

PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy
Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology

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[Handout #2]

John Doris, *Lack of Character*, Chap. 1-2

Experimental Psychology and Character/Virtue Ethics

Main Theses:

1. **Thinking productively about ethics requires thinking realistically about humanity.**
2. **Modern experimental psychology shows the conception of moral character prominent in the Western ethical tradition to be mistaken.**
3. **Therefore, we must revise our conception about character and about ethics.**

Character traits:

Good	Bad
Steady, dependable, steadfast, unwavering, unflinching....	Weak, fickle, disloyal, faithless, irresolute, ...

In this view it is character, more than circumstance, that decides the moral texture of a life; character is destiny.

Experimental studies in Social Psychology

1. Behavior is extraordinarily sensitive to variation in circumstance.
2. Minor situational variations have powerful effects on helping behavior.
3. Situations also have a potent influence on harming behavior.

Conclusion:

1. In very many situations it looks as though personality is less than robustly deterministic of behavior.
2. **People typically lack character.**

Q: Do the experimental studies validate the conclusion?

§ Moral Psychology

— The study of motivational, affective, and cognitive capacities manifested in moral contexts. Moral psychology investigates the psychological properties of moral agents.

Discussion questions: What bearing should empirical studies on human psychology have on ethical theories? What is the nature and function of ethics in general (namely, what should an ethicist address when she/he proposes an ethical theory?)

Argument against associating ethics with psychological findings:

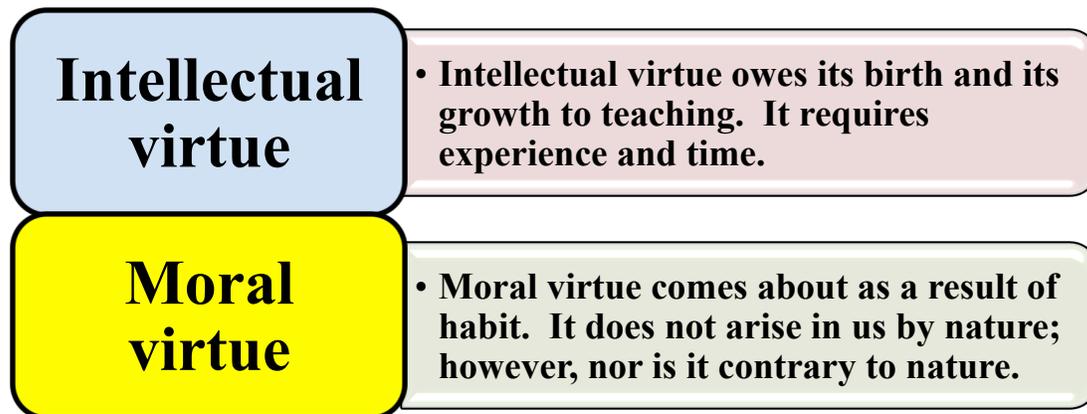
1. Science is primarily descriptive and ethics is primarily prescriptive.
2. As Hume has taught us, there is an unbridgeable logical gap between the *is* of human sciences and the *ought* of ethics.
3. Therefore, however much psychology may tell us about human beings, how human beings *ought to* behave remains an open question.

§ Virtue Ethics

Instead of focusing on formulating and obeying a given set of moral rules, virtue theorists focus on developing good moral habits and building moral characters [virtues].

§ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics Book II*

Different kinds of virtue:



§ Intellectual Virtue

Intellectual virtue = fulfillment of one's function (i.e., to live at one's best and fullest.)

§ Moral Virtue

The moral virtue is concerned with passions, in which excess is a form of failure. Therefore, virtue is a kind of *mean*; it aims at what is intermediate. It is a mean between two vices: excess and deficiency.

Excess (too much)	The Mean (just right)	Deficiency (too little)
Foolhardiness	Courage	Cowardice
Buffoonery	Wit	Boorishness
Vulgarity	Propriety	Fastidiousness
Empty vanity	Proper pride	Undue humility

Mean – relative to situations:

- Not every action nor every passion admits of a means, for some have names that already imply badness. It is not possible ever to be right with regard to them.
- The mean should be *relative to* the people, the context, the time and the place, etc. It is not a fixed calculation.

§ Virtue and Virtuous Actions

To truly be a virtuous person, one's virtuous actions must meet three conditions:

- they are done knowingly,
- they are chosen for their own sakes, and
- they are chosen according to a stable disposition (not at a whim, or in any way that the acting person might easily change his choice about).

§ Virtue and Character

[Moral Character]: Character = A disposition to behave in certain ways in certain sorts of circumstances.

- Virtue is a state of character with choice of the mean relative to us. This mean is determined by anyone of practical wisdom in accordance with a rational principle – doing things to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, in the right way.
- Therefore it is no easy task to be virtuous.

§ Character Ethics

Main Claim:

___ **The aim of moral education is to build character and to cultivate virtues.**

“The central task of education is virtue.” – Bennett

Moral instruction aims at inculcating good character. – McDowell, Sherman, Nussbaum, etc.

Discussion: Are there successful cases of character building?

§ Character Traits and Behavior

1. Character traits are widely held to involve dispositions to behavior.
2. If a person possesses a trait, that person will exhibit trait-relevant behavior in trait-relevant eliciting conditions.
3. Attribution of character and personality traits is associated with behavioral expectations.
4. It is standard in the Aristotelian tradition of character ethics to emphasize robust traits and behavioral consistency.

Shy (introverted)	Open (extraverted)
Generous	Stingy
Brave	Cowardly
Honest	Dishonest
Happy	Melancholy
Caring	Callous
Reflective	Impulsive
Diligent	Lazy
Responsible	Negligent
Rational	Emotional

Doris' critique:

___ The problem with character explanations is that they presuppose the existence of character structures that actual people do not very often possess.

How do you assess the claim: People typically lack character?

Liu's critique:

1. Character traits should be an inductive conclusion, based on the individual's repeated behavior. It should not be seen as some innate trait with determining causal power.
2. If someone with character trait P repeatedly fails to perform P-relevant behavior Q in situations conducive to Q, then that person should not be attributed P.
3. Therefore, empirical studies on people's failing to perform Q should prove those particular people's not possessing P, rather than the absence of P in general.

Consistent trait-relevant behavior → attribution of trait

But not: trait → consistent trait-relevant behavior