# Aristotle, Contemporary Psychology, and the Space between Virtue and Vice

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Contemporary virtue ethicists have inherited a famous taxonomy of character types from Aristotle. We are all familiar with the labels of the virtuous, vicious, continent, and incontinent person. The virtuous are said to have the best moral character, the vicious the worst, with the continent person's character closer to being virtuous and the incontinent person's character closer to being vicious.

The goal of this paper is to argue that contemporary virtue ethicists, especially those working in the Aristotelian tradition, should jettison this framework. The main reason is that psychological research in the past fifty years has suggested a much more complex picture of moral character than what can be usefully captured by these four categories. In its place, I will suggest a better taxonomy that makes use of the idea of what I call mixed character.

The first section of the paper presents and then criticizes the simple four category taxonomy. Section two shows how this taxonomy is not even a faithful rendering of Aristotle's own view, and that he has a much more sophisticated taxonomy in mind. As we will see, however, there are also serious problems with his approach as well. Section three then leaves Aristotle behind and looks at how moral traits would be assessed in contemporary personality psychology. On this approach, there would be only two categories, virtue and vice, and any given person can have both a virtue like compassion and an opposing vice like cruelty at the same time. This also is problematic in my view, at least from a virtue ethical perspective. So section four will introduce my three category taxonomy of virtues, vices, and mixed traits.

## 1. The Simplistic Aristotelian Taxonomy

In order to set up what I will call the simplistic Aristotelian taxonomy, we first need to introduce a few assumptions about character traits, virtues, and vices. Here is the first one:

(A1) A person cannot have a virtue and the opposing vice or vices at the same time.

Hence if someone is honest, then given this assumption it follows that he is also not dishonest. This is an assumption that Aristotle holds, and it is also commonsensical.

Here is another assumption:

(A2) Virtue and vice (and particular virtues and vices) are normative threshold concepts.

This is a fancy way of saying that there are certain normative criteria that a character trait must meet in order to qualify as a particular virtue or vice. For instance, it is commonly thought that reliably refraining from cheating is one of the criteria that must be met in order for a character trait to qualify as honesty. If a trait were to only lead to systematic cheating behavior, then it thereby could not qualify as honesty. Similarly, on many views of compassion that trait must

give rise to patterns of altruistic (rather than self-interested) motivation. The virtue and vice concepts are normative concepts, so it is only to be expected that there will be specific normative criteria that have to be met for a character trait to qualify as one of them. This too is an assumption shared by Aristotle and commonsense.[1]

Here is a third assumption:

(A3) Character traits come in degrees.

So two people can both have the virtue of honesty, and yet one of them could have it to a greater degree than another. Hence we might talk about someone being weakly honest and another person being deeply honest. Here too there is agreement between Aristotle and commonsense thinking about character.[2]

Combining these last two assumptions, the idea is that a character trait has to satisfy certain normative criteria to even count as a virtue (or vice) in the first place. But provided it does count, there is a further question of the degree to which someone has that virtue. To switch to the language of contemporary psychology for a moment, virtues and vices are both categorical traits (given their thresholds) and also continuous traits (given their coming in degrees).

These three assumptions are widely endorsed by contemporary Aristotelians too,[3] and in my view they are very plausible in their own right. I will make use of them when presenting my own taxonomy in section four.

Given this starting point, Figure 1 illustrates the simplistic Aristotelian taxonomy of character types.
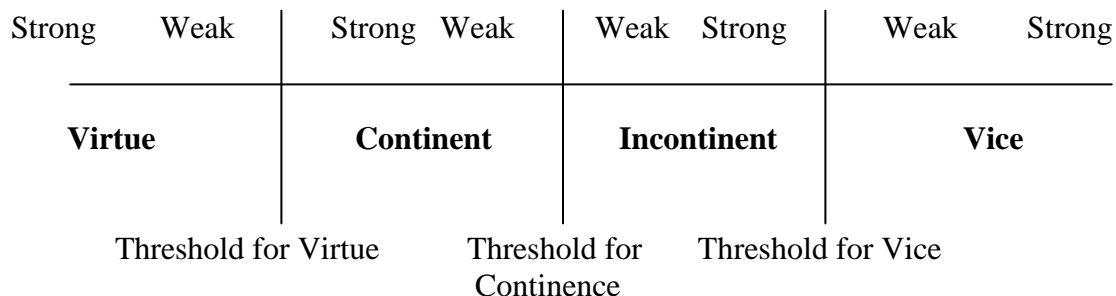
| Strong      Weak | Strong  Weak | Weak  Strong | Weak      Strong |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| **Virtue** | **Continent** | **Incontinent** | **Vice** |

Threshold for Virtue　　　　Threshold for　　Threshold for Vice
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Continence

**Figure 1. The Simplistic Aristotelian Taxonomy of Character Types**

On this approach, all moral agents can be classified in one of these four ways. On the far left hand side would be maximal or full virtue, and on the far right would be maximal or full vice. Briefly, on the Aristotelian approach the vicious person is such that his or her reason and desire align, but for the wrong ends. The vicious person, in other words, wholeheartedly pursues what in fact is not worth pursuing. The incontinent person shares the same understanding of what to do with the continent and the virtuous. However, some of his desires oppose reason, and he is not able to control these desires and so they regularly dictate his actual behavior. The continent

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[1] For more on thresholds for character traits, see Miller 2013: chapter one.
[2] See, e.g., Aristotle 1145a23 and Curzer 2012: 327, as well as Miller 2013: chapter one.
[3] For references see Miller 2013: chapter one.

person is in the same boat, except that her reason outweighs her opposing desires. Finally, the virtuous person does not have any inappropriate desires when in the relevant situations – her reason and desire align in wholeheartedly pursuing what is in fact good.[4]

Note that the three assumptions are at work in this taxonomy. Virtue and vice are the opposing ends of the normative spectrum. There is a threshold that must be crossed for a character trait to qualify as deserving any one of the four labels. And with respect to each of these labels, there can be a range of differences in the degree to which the trait is held. Finally, going beyond these assumptions, let me note that while a person might deserve the label of being continent now, it is widely thought that this need not become a permanent label. Over time perhaps she can improve her character so that it crosses over the threshold for being virtuous.

This taxonomy should be largely familiar, and so let me proceed directly to explaining why it is *overly* simplistic.

(a) *Virtue and vice become empty categories*. On this approach, one of the requirements in the normative threshold for virtue (and vice) is the complete absence of occurent desires which oppose what reason determines is good or best to do when in morally relevant situations. For instance, to qualify as even weakly honest, a person needs to have no occurent desires to cheat, steal, or lie inappropriately when the opportunity arises. Such a strict requirement preserves a clear distinction between honesty and continence.[5]

But on empirical grounds, it is reasonable to worry that this standard is psychologically unattainable for beings like us. Note that the requirement is *not* that in one particular instance of action there be no opposing desires. That would be unremarkable. It is that consistently and reliably across *all* situations relevant to virtue, there be no opposing occurent desires. So even in cases where highly rewarding cheating could go undetected, or powerful sexual experiences be felt, or terrible carnage on the battlefield avoided, the expectation is that there be no inclinations whatsoever in those directions. That puts virtue out of our reach.

And note that this is a requirement, not for maximal or full virtue, but just for *weak* virtue. It is one thing to say that full virtue is out of the reach of human beings. Few would disagree with that. But it is a much different claim to say that even minimal virtue is out of our reach.

The same is true for vice – all actions motivated by dishonesty, cruelty, and cowardice must be performed wholeheartedly. Again this can happen in particular instances of action, to be sure, but the vicious person would reliably have to never experience contrary good desires throughout all the different morally relevant situations in life.

A four category taxonomy is not very helpful if two of the categories do not apply to actual human beings.

(b) *Continence and incontinence do not apply to most people*. Even worse, the two remaining categories also do not apply to most people in general. To say that someone is incontinent is to

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[4] For further discussion in the secondary literature of these distinctions, see Broadie 1991: chapter five, Garrett 1993, and Curzer 2012.

