

## The Virtue of Principle Ethics

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*I raise four issues that militate against adopting virtue ethics as a guiding concept: (a) In the resolution of most ethics cases, virtue ethics is irrelevant; (b) there is substantial redundancy between virtue and principle ethics; (c) acting and deciding are unavoidable tasks for which principle ethics is particularly suitable; and (d) the emphasis on character and community wisdom increases the possibility of idiosyncratic and unsound decision making.*

I was quite impressed with the soundness and applicability of virtue ethics when I read an earlier formulation of the concept (Jordan & Meara, 1990). In fact, I referred to it approvingly and included a significant excerpt from that formulation in my recent text on ethics (Bersoff, 1995). After reviewing the current, lengthier exegesis of virtue ethics (Meara, Schmidt, & Day, this issue), however, I am less convinced as to its utility, although I remain impressed with the general concept. In this brief appraisal, I lodge four objections: (a) The application of virtue ethics is irrelevant in deciding the great majority of cases adjudicated by the APA ethics committee; (b) there is substantial similarity between virtue and principle ethics; (c) resolving ethics dilemmas is unavoidable, for which principle ethics is a valuable tool; and (d) the reliance on character and community wisdom, central tenets of virtue ethics, can lead to aberrant, if not problematic, resolutions of ethical conflicts.

### IRRELEVANCE

From empirical and practical perspectives, an argument concerning the relative importance of virtue ethics and principle ethics (Meara et al., 1996; Jordan & Meara, 1990) is inconsequential. The complaints brought before and adjudicated by the American Psychological Association's (APA) Ethics Committee almost exclusively involve behavior that the criminal law would call *malwn in se*, that is, conduct that is inherently wrong (Dressler, 1987). Among the primary reasons psychologists are sanctioned by the APA Ethics

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Committee are because they make false or misleading public statements, engage in sexual intimacies with their clients, or defraud insurance companies (APA Ethics Committee, 1994). In that light, psychology need not go through the endless debate, huge expense, and vast expenditure of time involved in developing, implementing, and enforcing a code of ethics, as it has done every decade in the past half century. It could simply borrow the all-encompassing honor code commandment found at our military academies: Thou shalt not lie, cheat, or steal. Debates about ethics codes or the relative merits of virtue and principle ethics are only relevant at the very outer margins of professional or scholarly conduct.

### REDUNDANCY AND UNAVOIDABILITY

Proponents of virtue ethics acknowledge that it and principle ethics are complementary, not "two competing philosophical systems" (Jordan & Meara, 1990, p. 108). Nevertheless, Meara et al. state that "principle ethics has as its structure a set of prima facie obligations; virtue ethics, in contrast, sets forth a set of ideals to which professionals aspire." I would question whether there are enough distinct differences to justify the advancement of another system.

Principle ethics encompasses five prima facie duties—nonmaleficence, fidelity, beneficence, justice, and autonomy (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994; Bersoff & Koepl, 1993; Ross, 1930). Like the components of virtue ethics, these prima facie duties provide an array of moral choices and can be applied flexibly in relation to the context of a dilemma. There does not seem to be a great deal of difference between these moral principles and the "four virtues," i.e., prudence, integrity, respectfulness, and benevolence, as Meara et al. define them. Only prudence, which is more categorizable as a means for arriving at an ethical outcome, is sufficiently different from prima facie duties to merit recognition as a separable concept. Integrity is highly similar to fidelity and justice; benevolence is closely congruent to beneficence; and respectfulness is little different from autonomy.

Although Meara et al. deride the resolution of ethical dilemmas as "abstract thought puzzles," judgment, choice, and the resolution of conflict are some of the inevitable, obligatory, and probably unwelcome tasks confronting human beings (Bersoff & Koepl, 1993; Hogarth, 1987). The most virtuous, principled, and law-abiding psychologists will be faced with difficult dilemmas throughout their careers for which there are no "cookbooks" prescribing a set of expected behaviors or universally acceptable solutions.

Consider the following facts, for example (adapted from Bersoff, 1995). A tenth grader is enrolled in research studying violence in adolescents and how it might be prevented through short-term intervention. During an inter-

view as part of the study, the student reveals that he has had many fantasies about harming his slightly older female next-door neighbor who refuses to pay him any attention. Upon further inquiry, the psychologist learns that he is contemplating buying a gun but that he has no history of violence. The researcher suggests that she inform his parents of the situation. The young man adamantly refuses to let the researcher do so and warns that he will drop out of the study and treatment if she does not honor his refusal.

On what basis could the psychologist resolve this problem? Recent critics agree that the current APA ethics code (1992) would be an informative but uncertain guide (e.g., Bersoff, 1994; Lakin, 1994; Vasquez, 1994). Under the code, the psychologist has significant discretion to disclose the threat (see the following Principles-5.01, Discussing Limits of Confidentiality; 5.02, Maintaining Confidentiality; 5.05, Disclosures; 6.11, Informed Consent to Research), but the code offers no definitive answers.

