

Learning from Failure: Shame and Emotion Regulation in Virtue as Skill

Matt Stichter – pre-print draft (do not cite)

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Abstract

On an account of virtue as skill, virtues are acquired in the ways that skills are acquired. In this paper I focus on one implication of that account that is deserving of greater attention, which is that becoming more skillful requires learning from one's failures, but that turns out to be especially challenging when dealing with moral failures.

In skill acquisition, skills are improved by deliberate practice, where you strive to correct past mistakes and learn how to overcome your current limitations. A similar story applies to virtue acquisition, as moral failures will be a part of anyone's life, and we will all have to learn from these experiences. However, despite the importance of being able to learn from our mistakes, this is very difficult in practice, given that failure of any kind can be distressing, and especially so for moral failure. The distress created by a recognition of moral failure often prompts responses of anger, avoidance, or defensiveness; rather than attempts to make amends and when necessary to work on self-improvement.

The most potentially distressing response to moral failure is shame, as it is often associated with defensiveness. It is here where emotion regulation will be important to manage that distress, and I focus on the skill of emotion differentiation. I argue that emotion differentiation is a promising strategy for distinguishing the emotions we may experience in the wake of failure, including shame, and to encourage those emotions that motivate self-improvement. Thus, emotion regulation is important for virtue acquisition.

Introduction

On an account of virtue as skill, virtues are acquired in the ways that skills are acquired. In this paper I want to focus on one implication of that account that is deserving of greater attention, which, in short, is that becoming more skillful requires learning from one's failures, but that turns out to be especially challenging when dealing with moral failures. The distress prompted by the prospect of having acted wrongly can often cause defensiveness in response, rather than attempts to redress the wrong and work on changing oneself for the better.

Given that accounts of virtue as skill have been laid out elsewhere, I will not cover that ground again here.¹ However, in this paper I will be adding to these accounts by grounding an account of skill within the larger framework of the psychological research on self-regulation.² Self-regulation theories cover both the considerations involved with setting goals and striving to accomplish those goals.³ Since skill acquisition is essentially a sophisticated form of self-regulation, this approach will shed further light on the nature of skill and thereby virtue.

In the case of skill acquisition, skills are improved by deliberate practice, where in such practice you are attempting to improve by correcting past mistakes, overcoming your current limitations, and learning how to tackle new challenges. If you do not do this, you remain at a fixed level of skill development. A similar story applies to virtue acquisition, as moral failures will be a part of anyone's life, and we will all have to learn in part from experience. But increasing our skillfulness in virtue will require that we can both acknowledge those failures, as well as learn from them by making genuine attempts to improve ourselves. This is important in both cases of

¹ Annas 2011; Sosa 2007; and Stichter 2017.

² This article draws from chapters in my book: *The Skillfulness of Virtue: Improving our Moral and Epistemic Lives*, Cambridge University Press (2018), reprinted with permission of Cambridge University Press © Cambridge University Press.

³ Self-regulation is broader in scope than 'self-control' (which is merely one aspect of self-regulation, and is often associated with virtues such as temperance or courage).

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eliminating vice and in becoming more virtuous. So in acquiring moral virtues as skills, we have reason to focus on some of the common moral mistakes we make, along with other frequent obstacles to acting well.⁴

However, despite the importance in skill and virtue acquisition of being able to learn from our mistakes, what I want to draw attention to in this paper is how difficult this often is in practice, given that failure of any kind can be distressing, and especially so for moral failure. The problem is that the distress created by a recognition of failure often prompts responses of anger, avoidance, defensiveness, or disengagement; rather than attempts to make amends and when necessary to work on self-change.⁵ Being able to acknowledge failure, but without that becoming too distressing, can be a difficult line to walk. It is here where emotion regulation, as a sub-category of self-regulation, will be of great importance to manage that distress. I will focus initially on the strategy of emotion differentiation, which has been discussed in the context of overcoming some situational influences on moral judgements (e.g. harshness of moral judgments being amplified by irrelevant emotions like disgust). What I will suggest is that emotion differentiation looks to be a promising strategy for sorting out a variety of emotions that we may experience in the wake of failure, and where some of these emotions can prompt defensiveness, while others encourage self-improvement.

In the rest of this paper, I will outline some general features of the psychological research on self-regulation and skill. I begin with a brief overview of self-regulation, in terms of the distinction between goal setting and goal striving, and where I highlight the idea that our affective reactions to succeeding or failing at our goals provide us with motivation to engage in self-regulation. I then situate skill acquisition within this self-regulatory framework. One aspect of skill acquisition I focus on is the need for deliberate practice for improvement, and where this requires us to acknowledge our failures and limitations in order to figure out how we can do better. This then leads to a discussion of how difficult it can be for us to acknowledge our moral failures, and how we often respond with defensiveness rather than attempts at self-change. In this context I elaborate on the mechanism of moral disengagement as an example of how the distress produced by a potential moral failure can lead us to avoid acknowledging any failure in the first place.

