# Virtue, Personality, and Social Relations: Self-Control as the Moral Muscle

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**ABSTRACT** Morality is a set of rules that enable people to live together in harmony, and virtue involves internalizing those rules. Insofar as virtue depends on overcoming selfish or antisocial impulses for the sake of what is best for the group or collective, self-control can be said to be the master virtue. We analyze vice, sin, and virtue from the perspective of self-control theory. Recent research findings indicate that self-control involves expenditure of some limited resource and suggest the analogy of a moral muscle as an appropriate way to conceptualize virtue in personality. Guilt fosters virtuous self-control by elevating interpersonal obligations over personal, selfish interests. Several features of modern Western society make virtue and self-control especially difficult to achieve.

Virtues and other moral traits are widely regarded by the general public as important aspects of personality, even though personality researchers have not accorded them prominent attention in recent decades. In line with this view, a recent philosophical account contends that virtues "come closer to defining who the person is than any other category of qualities" (Zagzebski, 1996, p. 135). When people list the traits they would desire in a spouse, for example, moral traits such as honesty, trustworthiness, and fidelity receive high rankings (e.g., Hoyt & Hudson, 1981; for

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reviews, see Hatfield & Rapson, 1996; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Meanwhile, research on guilt-proneness and similar traits suggests that the interest in moral traits is well founded, because such traits predict relationship success (Leith & Baumeister, 1998; see also Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994, 1995; Tangney, 1995).

One of the fundamental motivations shaping human personality is the need to belong, that is, the drive to form and maintain lasting social bonds with at least a handful of other people. The existence of this motivation has frequently been proposed on theoretical grounds as an inherent part of human personality (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1973; de Rivera, 1984; Epstein, 1992; Freud, 1930; Fromm, 1955, 1956; Guisinger & Blatt, 1994; Hogan, 1983; Horney, 1945; Maslow, 1968; Ryan, 1991; Sullivan, 1953). A recent literature review by Baumeister and Leary (1995) found strong evidence in support of this hypothesis and proposed that it may deserve even more centrality in personality theory than it has been given. Hence it seems fair to say that much human activity is structured by the formation and maintenance of lasting interpersonal connections. Personality is in substantial part a set of strategies and adaptations designed to accomplish this.

A central argument of the present article is that virtues, and moral traits in general, constitute an important set of these adaptations designed to facilitate relationships. We shall argue that morality is essentially a cultural structure designed to enable people to live together in harmony, and virtue represents the internalization of moral rules. Hence highly moral people will be more desirable and successful than others as members of small groups, partners in relationships, and the like. To put this another way, virtue cannot be fully understood without recognizing its interpersonal aspect.

The notion of virtue as beneficial to relationships presupposes that the selfish interests of the individual are sometimes in conflict with the best interests of the collective. In those cases, virtue involves putting the latter ahead of the former. Stifling self-interest for the sake of the greater collective good requires self-control. Thus, we shall argue that self-control deserves consideration as the core psychological trait underlying the majority of virtues.

Because this article is part of a special issue devoted to religion and personality, the link between virtue and religion deserves comment. It is hardly controversial to propose that moral systems (including virtues) have generally had strong links to religion. Systems of guidelines for

moral, virtuous behavior have often been presented as integral parts of religious teachings (e.g., the Buddhist Eightfold Path or the Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments). These links are not accidents. Indeed, religious thought has historically regarded self-oriented behavior (and attitudes) as a major obstacle to spiritual progress. Thus, insofar as virtue represents the use of self-control to overcome the impulses and appetites of the self, it is important for spiritual progress. That is, both religion and morality have a strong (and overlapping) interest in overcoming the self's natural, impulsive, grasping nature.

Indeed, MacIntyre (1981) has proposed that the crisis in moral philosophy over the past two centuries derives from the secularization of society and, by extension, the loss of the spiritual context for morality. In his view, religion offered a system containing three conceptual elements: a concept of untutored human nature, a concept of human potential and perfectability, and a means of passing from the first to the second. Morality and virtue constituted a major part of the third element: Virtue, according to MacIntyre, played a critical role in the attainment of religious salvation. Once people abandoned the religious context, however, morality simply became a set of rules for being good, without any reason or incentive to follow those rules. Modern moral philosophers have floundered around in a doomed struggle to explain why people should obey moral rules.

To parallel MacIntyre's observations about the philosophical deterioration of morality, we shall offer several suggestions about social changes that have weakened and undermined moral virtue in modern society. Our focus is on the social (rather than the religious) function of morality, although the two factors are likely to be compatible in many respects. When viewed from a social perspective, moral rules constitute enabling conditions for group life. If the terms and requirements of group life change—as cultural modernization inevitably requires—then moral codes also may have to change. We shall propose that the special conditions of modern social life present a peculiarly inhospitable environment for morality and virtue.

## Nature of Morality and Virtue

We shall not attempt to define morality and virtue beyond the standard definitions as used in the dictionaries. According to Webster's (Seventh) Dictionary, morality is the set of rules, doctrines, and lessons pertaining

to principles of rightness and wrongness in human behavior. Virtue involves conforming to standards of right behavior, moral excellence, or more generally exhibiting commendable qualities or traits. The last of these is too broad to be useful here (e.g., one may even speak of a particular "virtue" of a kitchen utensil). For our purposes, therefore, we shall use the narrower of those definitions, referring specifically to moral rightness or goodness.