[5] For similar remarks, see Rorty 1980: 274, Lear 1988: 167-168, Broadie 1991: 267, 270-271, Annas 1993: 56-57, Garrett 1993: 189, and Curzer 2012: 343, 386. According to Broadie, it would also count as continent for a person to be such that, "it is possible to be aware that something would be pleasant, and also to mind foregoing it, without for a moment being actually *tempted* to prefer it…these conditions count as 'continence,' every bit as much as the condition of the agent who experiences and resists actual temptation" (1991: 270, emphasis hers).

say that the person not only has opposing, non-virtuous desires but also routinely gives in to them throughout his life even despite reason telling him to do otherwise.

But most people are not like this either. We may be incontinent *in some areas* of our lives, but at best incontinence is typically domain specific. In other words, the person who gives in to temptation when it comes to eating desserts, may exhibit great strength of will when it comes to paying his taxes honestly.

Another way to put the point is that only a few philosophers are tempted by the unity of the virtues thesis. But no one, so far as I know, is tempted by a unity of continence or a unity of incontinence thesis. And for good reason – it seems undeniable that a person might be continent in one moral area of life and incontinent in another.

A four category taxonomy does even worse if it turns out that none of the four categories apply to most human beings.

(c) *There are missing categories*. Even without these previous worries, it should have been apparent just from the way the four categories are defined that they could not be exhaustive. For instance, there is no category for someone who has virtuous desires but mistaken reasoning about moral matters. Huck Finn is the standard example of so-called inverse incontinence where the appropriate desires get the upper hand over reason. There could also be inverse continence too, where the virtuous desires oppose reason, but the person's mistaken reason reliably trumps desire.[6]

Unfortunately, even adding these two categories does not help matters, since it is even more implausible to think that most people are inversely continent or inversely incontinent in general in their moral lives.

(d) *The categories do not even apply in one moral domain*. The final worry is one I will only mention here since it will be developed at length in the next section. It is that even with respect to one moral domain such as helping or cheating, the four categories do a bad job capturing what most people are really like. For as we will see, in any given moral domain most people tend to show signs of *all* these different categories in their behavior. When it comes to helping people in need, for instance, many of us will act virtuously, continently, incontinently, and viciously towards others over the course of a month or a year.

## 2. Aristotle's Sophisticated Taxonomy

The simplistic Aristotelian taxonomy of character types deserves it name; it is indeed much too simplistic, and contemporary virtue ethicists would be wise to discard it.

As Aristotle himself would have done. For the taxonomy presented in Figure 1 is *not* Aristotle's taxonomy as developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Let me note that my goal in this paper is not historical scholarship, and coming up with a workable taxonomy is far more important to me than accurately representing Aristotle's own view. But it is worth spending some time offering at least one reasonable interpretation of the text since in my opinion Aristotle's view is far superior to the simplistic taxonomy, at least given how I read him.

First of all, in addition to the three assumptions, Aristotle is willing to accept this additional assumption:

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[6] For related discussion, see Curzer 2012: 357, 372-373.

(A4)  Aside from the virtues, all other character traits are not unified.

Thus the categories he uses for the different character types (minus the virtues) are domain specific. So someone might be incontinent in one domain, and continent in another. Or vicious when it comes to stealing, but continent when it comes to danger.[7] The exception for the case of the virtues is because of Aristotle's famous unity of the virtues thesis, since on that view if a person has a virtue in one moral domain, then necessarily she has it in every domain. By not extending the unity thesis to the other categories, Aristotle avoids one of the main flaws of the simplistic taxonomy.[8]

In addition, Aristotle clearly rejects the use of only four categories. Most important of all, he asserts that:

(A5)  There is a distinct category between vice and incontinence.

This is the category of the *hoi polloi*, often translated as "the Many."[9] The label can be confusing, since as a matter of fact Aristotle believed that many of the people during his time belonged in this category of the Many. But that is a contingent fact – in principle only a few people in a given society could deserve the label. It is not the number of people which matters when it comes to applying the label of "the Many," but the specific moral features which it tries to identify.[10]

What are those features? First, unlike the incontinent, the Many in a given moral domain do not have a correct conception about what the good is in that domain. To use a different way of speaking, they do not have the correct values in that area of life.[11] In this respect they are like the vicious. Furthermore, they have the same desires as the vicious do which pertain to that domain. They are said to be lovers of money and material possessions, and lack a sense of shame and also a love of honor.[12] What then sets the Many apart from the vicious? Only that they are capable of making moral progress, and so over time can evolve into being incontinent and perhaps even ultimately virtuous with respect to a given moral domain.[13] The vicious, on the other hand, are said to be "incurable."[14]

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[7] Although as we will see later in this section, things get a bit more complicated when it comes to incontinence as there are passages which suggest that incontinence, at least in its paradigmatic form, only applies to the domain of pleasures and pains where the virtue is temperance.
[8] For further discussion, see Curzer 2012: 358, 385-386.
[9] See, e.g., NE 1151a25, 1166b2-6, and 1168a31-32.
[10] For more on this point, and for excellent discussion in general of the Many in Aristotle, see Garrett 1993. It should be noted that there is some disagreement among commentators about whether the Many should instead be interpreted as a sub-category of the vicious. I side with Curzer (2012: 369: fn. 5) in interpreting it as a distinct category (for an opposing view see Garrett 1993: 189). If I am wrong about this then we still have an interesting and improved taxonomy on the table even if it is not faithful to Aristotle in every respect.
[11] Garrett 1993: 181-183.
[12] See 1121b13-15, 1179b7-16, and 1125b15-16 respectively. For additional features, see Garrett 1993: 184-186 and Curzer 2012: 333, 335, 342, 370.
[13] As Howard Curzer rightly notes, "Incontinence is an under-appreciated state of character. On Aristotle's view, the incontinent are more morally advanced than most people. The incontinent actually make the right choices, although of course they do not act upon their choices" (2012: 339 fn. 39). See also Aristotle 1152a25.
[14] Hence Aristotle writes: "…the person who is [now] unjust or intemperate was originally free not to acquire this character, so that he has it willingly, though once he has acquired the character, he is no longer free not to have it [now]" (1114a20-22). See also 1150a22, 1150b33, and 1180a40-10, as well as Curzer 2012: 342, 358-359, 367-373.

With the category of the Many, Aristotle can try to avoid one of the main concerns with the simplistic taxonomy by agreeing that most people are not going to be accurately described as virtuous, vicious, continent, or incontinent, both in general and in particular moral domains.[15] Indeed, Aristotle not only introduces this fifth type of character which he uses to describe most of the people of his day, but he arguably has even more categories besides these five. Commentators have called attention to the "generous-minded,"[16] the "bestial,"[17] and the "heroically virtuous,"[18] among other distinctions.[19] It is a matter of some controversy, in fact, just how many categories there are, a controversy we can fortunately bypass for our purposes here.[20]

So just sticking with five categories for the moment and focusing on only one moral domain, Figure 2 outlines Aristotle's taxonomy with respect to the domain of pleasure and pain.
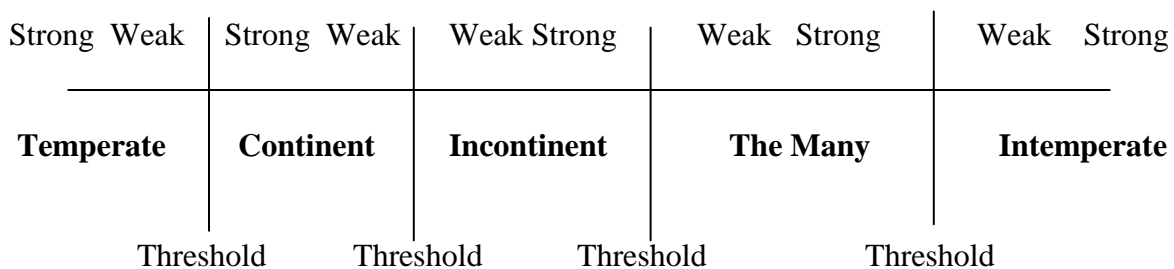
| Strong  Weak | Strong  Weak | Weak  Strong | Weak   Strong | Weak   Strong |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Temperate** | **Continent** | **Incontinent** | **The Many** | **Intemperate** |
| Threshold | Threshold | Threshold | Threshold | |

**Figure 2. Aristotle's Taxonomy of Character Types**

As I have indicated, my view is that Aristotle's taxonomy, by being domain specific and even just adding one extra category for the Many, represents a significant improvement over the simplistic taxonomy. Nevertheless, it still has some serious problems. I will mention three of them in increasing order of severity.

