Cognitive Behavioural Virtue – how to acquire Virtues

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Abstract:

The application and practice of virtue ethics raises an important question: How do we become virtuous? The pessimistic mainstream view is that virtue can only be cultivated in children who still have malleable characters and virtuous predispositions. This paper argues that even adults can cultivate virtues. We can cultivate virtues by using the empirically tested techniques of *cognitive behavioural therapy* (CBT) – if they work in the treatment of difficult problems like depression or phobias, then they should also work to ameliorate our character. This paper develops an account of cognitive behavioural virtue. To this purpose, it first introduces CBT's theoretical framework, second it shows how this framework naturally integrates with Aristotelian rather than Stoic virtue theory, third it proposes how CBT's techniques can be applied in the cultivation of virtue. Finally, it examines some of the proposal's theoretical consequences and shows its advantages over competing accounts, notably Stichter's account of virtue cultivation as skill acquisition.

Keywords: Virtue ethics; Psychotherapy; Cognitive Behavioural Therapy; Virtue cultivation; Aristotelian Virtue

Introduction

A principal purpose of virtue ethics and virtue epistemology is to be applicable for people (Sullivan 2023). Virtue theories pursue the venerable philosophical question: *How do we become good persons?* Virtue ethics aim to give agents tools to pursue virtue and avoid vice; not just describe them. The acquisition and cultivation of virtue form a key aspect for the practice of virtue ethics (Miller 2017, 469). This focus on cultivation can be traced back directly to the ancient roots of moral virtue philosophy – the question was already raised in Plato's *Republic* (2000), and ancient ethics often read like manuals. An influential example for this is the *Nicomachean Ethic* (Aristotle 2004) – a letter to

the author's son on how to behave. While analytic philosophy in general has focussed less on the application of its theories, virtue ethics and virtue epistemology have been at the forefront of this practical project.

Plato (2000) argues that knowledge of the good is sufficient to make one virtuous – he defends an essentially cognitive account of virtue. Meanwhile, the Aristotelian (2004) account of virtue is more complex. Knowledge of the good must also be accompanied by good habits. Aristotle adds a behavioural criterion to the cognitive account.

If virtue ethics is to be applied, then we need to nurture virtues in people. However, most accounts of virtue cultivation focus exclusively cultivating virtue in children (Baehr 2016; 2016; Kristjánsson 2015; Snow 2014). This follows the Aristotelian (2004, 1172a) view that our character, desires, and preferences have settled once we are adults and cannot be changed towards virtue anymore. While educating children early is certainly the most efficient way to cultivate virtue, we should not give up on adults. This paper aims to fill this gap with an applicable and empirically informed proposal.

I propose that – beyond pedagogics – psychotherapy is ideally suited to inform virtue epistemology and virtue ethics. More specifically, in this paper I will show that cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), one of the most widespread and successful therapeutic approaches, naturally meshes with virtue theories and how it can enrich our conception of moral virtue.[1] CBT is treated as the benchmark in therapy research (David, Cristea, and Hofmann 2018), consequently it is a good starting point. CBT has been inspired by Stoic ethics; but, I argue, Aristotelian virtue nevertheless is the better match for CBT given their respective psychological frameworks.

Virtues are character traits or behavioural dispositions that either are grounded in the agent's excellent motivations, or that lead to excellent behaviour by the agent (Battaly 2015). As an illustration, take the

[1] In a different vein, Porter (2015) proposes a psychoanalytic pedagogical approach to cultivate virtue in children.

virtue of honesty. It is the disposition to tell the truth whenever it is appropriate. Virtue comes in degrees: At the worst, we can have the vice of dishonesty. Less badly, we may lack both vice and virtue: You only tell the truth in circumstances where it is easy. Then there's weak ordinary honesty where you tell the truth in most appropriate circumstances, though not in cases where it is difficult. Finally, you can possess full-fledged honesty as an excellence, where you tell the truth in all cases where it is morally appropriate without exception. For Aristotle, only the last disposition counted as a genuine virtue. Note also that this account of virtue is anchored in folk psychology and Aristotelian psychology – tethering virtue accounts to models that are empirically better grounded would be a benefit.

As mentioned, most available views of virtue cultivation focus on the education of children, following Aristotle's idea that it is too hard for adults to acquire virtues. I side with Snow (2010) and Stichter (2018) who have suggested that it is nevertheless possible for adults to acquire virtues. Unfortunately, I find their proposals too unspecific – they only suggest mechanisms for virtue cultivation rather than developing the associated method and processes. I therefore propose an avenue to virtue cultivation that already has a tradition of applied practice but has been underexplored in philosophy – psychotherapy.

