

# Moral Transformation, Identity, and Practice

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**Abstract:** Standard ways of conceptualizing moral development and measuring pedagogical interventions in ethics classes privilege the growth of moral judgment over moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral habits by too often conflating improvement in moral judgment with holistic moral development. I argue here that if we care about students' construction and cultivation of their ethical selves, our assessment design principles ought to take seriously the transformative possibilities of philosophy as a way of life and be based on a more robust and holistic account of moral development. I illustrate these principles of assessment design through an examination of the Character Project, which I created to help students engage in their own deliberate ethical transformation through self-directed, individualized, and concentrated practice. Finally, I conclude with a discussion about how to appropriately and fairly assess this kind of deeply personal learning.

## Moral Development and Ethical Transformation

One common way of teaching ethics focuses on teaching the major moral theories, discussing moral dilemmas, and then assessing that knowledge through analytical papers and exams. Students practice comparing, contrasting, and criticizing different normative theories, with the presumption that in learning how to engage argumentatively with accounts of right action and abstract moral problems, students will be able to apply their moral reasoning skills outside of the classroom. But while demonstrating mastery of the details of moral theories and applying theory to moral dilemmas may help students to consider what an abstract agent ought to do in a given circumstance, students often struggle to move from that skill to determining what it is they ought to do in their own lives. While they often enjoy discussing the extreme moral dilemmas and abstract thought experiments that populate the philosophical literature, it is often less clear to them how those cases relate to the decisions they face, which are usually quite a bit less dramatic and yet no less important. Thus, even students who have fully mastered the content and application of moral theory to abstract cases often leave ethics classes without much substantial transformation of their own ethical dispositions and choices. Many of us who teach ethics, however, are in agreement with Aristotle that the

aim of ethics is not merely “to know what virtue is, but to become good,” and thus that an ethics class that does not help students shape their own ethical beliefs, values, and behaviors is a missed opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

I argue in this essay that if we want our students to engage in ethical transformation, we should pay attention to the implicit model of moral development that our assignments and methods of assessment assume. An examination of research on moral development shows the need to attend to the connection between moral judgment and lived experience, as improvement in moral judgment is too often conflated with holistic development of students’ ethical lives. Facilitating students’ abilities to construct and cultivate their ethical selves will necessitate rethinking common ways in which ethics is taught by engaging the whole person in living philosophically through self-directed, individualized, and concentrated practice that engages a variety of moral capacities. In this essay, I provide an example of such an assignment, along with a discussion of how to assess such projects.

### Moral Development and Moral Judgment

The assumptions, both explicit and implicit, about how we develop morally are important to interrogate, since these assumptions shape how we design assignments and evaluate their success. Since the 1960s, research has been shaped by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg’s conception of moral development understood as cognitive improvement.<sup>2</sup> Kohlberg’s account of moral development posits that we develop morally through six stages of moral reasoning, the highest of which involves moral judgments based on universal principles.<sup>3</sup> Kohlberg originally used interviews in which subjects explained what hypothetical agents should do in a series of moral dilemmas to classify subjects into one of six moral stages, but now a written instrument based on a modified form of Kohlberg’s moral development account has taken over as the primary instrument used to measure moral development. The Defining Issues Test (DIT) rejects the strong notion of development through sequential stages, but is still strongly committed to moral development as cognitive improvement. Since the DIT’s inception, the DIT has been the primary instrument utilized in the scholarship of teaching and learning to assess whether students have developed morally. On the DIT, participants are presented with fictional moral dilemmas and then asked to select a solution, rate the importance of various considerations, and rank the four most important considerations. Participants are given an overall score that corresponds to the moral schema that has been activated in response to the moral dilemma.<sup>4</sup> High scores are correlated with moral comprehension and identification of postconventional moral arguments, indicating that it measures the ability of participants to recall and apply specific moral content and to think carefully about the relevance of various moral considerations. Since the DIT measures how well participants can identify

which reasons are good and discriminate between moral and non-moral reasons, the score reflects how developed their moral judgment is. In many pedagogical studies, a correlation between increased scores on the DIT and the pedagogical intervention is taken as proof that students developed morally. These conclusions implicitly assume that an increase in a student's ability to weigh moral reasons in abstract dilemmas demonstrates overall moral development.<sup>5</sup>

