

# Reconsidering Virtue: Differences of Perspective in Virtue Ethics and the Positive Social Sciences

David S. Bright · Bradley A. Winn ·  
Jason Kanov

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**Abstract** This paper describes differences in two perspectives on the idea of virtue as a theoretical foundation for positive organizational ethics (POE). The virtue ethics perspective is grounded in the philosophical tradition, has classical roots, and focuses attention on virtue as a property of character. The positive social science perspective is a recent movement (e.g., positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship) that has implications for POE. The positive social science movement operationalizes virtue through an empirical lens that emphasizes virtuous behaviors. From a virtue ethics perspective, a behaviorally based account of virtue is a weak theory of virtue. Observations are suggested for integrating the two perspectives. First, virtue should always be understood as an excellence and is often an optimal point between extreme dysfunctions on continuum of potential states. Second, an empirical exploration of virtue needs to account for character and context. Finally, the properties of organization-level virtue need to be further specified and explored. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

**Keywords** Positive organizational ethics · Positive psychology · Positive organizational scholarship · Organizational virtuousness · Positive social science · Virtue · Virtues · Virtue ethics · Organizational virtue · Virtue theory

## Abbreviations

POS Positive organizational scholarship  
POE Positive organizational ethics

## Introduction

This paper explores differences of perspective about the idea of virtue as a basis for defining and explaining the dimensions of excellence in the human experience. In both classical and contemporary terms, virtue refers to moral and intellectual excellences of human character and action. Virtue has been described as the pursuit of the highest good of human beings, the most ennobling behaviors, and the essence of humankind when at its best (Cameron 2003; Comte-Sponville 2001; Chapman and Galston 1992; Dent 1984; MacIntyre 2007). However, beyond these lofty definitions, the term “virtue” has been used, understood, and operationalized in distinct ways across disciplines. We argue that an understanding of virtue is an important pillar and essential foundation for the framing of positive organizational ethics (POE), the focus of this special issue.

Broadly speaking, we will examine two perspectives. First, virtue ethics is a philosophical perspective, grounded in normative ethics, that harkens back to Aristotelian thought and “holds the virtues to be central to a theory of the ethical evaluation of action” (Russell 2009, p. viii; Driver 1998). Virtue ethics has a rich history as an

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D. S. Bright (✉)  
Raj Soin College of Business, Wright State University,  
250 Rike Hall, Dayton, OH 45435, USA  
e-mail: david.bright@wright.edu

B. A. Winn  
Jon M. Huntsman School of Business, Utah State University,  
6444 North Davis, Mountain Green, UT 84050, USA  
e-mail: brad.winn@usu.edu

J. Kanov  
College of Business and Economics, Western Washington  
University, 516 High Street, Bellingham, WA 98225, USA  
e-mail: Jason.kanov@wwu.edu

approach to the development of excellence of human character and as a framework to promote a strong, highly functional society (MacIntyre 2007). As a philosophical discipline, virtue ethics aims to develop a deep theory of virtue (Zagzebski 1996; Russell 2009) that accounts for both character and context in the performance of positive, right behaviors. Virtue ethics offers a philosophical foundation for both the “positive” and the “ethics” components of POE.

In contrast, the positive social science approach, appearing under such banners as “positive organizational scholarship” (POS, Cameron et al. 2003), “positive psychology” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000), and “positive organizational behavior” (Luthans 2002) emphasizes a behavioral understanding of virtue. These positive movements in social science are united in exploring accounts of virtue and “strengths of character that make the good life possible” in individuals (Peterson and Seligman 2004, p. 3) and lead to highly functional human systems (Cameron et al. 2003; Luthans 2002). Positive social science has generally focused on identifying factors associated with “positive deviance” (Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2003) in the human experience (e.g., the factors that are associated with the good life or extraordinary organization) rather than on virtue per se. In this view, virtue may be an aspect of positive deviance, but the focus in these scholarly endeavors relies heavily on empiricism for its account of what that “positive” entails. For many scholars in this movement, the idea of virtue is helpful to the extent that it aids this empirical understanding of the positive or the exceptional. For our purposes in this paper, the positive social sciences (especially POS) provide insights that are especially informative about the “positive” and “organizational” elements of POE. Thus, we argue that an integration of both perspectives, virtue ethics and positive social science, is essential to an understanding of POE, as both have a role to play in developing a rich, well-grounded, theoretical understanding of ethical excellence.

In addition, this special issue aims to address the observation that a theory of POE should “explain how ethical strength can endure and emerge as a result of human failings” (Sekerka et al. 2010, p. 1). Our review suggests that many positive social science scholars have not integrated a virtue ethics perspective in their theorizing, often leading to contrary findings that seem incommensurate with assumptions about what constitutes the “positive” in positive social science. Though the concept of virtue is central to both positive social science and virtue ethics, each field has dealt with the concept somewhat differently. Thus, we highlight distinctions between the two perspectives, suggest important questions that arise when examining these distinctions, and offer suggestions for how to

pursue empirical work that draws on both domains to build virtue theory as one potential pillar of POE. In sum, this paper demonstrates how cross-pollination between positive social science and virtue ethics clarifies the assumptions of POE.

## A Historical Perspective

### Foundations

Ideas about virtue have been around for millennia. Since ancient Greek civilization, philosophers have consistently sought to describe conditions that enable thriving for people and society. Writings in the ethics literature about virtue originated in the classical era; Aristotle is one of the earliest thinkers to articulate a theory of virtue (MacIntyre 2007; Arjoon 2000). The Greek word for excellence was *arête*, which was later translated into Latin as *virtus*. *Arête* entailed the proper development of character and one’s inner state as a prerequisite for reaching one’s full potential. Aristotle’s virtue is related to the Greek notion of *eudaimonia* or “human flourishing or achieving one’s full potential” (Arjoon 2010, p. 7): in Greek society, it was assumed that virtue was essential for experiencing a state of *eudaimonia*.

As the notion of virtue evolved, it came to more specifically connote particular forms of excellence, namely moral and intellectual excellence, signifying the highest good that a human could attain (Solomon 1992) and was linked to the good society. In essence, virtue is about living as a moral and honorable being, and one who is virtuous strives to cultivate such a state (MacIntyre 2007). Nearly all accounts of virtue include references to specific virtues like integrity, courage, justice, forgiveness, and compassion among others. Though the specific virtues may vary by context, the idea of virtue as an orientation toward excellence and flourishing seems to be remarkably consistent across time and cultures (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

A virtue-based approach to ethics was the dominant mode of moral reasoning through much of history (MacIntyre 2007; McCloskey 2008). Certainly, it was a common theme throughout the Medieval period and into the Renaissance. The essential hypothesis followed in the ancient Greek tradition: one could obtain the “good life” (*eudaimonia*) and contribute to healthy society by focusing on the cultivation of virtuous character. Such a character was understood to correspond with right behaviors as the challenges of life were confronted. For instance, the code of chivalry—preserved today in military codes of conduct—emphasized the need for excellence of character in warriors, emphasizing discrete virtues such as honor, integrity, loyalty, and courage. Religious and spiritual

thought also emphasized the need for the cultivation of virtuous character through the development of virtues such as faith, hope, and charity—as in the Christian traditions (Aquinas 1984) or through virtues such as compassion, forbearance, or balance in some Asian traditions (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

MacIntyre (2007) argues that the enlightenment began a period in which an increased focus on logic, reason, and the empiricism of science became a dominant basis for moral decision-making. By the nineteenth century, the virtue and character-focused approach had fallen out of favor, particularly in scientifically oriented secular circles. In Victorian England, the term “virtue” had lost much of its original meaning (Solomon 1992), coming to more narrowly connote a life of chastity or abstinence. In the early twentieth century, as the social sciences rose in prominence, there was an explicit effort to suppress considerations of virtue-oriented perspectives, apparently because of perceived concerns about maintaining the secular, objective values of the scientific method (Peterson and Seligman 2004; Tjeltveit 2003; Baumeister and Exline 1999).

