

Moral Identity and the Acquisition of Virtue: A Self-Regulation View

Tobias Krettenauer¹  and Matt Stichter²

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Abstract

The acquisition of virtue can be conceptualized as a self-regulatory process in which deliberate practice results in increasingly higher levels of skillfulness in leading a virtuous life. This conceptualization resonates with philosophical virtue theories as much as it converges with psychological models about skill development, expertise, goal motivation, and self-regulation. Yet, the conceptualization of virtue as skill acquisition poses the crucial question of motivation: What motivates individuals to self-improve over time so that they can learn from past experience, correct mistakes, and expand their ethical knowledge to new and unfamiliar circumstances? In this paper, it is argued that the motivation to increase one's level of skillfulness in leading a virtuous life is supported by a specific identity goal, namely the goal to be a moral person. However, this moral identity goal needs to carry specific goal characteristics in order to effectively provide this motivation. It needs to be sufficiently abstract, internally motivated and promotion- rather than prevention-oriented. Research in developmental psychology suggests that the moral identity of children is rather concrete, externally motivated, and prevention-oriented. With development, higher levels of abstraction, internal motivation, and promotion-orientation gain importance providing an important motivational basis for a self-regulated process of virtue acquisition.

Keywords

morality, identity, virtue, development, self-regulation

Virtue and related notions such as *character* have received a great deal of attention in philosophy and psychology over the more recent past, with considerable cross-border traffic between the two disciplines (e.g., Fowers et al., 2020). Scholars in philosophy are using psychological theory, models, and findings to elaborate on virtue theory (e.g., Darnell et al., 2019), or alternatively advocate against the use of certain concepts based on psychological research—as has been the case for the notion of moral character (Doris, 2002; Harman, 2000). On the other side of the divide, psychologists have been turning to philosophy to deepen their understanding of relevant constructs and to improve measurement strategies for studying virtue empirically (e.g., Cole Wright et al., 2020; Darnell et al., 2022; Ng & Tay, 2020).

The present paper represents another example of joining philosophical and psychological approaches to virtue, as we will cross the boundaries between the two disciplines in various directions: first by expanding virtue theory into psychological terrain, second by incorporating the concept of moral identity into a psychologically enriched conceptualization of virtue development, and finally by discussing some implications of this conceptual framework for (Neo-)Aristotelian views of virtue acquisition. The purpose of these efforts is not to contribute to scholarly discussions within two segregated academic fields, such as (Neo-)Aristotelian virtue

theory (e.g., Kristjánsson, 2012), on the one hand, and psychological models of self-regulation and development (e.g., Heckhausen & Dweck, 1998), on the other. Rather we intend to contribute to a growing literature in which philosophy and psychology jointly collaborate toward establishing a “science of virtue” (Fowers et al., 2020).

There are many possible ways of elaborating on virtues from a psychological point of view (see Kristjánsson, 2017). Snow (2010), for instance, relied on the cognitive-affective personality systems view (CAPS) that puts traits at center stage (see also Lapsley, 2016). So do Cole Wright and colleagues (2020) when incorporating whole trait theory (Jayawickreme et al., 2019) into virtue theory. From a trait perspective, virtues, no matter whether they are understood as global or as local traits, reflect stable individual differences. A less static view of virtues that is more akin to the perspective

¹Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON, Canada

²School of Politics, Philosophy, and Public Affairs, Washington State University, Pullman, WA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Tobias Krettenauer, Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Ave W, Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 3C5, Canada.

Email: tkrettenauer@wlu.ca

of developmental psychology has been proposed by [Stichter \(2018\)](#), who argued that virtues are equivalent to skills, which need to be acquired over time. From a skills perspective, a major question is how individuals attain and maintain a specific level of skillfulness with regard to virtue and what motivates them to do so ([Stichter, 2016](#)). This question of the motivation to acquire virtues as skills defines the topic of the present paper.

Virtue theory makes the individual person and their life focal for thinking about morality (unlike principle-based moral theories). Identity, on the other hand, defines a person's sense of self that extends over a lifetime. This common focus on the person and their life, rather than singular actions, invites the integration of the moral identity concept into virtue theory, and vice versa. Moral identity does not only contribute to bridging the gap between judgment and action by providing motivation to act morally as demonstrated empirically (for references see below). It also defines a goal individuals hold over their lifetime. A case can be made that moral identity, defined as the goal to be a moral person, provides important motivation to acquire virtue, however, only if this goal carries specific characteristics. The moral identity goal needs to be more abstract than concrete, promotion-oriented rather than prevention-oriented, and it needs to be internally rather than externally motivated. Without these goal characteristics, individuals would be unlikely to seek to engage in self-improvement, which is essential for virtue acquisition from a skills perspective.

This is the gist of the argument, as it will unfold in the subsequent sections. To mount this argument, we will first introduce the reader to the notion of virtue as a skill that is acquired similarly to other skills individuals exercise in their lives. We will then turn to the concept of moral identity and discuss what is implied in conceptualizing moral identity as a lifelong goal. Based on this discussion, we will describe three goal characteristics that provide motivation to acquire virtue: sufficient level of abstractness, promotion-orientation, and internal motivation. In the final part, we will discuss how the perspective developed in this paper can bolster Neo-Aristotelian models of virtue acquisition and, in this way, demonstrate what can be gained from it.

Before embarking on this endeavor, it is important to emphasize that this paper is conceptual in nature. While it relies on empirical research to back up its claims, much of the supportive empirical evidence is indirect. Thus, the proposition that the development of an abstract, promotion-oriented, and internally motivated moral identity goal is an important motivator for virtue as skill acquisition remains speculative and needs to be corroborated empirically in future research.

