SUFFERING, VIRTUE, AND CHARACTER: WHY THE SCIENCE OF VIRTUE MATTERS

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Summary: *1. Introductory Remarks. 2. Post Traumatic Growth. 3. Whole Trait Theory and Virtue. 4. Suffering, Post-Traumatic Growth, and Virtue. 5. Brady's Account of Suffering and Virtue. 6. Suggestions for Conceptualization and Measurement. 7. Concluding Thoughts.*

1. Introductory Remarks

One of the main arguments that has been given for the importance of virtue is that it is not only important for, but is in fact constitutive of, a life well-lived, necessary for human wellbeing and flourishing. Yet, human life is also profoundly fragile, often filled with, and always vulnerable to, suffering – from the mundane suffering associated with accident, illness, and aging to the more tragic suffering of poverty, oppression, conflict, and disaster. The experience of disappointment, loss, and failure are inevitable, and threaten to undermine our capacity to flourish. Thus, we must ask: what value is virtue within the context of suffering? What role – if any – does it have to play in our suffering, in how we face it, manage it, and survive it?

While it is important to acknowledge that some forms of suffering are simply and irreducibly terrible, resulting in an irreversible loss of healthy function and well-being, nonetheless, recent work in philosophy has argued for an important relationship between (at least some forms of) suffering and virtue. For example, Kidd argued that suffering affords a distinctive opportunity for the cultivation and exercise of virtues insofar as those who are suffering are able to adjust and adapt their attitudes and activities in ways that ameliorate or minimize the negative impacts of the suffering they are experiencing.[1] Similarly, Scrutton argued that suffering can be *transformative* across multiple

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[1] I. J. Kidd, *Transformative Suffering and The Cultivation of Virtue,* «Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology», 22/4 (2015), pp. 291-294.

modalities, enriching the sufferer's ethical, aesthetic, and existential sensibilities and allowing for the development of "insight, compassion, appreciation of beauty and other aspects of spiritual and psychological maturity".[2] In addition, Nouwen argued that suffering provides a deepening sense of radical dependence, a feeling of being anchored in a *deeper love*, within which a secure sense of trust and hope can develop.[3] The common thread between each of these views is the thought that the positive potential that suffering holds for transformation lies within the sufferers' *response* to their suffering and the suffering of others – not within the suffering itself.

In a landmark book on the topic, Brady argued that suffering is essential for virtue. More specifically, he identified three distinct ways that suffering meaningfully contributes to the development and manifestation of virtue. The first is that some forms of suffering – e.g., the experience of pain, grief, and remorse – are *constitutive* of virtue, insofar as they serve to indicate that we are responding appropriately to hardship and the evils of the world; that our capacity to detect and motivation to repair physical, emotional, and relational damage is intact and functioning properly. The second is that some forms of suffering are necessary for the development of particular classes of virtue: i.e., virtues of strength and vulnerability, certain moral virtues (such as compassion), and the practical and epistemic virtues necessary for wisdom. The third is that some forms of suffering are vital for the development of social virtues, such as justice, love, and trust, which are all necessary for the flourishing of social groups.[4]

2. Post Traumatic Growth

This thesis – namely, that there is (at least potentially) a positive relationship between suffering and virtue – is of central importance to not only philosophers, but also psychologists. As evidence of this, consider the growing literature on post-traumatic growth, the view that positive psychological change is often experienced as a result of adversity and other traumatic life events,[5] such as accidents, assaults, deaths, and natural disasters.

Even in the absence of physical harm or injury, such events can cause emotional trauma – e.g., intense and unpredictable feelings, experiences of uncer-

[2] A. P. Scrutton, *Two Christian Theologies of Depression: An Evaluation and Discussion of Clinical Implications*, «Philosophy, Psychiatry, Psychology» 22/4 (2015), p. 280.

[3] H. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 2009.

[4] M. S. Brady, *Suffering and Virtue*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.

[5] E. Jayawickreme & L. E. R. Blackie, *Exploring the Psychological Benefits of Hardship: A Critical Reassessment of Posttraumatic Growth*, Springer Science + Business Media, New York 2016.

tainty and helplessness, abrupt changes in thoughts and behavior patterns, increased sensitivity to environmental stimuli (e.g., loud noises), difficulty maintaining personal relationships, and stress-related physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, nausea, sleeplessness, etc.).

While reactions to such traumatic life events vary – and some are simply too severe to recover from – there is nonetheless a substantive body of evidence that people can experience a variety of positive shifts in reaction to trauma, such as an increased appreciation for "the small things" in life, a changed sense of life priorities and opportunities, greater feelings of warmth, love, and affiliation with others, a greater sense of strength and resilience, and heightened spiritual awareness and development. Indeed, there is general agreement amongst researchers at this point that positive transformations can occur in response to trauma and that they typically come in at least one of five different forms: improved relations with others, identification of new possibilities for one's life, increased perception of personal strength, spiritual growth, and an enhanced appreciation of life.[6]

To date, research on post traumatic growth has experienced a number of conceptual and empirical challenges. One of the difficulties has been how to best characterize the nature of the change that occurs during post-traumatic growth. Some view the change as occurring in "domains of life",[7] while others view it as resulting in an increase in eudaimonic wellbeing,[8] or as the development of a redemptive life-narrative,[9] or as gains in social and psychological resources.[10] Not only does this diversity of approaches locate the outcomes of post-traumatic growth in a range of different psychological capacities and domains, it is also not clear how they collectively tie back into, or otherwise relate to, virtue.

