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To cite this article: Christian B. Miller (2018): Some philosophical concerns about how the VIA classifies character traits and the VIA-IS measures them, The Journal of Positive Psychology, DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2018.1528377

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2018.1528377

Published online: 02 Oct 2018.

Article views: 33

View Crossmark data
Some philosophical concerns about how the VIA classifies character traits and the VIA-IS measures them

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ABSTRACT
Written from the perspective of a philosopher, this paper raises a number of potential concerns with how the VIA classifies and the VIA-IS measures character traits. With respect to the 24 character strengths, concerns are raised about missing strengths, the lack of vices, conflicting character strengths, the unclear connection between character strengths and virtues, and the misclassification of some character strengths under certain virtues. With respect to the 6 virtues, concerns are raised about conflicting virtues, the absence of practical wisdom, and factor analyses that do not find a 6 factor structure. With respect to the VIA-IS, concerns are raised about its neglect of motivation and about the underlying assumptions it makes about character traits. The paper ends by sketching a significantly improved classification which omits the 6 virtues and introduces additional strengths, vices, and a conflict resolution trait.

The positive psychology movement continues to gain momentum, with a flagship journal, a major institute, and dozens of handbooks and guides, together with hundreds of relevant papers appearing every year. Philosophers have been paying some attention to certain facets of this movement, especially results pertaining to happiness and flourishing. Comparatively little, however, has been said by philosophers about how positive psychology classifies and measures character traits.

I am a philosopher, not a psychologist, and my interests in classifying and measuring character traits ultimately relate back to theoretical matters in ethics. As such, when evaluating the work of positive psychologists, I am speaking not as a neutral observer but as someone who wants to see what of value from their approach could be incorporated into philosophical thinking about issues such as human flourishing, good character, and morally right behavior.

In this paper I raise a number of potential concerns that philosophers are likely going to have with the main classification and measurement approach used by positive psychologists over the past 15 years, namely the ‘Values in Action’ or VIA classification. I also assess how significant I think they each end up being from my perspective as a philosopher. At the end of the paper, I start to sketch what I think a significantly improved classification approach might look like. If nothing else, I hope to help inspire additional work on these issues.

Two important clarifications should be made upfront. First, positive psychology as a movement is not necessarily wedded to the VIA. So my aim is not to critically assess the movement as such, only the leading approach to thinking about traits within it.

Secondly, it is important to be clear about who my target audience is. In the first instance, it is my fellow philosophers. As already mentioned, philosophers working in ethics have had little to say about the VIA, but with the increasing interest in philosophy in psychological research, that is bound to change soon. Here I hope to offer some cautionary remarks about the usefulness of the VIA for advancing familiar discussions in ethics.

Having said this, I also hope that my contribution is of interest to psychologists too, especially those who actually employ the VIA. As an outsider to the field, I aim to raise some helpful questions about some of the basic assumptions that were employed and the decisions that were made in setting out the framework. Hence some of the claims I make may be of use only to philosophers, but hopefully some of them might benefit psychologists as well.

The paper is divided into four main sections. In the first, I offer a quick primer on how leading positive psychologists like Peterson and Seligman tends to
think about so-called ‘character strengths’ and ‘virtues.’ For readers already familiar with their work in this area, they are welcome to skip right to section two, which raises concerns about the VIA classification of character strengths. Section three turns to some concerns about the VIA classification of virtues. Finally, section four ends with a few worries about the main assessment tool for measuring character strengths, the VIA-IS.

1. Relevant background

The positive psychology movement really picked up steam at the turn of the century. According to leading advocates, it has three main pillars: positive experiences, positive traits, and positive institutions (Peterson & Park, 2009; p. 25. For overviews of positive psychology, see Snyder & Lopez, 2009; Moneta, 2014; Lopez, Pedrotti, & Snyder, 2015). I won’t say anything about experiences and institutions in this paper, but instead move quickly to traits.

Here the obvious starting place is Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification, edited by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman and published in 2004. Peterson and Seligman, with the help of over 50 leading scholars working on character, put together a novel classification of character traits. By focusing on psychological health rather than illness, they purported to offer a ‘manual of the sanities’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 4).

To develop their classification, they scoured writings from traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, ancient Greek philosophy, and medieval Islam. They examined lists of traits from Charlemagne, Benjamin Franklin, the Boy and Girl Scouts, Hallmark greeting cards, and Pokémon characters (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 15, 33–52). Naturally they came up with a huge amount of information, and developed a hierarchical schema of virtues, character strengths, and situational themes to organize it.

Virtues

Virtues are described as ‘core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). They are said to be universal, and serve as the most abstract level of classification in the schema.

Character strengths

Character strengths are ‘the psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms – that define the virtues. Said another way, they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). Peterson and Seligman compiled dozens of possible character strengths, and then devised a procedure for narrowing them down using the following 10 criteria (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 17–27):

1. A strength contributes to various fulfillments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others.
2. Each strength is morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes.
3. The display of a strength by one person does not diminish other people in the vicinity.
4. Being able to phrase the ‘opposite’ of a putative strength in a felicitous way counts against regarding it as a character strength.
5. It should be traitlike in the sense of having a degree of generality across situations and stability across time.
6. The strength is distinct from other positive traits in the classification and cannot be decomposed into them.
7. The character strength is embodied in consensual paragons.
8. We do not believe that this feature can be applied to all strengths, but an additional criterion where sensible is the existence of prodigies with respect to the strength.
9. Conversely, another criterion for a character strength is the existence of people who show – selectively – the total absence of a given strength.
10. The larger society provides institutions and associated rituals for cultivating strengths and virtues and then for sustaining their practice.

