

SECTION I

BACKGROUND

1. INTRODUCTION TO A “MANUAL OF THE SANITIES”

The classification of strengths presented in this book is intended to reclaim the study of character and virtue as legitimate topics of psychological inquiry and informed societal discourse. By providing ways of talking about character strengths and measuring them across the life span, this classification will start to make possible a science of human strengths that goes beyond armchair philosophy and political rhetoric. We believe that good character can be cultivated, but to do so, we need conceptual and empirical tools to craft and evaluate interventions.

In recent years, strides have been made in understanding, treating, and preventing psychological disorders. Reflecting this progress and critically helping to bring it about are widely accepted classification manuals—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* sponsored by the American Psychiatric Association (1994) and the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD)* sponsored by the World Health Organization (1990)—which have generated a family of reliable assessment strategies and have led to demonstrably effective treatments for more than a dozen disorders that only a few decades ago were intractable (Nathan & Gorman, 1998, 2002; Seligman, 1994). Lagging behind but still promising in their early success are ongoing efforts to devise interventions that prevent various disorders from occurring in the first place (e.g., M. T. Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 1999).

Consensual classifications and associated approaches to assessment provide a common vocabulary for basic researchers and clinicians, allowing communication within and across these groups of professionals as well as with the general public. Previous generations of psychiatrists and psychologists had no certainty, for example, that patients in London who were diagnosed with schizophrenia had much in common with patients in Topeka receiving the same diagnosis. They had no reason to believe that an effective psychological or pharmaceutical treatment of ostensible depressives in Johannesburg would be useful for supposed depressives in Kyoto.

With recent incarnations of the *DSM* and *ICD*, matters have begun to change, but only for half of the landscape of the human condition. We can now describe and measure much of what is wrong with people, but what about those things that are right? Nothing comparable to the *DSM* or *ICD* exists for the good life. When psychiatrists and psychologists talk about mental health, wellness, or well-being, they mean little more than the absence of disease, distress, and disorder. It is as if falling short of diagnostic criteria should be the goal for which we all should strive. Insurance companies and health maintenance organizations (HMOs) reimburse the treatment of disorders but certainly not the promotion of happiness and fulfillment. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) should really be called the National Institute of Mental Illness because it devotes but a fraction of its research budget to mental health.

This handbook focuses on what is right about people and specifically about the strengths of character that make the good life possible. We follow the example of the *DSM* and *ICD* and their collateral creations by proposing a classification scheme and by devising assessment strategies for each of its entries. The crucial difference is that the domain of concern for us is not psychological illness but psychological health. In short, our goal is “a manual of the sanities” (Easterbrook, 2001, p. 23).

We write from the perspective of positive psychology, which means that we are as focused on strength as on weakness, as interested in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst, and as concerned with fulfilling the lives of normal people as with healing the wounds of the distressed (Seligman, 2002). The past concern of psychology with human problems is of course understandable and will not be abandoned anytime in the foreseeable future. Problems always will exist that demand psychological solutions, but psychologists interested in promoting human potential need to pose different questions from their predecessors who assumed a disease model of human nature. We disavow the disease model as we approach character, and we are adamant that human strengths are not secondary, derivative, illusory, epiphenomenal, parasitic upon the negative, or otherwise suspect. Said in a positive way, we believe that character strengths are the bedrock of the human condition and that strength-congruent activity represents an important route to the psychological good life.

What distinguishes positive psychology from the humanistic psychology of the 1960s and 1970s and from the positive thinking movement is its reliance on empirical research to

understand people and the lives they lead. Humanists were often skeptical about the scientific method and what it could yield yet were unable to offer an alternative other than the insight that people were good. In contrast, positive psychologists see both strength and weakness as authentic and as amenable to scientific understanding.

There are many good examples of ongoing psychological research that fit under the positive psychology umbrella (see collections by Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Chang, 2001; Gillham, 2000; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; R. M. Lerner, Jacobs, & Wertlieb, 2003; Snyder, 2000b; Snyder & Lopez, 2002), but this new field lacks a common vocabulary that agrees on the positive traits and allows psychologists to move among instances of them. We imagine that positive psychology as a whole would be benefited—indeed, shaped and transformed—by agreed-upon ways for speaking about the positive, just as the *DSM* and *ICD* have shaped psychiatry, clinical psychology, and social work by providing a way to speak about the negative. We believe that the classification of character presented here is an important step toward a common vocabulary of measurable positive traits.

Our project coincides with heightened societal concern about good character (Hunter, 2000). After a detour through the hedonism of the 1960s, the narcissism of the 1970s, the materialism of the 1980s, and the apathy of the 1990s, most everyone today seems to believe that character is important after all and that the United States is facing a character crisis on many fronts, from the playground to the classroom to the sports arena to the Hollywood screen to business corporations to politics. According to a 1999 survey by Public Agenda, adults in the United States cited “not learning values” as the most important problem facing today’s youth. Notably, in the public’s view, drugs and violence trailed the absence of character as pressing problems.

But what is character? So long as we fail to identify the specifics, different groups in our society—despite their common concern for human goodness—will simply talk past one another when attempting to address the issue. For instance, is character defined by what someone does *not* do, or is there a more active meaning? Is character a singular characteristic of an individual, or is it composed of different aspects? Does character—however we define it—exist in degrees, or is character just something that one happens, like pregnancy, to have or not? How does character develop? Can it be learned? Can it be taught, and who might be the most effective teacher? What roles are played by families,

schools, peers, youth development programs, the media, religious institutions, and the larger culture? Is character socially constructed and laden with idiosyncratic values, or are there universals suggesting a more enduring basis?

The emerging field of positive psychology is positioned to answer these sorts of questions. Positive psychology focuses on three related topics: the study of positive subjective experiences, the study of positive individual traits, and the study of institutions that enable positive experiences and positive traits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Our classification project addresses the second of these topics and in so doing hopes to shed light on the first. One eventual benefit of the classification we propose may be the identification or even the deliberate creation of institutions that enable good character.

■ Thinking About Classification: Lessons From Systematics

Like everyday people, social scientists are fond of making lists: for example, enumerating defense mechanisms, emotional disorders, personality traits, job types, psychosexual stages, parenting practices, attachment styles, and so on. Unlike everyday people, social scientists often go on to reify their lists by giving them “scientific” labels like classifications or taxonomies. Scientific credibility is not gained by assertion but by making sure that the label fits. We call our endeavor an aspirational classification. What does this mean?

A *scientific classification* parses some part of the universe first by demarcating its domain and second by specifying mutually exclusive and exhaustive subcategories within that domain. Both sorts of parsing rules need to be explicit and demonstrably reliable. The validity of a classification is judged by its utility vis-à-vis one or more stated purposes. Are classifiers more interested in marking the perimeter of a scientific territory or in detailing an already agreed-upon domain? Is the classification intended to catalog already known instances or to accommodate new ones as they are encountered? Is it intended to inspire research or to guide intervention?

A classification should not be confused with a *taxonomy*, which is based on a deep theory that explains the domain of concern (K. D. Bailey, 1994). Why these entries but not others? What is the underlying structure? That is, how do the entries relate to one another? When melded with evolutionary theory, for example, the Linnaean classification of species becomes a profound theory of life and the course that it has taken over the

millennia. A good taxonomy has the benefits of a good theory: It organizes and guides the activity of an entire discipline.

But there is an important caution here. Along with their added value, taxonomies have a cost not incurred by classifications. Suppose the theory that girds a taxonomy is wrong, contradictory, or inarticulate? Then the activity that is organized and guided becomes self-defeating. Furthermore, it proves highly difficult to change the entries of a taxonomy, even in minor ways, because so much else linked together by the deep theory needs to be altered as a consequence.

Our classification is concerned with human strengths and virtues. From the perspective of positive psychology, itself a new endeavor, the domain of human excellence is largely unexplored. At the beginning of this project, we created a tentative “taxonomy,” but it proved beyond our ability to specify a reasonable theory (as a taxonomy requires). However, our efforts did convince us that it was possible to approach closely the classification goals of staking out territory (i.e., defining virtues valued in most cultures) and subdividing it (i.e., specifying instances of these virtues). Our measurement intent of necessity led us to articulate explicit rules for what counts as a strength or not (inclusion and exclusion criteria) and for distinguishing various strengths from one another. These rules further provide the basis for adding new instances of character strengths to the classification.

We already knew our constituencies—psychology researchers and practitioners—and their needs kept us on task as we devised assessment strategies. We disavow all intents to propose a taxonomy in the technical sense, even though previous drafts of our work used that term. A modest description of our endeavor—an aspirational classification of strengths and virtues—preserves the flexibility necessary to proceed. A thoughtful classification, even if tentative, will serve the goals of psychology more productively than a flawed taxonomy, even if the surface entries look exactly the same. We trust to the emerging field of positive psychology as a whole to create one or more theories that will conceptually unify our classification.

■ Thinking About Classification Part Two: Lessons From the *DSM*

As noted, an older cousin of our classification of strengths and virtues is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* sponsored by the American Psychiatric

Association (1952, 1968, 1980, 1987, 1994). A catalog of problematic ways of behaving, the *DSM* for several reasons has been a runaway success. First, it has made research into psychological disorders possible by providing a common vocabulary that lends itself to scientific operationalization (measurement). More subtly, the *DSM* has guided research programs by legitimizing investigations of some disorders rather than others. Finally, important societal institutions have endorsed the *DSM*, explicitly or implicitly: the American Psychiatric Association with its imprimatur, NIMH with its funding, insurance companies and HMOs with their reimbursement codes, the pharmaceutical industry, psychiatry and clinical psychology journals, and textbook publishers. Whatever one might think of the *DSM*, one must be conversant with its details in order to function as a mental “health” professional.

The *DSM* is far from perfect, and its weaknesses as well as its strengths have guided us. What are the positive and negative lessons that can be learned from the various incarnations of the *DSM* over its 50-year history? On the positive side, the *DSM* has moved toward behaviorally based criteria and proposed explicit rules for recognizing disorders of interest; it has spawned a family of structured clinical interviews and self-report questionnaires that allow these disorders to be reliably assessed; and, at least in principle, it has moved toward multidimensional (multi-axial) description, doing justice to the complexity of the subject matter it tries to organize. Thus, a full *DSM* diagnosis notes not only clinical disorders (Axis I) but also personality and developmental disorders (Axis II), medical conditions (Axis III), prevailing stressors (Axis IV), and global level of functioning (Axis V).

Following the *DSM* example, our classification includes explicit criteria for character strengths, and it has led us to develop a family of assessment devices ([chapter 28](#)). Finally, the present classification is multi-axial in the sense that it directs the attention of positive psychology not only to character strengths but also to talents and abilities, to conditions that enable or disable the strengths, to fulfillments that are associated with the strengths, and to outcomes that may ensue from them.

There are also negative lessons of the *DSM*, especially from the viewpoint of psychology (Schacht & Nathan, 1977). This taxonomy is focused too much on transient symptoms; it is reductionistic and at the same time overly complex, shaped by temporary trends within psychiatry (Vaillant, 1984). Even the current version of the *DSM* lacks an

overall scheme, fails to be exhaustive, and—given its medical roots—does not attend much to the individual's setting and culture. It uses categories rather than dimensions, and mixed or not otherwise specified (NOS) diagnoses are among the most frequently used. Many diagnostic entities are so heterogeneous that two individuals warranting the same diagnosis could have no symptoms in common. *DSM* disorders are not well located in their developmental trajectory. Some critics have argued that considerations of reliability have crowded out considerations of validity, and in any event that there are too many disorders (more than 300), perhaps by an order of magnitude or more (Goodwin & Guze, 1996).

What are the implications for our classification of these negative lessons? We hope to do for the domain of moral excellence (character strengths and virtues) what the *DSM* does well for disorders while avoiding what it does poorly. Thus, our classification is based on an overall structure of moral virtues suggested by our historical and cross-cultural reviews. It includes a manageable number of character strengths (24) and is open to the possibility of consolidating those that prove empirically indistinguishable, as well as adding new strengths that are distinct. It approaches character strengths as individual differences—as continua and not categories—and is sensitive to the developmental differences in which character strengths are displayed and deployed. Finally, our creation of assessment instruments never subordinated validity issues to those of reliability.

It is ironic that many of the shortcomings of the *DSM* have resulted from its very success. *DSM-III* and its subsequent versions grew out of a modest attempt some thirty years ago by researchers to standardize the operational definitions of a handful of psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia and manic depression (Feighner et al., 1972). Reliability was the chief goal, and the psychiatric research community was the intended audience. The research diagnostic criteria (RDC) that were the seeds of the modern *DSM* were intended only to be a starting point for research, a common vocabulary to facilitate communication among different research groups investigating ostensibly the same disorder. No one envisioned that the RDC would grow into the dominant taxonomy of psychopathology worldwide, carrying along all that the term taxonomy conveys: for example, implication of a theoretical deep structure, exhaustiveness, reification, and accountability to multiple (and quarreling) constituencies.

We have no way of forecasting the eventual success of the present classification, but we will be satisfied if it provides to psychologists ways of thinking about strengths, naming

them, and measuring them. Its proof will be in the science that develops around it, including thoughtful interventions that nurture character strengths in the first place or get them back on track if they have gone astray.

We express two related worries about the science of good character that we envision. First, this science will not thrive if it generates only ho-hum findings that every Sunday school teacher or grandparent already knew. It would be important to show, for example, that prudent individuals avoid unwanted pregnancies or that loving people have good marriages, but these results are not all that interesting. They would not attract to positive psychology the most curious and imaginative scientists from future generations. More intriguing are findings such as:

- the diminishing returns of material wealth for increasing subjective well-being (D. G. Myers & Diener, 1995)
- the lack of realism associated with optimism (Alloy & Abramson, 1979)
- the forecasting of presidential elections from the positive traits of candidates (Zulrow, Oettingen, Peterson, & Seligman, 1988)
- the increased life expectancy of Academy Award winners relative to runners-up (Redelmeier & Singh, 2001)
- the increased life expectancy of those who hold a positive view of aging (B. R. Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002)
- the prediction of marital satisfaction from smiles in college yearbooks (Harker & Keltner, 2001)
- the foretelling of longevity from expressions of happiness in essays by young adults (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001)

Second, we hope that the new science of character addresses explicitly what is invigorating about the good life. As we have written parts of this book, we sometimes found ourselves sounding like bad evangelists, going on and on about virtue but convincing no one, even ourselves, that virtue is worth pursuing. We do not want a grim-faced Cotton Mather as the poster child of positive psychology.

The solution to these potential pitfalls is not at hand. If it were, we would have made it an integral part of our proposed classification. We suspect that the solution lies in yet-to-be-articulated good theory that makes sense of the classification entries, individually and

collectively. To hark back to a distinction already made, positive psychology will thrive when classifications like the one here evolve into taxonomies—when there become available one or more deep theories of the good life.

We also suspect that it will be useful for psychologists to keep in mind that our classification is grounded in a long philosophical tradition concerned with morality explained in terms of virtues. The very first Greek philosophers asked, “What is the good of a person?” This framing of morality led them to examine character and in particular virtues. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and others enumerated such virtues, regarding them as the traits of character that make someone a good person.

Moral philosophy changed with the growing influence of Christianity, which saw God as the giver of laws by which one should live. Righteous conduct no longer stemmed from inner virtues but rather from obedience to the commandments of God. The guiding question therefore changed from inquiries about the traits of a good person to “What are the right things to do?” As Christianity waned in importance, divine law eventually gave way to a secular equivalent dubbed moral law, but the focus remained on specifying the rules of right conduct as opposed to strengths of character. Such well-known ethical systems as ethical egoism, utilitarianism, and social contract theory fall under the umbrella of moral law.

In recent decades, there have been calls within philosophy for a return to the ethics of virtue, starting with Anscombe’s (1958) influential criticism that modern moral philosophy was incomplete because it rested on the notion of a law without a lawgiver. Virtue ethics is the contemporary approach within philosophy to strengths of character, and we believe that virtues are much more interesting than laws, at least to psychologists, because virtues pertain to people and the lives they lead. Said another way, psychology needs to downplay prescriptions for the good life (moral laws) and instead emphasize the why and how of good character.

■ Unpacking Character

There are various ways to approach character. A *DSM*-like approach would talk about it as unitary and categorical—one either has character or not. Or one could think about character in terms of underlying processes such as autonomy or reality orientation. One might wed it to an a priori theory. One could view character as only a social construction,

revealing of the observer's values but not of who or what is observed. But in all these respects we have taken a different approach.

The stance we take toward character is in the spirit of personality psychology, and specifically that of trait theory, but not the caricature of trait theory held up as a straw man and then criticized by social learning theorists in the 1970s. We instead rely on the new psychology of traits that recognizes individual differences that are stable and general but also shaped by the individual's setting and thus capable of change. The initial step in our project is therefore to unpack the notion of character—to start with the assumption that character is plural—and we do so by specifying the separate strengths and virtues, then devising ways to assess these as individual differences. What we learn can be used to answer other questions about character: its dimensionality, its stability, its enabling conditions and consequences, and so on.

Some of our colleagues who are just as concerned with the good life prefer to look exclusively outside the individual to identify and create the conditions that enable health. They either distrust the notion of character because of its inadvertent political connotations or believe that psychological factors pale in comparison to the impact of situations. We also believe that positive traits need to be placed in context; it is obvious that they do not operate in isolation from the settings, proximal and distal, in which people are to be found. A sophisticated psychology locates psychological characteristics within people and people within their settings broadly construed. Some settings and situations lend themselves to the development and/or display of strengths, whereas other settings and situations preclude them. Settings cannot be allowed to recede into the distant background when we focus on strengths.

Enabling conditions as we envision them are often the province of disciplines other than psychology, but we hope for a productive partnership with these other fields in understanding the settings that allow the strengths to develop. Our common sense tells us that enabling conditions include educational and vocational opportunity, a supportive and consistent family, safe neighborhoods and schools, political stability, and (perhaps) democracy. The existence of mentors, role models, and supportive peers—inside or outside the immediate family—are probably also enabling conditions. There is no reason to think that these conditions equally predispose each of the strengths of interest to us or conversely that all the strengths are equally enabled by a given condition.

We can only do so much at present, but a future goal would be to characterize the properties of settings that enable strengths and virtues (Park & Peterson, 2003b). This characterization would point to features of the physical environment (e.g., naturalness, beauty, and feng shui as studied by environmental psychologists); the social environment (e.g., empowerment as studied by social workers and community psychologists); and both (e.g., predictability and controllability as studied by learning psychologists, novelty and variety as studied by organizational psychologists).

With this said, it is just as obvious that individuals and their traits need to be accorded a central role in understanding the good life. It is individual people, after all, who lead these lives. Despite the importance of the situation in shaping the characteristics of people, everyone brings something to the situation, and everyone takes something away from it. Among the most important of these “somethings” is character, construed as positive traits. The hazards of a personless environmentalism are well known within psychology, and we do not intend to blunder into them.

Another reason to avoid radical environmentalism is that it is spectacularly unwieldy to talk about the good life as being imposed on a person, in the way that psychological troubles can be imposed by trauma and stress. Situations of course make it more or less difficult to live well, but the good life reflects choice and will. Quality life does not simply happen because the Ten Commandments hang on a classroom wall or because children are taught a mantra about just saying no. Again, character construed as positive traits allows us to acknowledge and explain these features of the good life. What makes life worth living is not ephemeral. It does not result from the momentary tickling of our sensory receptors by chocolate, alcohol, or Caribbean vacations. The good life is lived over time and across situations, and an examination of the good life in terms of positive traits is demanded. Strengths of character provide the needed explanation for the stability and generality of a life well lived.

In focusing on strengths of character, we expect them to be numerous but not overwhelmingly so. We treat them as individual differences, in principle and often in practice distinct from one another. We treat them as stable, by definition, but also as malleable, again by definition.

In this first chapter, we lay the foundation of our classification: (a) the overall scheme we devised, which rests on distinctions among virtues, character strengths, and situational

themes; (b) the process by which we generated and decided upon entries; and (c) the criteria for a character strength we used to decide which candidate strengths to include and which to exclude. In the course of describing the foundation, we also mention:

- the differences between strengths of character on the one hand and talents and abilities on the other hand
- the situational conditions that enable or disable strengths
- the fulfillments that are inherent aspects of the exercise of character strengths
- the outcomes that may follow from strengths

The focus of the present classification is on strengths, just as the focus of the *DSM* is on clinical disorders. Also like the *DSM*, our classification recognizes that its domain must eventually be described in multiaxial terms. Thus, the identification of someone's signature character strengths would be noted on an Axis I, whereas talents and abilities, enabling and disabling conditions, fulfillments, and outcomes would be noted on additional axes.

■ Distinguishing Virtues, Character Strengths, and Situational Themes

We have found it useful to recognize the components of good character as existing at different levels of abstraction. Thus, our classification scheme is not only horizontal but also vertical (specifying different conceptual levels in a hierarchy). Philosophical approaches to character also propose hierarchies among virtues, but for a different purpose. Because enumerated virtues are numerous and potentially in conflict, philosophers introduce a hierarchy to explain when one or another virtue should be manifested. Indeed, a great deal of discussion has tried to enumerate master virtues (e.g., wisdom, courage, love) that take precedence over all the others. None has won universal acceptance, and we suspect that the master varies across cultures and individuals.

Regardless, our hierarchy is one of abstraction. As psychologists, we are less daunted than philosophers about adjudicating conflicts among character strengths because the relationship of traits to action and the melding of disparate traits into a singular self are after all the concerns of modern personality psychology. The present classification lists character strengths, as have philosophers for centuries, but our categories bring with them rich psychological content and strategies of measurement and hence explanatory power out of the realm and reach of philosophy.