Virtue as Skill Acquisition

Virtue is appealing because it “is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally

good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should” ([Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018](#)). A person with the virtue of kindness, for example, “can be relied on to behave kindly when that is what the situation requires” because “a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness” ([McDowell 1998](#), p. 51). According to virtue ethicists, the virtuous person knows how to act in a morally appropriate way and is reliable in acting accordingly because they have acquired a suite of moral virtues and developed them to a robust degree.

Virtues such as courage, honesty, kindness, temperance, and the like are necessary characteristics for living a flourishing life. In this sense, virtues are a constitutive element of living well. Importantly, virtues are acquired characteristics, which shape a person's thoughts, emotions, motives, and behavior. Aristotle makes this point clear in his claim that “[n] either by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit” (NE 1103a23-6). Aristotle argues that, while humans all have the capacity to acquire virtue, they are not born naturally virtuous. Instead, virtues are acquired excellences, whereby one has to put effort and practice into developing.

How is virtue acquired? In many Ancient Greek discussions of virtue, the acquisition of virtue was likened to the process of acquiring a skill, such as learning to play a musical instrument or learning how to build a house. As [Annas \(2006\)](#) highlights:

This is an important analogy, because ethical development displays something that we can see more clearly in these more limited contexts: there is a progress from the mechanical rule- or model-following of the learner to the greater understanding of the expert, whose responses are sensitive to the particularities of situations as well as expressing learning and general reflection. (p. 518)

If a virtue, like honesty, was simple and straightforward (e.g., “never tell a lie”), then it would be relatively easy to acquire and express it. But virtue theorists have long argued that morality is complex, and moral behavior cannot be captured by simple rule-following. Hence, there has been an emphasis on how virtues are acquired through experience and practice, since skill development enables individuals to progressively handle domains of great complexity.

In discussing an account of virtue as skill, it is important to note that although there is general consensus amongst competing accounts of virtue that virtues are acquired excellences that enable one to be sensitive to moral reasons, to know how to respond appropriately to them, and to be disposed to do so, it is still debated whether virtues are best conceptualized as traits or skills. While many virtue theorists have used skill analogies for illuminating the process of acquiring virtue, this is often taken to be merely a helpful analogy and is not an endorsement of the claim that virtues

are skills. For example, Aristotle (1941, 1140b4–8) claims that skills have a separate end that they aim at, like a carpenter building a house, whereas that is not true of virtue. In his view, skills are concerned with producing an outcome with a value that is independent of the production such that the skillful activity is only of instrumental value, whereas virtuous activity is not done instrumentally for the sake of some other end but is rather understood to be constitutive of living well (or *eudaimonia*).

However, while some skills may be acquired for merely instrumental reasons, it does not necessarily follow that all skills have a goal that is external to the skillful activity. For example, in performance skills (e.g., acting, dance, music, etc.) there is no separate end or product apart from the performance itself. Becoming skillful can be a constitutive goal in itself, such as when one holds long-term aspirations (e.g., aspiring to be a great writer, musician, or chess grandmaster). As Fowers et al. (2010) noted, in their studies on the different outcomes of constitutive and instrumental goal pursuit on well-being, a “feature of a constitutive goal orientation is that one tends to identify strongly with the goal because constitutive activities shape the individual as a certain kind of person and constitute one’s life as a certain kind of life” (p. 140). So, not only would virtues be considered constitutive goals in this sense, goals of becoming skillful can be constitutive as well (even though becoming skillful might often instead be a merely instrumental goal). Finally, the fact that not all skills are acquired constitutively like virtues does not imply that virtues cannot be skills. As Zagzebski (1996) points out: “[t]his argument does not support the conclusion that virtues are not skills, however, but only that the class of virtues is not coextensive with the class of skills” (107).

Virtue theorists frequently claim that the virtuous person is reliable in seeing the morally relevant features of situations and knows how to respond appropriately to them, often in a spontaneous and intuitive manner (McDowell, 1998). Annas (2006) draws attention to how it is characteristic of experts to act reliably in a skillful way, based on their extensive experience and practice in a domain, which gives them a sensitivity to and understanding of the relevant factors in a situation. In investigating the considerable psychological literature on skills and expertise, descriptions of experts are strikingly similar (Ericsson, 1996). Expert chess players, for example, can reliably play well in an intuitive manner, often saying that they just see the right moves to make in a situation as a result of their extensive experience and deliberate practice in that skill domain. It is therefore not surprising that there have been many recent depictions of the virtuous person, or the wise person, as someone who displays expertise (Annas, 2011; De Caro et al., 2018; Stichter, 2018; Swartwood, 2013).

Skill acquisition is needed in domains of high complexity. When goals are about performing competently in a complex domain (e.g., being a good musician, athlete, doctor, or

firefighter), achieving these goals will amount to acquiring and exercising skills. The process of skill acquisition enables individuals to learn how to act well in a domain of great complexity by handling that complexity in incremental stages and by progressively developing one’s abilities. During skill acquisition, there will be a progression of task difficulty, such that the initially difficult tasks become easier so that one is in the position to tackle more difficult tasks.

Acquiring skill in this way involves having flexibility in how one strives to perform well (to cope with changes in one’s environment—which is part of what makes a domain complex), as well as a broad (or abstract) view of the goal of the skill itself (e.g., learning how to speak a language, rather than just memorizing a few useful phrases). Through experience and deliberate practice, individuals build mental models of the domain they are acting in (Greene & Azevedo, 2009). Models do not only provide instances of past experience but also a fundamental understanding of how a system functions and why experiences are the way they are. Thus, this understanding allows individuals to make predictions about the future states of the system without necessarily being limited by basing those predictions merely on past experiences. As such, models also provide us with flexibility because modelling allows us to take into account the relevant features of a situation in order to more accurately predict potential outcomes even in novel situations (Fridland & Stichter, 2020). Becoming more skillful in virtue is a matter of being more nuanced in our understanding of these constitutive moral goals, as well as how to better realize them in actions.

