Non-Ideal Virtue and a
Scalar Theory of Character

Mayra Valadez
New Mexico State University – Dona Ana Community College

Recent arguments and critiques about the empirical adequacy of traditional (Aristotelian) virtue theory have prompted some virtue theorists to move away from grounding virtue theories in traditional trait theory and instead basing them on social-cognitive theory instead.[1] I argue that because there are multiple aims in character and virtue attribution, theories of character and virtue that meet those multiple goals have a place for both trait and social-cognitive theory. I propose a scalar conception of character grounded in both social-cognitive and traditional trait theory and a theory of non-ideal virtue grounded in this scalar conception of character.

A SCALAR CONCEPTION OF CHARACTER

Social-cognitive and Trait Theory
Psychologists have lately contrasted the social-cognitive model to the trait model of personality. Daniel Lapsley and Darcia Narvaez write that the distinction between the traditional trait approach and the social-cognitive approach to personality is that the trait approach is a "having" as opposed to a "doing" approach. They explain that trait theory understands personality as a sum of traits that one has, with different individuals having different distributions of each trait

(Lapsley and Narvaez 189).

On the other side, we have something like Walter Mischel's social cognitive framework of personality or "Cognitive-Affective Processing System" (CAPS). According to Mischel's theory, patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behavior are all part of personality, as well as "how the person construes… situations…and the beliefs, expectancies, goals, and self-regulatory competencies that became activated within the individual in the continuous stream of interactions with situations" (Mischel 4).[2] Mischel refers to these psychological processes under the collective title of cognitive affective units (CAU's).

Each approach to personality seems best suited for a different goal.[3] Trait theory seems useful for studying the differences in traits between individuals but not for an accurate prediction or understanding of a particular behavior of an individual. Trait theory gives us a general picture of the personality of an individual, while social-cognitive theory maps out the particular details of an individual's personality.[4]

THE GOALS OF CHARACTER ATTRIBUTION

Just as there are multiple aims in personality theory, there are multiple aims in character attribution. Some of the traditional aims of character attribution are the explanation and prediction of behavior, communication and collection of information, and moral appraisal and judgment.

One of the aims of character attribution is explanation and prediction of behavior. For example, if I want to explain Matt's actions, I may turn to his character for an explanation. Suppose I notice that Matt never goes out to lunch with his coworkers, speaks very quietly, and seems to embarrass quickly. Yet he generally seems considerate and kind. I conclude that Matt is not arrogant or antisocial but merely shy. If one of Matt's coworkers were to ask me why Matt never eats lunch with anyone, I may cite Matt's shyness as an explanation. Moreover, if I have known Matt a long time and know that he is somewhat shy, I may be able to make some predictions about his behavior in future situations.

We also use character attribution to divulge and collect information about others. In the previous example, I communicated Matt's shyness to one of his coworkers as an explanation of his behavior. His coworker in turn is collecting information from me about Matt, perhaps not just in order to understand him better, but also so that she can decide how to act towards Matt in the future.

Finally, we also use character attribution for the purposes of moral appraisal and judgment. If I say of Alan that he is kind, then I am attributing a certain type of moral character trait to him that entails certain expectations about how Alan will think and behave. Character traits are generally defined and restricted by a particular set of beliefs, values, and behaviors. The range of acceptable behavioral or psychological dispositions may widen or narrow depending on the particular

trait in question, but for every trait, there are psychological dispositions and behaviors that fall outside the acceptable range.

These different aims can fit roughly into two categories, prescriptive and descriptive. The primary intent of explanation, prediction, communication, and collection of information is to give or receive a description of someone's character. Meanwhile, limitations on the types of psychological and behavioral dispositions that characterize a particular trait are implied in evaluation and judgment.

I propose a scalar structure of character that satisfies both the descriptive and prescriptive aims of character attribution by including both conditional and Aristotelian (or robust) traits that reflect the social-cognitive and trait approaches from personality theory.[5] Conditional traits are mostly useful for fulfilling the descriptive aims of character attribution. Robust traits are useful for fulfilling prescriptive aims of character attribution as well as some cases of communication and collection of information.

Robust traits
Robust traits track the trait theory approach in personality theory and are useful for defining and limiting the types of behaviors, beliefs, values, goals, motivations, etc., that fall within the purview of a particular trait for the purposes of moral appraisal and judgment or when making broad character descriptions in conversation.

