



A Quantum Theory of Virtue: How to Contradict Oneself and Get Away With It

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The starting point

The philosopher G. Spencer Brown, in his book *Laws of Form* (1969), suggests that all knowing begins with “drawing a line”; that is, with a dichotomy, binary distinction, or dualism. Perhaps this is why dualistic thinking seems to be so over-represented human thinking. Certainly this is true in psychological theory, where there is an abundance of well-accepted dualisms; e.g., nature/nurture, introversion/extroversion, right/left brain hemispheric dominance, Type A vs Type B personality, etc. Indeed, perhaps the most widely accepted dualism is gender and its corresponding psychological concepts such as gender role, gender identity, etc.

Beyond dualism

As we have seen more recently, many dichotomies are giving way to continua, sometimes called “spectrums.” Social scientists have increasingly recognized the gradations and variations of many of the phenomena that used to be considered dichotomous. We talk of where a particular individual falls on the autism spectrum. We struggle with language to address the ever increasing set of categories for gender identity and gender preferences, perhaps nowhere more notable than the evolution of homosexual (or gay) to gay and lesbian to LGBT to LGBTQ and “trans-gendered” and onward. So, in essence, in many areas, we have moved beyond the simple starting point of dichotomizing the world, a move that is necessary, according to Brown (1969), as a starting point in order to know, but a place that is far too simplistic to capture the complexity of many of the phenomena we seek to understand.

One way of moving beyond dualism is to avoid the “zero sum” competitive nature of the dualistic options. In that way, it is typically assumed that the two options are mutually exclusive. That is, one is either male or female, Type A or Type B, intraverted or extraverted, etc. The key point is that one is assumed to be one or the other, but never both. A well known example of this is the nature/nurture debate in human development. This began as a naively dualistic debate. In other words, the original dominant question in this debate was whether human development is a result of one’s biological make-up (nature) *or* a result of what happens to one (nurture)? Theorists and researchers worked hard to answer this fundamentally unanswerable dualistic question. Impressive amounts of good scientific evidence were amassed on both sides of the debate. Animal research studies showed, for example, that rat pups raised without the normal grooming of a mother were poor mothers themselves. The conclusion was that a phenomenon (mothering) that was thought to be instinctive (nature) was in fact impacted significantly by early experiences. On the other side, children who were restricted due to medical conditions from creeping and crawling, quickly learned to walk normally and on time when finally allowed to do so. A competency (walking) that was thought to be

heavily influenced by experience (nurture) turned out to not rely on that. Language learning, which is often assumed to be mainly a learned competency, turns out to have a strong biological component as well. In essence, the dichotomous choice question was unanswerable because it was a meaningless question in that it misrepresented the phenomena under question through a dualistic lens.

Ultimately the unanswerable question (Which is it, nature or nurture?) had to be replaced with what was assumed to be a more meaningful and answerable question; namely, How much of development is due to nature and how much is due to nurture? While just as fundamentally unanswerable because it remained grounded in dualism, this second, somewhat more complex, question also had nefarious consequences. Researchers and theorists lined up to generate support for the degree that different developmental phenomena were influenced by nature and nurture. The most nefarious side of this was the multiple debates about intelligence and race, arguing in some cases that (1) intelligence is heavily impacted by biology and (2) demonstrating that those of one race or another scored higher on intelligence tests and were therefore biologically smarter, and hence superior (e.g., Shockley & Pearson, 1992). It is not worth revisiting the details of this debate here, as it has been raked over the coals many times. Rather, we will conclude that it was another fundamentally unanswerable question due to its grounding in dualism; i.e., an oversimplification of human development. In essence, it understood developmental influence as a dualistic zero sum phenomenon, whereby the influence of one plus the influence of the other were mutually exclusive.

Constructivist psychology (Piaget, 1970), also referred to as cognitive structuralism and cognitive developmental psychology, offered a third question about the nature/nurture relationship, which seems much more veridical of human (and other) nature. How do nature and nurture interact to produce development? Indeed this is where genetics has gone and where psychology has followed. The example I often used to teach this concept to my undergraduate psychology students was the following. If I become angry at someone and punch them in the eye, they are likely to “develop” a black eye. We can then ask the three developmental questions, using my fist as nurture and the biological structures of the person’s eye and surrounding tissue as nature. Employing the first question, we would ask which caused the black eye, my fist impacting the person (nurture) or the person’s facial structure (nurture)? Clearly that is a meaningless question, as the answer is both. We can then switch to the second question, and ask what percentage of the black eye was caused by my fist and what percentage by the person’s face? Again, a meaningless question. The meaningful question is the third non-dualistic question; in this case, how did nurture (my fist) and nature (his face) interact to produce the ensuing development (the black eye)? [Note to reader: I am *not* a violent person, and in fact have never punched anyone in the face. This is simply a very useful and memorable metaphor for communicating this concept.]

