

## The cultural salience of moral character and virtue declined in twentieth century America

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In a large corpus of American books, we tracked how frequently words related to moral excellence and virtue appeared over the twentieth century. Considering the well-established cultural trend in the USA toward greater individualism and its implications for the moral domain, we predicted that terms related to morality and virtue would appear with diminishing frequency in American books. Two studies supported our predictions: Study 1 showed a decline in the use of general moral terms such as *virtue*, *decency* and *conscience*, throughout the twentieth century. In Study 2, we examined the appearance frequency of 50 virtue words (e.g. *honesty*, *patience*, *compassion*) and found a significant decline for 74% of them. Overall, our findings suggest that during the twentieth century, moral ideals and virtues have largely waned from the public conversation.

**Keywords:** virtue; morality; moral character; values; culture; culturomics

### Introduction

The answer to the perennial question of how one should live, in inquiries ancient or modern, has oftentimes been ‘virtuously’. Though virtue is an elusive term, definitions agree that virtues represent extraordinary strengths in intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. They are powerful resources in addressing the difficulties inherent to human existence and social living (Hursthouse, 1999; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Sandage & Hill, 2001). As such, virtues are considered to advance the well-being of both individuals and the society (e.g. Aristotle, 2000; McCullough & Snyder, 2000; Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2011; Wren, 2008).

Empirical research supports the hypothesized relationship between the possession of virtues and well-being: Virtues have been associated with global life satisfaction (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2011), as well as physical and psychological resilience (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). Studies conducted with youth also link character strengths and virtues to desirable outcomes, such as increased academic success and decreased substance abuse, violence, depression, and suicidal ideation (Park, 2004). The sense that inculcating virtues in young people will have long-lasting positive consequences on both the individual and societal levels is also what motivates the proponents of moral and character education.

### America’s changing moral landscape

Social commentators from both sides of the political spectrum have recently observed that America has lost its moral compass in the past decades and is undergoing a moral decline (Bennett, 2001; Callahan, 2004). Though nostalgia for an idealized past and the attendant disapproval of contemporary morals may be as old as human history, sociologists and psychologists document that America’s moral fabric has indeed been changing: American socio-psychological ecology has shifted away from more communal values toward radical individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985; Myers, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Twenge, 2006). Accordingly, with each passing decade, more emphasis has been placed on the needs of the individual at the expense of those of the society (Twenge & Campbell, 2009) and the self has begun to be viewed as an ultimate source of value (Baumeister, 1991). Relatedly, narcissism has been on the rise, as are parallel socially and personally toxic behavior patterns such as materialism, over-competitiveness, entitlement, appearance obsession, fame worship, and attention seeking (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Morality is fundamentally about suppressing selfishness and making group living possible (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). A fascination with individual autonomy and an excessive focus on the self can

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become morally problematic to the extent ‘looking out for number one’ and ‘always putting oneself first’ take precedence over concern with the common good (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Traditionally, religions helped to keep egos in check and strengthen social bonds, by promoting humility and other virtues that inspire a concern for others and the public good. They also socialized people into shared moral frameworks. Declining religious affiliation among Americans in the past decades and the weakening impact of religion on public life (Chaves, 2011) thus constitutes another significant change in the new American moral landscape. These converging social trends suggest that if we are to expect any trend in the cultural salience of moral character and virtues in America, that trend would be southward.

### Capturing cultural change through artifacts

Individuals shape their cultural worlds, and the surrounding sociocultural milieu is in turn incorporated into individual selves, in an ongoing cycle of mutual constitution (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Shweder, 1991). Cultural products play a critical role in this mutual constitution process, because dominant cultural messages are embedded in artifacts such as news, books, fairy tales, and urban legends (Chiu & Hong, 2006; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). By reminding people of what is culturally relevant, important and appropriate, such products act as agents of socialization (Kesebir, Uttal, & Gardner, 2010). Consequently, distinct cultural patterns can be identified by analyzing artifacts, such as song lyrics (DeWall, Pond, Campbell, & Twenge, 2011), advertisements (Han & Shavitt, 1994), children’s books (Tsai, Louie, Chen, & Uchida, 2007), and newspaper articles (Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999).

If there has been a change in the relevance of morality and virtue concepts to the American culture, this phenomenon should also be reflected in cultural products. Salient cultural ideas are those that people talk and write about, so if morality and virtue diminished in their cultural salience, words pertinent to these concepts should appear with decreasing frequency in books. We were able to test this hypothesis using Google’s N-gram Viewer, which tracks word use in books digitized by Google.

