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ARTICLE



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the task of learning virtue through the lens of self-determination theory. Drawing on SDT's account of motivation and of innate psychological needs, I defend a theory of learning virtue that emphasizes knowing why virtue is important is pivotal to the development of virtue.

KEYWORDS

Virtue; motivation; moral development; self-determination theory

Fundamentally, when we think about 'learning virtue', we want to think about how any given individual can develop into a good person, who cares about others and respects their value, and does their best to treat others well; a person who contributes to society in positive, meaningful ways and who, in general, improves and supports the lives of those they are around. Such a person doesn't end up doing these good things by accident—they are the kind of person who genuinely knows what is important in life and whose moral compass consistently and steadily points in the direction of what is important in life.

Trying to become a virtuous person is a daunting task, and one that is potentially exacerbated by abstract theorizing about the nature of virtue. In this paper, I'll argue that self-determination theory (SDT) offers a fruitful perspective from which to think through the task of learning virtue. One of the central insights of SDT is that human motivation depends largely on how it is that the subject perceives their goals, and the extent to which they identify with them. Successful development of virtue, I'll argue, involves understanding virtue in a way that allows its subject to identify with it, such that through being virtuous, a subject develops forms of motivation that are conducive both to innate psychological needs satisfaction and to success in acting well. We will see that knowing *why* virtue is important turns out to be just as important as knowing *what* virtue involves and *how* to exercise virtue.

My interest throughout this paper is on the question of what is involved in learning virtue, where this project is framed primarily from the perspective of how an individual can best approach the task of learning virtue with the aim of successful development of virtue. My argument draws on fundamental themes within self-determination theory to show how framing the task of learning virtue in a way that supports innate psychological needs is conducive to the successful development of virtue. Given this approach, my argument has implications for an individual's psychological development; if I'm right, then the process of learning, and exercising, virtue, contributes to need satisfaction and psychological growth.

My argument also carries with it important implications for those interested in the question of how virtue can be taught from an educational perspective, a question about which self-determination theory has much more to offer. Within the context of this paper, however, I limit my focus to an analysis of the task of learning virtue, although I hope that the arguments I develop here bring new and fruitful considerations for those working within psychological development and moral education.

I begin this project by using the framework of SDT as a starting point to explore why virtue (and, by extension, learning virtue) is important. I then extend this line of argument to show that reflection on why virtue is important informs both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of virtue; that is, I argue that knowing why virtue is important can help subjects know what is involved in the exercise of virtue and learn how to exercise it, thereby successfully developing virtue. While SDT informs my discussion throughout this article, we will see its most direct contribution in analyzing *why* virtue is important; as I’ll argue in this section, when an individual is able to frame the importance of virtue in a way that they can identify with or internalize, this will transform the project of learning virtue in ways that are conducive to their successful development of virtue.

1. Knowing why

One of the most challenging aspects of learning virtue may be wrapping one’s head around what the point of it all is. Why is virtue important? Why is learning virtue important?

There is, of course, much philosophical discussion and debate about the importance of morality. Historically, this debate is often framed in terms of how to situate morality with respect to one’s self-interest. Plato’s analysis of this theme through his discussion of the ring of Gyges influenced a slew of philosophers to engage in the project of showing how morality can advance self-interest, despite its apparent encroachment of our immediate interests and wants.¹

Contemporary philosophical discourse tends to break away from the immediate question of how morality fits into one’s self-interest, but in doing so has also become very discipline-specific, with accounts of the importance of morality that are tailored to one’s preferred approach to morality.² Consequentialists may argue that morality is important because it consists in the promotion of intrinsic value. Contractualists may argue that morality is important because it is the correct response to the dignity and value of human beings. Perfectionists may argue that morality is important because it demonstrates excellence of our natures as human beings. Eudaimonistic virtue ethicists may argue that morality is important because it aids in the development of flourishing, while sentimentalist virtue ethicists may argue that morality is important because of our affective responses to others.

