cultivation. Additionally, Wright and colleagues (2020) posit that motivation is central to the development and structure of virtue as it is motivation that activates thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to the virtue. This account of virtue fits most of the tenets proposed in our definition: *dispositional, deep-seated, habit, and in accordance with right motivation and reason.*

It does not include three elements we in our definition of virtue: *contributing to flourishing, producing activities done well, and not done poorly.* Wright et al. (2020) intentionally chose not to incorporate aspects of flourishing into their definition of virtue as philosophers disagree about the eudaimonist claim.¹⁰ However, it is less clear whether elements akin to *producing activities done well* and *not done poorly* can be linked to their working conception of virtue. The emphasis in their model is on the interpretive framework, motivational structure, and goals of a person with virtue—indeed for them, “appropriate motivation stands at the core of virtue manifestation” in a way reminiscent of agent-centered, sentimentalist accounts of virtue (ibid, p. 145). When it comes to behavioral outputs of virtue, they concur largely with Whole Trait Theory’s notion that increases in virtue will be exhibited by increase in paradigmatic situationally-appropriate behaviors relevant to the virtue, such that what should then be measured is consistency and frequency (ibid, pp.170-181). They indicate that it is possible to act poorly with virtue, insofar as omitting a virtuous act qualifies as acting poorly: “even those who possess full virtue can miss occasions for the exercise of virtuous action and response” (ibid, p. 17). But notice that this does not settle the question of whether a virtue can be the cause of the omission or poorly done act, for instance, if someone’s patience can cause them

¹⁰ They write, “We take no stand on the relation between virtue and flourishing here because our focus is on virtue measurement, and we wish our account to appeal to many virtue ethicists, even those not committed to the view that virtue and flourishing are linked,” (Wright et al., 2020, pp. 15-16). We have not attempted to be so ecumenical; if the construct we operationalize for measurement does not include the connection to eudaimonia so many Aristotelians take to be fundamental to virtue, then we risk not measuring the disposition they are talking about or to capture data on dispositions in addition to the virtues and conflating them.

to not speak out against a bully when justice requires it. Finally, they explicitly reject as a common feature that virtue is a mean between extremes, arguing that in many cases this artificially narrows the range of which dispositions could be appropriate (ibid, p. 16 n. 5).

5. Other Considerations of Virtue Definition and Operationalization

Our analysis of current psychological definitions of virtue necessitates refinement to align with philosophical delineation. However, there are several other key considerations that must be addressed in this question for conceptual clarity.

Phronesis. Although both philosophy and psychology are concerned with understanding virtue, the fields differ in several important ways that have ramifications for future interdisciplinary collaboration. Of the present psychological conceptualizations of virtue, the common characteristic of philosophical definitions that *activity is situated at the mean* is not met by any definitions or operationalization. This element is doubtless the most controversial across both disciplines. It is important to note that there are many theoretical psychology papers that discuss this component (e.g., Ng & Tay, 2020); however, as of yet, operationalization of this tenet has not been addressed. This is, in part, because of the complexity of the issue, as, at the very least, it invokes three constructs—the virtue, the vice of deficiency, and the vice of excess.

One solution proposed is *phronesis*. Phronesis was discussed in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and translates to “practical wisdom.” Aquinas discusses this virtue as the cardinal virtue of prudence. This practical wisdom “deals with the sphere of human action” and allows a person to deliberate, reason, and choose a course of action that is neither excessive nor deficient (Darnell et al., 2019, p. 113). Phronesis conceptualized as such could be considered as “excellence in ethical deliberation of the mean” (Darnell et al., 2019, p. 114). Lerner (2019) further defined phronesis, stating that it “involves actions reflecting the morally correct virtue, in

the correct amount, at a specific time and in a specific place” (p. 80). However, this view of phronesis has its opponents, as other accounts of phronesis position it as a “general or unified form of ethical expertise” from which all virtues spring based on what is necessitated by the context (Lapsley, 2019, p. 138). As of yet, phronesis has not been empirically investigated alongside the claim that virtue produces *activity situated at the mean* (see Lapsley, 2019 for critique of phronesis as a psychological construct).

As psychologists continue to advance the study of virtue, consideration of this element and how to accurately operationalize it is necessary because this can further inform our understanding of virtue. Such empirical work can give psychologists a more definitive answer regarding whether this is a defining feature of all virtue. Likewise, further consideration by philosophers on whether this common characteristic should be a core tenet in defining virtues is necessary. Scholars will likely make the most progress when they engage across these disciplines.

Contextual Factors. Additionally, it is important to consider the effect of contextual factors. Say, for example, that we are comparing the virtue of patience in an adolescent and a middle-aged individual. What we might extol as patience in an adolescent—perhaps resisting the urge to yell at a younger sibling—we would take as a matter of course in the middle-aged individual. It may not necessarily be considered patience for the middle-aged individual to resist yelling at a sibling, because that individual has far greater capacity for self-regulation than the adolescent. All of this is to say that the context in which virtue takes place matters. There may, in fact, be different virtues at different life stages and in different cultures (Mehari & Jeffrey, ms.). A current limitation to virtue research is that most empirical inquiry emerges from Judeo-Christian worldviews among adults, without as much consideration given to other worldviews or

developmental periods. Recent research has begun to consider other worldviews (e.g., Balkaya-Ince et al., 2020), but further investigation is necessary to determine the impact of contextual factors on virtue.

6. Conclusion

This paper reengages the conversation between the disciplines of philosophy and psychology regarding virtue definition. Following the philosophical tradition, we sought to offer a unified definition of virtue, pulling primarily from Thomist thought. We compared this definition with various psychological conceptualizations of virtue. It is clear that from the inception of positive psychology up until now, there has been progress made toward achieving a more philosophically robust definition of virtue. The more recent definitions of virtue (e.g., Fowers et al., 2021) encompass more of the tenets of virtue that we identified than earlier definitions. As the field continues to move forward, empirical research can help to adjudicate whether the common characteristics we offered, namely *acquired by cultivation* and *activity is situated at the mean*, should be incorporated as defining features, remain common characteristics, or discarded for empirical inquiry.

The historical lack of precision in how virtue is defined and operationalized is by no means a unique critique to this topic in psychology. The same critique can be applied to many other psychological science constructs, such as spirituality, behavioral addiction, trauma, bullying, or abuse (though several constructs deviate from virtues in that they began with clear definitions that became fuzzy due to concept creep; Haslam, 2016). However, the critique is a necessary one to spur researchers to create or reconstruct robust definitions that are psychologically and philosophically sound. Returning to the example of Meno and Socrates,

psychological scientists need to move away from listing the “many kinds of bees” and move toward identifying the defining features and characteristics of constructs.

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Table 1*Examination of Virtue Conceptualizations & Potential Operationalization*

Conceptualization	Definition Criteria								Other Common Characteristics	
	<i>Dispositional</i>	<i>Deep-seated</i>	<i>Habit</i>	<i>Contributing to flourishing</i>	<i>Produce activities</i>	<i>Done well</i>	<i>Not done poorly</i>	<i>In accordance with right reason and motivation</i>	<i>Acquired by cultivation</i>	<i>Activity is situated at the mean</i>
Peterson & Seligman (2004)	X	X				X		*		
Fleeson et al. (2014)	X	X				X	X	X		
Lapsley & Narvaez (2014)	X	X	X		X	X			X	
Schnitker et al. (2019)	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	
Fowers et al. (2021)	X	X	X	X	X	X		*		
Wright et al. (2020)	X	X	X		X			X	X	
Our definition	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		

Note. X indicates fully meeting the tenet. * indicates partially meeting the tenet.