Meeting these criteria is neither necessary nor sufficient for a trait to qualify as a character strength. Rather it just has to satisfy ‘most’ of them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 16).

The result is a classification with 6 virtues and 24 character strengths, which today goes by the name of the ‘Values in Action’ or VIA classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 29–30) (Table 1):
Table 1. 6 Virtues and 24 Character Strengths.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wisdom</th>
<th>Creativity</th>
<th>Curiosity</th>
<th>Open-Mindedness</th>
<th>Love of Learning</th>
<th>Perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Social Intelligence</td>
<td>Vitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanity</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>Prudence</td>
<td>Self-Regulation</td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Humor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Forgiveness and Mercy</td>
<td>Humility/Modesty</td>
<td>Prudence</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Self-Regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence</td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Humor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Naturally Peterson and Seligman have a great deal to say in clarifying what is meant by each of these virtues and character strengths. But we do not need to get into these details here.

Situational themes

The last, most fine-grained level of the hierarchy has to do with the situational themes: ‘specific habits that lead people to manifest given character strengths in given situations’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 14). Peterson and Seligman say very little about such themes in their 2004 book (indeed they only show up on one page out of 800!), and as far as I can tell this trend has continued in subsequent work in positive psychology. So I will set them to one side as well in this paper.

Research making use of the VIA classification has been extensive, with many studies in particular looking at correlations between particular character strengths and other variables like health and educational success (for a review, see Niemiec, 2013). Peterson, Seligman, and others have also developed several assessment tools for character strengths, the main one of which is the VIA-IS. We will explore this instrument in some detail in section four.

In the spirit of positive psychology, let me first highlight some of the positive features of the VIA classification from the perspective of philosophy. Philosophers interested in the virtues are often challenged to come up with a defensible list of what does and does not count as a virtue. It looks like they might now be able to turn to positive psychology for help, as psychologists such as Peterson and Seligman have already undertaken the herculean task of extracting a list of character strengths from various sources as mentioned above. Plus they have done so in a careful and nuanced way, and while there might be a few omissions from their list, the resulting classification is remarkably comprehensive. An added bonus is that unlike other classifications of traits such as the Big Five, this one is focused specifically on character, rather than personality traits in general (Peterson & Park, 2009; pp. 26–27; for a review of the Big Five, see John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Provided philosophers find their criteria for selecting character strengths to be defensible and are onboard with how the criteria were applied, they should perhaps make use of the VIA classification in, for instance, developing a plausible virtue ethic.

But before philosophers interested in virtue get too excited, it is important to note a number of concerns about the VIA classification.

2. Some concerns about the VIA and character strengths

Starting with the 24 character strengths, I want to raise four concerns in this section. As is the case in the remaining sections as well, a few of these concerns are not original to me but have already been developed by others in the philosophy and psychology literatures.

The incompleteness concern

A natural first question a philosopher might ask is whether the list of character strengths is complete, or are there any important positive traits which are missing? A few quickly come to mind which seem like they belong on the list. Patience is a good example. So is self-respect (see Peterson & Park, 2009; p. 27; Noftle, Schnitker, & Robins, 2011; p. 219; Kristjánsson, 2013; pp. 151–152 for related examples).

This is a fair concern, but not a very serious one. Peterson and Seligman themselves were explicit in their 2004 handbook that they did not take their classification to be exhaustive, and that they were open to additions or deletions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; p. 13; see also Peterson & Park, 2009; p. 27). Perhaps the only real concern here is why, in the intervening 13 years, no such revisions seem to have been made.

The missing vice concern

The classification developed by Peterson and Seligman only appeals to character strengths. So where are the character weaknesses, i.e., the vices (see Noftle et al., 2011; p. 217; Kristjánsson, 2013; pp. 7, 153)? Their omission is especially surprising given that criteria #4 for character strengths has to do with their opposites. Of course it is important to get psychologists to pay more attention to psychological health rather than illness. But that can be...
done without dropping the vices entirely from one’s classification.

This is a serious omission from the classification, but one that could be remedied. Doing so, however, would require canvassing all the same philosophical, religious, and cultural resources. That would mean another herculean undertaking on a par with what Peterson and Seligman did in their 2004 handbook. Perhaps it is not surprising that psychologists have not taken up this task in the intervening years.

The closest attempt, so far as I am aware, was some preliminary work by Christopher Peterson prior to his death (see Seligman, 2015). Using the 24 character strengths, Peterson came up with an absence, an excess, and an opposite for each of them. In other words, he labeled a total of 72 character deficiencies. For example with respect to bravery, the opposite is cowardice, the absence is fright, and the excess is foolhardiness (Seligman, 2015, p. 5).

While this looks like a promising start, note that the framework has not yet been justified by examining discussions of character in various religions, philosophies, cultures, and the like, as was the case with the 24 character strengths. Indeed, we do not even have the analog of the 10 criteria to use to help us pick out which are the appropriate deficiencies and which are not.

Furthermore there are fundamental conceptual differences among philosophers in thinking about the vices. Aristotelians and Stoics, for instance, are deeply divided over whether the vices are on a continuum or not. Even among Aristotelian philosophers, there are active debates about whether there are, for instance, exactly two vices for each virtue, or a multitude. Recent work by J. O. Urmson, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Howard Curzer helps to sort through these issues (Curzer, 2012; Hursthouse, 1981; Urmson, 1980).