The progressive mastering of a skill requires practice, but neither mere experience nor rote repetition is sufficient for improving one’s level of skillfulness. Research indicates that a particular kind of experience is necessary for improvement. As it turns out, improving one’s level of skill requires not the mere repetition of things one already knows how to do, but continually striving to do things that one currently cannot do, which is referred to as “deliberate practice” (Ericsson, 1996). As individuals engage in deliberate practice, they seek out feedback about their performance in the hopes of identifying and correcting errors. Therefore, improvement in one’s degree of skillfulness requires attempts to correct past mistakes, overcome current limitations, and learn how to tackle new challenges. If someone fails to accomplish this task, they remain at a fixed level of skill development. Fridland (2014) draws attention to this process by defining “skills as the subclass of abilities, which are characterized by the fact that they are refined or developed as a result of effortful attention and control to the skill itself” (p. 82). Because of the incremental growth in skill development, in order to be skilled (e.g., to perform well), one has to have the goal to improve one’s level of skillfulness.

This overview of the acquisition of skills suggests a plausible route for virtue development. Yet, for the account of virtue development presented here, a crucial question pertains

to the motivation to engage in skill acquisition through deliberate practice. What motivates individuals to self-improve over time so that they learn from past experiences, correct mistakes, and expand their ethical knowledge to new and unfamiliar terrain? Evidently, the motivation to self-improve is not identical to the motivation to act morally. Imagine someone who tries hard to keep a promise but eventually fails, feels guilty about it, apologizes, and makes amends but then repeats the very same mistake again and again. A specific form of moral motivation seems to be missing, namely, the motivation to become better as a moral person. Individuals might be motivated to act morally but lack the motivation to self-improve.

In the present paper, it is argued that moral identity, conceptualized as the goal to be a moral person, is crucial in providing the motivation to self-improve over time. To bolster this claim, we will first discuss the concept of moral identity, which originated outside of philosophical and psychological approaches to virtue. We will then describe what characteristics allow moral identity to serve an important motivational function in the acquisition of virtue.

Moral Identity as a Goal

The concept of moral identity was introduced to Moral Psychology in the 1980s in an effort to bridge the gap between moral judgment and action. As Blasi (1980) demonstrated in a systematic literature review, moral judgment alone appears to be a poor predictor of what people actually do. Consequently, it seemed essential to identify factors that would enhance the motivational strength of individuals' moral judgments. Moral identity—defined as “the degree to which being a moral person is important to an individual's identity” (Hardy & Carlo, 2011, p. 212) is one of them. Individuals with a strong moral identity are supposed to care more about their moral judgments, which results in greater engagement in corresponding moral action. In line with this view, a quantitative meta-analysis revealed a systematic positive relationship between moral identity and moral behavior (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). Various psychological mechanisms rooted in the importance of morality to an individual's sense of self potentially account for this effect (see Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016).

While there is a robust relationship between moral identity and moral behavior, it should be noted at this point that the size of this effect is average, not larger than typical effect sizes obtained in social-psychological studies, while still slightly stronger than the effect size of moral emotions (Malti & Krettenauer, 2013). Krettenauer (2022b) argued that this finding is likely attributable to undermining effects as some aspects of moral identity potentially weaken the link between moral identity and moral behavior by allowing for *moral disengagement* (Bandura, 2016), *moral hypocrisy* (Batson, 2016), and *moral licencing* (Sachdeva et al., 2009). These phenomena qualify as specific forms of moral identity

failures. When moral identity is prevention- rather than promotion-oriented, it is possible to maintain one's moral identity by disengaging from immoral actions. When it is externally rather than internally motivated, it may fail to engender moral behavior because it is more important to appear rather than be moral. When moral identity is concrete rather than abstract, someone can easily use accumulated credits from past moral behavior to absolve present misbehavior (for details see Krettenauer, 2022b). It is a major claim of the present paper that moral identity does not only provide motivation to act in a given situation but also motivation to self-improve over time. However, as with the moral identity-behavior link this does not equally apply to all types of moral identity but requires the presence of certain moral identity characteristics.

Moral identity can be conceptualized in many different ways. Following McAdams's tri-partite account of personality (McAdams, 2013), Krettenauer and Hertz (2015) suggested distinguishing between three levels of moral identity: moral identity as a trait, goal, and narrative. For all three levels, multiple research examples exist (see Krettenauer & Hertz, 2015). Moral identity that is conceptualized as a trait manifests in stable dispositions to act morally across contexts and time. The trait-like quality of moral identity derives from the importance of coherence and consistency as an organizational principle of the self, as Blasi (1980) emphasized. On a less abstract level, moral identities are represented by various goal-orientations individuals maintain in different areas of their life (e.g., wanting a caring parent or a fair coworker). These goals reflect what individuals personally experience as important in their lives. On the least abstract levels, moral identities are expressed in life stories—“big” and “small” (Bamberg, 2007)—about past moral achievements and failures. These life-stories mitigate discrepancies and inconsistencies among conflicting self-aspects and sustain a personal sense of moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). It is important to note that stressing different levels of conceptualizing moral identity does not imply that moral identity in itself consists of segregated layers. Traits, goals, and narratives provide different analytical perspectives on individuals' moral identity that nevertheless intersect in many ways, for instance, when narratives reveal the dynamics of approaching (or failing to approach) an identity goal, or when a goal shows trait-like consistency across time and situations.

