

## Moral Virtues for Journalists

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□ *This essay outlines an account of virtue ethics applied to the profession of journalism. Virtue ethics emphasizes character before consequences, requires the “good” prior to the “right,” and allows for agent-relative as well as agent-neutral values. This essay offers an exploration of the internal characteristics of a good journalist by focusing on moral virtues crucial to journalism. First, the essay outlines the general tenets of Aristotelian virtue ethics. Second, it offers arguments touting virtue ethics in comparison with other popular normative theories such as Mill’s utilitarianism and Kant’s deontology. Finally, an original account of journalistic virtue ethics is offered, with an emphasis on the virtues of justice and integrity.*

Journalists have long been expected to rely on *external* moral guidance such as institutional norms and principles typified in codes of ethics. These prevailing external methods—called *external* because they are imposed on agents rather than psychologically internalized within the agent—have left many journalists confused in terms of specific application of norms, rules, and principles in practice, which in turn has left the public wanting higher ethical standards and more consistent (good) behavior (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005). This article will detail a classically underregarded *internal* view of professional ethics that utilizes an internalized moral psychology for journalists based in virtue.

This internal view—*internal* because moral reasons and motivations originate in the journalist’s thinking—does not require rejecting the various useful forms of external regulation. In fact, it is a foundational complement to some forms of external regulation. However, a strong moral framework requires that its possessors both understand and accept the inherently normative nature of journalism and gradually inculcate key journalistic moral virtues, moral values, and moral principles to positively develop their professional character. Ideally, these virtues, values, and principles are provided through life experience, professional experience, and a university-based journalism education that would include a substantial moral component, adequate practical experience, and more extensive forms of practical training (e.g., in investigation and research) than those that currently exist in journalism—at least in the Australian journalism scene, where this study was written.

The suggestions here are largely based on a virtue ethics approach to morality and the mental attitude one must possess to be a properly disposed journalist. The framework will not only offer a conception of the good, but will also offer principled action-guidance for journalistic roles, focusing mostly on the guiding virtues of justice and integrity.

The virtue of justice has been primarily conceived, at least in modern times, in terms of a principle of impartiality that frames our reasons and justifications in universal terms, and so conceived plays a central role regarding matters of social well-being and fairness. Integrity, on the other hand, informs moral choice based in part on an individual's moral point of view. It integrates a degree of moral emotion into ethical deliberation, something that, for example, many modern moral theorists (mostly deontologists) do not allow.

With this moral psychology, factors such as emotions, motives, and intentions, whose interdependence with the standard impartial or universal concerns of moral principles, culminate to create a complete professional *character*. This piece outlines the fundamental characteristics of virtue ethics, particularly the importance of *character* as the primary substantive moral force. It also contrasts this character-based virtue ethics with other moral theories in an attempt to show why this approach is preferable and makes two broad arguments for why a virtue-based moral framework is particularly suited to journalism.

First, the having of good (or bad) character largely involves conduct that has become habit. It is typical for journalists to find themselves in circumstances that disallow extensive reflection; journalism often requires rushed thinking and action, leaving little time for deep reflection. Thus a person whose habits have been well trained so that he or she makes good decisions quickly as part of his or her habitual nature is ideally suited to the work circumstances of the profession (Klaidman & Beauchamp, 1987).

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Second, good character is preferable to standard rule-based regulatory structures or rule-based moral theories primarily because rules can easily be followed to the letter, without morality being well served. This is particularly important in the defense against either self-serving or politically aligned journalists, who in many cases use rule-compliance to

produce the appearance of ethical behavior. By following the letter of a rule, but not its spirit, many media owners and their journalists appear to be ethical when in fact they are unjust. As we shall see, a morality based on character does not easily allow for these manipulations.