Yet another recent approach has been to conceive of post-traumatic growth

[6] E. Jayawickreme & L. E. R. Blackie, *Post-traumatic Growth as Positive Personality Change: Evidence, Controversies and Future Directions*, «European Journal of Personality», 28/4 (2014), pp. 312-331.

[7] R. G. Tedeschi & L. G. Calhoun, *Target Article: Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence*, «Psychological Inquiry», 15 (2004), pp. 1-18, doi 10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01.

[8] S. Joseph & P. A. Linley, *Psychological Assessment of Growth Following Adversity: A Review*, in S. Joseph & P. A. Linley (eds.), *Trauma, Recovery, and Growth,* Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012 (from: http://onlinelibrary.wiley. com/doi/10.1002/9781118269718.ch2/summary (Dec. 12, 2019), pp. 21-36.

[9] J. L. Pals & D. P. McAdams, *The Transformed Self: A Narrative Understanding of Posttraumatic Growth*, «Psychological Inquiry», 15 (2004), pp. 65-69.

[10] S. E. Hobfoll, B. J. Hall, E. Canetti-Nisim, et al. *Refining our Understanding of Traumatic Growth in the Face of Terrorism: Moving from Meaning Cognitions to Doing what is Meaningful*, «Applied Psychology: An International Review», 56 (2007), pp. 345-366.

as a change in personality traits.[11] We find this approach to be particularly promising because it provides a direct connection to virtue, which we have argued elsewhere is a particular type of personality trait,[12] and because it provides a valuable empirical window into the relationship between suffering, post traumatic growth, and virtue. Unfortunately, the research exploring this option has thus far been fairly limited, and those studies that have been successfully carried out have largely focused on the relationship between post-traumatic growth and the Big 5 – traits which are, at best, only indirectly relevant to virtue and cannot be considered virtue proper.[13] While a few studies that have looked at post-traumatic growth as evidenced by changes in something more closely resembling virtue (namely, the "character strengths" measured by the Values-In-Action survey)[14], these have failed to find any quantifiable links between the strengths and post traumatic growth.[15] Of course, as many have pointed out, the VIA is plagued with a range of difficult conceptual and empirical concerns of its own,[16] problematizing its use for gauging the relationship between suffering and virtue.

In this paper, our goal is to lay out a more philosophically and empirically rigorous approach to conceiving of and measuring virtue as a particular type of personality trait, which we recently developed.[17] We will briefly lay out some of the key elements of our account of virtue and then discuss what we take to be the implications of our approach for aiding philosophers and psychologists in their quest to understand the relationship between suffering and virtue.

[11] E. Jayawickreme & L. E. R. Blackie, *Exploring the Psychological Benefits of Hardship*, cit.

[12] N. Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory*, Routledge, New York 2010. J. C. Wright, M. T. Warren & N. Snow, *Understanding Virtue: Theory and Measurement*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming. Hereafter referred to as *UV*.

[13] L. E. R. Blackie, A. M. Roepke, M. J. C. Forgeard, *Act well to be well: The Promise of Changing Personality States to Promote Well-Being*, in A. C. Parks & S. M. Schueller (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Positive Psychological Interventions,* Wiley-Blackwell 2014, ch. 27, pp. 462-474, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118315927.ch27. P. A. Linley & S. Joseph, *Positive Change Following Trauma and Adversity: A review*, «Journal of Traumatic Stress», 17/1 (2004), pp. 11-21.

[14] C. Peterson & M. E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: a Handbook and Classification*, APA-Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004.

[15] R. V. Lamade, E. Jayawickreme, L. E. R. Blackie, et al., *Are Sequential Sample Designs Useful for Examining Post-Traumatic Changes in Character Strengths*?, «The Journal of Positive Psychology», (2019), doi 10.1080/17439760.2019.1610481. S. Schueller, E. Jayawickreme, L. E. R. Blackie, et al., *Finding Character Strengths Through Loss: An Extension of Peterson and Seligman (2003)*, «The Journal of Positive Psychology» 10 (2014), pp. 53-63. 10.1080/17439760.2014.920405

[16] Concerns summarized in our *UV*.

[17] *Ibidem*.

3. Whole Trait Theory and Virtue [18]

Our working model of virtue is a neo-Aristotelian account that was inspired by "Whole Trait Theory" or WTT,[19] a recent attempt to bring situational sensitivity (in the form of "social-cognitive mechanisms")[20] and dispositional stability (in the form of "traits")[21] together into a comprehensive theory of personality. According to WTT, personality traits are composed of a set of situation-specific trait-appropriate responses (typically a combination of mental states and behaviors), which are produced when certain social-cognitive mechanisms (i.e., cognitive, affective, motivational states, processes, capacities, and structures) are triggered by the perception of trait-relevant stimuli. The degree to which a person can be said to possess a particular personality trait is determined by the "density" of her trait-appropriate responses – in other words, by the frequency (and consistency) with which she produces trait-appropriate responses when encountering trait-relevant situations and by the range of different types of trait-relevant situations in which she produces them.