First, I will introduce the core ideas of cognitive behavioural therapy. I will focus on two authors foundational for CBT, namely Albert Ellis (1962) and Aaron Beck (1979). Second, I propose my cognitive behavioural account of virtue. That is, I show how Aristotelian virtues can be modelled with the tools of CBT and how acquiring these cognitive behavioural virtues is a natural extension of the clinical goals of CBT. This anchors Aristotelian virtue psychology in contemporary psychological frameworks. Finally, I will illustrate the benefits that this account has both for CBT and virtue theories with a simplified example. I also compare my proposal to competing accounts of virtue cultivation by Nancy Snow (2010) and Matt Stichter (2018).

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck developed CBT as a response to what they saw as the shortcomings of both psychoanalysis and behavioural therapy. Psychoanalysis, they argued, is too slow, and the insights gained from it rarely brings betterment (Beck 1979, 2; Ellis 1962, 4–5). Behavioural therapy is criticised as too superficial and not attacking the root issues (Beck 1979, 2).

They therefore pivoted their therapeutic practice to focus more on cognitive aspects of their clients' difficulties instead of treating the difficulties' unconscious roots or their behavioural manifestations. This pivot paralleled the emergence of a new trend in psychology: The cognitive revolution. Psychologists started to come away from the strict behaviourist paradigm and began to focus on the cognitive workings of the mind. Ellis notably relies on Magda Arnold's (1970) appraisal theory which argues that emotions are sustained by cognitive evaluations. This pivot to cognitive aspects of our psychology gave psychologists novel approaches and therapists new therapeutic tools.

CBT aims to treat emotional and behavioural disturbances. It argues that these disturbances are to a considerable degree caused or maintained by the client's cognitions, that is their (verbalisable) thinking. Take a claustrophobic panic attack as an example: S's using an elevator (A) does not warrant the intense fear (C) that is caused by it. Cognitive behavioural therapists do not stop at the simple behaviourist input-output model where (A) simply causes (C) – instead they want to examine the cognitive processes that lie between (A) and (C). This might for instance be S's thought process that 'the elevator might get stuck, and the door will not open again, and then I will suffocate in this elevator' (B). Such a thought process (B) would indeed explain the fear (C) (Beck 1979, 35–36; Ellis 1962, 126).

Targeting the thoughts or cognitions at (B) forms the centrepiece of CBT. Beck (1979) calls them "automatic thoughts". These cognitions follow "rules" that evaluate certain events as bad and underwrite fear and other negative emotions (Beck 1979, 42). Ellis (1962, 60) calls these rules

"irrational beliefs" or "irrational ideas" because he takes them to be unfounded and unhelpful. I will follow Beck's terminology because I disagree with Ellis about the irrationality of these rules – there usually is some rationale for them.

This model is based on *appraisal theory* which treats feelings and emotions as an evaluative counterpart to descriptive acceptances or perceptions. The latter represent a state of affairs as being the case; the former represent a state of affairs as good or bad along some particular dimension. For the emotion to occur, the represented object or state of affairs at hand must be *appraised* as good or bad (Kappas 2006, 955). This appraisal is essential for these theories of emotion. Concepts related to appraisal also play a key role in moral psychology (Railton 2014; Zarpentine 2016).

There are two types of appraisals: First there is automatic and fast *intuitive appraisal* which gives rise to short-lived, biologically anchored *affects* (Kappas 2006, 956) – or *feelings* to follow Ellis's (1962, 45) terminology. Affects constitute the "natural" reactions that a human organism is disposed to have in certain situations. Take the feeling of disgust that most people have when confronted with a carcass swarming with maggots – the carcass is represented as bad. This feeling or affect will soon subside once we do not see the carcass anymore, i.e. when its stimulus is missing.

Second, there is a controlled and explicit *cognitive appraisal* that gives rise to more sustained and reflected *emotions* (Beck 1979, 63–64). You can turn the feeling of disgust about the rotting carcass into a cognitively sustained emotion by thinking about all the diseases that this carcass may be harbouring and spreading. You may think about all the objects and surfaces that the carcass and the maggots have contaminated, and so on. This explicit and active cognising turns your intuitively appraised feeling of disgust into a cognitively sustained emotion. Depending on how obsessively you think about it, it can accompany you your whole day and may considerably influence your behaviour – for the worse or the better. Rumination sustains emotion. Note, that these cognitions may occur without your realising it; they may fly under the radar of your attention. You just *feel* ill at ease and disgusted as a result of the cognitive appraisal.

