Good Character: Too Little, Too Late

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The influence of virtue theory is spreading to the professions. I argue that journalists and educators would do well to refrain from placing too much faith in the power of the virtues to guide working journalists. Rather than focus on the character of the journalist, we would do better to concentrate on institutional constraints on unethical conduct. I urge this position in the light of the critique of virtue ethics advanced, especially, by Gilbert Harman (1999). Harman believed that the empirical findings of psychologists show that character-based approaches to ethics are useless. I suspect that this rather overstates the case. Nevertheless, special features of journalism make virtue-centered approaches especially inappropriate, and we had best turn to alternatives.

What Is Virtue Ethics and Why Is Everyone Talking About It?

Consequentialism and rights-based approaches to ethics, still the best known moral theories, focus directly on the notion of right action. Consequentialism provides a positive theory of right action. It tells us that everyone is to do that action that, of the alternatives open to them, maximizes utility (or whatever other good it aims at). Rights-based theories provide a negative account of right action. That is, they do not dictate a unique course of action to agents but instead place constraints on what they may do. Whatever they do, they must not violate anyone’s rights.

Virtue ethics is crucially different from both these approaches. Rather than focus on action, it concentrates on character. It exhorts everyone to cultivate the virtues: those excellences of character that are the possession of the ideally virtuous person. Virtue ethics therefore only provides action guidance in a derivative manner. Rather than telling people that they ought to maximize utility or refrain from rights violations, it tells them to behave honestly, compassionately, and so on (and, correlative, that they ought not to behave dishonestly, callously, etc.). Proponents of virtue ethics claim that this is a more humane vision of morality than that presented by its rivals. It does not place excessive demands on people by asking them to behave in a
counterintuitive fashion, as deontology and consequentialism notoriously can, and it does not ask them to guide their lives by alien principles and rules. It is, in fact, more attuned to the phenomenology of prereflective moral experience. It does not ask people to replace everyday morality with a theoretical system that is alleged to improve on it; instead, it introduces a system into that prereflective morality. Finally, it alone can account for the fact that morality is as much a matter of motivation as of belief, and it alone gives a central place to the practical wisdom and judgment that agents need to act well in difficult circumstances.

Virtue ethics has been particularly attractive to people interested in delineating the ethics of the professions. Professional ethics has been dominated by so-called role morality, which holds that professionals ought to act in a manner appropriate to their function as professionals, to the roles they play in society, rather than be guided directly by more universalistic concerns. Virtue ethics, as it is usually understood, is not role morality because the virtues to which it appeals are understood to be valid for everyone no matter what position they occupy in society. Nevertheless, role morality and virtue ethics seem natural allies, the more so because role morality can be spelled out by asking professionals to cultivate the character traits that enable them to perform their tasks. Moreover, at least one influential formulation of virtue ethics, that of Alasdair MacIntyre (1985), appeals directly to social roles to ground the virtues. For MacIntyre (1985), a virtue is an acquired trait that allows its possessor to achieve the goods that are internal to a particular practice; a practice, in turn, is defined as

Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (p. 198)

Obviously, on this view, virtues are closely tied to roles. Any practice in which human excellences are extended in a distinctive manner is an appropriate locus for the exercise of the virtues, and the virtues are those qualities that allow practitioners to excel in their roles.

Ethicists and reflective practitioners concerned with the best approach to the problems that confront journalists have been as quick as anyone else to embrace virtue ethics (Klaidman & Beauchamp, 1987; Lambeth, 1990; Belsey, 1998; Borden, 1999). The best known example here is Klaidman and Beauchamp’s book whose title is self-explanatory: The Virtuous Journalist. For its authors, journalists, first and foremost, ought to be guided by excellences of character, which will enable them to behave properly in all the
difficult situations they confront in the course of their work. If society ensures that its journalists are virtuous, it will need relatively little in the way of regulation to ensure that their conduct will be ethical. Journalists will not need to be cajoled into doing the right thing nor threatened with punishment if they fail to comply. Instead, virtuous journalism will be a matter of course for them. Kaidman and Beauchamp (1987) maintained everyone shall all benefit from this state of affairs, noting that “the public is better served when journalists perform well because of good character than because of sanctions, threats, rules, laws, regulations, and the like” (p. 18).

