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Understanding Empowerment Through Virtue Theory

**Western Washington University Honors Program
Senior Capstone Project**

Jane Somerville, Class of 2019

Introduction

Outside of my studies, I also volunteer as a domestic violence and sexual assault Advocate. This work involves working directly with clients who have experienced abuse, providing them with support and connecting them to resources. A buzzword that comes up a lot in that space is empowerment. We want our clients to feel empowered as they navigate through our agency and other systems. We seem to all agree on what that means, but the philosopher in me isn't satisfied with that. So, for this capstone project, I wanted to really explore power and empowerment, and I found that using virtue theory was a really interesting and unique way to do that. In this project, I will characterize what virtues are and attempt to apply empowerment to that framework.

What is Power?

A definition of power is notoriously tricky to parse out. Throughout the literature, power can either indicate authority or ability. For example, According to Arendt power is, "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert".¹ On the other side of that coin, Robert Dahl simply asserted that an agent has power over another agent when "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something B would not otherwise do."² This essay will be interested in both senses.

The goal of this essay is not to define power; plenty has been written on the subject, so I will instead stipulate a definition that I hope is broad enough to cover both senses mentioned above, and be flexible enough to encompass all of the experiences and situations I hope to include.

A person or collective, by matter of definition, has power in a particular situation if and only if they have the ability and inclination to control the behavior, decisions, or opportunities of themselves or another person or collective.

What are Virtues?

Broadly, virtues are those traits which are good to have, and vices are those which are bad to have. However, plenty of things are good without being virtues. It is good to be an excellent golfer, but we wouldn't call this a virtue. An ability to golf is only useful on a golf course, while virtues are useful throughout a human life. For this reason, Aristotle understood that virtues are central to human flourishing. One can have a very meaningful, happy life without the ability to make a hole-in-one, but one cannot without an ability to be humble or honest.

Virtues are classically considered to be on a spectrum with vices. Aristotle called them "the golden means". Virtues are somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between two vices, which either represent a deficiency or overabundance of an underlying trait. For example, on the spectrum of truthfulness, the virtue of honesty is in the center. To be honest is to be truthful in the appropriate amount, at appropriate times. Obviously, lying is the vice on the lacking end of that spectrum - it is an extreme lack of truthfulness. At the other extreme lies brashness- to tell

¹ Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace &, 1970: 44

² Dahl, Robert. "The Concept of Power." *Behavior Science* 2 (1957): 202-03.

unkind or unnecessary truths at bad times. Courage lies between cowardliness (an unwillingness to take any risks) and foolhardiness (behavior without regard for risk). By contrast, skill at golf isn't a mean between two extremes, and a lack of skills isn't a bad thing, at least not outside the context of a golf tournament.

This golden mean theory defines virtues negatively. A virtue is often easier to define by what it is decidedly not than what it is. Humility is not arrogance or low self-esteem, while courage is not foolhardiness or cowardice. This method will be useful in trying to understand empowerment.

Virtues are not merely positive descriptions of a person's behavior, but also character traits. Character traits describe not merely how a person behaves in a given moment, but how they tend to behave over long periods of time as an expression of their underlying personalities. "A character trait must express who the agent is as a person, and to do that it must express what the agent consistently values and cares about."³ Virtues are born of reverence, understanding, and value of the concepts they are based upon. Thus, someone who is honest tells the truth, not merely because it is beneficial to their life or because they have been told it is good behavior, but because they deeply value the truth and respect others enough to give it to them. A courageous person values the goods that come with taking risks, but also values safety enough to mitigate them.

Character traits are also much more stable than other descriptors like skill. An honest person will tend to be honest throughout their life. This is not to say that people cannot change and grow- in fact it is an extremely good thing to do so, especially when moving towards virtue- but this will tend to be more difficult and require more focused effort than other types of change. The path towards skill at golf is clear. If you want to be good at golfing, you should take classes, practice often, and invest in quality clubs and balls. To become more virtuous requires changing how one responds to difficult situations, and changing their underlying values. For example, if I habitual liar wants to become more honest, they will have to tell the truth in spite of a strong urge to lie. Usually one would tell a lie because it will get them some good; they could shirk responsibility by saying that they are too busy, or convince another person that they are more interesting or special than they actually are. The liar would have to convince themselves that respecting their listener is better than getting those goods. They would also have to develop empathy to truly understand why their listener wants the truth.

Virtues are experiencing a bit of a renaissance in the last half-century or so; they fell out of favor with thinkers such as Kant and Mill in the modern era, who switched their focus to the moral evaluations of actions, rather than the evaluations of people.⁴ Virtues by their nature blur the line between morally good actions and morally good agents- people are defined by the virtuousness of their actions, but the goodness of actions is also defined by the virtue they are associated with, which is in turn associated with people. Philippa Foot championed the resurgence of virtues in the seventies. She argued that virtues are corrective. "... each [virtue] standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation

³ Battaly, Heather. "Intellectual Perseverance." *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 2017.