This distinction between intuitive and cognitive appraisal tracks a distinction from cognitive psychology: Type 1 and Type 2 cognition from *dual process theory* (Evans and Stanovich 2013). Intuitive appraisal looks like a Type 1 process: It is both fast, automatic, and uncontrolled. Cognitive appraisal looks like Type 2 cognition: Slow, explicit, subject to cognitive control. I take the intuitive/cognitive distinction to track the Type 1/Type 2 distinction (Smith and Neumann 2005).

The therapeutic goal of CBT is to first uncover the role and content of automatic thoughts for the patient in causing disturbances. Tracking such automatic thoughts or inner speech may already be quite difficult and require some work. Therapists use the above-mentioned A-B-C schema of emotion to help uncover the automatic thoughts or appraisals. While these processes are *automatic* thoughts that may escape our attention, I nevertheless would argue that these thoughts belong to Type 2 cognition. The reason for this is that, according to CBT they are in principle controllable and have an explicit, visual or verbal format. An alternative hypothesis is that the automatic thoughts that CBT targets are automatic unconscious Type 1 processes, but that clients learn to translate these Type 1 intuitive appraisals into explicit Type 2 cognitive appraisals, through Type 2 introspection in therapy.[2] For simplicity's sake, I will assume the former hypothesis, but I would argue that with some supplemental argument we could integrate the latter hypothesis into my framework (*cf.* Zarpentine 2020).

Once the automatic thoughts or cognitive appraisals (B) that feed the client's emotion (C) are uncovered, the next step is to discover the rules that support these appraisals. That is, to which fundamental convictions is the client committed that support the (automatic) inferences that the client makes? Note, that also psychoanalysis aims at uncovering such fundamental convictions, however in a less direct fashion. In the case of the above-mentioned emotion of disgust, the underlying rule will

[2] McEachrane (2009) argues that there are no thoughts, only non-verbal Type 1 affects, and therefore the emotion precedes the verbal thoughts that are confabulated *post hoc* to explain the affect. Gipps (2013) similarly argues for an embodied non-cognitive notion of feeling. This fails to recognise that even automatic Type 1 cognition and affect can be conceptual and hence translatable into verbal statements and subject to rational evaluation. It does not need to be purely perceptual or embodied.

lie in the vicinity of "maggots and carcasses are indicators of contamination and disease". In the case of claustrophobia, the rule will look something like: "When I am in a narrow enclosed space, I will not be able to get out and suffocate".

The last step in CBT is to remove and replace the harmful rule so that the client will not be caught in the thrall of their automatic thoughts (B) each time they encounter a trigger (A) for their disturbances (C). Therapists have developed diverse tools to achieve this goal. All of these interventions are attempts at *emotion regulation* for which there are different behavioural, cognitive, and chemical mechanisms (Gross 2015).

A central approach is to show that the rule at hand is unfounded and – more importantly – that it harms the client by causing them disproportionate disturbances. However, it is not as trivial as to simply convincing a client that some rule – a deeply held conviction, after all – is unfounded. It therefore helps to *replace* the rules with different more helpful rules (Ellis 1962, 94; Beck 1979, 217).

For this purpose, CBT also draws also on the techniques of other therapeutic schools. For instance, cognitive behavioural therapists also use exposure therapy, confronting clients e.g. with the objects of their phobias, to show them how the harmful rules work and how alternative rules help (DiGiuseppe and Doyle 2019, 213). To override and replace the harmful rule, it may for instance help to continuously verbalise a new, more helpful rule as a mantra ahead of and during a stressful situation.

This is a very rough sketch of the basic functioning of CBT. I bracketed many important aspects of the approach and the underlying research, but it gives us a basic idea of how CBT works. I want to flag here that while CBT is called a therapy, i.e. a method to cure a disease, this is not how it models itself. Apart from, maybe, behavioural therapy, most psychotherapies do not only aim at *healing or treating* patients; instead, they also aim at helping clients change their life (Robertson 2010). It is a common misconception to think that psychotherapies are just another treatment like medication. Consequently,

my proposal does not pathologize or medicalize deficiencies in moral character when it advocates the use of CBT (*cf.* Sadler 2013).

