1. INTRODUCTION TO A "MANUAL OF THE SANITIES"

The classification of strengths presented in this book is intended to reclaim the study of character and virtue as legitimate topics of psychological inquiry and informed societal discourse. By providing ways of talking about character strengths and measuring them across the life span, this classification will start to make possible a science of human strengths that goes beyond armchair philosophy and political rhetoric. We believe that good character can be cultivated, but to do so, we need conceptual and empirical tools to craft and evaluate interventions.

In recent years, strides have been made in understanding, treating, and preventing psychological disorders. Reflecting this progress and critically helping to bring it about are widely accepted classification manuals—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) sponsored by the American Psychiatric Association (1994) and the *International Classification of Diseases* (*ICD*) sponsored by the World Health Organization (1990)—which have generated a family of reliable assessment strategies and have led to demonstrably effective treatments for more than a dozen disorders that only a few decades ago were intractable (Nathan & Gorman, 1998, 2002; Seligman, 1994). Lagging behind but still promising in their early success are ongoing efforts to devise interventions that prevent various disorders from occurring in the first place (e.g., M. T. Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 1999).

Consensual classifications and associated approaches to assessment provide a common vocabulary for basic researchers and clinicians, allowing communication within and across these groups of professionals as well as with the general public. Previous generations of psychiatrists and psychologists had no certainty, for example, that patients in London who were diagnosed with schizophrenia had much in common with patients in Topeka receiving the same diagnosis. They had no reason to believe that an effective psychological or

pharmaceutical treatment of ostensible depressives in Johannesburg would be useful for supposed depressives in Kyoto.

With recent incarnations of the *DSM* and *ICD*, matters have begun to change, but only for half of the landscape of the human condition. We can now describe and measure much of what is wrong with people, but what about those things that are right? Nothing comparable to the *DSM* or *ICD* exists for the good life. When psychiatrists and psychologists talk about mental health, wellness, or well-being, they mean little more than the absence of disease, distress, and disorder. It is as if falling short of diagnostic criteria should be the goal for which we all should strive. Insurance companies and health maintenance organizations (HMOs) reimburse the treatment of disorders but certainly not the promotion of happiness and fulfillment. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) should really be called the National Institute of Mental Illness because it devotes but a fraction of its research budget to mental health.

This handbook focuses on what is right about people and specifically about the strengths of character that make the good life possible. We follow the example of the *DSM* and *ICD* and their collateral creations by proposing a classification scheme and by devising assessment strategies for each of its entries. The crucial difference is that the domain of concern for us is not psychological illness but psychological health. In short, our goal is "a manual of the sanities" (Easterbrook, 2001, p. 23).

We write from the perspective of positive psychology, which means that we are as focused on strength as on weakness, as interested in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst, and as concerned with fulfilling the lives of normal people as with healing the wounds of the distressed (Seligman, 2002). The past concern of psychology with human problems is of course understandable and will not be abandoned anytime in the foreseeable future. Problems always will exist that demand psychological solutions, but psychologists interested in promoting human potential need to pose different questions from their predecessors who assumed a disease model of human nature. We disavow the disease model as we approach character, and we are adamant that human strengths are not secondary, derivative, illusory, epiphenomenal, parasitic upon the negative, or otherwise suspect. Said in a positive way, we believe that character strengths are the bedrock of the human condition and that strength-congruent activity represents an important route to the psychological good life.

What distinguishes positive psychology from the humanistic psychology of the 1960s and 1970s and from the positive thinking movement is its reliance on empirical research to understand people and the lives they lead. Humanists were often skeptical about the scientific method and what it could yield yet were unable to offer an alternative other than the insight that people were good. In contrast, positive psychologists see both strength and weakness as authentic and as amenable to scientific understanding.

There are many good examples of ongoing psychological research that fit under the positive psychology umbrella (see collections by Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Chang, 2001; Gillham, 2000; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; R. M. Lerner, Jacobs, & Wertlieb, 2003; Snyder, 2000b; Snyder & Lopez, 2002), but this new field lacks a common vocabulary that agrees on the positive traits and allows psychologists to move among instances of them. We imagine that positive psychology as a whole would be benefited—indeed, shaped and transformed—by agreed-upon ways for speaking about the positive, just as the *DSM* and *ICD* have shaped psychiatry, clinical psychology, and social work by providing a way to speak about the negative. We believe that the classification of character presented here is an important step toward a common vocabulary of measurable positive traits.

Our project coincides with heightened societal concern about good character (Hunter, 2000). After a detour through the hedonism of the 1960s, the narcissism of the 1970s, the materialism of the 1980s, and the apathy of the 1990s, most everyone today seems to believe that character is important after all and that the United States is facing a character crisis on many fronts, from the playground to the classroom to the sports arena to the Hollywood screen to business corporations to politics. According to a 1999 survey by Public Agenda, adults in the United States cited "not learning values" as the most important problem facing today's youth. Notably, in the public's view, drugs and violence trailed the absence of character as pressing problems.

But what is character? So long as we fail to identify the specifics, different groups in our society—despite their common concern for human goodness—will simply talk past one another when attempting to address the issue. For instance, is character defined by what someone does *not* do, or is there a more active meaning? Is character a singular characteristic of an individual, or is it composed of different aspects? Does character—however we define it—exist in degrees, or is character just something that one happens, like pregnancy, to have or not? How does character develop? Can it be learned? Can it be taught, and who might be the most effective teacher? What roles are played by families, schools, peers, youth development programs, the media, religious institutions, and the larger culture? Is character socially constructed and laden with idiosyncratic values, or are there universals suggesting a more enduring basis?

The emerging field of positive psychology is positioned to answer these sorts of questions. Positive psychology focuses on three related topics: the study of positive subjective experiences, the study of positive individual traits, and the study of institutions that enable positive experiences and positive traits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Our classification project addresses the second of these topics and in so doing hopes to shed light on the first. One eventual benefit of the classification we propose may be the identification or even the deliberate creation of institutions that enable good character.

■ Thinking About Classification: Lessons From Systematics

Like everyday people, social scientists are fond of making lists: for example, enumerating defense mechanisms, emotional disorders, personality traits, job types, psychosexual stages, parenting practices, attachment styles, and so on. Unlike everyday people, social scientists often go on to reify their lists by giving them "scientific" labels like classifications or taxonomies. Scientific credibility is not gained by assertion but by making sure that the label fits. We call our endeavor an aspirational classification. What does this mean?

A *scientific classification* parses some part of the universe first by demarcating its domain and second by specifying mutually exclusive and exhaustive subcategories within that domain. Both sorts of parsing rules need to be explicit and demonstrably reliable. The validity of a classification is judged by its utility vis-à-vis one or more stated purposes. Are classifiers more interested in marking the perimeter of a scientific territory or in detailing an already agreed-upon domain? Is the classification intended to catalog already known instances or to accommodate new ones as they are encountered? Is it intended to inspire research or to guide intervention?

A classification should not be confused with a *taxonomy,* which is based on a deep theory that explains the domain of concern (K. D. Bailey, 1994). Why these entries but not others? What is the underlying structure? That is, how do the entries relate to one another? When melded with evolutionary theory, for example, the Linnaean classification of species becomes a profound theory of life and the course that it has taken over the millennia. A good taxonomy has the benefits of a good theory: It organizes and guides the activity of an entire discipline.

But there is an important caution here. Along with their added value, taxonomies have a cost not incurred by classifications. Suppose the theory that girds a taxonomy is wrong, contradictory, or inarticulate? Then the activity that is organized and guided becomes self-defeating. Furthermore, it proves highly difficult to change the entries of a taxonomy, even in minor ways, because so much else linked together by the deep theory needs to be altered as a consequence.