Many years ago, Heinz Werner (1948), a seminal thinker in the field of human development, presented his “orthogenetic principle.” Essentially, the orthogenetic principle contends that human development progresses through a pair of interacting but seemingly contradictory processes: differentiation and integration. This is true of both biological and psychological development. One starts as a relatively undifferentiated state (e.g., a single fertilized egg cell or a relatively rigid and predictable set of responses to the world) and through the orthogenetic principle-driven process of development, the initial state becomes differentiated (e.g., the fertilized egg replicates itself and becomes a set of cells and then into specialized cells such as skin or neurons, or the simple set of reflexive responses become differentiated into different responses more specific to the stimuli or circumstances of their enactment). Think about a human neonate, who has a grasping reflex. If something touches her palm, she closes her hand tightly and grasps it. But with development, this grasping reflex becomes increasingly differentiated to accommodate the nature of the different objects

to be grasped, such as mother's index finger, or a bottle, or a blanket, or a favored toy. This is differentiation.

The other part of the orthogenetic principle is integration. The growing array of differentiated structures, behavioral schemes, or other aspects of the person do not merely generate a more complex set, but become a system. The skin cells are not independent of the nervous system which is not independent of the skeletal or muscular system. Rather they are integrated to work together. Similarly, the child's developed set of differentiated ways to grasp, or to suck, or to vocalize are not simply sets of options but also become integrated in more and more complex ways; e.g., so the infant can grasp an object more effectively and then bring it to her mouth to suck on it. As a result, we become complex systems. This is part of the grounding for Relational Developmental Systems theory (Overton & Müller, 2013; Lerner & Callina, 2014), which we will revisit later. Suffice it to say, at this point in the discussion, that RDS describes development as a fluid inter-connected set of constructs which are only fully understandable within broader social systems.

Embracing paradox

One of the frequent impasses or obstacles in character development and education is the focus on seeming paradoxes or even merely incompatibilities in proposed constructs. From the Kohlbergian tradition, the focus on universalism vs relativism is a tension that we will argue is really a solvable paradox. Universalism, in this case, is perhaps best exemplified by the proposition of universal decision-making ethical principles. Relativism, on the other hand, is best exemplified here by virtues and/or values. Kohlberg used the pejorative term "bag of virtues" to underscore the fact that any virtue or set of virtues had to be limited because it could not be universally applied. Any virtue or value will ultimately come into direct conflict with another, and one needed universal decision making principles to resolve value/virtue conflicts.

Such a limitation may be seen in the juxtaposition of two currently popular character concepts: Growth Mindset and Humility. How can individuals simultaneously believe that they can become whatever they want and yet remain humble? Colby and Damon (1992), in their study of moral exemplarity, identified a set of defining criteria for moral exemplars. Some might see a paradox or conflict between the criteria of persistence (sustained commitment) and putting oneself at risk for one's commitments and the criterion of humility. However, as one goes beyond the superficial seeming paradox and explores the nuances of these three criteria, one can see the synergy between them.

The debate about whether character in general, and virtue in particular, can be a meaningful construct is nearly a century old within psychology and is best exemplified by the impressive three volume study by Hartshorne and May (1928-1930), which concluded that character is situationally determined. Subsequent research and reanalyses of Hartshorne and May's data have led many to conclude that they overstated their case and conclusion and that there is evidence of stability in character. A parallel debate existed in the personality psychology literature; i.e., is personality stable or changeable? As described above, this is too simplistic a question as the answer is, "yes." Yes, personality is both stable and changeable.

A different relativism perspective has been argued by cultural relativists, such as Schweder et al. (1987), who contend that virtues and values are culturally generated and hence culturally relative. As in the nature/nurture debate more broadly, as described above, evidence can be amassed on both sides of the universalism vs. cultural relativism argument, rendering the dualistic question meaningless.