To understand the motivating role of moral identity in leading a moral life and for improving in this process, moral identity is best conceptualized as a specific identity goal, namely the goal to be a moral person. There are many other identity goals, such as being a loving spouse, a responsible parent, a productive scientist, a successful athlete, or a good citizen (see Fujita & Macgregor, 2012). Yet, in comparison to these more specific identity goals, individuals may (or may not) have, the moral identity goal stands out. The moral identity goal is not confined to specific social roles individuals adopt or activities they pursue. The moral identity

goal, therefore, is less contingent on individuals' age, social status, and life circumstances. More importantly, it is a goal presumably everyone has. This is because, besides sociability and competence, morality is a central dimension of person-perception and -evaluation (even for young infants, see Hamlin et al., 2007). Morality is an important lens through which individuals see themselves and others (Brambilla et al., 2011; Cottrell et al., 2007; Goodwin et al., 2014; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). Note that even moral hypocrites share this moral identity goal as they want to be perceived as moral by others while avoiding the actual costs of being moral, as Batson (2016) described it. While Batson claims that moral hypocrisy is pervasive (thus indirectly supporting the notion that the moral identity goal is ubiquitous), empirically, it appears to be far less common (e.g., Krettenauer et al., 2019). As will be detailed below, in the case of moral hypocrisy, the moral identity goal takes a specific form: it is predominantly externally motivated and carries zero internal motivation.

While the moral identity goal can be considered ubiquitous, this does not imply that it motivates everyone to acquire virtues to the same extent. This is because any goal can vary along three major dimensions (e.g., Milyavskaya & Werner, 2018). First, goals can be more or less concrete versus abstract. Goals typically form hierarchies along a concrete versus abstract continuum. As goals move up in a hierarchy, they become psychologically more distant and consequently more abstract (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Second, goals are either promotion- or prevention-oriented. Individuals either want to attain a desired state or want to avoid an undesired state (Higgins, 2012). Third, goals are more or less internally or externally motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). That is, individuals pursue goals because they find them valuable in themselves or as means for something else. All these distinctions apply to the moral identity goal as well (Krettenauer, 2022b). Thus, the goal to be a moral person can be more or less abstract or concrete, more or less promotion- or prevention-oriented, and more or less internally or externally motivated. These distinctions are of great importance for the motivating role of moral identity to acquire virtue, as will be detailed in the following section.

Moral Identity Goal and Self-Regulation

To better understand the importance of moral identity goal characteristics, it is helpful to consider the processes of setting and striving for goals within a broader self-regulatory framework. Goals define desirable states people want to attain and want to keep once attained (see Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Self-regulatory frameworks describe how people adopt or revise goals, as well as how individuals monitor discrepancies between their existing goals and current states (Bandura, 1999). They act in order to decrease these discrepancies, or they adjust their goals if goal-attainment seems out of reach. Thus, engaging in goal-directed behavior requires self-regulatory processes in terms of an ability to

initiate, modify, and control behavior while monitoring discrepancies between actual and desired states (for an overview of various forms of goal representation and regulation see Moskowitz, 2012). Also, as highlighted by Bandura's (1999) social cognitive account of self-regulation, adopting new goals is a process of discrepancy production (between current and desired states) rather than discrepancy reduction. Self-regulation is not limited to self-discipline or self-control. It starts with the adoption of a goal (goal setting), which may be specific and immediate (e.g., keeping a promise to help a friend moving) or general and long-term (e.g., being an honest person). Once the goal is set, individuals need to initiate activities and behaviors that ensure goal fulfillment (goal striving). The same basic categories of self-regulatory processes apply to the moral identity goal.

Moral identity as a goal competes with a potentially unlimited number of other goals individuals may have. Whether this goal takes priority over those competing goals and becomes effective in the process of goal setting depends on its self-importance. At this point, much of the existing literature on moral identity can be integrated into a self-regulation framework. If being a moral person were the only goal individuals had, and there were no competing or conflicting goals, goal fulfillment would likely not be an issue. Yet, this is rarely the case, particularly not in the context of morality. Goal fulfillment requires active managing of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in order to overcome distractions, obstacles, and setbacks. In the context of goal striving, these strategies vary on a continuum from preventive (or anticipatory) to interventive (Hofmann & Kotabe, 2012). Individuals use preventive strategies to protect their goals from anticipated temptations or disruptions. Preventive strategies support goal fulfillment indirectly by circumventing potential goal conflicts. In contrast, interventive strategies are needed when goal conflicts are experienced and increased self-control is required to ensure adherence to a specific goal. These various strategies apply to the moral identity goal in the same way as to any other personal goal. However, their importance and effectiveness vary depending on what goal characteristics the moral identity goal carries.

Moral Identity Goal Characteristics

As stated above, the moral identity goal carries various goal characteristics. It is abstract or concrete, internally or externally motivated, and promotion- or prevention-oriented. Before continuing to describe these characteristics in detail, a brief note about their theoretical status is in order. While these goal characteristics are introduced as conceptual contrasts, it is important to stress that they do not imply bipolar dimensions. Thus, it is possible, for instance, to combine concrete with abstract goal characteristics, or highly external with internal goal motivation. Correspondingly, the various goal characteristics might be best represented by independent (albeit correlated) scales. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the

various moral identity goal characteristics can be conceptualized as both states and traits. This corresponds with the bivalent nature of the moral identity construct itself, which has both trait- and state-like characteristics (Krettenauer et al., 2021).

Abstract versus Concrete

The moral identity goal can be represented on lower or higher levels of abstractness. The goal of being a moral person might be represented by specific actions, such as helping a friend, keeping a promise, or not lying to one's parents. In these cases, the goal of being a moral person is rather short-term and tied to concrete social settings the individual is part of (e.g., family, friends, community). Alternatively, the goal might be long-term and abstract. That is, it might consist of general commitments to values such as honesty or generosity that are held independently from the various roles a person occupies in specific social settings and that may even apply hypothetically to situations that may never occur in one's life.

