Moral Psychology

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2.1   Virtue Traits and Personality Traits

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In an effort to reinvigorate psychological discussions of traits in the wake of situationism's influence on philosophers, Jayawickreme and Fleeson present a model for thinking about traits that promises to deliver greater insight into the nature of a person's overall behavioral trends. Part of this insight, they suggest, is that people are in fact far more virtuous than the situationist literature seems to allow for. The "whole trait theory" is promising insofar as it offers us an alternative way to understand patterns of human behavior and the individual differences that arise within these patterns. However, I have some concerns about whether or not the whole trait theory can also provide an understanding of virtue. In what follows here, after exploring the advantages of the whole trait theory, I'll call into question Jayawickreme and Fleeson's fundamental assumption that virtue traits are a subset of personality traits. I'll argue that this is a mistake, albeit one not unique to Jayawickreme and Fleeson. Virtue traits are not personality traits.

The whole trait theory holds that there are two dimensions of personality: personality traits and personality states. "Personality traits" refer to the wide distribution of a person's behavior, to the traits a person typically exhibits. "Personality states" refer to a shorter duration of behavior. Your friend Dylan is typically quiet, but at a party last night she was exceptionally talkative. Her personality trait thus might be described as introversion, but at the party her personality state was one of extraversion.

The distinction between personality traits and states has important consequences for our understanding of individuals and for the study of personality. Because, on the whole trait theory, personality traits are wide distributions of behavior, they can be assessed only over a substantial period of time. Studies of this nature allow us to see general patterns of behavior and so to make trait attributions that the one-off studies favored by situationists do not allow for. I agree with Jayawickreme and Fleeson that this

kind of information is important: It would be a mistake to see Dylan acting extraverted at the party and to determine that she, in fact, was extraverted. To make these kinds of broader assessments, it is important to look at the individual's general patterns of behavior. This emphasis on exploring the patterns of behavior rather than particular acts in assessing one's possession of traits is one theme that arises in response to philosophical discussions of situationism, and it is an important one.

Jayawickreme and Fleeson's discussion extends this general concern and highlights an interesting implication of it for discussions of virtue: Once we start looking at patterns of behavior, they argue, we see that it is a mistake to dichotomize virtue into all-or-nothing categories. We cannot declare that a person lacks compassion because he or she failed to act compassionately in one experiment, which is what some take situationists to be doing; rather, we need to study the individual's overall patterns of acting compassionately, patterns which may reveal that he or she is mostly compassionate, or rarely compassionate, or not compassionate at all. Recognizing these degrees of virtue possession allows us to recognize individual differences and, presumably, to challenge any conclusions made on the basis of a one-off situation. We can attribute trait possession based on the patterns while acknowledging that an individual's personality state may not be reflective of his or her trait.

While I think it is important to recognize degrees of virtue, and think the distinction between personality traits and personality states is an important and promising one, the argument Jayawickreme and Fleeson use to substantiate why it is that we ought to recognize degrees of virtue places, mistakenly, I think, too much weight on consistency of choices. As I'll show, this move tracks a serious limitation in their methodology. They argue that as long as we hold that consistency of choices is important to evaluating virtue, then we ought to hold that some people are more virtuous than others. This is true. However, one point of the argument that they are criticizing (Aristotle's emphasis on being "fully virtuous" as opposed to being continent, incontinent, or vicious) is that when it comes to virtue, we cannot look solely at the consistency of choices. We have to instead look into the emotional and motivational states underlying a person's choices. As Jayawickreme and Fleeson note, for Aristotle the difference between being fully virtuous and being continent (and even being incontinent) has nothing to do with the consistency of an agent's choices; rather, it has to do with the agent's inner psychological states. Aristotle's position is thus that in order to determine whether or not someone is virtuous, we have to know what is going on inside the person's head both during the deliberative

process that culminates in the act, and during the individual's process of practical reasoning on a regular basis.

One limitation of Jayawickreme and Fleeson's research is that it overlooks this component of virtue. Their particular use of the experience sampling methodology to support the attribution of traits and states to individuals tracks only the individual's choices and not necessarily the emotional state the individual experiences in the moment of choice.[1] The kinds of concerns driving Aristotle's commitment to attributing virtue only when an individual acts virtuously *and* experiences the emotions appropriate to that virtue at "the right time, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner" (Aristotle, 1962, sec. 1106b21–23) are overlooked when we focus only on the subject's reports of having acted compassionately. Reports of compassionate acts alone fail to track these normative requirements that transform a particular act into a possible display of virtue.

