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There Is More to Ethics Than Principles

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I am grateful to Meara, Schmidt, and Day (this issue) for introducing the topic of virtue ethics to the profession and beginning the dialogue about the nature of virtues, their relationship to ethical principles, and the characteristics of virtuous agents in psychology. In general, I am in agreement with much of what they have suggested and, in fact, have begun to introduce issues of virtue and character into some of my more recent work (Kitchener, in press; Kitchener & Barret, in press). On the other hand, if I had unlimited space, the title of this article would have been, "There is More to Ethics than Principles, but Is Virtue Ethics Enough and, if So, How Do We Teach It?" In other words, I have some disagreement with them over their particular model, and some issues that I believe the profession must face in terms of ethics education if virtue and character are accepted as an essential component of the ethical professional.

It seems clear from Meara et al.'s (1996) arguments, as well as those put forward by Noddings (1984), Beauchamp and Childress (1994), and Frankena (1963), that principle ethics gives an incomplete account of what it means to be ethical. There are too many occasions when someone knows what is the right or principled thing to do but fails to act on those principles because of what we might consider to be a character flaw or acts out of principle but with little compassion or kindness for the person affected by his or her actions. As Meara et al. and others (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994; Frankena, 1963) point out, someone who has a virtuous moral character is both predisposed to understand what should be done and more likely to act on moral ideals. Beauchamp and Childress have argued that often people who are trusted to do what is morally right are those who would be considered to have a strong or virtuous moral character. Others may know moral rules or principles and in most cases adhere to them, but they seem to lack an in-depth understanding of what it means to be moral and may cut ethical corners even in their response to professional requirements. Particularly in psychotherapy, wherein the quality of practice is dependent upon the nature of the relationship, it may be that clients' willingness to trust psychologists depends less on their competence than on the extent to which clients can trust the therapist's character. Further, on a day-to-day basis, our interactions with clients, colleagues, and

loved ones are probably more affected by our moral character, that is, our general honesty, integrity, and compassion, than by our ability to balance ethical principles in complex ways.

On the other hand, I also agree with Meara et al. as well as Miller (1991), that virtue ethics can be dangerously ethnocentric without principles against which to evaluate and balance them. For example, it is not unheard of, and probably more common than we like to think, that "others" (those that are different from us in some way) are condemned for lack of a particular virtue, such as neatness, chastity, and so on. Further, even people of high moral character sometimes fail to perceive what they ought to do when faced with a moral crisis. Those with a virtuous character thus need principles and rules to provide important guidance in deciding the best moral action in difficult situations. Further, because people of good moral character sometimes make ethical errors, ethical principles can serve to evaluate their actions in terms of moral acceptability. In other words, moral principles can help us sort out particularly thorny ethical questions and can provide guidance when our moral character does not.

However, although moral principles may define the moral minimum required in a situation, and moral character suggests a predisposition to act or be motivated to act in a moral way, the first point at which I part with Meara et al.'s account is their apparent assumption that moral virtues are synonymous with moral ideals. For example, in contrasting virtue ethics with principle ethics, they argue that virtue ethics "sets forth a set of ideals to which professionals aspire." Later, they say "pursuit of professional virtue may represent a nonobligatory ideal." By contrast, many writing in the area of character ethics, including Aristotle (Hutchinson, 1995), suggest that virtue or character is centrally linked to the motivation for moral action, a point with which Meara et al. agree. If it is the case that a person with good moral character is motivated to do what is right, and if certain virtues such as what Meara et al. call "prudence" are necessary for making a judgment about what are good actions, then some aspects of a virtuous character may be an important component of ordinary moral action. In other words, certain virtues may be necessary for all ethical psychologists.

By contrast, in ethics, actions associated with the ethical ideal are typically considered to be extraordinary or above and beyond what is required of a moral person, as might be the case if a psychologist frequently visited dying patients in their homes—not for therapy but for the comfort that human companionship might offer at the end of life. Further, others (Beauchamp and Childress, 1994; Frankena, 1963) have argued that for every principle, there is a corresponding character trait that predisposes a person to act on the principle. Thus, for Frankena, the two overarching principles are beneficence

and justice and the corresponding cardinal virtues are benevolence and being just. In other words, for Meara et al.'s model or my own (Kitchener, 1984, in press), this suggests that there may be corresponding virtues for each principle articulated in the model. The idea of ordinary virtues implies that as the dialogue on the role of virtues in psychology continues, we should consider both ordinary virtues and what Beauchamp and Childress (1994, p. 66) call "ideals of virtue."

Further, the nature of the ethical ideal itself deserves articulation. In fact, Noddings (1984) speaks of the morality of care as an ethical ideal that is constructed on the development of the ideal self and that strives to maintain an ethical attitude that sustains natural caring and focuses on how to meet the other morally. If ethical principles provide guidance on how to "act" or "decide" in conflictual situations and virtue ethics focuses on how to "be," then a full account of the foundations of ethics for the profession of psychology will be incomplete without a fuller articulation of the ethical ideal.

