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Running head: VIRTUE ETHICS AND MORAL IDENTITY

Exploring the Relationship between Virtue Ethics and Moral Identity

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#### Abstract

The concept of moral identity based on virtue ethics has become an issue of considerable import in explaining moral behavior. This attempt to offer adequate explanations of the full range of morally relevant human behavior inevitably provokes boundary issues between ethics and moral psychology. In terms of the relationship between the two disciplines, some argue for “naturalized (or psychologized) morality,” while on the other hand, others insist on “moralized psychology.” This article investigates the relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity based on previous research on the relationship between ethics and moral psychology. This article especially attempts to show that meaningful links between the two concepts possible by using theoretical frameworks constructed by the most influential philosophers of science such as Kuhn and Lakatos.

*Keywords:* virtue ethics, moral identity, moral psychology, moral behavior, philosophy of science

## Exploring the Relationship between Virtue Ethics and Moral Identity

### Introduction

“What kinds of factors directly lead to moral behavior? Moral judgment? Moral intuition? Moral sentiment?” Answering these kinds of questions has been an important, controversial issue for scholars who study human morality and practical methods for encouraging an individual to live a morally good life. Many moral philosophers, moral psychologists, and moral educators have tried to explain the source and mechanism of moral behavior and establish a reliable model. Likewise, philosophers, from Socrates and Aristotle in Ancient Greece, to Kant in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to modern virtue philosophers, such as Anscombe or MacIntyre, have tried to discover the source of moral actions (Anscombe, 1958; Aristotle, 2007; Christian, 2009; Kant, 1996; MacIntyre, 1984). In addition, many psychologists including Piaget, Kohlberg, Rest, Lapsley, Narvaez, Blasi and Damon, who are interested in human morality have studied psychological foundations of moral behavior (Blasi, 1984; Damon, 1984; Kohlberg, 1981; Lapsley, 2008; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005; Lickona, 1994; Piaget, 1955; Rest, 1994). Therefore, it can be said that the source and mechanism of moral behavior is an issue of considerable import in both the fields of ethics and moral psychology.

In recent years deontological ethics and Kohlbergian tradition in developmental psychology have been criticized because of the lack of explanation for the actual mechanism of moral behavior, as well as the low correlation between moral judgment and moral behavior (see Blasi, 1980). As an alternative, virtue ethics and a new form of moral psychology based on virtue ethics have been introduced. Trends from both ethics and moral psychology point to greater interest in virtues and moral identity. Lapsley and Narvaez (2005) propose that virtue ethics has led the way and has given many psychologists the conceptual voice to address issues concerning

moral identity. Also, Weaver (2006) argues that there are several parallels between philosophical theories of virtue and the concept of moral identity as developed in psychology (see also Aquino & Reed, 2002).

Observing the recent trend in research on virtue ethics and moral identity, however, scholars are raising troubling questions about the proper relationship between ethics and moral psychology (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005). On the one hand, a group of scholars—Flanagan (1991), Lapsley and Narvaez (2005), McKinnon (1999), Johnson (1996), Doris and Stich (2005), and others—support the notion of “naturalized (or psychologized) morality” and argue that ethics should be grounded on the results of empirical studies in moral psychology. Another group of scholars, on the other hand—starting with Kohlberg (1981), Carr (2007), and others—emphasize the role of ethics in studies of moral psychology, supporting the notion of “moralized psychology” and insisting on the importance of theoretical studies in ethics.

To examine the relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity, we must first take note of the theoretical relations between the broader terms, ethics and moral psychology. Thus, in this paper we investigate the proper relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity based on previous research on the relationship between ethics and moral psychology. For this purpose, this study begins with a critical review of the primary features of ethics and moral psychology. Then, this study tries to determine the proper relationship between those two concepts using theoretical structures provided by the philosophy of science.

### Ethics and Moral Psychology

Singer (1985) defines ‘ethics or moral philosophy’ as the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad, right and wrong. He states that the term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles. Likewise, ethics is commonly regarded as a field of

philosophical reflection on first-order beliefs and practices about good and evil by means of which we guide our behavior (Hinman, 2002).