So clearly a great deal more work is needed to elevate these 72 character deficiencies to the same evidential status as the 24 character strengths, or to come up with a new list of deficiencies altogether.

The conflict concern

A problem that a number of writers have noted is that character strengths can seemingly conflict with each other. For instance, it is common to think that the strength of fairness could motivate actions in certain specific cases which are opposed to what the strength of kindness would require. Similarly with bravery and prudence, or open-mindedness and integrity (To be fair, not every philosopher would agree that character strengths can in fact conflict with each other, including Aristotle himself. So the claim is controversial.).

How serious is this concern? Peterson and Seligman themselves are aware of it, but do not seem very worried. They write, ‘As psychologists, we are less daunted than philosophers about adjudicating conflicts among character strengths because the relationship of traits to action and the melding of disparate traits into a singular self are after all the concerns of modern personality psychology’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13).

I am not sure what to make of this claim. But even if they are right that psychologists don’t have a reason to worry, many philosophers will demand that something more be said about conflicting strengths.

At the same time, there is nothing about Peterson and Seligman’s framework that would preclude adding another kind of trait, besides virtues and character strengths. We might call it a ‘conflict resolution trait,’ which can intervene when character strengths point in opposing directions. Alternatively, practical wisdom might be introduced into the framework as a part of every character strength, with one of its jobs being to harmonize their relationship to each other. We will return to these issues in greater detail in the next section.

The unclear connection to virtue concern

How exactly are character strengths supposed to be connected to virtues? It is worth quoting the passage above again, this time at greater length. According to Peterson and Seligman, character strengths are:

the psychological ingredients -- processes or mechanisms -- that define the virtues. Said another way, they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues. For example, the virtue of wisdom can be achieved through creativity, curiosity...These strengths are similar in that they all involve the acquisition and use of knowledge, but they are also distinct (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13; see also p. 51).

Unfortunately this characterization is very compressed, and could mean a variety of different things. Here are some leading possibilities:

(i) Strengths are not distinct from virtues, but are actual parts or components ('processes or mechanisms') of virtues.

Comment: This would make the virtues into super-traits with other character traits as their components. For instance, forgiveness and humility would be two of the parts which together constitute the larger trait of temperance. But it is hard to know what this even means. Plus, it just seems false that certain strengths (say, vitality) are literally components of a given virtue (say, courage).
In a more extensive discussion, we would also want to consider whether there is a difference between parts/components and processes/mechanisms. If so, then there are really two different proposals on offer here, and one of them might be more defensible than the other. For instance, we could say that vitality is one of the mechanisms for the virtue of courage to exist and operate. Even if this is on track, there would be large questions to face. Just what sorts of mechanisms are character strengths supposed to be? It seems like we need a larger personality theory to tackle that. And would we need to have all the mechanisms in place (i.e., all the character strengths) for a virtue to function? That might seem especially demanding as a requirement.

(ii) Strengths are distinct from virtues, and are ways that a given virtue is manifest (‘routes to displaying one or another of the virtues’). In other words, strengths are the psychological causes, and virtues are the patterns of exhibited behavior. So justice might be the underlying causal disposition which is manifest in a given person’s behavior as leadership. Comment: This strategy reduces character strengths to mere patterns of behavior. While this is a view that has been held in the past in social and personality psychology (see Miller, 2014, chapter one for a review), it is widely rejected by philosophers, and I suspect most positive psychologists would be reticent to accept it. Character strengths are more than mere behaviors; rather a strength like leadership is best understood as an underlying psychological disposition which can give rise to appropriate thoughts, feelings, and actions.

(iii) Strengths are distinct from virtues, and both of them exist as causal psychological dispositions in a given person’s mind. So if a person has the strength disposition of integrity, she also has a separate virtue disposition of courage. Furthermore, the courage disposition is what gave rise to the integrity one. Comment: This seems to bloat the commitments of positive psychology unnecessarily. A perfectly good person would have all 24 character strengths, plus 6 additional virtues on top of it. And whenever a person is doing something to express a character trait like fairness, she also has a distinct virtue (in this case justice) as well and is expressing that too. So if you ask, ‘Why did she perform that fair action?’, then two answers would need to be given, ‘Because she is a fair person and because she is a just person.’ This is one trait too many as part of the explanation. We do not need to posit two character traits for every fair action as being jointly responsible for producing it.

(iv) Strengths are distinct from virtues, and are stepping stones on the path to achieving a virtue (this interpretation is suggested by the text in Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 51). In other words, character strengths and virtues are the same type of thing, and one is a causal means of achieving the other. So acquiring or increasing one’s curiosity might in turn lead to increases in wisdom as well. Comment: Later in the handbook, Peterson and Seligman explicitly deny this interpretation: ‘this vertical dimension [between strengths and virtues] is one of abstractness, and it would be a category mistake to ask if curiosity causes wisdom’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 28). It is not completely clear what they have in mind here, but I suspect that they think strengths and virtues are different kinds of things, such that it is simply impossible for one to cause the other. Just as an oak or a maple does not cause a tree, so too creativity does not cause wisdom.

(v) Virtues don’t exist at all, and a virtue term like ‘justice’ is simply a useful shorthand way of referring to the character strengths of citizenship, fairness, and leadership which themselves tend to be closely related. Comment: This may be a promising route to go to make sense of the VIA classification. The problem is that Peterson and Seligman often talk as if the virtues do exist in their own right. Furthermore, their list of six virtues is derived from the ‘core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). But in the various traditions they surveyed, virtues are taken to be real traits and not mere useful labels or heuristics. ‘Courage’ or ‘wisdom’ are bedrocks traits which exist in their own right and are not derived from nor capture any other more basic character traits.