Cognitive Behavioural Virtue

The key idea of CBT is to help clients *change their behaviour* by helping them to *regulate their emotions*, especially by *modifying their rules and cognitive appraisals*. These things can obviously also be done when the client has no behavioural or emotional disturbances. I will argue that, as a consequence, this programme can be applied directly to the cultivation of *Aristotelian virtue*.

> For example, fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity, and in general pleasure and pain can be experienced too much or too little, and in both ways not well. But to have them at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the mean and best; and this is the business of virtue. Similarly, there is an excess, a deficiency and a mean in actions. Virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, in which excess and deficiency constitute misses of the mark, while the mean is praised and on target, both of which are characteristics of virtue. Virtue, then, is a kind of mean, at least in the sense that it is the sort of thing that is able to hit a mean. (Aristotle 2004, 1106b)

Aristotle describes virtue as emotion regulation.[3] Consequently, with CBT teaching emotion regulation, it can also help us to acquire virtue. Virtue on the Aristotelian view is the disposition to experience the right emotion, at the right time, for the right reason, and to then act accordingly. Having

[3] Carron (2021) and Stichter (2018) both have argued that Aristotelian virtue is the *skill* of emotion regulation. While I agree that a skill of emotion regulation is necessary for virtue, I do not think that it is sufficient – see my discussion of Stichter below. Note also that, differently from Carron, I do not aim to give an accurate interpretation of Aristotle's own position. This emotion-centred characterisation of virtue leaves little space for epistemic virtues which do not *prima facie* involve any emotions that need to be regulated (*cf.* Bamboulis and Bortolotti 2022).

the right emotion means making the right appraisal. This is the mechanism through which CBT can be used to cultivate virtue.

CBT analyses its clients' challenges in the A-B-C structure mentioned above. (A) is the input situation. (B) is the ensuing appraisal of the input situation. (C) is the emotional and behavioural (re)action to (A) as interpreted and appraised through (B). This structure *is a disposition*, and nothing requires that (B) and (C) need to be pathological or disturbing. An agent can strive to react *excellently* (C) to the situation (A). If an agent possesses the disposition to react excellently to a broad range of situations, then this disposition becomes a virtue.

For instance, the virtue of honesty is the disposition to be truthful across the board and to remain silent in cases where truthfulness would be harmful. To examine whether someone is honest, we have to examine the agent's behaviour (C) across all potential situations (A): If the agent is only truthful in situations where it is expedient but lies otherwise, then she exhibits the vice of dishonesty, she is a liar. If she is truthful in situations where it is easy or expected (e.g. under oath), but lies in hard cases, then she simply lacks the virtue of honesty. If she is also truthful in difficult cases, then she possesses the virtue of honesty.[4] There is also an excess in honesty – telling the truth without exception – which becomes a vice again.

This only describes the behaviourist profile of honesty with situational input (A) and behavioural output (C), it is an *Uneasy Virtue* (Driver 2004). Given my cognitive behavioural model, there is also a cognitive layer (B): This corresponds to what Aristotelian virtue ethicists call the motivational layer – the behaviour must be motivated by a desire for the good. This motivation is an appraisal and therefore has a cognitive aspect of how the agent conceives of the situation and an affective aspect of

[4] Note that this framing of virtue involves an agent's being situation-sensitive and therefore already incorporates the situationist challenge to virtue ethics (Doris 2002). Full-blown virtue exactly means that one has stable dispositions across situations. Snow's (2010) account of virtue goes the same situation-sensitive route as can be seen below.

how the agent evaluates the situation. The non-virtuous agent will for instance conceptualise telling the truth as shameful (B) in this situation and therefore avoid the shame by telling a lie (C). The honest agent on the other hand will conceptualise that in this specific situation (A) everyone knowing the relevant aspects is the best outcome (B), and therefore tell the truth (C).

This proposal differs from the Stoically inspired goals of CBT. The dispositions that CBT traditionally aims to train and instil are explicitly not Aristotelian virtues. Instead, it aims to reduce harm to self and others that is produced by pathological appraisals. Robertson (2010, 95) explicitly rejects the notion of virtue as too morally loaded; this goes hand in hand with Ellis's therapeutic outlook. Instead, they aim to give clients tools to reach Stoic, emotionally detached, *ataraxia* which differs from emotionally engaged Aristotelian virtue.

