

Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship for Research on Human Decision Processes and Risk Management: 2012 Application

Discipline and Desire: Strength of Will and Purity of Character in Judgments of Virtue

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Requested Support:

\$ 3,195.00

Descriptive Summary of Project

Research on intertemporal choice is thick with moral connotations: *virtues* and “*shoulds*” benefit a future self, whereas *vices* and “*wants*” benefit the present self (see Milkman, Rogers & Bazerman, 2008). Yet theories of morality involve helping or harming others, and would not consider many self-only tradeoffs to be moral. For example, questions regarding whether or not to eat healthy or save for the future primarily affect the self and do not have overt consequences for others. The present research seeks to explore how people understand the meaning of virtue across moral (self/other) and nonmoral (present/future self) tradeoffs.

In order to understand how individuals perceive such actions, we focus on two key determinants of virtue: (1) strength of will (i.e. an ability to overcome temptation) and (2) purity of character (i.e. not feeling tempted by a vice). We propose that when a decision is moral in nature (e.g. whether to commit adultery), purity of character will be a stronger signal of virtue than strength of will: someone who is not tempted by a vice will be seen as more virtuous than someone who resists temptation. However, when the decision is nonmoral in nature (e.g. whether to cheat on a diet), strength of will dominates: someone who resists temptation will be seen as more virtuous than someone who is not tempted by a vice.

We have conducted three studies that support our theorizing. In our first study, two individuals are described as choosing a virtuous option over a vice. One individual was described as being tempted by the vice option, while the other individual was described as being not tempted by the vice. When the tradeoff is nonmoral (whether to cheat on a diet; procrastinate work; avoid exercise), the individual who overcame temptation is judged to be *more* virtuous (t 's > 2.0 , p 's $< .05$). However, when the tradeoff is moral (whether to commit adultery; steal money; donate a kidney), the individual who overcame temptation is judged to be *less* virtuous (t 's < -6.1 , p 's $< .001$).

A second study examines whether it is the moral content of the decision or the potential harm caused by the vice that is driving these effects. Participants read a scenario about two overweight women who had the opportunity to eat a rich dessert, but chose not to. In the low harm condition, the women were described as being healthy, whereas in the high harm condition, the women were described as having been recently diagnosed with diabetes. To manipulate the moral content of the decision, we re-framed the scenario by titling it either “Individual Decision Making” in the nonmoral condition and “Moral Decision Making” in the moral condition. We find that manipulating the moral frame of the scenario affected perceptions of virtue ($F(1,193) = 4.70$, $p = .03$), but manipulating potential harm did not ($F(1,193) = 0.03$, $p = .85$). Further analysis revealed that in the nonmoral condition, participants rated the woman who overcame temptation to be more virtuous than the woman who did not feel tempted ($t(98) = 2.84$, $p = .005$). However, in the moral condition, this difference was eliminated ($t(97) = -0.59$, $p = .56$).

Study 3 sought to manipulate how individuals value strength of will versus purity of character in these decisions. We predicted and find that a low level construal (focus on feasibility) favors strength of will, whereas a high level construal (focus on desirability) favors purity of character ($t(42) = 2.50, p = .016$). These results are consistent with research showing that a low level construal focuses individuals on the situation-specific aspects of a decision, whereas a high level construal focuses on principled action (Eyal, Liberman & Trope, 2008).

In sum, we investigate how the meaning of virtue changes according to the moral content of a decision. We show that when the decision is moral in nature, judgments of virtue are based on purity of character. When a decision is nonmoral in nature, judgments of virtue are based on strength of will.

I hope to utilize the support of the Ackoff Fellowship to build on this research. In addition to providing support for the current hypothesis, and conducting follow up studies necessary for publication, I also hope to investigate further how individuals differentially apply moral credit to themselves and others.

The financial support of \$3,195 that I am seeking will be used for two purposes within this research project: to fund data collection and to share the results of my research at three conferences. Data will continue to be collected in a series of experiments primarily in the Wharton Behavioral Lab and online via the Qualtrics Panel and Amazon.com's MechanicalTurk.

In addition, I anticipate that this research will be of great interest to marketing, psychology, and economic audiences as well as to the general public. I hope to present my results at three relevant conferences: Behavioral Decision Research in Management (BDRM) conference in Boulder, CO; the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) North American conference in Vancouver, BC; and the Society for Judgment and Decision Making (SJDM) conference in Minneapolis, MN. The budget outlined below reflects estimated costs of lodging (at conference room rates) and travel to and from the conferences. I have already submitted this material to present at BDRM, and plan to submit to the two other conferences mentioned above. While the Marketing Department allocates some funding for research and travel, it is sufficient to cover only a small portion of the research I intend to conduct over the course of my studies. Any incurred expenses that the Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship does not cover will thus be paid out-of-pocket or by any funds remaining in my departmental research budget.

If you have any questions, or if there is any further information I can provide, please do not hesitate to call or email me. I greatly appreciate any support the Ackoff Fellowship can provide. Thank you for your consideration.