The most potentially distressing response to moral failure comes in the form of shame. However, there appears to be three different senses of “shame” that are often conflated in the literature. I draw on one framework that argues there is at least one form of shame that actually prompts self-improvement in response to moral failure, and this is critical for both eliminating vice and acquiring virtue. But how can we prompt this 'apt' sense of shame? Here I claim that one form of emotion regulation - emotion differentiation - will likely play an important role in moderating responses to moral failure. I then go on to point out what implications it has for virtue as skill.

Self-Regulation – Goal Setting and Goal Striving

Self-regulation theories in psychology begin with commitment to a goal, which implies adopting certain standards of behavior by which one judges oneself. This has an important affective dimension, as Albert Bandura relates, because “self-regulatory control is achieved by creating incentives for one’s own actions and by anticipative affective reactions to one’s own behavior

⁴ Given limited space, I will confine my discussion to implications for moral skills, though there will also be implications for epistemic skills.

⁵ Some failures, of course, are simply accidents, and while making amends may be appropriate if someone was harmed, it does not necessarily indicate that one has to work on oneself. But failures that indicate some habitual problem will require a focus on self-change. The problem could be one of vicious habits that need to be broken, but also could simply be that one needs to further develop one’s current degree of virtue.

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depending on how it measures up to personal standards.”⁶ In terms of self-reactions, achieving a goal is usually a source of self-satisfaction, while failing to do so can lead to self-censure. Furthermore, the strength of the self-reaction, in terms of the motivation it provides for self-regulation, depends in part on how the goal is valued. Goals that are highly valued can provide more self-satisfaction from achievement, and likewise more self-censure from failing to achieve them, than goals that are only minimally valued. A highly valued goal will make you feel really bad for violating it or really good for conforming to it. So motivation to strive for the goal arises from self-evaluative reactions (anticipated feelings of self-satisfaction or self-censure), the strength of which depends in part on the degree of value placed on the goal.

It is important to note here that the feelings of self-censure are important for two reasons. First, anticipation of violating a personal standard can trigger feelings of self-censure ahead of time, like in feeling a guilty conscience when contemplating an act that would violate a moral standard, which can then help us to regulate our actions by both alerting us to the violation and giving us a disincentive to go through with that action. Second, the feelings of self-censure after we have acted in violation of a standard can motivate us to do better in the future.

The value that a goal has (i.e. its desirability), however, is not the only factor to affect motivation. The above assumes a situation where the person believes that the desired outcome can be achieved, or the undesirable outcome can be avoided, by acting. If instead someone believes that they are not capable of achieving the desired outcome, she will have little motivation to self-regulate. As Bandura notes: “[a]mong the self-referent thoughts that influence human motivation, affect and action, none is more central or pervasive than people’s judgments of personal efficacy... Unless people believe that they can produce desired results by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties.”⁷ ‘Perceived self-efficacy’ then refers to people’s beliefs about what they are capable of achieving, and self-efficacy beliefs can strengthen or undermine one’s motivation to engage in self-regulation.⁸ Thus, goal setting is both a matter of perceived desirability and feasibility. Both considerations matter, as sufficient desirability can outweigh significant difficulties in feasibility, like for those setting out to become an Olympic athlete.

Furthermore, our goals are also frequently hierarchically organized, as a highly complex or abstract goal (i.e. a superordinate goal) will give rise to more context-specific subsidiary goals (i.e. subordinate goals).⁹ The relationship between the differing levels of the goals on the hierarchy need not be merely one of means to an end, though, as sometimes the lower order goals provide the constitutive elements of a higher order goal.¹⁰ So in goal setting, it may be necessary to specify some subsidiary goals to aim at achieving first.

⁶ Bandura 1999, 176. This does not mean, however, that such anticipation is necessarily conscious to the agent.

⁷ Bandura 1999, 180-181.

⁸ Connected to the issue of self-efficacy beliefs are people’s beliefs regarding whether the abilities needed to reach the goal are ones that are relatively fixed and unchangeable, or are rather malleable and capable of improvement. To the extent that one views an ability as fixed, setbacks will tend to undermine efforts at improvement, for one does not believe that one can do much to change that ability. See Dweck and Leggett 1988.

⁹ It could be that the goal itself is complex and requires many intermediary steps to accomplish, or that the goal itself is abstract and frequently requires a more concrete specification to act on. See Carver and Scheier 2003, 189.

¹⁰ In fact, this is how many virtue theorists view the relationship between virtues and living well. Virtues are not merely means to the end of living well, but rather the virtues are constitutive of what it means to live well.