It is important to note that having an abstract moral identity goal does not imply that it is devoid of any concreteness. An abstract moral identity goal is fully compatible with having more concrete subgoals, as goals can be hierarchically integrated. A highly complex or abstract goal (i.e., a superordinate goal) can give rise to more context-specific subsidiary goals (i.e., subgoals). The relationship between the different levels on the goal hierarchy need not be merely one of means to an end, as sometimes the lower-order goals provide the constitutive elements of the higher-order goal. The process of moving from higher-ordered abstract goals to lower-ordered and more concrete goals serves at least two purposes. First, the greater specification in lower-ordered goals provides better action guidance in specific situations (Carver & Scheier, 2003). Second, and relatedly, individuals receive more direct feedback from the actions they take. Because feedback plays a crucial role in self-regulation, it's important that goals are specified in ways that enable apt feedback on how one is doing (Achtziger & Gollwitzer, 2007).

Yet, it is also important whether or not concrete goals are part of a goal hierarchy with more abstract goal representations at the top. While focusing on the lower-ordered goals is helpful for more concrete action guidance, moving the focus on higher-order and more abstract goals back up lower-level goals (e.g., when switching focus from "not telling a lie" to "being an honest person"). This process is described by construal level theory, which distinguishes between "high" and "low" ways of construing events (Trope & Liberman, 2010). A "high" level construal focuses on the more abstract and distant goals and values that motivate actions (i.e., why you're doing it), whereas a "low" level construal focuses on the more concrete and immediate means for reaching those goals (i.e., how you're going to do it).

Research has found that affirming one's abstract and superordinate goals can help exert self-control when one is

conflicted between different courses of action (Fujita et al., 2006). Sometimes there are conflicting goals, where pursuing one goal means bypassing another. Take, for example, a student who must choose between spending an evening studying or partying. In this situation, orienting oneself toward more abstract and long-term goals (such as the goal to go to graduate school) can make it easier to overcome the temptation of pursuing the short-term goal of having a fun evening (see also Fishbach & Converse, 2010). Applied to moral identity, a more abstract moral identity goal is better suited to overcome lower-level goals, which typically take the form of temptations to disregard moral concerns for short-term gains.

An abstract representation of the moral identity goal also provides a more continuous source of moral motivation. Because concrete goals generally rank lower in goal hierarchies, they are more easily reached than abstract goals. However, once a goal is satisfied, competing goals take over, as research on moral licensing demonstrates. As a consequence, it can be assumed that a concrete moral identity goal is more easily overpowered by competing goals than an abstract one (Mullen & Monin, 2016). In contradistinction, if the moral identity goal is sufficiently abstract, it will never be fully satisfied, and the motivation to be a moral person is never fully exhausted.

Besides their greater endurance, abstract goals are also more easily expanded to new and unfamiliar situations. If the moral identity goal is sufficiently abstract, individuals recognize new challenges more readily, which will likely spur virtue development.

Promotion versus Prevention

The incremental approach to improving one's skillfulness highlights another relevant distinction in self-regulation theory, which concerns whether someone's focus is on promoting a desired outcome versus preventing an undesired outcome. Higgins (1997) explains that:

Because a promotion focus involves sensitivity to positive outcomes (their presence and absence), an inclination to approach matches to desired end-states is the natural strategy for promotion self-regulation. In contrast, because a prevention focus involves a sensitivity to negative outcomes (their absence and presence), an inclination to avoid mismatches to desired end-states is the natural strategy for prevention self-regulation. (p. 1282)

Prevention orientation implies maintaining one's existing state and trying to avoid losses relative to that state. Promotion orientation, by contrast, implies trying to improve upon one's existing state, such that one focuses more on gains and progress.

The moral identity goal can be more or less prevention- or promotion-oriented. As a promotion-oriented goal, moral identity defines a self-ideal that individuals want to achieve.

As a prevention-oriented goal, moral identity is a quality people do not want to lose. For example, a promotion-focused goal of being kind involves striving to become a kinder person, whereas a prevention-focused goal might be limited to avoiding any action that would count as unkind (in order to maintain a view of oneself as kind). Both orientations can motivate different behaviors despite the goals both being concerned with kindness. Virtues, as with skills in general, would require having a promotion focus to motivate improving upon one's current degree of virtue (or skillfulness).

Avoidance motivation does not provide a positively defined goal. Avoidance motivation is primarily concerned with preserving the status quo when this status quo is threatened but it does not expand beyond it. Yet, there are many different ways to respond to identity threats other than trying to self-correct, as the literature on mechanisms of moral disengagement demonstrates (Bandura, 2016). Individuals may rationalize their actions in light of supposedly higher moral standards, deny or displace responsibility, or minimize the negative consequences for the victim. These mechanisms of moral disengagement preserve one's identity as a moral person despite not abiding by one's own moral standards in a given situation. They do not involve self-correction to become a better moral person.

The distinction between prevention and promotion resonates with Dweck and Leggett's (1988) social-cognitive approach to motivation. Their work on implicit theories showed that people fall along a continuum with respect to how they view their cognitive abilities—as a fixed entity that one cannot change, or as malleable that one can improve (Dweck, 2000). These two implicit theories, “essentialist” versus “incremental,” have different consequences for how individuals react to failure. An essentialist theory supports maladaptive responses to failure because of feelings of helplessness to do better. If someone believes that they are not capable of achieving a desired outcome, they will have little motivation to self-regulate. In contrast, an incremental theory can lead to adaptive responses where a person puts forth the effort to learn how to act better the next time because they believe that they can improve their efforts. These responses to failure are important for skill development, as deliberate practice requires learning from mistakes and motivation to improve (Stichter, 2020).

Research demonstrated that people have the same mindsets about their moral capabilities (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Hertz, 2022). An essentialist theory corresponds with a prevention-oriented moral identity goal, where individuals are primarily motivated to preserve their current identity. These individuals neither desire nor welcome identity change. The promotion-oriented moral identity goal, by contrast, reflects an incremental theory, where individuals actively seek out opportunities to bring their moral identity closer to their self-ideal.