(vi) Virtues are real, but they are realized in different ways. Just as an oak is a species of tree, so creativity is one way of being wise in the world. An oak tree is not the same thing as a tree; it is a kind of tree. Trees are more ‘abstract,’ in a sense, than are oaks and maples and birches. But it would be a mistake to say that there are no trees, just as it would be a mistake to say that there are no virtues.
Comment: Something along these lines looks to me to have the most promise. But it would require considering what it means for more ‘abstract’ categories to exist, and what precisely it would mean for virtues – as the genus for the species of character traits – to exist. These are tricky philosophical questions.¹

Untangling the conceptual relationship between virtues and character strengths has been seriously neglected by positive psychologists using the VIA. Some of the proposals above do show some promise, and are worth further exploration.

**The misclassification concern**

Whatever the exact relationship is supposed to be between character strengths and virtues in general, one might also be concerned about some of the particular connections that show up in the classification. These connections were made on theoretical as opposed to empirical grounds. Hence it is entirely appropriate to question them on theoretical grounds too. For instance, why is humor under the heading of transcendence, forgiveness under temperance, leadership under justice, and vitality under courage?

This is a straightforward and legitimate concern. But so long as it is limited to a few of the character strengths, it hardly seems like a major one. After all, Peterson and Seligman themselves acknowledged that, ‘In some cases, the classification of a given strength under a core virtue can be debated’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; pp. 28, 31; see also Niemiec, 2013). So tweaks could be made to the classification, although again it is surprising that none seem to have been.

The concern takes on a more serious form in light of a recent paper by Willibald Ruch and René Proyer (2015). They had 70 experts (in personality psychology or closely related fields like philosophy) and 41 laypersons rate the degree to which a character strength is a good example of each of the six virtues. The scale was six-point (1 = not at all, 6 = very good) with 3.5 chosen as the threshold for a strength being prototypical for a given virtue.

The good news for the VIA classification is that the links postulated conceptually between virtues and character strengths were supported in every case except for humor which did not reach a 3.5 for transcendence (Ruch & Proyer, 2015, p. 10). The bad news is that several character strengths were prototypical for their assigned virtue, and for another virtue as well. So forgiveness met the threshold for temperance (3.71), as reflected in the VIA, but also for justice (4.02) and humanity (5.47). Hope, gratitude, leadership, and citizenship are other examples of strengths where this happened.

While this is just one study, and much further work is needed, it helps to raise the legitimate concern about whether it is too simplistic to assume a many to one relationship between character strengths and virtues. Instead, for some strengths at least, the relationship might be many to many, which would significantly complicate the classification and, as I will suggest below, call into question the usefulness of the virtues in the VIA in the first place.

### 3. Some concerns about the VIA and virtues

**The conflict concern**

Just as the 24 character strengths can come into conflict among themselves, so too can the 6 virtues, it would seem (Becker, 2007; p. 3; Kristjánsson, 2012; p. 94). Courage and temperance are natural examples. Same with humanity and justice. Here too a conflict resolution trait could be added to play the role of adjudicating conflicts, now at both the strength and the virtue levels.

Adding another trait at the top of the hierarchy is the obvious fix. But it is not the only one, as we will see next.

**The missing practical wisdom concern**

For philosophers working in the Aristotelian tradition, they will be surprised to find no mention in the VIA of what is, for them, the crucial element of moral virtue, namely practical wisdom (Kristjánsson, 2012; p. 94, 2013; chapter seven; Banicki, 2014; pp. 27–28, 32). Indeed, on traditional Aristotelian approaches, practical wisdom is necessary for the possession of any moral virtue (for more on practical wisdom, see Russell, 2009).

Now it might seem as if the VIA classification has already addressed the role of wisdom, since it is one of the six virtues. But it is clear that wisdom in the VIA is not the same thing as what Aristotelians mean by practical wisdom. For as just one of six virtues, wisdom in the VIA pertains only to its respective five character strengths, whereas practical wisdom is meant to apply more broadly (for related discussion, see Kristjánsson, 2012; p. 94, 2013; p. 155; Banicki, 2014; p. 28).

What is practical wisdom supposed to do? In the Aristotelian tradition, the leading contemporary discussion is by the philosopher Daniel Russell in his book *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*. There Russell argues that practical wisdom is literally a part of every
moral virtue. Furthermore, it plays at least three central roles which he summarizes as follows:

…it is an excellence of deliberating not merely about the means to virtuous ends (e.g. how to carry out a generous act) but also about the specification of the very content of virtuous ends (e.g. what would in fact be, in these circumstances, a generous act), as well as the reasons to adopt those ends in the first place (Russell, 2009, p. x, emphasis his).

Thus thanks to the work of practical wisdom, someone might adopt the end of aiding victims of the flooding in Houston, have good reasons for wanting to do this, and also be wise about the means of doing so (say, by donating to a reliable and efficient charity).

But there is more. The view is not that there is a practical wisdom component for courage, and a different one for generosity. Rather the view is that practical wisdom is shared by all the virtues, and as such, it ‘performs its role of balancing and integrating them’ (Russell, 2009, p. 25). If so, then with practical wisdom in the picture there is no need to posit a conflict resolution trait in addition to virtues and character strengths in the VIA.