Definitions aside, it is necessary to acknowledge that views have differed sharply as to the essential nature of morality and goodness. Given the long history of religious teachings about morality and virtue, many people have held a simple understanding of the nature of these things, which is that morality and virtue consist in obeying divine commands. Postulating the existence of a particular divinity as the source of moral authority is beyond the scope of social science, and so this simple explanation is unsatisfactory for psychological theory (regardless of whether one privately accepts religion or not). Many more recent approaches to morality, such as the widely cited works of Lawrence Kohlberg, are based on the insights articulated by Kant (e.g., 1797), in which moral principles are understood as innately furnished in the structure of human mind and intelligence. Theories invoking innate morality must, however, struggle to explain cross-cultural variations in morality. Yet another set of approaches attempts to explain morality simply as a device contrived by ruling elites to legitimize their own claims to power. These ideas have their intellectual roots in the work of Nietzsche (1887/1964; also 1886/1964). Nietzsche, who rebelled against Kant's approach, used rudimentary social science methods to demonstrate that conceptions of moral goodness and virtue derive from words referring to ruling classes (e.g., one might describe a virtuous action by saying "That was noble of you").

We shall treat morality as a set of cultural adaptations designed to allow people to live together (see Hogan, 1973). In this view, the requirements of group life and coexistence require that self-interest be restrained when it would be detrimental to collective life, such as when people might want to harm or kill their neighbors or to appropriate the personal property of others. In an important sense, all societies must solve the same practical problems in order to survive, and morals represent an important category of these solutions.

In some cases, social problems permit only one viable solution, whereas other problems can be solved in multiple ways. The former will

be reflected in cross-cultural universality of moral principles, such as the apparently universal injunction against unlicensed killing of fellow citizens. The latter cases will likely result in cross-cultural variation. As an example, the problems of managing sexual behavior can be solved in a variety of ways, and so different cultures have different sexual moralities. In such cases, the culture requires merely that there be some broad agreement to serve as the basis for mutual understanding and negotiation among citizens, but having some agreement is more important than precisely which agreement it is. Premarital sex, for example, can be tolerated or condemned. Either approach has advantages and disadvantages, but the society can cope as long as there is some broad agreement. In contrast, it is much more difficult for a society to continue to function if half the citizens approve and practice premarital sex while the others forbid it and regard it as morally intolerable.

It must be acknowledged that the different views of morality are not necessarily incompatible. For example, the view that morality is derived from religious principles could easily merge with the Kantian view that morality is built into the structure of the human mind, because a divine being could have created the universe (and the mind) that way. By the same token, the social functionalist view could be compatible with any of the other views. We shall pursue the social functionalist approach, but this does not entail a rejection of the other possibilities.

In the social functionalist view, the essence of sin lies in the interpersonal damage it causes, as opposed to being in its violation of innate or divine rules per se. Many of the biblical Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3–17), for example, can be viewed as prescriptions for social peace and harmony. Although some of the commandments involve religious loyalty and observances, over half of them regulate interpersonal behavior so as to prohibit socially disruptive acts, such as murder, theft, adultery, and dishonesty, or to require acts that promote social harmony and stability, such as respectful treatment of parents and the avoidance of covetous desire for the goods of others.

One might ask why moral rules are specifically needed in order to foster harmony. After all, the group might simply agree to abide by various rules and punish violators without elevating these agreements to the status of moral injunctions. Enforcing compliance would, however, be a difficult and costly problem under such a system. Freud (e.g., 1913, 1930) pointed out that policing and other external sanctions are not likely to be adequate to the problem of producing socially desirable behavior

in sufficient quantity and consistency to enable a society to function. Hence, he said, nearly all societies rely on internal psychological mechanisms that regulate behavior so as to punish bad actions with aversive emotional states such as guilt and shame.

It is these internal restraining mechanisms that make virtue an aspect of personality. Freud's term "superego" is no longer widely popular, but most theorists do acknowledge that the typical human psyche contains some mechanism that assesses whether various acts are good or bad and tries to regulate behavior so as to guide it toward the good ones. Perhaps it is not necessary to unite these in a single agency such as the superego. Then again, it is empirically plausible and perhaps conceptually parsimonious that such a single entity exists. We shall argue that there is indeed a single "moral muscle" and that it takes the form of self-control.

The question of how virtue operates in personality raises the broader issue of what is the proper unit of analysis. As one reviewer of this article asked, "Is virtue a behavioral disposition, a motivational tendency, an attitude, a skill, or an ability?" To answer that, it is necessary to distinguish between the way virtue appears to the self as opposed to others. From the community's perspective, in social functionalist terms, virtue consists of performing socially desirable actions. For the self, however, the intentions rather than the actions and outcomes are crucial, and so moral self-judgment may proceed quite differently than moral judgment of others. Thus, in terms of the inner personality processes, virtue consists of having the intention to carry out desirable actions as well as having the wherewithal to do so. The wherewithal will be the primary focus here, because it depends heavily on self-control.

## Self-Control as the Master Virtue

The understanding of how the self exerts control over its own responses has gradually risen to a prominent place in theories of self and personality (e.g., Bandura, 1977, 1982; Baumeister, 1998; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Higgins, 1996; Kanfer & Karoly, 1972; Mischel, 1974, 1996), although in an important sense it is one of personality psychology's oldest questions. (Indeed, much of Freud's career can be regarded as an attempt to understand how the self exerts control over its own responses.) We regard that understanding as central to the problem of virtue as well, because the self must stifle some of its impulses and perform socially desirable

behaviors instead. The purpose of this section is to analyze virtue in terms of self-control.[1] The core argument is that many socially problematic behaviors involve self-control failures, whereas the majority of positive virtues are based on high and effective self-control.

## Vice and Sin

We have proposed that failures of self-control are central to most cases of vice and sin, which are the opposite of virtue. To evaluate this, it is necessary to consider a specific roster of sins. Probably the most influential such list in Western civilization is the Seven Deadly Sins, as enumerated by Christian theologians in the Middle Ages (for reviews, see Lyman, 1978; Schimmel, 1992; it must also be noted that modern Christian thinking is more nuanced and contextualized in its views on sin). We contend that each of these seven sins can be linked to self-control failures.