### General Concepts in Virtue Ethics

Although virtue ethics may be used to complement other moral theories, it also comprises a complete, independent moral theory. Virtue ethics' roots are in ancient philosophy, most notably among Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece, but also perhaps in much older ancient Chinese philosophy (Hursthouse, 2003). Although work on virtue ethics was long dormant after the beginning of the Enlightenment Age, interest in virtue ethics was revived in the late 1950s when G. E. M. Anscombe (1958) declared that Aristotelian ideas of character and goodness ought to be central to any debate in moral philosophy. What followed over the ensuing years was a substantial acknowledgment of this message. Philippa Foot (1978, 1988), Bernard Williams (1985), Alasdair MacIntyre (1985), Michael Slote (1992), and Christine Swanton (2003), among others have continued to develop numerous versions of virtue theory. Because of the high quality of some of these developments, many now believe some forms of virtue ethics challenge consequentialism and deontology as the most plausible forms of ethical theory.

What virtue ethics provides that these modern Enlightenment theories lack is

Motives and moral character, moral education, moral wisdom or discernment, friendship and family relationships, a deep conception of happiness, the role of emotions in our moral life, and the fundamentally important questions of what sort of person I should be and how we should live. (Hursthouse, 2003)

There are three fundamental concepts derived from classical Greek notions of virtue ethics that are central to understanding virtue theory; these are *virtue*, *phronesis*, and *eudaimonia*. The brief account of each that follows draws largely from a survey of virtue theory by Rosalind Hursthouse (2003) and a book by Justin Oakley and Dean Cocking (2001) regarding virtue theory and the professions.

### Virtue

Take, for example, virtue in regard to truthfulness; one is not merely committed to telling the truth, as possessing the *virtue* of truthfulness

implies an understanding that what is good about truth is a deeply ingrained part of one's character, well entrenched in one's psyche, and depends not exclusively on the act of truth telling but largely on what motivates one to tell the truth and/or what one intends to achieve by being truthful.

For clarification, consider that the Kantian reason for truth telling is that it is what one's duty demands; that is, a Kantian will possess a maxim that requires him or her to tell the truth, thus it is impermissible in such circumstances to do anything but tell the truth. However, truth telling and possessing the virtue of truthfulness are different. Although this Kantian approach to truth telling secures what Kantians would call "right action," the reason for the action is independent of concern for the *good* the action may bring about. Therefore, the comparative weakness in the Kantian account of truth telling versus acting in accord with the virtue of truthfulness is that one can act rightly without securing—or even considering—the good. This leaves me the task of describing why *goodness* is a preferable criterion of morality to *rightness*.

As Oakley and Cocking claimed in regard to virtue ethics and professional roles, "goodness is prior to rightness" (2001, p. 19). According to virtue ethics, rightness, properly understood, can only be derivative of goodness, insofar as what is right must be based on what is valuable in regard to certain notions of the good (Oakley & Cocking). The advantage of goodness over Kantian rightness manifests itself in a variety of practical circumstances. For example, contrary to the classical Kantian, who is required to tell the truth in all instances, the person who possesses the virtue of truthfulness will know that to tell the truth is a strong but not always *overriding* reason for action. Thus, a person with the virtue of truthfulness will realize when it is appropriate to tell the truth and when it may be appropriate to refrain from being truthful or to even lie, in part because his or her *phronesis*, or practical wisdom (discussed later), will inform his judgment. Journalism, for example, has cases in which lies or deception are necessary for achieving the good. Take Australian journalist Chris Masters' covert methods for uncovering police corruption in the Australian state of Queensland. Masters used hidden cameras and hidden audio recorders to document various sources and subjects that gave evidence showing that Queensland police were working for underworld crime syndicates. In some cases police were said to have committed crimes as severe as contract murders. Thus, it seems that without using deceptive newsgathering methods, he would not have had the necessary evidence to uncover a severe case of police corruption (Masters, 2004).

Like police and various other forms of military and law enforcement, lying used as a tool for meeting the ends of justice is sometimes

paramount to truth telling. By and large, it is justice that permits certain role-players to omit truths or to deceive or lie when it brings about the appropriate good. The overarching virtue of justice, considered broadly, does much of the work in clarifying many difficult decisions that are less clear with alternative moral theories or traditional journalistic protocol found in ethics codes.

### Justice as Journalistic Virtue

Much like Aristotle regards justice as the complete moral virtue, so too justice ought to be a governing *agent-neutral* virtue for journalists. *Agent-neutral* is defined as virtue that calls for equal application to all persons, with no special consideration for an individual or discreet group. This is different from other sorts of virtues like integrity or friendship, which are *agent-relative*, wherein the moral value of the virtue in a given case relates directly to its relevance to a specific person or discreet group of persons. More will be discussed about the agent relativity later in this article.