On the other hand, this paper also focuses on moral psychology, an area of psychology that consists of the study of moral conduct, ethical thinking, and values (Lapsley, 1996). In essence, the study of moral psychology is simultaneously pursued in two disciplines—philosophy and psychology—with very different methodologies. Based upon those two fields, moral psychology can be structured around two related inquiries: first, the empirical claims about human psychology that advocates of competing perspectives on ethical theory assert or presuppose—which is an area of philosophical inquiry—and second, how empirically well-supported these claims are—which is analyzed by various empirical human sciences, including psychology. Finally, moral psychology is methodologically pluralistic and it aims to answer philosophical questions, but in an empirically responsible way (Doris & Stich, 2006).

We need to pay careful attention to several fallacies when dealing with problems in moral psychology, because these cover a broad area at the intersection of ethics and psychology of mind and action. From a psychological perspective, one of the most important and controversial issues is that of the naturalistic fallacy. This can occur when we try to induce norms from only empirical facts. Hume (1952) defined naturalistic fallacy as inferring that X is good based on any proposition about X's natural properties. For instance, someone who infers that drinking beer is good from the premise that drinking beer is pleasant is alleged to have committed the naturalistic fallacy (Moore & Baldwin, 1993; Ridge, 2008). Naturalistic fallacy can also occur if we induce norms from the empirical descriptions in psychology without the consideration of ethics. Sound norms and conclusions are not able to be induced because, as Hume points out, there is a fundamental difference between normative and descriptive-empirical studies.

Another kind of problem can occur if we are not aware of empirical studies of human morality and concentrate only on philosophical ethics. Doris and Stich (2005) argue that empirical research related to human moral functioning is often deeply relevant to important debates in the field of philosophical ethics, and it is therefore intellectually irresponsible to ignore them. They mention that many controversial issues in ethics such as character, moral motivation, or moral disagreement could be resolved or confirmed by the empirical research detailed in psychological studies (see also Musschenga, 2002). Consequently, we may conclude that concrete empirical literature can provide fruitful evidence in philosophical ethics that can confirm and make the concepts coherent.

Kohlberg (1981, 1984) provides a proper example of the relationship between philosophical ethics and psychology. Firstly, in *The Philosophy of Moral Development* in which Kohlberg (1981) establishes the philosophical basis of moral development, he reviews the ethics theories of Socrates, Kant, Rawls, and other moral philosophers and tries to determine the proper object of moral education—he concludes it is justice—and the proper developmental process of this education—he notes three levels and six stages. Then, after firm establishment of the philosophical basis, he continues his study on moral psychology, and then publishes *The Psychology of Moral Development* in which he deals with empirical evidence. In this book, he introduces his own tool to evaluate the human ability to exercise moral judgment and presents the results of longitudinal surveys that confirm the stages of moral development he had proposed in his philosophical work (Kohlberg, 1984).

Kohlberg's successful study of ethics and moral psychology has a firm basis in both philosophical ethics and moral psychology, denoting a sound relationship between the two. The philosophical basis provides normative objects and direction for the model and psychological

research confirms and justifies the basis. Recognizing the importance of both sides and of their proper relationship, this paper tries to investigate the proper theoretical relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity.

### A Theoretical Review of Virtue Ethics and Moral Identity

#### *Virtue Ethics in Philosophical Ethics*

Generally, virtue theory emphasizes the character of the moral agent, rather than rules or consequences, as the key element of ethical thinking. The concept of virtue ethics emphasizes virtues, or moral character, in contrast to deontology, which emphasizes duties or rules, or consequentialism, which emphasizes the consequences of actions (Baron, Pettit, & Slote, 2003; Hursthouse, 2002a, 2007). Therefore, virtue ethics concentrates on a person's characteristics rather than her thinking process or the consequences of her actions.