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Once you have committed yourself to realizing a goal, it is time to start figuring out how you are going to realize it, and this marks a transition from goal setting to goal striving. This distinction is important as deciding whether to commit to a goal in the first place, or later whether to maintain commitment to that goal, requires a different kind of mindset from the activities associated with striving to achieve a goal (which involves planning and acting). In short, in phases of goal setting you are undecided about your goal commitments, whereas phases of goal striving assume a decided goal commitment that you are now trying to realize. Bandura notes this connection in self-regulation, stating that “people motivate themselves and guide their actions anticipatorily through the exercise of forethought. They anticipate likely outcomes of prospective actions, they set goals for themselves, and they plan courses of action designed to realize valued futures”.¹¹ Committing yourself to a goal is part of this process of forethought. It motivates the next phase of forethought in planning what steps to take to achieve that goal, where you are likely trying to figure out what needs to be done, how you are going to do it, when and where you will take action, etc.

Skill Acquisition and Deliberate Practice

With this overview of self-regulation in place, we can show how skill acquisition is a sophisticated form of self-regulation, as skills enable us to achieve a desired goal in a domain of high complexity.¹² It is important to note that a skill necessarily involves some flexibility in how one goes about achieving that outcome (to cope with changes in one’s environment – which is part of what makes the domain complex), as well as a broad view of the outcome (such as in learning how to speak a language, rather than a single phrase). In committing yourself to acquiring a skill, you begin internalizing standards about what counts as a good performance, which will guide your efforts to learn the skill. Skill acquisition involves a progression from tackling simple tasks to more challenging tasks, no matter what level of skill you are aiming at, and as one advances in skill development which tasks count as ‘simple’ or ‘challenging’ will change. This progressive mastering of a skill requires “practice, practice, practice”. However, neither mere experience, nor rote repetition, is sufficient for improving one’s level of skillfulness. While additional experience may make performing at that level of skillfulness easier, that is not the same as become more skilled such that one is able to tackle more difficult challenges.

What more is needed for improvement? Research indicates that a particular kind of experience is necessary for improvement, as it turns out that the quality of the practice matters just as much as the quantity. Improving your level of skill requires not the mere repetition of things you already know how to do, but continually striving to do things that you currently cannot do, which is referred to as ‘deliberate practice’. Deliberate practice requires having specific goals in mind for improvement, rather than the vaguer goal of ‘getting better’ (which is also helpful with self-regulation more broadly). There need to be specific aspects of your performance that you go about planning how to improve, which then structures the kind of deliberate practice you engage in.¹³ As

¹¹ Bandura 1989, 19.

¹² That is, not all acquired abilities are necessarily skills. Some tasks are so simple, such as tying one’s shoelaces or opening doors, that once you have done it a few times there is nothing else to learn. The need to acquire sophisticated competencies such as skills arises when dealing with complex issues, since the skills enable one to handle the complexity by progressively developing one’s abilities (via deliberate practice). As such, my view is similar to that of Ellen Fridland, as she claims that “skills as the subclass of abilities, which are characterized by the fact that they are refined or developed as a result of effortful attention and control to the skill itself.” Fridland 2014a.

¹³ Horn and Masunaga 2006, 601.

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you engage in deliberate practice you seek out feedback about your performance, in the hopes of identifying and correcting errors. You keep monitoring your progress as you practice. If you do not seem to be progressing, you may need to redesign your practice sessions. If instead you keep up a steady progression, then at some point you achieve your current goal. At that point it is time to set out to strive to accomplish the next more difficult goal. This is how you improve your current level of skillfulness.¹⁴

For this reason, the findings of social psychology experiments can be helpful for improving our existing levels of moral skillfulness, as they reveal some of the mistakes we are prone to making, and thus can serve as the target of deliberate practice (when conceiving of virtues as skills). That is, if virtues are skills, skills are improved through deliberate practice, and deliberate practice requires focusing on improvement and correcting mistakes; then the experiments highlighted by the situationist critique provide us with feedback on the mistakes we are prone to make. They are helpful in providing us some structure for deliberate practice, so that we can improve our moral skillfulness.

The Distress of Moral Failure and Moral Disengagement

While some of our moral and epistemic weaknesses are now well known thanks to the situationist debate, there is one particularly troubling phenomenon that has received relatively little attention, yet frequently interferes with moral behavior, and that is moral disengagement. Moral disengagement refers to the various psychological processes by which we deceive ourselves into thinking that some action that we have taken, or will take, does not violate our personal moral standards (when in actuality it is a violation).¹⁵ To understand this phenomenon, we need to return to self-regulation, as goal setting and striving does take on an added dimension when the goals in question are moral. In general, when we feel that we are keeping to our moral standards, our actions can provide us with a positive self-evaluation. On the other hand, and more importantly, insofar as we feel that an action violates our moral standards, this will trigger self-sanctions – either helping to deter the action ahead of time, or triggering feelings of guilt or shame about it after the fact (and hopefully a different course of action in the future).¹⁶ These positive or negative self-evaluations provide some motivation to engage in future acts of self-regulation.