However, there is limited empirical support for the claim that improving the capacity for moral judgment leads students to apply this ability to their own lives. Even when students develop fairly sophisticated ways of reasoning about abstract, hypothetical moral dilemmas, studies show that most students reported no effect at all when they were explicitly asked to reflect on how their increased moral reasoning skills impacted their everyday moral choices, attitudes, and behaviors.<sup>6</sup> While this is disappointing, perhaps it should not be surprising. It is a less emotionally charged and complex task to make moral distinctions and intellectual judgments in hypothetical moral dilemmas than it is to make similar judgments about concrete choices students face in their own lives. Moreover, to act on a considered moral judgment may require fortitude and self-sacrifice that the judgment alone cannot provide. A study on the correspondence between participants' judgments about what they would do in hypothetical moral dilemmas and their actions in real-life moral dilemmas found that judgments about hypothetical dilemmas have very weak predictive power for what agents will actually do when they are faced with difficult choices.<sup>7</sup> Adding to the difficulty of actually acting well in real-life situations is the fact that we are not rational calculators, and in the face of real-life dilemmas, we may become paralyzed or overwhelmed, finding ourselves unable to choose at all.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the ability to weigh evidence and make decisions about what we ought to do on purely rational grounds is often undermined by our own self-interest and threats to our deeply-held identities, so it is not surprising that students can recognize what moral reasons are important in an abstract situation without changing much about how they themselves act.<sup>9</sup> This gap between moral judgment and action suggests that if we are to help students engage their full ethical selves, we need to have both a holistic model of moral development and also assignments that measure the development of a full range of moral capacities.

### Holistic Moral Development

The need for the development of a full range of capacities highlights the fact that while much of the focus has often been on improving moral judgment, moral judgment is only one of several capacities necessary for holistic moral development. Developing the capacity for abstract reasoning about moral issues does not mean that agents can, or will, apply this to the ethical concerns they encounter or that they will be able to act in accordance with their moral judgments in the face of

pressure. In response to such criticisms, psychologist James Rest, a prominent figure in the neo-Kohlbergian moral development tradition, argues that there are four processes necessary to produce moral action: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character.<sup>10</sup> For both theoretical and pedagogical reasons, the Four-Component Model (FCM) provides a useful starting point for developing a more holistic account of moral development. However, since the original aim of the model was to identify the psychological *processes* necessary for moral action, not the *skills* necessary for ethical transformation of the self, I have adapted and expanded the model to focus on the cultivation of moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. In taking each of these to be capabilities that enable agents to shape their ethical identities, not simply descriptive components that are necessary for an agent to choose a moral action, this holistic account identifies the kinds of capacities an agent must develop to shape not just what she does but the kind of person she is.

First, morally sensitive agents possess the capacity to interpret and see the world as it is, not simply as they wish it would be. This involves a sensitivity both to the features of a situation that are morally salient and also to how we understand ourselves and those we engage with. Iris Murdoch's argument that the basis for ethical transformation of the self lies in the capacity to lovingly attend to the world (and those we encounter in it) as they really are thoughtfully illuminates this notion of moral sensitivity.<sup>11</sup> The process of coming to see others more lovingly, more richly, and more accurately begins with the attender's recognition that her capacity to interpret others is distorted by her own biases and preferences and, thus, is in need of correction.<sup>12</sup> This does not merely influence the morally sensitive agent's behavior but also her capacity to perceive and interpret the world around her, motivating her to attend to aspects she might otherwise ignore and allowing her to recognize ethically salient features of the world that she could not see before.

To move from judgment to action requires the agent to care about moral values and be motivated to act in accordance with her judgments. When an agent makes a moral judgment (at least when she is being explicit and careful about her judgments), she takes it to apply to all agents in the same circumstances, including herself, for reasons all rational agents should accept. But her belief that this is so does not mean that she will be motivated to act in accordance with her judgment. If she does so only because of social pressure, for instance, then acting because it is the right thing to do is not yet part of her own ethical identity. To improve moral motivation, the agent must take acting in accordance with the good to be an important part of her self-conception and identity. When she does so, acting ethically becomes critical to her sense of integrity as an agent, and thus, if she fails to act in accordance with her considered moral judgment, she does not merely violate an impartial and impersonal moral judgment. Rather, in doing so, she lets herself

down by acting in a way that is inconsistent with the values and commitments she takes to be important.