⁴ Baehr, Jason. *The Inquiring Mind; On Intellectual Virtues & Virtue Epistemology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011.

to be made good.”⁵ In short, virtues prevent bad behavior and in turn promote good behavior. Honest people are often faced with situations where they may want to lie. Perhaps they know that if they just say that they have plans, they won’t have to attend a boring party. But they know the host will be hurt if they find out that they really could have come, and even if they don’t, they value the truth too much to take that risk. So, the person’s honesty has allowed them to resist that temptation.

Is Empowerment A Mean Between Extremes?

Now that I have characterized what virtues are, I will turn my focus to empowerment and how it interacts with virtue theory. Those with an overabundance of power are dominant, and those with a lack of it are oppressed. Typically we talk of empowerment as a gaining of power. But I would like to extend this to giving up power, having power removed, or refusing to exercise abilities one already has. The work of social justice advocates tends to focus on giving power to those to don’t have it at all, i.e. those who are oppressed, and rightly so. However, to do this effectively requires the removal of power from another person or collective, i.e. those who are dominant. This is especially true in cases where entire groups gain power, as well as ones where individuals become empowered. For example, when the (legally owned and taxed) slaves were emancipated in the United States, they gained certain really important powers; the right and ability to control their own bodies, to make money, to stay with their families, etc. I will refer to this kind of empowerment, where agents gain power, and positive empowerment. Their white slave owners lost their ability to control their slaves, as well as a lot of capital, and thus some of their economic advantage (though certainly not all of it). I will refer to this as negative empowerment. Furthermore, the state of having a correct amount of power in a given situation I will call being empowered. If empowerment is to be understood as a virtue, then the owners have been empowered just as the slaves have, but in the other (negative) direction.

To give an individual example, consider a woman who is in an abusive marriage. During the marriage, she is dominated by her husband, and once she leaves she gains agency and control over her own life. On the flip side, her husband loses his power over her. I will argue that he becomes empowered as well, in a way, as he now has an appropriate amount of power over his wife (in that he doesn’t).

In both cases above, the dominating individual had nearly or totally complete control over the oppressed before they became empowered. But most cases of power are much more complicated; consider the relationship between parents and children. When the child is a newborn, it is perfectly reasonable that the parents have complete control over them. A newborn can not control themselves at all, and relies on the parents to take care of them. However, as the child grows older, they will gain more and more autonomy. She will learn to walk, feed herself, and if all goes to plan, by the time she is eighteen she will be ready to take care of her own needs completely (or close to it). In a healthy, functional family, this gaining of autonomy, and thus power, isn’t empowerment by my view. Instead, the child is has been empowered their whole life. This is because they have always an age- and role-appropriate amount of autonomy.

⁵ Foot, Philippa. *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 2002: 8.

To become empowered (or dominating or oppressed) is to move along a spectrum of a differential of power, not absolute power.

This kind of appropriate power differentials happen all the time. It's okay that my bosses at work have some power over me, such as the right to dictate my behavior at work, and discipline me as they see fit. After all, that's exactly why they are paying me. It's reasonable and expected that the state has power over its citizens, as those citizens get goods such as the protection of law and governmental services out of this arrangement. Naturally, this raises the question, "What does it mean for someone or something to have an inappropriate abundance of power?" These examples show that it must have something to do with the goods that come with having someone else have some level of power of an agent. At work, I give up some of my power in exchange for pay. Parents have power over a child by necessity- the child couldn't survive to adulthood without that power differential in place. The loss of power is roughly equal to the goods that are gained, so it is worth it to the person with less power. However, slaves and battered women are not gaining anything by virtue of their predicaments.

Is it corrective?

Part of the role of virtues in a good life is to encourage morally good behavior. This is clearly true in the case of empowerment via a loss of power; the violence husband discussed above is, by nature of his wife's positive empowerment, must behave better, at least in relation to her, because he no longer has the power to treat her badly. Of course, this is not a total cessation of bad behavior, but it does inherently limit what he can do. But what about the wife?

While still in the marriage, she would have to alter her behavior to avoid the wrath of her husband; she would walk on eggshells around him and follow his commands, thus not advocating for her own needs and wants. She may have to cut off her friends or family members to keep him from being jealous. She may even lie to him to protect herself. None of these behaviors are avoidable, blameworthy, or impermissible; but they're not also not morally good. Such actions do directly harm the wife, her friends, and her husband. Furthermore, they don't contribute to her or anyone else's flourishing; they merely insure her immediate protection. As Aristotle pointed out, virtues are central to a good life, so if she isn't behaving virtuously, she isn't flourishing. Actions that harm cannot be good actions, regardless of their motivations or circumstances. They are at most permissible. Therefore, empowerment is corrective in both the negative and positive directions.