(a) *Aristotle limits the taxonomy to the domain of pleasure and pain*. It turns out that Aristotle had a very restricted vision for his taxonomy, as it is only meant apply to one moral domain (pleasure and pain), and hence involves only one virtue (temperance) and one vice (intemperance).[21] This is too severe of a limitation to make it useful to contemporary virtue ethicists.

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[15] The repeated qualification in the text above to particular moral domains is important since a person could belong to the Many with respect to one moral domain, and belong to the continent, for instance, with respect to another.

[16] Curzer 2012: 332-336.

[17] Aristotle 1145a15.

[18] See Aristotle 1145a20 and Curzer 2012: 332.

[19] For more, see Rorty 1980: 271 and Curzer 2012: chapter seventeen. There are also sub-categories within categories. For instance, Aristotle distinguishes between two types of incontinence, impetuosity and weakness (1150b19). These sub-categories will not matter for our purposes either.

[20] See Curzer 2012 for detailed discussion. Notably, though, none of these extra categories seems to resemble anything like inverse continence or inverse incontinence. However, regardless of Aristotle's own view, contemporary Aristotelians could add these categories to the list if they liked.

[21] As he writes, "It is likewise clear that the only condition we should take to be continence or incontinence is the one concerned with what concerns temperance and intemperance" (1148b11-12), and "It is clear, then, that

Fortunately, whatever Aristotle may have held, contemporary Aristotelians are free to employ the taxonomy across the various moral domains. Since I am not interested in defending Aristotle's own views in this paper, I will not make much of this first problem.

(b) *The virtues and vices are still empty categories*. More of a concern is that the first objection to the simplistic taxonomy carries over here as well. Even minimal possession of a virtue like temperance is going to require the complete absence of inappropriate occurent desires in relevant situations on a regular basis. As Aristotle writes,

> For the continent and the temperate person are both the sort to do nothing in conflict with reason because of bodily pleasures; but the continent person has base appetites, and the temperate person lacks them. The temperate person is the sort to find nothing pleasant that conflicts with reason; the continent is the sort to find such things pleasant but not to be led by them.[22]

That is a standard which is not psychologically realistic for beings like us. Same as well with the vices.

Here we cannot just use the maneuver of a moment ago and discard another aspect of Aristotle's historical view in order to make it more palatable to contemporary ethicists. For once we start allowing a person to be temperate *and* have some opposing desires for inappropriate pleasures, then the entire picture of continence would need revising too. For then continence cannot be defined in terms of reason outweighing opposing non-virtuous desires, if that can count as virtuous too.

What goes for virtue would go for vice as well. Once a vicious person is allowed to have either some opposing virtuous desires or virtuous beliefs in relevant situations, even if they get outweighed, then the core conception of vice and of incontinence would no longer apply. So in general the taxonomy would start to unravel from both ends.

(c) *The taxonomy does not even apply to particular moral domains*. This is my most serious concern, and it is the one I alluded to at the end of the last section. The concern will take a bit more space to develop, and I will also need to draw on some empirical results from psychology. The basic point will be that the behavior of most people varies too much from situation to situation to be accurately captured by the five (or more) labels that Aristotle uses. To focus the discussion, I will briefly look at the moral domains of helping others and cheating.

Let me start with helping. Hundreds of studies in social psychology have painted a picture whereby most people seem to exhibit a great deal of what psychologists call within-person variability in their helping behavior. In some situations they help. In other situations they

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incontinence and continence apply only to the concerns of intemperance and temperance, and for other things there is another form of incontinence, so called by transference of the name, and not simply" (1149a2021-23).

But he does seem to acknowledge other kinds of incontinence which are distinct from what he calls being "simply incontinent." For instance, he writes that, "When people go to excess, in conflict with the correct reason in them, in the pursuit of these sources of pleasure, we do not call them simply incontinent, but add the condition that they are incontinent about wealth, gain, honour or emotion, and not simply incontinent. For we assume that they are different…" (1147b32-34). See also the discussion in Broadie 1991: 268-271 for a good account of some of the complexities involved here.

[22] Aristotle 1151b35-1152a4. See also 1104b3-9 and 1119a11.

do not, even though there is very little difference between them. Sometimes they do not help when very little is at stake. Sometimes they do not help when there is a lot is at stake.

This variability applies to motivation as well as behavior. Sometimes helping happens for crudely self-interested reasons, such as guilt relief. Sometimes it happens for dutiful reasons, such as believing there is a moral obligation to do something. And sometimes it happens for purely altruistic reasons when feeling empathy for the suffering of another.

The explanation for this high degree of within-person variability is that there is no one psychological disposition or bundle of a few simple dispositions which governs all of our helping behavior. Rather, most of us have dozens and dozens of different dispositions to form beliefs, desires, emotions, and the like, each of which can influence us to help (or not help) in different ways. Here are a few examples:

> Desires concerned with helping when doing so will contribute towards alleviating my guilty feelings, and more so than any reasonable alternative means of doing so which is thought to be available.
> Desires concerned with not helping when doing so will contribute towards perpetuating my guilty feelings, or will not alleviate them as effectively as some reasonable alternative means of doing so which is thought to be available.
> Desires concerned with not helping when doing so will undermine my good mood, or will not extend the good mood as effectively as some alternative reasonable means of doing so which is thought to be available.
> Desires to help in order to affiliate myself more closely with and emulate those who are morally virtuous or admirable.
> Desires concerned with helping when doing so will contribute towards complying with the relevant moral norms.
> Beliefs concerned with which means of helping another person would be most effective in relieving her distress.
> Altruistic desires concerned with helping so as to relive the other person's distress, which are triggered by feeling empathy for that person.

I want to stress that these are just a few out of many examples of how we are disposed to think, feel, and act just with respect to this one domain of helping.[23]

Because our psychological life is so complex in this way, we will regularly display behavior which, in that given instance at least, might be virtuous, or it might be continent, or it might be incontinent, and so forth. Here are a few studies which illustrate the point:

> Participants had an opportunity to help a classmate who had been in a terrible accident and broken both of her legs. The majority (71%) who were induced to think empathetically about this classmate not only agreed to help (compared to 33% of controls), but there is good reason to think that they did so primarily for altruistic or selfless reasons.[24]

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[23] For much more on these examples and the empirical evidence supporting their attribution, see Miller 2013.
[24] See Toi and Batson 1982. For discussion of empathy and helping, and especially the connection to altruistic motivation, see Batson 2011 and Miller 2013: chapter five.

Participants had an opportunity to notify a shopper that her bag was leaking candy. The majority of participants (55%) who had a few minutes earlier been made to believe that they had broken someone's camera, subsequently notified this shopper. There is good reason to think that they were helpful primarily for self-interested reasons having to do with guilt relief. On the flip side, only 15% of participants who had not been made to feel guilty, notified the shopper.[25]

Participants had an opportunity to help someone in a serious emergency who was crying out in terrible pain in the next room. Those participants who were filling out forms in the same room as an unresponsive stranger when this happened, rarely did anything to help (7%). There is good reason to think that they did not help, at least in part, due to fear of embarrassment. Those who were in the room by themselves filling out the forms overwhelmingly helped (70%).[26]

The first example is one of very admirable moral behavior, and there are lots of other situations where empathy can lead us to altruistic helping. But the third example is one of very regrettable moral behavior, and there are also lots of situations where fear of embarrassment can lead us to not help even when the need is significant. The second example is somewhere in-between, in that it is good that the shopper was helped, but if the primary reason was guilt-relief, then that would be a motive with no moral worth.

Another way to get at the same point is to focus on just one person, and look at that person's pattern of behavior over many situations. On my reading of the psychology literature, we might expect that pattern to look something like Figure 3 for a fictional individual named Larry.



