

*Virtue Theory*

Although the term “virtue theory” may seem exotic to nonphilosophers, it has a straightforward meaning. Our focus is on moral virtue and we will offer a theory of the general features of moral virtue to guide scientific work, including work on specific virtues such as fairness, compassion, kindness, and curiosity. Today, many philosophers recognize the need to develop a virtue theory, but many disagreements remain about the role it should play in a broader account of moral right and wrong and of human welfare or happiness. Roughly, those associated with the term “virtue ethics” claim that virtue and virtue theory should have a central or dominant role in our ethical thinking and theorization. Meanwhile, opponents of virtue ethics instead assign virtue a secondary or derivative role. Our interest in this book is in virtue theory and the science this theory can inspire to investigate moral virtues empirically. We assume that philosophers interested in virtue ethics will naturally have an interest in our project, but we take no stand in the debate about virtue ethics and the role that virtue or virtue theory should play in a general ethical theory.

Empirical virtue researchers have not generally relied on robust virtue theory. This is partly due to the difficulty of interdisciplinary work. But even social scientists who actively engage with the philosophical literature find that most philosophers, the primary purveyors of virtue theory, tend to offer highly abstract accounts that are not designed to guide empirical science. Simply put, the existing philosophical literature does not, for the most part, offer a robust virtue theory that is of use to psychologists. Although this helps to explain the absence of robust virtue theory in psychology, it does not negate benefits that would come from robust theory. Without a unifying theory of virtue, scientific studies have developed without guidance, and the result is a patchwork of relatively disconnected studies of specific virtues based on ad hoc assumptions about those virtues. Without a theory that lays out the common conceptual core of all virtues,

it is difficult to create a cohesive, cumulative research domain. And it is also likely that some researchers will study some aspects of a virtue, some will study another aspect, and some aspects may simply be ignored. In this chapter, we offer a general theory of realistic virtues that we have formulated to be directly relevant to empirical study – one that can help virtue scientists to work together and achieve unified and cumulative results.

Our virtue theory is inspired by philosophic work, both historical and contemporary, but it has different aims and does not engage in the contentious debates active in philosophical approaches to virtue. Western virtue theorists have, since the ancient Greeks, been multivocal and engaged in lively discussion about how to conceptualize ideal forms of virtue that few if any human beings can hope to achieve. There are famous differences in the accounts of ideal virtue provided by Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Aquinas, Luther, Hume, and Nietzsche, to name just a few (e.g., Annas, 1993; De Caro & Vaccarezza, 2021). Contemporary virtue theorists are not univocal either and they strongly disagree about the nature of the moral virtues that a saint, sage, or moral hero would have. They also disagree about how we can best understand specific virtues (e.g., justice), about how humans can develop virtues, and about the value of these virtues for individuals and groups. We certainly cannot resolve these disagreements in this chapter, but we do not need to either.

Our general view is that virtue scientists can and should leave aside the debates about the nature and importance of ideal human virtue. Instead, the focus should be on the shared structural features of the ordinary virtues that are typically ascribed to people who are morally good, at least in the relevant respects, even if they fall short of various saintly, heroic, and sagely ideals. By turning from inspiring ideals to ordinary, realistic virtues, in this book we focus on the common features of various moral virtues that are relevant to scientific study. And a theory of realistic ordinary virtue that focuses on these features can be accepted by people who disagree and argue about what ideal virtue is like. So, scientists can use this virtue theory to improve and unify their studies while remaining neutral on contentious abstract questions about ethics, metaphysics, and theology that divide people in modern, pluralistic societies. In this way, our realistic virtue theory is designed to be ecumenical in the sense discussed by Snow (2010) and Russell (2009). It is also our hope to increase the conceptual cohesion and depth of virtue research through proposing hypothesis testing, especially regarding philosophically contentious ideas.

For example, we do not discuss debates about which virtues belong on the most complete but parsimonious list of virtues, claims about ideal

virtues being the result of divine agency or grace, or the unity of virtue thesis (roughly the idea that having one virtue entails having them all). Rather than delving into these philosophical debates about the nature and source of ideal virtue, we content ourselves in this chapter with presenting the structural features that we believe define the virtues that ordinary people talk and care about.

Further, when it comes to debates about how to understand various specific virtues, about how humans can develop virtues, and about the value of these virtues for individuals and groups, we think that scientists can convert many of the relevant views into interesting empirical hypotheses. For example, the claim that the moral trait of justice is conducive to both group and personal flourishing is made by philosophers in ancient Greece and China and we think that this hypothesis is one that virtue scientists can and should formulate and test. And, in a related vein, scientists could study two different understandings of a virtue – for example, libertarian and liberal justice – and compare which better promotes group cooperation or individual well-being. In this way, virtue scientists can make use of the range of reasonable but conflicting philosophic views regarding the virtues and investigate an ambitious set of empirically tractable research hypotheses that will help us learn about how humans can develop various virtues and about the value of these virtues for a variety of purposes.

Much Western virtue theory is Aristotelian in origin, and many claim that Aristotelian virtue theory is the richest available account of virtues (e.g., Fowers, 2005a; Russell, 2009; Wright et al., 2021). Other traditions exist, however, and we believe that scientists studying virtues will be best served by an account that captures broadly shared assumptions. For contingent personal reasons, the theory we propose in this book is mainly inspired by Western work in the Aristotelian tradition, but it is also substantively informed by the Confucian tradition, and we occasionally gesture toward evidence that our theory is acceptable to adherents of various world traditions.

We present a virtue theory that forms the conceptual foundation for the empirical model we propose to support virtue science. Our basic view is that moral virtues are (1) acquired traits, (2) manifested in behavior, (3) steered by knowledge, and (4) fully motivated. It is important for us to differentiate “action” and “behavior” at this point. Psychologists generally refer to behavior in the belief that observed activity is minimally interpreted (or even not interpreted at all!). These claims have been widely criticized (e.g., Danziger, 1990; Richardson et al., 1999; Taylor, 1985). In our usage, behavior is activity that may or may not be associated with

specific knowledge or motivation. In contrast, our usage of action denotes a cohesive integration of behavior, knowledge, emotion, and motivation. Although there are many kinds of action, we stipulate that action only qualifies as virtuous when it includes all four components.