Our classification is concerned with human strengths and virtues. From the perspective of positive psychology, itself a new endeavor, the domain of human excellence is largely unexplored. At the beginning of this project, we created a tentative "taxonomy," but it proved beyond our ability to specify a reasonable theory (as a taxonomy requires). However, our efforts did convince us that it was possible to approach closely the classification goals of staking out territory (i.e., defining virtues valued in most cultures) and subdividing it (i.e., specifying instances of these virtues). Our measurement intent of necessity led us to articulate explicit rules for what counts as a strength or not (inclusion and exclusion criteria) and for distinguishing various strengths from one another. These rules further provide the basis for adding new instances of character strengths to the classification.

We already knew our constituencies—psychology researchers and practitioners—and their needs kept us on task as we devised assessment strategies. We disavow all intents to propose a taxonomy in the technical sense, even though previous drafts of our work used that term. A modest description of our endeavor—an aspirational classification of strengths and virtues—preserves the flexibility necessary to proceed. A thoughtful classification, even if tentative, will serve the goals of psychology more productively than a flawed taxonomy, even if the surface entries look exactly the same. We trust to the emerging field of positive psychology as a whole to create one or more theories that will conceptually unify our classification.

■ Thinking About Classification Part Two: Lessons From the *DSM*

As noted, an older cousin of our classification of strengths and virtues is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) sponsored by the American Psychiatric Association (1952, 1968, 1980, 1987, 1994). A catalog of problematic ways of behaving, the *DSM* for several reasons has been a runaway success. First, it has made research into psychological disorders possible by providing a common vocabulary that lends itself to scientific operationalization (measurement). More subtly, the *DSM* has guided research programs by legitimizing investigations of some disorders rather than others. Finally, important societal institutions have endorsed the *DSM*, explicitly or implicitly: the American Psychiatric Association with its imprimatur, NIMH with its funding, insurance companies and HMOs with their reimbursement codes, the pharmaceutical industry, psychiatry and clinical psychology journals, and textbook publishers. Whatever one might think of the *DSM*, one must be conversant with its details in order to function as a mental "health" professional.

The *DSM* is far from perfect, and its weaknesses as well as it strengths have guided us. What are the positive and negative lessons that can be learned from the various incarnations of the *DSM* over its 50-year history? On the positive side, the *DSM* has moved toward behaviorally based criteria and proposed explicit rules for recognizing disorders of interest; it has spawned a family of structured clinical interviews and self-report questionnaires that allow these disorders to be reliably assessed; and, at least in principle, it has moved toward multidimensional (multiaxial) description, doing justice to the complexity of the subject matter it tries to organize. Thus, a full *DSM* diagnosis notes not only clinical disorders (Axis I) but also personality and developmental disorders (Axis II), medical conditions (Axis III), prevailing stressors (Axis IV), and global level of functioning (Axis V).

Following the *DSM* example, our classification includes explicit criteria for character strengths, and it has led us to develop a family of assessment devices (chapter 28). Finally, the present classification is multiaxial in the sense that it

directs the attention of positive psychology not only to character strengths but also to talents and abilities, to conditions that enable or disable the strengths, to fulfillments that are associated with the strengths, and to outcomes that may ensue from them.

There are also negative lessons of the *DSM*, especially from the viewpoint of psychology (Schacht & Nathan, 1977). This taxonomy is focused too much on transient symptoms; it is reductionistic and at the same time overly complex, shaped by temporary trends within psychiatry (Vaillant, 1984). Even the current version of the *DSM* lacks an overall scheme, fails to be exhaustive, and—given its medical roots—does not attend much to the individual's setting and culture. It uses categories rather than dimensions, and mixed or not otherwise specified (NOS) diagnoses are among the most frequently used. Many diagnostic entities are so heterogeneous that two individuals warranting the same diagnosis could have no symptoms in common. *DSM* disorders are not well located in their developmental trajectory. Some critics have argued that considerations of reliability have crowded out considerations of validity, and in any event that there are too many disorders (more than 300), perhaps by an order of magnitude or more (Goodwin & Guze, 1996).

What are the implications for our classification of these negative lessons? We hope to do for the domain of moral excellence (character strengths and virtues) what the *DSM* does well for disorders while avoiding what it does poorly. Thus, our classification is based on an overall structure of moral virtues suggested by our historical and cross-cultural reviews. It includes a manageable number of character strengths (24) and is open to the possibility of consolidating those that prove empirically indistinguishable, as well as adding new strengths that are distinct. It approaches character strengths as individual differences—as continua and not categories—and is sensitive to the developmental differences in which character strengths are displayed and deployed. Finally, our creation of assessment instruments never subordinated validity issues to those of reliability.

It is ironic that many of the shortcomings of the *DSM* have resulted from its very success. *DSM-III* and its subsequent versions grew out of a modest attempt some thirty years ago by researchers to standardize the operational definitions of a handful of psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia and manic depression (Feighner et al., 1972). Reliability was the chief goal, and the psychiatric research community was the intended audience. The research diagnostic criteria (RDC) that were the seeds of the modern *DSM* were intended only to be a starting point for research, a common vocabulary to facilitate communication among different research groups investigating ostensibly the same disorder. No one envisioned that the RDC would grow into the dominant taxonomy of psychopathology worldwide, carrying along all that the term taxonomy conveys: for example, implication of a theoretical deep structure, exhaustiveness, reification, and accountability to multiple (and quarreling) constituencies.

We have no way of forecasting the eventual success of the present classification, but we will be satisfied if it provides to psychologists ways of thinking about strengths, naming them, and measuring them. Its proof will be in the science that develops around it, including thoughtful interventions that nurture character strengths in the first place or get them back on track if they have gone astray.

We express two related worries about the science of good character that we envision. First, this science will not thrive if it generates only ho-hum findings that every Sunday school teacher or grandparent already knew. It would be important to show, for example, that prudent individuals avoid unwanted pregnancies or that loving people have good marriages, but these results are not all that interesting. They would not attract to positive psychology the most curious and imaginative scientists from future generations. More intriguing are findings such as:

- the diminishing returns of material wealth for increasing subjective well-being (D. G. Myers & Diener, 1995)
- the lack of realism associated with optimism (Alloy & Abramson, 1979)
- the forecasting of presidential elections from the positive traits of candidates (Zullow, Oettingen, Peterson, & Seligman, 1988)
- the increased life expectancy of Academy Award winners relative to runners-up (Redelmeier & Singh, 2001)
- the increased life expectancy of those who hold a positive view of aging (B. R. Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002)
- the prediction of marital satisfaction from smiles in college yearbooks (Harker & Keltner, 2001)
- the foretelling of longevity from expressions of happiness in essays by young adults (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001)

Second, we hope that the new science of character addresses explicitly what is invigorating about the good life. As we have written parts of this book, we sometimes found ourselves sounding like bad evangelists, going on and on about virtue but convincing no one, even ourselves, that virtue is worth pursuing. We do not want a grim-faced Cotton Mather as the poster child of positive psychology.

The solution to these potential pitfalls is not at hand. If it were, we would have made it an integral part of our proposed classification. We suspect that the solution lies in yet-to-be-articulated good theory that makes sense of the classification entries, individually and collectively. To hark back to a distinction already made, positive psychology will thrive when classifications like the one here evolve into taxonomies—when there become available one or more deep theories of the good life.

We also suspect that it will be useful for psychologists to keep in mind that our classification is grounded in a long philosophical tradition concerned

with morality explained in terms of virtues. The very first Greek philosophers asked, "What is the good of a person?" This framing of morality led them to examine character and in particular virtues. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and others enumerated such virtues, regarding them as the traits of character that make someone a good person.