Finally, an agent must possess the dispositions, shaped by her habits, necessary to consistently act in accordance with her considered convictions.<sup>13</sup> Even a thoughtful and motivated agent may fail to act in accordance with her judgments if she has not developed the appropriate habits. Someone who has habituated herself to act courageously will be more likely to resist pressure and stand up for what she is committed to, even when ignoring or participating in injustice would be easier, since she has regularly practiced taking a stand. Take, for example, someone who witnesses racist comments directed toward a colleague. She may interpret the action as racist, know that she ought to say something, and feel strongly that her commitment to anti-racist intervention is important to her identity, and yet fail to say anything since she is not sure what to say and has not developed a habit of intervening. Thus, to be morally developed in a holistic sense, an agent must develop not only the capacity to engage in thoughtful weighing of the evidence through moral judgment, but also the moral sensitivity to see what is salient, the moral motivation to care about what is right, and the moral character to habitually act as she believes she ought. To analyze and understand ethical beliefs, values, and behaviors, each of these four capacities thus helps us to understand a different aspect of moral development.

### Philosophy as a Way of Life

As the discussion of holistic moral development capacities from the previous section highlights, engaging in ethical transformation requires an agent to engage affectively as well as cognitively, shaping her dispositions and desires along with her judgment. This suggests that if philosophy should play a role in engaging agents in ethical development, then it is not simply a theoretical exercise that shapes our beliefs but a practice that transforms the whole self. This way of thinking about philosophy understands the aim of philosophy as forming us to live life well. This approach, called philosophy as a way of life (PWOL), takes seriously the importance of philosophy not simply as an intellectual activity that aims at truth but also as a method of learning how to live. This is not exclusively a question of ethical behavior and attitudes, of course; in taking up the PWOL approach, the philosopher aims more broadly at living well in light of what is true.

The PWOL approach was spearheaded in the contemporary era by Pierre Hadot, but he, in turn, drew his inspiration from ancient philosophers who thought that the pursuit of wisdom could not be separated from the practice of life.<sup>14</sup> Hadot argues for an approach to philosophy that takes a love for wisdom to centrally shape who we are, what we attend to, and what we pursue, transforming us as we engage in the pursuit of wisdom. The transformational aspect is critical

to this approach, since “real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way.”<sup>15</sup> To take the Stoics as a central example, the theoretical questions Stoic philosophers asked and the way in which logic, physics, and ethics were bound together for them demonstrates the common object they all took.<sup>16</sup> Doing philosophy is therefore not simply confined to abstract contemplation; even Aristotle, as Hadot points out, takes contemplation to be a practice that admits of nondiscursive activity.<sup>17</sup>

On this approach to philosophy, the picture of what activities we engage in while doing philosophy broadens. In addition to writing argumentative papers or reconstructing the premises of an argument, other types of practices that are not purely cognitive, such as spiritual exercises and explicit habitual practice, also count as philosophical. For example, *praemeditatio malorum* was a practice in which Stoic philosophers imagined themselves facing poverty, death, and suffering so they might know, in advance of actually experiencing such things, what it would be like. As they did so, they would remind themselves that (according to the Stoic doctrine) these are merely things that many people would prefer not to experience, rather than being intrinsically evil or bad for us.<sup>18</sup> By practicing their response in advance, they would be prepared to respond with acceptance rather than with the anger or fear that might come more naturally. In engaging in this spiritual exercise, the Stoics sought to train themselves to respond in accord with what they believed was true about the world. Though we make sense of how we ought to live in light of what we take to be true, however, philosophy practiced in this way does not just take our existing moral identities and connect them to moral reasoning and motivation; rather, it asks us to actively engage in the transformation of how we see the world, what we value, and what we choose to do. In the next section, I demonstrate how drawing on PWOL and the holistic account of moral development can identify the specific features of assignments that would help students engage in ethical transformation.