In addition to this basic account of moral virtue, we think virtue science should be geared to assess additional classic contentions about virtue's importance. One is that moral virtues are guided by practical wisdom or intelligence (our **hypothesis 11-12**).<sup>1</sup> Another is that moral virtues contribute to, or are even necessary for, a good human life (our **hypotheses 10-16, 10-17, 10-21, and 10-26**).<sup>2</sup>

These hypotheses are inspired by claims about the connections between virtue, wisdom, and the good life that are found in philosophic and religious traditions from all parts of the globe, but we propose them as guiding hypotheses in part because they are not universally accepted (Driver, 2001; van Zyl, 2018). Due to this contention, we recognize that these claims call for empirical investigation. Moreover, we believe that by investigating them, virtue science will become more interesting, important, and useful. This means linking up virtue science with other areas of psychological research that are independently pursued. First, practical wisdom is the subject of broad and vibrant psychological study (e.g., Darnell et al., 2019, 2022; de Caro & Vaccarezza, 2021; Grossman et al., 2020) that does not always directly involve studying moral virtues. Scholars will need to bring together results from practical wisdom research with the results of work on moral virtues to identify and test specific hypotheses about virtue–wisdom links. But virtue scientists might also draw on work on wisdom and intelligence to improve their studies of individual virtues (cf. Darnell et al., 2019, 2022; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2022). Similarly, both personal and relationship well-being or flourishing are studied by a range of psychologists, only some of whom are interested in moral virtues (e.g., Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Robles et al., 2014). And scholars can bring together results from those areas with the results of work on the moral virtues to identify and test specific hypotheses about virtue–good life links (cf. Fowers, 2005a, 2012, 2016). Virtue scientists can draw on work on well-being and relationship health to advance the study of individual moral virtues and their importance. As this suggests, our

<sup>1</sup> We number the hypotheses according to where they are discussed in a chapter in the book. Thus, this first-mentioned hypothesis is discussed in detail in Chapter 11 as the twelfth hypothesis in that chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle and most contemporary virtue theorists hold that virtue is not sufficient in itself for a good life because “external” goods such as friends, health, social harmony, and a reasonable degree of wealth are also necessary. We accept this premise as well.

approach involves developing a general model of moral virtue that can unify and guide virtue science. This can also point to the ways in which virtue science can be connected with other areas of psychological research to produce more interesting and valuable scientific results.

### Virtues as Traits

Aristotle (1999) was clear that virtues are reliable attributes, and this assumption is found in other traditions, for example, the Confucian one. Aristotle (1999) stated that “no function of man [*sic*] possesses as much stability as do activities in conformity with virtue” (1100b 13) and that the actions of a virtuous person “must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character” (1105a 32–35). But we adopt the less contentious view that virtues are stable characteristics that are expressed consistently, but not constantly or perfectly (**hypothesis 7-6**). There are, of course, virtue skeptics and some thinkers who question the stability of virtues (e.g., Doris, 2002; Harman, 2009; Miller, 2014). Their views have been widely discussed (e.g., Cokelet & Fowers, 2019; Wright et al., 2021) and we think it is clear that these skeptics tend to focus on the stronger claims just mentioned rather than more limited, realistic ones.

We consider virtues to be traits because an individual who has a virtue will generally act reliably when that virtue is called for. Among trait theorists, however, there is considerable debate about what is meant by a trait, with scholars’ views ranging from “purely descriptive concepts to biologically based causal concepts” (John & Srivastava, 1999, p. 130). Therefore, we must specify what we mean by virtue as a trait.

We specify five aspects of virtue traits. First, we do not believe that virtue traits are biologically given. Instead, we argue in the next section that virtues are acquired traits (**hypothesis 7-4**).

Second, we do not see virtue traits as causal forces that determine behavior, at least not in the way that contemporary social scientists typically understand causation. Moreover, these traits are not an essential interior characteristic of individuals. Rather, virtue traits are modes of activity that are achieved when individuals’ thoughts, emotions, and behavior are shaped to be appropriately responsive to situations. This means that virtues are an intelligent mode of activity that is reliably responsive to the environment rather than an interior causal force that determines behavior in a mechanistic manner. We discuss this distinction in more detail in Chapter 5.

For example, courage might be glossed as the intelligent capacity to protect what is valuable (persons, communities, or property) despite danger

and fear. There is no internal essence that causes one to act courageously. One acts with courage because one recognizes the need to protect something valuable. We have more to say about this intelligent ability to perceive what is necessary in the section “Virtues and Their Components 4: Practical Wisdom” in this chapter. Very briefly, the ability to recognize what is at stake in a given situation and act appropriately helps to constitute one as a person who has a virtue trait. Having a virtue trait means that one has acquired the capacity to act reliably with courage (or generosity, fairness, etc.) when a situation calls for it.

Third, we suggest that virtues are generally personally desirable traits that are related to what individuals find valuable in life and to the way they want to live. If, for example, someone values fairness in relationships, he will be readily motivated to act fairly toward the people in his life for the sake of relational fairness. Put otherwise, virtues are typically valued characteristics, in part, because they help people to enact their ideals about how to live.

Fourth, our understanding of virtue traits as desirable characteristics suggests that many people will want to intentionally cultivate them and that they may be able to do this (**hypothesis 7-4**). For example, some individuals may decide to intentionally develop virtues such as kindness and loyalty, in part because they believe these traits are important for maintaining the friendships they value. In Chapter 10, we discuss the relationship between virtues and what is seen as a good life overall, but the point for now is that virtues involve a form of intelligent responsiveness that sets them apart from the temperaments with which people are born. Our core theory of virtue assumes that virtues involve intelligence and we suggest that virtue science investigate the possibility that people can and do intentionally develop or cultivate these traits. For example, scientists can draw on various philosophic and psychological traditions to identify hypotheses about specific interventions or methods of cultivation (meditations, rituals, etc.) that people can use to develop or strengthen specific virtue traits.

Finally, it is important from the outset to make it clear that we do not endorse the simplistic view of traits that suggests that they are continuously expressed. Rather, we argue that trait expression is responsive to (or moderated by) situations and social roles (**hypotheses 8-1 and 9-5**). We discuss this variability at length in Chapters 8 and 9. When one has a virtue trait, one is generally motivated to act in accordance with that trait, but this is compatible with tailoring one’s actions to the current situation and to one’s social roles. In addition, there are situations that seem to call on us to embody some virtues instead of others. For example, when tasked

with giving awards to people based on important achievements, embodying the virtue of justice would be appropriate, while embodying the virtue of loyalty to a friend or family member would be less appropriate. This responsiveness to situations and roles means that virtues will be expressed when they fit the circumstances, rather than in a monotonously continuous manner.

### *Trait Consistency and Variability*

The two important empirical conditions for claiming that a characteristic or virtue is a trait are that individuals who have the trait enact it with a significant degree of consistency and that there is variation across individuals in the degree to which the trait is expressed. That is, there should be within-person consistency (**hypothesis 7-6**) and between-person variability (**hypothesis 7-7**). For example, if someone has the trait of generosity, we expect that individual to act generously with some consistency and score higher on measures of generosity than others.

Unfortunately, most studies on virtues have relied on single-timepoint survey studies with a global assessment of virtue, followed by aggregate analyses of sample level data (Fowers, 2014). These studies cannot assess this key requirement of trait theory (consistency over time within persons). Contemporary trait theorists recognize the necessity of multiple assessments of the candidate trait over time to document consistency (Fleeson, 2001; Jayawickreme et al., 2014). We discuss this approach to trait measurement more fully in Chapter 7.

In addition to within-person consistency, some people will be more generous than others. As Carver and Scheier (2008) suggested, “trait theories assume that people occupy different points on continuously varying dimensions. For that reason, this is sometimes called a ‘dimensional’ approach. In trait theories, differences among people are seen as *quantitative* rather than qualitative” (p. 46, emphasis in original). We discuss this between-person variability more in Chapter 7 and cite many studies that demonstrate clear between-person variability on a variety of virtues. These consistent individual differences results support the idea that individuals have differences in the degree to which they evidence virtues.

### *Within-Person Variability*

As already noted, our claim for trait consistency does not require that an individual constantly express a trait, even if the virtue is well developed.