If we are interested in virtue attribution, we need to know much more about the agent's decision-making process, motivations, and emotional states. Did the agent act compassionately because he or she felt sympathy for the person in need and wanted without hesitation to help? Did the agent act compassionately after hesitation and reflection, perhaps backtracking in order to help? Did the agent act compassionately because the agent was with a friend and didn't want to look bad in front of her? Or did the agent act compassionately because of feeling pressure to record some data? These are the kinds of considerations that allow us to attribute virtues, for virtues are not just dispositions to act. This point has been made by many in response to Doris's discussion of situationism (Doris, 2002). Doris's argument that people lack character traits revolves around the assumption that virtues are essentially robust dispositions to act, which can be proven to exist or not exist through the observation of people's behavior. However, as many have argued, this emphasis on the dispositional component of virtue overlooks other important components of virtue. Kamtekar (2004), for example, emphasizes that the Aristotelian conception of virtue includes practical reasoning, making it the case that we cannot isolate virtue from a person's deliberations. I've argued that conceptions of moral character ought to include a person's moral beliefs and how it is that those beliefs influence one's behavior, making it the case, again, that we cannot read virtue off of one's behavioral choices (Besser-Jones, 2014, chapter 5).

This point (that there is more to virtue than one's disposition to act) tracks a larger concern regarding the psychological study of virtue that

Jayawickreme and Fleeson's discussion falls victim to. Even if we bracket the notion that virtue involves something more than behavioral dispositions, there still remains the question of whether or not, at an individual level, virtue traits function in the same way as personality traits and can be studied by the same methodology used to study personality traits. Jayawickreme and Fleeson acknowledge that their empirical evidence "has mostly concerned traits in general, and not necessarily specifically virtuous traits" but argue that their evidence ought to apply to the virtues because "at least some of the virtues appear to be contained within the Big Five." This may be true, but it really just relocates the problem without resolving the driving question: Are virtue traits personality traits? I think there are several good reasons for thinking that virtue traits are not personality traits.

We can begin to see why by reflecting first on the nature of virtue traits as they are typically understood within philosophical discussion.[2] Virtues are generally recognized to exhibit the best or most excellent state of character. They serve as *aspirational traits*. We strive to develop the virtues in ourselves; we teach our children how to become virtuous; we seek out models of virtue to emulate. Virtues are also the subject of our *moral appraisals*. We praise the virtuous and fault the vicious; we praise efforts to develop the virtues and blame those who make no effort. Involved in these moral appraisals, and in the aspirational nature of the virtues, is the assumption that the development and exercise of the virtues involve choice and agency. They thus are *voluntary traits* that, we assume, people choose to develop, ideally because they believe that being virtuous is the best way to behave, and that possession of the virtues makes them a better person. Virtue traits, as I've already noted, are so *reflective of practical wisdom and moral beliefs*. Finally, because they are voluntary, aspirational, praiseworthy traits that are reflective of practical wisdom and moral beliefs, virtue traits are thought to also be *stable* and *consistent*.

These are the features, in addition to their content, that are constitutive of virtue traits. Whereas psychological discussions of the virtues, Jayawickreme and Fleeson's included, tend to see the virtues as defined by their other-regarding content or direction (e.g., a disposition to help), the content of the disposition alone does not define a trait as virtuous. We do not describe other-regarding dispositions in other species as virtuous. This would be a category mistake, precisely because those traits do not function in other species as the virtues function for human beings. Altruism in other species is just a fact about the nature of the species. It is not something we take individual members of the species to aspire to or even something we

think they can develop voluntarily; we do not take exhibitions of altruism in other species to be morally praiseworthy, and so forth.

Having laid out the components of virtue traits, let us now turn to a comparison of virtue traits and personality traits. Do personality traits share these features of virtue traits? It doesn't take long to see that they don't, and that they function differently within individuals than do virtue traits.

The study of personality traits, and here I limit my discussion to the Big Five model of which the whole trait theory is a species, finds that personality traits are largely the product of one's genetics and one's environment. Jang, Livesley, and Vernon's (1996) twin studies, for instance, find the genetic influence on personality to range between 41% and 61%, a finding that corroborates earlier research.[3] Environment counts too, and can explain variability, but here, again, the factors that influence personality are outside of the individual's control, such as parental income and sibling order.