This is valuable and important theoretical work. But I’d like to suggest that the perspective and consequent standards invoked in these analyses are importantly different from the perspective invoked in the context of moral development and the standards we ought to embrace from this perspective. The philosophical perspective typically aims for the ultimate truth. We find specific analyses compelling to the extent that they offer a better supported view of the importance of morality than we find in other analyses. In contrast, the perspective of moral development is a pragmatic one, that takes as its standard success in moral development. We have a good account of learning virtue

when those who embrace it become virtuous, or when we have good reason to expect that those who try will become virtuous.

With this standard in mind, when it comes to thinking, in the context of moral development, about why virtue is important our goal ought to be to formulate an answer that we can expect to resonate with subjects, i.e., one that clicks with them, and one with which they can identify. For most people, the analysis that resonates is probably not one that appeals to rational self-interest, nor intrinsic value, nor perfection of one's capacities. We might very well acknowledge the intrinsic value of the environment without finding that acknowledgement to resonate with us. We might recognize that exercising virtue is one of the highest forms of human activity, while caring less about it. We might even appreciate that exercising virtue may advance our interests in the long term while failing to find ourselves moved and engaged by that thought.

These considerations might very well be true (and might supplement and support one's own analysis), but SDT shows us that human motivation is more complex and nuanced, and informed more by the contours of our basic psychology than by rationality. I recognize this may sound counter-intuitive, as it seems a truism that, for example, when something is in one's rational self-interest it ought to resonate with them (and, it is also a truism—on some accounts—that recognizing intrinsic value involves being motivated to promote that value). But the sense of 'resonance' I'm focusing on here does not reduce to either advancing one's interest, or even to feeling motivated. It is a specific description of cases wherein something just 'clicks' for someone.³

I take this sense of resonance, and the kinds of experiences that resonate with individuals, to very much track the kinds of experiences that lie at the heart of SDT's framework. SDT begins with reflection on non-optimal and optimal functioning, and traces the difference between the two to whether or not an individual's activities support natural tendencies towards growth and integration. We thus might helpfully understand the seeds of SDT as rooted in observation of the fact that some activities resonate with individuals in ways that support their growth and integration, and some do not, and as engaged in an effort to explain the conditions that hold when something resonates with a subject.

Self-determination theory maintains that activities resonate with individuals to the extent that those activities support growth tendencies and satisfy innate psychological needs. When an individual engages in an activity that resonates with them, they find themselves self-motivated to engage in that activity. When it does not resonate with them, they may still find their actions self-motivated, but their source of motivation feels external and alienating.

Consider, along with SDT, the spectrum of the ways in which things can motivate us and how different those ways feel on the phenomenological level.⁴ At one end of the spectrum are instances wherein a subject is motivated by fear or threat of punishment. Subjects on this end of the spectrum are extrinsically motivated; the distinctive aspect of their motivation is that it feels non-autonomous to the subject: they are motivated, but their source of motivation is external to them. At the other end of the spectrum are instances wherein subjects are motivated out of a sense of interest or enjoyment—they are intrinsically motivated. It is on this end of the spectrum that things—activities, goals—are resonating with a subject. The subject experiences their self as the perceived locus of causality, and their actions feel autonomous.

Autonomous forms of motivation overall tend to be more effective. Because they depend upon a particular interaction between the subject and their activity and/or goals they provide a more stable source of motivation than forms of motivation that depend on contingent, separable effects. Because they motivate from a place of resonance, subjects find engaging in the activity itself a rewarding experience. And, as much research shows, this places subjects within a position of success in their pursuits.⁵ All these factors combine to support the thesis that when something resonates with someone, that person is apt to find themselves eagerly engaged in the activity and successful in its exercise.