Several of the Seven Deadly Sins are obviously related to poor self-control. Gluttony, for example, refers to eating too much and perhaps pursuing other pleasures to excess. Today, overeating has lost some of its religious opprobrium but is still a major source of guilt and a common vice bemoaned by many individuals, health and medical experts, and the beauty industry. In any case, self-control is supposed to restrain eating to proper levels, and so gluttony occurs when that self-control breaks down. Likewise, sloth (i.e., laziness) is an obvious case of deficient self-control. Indeed, most research that studies self-control in performance contexts tends to use some form of sloth, such as procrastination, lack of effort, or premature quitting. Sloth differs from most of the other sins in that the role of self-control is to initiate activity rather than to restrain it, but the pattern of overriding an easy, tempting response (in this case, of taking it easy, doing nothing, and neglecting one's duties) is the same.

Greed, lust, and envy are three more of the Seven Deadly Sins, and all of them refer to excessive desire or striving directed toward inappropriate goals, specifically money, sexual gratification, and the possessions or

1. The terms *self-control* and *self-regulation* are sometimes used interchangeably (e.g., Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), although some theorists use self-control to refer specifically to control over impulses, whereas self-regulation refers more broadly to how the self guides behavior toward goals and according to standards. Aspects of self-regulation that would not involve self-control are not relevant to this article, and so we may use the terms interchangeably.

advantages of other people. For each of these three, one must distinguish between two levels of sin, one that involves acting on these unworthy motives, and another that involves merely having the psychological desire (e.g., "lusting in one's heart"). The church condemned even the desire, whereas more modern sensibilities tolerate that people have such desires but insist that they not act on them except in socially approved, acceptable ways. Self-control is most obvious in restraining the actions, such as if a person refrains from greedy exploitation of others or from indulgence in illicit sexual pleasures. The lofty spiritual aim of ridding oneself of the very desires themselves also would require strong feats of self-control. To stop oneself from desiring material wealth, sexual satisfaction, or the good things that other people have would involve overriding normal, typical responses (hence self-control). Although it seems unlikely that someone could succeed entirely at eliminating such motivations from his or her own psyche, high self-control could reduce their frequency and power.

In practice, people probably manage their unwelcome impulses and feelings by more mundane means than eliminating the roots of desire. Distracting oneself can be an effective means of escaping from angry impulses, lustful feelings, or envious cravings. Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice (1994) noted that attention is the first and often most effective line of defense in nearly every sphere of self-control, and so if attention can be redeployed away from the forbidden or troublesome stimuli, the problematic responses can be minimized or avoided.

Anger is another of the Seven Deadly Sins, and it too can be addressed at either the behavioral level (acting angrily, especially as in aggressive or violent behavior) or the experiential level (merely feeling angry). Self-control is pertinent to both levels. Anger creates aggressive impulses, but usually people refrain from acting on them, and so self-control is a major, crucially important factor that prevents violent behavior (e.g., Baumeister, 1997; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Preventing oneself from feeling angry is of course far more difficult than refraining from violent behavior, but controlling one's anger is a common focus of efforts at affect regulation, and people have long sought to stop themselves from feeling angry (Stearns & Stearns, 1986; Tavris, 1988).

The last of the Seven Deadly Sins is pride. The role of self-control in pride is less obvious than with the other sins, although we believe that it is still genuine. Specifically, people generally desire to think well of themselves, and it is necessary to override and restrain such desires if one

is to maintain an attitude of humility. Christianity, like other major religions, has long regarded pride as a form of heresy and as a spiritual impediment (e.g., Zweig, 1980), and so people must engage in self-disciplined inner struggle to rid themselves of pride.

Pride is sometimes viewed less negatively than the other deadly sins, both historically and at present (e.g., Capps, 1989, 1992; Lyman, 1978). It has been acceptable for royalty and others to regard themselves as better than others, and today people often regard high self-esteem as a desirable, adaptive characteristic (e.g., California Task Force, 1989). The sinfulness of pride may thus not be as apparent as the sinfulness of anger and lust, for example. In religious teachings, pride was often sinful because it raised the danger that a mere mortal might regard himself or herself as comparable to God. The sin of hubris in pagan mythology, whose gods were far closer to humans in many respects, was recognized as a pervasive problem and one that the gods would punish as severely as any rude social climber has ever been put down by those who regarded themselves as his or her betters.

Still, the religious angle on pride does not satisfy the social functionalist approach, and we propose that alongside any purely religious interpretation it is useful to look for social problems that a given sin may provoke. Pride puts the self above others and so is conducive to a broad range of activities that can be harmful to the group. For example, prideful people may be so self-focused that they are less prone to contribute to the group's welfare or to be willing to make sacrifices for others. In particular, group harmony may depend on maintaining a broad sense of fairness and equity, but such calculations are distorted by pride, insofar as proud people overestimate the value of their own contributions and believe they deserve large rewards (e.g., Schlenker & Miller, 1977; Schlenker, Miller, Leary, & McCown, 1979; Schlenker, Soraci, & McCarthy, 1976; see Blaine & Crocker, 1993, for review). Consistent with this, even in a society as geared toward high self-esteem and self-promotion as the modern United States, people tend to eschew pride and become modest or self-effacing when interacting with long-term friends, as opposed to their more positive self-presentations to strangers (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995; see also Exline & Lobel, 1999).

Thus, the Seven Deadly Sins all seem to have a major component involving failed self-control. The point of identifying these responses as

sins was to persuade people to refrain from them, and self-control is clearly central to the ongoing effort to do so.

## Virtue

No roster of virtues is comparable to the Seven Deadly Sins in terms of prestige or consensual acceptance. This may be because, as already noted, popular usage of the term "virtue" may simply refer to commendable qualities without implying a moral aspect. Etymologically the word is derived from a Latin term for "strength," which clearly does not have a moral meaning. However, our focus is specifically on moral virtues.

Perhaps the most influential list of virtues in Western history has been that of medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas. He separated his roster of virtues into the "Cardinal" ones relevant to character and morality that we emphasize, "Theological" virtues emphasizing Christian faith, and "Intellectual" virtues such as wisdom. The Cardinal virtues consisted of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude, in Rickaby's translation (1896). His usage of these terms does not correspond precisely to modern uses, so it is necessary to consider each in terms of Aquinas's meaning and then to consider whether self-control is relevant.