¹⁴ This also supports Fridland’s view, which takes “attention-governed, practice-related improvement as a criterion of skill”. Fridland 2014, 2740.

¹⁵ There are 6 primary mechanisms. The first three are ways of using discourse and language, often involving moral concepts and theories, to reframe actions. It might involve inventing moral justifications or rationalizations to frame the action as having been the right thing to do, using advantageous comparisons to suggest that it was the best thing one could have done given the alternatives, or using euphemistic language to sanitize the action of any implications of harm. The fourth mechanism is one of turning a blind eye to the consequences of one’s action; the fifth involves displacing responsibility for the action to some other person or group; and the sixth involves dehumanizing the victim so as to suggest that they are not deserving of full moral status. See Bandura 2002.

¹⁶ Kristján Kristjánsson has described this in terms of “prospective” and “retrospective” roles of shame. He uses this distinction to undermine an argument that Aristotle gives as to why shame could not be a virtue. Aristotle argues that an ideal virtuous person would not need shame, as she would not commit any actions to be ashamed of. But, as Kristjánsson notes, even if an ideal virtuous agent would not have any need for shame in the retrospective sense, presumably she would still need shame in the prospective sense. Certainly Bandura’s work on how affective self-sanctions help to keep us adhering to our standards would support Kristjánsson’s view on the necessity of shame in the prospective sense. See Kristjánsson 2014.

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However, as Bandura's work has shown, whether these internalized moral standards can effectively guide someone's conduct depends in large part on the *activation* of self-regulatory mechanisms, especially the triggering of self-sanctions to help us avoid taking actions that violate our moral standards. When you morally disengage from your moral standards, you reframe an immoral action in such a way that it no longer appears to violate your standards, and hence no self-sanctions are triggered in response.¹⁷ It is not the abandonment or changing of your moral standards (which could otherwise still effectively guide your conduct on other occasions), but rather a failure to see a conflict between those standards and the immoral action you have taken (or are considering taking). Nor is moral disengagement the same as *akrasia* or weakness of will, which is a more widely discussed phenomena. In those cases, you view some course of action as better, but cannot bring yourself to do it, and as such you acknowledge having taken a worse action. That kind of failure would often be one of self-control, where you recognize the conflict but are unable to bring yourself to take the better action. By contrast, moral disengagement prevents you from acknowledging that there is a conflict, for you do not view your behavior as a violation of your moral standards. So internalizing moral standards can help guide our conduct, but only if we also sanction ourselves on the basis of those standards.

Ironically, one factor (though there are many others) that can prompt moral disengagement is if the negative self-sanctioning feelings are too intense, leading one to use moral disengagement mechanisms in order to avoid the unpleasant feelings altogether.¹⁸ This relationship can be seen in some studies of helping behavior, where too much personal distress was positively linked to the use of moral disengagement mechanisms. Paciello et al. showed that the more people experienced intense personal distress at the plight of others in need, the more they utilized moral disengagement mechanisms (since that could reduce the distress). By contrast, those whose main feelings were of empathy for those in need, rather being self-focused on their own distress, were less likely to morally disengage. In regards to personal distress and moral disengagement, Paciello et al. note that:

These results point to the link between emotion and cognition, and in particular on the unmarked relationship between negative self-focused feelings and self-serving mechanisms in the process leading to act behaviors that are disadvantageous for others and the community. Low relational and emotional competences (e.g. to perceive other's need but being unable to assume his/her perspective or to lose control and not be able to manage one's own emotions) could significantly compromise mature moral functioning.¹⁹

It is this link between negative self-focused feelings when they are not managed properly and the undermining of moral functioning that I am particularly concerned with here. The need for negative feelings of self-sanction to help us regulate our behavior according to moral standards, while also

¹⁷ Though by 'moral standards' here I do not intend to set up a contrast with 'immoral standards'. Rather, the disengagement is relative to one's own internalized moral standards (however appropriate or corrupt they may be). It is of course important to internalize appropriately justified moral standards, and much of ethical theory is devoted to figuring these out. But this other aspect of moral behavior, preventing disengagement from even justified moral standards, is a relatively neglected topics in contemporary ethics, which is especially surprising given that widespread moral wrongdoing often involves moral disengagement.

¹⁸ By 'negative' here, I mean both in the sense of a negative evaluation of one having failed to live up to an important standard, and in terms of this being an unpleasant affective state. So the worry here is that the negative evaluation might give rise to an overly intense negative affect, which the agent then wants to avoid. However, these two senses of 'negative' need not always go together, as Kristjánsson (2003) has aptly noted.