The theory of virtue ethics originated in Aristotle's work. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (2007) argues that a man is never praised for being afraid, or for being angry, nor is a man blamed for simply feeling anger, but for the manner in which he feels it. He then insists that with reference to our virtues and our vices we are praised and blamed. Likewise, for Aristotle, virtues are dispositions that are the only criteria of moral behavior and important criteria for a good life (Hursthouse, 2002b; Kraut, 2007; Swanton, 2003).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Anscombe (1958) builds on Aristotle's theory of virtue ethics and takes up the argument again for the importance of virtue in studies of human morality. Since the concept of a god who has given humanity moral laws has become weaker, ethics based on obligations no longer makes sense. She argues that we cannot be under a law unless it has been promulgated to us, so "natural divine law" and its obligations cannot influence us. Instead, she suggests that laws should be based on those virtues which people should have. As an alternative

to utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and social contract theories, she argues that we should develop prescriptive virtues that are established through a kind of naturalized approach where we carefully consider moral psychology as it relates to the human good (Driver, 2009; Pence, 1993).

MacIntyre (1984), the leading contemporary proponent of virtue ethics, explains that virtues are those dispositions that help us to sustain certain practices and achieve good outcomes by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which we encounter and by increasing our self-knowledge and knowledge of the good. It is also closely related to respect for communities and practices (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002). MacIntyre (1981) also argues that to achieve the internal goods of any practice, virtues must be exercised.

In short, virtue ethics emphasizes one's character over one's faculties of reason, cognition, or utility, the results of one's actions. Since virtue theories focus on humans' actual character traits and the development of moral dispositions, it seems to be closely related to fields of sciences that deal with human nature, especially psychology. So virtue ethics will be discussed in later sections along with the concept of moral identity in moral psychology.

#### *Moral identity in moral psychology*

Studies on moral identity have been carried out by critics of previous theories of moral psychology. Blasi (1980), for instance, cites inconsistency between moral cognition and moral behavior if one only takes into account cognitive theory. He argues that acting morally is a characteristic of mature people not in spite of but because of who they are as persons, because of their identity, especially moral identity. Blasi (1984) strongly argues that moral identity is directly related to moral action, namely by providing a truly moral motive (see also Wowra, 2007).



Blasi (1995) explains that identity refers to a “mature form of self-concept that is characterized by a strong sense of unity, by its salience in the person’s consciousness, and by its ability to anchor the person’s sense of stability, individuality, and purpose” (p. 229). Based on this, he argues that moral identity is an important part of moral integrity that culminates in overall moral character. In this model, one’s identity determines how one’s goals and concerns are arranged hierarchically and thereby creates a sense of subjective unity and lifelong direction, providing the individual with a sense of depth and personal significance. In essence, moral identity causes a person to feel self-betrayal when she compromises her central value-morality (Blasi, 2005).

Moreover, Damon and Gregory (1997) argue that the importance of one’s moral concerns to one’s sense of self constitutes the individual’s moral identity, and that this is the best predictor of the person’s commitment to moral action. In fact, Damon (1984) believes self-interest does play an important role in moral functioning, and argues that morality and self-interest interact in various ways as children at different developmental levels make real-life decisions. According to Damon, to determine how an individual deals with her own views on the place of morality in their life, we must understand not only that individual’s moral beliefs but also her view of herself in relation to these moral beliefs.

In sum, Damon’s model of moral self tries to determine the proper way to integrate the various elements of the moral self and cultivate it during childhood. Throughout childhood and into adolescence, self and morality are being integrated into the moral self. During this period, the boundaries of the self in moral terms and individual moral interests and self-interests become more clearly defined and interconnected (Bergman, 2004; Damon, 1984). Therefore, Damon proposes a model of integrated self, the moral self, and argues that it plays a significant role in

individual moral functioning and moral action. Reliance solely on the development of moral judgment and the exclusion of the concept of the moral self prevent us from properly determining the prominence of morality in the individual's life.

### The Theoretical Relationship between Virtue Ethics and Moral Identity

#### *Moralized Psychology and Psychologized Morality*

To determine the proper relationship between ethics and moral psychology, it is necessary to review the scholarly debates on “moralized psychology versus psychologized morality.” Understanding these debates helps establish the proper relationship between virtue ethics in philosophical ethics and the concept of moral identity in psychology.

