



# **Virtue and the Specificity Principle: An Integrative Approach to Understanding Character**

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## ***Virtue and the Specificity Principle: An Integrative Approach to Understanding Character***

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### ***Abstract***

*Virtue* is a controversial and complex concept. Debates have persisted for millennia regarding the universality and/or plurality of virtues, and about the systems of morality that deem them so. Since at least the time of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, philosophers have sought to identify and describe the intricate constellations of thoughts, feelings, and actions that promote good character and thriving societies, and why. Today, an increasingly global and technologically advanced civilization has afforded scientists and society vast bodies of knowledge along with an ever-expanding appreciation of diverse perspectives and cultural frameworks that define morality and character—in turn, providing reasonable assurance that no substantive debate regarding the nature of virtue will be resolved in this paper.

Nonetheless, we have reason to persist in our efforts of understanding virtue and character in terms of universality and specificity. In societies that are increasingly diverse and multicultural, individuals and groups are often confronted with those representing varying cultural backgrounds and espousing differing moral codes. If reconciliation among, or compromise of, divergent moral priorities cannot be achieved, debates risk devolving into conflict, and civility risks devolving into violence and tribalism. Values specific to hegemonic groups risk eclipsing the realization of social justice for all.

These risks therefore present us with a problematic: What can be described as *universal* regarding virtue and character? Can any such understanding be applied to promoting thriving for *all*? And, if so, what can be learned from the virtually infinite array of context- and culture-specific virtues and manifestations of character?

In the present article, we situate virtue and character within contemporary models of human development, ones framed by a relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory involving mutually influential relations between persons and contexts. We then describe the specificity principle and concept of phronesis as illuminating the context-specific applications of virtue that, we believe, can be grounded in universal principles described by RDS. We illustrate this approach by describing two virtues in particular— forgiveness and humility—and conclude by discussing implications for future research and practice.

### ***Relational Developmental Systems Metatheory and Character Science***

Derived from a process-relational paradigm, RDS metatheory views human development as involving universal functions of an inherently active, living, open, self-constructing (autopoietic), self-organizing, self-regulating (agentic), and integrated/holistic system that is complex and adaptive (Overton, 2015). Thus, the integration of different levels of organization (e.g., biological and social; see Jablonka & Lamb, 2005; Meaney, 2010, 2014) frames understanding of development across the life span and, as such,

emphasizes the concept of mutually influential relations among individuals and their contexts across ontogeny, represented as individual ↔ context relations. These relations, or developmental regulations, serve as the unit of analysis in the exchanges between individuals and their contexts (Brandtstädter, 1998; Lerner, 2006). When these developmental regulations are mutually beneficial for both individual and context, they may be termed *adaptive* developmental regulations (Brandtstädter, 1998).

In contrast to RDS-based perspectives of human development, Cartesian-split, mechanistic metatheory (Overton, 2015) is a common method used to conceptualize character, and frames psychological approaches that emphasize internal constructs and mechanisms as the paramount correlates of character. Such approaches to character research are often more concerned with specific components of the holistic system (e.g., development of moral reasoning and cognition), rather than with creating a platform for a more interesting science that embraces much more complex dynamics and non-ergodic change (e.g., Molenaar & Nesselroade, 2015; Rose, 2016). The individual and context can only be understood in their entirety in reference to one another, never as mutually exclusive entities; therefore, both are necessary and basic components of human development (Lerner, 2018).

The developmental system is sensitive to within- and between-person differences among individuals, as well as to time, and thus acknowledges plasticity, or the potential for change, on both the group and individual levels (Lerner, 2015). The presence of systematic variation in the observed trajectories of intraindividual change, that is, the instantiation of plasticity, allows for an optimistic approach to studying human life. The potential for plasticity in human development lends to the notion that character is a developmental phenomenon. Indeed, character is not a trait-like phenomenon, nor is it fixed (e.g., by genetics) across time and place (Nucci, 2017; Sokol, Hammond, & Berkowitz, 2010; see also Lerner & Callina, 2014; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). The malleability of human development means that conditions may be found to foster mutually adaptive relations between individuals and their contexts (Lerner, 2006).