Clearly, no trait is appropriate in all circumstances. For example, a generous individual would be generally expected to be giving in many situations but not in others (e.g., when giving is likely to be exploited). In addition, no human being is perfect, which means that even the most virtuous person will not act in the best way on every occasion. If a characteristically generous person does not give something he can ordinarily be expected to give, he seems to be acting “out of character.” Human imperfection means that one can act suboptimally due to fatigue, distraction, or error. One way that our portrayal of virtue is psychologically realistic is that virtue trait consistency implies neither perfection nor constant expression (**hypothesis 7-7**).

### *Virtues and Personality Traits*

The discussion of virtues as traits raises the question whether virtues can be subsumed within the category of personality traits. This is a natural question, given well-developed theory and research on personality traits. If it turns out that virtues are no more than restatements of what is already captured by personality psychology, then a science of virtue would be redundant. Scholars have taken a variety of positions on whether virtues can be subsumed within established personality frameworks (e.g., Fowers et al., 2021; Jayawickreme et al., 2014; Wright et al., 2021). We discuss this question in detail in Chapter 5. In brief, our view is that virtue traits have similarities with personality traits, but the differences are sufficiently important to maintain a distinction between the two types of traits (**hypothesis 5-1**).

### **Virtues as Acquired Traits**

In his account of the acquisition of virtue, Aristotle (1999) frankly denies any dichotomy of nature and nurture, saying: “The virtues are implanted in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature; we are by nature equipped with the ability to receive them, and habit brings this ability to completion and fulfillment” (1103a 24–26). A similar view can be found in Mencius, who argues that to have virtues we must develop or extend naturally occurring “moral sprouts” (e.g., Flanagan, 2014). Contemporary scholars will readily agree with Aristotle’s dismissal of a nature–nurture dichotomy, but some will balk at his firm assertion that virtue traits are acquired through intentional habituation (**hypothesis 7-4**). Aristotle (1984b) reinforced this idea many times, saying in the *Eudemian Ethics* that “character (virtue), being as its name indicates something that grows by habit ... consider,



then, character to be this, viz. a quality in accordance with governing reason” (1220a 39–1220b 5). Because some contemporary virtue theorists – and philosophers in the past – disagree with these sorts of claims, we believe that intentional habituation should be approached as an interesting and potentially empirically tractable topic. We think that hypotheses about intentional virtue development are fit subjects for ambitious and interesting virtue science (see Chapter 5).

The ultimate aim of virtue development is presumably robust virtue, with consistent and appropriate expression. We think virtue science can productively focus on the hypothesis that virtues are morally desirable traits that can be intentionally cultivated or developed, but that a general thesis and more specific hypotheses about the processes that will enable people to effectively cultivate various virtues call for scientific study.

Some philosophic traditions claim that individuals can or must cultivate virtues through intentional habit-forming practices, and this is one specific view of intentional development that virtue science should investigate. This view suggests that people decide how to act repeatedly in day-to-day life and predicts that if one chooses consistently to act generously or courageously, these actions become habitual and those habits, in turn, become settled dispositions or traits. In other words, developing a virtue trait is based on enacting the virtue recurrently, so that acting well becomes one’s habitual response. That means that one *characterizes* oneself by making these actions habitual, and this self-characterization occurs whether one acts virtuously, viciously, or just splits the difference (Fowers, 2005a). One’s endorsement of many similar decisions through time shapes one as a particular kind of person rather than another kind. One becomes generous by giving, loyal by standing by one’s friends and family, brutish by following one’s baser impulses, and so forth. This can be seen as an accretive process because each time one acts, it contributes to or detracts from the solidity of a virtue trait, albeit ever so slightly in each instance. Each action reinforces or undermines one’s virtue or vice traits and therefore one’s dispositions to act (in)consistently with a virtue. Practicing acts of courage and generosity can help us to become comfortable with those kinds of actions and to make them part of our identity. The idea is to act as though one has a virtue on the way to internalizing that virtue and identifying with it.

This is what it means to cultivate virtues (Broadie, 1991). The process is often compared to skills (Annas, 2011; Stichter, 2018), such as woodworking, jazz, or chess. One becomes a skilled woodworker, for example, only through the choice to practice and one needs both intentional

commitment and extended guidance to become adept at making beautiful objects with wood. Creating a few pieces of merely functional furniture would not qualify one as an expert woodworker, only a novice. To become a master woodworker, one needs to develop intelligent skills that integrate discursive knowledge and know-how. Similarly, the beginning of practicing courage or generosity would not be considered virtue because these actions have not yet become second nature and they do not reflect the agent's intelligent skill and know-how. We would count someone as courageous or just or temperate only when they become skilled at responding in courageous, just, or temperate ways and exercising that skill becomes to some extent second nature.

Regardless of whether one endorses a habit-formation model or not, intentional virtue development will presumably involve the element of choice. On these models, cultivating virtues involves an intentional set of choices over an extended period. The primacy of choice in intentional virtue trait development models is a key differentiation between virtue and personality traits, one which we discuss in greater depth in Chapter 5. This agentic emphasis means that one's decisions and actions do not generally occur episodically or independently of the rest of one's life and trait make-up. Rather, choices and actions are outgrowths of one's life and character and they also *constitute* that life and character. The accretive structure of virtue is sometimes said to underline the way in which virtues are continually under development (Annas, 1993). On the intentional models, each circumstance provides new opportunities to hone and refine one's capacity for virtuous action. For example, if one develops habitual generosity, it rests on repeated decisions to endorse and shape one's generous disposition in myriad situations. Of course, one may act ungenerously occasionally, but the extensive practice of generosity simply makes it easier to enact giving as a matter of course (Annas, 1993).

The general process of virtue acquisition is seen by intentional practice theorists as an active, conscious process involving choices made explicitly for the purpose of virtue development. Nevertheless, many of one's choices and actions do not require conscious consideration. The closer to second nature a virtue-related choice and action is, the less deliberative is the process. On some views, the goal of virtue development is even to make virtuous acts generally automatic. This is consistent with the contemporary understanding of automaticity, wherein automatic actions can be based primarily or solely on inherited or biological sources, or can be habituated over time to become the default response (Bargh, 1994).

Finally, in addition to considering and empirically investigating various models of virtue acquisition, virtue science should proceed by considering the possibility that most if not all human beings have natural capacities that can be developed into virtues (**hypothesis 4-18**). Virtue science should also integrate findings that tell us something about the possible natural tendencies that impede some or all humans from developing in a virtuous direction. Positive “seeds” of virtue might be found, for example, in the inclinations toward fairness that emerge by three years of age (Hamann et al., 2011; Warneken et al., 2011) and toward beneficence that has been documented at one year of age (Hamlin, 2013; Kuhlmeier et al., 2003). These tendencies emerge naturally in children, whether or not they have been taught fairness or beneficence, and serve notice that humans appear to be naturally ethically minded (Fowers, 2015). These capacities are often lumped into the bland term “prosociality” by psychologists, but if we think of them as possible seeds of virtue, we will be encouraged to frame and investigate hypotheses about their making it possible for us to develop and cultivate more specific adult virtues.