Internal versus External Motivation

The acquisition of skills requires not only a promotion focus but also sustained motivation to engage in an ongoing process

of self-improvement. Virtue theorists, such as Annas (2011), argue that “the drive to aspire” is fundamental to skill and virtue acquisition:

The drive to aspire stresses the equally important aspect of coming to understand what we are learning, the move to self-direction, and the point that we are always improving (or at least sustaining) virtue. Virtue is not a state you achieve and then sit back, with nothing further to do. (p. 25)

The possession of virtue is considered to be a matter of degree, so there is always the possibility of improvement. Likewise, once expertise (or the desired level of performance) has been achieved in a skill, the same kind of deliberate practice is necessary to retain expert performance (Horn & Masunaga, 2006).

How does one sustain this kind of motivation for self-improvement? It's important to emphasize that goals already do provide motivation—that is, to sincerely adopt a goal brings with it some level of motivation to try to achieve it (i.e., to reduce the discrepancy). But there are also important distinctions in types of motivation that are relevant to sustaining self-improvement, as maintained by Self-Determination Theory (SDT, see Ryan & Deci, 2017). From an SDT perspective, it is crucial whether a goal is externally or internally motivated (also distinguished as autonomous vs. controlled). If a goal is externally motivated, it is important because it is instrumental for achieving something else (e.g., wealth, recognition, power). An internally motivated goal, by contrast, is positively valued in itself. Correspondingly, the moral identity goal is externally motivated if goal fulfillment is instrumental in maintaining or improving one's social status in a community. It is internally motivated if being a moral person is considered valuable in itself.

Sheldon and Elliot (1999) have found that individuals are more effective in pursuing goals that are internally motivated (autonomously regulated), while Sheldon and Kasser (2001) showed that goals that are autonomously regulated contribute to increased well-being. These findings formed part of the basis of their self-concordance model of goals. Sheldon and Elliot (1999) define self-concordance as “the degree to which stated goals express enduring interests and values” (p. 482). When goals are not concordant (such as those that are externally imposed), this affects both goal striving (i.e., reducing goal motivation and thus progress) and the outcomes of goal fulfillment (i.e., not as satisfying). By contrast, there can be a self-reinforcing cycle in adopting more concordant goals. Sheldon and Elliot (1999) explain that “[b]ecause the developing interests and deep-seated values that such goals express are relatively enduring facets of personality, self-concordant goals are likely to receive sustained effort over time” (p. 483–484). So, self-concordant goals are more desirable, providing more sustained motivation, leading one to put more effort into striving for such goals, and this leads to higher rates of goal progress and attainment.

In the context of moral action, it has been demonstrated that internally motivated helping behavior is accompanied by more positive affect (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010) and authentic pride compared to externally motivated helping (Krettenauer & Casey, 2015). This connection between internal motivation and positive affect grants an internally motivated identity goal an important role in the development of moral virtue. If the moral identity goal is internally motivated, progress toward becoming a better moral person positively contributes to an individual's well-being. As a result, moral motivation reinforces itself. For an externally motivated identity goal, by contrast, the motivation to improve depends on external contingencies, for example, the praise and recognition one receives from others, which may not be consistently present.

Furthermore, an externally motivated moral identity goal is not compatible with virtue. Acquiring virtue means coming to value virtue for its own sake and not because it is merely expected by others. As Vasiliou (1996) emphasizes, this valuing of virtue for its own sake is connected to virtue being a constitutive subgoal of the more abstract goal of living well:

It is important to remember that an essential part of what is special about truly virtuous action is that it is chosen and undertaken for its own sake. This brings out the importance of the character and motives behind an action for determining its ethical value ... The courageous person acts courageously in a particular situation because that is what courage requires then and there; acting courageously in that situation just *is* what living or doing well is at that moment (p. 788).

For these reasons, virtue would need to be internally or autonomously motivated, because only autonomous motivation is consistent with choosing virtue for its own sake (Arvanitis & Stichter, 2022). While it is possible that individuals chose certain moral behaviors autonomously without fully recognizing the intrinsic value of virtue, such a motivation would not qualify as internal in the full sense of the word. In this case, individuals' moral motivation would take a middle ground on a continuum that extends from purely external to fully internal.

Moral Identity Development and Virtue Acquisition

In the previous section, it was argued that the moral identity goal provides important motivation to develop virtue. Yet, this is only the case if this goal takes a specific form: if it is abstract rather than concrete, approach-rather than avoidance-oriented and more internally than externally motivated. In the following section, we will further expand this conceptualization of moral identity motivation and consider it in a developmental context. We will discuss what our conceptualization of moral identity motivation adds to extant models of virtue acquisition and in this way, demonstrate the relevance of the proposed framework for virtue theory.

According to classical Aristotelian and various Neo-Aristotelian accounts, virtue acquisition follows two major phases (Darnell et al., 2019; Müller, 2004). The first phase is characterized by a lack of reasoning capabilities. In this phase, children (as well as adolescents and adults who lack maturity) may learn how to behave well, but they do not have a proper understanding of the reasons why specific behaviors qualify as virtuous. It is assumed that in this phase of virtue development, children acquire the prerequisites of virtue externally through role-model-guided habituation (i.e., by instilling specific behavioral dispositions in them). Once proper reasoning capabilities are in place, individuals enter the second phase of virtue development by acquiring practical wisdom (phronesis). Practical wisdom makes it possible to reach the right decisions in situations with conflicting demands, and it gives rise to the proper understanding of the foundations of value judgments (Darnell et al., 2019).