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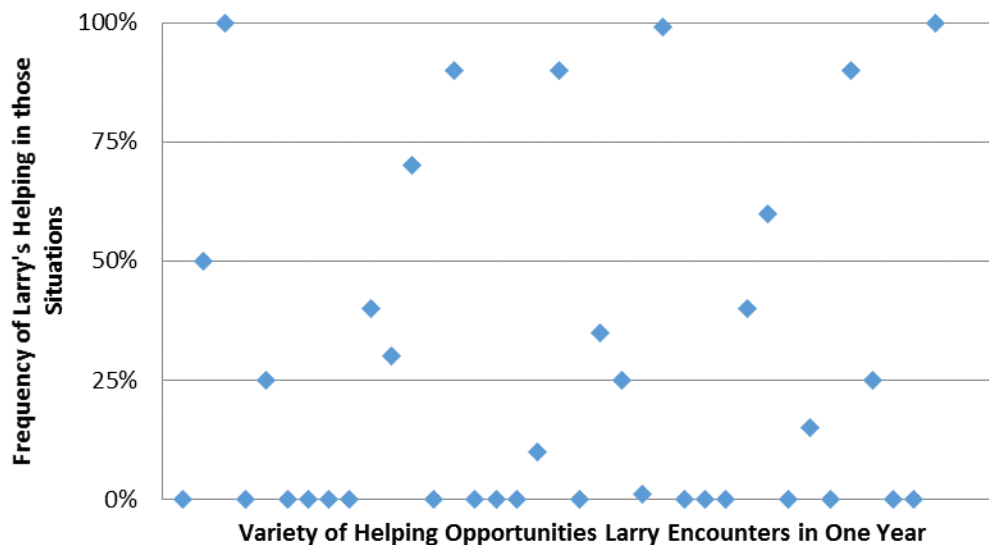
[25] See Regan et al. 1972. For discussion of guilt and helping, see Miller 2013: chapter two.
[26] See Latanė and Rodin 1969. For discussion of group effects and fear of embarrassment, see Miller 2013: chapter six.

**Figure 3. Larry's Frequency of Helping in all the Helping Opportunities He Encountered in One Year**

Like most of us, Larry was in many situations where he could help someone else in need. In the majority of those situations, he did nothing. But in a few of them, he always helped out. And in still other situations, he sometimes helped and sometimes did not.

How should we categorize someone like Larry? It seems to be a mistake to think of him as displaying either a vicious or an incontinent pattern of behavior. After all, there are some of situations (let us suppose) where he does help even at some cost to himself. On the other hand, it does not seem correct to categorize this as a continent or virtuous pattern of behavior either since there are plenty of other situations where he does not help at all even though he should.

What is true for behavior also seems to carry over to motivation. Depending on the situation, most people's type of motivation seems to regularly shift from egoistic to dutiful to altruistic. For instance, Figure 4 builds on the imaginary case of Larry's helping over the course of a year by focusing on how frequently his primary motive to help was either egoistic, dutiful, or altruistic.
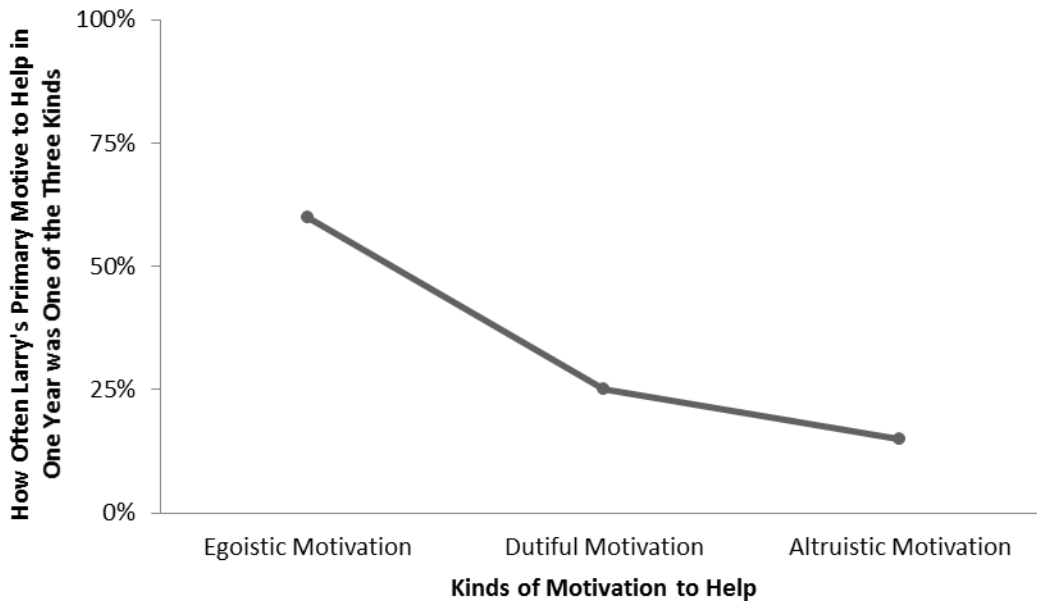


**Figure 4. Larry's High Within-Person Variability in Helping Motivation over a Year**

Here we can see that while Larry's central motive in helping others tended to be an egoistic motive, there were still plenty of cases where he helped primarily out of altruistic concern for the good of another.

Let me return now to Aristotle's more sophisticated taxonomy. As we saw, with respect to each moral domain Aristotle wants to use one of his five labels to capture someone's character.[27] My claim is that the psychological complexities with respect to helping, at least on my reading of the experimental literature, do not lend themselves to such categories. When we look at someone like Larry in Figures 3 and 4, to call him continent, for instance, or vicious

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[27] Although see footnote 21 for some of the complications with this claim when it comes incontinence in particular.

looks to not only be inaccurate. It also masks the tremendous complexity to be found in his moral life, and the same would be true for us as well.

What about the category of the Many? After all, Aristotle himself would not categorize most people as continent or vicious either. First we need to recall how this category is specified. Roughly speaking, it has the same features as the vicious, expect that someone in this category is capable of making moral progress because he or she wants to become a virtuous person, without yet having any of the correct values and virtuous desires. This, however, is a much worse picture of character than we find in the psychological literature, at least as far as most participants are concerned. Back to helping, we can see from the above that most people already have specific desires to perform dutiful actions. Even more, they are disposed to help others in numerous situations when feeling empathy for their suffering, and to do so for altruistic rather than egoistic reasons. Those are clearly not vicious desires. Again, the psychological profile here is much more complicated than what is reflected with this label.

One might think that this messy psychological picture is unique to helping others. But that is not the case. While I cannot support the claim here, it turns out that our psychological lives are similarly complex with respect to all the different moral domains like lying, harming, cheating, and the like. Let me very briefly provide one more illustration in the case of cheating, as there is good experimental evidence that here too we see quite a bit of within-person variability. For instance, Nina Mazar and her colleagues (2008) ran an experiment in which members of the control group first had to write down the names of ten books they read in high school (non-moral reminder), while the experimental group had to write down from memory the Ten Commandments (moral reminder). Then they completed a problem solving task with 20 problems. Either an experimenter checked their results (no opportunity to cheat), or they recycled their worksheet and could submit an answer sheet with any number of correct answers they wanted to without the experimenter checking (opportunity to cheat). It turned out that when there was no opportunity to cheat it did not matter which recall task was performed – an average of 3.1 problems was solved. However, when books were recalled in the recycling condition, cheating was noticeably higher (4.2 problems solved). But when the Ten Commandments were recalled in the recycling condition, performance dropped to an average of 2.8 problems solved – the lowest of all.[28] So on the one hand, when given an ordinary opportunity to cheat like this one, it seems that most of us would be likely to do so to some extent. But when our moral norms are made salient to us first, they can either preclude cheating motivation from developing or significantly outweigh it.