Over the last three decades, virtue-based theories have again gained traction in philosophy. The philosophical resurgence of work on virtue is generally attributed to MacIntyre’s (1981) book, *After Virtue*, in which the history and foundations of virtue ethics are articulated. A number of philosophers have built on his work to explore both the practice of virtue ethics and the various approaches to theories of virtue. “Contemporary virtue ethics is marked by a clear focus on action and the rightness of action” (Russell 2009, p. 1).

By comparison, the positive movement in the social sciences is at a novice stage in the venture of exploring the dimensions of virtue theory. The genesis of positive social science can be traced to the mid-1990s when Seligman (1999), as president of the American Psychological Association, noted that the field of psychology had almost exclusively focused on deficiencies and dysfunction in the human condition. Seligman and colleagues have since fostered a significant movement in psychology that aims to understand what constitutes the “good life,” a reference to a general condition of excellence at the individual level. One of the most notable endeavors was Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) effort to create a catalog of virtues and strengths, in which a coordinated effort scoured the philosophical and theological references to excellence of character in many civilizations throughout history. The outcome of this work was a “manual of the sanities” (p. 3) that organized known empirical work on virtuous dispositions, traits, and other positive characteristics or properties of a person that enable individual thriving.

Building on Seligman’s and colleagues’ work, POS can be traced to a group of scholars at the University of Michigan in the early 2000s. This movement aims to examine the attributes of excellence and virtue in the realm of organization studies (Cameron et al. 2003). In particular, these scholars point out the need for organizational research to focus not only on negative deviance but also on the conditions that enable flourishing in organizational life, and of organizations themselves (Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2003, 2004; Keyes and Haidt 2003). Similarly, Luthans (2002) has argued that there is a need for research on “positive organizational behavior,” that entails “a proactive, positive approach emphasizing strengths” (p. 695).

POE is another development in this string of movements that aims to explore human excellence. With a focus on factors that enable “good works” in and through organizations (Stansbury and Sonenshein 2012), POE is at an early stage of conceptual development. Generally, POE focuses on questions exploring the factors that enable exceptional, strong ethical conditions in organizational life.

#### Virtue Theory in the Virtue Ethics Literature

A key distinction is made in the philosophical literature between virtue theory and virtue ethics. A “virtue theory is a theory of what the virtues are” while virtue ethics relies on the virtues to qualify right action (Russell 2009, p. ix; Driver 1998). Virtue ethics is appealing because it encourages “good works” that are intellectually and morally “praiseworthy, discretionary, and positively deviant” (Stansbury and Sonenshein 2012, p. 340) in lieu of the more mainstream emphasis in ethics on the avoidance or rectification of that which is unethical (Solomon 1992; Whetstone 2001).

Accordingly to this logic, “every virtue ethic should build on a virtue theory” (Russell 2009), and indeed, the entire field of virtue ethics revolves around discussions of what constitutes such theories and their manifestation through virtue practices. While there are certain consistent patterns in the underlying assumptions about virtue theory as an underpinning to virtue ethics, it would be inaccurate to conclude that there is complete consensus among philosophers as to the constituent elements of virtue theory. However, virtue ethicists consistently cite the following five properties as assumptions found in most virtue theories:

1. Virtue is a deep property of a person that defines the human goodness of the individual. The virtue ethicist sees virtue as rooted in human character—habituated patterns of thought, emotion, motivation or volition, and action that are consistently morally excellent and

- develop well-being (Zagzebski 1996; Moberg 1999; Sherman 1991).
2. Virtue is a capacity that a person can develop. One is not necessarily born into particular virtuous dispositions, but rather one develops one's own personality, proclivities, and dispositions so that it becomes second nature to be in a virtuous state or aspire to act in virtuous ways to produce virtuous outcomes (MacIntyre 2007; Moberg 1999).
  3. Virtue practices, manifest through particular virtues, flow from the person who has a virtuous character. MacIntyre (2007, p. 187) explains that a virtuous practice is a "complex form of socially established cooperative human activity" that systematically extends, elevates, or amplifies the "human powers to achieve excellence." A virtue, in this respect, includes an entire system of practical considerations and skills, comprising an integrated whole that collectively generates positive, virtuous outcomes. For example, the virtue of compassion includes simultaneous attentiveness to one's inner state, awareness of the outward needs of others, and the exercise of skills associated with compassionate action. Much like a team sport is more than the sum of the skills of individual team members, any virtue practice requires a synthesis of several complementary elements.
  4. Virtue always includes some degree of attentiveness to context and circumstance. Some scholars argue that all virtues must include wisdom or *phronesis*, "the virtue of habituated excellence in reasoning" (Russell 2009, p. 4). *Phronesis* helps a person to determine the appropriate way to practice a particular behavior, given a particular set of circumstances. Thus, the virtuous actor pays attention to the context in which intentions are translated into action to ensure that virtuous aims are achieved. Aristotle refers to the importance of *phronesis* in his conceptualization of moral virtue as a mean between extremes such that a person practices virtue by balancing multiple considerations that eschew either deficiency or excess of action in context (Aristotle 1999; Moberg 1999).
  5. Virtue generally produces good outcomes: "a virtuous person reliably produces the ends of the virtue in question" (Zagzebski 1996, p. 99). Moberg (1999, p. 252) suggests that a virtue should encourage "unqualified flourishing" for the person or community in which is practiced. From this perspective, virtue cannot be defined solely in terms of outcomes, but virtue also cannot be fully understood independent of its consequences. That is, if a behavior that would seem to be consistent with a virtue is producing dysfunctional outcomes, then that behavior cannot be characterized as virtuous. Rather, virtuousness is

evident as compassion when suffering is alleviated, as courage when one acts with valor under pressure, as forgiveness where there is an alleviation of dysfunctional human interactions, and so forth.

A few observations are worth noting in this review. First, the most basic definition of virtue is that it is a particular kind of excellence—typically moral or intellectual excellence—such that any particular virtue refers to a discrete excellence that is by its nature oriented toward some greater good. The concept of virtue is thus linked to but not synonymous with the notion of excellence in that "all virtues are excellences, but not every excellence is a virtue" (Zagzebski 1996, p. 84). Second, this understanding of virtue is clearly normative in that it embraces notions of rightness or appropriateness of action. Finally, the development of virtue theory that qualifies the rightness or appropriateness of action is still very much a work in progress—there is much room for exploring the dimensions of virtue in both philosophical and empirical terms. In this respect, it is possible that the empirical emphasis of the positive social science movement may provide helpful insight to the field of virtue ethics.

#### Virtue Theory in Positive Social Science

Social science scholars have generally accepted the philosophical assertion that virtue refers to human excellence. The two primary thrusts of this movement are positive psychology and POS, each of which offers slightly different interpretations of these philosophical foundations.