So given the central role practical wisdom plays on an Aristotelian approach like Russell’s, it is striking that it does not play any role whatsoever in the VIA classification. But, alas, matters are more complicated in the philosophy literature. For there are other ways of thinking about the role of practical wisdom besides the Aristotelian approach. For instance, Christine Swanton has argued that practical wisdom is important for only certain virtues, and not others (Swanton, 2003). Julia Driver has gone even further and claimed that practical wisdom is not necessary for virtue at all (Driver, 2001).

Clearly a lot more work needs to be done by positive psychologists in this area (for a review of five measures of wisdom in the psychology literature, see Glück et al., 2013).

The factor analysis concern

Strikingly, the VIA classification was not arrived at using standard empirical techniques in psychology, such as factor analysis. This sharply distinguishes it from other leading classifications of traits in personality psychology like the Big Five. As we already saw, the VIA is a theoretical classification derived from the writings of philosophers, religious thinkers, and famous exemplars of good character, as well as more popular level expressions of character in greeting cards and games (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; pp. 9–10; Peterson & Park, 2009; p. 27). It is also explicitly aligned with virtue ethics (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 10). Hence as Peterson noted in a later article, ‘Our classification of character strengths under core virtues is a conceptual scheme and not an empirical claim’ (Peterson & Park, 2009, p. 31).

When empirical work has been done subsequently, some surprising results have emerged. More specifically, suppose participants are asked to complete character strength measures like the VIA-IS mentioned above. Then factor analyses are run on the survey data to see which responses tend to cluster together. Ideally, we would find six factors corresponding at least roughly to the six virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

But we don’t. MacDonald and colleagues (2008) found that four factors best fit the questionnaire data. Noftle and colleagues (2011) used confirmatory factor analysis to test existing six factor, five factor, four factor, and one factor models. They could not find support for any of them (212). Hence Noftle concluded that, ‘Consequently, the field of positive psychology does not have an empirically viable overarching framework for classifying and organizing its primary theoretical constructs. Although it is possible that an alternative model that was not tested could capture the structure of the VIA scales, it seems more likely that the VIA simply does not have a clear hierarchical structure’ (Noftle et al., 2011, p. 212). Subsequent to Noftle’s chapter, McGrath (2014) has found support for a five factor model (see also the recent three virtue classification by McGrath, 2015; as well as new work by Ng, Cao, Marsh, Tay, & Seligman, 2017; which did find a six factor structure.).

While there continues to be much debate about how many factors best fit the survey data, the concern here is about the empirical adequacy of the original six virtue classification in the VIA. What seems clear at this point is that it does not fit very well with how regular people tend to think about character and group different traits together.

How seriously should philosophers take this concern? On the one hand, Peterson and Seligman never intended the six virtues to be empirically grounded in this way in the first place. As Ruch and Proyer note in the same paper discussed above, ‘nowhere in the original work [is] it stated that the VIA-classification represents a factor model of character where the virtues are derived from the intercorrelation of the strengths’ (Ruch & Proyer, 2015; p. 3; see also p. 11, McGrath, 2014).

On the other hand, if philosophers are looking for a classification of virtues that emerges directly from the
empirical research, they may have to look elsewhere. Admittedly, the VIA classification, even if it does not map onto ordinary thinking very well, might still be useful for a range of other purposes, such as understanding behavior or character education. But in the process, it would have revisionary implications. In other words, to the extent to which it departs from folk thinking, the folk need to change or revise their outlook to conform to the classification. Otherwise there will be a fundamental misalignment between the two.

Expecting people to change their view of character may be a lot to ask for.

The eliminating virtue concern

Taking the previous concerns collectively, perhaps it would be better for positive psychologists who use the VIA to jettison the level of virtues in the classification altogether and only work with character strengths. We have seen three reasons for thinking that this might be the case:

(i) The six virtues do not actually emerge empirically via factor analysis, and there is no consensus (yet) as to how to replace them.

(ii) Positive psychologists don’t measure the virtues (as opposed to the character strengths), so they don’t play any direct role in the actual research that psychologists are doing, such as finding correlations with other important variables like subjective well-being and health.

(iii) As we saw, it is unclear how to understand what the proposed relationship is supposed to be between virtues and character strengths in general. Furthermore, we also saw that some of the connections postulated between a particular virtue and a particular character strength seem questionable, and certain character strengths seem as if they might fall under multiple virtues.

My own view is that the critic has a serious point (for additional reasons beyond the ones listed above, see Becker, 2007). Philosophers, and perhaps psychologists too, would be well-served to think about jettisoning the top level of the VIA hierarchy, and just work with the list of character strengths, however long that list ends up being (although for general philosophical reasons to favor a classification with two levels of character traits, the cardinal virtues and the subordinate ones, see Russell, 2009, chapter six).

4. Some concerns about the VIA-IS and measuring character strengths

While there are multiple measures of character strengths in the positive psychology literature, by far the leading one for adult participants is the VIA-IS (for a recent alternative, see Ng, Tray, & Kuykendall, 2017). This 240 item measure uses a 5-point Likert scale anchored on ‘very much like me’ and ‘very much unlike me’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 629). Some examples of its items include (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 629):

I am never too busy to help a friend. [kindness]
I always keep my promises. [integrity]
I have great difficulty accepting love from anyone. [love]

Anyone can take the survey for free at https://www.viacharacter.org/www/ and learn what her ‘signature strengths’ are, which are the character strengths she ‘owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 18).

When it comes to measuring positive character traits, there are obvious concerns with using surveys, especially when these are self-report surveys (as opposed to observer reports) with only a few items for each trait. I think these concerns are indeed serious, but also familiar ones as well. Let me turn instead to two concerns which might be less familiar.