Moral philosophy changed with the growing influence of Christianity, which saw God as the giver of laws by which one should live. Righteous conduct no longer stemmed from inner virtues but rather from obedience to the commandments of God. The guiding question therefore changed from inquiries about the traits of a good person to "What are the right things to do?" As Christianity waned in importance, divine law eventually gave way to a secular equivalent dubbed moral law, but the focus remained on specifying the rules of right conduct as opposed to strengths of character. Such well-known ethical systems as ethical egoism, utilitarianism, and social contract theory fall under the umbrella of moral law.

In recent decades, there have been calls within philosophy for a return to the ethics of virtue, starting with Anscombe's (1958) influential criticism that modern moral philosophy was incomplete because it rested on the notion of a law without a lawgiver. Virtue ethics is the contemporary approach within philosophy to strengths of character, and we believe that virtues are much more interesting than laws, at least to psychologists, because virtues pertain to people and the lives they lead. Said another way, psychology needs to downplay prescriptions for the good life (moral laws) and instead emphasize the why and how of good character.

■ Unpacking Character

There are various ways to approach character. A *DSM*-like approach would talk about it as unitary and categorical—one either has character or not. Or one could think about character in terms of underlying processes such as autonomy or reality orientation. One might wed it to an a priori theory. One could view character as only a social construction, revealing of the observer's values but not of who or what is observed. But in all these respects we have taken a different approach.

The stance we take toward character is in the spirit of personality psychology, and specifically that of trait theory, but not the caricature of trait theory held up as a straw man and then criticized by social learning theorists in the 1970s. We instead rely on the new psychology of traits that recognizes individual differences that are stable and general but also shaped by the individual's setting and thus capable of change. The initial step in our project is therefore to unpack the notion of character—to start with the assumption that character is plural—and we do so by specifying the separate strengths and virtues, then devising ways to assess these as individual differences. What we learn can be

used to answer other questions about character: its dimensionality, its stability, its enabling conditions and consequences, and so on.

Some of our colleagues who are just as concerned with the good life prefer to look exclusively outside the individual to identify and create the conditions that enable health. They either distrust the notion of character because of its inadvertent political connotations or believe that psychological factors pale in comparison to the impact of situations. We also believe that positive traits need to be placed in context; it is obvious that they do not operate in isolation from the settings, proximal and distal, in which people are to be found. A sophisticated psychology locates psychological characteristics within people and people within their settings broadly construed. Some settings and situations lend themselves to the development and/or display of strengths, whereas other settings and situations preclude them. Settings cannot be allowed to recede into the distant background when we focus on strengths.

Enabling conditions as we envision them are often the province of disciplines other than psychology, but we hope for a productive partnership with these other fields in understanding the settings that allow the strengths to develop. Our common sense tells us that enabling conditions include educational and vocational opportunity, a supportive and consistent family, safe neighborhoods and schools, political stability, and (perhaps) democracy. The existence of mentors, role models, and supportive peers—inside or outside the immediate family—are probably also enabling conditions. There is no reason to think that these conditions equally predispose each of the strengths of interest to us or conversely that all the strengths are equally enabled by a given condition.

We can only do so much at present, but a future goal would be to characterize the properties of settings that enable strengths and virtues (Park & Peterson, 2003b). This characterization would point to features of the physical environment (e.g., naturalness, beauty, and feng shui as studied by environmental psychologists); the social environment (e.g., empowerment as studied by social workers and community psychologists); and both (e.g., predictability and controllability as studied by learning psychologists, novelty and variety as studied by organizational psychologists).

With this said, it is just as obvious that individuals and their traits need to be accorded a central role in understanding the good life. It is individual people, after all, who lead these lives. Despite the importance of the situation in shaping the characteristics of people, everyone brings something to the situation, and everyone takes something away from it. Among the most important of these "somethings" is character, construed as positive traits. The hazards of a personless environmentalism are well known within psychology, and we do not intend to blunder into them.

Another reason to avoid radical environmentalism is that it is spectacularly unwieldy to talk about the good life as being imposed on a person, in the way

that psychological troubles can be imposed by trauma and stress. Situations of course make it more or less difficult to live well, but the good life reflects choice and will. Quality life does not simply happen because the Ten Commandments hang on a classroom wall or because children are taught a mantra about just saying no. Again, character construed as positive traits allows us to acknowledge and explain these features of the good life. What makes life worth living is not ephemeral. It does not result from the momentary tickling of our sensory receptors by chocolate, alcohol, or Caribbean vacations. The good life is lived over time and across situations, and an examination of the good life in terms of positive traits is demanded. Strengths of character provide the needed explanation for the stability and generality of a life well lived.

In focusing on strengths of character, we expect them to be numerous but not overwhelmingly so. We treat them as individual differences, in principle and often in practice distinct from one another. We treat them as stable, by definition, but also as malleable, again by definition.

In this first chapter, we lay the foundation of our classification: (a) the overall scheme we devised, which rests on distinctions among virtues, character strengths, and situational themes; (b) the process by which we generated and decided upon entries; and (c) the criteria for a character strength we used to decide which candidate strengths to include and which to exclude. In the course of describing the foundation, we also mention:

- the differences between strengths of character on the one hand and talents and abilities on the other hand
- the situational conditions that enable or disable strengths
- the fulfillments that are inherent aspects of the exercise of character strengths
- the outcomes that may follow from strengths

The focus of the present classification is on strengths, just as the focus of the *DSM* is on clinical disorders. Also like the *DSM*, our classification recognizes that its domain must eventually be described in multiaxial terms. Thus, the identification of someone's signature character strengths would be noted on an Axis I, whereas talents and abilities, enabling and disabling conditions, fulfillments, and outcomes would be noted on additional axes.

■ Distinguishing Virtues, Character Strengths, and Situational Themes

We have found it useful to recognize the components of good character as existing at different levels of abstraction. Thus, our classification scheme is not only horizontal but also vertical (specifying different conceptual levels in a hierarchy). Philosophical approaches to character also propose hierarchies among

virtues, but for a different purpose. Because enumerated virtues are numerous and potentially in conflict, philosophers introduce a hierarchy to explain when one or another virtue should be manifested. Indeed, a great deal of discussion has tried to enumerate master virtues (e.g., wisdom, courage, love) that take precedence over all the others. None has won universal acceptance, and we suspect that the master varies across cultures and individuals.

Regardless, our hierarchy is one of abstraction. As psychologists, we are less daunted than philosophers about adjudicating conflicts among character strengths because the relationship of traits to action and the melding of disparate traits into a singular self are after all the concerns of modern personality psychology. The present classification lists character strengths, as have philosophers for centuries, but our categories bring with them rich psychological content and strategies of measurement and hence explanatory power out of the realm and reach of philosophy.

Our hierarchical classification of positive characteristics was modeled deliberately on the Linnaean classification of species, which also ranges from the concrete and specific (the individual organism) through increasingly abstract and general categories (population, subspecies, species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, kingdom, and domain). We distinguish three conceptual levels:

Virtues are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These six broad categories of virtue emerge consistently from historical surveys, as detailed in chapter 2. We argue that these are universal, perhaps grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence as means of solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species. We speculate that all these virtues must be present at above-threshold values for an individual to be deemed of good character.