#### *Positive Psychology*

Peterson and Seligman's (2004) framework is perhaps the most ambitious attempt in the social sciences to explore the underlying dimensions of virtue through a "new science of character" (p. 9). They describe their framework as "grounded in a long philosophical tradition concerned with morality explained in terms of virtues" (p. 9–10). The aim of this work is to define and measure the character that leads to "the good life" (p. 3) and its constituent parts as described in a variety of cultures and traditions. Their initial work is "based on an overall structure of moral virtues suggested by historical and cross-cultural reviews" (p. 8). However, they also draw a distinction with virtue ethics, which they view as focusing on the generation of moral laws for right conduct, and instead focus on the virtues themselves:

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 (Peterson and Seligman 2004, p. 10).

Their resulting virtues framework provides a trait-based account of character that is rooted in personality psychology. Peterson and Seligman (2004) also draw a distinction between virtues—which they define as higher level conceptual constructs—and strengths, which are akin to the virtue practices articulated in the previous section. A virtuous person, in their view, develops habituated strengths (i.e., virtue practices as described earlier) that become traits intrinsic to the person.

Interestingly, Peterson and Seligman (2004) sought to avoid making a significant statement about the underlying theoretical nature of virtues, preferring instead to let the evidence lead to theory. “A thoughtful classification, even if tentative, will serve the goals of psychology more productively than a flawed [theoretically driven] taxonomy” (p. 7). In our view, there is considerable need to explore the theoretical assumptions related to virtue, now that we have nearly two decades of empirical research to examine and interpret.

#### *Positive Organizational Scholarship*

Scholars who identify with the POS movement have been reasonably active in speaking to and attempting to define the underlying meaning of virtue (e.g., Cameron 2003; Cameron and Winn 2012). Early writings identify three properties of virtuousness: human impact, moral goodness, and unconditional societal benefit (Cameron et al. 2004; Bright et al. 2006). Human impact is the positive effect that virtuousness has on humanity. “Desires or actions without positive human impact are not virtuous,” (Bright et al. 2006a, p. 251). Moral goodness is that which is cultivated and seen as praiseworthy, desirable, or right within a society. While any attempt to define “goodness” is inherently normative and potentially controversial, all societies and cultures possess catalogs of traits that they deem virtuous and praiseworthy (Bright et al. 2006a, b; Park and Peterson 2003). The third attribute, unconditional societal benefit, transcends the self-interest of the individual and creates social value to bring benefit to society (Bright et al. 2006a, b).

Cameron and Winn (2012) further argue that virtuousness is comprised of additional core properties: the eudaemonic assumption and the inherent value assumption. The “eudaemonic assumption” asserts that all people have at least some inclination to seek what is good (Dutton and Sonenshein 2007). This assumption finds support in empirical work that an inclination toward virtuousness may have developed through an evolutionary process (Miller

2007), and may develop in the brain before language as a basic moral instinct (Haidt 2006; Hauser 2006). The inherent value assumption is an aspiration to seek for “goods of first intent” (Nibley 1989; Aristotle 1999), an ultimate aim characterized by inherent or intrinsic worth. Virtuousness is not instrumental in that one aspires to it as a means to other ends; it is an end in itself. In this sense, seemingly virtuous behaviors practiced to generate instrumental outcomes cease to be virtuous.

At a basic level, these perspectives appear to be consistent with the assertions in virtue ethics about the nature of virtue. However, POS scholars have also made attempts to consider collective-level properties of virtue, and it is here where we see further divergence from the virtue ethics perspective. For example, Cameron and Winn (2012) identify a third property of virtuousness that is especially relevant at the collective level: the amplifying effect. People feel empowered and energized when they experience virtuousness. The interactions among people within a virtuous collective acquire a positively self-reinforcing dynamic. Associating with virtuousness and witnessing virtuous actions tend to inspire more of the same. In organizations, researchers have described the dynamics of individuals and groups that experience virtuousness (e.g., Cameron 2008), proposing that under such conditions, individuals experience a compelling urge to build upon the contributions of others and to perpetuate virtuous spirals (Fredrickson 2003).

#### **Reconsidering Virtue**

Our analysis of these research domains, virtue ethics and positive social science, suggests that social scientists often operationalize virtue in ways that are problematic and perhaps inconsistent with an espoused foundation of virtue as character excellence. For example, the drive toward empiricism in the positive social sciences has led to an emphasis on measurable behaviors as a means to identify and capture the presence of virtue. This emphasis on behaviors has led to convoluted theorizing with respect to the inherent nature of virtue and whether or not it is reducible to behavior. Consider the attention being given to the amplifying effect referenced above (Cameron and Winn 2012). Though this effect is surely positive, powerful, and empirically valid, the amplifying effect is often considered in behavioral terms such that witnessing or experiencing positive *acts* often begets more such *acts*. Enactments of virtue may very well exhibit an amplifying effect, but so too may seemingly positive acts that do not stem from virtue. The broader point here is that there are theoretical confounds in terms of the relationship between virtue and behavior as well as between virtuous acts and

positive behaviors. We therefore see a need for further theorizing on the inherent nature of virtue and its relationship to positive behaviors.

Another concern regarding the drive toward empiricism has to do with measurement. A perusal of the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder and Lopez 2009) or the *Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (Cameron and Spreitzer 2012) shows that there is now an endless array of instruments for measuring all sorts of discrete virtues. In most cases, the instrumentation used to measure a virtue assumes that a particular virtue or strength is continuous (Peterson and Seligman 2004, p. 8). For instance, to measure the presence or absence of a particular virtue trait or practice, the researcher might include items like, “to what degree have you expressed forgiveness to your spouse (or a coworker)?” or “to what extent do you see your co-workers demonstrating compassionate behavior?” The answers to such items are nearly always scalar, indicating that the presence of the virtue—operationalized as behavior—may be low, moderate, or high.

The findings from behaviorally focused studies, grounded in this action-focused view of virtue, have generated a number of counterintuitive findings and interpretations. For example, Gruber et al. (2011) have found that there is a “Dark Side to Happiness.” Forgiveness in marriage can perpetuate abuse (McNulty 2011). Generosity at work seems to interfere with one’s effectiveness (Flynn 2003). Optimism is associated with risky health behaviors (Milam et al. 2004). In fact, there are now dozens of articles in social science journals that explore how virtues may be vices and that many virtue strengths demonstrate inverse U-shaped properties (Grant and Schwartz 2011). These findings have led some social science researchers to argue that virtues are neutral, they are neither inherently positive nor negative, but rather it is context that determines whether or not they create functional effects (McNulty and Fincham 2012).

How is it possible that any virtue can be interpreted as neutral, particularly when scholars have emphasized for millennia that virtue is, by definition, an excellence? Such an interpretation is only possible when virtue is assumed to be equivalent with behavior.

In contrast, virtue ethicists seem to be somewhat consistent in challenging this assumption, generally agreeing that behavior alone is an inadequate account of virtue. Zagzebski (1996, p. 79) offers one helpful perspective:

Most ethical theories have something to say about virtues, but what makes a theory a virtue theory is that it focuses analysis more on the concepts involved in the evaluation of persons than, [rather] than on act evaluation. The *weakest form of virtue theory* focuses on virtue [actions]...It is compatible with such a

[weak] theory that a right act would be right whether or not it was chosen by a virtuous person....(emphasis added)

In other words, when a virtue is assumed to be equivalent to behavior, or where behavior alone is taken to be evidence of virtue, irrespective of the actor and the behavioral context, we have no basis other than the presumption that a particular behavior is synonymous with virtue.