This analysis of resonance and the spectrum of motivation begets the question of whether or not virtue can resonate with subjects. Elsewhere I argue that it is a mistake to expect that subjects can find intrinsic motivation within the exercise of virtue to the extent that we ought to see a state of intrinsic motivation as a necessary component of virtue.⁶ The problem is quite simply that not all of the wide range of activities required by virtue are ones that motivate through interest and enjoyment, which is seen to be a distinctive aspect of intrinsic motivation.⁷ But intrinsic motivation is just one—admittedly a very clear and compelling—form in which something can resonate with an individual. As Ryan and Connell (1989) argue, although not in terms of ‘resonance’, we find within the spectrum of motivation other forms of extrinsic motivation that have phenomenological profiles similar to those we find within intrinsic motivation. These are forms of ‘identified’ or ‘integrated’ extrinsic motivation. These forms of motivation occur when subjects identify with the goal invoked through the activity although do not find the activity itself to be interesting and enjoyable apart from the goal.

We see two forms of resonance within SDT’s spectrum of motivation.

- (1) The activity can resonate. This is what happens in instances of intrinsic motivation: a subject finds something within the activity that clicks for them, such that they find it interesting and enjoyable.
- (2) A goal can resonate. This is what happens in integrated and identified forms of extrinsic motivation: a subject identifies and commits wholeheartedly to the goal, even though the activities invoked in pursuit of that goal may not themselves resonate.

In a perfect world, virtue would resonate on both levels for subjects. But given the reality in which we live and the messy, often painful circumstances that can surround the exercise of virtue, our focus within moral development ought to be on helping subjects develop an understanding of the *goal* of virtue in a way that resonates with them.

Pushing the analysis of SDT further, we find within their approach to motivation a promising analysis of why certain activities and goals tend to resonate with subjects. This is because they satisfy innate psychological needs and support our natural growth tendencies. Innate psychological needs describe strivings people tend to have towards certain kinds of experiences whose support promotes growth and flourishing and whose frustration inhibits growth and flourishing.

The idea is that features of our psychology direct people to engage in experiences that help them grow and flourish. Just like physical strivings, innate psychological needs can be ignored—but not without consequence. Research by Baumeister and DeWall (2005), for example, suggests a direct link between need satisfaction and cognitive functioning

that exists absent emotional or cognitive awareness of one's needs.⁸ Similarly, Deci and Ryan find that 'there are not instances of optimal, healthy development in which [an innate psychological need] was neglected, whether or not the individual consciously valued these needs' (2000, p. 229).

Self-determination theory identifies three innate psychological needs: that of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.⁹ Very briefly, the need for autonomy describes people's strivings to see themselves as the origin of their actions; the need for competence describes people's strivings to feel effective within their environments; and the need for relatedness describes people's strivings to belong, and to relate positively to others.

Given that the domain of our ordinary conception of morality focusses on how it is that we engage with and treat others, thinking through how it is that we are connected to one another, and the ways in which our interactions affect ourselves and others, is a promising route towards moral development. Reflection on the need for relatedness can provide valuable insight into why virtue, and learning virtue is important, in a way that resonates with the subject. Focusing on resonation is another way of saying that we need to frame virtue in ways that are autonomy-supportive, so that subjects can come to see exercising virtue as an extension of who they are, rather than as a restriction on what they can do.

How would this go? First, we need to think about how it is that we are connected to others, and the extent to which these connections infiltrate both the obvious and the less obvious. Obvious points of connection include intimate connections between family members and loved ones. These kinds of 'strong ties' are essential to the need for relatedness. The need for relatedness shows itself early through an infant's need to attach their self to a caregiver: as Harlow (Harlow & Zimmermann, 1958) established, forming attachments to caregivers allows infants to feel secure enough to engage in the kind of exploration essential to their development.