Plato and Aristotle understood justice as a virtue that penetrated more or less all matters of morality, one that includes notions of social justice and particular justice. Justice in this sense promotes that persons, entities, or things generally ought to be handled according to how they *deserve* to be treated (Dahl, 1991). Thus, a person ought to be treated in accordance with what he or she deserves based on some system (or systems) of merit; for example, law-abiding citizens deserve the full rights of citizenship *qua* law because they have earned that right in being lawful.

### Phronesis

Being virtuous, as we know, involves what has been described as deeply ingrained, internal characteristics of persons, yet we have not determined what allows for such deep-seated traits. How does a journalist *know* when something like a lie is permissible or impermissible in the role of the journalist? To answer this, we must explore the second central concept in virtue ethics, *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Although practical wisdom is the focus of much scholarly debate, it is most simply understood as the requisite knowledge to act according to virtue. Thus, being virtuous is in part dependent on one's moral knowledge—*phronesis* or practical wisdom. Like being a good doctor is dependent on having knowledge about how to heal the sick, being a virtuous person requires having intimate knowledge of what is good, not just abstractly, but through training and experience in a given role.

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Good doctors know how to heal the sick because good doctors are appropriately educated, have the requisite experience, *and* are properly motivated to act on that knowledge in the right way. That said, the virtuous doctor, like any virtuous person, is often dependent on certain favorable life conditions—a good family upbringing, and a moral and prudential education, wherein one hones the right dispositions and motives often in the early stages of one’s *professional* moral development. Accordingly, practically wise persons (those with *phronesis*) have the “capacity to recognize some features of a situation as more important than others, or indeed, in that situation, as the only relevant ones” (Hursthouse, 2003, p. 4). However, to pursue moral knowledge—or to impart it to others—one must first have a conception of the good.

### **Eudaimonia**

The third concept central to virtue ethics, *eudaimonia*, is described by Aristotle as human flourishing. Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* is thought to be the “final end” or that for which all human activities are aimed—its ideal state involves living the best possible human life and is the ultimate conception of the good. It is the beginning in terms of it being the impetus for being virtuous; it is the end insofar as living well or human flourishing is the result of a life lived by virtue. This connects with the previous two central concepts of virtue ethics: First, achieving some degree of *virtue* is crucial to developing good character, which, of course, is dependent on one having *phronesis*, or moral knowledge, to pair with a good disposition—having the right intentions and motivations for one’s actions. And the fundamental conception of the good is *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, which is brought about by acting in accordance with virtue.

For one to be a virtuous journalist, one must usually have a good broad-based education, including an emphasis on parochial and theoretical matters in journalism. One must also be “raised” in an environment that provides examples of and supports moral behavior among journalists—in part this will happen in universities, but also with internships and other early career professional endeavors. It is analogous to a virtuous person (broadly construed) having been raised in a good family, which provides the proper assurance of moral understanding through

one's childhood. Finally, one must be internally motivated to do good, in part as a result of this upbringing, and in part from one's understanding that the good life can only be achieved in this manner.

### Two Common Objections Against Virtue Ethics

There are a number of theoretical objections against virtue ethics, two of which are most notable. These objections—the “justification problem” and the “virtue-conflict problem”—are in essence legitimate concerns about virtue ethics but also about moral theories generally. These objections are not unique to virtue ethics and arise in both consequentialistic and deontological theories as well.

#### Objection 1: The Justification Problem

Utilitarians and deontologists criticize virtue ethics for its “uncodifiability,” and its subsequent lack of a clear decision theory to justify its results. Virtue ethicist Rosalind Hursthouse (2003) claimed

... utilitarians and deontologists commonly (though not universally) held that the task of ethical theory was to come up with a code consisting of universal rules or principles (possibly only one, as in the case of act-utilitarianism) which would have two significant features:

1. The rule(s) would amount to a decision procedure for determining what the right action was in any particular case, for example Kant's Categorical Imperative and the general principle of utility.
2. The rule(s) would be stated in such terms that any non-virtuous person could understand and apply it (them) correctly. (Hursthouse, 2003)

Despite a noble attempt to make moral decision making more accessible by adding the structure of decision procedures, these theories have not circumvented the difficulties of practical reasoning. Ultimately, wisdom gained from experience, like the notion of *phronesis* in virtue ethics, is crucial to choosing the right moral maxims or to correctly identify and choose the actions that will maximize utility (Hursthouse, 2003). Ultimately, without “moral sensitivity, perception, imagination, and judgment informed by experience” one could not “apply rules or principles correctly” (Hursthouse, 2003).