The therapist's goal is simply to help her client to avoid the emotional distress that arises for the client from certain situations, to help the client cope with said emotional distress if it does occur, and to change her or his life in ways to change and replace the distressing situations. Compare this to the strategies of emotion regulation (Gross 2015). This requires rules and appraisals, geared quite narrowly towards managing emotional distress, e.g. replacing the rule "I will suffocate in small enclosed spaces" with the rule "elevators are the safest means of transport". Consequently, the rules and appraisals that a therapist helps to bring about are usually different from the rules and appraisals that would underwrite cognitive behavioural virtue.

Virtuous appraisals need to be considerably more demanding. While CBT only examines the appraisal (B) of the situation (A), cognitive behavioural virtue requires an additional appraisal. Virtue does not simply react to a situation as good or bad for the agent; it is sensitive to the more abstract potential for goodness or badness for everyone. Virtue requires an appraisal of truth, fairness, wellbeing, *et cetera* as good, and this appraisal implies that the virtuous agent *feels* that realising these values in this situation is good.

Just feeling that these values are good in the abstract (B) does not yet make a virtuous agent. The appraisal might remain in the abstract without any real consequence.[5] Instead, the virtuous agent's appraisal of the abstract good must be applied to the situation (A). That is, she must appraise this situation insofar as it may produce or undermine goods like truth, fairness, or wellbeing.

I do not think that these two appraisals are merged into one because the first, intuitive, appraisal of a situation simply is the automatic reaction that we have to a situation. It generates the affects of "fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity" (Aristotle 2004, 1106b), and these affects can be valuable and useful to have in principle. Zarpentine (2020) calls this underlying neurological structure our "affective engine" that motivates us to act. The second, cognitive, appraisal, calculating in more abstract goods, modulates them into sustained emotions to hit the right mean in light of the goods that are relevant in this situation.

To return to our example of honesty: Also honest persons will sometimes have the intuitive inclination not to tell the truth, be it because they are ashamed of it or afraid of others' reaction to the truth. Nevertheless, honest persons are not steered by this shame and fear, instead they appraise truthfulness as a greater value that merits confronting shame and others' reactions. Thus, this second appraisal modulates their shame and fear but it does not eliminate it.

Virtuous behaviour (C) is a product of this two-fold appraisal (B): An intuitive appraisal of the situation (A) and a cognitive appraisal of the values realisable or threatened in (A). These appraisals generate a modulated emotion that hits the appropriate mean confronting this situation. This virtuous emotion then motivates the resulting behaviour (C).

This cognitive behavioural model of virtue fits well with Nancy Snow's (2010) psychological model of virtue. Snow argues that virtue is anchored in our cognitive affective processing system (CAPS) as

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[5] This arguably is a special type of *akrasia*. For the psychology of akrasia, see (Murray 2015).

developed by Mischel and Shoda (1995). The system consists of modules which are dedicated to particular situations: If the agent classifies something as a specific situation, then the CAPS module activates and produces a specific behavioural reaction in response. The CAPS model was developed to explain the data from situationist psychological research: Not the situation itself determines agents' behaviour but rather the agents' interpretation of the situation.[6]

Snow argues that virtues are the disposition to activate particular CAPS-modules in the appropriate situations. This disposition arises if the modules are repeatedly activated in these situations thereby habituating the disposition to more easily activate the modules (Snow 2010, 31). The structure of CAPS-virtues matches my account of cognitive behavioural virtue: Both CBT and the CAPS-approach take some situation as the input which the agent interprets both cognitively and affectively. The agent's resultant behaviour can then be explained in light of this interpretation. This is no coincidence: Mischel himself argues that the CAPS model is of the same theoretical mold as the practice of cognitive behavioural therapy (Mischel 2004).

Above, I indicated that intuitive and cognitive appraisal are arguably distinct types of cognition. Intuitive appraisal is a kind of Type 1 cognition – fast, automatic, and heuristic. Cognitive appraisal is a kind of Type 2 cognition – slow, controlled, and deductive. Cognitive behavioural virtue, as I just sketched it above, is centrally based on our cognitive appraisal. An agent needs Type 2 cognition, to become virtuous in this sense, modulating and regulating their intuitive response.