In a manner we might employ whilst learning virtue, let us take a moment to reflect on this fundamental observation: infants, essentially, have two basic needs.¹⁰ They need physical sustenance, so that their bodies can grow. And they need emotional sustenance, so that their minds can grow. When they lack either one, they face developmental difficulties and delays—they fail to thrive. The kind of emotional sustenance infants need is warmth and security. When infants are emotionally supported, they feel secure enough to explore their surroundings. This exploration allows them to develop problem-solving skills, and to feel competent. And this is how we *all* grow. We *all* need to feel safe and secure in order to grow and flourish; the more that we can make others feel safe and secure, the better off we will all be.

The line of reasoning above stems from recognition of the importance of the strong ties distinctive to close, intimate relationships between family members and loved ones. We don't always think of these relationships as being the ones that are even in the domain of 'morality',¹¹ but, as I've illustrated above, the reality is that it is within these intimate relationships that we learn how to treat one another. We learn that our well-being depends on the well-being of those around us; we learn that interactions marked by care and respect nourish, while interactions that lack these features stifle.¹² Reflecting on these characteristics of strong ties, and the clear impact that they have upon cognitive development and emotional well-being, is an important first step towards learning virtue.

Yet just as important, and perhaps more so, is learning to extend the care and respect that mediates how it is we interact with our strong ties, to our weak ties. 'Weak ties' describe the connections we have to people we interact with, or with whom we come into

contact, yet with whom we have no close, one-on-one relationship. The UPS delivery person might be a weak tie, or the person sitting next to you on the subway or in the classroom, or the cashier at the convenience store, and so forth.

Recognizing the importance of weak ties is pivotal both to virtue and to satisfying our need for relatedness. The need for relatedness is ongoing and ever-present. We don't satisfy it (or other needs) through interactions with, for example, family members, and then move on having fully satisfied our needs; the strivings we have to belong extend towards most, maybe even all, of our interactions, both strong and weak. We are social beings with a psychology that is built to be receptive and responsive to the needs and emotional cues of others. When we engage with others there is within us a need to be recognized, affirmed, and supported as a person; cold interactions thwart this need within all parties of the interaction. And while a common tendency—a defense mechanism, really—may be to distance oneself from others, and to convince oneself that the weak ties don't matter, the reality is that they do. Effects of failing to satisfy the need for relatedness affect us independently of our acknowledgement of it.

In recognizing that our psychological growth and functioning is dependent upon the nature of both strong and weak ties, we can come to see that we ought to extend the care and respect that we typically attach to strong ties to weak ties as well. Because our relationships with weak ties are different along important dimensions than our relationships with strong ties, treating weak ties with care and respect involves different behaviors. We treat the convenience store clerk with care and respect when we look them in the eye, say thank you, and tell them to have a good day. When you are a regular customer and take time to learn the clerk's name and use it, even better.

These are small steps, but with significant effects, and it is within these small steps that the seeds of virtue begin to root. Taking even just the small steps is easier for some than others, yet regardless of where one falls on the spectrum, active reflection on why it is important to do so helps. As we will see in the following sections, knowing why virtue and its exercise is important places subjects in a position to learn what virtue consists in and how to exercise it. Engaging in active reflection about why virtue is important brings into focus the nature of our relationships and the connections that hold between all of us, allowing subjects to develop a shared sense of humanity that is grounded with our interconnectedness. Thinking through the needs we all share allows us to better understand ourselves and others, and so to frame the importance of virtue in a fashion that resonates with us. When virtue is so conceived, when a subject commits to virtue, they can begin to identify with it, and to integrate their commitment to it within their very sense of self. Virtue becomes important to the subject as an extension of who they are.¹³

2. Knowing what

I've argued that the first step of learning virtue is to reflect on its importance in a way that disposes the subject to identify with it, and that thinking about the goals of virtue as rooted in human being's needs to relate and belong is one promising route. Extending this picture, let us now turn to how it is a subject might begin to learn *what* is involved in the exercise of virtue.

On the one hand, I think that most of us already have a handle on what virtue requires. The ordinary conception of morality that infiltrates everyday discourse is more or less an accurate one. We need to treat others well, and not to harm, cheat, and steal from them.