In light of this and other studies, it is possible to infer what some of the dispositions are which seem to be widely held and which play a role in bringing about cheating behavior. Without taking the time to review such inferences, here are some important examples:[29]

Beliefs concerned with the moral wrongness of cheating.
Beliefs and desires concerned with cheating in order to avoid personal failure,
    embarrassment, and so forth.
Beliefs and desires concerned with not cheating in order to avoid getting caught,
    punished, and so forth.
Beliefs and desires concerned with various costs (for oneself and others) of not following

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[28] Mazar et al. 2008: 636.
[29] For relevant discussion, see Miller 2014: chapter three.

moral norms against cheating, such as potential social disapproval, guilt, lost trust, and so forth.

Beliefs concerned with how to weigh these various costs and benefits.

Desire concerned with not cheating when the benefits of cheating do not (significantly) outweigh the costs.

Desires concerned with cheating when the benefits of cheating (significantly) outweigh the costs, while also desiring as much as possible to still be thought of as an honest person by oneself and others.

These are by no means all the beliefs and desires which most of us have that are directly relevant to cheating behavior, but they are central ones.

Given these particular kinds of mental states, we should also expect to find a person's cheating behavior varying significantly across situations relevant to cheating. This is reflected in the case of imaginary Larry in Figure 5.
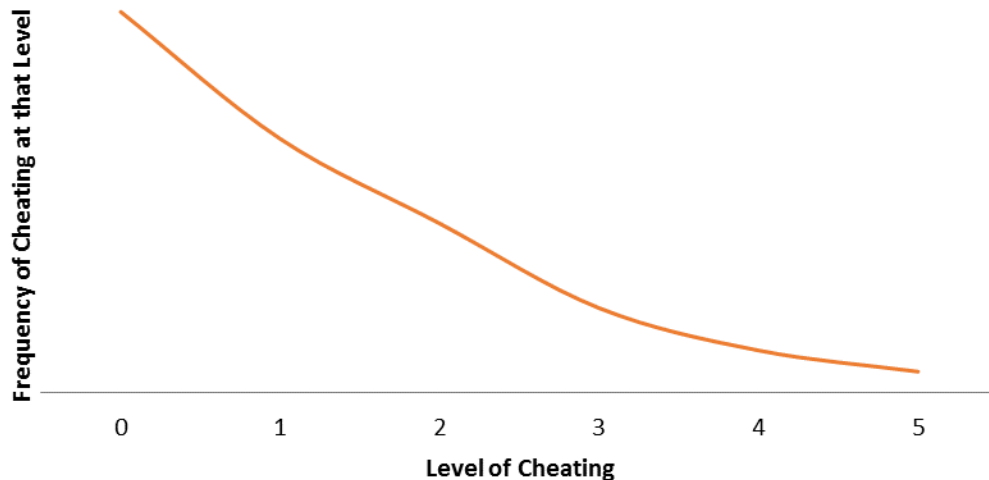


**Figure 5. Larry's Cheating Behavior Organized by the Severity of the Cheating over One Year**

Here we see Larry's behavior in many different cheating situations over the course of an entire year. Note that, perhaps not surprisingly, much of the time he exhibits very little cheating. After all, most of us tend to not cheat, especially when others are around to notice, and there are obvious self-interested reasons for why that is the case. But even still, we can see that Larry exhibits the entire range of cheating behavior over the course of the year. There are plenty of situations where he cheats to a moderate degree (say, by inflating his charity donations by $50 dollars on his tax forms), and a few where he does so to a great extent (perhaps by looking up the answers online during a take-home exam). Thus it turns out that, given this within-person variability, how much Larry cheats during any given hour of this year, does not reliably predict how much he cheats during any other given hour.

Aristotle's taxonomy seems ill-suited to categorize how most people seem to be put together in this moral domain as well. In particular, the collection of beliefs and desires listed above do not seem like they would be the constitutive elements of the virtue of honesty. But

since the same reasons that were offered against using Aristotle's taxonomy in the case of helping apply here too, I will not pause to rehearse them.

Having turned to contemporary psychology for evidence against the usefulness of a leading taxonomy of character types, should we look there for a promising positive approach as well?

## 3. Contemporary Personality Psychology and a Two Category Taxonomy[30]

When we look at what work is being done on traits in personality psychology, one approach clearly stands out from all others – the Big Five approach. While the Big Five personality traits (or Five-Factor model)[31] are almost never discussed at length in the philosophy literature, even despite the recent heated debates which have arisen about the empirical adequacy of character traits,[32] they dominate personality psychology, with thousands of relevant papers appearing in just the past five years.[33] So in this section I want to see if we can extract a better taxonomy of character types from this literature.

First, some background is needed. There are two commonly cited avenues of research which each arrived at the Big Five taxonomy.[34] The first is represented most prominently in the work of Lewis Goldberg, who spent much of his career analyzing lists of trait adjectives in ordinary language, having participants rate the degree to which they (or their peers) are describable by those adjectives, doing factor analyses on the data, and testing the generalizability of the findings across methods and data sources.[35] For instance, here are three of the trait adjectives from Goldberg's 1992 list of 100 Unipolar Markers:[36]

Fearful
Fretful
Generous

Participants have to rate how accurately the trait describes them on a 1 (extremely inaccurate) to 9 (extremely accurate) scale. Responses to this and other questions can then be factor analyzed to see which adjectives are highly correlated with each other, thereby suggested an underlying factor or latent variable which is more basic and which can account for these relations.[37] For

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[30] Some material from this section draws from Miller 2014: chapter six.

[31] It is now commonplace to use the labels 'Big Five' and 'Five-Factor model' interchangeably and I will do in what follows. Other common labels are 'Big Five personality dimensions,' 'Big Five taxonomy,' or simply 'the Big Five.' The label 'Big Five' derives from Goldberg 1981.

[32] See Miller 2014: chapter eight for these debates.

[33] As Costa and McCrae write, the Five-Factor model, "has become a dominant paradigm in personality" (1995a: 21). Of particular interest is the data on the number of publications related to Big Five personality traits as reported in John et al. 2008: 116.

[34] See, e.g., McCrae and John 1992: 181-187 and Goldberg 1993: 30. In what follows I focus on areas of overlap and agreement in the conclusions arrived at from these two avenues of research, but there are some differences in the details (e.g., Goldberg 1993: 30-31).

[35] See, e.g., Goldberg 1990, 1992, 1993 and Saucier and Goldberg 1996a.

[36] Goldberg 1992: 41.

[37] Factor analysis is the leading statistical approach in the Big Five literature. As Mark Leary nicely describes it, "Factor analysis attempts to identify the minimum number of factors or dimensions that will do a reasonably good job of accounting for the observed relationships among the variables" (2004: 188-189). For a helpful introduction, see Leary 2004: 187-192.

instance, fearful and fretful might tend to cluster together, but not generous. The first two can then be related to an underlying factor often labeled 'neuroticism.' Note that the evidence that would be gathered in this example (and in many of the actual studies) is self-report data involving categorizing oneself using broad trait labels.

The second prominent avenue of research which led to the Big Five taxonomy focused not on using trait adjectives, but on having participants fill out personality questionnaires. There are many such questionnaires in use today, include the NEO-FFI, HEXACO, TDA, BFAS, and BFI, but the leading measure continues to be the NEO-PI-R, developed by Robert McCrae and Paul Costa.[38] Here are a few examples from their instrument:[39]

> I am easily frightened.
> I don't get much pleasure from chatting with people.
> I don't take civic duties like voting very seriously.

where participants respond on a 1 to 5 scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. These items are longer than mere trait adjectives, thereby (the thought is) serving to mitigate the errors that might result if different participants define a trait adjective such as 'deep' or 'imperturbable' in different ways.[40]

Numerous factor analyses have been run on self-report data using the adjective and questionnaire scales.[41] The results of this work have seemed to many personality psychologists to point in the direction of five basic dimensions of personality. Here are the most commonly used labels for these dimensions:[42]

| | |
|---|---|
| Extraversion | (also labeled Surgency, Energy, Enthusiasm) |
| Agreeableness | (also labeled Altruism, Affection) |
| Conscientiousness | (also labeled Constraint, Control of Impulse) |
| Neuroticism | (also labeled Emotional Instability, Negative Emotionality, Nervousness) |
| Openness | (also labeled Intellect, Culture, Originality, Open-Mindedness) |

The idea, then, is that in a typical group there will be people who differ in their ratings on each of these five dimensions. Some, for instance, might be high on extraversion, which can be interpreted as involving an energetic approach towards social interaction manifested in, for instance, the behavior of attending more parties and introducing themselves to strangers.[43] Others might be quite introverted instead. And perhaps some of the extraverts and introverts are also

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[38] A search of the PsychLit database between 1980 and 1998 revealed more than 400 mentions of the NEO in citations, with the next questionnaire mentioned no more than 50 times (Pytlik Zillig et al. 2002: 850).