How do we determine, for example, whether someone is "friendly"? According to this account, the friendliness of a person can be measured as the distribution of her "friendly" responses (i.e., thoughts, desires, emotions, motivations, and actions that friendly-appropriate) to a variety of friendly-relevant stimuli presented across a wide range of situations over time. The more frequently (and consistently) she responds to friendly-relevant stimuli – and the wider range of friendly-relevant stimuli she responds to – in ways typically considered to be *friendly*, the more strongly she possesses the trait of friendliness.

Similarly, our view is that a person's virtue (let's say, her generosity) can be measured as the distribution of her "generous" responses (i.e., thoughts, desires, emotions, motivations, and actions that are generosity-appropriate) to a variety of generosity-relevant stimuli presented across a wide range of

[18] Please note that this section of the paper pulls heavily from the ideas we developed in Chapter 1 of the already referred *UV*.

[19] W. Fleeson & P. Gallagher, *The Implications of Big Five Standing for the distribution of Trait Manifestation in Behavior: Fifteen Experience-Sampling Studies and a Meta-analysis*, «Journal of Personality And Social Psychology», 97/6 (2009), pp. 1097-1114. doi:10.1037/a0016786, W. Fleeson & E. Jayawickreme, *Whole Trait Theory*, «Journal of Research in Personality», 56 (2015), pp. 82-92, doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2014.10.009.

[20] W. Mischel & Y. Shoda, *A Cognitive-Affective System Theory of Personality: Reconceptualizing Situations, Dispositions, Dynamics, and Invariance in Personality Structure*, «Psychological Review», 102/2 (1995), pp. 246-268.

[21] R. R. McCrae & P. T. Costa Jr., *Personality Trait Structure as a Human Universal*, «American Psychologist», 52/5 (1997), pp. 509-516, doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.52.5.509

situations over time. The more frequently (and consistently) she responds to generosity-relevant stimuli – and the wider range of generosity-relevant stimuli she responds to – in ways typically considered to be *generous*, [22] the more strongly she possesses the virtue of generosity.[23]

According to this view, trait activation requires: 1) accurate perception of trait-relevant stimuli, 2) activation of underlying social-cognitive mechanisms (beliefs, schemas, desires, values, goals, etc.), and 3) the generation of trait-appropriate responses. We present a thorough discussion of each of these in our volume *Understanding Virtue*. Now, it is worth taking a moment to highlight the two most important components of the social-cognitive mechanisms – which WTT calls the *interpretative* system and the *motivational* system.

The interpretative system is composed of a broad range of interrelated perceptual, cognitive, and affective states, processes, capacities, and structures (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, schemas, crystal and fluid intelligence, perspective-taking, etc.) that determine the manner in which trait-relevant information is analysed and interpreted, resulting in implications for behavior. It is central to how stimuli in a person's environment are perceived as being trait-relevant and interpreted as calling for trait-appropriate responses.

Just because trait-relevant stimuli are present does not necessarily mean that a trait-appropriate response is called for – or could be successfully given. For example, there could be other features of the situation present that make it better for a person to *not* give a trait-appropriate response, or make it unlikely that she would be able to do so successfully. This has to be assessed. And even if a trait-appropriate response is called for, no two situations are identi-

[22] Of course, this raises the important question of how to determine what typically counts as a "friendly" or "generous" response. This is an issue we explore in more detail in *UV*. One example of how this could be addressed is with the creation of a "paradigmaticity" index for each virtue. Here the idea is that the faster and more frequently examples of virtue-appropriate responses are identified or imagined, the more indicative of the virtue in question they are likely to be. For example, smiling at someone and welcoming people upon their arrival are more likely to be quickly and frequently identified or imagined as examples of "friendliness" than simply listening to a conversation partner; donating one's time to a cause or taking food and other goods to a person in need are more likely to be quickly and frequently identified or imagined as examples of "generosity" than only writing a check. Another option would be to have a set of nominated experts – e.g., philosophers, religious scholars, moral psychologists, etc. – rate the trait-appropriateness of a range of responses (generated either by themselves or other people) for particular virtues. These methods can be applied not just in developing a "paradigmaticity" index in the service of identifying virtue-appropriate responses, but also in developing a similar index that identifies virtue-relevant stimuli.

[23] Assuming, of course, that in all those instances, generosity-appropriate responses were in fact, all things considered, called for. See a few paragraphs down for further discussion of this issue.

cal, so what that trait-appropriate response will look like must be sensitive (at least to some degree) to situational details. Thus, the interpretative system must actively guide trait-expression in order to "hit the mark" with situation-specific trait-appropriate action. The interpretative system helps the person to first attune to the trait-relevant stimuli present (while ignoring irrelevant stimuli), and then adjudicate between the many different potential responses in order to land upon the most trait-appropriate response and the best way to enact that response.[24]

The motivational system is composed of a broad range of interrelated motivational states, processes, capacities, and structures that create the directional impetus for trait manifestation. According to WTT, these trait-relevant motivational states (e.g., desires, values, goals, commitments, etc.) are the core of trait activation. To see this, consider again the personality trait of friendliness. Arguably, this trait involves the activation of certain friendly-relevant desires/values/goals (e.g., the desire to create and maintain close social bonds, the value of having good relationships, the goal of making people feel comfortable and welcome, etc.), among other factors. As such, a person will produce friendly-appropriate responses when friendly-relevant stimuli in her environment (e.g., seeing a group of peers approaching her, noticing that someone looks anxious or is standing off by herself, etc.) activate those motivational states, generating the impetus to respond.