Rather than focus on principles, rights, rules, or legislation, society should ensure that journalists are of good character. Journalistic education should focus on inculcating the virtues appropriate to the profession.

What virtues ought journalists to display? Kaidman and Beauchamp (1987) did not attempt to provide an exhaustive list, but they did provide the beginnings of a catalogue: “Virtues like fairness, truthfulness, trustworthiness, and non-malevolence (avoiding harm) come to mind” (p. 19). I shall not attempt to evaluate this list. Instead, I shall concentrate on just one item on it. If anything counts as a virtue for the journalist, surely honesty must. On an account such as MacIntyre’s (1985), according to which a virtue is a character trait that allows its possessor to realize the goals of a particular practice, honesty will certainly count as a virtue of the journalist. If journalism has a goal, it is the production of truth. According to the fourth estate model of the media, their aim is to provide the public with information that will enable it to elect a government that represents its interests and to act as a watchdog guarding against abuses of power both public and private. Both these functions require the production of truth: truth concerning what politicians say and do, concerning the behavior of business and bureaucracy, and so on.1 Honesty is obviously a virtue conducive to the production and dissemination of truth. News reports must be truthful and must be known to be truthful, or the public will not in fact be informed by them. To this end, journalists must be honest and known to be honest.

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Thus honesty is the, or at least a, paradigm virtue for journalists, which is to say that if anything counts as a virtue for the profession, it must. If, therefore, it is doubtful that the creation of honest journalists is an effective
way of ensuring ethical behavior in journalism, the whole enterprise of virtue ethics in the service of journalism will be fatally undermined. This is precisely the claim I here defend: Focusing on the character of the journalist will not be an effective way of producing honest journalism.

The Situationist Critique of Virtue Ethics

Very recently, virtue ethics has come under sustained criticism from a number of philosophers who claim that it is empirically inadequate. These thinkers point to the results of a number of well-known psychological experiments that demonstrate, they claim, that there is no such thing as character. Most famous of all these experiments is that conducted by Stanley Milgram (1974). Milgram’s participants were told that they were to participate in a study of the effects of punishment on learning. They were introduced to another person who, they were told, was another volunteer. Then they drew lots to see who would be the learner and who the teacher. The learner had electrodes attached to him. His or her task was to memorize word pairs, which the teacher then asked him or her to recall. If he or she made a mistake (or failed to answer at all), he or she was given an electric shock. The first shock was set for 15 V; with each subsequent shock, the intensity increased by 15 V up to 450 V.

In actual fact, this elaborate apparatus, the entire experiment, was fake. The other participant was really an accomplice of Milgram’s (1974), and his or her failures to recall word pairs were deliberate. No shocks were administered to him or her; instead, each time the teacher activated the apparatus, the learner pretended to be in pain. The real object of Milgram’s experiment was to see how far random participants would go in administering shocks of increasing intensity to strangers. The voltage meter was labeled descriptively as well as numerically. At the upper end of the scale, the labels read as follows: “Intense Shock,” “Extreme Intensity Shock,” “Danger: Severe Shock,” and finally just “XXX.” The impression that severe shocks were being administered was reinforced by the accomplice. At 150 V, he or she demanded to be released. As the voltage increased, his or her protests became more desperate. At 285 V, he or she screamed. After that, he or she made no sound at all.

Milgram (1974) expected most participants to refuse to administer shocks as soon as the learner demanded to be released from the experiment or very soon thereafter. Milgram planned to urge them to continue but expected the instructions to be disobeyed in most cases. In fact, participants were far more compliant than he expected. Typically, about 65% of all participants continued to administer the shocks all the way up to 450 V, well after the learner had ceased to respond. Almost all participants continued to administer the
shocks up to 300 V. The experiment has been repeated all around the world with similar results.