We see signs of momentum in the positive social science literatures toward interpretations of empirical findings that violate a philosophical understanding of virtue as inherently associated with excellence. Grant and Schwartz (2011) provide perhaps the strongest articulation of this trend, summarizing dysfunctions at extremes in virtuous behaviors across four of the six Peterson and Seligman (2004) virtue clusters, leading to the conclusion that virtues can be vices.

There are at least three important implications in these developments in positive social science for the theoretical foundations of POE. First, as Sekerka et al. (2010) have noted, it is important to develop theories that account for the fact that “ethical strength” (2010, p. 1) may emerge from the interplay between “disorder and dysfunction,” on the one hand, and “ethical achievement, aspirations, and excellence” on the other. To this point, positive social science has only tepidly examined the connection between so-called positive and negative forces in organizational life.

Second, as a related issue, when articulating a theory about the link between positive and negative forces, it is essential to recognize the role of context. The extent to which certain factors can be characterized as positive or negative can only be understood in terms of the organizations and actors who are involved within a particular situation.

Third, taking a lesson from the POS movement, the level of “organization” as an ethical entity needs to be framed with great care. There is the orientation in POS toward exploring virtue as an organization-level concept, when virtue has historically been regarded as solely an individual-level function of personal character. The articulation and specification of virtue as an organization-level phenomenon needs a stronger theoretical foundation.

From these implications, we now turn our attention to three observations that may help to bridge the rhetorical gap between the virtue ethics and the positive social science perspectives and thus help shape a foundation for POE.

### An Ideal State of Excellence

Observation #1: *Moral virtues are not continuous or monotonic—empirical frameworks should account for virtue as an ideal point on a continuum of potential states.*

In the original conception of POS as a field, writers highlighted the idea that positive is related to “positive deviance” (Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2003, 2004). Other POS scholars have used the continuum of human states shown in vertical dimension of Fig. 1, derived from the work of Bright et al. (2011), to illustrate what is meant by the study of the positive in organizational life (Cameron 2003, 2008). In this view, positive deviance represents an extraordinarily functional state. When an organization is in a state of positive deviance, its members may be filled with a sense of vitality and they may experience flow in their work (Csíkszentmihályi 2008). People may go beyond a normal mode of functioning to a transcendent mode that exceeds the expectations. Extraordinary organizations thrive, they achieve extraordinary value, and they move beyond ordinary levels of performance. They are not merely effective but excellent. In this view, virtuousness is what “individuals and organizations aspire to be when they are at their very best” (Cameron et al. 2004, p. 2).

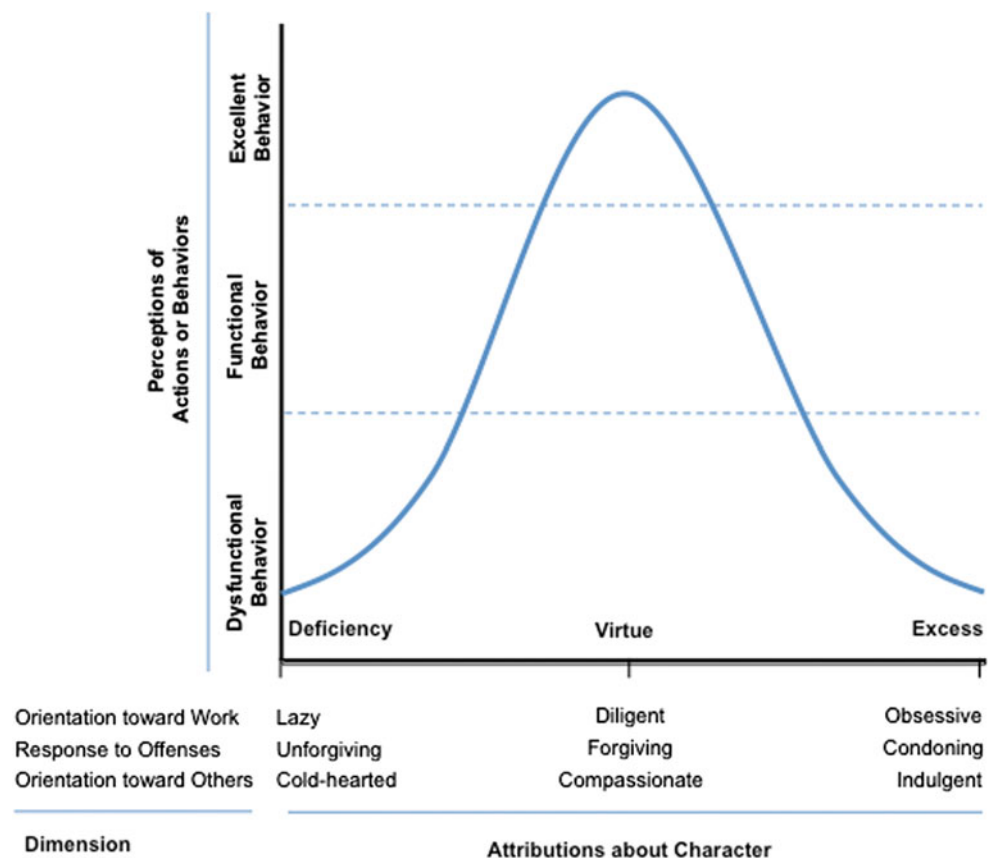
Virtuousness characterizes practices that may arise from this state because they are seen as the manifestation of behavioral excellence. Importantly, the POS continuum positions extraordinary organizing as an outlier, likely to be rare rather than common. In light of overwhelming tendencies to reinforce norms, POS places value on the outlier instances when norms are clearly exceeded in remarkable

fashion (Bright and Cameron 2010). However, as indicated earlier, behaviors that are supposedly virtuous can be taken to an extreme that exhibits dysfunction (Grant and Schwartz 2011).

In contrast, an Aristotelian understanding of virtue inherently incorporates the notion of wisdom (*phronesis*) and moderation, especially with respect to moral virtues. No character trait realizes its purpose if it is deficient on the one hand or excessive on the other (Bright et al. 2011). For instance, diligence is an optimal expression of one’s orientation to work, where a lack of diligence is laziness on one extreme and an overemphasis on work may be a dysfunctional obsession at the other extreme. Forgiveness is an optimal practice having to do with one’s reaction to offensive experiences, which is neither begrudgment (a deficiency) nor is it condoning (an excess, e.g., Exline et al. 2003). Similarly, compassion is an optimal orientation toward others that is neither cold-hearted (a deficiency) nor indulgent (an excess). Interestingly, the behaviors that may be associated with these dimensions may be identical, but may be virtuous, excessive, or deficient depending on the context.

The concept of virtue as moderation is represented in the horizontal dimension of Fig. 1, which shows several examples of deficiency and excess at extremes. The graphed line illustrates the most likely correspondence of

**Fig. 1** Relationship between behavior and character: virtue as a point on a continuum between deficiency and excess



behavioral excellence (relative to other actors) and the virtuous character of the people who generate those behaviors. On the rising end of the curve, behavioral excellence will increase to the extent that people are virtuous. At the top of the curve, where excessive behaviors begin to creep in, a high level of excellence may be present. Yet, at the far right end of the curve where excesses are more extreme, behavioral excellence declines.