Virtues have trait-relevant motivational states as well (e.g., the desire to treat others respectfully, to provide for those in need, the goal of always treating others as ends instead of means, etc.), many of which have the additional quality of being "trait-oriented" – i.e., directed at the manifestation and development of the trait (virtue) itself. According to our account, these virtue-oriented motivational states – e.g., the identification of virtue development as a worthy goal, valuing honesty and compassion, the desire to strive to be a good person and "do the right thing", etc. – are an essential feature of virtues.

Indeed, we think that they provide the necessary motivational structure for a trait to be considered a virtue. To see this, consider two different people who provide honesty-appropriate responses, one of which is motivated by an underlying desire to be truthful, a commitment to doing what is right, etc., while the other is motivated instead by the desire to preserve her social status. Not only does this difference in underlying motivation immediately strike us as relevant to whether or not we'd consider them honest people, it is also likely to result in a significant difference in the density distributions of their honesty-appropriate responses. The latter will only produce such responses

[24] It is not an accident that this sounds a lot like practical wisdom (*phronesis*). According to our view, much of what philosophers refer to as practical wisdom resides in the interpretative system.

when it serves her social interests to do so (resulting in a somewhat sporadic distribution), while the former will produce a "denser" density distribution, since her honesty-appropriate responses will not only be much more frequent and consistent, but will also occur across a much wider range of situations (including those that do not necessarily bolster her social standing).

Or, consider the difference in the density distributions of compassion-appropriate responses between someone who is only minimally compassionate and someone we would consider to be a truly compassionate person (i.e., fully possessing the virtue of compassion). The minimally compassionate person would be more likely than the truly compassionate person to fail to perceive occasions for which compassion is called for, so her responses to compassionate-relevant stimuli would be more sporadic. Similarly, her compassion-appropriate responses would likely be much narrower – e.g., she would only be inclined to respond compassionately when it was fairly easy for her to do so, requiring little effort on her part. Arguably, the most important explanatory factor for the difference between these two people is their underlying motivations. The minimally compassionate person is likely to lack any substantive virtue-oriented motivation, being instead motivated by other practical, prudential, or egoistical considerations. The truly compassionate person, on the other hand, will possess strong virtue-oriented motivations, such as a deep regard for the wellbeing of others, a general desire to (where appropriate) ease others' suffering, an appreciation for the value of compassion, and a commitment to developing her capacity for it.

Also of relevance is a social-cognitive process that encompasses both the interpretative and motivational systems: a person's *narrative identity*, by which we mean her internalized narrative of herself in relation to the world that provides her life with unity, purpose, and meaning.[25] For example, by identifying herself as "friendly," a person becomes more attuned to friendly-relevant stimuli in her immediate environment, making her more inclined to respond in a manner that is consistent with her narrative identity as a friendly person. Similarly, by identifying herself as a compassionate person, she becomes more attuned – and more inclined to respond – to any compassion-relevant stimuli that she encounters.

Narrative identity also influences the way in which a person reconstructs and interprets past events, as well as the way she structures the sorts of experiences and relationships she can envision for herself in the future. Self-identifying as a friendly, compassionate person influences the way she reconstructs and interprets past events – e.g., viewing the suffering she had experienced as forging her into the friendly, compassionate person she had become – and the

[25] D. McAdams & J. Pals, *A New Big Five: Fundamental Principles for an Integrative Science of Personality*, «American Psychologist», 61/3 (2006), pp. 204-217.

sorts of things she strives for, the goals that she sets for her future self, such as the desire to become a better, more compassionate, more loving person, or the commitment to always prioritize the wellbeing of those around her over decisions having to do with career, money, or status.

4. Suffering, Post-Traumatic Growth, and Virtue

How does our account of virtue relate to the question of the relationship between suffering, post-traumatic growth, and virtue? More specifically, what does it have to say about why and how some forms of suffering would lead to post-traumatic virtue development and manifestation? It might be useful to break our reflection on this question down into the three components of trait activation – i.e., the perception of trait-relevant stimuli, the activation of underlying social-cognitive mechanisms, and the generation of trait-appropriate responses.

One way that the experience of suffering could result in virtue "growth" is in terms of increasing a person's sensitivity to trait-relevant stimuli. To use a real-life example, one of us has travelled for the last nine years with students on study abroad programs to places in South-East Asia and East Africa that have experienced mass traumas (e.g., civil wars and genocides). One observation gained from these trips is that exposing students to the details of mass trauma (through readings, films, visiting on-site memorials and museums, talking with survivors, etc.) generally increases their awareness of, and sensitivity towards, manifestations of suffering around them (at least, temporarily). That is, they not only report a change in their awareness, but visibly change in their responses to the suffering they encounter and experience on the trip. In particular, they notice various forms of suffering going on around them that they may have previously ignored, or otherwise simply been blind to.