### Design Principles

The complexity of moral development shows the need for more careful attention to the various capacities necessary for ethical cultivation, and reorienting the aim of philosophy in light of transforming how we live suggests a philosophical approach that can shape our pedagogy. In this section, I bring the two frameworks together to show that if we take seriously both the complexity of moral development and also the power of philosophy to transform us, there are specific ways of designing assignments to help students engage in ethical formation.

As I argued earlier, the evidence suggests that abstract reasoning by itself is unlikely to easily translate into ethical transformation. If this is right, then this suggests two aspects to prioritize in course design and assessment. First,

emphasizing the development of moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral character alongside moral judgment requires broadening the kinds of skills students are asked to develop and practice. We should take seriously that it is not just beliefs that we are asking students to examine, but their deepest values, the kinds of persons they aim to become, and the actions they take in their everyday lives. Since this goes well beyond applying new moral knowledge to pre-existing beliefs, these exercises should also involve shaping desires, values, and habits. Second, focusing on disembodied reasons without reference to the real agents who have to make ethical decisions may convey to students that moral reasoning is merely an intellectual game, one that is often enjoyable to play but without real stakes for them. Since reasoning about abstract, hypothetical moral dilemmas by themselves show little effect on students' own moral development, explicit practice in connecting abstract reasoning skills to student experience is beneficial. Moving from abstract theory to practical application is difficult, so guiding students through structured exercises helps them to engage each moral capacity explicitly. Given the importance of scaffolding for learning, such exercises should include practical application to directly connect ethical theory and questions with the development of specific skills, judgments, and motivations.

Argumentative essays are ideal for wrestling with intellectual beliefs, but if attitudes and motives are to be shaped, students must also practice engaging them over time. We are what we habitually do, and what we habitually do shapes what we desire and value. It is for this reason that Aristotle speaks about the role of habit. Any long-term change requires practice over time; a one-time exercise is not enough for students to transform their existing values, feelings, and actions in a lasting way. This way of practicing philosophy, in other words, must be integrated in a systematic way throughout the course, rather than simply as a one-time opportunity. Shorter-term activity may prompt self-reflection and increase understanding of the hindrances to acting well, but are unlikely to result in long-term moral development, since there is not time to inculcate new habits or shape attitudes in any substantial way. Thus, shaping habit formation by practicing what we know we ought to do, regardless of our desires, is necessary for any lasting transformation.

But our dispositions to think, feel, and desire can only be indirectly addressed through habitually engaging in direct action. As Aristotle notes, our appetites themselves must be trained so that we not only know and do what is good, but we desire to do it.<sup>19</sup> While our habits shape our basic inclinations, addressing the inclinations themselves involves understanding why we are disposed to respond in certain ways and ridding ourselves of disordered attachments.<sup>20</sup> To engage in that kind of self-critical reflection, Hadot argues that spiritual practices are central since they train the self by connecting the imaginative and affective capacities with the work of reason.<sup>21</sup> Spiritual practices (such as meditation, imaginative exercises,

self-examination, and formational reading) involve the agent's entire psyche and direct her attention to what matters as she learns to see the world, her place in it, and her own nature as it really is.<sup>22</sup> By engaging thought, imagination, and emotion together, these exercises, slowly but surely, help to transform what she attends to, developing moral sensitivity and shaping affective responses. In the next section, I give a detailed example of a project that incorporates these principles.

### The Character Project

I have argued that successful strategies to help students cultivate their ethical selves involve encouraging ethical transformation through shaping attitudes, values, and behaviors, as well as careful application of moral reasoning to students' own lives. To do this, students must practice developing a variety of moral capacities, rather than primarily focusing on moral judgment. In this section, I give an example of an assignment I designed to do exactly this in my undergraduate ethics class for non-majors. The Character Project directly engages students in concrete and holistic ethical development over the course of the semester, not just as a capstone assignment or short-term exercise. Concrete ethical development does not happen overnight, and as a result, I designed a project that stretched over the entire semester, since this is long enough for students to see progress and to learn enough to continue after the semester is over. The project focuses on helping students develop ethical virtue through a highly scaffolded series of steps that includes choosing a virtue, designing a plan to practice the virtue, analyzing and reflecting throughout, and writing a final reflective essay where they evaluate what they learned and how they would apply their learning after the semester is over.