Integrating the virtue ethics perspective with the positive social science perspective has several significant implications for POE. First, an integrative perspective preserves the notion that a virtue is always an excellence, it is never “neutral” (e.g., McNulty and Fincham 2012), nor can there be a situation in which there is “too much of a good thing” (e.g., Grant and Schwartz 2011). Virtue is not a continuous construct, but rather it is found as a point on a continuum of possible states, and it describes that optimal state in which excellence exists. Thus, when a behavior becomes extreme such that it creates dysfunctional outcomes, that behavior loses its virtuous quality and becomes qualitatively different. By implication, the concept of virtue is a useful foundation for POE because it provides a logic for understanding a state that be characterized as positively ethical. In essence, a positively ethical state must be a condition in which competing values are balanced in a virtuous relationship, where the positive potentiality of competing concerns, interests, or questions is integrated in an optimal way.

Second, an understanding of virtue such that it is always associated with excellence implies the need for practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in the enactment of virtue. Indeed, some virtue ethics philosophers argue that a “hard theory” of virtue, the strongest virtue theory according to Russell (2009, p. 139), requires attentiveness to the outcomes of action. If an action is not producing a desired virtuous outcome, the virtuous person makes adjustments to the action to ensure that optimal outcomes are achieved. A virtuous actor is not blind to circumstances, but rather demonstrates restraint or action as needed to achieve optimal outcomes. Thus, a foundational aspiration in POE should be to center on the factors that enable wisdom (*phronesis*) and sound ethical judgment in organizational life.

Third, if virtue is always an excellence and if it is a point on a continuum, then these assumptions need to be integrated into the structure of empirical models. For example, instruments that ask a respondent to rate the degree of virtue in a situation (e.g., low forgiveness, moderate forgiveness, high forgiveness) are likely to generate less reliable representations of what is actually occurring in context. Interestingly, the behaviors that may be associated with two states may be identical, but in one context they are virtuous, while in another they are excessive and dysfunctional. Any empirical measures and models of virtue

practices should take into account this possibility for different qualities of behavior.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, more studies are needed that focus on the qualitative and contextual properties associated with virtue and virtue practices. Most empirically driven studies have relied on a positivist methodological orientation that emphasizes pre-defined quantitative measures. The underlying intent in most such studies is to define a virtue, then demonstrate some effect related to it. In contrast, research is needed to develop an understanding of the foundational dimensions of virtue and virtue practices. Rather than assume that a virtue is monotonic, scholars should take into account that there are many contextual factors that determine when virtue is actually present in a situation. By studying the complexities associated with virtue practices, an understanding of important nuances associated with a virtuous state can be developed. This is important because virtues are often espoused in organizational context, yet not actually achieved or practiced. From an empirical standpoint, we cannot accept at face value that a person or an organization is compassionate, practices integrity, exercises justice or any other virtue simply because they say they are practiced or important. The empirical grounding of POE should follow a similar logic, focusing not so much on specific behaviors, but rather on the milieu of factors that account for the interaction with context that allows for the strongest form of ethical thinking to be present in organizational life.

### Character and Behavior in Context

*Observation #2: We need a holistic understanding of virtue that accounts for both character and behavior in context.*

Virtue ethicists have always focused on character as the central point of virtue (Alzola 2007; Sherman 1991). As indicated earlier, character refers to the habits of mind, intention, emotion, and behavior to reflect the state of being in a person (see also Wright and Goodstein 2007). A virtuous person cultivates habits of mind, intention, and behavior that align with one’s understanding of goodness, concern for achieving a meaningful life, and creating positive human impact. Though these aspirations may have roots in religion or spirituality, they are not the sole purview of any specific tradition or cultural background. The virtue ethics approach appears to support an epistemic orientation in which virtuous actions flow from virtuous character. Zagzebski (1996, p. 16) argues that a “pure theory” of virtue is, “a theory that treats act evaluation as derivative from the character of the agent,” and Slote (1995) argues that the motives of the actors involved need to be virtuous to qualify actions as such. To take these



assertions seriously, both the POE and the social sciences in general need to integrate or account for considerations of character when evaluating the potential for an optimal, virtuous state of a person, behavior, or organization.

There are several potential ways of accounting for character in our theorizing about particular virtues. One way is to account for the inner emotional state or motivational state of an actor. For instance, there exist multiple viable conceptualizations of compassion. Some psychologists conceptualize compassion as an aspect of a person's disposition—a trait that pertains to one's general level emotional attunement to others (e.g., Davis 1980) or to oneself (Neff 2003). One endorses this view when describing a person as compassionate. Compassion has also been construed as socio-emotional such that it is not an aspect of who one is, but rather something one experiences (see Kanov et al. 2004). This view of compassion is consistent with the word's literal meaning—experiencing another person's suffering—and it has colloquial resonance in that people often talk about feeling compassion for others. Yet another view of compassion is that it is behavioral—an active other-oriented response to suffering (see Kanov et al. 2004). One invokes this perspective when saying someone shows compassion for another or when describing particular actions as compassionate.

These perspectives could perhaps be reconciled through a character lens, which implies a more holistic understanding of virtue. The Kanov et al. (2004) definition of compassion, which appears in the POS literature, suggests that compassion includes feeling and behavior, both of which may flow from one's character. It may be, for instance, that character differences explain why some people notice, feel, and respond to others' suffering more readily or effectively than others.

Kanov et al. (2004) suggest that compassion is located both in something internal (feeling) and in something behavioral. From this perspective, action without feeling is not compassionate (and therefore, in our view, also not virtuous) regardless of the effect the action has on another's suffering. Action without feeling is heartless, not in the sense that it is bad, but rather in the sense that one's heart is not the intentional guide. The relative good of such heartless action therefore becomes dependent on its outcome, which means that it is not a good of first intent and not a manifestation of compassion. Feeling without action also fails to qualify as compassion because although the feeling is a good in itself, it enacts no social outcome on its own. In short, both feeling and action are necessary in this view—one's feelings guide one's actions and one's actions enact one's feelings socially. A general lesson about virtue to be drawn from the compassion literature is that while virtue is enacted through behavior, it cannot be reduced to behavior. A consideration of virtue necessitates an appreciation of one's internal qualities as well as outward behaviors.

While such holism may make theoretical sense, the need to attend to character in considerations of virtue presents challenges to social scientists. One potential strategy for meeting this challenge is to examine the world-view, or ontological frame used by the actors in a particular circumstance as identified through specific patterns of sense making. For example, in a qualitative study on the meaning of forgiveness among employees in a unionized trucking company, Bright and colleagues (2005, 2006a, b) asked workers to define the meaning of the term “forgiveness” in their own words, based on their understanding of its function in the workplace. Results indicated that workers understood forgiveness in very different ways, dependent upon their attraction to one of three ontological frames. In a *begrudging* frame, workers saw forgiveness as an illusion, not really possible in the context of a conflict-laden work environment. As one worker explained, “It's like a cat and a rat, forever enemies! People around here don't forgive one another” (Bright et al. 2006, p. 92). In the *pragmatic* frame, workers saw forgiveness in terms of costs and benefits, where the costs (e.g., emotional, relational, etc.) of not moving beyond negative emotions were too great. In this frame, workers viewed forgiveness as a way to overcome or minimize the negativity they had experienced because of another employee's offensive action. Finally, in the *transcendent* or virtuous frame, workers saw forgiveness as a transformational life practice, and as a means to learn and grow from negative experiences.