*Utility as a Justification for Right Action.* Some utilitarians, such as J. S. Mill, address this matter by constructing sophisticated methods

of practical reasoning within the utilitarian structure that allow them to improve their utilitarian predictions over time, as they gain practical experience. And as Deni Elliot addresses in her essay in this issue, Mill's careful and nuanced utilitarianism should deter some criticisms often aimed at his work, particularly that Mill's utilitarian calculus disenfranchises the minority if doing so better serves the happiness of the majority. Elliot explained that Mill supports an *aggregate* happiness theory rather than a more basic arithmetic calculus that is perhaps more fairly attributed to Mill's mentor, Jeremy Bentham. Mill's formulation, Elliot noted, rejects the notion that a minority can justifiably suffer merely in order to satisfy a greater number of people in the majority, even if the benefit to each respective member of the majority is relatively small in degree compared with each member of the minority.

Nonetheless, even if it is the case that an aggregate utilitarian methodology spares the suffering of the minority, there are further relevant justification questions for utilitarians to address: (a) Is it reasonable to think that moral salience can be reduced to a single value (pleasure or happiness)? And (b) is it reasonable to think that, in all circumstances, the consequences of one's actions can be predicted accurately? On the former point, virtue ethics seems preferable because it takes into account a plurality of goods—not just pleasure or happiness. If, for example, utilitarians are uncertain of what action is likely to maximize aggregate pleasure, they face substantial moral doubt, because their criteria of rightness rests in their successfully maximizing aggregate pleasure; if they fail this, they fail morally. Persons of virtue, however, act morally by acting according to the virtue that they have reason to believe is most appropriate, and that action is moral, even if it results in an unforeseen negative consequence, because it was done for good reasons.

On this latter criticism of utilitarianism, numerous authors have addressed the inherent difficulty of predicting the consequences of actions, particularly because it plays such a central role in utilitarianism's criterion of right action. In *Normative Ethics*, Shelly Kagan (1998) offered a criticism of consequentialism (not just utilitarianism) based on the unforeseen outcomes that so many human actions cause:

An act that looks like it will lead to the best results overall may turn out badly, since things often don't turn out the way you think they will ... or there may be long term bad effects from your act, side effects that were unforeseen and indeed unforeseeable. In fact lacking a crystal ball, how could you possibly tell what all the effects of your act will be? (p. 64)

Similarly, Elijah Milgram (2000) criticized utilitarians for relying on outcome predictions, *even* in cases in which such predictions seem safe.

Milgram referred to an empirical study he said shows that the long-term happiness of accident victims and lottery winners is not nearly as easy to predict as our intuitions might tell us.

“Lottery winners and controls were not significantly different in their ratings of how happy they were now or how happy they were before . . . or how happy they expected to be in a couple of years.” While recent “accident victims . . . experience[d] their present as less happy than controls . . . the paraplegic rating of present happiness [was] still above the mid-point of the scale, and . . . the accident victims did not appear nearly as unhappy as might have been expected.” (p. 116)

Although predicting consequences is sometimes helpful or even crucial to making a good moral decision, it is the sole consideration for the utilitarian, and as such relegates the utilitarian as a special victim to the tribulations of prediction.

*Deontology as a Justification for Right Action.* In addition, the categorical imperative (CI) has in certain practical situations some questionable justificatory demands. One famous example in philosophy that challenges the practical application of the CI occurs in the case of the inquiring murderer (Kant, 1797). Contrary to Kant’s notion that truth telling is a “perfect duty” (thus lying is *always* morally impermissible), one may argue that if one were to knowingly direct a murderer to his intended victim when one could have prevented that murder by lying, one would have committed an egregious moral wrong.