Our hierarchical classification of positive characteristics was modeled deliberately on the Linnaean classification of species, which also ranges from the concrete and specific (the individual organism) through increasingly abstract and general categories (population, subspecies, species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, kingdom, and domain). We distinguish three conceptual levels:

Virtues are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These six broad categories of virtue emerge consistently from historical surveys, as detailed in [chapter 2](#). We argue that these are universal, perhaps grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence as means of solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species. We speculate that all these virtues must be present at above-threshold values for an individual to be deemed of good character.

Character strengths are the psychological ingredients—processes or mechanisms—that define the virtues. Said another way, they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues. For example, the virtue of wisdom can be achieved through such strengths as creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, and what we call perspective—having a “big picture” on life. These strengths are similar in that they all involve the acquisition and use of knowledge, but they are also distinct. Again, we regard these strengths as ubiquitously recognized and valued, although a given individual will rarely, if ever, display all of them. We are comfortable saying that someone is of good character if he or she displays but 1 or 2 strengths within a virtue group. Our classification includes 24 strengths, positive traits like bravery, kindness, and hope. At this juncture, we intend these strengths as neither exclusive nor exhaustive, but we expect that subsequent research will help us achieve a nearly exclusive and exhaustive list. This sort of goal has eluded the *DSM*, perhaps because its entries have become too entrenched and attracted too many constituencies, but we intend differently for our classification.

Situational themes are the specific habits that lead people to manifest given character strengths in given situations. The enumeration of themes must take place setting by setting, and it is only for the workplace that this inquiry has begun in earnest. The Gallup Organization has identified hundreds of themes relevant to excellence in the workplace, of which 34 are especially common in the contemporary United States (Buckingham &

Clifton, 2001). Among the Gallup Organization's situational work themes are empathy (anticipating and meeting the needs of others), inclusiveness (making others feel part of the group), and positivity (seeing what is good in situations and people).

Remember that these themes are meant to describe how one relates to others in the workplace, but if we look at them a bit more abstractly, empathy, inclusiveness, and positivity all reflect the same character strength of kindness. And if we look at kindness even more abstractly, this character strength—along with the strengths we call love and social intelligence—falls into the broad virtue class of humanity.

On a conceptual level, themes differ from character strengths in several crucial ways. First, they are thoroughly located in specific situations. Work themes are different from family themes, for example, although there may be some overlap in labels. Someone may be competitive at work and at home, but these themes manifest themselves differently. In other cases, a theme may make sense only for describing conduct in a given setting. Even within a domain like work or family, themes may differ across cultures, cohorts, gender, and other important social contrasts. Including themes in our scheme buffers us against the legitimate criticism that there is huge sociocultural variation in how people conceive of goodness. The variation exists at the level of themes, less so at the level of character strengths, and not at all—we assert—at the level of virtues.

Finally, themes per se are neither good nor bad; they can be used to achieve strengths and hence contribute to virtues, but they can also be harnessed to silly or wrong purposes. A sprinter does well (as an athletic competitor) if she tries to run her races as quickly as possible, but a spouse probably does not do well (as a marital partner) if speed is the paramount consideration. A related point about themes is that people can achieve the same result by using different configurations of them. There are different ways to be a good clerk, a good teacher, or—for our purposes—a good person. What is critical is that someone finds a venue in which his or her themes are productive for the desired end.

■ Generating Entries for the Classification

We generated the entries for the classification by work on different fronts. Initial brainstorming involved a core group of scholars (Donald Clifton, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, Ed Diener, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Robert Nozick, Daniel Robinson, Martin Seligman, and George Vaillant), who created a tentative list of human strengths. Christopher Peterson

later joined this group and helped elaborate the initial list, which was presented at several positive psychology conferences and further refined after discussions with conference participants too numerous to mention. Between conferences, Peterson and Seligman devised the framework for defining and conceptualizing strengths that structures this book. Especially helpful were several conversations among Peterson, Seligman, and Marcus Buckingham of the Gallup Organization about the relationship between the present classification and Gallup's work on workplace themes. Also critical were surveys by Peterson of pertinent literatures that addressed good character, from psychiatry, youth development, philosophy, and of course psychology (see [chapter 3](#) for summaries of these literature reviews).

We also collected dozens of inventories of virtues and strengths, from historical luminaries like Charlemagne (S. E. Turner, 1880) and Benjamin Franklin (1790/1961) to contemporary figures like William Bennett (1993) and Sir John Templeton (1995). We consulted statements by the Boy Scouts of America and the Girl Guides of Canada as well as those attributed, with tongue in cheek, to the Klingon Empire. We looked at the goals specified by advocates of character education programs (e.g., M. W. Berkowitz, 2000) and social work from the strengths perspective (e.g., Saleebey, 1992). We identified virtue-relevant messages in Hallmark greeting cards, bumper stickers, *Saturday Evening Post* covers by Norman Rockwell, personal ads, popular song lyrics, graffiti, Tarot cards, the profiles of Pokémon characters, and the residence halls of Hogwarts.

Our intent was to leave no stone unturned in identifying candidate strengths for the classification. We combined redundancies and used the criteria described in the next section to winnow the list further. Had we neglected any character strengths deemed important by others, no matter how vaguely defined these might be? And if we had left out someone's enumerated strength, did we have a good reason? For example, we excluded from our classification talents and abilities (e.g., intelligence) and characteristics not valued across all cultures (e.g., cleanliness, frugality, silence). We were not bothered if we had included a virtue or strength not specified in a particular catalog, because the purpose of each catalog dictates its emphases. For example, Charlemagne's code of chivalry for knights of the Holy Roman Empire did not urge them to appreciate beauty, but why should it have? Nor did it urge upon them bravery, because that virtue was a given.

Our initial brainstorming about positive characteristics spontaneously took place at the level of character strengths, which in retrospect suggests that they constitute what Rosch and colleagues (1976) labeled a “natural” level of categorization. Strengths are akin to cats and dogs, tables and chairs: categories that people readily use to make sense of the world in which they live (in this case the moral character of themselves and others). Rosch et al. proposed that natural categories emerge as a way for people to categorize the world at a level that maximizes the perceptual similarity among objects within a category and the perceptual dissimilarity between these objects and those in other categories. Consider this hierarchy:

- kitchen table
- table
- furniture

Their argument is that table represents the basic—that is, natural—level at which people most easily categorize objects. Kitchen table is too concrete, whereas furniture is too abstract. Empirical studies support this idea, showing that cognitive processes such as recognition proceed most efficiently when content is at the basic level. Also, when children start to name objects, they first use terms from the basic level. “Perception” in this analysis should not be taken too literally because it is clear that natural categories exist not just in the realm of things that can literally be seen but also in less tangible realms, such as abnormality or, in the present case, character.

There is an important implication of viewing character strengths as natural categories: Each category encompasses a group of related traits. Together, this group of traits captures the “family resemblance” of the strength, although given traits within the same category are *not* exact replicas of one another (Wittgenstein, 1953). We emphasize this point because we introduce the character strengths in most cases by listing related traits. Thus, the character strength of hope is rendered fully as hope, optimism, future-mindedness, and future orientation ([chapter 25](#)). But the reader should not expect to find detailed distinctions within these lists. We instead emphasize the family resemblance.

We call this strategy one of *piling on synonyms*, and besides being faithful to the actual semantic texture of natural categories, it pays the benefit of minimizing subtle connotations, political and otherwise, associated with any given synonym. Thus, “hope”

has Christian connotations, which we do not wish to emphasize, whereas “future orientation” has socioeconomic connotations, which we likewise do not wish to emphasize. The only downside is that our shorthand identification of a strength (e.g., “hope”) may not convey the acknowledged heterogeneity of the strength.

■ Criteria for a Strength of Character

In this book, we focus on character strengths, the intermediate level of our classification, because they represent a good balance between the concrete (themes) and the abstract (moral virtues). To be included as a character strength, a positive characteristic must satisfy most of the following 10 criteria. These criteria were articulated after we had identified many dozens of candidate strengths and needed a way to consolidate them. We came up with these 10 criteria by scrutinizing the candidate strengths and looking for common features. About half of the strengths included in our classification meet all 10 criteria, but the other half of them do not. Thus, these criteria are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for character strengths but rather pertinent features that, taken together, capture a “family resemblance” (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953).

CRITERION 1 A strength contributes to various fulfillments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others. Although strengths and virtues determine how an individual copes with adversity, our focus is on how they fulfill an individual.

In keeping with the broad premise of positive psychology, strengths allow the individual to achieve more than the absence of distress and disorder. They “break through the zero point” of psychology’s traditional concern with disease, disorder, and failure to address quality of life (Peterson, 2000).

There is a long tradition within philosophy that discusses the meaning of fulfillment. Hedonists and epicurians notwithstanding, most other philosophers agree that fulfillment should not be confused with momentary pleasure or happiness per se, if happiness is construed only as the presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect (Seligman, 2002). Rather, what counts as a fulfillment must pass the *deathbed test*. How might people, if able to collect their thoughts in the face of death, complete the sentence: “I wish I had spent more time ____”? It is doubtful that anyone would say “visiting Disneyland” or “eating butter pecan ice cream.” These activities are fun but not fulfilling. At least in our

society, the deathbed test is instead met by activities that pertain to work and love broadly construed, as in “I wish I had spent more time making a mark on the world” and “I wish I had spent more time getting to know my children and being kind to my friends.” In a less secular society, people might wish that they had spent more time praising God and giving thanks.

It seems that fulfillments must reflect effort, the willful choice and pursuit over time of morally praiseworthy activities. This is why we chose our language carefully to say that character strengths “contribute” to fulfillments rather than “cause” them in the automatic way that Jägermeister causes intoxication. There are no shortcuts to fulfillment.

We hope this analysis does not smack too strongly of Puritanism. We are not opposed to pleasure, and we are certainly not opposed to shortcuts. Self-adhering postage stamps, cruise control, panty hose, plastic garbage bags with drawstrings, microwave popcorn, air-conditioning, canned foods, and automatic redial are among the most noteworthy inventions of the modern world precisely because they are shortcuts. But the value of these and other shortcuts is that they save time and effort that would otherwise be spent on unfulfilling pursuits. The moral significance of a shortcut is only indirect, judged by what one does with the time and effort that have been saved.

What, then, is this contributory relationship of character strengths to fulfillments? Our thinking here has been by the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia*, which holds that well-being is not a consequence of virtuous action but rather an inherent aspect of such action. We want to allow for the possibility that some of the ostensible outcomes of the strengths (fulfillments) do not show up at some later point in time, caused as it were by the strength, but instead are part and parcel of the actions that manifest the strength. For example, when you do a favor for someone, your act does not cause you to be satisfied with yourself at some later point in time; being satisfied is an inherent aspect of being helpful.

At present, we have little data on this point, but we believe that given people possess *signature strengths* akin to what Allport (1961) identified decades ago as personal traits. These are strengths of character that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises. In interviews with adults, we find that everyone can readily identify a handful of strengths as very much their own, typically between three and seven (just as Allport proposed). Here are possible criteria for a signature strength:

- a sense of ownership and authenticity (“this is the real me”) vis-à-vis the strength

- a feeling of excitement while displaying it, particularly at first
- a rapid learning curve as themes are attached to the strength and practiced
- continuous learning of new ways to enact the strength
- a sense of yearning to act in accordance with the strength
- a feeling of inevitability in using the strength, as if one cannot be stopped or dissuaded from its display
- the discovery of the strength as owned in an epiphany
- invigoration rather than exhaustion when using the strength
- the creation and pursuit of fundamental projects that revolve around the strength
- intrinsic motivation to use the strength

Our hypothesis is that the exercise of signature strengths is fulfilling, and these criteria convey the motivational and emotional features of fulfillment with terms like *excitement*, *yearning*, *inevitability*, *discovery*, and *invigoration*.

The positing of signature strengths linked to the individual's sense of self and identity helps us avoid the trap of equating a strength with a given behavior taken out of context (e.g., operationally defining honesty as "saying whatever one thinks or feels at the moment the impulse flits through consciousness regardless of the circumstances") and then discovering that by this definition, honesty often produces interpersonal disaster. This behavior is *not* in accord with the spirit of honesty. Assessment of strengths is made more difficult by these considerations, but they are imperative. Again, attention to the setting is demanded.

CRITERION 2 *Although strengths can and do produce desirable outcomes, each strength is morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes.*

A pragmatic larger society will want to be convinced that character strengths produce more than their own reward, that their exercise reduces the likelihood of distress and dysfunction while encouraging tangible outcomes like:

- subjective well-being (happiness)
- acceptance of oneself
- reverence for life

- competence, efficacy, and mastery
- mental and physical health
- rich and supportive social networks
- respect by and for others
- satisfying work
- material sufficiency
- healthy communities and families

If there were not at least some statistical link between strengths and such outcomes, they would not have appeared across cultures and lasted throughout time. Strengths allow problems of survival to be solved.

However, these outcomes are not part of the definition of a character strength. If a strength is recognized only when it produces a payoff, we do not need the notion of good character to account for human conduct. We can return to a radical behaviorism and speak only of prevailing rewards and punishments. But as Aristotle and other philosophers concerned with virtue persuasively argue, actions undertaken solely for external reasons cannot be considered virtuous, precisely because they are coaxed or coerced, carroted or stucked.

To say that a strength is *morally* valued is an important qualification, because there exist individual differences that are widely valued, contribute to fulfillment, and qualify as signature characteristics (meeting many, if not all, of the hypothesized criteria just enumerated) but still fall outside our classification. Consider intelligence, facial symmetry, immunocompetence, or athletic prowess. These talents and abilities are cut from a different cloth than character strengths like valor or kindness, but what is the difference?

We have devoted considerable thought to the distinction between strengths and virtues on the one hand versus talents and abilities on the other.¹ Talents and abilities on the face of it seem more innate, more immutable, and less voluntary than strengths and virtues. These of course are matters of degree. So, the talent of perfect pitch is always discussed as if it were more innate than the strengths of kindness or modesty, but the ability to read train schedules certainly is not. And suppose it turns out that the character

strengths in the present classification prove to be heritable? All other investigated individual differences seem to have some basis in genetic variation, so why not curiosity, for example, or even spirituality and leadership?

To be sure, no one will ever discover single genes that code for specific moral virtues, and any biogenetic account of character will ultimately be phrased in terms of heritable raw ingredients interacting with specific environments and experiences. But the same account already exists for many talents and abilities, so where is the distinction?

We are left, somewhat reluctantly, with the conclusion that character strengths differ from talents and abilities at least because they fall in the moral domain. This is a less-than-satisfactory conclusion because we must cede the designation of a character strength to the larger society and culture. Our early efforts in creating this classification were done with the worry that we would create a list of characteristics that reflected only our own take on the good life. We think we have avoided this problem because we did not include characteristics valued only at the turn of the new century by upper-middle-class agnostic European American academic males (e.g., diversified investment portfolios, wireless Internet access, and reduced teaching loads). As emphasized, the virtues and strengths we include here are ubiquitously recognized as moral across cultures.

There are two further answers that clarify the distinction between character strengths and other dimensions of virtuosity. First is the role played by effort and will in the exercise of these characteristics. Basketball player Michael Jordan was revered for his athletic ability but also for his refusal to lose. In both cases, the talent/strength was practiced and nurtured, but those of us who are not delusional recognize that we can never soar through the air like Michael, with or without the shoes he endorsed. We can imagine, however, that we might arise from our sickbed to do our job as best we can, as Jordan did in a 1997 playoff game against the Utah Jazz, in which only his temperature (103°) exceeded his point total (38). This storied performance represented the melding of a talent with a character strength, yet it is the latter that we value morally.

This chapter is not the right forum for a discussion of free will and determinism, so we will just note in passing our strong suspicion that positive psychology, as the field evolves, will necessarily lead social scientists to grapple anew with the crucial role in human

activity played by choice. A morally praiseworthy action is chosen in a way that a merely skilled action is not. All people can aspire to have strong character in a way that they cannot aspire to be good-looking or physically resilient.

A second distinction between character strengths and talents is that the latter seem valued more for their tangible consequences (acclaim, wealth) than are the former. Someone who “does nothing” with a talent like a high IQ or musical skill courts eventual disdain. Witness the ridicule directed at Michael Jordan when he abandoned basketball to pursue a baseball career or the dismay we experience when extremely talented individuals like Judy Garland, Lenny Bruce, Andy Gibb, or Darryl Strawberry are overwhelmed by drug problems. In contrast, we never hear the criticism that a person did nothing with his or her wisdom or kindness. Said another way, talents and abilities can be squandered, but strengths and virtues cannot.

CRITERION 3 *The display of a strength by one person does not diminish other people in the vicinity.*

In many if not most cases, onlookers are elevated by their observation of virtuous action. Admiration is created more than jealousy because character strengths are the sorts of characteristics to which most can—and do—aspire. The more people surrounding us who are kind, or curious, or full of hope, the greater our own likelihood of acting in these ways. Said another way, strengths accompany non-zero-sum games (Wright, 1999). All are winners when someone acts in accordance with his or her strengths and virtues.

One can be skeptical of this criterion, and three reasons are cited to support this skepticism. First, morally praiseworthy acts by others may create shame among those of us who are less brave or less kind. The likelihood of such a reaction is unknown but an interesting empirical issue, as is how people react to such shame. We speculate that many may rise to the next available occasion, which means that they indeed have been elevated by what they have observed.

The second reason for skepticism is that people with ostensibly good character are phony—their virtuous deeds mask insecurity or even deeper psychopathology. A common theme in literature as well as contemporary shock journalism is the moral undressing of a supposedly good person. We are intrigued by these sorts of stories, even as they leave us feeling empty, but are they the rule? And even if true, do the strengths somehow arise only

as defenses against the vices? The answer from positive psychology is that we want to see the evidence before dismissing all instances of human goodness as mere displays, disguises, or displacements. And there is no such evidence. Indeed, what runs through the examples of clay-footed celebrities other than the obvious transgressions is some sort of false righteousness on the part of the transgressor. The real sin may not be the obvious one but the failure of authenticity on the part of the sinner.

Another point here is that we see character as plural, and that the existence of nonvirtuous activity (with respect to one strength) does not mean that the individual cannot display other strengths. That baseball manager Pete Rose may have bet on baseball games does not diminish the enthusiasm he displayed for decades as a player.

A third reason that goodness is viewed with skepticism is that virtuous people are thought to be boring. Remember Billy Joel's song lyric that he would rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints, because the sinners are much more fun? In a more serious venue, Wolf (1982) phrased the argument this way:

If the moral saint is devoting all his time to feeding the hungry or healing the sick or raising money for Oxfam then necessarily he is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his backhand. Although no one of the interests or tastes in the category containing these latter activities could be claimed to be a necessary element in a life well lived, a life in which *none* of these possible aspects of character are developed may seem to be a life strangely barren. (p. 421)

This point would have merit if it were empirically the case that good deeds preclude the development of nonmoral interests, but how could this be true? Character strengths pervade many activities, including reading, music, and sports, and they are associated with popularity ([chapter 28](#)). Wolf further said, "I don't know whether there are any moral saints" (p. 419), to which we respond that she looked in the wrong places and at the wrong sorts of activity.

CRITERION 4 Being able to phrase the "opposite" of a putative strength in a felicitous way counts against regarding it as a character strength.

Consider flexibility. One can render its opposite in an undesirable way (as inflexibility) but just as easily in a desirable way (as steadfastness). For almost all character strengths and

virtues, anyone with a thesaurus can find approximate antonyms with desirable connotations, but the issue is the ease with which this can be done and the excess baggage that gets dragged along in so doing. One can weigh the baggage by a process of *back-and-forth antonym creation*. How quickly does the process fall apart? For example, one possible opposite of honesty is tact, but the obvious opposite of tact is not honesty but rudeness. Honesty, therefore, meets this linguistic test.

This criterion should not be confused with the fact that some strengths and virtues are *bipolar*, that is, there is a negative anchor to the continuum that defines the characteristic (e.g., “kindness” ranges across degrees of mean-spiritedness through a zero point to its increasingly positive instances). Other characteristics are better seen as *unipolar* (e.g., “sense of humor” has a zero point but no meaningful negative range). Our focus in all cases is on the positive end of the strength continuum, but the bipolarity versus unipolarity of given characteristics is an intriguing contrast to keep in mind when we address assessment strategies. We also need to remember the premise of positive psychology that the absence of a weakness is not in and of itself a strength and further that the determinants of strengths versus weaknesses are not simple obverses (Peterson, 2000; Peterson & Chang, 2003; Peterson & Steen, 2002). Bipolarity needs to be established on empirical grounds.

CRITERION 5 *A strength needs to be manifest in the range of an individual’s behavior—thoughts, feelings, and/or actions—in such a way that it can be assessed. It should be traitlike in the sense of having a degree of generality across situations and stability across time.*

Strengths differ in terms of being *tonic* (constant) versus *phasic* (waxing and waning depending on their “use”). This distinction has important measurement implications. A tonic characteristic (e.g., kindness or humor) shows itself steadily in a variety of settings, which means that it can be assessed by deliberately general questions posed to an individual and/or informant (“Do you like to tease others?”). A phasic characteristic comes and goes because it is relevant only in settings that afford it. Bravery, for example, does not—indeed, cannot—show itself as one is standing in the checkout line of a grocery store. But if the store is being robbed, then a person can manifest varying degrees of valor.