This research demonstrates that the very meaning of virtue-oriented terms can assume significantly different contextual significance, and that these meanings do not always carry optimal implications. It would be intriguing to document variations in the meanings of other virtues besides forgiveness to see if this pattern of ontological framing extends to a broader perspective on the relevance and place of other virtues. It would also be worth exploring the implications of such frames. For instance, it may be that for actors to be primed to practice a virtue in a way that is most likely to generate a virtuous, highly functional outcome, they may need to be in an ontological frame in which they can perceive virtues and moral excellence as a realistic, ideal possibility.

Furthermore, if such a finding could be demonstrated, with instrumentation to assess an actor's ontological state, additional studies could examine interactions between an actor's ontology and actual behaviors as they relate to contextual outcomes. For instance, earlier in this paper, we cited studies that find dysfunctions associated with excessive displays of forgiveness in marriage, particularly in the context where abuse is present (McNulty 2011). By controlling for the actors' framing of forgiveness in such studies, we might be able to further tease apart the nuances of context. For instance, an abused person may be trapped in a

*pragmatic* ontological frame, thereby understanding the term “forgiveness” in a non-virtuous way as implying that one should suppress one’s negative thoughts and feelings toward an offender. What the worker understands as “forgiveness” in this context is actually a dysfunction associated with the vice of condoning abusive behavior. Taking this logic one step further, with these more fine-grained understandings of virtue (and non-virtue) in context, behavioral social scientists could then recommend specific kinds of interventions that might enable the emergence of a virtue-oriented ontology that could foster genuinely virtuous behaviors and outcomes in organizational life.

### Organization-Level Virtue

*Observation #3: The properties of organization-level virtue need to be more rigorously explored and specified.*

While there is clear consensus across disciplines that the concept of virtue is relevant at the individual level of analysis, there are varying perspectives regarding virtue at the collective or organizational level. The most basic question to be asked for the establishment of POE is whether virtue (or ethics in general) is relevant when the unit of analysis is a human group or organization rather than the individual. Can an organization really be virtuous or ethical, and if so what do these macrolevel constructs look like relative to the more familiar micro ones? For many, virtue is regarded as quintessentially an individual-level construct (e.g., Solomon 1992). From this perspective, virtue can only truly exist at the individual level where the object of inquiry is an independent, thinking, and feeling human being with intent and autonomy to make conscious and moral decisions. Such a view suggests that virtue cannot be attributed to an organization, at least not in the same way it is attributed to individual human beings.

While many scholars have implicitly and explicitly endorsed this view of virtue, some social scientists question it (e.g., see Wright and Goodstein 2007). In the POS literature in particular, much attention has been devoted to the idea of organization-level virtue (e.g., Cameron et al. 2003; Cameron and Spreitzer 2012). This attention has so far been fruitful in generating unique insights, as can be seen in research on specific virtues. For instance, recent work by Bright and Exline (2012) illustrates qualitatively different forms of forgiveness depending on the level of analysis. Different configurations of forgiveness are possible depending on the level of offender and the level of the forgiver. The offender might include an individual or organization that perpetuates a harmful action. Victims can include individuals, groups, or organizations. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus specifically on the different types of forgivers to illustrate the difference between

how an organization forgives and how an individual forgives.

At the individual level, the most visceral form of forgiveness is purely intrapsychic, taking place solely within a person (Yamhure-Thompson and Shahen 2003). When forgiveness occurs in this way, people choose to displace or dissolve the negativity they feel toward an offender. They let go of their negative emotions and they overcome the negative cognitions they may harbor toward an offender that consist of a desire for vengeance and retaliation. This type of forgiveness can be unconditional, meaning that if a person feels victimized, he or she can choose to engage in intrapsychic forgiveness irrespective of context (Bright and Exline 2012).

All other forms of forgiveness deal with relationships between victims and offenders. In each case, three considerations for *phronesis* are paramount: first, that the harmful behavior stops; second, that the forgiver acknowledges the behavior has stopped; and third, the forgiver forgoes additional retributive action. There are three ways in which this can occur, depending on the level of forgiver.

First, at the interpersonal level, a person who is a victim can choose to communicate forgiveness toward an offender (Bright and Exline 2012). For example, a boss berates an employee using offensive language in an unjustified manner. The employee can explain to the boss that this language is offensive. The supervisor might apologize, and the employee may express forgiveness toward him, assuming that the harmful behavior will stop. This assumption is implicitly communicated, and the employee forgoes additional retributive action such as filing a grievance or complaint.

At the organization level, forgiveness becomes relevant when the organization itself is threatened or harmed by the action of the offender. For example, research in a medical training hospital in which surgical residents sometimes make mistakes showed that through a process of organization-level forgiveness, hospital administrators acknowledge the harm committed, they work with the physician and staff to ensure that the harmful behavior is not repeated, and they may forgo retributive actions, though they may still provide restorative actions if the circumstance allows for it (Bosk 1979).

A third form of relational forgiveness has to do with forgiveness between collective groups (Lamb 2006). Victims may be part of a collective with a salient social identity (e.g., participants in the Palestinian Israeli conflict or those involved in the Rwandan genocide). Because many collective groups are not formally organized, it is difficult to track how forgiveness actually occurs at the collective level. However, it can be found in narratives that a collective can forgive former offenders. For example during the eighteenth century American Revolution there was deep animosity between American and British citizens.

Yet, the narrative today no longer harbors or portrays this animosity, and in fact includes just the opposite or a sense of the solidarity. This modern narrative suggests that the deep-seated animosity against members of one collective toward the other have largely disappeared (Bright and Exline 2012).

This research on forgiveness not only illustrates the value of thinking about virtues at multiple levels of analysis but also it suggests that to fully understand the virtue of forgiveness, we have to be willing to look at multiple levels of analysis. This is because, ultimately, even when dealing with organization or collective considerations, the intention to forgive is manifest in the behaviors and narratives generated and communicated at the individual and collective levels.

Although research on virtue at higher levels of analysis has promise, the concept of collective- or organizational-level virtue—or ethics more generally—has not been adequately vetted. As a result, there is not a clear articulation in the POE or POS literatures about what organizational virtue actually is. As we reflect on the construct, we see three distinct conceptualizations of organizational virtue—presented as three distinct hypotheses—as summarized in Table 1.

### *The Container Hypothesis*

The first hypothesis sees organizational virtue as an aggregation of individual virtue. The idea is that when organized into a group, individuals bring with them their personal virtues, and “organizational virtue” refers to the resulting aggregation. In this view, saying that an organization is virtuous is simply to say that its members are virtuous. This hypothesis implies that “organizational virtue” is not a qualitatively different concept than “virtue;” virtue is still seen as pertaining solely to the individual, and the organization is nothing more than a passive vessel.

We refer to this as the container hypothesis because the organization merely holds or contains whatever virtuousness already exists among its individual members. The organization does not add to, detract from, enhance, or inhibit the virtue within it. This view suggests a univocal meaning of “virtue” across levels of analysis—the “virtue” of organizational virtue is the same phenomenon as “virtue” at

the individual level. The container hypothesis does not offer a new way of thinking about virtue; it merely suggests that virtue can be present to a greater or lesser extent in an organization as a direct function of the amount or degree of virtue that is present at any one time within, among, or between organizational members.