The first one, prudence, was explained by Aquinas as "goodness in the consideration of reason." Prudence does seem to have retained this meaning today, insofar as it means acting cautiously and with due consideration of long-term implications and risks (for a review, see Haslam & Baron, 1994). The practice of guiding one's choices by long-range considerations is central to self-control and has been used as a definition of it (Rachlin, 1995), and this emphasis is likewise emphasized in research on delay of gratification. Delay of gratification studies set up situations in which the prudent choice is to take the delayed but larger reward instead of the immediate but smaller one. Prudence is obviously a matter of self-control.

Second on Aquinas's list is "justice," which for him meant doing what one ought to do. It involved good action in the sense of doing what was morally right. Insofar as morally good behavior requires overriding selfish interests and impulses in order to comply with standards of proper behavior, this virtue is again clearly a matter of self-control.

The third Thomistic Cardinal virtue is "temperance," which refers to restraint of passion and prohibition of excess. As we noted with the Seven Deadly Sins, people have many urges and impulses that are unacceptable,

and even if some degree of feeling or acting in those ways is permitted, it becomes sinful to do too much. (For example, eating is necessary for survival, but too much eating constitutes the sin of gluttony.) Restraining one's passions and impulses clearly requires self-control and is indeed probably the most common colloquial sense of the term self-control.

The last virtue on Aquinas's Cardinal list is "fortitude," which is understood as being firm and resolute in the face of passion, suffering, misfortune, and the like. Self-control is again implicit in this firmness, insofar as this virtue is what enables the person to hold to a course of action or commitment in the face of adversity.

Although we have emphasized the moral virtues, we do note that self-control can be central to other virtues as well. Courage, for example, has long been considered a prominent and important virtue, although undeniably its importance has diminished considerably in modern life. Throughout most of history, courage reflected the acceptance of physical risks to one's own safety in order to serve the goals of the community, particularly when a man would risk his life in battle for the sake of his social group and homeland. Fear of violent harm and death is a natural response to dangerous situations, and so courage requires conquering this fear and overriding the impulse to save oneself through flight or hiding. Men were not praised for courage when they were unaware of risks; rather, courage meant perceiving the danger and yet still acting in the dangerous but unselfish fashion. Conquering fear required affect regulation, and performing well in battle (as opposed to running away) required behavioral regulation. Thus, again, self-control was involved at two levels.

## Implications

As the above analysis demonstrates, both virtue and vice involve self-control. More precisely, virtues seem based on the positive exercise of self-control, whereas sin and vice often revolve around failures of self-control. Insofar as it is fair to regard vice and sin as the opposite of virtue, the centrality of self-control to both is an impressively consistent theme. We submit that it is fair to consider self-control the master virtue.

The broader context is that living effectively in society requires many individuals to restrain their impulses and desires. The motivations and even the rational interests of the individual are sometimes in irreducible conflict with the interests of society. Hence the choice is between acting

for oneself in some antisocial manner—or overriding one's own motivations and doing what is best for the group (or broader society). The latter is the course of virtue, but by definition overriding one's impulses requires self-control.

## Virtuous Self-Control as Personality Process: The Moral Muscle

In this section, we use personality concepts and theories to explain the process of virtuous behavior. Specifically, we explain the operation of self-control, which is what enables people to overcome their own self-oriented wishes and impulses in order to do what is best according to the interests and standards of the culture.

Self-regulation can be analyzed into three main ingredients: standards, monitoring, and operations that alter the self. Failures or problems with any of these ingredients can result in the breakdown of self-control (e.g., Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). In the feedback-loop model of self-regulation contributed by Carver and Scheier (1981, 1982; see Powers, 1973), the "test" phases involve comparing the self's current status against relevant standards (hence monitoring), and the "operate" phase encompasses activities that alter the self so as to reduce discrepancies.

Virtue thus depends on three factors. The first is having clear standards. Much of Western literature has revolved around portraying people facing moral dilemmas, because such dilemmas reflect the difficulty of doing what is right when moral standards are lacking or, more commonly, in conflict. Shakespeare's theatrical protagonist Hamlet, for example, found himself torn between standards that condemn vindictive violence and other standards that insist on avenging a father's murder. The pull of conflicting moral obligations is often experienced as difficult or even painful, and people facing such dilemmas find it hard to know which course of action is the good and right one. Fortunately, moral standards do not come into conflict most of the time, so people are able to know what is right to do in most situations.

Second, virtue depends on monitoring, which is a matter of keeping track of one's own behavior and comparing it to the relevant standards. Self-regulation is thus closely allied with self-awareness (Carver & Scheier, 1981). Circumstances that cause people to stop monitoring their behavior are likely to reduce virtuous behavior. Thus, people lose self-

awareness and cease monitoring their acts when they are deindividuated, and that state has been associated with theft and dishonesty (e.g., Diener, Fraser, Beaman, & Kalem, 1976). By the same token, alcohol reduces self-awareness (Hull, 1981), and alcohol is well known to be implicated in a broad range of nonvirtuous behavior ranging from interpersonal violence to sexual misdeeds (Baumeister, 1997; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994).

Third, virtue depends on the self's capacity to alter its own behavior so as to conform to standards. Violent impulses must be restrained, promises must be kept even despite disinclinations, temptations must be resisted, and so forth. Even if the self has clear standards of virtue and understands how they apply to its current situation, behavior may fall short of virtue if the self is unable to make itself behave according to them.

Accumulating evidence suggests that self-regulatory operations can best be understood as conforming to a strength or muscle model. That is, there is one resource (one "muscle") that the self uses for all its regulatory and other volitional operations. Moreover, it is vulnerable to depletion (or fatigue) in the short run, so that behavior may fall short of virtuous standards when people have already expended their inner resources.