Philosophers often refer to virtues as corrective, meaning that they counteract some difficulty thought to be inherent in the human condition, some temptation that needs to be resisted, or some motivation that needs to be re-channeled into something good (Yearley, 1990, p. 16). We would not need to posit the virtue of generosity if people were not (sometimes) selfish, the virtue of persistence if people were not (sometimes) idle, or the virtue of bravery if people were not (sometimes) swayed from doing the right thing by fear. What is difficult or challenging need not be front and center when the virtue is displayed. In some cases (e.g., selfishness) what needs to be corrected is a general human tendency. But in other cases (e.g., bravery) what demands correction is an immediately pressing psychological state. Identifying what it is that a character strength corrects should help us identify it as tonic versus phasic.

One or more of our character strengths may prove to be so thoroughly phasic that it will not prove plausible to speak of it as a trait. We worry in particular about what the data will eventually show about the “traitedness” of the strength we include here as open-mindedness (aka judgment, critical thinking). Early on in our project, we identified this characteristic as rationality but then jettisoned this label. First, rationality has earned itself bad connotations; many everyday people juxtapose it with compassion and see it as a stereotypically “male” defense against feeling. Second, there is good reason to doubt that people show across-the-board good versus bad reasoning, at least insofar as this hypothesis has been studied in terms of effective problem solving across disparate domains (Lehman & Nisbett, 1990). There really are Ph.D. mathematicians who cannot balance their checkbooks. “Thinking” may be made possible by a host of rather independent cognitive modules, each devoted to its own sort of content. What this means is that “open-mindedness” would be useful only as an umbrella term for these modules, not as the label for a personality trait. Perhaps the assessment of individual differences in open-mindedness can take place only at the level of themes.

CRITERION 6 The strength is distinct from other positive traits in the classification and cannot be decomposed into them.

For example, the character strength of “tolerance” meets most of the other criteria enumerated but is a complex blend of open-mindedness and fairness. The character strength of “patience” melds self-regulation, persistence, and open-mindedness. The

reaction of people to the 24 strengths in our classification has never involved the criticism that we have included unimportant aspects of character. Rather, the reaction has been “What about ____?” In all cases to date, the suggested candidate strikes us as a blend of strengths that are included.

The corollary of this criterion is that as assessment proceeds and the relevant data are obtained, we may decide to combine several strengths in the classification because of empirical redundancy and theoretical overlap. For example, curiosity and love of learning appear difficult to distinguish; that is, the same people are usually high, middling, or low on both (see [chapter 28](#)). At present, we distinguish these on theoretical grounds because curiosity need not entail the *systematic* acquisition of information as does love of learning, but it may be possible to regard love of learning as a special case of curiosity.

CRITERION 7 *A character strength is embodied in consensual paragons.*

One important way in which the larger culture highlights strengths of character is by providing stories, parables, creeds, mottoes, pledges, songs, and poems that feature people who compellingly demonstrate a given positive trait (e.g., Burrell, 1997; W. Kilpatrick, Wolfe, & Wolfe, 1994). Models may be real (Cal Ripken and persistence), apocryphal (George Washington and honesty), or mythic (Luke Skywalker and authenticity). Regardless, children grow up surrounded by a bevy of potential role models, and a question of critical importance is when and why good lessons are learned from the media versus bad lessons. What leads some folks to fix on Madonna, Eminem, Donald Trump, or professional wrestlers as role models?

We have been reading children’s books and the moral role models that figure in them. In some cases, we find strengths glorified, as in Watty Piper’s *The Little Engine That Could*. But in other cases, we are a bit dismayed. Curiosity is an obvious human strength, but Hans Rey’s *Curious George* is disaster incarnate. Hope is also an unambiguous virtue, but Eleanor Porter’s *Pollyanna* is a ninny, and Kate Wiggins’s *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* strikes some as simply sugar-coated. As this endeavor continues, we may gain some insight into the character crisis that supposedly threatens our youth (cf. Bennett, 1997). Perhaps Hollywood is not the only culprit.

Strengths are also encouraged by the recognition of actual people in our immediate vicinity who embody to a remarkable extent a given positive trait. These paragons of

virtue display what Allport (1961) called a cardinal trait, and the ease with which we can think of paragons in our own social circles gives the lie to the claim that all virtuous people are phony. Certainly, the virtuous people we each know are not phony. They really are kind, or fair, or playful, and so on for all the entries in our classification. In one of our ways of evaluating assessment strategies, we have asked our research assistants to nominate people of their acquaintance who are paragons of virtue and prevail upon them—without full disclosure of why—to complete our measures ([chapter 28](#)). No one has had any difficulty thinking of appropriate respondents.

We do not know how many people are paragons of one or another strength, and some intriguing questions can be asked about the relative frequency or infrequency of cardinal strengths. In given cultures or subcultures, are certain paragons more common than others? Are there gender differences? How about developmental differences?

CRITERION 8 We do not believe this feature can be applied to all strengths, but an additional criterion where sensible is the existence of prodigies with respect to the strength.

In his theory of multiple intelligences, H. Gardner (1983) directed our attention to children who evidence at a particularly early age exceptional talents in such domains as music, mathematics, and athletics. Prodigies appear only in some fields of endeavor, and Gardner argued that these fields tap biologically based abilities inherent in the human species. Aside from their particular skill, prodigies are otherwise unremarkable children (Feldman, 1993). Popular stereotypes of child prodigies as miniature adults are incorrect.

Suppose these arguments apply as well to the moral domain. Are there kindness prodigies? Are there children who display precocious fairness or bravery? These sorts of questions are completely unexplored, and all we have at present is anecdotal evidence to answer them.

One of our college students told us a story about herself when she was about 9 years of age and worried that her parents might divorce. Without telling her parents, she went to the local library and read books on couples therapy, which is remarkable enough, but what really made us marvel was the rest of her story: She turned dinner conversations with the family into deliberate interventions, encouraging her parents to solve problems jointly, to

argue fairly, to express their likes and dislikes about one another in behavioral terms, and so on. She was a prodigy, specifically with respect to the character strength of social intelligence. (And yes, her parents are still married to one another.)

If character prodigies exist, we can make some predictions about them from what is known about other sorts of prodigies. First, their prodigious achievements will not be spontaneous. Rather, they will develop through steps or stages, although more rapidly than do other individuals. Second, prodigies will not achieve their advanced levels without some instruction. We do not know much more about our child couples therapist than what we just conveyed, but we suspect that there were adults in her life—perhaps her parents or perhaps not—who cultivated her social intelligence. Third, and sadly, character prodigies may not grow up to be paragons of virtue because it is rare for a musical or mathematical prodigy to be hailed as a genius when an adult. Perhaps the domain of character is different. We simply do not know.

CRITERION 9 Conversely, another criterion for a character strength is the existence of people who show—selectively—the total absence of a given strength.

We again borrowed this criterion from H. Gardner's (1983) discussion of multiple intelligences. He focused on the cases where the selective absence of a skill could be attributed to neurological damage, but the more general point is that certain skills or their absence may segregate themselves from other aspects of the person. They can therefore be regarded as natural groupings able to be approached profitably in biosocial terms.

How might we describe such people? We have sometimes used the phrase “character imbecile” in a deliberate attempt to be jarring. Some of our colleagues do not like this label—and we understand why—but if there is something offensive here, it is not the label but to what it applies: people completely devoid of one or another character strength. Imagine a person with no curiosity about the world, or one who is incapable of loving or being loved. We know these people exist, but we do not know whether their deficiency is specific to a given character strength or general. Our assumption about the plurality of character would be supported by selectivity.

Consider the well-known Darwin Awards, given to individuals—invariably young males—who remove themselves from the gene pool by acting in “really stupid ways” (Northcutt, 2000). Playing Russian roulette with an automatic pistol or tying helium

balloons to a lawn chair and floating gently upward (and then falling rapidly downward when the balloons burst) represent colossal failures of common sense—that is, prudence. Perhaps these actions are predisposed as well by massively misguided curiosity.

In contrast to moral prodigies, individuals completely devoid of one or another strength of character have been extensively studied under the rubric of personality disorders, the *DSM's* Axis II. As a scientific topic, Axis II disorders are problematic—most cannot be diagnosed reliably, and most cannot be treated effectively. But perhaps this state of affairs results from ongoing attempts by psychiatry to medicalize these problematic styles of behaving. If personality disorders were recast as failures of character, more productive insights into them might result.

CRITERION 10 As suggested by Erikson's (1963) discussion of psychosocial stages and the virtues that result from their satisfactory resolutions, the larger society provides institutions and associated rituals for cultivating strengths and virtues and then for sustaining their practice.

The rituals that cultivate strengths can be thought of as simulations: trial runs that allow children and adolescents to display and develop a valued characteristic in a safe (as-if) context in which guidance is explicit (cf. Unell & Wyckoff, 1995). High school student councils presumably foster leadership; Little League baseball teams are thought to contribute to the development of teamwork; catechism classes attempt to lay the foundation for spirituality. To be sure, institutions may backfire (think of win-at-all-cost youth hockey coaches or beauty contests for 6-year-olds), but these failures are readily apparent and widely decried.

We have encountered some difference of opinion regarding whether individual parents and teachers try to encourage specific strengths and virtues. Some of us may try to inculcate praiseworthy characteristics, but others of us may regard their development as beyond our control, trusting to the genetic roulette wheel, local schools, youth development programs, or a vaguely defined “society” to bring about strong and virtuous children. We hasten to add that we believe that strengths and virtues can be cultivated, but any interventions to nurture strengths need to be informed by what people in general believe about their origins.

In the United States alone, millions of young people participate in school programs and after-school programs intended to cultivate good character. The almost total absence of program evaluation vis-à-vis this stated goal is remarkable. We can conclude, based on appropriate empirical evidence, that youth who participate in a variety of programs are less likely to show problems like school failure, drug use, violence, unwanted pregnancy, and the like, but the problem-centered focus of evaluation efforts leaves the issue of deliberately cultivated strengths largely unexplored. The programs exist, and their character-relevant goals are explicit. One of the benefits of our classification project may be the provision of research instruments to undertake the needed empirical investigations.

Just as important as creating strengths in the first place are the rules, roles, and norms that sustain them. Although we regard character strengths as traits, they are not evident in any and all circumstances. Prevailing rewards and punishments in a given situation work for or against the display of a particular strength. If one is involved in an automobile accident, kindness is not the trait that should come to the fore, at least insofar as it would give the other participants leverage for an unwarranted insurance claim. Humor is a terrible trait to display when walking through a metal detector at an airport. Conversely, certain occupational roles demand specific strengths of character—for example, family court judges need to be fair, inventors need to be creative, therapists need to have social intelligence, telemarketers need to be hopeful—and we expect that individuals in these roles will either develop the requisite strengths or soon seek other jobs.

Remember our distinction between tonic and phasic strengths. Tonic strengths are those that can be displayed on an ongoing and steady basis, except when there is good reason not to do so, traits like curiosity, modesty, and zest. Phasic strengths are those that rise and fall according to the demands of specifiable situations. One can be brave only when in a situation that produces fear. One can display teamwork only as a member of a group with a common task. One can exercise open-mindedness only in the face of a complex decision. We therefore speculate that tonic strengths are less contextualized than phasic strengths. Regardless, society needs to recognize that both sorts of strengths matter but may require different means of encouragement. In the case of tonic strengths, it may be sufficient *not* to punish those who display them. In the case of phasic strengths, the appropriate way to display a strength needs to be articulated, trained as needed, and of course rewarded. We have interviewed firefighters, for instance, and found that valorous

individuals report that the requisite skills for doing their job despite fear have been so overlearned that they are automatized.

■

The Strengths

When we applied these criteria to the many dozens of candidate strengths we identified through brainstorming and literature searches, what resulted was the list of positive traits shown in [Table 1.1](#), categorized under the six core moral virtues that emerge consensually across cultures and throughout time ([chapter 2](#)). Remember that this vertical dimension is one of abstractness, and it would be a category mistake to ask if curiosity causes wisdom. Instead, curiosity is an instance of a virtue category that revolves around knowledge and its use. We believe that the positive traits in this classification themselves are ubiquitously if not universally recognized, an assumption we are in the process of checking with cross-national and cross-cultural studies.²

In some cases, the classification of a given strength under a core virtue can be debated. Humor, for example, might be considered a strength of humanity because playfulness and whimsy can create social bonds. It might also be classified as a strength of wisdom, inasmuch as wit helps us acquire, perfect, and use knowledge. But we had a reason for dubbing humor a strength of transcendence: Like hope and spirituality, it connects us to something larger in the universe, specifically the irony of the human condition, the incongruent congruencies to which playful people call our attention, for our education, amusement, and comfort.

TABLE 1.1 *Classification of Character Strengths*

1. **Wisdom and knowledge**—cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
- Creativity* [*originality, ingenuity*]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
- Curiosity* [*interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience*]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering

Open-mindedness [*judgment, critical thinking*]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; *not* jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly

Love of learning: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add *systematically* to what one knows

Perspective [*wisdom*]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people

2. **Courage**—emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

Bravery [*valor*]: *Not* shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it

Persistence [*perseverance, industriousness*]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door”; taking pleasure in completing tasks

Integrity [*authenticity, honesty*]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions

Vitality [*zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy*]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; *not* doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

3. **Humanity**—interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

Love: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people

Kindness [*generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, “niceness”*]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them

Social intelligence [*emotional intelligence, personal intelligence*]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

4. **Justice**—civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

Citizenship [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share

Fairness: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; *not* letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance

Leadership: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same maintain time good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen

5. **Temperance**—strengths that protect against excess

Forgiveness and mercy: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; *not* being vengeful

Humility / Modesty: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; *not* seeking the spotlight; *not* regarding oneself as more special than one is

Prudence: Being careful about one's choices; *not* taking undue risks; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted

Self-regulation [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions

6. **Transcendence**—strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience

Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks

Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about

Humor [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes

Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

We urge the reader not to be too concerned about the details of how we classified the 24 strengths under the six virtues. We have not measured the virtues per se; they are too abstract and general. We measured only the strengths, and if the data suggest—for example—that playfulness belongs elsewhere because of its co-occurrence with other strengths, we will gladly move it.

The classification we present here is not a finished product, and we expect it to change in the years to come, as theory and research concerning character strengths proceed. After all, the *DSM* has taken more than 50 years to attain its current form. We anticipate that our classification of strengths will similarly evolve, by adding or deleting specific strengths of character, by combining those that prove redundant, by reformulating their organization under core virtues, and by more systematically evaluating them vis-à-vis our 10 criteria. The measurement tools we sketch in [chapter 28](#) should prove useful in crafting future versions of the classification, and we also believe that positive psychology applications—interventions aimed at increasing specific strengths of character and general well-being—will provide empirical grist for the conceptual mill. But let us not get too far ahead of ourselves.

■ Organization of the Volume

This book has three sections. The first section provides background, explains the rationale for the classification scheme and its basis in previous classification efforts, and defines terms.

The second section contains chapters describing the current state of knowledge with respect to each of the 24 character strengths in the classification. Each chapter in the second section uses the following format:

- the consensual definition of the strength (as an individual difference), phrased in terms of behavioral criteria
- the theoretical/research traditions that have studied it
- existing individual difference measures (self-report or informant questionnaires, interviews, assessments from laboratory simulations, in vivo observations, content analyses, and so on)
- known correlates and consequences (outcomes) of the strength
- how the strength develops and is manifest across the life span
- factors that encourage or thwart the development and display of this strength
- if available, information about gender differences and cross-national and cross-cultural aspects of this strength
- if available, information about deliberate interventions that foster it
- what is not known?
- a bibliography of “must-read” articles and books

The third section briefly addresses issues of assessment of strengths and sketches how the classification and assessment package might be used in different practical domains. The most obvious domain of application is the science of positive psychology, but the classification might prove useful as well to youth development, gerontology, family relations (including marriage and child rearing), education, business, the military, leisure and recreation, and even clinical/counseling psychology.

2. UNIVERSAL VIRTUES?—LESSONS FROM HISTORY

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalog more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name.

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, *The Autobiography*

It is not possible, many argue, to insist on respecting both difference and sameness when it comes to moral values: on honoring individual and cultural diversity while also holding that certain moral values go to the heart of what it means to be human and always have, since the beginning of time, and always must if we are not to lose touch with our humanity.

—SISSELA BOK, *Common Values*

In creating a classification of character strengths, we need to distinguish “character” from related notions, and we need to subdivide character into its components. This latter task is remarkably easy. Indeed, it is so easy that it has been done hundreds if not thousands of times throughout history. Moral philosophers, theologians, educators, legislators, sports writers, and parents all have ideas about what character means, and few have resisted the temptation to articulate a definitive list of the virtues that constitute the well-lived life.

When we undertook our project, we started by creating our own list. With little modesty, we asserted that our list included strengths and virtues valued in all contemporary cultures around the world. But when we showed our list to colleagues, we encountered the frequent objection that there are no strengths and virtues valued across all cultures. Indeed, we were told that the subcultural variations along regional, socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic lines in just the contemporary United States preclude a universal list even for the here and now. We took these criticisms seriously and worried about reifying characteristics valued only at the turn of the new century by upper-middle-class European American academics.

We could have quit, but we are empirically minded. Is it really the case that there is no consensus about the strengths and virtues that are most valued? We undertook a thought experiment and tried to imagine a culture or subculture that did not stress the cultivation of courage, honesty, perseverance, hope, or kindness. Done another way, this

experiment requires that we envision parents looking at their newborn infant and being indifferent to the possibility that the child would grow up to be cowardly, dishonest, easily discouraged, pessimistic, and cruel.

Perhaps there are after all some ubiquitous, if not universal, virtues. Perhaps some virtues exist that are so widely recognized that an anthropological veto (“The tribe I study does not have that one!”) would be more interesting than damning. But other than nonsystematic brainstorming, how might these be specified?

In describing one prerequisite for wisdom, Kramer (2000) observed that “exposure to alternative knowledge contexts, or perspectives, would facilitate the ability to accept multiple perspectives and critically evaluate human truths” (p. 84). If we 21st-century psychologists were searching for the enduring truths of virtue, we suspected that we might find them in the collected wisdom of the ages (cf. Comte-Sponville, 2001; Templeton, 1995). Hence, we decided to undertake a survey not of the random digit-dial variety but of what early thinkers from far-flung traditions have said about the components of character.

Thus, the purposes of the exercise we describe in this chapter were dual and complementary. The first was a literature search and review of previous influential attempts to list virtues crucial to human thriving. Because the historical inquiry into what strengths make for the most exemplary person or lived life involves the realms of philosophy, religion, politics, and education, the focus was necessarily interdisciplinary and cross-cultural. The second aim was empirical: Would the virtue catalogs of early thinkers within these disciplines converge? Would certain virtues, regardless of tradition or culture, be widely valued?

But which cultures, which texts, and which authors would we consider? The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were employed. We limited the search to ancient cultures recognized for their influential and enduring impact on human civilization and then further restricted our examinations to written texts from these large-scale societies. We meant no snub by excluding from this exercise other intellectually fertile cultures from which written texts are not at present readily available in translation, although we note in passing our future interest in an ethnographic survey of character strengths among nonliterate cultures.

In his broad survey *World Philosophies* (1999), Smart nominated China, South Asia (India, mostly), and the West as the “Great Three”—the most widely influential traditions

of thought in human history. We followed Smart's lead and concentrated on these traditions, focusing more specifically on the dominant spiritual and philosophical traditions originating in each: Confucianism and Taoism in China, Buddhism and Hinduism in South Asia, and ancient Greece, Judeo-Christianity, and Islam in the West.

Then, within these traditions, we looked for expository discussions of virtue consensually recognized as the earliest, the most influential, or preferably both. We were particularly attracted to those authors who had deliberately developed a catalog, and were even more pleased when these had clear beginnings and ends in the form of explicitly numbered virtues (e.g., the Ten Commandments, the Holy Eightfold Path). If there was more than one possible entrant, we chose that which reflected the most crucial aspects of the tradition under study. Thus, for example, we did not include Pantanjali's ideas on virtue as outlined in the *Yogasutra* (trans. 1979); although this text is the basic one of the sixth orthodox school (yoga) of Hindu philosophy, the virtues as outlined in the *Bhagavadgita* (trans. 1990) are both more inclusive and well known. Occasionally no single text emerged as most representative, in which case we included more than one text per tradition. If we could not find a deliberate or concise exposition on virtue within a tradition, we opted to study its most well known text, as well as respected secondary sources, and extrapolate. For instance, nowhere in the *Analects* (trans. 1992) does Confucius reel off a discrete list of crucial virtues; rather, they are referred to throughout, and the text is so unanimously the one most associated with the tradition that we focused our inquiries there.

■ Core Virtues

Texts and their virtue catalogs were gathered in more or less chronological order. Nominated virtues could be vaguely defined, in which case secondary sources and expert colleagues were consulted to determine the meaning of each entry within its cultural context.

When data collection was complete, analysis involved condensing each list by locating thematically similar virtues and classifying them under an obviously emerging core virtue. By that term, we mean an abstract ideal encompassing a number of other, more specific virtues that reliably converge to the recognizable higher-order category. For instance, the core virtue justice is an abstract term representative of the ideals of more minimalist

virtues such as injunctions, laws, and procedural rules for fairness (see Bok, 1995, for further discussion on minimalist values and virtues). To say that particular virtues—*within a tradition*—converge into a core virtue is not to argue that all their features line up perfectly, but rather that they have a coherent resemblance to one another, sharing more features than not. Individual virtues that could not, without pushing and squeezing, be classified within a core virtue category were considered distinct.