¹⁹ Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, Tramontano, Cole 2013, 7. Also, one of the reasons why someone might feel distress specifically in response to others in need is a lack of self-efficacy beliefs about one's ability to help.

needing to be able to keep such unpleasant feelings managed so they do not threaten to overwhelm us, is one of the main reasons we need to be concerned about emotion regulation in virtue theory. Given the potential of moral failure to result in intense distress, we need to have skills to keep that distress within reasonable limits.

Moral Failure and Three Types of Shame

Unfortunately, though unsurprisingly, people find moral failure, whether committed by themselves or their in-group, particularly distressing, and as such is frequently met by defensive reactions. To be clear, one typically ought to be feeling distress in response to one's own moral failure, but being able to properly regulate that distress will be important for promoting adaptive responses to that failure (e.g. reparations and self-change), as too much distress has been shown to promote defensiveness instead. Here it will be helpful to dig further into the recognition of moral failure and why some respond appropriately and others do not.²⁰ There is an interesting set of conflicting results in some of the literature on shame, which indicates that sometimes it prompts defensiveness and disengagement, whereas other times it promotes attempts to redress the wrong as well as self-improvement.²¹ Much work has been done by Gausel and Leach to disentangle several similar but distinct emotional responses to moral failure. They show that:

a moral failure can be appraised as indicating either that others will condemn one or that one suffers a self-defect. If the self is appraised as suffering a self-defect, this self-defect may be viewed as either global (and thus unalterable) or specific (and thus potentially alterable).

These appraisals are the central subjective meaning that people give their moral failure.²²

These three appraisals are then connected to three feelings: rejection (condemnation by others); inferiority (a global self-defect); and shame (a specific self-defect). So in this framework, 'shame' is picking out a specific feeling that is tied to a self-appraisal where you find in yourself a flaw that you believe can and ought to be fixed.

The first combination, condemnation – rejection, is a concern over one's social image, and how it might be damaged by a moral failure. This is a potentially serious concern, as condemnation by one's social group might lead to punishment or exclusion. How one responds to this feeling of rejection depends in part on whether there is an opportunity to prevent that damage to one's social image, for as Gausel and Leach point out: "the *possibility* of other-condemnation can motivate individuals to defend their social image before serious damage is done".²³ So one response might be some form of pro-social behavior, in order to bolster one's social image. For example, one might make a public apology, in order to avert the condemnation. However, it should be pointed out that this kind of pro-social behavior is not necessarily moral behavior, and further might not be a sincere expression but rather a mere means to avoid the consequences of condemnation (i.e. merely public

²⁰ Both guilt and shame are feelings one could have in response to recognizing a moral failure. While they are often linked, they can come apart. One way of differentiating the two is that guilt is focused on the act, while shame is a concern for how the action reflects on oneself. Some mistakes may be mere accidents for which one is still responsible, but which do not indicate a problem with who one is as a person. I focus on shame for two reasons. First, I take eliminating vice and acquiring virtue to be working on our moral identity, rather than a one-off reaction to a particular action we have taken. Second, shame is seemingly the more distressing of the two emotions, for calling into question not just our actions, but also our identity as a moral person.

²¹ Kristjánsson (2014) also recently set out to resolve some of the conflicting interpretations of shame found in multiple academic discourses.

²² Gausel & Leach 2011, 469.

²³ Gausel & Leach 2011, 475, their emphasis.

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relations management).²⁴ Alternatively, one might try to cover up the failure, or attempt to deny it, in order to avoid condemnation. So self-defensive reactions can also be a result of this concern for one's social image, as can withdrawal from those who condemn you.

In regard to the next two combinations, the moral failure is an indication to yourself that you suffer some sort of self-defect, regardless of how you might be appraised by others. When your actions reflect poorly on who you are as a person, it can trigger a feeling of shame, and that might have two different sorts of consequences. If it makes you feel as if you are inherently a morally bad person, where there is not much you can do about it, then that feeling of inferiority is likely to lead to defensiveness, and perhaps to anger and aggression as well. In this sense, your whole identity as a morally good person is being called into question, thus producing a lot of distress. The negative consequences that can result from this have led some to evaluate the emotion of shame in purely negative terms. However, as Gausel and Leach have argued:

Although people may describe this experience as a feeling of shame, a feeling of inferiority is a more accurate conceptualization and description. Inferiority is a highly unpleasant and intense feeling of self-criticism that people wish to be rid of. Thus, as shown in the research we reviewed above, there is some reason to expect felt inferiority to predict self-defensive responses to moral failure. Indeed, escape and avoidance is a reasonable response to an unalterable self-defect. What else can one do but run away?²⁵

This feeling of inferiority is going to be a barrier to any kind of productive response in the light of a moral failure, and people may morally disengage to avoid feeling it altogether.