Kant (1797) addressed the inquiring murderer question in an essay titled *On a Supposed Right to Lie from Benevolent Motives*, wherein Kant argued that truth telling is morally obligatory even in the face of a murderer standing outside your home who intends to kill someone, say, a friend, inside your home. Therefore, although Kant claims the CI is an undisputable normative prescription, it is in some cases prone to what one could argue is a serious moral flaw—that telling the truth would likely lead the murderer to the intended victim in a way that was, it seems, both foreseeable and avoidable.<sup>1</sup>

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Alternatively, virtue ethics requires that a plurality of goods be considered as morally salient (the virtues), and that there often will not be a single, correct moral answer, but a multitude of acceptable choices. Thus, virtue ethics allows one to consider the salience of a variety of morally rich concepts to guide one's moral judgments. For example, in the case of the inquiring murderer, the virtuous person, as opposed to a Kantian, may choose to deceive the inquiring murderer—albeit with some regret because of the *prima facie* wrongness of deception—because the virtuous person's disposition as a good friend would guide the person to act in a way that he or she has reason to believe is in his friend's best interests.

*Character as a Justification for Right Action.* Unlike utilitarianism and deontology, *character* is the justificatory lynchpin of virtue ethics in regard to action, as a good agent's character is what makes his or her action right. Moral character is developed by inculcating virtue over time—in the case of Aristotle, the moral virtues are justice, temperance, prudence, and courage, and include influence from epistemic virtues implicit in the moral virtues such as benevolence, fairness, honesty, and truthfulness, among others. In developing good character, these virtues are internalized by conscientious practice; in part becoming virtuous is self-imposed and in part one is influenced by paternalistic imposition from family and friends in one's childhood moral education, in what Aristotle would call a *good upbringing* (Aristotle, trans. 1952).

Because character is the central justification for virtue ethics, the good character of a person has a direct relationship with the rightness of his or her actions. Thus, according to a version of virtue theory held by philosophers such as Oakley and Cocking (2001) and Hursthouse (1991), actions are justified on the basis of their being caused by an agent with good character, so that an action is right only if it is the action a virtuous person would do in the circumstances, and what makes it right is that it is what a virtuous person would do (Hursthouse, 1991).

### Objection 2: Virtue Conflicts

There is a second common objection directed at virtue ethics from deontologists and consequentialists; namely, without a decision procedure, how does one settle conflicts among competing virtues (Hursthouse, 2003)? Most forms of action guidance within consequentialism and deontology are built around decision procedures as described above.

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Thus, consequentialists and deontologists question how one might possibly prioritize between the plural, conflicting, and often incommensurate values prominent in virtue ethics. For instance, if one is guided to be both honest and courageous, but one must in some circumstances violate some facet of one virtue to achieve success in the other. Thus, as a journalist, the virtue of courage may drive a reporter to act covertly to gather information to uncover grand corruption, yet the virtue of honesty may guide the reporter away from using deception as a means to that end. How is such a conflict resolved?

There is no doubt that this is indeed a challenge of practical reasoning. What seems puzzling about this conflict objection, however, is that it is not a problem unique to virtue ethics. Although Kant and some Kantians believe rational humans inherently possess knowledge of what maxims are the correct maxims in a given circumstance, consequentialists (and some modern deontologists) have similar conflicts with virtue ethicists in judging between which possible acts will best achieve their respective ends—acting according to duty (Kant), maximizing aggregate pleasure (utilitarian), or acting as the agent with good character would act (virtue).

Therefore, the conflict problem is a difficult matter to resolve, and it is an issue that has received a fair amount of attention in scholarly philosophy. In *Plural and Conflicting Values*, Michael Stocker (1990) aimed to account for ways to resolve such conflicts. Stocker claimed that people unproblematically account for conflicting values—both commensurate and incommensurate—all of the time. In his book, he referred to a number of “dirty hands” examples—situations in which one must commit a prima facie moral wrong, such as lying, to achieve a more crucial moral right, such as exposing corruption. A paradigm example of this in journalism comes with police or journalistic deception: The Australian case referenced earlier provides a good example of such an instance.