Furthermore, to say that certain virtues—*across traditions*—converge onto a core virtue likewise does not mean that we argue for a one-to-one mapping of a virtue across cultures. Certainly an abstraction such as justice will mean slightly different things—and will be valued for different reasons—from one culture to another. Again what we suggest is coherent resemblance: The higher-order meaning behind a particular core virtue will line up better with its cross-cultural counterpart than it will with any other core virtue (e.g., examples of Confucian justice will have more to do with those of Platonic justice than they will with Platonic wisdom). What we sought were instances in which the similarities across cultures outweighed the differences; again, when the core virtue of a particular tradition did not have an obvious cross-cultural counterpart, it was considered as a separate entity in the final analysis.

The literature review in the next section reveals a surprising amount of similarity across cultures and strongly indicates a historical and cross-cultural convergence of six core virtues: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom. We dub these the High Six. First, however, we characterize each of these six categories.

Courage

French philosopher Comte-Sponville (2001), arguing for the universality of courage, reminded us that while fears and the acts to defeat them vary from society to society, the capacity to overcome fear “is always more valued than cowardice or faintheartedness” (p. 44). D. Putnam (1997) offered an inclusive account of courage by delineating three types: physical, moral, and psychological. Physical courage is the type involved in overcoming the fear of physical injury or death in order to save others or oneself. Moral courage entails maintaining ethical integrity or authenticity at the risk of losing friends, employment,

privacy, or prestige. Psychological courage includes that sort required to confront a debilitating illness or destructive habit or situation; it is the bravery inherent in facing one's inner demons.

We follow Putnam's lead and include all three characterizations in the core virtue of courage. We also do not limit our definition to single astonishing acts—chronic courageousness counts, too (see Finfgeld, 1999). This brings us to a perhaps obvious but necessary remark on courage: It has an inner life as well as an outer one. That is, courage is composed of not just observable acts but also the cognitions, emotions, motivations, and decisions that bring them about. Thus, as we examine the ubiquity of courage, although most of the examples that follow are of the physical or soldier-in-battle variety, what we mean abstractly is closer to Cicero's (1949) definition: Courage is "the deliberate facing of dangers and bearing of toils" (*De inventione*, II.LIV.163). We mean courage to include physical valor, yes, but also integrity and perseverance—any act of willfully overcoming into what it is so easy to slip: security, comfort, complacency. We mean doing what is right, even when one has much to lose. Or, to return to Comte-Sponville (2001), "Without courage, we cannot hold out against the worst in ourselves or others" (p. 50).

Justice

The core virtue justice, as already stated, refers generally to that which makes life fair. Intuitively, perhaps, that means the equality of everyone. But we are all well aware that life is not fair, and that "some animals are more equal than others," which is why we need the more pragmatic rendition of justice, that of the laws that give fairness a fair shot (see Rawls, 2001).

In Western industrialized nations, justice generally translates to the notion of equity—the belief that rewards should be apportioned according to contributions or merit (Walster, Walster, & Bersheid, 1978) and that people ultimately get what they deserve (M. J. Lerner, 1980). This particular concept of justice is not universal—collectivist cultures tend to prefer the notion of equality or need when making fairness-based decisions (Murphy-Berman & Berman, 2002; Murphy-Berman, Berman, Singh, Pachauri, & Kumar, 1984; Sampson, 1975). However, whether a culture views justice as equity ("everyone agrees that justice in distribution must be in accordance with some kind of merit"; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2000, 1131a) or equality/need ("from each according to his abilities,

to each according to his needs”; K. Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program,” 1875/1977, p. 569), the shared notion is that some standard should be in practice to protect intuitive notions of what is fair (see N. J. Finkel, 1995, 2000). Hence, the exemplars of justice are those that are civic in nature—fairness, leadership, citizenship, and teamwork.

Humanity

Though both may involve improving another’s welfare, we separate the core virtues of justice and humanity. By humanity we are referring to the virtues involved in relating to another—the interpersonal strengths. Certainly justice involves the interpersonal (how could it not?), but it is usually virtuous only when impersonally so (“for fairness’ sake”). Put another way, whereas the virtue of justice lies in impartiality, the virtue of humanity relies on doing more than what is only fair—showing generosity even when an equitable exchange would suffice, kindness even if it cannot (or will not) be returned, and understanding even when punishment is due.

Virtues of humanity are rendered within psychology as altruistic or prosocial behavior. Many species, not just primates, appear to behave in ways that reflect altruism (de Waal, 2000; Krebs & Davies, 1993). While there is argument that all altruism is the result of kin protection (Dawkins, 1976; S. E. Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung, & Updegraff, 2000), social exchange (Foa & Foa, 1975), capitulation to social norms (L. Berkowitz, 1972), or garden-variety egoism (Cialdini, 1991), other theorists have noted that humans sometimes display altruism where the possibility of any advantageous outcome is quite remote, and suggest that empathy and sympathy underlie such admirable behaviors (Batson, 2001; Knight, Johnson, Carlo, & Eisenberg, 1994; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1983). Moreover, sympathy can sometimes lead us to violate the principles of fairness, supporting the notion that altruism and justice are independent prosocial motivations (Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995). Regardless of the real reasons for altruism and prosocial behaviors among humans, the fact remains that we are quite capable of and often willing to engage in acts of generosity, kindness, or benevolence that are consensually recognized and valued and that elevate those who witness them (Haidt, 2000; see also Fredrickson, 2001).

Temperance

“Everything in moderation,” or so the saying goes. Temperance is the virtue of control over excess. Usually the term is used as a signifier for abstinence, particularly from several of the more pleasant appetites—eating, drinking, smoking, sex. We mean the term more generally to include any form of auspicious self-restraint.

For instance, temperance translated into psychological terminology becomes self-efficacy or self-regulation, that practiced ability to monitor and manage one’s emotions, motivation, and behavior in the absence of outside help (Bandura, 1997; Kopp & Wyer, 1994), the failure of which leads rather impressively to all sorts of personal and social problems (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Block, Gjerde, & Block, 1991; Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000). All this shows, however, is that intemperance is unhealthy, not that temperance is all that great. On the plus side, Baumeister and Exline (2000) stated, “Having strength of character means having the capacity to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. Self-control, when applied to adaptive or virtuous goals, is essentially that capacity” (p. 33). Indeed, children, adolescents, and adults who consistently exercise the muscle of self-control are happier, more productive, and more successful individuals (Eisenberg et al., 2000; Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988; Pintrich, 2000; Tsui & Ashford, 1994; Zimmerman, 2002). Moreover, because the individual benefits of temperance tend to prompt social ones, Heatherton and Vohs (1998) argued for the natural selection of self-control, pointing out that “inhibitions are important for harmonious social interactions, and evolution has undoubtedly favored those who could control undesirable impulses” (p. 212). Thus, temperance is a form of self-denial that is ultimately generous to the self or others—prudence and humility are prime examples.

Transcendence

The transcendent, according to Kant (1781/1998), is that which is beyond human knowledge. We define it here in the broad sense as the connection to something higher—the belief that there is meaning or purpose larger than ourselves. Transcendence, in other words, is the opposite of nihilism, the contention that life has no meaning.

In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl (1946/1984) described what he termed the self-transcendence of human existence:

Being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. (p. 133)

We follow this lead and separate transcendence from religiosity or even spirituality, although both of the latter concepts are examples of what transcendence means. Whereas religiosity implies connection to formal institutions and spirituality does not, both refer to beliefs and practices regarding the sacred, defined as a divine being, higher power, or ultimate reality (L. K. George, Larson, Koenig, & McCullough, 2000; see also Gallup & Jones, 2000). We believe that what is transcendent does need to be sacred but does not need to be divine. Thus, transcendence can be something or someone earthly that inspires awe, hope, or even gratitude—anything that makes our everyday concerns seem trifling and the self seem small. Transcendence, in other words, is that which reminds us of how tiny we are but that simultaneously lifts us out of a sense of complete insignificance.

Wisdom

What distinguishes wisdom? It is a type of intelligence but not one synonymous with IQ, *g* (general intelligence), or academic honors. It is knowledge, yes, but not reducible to the mere sum of books read, or lectures attended, or facts acquired. Perhaps it has something to do with living through hardship, emerging a better person able to share what has been learned with others.

“Wisdom,” wrote Kramer (2000), “involves exceptional breadth and depth of knowledge about the conditions of life and human affairs and reflective judgment about the application of this knowledge” (p. 84). According to the researchers at the Berlin Max Planck Institute, wisdom is “good judgment and advice about important but uncertain matters of life” (Baltes & Smith, 1990, p. 87). Erikson (1963) believed wisdom to be the lasting outcome of a favorable resolution of the last psychosocial stage of adult life—ego integrity (acceptance of the triumphs and disappointments of one’s life) versus despair (the ultimate belief that one’s life has been wasted). And Sternberg (1998) argued that wisdom:

is involved when practical intelligence is applied to maximizing not just one’s own or someone else’s self-interest, but rather a balance of various self-interests

(intrapersonal) with the interests of others (interpersonal) and of other aspects of the context in which one lives (extrapersonal), such as one's city or country or environment or even God. (p. 354)

Hence we define this core virtue as knowledge hard fought for, and then used for good. Wisdom is a form of noble intelligence—in the presence of which no one is resentful and everyone appreciative. The strengths that wisdom encompasses are those entailing the acquisition and use of knowledge into human affairs, such as creativity, curiosity, judgment, and perspective.

■ The High Six Across History and Culture

We now show in detail how each of these six core virtues is evident in the traditions of China, followed by those of South Asia and then those of the West.

China

The two indigenous traditions of China arose contemporaneously in the sixth century B.C.E., and there is argument as to whether they best represent a philosophical, social, or religious system of beliefs. Confucianism, with its emphasis on social criticism and education of the young, became the official state religion by the second century B.C.E. Likewise, early Taoism, though more mystical and esoteric, was a religious-philosophical tradition with its own political exhortations.

Confucian Virtues. The teachings of Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) are the most influential in the history of Chinese thought and civilization. His moral and political philosophy, with its prescriptive focus on education and leadership, became the official religion of China by the second century B.C.E. and compulsory study for 2,000 years beyond that (Smart, 1999).

His teachings were recorded mainly in the form of aphorisms, most reliably collected in the *Analects* (Confucius, trans. 1992). His comments on virtue are scattered across the *Analects*, not presented as a formal catalog. There is, however, a general agreement among scholars that there are four or five central virtues espoused in the tenets of Confucianism: *jen* (translated variously as humanity or human-heartedness or benevolence), *yi* (duty or justice or equity), *li* (etiquette or observance of the rites of ceremonious behavior), *zhi*

(wisdom or perspicacity), and, possibly, *xin* (truthfulness or sincerity or good faith) (see Cleary, 1992; Do-Dinh, 1969; Haberman, 1998a).

When asked to define humanity (*jen*), Confucius answered, “Love people” (12:22); when asked to operationalize it, he said “If you want to make a stand, help others make a stand, and if you want to reach your goal, help others reach their goal. Consider yourself and treat others accordingly: this is the method of humanity” (6:29). Scholars have described Confucian humanity as the ideal manifestation of human nature or the attitude of sympathetic concern when dealing with others, but not the selfless love exalted in, say, Christianity; acting with humanity is instrumental in that it brings similar treatment from others (Dawson, 1982; Ivanhoe, 2002).

Humanity is considered the virtue most exalted by Confucius, as throughout the *Analects* the core sentiment that constitutes humanity permeates and infuses all others. For instance, the Confucian ideal of duty (*yi*) is not one prescribing humble acquiescence of the many to the undeserving and powerful few; rather, it denotes the mutual respect persons should have in relation to one another, beginning with the familial relationship and extending outward to the state and citizen (Huang, 1997). Put another way, the Confucian notion of justice or duty is not permission for tyranny, as it has often been misinterpreted, but that one is obliged to act honorably and with self-control in all personal affairs rather than with a motive for personal gain: Confucius said, “The noble-minded are clear about duty; little people are clear about profit” (4:16). Dawson (1982), noting the significance in Confucius’s contrast of duty and profit, states, “[Duty’s] original sense seems to have been natural justice, what seemed just to the natural man before concepts like law and ritual were evolved. ... it is clearly regarded as the ultimate yardstick against which matters of law and ritual must be judged” (p. 52).

The Confucian precept of good etiquette (*li*) is also best understood as a directive to treat others sensitively: Confucius said, “To master oneself and return to courtesy is humaneness” (12:1). Thus the cultivation of courteousness and deference in one’s everyday behavior is the equivalent of the cultivation of humanity, as manners and deference are concerned more with consideration for another’s feelings than they are with strict adherence to rules and empty ceremonial custom. Confucian wisdom (*zhi*) is best

understood as the functional application of an informed intellect to humanity, justice, and etiquette, while truthfulness (*xin*) is that which is exemplified by fidelity to the ideals of the four preceding virtues (Cleary, 1992).

Confucius does not explicitly mention temperance, but its importance to the humane life is strongly implied. The importance placed on rites presumably involves a respect for propriety and self-control as much as for humanity. Indeed, in both his personal affairs and the *Analects*, Confucius advocated modesty and self-control. Though he could have lived quite comfortably in the employ of many a noble, Confucius instead chose the relatively modest life of a teacher; though known as sage Master Kong to his students, Confucius still argued that true humanity was an impossible ideal for most mortals to attain, including himself (7:33–34). In the *Analects*, he commends as virtuous those who choose to live simply (6:10), refrain from self-aggrandizing boasts (6:14) or extravagance (3:4), and place hard work before reward (6:22).

Another core virtue not explicitly named as of central importance is transcendence. The Chinese did not believe in a divine lawgiver, and Confucius's philosophical focus was clearly on the secular and rational aspects of human functioning, not the cosmic or spiritual (5:13; 11:12). This is not to say Confucius completely ignored the transcendent or that he relegated it to a nonsignificant role (D. L. Hall & Ames, 1987). For instance, excellence in moral conduct is afforded the status of the transcendent: Confucius invoked heaven when discussing the origin of virtue (7:23) and his reverence for sages whose perfect virtue was modeled after the divine (6:17; 16:8; see also Haberman, 1998a).

Taoist Virtues. The Taoist tradition is the second indigenous one of China. Its creator, Lao-tzu (ca. 570 B.C.E.–?), is said to be a contemporary of Confucius, although there is some debate regarding whether he is one sage or many, and whether the primary work attributed to him, the *Tao Te Ching* (or *The Classic of Tao and Its Virtue*; trans. 1963), came much later than he may have lived (A. C. Graham, 1998; Kohn, 1998; Lynn, 1999).

The central tenet is one of transcendence: The Tao, or Way, that governs the heavens and earth is indescribable, unknowable, and even unnameable (*Tao Te Ching*, trans. 1963, chap. 1). And untranslatable—the Way (its Chinese character depicts a head in motion) refers simultaneously to direction, movement, method, and thought, and so no single word

can depict the profundity of its total meaning. Moreover, it is the creator of all things, including virtue (*Te*), but does not act—the Way is spontaneous and without effort (Cheng, 2000; Wong, 1997).

The text of the *Tao Te Ching*, however, can be cryptic and mysterious, and thus attempts, particularly Western ones, to interpret its verses can never be definitive (see Clarke, 2000; LaFargue, 1998). Like Confucius, Lao-tzu attempted to use his philosophy to reform rulers and improve society, but the emphasis was not on virtue as social interaction (Cheng, 2000). For instance, in a particularly famous passage, Lao-tzu seems to advise *against* wisdom, justice, and humanity—the very virtues that Confucius esteemed (as well as what we are arguing are core virtues found even in this tradition):

Reject sageness and abandon knowledge,
The people will benefit a hundredfold.
Reject humanity and abandon justice,
The people will return to filial piety and parental love. ([chap. 19](#))

Of course, no Taoist scholar argues that Lao-tzu was advocating anarchy, or even a society lacking in these things. Rather, it appears that what Lao-tzu believed in most was the virtue of “naturalness” or “spontaneity” (*tzu-jan*), or that quality of being without effort. Indeed, scholars tend to agree that naturalness is the cardinal virtue of Taoism, with nonaction (*wu-wei*) as the essential method to realize naturalness in social life (Cheng, 2000; Xiaogan, 1998).

Hence, it is not that Lao-tzu argued that rulers should be unjust but that the most justice comes from reigning without ruling (Xiaogan, 1998) or ruling with naturalness:

The best ruler, the people only know of his existence. ...
The best ruler is so relaxed, he hardly talks.
when he successfully completes his work,
People all say that for us, it is only natural. ([chap. 17](#), see also chap. 57)

The point is that Lao-tzu esteemed other virtues, but only if they arise from the higher one of spontaneity; later in the *Tao Te Ching* he explicitly cites as important the virtues of humanity, justice, and propriety, but only after (or in the presence of) this higher one (chap. 38, see also Cheng, 2000).

Likewise, wisdom is espoused in both rulers and commoners, but only if that knowledge is the true sort of the Way, not the superficial sort used for cunning: A sage ruler is “a man of subtlety [but] with deep insight,” ([chap. 15](#)); he does not “insist on his own views, thus he has a clear view,” nor does he “justify himself, thus he sees the truth” ([chap. 22](#); see also chaps. [3](#), [19](#), 33, 49; and Schwartz, 1994). And temperance, in terms of both humility and restraint from pursuing the false gods of material wealth and privilege, is advocated again and again: “He who becomes arrogant with wealth and power ... sows the seeds of his own misfortune [[chap. 9](#)] ... he who boasts of his own achievements harms his credibility ... he who is arrogant experiences no growth in wisdom [[chap. 24](#)] ... he who knows glory, but keeps to humility ... is sufficient in the eternal virtue [[chap. 28](#)].”

South Asia

As with China, there are two main branches of indigenous South Asian religious-philosophical thought. Though its importance has faded there, Buddhism had its origins in South Asia and only later went on to join Confucianism and Taoism as one of the three great traditions of China. Hinduism evolved over thousands of years through the integration of the many religions native to the Indian subcontinent and today remains the region’s predominant religion.

Buddhist Virtues. Buddhism is a philosophical-religious tradition of great variety and far reach—its tenets and practices extend from its birthplace in South Asia to China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, and beyond. The origin of all teachings, however, may be traced to the Buddha (563?–483? B.C.E.), or “Enlightened One,” who lived at the same time as Confucius and six centuries before Christ. Canonical texts describe his renunciation of his traditional and comfortable life in favor of a search for the end to the chronic suffering of life, death, and rebirth (*samsara*). After years of travel, asceticism, and yogic meditation, the Buddha came upon the path to enlightenment, to *nirvana*—the ultimate destiny of existence, the state of bliss brought on by an effacement of the self and its desires (Bhatt, 2001). The Buddha believed that anyone, with the right sort of practice, could reach nirvana, and he spent the rest of his life teaching people the way to it (Dutt, 1983).

If there can be said to be a fundamental virtue catalog in classical Buddhism, it is the Holy Eightfold Path, a subset of the more inclusive doctrine of the Four Noble Truths (*arya*

satyani), which the Buddha preached at his very first sermon. The Noble Truths are that life is suffering; the cause of this suffering is the “birth sin” of craving or desire; suffering ceases only upon nirvana, the extinction of desire; and nirvana may be achieved only by following the Holy Path (or Middle Way), an eight-pronged strategy to counteract the innate tendency to desire. In turn, the Holy Eightfold Path invokes the notion of perfection or right in one’s understanding, thinking, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration (see M. Fowler, 1999; also *Dhammapada*, trans. 2000).

The components of the Eightfold Path have been divided still further into a three-step plan of action consisting of virtue (*sila*), meditation (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*prajña*). The third (right speech), fourth (right action), and fifth steps (right livelihood) involve virtue; six (right effort), seven (right mindfulness), and eight (right concentration) involve meditation; and one (right understanding) and two (right thinking) involve wisdom. The strategy of the Path and the philosophy behind it invoke the core virtues of humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom. Examples, for instance, of virtue as described by various canonical texts include avoiding lies and gossip; abstaining from stealing, killing, or other bad deeds; and earning one’s living in a way that does not violate the Path—a Buddhist could not work as a hunter or butcher (Klostermaier, 1999).

A later Buddhist virtue catalog is suggested by what is known as the Five Virtues or Precepts (*pañca-sila*). These are ritually chanted abstentions from harming living things; taking what is not given (theft or fraud); misconduct concerning sense pleasures; false speech (lying); and unmindful states caused by alcoholic drinks or drugs (see P. Harvey, 1990). One can see notions of humanity and justice in the first, second, and fourth precepts, and strong directives toward temperance or self-restraint in the third and fifth precepts.

Finally, there are the four Universal Virtues (*apramana*; also known as “immeasurables”) of Buddhism. These are also mentioned in various canonical texts, concern the practical (as opposed to theoretical) aspects of Buddhism, and clearly advocate humanity. They are benevolence (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upeksa*; see Nagao, 2000).

Buddhism, with its emphasis on nonduality and enlightenment, is a forth-rightly transcendent tradition. It is also—due to its fundamental tenet of the impermanence of all things, including the self—one most likely to frustrate Western hermeneutic endeavors.

Armstrong (2001) warned against interpreting the *action* section of the Eightfold Path as some sort of collection of moral directives—to do so would be to blur Buddhist teaching (i. e., that voluntary adherence to these precepts helps remove hindrances to clarity and enlightenment) with Western notions of obeisance to a higher power. It is also important to note that Buddhist “virtues” are not metaphysically stable entities (because there are no stable entities in Buddhism) such as they are in many traditions; rather, they are thought or behavior tendencies designed to ultimately end the frustration of desire and craving.

