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Positive psychology and virtue: Values in action

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the issues and themes that were discussed on an interdisciplinary panel which occurred at the American Philosophical Association's pacific division meeting in April of 2017. The panel focused on the connections between the VIA classification of virtues and character strengths in psychology and virtues and the Aristotelian approach to virtue in philosophy. Three key themes emerged from the papers presented at this panel: 1) the nature of the relationship between virtues and character strengths on the VIA model; 2) the extent to which the conceptions of virtues and character strengths are best understood as universal or culturally-embedded; and 3) the reliability of using self-report measurements to measure character strengths. This paper serves to frame papers that resulted from that panel and were incorporated into this special issue of the *Journal of Positive Psychology*.

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Introduction

During an exciting time of increased interdisciplinary work between philosophers and psychologists, especially at the intersection of moral psychology and virtue ethics, the connections between virtue theory (in philosophy) and the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues (in psychology) have yet to be explored in much depth (see though, Kristjánsson, 2013, for an exception). This is a tad surprising, as Peterson and Seligman (2004) explicitly drew inspiration from an Aristotelian approach to virtue, in forming their views on virtues and character strengths. Given their interest in capturing philosophical views of virtue, and the great interest philosophers are taking these days in psychological foundations for virtue, an exchange between the two sides can prove beneficial in driving further interdisciplinary work that strengths both fields.

This special issue draws together work presented at the American Philosophical Association's pacific division meeting in April of 2017. The purpose of the panel was to discuss the connections and disconnections between the VIA classification of character strengths in psychology and virtues and the Aristotelian approach to virtue in philosophy. The panel brought together philosophers and psychologists including Hyemin Han (educational psychology), Christian Miller (philosophy), and Nancy Snow (philosophy) offering evaluations of the VIA approach, along with Robert McGrath (a psychologist

and a senior scientist at the VIA Institute on Character) offering a reply. The panel was organized by Matt Stichter, who is on the programming committee of the pacific division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, with advice from Christian Miller, and chaired by Leland Saunders. In this special issue we include the papers presented in this panel along with a response to critiques by Robert McGrath. This introduction serves to provide an overview of the issues and themes raised during this panel and highlight key issues related to virtue and the VIA model that will help frame these papers.

One difficulty in comparing the approaches in philosophy and psychology, which is not uncommon to interdisciplinary work in general, is the use of key terms with different conceptual content. So in comparing and contrasting the two approaches, it will be useful to note some of these differences at the start. For example, in virtue theory in philosophy, the term 'virtue' is usually understood as an acquired character trait that it is good to possess. In this sense, virtues are directly predicated of people. This was one important point that came out of the discussion at the panel. People have traits of honesty or generosity, for example. In the VIA classification, by contrast, a distinction is made between virtues and character strengths. While virtues are defined as valuable characteristics, they seem to represent merely abstract categories, as character strengths are defined as 'the psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms – that define the virtues' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). So it is instead

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character strengths that are directly predicated of people, such as mercy or prudence. This distinction between virtues and character strengths in the VIA model turns out to be one of the three main problems that will be addressed by the papers, along with the extent to which the conceptions of virtues and character strengths are best understood as universal or culturally-embedded, and the reliability of using self-report measurements to measure character strengths.

In regards to the first issue surrounding the distinction between virtues and character strengths, there are 6 virtues in the VIA model, and they appear to play a taxonomic role with respect to the 24 character strengths, with each virtue forming a hierarchy with 3 to 5 character strengths falling under it, in something akin to a genus-species relation. This difference leads to significant questions about how to understand the relationship between virtue and character strengths, as noted in some of the exchanges between panel members as described below. For example, it is not clear that a virtue such as wisdom is necessarily exhausted by the character strengths that fall under it.

Furthermore, questions arise regarding what purpose is served by this more abstract categorization of virtues. One possibility, raised by McGrath, is that it might address an enumeration problem posed by Daniel Russell (2009). Russell was concerned with requiring people to acquire and exercise virtues to live well, while being confronted with the possibility of an endless list of virtues to acquire and exercise. A taxonomy that limits the number of potential virtues is one way to handle the concern, and Russell provides a theory of the cardinal virtues that does this, where virtues are grouped together by their characteristic reasons for action.

Perhaps the virtues on the VIA classification can be seen as playing a similar role to Russell's cardinal virtues. However, it is important to note that with Russell's approach, the cardinal virtues are still virtues that people can possess, as opposed to merely serving a classificatory role. Furthermore, it is not clear that this will support how some of the character strengths are grouped together, such as the strengths of mercy and prudence both falling under the virtue of temperance, as they seem to be responding to very different reasons for action.