Character strengths are the psychological ingredients—processes or mechanisms—that define the virtues. Said another way, they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues. For example, the virtue of wisdom can be achieved through such strengths as creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, and what we call perspective—having a "big picture" on life. These strengths are similar in that they all involve the acquisition and use of knowledge, but they are also distinct. Again, we regard these strengths as ubiquitously recognized and valued, although a given individual will rarely, if ever, display all of them. We are comfortable saying that someone is of good character if he or she displays but 1 or 2 strengths within a virtue group. Our classification includes 24 strengths, positive traits like bravery, kindness, and hope. At this juncture, we intend these strengths as neither exclusive nor exhaustive, but we expect that subsequent research will help us achieve a nearly exclusive and exhaustive list. This sort of goal has eluded the *DSM*, perhaps because its entries have become too entrenched and attracted too many constituencies, but we intend differently for our classification.

Situational themes are the specific habits that lead people to manifest given character strengths in given situations. The enumeration of themes must take place setting by setting, and it is only for the workplace that this inquiry has begun in earnest. The Gallup Organization has identified hundreds of themes relevant to excellence in the workplace, of which 34 are especially common in the contemporary United States (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Among the Gallup Organization's situational work themes are empathy (anticipating and meeting the needs of others), inclusiveness (making others feel part of the group), and positivity (seeing what is good in situations and people).

Remember that these themes are meant to describe how one relates to others in the workplace, but if we look at them a bit more abstractly, empathy, inclusiveness, and positivity all reflect the same character strength of kindness. And if we look at kindness even more abstractly, this character strength—along with the strengths we call love and social intelligence—falls into the broad virtue class of humanity.

On a conceptual level, themes differ from character strengths in several crucial ways. First, they are thoroughly located in specific situations. Work themes are different from family themes, for example, although there may be some overlap in labels. Someone may be competitive at work and at home, but these themes manifest themselves differently. In other cases, a theme may make sense only for describing conduct in a given setting. Even within a domain like work or family, themes may differ across cultures, cohorts, gender, and other important social contrasts. Including themes in our scheme buffers us against the legitimate criticism that there is huge sociocultural variation in how people conceive of goodness. The variation exists at the level of themes, less so at the level of character strengths, and not at all—we assert—at the level of virtues.

Finally, themes per se are neither good nor bad; they can be used to achieve strengths and hence contribute to virtues, but they can also be harnessed to silly or wrong purposes. A sprinter does well (as an athletic competitor) if she tries to run her races as quickly as possible, but a spouse probably does not do well (as a marital partner) if speed is the paramount consideration. A related point about themes is that people can achieve the same result by using different configurations of them. There are different ways to be a good clerk, a good teacher, or—for our purposes—a good person. What is critical is that someone finds a venue in which his or her themes are productive for the desired end.

■ Generating Entries for the Classification

We generated the entries for the classification by work on different fronts. Initial brainstorming involved a core group of scholars (Donald Clifton, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, Ed Diener, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Robert Nozick, Daniel Robinson, Martin Seligman, and George Vaillant), who created a tentative list

of human strengths. Christopher Peterson later joined this group and helped elaborate the initial list, which was presented at several positive psychology conferences and further refined after discussions with conference participants too numerous to mention. Between conferences, Peterson and Seligman devised the framework for defining and conceptualizing strengths that structures this book. Especially helpful were several conversations among Peterson, Seligman, and Marcus Buckingham of the Gallup Organization about the relationship between the present classification and Gallup's work on workplace themes. Also critical were surveys by Peterson of pertinent literatures that addressed good character, from psychiatry, youth development, philosophy, and of course psychology (see chapter 3 for summaries of these literature reviews).

We also collected dozens of inventories of virtues and strengths, from historical luminaries like Charlemagne (S. E. Turner, 1880) and Benjamin Franklin (1790/1961) to contemporary figures like William Bennett (1993) and Sir John Templeton (1995). We consulted statements by the Boy Scouts of America and the Girl Guides of Canada as well as those attributed, with tongue in cheek, to the Klingon Empire. We looked at the goals specified by advocates of character education programs (e.g., M. W. Berkowitz, 2000) and social work from the strengths perspective (e.g., Saleebey, 1992). We identified virtue-relevant messages in Hallmark greeting cards, bumper stickers, *Saturday Evening Post* covers by Norman Rockwell, personal ads, popular song lyrics, graffiti, Tarot cards, the profiles of Pokémon characters, and the residence halls of Hogworts.

Our intent was to leave no stone unturned in identifying candidate strengths for the classification. We combined redundancies and used the criteria described in the next section to winnow the list further. Had we neglected any character strengths deemed important by others, no matter how vaguely defined these might be? And if we had left out someone's enumerated strength, did we have a good reason? For example, we excluded from our classification talents and abilities (e.g., intelligence) and characteristics not valued across all cultures (e.g., cleanliness, frugality, silence). We were not bothered if we had included a virtue or strength not specified in a particular catalog, because the purpose of each catalog dictates its emphases. For example, Charlemagne's code of chivalry for knights of the Holy Roman Empire did not urge them to appreciate beauty, but why should it have? Nor did it urge upon them bravery, because that virtue was a given.

Our initial brainstorming about positive characteristics spontaneously took place at the level of character strengths, which in retrospect suggests that they constitute what Rosch and colleagues (1976) labeled a "natural" level of categorization. Strengths are akin to cats and dogs, tables and chairs: categories that people readily use to make sense of the world in which they live (in this case the moral character of themselves and others). Rosch et al. proposed that natural categories emerge as a way for people to categorize the world at a level that maximizes the perceptual similarity among objects within a category and the

perceptual dissimilarity between these objects and those in other categories. Consider this hierarchy:

- kitchen table
- table
- furniture

Their argument is that table represents the basic—that is, natural—level at which people most easily categorize objects. Kitchen table is too concrete, whereas furniture is too abstract. Empirical studies support this idea, showing that cognitive processes such as recognition proceed most efficiently when content is at the basic level. Also, when children start to name objects, they first use terms from the basic level. "Perception" in this analysis should not be taken too literally because it is clear that natural categories exist not just in the realm of things that can literally be seen but also in less tangible realms, such as abnormality or, in the present case, character.

There is an important implication of viewing character strengths as natural categories: Each category encompasses a group of related traits. Together, this group of traits captures the "family resemblance" of the strength, although given traits within the same category are *not* exact replicas of one another (Wittgenstein, 1953). We emphasize this point because we introduce the character strengths in most cases by listing related traits. Thus, the character strength of hope is rendered fully as hope, optimism, future-mindedness, and future orientation (chapter 25). But the reader should not expect to find detailed distinctions within these lists. We instead emphasize the family resemblance.

We call this strategy one of *piling on synonyms,* and besides being faithful to the actual semantic texture of natural categories, it pays the benefit of minimizing subtle connotations, political and otherwise, associated with any given synonym. Thus, "hope" has Christian connotations, which we do not wish to emphasize, whereas "future orientation" has socioeconomic connotations, which we likewise do not wish to emphasize. The only downside is that our shorthand identification of a strength (e.g., "hope") may not convey the acknowledged heterogeneity of the strength.

■ Criteria for a Strength of Character

In this book, we focus on character strengths, the intermediate level of our classification, because they represent a good balance between the concrete (themes) and the abstract (moral virtues). To be included as a character strength, a positive characteristic must satisfy most of the following 10 criteria. These criteria were articulated after we had identified many dozens of candidate strengths and needed a way to consolidate them. We came up with these 10 criteria by scru-

tinizing the candidate strengths and looking for common features. About half of the strengths included in our classification meet all 10 criteria, but the other half of them do not. Thus, these criteria are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for character strengths but rather pertinent features that, taken together, capture a "family resemblance" (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953).

CRITERION 1 *A strength contributes to various fulfillments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others. Although strengths and virtues determine how an individual copes with adversity, our focus is on how they fulfill an individual.*

In keeping with the broad premise of positive psychology, strengths allow the individual to achieve more than the absence of distress and disorder. They "break through the zero point" of psychology's traditional concern with disease, disorder, and failure to address quality of life (Peterson, 2000).