Hindu Virtues. The collection of sacred texts known as the *Upanishads* deal with spiritual and metaphysical aspects of Hinduism; the earliest of these texts appear to date to the sixth or seventh century B.C.E., marking their existence slightly before the rise of Buddhism. The oldest, the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad*, elucidates some of the central theological tenets of early and modern-day Hinduism: the unifying principle of brahman, the sacred absolute power and the creator of the universe; the related notion of the interconnectedness of all things, as all ultimately extends back to brahman; and the cycle of rebirth, which comes from the blending of the self and brahman (Haberman, 1998b; Leaman, 1999). Hinduism and Buddhism diverge in the notion of the self: In the former tradition, the self is eternal, universal, indistinguishable from brahman; in the latter there is no permanent self and no ultimate creator (P. Harvey, 1990).

The emphasis in Hinduism is on personal virtues, such as self-denial and renunciation; these promote self-improvement in the current life and a potential for salvation or the attainment of a higher caste in the next. Hence, one catalog of Hindu virtues, as narrated in the sacred text of the *Bhagavadgita* (trans. 1990), is unsurprisingly intertwined with the notion of caste. This text describes a stratified caste society consisting of the Brahmins (educated aristocrats), Kshatriyas (soldiers), Vaisyas (agricultural and lower-trade laborers), and Sudras (menial laborers). Each of the four castes is distinguished by the characteristic virtues exhibited by its members: The spirituality of the Brahmin shows itself in penance, self-control, forbearance, purity, rectitude, knowledge, experience, and faith; the qualities ascribed to the soldier caste include those of valor (or courage in battle), skill, glory, fortitude, and charity (generosity); the lower castes are assigned the virtues of dutiful performance of labor—little is expected in the way of spiritual and intellectual achievement for these people in their current life (XVIII, 40–45).

Hinduism, with its emphasis on personal improvement, echoes Buddhism but contrasts sharply with the Confucian (and later Athenian) belief in virtue as citizenship. And though their meanings have some cultural specificity, the core virtues are present thematically within the Hindu tradition. Consider wisdom: Although the Hindu (and Buddhist) ideal of attainment of transcendental knowledge of the self does not directly compare with the Confucian notion of the importance of wisdom gained through education and experience, the theme of coming to a higher knowledge is central to all traditions. Transcendence, as invoked by the concept of brahman, is diffused throughout the *Bhagavadgita*; and examples of justice (rectitude), courage (valor), temperance (self-restraint), and humanity (charity) all make their appearance as virtues attributed to specific castes. Notice also that the concept of justice is interwoven with the Hindu belief that actions in one life help to determine caste status in the next. That the text ascribes different virtues for different castes does not argue for nonubiquity within the culture—indeed, it is difficult to imagine that Hindu culture advocates bravery for soldiers and cowardice for everyone else.

The West

In the West, the very first Greek philosophers asked, “What is the good of a person?” This framing of character led thinkers like Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle to examine and enumerate virtues as traits of character. As mentioned in [chapter 3](#), moral philosophy changed with the growing influence of Judeo-Christianity (and later Islam), which saw God as the giver of laws by which one should live and virtue as obeisance to his edicts—shifting the focus of Western discourse on morality from that of inner character to observable actions.

Athenian Virtues. The first major virtue catalog of the West was articulated by Plato (427–347 B.C.E.) in the *Republic*, his magnum opus on the ideal human society. Here Plato, using Socrates as his mouthpiece, proposes wisdom (*sophia*), courage (*andreia*), self-restraint (*sôphrosune*), and justice (*dikaisunê*) as the four core virtues of the ideal city (trans. 1968; IV, 427e ff.). He argues that these constitute a class-based hierarchy of civic virtues that has its anchor in the makeup of the individual soul (IV, 441c ff.). That is, the desirable division of civic virtues—wisdom belongs to the ruling class, courage to that of the soldier class—is mirrored in an individual’s healthily functioning psychology. The soul has its divisions, and to each belongs a virtue—wisdom is exercised by reason, courage by the

“spirited” part, self-restraint is imposed on the appetite. In both the civic and individual cases, justice (moral action) will occur when each division is properly carrying out its assigned task (IV, 443d–e; see Johansen, 1998). This Platonic vision of virtue is particularly comparable to the Hindu notion outlined earlier in this chapter: Virtues are categorized along professional and class lines, with the rulers complementary to the Brahmins in their position as virtue specialists.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), Plato’s most accomplished student, picks up the argument that virtuous behavior is a social practice exercised by a citizen of an ideal city (trans. 2000, V.I, 1129a ff.). For Aristotle, virtue is an acquired skill learned through trial and error. Related to this is his characterization of virtue known as the *doctrine of the mean*: One encounters a situation and, basing the decision on reason, experience, and context, picks a course of action from between two extremes of disposition, those of deficiency or excess. The mean between these two is virtue (1107a). Generosity, for instance, is the mean between wastefulness and stinginess (1120a); courageousness is the mean between cowardliness or rashness (1116a).

Aristotle’s list of the virtues includes the original Platonic four (courage, justice, temperance, wisdom), but to these he adds quite a number of others, such as generosity, wit, friendliness, truthfulness, magnificence, and greatness of soul (Aristotle, trans. 2000, IV). The latter two might sound strange to the modern reader: Magnificence has to do with spending lavishly, though in a tasteful way, on honorable items such as sacrifices or warships (IV.II); greatness of soul refers to thinking oneself worthy of great things, particularly honor (IV.III).

In neither Plato’s nor Aristotle’s account is transcendence given the official status of virtue. But, as was also the case with Confucius, the notion of transcendence as a crucial good suffuses the works. In the *Republic*, Plato described how the ideal city would be governed; philosophers, whose inner constitution of virtue is such that they are above selfish interests, should rule. But he admits that this state is yet to be realized on Earth, and mortal man must look to the heavens to find its model (IX, 592 a–b). Aristotle invoked the transcendent when he discussed the relationship of virtue and happiness (*eudaimonia*). For Aristotle, happiness is “activity in accordance with virtue” (X.VII. 1177a). He told us in the last book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that, of all the virtues, wisdom is the most perfect, and the exercise of it—contemplation—constitutes perfect happiness (X.VII, 1177a). A life

of contemplation, of perfect eudaimonia, is transcendent because it indicates a “divine element” within the individual and so is an ideal for which to strive. He stated, “If intellect, then, is something divine compared with the human being, the life in accordance with it will also be divine compared with human life” (X.VII, 1177b).

Likewise, humanity (kindness, love) is never specifically named as a virtue in either Athenian account, but notions of shared humanity, of the importance of friendship, of generosity and charitable acts, of giving others pleasure and not pain, are scattered across both works (e.g., Plato, trans. 1968, II, 372b, II, 376b–c, V, 471a–b; Aristotle, trans. 2000, IV.I, IV.VI, VIII.I).

Judeo-Christian Virtues. The account of the Seven Heavenly Virtues, the classic Christian enumeration of human strengths, is described in Aquinas’s (1224–1274) doctrinal work *Summa Theologiae* (trans. 1989). Because the work is celebrated as a successful interpretation of Aristotelian (pagan) philosophy with Christian theology, we will present this text prior to Jewish ones, and hence out of chronological order.

In his virtue catalog, Aquinas deleted all of Aristotle’s additions to Plato. He constructed his list by retaining the cardinal virtues of temperance, courage, justice, and wisdom and then adding the three theological virtues proposed by Saint Paul: faith, hope, and charity (or love). Aquinas argues for a hierarchical organization of the virtues—of the cardinal virtues, wisdom is the most important, but the transcendent virtues of faith and hope are more important than that, and of all the seven, charity (love) reigns supreme:

Having faith and hope in something beyond our human power exceeds all human virtue. As activities faith precedes hope and hope charity; though as dispositions they are all instilled together. ... but charity is more perfect than faith and hope which, without charity, are not perfect. So charity is the mother and root of all virtue. (II-8, Q. 62, arts. 3–4)

Note that within the Seven Heavenly Virtues, Aquinas enumerated what we believe are the six core virtues: He presents the four cardinal virtues by name, invokes transcendence with the virtues of faith and hope, and humanity with the virtue of charity.

Within the Old Testament, two sections are particularly illustrative of virtues esteemed by Jewish culture: the account of the Ten Commandments received by Moses in Exodus and two books of Proverbs that specifically instruct on the consequences of virtues

and vices. The Ten Commandments is a list of “thou shalt’s” and “thou shalt not’s” from which conclusions regarding the virtues advocated in this tradition may be drawn. The Commandments forbid polytheism, idolatry, taking God’s name in vain, murder, adultery, theft, lying, and covetousness, while commanding that the Sabbath be kept holy, and parents honored (Exodus 20:1–17, Revised Standard Version). Justice is implied in prohibitions against murder, theft, and lying; temperance in those against adultery and covetousness; and transcendence generally within the divine origin of the commands.

Sage instructions to Jewish youth on moral and religious behavior are the main concerns of Proverbs. The opening lines of the first book of Proverbs are a call to edification and are quite clear in distinguishing those virtues that Judaism esteems:

That men may know wisdom and instruction,
understand the words of insight,
receive instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity;
that prudence may be given to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth.
The wise man also may hear and increase in learning,
and the man of understanding acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles. (1:2–6)

Books II (10:1–22:16) and IV (25:1–29:27) of Proverbs are attributed to Solomon and deal specifically with recommendations for virtuous behavior (as well as admonitions against vice). Many of the maxims given here are particularly well known (“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger,” “Hearken to your father who begot you, and despise not your mother when she is old,” and “A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls”) and are contained within verses 15, 23, and 26, respectively. The verses of Proverbs are plentiful, and many virtues are advocated, often repeatedly. They include integrity (courage); righteousness, just leadership, trustworthiness (justice); love, graciousness, and kindness (humanity); diligence, prudence, humility, and restraint (temperance); hope and fear/love of God (transcendence); and understanding, knowledge, and respect for instruction and teaching (wisdom).

Islamic Virtues. Islam's core beliefs and practices were formed during and shortly after the life of Muhammad (570–632 C.E.). Revelations communicated to him by the angel Gabriel, recorded in 114 chapters of scripture known as the Koran (“recitation”), founded Muhammad's claim to being Jesus' successor and the last of the prophets. The revelations also established the foundation for his further teaching, which quickly developed into the organized Islamic faith (Leaman, 2002).

Though differing from Judaism and Christianity in crucial ways, Islam nonetheless was influenced by and includes some of these religions' values (Mahdi, 2001). The ideas presented in the Koran are thought to have germinated the tendency to philosophic thought; in turn, the main influence on the development of Islamic philosophy is thought to be the Greeks, though with some Indian strains (Dunlop, 1971).

Islamic philosophy is distinguished from much of the rest of the West by the central inclusion and importance of God (Leaman, 2002). Mahdi (2001) wrote that the “single attitude” that has historically characterized the Islamic community is “gratitude for the revelation and divine law” (p. 17), and so not surprisingly the transcendent plays a central and powerful role in most of the early philosophical texts.

Alfarabi (870–950 C.E.) is distinguished as the “first outstanding logician and metaphysician of Islam” (Fakhry, 1983, p. 107). He is also known for his numerous interpretive works of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, and his most concise virtue catalog, given in *Fusul al-Madani* (*Aphorisms of the Statesman*; trans. 1961; also known simply as *Selected Aphorisms*, trans. 2001), is highly reminiscent of theirs. Alfarabi's discussion of virtue, though rare in its relative omission of the divine, is presented here because he is generally regarded as the founder of Islamic philosophy.

Fusul al-Madani is composed of 96 aphorisms that deal with, broadly, the health of the soul. Specifically, Alfarabi describes the government that best nourishes the individual soul in its quest for perfection. Again, this is a forth-rightly political work: Alfarabi does not specifically invoke the Prophet, and he mentions the revelation and philosophy only rarely; rather, his focus is on the city-state, and he constantly mentions and describes the activities of the ideal citizen and ruler (Butterworth, 2001).

Much of Alfarabi's catalog will be familiar: Justice in the city-state is of central concern, and virtue is said to be the middle way between two extremes; this echoes Aristotle's earlier doctrine of the mean (trans. 2000, aphs. 61–67). He borrows again from

the Athenians when he presents the notion of the divided soul: The soul is split into the Rational and the Appetitive, and the exercise of each part comprises the corresponding Rational and Moral virtues (aphs. 8–9).

It appears that the virtues of the former category are the personal virtues of contemplation; those in the second are the social virtues invoked in dealings with others. Those included in the Rational category are “wisdom, intellect, cleverness, quick-wittedness, and excellent understanding”; those of the Ethical category are “moderation, courage, liberality (generosity), and justice” (aph. 8). Hence, we see a repetition of the Platonic virtues, with a humanity virtue (generosity) added and afforded equal standing. Despite his specific omission of the Prophet, transcendence is present in Alfarabi’s account, for he contends that religion and philosophy can be harmonized, and that the exercise of virtue is in itself a spiritual act (e.g., aphis. 68, 81, 86–87, 94).

■ Convergence, Caveats, and Conclusions

The impetus for this exercise was our attempt to create a consensual classification of human strengths while avoiding the criticism that any specific list we proposed would be culturally and historically idiosyncratic. The primary lesson we learn from the historical exercise described in this chapter is that there is a strong convergence across time, place, and intellectual tradition about certain core virtues. As one tradition bled into another, as one catalog infused and then gave way to the next, particular virtues recurred with pleasant tenacity. Although others may appear on some lists and then be lost again, certain virtues, either explicitly or thematically, had real staying power.

Caveats are in order. First, it makes good sense to ask whether all of the High Six are equally ubiquitous. Probably not. Justice and humanity show up the most reliably in that they make every tradition’s list; they tend to be named explicitly; and we suspect, given their crucial importance to the survival of even the smallest society, that they are truly universal (Bok, 1995; de Waal, 2000; Ridley, 1996). Temperance and wisdom finish a close second: At least in our survey of the “Great Three” cultures with their long literary traditions, they appear reliably and usually explicitly. Transcendence seems the next most ubiquitous, finishing fifth only because it is the most “implicit” of the core six: Transcendence is rarely nominated explicitly, but the notion that there is a higher meaning or purpose to life, be it religiously underpinned or not, infuses each tradition to the extent

that in some decidedly nonreligious entries (such as Plato or Confucius), the notion of virtue serving heaven or the gods seems taken for granted. Finally, courage is very explicitly nominated (usually as physical valor) on most lists but is missing even thematically from others, such as those from the Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian traditions. We doubt this means bravery is not valued in these traditions, and the more modern definitions of courage discussed earlier can be detected in their classic literatures (cf. Yearley, 1990). We preferred not to do that here, but we do discuss Chinese conceptions of bravery in [chapter 9](#).

Second, we find enormous variability across cultures in terms of what the culture esteems. Whereas each tradition nominated some number of virtues as proper or necessary for the well-lived life, no two lists were identical, and, not surprisingly, many virtues we encountered fell by the wayside because they failed the test of ubiquity, even by expanded and fuzzy criteria. Among culture-bound (nonubiquitous) virtues, a number are very familiar to those of us in the here and now, for example, glory. Other culture-bound virtues seem very exotic from our vantage point, for example, magnificence and naturalness. One virtue—perhaps best termed “duty”—was even a contender for core virtue status. Highly stratified cultures, specifically those described in the Confucian, Hindu, and Platonic traditions, tended to champion role-related duty or class-defined virtues, but these concepts were not present among the other traditions (plus there is good evidence that at least some part of Confucian duty relates to ubiquitous notions of justice). All these examples of nonubiquitous virtues are of course important and deserve serious attention by psychologists, but they were not the main concern of this exercise. We hope that as our classification project evolves, we can turn to these less ubiquitous, culture-bound virtues.

Third, all the traditions we surveyed come from literate, large, and long-lived societies with cities, money, law, and division of labor. None of these cultures existed in total isolation from the others (e.g., the Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages read Aristotle). We do not pretend to know if the High Six characterizes small or short-lived or nonliterate or hunter-gatherer societies.

To summarize, our survey of influential religious and philosophical traditions reveals six broad virtue classes to be ubiquitous. This conclusion has important implications for our attempt to classify positive traits. Most significantly, we have a nonarbitrary basis for

focusing on certain virtues rather than others. Much of the ongoing societal discourse on “character” is tilted in one direction or another by less than universal political and personal values. Although our classification is decidedly about such values, it is descriptive of what is ubiquitous, rather than prescriptive or idiosyncratic.

As explained in [chapter 1](#), we use these core virtues to organize our longer list of more specific character strengths. We opt for this strategy for several reasons, including the aforementioned complexity of the general virtues. In each case, we can think of several ways to achieve the general virtue, and our eventual measurement goal led us to focus on these more specific routes (what we term strengths) to the High Six. Thus, the virtue of “humanity” is achieved by the strengths of kindness and generosity on the one hand versus loving and being loved on the other. The virtue of temperance similarly has several routes: modesty and humility, self-control and self-regulation, and prudence and caution. The practical implication of this classification is that it suggests which character strengths are similar and which are not.

The ubiquity of these core virtues suggests the possibility of universality and eventually a deep theory about moral excellence phrased in evolutionary terms (Wright, 1994). One possibility is that these are purely cultural: acquired characteristics that long-lived, moneyed, literate, citified societies with massive division of labor select for. Another possibility is that the High Six are purely biological, that they define the “moral animal.” And a third possibility, the one we lean to, is that they are evolutionarily predisposed. These particular styles of behaving may have emerged, been selected for, and been sustained because each allows a crucial survival problem to be solved. Without biologically predisposed mechanisms that allowed our ancestors to generate, recognize, and celebrate corrective virtues, their social groups would have died out quickly. The ubiquitous virtues, we believe, are what allow the human animal to struggle against and to triumph over what is darkest within us.

3. PREVIOUS CLASSIFICATIONS OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS

So far, we have overviewed the classification, focusing on the criteria we used for identifying character strengths ([chapter 1](#)), and we have described our historical survey leading to the conclusion that six core virtues—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence—recur across time and place ([chapter 2](#)). In the present chapter, we present more background by describing previous classifications of character strengths and the lessons we learned from them while devising the classification. We focus on the contributions of psychologists but touch as well on how other fields have unpacked the notion of good character. In discussing these previous classifications of character strengths, we compare and contrast them with the present classification. Seeing how other thinkers have classified character in particular helped us to articulate the criteria for designating positive traits as character strengths.

■ Lessons From Virtue Catalogs

As mentioned in [chapter 1](#), we collected many dozens of inventories of virtues and strengths, from historical and contemporary sources. We ended up calling these statements virtue catalogs because they occupy a place somewhere between mere lists and more formal classifications.

A catalog intends to be exhaustive and to have mutually exclusive categories. It aspires to stability because it needs to be useful not just now but in the future. Think of a college catalog: It should list all the courses that might be offered to students in the next several semesters. Or think of an L. L. Bean catalog: It should list all the products the company is offering for sale to yuppies that season. These properties of a catalog—exhaustiveness and stability—are together termed its *coverage*. Coverage cannot be judged out of context. One must keep in mind the purpose of the catalog. Who will use it, and why? The *DSM*, for example, has good coverage for the purpose of inpatient psychiatrists,

who need to describe to third-party payers the sorts of psychological problems that result in hospitalization, but it has poor coverage for vocational counselors who need to describe the issues and problems of people in the workplace (cf. Schacht & Nathan, 1977).

The typical purpose of virtue catalogs is to provide a language for moral evaluation and discourse, to state the important goals for which individuals and organizations should strive. What these catalogs all leave unsaid is how to recognize progress toward these goals or even what the goals might mean in concrete (measurable) terms. Witness the flap encountered several years ago by the Boy Scouts of America when they tried to interpret their very general value statements in terms of specific sexual orientations.¹ This shortcoming of catalogs illustrates why they do not qualify as scientific classifications. As a parsing strategy, a classification introduces explicit rules for deciding where entries go based on their features. Its rules allow the accommodation of new and potentially ambiguous entries.

Despite their limitations with respect to measurement, the virtue catalogs nonetheless helped us as we brainstormed potential entries for our classification. Had we left out any virtues or strengths deemed important by others, no matter how vaguely defined these might be? If we had left out a listed virtue or strength, did we have a good reason? [Table 3.1](#) illustrates how our classification compares with well-known virtue catalogs by William Bennett (1993), the Boy Scouts of America (1998), Benjamin Franklin (1790/1961), Charlemagne (Turner, 1880), and Merlin (2001). Space does not permit a table with dozens of columns, but the exercise proved to work rather well for every catalog we collected. Across catalogs, all core virtue classes were represented and virtually all character strengths, with the exception of those phrased in modern psychological jargon (e.g., social intelligence). In any given catalog, some of the virtues and strengths we include in our classification were absent because they did not fit the purpose of the catalog in question. For example, humor and appreciation of beauty were not mentioned in the catalogs summarized in [Table 3.1](#), but we have no problem including these in our classification even though some of our esteemed predecessors and contemporaries did not

In other cases, catalogs included strengths that did not fit our classification. Thus, in [Table 3.1](#), the reader can see that cleanliness was explicitly mentioned by Benjamin Franklin and the Boy Scouts. Why did we not include it in our final list? We have nothing against hygiene, but in many sectors of the modern world in which running water and

antibiotics are taken for granted, cleanliness is what we call a conspicuous-in-its-absence-only strength—not celebrated when present although certainly lamented when absent. Cleanliness therefore fails to satisfy a number of the criteria presented in [chapter 1](#). In any event, a historical view of cleanliness reveals considerable religious significance (cf. the various taboos surrounding food and menstruation in Leviticus and elsewhere), so perhaps these aspects of cleanliness indeed show up in the present classification under the rubric of spirituality.