An analogy can clarify this point. Humans are generally born with the capacities to speak and understand language, but we must learn to speak in ways that are intelligible to others. Learning to speak is a long process that requires shaping vocalizations into meaningful utterances, with extensive feedback and encouragement from caregivers. Speech development can lead to the appreciation (and even composition) of beautiful prose or poetry. But the process of understanding and composing excellent expressions of language also requires a lengthy process of education. There is no certainty about whether children will come to appreciate the finest written language just because they are generally born with the capacity for speech, but that ability is a prerequisite that is available for cultivation. Similarly, humans are not born with the knowledge of how to act in the best ways. Each child must learn what is considered the best ways to act because human ethical mindedness involves a general interest in acting morally, but it is not a fully defined or inevitable inclination (Fowers, 2015). Clearly, this learning is culturally conditioned and virtue concepts vary across historical cultures, a point that we now discuss.

### **Virtues in Cultural Context**

Even if individual choice and commitment are crucial for virtue development, it is important to remember that individuals always operate in concrete sociohistorical contexts, which shape both how individuals conceive

of the virtues and how they can best attempt to develop them. This cultural dependency is clear in the variations in virtue concepts in various cultures. Two quick examples are the culturally elevated importance of honor as a virtue term in many warrior societies, such as ancient Greece, and *Li*, a Confucian virtue which involves demonstrating the appropriate reverence for cultural rituals (Ivanhoe, 2013; Woodruff, 2001). Although both are recognizable to contemporary Westerners, neither is emphasized as a central, morally desirable virtue trait in the West today. In contrast, it is relatively easy to make a case for morally desirable traits related to the appreciation of diversity and the inclusion of people from various backgrounds, at least in liberal Western circles. (Fowers & Davidov [2006] termed this the virtue of openness to the other.) This openness and welcoming of people from diverse backgrounds has become increasingly important (and contested) as migration and cultural differences have become more prominent in the contemporary world. This is an example of cultural change in the increasing importance of the ideal of inclusion. This inclusion leads to cultivating excellence in welcoming and appreciating people with various backgrounds.

The cultural and temporal variability of virtue concepts (**hypothesis I-1**) presents several issues. First, cultural variability suggests one reason why it is unlikely that there will ever be a once-and-for-all, definitive list of virtues. Each cultural group defines and enacts virtues in its own way in response to new challenges and changes that are hard to foresee (Herman, 1997). The cultural dependency of virtue concepts also raises worries about our ability to develop a justifiable, if not final, list of virtues. Because these background assumptions about virtue traits are culturally and perhaps evolutionarily conditioned, it is possible that some are not sound or justified: for example, a certain culture might treat a trait that is actually harmful and shameful as a virtue. But it is not clear how we can justify our decisions about which concepts to keep on our lists and which to toss out as defective (Crisp, 2015; Williams, 2006).

Second, cultural groups may deploy assumptions about the virtues that are incompatible and that appear incommensurable and unintelligible across cultural divides. This makes it unclear how we can rationally decide which virtues to include on our list and how we can reduce the list to a manageable size. Both worries are serious, but we do not think they undermine the prospects for developing a robust program of virtue science.

We first discuss our concept of culture because this helps to clarify the degree of variability that we need to worry about. Cultural relativity is a real and important phenomenon, but, as we argue in the following paragraphs,

that cultural relativism is not decisive in rendering a virtue valueless. The first two points clarify the reality of cultural variation and the second two indicate how this variation does not rule out virtue science. First, by definition, a culture is a temporally extended group of people that has been able to foster a relatively stable way of life, suggesting that the group has fostered the kind of socially beneficial traits that promote enough social harmony for self-maintenance. Although cultural perspectives vary on what morally desirable traits are, there is generally an internal logic to each culture that makes it sustainable. Moreover, even if one does not endorse another group's views on virtue, this logic may be generally intelligible and the nobility of the virtue-related actions can be appreciated from an outsider's perspective, as the examples of honor cultures and *Li* suggest.<sup>3</sup> Of course, there are many examples of cultures that have collapsed or been absorbed by other cultural groups. The relationship between cultural group trajectories and virtue conceptions is a fascinating domain of study (cf. Appiah, 2011; Glover, 2012) but well beyond the scope of this book.

A major concern about cultural relativity is that cultural norms and ideals not only differ across cultures but also can appear immoral from other cultural perspectives. In particular, cultural groups that seem to value the extreme xenophobia that underwrites ethnic cleansing or the domination and exploitation of other groups come to mind. This concern is best addressed directly by recognizing that cultures can go wrong in their views of virtue (e.g., the desirability of a strong tendency to dehumanize people from other cultural or religious groups).

This raises the second reason that we do not see the cultural variability of virtues as delegitimizing virtue. Cultural norms and ideals can be critiqued both internally and from alternative perspectives. Of course, no one has an unassailable critical perspective or a god's eye viewpoint, but with appropriate modesty, questions can be raised among fellow humans regarding cultural ideals. Raising such questions can be difficult, but it is far from impossible to have reasonable discussions about cultural ideals. Moreover, progress in cultural ideals is always possible, and no culture can progress without questioning its reigning ideals. Because cultures are dynamic rather than static, cultural change is a constant, and it is a mistake to see cultural norms and ideals as sacrosanct and beyond critique. Moral outlooks can and should be questioned, albeit with the appropriate modesty and circumspection. Virtue scientists can study a variety of different

<sup>3</sup> We understand that this intelligibility can be doubted, but we see no reason to assume a kind of incommensurability.

virtues from a variety of different traditions and cultures without needing to claim that one set of virtues or one tradition is best or right.

The critique of cultural norms brings up the third way to address the cultural variability of virtue. We suggest that virtues are defined as traits, the exercise of which is typically taken to foster healthy human communities (**hypothesis 10-13**) and individual welfare (**hypotheses 10-11 to 10-34**). Of course, both relations need empirical assessment. We discuss the available evidence and suggest more hypotheses about those relations in Chapter 10. To give a few examples, fairness fosters trust and social harmony, courage allows the protection of what is valued when it is threatened, and forgiveness allows relational healing after a transgression. The virtues of fairness, courage, and forgiveness are valued in many cultures because they promote desirable states of affairs such as social harmony, value protection, and relational healing.

Questions about whether culturally promoted attributes promote genuine goods is one important basis for critiquing a group's views on morally desirable traits. For instance, the military subculture in Western societies places great value on respect for and obedience to people with higher ranks. This clearly serves the ends of unit cohesion and coordinated action that, in turn, leads to effective defense, the primary purpose of the military. Yet that respect for and obedience to authority goes seriously wrong when it is deployed to cover up errors or transgressions within the unit or by the ranking officers. Serious cover-ups of atrocities and sexual offenses are abhorrent both within and outside the military. The recognition that such actions are serious transgressions shows that respect for authority cannot be an absolute value but must be balanced with other ideals such as justice and honesty. Those who wish to cover up transgressions often do so by touting an absolute valuing of obedience. Although obedience is important, absolute obedience can support covering up serious transgressions, which is damaging to the primary purposes of the military (unit cohesion and its role in effective defense). This means that the virtue of obedience must be tempered by virtues such as justice and honesty to maintain the goods that are internal to the military, as well as the trust and support of the military by a broader polity that cannot accept atrocities or sexual misconduct. This is just one example of how important ideals can be critiqued and clarified, and it remains an ongoing challenge in many forms of organization. Nevertheless, it indicates the respectfulness and shape that cultural critiques can have.