Recently, scholars have attempted to determine the root of human morality by looking to naturalistic and psychological foundations, rather than traditional ones, such as normative ethics. Flanagan (1991, 2009), who upholds the importance of the naturalistic aspect of human morality, argues that virtue is a disposition that reliably activates a {perception—feeling—thought—judgment—action} sequence and is such a concrete, pragmatic feature of humanity that we should concentrate upon those “foundations” in our nature that are culturally elaborated to form “character” and even evolutionarily ancient, fast acting, psychological programs that constitute what we might call “first nature”. Flanagan further says that character traits (virtues) are psychologically realizable, and that, according to virtue theory, they must exist if human morality is possible.

Flanagan's perspective can be understood as a naturalistic approach to determining virtue and the roots of human morality with an emphasis on the role of psychology. According to Flanagan, human morality is psychological, naturalistic, and even biological rather than normative, as the traditional form of ethics proposes.

On the other hand, “psychologized morality” is criticized by scholars who argue in favor of “moralized psychology.” Carr (2007) says that deciding what can be subjected to moral empirical investigation must obviously depend upon what we count as morally significant rather than vice versa. He criticizes modern naturalistic moral philosophers since they make logical disconnections between modes of discourse such as factual and evaluative, and descriptive and prescriptive. He also criticizes current trends in moral psychology that concentrate on determining human morality from naturalized and scientific studies, emphasizing instead the importance of the normative aspect of ethics. Carr (2002) states that studies of moral development and its implications for moral education are normative or evaluative rather than descriptive. Hence, Carr insists strongly on elucidating the normative, prescriptive, or evaluative natures of studies of human morality. Essentially, Carr is a defender of “moralized psychology.”

Arguing for a middle ground between these two opposing views, Kristjánsson (2009) proposes a more balanced perspective, proposing the possibility of a division of labor between those doing the theoretical groundwork and those doing the empirical spadework. Although he acknowledges that his viewpoint is closer to the “moralized psychology” than to “psychologized morality,” he argues that if we want to understand “self,” it cannot be “philosophically neutral” or “value-free,” and it cannot be studied without grounding it on psychology, the empirical knowledge of how people actually think.

In short, the debate on “moralized psychology” versus “psychologized morality” can be helpful to understand the structural relationship between ethics and psychology and yield useful implications for determining how to establish the proper theoretical relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity. So this study will proceed to discuss its main thesis against the backdrop of this debate and other philosophical frameworks.

### *The Proper Relationship between Virtue Ethics and Moral Identity*

Virtue ethics can be helpful to psychological studies in several different ways. According to Fowers (2005), virtue ethics can provide a perspective that allows us to see and explore vitally important ethical questions that are often neglected in psychology, especially how moral identity is directly connected to ethics. Without assistance from a philosophy of virtue ethics, we cannot properly investigate moral identity. Indeed, based on the general concept of moral identity—more specifically, that the degree of one’s moral identity is determined by the extent to which moral notions, such as being good, just, compassionate, or fair, is judged to be central, essential, and important to one’s self-understanding (Lapsley, 2008)—it is clear that there are various philosophical or norm-related terms in the concept such as ‘good,’ ‘just,’ ‘compassionate,’ or ‘fair.’ In other words, philosophical terms and concepts especially in virtue ethics play important roles in defining and establishing the concept of moral identity. Because virtue theories speak in terms of what one is, in the sense of being characterized by dispositions to act and feel in certain, especially virtuous, ways, and also address how these dispositions might be developed and put into action, they are directly related to the concept of moral identity, that is, the notion of ‘self-conception organized around a set of moral traits’ (Weaver, 2006).

The relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity can be explained by theories in the philosophy of science that deal with the relationship between theoretical framework and empirical research. Hanson (1981) characterizes the relationship between theoretical framework and observations with the term “theory-laden.” He argues that scientists rarely discover laws of nature by enumerating and summarizing observable datum, but instead as a result of shaping those observations or empirical studies using prior knowledge of the study (see also Chalmers,

2006). Hanson also points out that language or notation used to express what we know can affect the observations and overall study.

This means that an experimental datum confirms (gives us reasons to believe) a statement only in conjunction with a great number of theoretical ideas, background assumptions about the experiment, and assumptions from logic and mathematics, any one of which could be—and in the history of science many often have been—challenged when problems arise (Block, 1998). So, according to Hanson's (1981) notion of theory-laden observations, theoretical frameworks that consist of virtue ethics greatly affect empirical studies on moral identity in moral psychology.