One need not, however, view a self-defect as indicating that one is a morally bad person altogether, where there is nothing to do about it other than a fight-or-flight response. Shame has also been frequently shown to motivate attempts at self-improvement, in addition to restorative acts for anyone harmed by one's error. When does this seem to occur? If one views the failure as indicating only a specific defect in one's identity, then that's something that seems more likely to be repairable, as compared with an overall (or global) defect in your identity. In such situations, it is not the whole of one's identity as a morally good person that is called into question, but only a part, and as such that seems likely something that one could work on to improve.²⁶ Shame in this sense is tied to a motivation for self-improvement because self-improvement is necessary to fix this part of the self in the long run.

This form of felt shame is important for virtue. When you make a moral mistake you ought to feel bad about it, but if your only concern is about how others might react, then this would seem to indicate a failure of virtue (as in, the virtue is not valued as part of who one is, but is externalized as other people's expectations of you). So a mere concern for social image is not our target for how one ought to feel after recognizing that one has made a moral mistake. If one is instead concerned for what the mistake implies about oneself, then that is a more fitting response to recognizing that a mistake has been made. However, if what one feels is inferiority, due to regarding the failure as stemming from a morally problematic and unalterable part of oneself, then one will have little motive to make attempts at self-improvement. What we are after then is an appraisal of a self-defect that yields what one might call 'apt' shame (to distinguish it from the other emotions that are

²⁴ Furthermore, this distinction between pro-social and genuinely moral behavior don't seem to be accounted for in studies on shame, as any kind of overtly pro-social behavior is often considered good, which is likely another reason why there is conflicting evidence about responses to feeling shame.

²⁵ Gausel & Leach 2011, 476.

²⁶ Gausel, Leach, Vignoles & Brown 2012.

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sometimes felt in response, but which have all been lumped under the label ‘shame’). This apt shame is what we would need people to feel in response to moral failure, in order to motivate attempts to become more virtuous.

Emotion Differentiation and Shame

Given that we have identified apt shame as what we want people to feel in response to moral failure, the question is then: how do we nurture that feeling rather than inferiority? This is where emotion differentiation is likely to be of value, which is a skill at being able to categorize discrete emotions.²⁷ This is especially important with respect to differentiating negative (in the sense of feeling unpleasant) emotions. Differentiation allows one to take an initial global and diffuse affective state (or mood), like ‘I’m feeling bad’, and recognize that one is feeling a specific emotion – like feeling anger, disgust, fear, guilt, sadness, shame, etc.²⁸

Why is this important? Lennarz et al. point out that “[b]eing aware of one’s emotional states and understanding them as distinct states enables people to react to situational demands adequately and regulate emotions effectively”.²⁹ Differentiation helps with emotion regulation, when dealing with negatively valenced emotions, because one can then employ a specific self-regulation strategy to regulate that negative affect.³⁰ Smidt and Suvak point to evidence that those who are more skilled at emotion differentiation have been found “to utilize a wider range of negative emotion regulation strategies, particularly when they experienced their emotions at greater intensity”.³¹ In this respect, emotion differentiation is an important skill for self-knowledge.

In addition, Cameron, Payne, and Doris showed how being skilled at emotion differentiation can help prevent irrelevant emotions, like disgust, from impacting moral judgment.³² Some experiments in social psychology have indicated that manipulating emotions can influence people’s subsequent moral judgments. These incidental emotions are ones that are not directly related to the judgment, and thus should be irrelevant. However, for example, inducing disgust seems to lead to people making more severe moral judgments. The influence of these incidental emotions, as well as general moods (with either positive or negative valence), on moral judgement has already been recognized in the situationist critique of virtue.³³

Being skilled at emotion differentiation, however, can mitigate this influence of incidental emotions on moral judgment. Cameron et al. found that those skilled in emotion differentiation were not affected in their moral judgments by the priming of incidental disgust (which was done by

²⁷ Kashdan, Barrett & Mcknight 2015. Kashdan et al. are referring to ‘negative’ emotions in the sense of intense negative affect.

²⁸ It is important to note that moods are different from emotions in several respects. Where moods are diffuse, emotions have specific intentional objects (e.g. being angry about something in particular), and emotions have propositional content, which is why they can be differentiated from each other. For these and other differences, see Kristjánsson 2003, 353.

²⁹ Lennarz, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, Timmerman & Granic 2017.

³⁰ For example, cognitive behavioral therapy offers strategies for emotion regulation.

³¹ Smidt & Suvak 2015. They also intend by ‘negative’ that the feelings are negatively valenced.

³² Cameron, Payne & Doris 2013.