### Study 1

Study 1 aimed to observe the frequency with which words related to morality appeared in American books throughout the twentieth century. We tracked the change in 10 nouns that are global moral terms or attributes. These words were selected by looking up ‘morality’ in a thesaurus. They were *character, conscience, decency, dignity, ethics, morality, rectitude, righteousness, uprightness, and virtue*.

### Method





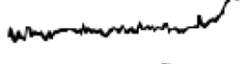


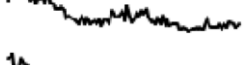


We obtained word frequency data from Google N-gram Viewer (<http://books.google.com/ngrams>). Google N-gram Viewer displays the appearance frequency of words in a set of books digitized by Google. These frequencies represent the percentage with which the word appears among the total number of words published in a year. In this way, N-gram Viewer corrects for the number of words (and indirectly for the number of published books) in a year. Currently, the Google Books corpus contains ~5.2 million books or ~4% of all books ever published (Michel et al., 2011). These books are not a random sample of published books but mostly reflect library acquisition practices. We limited our analyses to American books published between 1901 and 2000, because the database underwent some changes in 2000 that affected the sampling of the books and can present threats to an accurate interpretation of the data (Michel et al., 2011). For each word, we obtained the graphs corresponding to the years of interest. These graphs depict the yearly appearance frequency of the words as a percentage of the total number of words published in that year. We then used a freely available graph digitizing software (Engauge Digitizer) to obtain an accurate reading of these percentages.

### Results and discussion

Table 1 presents the frequency pattern for each word, the correlation coefficient between frequency and time, peak and nadir years, effect size, and the percentage of change from 1901 to 2000. For each morality-related word, we computed the correlation of appearance frequency with year. The frequency of eight words (*character, conscience, decency, dignity, rectitude, righteousness, uprightness, and virtue*) showed a significant negative correlation with time. One did not correlate significantly with time (*morality*), and one had a significant positive correlation (*ethics*). To obtain an average correlation, we converted the coefficients into Fisher’s *z*-scores and back-transformed the average to *r* (Silver & Dunlap, 1987). The average correlation coefficient across the 10 words was  $-0.69$ ,  $CI_{0.95} = [-0.87, -0.32]$ . The average effect size was  $-2.06$  and the average frequency drop from 1901 to 2000 was 23.12%. The average frequency drop is 50.15% when we exclude the word *ethics* that showed a 220.2% increase over the period. The overall decline in the appearance frequency of these words was also clearly visible in the distribution of peak and nadir frequencies. Of the 10 words, six had already reached their peak frequency by 1904 and 7 had their nadir after 1980s.

The only word in our sample that rose in its frequency was *ethics*. This increase was most pronounced in the last quarter of the century. A look at books mentioning *ethics* reveals that the majority of

Table 1. Frequency time plots and summary statistics for morality-related words (Study 1).

	Pattern (1901–2000)	Peak year	Nadir year	<i>T</i>	<i>d</i>	% Change
<i>character</i>		1902	1997	-0.97**	-2.98	-55.71
<i>conscience</i>		1901	1997	-0.85**	-3.87	-64.62
<i>decency</i>		1934	1986	-0.76**	-1.95	-41.74
<i>dignity</i>		1901	1984	-0.40**	-3.77	-47.22
<i>ethics</i>		2000	1904	0.72**	4.38	220.20
<i>morality</i>		1967	1937	0.04	0.25	3.19
<i>rectitude</i>		1904	1994	-0.80**	-3.76	-63.45
<i>righteousness</i>		1903	1978	-0.81**	-1.93	-53.16
<i>uprightness</i>		1903	1989	-0.89**	-3.51	-79.70
<i>virtue</i>		1945	1984	-0.77**	-3.44	-48.93

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

them are moral philosophy books. The word was thus often used in reference to the philosophical field of study rather than the moral qualities of individuals. Except for *ethics*, *morality* was the only word that did not show a decline. It displays a wavy pattern across the century, and seems to be on the rise after a local dip around 1980s. As a whole, however, our results point to a decline in the use of words denoting the general moral worth of a person.