There is a long tradition within philosophy that discusses the meaning of fulfillment. Hedonists and epicurians notwithstanding, most other philosophers agree that fulfillment should not be confused with momentary pleasure or happiness per se, if happiness is construed only as the presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect (Seligman, 2002). Rather, what counts as a fulfillment must pass the *deathbed test.* How might people, if able to collect their thoughts in the face of death, complete the sentence: "I wish I had spent more time _____"? It is doubtful that anyone would say "visiting Disneyland" or "eating butter pecan ice cream." These activities are fun but not fulfilling. At least in our society, the deathbed test is instead met by activities that pertain to work and love broadly construed, as in "I wish I had spent more time making a mark on the world" and "I wish I had spent more time getting to know my children and being kind to my friends." In a less secular society, people might wish that they had spent more time praising God and giving thanks.

It seems that fulfillments must reflect effort, the willful choice and pursuit over time of morally praiseworthy activities. This is why we chose our language carefully to say that character strengths "contribute" to fulfillments rather than "cause" them in the automatic way that Jägermeister causes intoxication. There are no shortcuts to fulfillment.

We hope this analysis does not smack too strongly of Puritanism. We are not opposed to pleasure, and we are certainly not opposed to shortcuts. Self-adhering postage stamps, cruise control, panty hose, plastic garbage bags with drawstrings, microwave popcorn, air-conditioning, canned foods, and automatic redial are among the most noteworthy inventions of the modern world precisely because they are shortcuts. But the value of these and other shortcuts is that they save time and effort that would otherwise be spent on unfulfilling pursuits. The moral significance of a shortcut is only indirect, judged by what one does with the time and effort that have been saved.

What, then, is this contributory relationship of character strengths to fulfillments? Our thinking here has been by the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia,* which holds that well-being is not a consequence of virtuous action but rather an inherent aspect of such action. We want to allow for the possibility that some of the ostensible outcomes of the strengths (fulfillments) do not show up at some later point in time, caused as it were by the strength, but instead are part and parcel of the actions that manifest the strength. For example, when you do a favor for someone, your act does not cause you to be satisfied with yourself at some later point in time; being satisfied is an inherent aspect of being helpful.

At present, we have little data on this point, but we believe that given people possess *signature strengths* akin to what Allport (1961) identified decades ago as personal traits. These are strengths of character that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises. In interviews with adults, we find that everyone can readily identify a handful of strengths as very much their own, typically between three and seven (just as Allport proposed). Here are possible criteria for a signature strength:

- a sense of ownership and authenticity ("this is the real me") vis-à-vis the strength
- a feeling of excitement while displaying it, particularly at first
- a rapid learning curve as themes are attached to the strength and practiced
- continuous learning of new ways to enact the strength
- a sense of yearning to act in accordance with the strength
- a feeling of inevitability in using the strength, as if one cannot be stopped or dissuaded from its display
- the discovery of the strength as owned in an epiphany
- invigoration rather than exhaustion when using the strength
- the creation and pursuit of fundamental projects that revolve around the strength
- intrinsic motivation to use the strength

Our hypothesis is that the exercise of signature strengths is fulfilling, and these criteria convey the motivational and emotional features of fulfillment with terms like *excitement, yearning, inevitability, discovery*, and *invigoration.*

The positing of signature strengths linked to the individual's sense of self and identity helps us avoid the trap of equating a strength with a given behavior taken out of context (e.g., operationally defining honesty as "saying whatever one thinks or feels at the moment the impulse flits through consciousness regardless of the circumstances") and then discovering that by this definition, honesty often produces interpersonal disaster. This behavior is *not* in accord with the spirit of honesty. Assessment of strengths is made more difficult by these considerations, but they are imperative. Again, attention to the setting is demanded.

CRITERION 2 *Although strengths can and do produce desirable outcomes, each strength is morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes.*

A pragmatic larger society will want to be convinced that character strengths produce more than their own reward, that their exercise reduces the likelihood of distress and dysfunction while encouraging tangible outcomes like:

- subjective well-being (happiness)
- acceptance of oneself
- reverence for life
- competence, efficacy, and mastery
- mental and physical health
- rich and supportive social networks
- respect by and for others
- satisfying work
- material sufficiency
- healthy communities and families

If there were not at least some statistical link between strengths and such outcomes, they would not have appeared across cultures and lasted throughout time. Strengths allow problems of survival to be solved.

However, these outcomes are not part of the definition of a character strength. If a strength is recognized only when it produces a payoff, we do not need the notion of good character to account for human conduct. We can return to a radical behaviorism and speak only of prevailing rewards and punishments. But as Aristotle and other philosophers concerned with virtue persuasively argue, actions undertaken solely for external reasons cannot be considered virtuous, precisely because they are coaxed or coerced, carroted or sticked.

To say that a strength is *morally* valued is an important qualification, because there exist individual differences that are widely valued, contribute to fulfillment, and qualify as signature characteristics (meeting many, if not all, of the hypothesized criteria just enumerated) but still fall outside our classification. Consider intelligence, facial symmetry, immunocompetence, or athletic prowess. These talents and abilities are cut from a different cloth than character strengths like valor or kindness, but what is the difference?

We have devoted considerable thought to the distinction between strengths and virtues on the one hand versus talents and abilities on the other.[1] Talents

[1]Hampering this distinction are Western intellectual trends to which we are heir. For example, the Greeks used the term *virtue* to include both moral character and talent, and the word *virtuoso* has survived in the talent domain (although, interestingly, not in the character domain). In Renaissance Florence, physical beauty and moral goodness were regarded as part and parcel of the same individual difference, at least for upper-class women (O'Neill, 2001), and we still may labor under the assumption that what is beautiful is good (cf. Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972).

and abilities on the face of it seem more innate, more immutable, and less voluntary than strengths and virtues. These of course are matters of degree. So, the talent of perfect pitch is always discussed as if it were more innate than the strengths of kindness or modesty, but the ability to read train schedules certainly is not. And suppose it turns out that the character strengths in the present classification prove to be heritable? All other investigated individual differences seem to have some basis in genetic variation, so why not curiosity, for example, or even spirituality and leadership?

To be sure, no one will ever discover single genes that code for specific moral virtues, and any biogenetic account of character will ultimately be phrased in terms of heritable raw ingredients interacting with specific environments and experiences. But the same account already exists for many talents and abilities, so where is the distinction?

We are left, somewhat reluctantly, with the conclusion that character strengths differ from talents and abilities at least because they fall in the moral domain. This is a less-than-satisfactory conclusion because we must cede the designation of a character strength to the larger society and culture. Our early efforts in creating this classification were done with the worry that we would create a list of characteristics that reflected only our own take on the good life. We think we have avoided this problem because we did not include characteristics valued only at the turn of the new century by upper-middle-class agnostic European American academic males (e.g., diversified investment portfolios, wireless Internet access, and reduced teaching loads). As emphasized, the virtues and strengths we include here are ubiquitously recognized as moral across cultures.

There are two further answers that clarify the distinction between character strengths and other dimensions of virtuosity. First is the role played by effort and will in the exercise of these characteristics. Basketball player Michael Jordan was revered for his athletic ability but also for his refusal to lose. In both cases, the talent/strength was practiced and nurtured, but those of us who are not delusional recognize that we can never soar through the air like Michael, with or without the shoes he endorsed. We can imagine, however, that we might arise from our sickbed to do our job as best we can, as Jordan did in a 1997 playoff game against the Utah Jazz, in which only his temperature (103°) exceeded his point total (38). This storied performance represented the melding of a talent with a character strength, yet it is the latter that we value morally.