Given the focus on concretely practicing virtue, PWOL-inspired principles might suggest practicing virtuous habits or engaging in spiritual exercises should be done before doing research. However, since the aim is for students to develop the skills necessary for ethical self-cultivation, students must first identify the growth they wish to pursue, along with the attitudes and habits that currently keep them from achieving their aim, before they can practice effectively. To ensure that this process is as concrete and individualized as possible, the project is therefore scaffolded into stages that involve learning about the chosen virtue, connecting and analyzing the student's own self in relation to the virtue, and developing a practical plan. It is only once students have a clear idea of their virtue and their relationship to it that they begin practicing their virtue.

To practice effectively, the student must identify which specific habits, actions, and attitudes to target. The first step in this process is choosing a specific virtue to aim at, which begins with assigned readings that focus on what a virtue is (along with examples of specific virtues) and explore how habituation and spiritual exercises promote the development of virtue.<sup>23</sup> Our class discussions then



center on making example virtues concrete, explaining the relationship between virtue and the moral development capacities, and identifying particular habits, action commitments, and practices that enable the cultivation of specific virtues. Afterward, students research the virtue they want to develop during the semester and then write a short paper on the virtue and its corresponding vices. In engaging with the scholarship on particular virtues, students come to understand the virtue they want to work on in more precise terms. To ensure that the picture of their virtue is vivid and specific, they identify a public figure they see as an exemplar of this virtue and describe how that virtue exemplar illustrates the virtue in action. When I first designed this project, there was no research component, but I found that students' conceptions of what they were aiming at were often hazy and they often struggled to align their practices with the specific virtue. Adding the research component as their first assignment gave students a more concrete target and better prepared them to design a plan that reflected their own strengths, weaknesses, and values. The research assignment thus ensures that students begin with a clear, concrete conception of what their virtue is before they turn to application.

In the second assignment, students examine how their chosen virtues and corresponding vices apply to their own lives. In this assignment, each student completes an assessment evaluating how they struggle with the vices that correspond to their chosen virtue. In doing so, they evaluate how the aspects they struggle with relate to the capacities of moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. For example, if a student chose courage as his virtue, he should reflect on specific examples that illustrate his lack of courage, evaluate how each of the moral capacities would address that weakness, and identify the specific habits that would combat the vices of cowardice or foolhardiness.

Together, the research and self-assessment assignments are designed to prepare students to create their own virtue cultivation plan. In designing the project plan, students concretely identify the habits, action commitments, spiritual exercises, and means of self-monitoring they will employ, laying them out in a weekly plan.<sup>24</sup> I require that each week consists of a deliberate mix of types of practices designed to promote the development of the specific virtue. In the self-assessment assignment, students begin to identify the specific habits they want to inculcate in themselves, but in the project plan, they connect those with specific action commitments that are concrete manifestations of the habits into more measurable and specific steps. Additionally, each week includes the practice of at least one spiritual exercise.<sup>25</sup> Since most students tend to default to practices they are already familiar with, I require them to try out different types of spiritual exercises during the first few weeks. The final component of the plan involves identifying how they will monitor their progress. Each day, they are asked to engage in a brief check-in, so they specify in the plan when and how they will do

this. Having a daily check-in creates a rhythm for students so that thinking about the project becomes a habitual part of their day.

For example, a student working on the virtue of courage might identify three habits she will try to inculcate over the course of the semester: (1) develop the confidence to intervene when I see injustice, (2) try new things even when I'm scared, and (3) nurture the confidence to share my thoughts in class and social settings. Then, for each week of the plan, she will specify at least one action commitment that corresponds to each habit. In the first week, the student's specific actions commitments might be: (1) initiate a discussion with my housemates about fair distribution of the chores, (2) try a hobby that I'm interested in but I'm afraid I'll be bad at, and (3) introduce myself to one new person in each of my classes this week and raise my hand to speak in at least half of my classes. In week two, she might continue some of the same action commitments, ramp up existing commitments, or add some new ones. For example, week two commitments might include: (1) research and try out a bystander intervention technique at least once, (2) go alone to an event where I won't know anyone, and (3) raise my hand to speak in two-thirds of my classes. For each week, the student also specifies at least two different spiritual exercises that are connected with her virtue. For example, in her first week, the student might plan on three meditation sessions and three sessions in which she practices visualizing herself behaving courageously. Finally, the student will specify exactly how she will do her daily check-in, such as "I will keep a log throughout the day of when I encounter situations that involve courage and then review the log each night before I go to bed."