The virtues dear to journalism are many and wide-ranging in application. An unscientific sample of virtue-like goods found in Australian and American ethics codes include truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, honesty,

integrity, autonomy, independence, impartiality, objectivity, freedom (of speech), transparency, nonmaleficence, compassion, and courage. However, because each virtue is an irreducible intrinsic good—meaning that it is (a) good for its own sake, and (b) not reducible to a single overarching good like pleasure—they will sometimes conflict in ways in which one virtue, and not the other, will be given primacy.

Moreover, because there is no expectation of strict uniformity in the way virtuous agents internalize the virtues or in the way they subsequently act—some may be more courageous than just, and others more compassionate than impartial—there will often be an asymmetry in right actions. That is, there will often be more than a single right action for a given circumstance, so long as the action stems from one's virtuous character.

However, there is a further distinction to make in terms of the different domains of goodness within human activity. For example, one need not be a good worker to be a good father. One might be a good friend but a bad boss. Thus, the case of the good journalist described here need not require that all good journalists also be excellent persons in all aspects of their lives. Some journalists might be good people in a general sense; it is more important for journalists to be good journalists, that is, to do what a good journalist would do in the circumstances. Therefore, it is essential here to further specify the earlier discussion about character as a justification for right action by explaining the concept of a *regulative ideal* for journalism that specifies how a good journalist would model his or her behavior to suit that role.

### **Reconciling Conflicts: Internalizing a Regulative Ideal**

Although there are a number of virtues relevant to journalism—justice and integrity being the focus here—it seems fairly clear that there will be differences in the way these virtues are judged by individuals. However, there must be some benchmark to demarcate what range of difference is acceptable. For example, although it may be acceptable as a journalist to lie in some circumstances, there must be some limitations on how often or how severely one may lie in a given circumstance.

Here it is useful to employ the notion of a *regulative ideal*, which is a standard by which one ought to judge one's actions both in a general sense—what it is to be a good journalist—or in a particular circumstance, how ought a journalist to act in this situation, right now.

To say that an agent has a regulative ideal is to say that they have internalized a certain conception of correctness or excellence, in such a way that they are able to adjust their motivation and conduct so that it conforms—or at least does not conflict—with that standard. (Oakley & Cocking, 2001, p. 25)

For example, a man who is to be a good father would internalize a conception of what it is like to be a good father and be guided by that. For journalists, a regulative ideal would consist of understanding what a good journalist is like and to be guided by that. So in this regard, the regulative ideal is something that is happening in the background and foreground. It includes how one generally conducts oneself and also how one would act in a given circumstance, being that one's actions will flow from one's good character.

The basic conception of what a good journalist or a good father is can derive from a number of sources. In the specific case of journalists, it is probably best to draw from both abstract notions of an ideal journalist *and* from one's experiences working with or observing an exemplary journalist, if in fact one has been privy to working with or observing such a person. For example, it is useful for young or aspiring journalists to learn abstract ideals during the course of their education, because they are unlikely to have practiced much actual journalism, wherein to have observed an excellent journalist.

During these professionally formative years, one ought to internalize what one is taught in terms of what values and virtues one ought to have; for example, it would be imperative for one to internalize a notion of a just journalist based on the descriptions of justice described above. One might also develop one's sense of a regulative ideal by internalizing historical renditions of what excellent journalists did in particular circumstances; say, for example, how Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein approached their Watergate reporting.

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Again, any reference to the ideal journalist—whether real or imagined—does not imply a perfect journalist, free of flaws or error, but rather a journalist one would consider excellent because of a range of realistic professional qualities that person possesses. Therefore, there are two ways in which a regulative ideal helps journalists develop morally. First, it helps developing journalists add substance to the notions of key virtues such as justice and integrity, with which they may have little practical experience. Second, it forces them into a certain amount of reflection on their potential actions, which in turn helps them develop their practical wisdom. For example, a fairly experienced journalist may have internalized his regulative ideal so well that she acts excellently

with little reflection. A younger, less experienced journalist, on the other hand, may require a more reflective approach in regard to his regulative ideal. That is, he might think to himself: "I feel inclined to do X, but would (my conception of) the ideal journalist do X?" By no means does this guarantee one will act rightly, but it is, in essence, an activity that promotes moral growth through reflection and experience.