One possible explanation for the general downward trend we report is that the vocabulary of morality has changed over the course of the twentieth century. It is conceivable that the 10 nouns we retrieved from the thesaurus reflect global moral terms belonging to an earlier period of the twentieth century. These terms may now be linguistically outdated and replaced by a different set. Study 2 aimed to evade this alternative explanation by covering a modern selection of morality-related words.

## Study 2

Study 1 focused on the cultural salience of general morality terms, whereas Study 2 centered on specific virtues. We tracked the frequency with which 50 virtue words appeared in American books during the twentieth century.

## Preliminary data collection

In order to tap the views of a contemporary American sample on what constitutes a virtue, we conducted a preliminary study. We came up with a list of 80 words that appeared as virtues and character strengths in various books (e.g. Comte-Sponville, 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and websites (e.g. <http://www.virtuescience.com/virtuelist.html>; <http://www.wisdomcommons.org/virtues>), and asked participants how much they conceived of these words as virtues.

We recruited 171 participants (89 female, 81 male, 1 unknown) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The average age was 35.6 ( $SD = 11.8$ ). Participants were given a list of 80 words and asked to indicate whether they thought each of these words constituted a virtue. Their responses were coded as *No* = -1, *Perhaps* = 0, and *Yes* = 1.

Participants' average rating across all items was 0.34 ( $SD = 0.37$ ). Women's average rating ( $M = 0.39$ ,  $SD = 0.35$ ) was significantly higher than that of men ( $M = 0.28$ ,  $SD = 0.39$ ),  $F(1,168) = 4.03$ ,  $p = 0.05$ , indicating that women were more likely to perceive the listed words as instances of virtue than men. Age was also positively correlated with virtuousness ratings: Older participants tended to see more of the words in the list as virtues,  $r(170) = 0.17$ ,  $p = 0.03$ .

From among the 80 words in the original list, we decided to include in our subsequent analysis the 50 words rated highest in terms of virtueness. Table 2 presents the average ratings for those words. The 30 eliminated words, in declining order of their perceived virtueness, were *persistence*, *prudence*, *hope*, *restraint*, *dutifulness*, *forbearance*, *impartiality*, *magnanimity*, *leadership*, *calmness*, *discretion*, *endurance*, *tact*, *tenacity*, *optimism*, *confidence*, *moderation*, *tranquility*, *chastity*, *cleanliness*, *creativity*, *humor*, *candor*, *vitality*, *enthusiasm*, *curiosity*, *caution*, *frugality*, *thrift*, and *playfulness*.

### Method

As in Study 1, we obtained from Google's N-gram Viewer the appearance frequency of the 50 virtue words in the American corpus between 1901 and 2000 as percentages of the total number of words published in a year.

### Results and discussion

Table 2 presents the frequency patterns for these words throughout the twentieth century, the correlation coefficients, effect sizes, and the percentage of change. Looking at years of peak and nadir frequency, we find that 33 (66%) of the 50 words had their peak frequency in the first quarter of the century (1901–1925) and 37 (74%) had their nadir in the last quarter (1976–2000) (Figure 1). For each of the virtues, we computed the correlation of appearance frequency with year. Of the 50 virtues, 37 (74%) had a significant negative correlation with time (*honesty*, *patience*, *honor*, *truthfulness*, *kindness*, *sincerity*, *courage*, *generosity*, *mercy*, *wisdom*, *humility*, *faithfulness*, *charity*, *humbleness*, *bravery*, *thoughtfulness*, *grace*, *helpfulness*, *courtesy*, *love*, *perseverance*, *modesty*, *politeness*, *fidelity*, *justice*, *gratitude*, *diligence*, *thankfulness*, *gentleness*, *sacrifice*, *benevolence*, *fortitude*, *purity*, *temperance*, *faith*, *hospitality*, and *appreciation*). In contrast, 8 (16%) had a significant positive correlation with time (*compassion*, *integrity*, *fairness*, *tolerance*, *selflessness*, *discipline*, *dependability*, and *reliability*). The correlation coefficient for the remaining 5 virtues (10%) did not reach significance at the  $\alpha = 0.05$  level (*loyalty*, *trustworthiness*, *forgiveness*, *respect*, and *determination*).