At various stages during the project, students engage in more formal, written reflection on their progress and learning. In regular journal entries, students describe and then analyze how practicing their virtue went with reference to specific scenarios they faced during that particular week. To guide this analysis, students respond to four questions, each corresponding to one aspect of moral development. First, to encourage them to develop moral sensitivity, they are asked to identify and reflect on what they noticed and attended to during the week. Second, to promote reflection on their moral judgments, they are asked to identify specific situations in which they made a judgment about what the virtuous thing to do was and explain how they decided it was virtuous. Third, to reflect on moral motivation and its connection to their ethical identities and desires, students are asked to identify what motivated (or undermined) their motivation to act virtuously during the week. Finally, to identify how successfully they are developing habits, students are asked to explain which specific action commitments they completed during the week. These frequent entries enable students to chart their trajectory over time, remain focused on the project throughout the semester, and encourage metacognitive reflection. Both at the midpoint of the project and at the end, students complete a more detailed reflection paper. At the midpoint, the

reflection focuses on what they have learned and accomplished so far, along with any modifications to their initial plan that this learning suggests. At the end of the semester, the final paper serves to assess what they have learned about the process of moral development through the Character Project. They are asked to use detailed evidence to self-assess their own consistency of effort, depth of engagement, and growth over the course of the semester. In examining their growth, they analyze how different types of practices contributed to their development of the capacities for moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character. Drawing on this analysis, students then explain how they could apply what they have learned over the course of completing the project to ethical self-cultivation going forward.

As the individual assignments of the overall project show, the project also encourages students to develop each of the moral capacities. To develop moral sensitivity, students must come to see what is morally salient. This feature involves shaping what they attend to and therefore, what they can see about themselves and the world around them. The project does this by encouraging students to attend specifically to their own attitudes, dispositions, and actions, and then to reflect on how this impacts others through the spiritual exercises and self-reflection. Doing research on their particular virtue also helps them to see the possibilities of action and the range of cases in which their virtue might be implicated, improving their ability to recognize situations and features that have moral salience. Each week, students also practice moral judgment as they decide in specific situations how to implement their virtue. Additionally, since each student selects their own virtue and creates their own plan, the project is designed to harness existing motivation, with the understanding that as students begin to see progress, this will increase their motivation to continue with the project.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the project focuses on developing moral character through habitual practice of both specific actions and spiritual exercises. Each of these capacities is not developed independently from the other, of course, and the journal and paper reflections explicitly ask students to bring all aspects together.

The Character Project therefore encourages students to engage in the process of explicitly constructing their own ethical identity in several ways. First, students begin with a theoretical account of virtue and apply this by exploring how one particular virtue manifests (or fails to manifest) within their own lives. This step of requiring students to combine theoretical understanding, cognitive self-construction, and emotional self-discovery together has been shown to be a powerful way of facilitating moral identity formation.<sup>27</sup> Second, after applying the virtue, students generate a plan to cultivate the virtue. Since students choose their virtue and identify the ways in which they would like to grow over the course of the semester, this process encourages them to see the theoretical claims as having real-life implications for them and the development of virtue as an exercise in identity formation. Finally, since practicing the virtue is accompanied throughout

the semester with structured self-reflection on what they are learning and how they are growing (or what inhibits their growth), the project encourages students to think of the process of re-shaping and articulating their ethical identities as long-term, while providing them with the tools to continue this work of aligning their ethical values, attitudes, and actions long after the semester has ended.