In contrast, empirical research on moral identity can affect virtue ethics. For instance, Aquino and Reed (2002), building on work by Blasi (1984) and Hart et al. (1998), empirically measure moral identity. Premised upon the argument that moral traits form an associative network for the higher order construct of moral identity, their study first identifies a set of traits that could reliably invoke the identity. Following this, the study identifies nine moral traits (e.g., caring, compassionate, etc.) that it claims are necessary for describing a moral person. The study concludes that there is evidence to support the notion that moral identity, as empirically studied, is related to moral thought and moral action (Aquino & Reed, 2002, 2003; Reed, Aquino, & Levy, 2007). These studies allow for the identification of empirical findings relevant to virtue ethics as their classifications of moral traits are reasonably described as essential virtues that exist in global humanity.

Scholars who agree with “psychologized morality” or “naturalized morality” may argue that studies on moral psychology-moral identity can also contribute to studies of philosophical ethics-virtue ethics. They insist that we should concentrate upon studies of human nature in

empirical psychology to explain human morality, because those studies can provide validity to theories of ethics (Doris & Stich, 2005, 2006; Johnson, 1996; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005; McKinnon, 1999). In sum, scholars who emphasize the importance of naturalized or psychologized morality argue that empirical, psychological studies of humankind benefit our understanding of the philosophy of morality.

The notion that psychology can contribute to virtue ethics is not only supported by psychologists but also by philosophers. For example, MacIntyre (1998) notes that empirical observations, as typified by Socrates, of how virtues are communicated and embodied in practice through the use of story-telling and of the influence of examples in the acquisition and practical understanding of the virtues, can contribute to the discovery of moral virtues. MacIntyre also argues that the manner in which the moral virtues are acquired is something to be learned from social psychology, anthropology, and especially everyday observation.

As MacIntyre observes, one scholarly perspective proposes that empirical research can critically contribute to studies of human virtues. Such a view suggests that virtuous ideals are those that, when engaged by actual human beings, will be most conducive to ethically desirable behavior; this certainly connotes the validity of empirical claims about actual human psychologies, and good empirically grounded reasons would be required to believe it (Doris, 2002). This explanation provided by Doris may be intended to provide an easy way of deriving ideals of virtue from empirical observations of actual moral persons, so we can learn about core ethical virtues from empirical-psychological studies. Doris also argues that by attaining empirical evidence through moral psychology, philosophical theories can be made more robust and more “empirically adequate.”

In this sense, we can see that another direction of the relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity in moral psychology moves from moral psychology to virtue ethics.

Generally, hypotheses are confirmed by continuous, accumulative data gathered from observations, surveys, or examinations, and then generalized into theories, and even those theories are generated by empirical data. While verifying or confirming is the primary task of empirical study, new theories or revisions of theories can also be purposefully generated from the research data (Earman & Salmon, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Finally, on the basis of the aforementioned arguments, we can investigate the bi-directional relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity. This relationship can be better understood by the model research program proposed by Lakatos. Four connected components are embedded in Lakatos' program: the hard core (HC) located in the core of the program, the protective belt (PB) surrounding the HC, and the negative heuristic (NH) and positive heuristic (PH), which are both held in the PB (Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970; Lakatos, 1974). The HC is the core and foundation of the theory, and it possesses firm and immutable features that are very difficult to attack and degenerate in the program; the PB is composed of auxiliary hypotheses for preventing the HC from being attacked; the NH and PH are both strategies embedded in the PB with separate functions to forbid rebuttals and to expand theory (Han & Jeong, 2009). In this same context, Kuhn's (1996) model of scientific knowledge provides the means to understand the relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity and their interactivity. Kuhn says that science seems to be a certain kind of cultural achievement. Kuhn explains scientific principles as similar to habits and values in scientists who share common training and activities (Kuhn, 1996; Godfrey-Smith, 2003). In other words, Kuhn sees natural science as a framework or world view

that causes scientists to perceive, understand, and cope with reality in certain specific ways that follow paradigmatic principles.