More ambitiously, an argument has been made (Fowers, 2015, 2017) that some of these robust virtues are important elements of basic human

functions, such as standing up to harm or exploitation (courage), communication (honesty), benefaction (generosity), and social harmony (justice). We do not reiterate that case here, but we do want to suggest that the selection of which traits are virtues is not made arbitrarily by individuals or cultures. Virtues are socially recognized and often directly encouraged within societies based on recognizable cultural ideals.

The fourth reason that cultural relativity does not necessarily render virtue conceptions arbitrary is that many virtue traits are not only intelligible across cultures, but these virtues show up across many groups' virtue understandings. Traits commonly recognized cross-culturally are virtues such as courage, honesty, generosity, and justice. To be sure, there are variations in ways of understanding these virtues across cultures, but the virtues are easily recognized in differing cultural contexts and the variations tend to involve nuances rather than incommensurabilities. For example, Tudge and colleagues (O'Brien et al., 2018; Tudge et al., 2018) have studied the virtue of gratitude cross-culturally, and they report that there are identifiable cultural differences in the expression of gratitude. Nevertheless, the differences they found occurred within a family resemblance across gratitude conceptions and expressions because the differences emerged in the degree to which various aspects of gratitude (e.g., verbal and behavioral gratitude) are emphasized in the four cultural groups they studied.

In our view, cultural variations in virtue understandings are important and ineliminable. We must attend to culture as an important source of virtue conceptions and actions. Yet it seems unreasonable to simply throw up our hands in despair about the general concept of virtue based on cultural variation. Although cultural differences in virtues still need more attention from virtue theorists, we believe that culture can be incorporated in virtue theory in ways that nuance and deepen that theory rather than undermine it. We have only scratched the surface of this question here, but a deeper consideration of these questions is beyond the scope of this book.

### **Virtues and Their Components 1: Behavioral Patterns**

Our model of virtue involves several components. The first is behavior, which registers the **hypotheses (11-13 to 11-15)** that fully developed virtues are characteristically expressed in patterns of observable behavior. Generous thoughts or courageous feelings may in some cases be enough for low-grade generosity or courage, but when we think of a fully fledged generous or courageous person we think of someone whose "inner" states are manifest in

durable patterns of action.<sup>4</sup> For example, while we may grant that someone who has a locked-in syndrome and cannot act could be classified as generous if her thoughts and feelings are all generous, we would consider someone who has such thoughts, and acts on them, even more generous. And someone who acts on generous thoughts and feelings once or twice but does not exhibit a pattern of extended behavior can hardly be called generous at all. This focus on patterns of action is built into our thinking about virtue and it is also congenial to psychologists' interest in observable phenomena.

As we explore in more detail in Chapter 3, however, one of the shortcomings of virtue research to date is that it relies too much on single-timepoint, global self-reports of virtues; there are relatively few studies of observable virtue behavior or patterns of behavior that are temporally extended. Relying primarily on self-report provides relatively weak evidence of virtue behavior due to questions about respondents' ability and willingness to accurately report on their behavior. In addition, single-timepoint assessments require respondents to summarize vast amounts of behavior across a set of individual items. We discuss several methods for reducing these burdens in Part III. In addition, we discuss the behavioral aspects of virtue in Part III and Chapter 7.

### **Virtues and Their Components 2: Intentional, Intelligent Agency**

Although our model draws attention to the importance of patterned behavior, it also reflects the idea that behavior alone is insufficient for the ascription of fully fledged virtue. In addition, we offer **hypotheses II-16** and **II-17** that virtue requires knowledge (i.e., intention and understanding). In other words, we suggest that virtues are not blind habits.

To make these points more vivid, think again about a generous person. To be generous, someone needs to be disposed to share their goods (e.g., wealth, time, or talent) in ways that are not legally or morally required. But a fully generous person will also act intentionally and with knowledge and understanding. For example, proper gift-giving requires knowledge about the occasions for gift-giving, understanding the sort of gift that is fitting to the occasion, and an appreciation of how the relationship one has with the recipient conditions appropriate gift-giving. It is possible that someone would be raised or habituated to get these things right while remaining

<sup>4</sup> Of course, the Stoics, Plato, and other views suggest that one can have inner virtues without ever expressing them in action.



unable to articulate the relevant knowledge or understanding in any systematic way. If they are generous, however, they will still have the know-how or intelligent sensitivity that will allow them to give appropriate gifts and be able to recognize mistakes on their own part or on the part of others. In most cases, explicit knowledge of what makes things appropriate or not will also be a good thing because it allows us to better explain and guide our actions. Explicit knowledge can also facilitate teaching virtues to others.

Virtues are intentional in the sense that they involve more than accidental behavior, but virtue requires that one must not only intentionally act virtuously but also act for the right reasons. To continue with the example of generosity, there are clearly many reasons that one might contribute money, time, or talent. These reasons can include a genuine desire to share one's abundance, the wish to be praised for one's generosity, a plan to reduce one's taxes, or an intention to atone for past transgressions. Clearly, the reasons for action are an important component in whether a behavior counts as virtuous. If someone intentionally performs generous acts over time and displays intelligent know-how in picking out the best ways to give gifts, we might initially think of him as generous. But if we found out that apparently good gift choices were merely accidental, we would either entirely withdraw the attribution of generosity or downgrade it and hold that this person is minimally generous but not as generous as someone who acts similarly based on their knowledge of generosity (Gulliford & Morgan, 2016). Similarly, the fully fledged virtue of loyalty is motivated by a desire to promote or maintain a valued relationship or group, not just to conform or avoid exclusion.

According to theorists in many traditions, one of the important elements of the development of virtues is the capacity to intellectually understand virtue. There is good evidence that children commonly and spontaneously behave in ways that benefit others, through helping, cooperating, and expressing moral emotions (Killen & Smetana, 2015; Tomasello, 2019; Walker, 2014). As individuals mature, they develop the ability to understand better how one can benefit others, how to properly modulate one's emotions and impulses, and how to adjudicate among competing priorities. Acting well becomes more and more a matter of acting for the right reasons and less acting from impulse. Transforming the natural other-benefiting impulses of children into real virtues may also involve cultivating a self-conscious, intentional kind of virtue, which means that one can act on other-benefiting inclinations in a consistent and excellent manner rather than in a hit or miss way. But that claim about intentional enactment of virtue being important for the cultivation

and expression of consistent and excellent virtue is contentious, so we think this should be among the hypotheses that virtue science tests, rather than a part of the core theory of virtue.

Although we have emphasized cognition in this section, there is little to be gained by thinking of cognition, emotion, and motivation as separate domains of human experience. Acting virtuously actually involves a concordance of emotion, motivation, and understanding because a proper understanding of what is good is itself motivating. We now turn to the question of the roles of emotion and motivation in virtue.