What conclusions ought to be drawn from the Milgram (1974) experiment? According to the situationist critics of virtue ethics, what this experiment and many others devised by social psychologists show is that situation is more important than character in determining how people behave. Character traits, if there were any such things, would be dispositions manifested in a variety of situations. They would be relatively robust and relatively resistant to situational pressures. However, the Milgram experiment showed that the situation determines how the great majority of people will act. Thus, character, in the sense we ordinarily mean by this word, just doesn’t exist. As Harman (1999) said

It seems that ordinary attributions of character traits to people are often deeply misguided and it may even be the case that there is no such thing as character, no ordinary character traits of the sort people think there are, none of the usual moral virtues and vices. (p. 316)

Or, as another situationist critic put it, “to put it crudely, people typically lack character” (Doris, 1998, p. 506).

This follows, the situationist critics believe, because if there are such things as character traits of the sort both common sense and virtue ethics require, then people differ in which such traits they possess. However, if they differed in their possession of character traits, then they would act differently in different circumstances. Different people would respond in different ways when they are asked to administer electric shocks, or when they find a wallet, or when they are confronted with a stranger apparently in urgent need of assistance (to mention some of the experiments devised by social psychologists). Their character traits would manifest themselves regardless of situational differences. Yet they don’t: It is the situation that determines how they behave. Hence, there are no such things as character traits in the form required by virtue ethics.

Now, the friends of character have not been slow to reply to these situationist criticisms. They have pointed out that what Harman (1999) and Doris (1998) have taken to be the settled findings of the science of social psychology are very much disputed within that science and that social psychology has itself produced evidence that reinforces the virtue-ethical notion of character. They have argued that the situationist findings do not show that the virtues are nonexistent, merely that they are much harder to achieve than people would like to think. After all, there were some differences among people as to the extent to which they obeyed the instructions to administer the shocks (Athanassoulis, 2000). These critics have alleged that the results of the experiments actually support folk-psychological at-
tributions of character traits, which are much finer grained than Harman (1999), in particular, allows for (Kupperman, 2001).

This debate is very much a live one, and philosophers would do well to be hesitant about drawing firm conclusions concerning its results. However, even as the evidence mounts that Harman’s (1999) initial and relatively unnuanced rejection of the entire notion of character traits was too hasty, his conclusions remain unsettling for those people who reflect on the practice of journalism. Whether or not Harman was right in thinking that character traits do not exist in the form required by virtue ethics, the evidence he presented gives us reason to believe that reliance on character traits is not a good strategy for journalists.

Journalism and Moral Danger

Journalism is a morally dangerous profession. That is, journalism is one of a range of professions in which practitioners are regularly subjected to moral risks of one sort or another. In some professions, these risks involve the constant temptations of bribes or of abuses of power. In journalism, the moral dangers stem from the constant temptations to use deception. Deception is prima facie ethically objectionable; the more so in a profession whose entire raison d’être is the production of truth. Indeed, some media professionals have gone so far as to suggest that deception is always unacceptable. For instance, Ben Bradlee, a member of the Pulitzer Prize committee and a former editor of the Washington Post, explained the committee’s refusal to award the prize to the Chicago Sun-Times for an exposé of municipal corruption that involved journalists operating a bar by arguing that journalists aim to uncover deception and therefore “simply cannot deceive” themselves (Luljak, 2000, p. 13). In fact, however, deception is frequently warranted. When it is the only way to reveal information that is in the public interest to know—when, in other words, it enables journalists to fulfil their role—its use is justified.

However, the fact that the use of deception is often legitimate makes it more dangerous, not less, for journalists. After all, the manner in which police officers ought to behave when they are offered a bribe is clear: They always ought to refuse it. Policing remains a morally dangerous profession because the temptation may sometimes be difficult to resist, but the correct action is always clear. For journalists, however, the dangers are increased precisely because the correct way to behave is often far from clear. Journalists frequently find themselves in situations in which they are unsure whether deception is warranted. They often cannot know in advance how important the information is they might uncover. They are frequently uncertain as to whether a particular activity falls within the domain of the public interest. In this kind of situation, the scope for self-deception
abounds, and the journalist may well find himself or herself utilizing deceptive means on the slightest of pretexts.