The neglect of motivation concern

For each of the 24 character strengths, there are 10 associated items for measuring it. But it turns out that almost none of them probes motivation as opposed to action.

Given copyright restrictions, I can’t reprint all the items for a given strength to demonstrate this. But take the case of integrity/honesty. Not one of the ten items associated with this strength is motivational. They ask about keeping promises, telling the truth, being genuine, and the like. But they don’t ask why the person is doing those things. If she is keeping her promises, for instance, it could be for morally admirable reasons. But it could also be for reasons which have little or no moral worth, such as to deceive other people for no worthwhile purpose or to get rewards in the afterlife.

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In the case of kindness/generosity, it might seem as if the items get at motivation better. And they do. Several of the items ask about the person’s enjoyment, love, and excitement. But unfortunately that doesn’t
really help much with the concern here. For if a person does say that he enjoys helping others, that isn’t specific enough to tell us whether the reason why he helps is primarily self-interested (to get the enjoyment for himself) or whether it could be other-regarding (he is concerned about the other person for that person’s sake, and the enjoyment is just a by-product or side effect of helping out). More carefully worded items would be needed to try to disentangle these possibilities.

The problem with not paying careful enough attention to motivation is that on most accounts of the virtues in the philosophical literature, especially those at home in the Aristotelian tradition, appropriate motivation is essential to having a virtue. So no matter how accurately the VIA might be able to capture someone’s behavior, it is unlikely that we will have sufficient evidence on that basis alone to conclude whether she is virtuous.7

This is a serious concern, and the obvious remedy is to simply revise the VIA-IS by adding some items for each strength which carefully target motivation rather than behavior. Fair enough. But motivation is notoriously difficult to accurately assess using surveys. There is the obvious problem of unconscious motives, and the influences of priming, moods, and the like. There is the problem of post-hoc confabulation. And there is the problem of mixed motives. In this last case, even if a virtuous motive is present, and even if the person accurately reports its presence, that would still not be enough if that motivation is actually not the main causally operative motive in the relevant situations. For instance, suppose someone keeps her promises reliably, but does so to not get punished for breaking them. She also wants to do the right thing, but that desire doesn’t contribute much to her behavior (even though she thinks that it does). By itself, the desire to do the right thing would not have been strong enough to get her to keep her promises. Then in that case, there is a lack of virtue.

So the upshot in my view is that to be of use to philosophers, the VIA-IS will have to be supplemented with some other kind of assessment instrument or approach which gets at the underlying motivation of the participants.8

The threshold concern

Before developing this final concern, let me step into philosophical thinking about character for a moment. Philosophers tend to accept the following three assumptions (see Miller, forthcoming for more extensive discussion):

(A1) Virtues and vices come in degrees.
(A2) The virtues and vices are threshold concepts.
(A3) A person cannot have a virtue and an opposing vice as part of her character at the same time.

The first assumption is straightforward enough – two people can have a virtue like honesty, for instance, but also have it to different degrees (for much more, see Miller, 2013, chapter one).

The second assumption just means that there are certain categorical criteria or qualifications a character trait will have to meet in order to count as a virtue or vice. So a trait which disposes people to lie for fun will not qualify as honesty. It doesn’t give rise to the correct pattern of behavior. Nor does a trait which gives rise to honest behavior, but only for selfish reasons, count as honesty either. It doesn’t give rise to the correct pattern of motivation. A given character trait does not get to count as honesty just because it has to do with lying and telling the truth. It has to dispose people who have it to, among other things, not tell inappropriate lies and to do so for the right reasons. These are among the threshold criteria or qualifications to count as the virtue of honesty.

All virtues and vices have their own specific criteria. It may be hard to spell them out precisely, and there may be some element of vagueness to them, but that does not change the fact that they exist. These criteria do not emerge from empirical research in psychology. Rather they are evaulatively loaded criteria which are formulated while doing ethical theorizing about the different moral virtues and vices.

They are important to philosophers for a number of reasons. To differentiate between a virtue and a vice, or particular virtues and vices, we need evaluatively loaded criteria to judge character traits. To know what kind of character to aim for and develop in ourselves and in others (say through character education), we need to know what the criteria are for having morally good traits. To develop an account of right action or other morally important concepts, philosophers who are followers of virtue ethics need criteria to determine what counts as a virtuous person (see, e.g., Russell, 2009). And there are plenty of other reasons besides these three for why thresholds and categorical criteria tend to be important for philosophers working on character.

Finally, the last assumption (A3) is meant to be familiar as well. Certainly the same person can have a virtue like honesty and a vice like dishonesty at different times in her life. But most philosophers working on character would have a hard time making sense of this person having a character which is both very honest and very dishonest at the same time with respect to the same issues, projects, people, and the like. That would be to say, for instance, that...
this person is disposed to be dishonest by reliably distorting certain facts (lying, cheating, deceiving, etc.), and that this person is disposed to be honest by reliably representing the same facts accurately. This is unintelligible to me (Note that (A3) is saying something stronger than that being higher on a virtue means being lower on its related vice. It is saying that possession of the one is necessarily incompatible with possession of the other. They are dichotomous traits.).

When we put these three assumptions together, we find that a trait has to meet certain qualifications to count as a virtue. If it does, then it has passed the threshold for being that virtue, and can still come in degrees of more or less. We would also know that it is thereby not a vice. To shift to language common in psychology for a moment, virtues and vices as philosophers typically understand them are categorical traits (given their thresholds) and also continuous traits (given their coming in degrees).