This chapter is not the right forum for a discussion of free will and determinism, so we will just note in passing our strong suspicion that positive psychology, as the field evolves, will necessarily lead social scientists to grapple anew with the crucial role in human activity played by choice. A morally praiseworthy action is chosen in a way that a merely skilled action is not. All people can aspire to have strong character in a way that they cannot aspire to be good-looking or physically resilient.

A second distinction between character strengths and talents is that the latter seem valued more for their tangible consequences (acclaim, wealth) than are the former. Someone who "does nothing" with a talent like a high IQ or musical skill courts eventual disdain. Witness the ridicule directed at Michael Jordan when he abandoned basketball to pursue a baseball career or the dismay we experience when extremely talented individuals like Judy Garland, Lenny Bruce, Andy Gibb, or Darryl Strawberry are overwhelmed by drug problems. In contrast, we never hear the criticism that a person did nothing with his or her wisdom or kindness. Said another way, talents and abilities can be squandered, but strengths and virtues cannot.

CRITERION 3 *The display of a strength by one person does not diminish other people in the vicinity.*

In many if not most cases, onlookers are elevated by their observation of virtuous action. Admiration is created more than jealousy because character strengths are the sorts of characteristics to which most can—and do—aspire. The more people surrounding us who are kind, or curious, or full of hope, the greater our own likelihood of acting in these ways. Said another way, strengths accompany non-zero-sum games (Wright, 1999). All are winners when someone acts in accordance with his or her strengths and virtues.

One can be skeptical of this criterion, and three reasons are cited to support this skepticism. First, morally praiseworthy acts by others may create shame among those of us who are less brave or less kind. The likelihood of such a reaction is unknown but an interesting empirical issue, as is how people react to such shame. We speculate that many may rise to the next available occasion, which means that they indeed have been elevated by what they have observed.

The second reason for skepticism is that people with ostensibly good character are phony—their virtuous deeds mask insecurity or even deeper psychopathology. A common theme in literature as well as contemporary shock journalism is the moral undressing of a supposedly good person. We are intrigued by these sorts of stories, even as they leave us feeling empty, but are they the rule? And even if true, do the strengths somehow arise only as defenses against the vices? The answer from positive psychology is that we want to see the evidence before dismissing all instances of human goodness as mere displays, disguises, or displacements. And there is no such evidence. Indeed, what runs through the examples of clay-footed celebrities other than the obvious transgressions is some sort of false righteousness on the part of the transgressor. The real sin may not be the obvious one but the failure of authenticity on the part of the sinner.

Another point here is that we see character as plural, and that the existence of nonvirtuous activity (with respect to one strength) does not mean that the individual cannot display other strengths. That baseball manager Pete Rose may have bet on baseball games does not diminish the enthusiasm he displayed for decades as a player.

A third reason that goodness is viewed with skepticism is that virtuous people are thought to be boring. Remember Billy Joel's song lyric that he would rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints, because the sinners are much more fun? In a more serious venue, Wolf (1982) phrased the argument this way:

> If the moral saint is devoting all his time to feeding the hungry or healing the sick or raising money for Oxfam then necessarily he is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his backhand. Although no one of the interests or tastes in the category containing these latter activities could be claimed to be a necessary element in a life well lived, a life in which *none* of these possible aspects of character are developed may seem to be a life strangely barren. (p. 421)

This point would have merit if it were empirically the case that good deeds preclude the development of nonmoral interests, but how could this be true? Character strengths pervade many activities, including reading, music, and sports, and they are associated with popularity (chapter 28). Wolf further said, "I don't know whether there are any moral saints" (p. 419), to which we respond that she looked in the wrong places and at the wrong sorts of activity.

CRITERION 4 *Being able to phrase the "opposite" of a putative strength in a felicitous way counts against regarding it as a character strength.*

Consider flexibility. One can render its opposite in an undesirable way (as inflexibility) but just as easily in a desirable way (as steadfastness). For almost all character strengths and virtues, anyone with a thesaurus can find approximate antonyms with desirable connotations, but the issue is the ease with which this can be done and the excess baggage that gets dragged along in so doing. One can weigh the baggage by a process of *back-and-forth antonym creation.* How quickly does the process fall apart? For example, one possible opposite of honesty is tact, but the obvious opposite of tact is not honesty but rudeness. Honesty, therefore, meets this linguistic test.

This criterion should not be confused with the fact that some strengths and virtues are *bipolar,* that is, there is a negative anchor to the continuum that defines the characteristic (e.g., "kindness" ranges across degrees of meanspiritedness through a zero point to its increasingly positive instances). Other characteristics are better seen as *unipolar* (e.g., "sense of humor" has a zero point but no meaningful negative range). Our focus in all cases is on the positive end of the strength continuum, but the bipolarity versus unipolarity of given characteristics is an intriguing contrast to keep in mind when we address assessment strategies. We also need to remember the premise of positive psychology that the absence of a weakness is not in and of itself a strength and further that the determinants of strengths versus weaknesses are not simple obverses (Peterson,

2000; Peterson & Chang, 2003; Peterson & Steen, 2002). Bipolarity needs to be established on empirical grounds.

CRITERION 5 *A strength needs to be manifest in the range of an individual's behavior—thoughts, feelings, and/or actions—in such a way that it can be assessed. It should be traitlike in the sense of having a degree of generality across situations and stability across time.*

Strengths differ in terms of being *tonic* (constant) versus *phasic* (waxing and waning depending on their "use"). This distinction has important measurement implications. A tonic characteristic (e.g., kindness or humor) shows itself steadily in a variety of settings, which means that it can be assessed by deliberately general questions posed to an individual and/or informant ("Do you like to tease others?"). A phasic characteristic comes and goes because it is relevant only in settings that afford it. Bravery, for example, does not—indeed, cannot—show itself as one is standing in the checkout line of a grocery store. But if the store is being robbed, then a person can manifest varying degrees of valor.

Philosophers often refer to virtues as corrective, meaning that they counteract some difficulty thought to be inherent in the human condition, some temptation that needs to be resisted, or some motivation that needs to be rechanneled into something good (Yearley, 1990, p. 16). We would not need to posit the virtue of generosity if people were not (sometimes) selfish, the virtue of persistence if people were not (sometimes) idle, or the virtue of bravery if people were not (sometimes) swayed from doing the right thing by fear. What is difficult or challenging need not be front and center when the virtue is displayed. In some cases (e.g., selfishness) what needs to be corrected is a general human tendency. But in other cases (e.g., bravery) what demands correction is an immediately pressing psychological state. Identifying what it is that a character strength corrects should help us identify it as tonic versus phasic.

One or more of our character strengths may prove to be so thoroughly phasic that it will not prove plausible to speak of it as a trait. We worry in particular about what the data will eventually show about the "traitedness" of the strength we include here as open-mindedness (aka judgment, critical thinking). Early on in our project, we identified this characteristic as rationality but then jettisoned this label. First, rationality has earned itself bad connotations; many everyday people juxtapose it with compassion and see it as a stereotypically "male" defense against feeling. Second, there is good reason to doubt that people show across-the-board good versus bad reasoning, at least insofar as this hypothesis has been studied in terms of effective problem solving across disparate domains (Lehman & Nisbett, 1990). There really are Ph.D. mathematicians who cannot balance their checkbooks. "Thinking" may be made possible by a host of rather independent cognitive modules, each devoted to its own sort of content. What this means is that "open-mindedness" would be useful only as

an umbrella term for these modules, not as the label for a personality trait. Perhaps the assessment of individual differences in open-mindedness can take place only at the level of themes.