Evidence for the strength model has been provided in a series of studies showing that one act of self-control (e.g., resisting temptation) is typically followed by decrements in self-control even in unrelated spheres (e.g., lower physical stamina). Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister (1998) showed depletion or fatigue of self-control carrying over between thought control, affect regulation, and task performance regulation. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice (1998) showed similar effects that extended to acts of responsible choice, impulse control, and active (as opposed to passive) responding. These latter findings suggest that the self uses the same limited resource for all its acts of volition, including both self-control and active choice, and hence the term ego depletion was chosen to describe the state of weakness and vulnerability that apparently ensues when the self has already engaged in some acts of deliberate choice, active responding, or effortful self-regulation. In other words, in all acts of volition the self uses some resource that operates like an energy or strength, and after such an act the self's stock of this resource is depleted.

The fact that exerting self-control or volition in one sphere causes subsequent decrements in other spheres suggests that there is indeed a

single resource that is used for all acts of self-control and volition. The previous section of this article contended that self-control is centrally involved in most if not all virtue. The unity of self-control, as well as its tendency to show fatigue after exertion, is the basis for labeling self-control as a moral muscle.

In daily life, the unity of self-control may have important implications beyond ego depletion. If all spheres of self-control are interrelated, then there should be a tendency for self-control to break down in multiple respects at the same time. Immoral behavior in one sphere should correlate with immoral behavior in other spheres. Laboratory studies of generalized disinhibition are only beginning to be done, but an important criminological work by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) contended that criminality shows precisely this pattern. In their account, criminals have lifestyles that show poor self-control in multiple spheres. They document, for example, that most criminals are arrested repeatedly but for different crimes, contrary to the view of criminality as a specialized career choice (as movies like to portray it). Moreover, criminals tend to show patterns that reflect poor self-control even in legal activities. For example, criminals are more likely than others to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, be involved in unplanned pregnancies, and have erratic attendance records at school or work. The pattern of pervasively poor self-control is further testimony to the theory that all different acts and spheres of self-control depend on a single process or resource.

The muscle analogy extends beyond the fact of fatigue and depletion. Muscles should in principle grow stronger with exercise. Many wise thinkers through the ages have advised people to try to exercise virtuous self-control on a regular basis, and this advice makes most sense in the context of a muscle analogy (see, for example, William James, 1890/1950). Direct evidence is difficult to come by, however. A single longitudinal study by Muraven, Baumeister, and Tice (in press) showed that people who performed a series of self-control exercises over several weeks were subsequently more resistant to ego depletion, consistent with the view that the capacity for self-control can be strengthened. Although replication and further work are needed, these findings do increase confidence in the muscle model.

To the extent that self-control is implicit in virtue, virtue depends on managing a limited resource. Moreover, the self uses that same resource in all acts of self-control and volition. When circumstances require people to expend these resources, less will remain to ensure virtuous behavior,

and so undesirable behaviors become more likely. When people are under stress, for example, they may have to devote all these limited resources (i.e., their inner strength) to coping with it, and as a result they may be less able to resist temptations or restrain impulses than at other times. Put another way, coping with stress puts a heavy load on the moral muscle (even when the stress itself does not explicitly involve moral choices), and consequently virtue is likely to deteriorate.

One crucial feature of this analysis of virtue and resources is that it focuses on instances in which virtue depends on a conscious exertion of strength or willpower. These are typically called controlled processes, as opposed to automatic ones (e.g., Bargh, 1982, 1994). To the extent that virtue can be accomplished by automatic processes, there is less need to expend these resources, and the vulnerability to nonvirtuous behavior is less. Hence virtue can be maximized by automatizing it as much as possible. In plainer terms, if people can cultivate habits and routines that maintain virtuous behavior, they are more likely to remain virtuous than if virtue depends on conscious choice. Unfortunately, if it were that easy, the reign of virtue would presumably be in full bloom by now. Still, it is possible to use some habits and automatic patterns so as to reduce the degree to which virtue depends on the strength of will employed by the conscious self.

Traditional moral discourse has often emphasized concepts such as strength of character (e.g., Margolis, 1984; Wishy, 1968). Translated into personality theory, the implication of this view is that people have stable differences in their capacity for exerting self-control so as to achieve virtuous actions. That the capacity for self-control is a property of the person is consistent with the evidence we cited about increasing strength through exercise. We turn now to a brief consideration of personality traits relevant to virtue.

## Individual Differences

One traditional focus of personality theory concerns individual differences. Research on the inner processes that accomplish virtuous behavior is still rather new, particularly with respect to ego depletion, and so clear measures of individual differences are not yet widely available. We do, however, wish to provide a theoretical basis for conceptualizing such differences.

Existing research clearly demonstrates that such differences exist. For example, a longitudinal study by Block, Block, and Keyes (1988) suggested that adolescent drug use was a behavioral expression of ego undercontrol—a personality construct closely related to self-control failure (see Block & Block, 1980, for a review). Mischel, Shoda, and Peake (1988) investigated delay of gratification among children at age 4 and reassessed these individuals over a decade later to ascertain behavior patterns. Children who exhibited better capacity for delaying gratification at this early age were doing better—both academically and socially—over a decade later (see also Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990). This continuity in behavior from early childhood into young adulthood suggests that self-control is a stable aspect of personality. (It must be acknowledged that the home environment that instilled strong self-control by age 4 is likely to have continued its influence through many subsequent years. These findings thus do not prove that some feature of personality is already set in stone at that early age.)

The self-control analysis of virtue implies that three distinct sets of personality traits will predict virtuous behavior. Each should have an independent main effect, although the combined effects should produce an extra boost. One is the capacity for self-awareness and monitoring. The second is the relative strength of the person's moral muscle, that is, the size of the limited resource available to carry out the "override" operations. The third factor is whether people use the moral muscle for the sake of making themselves behave in a virtuous fashion. After all, strong self-discipline might help one person to become a saint but might enable another to be a highly accomplished torturer or killer.