If there are virtues that are intrinsically related to ordinary moral action as well as the ethical ideal, then there is more to having a virtuous character than Meara et al. have articulated. Further, as Beauchamp and Childress (1994) argue, "[o]ne or two virtuous traits do not amount to a virtuous person. A virtuous person has a virtuous character" (p. 406). Some traits may be more central to a virtuous character than others, and these may be what Meara et al. are trying to identify; however, it is important to clarify that the list may not be a sufficient one.

Further, there are points in Meara et al.'s model that remain confusing, particularly in the distinction between characteristics needed to become virtuous and the virtues themselves. This is especially the case in their discussions of discernment and prudence. Both are derived from and have characteristics in common with what Aristotle (Hutchinson, 1995) called "practical wisdom" and include good judgment in the face of uncertainty. In fact, it is less clear how they are different than how they are similar. Meara et al. note that prudence includes both discernment and the motivation to do good, two of the characteristics of virtuous agents. This seems to imply that to be prudent we have to have the characteristics needed to become prudent. Additional clarification of this aspect of their model would be helpful.

Although it is beyond the scope of this response to examine all of Meara et al.'s arguments regarding virtue ethics and multiculturalism, I want to note one caution about their claim that "virtue ethics provides a useful multicultural framework." As they note, virtue ethics can be community specific, and one of the disadvantages of community- based virtues is that they can become ethnocentric. Such ethnocentrism can be used as a vantage point from which

to exercise intolerance. For example, from Aristotle's perspective, non-Greeks were barbarians because they lacked the virtues of character that the Greeks refined (Hutchinson, 1995). It is my own suspicion that as many acts of intolerance have been committed in the name of virtue as in the name of principle—from the burning of women as witches in Salem to the murder of abortion physicians in Florida. Although perhaps the virtues of tolerance and respectfulness are central to being multiculturally sensitive professionals, it would be a mistake to consider virtue ethics a panacea for developing an ethic that is multiculturally sensitive. Principles give us a way to evaluate both virtues and the actions committed in the name of virtue so that they remain an important part of the ethical balance, but neither principles nor virtues are absolute guarantees of ethical responses to others. We may also need an ethical ideal that examines, as Noddings (1984) suggests, how to meet the other morally.

Last, I want to suggest that virtue ethics poses important unanswered questions for the education of psychologists. Although Meara et al. identify some useful ideas for the teaching of both principles and virtues, in some ways their recommendations beg important theoretical questions about the nature of virtues themselves and how they are learned. Aristotle, for example, believed that virtues were developed during youth by the "judicious application of pleasure and pain, when we are punished and rewarded" (Hutchinson, 1995, p. 213). This implies a behavioral model of learning that would suggest, first, that graduate school may be too late to make serious modifications in character and, second, that if modifications could be made, we would need to take seriously the task of "shaping" our students' character. On the other hand, if we accepted this model, we would have ethical questions, on the basis of such principles as autonomy, about students' rights to make decisions about how their character was shaped.

By contrast, in several places, Meara et al. refer to virtues as "traits of character" and suggest that psychologists ought to work to develop them. If virtues are character traits, then, as psychologists, we might want to ask how character traits differ from the more familiar psychological construct of personality traits. Frankena (1963) makes a point of distinguishing between virtues as traits of character and personality traits; however, there are some striking similarities between descriptions of both. For example, Costa and McCrae (1989) describe traits as "characteristic ways of thinking, feeling and acting" (p. 50) that include basic emotional, motivational, and interpersonal styles. Certainly, many of these elements overlap with Meara et al.'s descriptions of traits of character. Costa and McCrae also claim that such traits are relatively stable and that there is little room for changes in traits beyond the early adult years. If character traits and personality traits are overlapping

constructs, and if Costa and McCrae are right, then our task may be to carefully select students who already possess the right character traits to be good psychologists and to nurture what already exists rather than to try to develop new traits while students are in graduate school.

There is, however, a third model of character development that is implied by some of the descriptions Meara et al. have used for the virtues that they advocate. For example, in their descriptions of prudence, they say that it "involves knowing that one doesn't know; and being able to figure out what to do in the face of such uncertainty" as well as the ability to envision things in context and to judge circumstances. All of these sound like characteristics associated with what others in the cognitive developmental tradition have called "practical wisdom" (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Holiday & Chandler, 1986; Kitchener & Brenner, 1990). From this perspective, there needs to be both a developmental readiness to change and appropriate supports and challenges to facilitate change.

I do not want to imply that I have an answer for the question of how to best develop virtuous character; before we can understand how to develop traits of character, we need a better understanding of what they are and how they may be related to psychological constructs we already understand. Meara et al.'s has presented a challenge both for articulating the foundations of ethics in psychology and for understanding how ethical professionals can best be identified and educated. This challenge will not be easily answered, but it is important that a profession concerned about the ethical behavior of its members face it.

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