



Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: American Psychological Association & Oxford University Press, 2004), 800 pp.

Anybody interested in improving reflective professional practice could benefit from owning, perusing, occasionally consulting, and perhaps, even reading all 645 pages of this 2004 seminal work from the growing field of positive psychology. For all of its centuries of history, psychology has for the most part panned the concept of virtue as unscientific and virtuous behavior as likely avoidant of the “real” issues supposedly underlying them—not anymore.

Today as all public systems seem to be racing into disaster, virtues are getting a second look as life enriching phenomena. Clinical ethics and the other behavioral sciences, and even politics and finance, see in the greed, envy, self-absorption, and gridlocked bickering of today’s public servants a need for a deeper understanding of what makes people whole and excellent citizens. This book provides a solid grounding for that renewal of interest in character strengths.

Two experienced and celebrated university psychology professors (Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman) from different major universities (Michigan and Pennsylvania, respectively) have spent years leading a comprehensive study of the evolution of virtue. They present the results in this publication, hoping to create a companion to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth ed. (*DSM-IV*), emphasizing what goes right with human personality development to augment the traditional view of all that can go wrong.

The authors have distilled a tight taxonomy through an exhaustive study of the 2,500-year history of written recording of positive traits, from the wide ranging fields of philosophy and religion to developmental psychology and political theory. They used extensive peer discussions applying ten specific criteria to exclude words historically used for positive human traits that do not measure up to their understanding of what constitutes a virtue. They then organized the resultant list of twenty-four character strengths under a few most basic virtues they find ubiquitously throughout those historical lists, calling them the “High Six.”

The difference the authors find between the concept of “virtue” and that of “character strength” is in itself somewhat instructive. *Virtues*, the Big Six—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence—

are core characteristics that are being refined through an evolutionary process, perhaps because society cannot move forward without them. *Character strengths* are the processes or mechanisms that define the virtues.

Thus for example, the High Six virtue of *justice* is made up of several civic strengths that underlie healthy community life. They are *citizenship* (social responsibility, loyalty, and teamwork), *fairness* (treating all people the same and giving everyone a fair chance), and *leadership* (being a member of a group that encourages others to get things done and maintain collegial relationships). Underlying the Big Six virtue of *courage*, one finds the strengths of *bravery*, *persistence*, *integrity* and *vitality*. Any professional association could benefit from bringing to wide and serious discussion even these two virtues, with their underlying character strengths, in examining their own membership standards and organizational leaders.

Virtue has been the subject of examination from several distinct perspectives over the centuries. In time philosophical, literary, and religious traditions were joined in that endeavor by psychology. Chapter three of this book serves as a summary of the rich ways various psychological viewpoints have construed the traits that constitute the mythical "good life." Erik Erikson, Abraham Maslow, and Kohlberg will be recognized here and the reader gets a short course in the development of positive psychology in the past eighty years.

The most fascinating pages in this tome, however, are the few that trace the evolution of thinking about character strengths historically and religiously. They summarize ways the High Six have been recognized in hundreds of tribes and cultures and coalesced into the major religious traditions that emerged out of China (Confucian and Taoist writings), South Asia (Buddhist and Hindu teachings), and the West (Greek, Judeo-Christian, and Islamic traditions). The correspondence among them regarding core positive traits, while not surprising, is heartening. The evolution of humanity is indeed making its way forward in improvement of human personality through its numerous paths and obstacles.

The second of the book's three parts examines each of the twenty-four character strengths exhaustively from ten other points of view, including efforts to establish consensual behavioral definitions, a review of previous attempts to research and measure them, some gender differences regarding them, and a bibliography of "must read" materials about each one. This section, roughly eighty-five percent of the book's content, can quickly become tedious unless it slakes a specific thirst the reader has for understanding a given virtue or class of them.

Teachers of youth and clinical supervisors can benefit from letting this book challenge their established conceptual frameworks of assessing their students and their educational progress. Virtue, used to augment a pathological or “issues” focus, could encourage better ways of living and enjoying life. Educators who can help their students or mentees uncover their own operant virtues, showing them the value of those traits to their work or caregiving efforts, and helping them value and enhance those characteristics, can quench a natural thirst for self-worth in growing a professional identity.

Critics are likely to quip that none of this near-scientific treatment of the beautiful aspects of the human personality is likely to improve one bit the actual quality functioning of human beings. Perhaps they are right, but for those of us who have long been hooked on the questions of what is actually best for individuals, communities, and the evolution of the human race itself, this writing brings substance.

I found this book to be an exceptional treatment of the concept of virtue, well worth the price if not a thorough read. Like the dictionary and Google, it lends itself much better to being consulted than to be studied, unless you have a penchant for pondering what actually constitutes a successful life, a rich personality, resilient health, and an enjoyable day.

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Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tuto, *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 206 pp.

Made for Goodness is Desmond Tutu’s reply to questions frequently asked of him: “Why are you so joyful?” “How do you keep faith in people when you see so much injustice, oppression and cruelty?” “What makes you so certain that the world is going to get better?” (p. ix). He answers the questions by reflecting on his belief in the infinite goodness of God and sharing stories of individuals and communities who helped to overcome South Africa’s apartheid regime by choosing to be an instrument of God’s goodness. However, the book is not written as a spiritual memoir of the socio-cultural revolution in South Africa. Tutu invites us to ponder how our own values, relationships, and worldview might become more personally and communally life-