Does the direct experience of suffering lead to a similar increase in awareness and sensitivity to virtue-relevant stimuli? While we must be hesitant to think that it always does, it certainly can. Survivors of trauma often become more attuned to at least certain kinds of virtue-relevant stimuli in their environments – i.e., they become more aware of the need for compassion, generosity, courage, patience, and so on in response to the difficulties they and others encounter in their daily lives.

Perhaps an even more likely location of "transformation" is the social-cognitive mechanisms that link the perception of virtue-relevant stimuli to virtue-appropriate responses. According to the research, post-traumatic growth often includes significant changes to people's underlying attitudes and beliefs, as well as their desires, values, and goals – for example, they report virtue-relevant changes in their life priorities, shifting away from materialistic or status-oriented pursuits towards virtue-oriented values and

activities.[26] Through the process of supporting and being supported in times of trauma, people develop schemas for what loving relationships ought to be like. They observe the positive impact of virtue and the need for more of it in the world. And in doing so, they come to value it in others and in themselves, developing a commitment to becoming more virtuous (more compassionate, honest, generous, courageous, patient, and so on).

Some of these changes occur in the underlying narrative structure – their "life stories" and identities. For example, post-traumatic growth often results in "redemptive" life-narratives, where people view the pain and difficulties they have experienced as sculpting and refining their characters, deepening their ability to care about themselves, other people, and the world, and crafting a commitment to becoming an agent of positive change.[27] For example, Wright, Cohen, and Hoffman found that having a past involving drug addiction and crime, which resulted in spending several years in prison, often resulted in the development of a redemptive narrative – where people viewed their previous life as a necessary "dark path" that lead them to a life of virtue.[28] And where the Authors found these redemptive narratives, they also found lives organized around commitments to community well-being and to helping other troubled youth, lives that showed a surprising degree of what Frimer et al., call "enlightened self-interest" – i.e., the view that one's own self-interests and the interests of others are necessarily intertwined.[29]

[26] For a discussion of these findings, see E. Jayawickreme & L. E. R. Blackie, *Exploring the Psychological Benefits of Hardship,* cit.

[27] D. P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live by,* Oxford University Press, New York 2006, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195176933.001.0001

[28] J. C. Wright, O. Cohen & H. Hoffman, *On the Value Integration of Successfully Reformed Ex-convicts: A Comparison with Moral Exemplars*, «The Journal of Humanistic Psychology», 58/6 (2015), pp. 640-658, doi: 10.1177/0022167815614955

[29] J. A. Frimer, L. J. Walker, W. Dunlop, et al., *The Integration of Agency and Communion in Moral Personality: Evidence of Enlightened Self-Interest*, «Journal of Personality & Social Psychology», 101/1 (2011), pp. 149-163. Other research has also found links between redemptive narratives and well-being – see, for example, W. L. Dunlop & J. L. Tracy, *Sobering Stories: Narratives of Self-Redemption Predict Behavioral Change and Improved Health among Recovering Alcoholics*, «Journal of Personality & Social Psychology», 104, (2013), pp. 576-590, doi:10.1037/a0031185. J. M. Adler, A. F. Turner, K. M. Brookshier, et al., *Variation in Narrative Identity is Associated withTtrajectories of Mental Health over Several Years*, «Journal of Personality & Social Psychology», 108 (2015), pp. 476-496, doi:10.1037/a0038601. It is important to note, however that redemptive themes may only be linked to well-being in some cultures, and for some cultural groups. K. C. McLean & M. Syed, *Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives: An Integrative Framework for Understanding Identity Development in Context*, «Human Development», 58 (2015), pp. 318-349, doi:10.1159/000445817 point out that the redemptive theme is a major part of the dominant American cultural ("master") narrative (see also P. L. Hammack, *Narrative and the Politics of Identity: The Cultural Psychology of Israeli and Palestinian Youth,* Oxford University Press, New York 2011; D. P. McAdams, *The*

This linking of one's life-narrative and sense of identity to virtue, along with the context-general nature of virtue-oriented motivation (i.e., the desire to *always* be honest, compassionate, etc. regardless of the difficulty involved, because it is the right thing to do) creates the sort of stability that we are looking for in post-traumatic growth. These are not simply temporary adjustments to difficult situations, but are long-standing changes in personality structures that have the potential to lead to lasting and far-reaching changes in the direction and composition of a person's life. These changes meaningfully contribute to our ability to flourish, providing support for future trials and tribulations.

Given the neo-Aristotelian nature of our account of virtue, we would be remiss to not discuss the contribution of suffering to the development of practical wisdom.[30] Grappling with difficult situations, figuring out how to overcome obstacles and survive loss requires problem-solving, perspective-taking, careful reflection and analysis, and developing an honest accounting of our lives call for the exercise of practical wisdom. As we work through the difficulties we encounter, it requires that we engage more deeply with the world, forcing us to pay closer attention to ourselves, to other people, and to various features of our physical and social environments, even when doing so may be unpleasant. Through this, we develop and refine our orientation towards virtue by critically reflecting on our past and current experiences and applying what we glean from these reflections to potential future encounters, and by regulating our attention and arousal so that we fully attend to and analyse the virtue-relevant stimuli we encounter, especially when it is calling for the activation of multiple (at times competing, even conflicting) virtues. All of these things help to make us practically wise. Thus, our account of virtue supports Brady's view that suffering provides an opportunity to develop practical wisdom – an opportunity that people may not get elsewhere.