The average correlation coefficient across 50 virtue words was  $-0.65$ ,  $CI_{0.95} = [-0.79, -0.46]$ . This value is very close to the average correlation observed with morality words in Study 1. The average effect size was  $-1.63$ . The average change from 1901 to 2000 is overwhelmed by the change in three words, *tolerance*, *reliability*, and *selflessness* that increased about 5-fold, 20-fold, and 95-fold, respectively. The average change


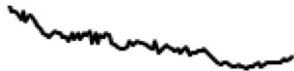

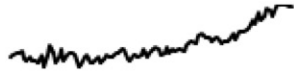
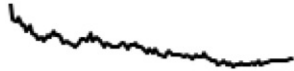

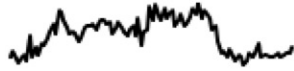
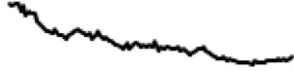
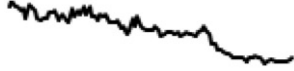

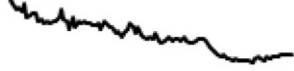

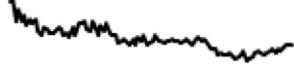
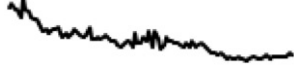
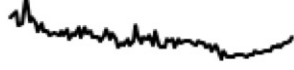

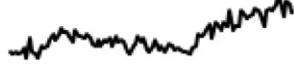
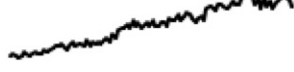

is not computed for *dependability*, which had a frequency of 0 in 1901. When we impute the next maximum value (103.08%) for these four words, the average drop is 23.12%, which is exactly what we found in Study 1.

Overall, our analyses indicate a trend for virtue words to decline in their use over the course of the twentieth century. Closer inspection reveals that the effect was stronger for certain groups of virtues. For example, the use of virtues encouraging a modest opinion of oneself (*humility*, *humbleness*, and *modesty*) showed a precipitous decline, with an average correlation with time of  $-0.80$ ,  $CI_{0.95} = [-0.90, -0.62]$ . From 1901 to 2000, the average drop in the frequency of these words was 51.5%. Words indicating indebtedness to and recognition of one's blessings (*gratitude*, *thankfulness*, and *appreciation*) also declined substantially as a group, with an average correlation with year of  $-0.88$ ,  $CI_{0.95} = [-0.96, -0.64]$ , and an average drop of 48.7%.

Another set of words that declined in use throughout the century relate to the ability to act and prevail in difficult circumstances (*courage*, *bravery*, and *fortitude*). This group had an average correlation with time of  $-0.91$ ,  $CI_{0.95} = [-0.96, -0.81]$  and an average drop of 66.6%. Notably, all three words showed a frequency increase during the period USA was waging World War II. To capture this change numerically, we created an index by dividing the average frequency of each virtue word between 1942 and 1945 by its average frequency in the four years preceding and succeeding the war involvement. Of all 50 virtue words, this index was highest for *fortitude* (1.24), followed by *bravery* (1.21). *Courage* (1.11) also peaked locally although not by as much as the other two. Combined, during wartime these three words were mentioned 18.8% more frequently compared to surrounding years, whereas other virtue words were mentioned on average 1.9% less frequently. The war-induced increase in the cultural salience of these virtues signals the sensitivity of our measure to the socio-historical context.

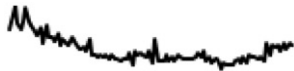
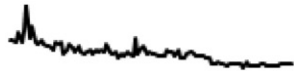
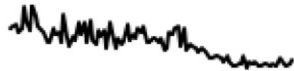
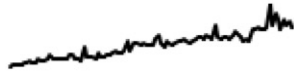


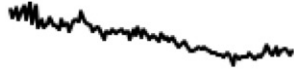

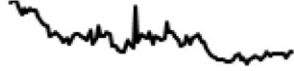
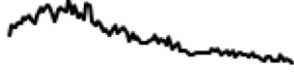
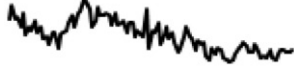
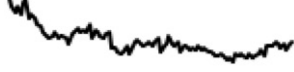
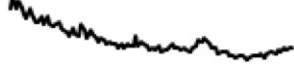

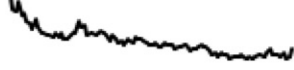
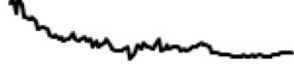