We need to help others when we can, to stick up for those less able to fight for their needs, and to treat the world as a limited resource in need of protection. Invoking—and discussing—these ordinary claims goes a long way towards learning what the exercise of virtue requires.

On the other hand, it is common for those learning virtue to feel stuck; to feel a gap between the basic (likely hodgepodge) commitments they have and the demands that face them daily. There is a need to think directly about what is involved in virtue. Beginning to think about what virtue involves is a natural extension of thinking and learning about why virtue is important. It promises to allow the subject to organize and structure their ordinary conception of morality so that they have a clear understanding of what is involved in virtue. They might realize some of their moral beliefs are off-base and don't warrant inclusion. They will also begin to be able to prioritize their beliefs and commitments in a way that situates them to perceive more clearly what to do, even in cases of conflict.

Learning what virtue involves is made easier when subjects can see their thoughts about what to do as embedded within a rich belief system about the importance of their interpersonal interactions. As the preceding discussion shows, when the latter is framed in such a way that is autonomy-supportive and grounded in reflection on the extent of our need for relatedness, subjects learning virtue ought to be able to identify with its importance. This kind of insight primes a subject to be able to fine-tune and adjudicate their beliefs about what exercising virtue involves, and indeed knowing *what* essentially involves knowing *why*.

One of the most helpful aspects of reflecting on beliefs about *what* virtue involves in the context of *why* virtue is important is that this embedding allows a subject to frame their beliefs about *what* hierarchically, according to the extent that they support the *why*. Having a clear understanding of the goal of exercising virtue provides a subject with the resources to reflect on the extent to which the various beliefs to which they are committed support that goal, and which of these beliefs do so most directly, while others do so only under certain circumstances.

How would this go? Again, the reflection involved is grounded and concrete. A subject, recognizing this to be the core aspect of satisfying needs for relatedness, might take as their goal treating people with care and respect. They then think about how their ordinary beliefs and commitments support this goal. Take the Golden Rule, which seems to be an ordinary belief many have about morality: treat others as you wish to be treated yourself. While kind of empty on its own, the subject who thinks about the Golden Rule through the lens of the need for relatedness can begin to think genuinely about how they wish—or more appropriately, need—to be treated. Embedding this belief within the need for relatedness gives it content and direction. It might even start to serve as an organizing principle for other beliefs a subject might have, such as a commitment to the importance of honesty and fairness. The subject can begin to see that being honest is typically important, but that sometimes treating others with care and respect might require a departure from honesty. Likewise, they will learn that treating people fairly is an important mode in which they can demonstrate concern for them, but that holding on too tightly to fairness might end up setting up barriers between their self and others and so might on occasion interfere with their level of interaction. They will learn that compassion and benevolence serve as the touchstones of our interaction and are not emotions reserved only for desperate times.

Notice that within this exercise many of the details that interest philosophers fall out of the picture. From a philosophical perspective, it matters whether fairness ought to trump compassion, or whether care and respect can come into conflict. It matters whether or not we commit ourselves more to the importance of developing character traits or to adhering to rules of behavior. These are important considerations to tackle in the course of trying to understand the fundamental nature of morality but tackling them in the course of learning virtue is more likely to inhibit one's learning than to advance it. At the end of the day, subjects need to do their best, and need direction in doing their best; their best doesn't require operating from a philosophical level and aiming at ultimate truths. Their best requires, simply, treating others well. Learning what counts, and which strategies to employ in their efforts primes them to do their best.

There's a further point to be made in defense of the claim that learning what the exercise of virtue consists in shouldn't require philosophical analysis and commitment to a particular understanding of the fundamental nature of morality. This is that learning is facilitated when subjects feel confident and competent to the task. Their need for competence is such that failures to feel effective inhibit a subject's progress and success in the task, while success breeds further success (Bauer & Baumeister, 2010). Taking the time to think—in advance—about what is involved in virtue delivers feelings of competence and efficacy that will carry over to one's actions, so that in the moment of action one is not stuck deliberating and calling one's deliberations into questions. One who has learnt virtue is able to exercise it quickly and with confidence. Their attunement to the goal, and reflection on why that goal matters, allows them to adjudicate cases of conflict and focus on what truly counts, which is how they are relating to others. These are the things that count when it comes to learning what virtue requires.