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Of course, it is precisely these kinds of dangers that those thinkers who emphasize the importance of the journalist’s character have in mind. Their thought is that by ensuring that journalists have the virtue of honesty, society can best guarantee that they will not use deception lightly but will only utilize it when it is the best means of producing significant truth. I suggest, however, that character will be of little use in guiding the behavior of journalists because the situations in which the use of deception might be appropriate share significant features with the Milgram (1974) experiments. Accordingly, situational factors will determine whether or not deception is used.

What are the features of the Milgram (1974) experiment that made disobedience unlikely? Essentially, there were three, each of which has an analogue in the situation of the journalist considering the use of deceptive means. In the first place, participants in the Milgram experiment were reassured that the electric shocks they were apparently inflicting on the learner were harmless: painful but not dangerous. Of course, there was countervailing evidence to this assertion ranging from the screams and apparent lapse into unconsciousness of the learner to the labeling of the voltage meter (“Danger: Severe Shock” being not the highest but only the third highest shock the participant was asked to give). On the other hand—and this is the second feature of the experiment that made disobedience difficult—the reassurance came from an authority figure, a scientist in a white coat invested with all the prestige that science has in Western society. Finally, there was the feature that Harman (1999) himself pointed to, the fact that the shocks increased in intensity gradually so that the participants never had a clear sense that they were crossing an ethically significant line. As social psychologists like Ross and Nisbett argued, according to Harman (1999), “‘The step-wise character of the shift from relatively unobjectionable behavior to complicity in a pointless, cruel, and dangerous ordeal,’ make[s] it difficult to find a rationale to stop at one point rather than another” (p. 322). These three factors combine to intensify the situational
pressures, almost guaranteeing that they will outweigh the resources of character, if indeed there are any such resources to be had.

What features of journalism mirror these situational pressures on the subjects of Milgram’s (1974) experiment? First, there is the assurance that the shocks are not harmful. The analogue here is the assurance that the use of deception is not harmful. Of course, all journalists know that deception is potentially dangerous if, for instance, it were to lead to a decrease in trust on the part of the public. However, journalists can reassure themselves that these risks are worth taking. Deception can be an important means of reducing harms overall when it is used to uncover information that ought to be in the public domain but that is being hidden by unscrupulous politicians or businesspeople.

Second, and closely related to this first factor, there is the fact that reassurance concerning the use of deception comes from authority figures in the field. Journalists who hesitate to use hidden microphones or to adopt a false identity can take comfort in the example of such great investigative reporters as Woodward and Bernstein who used deception in uncovering the scandals of Watergate (Bok, 1978, p. 121).

Finally, and I suspect most important, there is the stepwise character of the use of deception. Journalists are very frequently enculturated into its use in a gradual manner. An example from a study of a Midwest newsroom illustrates this process. The press had been banned from a certain area in a sporting stadium at the local university. The on-camera staff at the station could not violate this ban with any ease because their faces were too well-known. However, they had a student intern working for them at that point. She could enter that part of the stadium without attracting attention. There she conducted interviews using a hidden microphone (Luljak, 2000, p. 19).