CRITERION 6 *The strength is distinct from other positive traits in the classification and cannot be decomposed into them.*

For example, the character strength of "tolerance" meets most of the other criteria enumerated but is a complex blend of open-mindedness and fairness. The character strength of "patience" melds self-regulation, persistence, and open-mindedness. The reaction of people to the 24 strengths in our classification has never involved the criticism that we have included unimportant aspects of character. Rather, the reaction has been "What about _____?" In all cases to date, the suggested candidate strikes us as a blend of strengths that are included.

The corollary of this criterion is that as assessment proceeds and the relevant data are obtained, we may decide to combine several strengths in the classification because of empirical redundancy and theoretical overlap. For example, curiosity and love of learning appear difficult to distinguish; that is, the same people are usually high, middling, or low on both (see chapter 28). At present, we distinguish these on theoretical grounds because curiosity need not entail the *systematic* acquisition of information as does love of learning, but it may be possible to regard love of learning as a special case of curiosity.

CRITERION 7 *A character strength is embodied in consensual paragons.*

One important way in which the larger culture highlights strengths of character is by providing stories, parables, creeds, mottoes, pledges, songs, and poems that feature people who compellingly demonstrate a given positive trait (e.g., Burrell, 1997; W. Kilpatrick, Wolfe, & Wolfe, 1994). Models may be real (Cal Ripken and persistence), apocryphal (George Washington and honesty), or mythic (Luke Skywalker and authenticity). Regardless, children grow up surrounded by a bevy of potential role models, and a question of critical importance is when and why good lessons are learned from the media versus bad lessons. What leads some folks to fix on Madonna, Eminem, Donald Trump, or professional wrestlers as role models?

We have been reading children's books and the moral role models that figure in them. In some cases, we find strengths glorified, as in Watty Piper's *The Little Engine That Could*. But in other cases, we are a bit dismayed. Curiosity is an obvious human strength, but Hans Rey's *Curious George* is disaster incarnate. Hope is also an unambiguous virtue, but Eleanor Porter's *Pollyanna* is a ninny, and Kate Wiggins's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* strikes some as simply sugar-coated. As this endeavor continues, we may gain some insight into the character crisis that supposedly threatens our youth (cf. Bennett, 1997). Perhaps Hollywood is not the only culprit.

Strengths are also encouraged by the recognition of actual people in our immediate vicinity who embody to a remarkable extent a given positive trait. These paragons of virtue display what Allport (1961) called a cardinal trait, and the ease with which we can think of paragons in our own social circles gives the lie to the claim that all virtuous people are phony. Certainly, the virtuous people we each know are not phony. They really are kind, or fair, or playful, and so on for all the entries in our classification. In one of our ways of evaluating assessment strategies, we have asked our research assistants to nominate people of their acquaintance who are paragons of virtue and prevail upon them—without full disclosure of why—to complete our measures (chapter 28). No one has had any difficulty thinking of appropriate respondents.

We do not know how many people are paragons of one or another strength, and some intriguing questions can be asked about the relative frequency or infrequency of cardinal strengths. In given cultures or subcultures, are certain paragons more common than others? Are there gender differences? How about developmental differences?

CRITERION 8 *We do not believe this feature can be applied to all strengths, but an additional criterion where sensible is the existence of prodigies with respect to the strength.*

In his theory of multiple intelligences, H. Gardner (1983) directed our attention to children who evidence at a particularly early age exceptional talents in such domains as music, mathematics, and athletics. Prodigies appear only in some fields of endeavor, and Gardner argued that these fields tap biologically based abilities inherent in the human species. Aside from their particular skill, prodigies are otherwise unremarkable children (Feldman, 1993). Popular stereotypes of child prodigies as miniature adults are incorrect.

Suppose these arguments apply as well to the moral domain. Are there kindness prodigies? Are there children who display precocious fairness or bravery? These sorts of questions are completely unexplored, and all we have at present is anecdotal evidence to answer them.

One of our college students told us a story about herself when she was about 9 years of age and worried that her parents might divorce. Without telling her parents, she went to the local library and read books on couples therapy, which is remarkable enough, but what really made us marvel was the rest of her story: She turned dinner conversations with the family into deliberate interventions, encouraging her parents to solve problems jointly, to argue fairly, to express their likes and dislikes about one another in behavioral terms, and so on. She was a prodigy, specifically with respect to the character strength of social intelligence. (And yes, her parents are still married to one another.)

If character prodigies exist, we can make some predictions about them from what is known about other sorts of prodigies. First, their prodigious achievements will not be spontaneous. Rather, they will develop through steps or stages,

although more rapidly than do other individuals. Second, prodigies will not achieve their advanced levels without some instruction. We do not know much more about our child couples therapist than what we just conveyed, but we suspect that there were adults in her life—perhaps her parents or perhaps not—who cultivated her social intelligence. Third, and sadly, character prodigies may not grow up to be paragons of virtue because it is rare for a musical or mathematical prodigy to be hailed as a genius when an adult. Perhaps the domain of character is different. We simply do not know.

CRITERION 9 *Conversely, another criterion for a character strength is the existence of people who show—selectively—the total absence of a given strength.*

We again borrowed this criterion from H. Gardner's (1983) discussion of multiple intelligences. He focused on the cases where the selective absence of a skill could be attributed to neurological damage, but the more general point is that certain skills or their absence may segregate themselves from other aspects of the person. They can therefore be regarded as natural groupings able to be approached profitably in biosocial terms.

How might we describe such people? We have sometimes used the phrase "character imbecile" in a deliberate attempt to be jarring. Some of our colleagues do not like this label—and we understand why—but if there is something offensive here, it is not the label but to what it applies: people completely devoid of one or another character strength. Imagine a person with no curiosity about the world, or one who is incapable of loving or being loved. We know these people exist, but we do not know whether their deficiency is specific to a given character strength or general. Our assumption about the plurality of character would be supported by selectivity.

Consider the well-known Darwin Awards, given to individuals—invariably young males—who remove themselves from the gene pool by acting in "really stupid ways" (Northcutt, 2000). Playing Russian roulette with an automatic pistol or tying helium balloons to a lawn chair and floating gently upward (and then falling rapidly downward when the balloons burst) represent colossal failures of common sense—that is, prudence. Perhaps these actions are predisposed as well by massively misguided curiosity.

In contrast to moral prodigies, individuals completely devoid of one or another strength of character have been extensively studied under the rubric of personality disorders, the *DSM*'s Axis II. As a scientific topic, Axis II disorders are problematic—most cannot be diagnosed reliably, and most cannot be treated effectively. But perhaps this state of affairs results from ongoing attempts by psychiatry to medicalize these problematic styles of behaving. If personality disorders were recast as failures of character, more productive insights into them might result.

CRITERION 10 *As suggested by Erikson's (1963) discussion of psychosocial stages and the virtues that result from their satisfactory resolutions, the larger society provides institutions and associated rituals for cultivating strengths and virtues and then for sustaining their practice.*

The rituals that cultivate strengths can be thought of as simulations: trial runs that allow children and adolescents to display and develop a valued characteristic in a safe (as-if) context in which guidance is explicit (cf. Unell & Wyckoff, 1995). High school student councils presumably foster leadership; Little League baseball teams are thought to contribute to the development of teamwork; catechism classes attempt to lay the foundation for spirituality. To be sure, institutions may backfire (think of win-at-all-cost youth hockey coaches or beauty contests for 6-year-olds), but these failures are readily apparent and widely decried.