We can represent these ideas for the case of honesty with the help of Figure 1 and what I have called elsewhere the threshold taxonomy (Miller, 2017a, 2017b).

We see honesty coming in degrees (A1). We see that honesty and dishonesty have thresholds (A2). And we see that honesty and dishonesty are incompatible (A3).

For our purposes here, we can leave it open what if anything occupies the middle space between honesty and dishonesty. Aristotle, who had this basic picture in mind thousands of years ago, would invoke the categories of continence (strength of will) and incontinence (weakness of will), among others (see Miller, 2017b for related discussion). In my own work, I have argued for the importance of what I call ‘mixed traits’ (Miller, 2013, 2014). But none of this needs to detain us here.9

The important lesson is that most philosophers working on the virtues and vices tend to have something like the threshold taxonomy in mind. For them it is an empirical question where most people’s character will end up in the taxonomy, although just about everyone who has written on the matter holds that most people will not as a matter of fact be in the virtue space.

I say ‘most philosophers’ have a threshold taxonomy, but not all. Historically, for instance, the Stoics rejected (A1) and the idea that virtues come in degrees. They accepted thresholds, and accepted that virtues and vices cannot overlap each other. Taken together, this means that for them, virtues are ‘all-or-nothing’ categorical traits. One either has perfect honesty, for instance, or one doesn’t have honesty at all. There is no other option. I will not pause here to examine their view in more detail (see Miller, forthcoming). My only point is to highlight that while the threshold taxonomy is extremely widespread in philosophy, it is not unanimous (for more on the Stoic position, see Annas, 1993, pp. 405–408).

What does this have to do with the VIA-IS and measuring character strengths? While it is not completely clear that positive psychologists who use the VIA-IS are of one mind about the matter, there are places where they say things which contradict the threshold taxonomy and reject assumptions (A2) and (A3). For instance, René Proyer and his colleagues write:

At this point it is important to note that the VIA-IS does not measure weaknesses, but that those strengths only have comparatively lower expressions, which means that participants indicate that they possess the strength to a relatively lower degree. Hence, one might speak of a person’s lesser strengths. As mentioned, however, this should not be interpreted as the absence and, of course, also not as the opposite of a given strength (Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2015; p. 3, emphasis theirs; see also Haidt, 2002; Rust, Diessner, & Reade, 2009; Seligman, 2015; p. 6).

Indeed, when participants complete the VIA-IS online at the VIA Institute, they are told what their signature strengths and their lesser strengths are. But the implication is that they have all 24 strengths to begin with. Their character is strong across the board – the only question is, in which areas of morality is it the strongest.

In place of the threshold taxonomy, we find what I have called the overlapping taxonomy. In the case of honesty, it would look like this (Figure 2):

![Figure 1. The threshold taxonomy for honesty.](image-url)
In other words, it will turn out that everyone (or just about everyone) has the character strength of honesty (to some degree or other). And while we have already noted that the VIA does not address character weaknesses, once we add dishonesty it is hard to see how it wouldn’t also have to follow that everyone (or just about everyone) has this weakness as well. At the same time.

In other words, everyone has both honesty and dishonesty, and more generally every character strength and every character weakness, all at the same time. The only empirical question, on this way of thinking, is about individual differences between individuals and about change over time within individuals. Possession of character strengths (and weaknesses) is not in question.

Now my goal here is not to criticize the overlapping taxonomy per se. It might serve valuable purposes for positive psychologists. Rather my goal is simply to note, for philosophers, how different of an underlying approach to thinking about character strengths is at work when positive psychologists go about measuring them using the VIA-IS. Furthermore, this is an approach which I don’t think philosophers would want to accept when it comes to thinking about virtues and vices in ethics.

The remedy for philosophers, it seems to me, is to try to adapt the threshold taxonomy to the VIA. So in the case of the VIA-IS, a response of ‘very much unlike me’ wouldn’t be interpreted to mean that the person is low on some aspect of a given character strength. Rather it would mean that the person doesn’t have that character strength at all. That much is fairly straightforward. But where exactly would one draw the line signifying lack of a character strength? And should it be drawn in the same place for every item, and with respect to every character strength? Those details would need to be worked out, and doing so is going to be challenging. No doubt it is hard to tell in general whether someone is over or under a given threshold.

Furthermore, lack of a character strength wouldn’t entail possession of the corresponding character weakness. First we would need to investigate the possibility of a middle space between strengths and weaknesses. Then we’d have to come up with measures which can differentiate between the case where someone fails to have a character strength because his character is in this middle space, versus someone who fails to have a character strength because he has a weakness. Suddenly the process of converting from the overlapping to the threshold taxonomy has gotten significantly more complicated.

Which isn’t to say that it should not be done.

5. Conclusion: an emerging alternative classification

In this paper I have presented and briefly examined a number of different concerns for the VIA classification, which has served as the leading framework in positive psychology for over fifteen years. To return to where we began, I see these concerns as primarily ones for philosophers to consider who are taking an interest in developments in positive psychology which might be relevant to their work in ethics. Of the ones developed above, I consider the missing vice concern, the missing practical wisdom concern, the neglect of motivation concern, and the threshold concern to be especially worrisome for philosophers.

But as I also indicated at the outset, at least some of the concerns I have raised should, I believe, also be troubling for positive psychologists too who make use of the VIA. Here I am thinking especially of the missing vice concern, the conflict concern, the unclear connection to virtue concern, and the misclassification concern. Hence I hope this paper will also be of some value to psychologists working in this area.