■ Lessons From Psychology

Once upon a time, psychologists were greatly interested in “character”—what it meant and how it could be cultivated (McCullough & Snyder, 2000). But for many reasons the topic fell out of favor. First, a growing sophistication among psychologists about how personal values could unintentionally pervade “objective” research and theory made researchers gun-shy about pronouncements concerning the psychological components of the good life. Gordon Allport, the main personality trait theorist in 20th-century United States psychology, explicitly banished the term *character* from academic discourse concerning personality (Nicholson, 1998). He argued that character was the subject matter of philosophy and not psychology (Allport, 1921, 1927; Allport & Vernon, 1930). The traits he urged psychologists to study were presumably objective entities (Allport dubbed them *neuropsychic structures*) stripped of moral significance and linked to “adjustment” but not imbued with inherent value.

Allport’s argument reflected the positivism sweeping social science at this time and its rigid distinction between fact and value. Fact was the province of science, and value was the province of philosophy. Traits were therefore part of psychology, whereas character was not. Although Allport’s argument won the day, not all his contemporaries agreed. John Dewey (1922/1998), for example, thought that character and virtue should be included in the subject matter of psychology and indeed that psychology’s empirical methods could profitably inform discussions of value by philosophers. The present classification falls squarely within the Dewey vision.

Second, pressing social problems like violence, poverty, and racism as well as psychology’s entry into the business of treating psychological disorders further shifted the attention of psychologists away from good character. Human ills of course demand

attention. We are not critical of psychology's decision to study problems and devise remedies. We ourselves have spent the bulk of our careers studying psychological disorders. However, an exclusive focus on what is wrong with people can lead us to overlook what is right and precludes the possibility that one of the best ways to undo someone's weakness is by encouraging his or her strengths.

TABLE 3.1 *Selected Catalogs of Virtues and Strengths*

Character strength	William Bennett	Boy Scouts
<i>Wisdom and knowledge</i>		
Creativity	—	—
Curiosity/love of learning	—	—
Open-mindedness	—	—
Perspective	—	—
<i>Courage</i>		
Bravery	Courage	Brave
Persistence	Work; perseverance	—
Integrity	Honesty; responsibility	Trustworthy
Vitality	—	Cheerful
<i>Humanity</i>		
Love	Friendship	—
Kindness	Compassion	Helpful; friendly; kind
Social intelligence	—	—
<i>Justice</i>		
Citizenship	Loyalty	Loyalty; obedient
Fairness	—	—
Leadership	—	—
<i>Temperance</i>		
Forgiveness and mercy	—	—
Humility and modesty	—	—
Prudence	—	Thrifty; courteous
Moderation	—	—
Self-regulation	Self-discipline	—
<i>Transcendence</i>		
Appreciation of beauty	—	—
Gratitude	—	—
Hope	—	—
Humor	—	Cheerful
Spirituality	Faith	Reverent
<i>Missing</i>		
Cleanliness	—	Clean

Benjamin Franklin	Charlemagne	Merlin
—	—	—
—	—	Acquire knowledge
—	Render righteous judgment	—
Order	—	—
—	—	—
Resolution; industry	—	—
Sincerity	Do not consent to wrong; do not steal; do not perjure yourself	Love virtue; abhor evil
—	—	—
—	—	Love your neighbor
—	Be kind; do good to the weak	Be beloved by all men
—	—	—
—	Serve the liege lord faithfully; defend the Church	Obedience
Justice	Be merciful to prisoners	—
—	—	When in authority, decide reasonably
—	—	—
—	Forgive as you hope to be forgiven	—
Humility	Be humble	—
Temperance; frugality	Shun excess in eating and drinking	—
—	—	—
Silence; tranquility; chastity	Persevere not in wrath	Fortitude
—	—	—
—	—	—
—	—	—
—	—	—
—	Love God almighty	—
Cleanliness	—	—

Third, another concern of early psychology—the study of genius—became mired down in controversies surrounding intelligence tests, tarnishing by implication the study of character (Gould, 1981). Two babies were thrown out along with the bathwater of just one. As we began work on our classification, we constantly looked over our shoulders, fearing that we would be criticized as politically incorrect or insensitive. We have since discovered—happily—that a concern with good character resides in no single place along the political spectrum. The virtues and strengths on which we focus in this book are close to universally valued. We expect and invite criticism of our attempt to define and measure character strengths, but we do not anticipate this criticism to be on political grounds.

Fourth, the growing popularity of psychoanalytic theory led many psychologists to regard anything positive about people as suspect, the result of unconscious defenses that disguised our real motives—sex and aggression.² Even psychologists who would not have

considered themselves Freudians participated in this debunking of the good life. Hope and optimism were dismissed as wishful thinking if not outright delusions. Ostensible altruism was viewed as just another strategy for personal gain. Courage was reinterpreted as deficiencies in those parts of the nervous system responsible for fear. And so on. We of course disagree, endorsing the position of positive psychology that human strengths are as authentic as human weaknesses.

Finally, before character fell off the radar screen of psychology, there were some apparent failures by researchers attempting to demonstrate the reality of positive traits. In 1928, Hartshorne and May undertook an ambitious study of moral conduct among school children. These investigators wanted to know if children had a general trait of honesty or dishonesty. Concretely, when given different opportunities to transgress, did the same children always step over the line? Hartshorne and May thought of many situations in which a young person might lie or cheat or steal. Settings included the home, the classroom, and the playground. Findings implied that moral conduct was not particularly consistent. Although correlations across situations were usually positive, they were not of great magnitude, suggesting that honesty was not a general trait.

Decades later, this study and others like it figured prominently in an influential argument by psychologist Walter Mischel (1968) challenging the assumption of consistency with respect to any personality trait. He surveyed studies dealing with consistency—like the Hartshorne and May investigation—and concluded that there was little evidence to support the widespread assumption of personality consistency. He then suggested that personality theories were across-the-board wrong and should be replaced with a version of learning theory that located “personality” only in particular situations (Mischel, 1973). Behavior was of course sensible and orderly, but its coherence did not stem from psychological traits but rather from the concrete environment and how people think about it. The most radical interpretation of Mischel’s conclusion is that there was no such thing as personality. And if there were no personality, then how could one entertain the possibility of character?

Mischel’s apparent dismissal of personality is regarded by many psychologists as a wakeup call, and in recent decades personality psychology has been reborn in a much more sophisticated form (Peterson, 1992). No one talks seriously about types of people anymore—personality characteristics are now described along more-versus-less

dimensions. No one discusses behavior without reference to the setting, both proximal and distal. No one assesses a personality characteristic with a one-shot measure—this would be akin to limiting the SAT to one question or basing a college grade point average on performance in one course only. And no one believes that people are completely inconsistent across situations.

Indeed, a reexamination of the original Hartshorne and May (1928) data shows a notable degree of cross-situational consistency in honesty versus dishonesty (Burton, 1963). In his critique, Mischel acknowledged positive correlations across situations but went on to dismiss the actual figures as too low to take seriously. But he was mistaken. Without getting into the numerical details, suffice it to say that the correlations of honesty scores across situations are higher than the correlations between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, between antihistamine use and reduced sniffing, or between adherence to an AZT regimen and the progression of AIDS (cf. G. J. Meyer et al., 2001; R. Rosenthal & Rubin, 1982). When expressed in the same metric, these correlations are as robust as the effects of the situation in such well-known social psychology experiments as Milgram's (1963) investigation of obedience or Darley and Latané's (1968) study of unresponsive bystanders (Funder & Ozer, 1983). If we take all these findings seriously—and of course we do—then we should take just as seriously the evidence in favor of personality traits. A psychology of character traits is not a fool's errand. The overarching goal of the present classification is to reclaim psychology's early concern with character by drawing on a century's worth of hard-learned lessons about how to conduct good psychological science.

Even though character has not been of major concern to psychologists for many years, many traditions within the discipline have had something to say about the topic, even if the implications have been indirect. We cannot survey all the relevant traditions, but we offer thumbnail sketches here of some that shaped our thinking.

Thorndike

Perhaps the most influential psychologist in the discipline's early United States history was Edward L. Thorndike. Remembered today chiefly for his pioneering studies of instrumental conditioning and his "law of effect" (the forerunner of Skinner's principles of operant conditioning), Thorndike (1911, 1939, 1940) also wrote extensively on character and how it could be cultivated. In keeping with a behaviorist emphasis on the environment,

Thorndike pointed to the setting as crucial in shaping character. He even quantified the goodness of cities in terms of such indices as (a) low death rate; (b) per capita expenditure for teachers' salaries; (c) per capita acreage of public parks; (d) excess of physicians and teachers over domestic servants; and (e) number of automobiles, telephones, and radios. Thorndike phrased most of these indices as positive outcomes—not simply the absence of negatives. Long before positive psychology took form and called for researchers to look beyond the zero points of deficiency, deficit, disease, and disorder, Thorndike proposed that quality of life entailed more than the elimination of problems.

Although he did not follow through to create a concrete measure, Thorndike (1940) also proposed that a person's morality (character) could be measured in quantitative terms, just as intelligence was measured. We would like to believe that he would approve of our decision here to disaggregate character into separate components, just as contemporary psychologists have disaggregated intelligence (cf. H. Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985).

Erikson

Erik Erikson (1963, 1968, 1982) both built upon and modified Freud's stage theory of development by proposing that individuals across the life span must confront and resolve a series of specific social challenges. Different psychosocial virtues develop in each case ([Table 3.2](#)). Erikson's theory was useful to us in several ways. First, it is one of the first examples of a psychologically informed classification of character strengths. All of Erikson's virtues have a counterpart in our classification, although not vice versa, perhaps because only some strengths arguably result from the resolution of a social conflict. Consider open-mindedness or appreciation of beauty—their typical developmental precursors are unlikely to involve conflict. Second, Erikson's approach is an explicit reminder that strengths have a developmental trajectory and that certain strengths can lay the foundation for others. Third, it points to the fact that cultures recognize the social nature of people's conflicts and provide their members with help to accomplish the tasks that confront them at different periods of life. Consider the dating rituals institutionalized within our own society. They help young people achieve love by bringing them together precisely when intimacy is their prevailing concern. Here is a useful way of thinking about youth development. Rather than adopting a “more is better” approach to the activities we program for our children, we

should stop and ask what we want an activity to accomplish (e.g., to forge curiosity, kindness, or citizenship), whether a child is developmentally ready for this activity and purpose, and whether the details of this activity indeed accomplish its stated goal vis-à-vis a targeted character strength.

TABLE 3.2 *Erikson's Psychosocial Stages*

According to Erikson, all people pass through the following stages. Satisfactory resolution of a stage results in a character strength and allows the next stage to be entered. Erikson's term for the resulting character strength is shown in the table along with (in parentheses) the approximately corresponding strength(s) from our classification.

Approximate ages	Characterization	Resulting character strength
Birth to age 1	Infants must learn to achieve a sense of safety, trusting caretakers to provide for their well-being	Trust (hope, gratitude)
Age 1 to age 3	Children must learn to make things happen, to choose, to exercise will	Autonomy (persistence)
Age 3 to age 6	Children must learn to initiate their own activities, thereby gaining confidence in oneself	Initiative (curiosity)
Age 6 to puberty	Children must learn to explore systematically their skills and abilities	Competence (love of learning; creativity)
Puberty to age 18	Adolescents must create a set of personal values and goals by which to live, represented as a coherent identity	Identity (social intelligence; spirituality)
Age 18 to age 25	Young adults must learn to merge their identity with that of another person	Intimacy (love)
Age 25 to age 50	Middle-aged adults must learn to concern themselves with the world and the next generation	Generativity (kindness)
Age 50 to death	Later adults must come to terms with how they have resolved previous issues	Ego integrity (integrity; perspective)

We also learned some negative lessons by attending to criticisms of Erikson's work. So, there is little evidence to support his strict stage approach to development, which reaffirms our decision not to wed our classification to a single theoretical framework. For example, it does not seem plausible that generativity appears only in adulthood. Our scheme renders this strength as kindness, and this character trait can show itself very early in life. Even the most literal interpretation of Eriksonian generativity allows it to be seen among children who participate in the March of Dimes, Earth Day celebrations, and the like.

Erikson's theory is probably a better description of men than women, and it is probably a better description of individuals in societies with formal institutions than individuals in other sorts of societies. We need to remain vigilant in our classification efforts not to preclude large segments of the population by inadvertent theoretical assumptions.

Finally, Erikson's theory can also be criticized for proposing a right way to pass through life. A more flexible—and indeed more accurate—position is that there are various routes through life. We do not back off from endorsing good character as a goal for all, but we must allow it to develop in different ways and to manifest itself in different forms.

Maslow

Also influential in our thinking were the writings of Abraham Maslow (1970), who suggested that humans' motives are arranged according to a hierarchy of needs. At the bottom are biologically based needs, such as hunger and thirst. We cannot leave these needs unsatisfied for too long because our lives are at stake. Only when these needs are met does the need to be free from threatened danger arise. Maslow called this need one of safety—both physical and psychological. We need to believe that the world is stable and coherent.

Next in the hierarchy is attachment, which leads us to seek out other people, to love and to be loved. If we successfully satisfy this need for attachment, then we need to feel esteemed, by ourselves and by others. Maslow grouped our needs for knowledge, understanding, and novelty together as cognitive needs and proposed that they are next in his hierarchy. Then we find aesthetic needs: the desire for order and beauty.

Near the top of his hierarchy is self-actualization: “the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities” (Maslow, 1970, p. 150). Maslow argued that we must

satisfy lower needs before we seek satisfaction of higher needs. The need for self-actualization is difficult to achieve because it becomes relevant only when the needs that fall below it have been successfully addressed. Maslow was particularly interested in the self-actualized individual, to whom he attributed such characteristics as spontaneity, autonomy, sense of humor, and a capacity for deep interpersonal relations. Finally, at the very top of the hierarchy is the need for transcendence, which refers to spiritual and religious needs.

Like Erikson's scheme, the one proposed by Maslow can be recast as a catalog of virtues and strengths. This reformulation can be done with respect to the needs themselves, many of which map rather neatly into what we have identified as core virtues, or with respect to the characteristics of self-actualized individuals, which largely correspond to our more specific character strengths (Table 3.3). Not all the features of self-actualization correspond to particular character strengths, in part because Maslow included several culture-bound traits (e.g., focus on ends rather than means; need for privacy; spontaneity; autonomy), which we did not place in our classification, and in part because he conflated character strengths with what we consider possible (but not inevitable) outcomes or fulfillments of these strengths (e.g., problem-centered focus; peak experiences).

TABLE 3.3 *Maslow's Characteristics of Self-Actualized Individuals*

In some cases (~), we suggest a very rough correspondence between dimension of psychosocial maturity and a character strength, but we do not claim it to be a good match.

Characteristic	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
1. Accurate perception of reality	Open-mindedness
2. Acceptance of oneself	Social intelligence; ~spirituality
3. Spontaneity	None
4. Problem centered	None
5. Need for privacy	None
6. Autonomous	None
7. Freshness of appreciation	Appreciation of beauty and excellence
8. Peak experiences	~Vitality
9. Human kinship	Citizenship
10. Humility and respect for others	Humility and modesty; fairness
11. Deep interpersonal relationships with a select few people	Love
12. Strong but not necessarily conventional ethical standards	Fairness
13. Focuses on ends rather than means	None
14. Nonhostile sense of humor	Humor
15. Creative	Creativity
16. Resistance to enculturation	Integrity; open-mindedness

Regardless, there is decent overlap between what Maslow regarded as human excellence and the strengths enumerated in the present classification. We also are persuaded by the general idea of a hierarchy of needs, if not Maslow's details, because it underscores the notion that strengths cannot easily develop or be displayed in adverse environments—when basic needs for sustenance or safety go unmet.

We disagree, however, with the specific hierarchy hypothesized by Maslow. We see no reason to place cognitive needs below aesthetic needs, for example, or transcendence needs above attachment needs. Indeed, the particular order in which Maslow arranged different needs has been frequently criticized (Neher, 1991). A parent might run into a burning building to save a stranded child or forgo all manner of personal satisfactions to pay for the child's music lessons. Along these lines, a study comparing homeless individuals and college students in terms of their need for self-actualization found no

differences (Sumerlin & Norman, 1992). Strengths do not belong just to the have's of the world; they are also found among the have-not's. As we have already concluded, our classification is well served by not aligning it with a particular theory.

Greenberger et al.

In the 1970s, psychologist Ellen Greenberger and her colleagues began a research program that foreshadowed some of the goals of our classification project (Greenberger, 1984; Greenberger, Josselson, Knerr, & Knerr, 1975; Greenberger & Sørensen, 1974). Drawing upon theoretical discussions by Allport, Freud, Erikson, Maslow, and Robert White, they proposed a multidimensional model of psychosocial maturity for adolescents that went beyond extant discussions of cognitive and intellectual development. A number of their dimensions of maturity correspond to what we describe as character strengths ([Table 3.4](#)). Most of our strengths of wisdom are missing from Greenberger et al.'s scheme, which makes sense given the purpose of their classification. And some of Greenberger et al.'s dimensions are missing from our classification because they strike us as culture bound and perhaps historically limited (e.g., tolerance of individual differences and openness to sociopolitical change, respectively). Nonetheless, the fit is good, which is encouraging to us because the focus of Greenberger et al. was on youth, a population of particular interest to us.

Also notable about this research program is that the investigators developed a self-report instrument—the Psychosocial Maturity Inventory—suitable for use with teenagers. The questionnaire was administered to a variety of samples, allowing the researchers to specify through factor analysis the basic structure of their construct. Good support was found for two distinct factors, individual adequacy and social adequacy. The third factor hypothesized on theoretical grounds, interpersonal adequacy, did not clearly emerge; its supposed components loaded on the other factors. In retrospect, this finding does not strike us as surprising, because the interpersonal domain represents the intersection of the individual and the social.

TABLE 3.4 *Greenberger et al.'s Model of Psychosocial Maturity*

In some cases (~), we suggest a very rough correspondence between a dimension of psychosocial maturity and a character strength in our classification, but we do not claim it to be a good match.

Dimension (and components)	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
Individual adequacy	
Reliance on oneself	Creativity
Identity	Spirituality
Work orientation	Persistence
Interpersonal adequacy	
Communication skills	Social intelligence
Enlightened trust	Love
Knowledge of major roles	~Love of learning; ~social intelligence
Social adequacy	
Social commitment	Citizenship
Openness to sociopolitical change	None
Tolerance of individual differences	~Open-mindedness; ~fairness

Scores on the Psychosocial Maturity Inventory indeed increase over the teen years, and they are distinct from measures of academic achievement. Furthermore, Greenberger (1984) explored some of the correlates of psychosocial maturity. Good family relations and school involvement are associated with individual adequacy but not—interestingly—with social adequacy.

Jahoda

In 1958, Marie Jahoda wrote a provocative book—*Current Concepts of Positive Mental Health*—that made the case for understanding psychological well-being in its own right, not simply as the absence of disorder or distress. Her argument is of course the premise of contemporary positive psychology, and one wonders why it has taken more than four decades for other psychologists to take up her challenge. Jahoda surveyed what previous thinkers—mainly clinicians—had to say about mental health and integrated their views by proposing half a dozen underlying processes presumably producing the states and traits we dub psychologically healthy. Jahoda labeled them criteria, but they seem to be more processes rather than easily observable contents.

Her analysis of positive mental health in terms of these underlying processes is persuasive, and we have little to add to it in these terms. We considered seriously basing our explication of good character on Jahoda’s synthesis but were eventually dissuaded by our measurement goal and by our decision to avoid deep theory. That is, we wanted to start with positive traits and then to develop measures and only as a final step to look deeper within the individual at basic causes. We suspect that such inquiry might confirm much of what Jahoda hypothesized, but that will be an empirical issue. [Table 3.5](#) describes Jahoda’s processes and the character strengths that reflect them. The only qualification we offer is that her processes and criteria seem to reflect a Western bias on the person as autonomous rather than interdependent; what we call strengths of humanity and justice—which have an explicit social reference—are not included.

At the same time that Jahoda (1958) published her book, psychologist William Scott (1958a, 1958b) surveyed the existing research literature on mental health, focusing on research definitions (measures) of well-being and empirically established correlates of these measures. Then as now, the majority of studies ostensibly looking at health were really studies of disorder. Scott could draw firm conclusions from this research only about the factors that characterized lack of pathology—good social relationships were the most common correlate. Scott cited a personal communication from Jahoda in which she described her attempts to develop measures of several of her criteria for mental health (i. e., accurate perception of reality and environmental mastery) as less than satisfactory, which is probably why they were never widely used.

TABLE 3.5 *Jahoda’s Processes Producing Positive Mental Health*

Process	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
Acceptance of oneself	Social intelligence
Growth; development; becoming	Curiosity; love of learning
Integration of personality	Integrity; perspective
Autonomy (freedom from social pressures)	Integrity
Accurate perception of reality	Open-mindedness
Environmental mastery	Creativity

Ryff et al.