[39] From the NEO-PI-R Item Booklet-Form S, page 3.

[40] These two adjectives are taken from Goldberg's 100 Unipolar Markers (Goldberg 1992: 41).

[41] Comparisons have also been made between self-reports and friend, spouse, and expert reports. See, e.g., McCrae and Costa 1987 and Piedmont 1998: 52-56, chapter five. In addition, analyses have been done between the NEO-PI-R and other personality instruments not tied specifically to the Big Five, such as the California Q-Set, Wiggins's revised Interpersonal Adjective Scales, Jackson's Personality Research Form, the Guilford-Zimmerman Temperament survey, the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the MMPI, the Comrey Personality Scales, and the California Psychological Inventory. For a review, see John et al. 2008: 130-140.

[42] See, e.g., John et al. 2008: 120.

[43] John et al. 2008: 120.

highly conscientious, as manifested by, for instance, showing up on time or cleaning the house regularly.

So a person's rating on the Big Five dimensions is believed to correlate with certain patterns of thought and actual behavior, as well as with consequences for oneself and others. And studies have indeed suggested that this is the case.[44] For instance, high conscientiousness has been linked to avoidance of risky behaviors[45] and success on job performance criteria.[46] High neuroticism, on the other hand, positively correlates with job dissatisfaction and criminal behavior.[47]

The Big Five are not the only personality traits in the picture, even if they are typically the broadest and most comprehensive. Advocates typically have hierarchical models of personality traits in mind, where the Big Five are subdivided into different 'facets' that are less broad and so are claimed to have increased accuracy.[48] To cite one example in order to focus the discussion, here are the 30 facets from McCrae and Costa's version of the Five-Factor Model:[49]

Neuroticism
    Anxiety, Angry Hostility, Depression, Self-Consciousness, Impulsiveness, Vulnerability

Extraversion
    Warmth, Gregariousness, Assertiveness, Activity, Excitement Seeking, Positive Emotions

Openness to Experience
    Fantasy, Aesthetics, Feelings, Actions, Ideas, Values

Agreeableness
    Trust, Straightforwardness, Altruism, Compliance, Modesty, Tender-Mindedness

Conscientiousness
    Competence, Order, Dutifulness, Achievement Striving, Self-Discipline, Deliberation

In the 240 item NEO-PI-R, 8 items are designed to measure each of these facets. For instance, "I keep my belongings neat and clean" and "I like to keep everything in its place so I know just where it is" are two items for the consciousness facet of order.[50] I especially want to highlight the

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[44] For helpful reviews, see Ozer and Benet-Martínez 2006 and John et al. 2008: 141-143.

[45] Bogg and Roberts 2004.

[46] Mount and Barrick 1998.

[47] Ozer and Benet-Martínez 2006.

[48] Unfortunately there is little agreement about how many facets there are or even what to call them: "…there is no consensus about what might constitute even the beginning of a compressive list of narrow traits" (Ozer and Benet-Martínez 2006: 403). Indeed on my reading of the literature, the number of facets at times seems to be a matter of convenience as dictated by the researcher in question. As McCrae and Costa note, "The finer distinctions within domains, however, are more arbitrary…no one has come up with a compelling theoretical or empirical basis for identifying facets…30 constructs seemed to be pushing the limit for most users to grasp…" (2003: 47). And, "Unlike five and seven, there is nothing magical about the number six. It was chosen because we saw the need to make at least that many distinctions within domains and because inclusion of more than six would soon lead to intellectual overload" (Costa and McCrae 1995a: 26-27).

[49] Costa and McCrae 1995a: 28.

[50] Costa and McCrae 1992: 73.

facets of 'altruism' and 'modesty,' as these labels have moral connotations which I will return to very shortly.

There is obviously much more that could be said in reviewing the details of and supporting evidence for the Big Five.[51] But the project of this paper is to begin to construct a taxonomy of moral character types which will be of value to contemporary virtue ethicists. And for that purpose, the Big Five approach as stated here will not be helpful. The taxonomy is populated mainly with non-moral traits like extraversion and openness to experience, and the same goes with the facets too. More centrally moral facets like altruism and modesty are the exception. Traits like justice or honesty are not mentioned at all.

Now major changes could be made in order to construct a specifically moral character taxonomy – particular traits and facets could be replaced with others, and the number of traits and facets could be changed too. What is more relevant to the discussion here, though, is the basic underlying framework that is being presupposed by personality psychologists. As with the two previous taxonomies, the following is readily embraced by researchers in this area:

(A3)  Character traits come in degrees.

But a distinctive feature of the Big Five approach, if applied to moral character traits, is that it would reject another one of our earlier assumptions:

(A2)   Virtue and vice (and particular virtues and vices) are normative threshold concepts.

Instead, for any particular virtue, it will turn out that each and every person has it to some degree or other. Let me explain.

When a participant in a study rates herself on, say, Goldberg's "generous" item and how accurately the trait describes her on a 1 to 9 scale with 9 being extremely accurate, the result will be interpreted straightforwardly as follows: a high score means the person is very high on the trait of generosity, and a low score means the person is very low on the trait of generosity. But in either case the end result will be that this person is to be understood as generous *to some extent or other* – the question is only how much she is. The same goes for all the regular Big Five measures, and would hold for any new moral traits that are assessed as well.

One reason for this has to do with the nature of the instruments being used by Big Five researchers. They are asking people (whether the target individuals, friends, family members, neutral raters, etc.) to rate to what degree certain trait terms or trait relevant statements describe someone. So it will turn out that what the instrument tells researchers is the degree to which something applies, and not whether it applies in the first place.

Hence every participant can be rated on the degree to which he or she is a generous person. But the same holds for the vice traits too. These same people can also be rated on the degree to which they are stingy. Someone might score a 2 out of 9 on generosity and an 8 out of 9 on stinginess.

Because of this last point, adopting such an approach will also lead to the rejection of the first assumption:

(A1)  A person cannot have a virtue and the opposing vice or vices at the same time.

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[51] For helpful reviews and historical background related to the Big Five, see McCrae and John 1992, Goldberg 1993, Piedmont 1998, McCrae and Costa 2003: chapter two and three, and John et al. 2008.

As we have just seen in this example, the same person can be said to be high on stinginess and low on generosity.

What we get, then, is a taxonomy that looks like Figure 6 for the moral domain of donating.
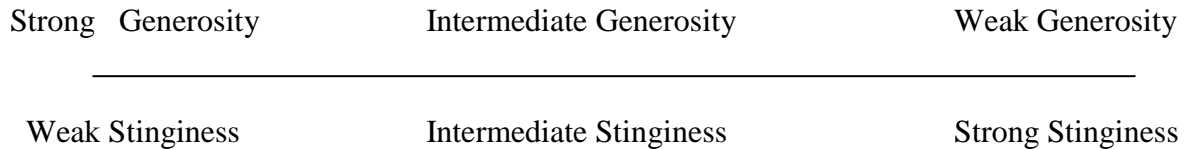

Strong   Generosity                Intermediate Generosity                Weak Generosity
_____

Weak Stinginess                Intermediate Stinginess                Strong Stinginess

**Figure 6. A Two Category Personality Psychology Taxonomy**


Hence this would be a two category taxonomy where for any given domain, a person is to be assessed both for her level of the relevant virtue and for her level of the relevant vice (or vices).[52]

From a psychological assessment perspective, this kind of taxonomy makes perfect sense. Researchers in psychology tend to want to import as few substantive normative assumptions from ethical theory as possible and just stick to using data from self- and peer ratings for some trait. Hence to them it would seem arbitrary to try to draw any lines between someone who has the trait of generosity and someone who does not. For instance, to take a simple example using Goldberg's 1 to 9 scale, on what grounds would a psychologist assign a threshold for possessing the virtue of generosity at, say, level 7?