The last step in virtue manifestation is the production of virtue-appropriate behavior itself. How do our encounters with suffering influence how we respond to virtue-relevant stimuli – or, in other words, how does it impact the density distribution of our virtue manifestation? It may be that suffering increases the frequency of (or capacity for) virtuous responding, so we are able to more consistently respond with compassion, honesty, courage, patience, etc. to the virtue-relevant stimuli we regularly encounter in our daily lives.

Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live by (rev. and expanded ed.), Oxford University Press, New York 2013) – and thus, may not be a part of other cultures' master narratives, and may have negative consequences for those members of American society (e.g., minority individuals) who are at odds with (and even harmed by) the master narrative (D. P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self* (ed. 2006), cit.).

[30] Our *UV*.

Or perhaps it broadens the range of situations within which we can respond virtuously, expanding our capacity to behave compassionately, honestly, generously, courageously, etc. even in situations where it is difficult to do so.

It is also the case that in heightening our sensitivity to, and awareness of, virtue-relevant stimuli, it also thereby deepens our capacity to respond to complex situations with nuance. As we become more attuned to virtue-relevant stimuli, we become more aware of the full range of stimuli that are present, as well as the many ways this range of stimuli interact – complementing and contradicting one another – blending together into a complex and nuanced call for virtuous responding. And in learning to navigate this rich environment of virtue-relevant stimuli, we develop the capacity to regulate our responses so as to be more appropriate for this higher level of complexity. Among other things, this allows for a greater synchronization and synthesizing of multiple virtues into a coherent, well-functioning character, thereby allowing us to appropriately respond to the virtue-relevant situations we encounter with a complex constellation of virtues: courageous gentleness, compassionate honesty, kind generosity, etc.

5. Brady's Account of Suffering and Virtue

We now turn our focus to Brady's discussion of the relationship between suffering and virtue in order to explore what our account has to offer – specifically, it's relevance to his discussion of the three ways suffering is necessary for, and contributes to, virtue. Let us consider each way in turn.

First, Brady argues that some forms of suffering serve as indicators that we are virtuous – i.e., we are responding appropriately to hardship and the evils of the world, and are accurately detecting and desiring to repair physical, emotional, or relational damage incurred. According to our account, the inability to successfully pursue or complete a goal – in this case, the virtuous person's goal to respond virtuously to virtue-relevant stimuli – is indeed likely to induce a painful experience, such as frustration, guilt, or remorse. For example, if a person has the goal of being compassionate and yet is thwarted in her attempt to act compassionately when there is reason for her to do so – e.g., she sees someone on the street suffering, but is unable to respond because something prevents her from doing so – then this would likely make her feel badly; sad for the person, guilt at her inability to respond, frustrated by the situation at hand, etc. In other words, whenever a virtuous person is prevented from responding virtuously, this is likely to cause suffering.

What is more, the compassionate person values compassion, not only in herself but in others. She wants to see more, not less, compassion in the world. And wherever it is called for, she would prefer that it be manifested as opposed to not. Thus, she is likely to experience pain – a sense of loss, remorse, frustra-

tion, sadness – when she witnesses a lack of compassionate responding in the compassion-relevant situations she encounters, situations where compassion was called for but not manifested. And the same would be true for the honest, generous, patient, and courageous person. Thus, in alignment with Brady's view, our account supports the view that suffering can be an important indicator that a person's virtue is intact and well-functioning.

Of course, suffering is also likely to arise in response to people's failure to respond appropriately even when they aren't yet fully virtuous – for example, a person feeling ashamed for lying because deep down she knew that she should have told the truth, or guilty for failing to act compassionately towards a friend in need because it would have been inconvenient for her to do so, etc. Indeed, we think that such negative feelings often function as a crucial motivator for virtue development. And importantly, they are feelings that can be both internally and externally generated – meaning that sometimes we feel ashamed, remorseful, or guilty because we ourselves recognize our failings, but other times these feelings are brought about by other people pointing out what we have done wrong. Either way, they may help to facilitate virtuous responding in the future.[31]

Interestingly, this implies that the function of this type of suffering may be broader than what Brady suggests, serving not only as indicators of well-functioning virtue, but also as indicators of healthy virtue development. Of course, this fits in nicely with Brady's second claim, which is that some forms of suffering are necessary for the development of particular classes of virtue – the relevant class here being people's moral virtues (e.g., their honesty, generosity, compassion, etc.). The presence of suffering in ourselves and others presents us with a range of virtue-relevant stimuli – situations that call for compassionate, generous, patient, honest responses. Over time, our continued encountering of these stimuli in our daily lives (which the ubiquity of suffering makes likely) facilitates the development of a robust disposition to respond to them appropriately. We become more morally virtuous (more compassionate, generous, patient, courageous, honest, etc.), at least in part, because the suffering we encounter in the world around us provides us with opportunities to do so. And doing so is *adaptive* – virtues help us to respond constructively to suffering, in ways that support our own and others' survival and recovery from it, which in turn reinforces their activation and develop-

[31] Which is one of the reasons why psychologists refer to guilt and shame as "moral" emotions (J. Haidt, *The Moral Emotions*, in R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer & H. H. Goldsmith (eds.), *Series in Affective Science. Handbook of Affective Sciences*, Oxford University Press, Oxfrod 2003, pp. 852-870). A couple of excellent discussions of this worth noting here: K. Kristjánsson, *Virtuous Emotions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, & B. J. Fowers, F. C. Richardson & B. D. Slife, *Frailty, Suffering, and Vice: Flourishing in the Face of Human Limitations*, apa 2017.

ment, as well as our valuing of them for the good that they help us to manifest in the world.