This integrative foundation of RDS-based theories is equally necessary in understanding character development, and the development of virtues. From an RDS-based perspective, “character... is a multidimensional, relatively plastic feature of adaptive developmental regulations, of mutually beneficial individual ↔ context relations” (Lerner & Callina, 2014, p. 333). Character-related theory and research from an RDS-based perspective could generate knowledge of associations between the individual and his or her specific context, and of how those associations may promote or hinder well-being and thriving on both the personal and societal levels. In addition, RDS-based theories can elucidate how these person ↔ context relations relate to broader levels of the ecology to influence development of character within and across individuals.

From an RDS-based standpoint, human development exists in person ↔ context relations among the multiple, fused levels of an individual’s context over time. Therefore, what might be considered the *universal* aspects of any component of life are that of mutually influential individual ↔ context relations. That is, no person, situation, or behavior is an island—there always exists contextual relations that mutually define and influence the other. Following this logic, then, a universal aspect of positive development or thriving would entail mutually *beneficial* person ↔ context relations, described earlier as adaptive developmental regulations (Brandtstädter, 1998). In turn, a behavior or a person may be deemed virtuous if mutually beneficial person ↔ context relations are promoted as a result (see Lerner & Callina, 2014 for a more in-depth examination).

### ***Specificity Principle: Fusing Phronesis and RDS Metatheory***

How, then, can this concept of universality in RDS metatheory be reconciled with the array of context- and culture-specific virtues? Indeed, elucidating what social science typifies as “universal” might seem to create a chaotic picture for systematic empirical investigation (e.g., by posing difficulty in operationalization and conceptual consistency), particularly when considering the virtually infinite array of individual and contextual variables that allow for and support plasticity. Nonetheless, developmental science offers up, instead, an alternative approach to understanding and qualifying what is universal by providing a principle for evaluating the specific features of adaptive developmental regulations.

From an Aristotelean perspective, phronesis is a term used to describe the wisdom of practical action that informs what virtue to apply, to whom, at what time, and in what amount. In developmental science, such exactness according to situational factors is consistent with the concept of the specificity principle (Bornstein, 2017). The Bornstein (2017) specificity principle entails asking a series of *what* questions: what works (e.g., about a program), for what specific individuals, in what specific contexts, at what specific times (historically and developmentally), for what specific domains of development, and in what specific ways. In regard to acting virtuously, then, phronesis may be regarded as the executive functioning tool useful for discerning what behaviors or responses would be appropriate given a specific situation.

Such specificity suggests that nothing is universal—more precisely, that group-based averages do not and cannot represent any one individual (see also Rose, 2016)—given situational contingencies and between- and within-individual differences. The concept of positive development, that is, one that focuses on mutually beneficial relations among individuals and contexts, marries well with the concept of phronesis, such that the array of individual- and context-specific factors requires attention to specificity in how virtue is elicited.

If we are to, as scientists, empirically explore these concepts holistically and with theoretical soundness, we must bridge the gap between millennia of philosophical groundwork and scientific assessments of virtue. Nucci (2017) and Callina and Lerner (2017) would qualify this movement toward a phronesis-friendly model of virtue as once of “coherence” of character rather than consistency of action. Indeed, to *consistently* apply a behavior that might be considered virtuous in some contexts, without regard to the specific needs of the situation, lacks *coherence* that might truly represent one’s way of being virtuous in the world. Therefore, trait-oriented theories of character fall short in that they tend to prioritize consistency or stability in profiles of character, as compared to considering coherence across situational variation.

Callina and Lerner (2017) proposed that using an RDS-based approach that allows for situational flexibility based on the appropriateness of the virtue required in a particular situation would eliminate this shortcoming of trait-oriented theories. Using RDS as a framework, instead, looks at similarities across similar situations with similar individuals, to assess whether there is a consistency of how virtues are deployed in particular scenarios, and that the constellation of virtues is coherent across those situations. This notion of coherence encompasses (1) that there is a universality of virtue, in that it involves adaptive developmental regulations (increasing mutually beneficial individual ↔ context relations) ; and (2) that there is specificity, or locality, of the dynamics and appropriateness of the virtues across and within individuals and phronesis is the executive functioning tool for navigating such specificity in deploying virtue (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006).