Now, this particular use of deception is fairly innocuous. However, it is far from clear that any information could be obtained in this manner that would justify it. More important, however, it has the potential to set a young reporter on the road to a habitual use of deception. Although she was technically free to refuse to go along with the scheme, in practice, so doing was extremely difficult for her. She found herself on the verge of entering a very competitive market and needed good references from the station if she were to succeed. Moreover, she probably felt that she was not the person best placed to judge the merits of the case. Indeed, when Luljak (2000) asked her if she had any reservations about it, she told him that “having the news director behind me helped me know that I was right” (p. 19). At this point in her career, she felt unable to refuse the requests of her superiors and incompetent to judge the merits of the deception that she was asked to employ. At most, her responsibility for the scheme, which she did not initiate, was partial. She probably felt, rightly, that she was not crossing an ethically significant threshold because she was a minor player
in a relatively insignificant ruse. However, by the time she is in a position to take full responsibility for such schemes, to initiate them, and carry them out herself, she will have been thoroughly socialized into a culture of casual deceit. She might go from this relatively innocuous case to more serious and totally unjustified invasions of privacy without ever having the sense that she has crossed an important line.

Conclusions

The situational pressures that characterize journalism, at least as it is structured today, are therefore likely to overwhelm the resources of character no matter how good our education, no matter how virtuous our students. If young reporters leave college and enter a workplace in which “deceptive reporting techniques [are] a standard form of journalistic behavior” (Luljak, 2000, p. 25), then reliance on the virtues is useless. Honest students will become deceptive reporters as easily as dishonest ones. So long as journalism is structured as it is presently, society can expect more cases like that of Janet Cooke.³

If this is the case, if virtue ethics is powerless, then how are regulators to limit the use of deception in journalism? How are they to ensure that it is used only when it ought to be, when it is the only means of uncovering information that is clearly in the public interest? The situationist critics of virtue ethics have constructive suggestions to make, as well as criticisms. John Doris (1998) is particularly useful here. Doris pointed out that if it is true that agents cannot rely on their characters to ensure that they behave ethically, they have other strategies that they can call into play. They can, for instance, refrain from entering into situations in which they will be put to the test (Doris, 1998, p. 516). Unfortunately, journalists cannot do this. As I have shown, journalism is unavoidably a morally dangerous profession in that deception will always remain a necessary tool for the investigative reporter. However, there are other ways of structuring the situation besides removing oneself from it altogether. Measures can be put in place to ensure that young reporters do not come under pressure to use deception. One way to do this would be to add a clause to codes of ethics barring journalists from such techniques during their 1st year of employment. This would ensure that they would not have to face ethical dilemmas when they are at their most vulnerable. Regulators might also consider means of structuring the rewards internal to journalism, from promotions to prizes and, most important, the admiration of one’s peers so that those who use deceptive techniques are required to justify themselves before they are eligible for these rewards. Journalists cannot rely on character or virtue to inhibit deception, but regulators can structure the situation to reduce the pressure to employ it.
If these suggestions and the many others that creative professionals will no doubt invent were implemented, deception would become less commonplace, less routine in journalism. We would all live in a world in which there were fewer Janet Cookes. Indeed, if these reforms had been implemented earlier, fewer people would be exposed to the pressures to which Cooke herself succumbed.

This is not to say that good character is irrelevant to journalism. The advocates of virtue-centered approaches to ethical education are right to emphasize its importance. The point of these reflections is instead to stress the extent to which character formation is a process that requires a conducive environment, which is to say an environment shaped by regulations. If society is to produce virtuous journalists, journalists capable of resisting the pressures to deceive when it is not appropriate and when the regulations no longer guide them, it must focus at least as much on rules and structures as on character. The focus on character cannot be a substitute for the formulation of rules and guidelines for right action.

Notes

1. This is not the only end of journalism. As many people have pointed out, if legitimate journalism were limited to the functions mandated by the fourth estate conception, then a great many things that journalists actually do, from the reporting of sport to the covering of celebrity gossip, would be illegitimate. However, the fourth estate conception does provide the justification for behavior that would otherwise be ethically dubious. Use of entrapment techniques or of deception, for instance, is impermissible when there is no public interest as defined by the fourth estate conception in the information thereby revealed.


3. The case of Janet Cooke is notorious among journalism professionals. In 1981, Cooke was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her story about “Jimmy,” an 8-year-old heroin addict, for the *Washington Post*. It later emerged that Jimmy was a fabrication. Cooke returned the prize and resigned in disgrace.

References