### Agent-Relativity and the Virtue of Integrity

Earlier in this paper, the role of justice as the governing agent-neutral virtue was given as one of the primary advantages virtue ethics offers a professional role morality. However, a second fundamental contribution made by virtue ethics is through its inclusion of *agent-relative goods* as morally salient considerations, as opposed to requiring strictly impartial, or agent-neutral goods, such as justice. In virtue theory, some virtues, particularly the virtue of integrity, allow us to consider that a good of *mine* may give it greater importance to *me* (Oakley & Cocking, 2001).

Several philosophers address integrity as a substantial part of a person's moral being (see, among others, Blustein, 1991; Taylor, 1985; Williams, 1973, 1981). Although their specific accounts of integrity vary to some degree, each draws a relationship between one's integrity and its bearing on one's identity or agency. More specifically, on these accounts, one's integrity involves one maintaining either a "fidelity to those projects and principles which are constitutive of one's core identity," or that one maintains "the purity of one's own agency, especially in dirty hands situations" (Calhoun, 1995, p. 235). Journalistic integrity can include both of these philosophical descriptions of integrity. In the broader scheme of shaping one's moral disposition, one should strive for integrity in the former sense (identity), although in specific situations, one would think of integrity as an action guidance tool in the latter sense (agency).

Journalism is filled with situations in which integrity can be crucial to guiding action, particularly for journalists who have internalized an appropriate regulative ideal. For those who have a sense of what a good journalist is and are willing to modify their behavior to act according to what a good journalist would do, they will act with integrity merely by doing what they believe they have reason to do. Ultimately, this conception of integrity is not particularly complicated; rather, it asks no more than that agents act according to their reasons. Although anyone's reasons or judgments ought to be open to revision—for we all learn from experience, even in terms of moral learning—acting with integrity is acting according to what we believe we have reason to do.

### Death Knocks

One of the common moral dilemmas of journalism arises in instances in which bereaved families are approached by journalists for commentary about their lost or deceased relatives or friends. In many cases, speaking to relatives or friends of the deceased is highly relevant and appropriate for news; for example, if one has been murdered, speaking to a relative of the victim may lead to a more accurate account of the victim's death. In other cases, speaking to a grieving family member—or at least giving family an opportunity to speak—is morally obligatory; for example, if the deceased is likely to be criticized in a story and no one has spoken on the deceased's behalf, it may be that only family or friends can add balance to the story either by confirming certain information (or speculation) or by refuting it.

There are often instances in which police make a speculative claim on the one hand, and the family makes a competing claim on the other (e.g., "No, my son did not kill that man!"). However, if no one bothers to seek information from the family, the deceased may be unjustly criticized. In many cases of violent death, police, witnesses and other sources may give speculative information to reporters that in many cases is incorrect, if not error-laden. Thus, offering close relatives and friends the opportunity to speak on behalf of the deceased is critical to giving a *just* account of the story, even if their claims are later learned to be incorrect. In these cases, a journalist with the virtue of justice—which is typically considered an agent-neutral virtue—would appropriately balance the competing goods between the public and the family depending on who needs each respective good more.

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For there are many instances in which someone has what is considered a traditionally newsworthy death—that is, death by violence or rare and public accidents (auto collisions, etc.)—but the deceased's friends and relatives are either unwilling or emotionally unable to speak with reporters. Yet many reporters or their editors persist in trying to gather commentary despite clear and even angry requests by friends and relatives that they be left alone. Many reporters and editors claim

it is in the public's interest to have this news, thus there is a "right" to know, even at the expense of the bereaved's duress. But reporters ought to be especially careful how invasive they are, particularly because they risk corroding their subject's well-being and their own *integrity*. Integrity here means reporters have an obligation to work within their moral boundaries by acting according to their reasons, even if in some cases they conflict with journalistic conventions or institutional rules. Indeed, such integrity should be a guiding force in the appropriate circumstances.