That personality traits are so influenced by these factors, which are external to an individual's agency, helps to explain another aspect of personality traits, which is that they tend to be relatively stable across an individual's lifetime. McCrae and Costa's (1999) influential theory of trait development holds that traits develop throughout childhood but are stable in adulthood. Economists find that personality traits function as fixed inputs to decision-making and attribute to personality significant predictive power.[4] Personality traits, we see, are taken to be traits ingrained in the individual, early on, by factors he or she does not control, and, for the most part, to remain that way.

This research regarding personality trait change and development reveals a view of personality traits according to which personality traits are seen to be traits that an individual experiences, rather than chooses; they are traits individuals find themselves developing, rather than developing because they think they are important traits to have.[5] The presumption is that personality traits are primarily the outputs of factors that are external to the individual's locus of agency.[6] Whether this presumption results from the data, or whether this presumption guides the data,[7] what results is an understanding of personality traits that stands at odds with the philosophical understanding of virtue traits.

Consider again what I've suggested to be the definitive features of virtue traits. Virtue traits are voluntary, aspirational, praiseworthy traits that reflect practical wisdom and moral beliefs and are thus stable and durable. There is little evidence that personality traits share these features of virtue traits so considered. Personality traits are not voluntary but are instead,

most often, the products of factors external to an agent's choosing. We see Paul's shyness as something that he is given; while Paul might try to over-come his shyness, more often than not, these efforts take the form of man-aging one's shyness, rather than eliminating it. Because personality traits are not things that are completely up to us, this limits the extent to which they can be aspirational and the subject of praise or blame. While we often admire another's personality trait, and even wish it for ourselves, admira-tion is different than praise. We admire someone's confidence in the way we admire someone's physical features: as traits that are good to have, but not necessarily reflective of something deep about the person. And indeed, there is little evidence that personality traits reflect anything about the per-son, other than the dispositions that they describe. Whereas virtue traits reflect a person's practical wisdom and moral beliefs, personality traits do not. They are reflective of what the person has been given, rather than reflective of what the person chooses to be. Finally, while personality traits (according to some, at least) may be durable and stable, this durability and stability functions differently in personality traits than it does in virtue traits. Virtue traits are meant to be durable and stable insofar as they reflect a person's most fundamental beliefs about how one ought to behave, beliefs that, in a virtuous person, translate into an added layer of protection against the everyday whims and contingencies of our experiences. Personality traits, to the extent that they are durable and stable, are so because of envi-ronmental consistencies and genetic influence.

Given these differences between virtue traits and personality traits, the study of virtue traits must proceed differently than the study of personality traits. Understanding the incidence of compassionate behavior, as Jayaw-ickreme and Fleeson's research delivers, is a promising start, but until we investigate the mental states underlying this behavior we won't have a feel for whether the behavior reflects virtue. Most importantly, psychological investigation of the virtues should begin with the presupposition that vir-tue traits play a unique role within individuals, and that given this unique-ness, we can learn about them (and, indeed, determine their existence) only by exploring the features that make them unique.

Notes

1. It also neglects to track the number of opportunities an individual has or does not have to exercise the particular trait, a point I think seriously limits the use of this methodology to establish virtue possession.

2. For one example of virtue, see Besser-Jones (2014, chapter 6); for overviews of different formulations of virtue, see Besser-Jones and Slote (2015).

3. See Bouchard (1994), Loehlin (1992), and, for review, Bouchard and McGue (2003).

4. For a review, see Boyce, Wood, and Powdthavee (2013).

5. And note that where substantial personality change is desired, change occurs as the product of intervention and cognitive theory and thus evolves in the therapeutic context.

6. Bouchard and Loehlin, for example, describe the development of personality as a result of the interaction between genetics and environment: Personality traits are "major reflections of 'causal agency' embedded in humans by evolutionary processes ... [they] have distal causes but are influenced, triggered, and moderated by proximal internal and external stimuli," where the internal stimuli are one's genetic makeup and the external stimuli are features of one's environment (Bouchard and Loehlin, 2001, p. 244).

7. As Roberts, Walton, and Viechtbauer (2006) note in their meta-analysis of personality trait development, research on personality change has most often focused on mean-level change, or changes that are evident within a group of people (e.g., a specific age group), as opposed to change at the individual level. Research on mean-level change will naturally support findings that place the explanation of trait change in factors external to the individual, such as genetically driven biological changes, or, perhaps, engagement with tasks associated with distinct periods of one's life (e.g., starting a career). This is one area where the approach offered by Jayawickreme and Fleeson (and developed in more detail in Fleeson, 2001) appears more promising, insofar as it tracks personality traits at the individual level and focuses on within-person variation.

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