As an example of this proposed model for virtue, such levels of specificity can be organized using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model, where general virtues are evaluated and shaped by the particular levels of context in which an individual is situated, and then finally by one's agentic capabilities (i.e., one's own affect, cognition, and behavior), across the life-span and embedded within historical time. A visual would be as follows: the virtues exist outside of the system of human application in the Platonic *form*. Then, the specificity and appropriateness of the manifestation of that virtue is filtered by the various systems that the virtue "permeates"—that is, the macrosystem of culture, the exosystem of institutions, the microsystem of contexts immediately related to an individual, the mediating mesosystems that join the exo- and microsystems and, finally, the individual, who is comprised of his or her experiences and abilities across historical and developmental time. In keeping with the visual, once the virtue, as we classically understand it, permeates all of the bidirectional systems of one's ecology, the same virtue may be exhibited or manifested by two different individuals in very different manners and still be the same virtue when all human contingencies are stripped from the virtue's manifestation.

### ***Applying the Specificity Principle to Virtues: Two Examples***

We use two examples of moral virtues to illuminate this theoretical model of character for integrating the universal and local aspects of virtue: forgiveness and humility. According to the RDS-based model, the *universal* aspect of virtue is that it promotes mutually beneficial person ↔ context relations, or adaptive developmental regulations. Given the vast array of person- and context-specific variables across time and place, the realization of such universality—that is, in order to understand virtues as promoting mutually beneficial relations—means that *locality* in regard to manifestations and applications of virtue must necessarily vary according to the specificity principle. Phronesis, then, being the executive functioning tool for navigating specificity, enables discerning the practical action to take that may promote personal and societal well-being which, in turn, may be termed virtuous action.

### ***Forgiveness***

Forgiveness involves "a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her" (Enright et al., 1998, p. 47). Its role as a virtue, however, remains controversial and understudied. Although research supports health benefits for the forgiver in managing and letting go of negative emotions (see Toussaint et al., 2015), much less is known about whether forgiveness promotes mutually beneficial relations in human development—that is, do forgiveness responses to injustice benefit the forgiven as well as the forgiver, the persons and the context?

Challenges to forgiveness are not new. Nietzsche (1887/1996) regarded forgiveness as a weakness—a view also held by some clinicians and scholars who challenge the value of forgiveness as a virtue. For instance, Exline et al. (2003) described that some motives to forgive may reflect vice behaviors, including fear of confrontation, avoidance of anger, or prioritizing personal comfort over justice. Others conflate forgiveness with pardoning or justifying bad behavior, and being "too soft on justice" (Worthington,

2005, p. 21). Given such controversy, how could forgiveness be considered a character virtue, and how could such a “virtue” be considered universal?

We argue that such views of forgiveness as a vice behavior may reflect instances of rigid consistency, lacking the coherence allowed by phronesis, in which the specificity principle is applied with the aim of promoting mutually beneficial relations between person and context. We could imagine instances where such rigid consistency of forgiveness responses across contexts might yield outcomes that are less-than mutually beneficial. For instance, consider a victim who forgives a thief out of fear of confrontation or retaliation: the victim may initially feel relief from the negative emotions by transforming them into positive ones; yet the avoidance-motivated response might prevent the thief from being prosecuted, which, in turn, might lead the thief to steal again, putting the community at risk for repeat offenses. Such an instance may not be termed “true” forgiveness, let alone virtuous.

Similarly, another example might involve one who takes a deontological approach to forgiveness, always forgiving interpersonal grievances because forgiveness is deemed the “right thing to do.” The forgiver may risk neglecting his or her own negative experiences, missing opportunities to process and learn from the injustices; and the offender may not be responded to in a way in which positive change can occur; again risking repeat offenses. In these instances, there is a lack of promoting *mutually* beneficial outcomes for forgiver and forgiven (and the community context) and, as such, a lack of justification, from an RDS-based perspective, for counting forgiveness as a virtue.

However, when the proposed universal aspects of virtue are considered—that virtue involves promoting mutually beneficial relations between persons and contexts; and that phronesis, or applying the specificity principle, is used to discern the response that promotes mutually beneficial relations—a coherent view of forgiveness as a virtue may emerge. For instance, the above-noted victims may use forgiveness, first, to recognize, reflect upon, and process their own negative responses to injustice (the emotional and cognitive responses of forgiveness) and, then, may act in such a way (the behavioral response) that promotes justice while seeking to redress the humanity of the offender.