3. Knowing how

Moral excellence involves not mere possession of some psychological state, but the *active exercise* of it. While we've been emphasizing the importance of active reflection on why virtue is important and in what virtue consists, virtuous people don't just think about what is important in life, they also act on these thoughts. Their psychological state thus involves, at a minimum, dispositions to think and feel in virtue-relevant ways, as well as dispositions to act on these thoughts and feelings. They thus know not just *what* a good person ought to strive for, and *why* they ought to strive for it, but *how* to do it.

Knowing what to do does not entail that one knows how to do it. As I've argued previously one of the most important lessons we can take away from recent critiques of virtue ethics is that developing virtue isn't solely a matter of coming to have the proper set of beliefs about virtue, even when these beliefs are structured by and embedded within a robust understanding of what is at stake in acting well, and of why virtue is important.¹⁴ It seems to be a feature of most of our psychologies that knowing what to do doesn't translate into doing it at the appropriate times. Various obstacles stand in our way and can prevent us from success in acting on our beliefs. We are heavily influenced by situational features that block us from appreciating that others are in need. The empathy that no doubt helps us to engage with our strong ties and be responsive to their needs is nonetheless biased. It might be limited within our encounters with others and can't be relied on to sustain positive interactions with weak ties.

Learning how to exercise virtue will thus involve learning about ourselves, and our natural tendencies. As we have seen, SDT's analysis of innate psychological needs teaches us much about ourselves and what our growth and development depends upon. When it comes to knowing how to exercise virtue, we need also to take into consideration research on the nature of behavior. What kinds of things tend to impact what we do, and how can we take better control over these influences so that we can exercise virtue, having already learnt why doing so is important, and what virtue involves?

By looking at research on self-regulation, we can begin to think about how to transform our natural tendencies, so that our 'natural' response is to exercise virtue. And here we see that while active reflection was crucial to learning why virtue, and its exercise, is important, and to learning what the exercise of virtue involves, active reflection is less central to the actual exercise of virtue. The actual exercise of virtue, rather, likely goes best when it has become automatic.¹⁵

It very well may sound antithetical to virtue to talk about it as a skill which subjects ought to automatize. When we set out to explore how to learn virtue, images of robots were certainly not on our radar. But this isn't at all what I have in mind in suggesting that automatizing one's responses is central to learning how to exercise virtue. Within the psychological context, automaticity refers to processes of the brain that generate thoughts and behaviors without the engagement of conscious thought processes. Automaticity is functional for people insofar as it frees their brain from having to engage consciously in the details and thereby makes the best of the brain's limited resources. Research on the surprising extent of actions which people engage in automatically supports the notion that our minds are predisposed to make regular patterns of action automatic.

Many of our regular activities are of this nature: when an experienced driver sits down behind the wheel, they don't engage in conscious thoughts about every move they make. Rather they shift gears, adjust their speed, turn the steering wheel with the curves of the road, and so on—without ever having explicit thoughts about doing so or needing to do so. That the person's driving is automatic doesn't entail that they are mindless, or checked out, or somehow falling short in their performance. What it does mean is that they have already done the hard work of learning how to drive, and that they have engaged in the activity enough to make their skill flow from them effortlessly.

Likewise, a person who has learned to automatize virtue ought not to be mistaken for one whose performance is hindered by the extent to which their exercise occurs outside of their conscious awareness. Rather, we should recognize them as exhibiting experience in virtue, just as we recognize that an experienced driver does not think about every move they make.