At the same time, such a taxonomy does not seem to be well suited to the purposes of virtue ethical theorizing, especially in the Aristotelian tradition. Virtues are moral excellences, whereas vices are serious moral blemishes to our characters. As a result, it is not clear how to make sense of the idea of having both a virtue and its opposite vice *at the same time* with respect to, say, stealing or cheating or lying. Recall that on the traditional Aristotelian approach, a virtuous person is wholeheartedly in favor of the good with respect to a particular domain. A vicious person is wholeheartedly in favor of the bad. What sense can be made of being wholeheartedly in favor of the good and of the bad with respect to the same situations in the same moral domain of life?

Note that the proposed taxonomy is *not* that someone has a mixed character which is neither virtuous nor vicious, but has some positive and negative elements. That importantly different idea will be explored in the next section. Rather the idea is that all of us with moral character traits have *both* all of the virtues to some degree, *and* all of the vices to some degree. What that degree is, would vary from person to person (one person has generosity to a higher level than another, while the reverse is true for stinginess), but the entire complement of traits is there in each of us. And that is an idea which most virtue ethicists would be reticent to accept.

A further problem is that ascribing the entire collection of virtues and vices to all people, would preclude from the very start the possibility that some people are neither virtuous nor

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[52] Alternatively, if the vice is just the exact opposite trait to the corresponding virtue, then this could be a one category taxonomy. Anyone who scores, say, a 6 out of 9 on a virtue measure, could be inferred to deserve a 3 out of 9 on the corresponding vice scale. As far as this paper is concerned, either way of stating the approach will make little difference.

vicious. Despite the problems noted above with the categories of continence, incontinence, and the Many, they were all intended to capture an important insight from our experience, which is that being virtuous and vicious are matters of habituation over an extended period of time, and some people just do not seem to form their characters in these ways. We need a taxonomy which is sensitive to the complexities of our characters and opens up a middle space between virtue and vice. The current approach does not leave any such space.[53]

Having said all this, one *could* modify the two category taxonomy by adding thresholds for virtues and vice. To stick with the same example, one could stipulate that a score in the 7 to 9 range counts as being generous, while a score in the 1 to 3 range counts as being stingy. This would leave a middle range from 3 to 7 which would have to be analyzed further.[54]

A three category approach is exactly what I have in mind as well. However, rather than arbitrarily drawing lines on a scale, in the last section of this paper I will approach what I consider to be the best taxonomy on offer in a different way.

## 4. A New Taxonomy of Character Types

The taxonomy of character types which I find to be most useful in general, and the one which I want to commend to contemporary virtue ethicists, is a taxonomy that was inspired not by personality psychology but by research in social psychology. It accepts assumptions (A1) through (A3), and is represented in Figure 7.
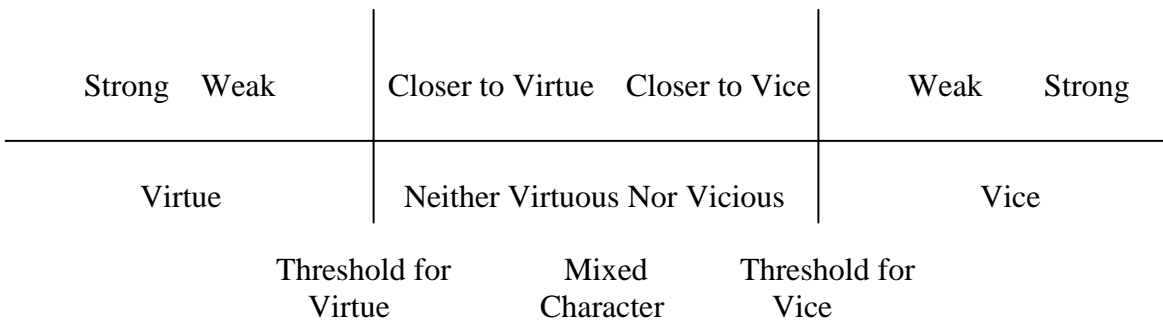
| Strong    Weak | Closer to Virtue    Closer to Vice | Weak    Strong |
|---|---|---|
| Virtue | Neither Virtuous Nor Vicious | Vice |

Threshold for            Mixed            Threshold for
Virtue            Character            Vice

**Figure 7. The Three Category Taxonomy of Character Types**

Here we can see thresholds for virtue and vice, with only one middle category for what I call mixed character.

As I mentioned, the idea behind this taxonomy comes from my reading of the social psychology literature and from seeing what our beliefs, desires, emotions, and other mental states

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[53] In principle, this is not true. One could also rate people on measures of continence and incontinence as well, for instance, and then come up with a rating for a given person on these dimensions plus virtue and vice. Now, though, we would be attributing all the virtues, all the vices, all the continent dispositions, and all the incontinent dispositions to every person. And on philosophical grounds, that does not look to be very promising.

[54] Or one could make the range 1 to 5 for stinginess and 5 to 9 for generosity, thereby resulting in a two category taxonomy. But this removes any third option for people being neither virtuous nor vicious, which I just noted above would be a negative feature of a taxonomy for many virtue ethicists.

tend to be like with respect to the various moral domains.[55] I introduced a bit of this picture in section two for the domains of helping and cheating. Recall, for instance, some of the beliefs and desires pertaining to helping other people:

> Desires concerned with helping when doing so will contribute towards alleviating my guilty feelings, and more so than any reasonable alternative means of doing so which is thought to be available.
> Desires concerned with not helping when doing so will contribute towards perpetuating my guilty feelings, or will not alleviate them as effectively as some reasonable alternative means of doing so which is thought to be available.
> Desires concerned with not helping when doing so will undermine my good mood, or will not extend the good mood as effectively as some alternative reasonable means of doing so which is thought to be available.
> Desires to help in order to affiliate myself more closely with and emulate those who are morally virtuous or admirable.
> Desires concerned with helping when doing so will contribute towards complying with the relevant moral norms.
> Beliefs concerned with which means of helping another person would be most effective in relieving her distress.
> Altruistic desires concerned with helping so as to relive the other person's distress, which are triggered by feeling empathy for that person.

Now suppose that someone has all these desires and beliefs, and has them to precisely the same degree. So when feeling empathy for another's suffering, he is reliably motivated altruistically to help. But in other situations he reliably avoids helping to address someone's obvious needs so as to not perpetuate his guilty feelings or to undermine his good mood. What should we make of such a combination of attitudes?

When I ask this, I have in mind a normative question as to how to evaluate this area of the person's life morally speaking. And the answer, it seems to me, is that he is very much a mixed bag. In some respects he is morally positive, such as when it comes to his empathetic feelings. But in other respects he is definitely morally negative, such as his desires to not help for what are, in fact, morally illegitimate reasons. Thus, my inclination is to say that he is not morally virtuous in this area – this is not the psychological profile of a person with the virtue of compassion. But he is also not morally vicious either – an apathetic or indifferent person would not have strong desires to help others for altruistic or for dutiful reasons.

I conclude that this person, when it comes to helping, is mixed. Another way to say this is that he has a mixed character in this domain, or has what I have elsewhere called mixed character traits.[56] He occupies a conceptual space between being virtuous (in this case, compassionate) and being vicious (in this case, apathetic). Hence the need for a third category, as represented in Figure 7.

Several points are worth clarifying about this new taxonomy.

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[55] The "our" needs to be restricted to contemporary adults in the West, since those are the participants in the vast majority of relevant studies.
[56] For extensive discussion of mixed character traits, see Miller 2013.

(a) *The third category comes in degrees*. As with virtue and vice, I take the middle category of mixed character traits to represent traits which come in degrees. For instance, in the above example suppose that the person has changed so that now the morally negative desires to not help for various egoistic reasons are slightly stronger than the morally positive desires to help. Such a person could still help often, say when feeling empathy, but in cases where one of the negative desires is activated, she could feel a slightly greater psychological pressure to not help than she would have before. In that case, her mixed character has become closer (perhaps only a little bit) to the vicious side of the continuum than to the virtuous side.