Thus, measurement of virtue as an aspect of personality will eventually have to be multidimensional, even though we have argued that self-control strength is unidimensional and that self-control is the master virtue. One dimension will involve the self-reported desire to act according to standards of virtue. A second dimension is the size of the available psychological resources used by the self for self-control and volition—in plainer terms, the strength of the person's moral muscle. The third is the tendency to monitor oneself and compare one's actions to standards.

The first dimension (endorsement of moral standards) will clearly be the easiest to measure. It is to some extent an attitude measure (e.g., Is it acceptable to lie in order to protect someone's feelings? May a man force a woman to have sex if they have been dating for over a year?), although naturally it must be corrected for social desirability biases, insofar as

some people who do not care about virtue may know that they should pay lip service to it. Still, simple self-reports provide good measures of attitudes. The third dimension, self-awareness and self-monitoring, has already been found to be responsive to self-report measures (see especially Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; the self-monitoring scale by Snyder, 1974, may or may not be relevant to regulatory monitoring). However, the second factor (strength of the moral muscle) requires assessment of a psychological resource that may not be accessible to conscious introspection, and so it is unclear how valuable self-report measures can be. Indeed, once social desirability biases are corrected, there may be little or nothing useful or valid in self-reports about ego strength, implying the need for behavioral measures.

## Guilt as Facilitator of Virtue

We turn now to consider guilt. Guilt is central to the psychology of virtue because it often forms the proximal motivation to behave in socially desirable (thus virtuous) ways.

Guilt of course is prominent in religion too. The shift in Christian thought around the 12th century toward more individual judgment and salvation entailed an increased conception of individual guilt accumulating as a consequence of sin (see Aries, 1981; Baumeister, 1987). Likewise, the concept of Original Sin entailed that each person was held to be born guilty. Such views suggest an individualistic focus of guilt. Recently, religiously minded psychologists have sought to put more distance between religion and that form of guilt. Building on the work of Narramore (1984), Bassett et al. (1990) have rejected the term *guilt* except in a destructive sense which they attribute to (unnamed) psychologists, suggesting that Christians experience something they call "godly sorrow" instead of guilt.[2] In essence, they distinguish between good guilt and bad guilt, and good guilt is Christian whereas bad guilt is psychological. This is, however, an unusual and conceptually problematic way of thinking about guilt, and we shall not use it here. In particular, its claim that guilt is destructive runs contrary to a large mass of research findings reviewed by Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994; see also Tangney & Fischer, 1995).

2. We thank a reviewer of this article for calling this work to our attention.

For present purposes, the crucial fact is that guilt connects self-control to virtuous behavior. It is readily apparent that guilt is a moral emotion. Tangney (1991, 1992) had included guilt in the category of "moral affect," which is a good way to combine the understandings of guilt as an emotional state and a component of virtue and morality. Psychopaths (now called people afflicted by "antisocial personality disorder") are people who perform a disproportionately high number of destructive, exploitative, and otherwise immoral behaviors (e.g., Hare, 1993), and what sets them apart from others is apparently the lack of guilt: They are "without conscience," to use the phrase that Hare (1993) chose as the title for his book.

Guilt also relates directly to self-control. Indeed, self-control failures represent a major category of guilt episodes. Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1995) assembled a collection of first-person accounts of feeling guilty, and all of them could be categorized as either interpersonal transgressions or action control/self-regulation failures. The latter included feeling guilty in episodes of overeating, neglecting to study, failing to exercise, and other misbehaviors. (Obviously, the two categories overlapped substantially, for many of the interpersonal transgressions also involved breakdowns in self-control.) They concluded that in order to explain guilt it is necessary to postulate two main functions: one of supporting self-control and another of regulating interpersonal relationships.

In contrast to earlier views of guilt as a destructive intrapsychic state, recent work has focused on the interpersonal and adaptive facets of guilt. In this view, forwarded in a literature review by Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994), guilt originates in concerns about maintaining close relationships (see also the "need to belong"; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Guilt feelings originate in empathic distress connected with the suffering of others (Hoffman, 1982), especially others with whom one holds a close relationship. Guilt can also stem from fear or anxiety over the possible loss of relational bonds that could arise if one's transgressions prompt social rejection. The prosocial and relationship-enhancing effects of guilt are well established (see Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994, for review). Guilt over interpersonal transgressions motivates people to confess and apologize. It makes them learn lessons and change their behavior so as to avoid committing similar transgressions in the future. It leads them to try to make restitutions and amends to people they have wronged. Inducing guilt is also a means by which people who lack

formal power can still get their way, even influencing more powerful others to do what they wish. Guilt may even be responsible for some of the relationship-enhancing benefits of empathy, insofar as guilt improves people's capacity to appreciate the perspective of a relationship partner with whom they have a conflict (Leith & Baumeister, 1998).

The all-purpose nature of guilt is also relevant. That is, guilt does not appear to be limited to one particular behavior but rather can ensue from a broad variety of transgressions. Our proposal that self-control underlies the majority of virtues and vices is consistent with the observed common role of guilt in the broad variety of virtue and vice.

In this article, we have analyzed morality as a means of fostering group harmony and allowing people to live together, and we have presented virtue as the internalization of traits that cause behaviors that benefit the group. The interpersonal analysis of guilt dovetails well with this interpersonal account of morality and virtue. Guilt motivates and directs people to act in ways that are beneficial to their social groups and relationships—in other words, guilt drives people to act in virtuous ways.

## Virtue in Modern Society

Before closing, we would like to briefly address some of the special problems of virtue and morality in modern Western society. There may indeed be universally valid principles of personality psychology, but with regard to virtue and morality it seems necessary to acknowledge facts of cultural variation. Indeed, certain recent social and historical developments may have put virtue and morality in positions that differ markedly from those they have held throughout most of world history.

Three major trends in particular must be noted, because they all weaken the social underpinnings of morality and virtue. Additional factors such as the glorification of immoral behavior in the mass media could be noted, but most likely these are mediating factors rather than independent causes. (One could, however, argue that the institution of advertising is inherently inimical to self-control, because stimulating the desire for goods is in fundamental opposition to the goal of restraining the self's needs.) These three root causes change the moral basis of the relationship of the individual to society, and so they affect how we can understand the role of virtue in personality psychology.