Robust traits provide a paradigmatic framework against which to evaluate conditional traits. A robust trait is cross-situationally consistent and includes all the definitive characteristics of a particular trait. So for example, a robust trait of compassion might be something like the psychological and behavioral disposition to perform beneficent actions in *each and every* situation in which beneficent actions should be performed. A person possessing a robust trait of compassion would have goals, values, emotions, and affective responses consistent with compassion (likely sympathy and/or empathy). This person would understand what compassion required of him in each and every situation, would believe and expect that his actions would be effectual and would benefit other people. Further, he would have the self-regulatory mechanisms necessary to go through with his decision to behave compassionately.[6] The robust trait of compassion sets the standard for the *ideal* psychological and behavioral dispositions of an agent possessing that particular trait to the highest degree. Obviously, the consistency requirements of psychological and behavioral dispositions relevant to compassion are prohibitively high. They are improbable if not impossible for most agents.

However, robust traits are merely ideal models setting a standard for the perfect possession of a trait, not an accurate description of the character traits of actual agents. For comparison, in trait theory in psychology, trait theorists do not expect that subjects will score one hundred percent in any of the traits that are usually measured. Robust traits merely set the high standard against which actual

performance is measured. There is a difference between what robust traits actually are and the way in which we use the language of robust traits. Although robust traits refer to the highest degree possible of a particular trait, in common parlance we also use the language of robust traits when communicating appraisal or judgment of character. The language of robust traits provides us with a way to give a broader description about the behavioral dispositions of a particular agent. Robust traits are useful when trying to describe how *likely* an agent is to display behavior relevant to some trait *x* in a situation that elicits *x* relevant behavior or, alternately, how likely that agent is to display *x* relevant behavior in any given situation *as compared to others in a population*.

It is economical for communication and useful for information processing in day-to-day contexts when extra information will not be useful.[7] For example, suppose I am describing my co-worker Mary to my friend Matt. I describe her as "helpful" despite being aware that Mary is helpful to people she knows but is also rather shy around strangers and not quite as helpful in situations with them. Calling Mary helpful is an economical way to communicate that Mary is *often* helpful and has certainly been helpful to me in the past. Moreover, perhaps I feel it unnecessary and indiscreet to tell Matt about Mary's shyness since the information will be of no use to him.

However, since Matt lacks any personal or contextual information, he will probably understand "helpful" to mean that Mary is helpful all or most of the time. This is the default meaning of the concept. Since Matt understood helpful to mean possessing the robust trait of helpfulness, lacking other information that I withheld, he might be surprised at Mary's behavior if he ever runs into Mary in a situation where her shyness overcomes her helpfulness. Because robust trait descriptions are not highly accurate, they are not as useful in helping to understand a particular individual's behavioral or psychological dispositions or in helping with the prediction of future behavior in particular situations.

Conditional Traits
Conditional traits track the social-cognitive approach and are useful for compiling (or communicating) a more accurate description of the character of a particular agent. They can help us explain and predict individual behaviors with greater accuracy. Whereas robust traits indicate the highest degree of a possible trait that an agent can develop, conditional traits indicate that an agent has only developed a particular trait to a lesser degree than a robust trait because he has only developed part of the requirements of that trait. This approach to character increases our accuracy in predicting the behavior of an individual, even in a particular circumstance. By understanding the psychological factors and history that contributed to that individual's particular construal of different situations, and what situational factors activate different psychological processes, we can truly come to understand his character.

Conditional traits are also useful for communication and collection of more accurate information about character and behavior. Conditional traits describe specific pairings of an agent's psychological factors with specific situational influences, so conditional traits are useful for determining the cause of an agent's behavior and predicting future behavior. If I wanted to communicate information about an agent's character that was specific to a certain type of situation, then I would use conditional traits to do so.

Actually acquiring all the information necessary for this level of accuracy in every situation requires a great amount of knowledge of the psychological factors of the individual. One could gain this sort of information about another agent through years of friendship or other close relationship with that agent. At the very least, one would need to do a longitudinal study of the individual's behavior to detect patterns in his behavior from situation to situation. If we want to map the particular character of a single individual, we would use the social-cognitive approach to do so, parceling out conditional traits for a particular individual according to psychological situations.

FURTHER ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF A SCALAR APPROACH TO CHARACTER

The Scalar Approach to Character is Intuitive

Conditional traits based in a social-cognitive approach to character can account for both the complexity of factors that motivate behavior as well as how we can often make accurate predictions about the behavior of people we know well. Despite how complicated the social-cognitive approach seems, we often *do* predict how a particular individual will behave in a particular situation using something like this model. The reason that we notice cross-situational variability in the behavior of those we know well is because we observe the dynamic interaction of an individual's personal variables with some particular features of their environment.