³³ Alfano 2013; and Miller 2013. It may also be the case that even positive connotations of an event can invalidate the moral evaluation of an event (as it doesn’t have to be merely negative like with disgust), by leading one to make less severe moral judgements that one ought to (rather than more severe as with disgust). If so, emotion differentiation may also be needed to help counteract the effect of positive moods influencing one to make less severe moral judgments than one ought to. My thanks to a reviewer for pointing this out.

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exposing participants to disgusting images). Those who could differentiate were able to recognize that they were feeling disgust, and thus could discount that as an incidental emotion that was not relevant to their moral judgment about a moral transgression they later read about.

By contrast, those who could not differentiate effectively had more severe reactions to the moral transgression. Cameron et al. claimed that:

unskilled emotion differentiators may simply report that they “feel bad” (focusing on unspecified negative valence), without distinguishing between negative emotions such as disgust and anger (they would report equivalent levels of disgust and anger because they are not conceptually differentiating between the two). Unskilled emotion differentiators do not use specific emotion concepts to categorize affect into distinct emotional states, leading their affective experiences to be broad, undifferentiated, and diffuse.³⁴

This diffuse negative affective state then colored their moral judgment, as those who were unskilled ended up misattributing their negativity entirely on the moral transgression, and ignoring the contribution made by their disgust, thus leading to a harsher overall judgment about the transgression. This happened despite the fact that they had been previously warned that disgust could have this effect. This shows that merely knowing that there is such an effect is not sufficient to counter it.

But in a second study, Cameron et al. provided participants with some training in emotion differentiation, and this helped to counter the influence of the incidental emotion. The brief training involved participants being instructed how emotions have important nuances in how they feel, and then asked participants to reflect on a variety of emotional responses that they might be having when they were later shown some highly emotional imagery. Cameron et al. stated that these “instructions were designed to encourage differentiated emotional introspection by focusing people on subtle differences between their emotions.”³⁵ By contrast, those in the control group were told to focus only on whether the emotional imagery made them feel good or bad (i.e. undifferentiated affective states). Those in the training group, who were able to engage in some deliberate practice in emotion differentiation, “showed no influence of incidental disgust on their moral judgments.”³⁶ This supported Cameron et al.’s contention that emotion differentiation can reduce the effect of incidental emotions, as well as showing the effectiveness of training emotion differentiation as a skill.

It is important to also point out that this effect was independent of the intensity of the person’s overall affective mood. Emotion differentiation does not necessarily lead to less intense emotions, even if it helps people regulate them more effectively, for people with intense negative affect were still able to ignore the effects of incidental disgust via emotion differentiation. In other words, knowing what you are feeling does not necessarily alter the intensity of it, but it does help you to know how to respond to it. Emotion differentiation presumably will be effective in counteracting effects of moods on moral judgment in other situations, since moods are undifferentiated affective states that reflect a general valence (positive or negative). Being able to differentiate effectively could allow you to change that diffuse affective state into a discrete emotion with a specific source, which you can then better regulate, even though the act of differentiation does not necessarily alter the intensity of the feeling (though you presumably could then alter it with other emotion regulation strategies).

³⁴ Cameron et al. 2013, 720.

³⁵ Cameron et al. 2013, 722.

³⁶ Cameron et al. 2013, 723.

Emotion Differentiation for Virtue as Skill

As Cameron et al. point out, emotion differentiation might help in achieving the kind of mastery of one's emotions that Aristotle discusses in relation to virtue – such as being “angry at the right things and with the right people, and further, as they ought”.³⁷ For example, those with better emotion differentiation skills are reported to have less aggressive tendencies when they are angry.³⁸ In addition, emotion differentiation might impact temperance, as it can be harder to exert self-control when experiencing negative affect. Kashdan et al. suggest that in dealing with distress, “those who struggle with emotion differentiation and regulation may be prone to unhealthy, unfocused responses to feel better that are not well tailored to the situation—such as binge drinking or physical aggression.”³⁹ Emotion differentiation seems to be a moderator between intense negative affect and these kinds of disinhibited behaviors, and thus would likely have a significant effect on the exercise of virtues that are traditionally considered as virtues of will power (i.e. self-regulation).

My concern, though, is on a different role emotion differentiation could play within the framework of virtue as skill. To recall, improvements in skill come about in part by correcting errors and overcoming limitations.⁴⁰ However, there are many factors that can create distress in response to failure, thus prompting a maladaptive response to failure that inhibits efforts at improvement. So too with virtue – improvement in virtue will require being able to acknowledge errors and limitations, so that one can practice to improve. But if one gets defensive in response to these problems being noticed or pointed out, then that is not going to motivate further efforts to improve. Here it is important to notice that Gausel and Leach's framework with respect to shame already involved differentiating a broad, undifferentiated, and diffuse feeling of ‘I feel bad’ into more specific feelings of rejection, inferiority, and shame. These discrete emotions are different in how they feel, in their appraisal of the problem, and in the behaviors that might be motivated in response. This is then similar to Cameron et al. results showing how to differentiate a diffuse feeling of ‘I feel bad’ into anger and disgust.⁴¹

Commenting on the findings of Cameron et al., Kashdan et al. note that “emotion differentiation might have its greatest impact during emotionally reactive situations, when the need for regulation is greatest.”⁴² Realizing that one has failed to act morally is likely just such a situation, and the need for regulation is apparent from the adaptive and maladaptive ways people can respond. As Lickel et al. have noted in a discussion of the different ways people respond to shame, “the emotion regulation demands of intense feelings of shame may create a self-regulatory burden that

³⁷ Aristotle 1941.