The first is the reduced stability of social relationships. To be sure, it is necessary to avoid romanticizing or idealizing the past. Still, it is

undeniable that the social, economic, and geographical mobility of the modern North American citizen is far in excess of what has traditionally been available to the average citizen of other eras and cultures. For example, historical accounts of collective life such as that of the average European peasant during the Middle Ages or early modern period (e.g., Shorter, 1975) describe a social world in which one spent one's entire life among the same few dozen people. In contrast, many people in modern service occupations encounter that many different individuals each day. The peasant's small social world derived particularly from the fact of spending one's entire life in the same village—and the fact that one's neighbors and relatives were likely to remain there too. Modern geographical and social mobility has utterly changed the composition of such social networks. The most relevant result of this mobility is that social relationships tend to be transient. Over a 5-year period, a person may very well end friendships and begin new ones, acquire a new job with a new set of colleagues, divorce and remarry, and move away from family and lose touch with some relatives. If you are rude or even dishonest when dealing with a checkout clerk in a store, you never need to interact with that person again, in sharp contrast to life in the small villages and closed networks that characterized much of human history. Only the parent-child bond remains impervious to dissolution, and even that one is subject to weakening and separation.

We have presented morality as a force designed to promote group harmony. When groups are temporary and unstable, moral codes are less stringent and more difficult to enforce. In a medieval farming village, a single dishonest or immoral act would be known to many and would remain a defining fact of the person's social identity for the rest of his or her life, particularly because the person and his social network were both likely to remain in that village for life. In the modern United States, however, a person who develops an immoral reputation can move to a new place and start over. Even if the person remains there, most of the friends and neighbors who knew of the incident may leave. Because stable, long-term relationships seem to serve as the main sources of guilt, virtue, and self-control, the reduction of such relationships in modern society has generally weakened those factors.

The second development is economic. That is, economic changes in modernization have weakened the traditional basis for morality and rendered it less powerful than it previously was. As we have proposed, the historical and social basis for morality is that it restrains self-

interested behaviors in order to promote the interests of the broader social group. Modern society has evolved a basis of economic relations that do not easily lend themselves to simple analysis in terms of individual interests vs. societal interest. In fact, the individual pursuit of self-interest is often congruent with the pursuit of the greater social good. We can hardly claim that this new congruence is our original insight. Over two centuries ago, Adam Smith's concept of the "invisible hand" expressed that under free-market capitalism, each person (man, back when Smith was writing) could advance the benefit of all by his own quest for personal profit. A town might need a baker, or a blacksmith, or a teacher, and so an individual would be likely to take on that role. The man would benefit himself by this action, because it would secure him a profitable livelihood. The town would benefit, because it gained the goods and services he provided. At least in principle, capitalism can make everyone happy. In practice, of course, there are many problems and grievances, but it does still appear to be true that capitalism is a better format for modern economic relations than any other system that has been tried, as the worldwide rejection of communism and central planning in 1989 indicated.[3]

To some extent, the revision of theories about virtue that modern economic relations entailed has been recognized and institutionalized. For example, early Christian thought condemned greed as a sin and held that people should never act out of a desire to make money. Modern economic relations presuppose that people are basically profit-maximizing, however, and this tendency is seen as acceptable. Only when a desire for money leads to illicit or exploitative behavior do people object to it as greed. By the same token, the church historically condemned as sinful (usury) the practice of lending money and charging interest, partly based on the theoretical position that interest amounted to charging money for time, whereas time belonged to God. This view endured for centuries and contributed to the rise of a powerful Jewish presence in banking and money lending, because people needed to borrow money and Jews were exempt from the Christian proscription. In the 20th century, however, usury is not condemned as a sin, and in fact many bankers regard themselves as proper Christians.

3. China constitutes the one major exception to this rule. Yet China is hardly an advertisement for successful Communism, appearing instead to remain handicapped by its allegiance to this system. Its per capita economy still ranks China among the poorest countries in the world. In fact, the news magazine *The Economist* estimated in 1996 that China has an economy the size of Germany's despite having an additional billion people.

Again, our point is not merely that socioeconomic changes have led the church to abandon certain conceptions of sin, so that undesirable acts that were once forbidden can now be tolerated. More fundamentally, we propose that the modern economy enables people to perform acts that are positively good and socially desirable even while those people are pursuing their own financial self-interest. The simple notions of virtue and morality as promoting what is best for the group over what is best for the individual must now operate in a culture where there is considerable and growing overlap between those two categories.

The eroding distinction between society's best interest and individual self-interest brings us to the third and possibly most problematic trend in the modern world. In the 20th century, Western culture has put an increasingly positive moral value on the self. This new moral glorification of selfhood has made it difficult for morality to retain its traditional function of restraining the self.

Social philosophers such as Habermas (1973) have contended that positive value in society (legitimation) depends in part on having important sources of value, that is, entities that can provide positive value to other entities without having to receive their value from an outside source. Baumeister (1991) used the term value base to describe these sources of value, which have included God's will and tradition. Habermas (1973) proposed that as a society goes through the process of modernization, some of its value bases are destroyed (e.g., traditional ways of doing things are discredited), and so modern societies sometimes struggle with chronic shortages of value, which he termed legitimation crises.

Modern society has responded to this value deficit by elevating certain other principles to the status of autonomous value bases, according to Baumeister (1991). The work ethic was a first attempt of this nature: Instead of arguing that people should work because it was God's will or a moral duty or a necessary way to support a family, the work ethic proposed that work was good in and of itself. This did not prove entirely convincing, and the work ethic deteriorated into a basis for self-righteous criticism of others rather than a genuine way of life (Rodgers, 1978). Another attempt to erect a new supreme, independent value base was the Victorian apotheosis of home, family, and romantic love.