Would reliance on virtue ethics be more helpful? We can agree that being motivated to do good, possessing vision and discernment, allowing affect to enter into the process of decision making, understanding oneself, and being connected to the moral sense of the community (the characteristics of virtuous agents) are all laudable characteristics of any psychologist. Further, we would hope that the psychologists will act with prudence, integrity, respectfulness, and benevolence. It is difficult for me, however, to see how these virtues will resolve the dilemma.

If I understand their extended discussion, Meara et al. distinguish between virtue ethics and principle ethics by stressing idealism, character, and the nature of the actor rather than obligation, cognition, and the nature of the action. Or more pithily, Jordan & Meara (1990, pp. 107-108) state:

Principle ethics typically focus on acts and choices. Through the application of what are taken to be objective, rational standards, rules, or codes, they attempt to answer the question "What shall I do?" Virtues, on the other hand, emphasize agents or actors. Through the formation of internal qualities, traits, or mature habits, virtue ethics attempt to answer the question "Who shall I be?"

To my mind, "What shall I do?" and "What shall I be?" are not competing questions. The answers to both are inextricably interwoven. Who I am is determined by what I do.

For example, under the APA ethics code, it would be perfectly ethical for the researcher to disclose the young man's confidences and even to refuse to

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abide by his demand for secrecy. In fact, it might be prudent (a virtue) for her to do so, particularly because that decision would show respect for predominant community values (a quality of a virtuous agent). Additionally, she could decide that beneficence (a central component of virtue and principle ethics) requires her to protect her research participant from engaging in behavior that will lead him to harming, if not killing another, and subject him to criminal penalties. Conversely, she could decide to promote the self-determination and sense of accountability of her subject while reinforcing her obligation to remain faithful to his expressed interests without harming innocent victims (for some suggestions for doing this, see Bersoff, 1995, and references therein). Thus she could conclude that disclosure would conflict with what she considers to be the more overriding moral principles of autonomy, fidelity, and nonmaleficence, prima facie obligations that are also an inherent part of her value system. In any event, the psychologist must judge the risks and benefits of her value choices and decide which prima facie duties should take precedence in this case. By adopting some over others and by deciding what she should do, she is also deciding who she should be.

### CHARACTER AND COMMUNITY

If virtues "are traits of character," and if "[v]irtue ethics calls upon individuals to aspire toward ideals and develop ... traits of character that enable them to achieve these ideals" (Meara et al.), two problems arise. First, I question whether virtue ethics is teachable. Character traits, although potentially malleable, are developed as a result of genetic endowment and life experiences. It is doubtful whether a course in ethics or even 4 years of professional training in which students are sensitized to ethics will produce a virtuous agent able to employ virtuous ideals. Intensive therapy over many years fails to accomplish this goal. Second, if acting ethically depends on character, I wonder if the outcomes will be too individualized and idiosyncratic. An ethical code and ethical conduct, I would assert, relies on consensual decision making about the integrity of the profession, not the singular vagaries of a psychologist's character.

More problematic for me, however, is the heavy reliance on communitarian values. Meara et al. unabashedly assert that "[v]irtue ethics is rooted in community and relies on a community's wisdom and its moral sense." To their credit, they recognize concomitantly that reliance on community can create ethnocentric, even immoral decisions, but they characterize much of virtue ethics as community based. I see the dangers of a communitarian view as outweighing its benefits. It would be difficult for me to subscribe to a

system that led me to act in ways that denied women responsible choices in deciding whether to bear children, that treated those denominated as mentally disabled as incompetent to become involved in decisions regarding their own treatment, that refused to permit the works of Ellison, Salinger, Shakespeare, and Blume in the classrooms of our high schools, that advocated religion in our public institutions, or that perceived single mothers on welfare as the cause of society's violence. These are precisely the views that many communities in the United States hold and act on today.

Meara et al. criticize principle ethics in large part because it holds autonomy and self-determinism in high esteem, because it does not place primacy on religious traditions, and because it depends so highly on rationality. But I value these virtues of principle ethics (Bersoff, 1992) precisely because I want to act with prudence, respect, integrity, and benevolence. If being virtuous means acting paternalistically, irrationally, and on the basis of faith, I prefer principled iniquity.

## CONCLUSION

My concerns notwithstanding, at bottom I would wholeheartedly agree with the authors that acting ethically is not a compartmentalized function, neatly separable into virtues or principles. Ethical conduct results from a combination of didactic knowledge, an understanding of problem-solving approaches, a clear conception of the philosophical principles—often competing with each other—that underlie a formal code of ethics, and a basically sound character that leads one to respond with maturity, judgment, discretion, wisdom, and prudence.

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