One classic example of such a response may be Pope John Paul II’s forgiveness of his attempted assassin, while the transgressor was still serving time in jail. There was no condoning or pardoning the offense, yet forgiveness allowed the victim to foster positive responses, the offender to be seen as a person with value and dignity, and, perhaps, the community to grow toward restorative justice. Indeed, as Pope John Paul II proclaimed, “The command to forgive does not precede the objective demands of justice, but justice in the correct sense of the word is actually the ultimate aim of forgiveness” (Encyclical no. XIV, quoted in Bronkhorst, 1995, p. 41). Forgiveness, itself, does not need to be consistently ever-present for one to be considered virtuous; instead, the goal of promoting thriving for all involved in the situation, and using phronesis to determine the appropriate response to the specific instance of injustice, guides the forgiving response toward virtue and, as Pope John Paul II described, justice.

More work is indeed needed to further explore such a model of forgiveness as a virtue. Nonetheless, evidence does exist suggesting that forgiveness responses to injustice may promote mutually beneficial outcomes, for the forgiver, the forgiven, and the community. For instance, in regard to school bullying, forgiveness-related interventions have been associated with reducing bullying behaviors and promoting harmonious communities (e.g., Ahmed & Brathwaite, 2006; Hui et al., 2011). In regard to criminal behavior, restorative justice approaches promoting forgiveness have been associated with decreased recidivism (e.g., Sherman et al., 2015) and promoting positive transformational change among offenders

(e.g., Adler & Mir, 2012; Brown, 2011; Straub, 2013). Certainly, in each instance of school bullying and criminal behavior, a rigid and consistent, decontextualized forgiveness response would not produce such outcomes; rather, we can expect that a level of phronesis was applied to understand what specific response, to what specific individual, in what specific amount, at what specific time, and in what specific way, promoted such mutually beneficial outcomes.

## **Humility**

Humility, defined here from the relational humility lens, involves an accurate view of the self with modest self-presentation and an orientation toward others (Van Tongeren & Myers, 2016), and also garners controversy similar to that of forgiveness. Aristotle's theory of virtuous means denotes that pride, not humility, is actually the virtue to strive toward, a balance of arrogance and servility (or humility). This conception of proper pride is that there is an accurate individual perception of strengths. Many faith traditions took the same coin and addressed the opposite side, in that with accurate perceptions of strengths comes the accurate perceptions of limitations and, thus, humility. But this view of humility tended toward servility, which caused issue with those attempting to reconcile Aristotle's proper pride and servility in operationalizing and measuring such a construct in the psychological sciences. Understanding of humility has migrated toward somewhat of a balance, in that there is a recognition of the self and other and that the purpose of humility is to understand what one might lack in the context of interacting with others or something new entirely.

In philosophical literature and psychological considerations, this perspective of humility is both satisfying and frustrating because it holistically accounts for personally recognizing and owning one's limitations, but creates a definitional and measurement nightmare. Owning and recognizing limitations requires some amount of self-confidence in each circumstance, which means that definitions could argue that pride is somehow part of humility and therefore a requisite component of the construct (as compared to being a separate but necessary component of the process of enacting humility). Furthermore, as owning limitations are person- and context-specific, operationalization of a general, consistent construct of humility is near impossible. In creating measures sensitive to such situational contingencies, psychologists have even attempted to assess "specific" humility (e.g., Hoyle, Davisson, Diebels, & Leary, 2016) so as not to assume broad-brush humility for individuals.

One positive component inherent in humility is that its research has lent itself quite easily to the framework of virtues as represented by mutually beneficial relations, in that humility research acknowledges the other in the process of exhibiting the virtues. Humility research has managed to extend past typical psychological research and expanded into management studies and other applied fields. For example, leader humility and the effects on organizations has been a major focus of work in management schools (e.g., Owens & Hekman, 2016), and has led to a movement in larger corporations hiring for capabilities such as *intellectual* humility (Google actually lists this attribute as desirable on some of their job postings). Much research has also emerged on the importance of humility in marriages (e.g., Wang, Edwards, & Hill, 2017) and even better if both partners are humble (Van Tongeren, et al., 2017)! The controversy in humility research is mostly about the definitions of humility and how it is pieced together with the concept of pride, as either separate or fused entities.

Issues in conceptualizing the virtue and vice components of humility fall away when coherence and specificity are applied to understanding the construct, with an emphasis on the mutually beneficial relations between person and context. As noted above, empirical investigations of humility emphasizes such mutually beneficial relations. Humility can be vital to knowledge acquisition and improving contexts through such knowledge, and, as mentioned above, relationship-building and maintenance in various private and public spheres of one's life (e.g., Owens & Hekman, 2016; Wang et al., 2017). It is additionally beneficial for developing other social-emotional competencies, such as empathy and other forms of perspective-taking (e.g., Davis et al., 2011), and even benevolence (Cole Wright, Nadelhoffer, Perini, Langville, Echols, & Venezia, 2016).