For present purposes, however, the most important response to the value gap has been the elevation of selfhood into a value base (Baumeister, 1991). During the 20th century, people began to regard it as not merely tolerable but even positively good and even morally

obligatory to perform acts that would benefit the self. Such acts include the pursuit of self-actualization and self-knowledge. Personal growth and even "looking out for number one" became widely asserted as positive values.

The power of this new value base has radically transformed the moral landscape of the twentieth century. For example, scholars such as Zube (1972) have documented how the mass media shifted their prescriptive balance between self and marriage: At midcentury, women's magazines preached that self-sacrifice for the sake of marriage was the best course, but during the 1960s this hierarchy was reversed and articles began to assert a right and even a duty to get oneself out of a marriage if it thwarted the self's quest for growth or fulfillment. In parallel, the rise of the moral value of the self affected attitudes toward work and religion (Baumeister, 1991). For example, many preachers now accept the hegemony of selfhood, using church premises for self-help meetings and presenting sermons on how to boost self-esteem. The collapse of the work ethic could have created a cultural antipathy toward work, but the modern careerist mentality treats work as a means of glorifying and fulfilling the self (hence the astonishing proliferation of awards in seemingly all professions and even occupations), and many people work harder than their ancestors simply because of the drive to elevate the self.

The limited space available for this article renders us unable to provide a full recapitulation of the evidence for and implications of the new moral status of selfhood (see Baumeister, 1991). We do, however, wish to highlight how fundamentally the rise of self as value base has changed the role of morality and hence the nature of virtue. Throughout most of history and most of the world, morality has existed as a major counterforce to self, and virtue has represented the internal overcoming of self-interested behavioral tendencies. Now, however, these seemingly eternal opponents appear to have joined forces. This change is arguably the most radical moral realignment in Western history, at least from a psychological standpoint.

The moral shift favoring the self should not be overstated. There is still certainly a moral sense that condemns the pursuit of self-interest at the expense of others. Yet this sense must coexist uneasily with an awareness of self as a locus of rights and entitlements. Moral calculations often need to show that the person positively intended to harm others, and selfish action is no longer condemned out of hand.

Given these historical shifts toward unstable relationships, capitalism, and the elevation of self, the concept of virtue clearly has an awkward status in the modern world. Founded as it is on self-denial, it cannot easily adapt to a society in which self-seeking is mostly acceptable and even in many cases positively endorsed. The primacy of self in modern society raises a disturbing question: Has the notion of virtue become an anachronism?

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have offered a framework for understanding virtue as an aspect of personality. We began with the assumption of the fundamentally social nature of human existence, including the powerful motivation of a human need to belong and the universality of group life in human evolution (and current life). Personality can be understood as in part an adaptation to the requirements of living among others (e.g., Hogan, 1983; Sullivan, 1953). If the need to belong were the only human motivation, then morality and virtue might not be difficult to achieve. Unfortunately, however, the potential for conflict between individuals is inherent in group life.

Morality can therefore be understood as a set of solutions to the practical requirements of group life. When the selfish inclinations of the individual conflict with the group's needs for stable, harmonious social relations, morality prescribes how far the individual should yield. Virtue is an internalization of these moral traits. Hence virtuous people should make the best citizens and relationship partners, because they will not let their own wishes cause actions that are detrimental to other people or to the group or community.

Recent evidence for the interpersonal nature of guilt supports the view that moral traits must be understood in the context of social relations. Likewise, if morality depends on social relations, then changes in the nature of social relations can have strong effects on virtue. We suggested that three aspects of modern Western social life have created a social environment that is especially inhospitable to virtue. First, the rising instability of social relationships has weakened the social forces that penalize immoral behavior. Second, new economic patterns depend on the pursuit of self-interest to achieve benefits to the collective. Third, the rising moral ideology of selfhood has recategorized many self-interested

actions as morally good, a change that undermines the age-old opposition between self and morality.

In understanding virtue, therefore, the central challenge for personality theory is to understand how people manage to override their own selfish inclinations and do what is socially desirable instead. We proposed that the most relevant work in psychology is the study of self-control and self-regulation. Self-regulation is the process by which the self alters its own responses. When we considered a series of vices and virtues culled from religious writings, we concluded that self-control was implicit in all of them. Vice signifies failure of self-control, whereas virtue involves the consistent, disciplined exercise of self-control. Self-control can fairly be regarded as the master virtue.

As for how self-control operates, recent work suggests that it is similar to a muscle (indeed, resembling the traditional concept of "willpower"; see Mischel, 1996). People may vary in the strength of this moral muscle, and these individual differences will contribute to differences in virtue. A personality theory of virtue also should recognize that the moral muscle is used for other acts of volition, such as responsible choice and active initiative, alongside self-control. Virtuous behavior may therefore deteriorate when people expend their strength in responsible decision-making. Exercising power and responsibility, making important decisions, dealing with stress, and similar demands may deplete the resource and lead to moral deterioration.

Undoubtedly there are other factors that contribute to differences in virtuous behavior. For example, morality depends on using one's self-regulatory strength in the service of conforming to moral standards. Thus, people who do not endorse moral standards may behave in immoral ways regardless of their degree of willpower. Likewise, monitoring is necessary for successful self-regulation. When people cease monitoring themselves (such as when intoxicated with alcohol), virtue may fail.

Psychology has aspired to being value-free in its pursuit of the scientific ideal, and it is possible that this reluctance to make value judgments has hampered the study of virtue. We suggest that the approach advocated in this article can solve this problem. By recognizing self-control as the master virtue, personality research can study both processes and differences in moral traits in ways that are amenable to currently available research methods. As has been recognized by ancient philosophers, medieval theologians, and modern therapists, virtue involves overcoming one's own undesirable dispositions in order to act in ways that will benefit

others. The processes by which people alter their own behavior so as to behave in socially desirable ways can be studied objectively, and indeed the study of these processes holds a promising key to major features of human personality.

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