Is is a character trait?

The definition of power that I stipulated reads as follows; A person or collective, by matter of definition, has power in a particular situation if and only if they have the ability and inclination to control the behavior, decisions, or opportunities of themselves or another person or collective.

The word "inclination" is what renders the vices and virtues of power character trait-like. I don't wish to argue that all power is a totally matter of internal character - it isn't. While we may have some jurisdiction over our own abilities to control ourselves or others, much of that comes from without; it is often our identities such as gender, socioeconomic position, or race that decides what abilities we have within a society. But how and whether we choose to use those

abilities is often up to us. Through this section, I will examine those cases where one does have control over their own power, but also the cases where they don't.

Often if someone goes through a process of being negatively empowered, they are willingly giving up certain abilities. For example, a politician who voted to ratify the 13th amendment gave up his ability to own slaves; he had a disinclination to control black people, and thus didn't have the power to. This is more clear in cases of power on a small, individual scale. A cisgendered, straight man who chooses to marry a straight woman has societal privileges that his wife doesn't, and it's relatively easy to use those privileges to wield power over the wife, in such a way that it would be domestic violence. That is how domestic violence advocates, like myself, and gender theorists explain why violent relationships tend to (though they definitely don't always) mimic the power relations of society at large. However, plenty of heterosexual marriages are not violent ones. Our hypothetical husband has the choice to not wield those privileges over his wife, so in a way, by choosing to work towards a more egalitarian marriage he is giving up some power that he could potentially have. This reflects his values, such as respect for his wife and a desire for an equal world at large. So, it is similar to a character trait. That said, the abusive husband has lost power against his will, and he has not gained or shown any positive values by going through the process. In fact, his anger and hatred for his wife and women at large may be exacerbated.

Those that take an excess of power (domination) could also do this out of their own values. A business person may work very hard to become the CEO of her company, and will want to do anything to cut costs. She could decide to move production to a place with lower cost of labor and lax laws that make it easier for her and her managers to exploit the low-level laborers. She could decide to give high-level jobs within the company to her cronies, regardless of merit. She could use her power in the company to influence matters in government and politics. All of this unethical behavior shows her values; She clearly cares about influence, money, and flattery than kindness, merit, and sound business practice. So, her power is like a character trait, because it is determined by who she is as a person.

The case for positive empowerment as a character trait is perhaps more controversial. It is unfair to blame someone who is being oppressed for that oppression. But, the decision to work towards a state of empowerment when the opportunity presents itself shows internal values. Consider the battered wife from the above sections; when she decides to take advantage of the resources that are available to her, and get out of the abusive marriage, that show that she values her autonomy and safety. She values the relationships with her friends and family that may have been strained due to the marriage. And she is showing that she doesn't value her husband's preferences for how she should behave. She could very well have valued these things before, and wished desperately to be able to act upon those values, but until she actually did it wouldn't be considered a character trait by the strict definition above.

These examples are pretty specific, and in plenty of situations, agents don't even have enough resources or agency to change the amount of power they have. In much the same way that it is frustratingly easier to get a job when you already have one, it's easier to gain power when you already have some. For example, the slaves that were freed with the thirteenth amendment did not have any say in the matter. They were not able to vote for or represent their interests to the politicians that ultimately made it happen. There were a few famous abolitionists

who escaped slavery, such as Harriet Tubman or Frederick Douglass, but most slaves were completely silenced. In my case of the battered wife, I am assuming that she still has some resources to take advantage of. Domestic violence relationships becomes most dangerous at the point when the victim tries to leave. The perpetrator is losing control of the victim, which makes them even more angry. In order for her to get out of her marriage safely, she would need support from friends and family, robust local domestic violence services organizations, and laws permitting divorce. Many people stay and have stayed in violent situations due to lack of those resources, and no amount of internal value will make them appear.

So, empowerment is not properly a character trait in all circumstances, because in many cases the abilities one has, and thus the power they have, are not at all influenced by their internal values. This is not to say that virtues must be entirely in conscious control of the virtuous person. Our virtuous or vicious behavior may have more to do with how we were raised or the situations we find ourselves in than how we want to act. Someone who was raised in a household where honesty was valued will tend to be honest without much effort, while a person who wasn't will not think twice about lying. But, while these behaviors are not totally in the person's conscious control, they are influenced by those underlying values.

Conclusion

Due to the fact that the characteristic of being empowered cannot properly be considered a character trait, it is not a proper virtue in the same way that honesty, charity, courage, and other famous traits are. However, I believe that this was a useful exercise. It helped me understand both virtue and power significantly better. It was also fascinating to try and examine the boundaries of virtue by examining a concept that hadn't been applied to virtue theory before. Lastly, I was able to think about power, oppression, domination, and empowerment through one unified framework, rather than examining them separately.

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