We have encountered some difference of opinion regarding whether individual parents and teachers try to encourage specific strengths and virtues. Some of us may try to inculcate praiseworthy characteristics, but others of us may regard their development as beyond our control, trusting to the genetic roulette wheel, local schools, youth development programs, or a vaguely defined "society" to bring about strong and virtuous children. We hasten to add that we believe that strengths and virtues can be cultivated, but any interventions to nurture strengths need to be informed by what people in general believe about their origins.

In the United States alone, millions of young people participate in school programs and after-school programs intended to cultivate good character. The almost total absence of program evaluation vis-à-vis this stated goal is remarkable. We can conclude, based on appropriate empirical evidence, that youth who participate in a variety of programs are less likely to show problems like school failure, drug use, violence, unwanted pregnancy, and the like, but the problem-centered focus of evaluation efforts leaves the issue of deliberately cultivated strengths largely unexplored. The programs exist, and their character-relevant goals are explicit. One of the benefits of our classification project may be the provision of research instruments to undertake the needed empirical investigations.

Just as important as creating strengths in the first place are the rules, roles, and norms that sustain them. Although we regard character strengths as traits, they are not evident in any and all circumstances. Prevailing rewards and punishments in a given situation work for or against the display of a particular strength. If one is involved in an automobile accident, kindness is not the trait that should come to the fore, at least insofar as it would give the other participants leverage for an unwarranted insurance claim. Humor is a terrible trait to display when walking through a metal detector at an airport. Conversely, certain occupational roles demand specific strengths of character—for example,

family court judges need to be fair, inventors need to be creative, therapists need to have social intelligence, telemarketers need to be hopeful—and we expect that individuals in these roles will either develop the requisite strengths or soon seek other jobs.

Remember our distinction between tonic and phasic strengths. Tonic strengths are those that can be displayed on an ongoing and steady basis, except when there is good reason not to do so, traits like curiosity, modesty, and zest. Phasic strengths are those that rise and fall according to the demands of specifiable situations. One can be brave only when in a situation that produces fear. One can display teamwork only as a member of a group with a common task. One can exercise open-mindedness only in the face of a complex decision. We therefore speculate that tonic strengths are less contextualized than phasic strengths. Regardless, society needs to recognize that both sorts of strengths matter but may require different means of encouragement. In the case of tonic strengths, it may be sufficient *not* to punish those who display them. In the case of phasic strengths, the appropriate way to display a strength needs to be articulated, trained as needed, and of course rewarded. We have interviewed firefighters, for instance, and found that valorous individuals report that the requisite skills for doing their job despite fear have been so overlearned that they are automatized.

■ The Strengths

When we applied these criteria to the many dozens of candidate strengths we identified through brainstorming and literature searches, what resulted was the list of positive traits shown in Table 1.1, categorized under the six core moral virtues that emerge consensually across cultures and throughout time (chapter 2). Remember that this vertical dimension is one of abstractness, and it would be a category mistake to ask if curiosity causes wisdom. Instead, curiosity is an instance of a virtue category that revolves around knowledge and its use. We believe that the positive traits in this classification themselves are ubiquitously if not universally recognized, an assumption we are in the process of checking with cross-national and cross-cultural studies.[2]

In some cases, the classification of a given strength under a core virtue can be debated. Humor, for example, might be considered a strength of humanity

[2]With Ilona Boniwell and Nansook Park, we have been asking bilingual/bicultural social scientists to complete a questionnaire (in English); it lists the 24 strengths and asks in each case if there is a comparable concept in the respondent's home culture and whether that concept satisfies our criteria for a character strength. The project is ongoing, but data from more than 30 nations so far support the ubiquity of these strengths. In a related project, Robert Biswas-Diener and Ed Diener conducted focus groups with the Maasai in Africa and the Inuit in Greenland, finding that all 24 strengths in the classification were readily recognized by participants.

TABLE 1.1 *Classification of Character Strengths*

1. ***Wisdom and knowledge***—cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

   Creativity [*originality, ingenuity*]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it

   Curiosity [*interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience*]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering

   Open-mindedness [*judgment, critical thinking*]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; *not* jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly

   Love of learning: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add *systematically* to what one knows

   Perspective [*wisdom*]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people

2. ***Courage***—emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

   Bravery [*valor*]: *Not* shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it

   Persistence [*perseverance, industriousness*]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks

   Integrity [*authenticity, honesty*]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions

   Vitality [*zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy*]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; *not* doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

3. ***Humanity***—interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

   Love: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people

   Kindness [*generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"*]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them

   Social intelligence [*emotional intelligence, personal intelligence*]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

(continued)

TABLE 1.1 ***Classification of Character Strengths*** *(continued)*

4. ***Justice***—civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

   Citizenship [*social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork*]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share

   Fairness: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; *not* letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance

   Leadership: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same maintain time good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen

5. ***Temperance***—strengths that protect against excess

   Forgiveness and mercy: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; *not* being vengeful

   Humility / Modesty: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; *not* seeking the spotlight; *not* regarding oneself as more special than one is

   Prudence: Being careful about one's choices; *not* taking undue risks; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted

   Self-regulation [*self-control*]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions

6. ***Transcendence***—strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

   Appreciation of beauty and excellence [*awe, wonder, elevation*]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience

   Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks

   Hope [*optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation*]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about

   Humor [*playfulness*]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes

   Spirituality [*religiousness, faith, purpose*]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

because playfulness and whimsy can create social bonds. It might also be classified as a strength of wisdom, inasmuch as wit helps us acquire, perfect, and use knowledge. But we had a reason for dubbing humor a strength of transcendence: Like hope and spirituality, it connects us to something larger in the universe, specifically the irony of the human condition, the incongruent congruencies to which playful people call our attention, for our education, amusement, and comfort.

We urge the reader not to be too concerned about the details of how we classified the 24 strengths under the six virtues. We have not measured the virtues per se; they are too abstract and general. We measured only the strengths, and if the data suggest—for example—that playfulness belongs elsewhere because of its co-occurrence with other strengths, we will gladly move it.

The classification we present here is not a finished product, and we expect it to change in the years to come, as theory and research concerning character strengths proceed. After all, the *DSM* has taken more than 50 years to attain its current form. We anticipate that our classification of strengths will similarly evolve, by adding or deleting specific strengths of character, by combining those that prove redundant, by reformulating their organization under core virtues, and by more systematically evaluating them vis-à-vis our 10 criteria. The measurement tools we sketch in chapter 28 should prove useful in crafting future versions of the classification, and we also believe that positive psychology applications—interventions aimed at increasing specific strengths of character and general well-being—will provide empirical grist for the conceptual mill. But let us not get too far ahead of ourselves.

■ Organization of the Volume

This book has three sections. The first section provides background, explains the rationale for the classification scheme and its basis in previous classification efforts, and defines terms.

The second section contains chapters describing the current state of knowledge with respect to each of the 24 character strengths in the classification. Each chapter in the second section uses the following format:

- the consensual definition of the strength (as an individual difference), phrased in terms of behavioral criteria
- the theoretical/research traditions that have studied it
- existing individual difference measures (self-report or informant questionnaires, interviews, assessments from laboratory simulations, in vivo observations, content analyses, and so on)
- known correlates and consequences (outcomes) of the strength
- how the strength develops and is manifest across the life span

- factors that encourage or thwart the development and display of this strength
- if available, information about gender differences and cross-national and cross-cultural aspects of this strength
- if available, information about deliberate interventions that foster it
- what is not known?
- a bibliography of "must-read" articles and books

The third section briefly addresses issues of assessment of strengths and sketches how the classification and assessment package might be used in different practical domains. The most obvious domain of application is the science of positive psychology, but the classification might prove useful as well to youth development, gerontology, family relations (including marriage and child rearing), education, business, the military, leisure and recreation, and even clinical/counseling psychology.