This tracks the notion of responsibilist epistemic Type 2 virtue defended by Ohlhorst (2022). However, the epistemic Type 2 virtues do not have an affective component. They are purely cognitive, although they require a love of truth as an appraisal. They are defined as the disposition of a Type 2 process to

[6] Snow is motivated to introduce the CAPS model of virtue because it offers an empirically supported response to the situationist challenge. By now she has modified her account. For simplicity's sake, I will remain with the old model because it includes sketches of an account of virtue cultivation. I am, however, not committed to the *modularity* of situation-sensitive dispositions.

function excellently and do best what a Type 2 process does. Appraisal is a cognitive process which is integrated with the cogniser's emotional life. Consequently, cognitive behavioural virtues are an emotional-behavioural instance of these responsibilist Type 2 virtues. Stichter (2018, 78) also notes the important role that Type 1 and Type 2 cognition play for our virtues.

Cultivating cognitive behavioural virtue

How can we then cultivate virtue through CBT? The process would arguably follow these six steps:

1. Identify the lacking virtue or the vice that the agent wants to change.
2. Identify situations in which this virtue should be operating, notably both situations with low and high stakes.
3. Identify the operant automatic thoughts and appraisals in the pertinent situations and examine how they keep the agent from acting virtuously.
4. Identify the rules behind these automatic thoughts and appraisals.
5. Develop new rules that embody the values of the target virtue, truthfulness in the case of honesty for example.
6. Try to implement these rules, replacing the old rules. The new rules need to be quite deeply anchored and become habitual in order to actually influence the agent's appraisal. They may be implemented through practices like:
    a. Meditating the rule, i.e. thinking about it carefully.
    b. Exercising the rule by seeking out situations where it becomes operant. This is the CBT approach to exposure therapy.
    c. Observe the old non-virtuous appraisals and try to supersede them with new virtuous cognitive appraisals.

These steps do not have to happen sequentially; they may be done in parallel. This also is not the only possible way to become virtuous. Rather, it is a CBT-inspired proposal how acquiring a virtue can be

done comparatively efficiently. Compare it to Snow's proposal for virtue cultivation: She focuses on training yourself to activate particular CAPS-modules by focussing our attention on relevant situations and attempting to avoid virtue-suppressing factors (Snow 2010, 34).

Her approach focuses on reinforcing and broadening extant cognitive dispositions with the Mencian[7] method of extending compassion from the close to the remote. My proposal is not limited to reinforcing extant dispositions, but it can also extirpate vicious dispositions[8] or generate entirely new ones. It can do this because, like CBT, it aims to transform our interpretation of a given situation. This promises to be an efficient method because CBT itself is an efficient method to achieve emotional and behavioural change in often considerably more difficult situations, for instance, in dealing with depression or personality disorders (Dobson, McEpplan, and Dobson 2019).

Clearly this proposal is much too rough and needs considerable further development. But developing a proper and detailed protocol for virtue cultivation on the basis of CBT's protocols would be beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I want to present an example how these steps might look for an individual trying to become more virtuous as a very rough sketch.

Let us return to honesty as a virtue. Behaviourally speaking, it is the disposition to tell the truth in all circumstances where it is appropriate, even if this creates problems for the honest person. Although being virtuously honest does not require telling the truth under any and every possible circumstance, as some Kantians might have us believe. Also in truth-telling, there is an ideal mean and there can be too much information. Motivationally, meanwhile, honesty requires a desire and love for the truth. The virtuously honest person needs to appraise telling the truth in a situation as a good in itself.

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[7] For a discussion of Mencius' account of virtue cultivation, see (Slingerland 2014, 146–49).

[8] For this purpose, Zarpentine (2023, 6–7) proposes relying on one particular affective mechanism: associating vicious behaviour with aversive emotions through cognitive training.

Consider Honesto who is not honest. He is a habitual white liar. The lies he tells never cross a certain line. Still, ultimately, one of Honesto's lies turns bad and a friend of his is hurt as a consequence. Honesto realises that he did wrong, and he resolves to change his lying ways. Unfortunately, his lying is habitual. He cannot help it. In all kinds of situations, he distorts the truth or lies straight out.

Honesto tells his friend Clara that he wants to quit his lying habit, but that he finds it impossible. At the first opportunity, a new lie escapes his lips. Luckily for Honesto, Clara has just read this paper and she proposes that they go through the steps that I proposed above. Honesto arguably already made step number 1., he realises that he needs to become more honest. So step number 2. is finding out in which situations he is prone to lie. Let us say, he feels the temptation to lie every time that a situation could turn out embarrassing for him.

In step 3. Honesto and Clara identify the things that Honesto is thinking in such situations. For example, he might think: "Oh no, if I tell them the truth, they will look down on me and I will feel embarrassed." In step 4., they try to find the presuppositions, i.e. rules, of these thoughts. Suppose the rule is: "I cannot have others think embarrassing things about me, even if they are true."