An Explanation for the Fundamental Attribution Error

The social-cognitive approach to character can also explain why we commit the fundamental attribution error while also being able to predict and understand the behavior of people close to us. The fundamental attribution error is our tendency to explain an instance of the behavior of other people by reference to dispositions or traits while paying little or no attention to the context of the situation. This includes our tendency to assume consistency of behavior from one situation to the next. The reason I do this is that I do not have any information about the particular situational features that are relevant in a situation. When we make judgments about the behavior of others, unless we know how they perceive and construe the world, we may instead judge their action on our own perception of the world.

Psychologists discussing the fundamental attribution error have pointed out that when asked to explain their own actions, agents will reference personal traits

as well as situational features as motivating factors whereas when asked to explain the actions of others they reference personal traits (Ross and Nisbett 141). This seems to imply that agents are aware of the influence of situational features on their behavior. However, since we lack information about the situational features affecting others, we cannot use this information when judging the behavior of others.

   We may also point to the fact that from our own point of view we behave consistently with our values, goals, and beliefs.[8] While we may use the social-cognitive approach to character to understand our behavior and that of our intimates, we may do so without realizing the precise method by which we do so. For people whom we know well, we may learn to recognize their different conditional traits and how those traits are related to each other. In cases where an agent is judging the behavior of a stranger that he may not ever see again, the agent lacks the necessary information to make an accurate judgment as well as sufficient motivation for doing so (Mischel 12).

A NON-IDEAL THEORY OF VIRTUE

The premise that grounds the critique of virtue theory as not being empirically adequate is the assumption that if traditional virtue theory is grounded in a particular conception of character, character traits according to that theory must resemble the structure of a virtue, being cross-situationally consistent and displayed even in diagnostic situations.[9] If virtues are just a type of robust character trait and people do not generally have robust character traits, then they also cannot have the virtues. This assumes that robust character traits are descriptive. However, I have argued that robust traits are not descriptive, but rather prescriptive. Robust traits are only used descriptively as a sort of shorthand way of stating that a particular individual is more or less likely than his peers to show behavior relevant to that particular trait but we generally do not assume that most people actually have robust traits.

   Just as there are two types of traits to satisfy different goals, there are two different ways that we talk about virtue that meets two different purposes. I begin from the claim that virtue comes in degrees. I argue that this is so because agents generally develop virtue slowly over the course of time and experience and since virtue requires a variety of components, an agent may have developed a few (but not all) of these and thus still have *some* virtue.

   There are two basic "types" of virtue that track the ways in which we talk about virtue: ideal virtue and non-ideal virtue. Ideal virtue is a description of the highest degree of virtue, while non-ideal virtue is a description of any type of virtue that is not ideal virtue. Ideal virtue is primarily normative and prescriptive but not empirically adequate. An agent with ideal virtue will have all of the goals, beliefs, and values consistent with each virtue (i.e., he will have developed all of the virtues

robustly) and will exhibit cross-situationally consistent behavior. Non-ideal virtue is empirically, but not normatively, adequate. It describes the type of virtue that agents actually have. An agent with non-ideal virtue might have fully developed some virtues but not others or he may have developed only *some* of the goals, beliefs, and values consistent with each virtue. He is not likely to exhibit cross-situationally consistent behavior, especially for all of the virtues. Non-ideal virtue is frail, susceptible to circumstance and luck.

Most people begin by acquiring conditional traits or virtues, and displaying trait-relevant behavior in only some situations (Adams 125-130).[10] Agents acquire various traits or virtues depending on factors like their upbringing, their environment, their social influences, as well as the goals, beliefs, and values that they develop. Conditional virtues have only been developed in reference to certain situations so an agent may display a particular virtue in only some situations because of the way that he construes those situations. An agent may construe situations x and y in a similar way while construing situation z to be markedly different and so requiring different behavior. The agent may have a different perception of the three situations merely because he has not had enough experience with situation z to notice the situational features that make it similar to situations x and y, or he may lack the goals, beliefs, values, or critical thinking skills to generalize from situations x and y to other situations.

For example, suppose Jones had a rough childhood that taught him to be distrustful of people. Jones is deeply distrustful of others and is rude towards most people. However, Jones is surprisingly polite and respectful towards supermarket workers. Since he worked at supermarket himself and had the good fortune of being treated with dignity and respect by his superiors and peers, he comes to have the belief that people who work in supermarkets are "good people" and "worthy of trust."