### **Virtues and Their Components 3: Emotion, and Motivational Concordance**

In addition to behavioral enactment and cognitive understanding, we predict that fully fledged virtue involves concordant emotions and being motivated properly (**hypotheses II-8 to II-11**). This means that a virtuous person's emotions are in line with his intelligent sensitivity to the ethically relevant aspects of the situations he encounters and that they reflect his intrinsic concern for these ethically relevant considerations.

Aristotle (1999) saw emotion as integral to virtue as well, and he clarified that when one sees a situation rightly, one's emotions will be consistent with acting well:

Thus, we can experience fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity and generally any kind of pleasure and pain either too much or too little, and in either case not properly. But to experience all this at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner—that is the median and the best course, the course that is the mark of virtue. (1106b 18–23)

Virtues are manifested in how one's emotions align with the circumstances and with one's actions. From an observational standpoint, the match between emotion and behavior can be observed in facial features, as well as other nonverbal and paraverbal indicators.

Another aspect of emotion and virtue is that individuals enact virtues gladly. Alternatively, people who lack virtue or who are less virtuous will often act grudgingly. The willingness to act wholeheartedly is due to the way that one's emotional responses correspond to the good reasons to act in a particular way. As already noted, a loyal person acts loyally because he values a relationship or group, and he acts courageously because he values what he is protecting. Emotional concordance adds that his fear or reluctance to loyally and courageously put himself at risk reflects his primary

sensitivity to the ethically significant costs he might bear. For example, if his courageous and loyal act of whistleblowing would put his child at risk, he would feel fear or reluctance, but if it would only cost him invitations to dinner parties with his unethical peers, then he would feel no reluctance and gladly stand up for what is right.

We agree with Aristotle and Confucius that the bottom line about emotions in virtue theory is that one's emotions reveal the kind of person one is. One's character is revealed by the kinds of things that elicit feelings of delight or pleasure and by the sorts of things that evoke pain or revulsion. As Aristotle (1999) put it, "it is the mark of virtue both to be pleased and to be pained at the right objects and in the right way" (1121a 3–4). Emotion is an integral aspect of virtue, and it arises spontaneously in our responses to situations. For someone who has cultivated the virtues, one's emotional response primes one to act in the best way, given the circumstances. Therefore, a virtuous person experiences compassion rather than contempt when observing undeserved suffering and joy rather than envy when seeing excellent performance. One's emotions are, at best, concordant with acting in the best ways in the given circumstance. This concordance between emotion, cognition, and behavior renders one's experiences and actions wholehearted and focused. This emotion–action harmony is a vital component of virtuous activity because one's motives and emotional experience can either resonate with and enhance one's actions or create disharmony and thereby undermine one's activity.

The process of character development, which we examine in greater detail in Chapter 4, includes schooling or cultivating one's emotions so that they are consistent with acting well. According to many traditions in moral philosophy, it is possible to train one's emotions because our affective experience is responsive to our appraisals of situations, through which we identify what is important. On these views, the point of training oneself to be properly affected is to increase one's attachment to what is best in life and to recognize how to act in ways that bring that goodness into being. By adopting a virtue model that builds concordant emotion into virtue, we set ourselves up to test the empirical hypotheses embedded in these views and to explore various other ways in which we might be able to become more virtuous (Chapter 11).

### **Virtues and Their Components 4: Practical Wisdom**

Last but not least, we suggest that virtue science should investigate the contention that one's degree of virtue is partially a function of one's degree of

practical wisdom (hypothesis 11-12). To explain what we mean, however, we must pause to say a bit more about what practical wisdom is.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Aristotle's famous treatise on ethics, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is that it contains virtually no rules for ethical behavior. This is because he understood that the human world is far too complex to be managed with a rule book or a set of algorithms. In everyday life, individuals confront particulars rather than abstract or general patterns. The particulars of the situations people encounter are often delicately balanced, obscured by other specifics, and connected to still other particulars, making each situation somewhat unique and complex. Reasoning about such complex and changeable matters cannot be too precise or guided effectively by the application of general rules (Darnell et al., 2019). If one had a workable set of general rules, one would need guidelines for how to apply them to a wide range of specifics. Because situations are so variable, one would need a nearly infinite set of such guidelines to ensure proper rule-following. This would make a rule book far too lengthy and cumbersome to have any practical value.

Instead, moral philosophers as diverse as Aristotle, Kant, and Confucius advocate the cultivation of good judgment or practical wisdom that can guide individuals in acting for the best in the myriad circumstances we encounter. Despite all their disagreements, they are united in thinking that the guidance of practical wisdom is central to virtuous activity. It is also worthwhile to distinguish practical wisdom from two other conceptions: skills expertise and cleverness. It is true that Aristotle and other virtue theorists frequently mention skills as a metaphor for virtue, and expertise as a metaphor for practical wisdom, but it is important to bear in mind that this relationship is metaphorical rather than isomorphic. Skills and expertise refer to specific domains of production, wherein the product is the primary concern. With skills (e.g., carpentry), the productive outcome (e.g., a cabinet) is what is important, and various means could be recruited to achieve the outcome.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, virtue and practical wisdom refer to the overall process of living, with a way of life as the primary concern. Living ethically requires the ongoing, daily engagement with ethical concerns.

<sup>5</sup> In our first two publications on the STRIVE-4 Model (Cokelet & Fowers, 2019; Fowers et al., 2021), the fourth component was focused on disposition, but this was somewhat redundant with the concept of trait, and we recognized that we had not given practical wisdom its due. For those reasons, we have altered our model to make practical wisdom the fourth component of virtue.

<sup>6</sup> Stüchter (2018) has articulated a skills approach to virtue and practical wisdom that is much less instrumental than is portrayed here and is illuminating. We remain committed to the view that virtues and practical wisdom are modes of living rather than skills, however.

The only way to do this is to act in a consistently ethical manner, making the means (acting ethically) and the end (a moral life) inseparable. We discuss this way of being in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

Practical wisdom can be fruitfully differentiated from cleverness as well. Cleverness is the capacity to figure out how to obtain what one desires. Once again, the emphasis is on the outcome – the attainment of a desired state of affairs. Clever people can figure out different pathways to their goals, and the pathway may be taken to be less important than the goal. In addition, there is no ethical constraint on the desire a clever person can pursue. One can be a clever inventor, artist, thief, or human trafficker. In contrast, virtue theory stipulates that the purpose of practical wisdom is to pursue what is good (knowledge, justice, etc.). Therefore, cleverness by itself can be deployed for ethically unpalatable goals, but practical wisdom cannot.

Darnell et al. (2019, 2022) developed a neo-Aristotelian theory of practical wisdom that incorporates the most recent insights of moral psychology and has four functions. We discuss here only two of the functions they described, as a way to introduce practical wisdom.<sup>7</sup> The first is the guidance practical wisdom provides in recognizing the ethically relevant features of the situation at hand. This has been termed the constitutive function (Darnell et al., 2019). The second is the ability to prioritize and harmonize competing ethical demands in a justifiable or admirable way when various virtue-relevant features or considerations conflict. Darnell and colleagues called this the integrative function. We offer **hypotheses II-13 to II-17**, to explore individual differences in these components.