For example, Jennifer Holmes, a reporter with the *Detroit Free Press*, said one of her most difficult days in journalism was when she covered the vigil for a likely-to-be-dead American soldier who been attacked in the U.S.-Iraq conflict in the late 1980s. She was assigned to speak to the family of Kelly Robert Quick, a missing soldier presumed dead, and had phone contact with his father, Robert. Robert pleaded with Holmes to be left alone, claiming he had done several interviews already and could no longer bear to speak about his son without crying uncontrollably. Holmes said she reported to her editors that she agreed not to interview him because of his high level of grief and despair (Holmes, 1989). Her editors at the *Free Press* were outraged at her concession:

"YOU FOOL!" was the reaction I got from assistant city editor Andrea Ford when I told her. (Or maybe it was "YOU IDIOT"; I can't remember which.) OF COURSE he said that. "You NEVER give them ADVANCE WARNING. You have to take them BY SURPRISE." Andrea continued to lecture me that, "Your job is not to concern yourself with what sources want or don't want. Your job is to GET THE STORY." Then she added, "Too bad you did that. Now it'll be that much harder to get in." (Holmes, 1989, pp. 2-3)

Holmes was ordered back to the Quick home and made another attempt to speak with the family. According to Holmes, Robert Quick graciously accepted her and agreed to make a statement, despite his earlier pleas for privacy. During her interview with Robert Quick, Holmes's editor called the Quick home, demanding to speak with Holmes. The editor implored that Holmes stay there because, the editor had learned, Kelly Quick was just confirmed dead, and Army representatives were on their way to Quick's home to inform the family about his death.

The *Free Press* apparently knew that Kelly Quick was dead and the family did not. Moreover, I was NOT to tell them, and NOT to leave the house, because "the officers in the white uniforms" were on their way to inform them. This was the BIG story, the one we couldn't miss. How the Family Reacted When Told Their Son Was Really Dead. (Holmes, 1989, pp. 2-3)

Ultimately, Holmes left the Quicks' home and went to her own home. She resigned from the *Free Press* and quit journalism.

For the sake of our souls—never mind . . . the newspaper—I think we have to screw up the courage to “Just Say No.” And I don’t think we should assume we’ll all be fired. Not long ago, I noticed an editorial by the most recent executive editor of the *Free Press*, Heath Meriwether, in which he spoke openly to his troops about disaster coverage: “Show compassion,” he said. “If the families don’t want to talk, or allow a photographer, respect that. Put yourselves in their shoes. Treat them the way you would want to be treated in such a situation.” (Holmes, 1989, pp. 4–5)

As we can see, Holmes’s decisions reflected her commitment to both justice and integrity. Although she did err early in her persistence in pursuing the Quick family, her idea of justice and sense of integrity motivated her to resist rash violations of the Quicks’ privacy and dignity. In her parting comments, she incidentally quoted a colloquial principle of justice—treat others as you would like to be treated. In regard to her integrity, Holmes ultimately decided—similar to the thoughts of Bernard Williams (1973) on integrity—there are certain things (required in journalism) she could not live with.

### Conclusion

The paper states several reasons why virtue ethics is preferable to competing moral theories. First, virtue ethics relies on good character and practical wisdom for practical reasoning rather than committing to the strict decision procedures common to both consequentialistic and deontological theories that, to say the least, fail to offer the correct moral judgment for all moral problems. Moreover, with practical wisdom guided by the virtues of justice and integrity, virtuous journalists have both an impartial and agent-relative view of morality.

Second, virtue ethics is particularly suited to journalism because of the profession’s demands—journalism requires quick thinking and is fraught with moral confusion; virtue ethics offers a habituated person who by disposition is prone to make good decisions. As Klaidman and Beauchamp (1987) pointed out in *The Virtuous Journalist*,

Virtuous traits of all kinds are especially significant in crises and environments such as journalism that are often too pressured to permit prolonged and careful reflection. By cultivating moral virtues, doing what is right in these situations can become a matter of course rather than a conflicted debate over how to interpret rules whose meaning and application may be less than clear. (p. 19)

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### Note

1. Although I argue above against the perils presented by utilitarianism's overreliance on predicting consequences as a means to assessing expected happiness, I do not mean to devalue the role of consequence prediction altogether. In many cases, the prediction of consequences is both reasonably reliable and necessary to making good decisions, such as in the aforementioned case of the inquiring murderer. However, unlike utilitarians, I believe these cases are limited, and even so, prone to a significant (but acceptable) degree of error.

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