### Grading the Character Project

Any project that asks students to explicitly engage their own lives so deeply faces questions about appropriate ways to assess student learning. In other types of assignments that emphasize the demonstration of more abstract skills or knowledge, students are usually assessed in terms of direct outcome (the accuracy of the exposition, the strength of the arguments presented, and so on). But applying the same standard to a project like this might seem suggest we should assess whether the student is a good person or how well the student meets professor-identified moral standards, which seem to be inappropriate measurements for a grade in an academic class. For these reasons, effort or completion are often common ways to assess similarly personal projects.<sup>28</sup> However, grading merely on effort or completion can often be insufficiently rigorous and students may be less likely to make use of feedback designed to promote their growth and learning if the standards of assessment are simply whether the student completed the practices they said they would. This also does not meaningfully distinguish between students who put in a lot of effort that was ineffective and those who put in the same amount of effort but adapted and learned to use more successful strategies. A third method of assessment might focus on grading the quality of student reflections, but identifying appropriate criteria to grade students' deeply personal writing is a challenge and focusing entirely on students' reflections leaves out the importance of the practice of virtue.

I feel the force of each of these concerns. However, since my major aim for this project is to equip students to engage in ethical identity formation and self-transformation, I think that measuring how well students have learned how to engage in holistic moral development is an appropriate way to assess their learning. Focusing on the development of moral capacities provides robust criteria for evaluating growth that does not collapse simply either into grading whether the student has become a good person or whether they completed all the required tasks. Measuring growth in this respect does not assess the level of virtue achieved nor make any sort of judgment about whether the student has become a good person. Instead, it assesses whether the student has developed their moral capacities. With specific capacities that can be learned and developed, measuring holistic moral development does not only measure completion. Instead, using the moral capacities as a framework for assessment identifies standards that are meaningful and clear.

Though students are reflecting on deeply personal material, the fact that the growth measured and assessed is growth of capacities provides a robust and more objective way of grading quality beyond completion. As an example, consider the capacity of moral sensitivity, which requires a realistic recognition of one's own failures as well as successes, along with attention to and interpretation of the details that are ethically relevant. A journal entry that merely reports which situations tested the student's virtue without attempting to understand what this might reveal about his particular challenges or the moral salience of features of the situation does not show that the student is developing moral sensitivity. In contrast, an entry that draws on specific, detail-rich experiences to identify morally relevant features about the situation and reflect on what the student learned about herself when she failed to act virtuously exhibits growth in moral sensitivity.

Utilizing the moral capacities framework as a criterion in assessment also shows why effort is appropriate for measuring some aspects of moral development. Habitually practicing specific action commitments and spiritual exercises each week develops moral character (and, indirectly, the other moral capacities as well). So, having effort play some role in the grade reflects the importance of, week after week, doing the work of practicing virtuous habits. As a result, while part of the journal grade is based on the quality of the reflection, part of the grade is based on the student's self-report of how successfully they followed the project plan that they designed. This mix of assessment measures reflects the fact that different methods of measurement reflect the growth of different capacities.

I have now used this assignment in seven sections over five semesters with over 170 students. In every semester, I have been inspired by the impact I have seen in my students' lives. Nearly all of the students who have completed the project reported significant improvement in their particular virtue, in learning how to engage in ethical self-cultivation, and in developing a realistic growth mindset. Additionally, though they are not required to relate their journal reflections to what we are reading in class, students often do connect non-virtue readings to their virtue development, which has the additional benefit of helping students to draw connections between different accounts of what it means to live well and to consider how normative theory is connected to virtue practice. Students engage in deep and insightful reflection on their own ethical identities, connecting their specific virtues to broader questions about how they might become the kind of persons they want to be. These are not simply academic questions; my students are wrestling with the deep questions of who they want to be and how to align their choices with their values. The Character Project equips students with the tools necessary to continue to engage in ethical transformation long after the semester is over, and it is this, I think, that is the best we can hope to give our students.