The research implications of this view are interesting. For example, the container hypothesis is easily reconcilable with the conventional argument that virtue is fundamentally an individual-level construct because the very notion of organizational virtue that this perspective endorses is defined in terms of individual-level virtue. On the other hand, from an organizational point of view, this hypothesis may be hard to accept given the fundamental relational nature of human beings and the wealth of previous research on a wide range of phenomena indicating that there does tend to be interaction—for better or worse—within organizations (systems, structures, processes, culture, etc.) and organizational members (cognitions, feelings, behaviors, etc.) (e.g., Kanov et al. 2004; Dutton et al. 2006). Still, we think it would be a mistake to eliminate this hypothesis prematurely being that virtue—which is rooted in character—is conceptually and phenomenologically different from the more typical organization-level constructs. Additionally, the magnitude of the potential interactions or effects of the collective upon its members has not been fully vetted. For example, in what contexts or conditions would individuals be almost unaffected by their organization and thus approach support for the container hypothesis? Further research that considers the container hypothesis is thus warranted.

### *The Synergy Hypothesis*

A second way of thinking about organizational virtue suggests that it is qualitatively different from virtue at the individual level. In this view, when we speak of an organization being virtuous, we mean that regardless of what the organizational members bring as far as their individual virtue, an organization may in some way augment (or diminish) virtuousness beyond what we might expect from its members individually. Unlike the container hypothesis, the synergy hypothesis represents the idea that there is a dynamic relationship between the micro and the macro.

**Table 1** Alternative perspectives on organizational virtue

Container hypothesis	Organizational virtue is the sum of the virtuousness of the individual members. The organization simply holds or contains the virtues of its members
Synergy hypothesis	Organizational virtue has to do with the dynamic relationship between the collective and the individual. The collective has some kind of multiplicative, amplifying, or synergistic effect such that the overall virtuousness comes to be greater than the sum of the virtuousness of individual members
Intrinsic hypothesis	Organizational virtue is virtue that is intrinsic to the organization as an entity unto itself

There are at least two variations of this view within the literature. For one, it may be that there is a kind of multiplicative effect such that the virtuousness of a collective is greater than the sum of the virtuousness of its individual parts simply because virtue begets virtue. People within an organization are in relatively close contact with other members, and as a result, the marked presence or absence of virtue may have a kind of contagious effect on others within that collective. This idea is consistent with researchers' descriptions of the amplifying effect of virtuousness (Bright et al. 2006a, b; Fredrickson and Joiner 2002).

Another possibility is that an organization is not merely a passive container that holds the virtues of its members, but rather it provides a more generative (or perhaps deleterious) context in which organizational members interact in ways that prompt, enable, and/or enhance (or perhaps diminish or inhibit) virtue. Scholars who have examined this hypothesis have focused on a range of organizational elements that may play a role in this process such as culture, structures, leadership, routines, reward, analytics, and management practices (e.g., Cameron et al. 2011; Cameron 2003; Cox 2008; Dutton et al. 2006; Kanov et al. 2004; Manz et al. 2008; Martin and Cullen 2006; Victor and Cullen 1988; Winn and Cameron 1998).

Both variations of the synergy hypothesis are similar in suggesting that the term "organizational virtue" refers to the dynamic capacity of a collective to affect the virtuousness of its members. Both variations would benefit from continued exploration as many questions remain about how and under what circumstances the dynamic processes unfold.

### *The Intrinsic Hypothesis*

A third perspective on organizational virtue considers the possibility that an organization can, as an entity unto itself, have an intrinsic virtuous "character" similar to that of an individual (e.g., see Wright and Goodstein 2007). From this point of view, when we speak of an organization being virtuous, we are not referring to the virtues of its members, but rather we are treating the organization as a unified organism with its own deliberative systems, structures, processes, and culture such that the organization itself has virtues. Indeed, corporations are treated as persons before the law and in common speech collectives are referred to as moral agents (Schudt 2000). For example, "that family is upstanding," or "this team has heart," or "that company is ruthless."

From this perspective, organizational virtue can, like organizational learning (Vera and Crossan 2003; Nelson and Winter 1982), reside outside of individual human beings in repositories such as culture, climate, routines, and

strategies. Organizational virtue in this case is similar to virtue at the individual level in that both types of virtue are considered to be properties of a discrete entity—the organization for the former and the individual for the latter. Thus, unlike the container and synergy hypotheses, the intrinsic hypothesis is directly at odds with the view that virtue is fundamentally and solely an individual-level construct. Rather, the intrinsic view suggests that organizational virtue is a property or quality of the organization as an entity unto itself or independent organism. On the other hand, from a classical point of view, this hypothesis may be hard to accept given our understanding that virtuousness requires independent reasoning, agency, contextual consideration, and virtuous intent and action (Aristotle 1999). Still, we think this hypothesis merits consideration given the volume of organizational studies that acknowledge deliberative organizational systems, structures and culture that exist beyond individual members. Further research on the intrinsic hypothesis may help us better understand what is, at its essence, "organizational" within the discussion of virtue and may lead to clarifying it as either an equivocal or analogical construct.

Our purpose in highlighting these three hypotheses on organizational virtue is not to pit them against each other. On the contrary, we do not see these perspectives as mutually exclusive, and each may have legitimacy and value in its own right.

This review of the different perspectives highlights the need for semantic and conceptual precision when referring to ideas such as organizational virtuousness or POE. We see a need for scholars to develop a more nuanced language in writing about virtue and ethics in general in organization studies. While we are not in a position to impose such a language, we do wish to offer some suggestions. First, we do not see it as appropriate to use the term "organizational virtue" or "POE" when referring to the container hypothesis, which focuses on individual virtue or ethics within some collective context.

The terms "organizational virtue" or "POE" are perhaps a better fit—though not ideal—for referencing the synergy hypothesis, which is similarly concerned with the virtues and virtuousness of its individual members. However, unlike the container hypothesis, the synergy hypothesis focuses on the interaction between the individual members and the collective. Therefore, the synergy hypothesis is not ultimately about virtue and virtuousness within organizations, but rather about virtue and virtuousness *through* organizations (Cameron et al. 2004; Bright et al. 2006). That is, the organization itself is not virtuous nor does it possess virtue, but it does—as a kind of ecological system—influence such things as the presence, degree, enactment, and impact of virtue among its members. The virtuousness of members may also influence the



qualities and characteristics of the organization. We might therefore suggest that organizational research aligning with this perspective use more process-oriented terminology such as virtue moderation, virtue amplification, or virtue inhibition.

The most appropriate use of the terms “organizational virtue” or “POE” seems to be in reference to the intrinsic hypothesis, either in referring to the virtue of the organization holistically as an entity unto itself or perhaps in referring to the intrinsic moral excellence of specific aspects of an organization such as its culture or its structures. While the term “virtue” at the individual level can refer both to the general notion of moral and intellectual excellence, and also to specific forms of moral excellence (e.g., compassion is a virtue), organizational virtue is analogous to the more general focus on excellence that is “virtue.” It may also be that there are virtues that are uniquely organizational (i.e., that only exist within an organizational setting or at the organizational level). We see the exploration of this possibility as another avenue for future research and philosophical exploration.

## General Discussion

Neubert (2011, p. 228) argues that the positive turn in social science indicates the emergence of a “virtue-based management and organizational theory.” A key assumption underlying this fast-growing body of work is that a deepened understanding of virtue in general, and specific virtues in particular, reflects and fulfills an intention to explore human flourishing and positive deviance (Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2004). However, as Fowers (2008, p. 629) notes, the “positive movement” relies on a superficial understanding of virtue and argues that positive scholars “have not developed a substantive concept of what is good.” Fineman (2006, p. 272–273) earlier worried that the positive social science movement depends on “predefined virtues” as the foundational meaning of “positive.” The contributions of positive social science will be of limited significance and relevance if they are not well grounded theoretically.