Jones has learned to be genuinely respectful of workers at supermarkets. Unfortunately, he has not learned to generalize his behavior to include other people in other sorts of situations. Jones may still be blameworthy for having failed to generalize across situations, but he at least has a module of the virtue of respect. The more modules pertaining to the virtue of respect that Jones acquires, the more likely he is to display that virtue in any particular situation and so acquire a more robust virtue of respect.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that both traditional trait theory and social cognitive theory have a place within a scalar conception of character and that a theory of virtue that is both empirically and normatively adequate should be grounded in a scalar conception of character.

NOTES

1.   See Nancy Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory*; Candace Upton, *Situational Traits of Character: Dispositional Foundations and Implications for Moral Psychology and Friendship*; Rachana Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of our Character;" and Christian Miller. Miller argues for a "commonsense understanding of folk psychology" that is consistent with Mischel's CAPS model.

2.   Self-regulatory competencies refer to control mechanisms that operate in response to social sanctions or self-reactive influence. The major self-regulatory mechanism operates through self-monitoring of conduct, judgment of conduct in relation to personal standards and environmental circumstances and affective self-reaction (the emotion an individual feels in response his own conduct). (See Bandura 68)

3.   Psychologists Daniel Lapsley and Patrick Hill argue that these two approaches might be complementary and mutually informative, as well as capable of integration (185-213).

4.   For example, trait theory would be useful for determining how compassionate Matt is when compared to Alan. If I find that Alan is generally more compassionate, I might guess that Alan is more likely than Matt to act compassionately in a particular situation. However, if I am interested in making an accurate prediction about Alan's compassionate behavior in a particular situation, I have to know more about his particular personality structure, not just how he compares to others.

5.   Although I am borrowing John Doris's term "robust traits," my definition of robust traits is not exactly the same as Doris's. For Doris, an agent has a robust trait only if an agent can "be confidently expected to display trait-relevant behavior across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations, even when some or all these situations are not optimally conducive to such behavior" (18).

6.   An agent possessing a robust trait would never fail to act compassionately (and/or would never fail to have the right sort of psychological dispositions relevant to compassion) in all situations in which compassion was required.

7.   See Kamtekar, 468-9, and 478 as well as Flanagan 299.

8.   Mischel argues that when asked about their behavioral consistency, "people may base their impressions on the inferred motivations, beliefs, values, and other mental qualities that account for and explain those behaviors" rather than on the behaviors themselves. As long as an agent feels he has been consistent in his conditional traits, he feels that he has behaved consistently. He does not measure consistency using a robust trait approach but rather a conditional trait approach.

That is not to say we actually *do* behave consistently with our values and goals across different situations. There are number of psychological mechanisms by which an agent can behave inconsistently with his moral commitments while believing that he is behaving consistently with his moral commitments.

9.   According to John Doris, diagnostic situations are situations that are unfavorable enough to trait-relevant behavior that the behavior must be explained by individual dispositions (i.e. traits) than by situational features.

10. Conditional virtues are similar to what Robert Adams refers to as "modules of virtue."

WORKS CITED

Adams, Robert. *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being* for *the Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. by Martin Oswald Trans. Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1962. Print.

Bandura, Albert. "Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action." *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development*. Eds. William Kurtines and Jacob Gewirtz. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1991. Print.

Doris, John. *Lack of Character.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Print.

Flanagan, Owen. *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991. Print.

Kamtekar, Rachana. "Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of our Character." *Ethics* 114. 3 (2004): 468-9, 478. Print.

Lapsley, Daniel and Darcia Narvaez. *Moral Development*, *Self, and Identity.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004. Print.

Lapsley, Daniel and Patrick Hill. "The Development of the Moral Personality." *Personality, Identity, and Character: Explorations in Moral Psychology.* Eds. Darcia Narvaez and Daniel Lapsley. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 2009. 185-213. Print.

Miller, Christian. *Character and Moral Psychology.* New York: NY: Oxford UP, 2014. Print.

———. *Moral Character.* New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2014. Print.

Mischel, Walter "Toward an Integrative Science of the Person." *Annual Reviews in Psychology.* 55 (2004): 1-22. Print.

Ross, Lee and Richard Nisbett. *The Person and the Situation: Perspective of Social Psychology.* Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 1991. Print.

Snow, Nancy. *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010. Print.

Upton, Candace. *Situational Traits of Character: Dispositional Foundations and Implications for Moral Psychology and Friendship.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009. Print.