With this investigatory groundwork laid, Honesto and Clara take on step 5., finding some alternative and better rule. They settle on the rule "if it does not harm people, then I should tell the truth, even if it is embarrassing." Honesto abstractly subscribes to this rule, but it is not anchored in his belief set in a way to actually influence his appraisals or behaviour. It remains inert.

Now the last and hardest step comes: Honesto needs to deeply anchor the rule and make it a part of his character which influences his appraisals. With Clara's help, Honesto does the things suggested in this paper and more: He meditates about why he should be telling the truth, and about circumstances that might excuse not telling it. He examines why the instances in which he tended to lie are cases where he should have told the truth instead. He starts to force himself into telling the truth: At first simply as an exercise with Clara, where he tries to tell her embarrassing truths about himself as a kind of exposure

therapy. At a later stage he starts doing the same with others. A further practice that Honesto tries to pursue is to pay attention to what he is thinking in his everyday life, especially in cases where he risks feeling embarrassed. When he comes across an appraisal of something as embarrassing, tempting him to lie, he instead tells himself: I could tell them the truth here, and sometimes he does it.

With these practices and further devices that Clara and Honesto cook up together, Honesto slowly loses his aversion of telling the truth in these situations. He is becoming honest. This is a slow process, occasionally he still feels the temptation to lie and ends up lying, but he also finds a certain pleasure in telling people the truth. It makes him more relaxed to not have to be on the lookout for embarrassing things.

Fast-forward one year: Honesto rarely ever thinks about the honesty regimen that he developed with Clara. He may at times still be tempted to lie, but his cognitive habits firmly supersede his giving in, even in difficult situations. The new rule has become truly operant even though he may not think about it explicitly anymore. By being honest, Honesto has become a much more open person whose joyful honesty impresses others. Honesto has acquired the cognitive behavioural virtue of honesty.

This example is vastly simplified and only a sketch of how this process could work. However, the approach expounded in the example can partially rely on the empirically informed foundation that CBT offers, therefore it is not pure speculation.

You may worry that I essentially skipped over the most important step in this example. How do you bring someone to realise that they have to change? Is the will to change not enough already? First, if the example I proposed here has even minimal realism, then the simple will to change is not sufficient for change. Changing one's character requires considerably more work. But I agree that, in this example, I already presupposed the will to acquire a specific virtue.

However, second, I do not think that the desire to better oneself and to become more virtuous is that rare. It may be unearthed with a simple conversation, asking what someone would like to change about

themselves if they could do it with the flick of a wand. Indeed, people who do not recognise that they should change for the better do not simply lack virtue, but arguably they possess a certain kind of vice. How to give someone the desire to lose their vices is a considerably more difficult question that may require an entire book for itself.

Note that this is a narrow-band approach to cultivating virtue. It helps you cultivate single virtues like courage, honesty, or patience. Consequently, we cannot directly train a broad-band virtue like justice with these techniques; justice requires the acquisition of narrow virtues as a precondition. This is analogous to CBT's approach of treating single syndromes, e.g. particular phobias or a depression, rather than just abstractly cultivating general mental health and well-being. The more broad-band goods are acquired by cultivating the narrow goods.

Virtue beyond pathology or skill

My account of cognitive behavioural virtue does not only give an empirically informed account of virtue and its acquisition, it also expands the philosophical psychology of cognitive behavioural therapy. Given its therapeutic goals, traditional CBT is focussed on helping patients function and cope with their life; it does not aim at making agents excellent.

This decidedly pragmatical bent can be seen exemplarily both in the most detailed philosophical account of CBT by Robertson (2010) and in Ellis's (1962) own work. The latter explicitly subscribes to a thin "hedonist-stoical" account of morality where the principal goal is for the patient to be able to live without too many disturbances (Ellis 1962, 123–24). Similarly, Robertson emphasises this pragmatic and Stoic approach to the agent's moral life. For instance, he explicitly rejects virtue ethics as too Christian and moralising (Robertson 2010, 95). This is the principal difference between Stoic and Aristotelian virtue: The former aims at helping the individual reach *ataraxia* and at the goal of becoming a Stoic sage who is unperturbed by the world's afflictions. The latter aims at making the individual into a valuable member of society by making the individual honest, brave, and just.