Through a review of the dimensions and assumptions associated with virtue, this paper makes multiple theoretical contributions that have relevance to the study of and implications for research on POE. First, we consider that it is important for POE to be rooted in a historical understanding of virtue. In addition, we have discussed three distinct, interrelated observations that highlight the need for more precision in the way we think about and invoke ideas related to virtue.

To begin, this paper critically examines the construct of virtue as it has been discussed in contemporary scholarship, particularly within the fields of virtue ethics and positive

social science. We argued that although the concept of virtue is invoked as foundational to the very meaning of the word “positive,” the positive social science literature in general and POS literature in particular have not yet sufficiently established a theoretical understanding of virtue. We have shown that an acknowledgment of ancient roots and logic found in virtue ethics has been absent in most writing from the positive social science community.

We suggest that it is essential to understand this history to establish a more nuanced grounding for all of the so-called positive movements, whether in social science or in ethics, particularly when considering the following kinds of questions: Why and to what extent did early social scientists seem to be so averse to an explicit examination of virtues in their research? What are the consequences, in terms of benefits and limitations, of the enlightenment-era emphasis on empiricism that has been passed down to the positive social sciences? Given the fact that virtue-based theorizing has such deep roots, is POE really new—what is it that makes it distinctive and contemporary?

An integration of virtue as understood in virtue ethics and POS suggests that virtue (and by extension, positive ethics) is an ideal point on a continuum of possible states. Both extremes of this continuum are dysfunctional, where one end represents a total lack of concern for ethics or virtue, while the other extreme represents an imbalanced, hyper-emphasis on certain virtue ideas or ethical principles.

From a virtue-based approach, the concern of POE should center on factors, enabling conditions, and forces that encourage this virtuous balance in organizational life. To advance knowledge in this area, we need instrumentation that accounts for the possibility of not only ideal but also dysfunctional, unethical conditions in organizational life.

In addition, we have demonstrated how the way in which “positive” has been understood in the positive social sciences has led to an overemphasis on behaviors over character and context. As a result, many positive social science studies have generated oddly interpreted findings, claiming, in essence, that it is possible to be too good, too virtuous, etc. (and by implication, too ethical). We demonstrate how these illogical findings are only possible when considering virtues or ethics in narrowly operationalized terms that take them out of context. Virtue and positive ethics, by definition, are always associated with optimal states, and thus we argue that it is essential the positive social sciences and POE acknowledge this and account for character and context in their theorizing. In essence, we argue that one property of POE, from a virtue-based perspective, is that it is always associated with the ethical strengths, character traits, or dimensions of the actors involved.

It is for this reason that we call for more theoretical precision in how we should think about behavior relative to virtue. While virtue should not be assessed solely in terms

of behavior, virtue is expressed and enacted through behavior and thus behavior is an important piece of the virtue puzzle. A key implication for positive social scientists is to be wary of labeling behaviors themselves as virtuous. For example, to identify a caring or helpful act as an example of the manifestation of the virtue of compassion without taking into account the internal state of the person engaging in the behavior is theoretically inappropriate. This is not to say that such behaviors are not or cannot be “positive” in some other sense, though if scholars do invoke such a notion of positive, they must work toward an understanding of “positive” that does not stem from the notion of virtue.

Perhaps the biggest research challenge from this perspective is empirical in nature. How do people experience the ideal state of POE? How do they experience extremes? Do people in organizations ever feel like it is possible to be too ethical or virtuous? If so, what is it about conditions in an organization that foster such a perspective? Our point is simply that we should be more judicious in our use of the virtuous label in reference to such behaviors.

### The Meaning of Organization in POE

Finally, this paper argues for precision when referencing the “organizational” aspects of POE. By reviewing the ways in which the term “organizational virtuousness” has been used, we have highlighted three distinct organization-level hypotheses; the *container* hypothesis suggests that organizations are merely gathering places for people who may or may not be virtuous, the *synergy* hypothesis assumes that there is a dynamic interplay between members and organizations that allow virtuousness to be magnified (or possibly diminished) through organizations, and the *intrinsic hypothesis* takes the view that an organization can, unto itself, exist in a state with moral properties.

We call for a more nuanced language of organizational-level virtue that better accounts for the varied perspectives we identify. In doing so, we leave open the possibility that an organization as an entity unto itself may be virtuous just as an individual person may be virtuous while also encouraging scholars to continue to explore the synergistic view of organizational virtue, which looks at virtue and virtuousness in ways that are more uniquely organizational (i.e., not analogous to individual-level virtue).

We encourage researchers to seriously consider each perspective, for each may lead to unique questions and insights. Further exploration of the container hypothesis, for example, may have implications for personnel selection and retention. Alternatively, the synergy hypothesis raises a host of questions such as those about how and when amplification effects occur and what factors may facilitate or inhibit their occurrence. A consideration of the intrinsic

hypothesis engages virtue researchers and theorists in the ongoing debate about the very nature and function of an organization. Questions about whether we can or should ascribe individual-like qualities (e.g., character, the capability to discern and act, etc.) to an organization become paramount. Having said that, regardless of whether or not, in an epistemological sense, an organization can be virtuous in the same way that an individual human being can, the intrinsic view is still worth considering because it invites scholars to consider the issue of intrinsic virtuousness at the organizational level more generally. Future research could, for instance, investigate the possibility that certain aspects of an organization (e.g., culture, processes, structures, strategies, etc.) have the potential to be intrinsically virtuous. Finally, because these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, there may also be value in examining them in combination (Moore and Beadle 2006).

### Summary Implications

The explicit identification and in-depth descriptions of the three observations moves us well beyond the observation that there are shortcomings in our thinking about virtue, enabling a more precise exploration of the properties of organizational virtue and POE in general. As researchers and scholars we need to fully appreciate each issue in its own right and consider how they interrelate. For example, our discussion of the second observation about the need for a more holistic understanding of virtue has implications for issues we raised in discussing the third observation about organizational virtue—if we accept that virtue does ultimately reside in intrinsic character then we must think carefully about if and how we ascribe virtue to an organization given the theoretical uncertainty of whether or not an organization has an intrinsic character.

Our discussion also brings to the forefront significant knowledge gaps and thus provides a roadmap for future research. For example, we point out marked differences in how people have conceptualized organizational virtue and argue that the conceptualizations are not mutually exclusive, but rather each focuses on a different aspect of organizational-level virtue. In making this case, we highlight various knowledge gaps within each perspective. For instance, we call attention to our limited understanding of intrinsic character-like aspects of organizations, and we raise a question about whether there are any virtues that are uniquely organizational. We also underscore a gap in the virtue ethics literature pertaining to the possibility that virtue may exist at a collective level in a form that is analogous to individual-level virtue. Each of the gaps we identify directly translates to research questions that can be addressed in future research.

Overall, by arguing for a more expansive view of virtue that is not reduced to assumptions of behavioral empiricism and is instead more aligned with established historical perspectives as well contemporary thinking in virtue ethics, this paper takes steps toward establishing a stronger and more stable theoretical foundation for positive social science, and especially for POE. This gives much greater clarity and substance to our ongoing discussions about the pursuit of excellence in organizational life. Furthermore, the rigorous attention this paper gives to the concept of virtue echoes and amplifies the calls of other researchers and practitioners imploring organizations to fulfill broad social purposes that go beyond an excessive focus on profitability to build a positive organizational ethic.

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