In the spirit of Jahoda’s review and synthesis of (then) prevailing views of mental health, psychologist Carol Ryff and colleagues (1989, 1995; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 1996, 1998) more recently integrated what different theorists, again mostly clinicians, have said about the psychological components of being and doing well—striving and thriving, as it were. They identified what they called six points of convergence, which agree substantially with those enumerated by Jahoda decades earlier. Most of Ryff et al.’s points of convergence coincide with strengths included in our classification ([Table 3.6](#)). Their notion of “personal growth” is somewhat of an exception. By this they mean a person’s sense of continued development and ongoing realization of potential, what an earlier generation of humanistic psychologists called self-actualization. Curiosity and love of learning are aspects of this dimension, but they do not fully capture its emphasis on oneself as the major topic about which the individual is curious and loves learning. We think that personal growth as Ryff and her colleagues defined it is culture bound, a concern to the disaffected upper-middle class in the contemporary United States. People in other times, places, and circumstances, with a different notion of who they are and the place they occupy in the world, do not concern themselves with growth of this sort. One might even suspect that it would be dismissed as a frivolous concern—hardly a strength. Along these lines, Ryff et al. did not include what we call the justice virtues, again reflecting a cultural bias.

On the positive side, Ryff and her colleagues developed a self-report measure of their six points of convergence. We intend eventually to check our strengths measures against this instrument. Inspection of the items suggests that their virtues and strengths may be more heterogeneous than the ones we emphasize, but that is an empirical issue.

TABLE 3.6 *Ryff et al.’s Dimensions of Well-Being*

In some cases (~), we suggest a very rough correspondence between a dimension of well-being and a character strength, but we do not claim it to be a good match.

Dimension	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
Acceptance of oneself	Social intelligence
Positive relations with others	Love; kindness
Autonomy	~Integrity
Environmental mastery	~Creativity
Purpose in life	Spirituality
Personal growth	~Curiosity; ~love of learning

The Big Five Tradition

As early as the Greek philosopher Theophrastus, thinkers have made lists of personality types and traits with the goal of discerning the most basic. The present project can be seen as a special case of this venerable activity, and our work has been influenced by what has come to be known as the *lexical approach* to personality (L. R. Goldberg, 1993).

In 1936, Gordon Allport and Henry Odbert read through an unabridged dictionary and identified the thousands of English-language words that refer to traits. Their list has usually been the starting point for lexical researchers trying to identify basic individual differences. Allport and Odbert roughly classified their list, and their largest category—social evaluation—approaches the sorts of characteristics in which we were interested for the present classification of strengths. However, this category was not preserved in its own right during the decades that followed, probably because of Allport's exclusion of character from the province of personality psychology. Nonetheless, many character terms remained in this list.

Modern lexical researchers have been guided by the synthesis of Warren Norman (1963), who proposed that there are five basic personality traits under which all others can be subsumed. His scheme has come to be known as the Big Five. It has been fine-tuned, confirmed by various measurement strategies (e.g., self-report, observer report), and tested cross-culturally. Apparently, our primate cousins can also be sensibly described along the Big Five dimensions, and so too can inanimate products like automobiles! Some researchers have added one or two other basic traits, but few seriously disagree with the five that Norman highlighted. Other classifications of personality traits, like those proposed by Eysenck, Cattell, and the creators of the MMPI, relate sensibly to the Big Five.

When we look at the Big Five in terms of character strengths, we find that four of the five basic traits have clear counterparts in the virtue domain ([Table 3.7](#)), an unsurprising

finding given the large number of trait terms in the language that apply to morally valued characteristics. We could probably force other character strengths into the Big Five scheme, but we would be relying on what is known about their nomological nets—for example, we know that hopeful individuals score low on measures of neuroticism; we know that leaders often score high on extroversion; and so on—rather than on the substantive meanings of the strengths.

The Big Five tradition strikes us as largely atheoretical (not a problem in our view of things) and largely nonpsychological (a big problem to us) in that classification per se seems to be the goal, not an understanding of the causes or consequences of the classification's entries. When a new measure of individual differences is reported in the literature, one or another lexical research group invariably conducts a study linking the new measure to existing Big Five inventories. There is invariably convergence, but rarely is it so striking that one would conclude that the new measure is superfluous, probably because the Big Five traits are very broad and unlikely to capture the meaning of a more nuanced individual difference. Perhaps the point is that when new individual differences are proposed and studied, part of making sense of them is showing that they are consistent with the Big Five tradition, and we expect this will prove to be the case for the strengths in the present classification.

TABLE 3.7 *The Big Five*

Trait (and representative examples)	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
Neuroticism (worried, nervous, emotional)	None
Extroversion (sociable, fun-loving, active)	Vitality; humor; playfulness
Openness (imaginative, creative, artistic)	Curiosity; creativity; appreciation of beauty
Agreeableness (good-natured, softhearted, sympathetic)	Kindness; gratitude
Conscientiousness (reliable, hardworking, punctual)	Self-regulation; persistence

Cawley, Martin, and Johnson

More immediately instructive to us was the lexical approach of Michael Cawley, James Martin, and John Johnson (2000). Like Allport and Odbert decades earlier, Cawley et al. read through a dictionary and used linguistic criteria to winnow entries to virtue terms. Among their criteria was the question: Can the appropriate form of a word be used sensibly in the sentences:

- “I ought to be _____”
- “I ought to show _____”

If so, the word refers to a human virtue. In other words, the term should have an adjective form as well as a noun form. Note how *patience* meets these criteria (“I ought to be patient,” and “I ought to show patience”), whereas other social evaluations (beauty, fame, wealth) do so awkwardly or not at all. A virtue or strength describes a person as well as what the person does.

Redundancies were eliminated, leaving a total of 140 unique virtue terms. Items for a self-report questionnaire were written, asking respondents to endorse the degree to which these terms described them and their actions in concrete situations. Several hundred university students completed the resulting Virtues Scale, along with a typical measure of the Big Five.

Factor analysis of the Virtues Scale revealed four factors that were sensibly related to Big Five scores ([Table 3.8](#)). Again, we can find substantial overlap between Cawley’s virtue factors and entries in our classification, although missing are what we term strengths of wisdom and strengths of justice, as well as strengths subsumed by the Big Five openness to experience factor, probably because Cawley et al. excluded the relevant words from their initial list. One more comment: Notice that “meekness” as identified by Cawley et al. was negatively associated with the Big Five neuroticism factor, not positively as one might think if this were reflecting anxiety-driven reticence (cf. humility and modesty; [chapter 20](#)).

Cawley et al.’s approach was valuable to us because it alerted us to how linguistic criteria could be used to designate some traits as character strengths, to the viability of asking people about their own strengths in a face-valid self-report questionnaire, and to one possible way in which various character strengths might cluster into virtue factors. We intend eventually to check our measures of strengths against the Virtues Scale introduced by Cawley and his colleagues. Because our list is arguably more inclusive, we expect not

only the obvious convergence but also evidence for divergent validity, especially with respect to wisdom and justice strengths.

Kohlberg

We have explained how moral character largely fell off the research agenda of most psychologists in the 20th century. The best known exception to this generalization is research into moral development, which began with Piaget's (1932/1965) pioneering investigations of how children at different stages of cognitive development reasoned about the morality of everyday acts and was carried through by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984). His work is well known, so much so that his theory of moral reasoning is the only instance most can think of as a psychological approach to morality. Obviously, we too were aware of his work, although close scrutiny led to the conclusion that it followed a very different direction than what we intended for the present classification.

TABLE 3.8 *Cawley et al.'s Virtue Factors*

Factor (and representative examples)	Big Five correlate(s)	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
Empathy (concern; sympathy; friendliness)	Agreeableness	Kindness
Order (discipline; scrupulousness; caution)	Conscientiousness	Self-regulation; prudence
Resourcefulness (purpose; perseverance)	Conscientiousness; neuroticism (-)	Spirituality; persistence
Serenity (meekness; forgiveness; patience)	Agreeableness; neuroticism (-)	Humility; forgiveness; gratitude

Kohlberg was interested in moral reasoning and not moral behavior per se. He certainly was not interested in character strengths associated with moral behavior and explicitly dismissed “virtues” as a concern. Kohlberg’s was a thoroughly cognitive approach to moral reasoning about the actions of other people, and he proposed that children passed through stages of reasoning constrained by their general cognitive abilities. Specifically, moral development according to Kohlberg increasingly transcends the particular and moves to the use of general standards of justice, equality, and respect.

As is well known to students of psychology, Kohlberg studied moral reasoning by posing moral dilemmas to research participants. Respondents are asked to decide what would be right or wrong and then to justify this decision. To Kohlberg, how one justifies the course of moral action is more important than the actual decision. As noted, Kohlberg's theory of moral development embodies a stage approach. A particular individual either is at a given level of reasoning or is not. People pass through these levels in the proposed sequence only. These stages are regarded as a universal aspect of human nature. Kohlberg proposed three general levels of development.

According to Kohlberg, *preconventional reasoning* takes into account only rewards and punishments. Morality is placed outside the individual. A child at the level of preconventional morality would say that people should not steal because they would be punished if caught. Those exhibiting *conventional reasoning* justify moral action in terms of society's rules and conventions. Most adolescents and adults think in these terms. Their concern is with conforming to social standards, rules, or laws. Someone at the level of conventional morality would say that people should not steal because it is against the law to do so. *Postconventional reasoning*, apparently shown by only 20% of the adult population, involves the application of one's own abstract standards. Those at this level recognize that laws and rules are useful but sometimes in conflict. In resolving moral conflicts, people at this stage try to judge the relative importance and intentions of different laws. Someone at this level might explain that stealing is justified if it is done to save the life of another person, because respect for another's property must give way to respect for human life.

We could have shoehorned some of the character strengths we enumerate into this scheme but did not do so because the fit would be awkward. Instead, we have relied on Kohlberg's work in our discussion of one character strength in particular, fairness ([chapter 17](#)).

Although we took from Kohlberg's work the insight that morality in general shows a developmental trajectory and that so too—by implication—does character, we disagreed with his particular trajectory and rank ordering. In part, we were echoing the familiar criticism of Kohlberg's approach that it overemphasizes abstract rules and principles (what we call justice strengths) while downplaying caring and compassion (what we call humanity strengths). And in part, we were criticizing the cultural bias inherent in Kohlberg's

s scheme. For example, Americans phrase their moral judgments in terms of individual considerations, whereas Indians speak in terms of interpersonal ones, apparently relegating themselves to the conventional level (J. G. Miller, 1994).

Finally, the relationship between moral reasoning and moral behavior is not clear. Research in the Kohlberg tradition often assumes that the former leads to the latter without explicitly showing that it does. Some studies find that people at the level of postconventional reasoning are less likely than others to lie or cheat, but other investigations do not find the expected link (Clarke-Stewart, Friedman, & Koch, 1985). Researchers interested in moral development have tended to neglect the emotional and motivational aspects of morality, which doubtlessly influence whether thought is translated into action (Blasi, 1990; Nunn & Hazler, 1990). Thus, believing that someone faced with a given dilemma should proceed with a specific course of action is not the same thing as doing so if the situation were actually to present itself.

Vaillant

Another influence on our thinking was George Vaillant's (1971, 1977, 1993, 2000) theorizing about psychodynamic defense mechanisms. Vaillant hypothesized that the various defenses can be ranked from relatively immature defenses such as denial to relatively mature defenses such as sublimation, depending on the degree to which the individual using the defense distorts reality. The mature defenses identified by Vaillant have been linked to both psychological and physical well-being, and when habitual, they can be construed as character strengths ([Table 3.9](#)).

Some of the character strengths are akin to these defenses, although the fit is at best approximate because the defenses are styles of coping more than contents of behavior. We also disavow the connotation of defense as solely a reaction to threat and regard as an empirical question whether defenses qua character strengths play themselves out on an unconscious level, as most psychodynamic theories assume. Vaillant's theorizing demonstrates that good character can be construed, even from a Freudian perspective, in such a way that does not reduce strength to something negative. Indeed, Vaillant's empirical documentation of the benefits of mature defense mechanisms was one of the important triggers of the positive psychology movement.

TABLE 3.9 *Vaillant's Mature Defense Mechanisms*

Defense	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
Altruism	Kindness
Anticipation	Curiosity; hope
Humor	Humor
Sublimation	Love of learning; persistence
Suppression	Self-regulation

Gardner

Ever since its beginnings in the work of Galton, Binet, Terman, and Spearman, intelligence has usually been regarded as a singular characteristic that people showed across a variety of domains. Not all intelligence theorists have made this assumption (e.g., Thurstone, Guilford, and Cattell), instead preferring to look at intelligence as plural or multiple—a set of distinct and specific abilities. Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner (1983, 1993b, 1993c) is the best known advocate of the view of intelligence as plural, and we have borrowed from his ideas in conceptualizing character as plural.

In particular, he proposed explicit criteria for identifying a distinct intelligence, and we deliberately borrowed this strategy—not the criteria themselves—in our own work ([chapter 1](#)). For example, is a particular set of skills selectively isolated by brain damage? If damage to nervous tissue selectively attacks or spares a given competence, then one can argue that it has a biological basis, which Gardner felt to be important in designating a specific competence as a basic intelligence. Additional criteria include a distinctive developmental history for a set of skills, an associated set of symbols that people use in exercising these particular skills, and the existence of prodigies who excel at them. When all these criteria point to the same ability, it became an “intelligence” in Gardner’s scheme.

Gardner thus identified six types of intelligence, several of which have long been the concern of traditional intelligence researchers:

- linguistic intelligence—sensitivity to the meanings and functions of language
- logical-mathematical intelligence—competence at organizing ideas in abstract ways

- spatial intelligence—capacity for visual or spatial imagery, including the ability to transform images

His other categories are more unique as types of intelligence:

- musical intelligence—ability to produce and organize sounds according to prescribed pitch and rhythm
- bodily intelligence—kinesthetic mastery over body movements
- personal intelligence—ability to access one’s own feelings and those of others

We do not regard intelligence per se as a strength or virtue—we place it in the talents and abilities group—and we can say the same thing about Gardner’s specific intelligences, with one exception: personal intelligence. Gardner himself acknowledged that personal intelligence stands apart from the other abilities of concern to him, and although he did not say so, we think that the chief differences are the virtue-laden context in which personal intelligence operates and its mutability. Thus, it makes sense to include some version of personal intelligence in our classification of character strengths (cf. [chapter 15](#)).

Schwartz et al.

Drawing upon earlier work by Rokeach (1973) in values, Shalom Schwartz and his colleagues proposed that there are 10 distinct and universally recognized values (S. H. Schwartz, 1994; S. H. Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990; S. H. Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995). Although values are not identical to virtues, there should be a relationship given Schwartz’ s working definition of a value as “conceptions of the desirable that influence the way people select action and evaluate events” (S. H. Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, p. 550). Virtues embody values when the behavior they organize and direct becomes habitual. Schwartz et al. arrived at their particular 10 by considering “universal” requirements of survival, for individuals and societies:³ satisfaction of biological needs; coordination of social interaction; and facilitation of societal functioning. From these requirements, they specified 44 individual values, which cross-cultural research suggests can be grouped into 10 classes distinguished by people around the world. The 10 values themselves can be grouped into four higher order groups of values.

Table 3.10 presents the 10 universal values and their corresponding strengths in our classification. The fit is very good. We do not have a category that broadly captures hedonism—pleasure per se. The inclusion of hedonism as a universal value stems from Schwartz et al.’s biological emphasis, not part of our vision of character strengths.

Schwartz et al.’s values—the 44, the 10, and the 4—could presumably be represented in a hierarchy akin to what we suggest for the present classification of strengths and virtues. These theorists instead opted for a circumplex model, in keeping with their goal not only of understanding what the universal values might be but also of understanding their structure—that is, their interrelationships. Their circumplex has two dimensions referring to the interests served by the value—individual versus collective; and by the goal type—instrumental (modes of behavior; e.g., obedience) versus terminal (end states; e.g., wisdom). We find the second dimension especially useful because it addresses a matter we have glossed over in our classification. Our strengths are a mixed lot, like psychological traits in general. Some of the strengths we include refer to psychological processes and others to psychological content. Perhaps this sort of dimension will help us make sense of the structure of the proposed classification.

TABLE 3.10 *Schwartz et al.’s Universal Values*

In some cases (~), we suggest a very rough correspondence between a universal value and a character strength, but we do not claim it to be a good match.

Value	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
Achievement	Persistence
Benevolence	Kindness
Conformity	Citizenship; self-regulation
Hedonism	~Appreciation of beauty and excellence
Power	Leadership
Security	Gratitude
Self-direction	~Creativity
Stimulation	Curiosity; love of learning
Tradition	Humility; spirituality; prudence
Universalism	Perspective; fairness

Schwartz et al. developed a questionnaire for measuring the degree to which people in different cultures emphasize different values. As noted, research supports their contention that the ability to distinguish among these is near universal and that the two-dimensional circumplex captures the structure. There are also some culturally specific emphases and exceptions to the generalizations. For example, among Japanese students, friendship falls into what Schwartz calls security, rather than into benevolence, where it fits for most other cultures (S. H. Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995). This makes sense if one assumes that the Japanese regard friendship as a way of achieving security rather than expressing care.

The Values Questionnaire of Schwartz et al. is not identical with the measures of strengths we have developed. It measures what people value, not their traits or habitual actions. But insofar as the definition of a strength includes being sensitive to it in others and celebrating it when present, one expects convergence. We intend eventually to compare responses to our character strength measures with those to Schwartz et al.'s measure.

Evolutionary Psychology

Of concern to evolutionary psychologists are the characteristics found attractive in a mate (Buss, 1989, 1994, 1998; Buss et al., 1990; Feingold, 1992). We need not delve into ongoing debates about whether these characteristics have been selected in the course of human evolution, whether there exist male–female differences in the most valued of these, or whether short-term preferences differ markedly from long-term preferences. Rather, we simply observe that extensive cross-national and cross-historical studies—based on surveys and content analyses of personal ads—reveal much the same list of valued characteristics. Many of these are strengths of character ([Table 3.11](#)). The individual differences that do not have a counterpart in our classification fall into the talents and abilities domain, which we think of as more immutable and less voluntary than character strengths.

We need to take very seriously the list of desired character strengths that emerges from evolutionary psychology because one of our issues entails the universality of strengths and virtues ([chapter 2](#)). Evolutionary psychologists are interested in what is generally true of people—in human nature, as it were—so if a strength is on their list, it needs to belong on our list. We are therefore pleased that the character strengths we identify almost all have counterparts. Indeed, the strengths identified by evolutionary

psychologists as desirable in mates agree well with the strengths that people most seek in close friends, the most valued of which are character strengths like honesty and responsibility (e.g., General Social Survey, 2001).

TABLE 3.11 *Desirable Characteristics in a Mate*

In a survey of 9,474 men and women in 37 nations, Buss et al. (1990) asked about the most desirable characteristics in a mate. Although there were gender differences and national differences, which these researchers tended to emphasize, the characteristics in this table were the most widely valued across all samples.

Characteristic	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
Ambition and industriousness	Persistence
Dependable character	Integrity; citizenship; prudence
Desire for home and children	Love
Education and intelligence	Creativity; love of learning; perspective
Emotional stability	Self-regulation
Good cook and housekeeper	None
Good financial prospect	None
Good health	Vitality
Good looks	None
Mutual attraction—love	Love
Pleasing disposition	Kindness; gratitude; humility; humor
Refinement; neatness	Appreciation of beauty and excellence
Sociability	Citizenship; social intelligence

Resilience

Although it is a truism that stress and adversity take a toll, the question arises, “Why do some children exposed to terrible events show good or even exceptional outcomes in their wake?” This question has guided several decades of research into what was initially termed *invulnerability* (Anthony & Cohler, 1987) and now is labeled *resilience* (Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1999). According to the prevailing assumption in this research, the resilient child must be benefiting from protective factors, and researchers have therefore tried to

articulate what these might be and how they function. Some of the identified factors are the sorts of character strengths with which our classification is concerned, although resilience researchers have usually looked beyond the individual child for protective factors, finding them within the family, peer group, or community. Here, then, is an important caution for us in our classification project: Do not examine character strengths in isolation from the social contexts in which they develop (or not) and in which they result (or not) in desirable outcomes.

Studies of resilience, by definition, also focus on risk factors. Risk factors and protective factors are cumulative and interactive. Indeed, a protective factor can affect problems in a variety of ways (Coie et al., 1993):

- by directly decreasing the problem
- by interacting with the risk factor to buffer its effects
- by disrupting the process leading from the risk factor to the problem
- by undoing the risk factor

Thus, another caution from research into resilient children is that strengths must sometimes be studied in relation to adversity. There is a temptation to regard positive psychology as focusing on the stress-free individual, but this is a mistake. Character may not even be relevant unless someone is called on to develop it and/or show it, a point to which we return when discussing lessons we have learned from philosophy's study of virtues.

Research in this tradition often identifies resilience by the absence of negative outcomes, not the presence of positive outcomes, and there is some sleight of hand in going from the statement that a child is not depressed or not using drugs to saying that he is doing well (cf. Peterson, 2000). We wish that resilience research were more true to its original premise of trying to understand good outcomes in the wake of adversity, not simply the diminution of bad outcomes.

Still another caution from this research is that resilience is not a unitary trait or characteristic. A child may display resilience with respect to some stresses and vis-à-vis some outcomes but not with respect to other stresses and other outcomes (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). Perhaps resilience is better regarded as an umbrella term, just as we regard character.