### *The Constitutive Function*

With respect to practical wisdom, the term constitutive refers to what constitutes or makes up a virtue. The constitutive function of practical wisdom is the process of determining what constitutes a virtue, given the particulars of a situation. Practical wisdom involves moral perception (Fowers, 2005a) because it depends on perceiving the ethical dimensions of a situation accurately. Seeing one's circumstances properly involves sorting the central features of the situation from what is peripheral so that one can respond to the most essential elements, rather than being distracted by less important concerns. In many cases, this is very simple and quickly resolved, as in complimenting someone who has performed

<sup>7</sup> The other two functions – emotional regulation (integrating affect and reason) and the blueprint (overall understanding of the good life) functions – are discussed at length in Chapters 10 and 11.

well, expressing gratitude for a kindness, or deciding to give an award to someone who is clearly the most deserving. For a virtuous person, the appropriate behavior, cognition, and motivation is usually recruited instantaneously, as a matter of habit. This habituation is the aim of virtue cultivation. When circumstances are relatively simple or when one has dealt with many similar situations, virtuous action is quickly enacted because it has become habitual.

Of course, not all situations are simple and straightforward. In some cases, it is not immediately clear what would constitute virtuous action, even if it is clear which virtue is appropriate. Courage – the inclination to take risks to protect what is valuable – provides a simple example because what constitutes courage varies by situation, which includes how much protection a specific item merits. Imagine a firefighter working to contain a building fire. When a parent begs the firefighter to go into the building to save a child, we can imagine that the firefighter will risk injury or death to save the child (assuming that there is a sufficient chance of success – another possible constitutive factor of courage). If we imagine another person asking the firefighter to enter the burning building to save his stamp collection, it would be far more reasonable for the firefighter to decline (and even marvel that someone would ask him to risk injury or death for such a reason). The central point here is that the value of what is to be preserved helps to determine what constitutes courage in a dangerous situation. Whereas it could well be courageous to attempt to save the child, it would be foolhardy to attempt to save the stamps if there were significant risk.

In such cases, some degree of deliberation may be required to establish how to act in a justifiable or admirable way. This deliberation may be quick and close to automatic (as efforts to save lives tend to be) or more extended when the moral elements of the situation are more difficult to perceive and assess. In the firefighter's case, the deliberation is focused on how much risk is merited in the situation. The firefighter could take excessive risks, appropriate risks, or be deficient in his risk-taking, given the stakes of the situation. Attempting to save a child would usually be an appropriate risk and refusing a reasonable request to save a child would generally be seen as deficient risk-taking. In contrast, taking significant risks to save a stamp collection would typically be viewed as excessive. A more difficult deliberation might involve taking risks to save the Mona Lisa or an original copy of the Magna Carta. The intensity of the flames and the structural integrity of the building are additional sources of complexity. The question of excess, proper, and deficient risk-taking is almost always a matter of judgment about the specifics of the situation.

Other virtues have a similar structure, with contextual cues that call for them, and particulars that guide one in deciding what is excessive, appropriate, and deficient. Another simple example is gift-giving. There are many occasions and relationships in which gift-giving is customary. One must decide what sort of gift would be extravagant (excessive), appropriate, or miserly (deficient) based on the particulars of the situation. The constitutive function of practical wisdom is a decision-making process that guides one in deciding what constitutes a virtue, given the specifics of the situation that calls for the virtue. But there are also cases where multiple virtues are evoked, some of which may not be entirely compatible, and this calls for the integrative function of practical wisdom.

### *The Integrative Function*

Practical wisdom is even more important in situations that are thornier, less well defined, or present conflicting demands. For example, Derrick had worked with a colleague, Stan, for many years. Derrick and Stan are good friends and spend time together both at work and outside work. Stan was promoted to supervise their unit in the organization, and he relied on Derrick a good deal for keeping the unit functioning smoothly. As this reliance increased over time, Derrick began to feel overburdened. When Stan made a new request for Derrick to take on more responsibility, Derrick felt this was too much to ask, but he also felt a call to respond to his friend. Derrick felt significant loyalty to Stan, given their friendship, and Derrick wanted to act generously because he could see how the management responsibilities weighed on Stan. Yet the requests felt somewhat unfair because Derrick was assisting far more than other unit personnel of equal standing, and it seemed like simply accepting the responsibility would be cowardly and self-sacrificial. Derrick resolved this set of conflicting calls to action by making the conflict explicit. He told Stan that, as Stan's friend, he would do anything he could to support Stan, but as his co-worker, a spouse, and a parent, Derrick did not think it was wise or fair for him to take on more responsibility. He left the decision about the responsibility to Stan, who, as Derrick's friend, recognized that this responsibility should be delegated to someone else. Of course, the exercise of practical wisdom does not always result in such a harmonious resolution, but the point of practical wisdom is to identify and enact some justifiable or admirable course of action. We think that is as much as ordinary mortals can do.

When one's circumstances are complex, it is still sometimes possible to recognize a good course of action quickly, without much conscious

deliberation. Yet difficult situations also arise about which one needs conscious deliberation to arrive at the best course of action. The claim that conscious consideration may be necessary on some occasions seems to contradict the Social Intuition Model (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2013), in which conscious thought is portrayed as mainly occurring after one has acted in a particular way, with the purpose of the cognition being to justify the act post hoc. Although post hoc justification certainly occurs, we see the inadequate account of moral deliberation in the Social Intuition Model as a major flaw.

Practical wisdom does not spontaneously spring into existence. Rather, many thinkers see it as cultivated in much the same way as virtues are fostered. For example, Confucius and Aristotle hold that it is taught and exemplified by wise individuals, practiced by the developing person, and taken on board through habituation. We have more to say about these **hypotheses (II-12 to II-19)** about virtue and practical wisdom cultivation in Chapters 4 and 11.

We have only scratched the surface of practical wisdom here. There are many more extensive discussions that have informed this section but go significantly beyond this brief description (Darnell et al., 2019, 2022; Dunne, 1993; Fowers, 2003, 2005a; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2022; Kristjánsson et al., 2021; Russell, 2009; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). For example, we have not touched on controversial claims about the unity of the virtues, which we think is better left aside in virtue science (for reasons we give in Chapter 2).

To summarize this discussion of practical wisdom, we set out to make three important points. First, it is not possible to formalize ethical action in a set of rules or principles, the application of which provides sufficient moral guidance. Acting morally requires making good judgments about what is at stake and what is called for, and about justifiable or admirable ways to pursue what is good. We have described this judgment as practical wisdom. Second, enacting virtues always involves practical wisdom to decide what constitutes acting well in each situation, whether or not that wisdom emerges in conscious deliberation. As virtues and practical wisdom are cultivated, more and more of their enactment is spontaneous and automatic. Making virtue and practical wisdom “second nature” is the goal of virtue cultivation. Finally, practical wisdom makes it possible to prioritize and harmonize the best expressions of multiple virtues when they are called for, which has been termed the integrative function of practical wisdom.

We have intimated that practical wisdom is also informed by a robust understanding of what is good. We describe our views of the relationships



among virtues, practical wisdom, and the good life in the next section, and we enumerate these views as hypotheses in Chapter 10.