This two-phased account of virtue development has been called into question from the perspective of developmental psychology. As demonstrated in this research area, children show considerable moral reasoning capabilities. They reason about interpersonal-moral conflicts in a much more sophisticated way than Kohlberg's model suggests (Eisenberg, 1982; Keller & Edelstein, 1990). Moreover, they draw distinctions between moral, conventional and personal issues in a similar way as adults do (e.g., Smetana et al., 2014). It is, thus, problematic to attribute the need for role-model guided habituation in children to a presumed lack of reasoning capabilities. Correspondingly, Darnell and colleagues (2019) concede that "the developmental story behind phronesis is presently its weakest link" (p. 18) in connecting (Neo-)Aristotelian models of virtue acquisition with insights of developmental psychology.

The account presented in this paper offers a different view of the claim that virtue acquisition is more externally guided than internally driven in childhood, without relying on contested claims about children's lack of moral reasoning capabilities. This is the case because the various goal characteristics described in the previous sections are in themselves developmental dimensions. Moral identity can be assumed to be rather concrete, prevention-oriented, and externally motivated at the onset of moral identity development in middle childhood. As moral identity matures, it becomes more abstract, promotion-oriented and internally motivated. As a consequence, virtue acquisition becomes an internally driven process where individuals strive for self-improvement in the moral domain through self-regulated action. Note that this view complements classical Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue acquisition rather than contradicts them.

In the following section, this developmental claim is further substantiated. We will first address a common misconception that moral identity development starts in adolescence but not earlier (see also Kingsford et al., 2018; 2021). We will then outline how moral identity can be assumed to develop from early forms to adult maturity. A more

detailed account of this developmental process is provided in [Krettenauer \(2022a\)](#).

Development of the Moral Identity Goal

A person's identity is rooted in inter- and intra-personal processes. As the social psychological literature on social identity highlights, an identity defines what social group individuals want to belong to and from what groups they distance themselves ([Hogg, 2016](#)). At the same time, a person's identity provides a sense of self-continuity and -coherence, as research on ego identity originating from Erikson's writings stresses (see also [McAdams, 1998](#)). This double-edged structure also applies to the concept of moral identity (cf. [Ellemers et al., 2013](#); [Lapsley & Stey, 2014](#)). Individuals want to see themselves as members of a moral community they are part of (social identity). At the same time, they want to act in accordance with their moral convictions for the sake of self-consistency or -coherence (self- or ego-identity). While the formation of moral identity in terms of self- or ego-identity is the realm of adolescent development, moral identity as social identity likely develops much earlier, as recent research suggests.

In a series of experiments, Tomasello and colleagues demonstrated that already five-year-old children actively manage their social reputation by engaging in prosocial behaviors (sharing) and by avoiding antisocial actions (stealing) when watched by uninvolved observers ([Engelmann et al., 2013](#); [Engelmann & Rapp, 2018](#); [Rapp et al., 2019](#)). In contrast, 3-year-olds do not show these tendencies. Similarly, [Fu and colleagues \(2016\)](#) demonstrated that 5-year-old children cheated less when their reputation of being "a good kid" was at stake, while this does not apply to 3-year-olds. These and other related studies ([Bryan et al., 2014](#)) demonstrate that children around the age of 5–6 years, want to be viewed as a member of their group who is helpful, sharing, and honest. In other words, children at that young age have a moral identity that is social in nature. This social identity can be assumed to be rather concrete, prevention-oriented, and externally motivated. With development, it becomes more abstract, promotion-oriented, and internally motivated. It is important to note, at this point, that the conceptual contrasts concrete versus abstract, external versus internal, prevention-versus promotion-oriented do not describe absolute start- and end-points of moral identity development but trends in the relative importance of these goal characteristics. Thus, adults' moral identities are perhaps never fully abstract, internally motivated and promotion-oriented. Conversely, children's moral identity may not be completely devoid of these characteristics.

From Concrete to Abstract. In her overview of the development of self-representations, [Harter \(2012\)](#) emphasizes that "young children can only construct very concrete cognitive representations of observable features of the self" (p. 30). In

middle to late childhood, children form generalizations of specific behavioral tendencies by stating, for instance, a self-view of being "helpful," "popular," "nice," or "smart." In adolescence, these single-trait abstractions become integrated into higher-order abstractions, for example, when a teenager combines being talkative, cheerful, and funny to the self-presentation of being an extrovert.

Applied to moral identity, the representation of the moral identity goal likely changes systematically from childhood through adolescence. While for younger children wanting to be a moral person is defined by demonstrating specific behaviors, children later form more abstract categories of these behaviors. These categories are further integrated into higher-order abstractions in the course of development. For instance, a child might define being a moral person as someone who does not lie, does not cheat and keeps one's promises. Later in the course of development, these single behavioral representations are combined to the abstraction of being honest. In adolescence, the moral identity goal of being honest becomes coordinated with other self-representations. Honesty, therefore, might take priority over other identity concerns. Following this development, the moral identity goal of being a moral person becomes increasingly abstract.

In line with this view, [Lefebvre and colleagues \(2022\)](#) demonstrated that young adults endorse abstract moral identity attributes such as being honest, fair, or caring more than 13- to 14-year-olds in comparison to their concrete counterparts of "not telling lies," "not playing favourites," or "helping others."

From Prevention to Promotion Orientation. An outstanding feature of children's self-concept, is its positivity ([Boseovski, 2010](#); [Harter, 2012](#); [Trzesniewski et al., 2011](#)). Children typically have a highly optimistic view of their own capabilities and competencies across all major behavioral domains (physical, cognitive, social) including morality ([Krettenauer et al., 2013](#); [Thomaes et al., 2017](#)). This positivity bias also manifests in children's predictions of future change. Younger children typically expect positive traits to remain stable in the future and negative characteristics to disappear in the future ([Lockhart et al., 2002](#)). Adults, by contrast, are less optimistic and do not think that negative traits naturally improve.