Can we therefore unpack resilience? A number of theorists have attempted to do so, dividing protective factors into environmental ones (e.g., good parent–child relationship; strong extended family) and internal ones, which include some of the character strengths from our classification. A representative list of these internal factors is shown in [Table 3.12](#) (from Kumpfer, 1999). They strike us as a very mixed set of characteristics, drawn from different domains and across different conceptual levels. Some are what we call talents, including physically based ones (e.g., attractiveness, good health) and abilities (e.g., intelligence). Some are very specific instances of procedural knowledge (e.g., homework skills). Still others are what we regard as outcomes of strengths (e.g., happiness). Finally, others strike us as character strengths but culturally specific ones (e.g., peer resistance, multicultural competence). In any event, if we exclude these sorts of protective factors—without dismissing their importance—we are still left with a number of good matches to the character strengths in our classification.

Missing in the resilience literature is any discussion about which protective factors are relevant for whom, under what stressful circumstances, and with respect to what desirable outcomes. However, one can glean from the literature the working hypothesis that highly specific links do not exist, in part because of bidirectional effects among virtually all the variables in the potential equations. We hope that the present classification, because it is highly attentive to the definition of character strength, can be useful in future resilience research concerned with this particular class of protective factors.

TABLE 3.12 *Internal Resilience Factors (Kumpfer, 1999)*

In some cases (~), we suggest a very rough correspondence between an identified resilience factor and a character strength, but we do not claim it to be a good match.

Protective factor	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
<i>Spiritual/motivational factors</i>	
Dreams and goals	Hope
Purpose/meaning in life	Spirituality
Spirituality	Spirituality
Belief in uniqueness of oneself	None
Independence (autonomy)	~Integrity
Hope and optimism	Hope
Determination and perseverance	Persistence
<i>Cognitive competencies</i>	
Intelligence	None
Academic achievement and homework skills	None
Ability to delay gratification	Self-regulation; prudence; hope
Reading skills	None
Moral reasoning	Fairness
Insight	Perspective
Interpersonal awareness	Social intelligence
Self-esteem	None
Planning ability	Open-mindedness
Creativity	Creativity
<i>Behavioral/social competencies</i>	
Social skills and street smarts	Creativity; social intelligence
Problem-solving skills	Creativity; open-mindedness
Multicultural and bi-gender competencies	~Social intelligence
Empathy	Social intelligence
Emotional stability and emotional management	Prudence; self-regulation
Happiness	~Vitality
Recognition of feelings	Social intelligence
Emotional management skills	Self-regulation
Ability to restore self-esteem	Self-regulation
Humor	Humor
<i>Physical well-being and physical competencies</i>	
Good health	~Vitality
Health maintenance skills	None
Physical talent development	~Persistence
Physical attractiveness	None

Conclusions

Throughout this survey of a century of psychological inquiry into people's positive characteristics, we have commented on the lessons we learned. Let us now gather these together. First, when psychologists speak of positive characteristics, almost all phrase them in terms of personality traits: relatively stable and general individual differences. There are other types of human strengths—talents and abilities, for example, or instances of procedural knowledge—but these are readily distinguishable from the traits we identify as character strengths.

Second, almost all psychologists propose a variety of character strengths. The exact number differs, from a mere handful to several dozen, but the difference is largely one of the abstractness with which the strengths are described. Taking this into account, there is good agreement across past classification efforts about the appropriate entries. At the same time, we found that many previous classifications can be faulted for inadvertent bias—cultural and/or theoretical—that led theorists to include some strengths we regard as bounded while excluding others that we regard as ubiquitous. The present classification needs sufficient breadth and generality to be useful beyond the here and now.

Third, most previous classification efforts address strengths as they exist among adults. There are some exceptions that look at positive traits among young people. Missing in most cases is a link between these two approaches. Most would agree that character strengths develop across the life span, but we do not know much about how this happens. One of the long-term goals of our classification project is to begin in earnest such developmental inquiry. Crucial to this work will be serious attention to the individual's setting, proximal (e.g., the family of origin) and distal (e.g., the culture). In calling for psychology to study positive traits, we do *not* mean personality predispositions taken out of context.

Fourth, there is no consensus about how to represent the relation among entries in a classification. Some theorists grounded their classification in an a priori theory and generated a structure on theoretical grounds. As explained, we find this strategy premature. Other theorists used factor analysis or similar descriptive techniques to identify underlying dimensions or clusters of strengths. We followed a somewhat different strategy, relying on the history of moral and religious theorizing to identify broad classes of virtues (

chapter 2), filling in the details with psychological investigations of positive traits falling into these classes (chapters 4–27), and then only as the final step relying on statistical methods to structure our classification (chapter 28).

Fifth, when psychologists devise measures of character strengths, they rely on face-valid self-report questionnaires. Many psychologists are skeptical of what people say about themselves, but we conclude that the yield of research using various virtue inventories has been rich enough to justify their continued use. Perhaps the distrust of self-reports about what is good stems from business-as-usual psychology, which has trouble recognizing anything inherently positive about people. We return to this point in chapter 28 on assessment.

■ Lessons From Youth Development

Youth development is an interdisciplinary field that draws broadly on different social sciences to understand children and adolescents (Larson, 2000). It embraces an explicit developmental stance: Children and adolescents are not miniature adults, and they need to be understood on their own terms. Youth development also emphasizes the multiple contexts in which development occurs. Particularly influential as an organizing framework has been Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1986) ecological approach, which articulates different contexts in terms of their immediacy to the behaving individual. So, the *microsystem* refers to ecologies with which the individual directly interacts: family, peers, school, and neighborhood. The *mesosystem* is Bronfenbrenner's term for relationships between and among various microsystems. The *exosystem* is made up of larger ecologies that indirectly affect development and behavior, like the legal system, the social welfare system, and mass media. Finally, the *macrosystem* consists of broad ideological and institutional patterns that collectively define a culture. There is the risk of losing the individual amid all these systems, but the developmental perspective reminds us that different children are not interchangeable puppets. Each young person brings his or her own characteristics to life, and these interact with the different ecologies to produce behavior.

Youth development has always had a strong interest in application (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1999). Throughout much of the 20th century, these applications were directed at youth problems such as school dropout, juvenile crime,

alcohol and drug use, and unwanted pregnancy. The earliest interventions targeted young people in crisis (i.e., they helped youth with problems), and the more recent interventions have been preventive (i.e., they supported youth before problems developed). The earliest applications were very much seat-of-the-pants endeavors, uninformed by research. This state of affairs changed in light of information from longitudinal studies about the predictors of specific problems (e.g., Jessor & Jessor, 1977). This information provided explicit targets for interventions, and theory began to guide practice.

Another change that has occurred as the field of youth development matured is that prevention efforts that target but a single problem came under criticism. Many problems co-occur and have the same risk factors. Broad-based interventions can therefore have broad effects. Part of the broadening of youth development and its applications was a call for studying and eventually cultivating what has come to be known as *positive youth development*—desirable outcomes such as school achievement, vocational aspirations, community involvement, good interpersonal relations, and the like. As Pittman (1991, 2000) phrased this change, “Problem-free is not fully prepared.” Here is where youth development converges with positive psychology and its premise that the best in life is not simply the absence of disorder and dysfunction.

Youth development proponents seem to have an ambivalent relation with the notion of character, perhaps because of its objectionable implication that the kids would be okay if they only learned to say no. Needless to say, a concern with character—virtues and strengths in the case of the classification—does not preclude acknowledgment of the role played by Bronfenbrenner’s multiple systems in shaping the person, for better or for worse. Indeed, if youth are to be developed, we need to say just what it is about them that develops. We suggest that one answer is their character, unpacked in the way that we have done so.

As an applied field, youth development marches to the drummer of societal priorities. At least as far as the nation’s youth are concerned, the reduction of their problems has been the priority, for good reasons. “Positive” outcomes can be a difficult sell when juxtaposed with tax cuts, pothole repair, and defense spending. But there is good reason to believe that attention to positive outcomes has the additional effect of reducing negative outcomes. Researchers at the Search Institute in Minneapolis have studied what they call *developmental assets*, which include external factors like family support and adult role

models, and internal factors like commitment to learning, positive values, and sense of purpose (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Youth with more of these assets not only show fewer problems but also display more evidence of thriving (e.g., school success, leadership, helping others, and physical health). The internal assets of interest to these researchers correspond to many of the character strengths we have identified (Table 3.13).

Two qualifications are in order about this correspondence. First, the developmental assets are contextualized—defined with respect to behavior in the school, the peer group, or the community—whereas character strengths are deliberately broad personality traits. Second, the handful of developmental assets that do not match up with character strengths (i.e., cultural competence and self-esteem) are culture-bound. They are valued in the contemporary United States but not part of our vision of ubiquitous character strengths. Regardless, the correspondence on the whole is excellent and supports the entries in both lists, which were generated by very different processes. When the focus is on strengths among youth, society can have it both ways: Reduction of negative outcomes, and encouragement of positive outcomes.

TABLE 3.13 “Internal” Developmental Assets (from Leffert et al., 1998, Table 1)

In some cases (~), we suggest a very rough correspondence between a developmental asset and a character strength, but we do not claim it to be a good match.

Asset	Approximately corresponding character strength(s)
<i>Commitment to learning</i>	
Achievement motivation	~Love of learning; ~curiosity
School engagement	Love of learning
Homework	Persistence
Bonding to school	Citizenship
Reading for pleasure	Curiosity; love of learning
<i>Positive values</i>	
Caring	Kindness
Equality and social justice	Fairness
Integrity	Integrity
Responsibility	~Integrity
Restraint	Self-regulation; prudence
<i>Social competencies</i>	
Planning and decision making	Hope; open-mindedness
Interpersonal competence	Love; social intelligence
Cultural competence	~Social intelligence
Resistance skills	Self-regulation; prudence
Peaceful conflict resolution	Perspective; ~social intelligence; ~leadership
<i>Positive identity</i>	
Personal power	~Creativity
Self-esteem	None
Sense of purpose	Spirituality
Positive view of personal future	Hope

At least as an intellectual point, we observe that virtues and strengths are worth cultivating in their own right, with or without a payoff. Whether the larger society is ready to accept what seems to us (and to thinkers across the centuries) to be obvious is not clear, but we are encouraged by the fact that society has long “bought” higher education as an unalloyed good that needs no further justification. To be sure, there are many demonstrable benefits of education vis-à-vis the reduction of problems, but these need not be part of the argument in favor of supporting schools and school programs. Perhaps the day will come as well when kindness and curiosity are also regarded as traits worth cultivating because they are good. In the meantime, we can point to research like that by the Search Institute.

One way in which youth development advocates address character is by speaking about competencies. Like the components of resilience discussed earlier, the various faces

of competence include traits, talents, abilities, skills, and particular instances of procedural knowledge. We think it would be profitable to distinguish among these. Being able to use a condom and knowing how to take public transportation are important competencies for many young people, but these practical skills exist at different conceptual levels than traits of prudence or practical intelligence.

There is also a tendency in the youth development field to regard competencies (including character) as outcomes of intervention programs, coequal with the reduction of problems, rather than mediators: that is, factors cultivated by the program, which in turn produce the outcomes of interest. To some degree, this issue is one of semantics and how one wishes to represent patterns in longitudinal data. But it also speaks to an important conceptual distinction. We think character matters in part because behavior follows from it. As psychologists, we think person-level variables are as important as system-level variables. They do not compete, and one need not choose one over the other. Indeed, system-level factors can influence an individual's behavior only by affecting something about the individual.

In closing this section, we note briefly the conclusions of two recent literature reviews of intervention programs for youths, the first focusing on “negative” psychological outcomes (symptoms and disorders) and the other on “positive” psychological outcomes (striving and thriving). Despite the millions of young people involved in such programs, scientifically respectable outcome studies with pre–post designs, comparison groups, and objective measures are apparently very scarce: 34 in the case of negative outcomes (M. T. Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001) and 42 in the case of positive outcomes (Catalano et al., 1999). Interestingly, though, there was convergence of conclusions about effective programs, even though the type of outcome measure varied dramatically within and across the reviews:

- *More is better.* Weekend workshops or one-shot lectures are not effective interventions; however, programs in which youth spend many hours over extended periods of time are effective in reducing negative outcomes and encouraging positive outcomes.
- *Earlier is better.* The most effective programs do not wait for their participants to enter adolescence but instead start with younger children.

- *Broad is better.* The most effective programs target several systems simultaneously: for example, home *and* school. In Bronfenbrenner’s terms, the action is in the mesosystem.
- *Sophisticated is better.* Programs that work best take a “person-in-environment” approach. They do not address just internal factors like character strengths, and they do not address just external factors like school safety. Instead, they address both.

The lessons from youth development for the present classification are several, and they correspond to the conclusions we drew from previous attempts by psychologists to classify positive traits. First, we are encouraged by the demonstration that strengths among young people can be specified, measured, and shown to have tangible consequences. Second, although our project is of course concerned with character strengths, these cannot be taken out of context in understanding when and how young people thrive. Strengths are embedded in Bronfenbrenner’s multiple ecologies. So far, we have tersely lumped these ecologies together under the rubric of enabling conditions, but these conditions need to be unpacked as fully as character itself. Third, along these lines, a developmental perspective is useful in understanding strengths. Fourth, we are reminded that not everything positive about young people is captured by the notion of character strengths. The other components of competence—internal assets other than personality traits—also deserve the attention of anyone interested in promoting the best in people.

■ Lessons From Philosophy

Long before there was positive psychology, or even psychology, philosophers grappled with issues of morality and ethics. In our endeavor to describe good character, we have learned much from these efforts. As it has taken form over thousands of years, the philosophy of ethics has three related realms (Yearley, 1990):

- the study of *injunctions*: commands and prohibitions, for example, the “thou shalt nots” and the occasional “thou shalt” in the Ten Commandments
- the listing and organizing—usually hierarchically—of *virtues*: predispositions to act in ways leading to a recognizable human excellence or instance of flourishing
- the analysis of *ways of life* protected by the injunctions and picked out by the virtues

The second and third realms are obviously most relevant to our classification project, although they are vaguer than the first realm, which is often approached by philosophers who strip away psychological considerations.

Rachels (1999) provided a useful summary of how Western philosophers throughout history have approached morality. The initial question posed by philosophers dictates the direction their inquiries take. As noted in [chapter 1](#), the very first Greek philosophers asked, “What is the good of a person?” This framing of morality led them to examine character and in particular virtues. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and others enumerated such virtues, regarding them as the traits of character that make someone a good person.

Let us amplify a point we made in [chapter 1](#): This framing changed with the growing influence of Christianity, which saw God as the giver of laws by which one should live. Righteous conduct no longer stemmed from inner virtues but rather from obedience to the commandments of God. Whereas the early Greeks regarded reason as chief among the virtues, Christian thinkers like Saint Augustine distrusted reason. One must subordinate oneself to God, whether or not it seemed “reasonable” to do so (cf. the dilemma of Job). The guiding question of moral philosophy therefore changed from inquiries about the traits of a good person to “What are the right things to do?” As Christianity waned in importance, divine law eventually gave way to a secular equivalent dubbed moral law. Human reason was reintroduced to the philosophy of morality, but the focus remained on specifying the rules of right conduct.

But virtues would not go away. In recent decades, there have been calls within philosophy for a return to the ethics of virtue (Anscombe, 1958). “Virtue ethics” is the contemporary approach within philosophy to strengths of character. As described by Rachels (1999), virtue ethics must do the following:

- explain what a virtue is
- list the character traits that are virtues
- explain what these traits mean
- explain why these specific traits are desirable
- address whether virtues are the same for everyone or differ from person to person or culture to culture

With respect to the last matter, Rachels (1999) argued in favor of at least some universal virtues:

Even in the most disparate societies, people face the same basic problems and have the same basic needs. ... it may be true that in different societies the virtues are given somewhat different interpretations, and different sorts of actions are counted as satisfying them; and it may be true that some people, because they lead particular sorts of lives in particular sorts of circumstances, will have need of some virtues more than others. But it cannot be right to say simply that whether any particular character trait is a virtue is never anything more than a matter of social convention. The major virtues are mandated not by social convention but by basic facts about our common human condition. (pp. 186–187)

Consistent with this argument, one of the goals of our classification is to specify ubiquitous if not universal strengths of character. However, unlike Rachels, we did not deduce this goal as a plausible one but rather observed that much the same virtues indeed are valued throughout history and across cultures ([chapter 2](#)).

Yearley (1990) summarized the modern field of virtue ethics. First, the typical definition of a virtue in effect identifies it as a personality trait, that is, “a disposition to act, desire, and feel that involves the exercise of judgment and leads to a recognizable human excellence or instance of human flourishing” (p. 13). Moreover, virtues are not segregated mechanisms with automatic effects on behavior. Most philosophers emphasize that virtuous activity involves choosing virtue for itself and in light of a justifiable life plan. In more psychological language, a virtue is a property of the whole person and the life that person leads. People can reflect on their own virtues and talk about them to others. They may of course be mistaken, but virtues are *not* the sort of entities that are in principle outside of awareness or the realm of self-commentary (cf. Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). This conclusion is an important one when we turn to the matter of assessing virtues ([chapter 28](#)).

Second, listed virtues are typically numerous, drawn from different levels of abstractness, and potentially in conflict. A hierarchy of virtues is therefore introduced by most philosophers to help determine when one or another virtue should be manifested. Indeed, a great deal of discussion has tried to enumerate master virtues (e.g., wisdom,

courage, kindness) that take precedence over the others. None has won universal acceptance. Regardless, the exercise of a virtue is invariably discussed as reflecting choice, so in this sense rationality is always an overarching theme, as it was to the early Greek philosophers.

Third, in the act of displaying a virtue, someone does not think of the virtue per se or the way of life to which it is related. “I do not act benevolently in order to be benevolent or to be seen as benevolent by myself or others. ... I act benevolently because the situation I face fits a description of a situation that elicits my benevolence” (Yearley, 1990, p. 14). Virtue, like the devil, is in the details.

Fourth, enumerated virtues and their hierarchical organization depend on the way of life—the cultural ethos—in which they are embedded. Indeed, the way of life can dictate the content of a virtue. “Whether we can call courageous Robert E. Lee’s decision to lead the Confederate Army ... often will rest on the respondent’s actual or assumed social location” (Yearley, 1990, pp. 12–13). This conclusion also has important assessment implications. Concrete questions about virtuous action must be tailored to the cultural reality of the potential respondents. We can measure curiosity or kindness in all corners of the world and across all stages of life, but we need to ask different questions in so doing.

Fifth, virtues are often referred to as corrective, meaning that most if not all counteract some problem thought to be inherent in the human condition, some temptation that needs to be resisted, or some motivation that needs to be rechanneled into something good. Note the potential tension with the stated goals of positive psychology. In accentuating the positive, we cannot ignore the negative. If virtues are usually corrective, they can only be discussed in this context. Conditions of adversity, whether external or internal, must be part of what we address in discussing character strengths. Trauma may or may not build character, but it probably is one of the best ways to reveal it.

In contrast to the different versions of moral law, virtue ethics pays benefits, chiefly its ability to explain moral motivation. Virtue ethics can also accommodate the fact of partiality (Rachels, 1999). Let us explain. Essentially all ethical systems are based on the premise that people are moral equals. But the principle of moral impartiality does not square with the way that people actually live and render moral judgments. Often we are partial to friends and family members, and no one takes us to task for acting this way. The resolution from virtue ethics is that the issue of when to be partial versus impartial

depends on the virtue in question. We should love our friends and family members (partiality) and be benevolent to people in general (impartiality). The conflict disappears.

At the same time, virtue ethics strikes many philosophers as incomplete. It does not explain what we should do.

Why shouldn't a person lie, especially when there is some advantage to be gained from it? Plainly we need an answer that goes beyond the simple observation that doing so would be incompatible with having a particular character trait; we need an explanation of why it is better to have this trait than its opposite. (Rachels, 1999, p. 191)

A related problem is that virtue ethics does not explain how we should adjudicate moral conflict. What happens when two virtues are in conflict, pushing us in altogether different directions?

The philosophical answer to these shortcomings of virtue ethics is to combine this approach with one or another theory of moral conduct (i.e., versions of the moral law tradition; Holmes, 1998; Rachels, 1999). The psychological answer is probably simpler because the relationship of traits to action and the melding of disparate traits into a singular self are precisely the concerns of modern personality psychology. The present classification lists character strengths, just as do the proponents of virtue ethics, but our rendering of strengths brings with them richer psychological content and greater explanatory power.

Let us mention the specific substantive work of Yearley (1990) to make one final point about virtue ethics. Yearley was especially interested in the comparative study of virtue. How can one compare (and contrast) specific virtues across different philosophical and cultural traditions? Yearley suggested two strategies, both of which were followed by our inquiry across culture and history as described in [chapter 2](#). The first is to expand a virtue by extending its range and thus its meaning. So, bravery historically was seen as a virtue of the warrior. But current conceptions see it also as a virtue of how people face psychological or physical difficulties. Indeed, in the modern era, the paradigm case of bravery is not the soldier with his smart bombs but instead the medical patient facing with equanimity long odds against survival.

The second strategy is to introduce the notion of semblances of virtue. One identifies distinctions among types of roughly similar virtuous activities. One then turns around and asks of all the possible distinctions, how many are shared by two conceptions of virtue? Comparison is thus not either-or but a matter of degree.

In creating the present classification, we also used several other ideas from virtue ethics. We heeded the demand of virtue ethics philosophers to be clear about the meaning of character in general and character strengths in particular. We assumed that the important virtues are numerous, that they are related to one another, and that they are linked to a way of life in turn embedded in a cultural and historical setting. Although we arranged our character strengths in a hierarchy, it is not one of importance and motivational precedence but rather one of abstractness. We leave the issue of “master” virtues to empirical study. In sum, we can describe our classification as the social science equivalent of virtue ethics, using the scientific method to inform philosophical pronouncements about the traits of a good person.