However, a more promising route may lie with McGrath's revision of the VIA taxonomy, which differs from the original approach by grouping the character strengths into 3 main categories of caring, inquisitiveness, and self-control (McGrath, Greenberg, & Hall-Simmonds, 2018). Here we can see some similarities to virtue theory, as this approximates the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues, along with a separate category for the virtues of 'willpower' (see Roberts, 1984). An advantage of this approach is that it is clearer that what ties the virtues

together under a particular category is the kind of end they aim at (be it moral, epistemic, or self-regulation in general). That might further help in separating out different programs for guiding character education and virtue development (see Han article, this issue). However, with this new taxonomy, there may then be pressure on the account to make room for the original 6 virtues (such as wisdom and justice) in the list of character strengths, as they would otherwise disappear altogether from the account.

Related to the taxonomy issue is Peterson and Seligman's claim that a fundamental criterion for something to count as a character strengths is that it 'is morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pg. 19). While this does connect up well with a neo-Aristotelian approach to moral virtue, according intrinsic value and not merely instrumental value to a character strength, it raises a few questions as well. On McGrath's approach, some character strengths are specifically intellectual or prudential, so they need not connect at all to specifically moral ends.

This might be addressed by simply removing the reference to 'morally' in 'morally valued', while preserving the idea that character strengths are intrinsically valued. However, the measurement tool for assessing character strengths relies on self-reporting, and may not ask the right kind of questions to assess the degree to which someone has a character strength. A point Miller raises in his discussion, is that the questionnaire does not ask questions regarding the motivations of the person, and so it will be left unclear as to whether the people who engaged in behavior associated with a character strength did so for solely instrumental reasons. But likely this could be corrected for, to some degree, with additional measurement tools.

While the self-reporting aspect of the VIA survey may have some limitations, overall it appears to be a useful assessment tool for the purposes of character education. As Han notes, character strength measurements have been reliably associated with positive psychological indicators. That should be good news to virtue theorists, especially those who are also working on educational issues.

One issue that complicates character education, though, is whether the character strengths and virtues should be understood and taught as universal, or rather as culturally-embedded. The VIA model certainly aspires to universality, though Snow raises a number of concerns about how the model falls short of such aspirations. Though to be fair, philosophers have long made claims to the universality of virtue, without putting into anywhere near the effort that Peterson and Seligman did in studying different cultural traditions. While many cultures may have a concept of justice, there may be significant differences in their

conceptions of justice, such that grouping them altogether under the heading of 'justice' may introduce a bias towards the western conception. Snow suggests that to avoid such bias, and to really get at a culturally-embedded understanding of character strengths, would likely require techniques such as interviews with people within those cultures.

Furthermore, in discussion at the panel, Stichter raised a concern that if character strengths are understood in terms of cultural embeddedness, and one is encouraged to further develop such character strengths in character education, it could lead to promoting a kind of conservatism that comes with fitting into your particular culture. That is, without an element of critical reflection as part of the VIA model, there is the danger that character education becomes all about fitting into existing society, rather than helping to change society for the better. In virtue theory, practical wisdom (or *phronesis*) is a virtue that plays this role of critical reflection, and practical wisdom's omission from the VIA model is a point that all the panelists touched on.

This is, of course, only a glimpse at the issues that are ripe for exploration between these two approaches to virtue. With that brief overview, we turn now to some of the specific themes that emerged from the panel presentations and the ensuing discussion.

Emerging themes

Three authors were invited to offer criticisms of, and suggestions for the VIA model (Han, Miller, Snow). Each author developed a number of thoughtful and substantive criticisms of the VIA model that deserve careful attention. The aim of this section is not to provide a summary of each paper (which we invite you to read in this special issue), but to develop themes that emerge across the papers, and point to the ways in which these themes relate to each other. Though these papers reflect different disciplinary foci, and different sets of interests, three central themes emerge: (1) the consistency of the VIA model with the Aristotelian conception of morality; (2) the empirical support for the virtues in the VIA model; (3) and the meaningfulness of the VIA-IS measurement tool. This section will characterize these themes, and briefly conclude by highlighting how McGrath proposed these criticisms can be addressed.

Is the VIA model consistent with the Aristotelian conception of morality?