But suffering, according to Brady, is also relevant to the development of virtues of strength and vulnerability, as well as the practical and epistemic virtues necessary for wisdom. Given that accomplishing many of our most highly valued goals requires extended effort and commitment on our part, it makes sense that human flourishing will inevitably require the cultivation of virtues of strength (e.g. patience, courage, resilience). And given the inevitability of disappointment and setbacks in these endeavours – due to the common occurrence of illness, accident, and tragedy – it will also require the cultivation of virtues of vulnerability (e.g. adaptability, creativity, intimacy). In other words, flourishing requires the development of robust dispositions to respond well to difficulties, setbacks, trials, and tribulations. And responding well requires a balance between strength and vulnerability – being able to tackle problems and handle difficulties on our own, but at the same time to support, and be supported by, others through these difficulties.

Finally, as each of these virtues develops, they begin to increasingly work together, to coordinate with, complement, and counterbalance one another. According to our account, this interweaving of virtue manifestation creates the virtue constellation of one's character. And at the core of this constellation is the functioning of practical wisdom – i.e., the ability to properly attune one's virtuous responses to the complex and nuanced situations one encounters, to determine exactly what response is being called for, and what combination or blend of virtues is required. This certainly fits well with Brady's claim that suffering can, under the right conditions, provide the occasion and motivation for *reflection* (which is the heart of wisdom), promoting increased understanding and appreciation of value and the ability to make good decisions with humility and compassion.[32]

As discussed above, some post-traumatic growth theorists agree with Brady that wisdom develops through one's encounter with suffering. For example, Jayawickreme and Blackie argue that:

> Wisdom is an emergent property that is more than the sum of its parts; wisdom is only manifested when individuals enact a set of virtues that give them the capacity

[32] Of course, once again, Brady is careful to note that not all forms of suffering afford this. Indeed, some forms of (e.g., chronic or severe) suffering are likely to result in the opposite development, leading a person to develop a threat-reactive or survival-based mindset, which in turns can thwart the reflective process discussed above. For example, children growing up in extreme conflict and poverty conditions of suffering are vulnerable to failing to develop secure attachments and a sense of empathic interconnectedness, which can in turn stymie (or skew) virtue development.

to make good judgments about what matters in life and to act on these judgments within the boundaries of what is under their control.[33]

In some respects, this definition of wisdom goes beyond Brady's insofar as the manifestation of the virtues necessary to make good judgments and act upon them – which fits in well with our account of practical wisdom – often operates automatically and intuitively *beneath* reflection, without the need for conscious processing.[34]

Brady's final claim is that some forms of suffering are vital for the development of social virtues, such as justice, love, and trust, which are all necessary for the flourishing of social groups. While all moral virtues are responsive to virtue-relevant stimuli generated by the suffering of others, some are particularly oriented towards creating and protecting social harmony, so that not only can individuals flourish within a group, but the group that they are a part of can flourish as well.

Each of the social virtues Brady identifies require individuals to rely on – to be dependent upon – other members of the group. For example, Brady identifies justice as a virtue that requires individuals to largely turn over their right to retaliate against harms inflicted upon them by others to social institutions, such as the policing force and court systems. Thus, our individual and social response to suffering caused by injustice – our individual and collective attempts to restore justice – communicates our commitment to belonging to a society in which its members are equally responsible and accountable to institutions that facilitate human flourishing. And ideally, it motivates those who have behaved unjustly to repent, seek reparations, and reform, so as to continue to be a meaningful part of (and contributor to) this well-functioning system. It promotes a sense of trust and care between members of the society, strengthening social bonds and a commitment to the shared welfare of its members.

6. Suggestions for Conceptualization and Measurement

One of the strengths of our account is that it provides clear ways to empirically explore the relationship between suffering, post-traumatic growth, and virtue. Therefore, we conclude our paper with a few suggestions for productive avenues of research.

The first important distinction that researchers need to make is between the different steps involved in virtue manifestation – i.e., perception of virtue-relevant stimuli; the activation of social-cognitive interpretative, motivational, and narrative identity processes; and the production of virtue-appro-

[33] E. Jayawickreme & L. E. R. Blackie, *Exploring the Psychological Benefits of Hardship*, cit., p. 48.

[34] *Ivi*.

priate behavior. Do people who report having experienced a greater degree of challenge, difficulty, loss, and hardship show a greater degree of sensitivity to the presence of virtue-relevant stimuli – e.g., do they notice compassion or courage-relevant stimuli that others miss? Does putting people into challenging situations increase (even temporarily) their sensitivity to virtue-relevant stimuli – do they notice things that they would have previously failed to?