(b) *There is no unity thesis here*. I am not assuming any kind of unity thesis for mixed character traits across moral domains. One could be vicious in one domain and mixed in another.

(c) *The categories of continence and incontinence have been dropped*. Consistent with the evidence for high within-person variability in moral thought and action, I do not find it helpful to use the labels of continent and incontinent in the various domains. Someone in the middle space is going to be exhibiting weakness of will in some situations, strength of will in others, and wholeheartedness (whether positive or negative) in still others. This all depends on what those situations are and which of the mental states they serve to activate from the array which constitute the person's mixed character in a particular moral domain.

(d) *The thresholds can be crossed*. Assuming that change in moral character is possible over time, which it surely is, then it is also possible to start with a mixed character in some moral domain, and have that character improve (or devolve) to the point where it crosses the threshold for being weakly virtuous (or vicious). One's mixed character, in other words, does not have to always stay mixed.

This last point leads to an objection that was raised against the first two taxonomies, namely that if the threshold for virtue and vice requires wholehearted motivation in all relevant situations, then those categories will be practically useless since as a contingent matter we would not live up to this standard.

My response is to simply give up on a strict wholeheartedness requirement for both virtue and vice. And since I do not have the categories of continence and incontinence in my taxonomy, I do not have to worry about how I would be able to distinguish them from virtue and vice respectively.

What would happen if we gave up on this requirement? At least two things are worth mentioning here. First, we would have to determine whether the requirement is part of the folk psychological concept of a virtue and a vice. If it is, then we would be replacing that concept, or at least revising it to some degree, by abandoning the requirement. If it is not, then so much the better for the practical usefulness of my new taxonomy.

Secondly, if we drop the requirement, then it will be important to come up with other informative criteria for spelling out what the threshold consists of between virtue/mixed character and mixed character/vice.

In other work, I have begun to spell out a variety of criteria in some detail. I will not be able to reproduce that discussion here, but let me at least mention a few examples for the domains of helping and cheating which have been central in this paper:[57]

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[57] For much further discussion, see Miller 2013 and 2014: chapter three.

(1) A person who is compassionate, when acting in character, will typically attempt to help when, at the very least, the need for help is obvious and the effort involved in helping is very minimal.

(2) A compassionate person's trait of compassion will not be dependent on the presence of certain psychological influences such as moderate guilt, embarrassment, or good mood in leading him to perform helpful actions, such that if these were not present, then his frequency of helping would significantly decrease in the same situations.

(3) A compassionate person's trait of compassion will not be dependent on the absence of certain psychological influences such as anticipated moderate embarrassment or blame, or moderately bad moods in leading him to perform helpful actions, such that if these were not present, then his frequency of helping would significantly increase in the same situations.

(4) A compassionate person's trait of compassion and trait of honesty will typically lead to behavior which is done at least primarily for motivating reasons that are morally admirable and deserving of moral praise, and not primarily for motivating reasons which are either morally problematic or morally neutral.

(5) A person who is honest, when acting in character, will regularly refrain from cheating in situations where he is a free and willing participant and the relevant rules are fair and appropriate, even if by cheating he is assured of acquiring some benefit for himself.

(6) A person who is honest, when acting in character, will not allow his honest behavior and cheating to be dependent, at least in many cases, on the presence of certain psychological influences such as anticipated punishment or anticipated embarrassment, especially when important moral matters are at stake.

These criteria are intended to be intuitively plausible – most people should be willing to agree that if a person does not meet one of these standards (given some latitude since it will be impossible to specify any criteria for virtue or vice without some degree of vagueness), then that person does not qualify as compassionate or honest. Furthermore, they are criteria which should be acceptable to many in the virtue ethical tradition, especially followers of Aristotle. Finally, they can be used in experimental designs of longitudinal studies which could probe someone's character by assessing her behavior in relevant situations and, indirectly, her underlying motivation.

The criteria above are by no means exhaustive. But note that they do not include a wholeheartedness requirement. Indeed, it seems to me that weak virtue is compatible with occasional weakness of will, especially in really demanding situations. In other contexts, there could be weak virtue and some opposing desire such as fear, but the desire gets swamped by virtuous motivation.

Hence this taxonomy appears to succeed in avoiding the objections from the previous sections.

## 5. Conclusion

It is one thing to construct a useful and interesting taxonomy of character types. In this paper, I hope to have succeeded in laying the groundwork for such a taxonomy and to have made a plausible case that it is superior at least to the other options mentioned above.

It is another thing, though, to actually *apply* the taxonomy and see how people's moral character ends up getting classified using the three categories. The most reliable way available to carry out this project, in my view, is to consult the best experimental studies in social psychology over the past fifty years, and for each moral domain, to see what the evidence seems to suggest (to the extent that there has been sufficient experimental work done to warrant a conclusion at this point).

For all that I have said in this paper, the following are live options (among others) with respect to a given moral domain such as cheating:

(i)    Most people have the virtue of honesty.
(ii)   Most people have the vice of dishonesty.
(iii)  Most people have a mixed character when it comes to cheating.
(iv)   People are split roughly equally between some having the virtue of honesty and others having the vice of dishonesty.
(v)    People are split roughly equally between the three categories.

Of course we might have hunches and guesses as to which option is the correct one, but we need to defer to what carefully conducted studies tell us.

I have done a review of the relevant literatures with respect to helping, harming, cheating, lying, stealing, and distributing goods.[58] Over and over again, the same picture emerges. It is illustrated with respect to cheating in Figure 8.
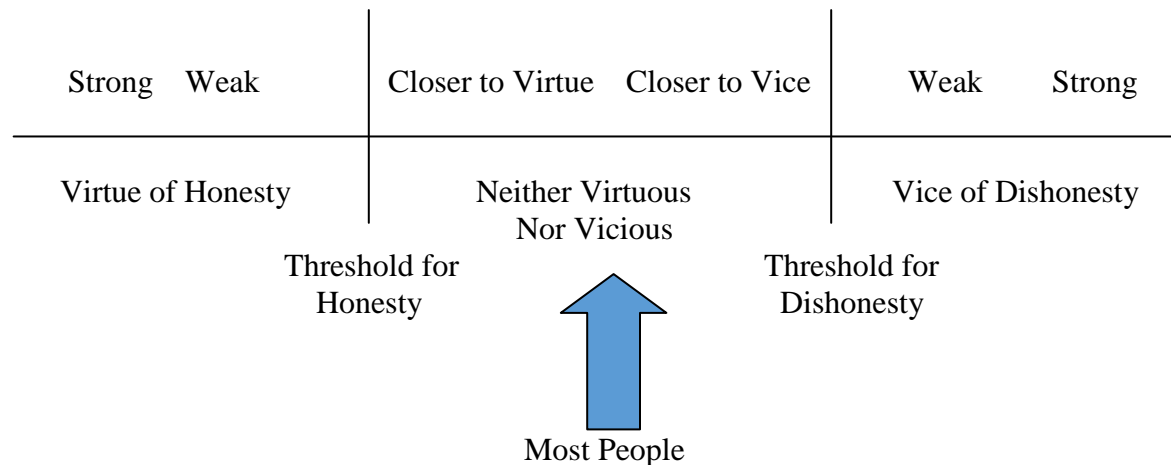


| Strong    Weak | Closer to Virtue    Closer to Vice | Weak        Strong |
|---|---|---|
| Virtue of Honesty | Neither Virtuous Nor Vicious | Vice of Dishonesty |

Threshold for Honesty          Threshold for Dishonesty

Most People

**Figure 8. Categorizing Most People when It Comes to Cheating**

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[58] See Miller 2013, 2014, 2015.

What holds for cheating holds for these other moral domains as well. It may hold for every moral domain, although I have not examined all of them yet. But so far, it appears that most of us are not as bad as the vicious people we could be, but we are also not nearly as good as the virtuous people we should be.

Commonsense would tend to agree, I suspect.[59]

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