Therefore, according to Lakatos' program, the theoretical framework of virtue ethics can be interpreted as the hard core of a research program—or as a paradigmatic world view, according to Kuhn—to study moral identity. It provides the theoretical justification, definition, and initial idea of 'how to research' (how to define the problem of) moral identity. Also, empirical results corroborating moral identity can contribute to the formulization of theory or to the development of virtue ethics, as 'development of the protection belt (PB) to strengthen the validity of the hard core,' in Lakatos' terms, or as 'normal scientific activities that accumulate knowledge on established normal science.' In either case, it denotes an empirically grounded progressive shift (Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970; McGuire, 1992).

To sum up, the relationship between the theory of virtue ethics and moral identity in moral psychology can be depicted as a "co-constructive" relationship. It can be explained by reviewing the theoretical backgrounds of the philosophy of science, such as the 'theory-laden' observation, Lakatos' research program, and others. Virtue ethics provides researchers of moral psychology with the capacity to conduct empirical studies within a theoretical framework for moral identity, which can be understood as the 'hard core' of a research program, in Lakatos' terms, or as a paradigm of normal science, in Kuhn's terms.

On the other hand, theories of virtue ethics are also affected by results of empirical research on moral identity in the field of moral psychology. Empirical studies identify areas for modification and development in their theoretical conceptions of virtue ethics. This is an example of the development of a protection belt in the process of heuristics according to Lakatos' research program, or of the accumulation of knowledge (puzzle solving) according to



Kuhn's structure of scientific revolution. In fact, several researchers try to confirm the existence of moral identity using empirical methodologies and to identify common moral traits that can be applied to theories of virtue ethics (Aquino & Reed, 2002, 2003; Blasi, 1984; Weaver, 2006).

Consequently, we may conclude that the relationship between those two factors can be characterized as "co-constructive," "interactive," and "interdependent." Virtue ethics and moral identity cannot be properly developed and understood in isolation; they can only be understood together. As explained in the various models of scientific research in the philosophy of science, virtue ethics provides the theoretical framework and the starting point for research and for the "structured puzzle problem", while the scientific study of moral identity provides empirical adequacy, confirmation, and actuality to clarify and strengthen virtue ethics. Therefore, we should be aware of bi-directionality when studying the relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity.

### Conclusion and Implications

In this paper we examined the relationship between virtue ethics and moral identity by arguing that it is bi-directional, co-constructive, and interactive. Virtue ethics is an important starting point for studies on moral identity and it provides a completely different viewpoint and framework for morality. Crisp and Slote (2003) argue that virtue ethics differs from other forms of ethics through its insistence that aretaic notions like virtue, admirability, and excellence are intrinsic and replace deontic notions like moral obligation and rightness in Kantian ethics. Virtue ethics is an area of study for investigating the theoretical potential of the concept of moral identity to extend the explanatory reach of the empirical study of morally relevant human behavior, in quite a different way from that of justice-based moral reasoning.

Studies of moral identity may have a great influence on studies in virtue ethics. As empirical evidence provides the theoretical basis for positive and negative heuristics, it can buttress the explanatory power of the theoretical framework and even reconstruct parts of the theory. As Blasi (1984), Aquino and Reed (2002, 2003), Weaver (2006), and other moral psychologists who study the psychological aspects of moral identity have noted, the results of empirical studies of moral identity have identified the moral traits of moral humans which comprise the contents of virtue ethics. In addition, as Lapsley and Narvaez (2005) argue, empirical studies can contribute to the assessment of philosophical theory because they can provide actual evidence from observations and experiments, and therefore the veracity of the theoretical framework can be tested.

Indeed, “moralized psychology” and “psychologized morality” are interdependent aspects of ethics and moral psychology. Neither of the fields can be entirely independent since philosophy sets the framework and starting point for psychological studies and empirical study provides the concrete contents of the framework or reconstructs it.

Finally, to study the core of virtue ethics or the psychological aspects of moral identity scholars must be aware of and understand the opposing viewpoint. Viewing from both vantage points will enhance the quality of the study by providing a firmly established theoretical framework (virtue ethics to moral identity), or an up-to-date, fully grounded or concrete empirical evidence to fit, revise, or recreate the framework (moral identity to virtue ethics).

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