That said, there are circumstances where it might not serve individuals to be deferential to others but, instead, to enact a sense of confidence and authority. An example from on-going work at the United States Military Academy on character is that in times of warfare and on-the-ground decision-making, the most prudent course of action is not for the leader of a corps of soldiers to ask his or her subordinates for suggestions on the next step, but rather to take charge and ensure the safety of the individuals in his or her command. Doing otherwise could result in immense harm, and therefore does not provide the necessary component of virtue that is mutually beneficial relations to person and context. Whereas the leader may gain some insight and knowledge from those who have been enlisted soldiers with more field experience (person-benefitting), most likely great danger will befall the corps as the leader delays action and hence invites harm.

In developing a narrative of coherence and specificity, we are brought back to the importance of integrating phronesis into our empirical investigations and theoretical approaches to virtue. Similar to the argument that forgiveness, if elicited consistently across all circumstances, would at times be construed as a vice, humility is subject to the same balancing act with other virtues. Applying specificity and phronesis allows us to ask the questions (1) is this virtue necessary at all in this circumstance, and, if so, (2) what amount of this virtue is appropriate, and in what fashion, that I may benefit both myself and the circumstance overall? These questions give us a coherent, dynamic portrait of virtues where there is a constant process of fore-fronting and dampening virtues based on person, place, and time, and allow us to maintain an overarching perspective of the universal, mutually beneficial relations that result in virtues exhibited in unique and locally-appropriate ways.

These two examples are not exhaustive by any means but exemplify how vital it is to find ways to connect empirical work, applied anecdotes, and phronesis; we believe in elevating the importance of the specificity principle and coherence in exhibiting virtue, as compared to perspectives on consistency, both within and across individuals.

### ***Moving the Needle on Virtue in Developmental Science***

By merging the metatheoretical framework of mutually beneficial individual ↔ context relations in human interaction and behavior with the specificity principle and coherence, something analogous to phronesis, we end up with a method by which to both recognize and exhibit virtue, in a way that is not constrained by merely agentic approaches (traits) or circumstantial approaches (situationism). We instead are left with universal attributes that are, in every circumstance, exhibited as a result of the unique combination of individual, context, and the relations between those components, in a way that is



coherent and yet sensitive to change. Utilizing such an approach to classifying and interpreting virtues also assists in the inclusion/exclusion issue in virtue theory and research, because the metatheoretical approach is comprehensive but also eliminates non-virtues because of the necessary criteria; a more comprehensive approach may then lend itself to more psychometrically robust measures of the virtues, a pervasive issue in the social and behavioral sciences (e.g., Card, 2017).

Some philosophers that have been distraught with the process of getting virtue science up to speed with the complexities of the philosophical foundations (e.g., Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006; Vacarezza, 2017) may read this paper and think, “Bravo, psychology, you have caught up with the theory we have had for thousands of years.” However, the importance of this paper is not to necessarily say that we are developing something novel; rather, we are (1) putting it into terms that feel justified as an empirical researcher, and (2) presenting this perspective at a time where the methods are available to empirically address and scrutinize such a theory. Virtues have had little examination by developmental scientists, which is an unfortunate truth, as developmentalists have the empirical knowledge of change across the life span.

With such an eye for the dynamic nature of the individual and his or her context, we can better understand virtue as it manifests across and within individuals, and more appropriately design contexts that provide positive spaces for furthering the development of aspects of human flourishing, such as character virtues. Having a theory is great, but if it cannot be tested, then it is useless to scientific inquiry. But with a developmental theory and psychological language to frame it, developmental science now has rigorous, complex modeling capabilities that require very little input to get robust output (like continuous time structural equation modeling that integrates Bayesian and frequentist modeling; see Driver, Oud, & Voelkle, 2017). We can also use this developmental, integrated approach to focus on measurements and analyses that address the unity and dynamics of the virtues, and not just the developmental trajectories and idiosyncracies of singular virtues. With such techniques, we can finally take the philosophical theories, armed with social science, and empirically explore what has been hypothesized about in the past.

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