Julie Annas (1995) notes that thinking of virtue as a skill allows us to develop a more nuanced understanding of how a disposition to exercise virtue is both built and maintained, and how that disposition should be seen as more than just a routine, habitual action. My suggestion is that we push this one step further, by seeing a disposition to exercise virtue as a skill that can be automatized.¹⁶ Learning how to exercise virtue, then, is analogous to learning a skill and perfecting it by making it, as much as possible, automatic.

We can develop the analogy further to illustrate what is involved in learning how to exercise virtue. Think through how it is most people learn to drive. They know that the point of driving is to reach a desired destination safely and efficiently. They know that this requires coordination amongst other drivers and that there are rules (laws) in place to regulate that coordination. They know the practical mechanisms of operating

a vehicle: turn the key to start the engine, use the gas pedal to accelerate and the brake to slow down and stop, etc. Taking this body of knowledge about the purpose of driving and what is involved in driving, they begin to learn how to drive by drawing on this knowledge and by practicing. Through the process of learning, they create thought-action patterns that direct towards the goal—safe, efficient operation of a motor vehicle that obeys the laws.

These patterns tend to become automatic—we get in the car, put the key in the ignition and immediately turn the key to start the engine—but that they are automatic does not entail that they are inflexible. Rather their nature is such that they are triggered by certain conditions, while nonetheless being responsive to the nuances of those conditions, nuances which very well might entail a different thought/action pattern as appropriate.

Turning to virtue, we can tell a parallel story of learning how to exercise virtue. In the context of virtue, the patterns at stake are more accurately described as links between affect, thought, and action, but they are formed in the same fashion as the thought/action patterns involved in learning how to drive: through reflection on why exercising virtue is important and what is involved in the exercise of virtue.

In the preceding section, I suggested that conceiving of what virtue involves in a hierarchal fashion, according to how each component supports the goal (conceived in general terms of treating others with care and respect) provides a framework that helps a subject analyze, prioritize, and adjudicate between ordinary beliefs about morality. Here's another way in which the hierarchal model can be helpful: by providing feedback loops that alert a subject to when their regular thought patterns fail to support their goals, thus providing a subject with feedback to adjust their behavior. This is one way of seeing how thought patterns can be automatic yet not inflexible.

Carver and Scheier's work on feedback mechanisms is helpful here (Carver & Scheier, 2001). Their research finds that when subjects develop hierarchal knowledge structures that consist in both concrete specific plans of actions ('action-sequences') and the abstract goals those plans promote, the knowledge structure operates as a feedback mechanism, alerting subjects to any discrepancies that arise between their actions and their goals. Once developed, these knowledge structures begin to function without a subject actively, consciously, engaging in them. They can thus be automatic, but by no means mindless. A person learning how to exercise virtue must think a whole lot about virtue, just not necessarily in the moment in which virtue is called for.

I've argued that learning how to exercise virtue involves automatizing the exercise of virtue so that it becomes the subject's default tendency, thereby displacing the thought/action patterns most of us seem to start with, which lead many astray from virtue. In automatizing the exercise of virtue, a subject doesn't give up thinking about virtue; they just don't rely on reflection in the moment as a necessary component of exercising virtue. Knowing how to exercise virtue thus involves knowing oneself, knowing when reflection is appropriate, and knowing when it can inhibit the exercise of virtue.

4. Learning virtue

I've argued that the task of learning virtue involves knowing why virtue and its exercise are important; knowing what is involved in the exercise of virtue; and knowing how to exercise it. Where virtue is framed to be important insofar as it satisfies the need for relatedness and

promotes growth and flourishing, we have an account of virtue that resonates with subjects. This means that subjects should be able to identify with the goals surrounding the exercise of virtue and therein develop autonomous forms of motivation towards it, which nourish the need for autonomy and make them more successful in their exercise of it.