Philosophers and psychologists alike can agree, I hope, that clearly there needs to be much more work done on the VIA. But let me end by tentatively suggesting that, in light of these concerns, we consider a replacement classification, and one that can be of use in both disciplines. It could start with something like the following:

Conflict Resolution Trait

| The Character Strengths and Weaknesses |

On this approach, all of the character strengths are related to a higher-order trait, which serves to decide conflicts between them (or alternatively an Aristotelian account of practical wisdom as a part of all the

Figure 2. The Overlapping Taxonomy for Honesty.
character strengths could be developed instead). Presumably the number of character strengths would be expanded beyond 24 to include traits like patience. And for any given character strength, the relevant character weaknesses (vices) would be noted as well. Both character strengths and weakness would come in degrees.

Beyond this, as we have seen, many philosophers and positive psychologists are likely to part ways. Philosophers could add extra features to the framework, such as the claim that the traits also have thresholds, and the claim that no one could have a given character strength and one of its corresponding weaknesses at the same time. For much of the population, it might turn out on empirical grounds that some or even all of the character strengths are not possessed to any degree. In fact, I have argued that this is indeed the most plausible interpretation of the collective body of data from personality and social psychology on morally relevant behavior (see Miller, 2013, 2014).

These additional claims might be resisted by positive psychologists. But they can still adopt the basic framework. Either way, what we would end up with is a fairly radical revision to the initial VIA classification.

After almost fifteen years, it is time for change.

Notes

1. Parts of this section draw from Miller (2016) and are used here with permission of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

2. The untimely death of Peterson could have had a role to play here. Beyond that, I can only speculate that inertia might be involved, especially once hundreds of publications are already in the literature using the classification, sophisticated instruments have been developed around it, and the VIA has spread to many other disciplines and even popular culture in general.

3. In what follows I have been helped by several of my colleagues at Wake Forest and especially by an anonymous reviewer.

4. We could also develop the proposal in terms of cardinality. Historically many philosophers writing on virtue have held that there are cardinal virtues and subordinate virtues. The two bear the same relation to each other as a genus is related to its species. For helpful discussion, see Russell (2009), chapter six.

5. As Mark Leary nicely describes it, ‘Factor analysis attempts to identify the minimum number of factors or dimensions that will do a reasonably good job of accounting for the observed relationships among the variables’ (2004, pp. 188–189). For a helpful introduction, see Leary (2004, pp. 187–192).

6. An anonymous reviewer pointed out to me a third concern. Take the kindness item, ‘I am never too busy to help a friend.’ First, there are situations where one is rightly too busy to help a friend. And those can even be situations where kindness is the relevant virtue. So it is not clear how good of a job this item does in identifying kindness, and similar points apply to many other items. Second and more generally, these items can implicitly seem to be equating character strengths with behavioral tendencies. But that is very different from an Aristotelian approach which would focus on underlying thoughts and feelings informed by practical wisdom.

7. Unlikely, but not impossible. It could be that self-reported behavior is a reliable guide in some way to telling us about the person’s underlying motivation. Even if it is not conclusive in determining that motivation, the thought is that it is still a source of quality evidence. I have some concerns about this hypothesis, based upon the reliability both of self-reports of behavior and on whether those reports, even if accurate, would uniquely favor a particular motivational explanation. But I do need to acknowledge this line of reasoning. Thanks to Will Fleeson for help here.

8. What might that assessment or instrument look like? The work of C. Daniel Batson gives us an illuminating example. While focused specifically on offering a motivational explanation of the relationship between empathy and helping, Batson’s approach can be generalized. Briefly, he outlined a number of motivational hypotheses which could explain this relationship. From these hypotheses, he formulated predictions about how people would behave in various situations, looking specifically at conflicting predictions. He then put participants in those situations, observed how they behaved, and saw which prediction was supported and which was not. In this way he could eliminate problematic motivational hypotheses and hone in on the ones which showed the most promise. For further discussion, see Batson (2011).

9. In light of feedback from an anonymous reviewer, it is worth clarifying two things. First, my theory of mixed traits employs the threshold taxonomy, but all the other approaches in philosophy of which I am aware employ the threshold taxonomy too. This includes Aristotle’s own taxonomy which appeals to continence and incontinence. Hence since it would take a great deal of space to explicate my mixed trait model, and since nothing I say in the paper depends on it, I have chosen to mention it only in passing here. Secondly, the reviewer notes some similarities between the threshold taxonomy and both the Meyer-Briggs approach and learning styles in educational psychology. If there are similarities, I did not have them in mind when articulating the taxonomy. Furthermore, there is no necessary connection between them. Both of these approaches could be unreliable, and the threshold taxonomy still be the best way to think about character traits.

10. However, as I noted, there are places where positive psychologists do seem to accept thresholds. See for instance Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 13); Park (2009, p. 139); Seligman (2015, p. 4); Ruch and Proyer (2015, p. 3).
Acknowledgments

Work on this paper was supported by a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Templeton Religion Trust. I am very grateful to be a part of this special issue, and to the help of Stephen Schueller and Robert McGrath in particular. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a symposium on positive psychology at the 2017 American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting. I am very grateful to Matt Stichter for inviting me to be a part of that symposium. Finally, I would like to thank Will Fleeson, Mike Furr, Eranda Jayawickreme, Mike Prentice, and Michael Lamb for their very helpful comments, and especially two anonymous reviewers for extensive written feedback that significantly improved the paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Templeton Religion Trust [TRT0096]

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