Whereas Hartshorne and May (1928-1930) contended that character was too situational to be real, and Schweder et al. (1987) argued in a parallel fashion that character is too culturally relative to be a within-person concept, a recent paper on Relational Development Systems Theory, Lerner and Callina (2014) argues that one can only understand the *development* of character from this RDS lens, as it is essentially a dynamic and multidimensional process of human development. The apparent implication is that one should not think of character as either static nor residing within the individual. In many ways this is parallel to the arguments offered by Klaus Riegel (1976) in his positing of a dialectical frame for psychology in general. Stability was argued, in direct contrapoint to structuralism, as an illusion, as humans are in constant flux, much as Siddhartha concluded in staring at a moving river at the end of Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1971).

Paths to Putting It All Together

We have so far argued that dualism is a sensible starting point to understand a phenomenon, and may indeed be a human tendency; however, it is ultimately too simplistic to capture the complexity of most of human nature. In the field of character and virtue development, this is decidedly true. Debates over whether character/virtue is biological determined or the product of experience, whether it resides within the individual or only in the person/context system, whether it is stable or changeable, etc. are too narrow to effectively describe and understand character and virtue and their development. It is not an “either/or” but rather a “yes/and.” Yes, virtue has a biological base, *and* it is deeply impacted by experience. Yes, virtue is a person-centered characteristic, *and* it is best understood as situated within a relational system. Yes, virtue has stability within an individual, *and* it changes and develops.

I used the metaphor of quantum mechanics in an earlier paper on this topic (Berkowitz, 2014) which was in fact a response to Lerner and Callina's (2014) presentation of Relational Developmental Systems Theory as applied to character development. My argument then and now is that, like the quantum argument that light is, seemingly paradoxically, both a wave and a particle, character is both a relatively stable within-person construct and a product of complex person-system dynamics. To assume dualisms and mutual exclusivity of seemingly opposed concepts is to jump to the conclusion of a paradox prematurely. In the complexity lies the solution.

Recently my staff asked me to clarify the difference between a value and a virtue. So I told them that I deeply *value* the virtue of humility. However, I do not *have* the virtue of humility as I don't embody it in my behavior. I believe humility is valuable but I have not *come to embody* it. This is but one simple nuance in the ways we tend to oversimplify human goodness. Understanding its complexity does not get resolved by RDS, but requires a quantum perspective of “yes, and.”

A further way to understand this stance is directly from Aristotelian virtue theory. Aristotle both posited a set of virtues and argued for the unity of the virtues as a defining characteristic of being a virtuous person. One could argue then that virtue is only a mature end state of ethical development whereby the person has the full suite of integrated virtues. Then one is left without a means of talking about *individual* virtues and left only with the concept of the fully virtuous person. The developmental quandary clearly is how one arrives at this mature end-state, the state of *being* virtuous, without formerly *having* specific virtues.

Furthermore, Kohlberg's “bag of virtues” argument overlaps this and adds even more complexity. Kohlberg would argue that any specific set of virtues is somewhat arbitrary as there are so many to choose from. Even more dauntingly, he argued that virtues will ultimately conflict with each other and hence cannot be universal nor fully explain human goodness, which is why he posited moral reasoning

as the universal aspect of human goodness. Fortunately, Aristotle, in a somewhat parallel fashion, described *phronesis* as the necessary arbiter of moral conflicts. While having certain virtues may not be sufficient to describe ultimate (mature?) human goodness, and while virtues may not be fully stable because of system influences and developmental processes, having the capacity for self-reflection (a Confucian virtue) and ethical reasoning (*phronesis*) can move us in the direction of a fuller veridical understanding of human goodness.

Hence, as we move past the dualism rampant in our attempts to understand virtue and character and human goodness in general, we can see that being open to the possibility of resolving paradoxes (or perhaps even living with the fact of them) can enrich our understanding of virtue and character. It is a dynamic developmental phenomenon, residing in a system with both the person and surrounding contextual entities and processes (human relationships, culture, etc.). It moves through developmental phases, changing yet with each prior state related to each subsequent state (we do not “erase” ourselves every evening when we sleep). Virtues exist with those caveats and it is ethical reasoning and self-knowledge that allow for them to exist as virtues and still compete at times with each other.

So to use the language of virtue theory is *not* to argue for rigidly stable characteristics of the person in some solipsistic sense. Rather it is to acknowledge that there are loci of relatively stable nodes of human goodness in people, but like all other aspects of humans, they are not in isolation from (1) other characteristics of the person, (2) context, nor (3) development and change. We have to be comfortable with living in the world of probabilities and not the dualisms to which we are so intrinsically attracted. Then we can indeed be virtuous.

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