Secondly, do people who have experienced a greater degree of challenge, difficulty, loss, and hardship possess more virtue-relevant and virtue-oriented beliefs, desires, values, schemas, or goals? Do their narrative identities include more virtue-relevant characteristics? Do they display a higher degree of practical wisdom? And does the presence of these things predict a greater degree of post-traumatic growth? Does putting people into challenging situations change (even temporarily) the values/goals that are prioritized, the beliefs that are chronically accessible, or the schemas that are activated?

Finally, do people who have experienced a greater degree of challenge, difficulty, loss, and hardship report responding virtuously more frequently, with a higher degree of consistency, or over a wider range of circumstances? When put in challenging situations, will they more readily produce virtue-appropriate responses? Are their responses more nuanced, involving a higher degree of virtue complexity? And does putting people into challenging situations foster (even temporarily) a higher degree of virtue-appropriate responding?

In the questions we have posed above, we highlight two basic methodological approaches: correlational and experimental. The correlational approach allows researchers to study the relationship between suffering and virtue in people who have actually faced challenging situations, experienced difficulty, loss, and hardship in their lives. And this relationship can be explored using surveys and interview instruments either at one discrete measurement point, or longitudinally, tracking the relationship with multiple measurement points across time.

There is a wealth of different questions worth exploring here. For example, are there particular types of challenges/hardships, or particular ways of responding to them, that are most likely to contribute to post-traumatic growth? Are there particular virtues, or classes of virtues, most likely to be positively impacted by suffering? Does suffering caused by a failure to respond virtuously (versus other forms of suffering) have a particularly strong connection to post-traumatic growth?

Of course, correlational designs have their weaknesses, not the least of which is that there may be other features of the people and situations being studied – other than the suffering they have experienced – that are responsible for their ability to respond positively and develop their virtues and character.

To isolate the causal role of suffering in post-traumatic growth is tricky (to say the least), and would require a different approach. One resource that re-

searchers have at their disposal is an experimental methodology, which allows researchers to carefully control the demographic and environmental variables involved in order to directly explore the effects of different features of suffering on virtue, and other forms of post-traumatic change. One example of an experimental design would be to randomly assign people to one of two groups: those who are exposed to carefully crafted challenging situations (within the ethical guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board) – once again in either a one-time discrete measurement situation or longitudinally over time – and those who are not (i.e., the "control" group). This would allow researchers to measure differences in their "before exposure" and "after exposure" virtue-related measurements, in order to determine whether there is greater virtue-related change for the group exposed to the challenging situation than for the control group. And these outcomes could be documented in the moment, immediately after experiencing hardship, as well as at various points in the future (e.g., 2 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year later) – allowing researchers to examine how long-lasting the positive reactions to suffering are, and whether they indeed stabilize into meaningful changes in people's virtue and character.

As above, there are a range of interesting research questions that could be explored. For example, does exposing people to (certain forms of) hardship increase their sensitivity to virtue-relevant stimuli, shift their prioritization of values, goals, etc., lead to changes in their narrative identities, increase their capacity for practical wisdom, and/or increase the frequency or range of their virtue-appropriate responses? Are certain virtues more powerfully impacted? And are there particular types of hardships – or types of responses to it – that best promote post-traumatic growth (or, for that matter, thwart or dampen post-traumatic growth)?

In short, using our account of virtue to explore relationship between suffering, post-traumatic growth, and virtue provides the conceptual and empirical foundation for a rich and promising research program.

7. Concluding Thoughts

Perhaps the main take-away of our discussion here is that (as many before us have noted) as fragile, imperfect, and finite beings – beings deeply vulnerable to suffering – virtue provides us with a much-needed means not only to *track* (to mark or "bear witness" to, if you will) the harms occurring and being committed in the world, to ourselves and others, but also to adaptively *respond* to them. Virtue provides not only a barrier against, a protection from, the "evils" of the world, but also a medicinal balm – a substantive method of repair – for the harms done by them. It is what allows our dignity and humanity to survive, and even thrive, in the face of loss, hardship, and devastation. This makes

virtue an essential feature of human life, something we should not only value, but strive in earnest to promote and develop.

Our account (discussed briefly here and in more depth in *Understanding Virtue*) helps to identify and conceptualize how – and why – virtue is able to function in this way. And we hope it will also help researchers in their attempts to better understand, and capitalize on, the power of virtue to bring much needed goodness into a suffering world.

ABSTRACT · One of the main arguments that has been given for the importance of virtue is that it is not only important for, but is in fact constitutive of, a life well-lived, necessary for human wellbeing and flourishing. Yet, human life is also profoundly fragile, often filled with, and always vulnerable to, suffering. Thus, we must ask: what role does virtue play in our suffering, in how we face it, manage it, and survive it? Recent work in philosophy and psychology has argued for an important potential relationship between suffering and virtue, but the nature of this relationship is not well understood. In this paper, we lay out a philosophically and empirically rigorous approach to conceiving of and measuring virtue as a particular type of personality trait, and then discuss the implications of our account for aiding philosophers and psychologists in their quest to understand the relationship between suffering and virtue.

KEYWORDS: Virtue, Suffering, Post-Traumatic Growth, Trauma, Personality.