### **Virtue and the Good Life: A Potentially Orienting Hypothesis for Virtue Science**

One of Aristotle's (1999) primary goals in writing the *Nicomachean Ethics* was to describe the good life and how to achieve it. He termed it eudaimonia (flourishing) and argued that the role of the virtues is to foster eudaimonia, as the best kind of life. As we stated in the Introduction, eudaimonia is a matter of how one's life comes together as a whole over the course of myriad decisions and actions. Aristotle claimed that acting virtuously, as guided by practical wisdom, is the pathway to a eudaimonic life. We think these are exciting and interesting hypotheses that virtue science should be oriented to test (our **hypotheses 10-1 to 10-6, 10-16, 10-33**).

To motivate this proposal and to begin to point to the relevant orienting hypotheses, we need to review the broadly Aristotelian way of thinking about virtues and their role in the good life. Before we do so, however, we should note that the authors of this book endorse this approach to varying degrees. This might sound surprising and lead readers to wonder why we think it is wise to discuss this approach in detail.<sup>8</sup> The answer is that while not all of us fully endorse the Aristotelian approach, we all agree that virtue science will be greatly enriched if it tests hypotheses that are suggested by various rich and varied traditions in philosophy. So, our intention is to describe one tradition – the Aristotelian one – in some detail to concretely demonstrate how philosophy and theory can enrich virtue science. We hope that others will follow this lead and mine other traditions to enrich the fund of interesting and important hypotheses that virtue science investigates.

With that said, we turn to a sketch of the broadly Aristotelian or “eudaimonic” view. Crucially, this approach suggests that virtues are traits, which means that one is generally likely to act well across a variety of circumstances. The reason that virtues need to be habituated and forged into a trait is to make this form of activity the default option, thereby creating a way of life in which one consistently enacts what is good. Because one's life is the cumulative result of an untold number of decisions and actions,

<sup>8</sup> The doubts about the Aristotelian connection between virtue and welfare focus primarily on how universally this perspective applies. It is possible that strengthening some virtues in some populations may turn out to decrease welfare or leave it unchanged in that group.

an individual can develop increasingly potent ethical resources to act well in many circumstances. A well-developed set of virtues positions a person to consistently pursue the kind of integrated life that can be described as flourishing.

In the contemporary West, ethics is commonly restricted to a matter of acting rightly in a limited domain of occasions that are somehow identified as especially “ethical.” This creation of a special domain of ethics is mistaken from a eudaimonic viewpoint because the latter perspective views ethics as integral to one’s life as a whole. From a eudaimonic perspective, cultivating and enacting virtue is integral to all one’s activities, including how one approaches work, the kind of jokes one tells, the sorts of personal relationships one has, and the things in which one takes pleasure. The upshot is that virtue and flourishing are a way of life, not a discrete set of activities, and certainly not an identifiable set of outcomes (e.g., wealth, fame, or simple pleasures). This focus on creating an ethically good life as the goal of ethics seems to us to make virtue theory a thoroughly comprehensive and integrative form of ethics. The idea that virtues are integral to all aspects of a person’s life suggests that virtues are taught, cultivated, and enacted through engaging in the ordinary activities of life in an excellent manner. As Broadie (1991) clarified, “an excellence or virtue, as Plato and Aristotle understand that concept, is nothing but a characteristic which makes the difference between functioning and functioning well” (p. 37).

There are two important caveats to this rosy-sounding picture. First, even the most virtuous person will fail to act virtuously on occasion. This can be due to confusion, fatigue, illness, or extremely trying circumstances. Neither virtue, practical wisdom, nor eudaimonia require or suggest perfection because that is simply impossible for humans. The idea of virtues as traits means that a virtuous person will *typically* act according to virtue. Contemporary understandings of traits portray traits as responsive to one’s internal and external circumstances, rather than being independent of factors that moderate them (cf. Fleeson, 2007). We discuss the interaction of virtue traits and situational factors at length in Chapter 9.

Second, as Aristotle (1999) and most ancient Greeks recognized, eudaimonia is partly dependent on having the good fortune to have the kind of resources and context that make it possible. Factors such as extreme poverty, pervasive family dysfunction, persistent discrimination or exploitation, incessant warfare or social disharmony, tyranny, or plague can render it very difficult to create a eudaimonic life. Of course, some individuals manage to overcome such obstacles in exemplary ways, but these factors impair most individuals’ capacity for the cultivation of virtue and the good life.

We also want to indicate some of the substantive components of eudaimonia. What constitutes a flourishing life? Neo-Aristotelian views on the goods that humans need to flourish are no doubt contentious, but we think it is worthwhile to briefly present some more tangible substance to make eudaimonia more comprehensible. Fowers (2015) has argued that what is good for human beings can be recognized by understanding what helps humans to live well. There are many important contributors to human welfare, including good social relationships (Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010), clarity about the meaning and purpose of one's life (Fowers et al., 2010; McGregor & Little, 1998), communal harmony (Boehm, 2008; Kruger & Nesse, 2007), and group belonging (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Steptoe et al., 2013), to name a few. Fowers (2015) presents evidence that these are ubiquitously pursued human goods that contribute to a flourishing life, and we encourage the investigation of these relationships in **hypotheses 10-11 to 10-33**.

Our core theory of virtue does not presuppose that any specific virtues are vital for the good life, but with the neo-Aristotelian view in mind, we suggest that virtue science can and should investigate whether any virtues play this role and, if so, which ones. In other words, we propose that virtue science should be oriented to study various virtues and their connections to various aspects of the good life. Chapter 10 is devoted to describing these human goods more fully and to expressing them as worthwhile hypotheses to investigate.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented a brief, ecumenical version of virtue theory, discussing both a core theory that we think most if not all thinkers would endorse and a variety of contentious hypotheses that we think virtue science can and should test. We have also discussed Aristotle's (1999) ethics in general, which suggest that virtues are the traits that make it possible to cultivate a flourishing life based on pursuing the goods that underwrite human flourishing. Seeing virtues as traits clarifies that consistency is important and raises the question about whether virtue and flourishing are ways of life.

The value of this chapter is in its provision of a theoretical basis for the model we have developed as a framework for virtue science. We suggest that virtually all the hypotheses we have presented, and the numerous others we identify in what follows, are subject to empirical investigation. Of course, it takes many different methods to investigate such a rich set of

claims, and virtually all the individual studies of virtue concepts examine small portions of these claims in ways that are far from ideal. We intend to contribute to the growing interdisciplinary efforts to incorporate the richness of philosophical analysis and the rigors of social science research in studying virtue and flourishing. This is a challenging endeavor. It is extremely difficult to do justice to philosophical analysis in empirical research, and conceptual analysis is often too abstract and idealistic to support good empirical study. We aim to chart a course in which philosophically strong theory can inform high-quality empirical methods to illuminate human ethical mindedness and its excellent expression.

The pursuit of this knowledge requires that we avoid the tendency to make the perfect into the enemy of the good. The analyses, model, and evidence we present will not satisfy all critics, answer all questions, or constitute a final understanding of virtue and flourishing. We can only attempt to take the next reasonable steps to move this research forward. We do so by formulating a framework for a science of virtue that is informed by moral philosophy and proposes social scientific study of the virtue concepts that philosophers have clarified. We see the illumination of virtue and flourishing as one of the most important and valuable avenues of study in which philosophers and social scientists can engage. The next step in this endeavor is to clarify what we mean by a psychologically realistic theory of virtue in Chapter 2.