Both Han and Miller addressed the VIA model explicitly in the context of Aristotelian moral philosophy, and while they both think that philosophers that have interest in empirical approaches to virtue and happiness will find

much to like about VIA, they are both concerned with the omission of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, from the model. *Phronesis* in the Aristotelian tradition is the character trait of knowing how to act well in a particular situation – knowing what to do, at the right time, and in the right way. This is quite different than the virtue of wisdom enumerated in the VIA model. Han and Miller both argued that a character trait such as *phronesis* is necessary to any Aristotelian account of morality because it figures centrally in adjudicating conflicts among virtues and among character strengths, and they both agree that omitting *phronesis* from the VIA model marks a significant and deleterious departure from Aristotelian moral theory. Han was particularly concerned that the omission of *phronesis* from the VIA model severs the link between virtue and flourishing (*eudaimonia*), which is essential to Aristotelian moral theory, and the task of moral justification needed to properly ground moral education. This connects *phronesis* to another central theme in Han's argument, which is the need to distinguish two conceptions of happiness, *hedonia* (subjective well-being) and *eudemonia* (objective well-being) in studies that measure associations between VIA character strengths and positive psychological indicators.

While Han and Miller agreed that the omission of *phronesis* is serious problem for the VIA model, they also agree that the structure of the VIA model allows for the possibility of adding it in. Miller explicitly stated that there is nothing directly about the VIA model that rules out the addition of *phronesis*. However, a significant difference between Han and Miller was how well they thought the current VIA model could accommodate it. Han suggested that *phronesis* could be added to the top-level of the VIA model as a second-order virtue with corresponding second-order character strengths that regulate and moderate other first-order character strengths and virtues. Han proposed this as an open empirical question that should be addressed by future research. Miller agreed that adding *phronesis* to the top of the VIA model is '[t]he obvious fix,' but he concluded by tentatively suggesting that the virtues in the current VIA model be replaced by *phronesis*, so that all character strengths (and weaknesses) are related directly to it. This would mark a significant revision to the current VIA model. Moreover, this suggestion by Miller is not based solely on the need to accommodate *phronesis* in the model; it is directly related to the second theme that emerges in these papers: the relationship between character strengths and virtues.

Is there empirical support for the virtues in the VIA model?

The VIA model is hierarchical, with several character strengths collected under a single virtue, for example,

the character strengths of bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality are all collected under the virtue of courage. Han argued that there are good empirical reasons for this hierarchical structure, and that this is consistent with Aristotelian moral theory. Both Miller and Snow, however, were skeptical of the empirical support for the virtues in the VIA model.

Miller raised a number of issues with regard to the role of virtues in the VIA model, but one issue that bears importantly on this second theme is that the conceptual connection between character strengths and the virtues is unclear. There are many possible ways that character strengths and virtues can be related, but none of them are free of serious problems, which makes it unclear what role the virtue level of the VIA model is playing. Moreover, he argued that at least one factor analysis casts doubt on the many-to-one relationship given by the VIA model (many character strengths under one virtue), and instead it supports a many-to-many relationship (many character strengths belong to many virtues). While this is just one study, it points to a deeper methodological worry with the VIA model shared by Miller and Snow. The worry is that the VIA classification scheme does not emerge directly from empirical research, but instead from the theoretical commitments of VIA researchers: a claim for which there is good textual evidence from VIA researchers. For Miller, this means that philosophers cannot look to VIA as a strictly empirical classification of virtue, and will have to recognize that the VIA hierarchy is not strictly theory neutral. Snow would seem to agree, and she is concerned that the theoretical commitments of VIA researchers introduces bias towards western values, which in turn raises serious questions about the cross-cultural validity of the VIA model.

Many of Snow's concerns will be familiar to those working in comparative philosophy, but one important strand is that the meaning of specific virtue terms varies cross-culturally because of how they are situated in certain metaphysical commitments and sense-making narratives and practices. So, it is not at all clear, for example, that what Americans or Plato or Aristotle mean by 'justice' can be rightly thought to be what Confucians mean by 'li' and 'yi,' and good reasons for thinking that they do not. Categorizing all of these different senses of 'justice' under a single virtue of justice in the VIA model eliminates these distinct culturally-embedded meanings. Of course, on some level of abstraction it is possible to find similarities between 'justice' and 'li' and 'yi,' but Snow was concerned that without a proper appreciation of how these moral notions are embedded in their cultural contexts that such cross-cultural similarity judgments gloss over important differences that give the appearance that various moral notions are much more aligned cross-culturally than they

really are. This putative alignment, however, will be due to failing to notice differences, rather than genuine agreement. Moreover, the problem is compounded by the decision of VIA researchers to omit certain traditions or traditional texts when those traditions or texts failed to align, in the judgment of VIA researchers with emerging trends. The worry here is that such judgments of alignment and similarity, degree of difference, failure of fit, and the inclusion or exclusion of certain texts implicitly relies on the cultural understandings of the researchers, and so introduce a bias towards western values.