If one has a highly positive self-view, promotion toward a self-ideal is not a relevant goal characteristic. Instead, preserving the status quo is of primary importance. Thus, younger children's moral identity likely is more prevention- than promotion-oriented. For children, it is more important to avoid mismatches between their moral identity goal and behavior (prevention) than to produce matches between this goal and behavior (promotion). In line with this view, [Pletti and colleagues \(2022\)](#) reported that for 10-year-old children with a strong moral identity observing antisocial behaviors captured more attentional resources than prosocial behaviors (as evidenced by event-related potentials). As the positivity bias eases in late childhood and adolescence and as real- and

ideal-self become increasingly differentiated, this prevention-orientation makes room for a more promotion-oriented moral identity. Thus, moral identity becomes a self-ideal individuals strive for, as opposed to a self-characteristic they do not want to lose.

From Externally to Internally Motivated. While empirical evidence in support of changes in moral identity goal characteristics along the concrete versus abstract and avoidance versus approach dimensions is mostly indirect, age-related increases in internal moral identity motivation have been reported in several independent studies using a variety of methods and age groups. In a cross-sectional sample of 14- to 65-year-old Canadian participants and based on semi-structured interview data, Krettenauer and Victor (2017) found that external moral identity motivation decreased with age, whereas internal motivation increased. Age-related differences were most pronounced in adolescence and early adulthood and levelled off after the age of 25 years. Using a standardized questionnaire for assessing internal and external moral identity motivation yielded similar results (Lefebvre et al., 2022). In a sample of 9- to 15-year-olds, participants were asked to explain why certain moral identity characteristics (e.g., being honest, fair, kind, helpful) were important for them. Answers were classified into four categories, as external, introjected, identified, and integrated (for details see Krettenauer, 2020). For three out of four of these motivational categories, significant age-related differences were found in line with the notion that moral identity motivation becomes less external and more internally motivated with age. Finally, in a sample of 4- to 9-year-old children and by using a method similar to a puppet interview, Goddeeris and Krettenauer (2023) demonstrated that children's internal motivation increased with age while external motivation decreased. All these results evidence a general developmental trend towards higher levels of internal moral identity motivation with age. They are consistent with studies demonstrating age-related increases in internal motivation for personal goals (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001) and for social role obligations across the lifespan (Sheldon et al., 2005).

Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that virtue acquisition can be conceptualized as a self-regulatory process in which deliberate practice leads to increasingly higher levels of skillfulness in leading a virtuous life. This conceptualization resonates with philosophical virtue theories as much as it coheres with psychological models about skill development, expertise, goal motivation, and self-regulation. Yet, the conceptualization of virtue acquisition as a self-regulatory process poses the crucial question of motivation: What motivates individuals to self-improve over time so that they can learn from past experience, correct mistakes, and expand their ethical knowledge to new and unfamiliar circumstances?

In this paper, we argued that the motivation to increase one's level of skillfulness in leading a virtuous life is supported by a specific identity goal, namely the goal to be a moral person. Yet, the moral identity goal needs to carry specific goal characteristics in order to effectively provide this motivation. It needs to be sufficiently abstract, internally motivated and promotion- rather than prevention-oriented. In the final step of our argument, we pointed out that these goal characteristics undergo systematic change in the course of development. While children around the age of 6 years do have a moral identity, their moral identity is rather concrete, externally motivated, and prevention-oriented. Thus, it lacks important prerequisites for a truly self-regulated process of virtue acquisition. With development, higher levels of abstraction, internal motivation, and promotion-orientation gain importance relative to concrete, externally motivated, and prevention-oriented identity characteristics. In sum, the goal to be a moral person needs to carry certain characteristics that are only rudimentarily present in children and young teenagers in order to kick-start virtue development as a self-regulatory process. Virtue acquisition through self-regulation requires moral identity development in order to materialize.

This view expands on the position taken by Darnell and colleagues (2019), who argue for moral identity as an important component of practical wisdom. In the (Neo-)Aristotelian literature on virtues, it is a widely accepted notion that virtues need to be acquired through externally guided habituation, that is through instilling the habit of acting virtuously. The argument developed in this paper is consistent with this view. Yet, it provides a different rationale for holding it. Externally guided habituation in childhood might be needed not because of a presumed lack in children's reasoning abilities as Neo-Aristotelians would claim, but because the moral identity goal of children is rather concrete, externally motivated, and prevention-oriented. These goal characteristics do not support the acquisition of virtue as a self-regulatory process, through goal setting and goal striving. Concrete goals are more easily satisfied than abstract goals and allow for the dynamic of moral licencing. External motivation renders moral actions contingent on external rewards and boosts the desire to appear moral rather than be moral. Finally, prevention-orientation invites defensive maneuvers to protect one's moral identity when failing to act morally by employing mechanisms of moral disengagement.

Viewed from this angle, moral identity development can be considered foundational to virtue acquisition through self-regulatory processes. As a consequence, educators, teachers, and parents should be concerned with supporting moral identity development to the point that the moral identity goal becomes sufficiently abstract, internally motivated and promotion-oriented. Once these goal characteristics are established, virtue development through self-regulation can follow. It is an open question that is beyond the scope of the present paper, what factors contribute to the development of these goal characteristics. As this development is

multifaceted, factors that support the development of specific goal characteristics are likely multitude. They involve cognitive processes, such as encouraging children and adolescents to articulate more general values and principles that guide their moral actions. They include educational practices where moral mishaps and failures are not dealt with as identity threats but as opportunities to improve (see also Oser, 2005). They also require environmental conditions that facilitate the integration of cultural norms and values into the self, which have been described as *autonomy supportive* in Self-Determination Theory (see Deci & Ryan, 2014). Once such conditions are present, the human capacity to acquire virtue through self-regulation becomes actuality.

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ORCID iD

Tobias Krettenauer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0421-8771>

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