## Notes

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1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b26–29. Of course, not everyone agrees that this is the best aim for an ethics class. Some object that this amounts to an inappropriate attempt at indoctrination. Who, we may ask, are ethics professors to do this? If by “becoming good,” we mean trying to get our students to meet a standard of morality determined by the professor, then I agree with these critics. I am not advocating that this is what we should do; instead, what I aim to do in my own classes is present my students with serious ethical problems and concerns that challenge them to wrestle with their own beliefs and values and push them to develop coherent, thoughtful, and defensible ethical commitments.
2. The increased prominence of virtue ethics and philosophy as a way of life have spawned a discussion about character and virtue development, but these discussions often do not connect with existing literature on moral development and thus have played a surprisingly small role in psychological and pedagogical research on moral development.
3. Kohlberg, “Stage and Sequence,” 376–77.
4. Rest et al., “Neo-Kohlbergian,” 194–95; Rest et al., “DIT2,” 645. The test was initially developed in 1974 and updated as the DIT2 in 1999, but the structure of the instrument remains the same. I use the term “DIT” to refer to both versions.
5. Alternative instruments have been proposed by critics of the DIT that seek to address a number of concerns. Nevertheless, even the alternate instruments, such as the SMARTS test proposed by Curzer et al., “Ethics Classes,” still focus on moral judgment. Several tests have been developed to measure moral sensitivity (for an overview, see Jordan, “Moral Action”), but they mainly focus on professional education in specific domains (e.g., ethics education in dental schools) and have not been used for assessing pedagogical interventions in philosophy.
6. Hornsby, “Moral Reasoning Skills.” See also the claim in Schlaefli, Rest, and Thoma, “Moral Education,” 248, who say that “no studies have demonstrated directly that changes wrought by these moral education programs have brought about changes in behavior.”
7. Bostyn, Sevenhant, and Roets, “Mice, Men, and Trolleys.”
8. The TV show *The Good Place* shows exactly this problem in an episode where moral philosopher Chidi Anagonye is faced with a real-world Trolley Problem and freezes instead of making a decision.
9. For more discussion of studies that show that moral reasoning about hypothetical cases often looks quite different than moral reasoning about personal situations, see Lickona, “Moral Psychology,” 115–16. For an influential discussion of the role that an individual’s own moral identity plays in motivating her behavior, a factor that is not accounted for by

focusing on moral judgment alone, see Blasi, “Bridging Moral Cognition,” especially 37 and 40–41. See Kunda, “Motivated Reasoning,” for a discussion of how motivated reasoning undermines thoughtful reasoning about oneself.

10. FCM was first developed in Rest, “Morality,” 29–33, and further in Rest, Bebeau, and Volker, “Psychology,” 3–16.

11. Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*.

12. For more detailed analysis on this process (which Murdoch calls “unselfing”) and a defense of its appropriateness as a pedagogical goal, see Snow, “Learning to Look.”

13. Aristotle emphasizes this throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, noting that for moral argument and reason to be successful in shaping us, we need to be properly habituated first to appreciate virtue (see especially 1179b24–26).

14. According to Davidson, “Introduction: Pierre Hadot,” 33, Hadot also attributes this mode of approaching philosophy to figures as diverse as Abelard, Montaigne, Descartes, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Foucault.

15. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 265.

16. Davidson, “Introduction: Pierre Hadot,” 25.

17. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 269; Davidson, “Introduction: Pierre Hadot,” 29.

18. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85.

19. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b24–26.

20. For more on this aspect of the spiritual exercises, see Grimm and Cohoe, “What is Philosophy as a Way of Life,” 242–43.

21. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 127 and 284.

22. For more extended discussions about how specific spiritual exercises do this, see Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83–89; Gould, “Becoming Good,” 142–46; and Bommarito, “Moral Development,” 255–57.

23. The specific readings I assign to my students are selections from books I, II, and IV of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Gould, “Becoming Good,” and Bommarito, “Moral Development.”

24. While I used to require students to provide a plan for the entire project length before they embarked on the first week of the project plan, I now have them initially complete a plan for the first five weeks. When they complete their midpoint reflection, they then submit a plan for the final five weeks. This allows students to incorporate what they have learned about themselves into the second half of their plan.

25. By “spiritual,” I follow Hadot’s usage, which differs from traditional definitions in theological contexts. For Hadot, spiritual exercises are those that involve the whole spirit, or the participant’s whole self. For more on this, see Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 82–85, as well as Davidson, “Introduction: Pierre Hadot,” 21–29.

26. That this is successful is commonly attested to in both student evaluations and their final reflections.

27. Schwartz, Kurtines, and Montgomery, “Comparison of Two Approaches,” 337.

28. Horst, “Empirical Exploration,” 468, expresses similar reservations about grading PWOL exercises and therefore recommends pass/fail grading.

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