What does VIA-IS measure?

Another related worry that emerges from both Miller and Snow relates to the VIA-IS measure. Snow was concerned with the cross-cultural validity of the VIA-IS measure, given that the meaning of constructs such as 'forgiveness' can vary across cultures, among different groups within a culture, and across time. For example, how a person understands 'forgiveness' may depend not just on their own culture, but their social position within that culture, and the social roles that person occupies. Moreover, its contemporary meaning within a culture can differ dramatically from the classical sources used in constructing VIA. The overall concern is that we do not really know what VIA-IS is measuring when it says it is measuring a construct such as 'forgiveness' cross-culturally or even among different members in the same culture. Perhaps a more interesting route for future research, Snow suggested, is to use the VIA-IS tool to discover whether certain strengths emerge or cluster together in different cultures, instead of seeking cross-cultural validity.

Miller raised a different set of concerns regarding the VIA-IS measure, which have more to do with its lack of fit with how contemporary philosophers understand virtue. In the Aristotelian tradition, virtue requires not just acting correctly, but having the right thoughts, feelings, and motivations. Being kind, for example, requires not just giving to others, but giving for the right reasons. The VIA-IS measure, however, predominantly focuses on overt behaviors, and not motivations. There are a few motivational questions, but those are notoriously hard to measure given the possibility of unconscious motives, *post hoc* confabulation, and mixed motives. More problematically is that contemporary philosophers understand virtues to be both threshold notions and to come in degrees. That is, a person must satisfy some threshold condition for having a virtue or a vice, but one can possess a virtue or vice in degrees. In between the thresholds is some indeterminate area, where perhaps most people fall, and what Miller calls mixed traits. VIA-IS, on the other hand, measures degrees of character strengths, and the model suggests that

everyone possesses each character strength in some degree. That is, it suggests that everyone possesses honesty to some degree. There are two important points about this, for Miller. One is that Aristotelian moral theorists typically think that there are character weaknesses as well as character strengths. On this picture, some people are dishonest, not merely weakly honest. (Miller raised this point at another point in the discussion, but it applies here as well). Second, this violates a critical philosophical assumption regarding the exclusivity of virtue and vice terms, e.g. if a person is honest, they are not at the same time and in the same way dishonest. This understanding of virtue is not reflected in the VIA-IS tool.

A reply in defense of the VIA model

These are three themes that emerged from the presentations on the panel, and now to briefly highlight the avenues the McGrath pursued in his response. With regards to the first theme, that the VIA model is not consistent with Aristotelian moral theory, McGrath wondered why people think it should be. He noted that many of the character strengths enumerated in the VIA model have no particular moral focus, and so do not need moral justification such as aiming at *eudemonia*. Similarly, McGrath argued that *phronesis*, which is important to Aristotelian moral theory, is not the sort of thing that can be added to the VIA model because it is not, strictly speaking, the correct sort of psychological kind. On the second theme, of the empirical support for the virtues on the VIA model, McGrath argued that character strengths and the virtues are aimed at different levels analysis, and so it is not a problem that they are not conceptually related. Moreover, the different levels of analysis defuse the worry regarding western bias, because some levels are more conceptual, but others are empirically-derived. Lastly, on the theme of the VIA-IS measure, McGrath argued that there is an important way in which the virtues in the VIA model are cross-culturally universal, even though their meanings will vary, but this is all that is needed to show that the virtues in the VIA model are cross-

culturally valid. Moreover, he argued that the Aristotelian picture of vice is too simplistic, and that a more nuanced account of character strengths, weaknesses, excess, and absence, can be derived from the VIA model.

Conclusions

We invite you to consider these points for yourself as you read the papers within this special issue. We attempted to capture the key points and synthesis as they arose during our interdisciplinary panel, but fully acknowledge that in reflection and revision, the points and synthesis contained in these special issue papers have continued to develop since that presentation. We appreciate the opportunity to continue this important dialogue with a wider community of philosophers and psychologists and to bring these papers to the pages of the *Journal of Positive Psychology*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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