When virtue is so conceived, the subject thinking about why virtue is important will very much feel the project as an extension of their self. They will be thinking about the extent and nature of their own needs for relatedness and how all of us share the same innate needs and are united as such. They will begin to develop a shared sense of humanity that is inclusive of strong and weak ties. These reflections carry over to their thoughts about what is involved in exercising virtue and examination of how their ordinary beliefs and commitments fulfill the aims of virtue. All of this reflection situates subjects to learn how to exercise virtue in a fashion that promises the development of automaticity and sets the subject up for success in their efforts, therein satisfying additionally their need for competence.

SDT's conception of innate psychological needs and of how these needs inform people's motivational styles is pivotal to this framework. It provides a perspective from which we can understand the rich nature of our motivational systems and avoid falling into the traps of thinking that everything reduces to self-interest. Understanding the needs that drive us psychologically allows us to see how we are similar to one another, and to see that the things we need to grow and flourish are the same things that others need as well. We learn that we all need to feel safe and secure; that we all need to feel like we belong and that we are accepted; and that we are all worthy of one's care and concern.

Notes

1. See Tiberius (2014), chapter 10 for helpful discussion of this debate.
2. For examples, see Kagan (1998), Southwood (2013), Besser-Jones and Slote (Besser-Jones & Slote, 2014).
3. The language of resonance is often used in the context of well-being, where some maintain that a constraint upon an adequate theory of well-being is that it resonates with the subject. For initial statement of the view, see Railton (1986); for a helpful analysis of resonance, see Dorsey (2012).
4. My discussion here follows Ryan and Connell (1989).
5. For overview of SDT's approach to motivation, see Deci and Ryan (2000). For examples of research showing the effectiveness of autonomous motivation in the context of education, see Black & Deci (2000); Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan (2007).
6. (Besser-Jones, 2012).
7. As Deci and Ryan describe, 'intrinsic motivation is a property of the interaction between a person and an activity. For people to be intrinsically motivated for an activity, they must be doing it because they find it interesting' (Deci & Ryan, 2010, p. 2).
8. Their focus is on the need for relatedness, but the point generalizes. See Besser (Besser-Jones, 2014) for further discussion.
9. These formulations are specific to SDT; however, multiple theoretical perspectives recognize the strivings.
10. This is an oversimplification, obviously. But there's nonetheless important truth to what follows, and sometimes oversimplifying can help us see and appreciate what really counts in life, which is part of learning virtue.
11. This view faces pushback from those concerned that patriarchal gender dynamics, often found with the family, can be oppressive (Okin, 1989).

12. This isn't to say that all strong ties consist in these kinds of positive relationships. It is all too familiar for people's strong ties to be harmful ones, such as when a child is raised within an abusive household. My point is that there is within our strong ties the opportunity for reflection about how to treat others in a way that supports them, and provides them the emotional sustenance they need. For those lucky to have positive strong ties, this reflection goes smoothly and easily: we learn how to treat others based on how we've been treated. Yet for those less lucky, whose strong ties do not provide emotional support, there is still opportunity for reflection; this reflection may be more painful, for it may consist in thinking through how we wish we were treated, and the negative consequences we've suffered through not having our needs met. The point remains that reflection on the natures of our strong ties, and the degree to which we need emotional support, is a promising route towards understanding why virtue is important.
13. Research on autonomous motivation in the context of morality supports the plausibility of this claim. See (Assor, 2012; Gagné, 2003; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).
14. (Besser-Jones, 2014).
15. For discussions of automaticity see Ryan & Connell (1989); Bargh & Chartrand (1999); Bargh & Ferguson (2000); Fitzsimons & Bargh (2004); Gallo, Keil, McCulloch, Rockstroh, & Gollwitzer (2009).
16. I'm presenting this as a general claim about learning how to exercise virtue. There are likely some aspects of exercising virtue that may not lend themselves to automatization, and which require active reflection in the moment. The picture I develop below creates space for active reflection when one's action-sequences fail to track the goals of virtue, and alert the subject to this, indicating that the situation is one which requires active reflective engagement about how best to act.

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