This thin, individualistic morality is due to the primarily therapeutic function of CBT: The goal of therapists is not to help their clients become excellent moral agents. Instead, they simply aim to help patients overcome their mental health issues. For this purpose, a thin, pragmatical, and individualistic moral framework may be more helpful than a morally demanding virtue ethic. Though Gipps (2013) criticises this Stoic perspective as alienating.

Cognitive behavioural virtue shows, however, that the framework can also be ethically ambitious and emotionally engaged. CBT can not only be used to help agents to deal with their phobias; it can also serve to help them become excellent. This does not entail that Ellis's and Robertson's Stoic considerations about CBT as a therapeutic approach are mistaken. It is an empirical question which degree of moral demandingness is most helpful for patients who struggle with mental health issues, and, plausibly, asking clients to become virtuous could be counterproductive.

Nevertheless, we can consider extending the Aristotelian cognitive behavioural virtue framework into therapeutic practice. Cognitive behavioural virtue as a therapeutic practice would aim not at inculcating virtue but also at extirpating vice. Vices are the virtues' excessive counterparts: Dispositions to experience a particular emotion too intensely and to be harmfully guided by it – e.g. an excess of fear is cowardice. As Alvarez-Segura, Echavarria, and Vitz (2017) argue, our vices have striking parallels with a range of psychiatric diagnoses, and Sadler (2013) explores the historical and conceptual tensions between vice and mental illness. For instance, situation-specific cowardice matches the profile of phobias. Arguably, the CBT-method that I proposed above could also be used to get rid of a vice. Consequently, a therapist might also be guided by an Aristotelian ethical framework in their therapeutic practice.

Finally, I want to examine a competing account of virtue and virtue acquisition: Drawing on Aristotle and psychological research, Matt Stichter (2018) argues that virtue is a skill. His core argument is that acquiring a virtue is just like acquiring a skill (Aristotle 2004, 1103a). It is the product of sustained training, i.e. intentional and motivated habituation to acquire certain behavioural dispositions. Stichter

and I agree that virtue requires self-regulation. However, we disagree on the psychological mechanism underlying virtuous self-regulation (Stichter 2018, 59–60).

Stichter considers virtue to be the skill or expertise that is required to follow a moral standard. However, for him, moral standards are psychological, they are whatever the agent takes to be moral, and be it the standards of chess (Stichter 2018, 62; MacIntyre 1981, 88). Virtue is then the skill to satisfy these standards, ideally automatically, because it has become a Type 1 skill (Stichter 2018, 61). Just like the standards of driving are automatically satisfied by our Type 1 skills.

I reject this separation of virtue and morality: Virtue as a character disposition must encode moral standards. This distinguishes my view of virtue from the virtue-as-skill account in two ways.

First, when you are virtuous on my view, then you cannot help but pursue the moral standard, while the exercise of skills and the satisfaction of their standards is optional. To recall Aristotle's adage: You can intentionally exercise a skill badly. A skilful driver can for example intentionally drive badly. Even an automated Type 1 skill can be suppressed, less so emotional and affective evaluations. You cannot act viciously or non-virtuously if you are virtuous because you wouldn't be virtuous acting this way (Aristotle 2004, 1105b, 1140b). A (courageous) person who acts cowardly is not really courageous (Zagzebski 1996, 107). Once you have virtuous appraisals you cannot help but be motivated by them.

Second, if moral virtue is just the skill to pursue (any) moral standards, then you can exhibit virtue in the pursuit of vicious moral standards. A fascist pursuing his clearly flawed goals with self-regulatory skill would count as morally virtuous (See also Zagzebski 1996, 92–93). I would argue that vicious moral standards in such a case undermine the respective skills' virtue status – these skills are just a simulacrum of virtue. If morality is not part and parcel of virtue, but rather something external that the morally skilful agent can pursue, then virtue would be a mere auxiliary to morality. This is too weak a notion of moral virtue. Cold emotion regulation alone is insufficient; virtue needs the warm motivational push from our affective and emotive dispositions.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Aristotelian virtue has striking parallels with the theoretical framework of CBT. On the one hand, this broadens the empirically informed foundations for virtue theory – integrating nicely with and expanding on Snow's (2010) account of virtue as anchored in our cognitive affective processing system. On the other hand, it gives us an empirically tested framework to model the acquisition of virtues also for adults, namely cognitive behavioural therapy. Acquiring virtue for adults is typically considered to be either too difficult or impossible. This is a proposal how to apply virtue ethics in everyday practice: By cultivating our virtues through CBT's tools.

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