³⁸ Smidt & Suvak 2015, 50.

³⁹ Kashdan et al. 2015, 11.

⁴⁰ I should note that overcoming our limitations need not necessarily imply that any mistakes have been made, as it takes practice to try new tasks or to do existing tasks more efficiently. Thus, the learning process is not limited to only fixing errors.

⁴¹ It is worth noting though that Cameron et al. were not looking at this from the perspective of employing better self-regulation strategies once the negative affect has been specified, beyond discounting the disgust as irrelevant to the moral judgment, because they were looking at judgments of transgressions by others. This would not produce as much distress as when it is your own (or your in-group's) transgression, and it is the distress resulting from that recognition that needs to be regulated.

⁴² Kashdan et al. 2015, 13.

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ironically results in a reduced capacity for controlling the behavior that is the focus of change.”⁴³ The reduced capacity for control is what we see resulting from feelings of inferiority, as such feelings indicate that one has an unalterable moral defect, for which there is little one can do in the way of regulation.

If my suggestions here are on target, then a lack of skill in emotion differentiation might leave people basically stuck at an initial undifferentiated state of ‘I feel bad’ in response to wrong doing, and thus likely inhibiting adaptive responses to moral failure. Bringing this back to virtue as skill again, these maladaptive responses inhibit efforts at self-improvement necessary to further develop one’s virtue (or to eliminate some vice), as well as efforts to make amends to any victims. If differentiation is based on better conceptual knowledge of distinct emotions, that may go some way to helping people resolve a diffuse mood of “I feel bad”, and to make it clear that this stems from a particular issue (as it is usually unlikely to actually implicate the whole self – though that might be how people feel without further clarifying the feeling). That is, in reflecting on one’s failure, one can come to realize that it likely only points to a specific problem with oneself. Knowing the specific issue should then make self-regulation easier, by bringing to mind the proper self-regulatory strategy.

Finally, it may be that emotion differentiation is broad enough in scope to be regarded as a separate virtue of self-regulation. Kashdan et al. argue that the benefit of emotion differentiation “transcends any single psychological problem, serving as a skill that facilitates psychological and social well-being.”⁴⁴ This can be seen from some of the references earlier to how those low in emotion differentiation may struggle with self-control. Furthermore, in pursuit of so many of our goals in life, we need the abilities to change our habits, resist impulses contrary to our goals, and regulate both our thoughts and emotions. Nobody is going to live a flourishing life without these kinds of self-regulation skills. In addition, these kinds of skills are crucial for both being able to eliminate vice and to acquire virtue. One may have good intentions to change one’s behavior, but putting that into practice will be challenging. Character change, as a goal, is difficult, and will require the exercise of many skills of self-regulation to happen. This gains a special importance given Lisa Tessman’s arguments about moral damage occurring to everyone’s character (albeit it in different ways) under conditions of oppression.⁴⁵ Critiques of those in the privileged group (who actively participate in, or passively benefit from, oppression) are sure to generate a lot of distress for those who otherwise want to view themselves as morally good people.⁴⁶ Managing that distress is going to be very important in order to pursue long-term personal and social change.

Conclusion

I hope that this paper is illustrative of how an account of virtue as skill, grounded in self-regulation, will require us to think about the acquisition of virtue, by highlighting a relatively neglected issue of responses to moral failure. Learning from failure is an important part of skill acquisition, and it should be no different for virtue. Furthermore, far from being of mere secondary importance, moral failure tends to be particularly distressing, which can initiate not only responses that are in-and-of themselves far from virtuous, but also inhibit attempts to make amends and work on moral self-improvement. Here is a potential payoff of training in the skill of emotion differentiation in relation to shame, beyond the benefits of it being useful to a lot of psychological issues and its overall connection to well-being. Granted, the usefulness of this approach is still in

⁴³ Lickel, Kushlev, Savalei, Matta and Schmader 2014, 1059.

⁴⁴ Kashdan et al. 2015, 12.

⁴⁵ Tessman 2005.

⁴⁶ Gausel et al. 2012.

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need of further empirical support, but part of the interesting work to be done in virtue theory at the intersection of philosophy and psychology is of this kind.

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