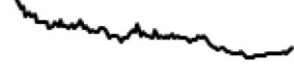

The majority of virtues indicating care and concern for others also showed steep declines (e.g. *kindness*, *generosity*, *mercy*, *charity*, *thoughtfulness*, *helpfulness*, *courtesy*, *love*, *politeness*, *gentleness*, *benevolence*). The average drop from 1901 to 2000 was 55.7% for this set of words and the average correlation with year was  $-0.88$ ,  $CI_{0.95} = [-0.91, -0.84]$ . The two exceptions to this downward trend in virtues of care and concern are *compassion* and *selflessness*. The increase in the frequency of *compassion* seems to parallel the increasing popularity of Buddhism in the USA. Indeed, the appearance frequency of *compassion* was highly correlated with the frequency of *Buddhism* in Google Books,  $r(99) = 0.76$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The increase in *selflessness*, on the other hand, seems to reflect the absorption of the word into the American language; the word

Table 2. Frequency time plots and summary statistics for virtue words (Study 2).

Virtue	Pattern (1901–2000)	Rating ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>r</i>	<i>d</i>	% Change
<i>honesty</i>		0.87 (0.42)	-0.90**	-2.66	-40.32
<i>patience</i>		0.84 (0.46)	-0.93**	-3.35	-48.07
<i>compassion</i>		0.81 (0.47)	0.64**	2.36	61.37
<i>integrity</i>		0.79 (0.49)	0.85**	3.00	83.97
<i>honor</i>		0.76 (0.51)	-0.92**	-4.31	-64.49
<i>truthfulness</i>		0.74 (0.56)	-0.78**	-1.95	-39.88
<i>loyalty</i>		0.74 (0.53)	-0.19	0.50	9.85
<i>kindness</i>		0.74 (0.58)	-0.93**	-3.41	-70.22
<i>sincerity</i>		0.68 (0.55)	-0.95**	-2.78	-63.56
<i>trustworthiness</i>		0.68 (0.6)	0.15	3.36	103.08
<i>courage</i>		0.68 (0.59)	-0.96**	-3.31	-60.82
<i>forgiveness</i>		0.68 (0.59)	0.03	0.93	17.35
<i>generosity</i>		0.67 (0.61)	-0.86**	-3.56	-45.22
<i>mercy</i>		0.66 (0.62)	-0.90**	-3.32	-60.31
<i>wisdom</i>		0.65 (0.59)	-0.81**	-1.80	-25.20
<i>respect</i>		0.64 (0.61)	-0.09	-1.36	-16.73
<i>fairness</i>		0.60 (0.61)	0.73**	2.53	63.41
<i>tolerance</i>		0.59 (0.63)	0.98**	2.53	482.54
<i>humility</i>		0.59 (0.67)	-0.62**	-1.93	-30.63

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Virtue	Pattern (1901–2000)	Rating ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>r</i>	<i>d</i>	% Change
<i>faithfulness</i>		0.58 (0.68)	−0.62**	−1.11	−24.03
<i>charity</i>		0.57 (0.67)	−0.84**	−2.44	−57.35
<i>humbleness</i>		0.57 (0.62)	−0.84**	−2.04	−58.03
<i>selflessness</i>		0.53 (0.72)	0.94**	2.99	9502.14
<i>bravery</i>		0.52 (0.66)	−0.87**	−3.19	−65.49
<i>discipline</i>		0.49 (0.69)	0.64**	2.23	32.37
<i>thoughtfulness</i>		0.48 (0.69)	−0.93**	−2.84	−55.81
<i>dependability</i>		0.48 (0.72)	0.33**	1.36	–
<i>grace</i>		0.47 (0.74)	−0.81**	−3.07	−52.62
<i>helpfulness</i>		0.47 (0.72)	−0.91**	−1.49	−64.25
<i>courtesy</i>		0.46 (0.76)	−0.75**	−2.01	−22.01
<i>love</i>		0.46 (0.76)	−0.78**	−3.16	−35.04
<i>perseverance</i>		0.45 (0.68)	−0.86**	−2.79	−52.90
<i>modesty</i>		0.45 (0.69)	−0.87**	−3.69	−64.77
<i>politeness</i>		0.43 (0.74)	−0.90**	−4.13	−68.27
<i>fidelity</i>		0.42 (0.73)	−0.81**	−3.60	−61.15
<i>justice</i>		0.42 (0.74)	−0.82**	−2.99	−37.18
<i>gratitude</i>		0.40 (0.75)	−0.93**	−3.53	−55.36
<i>reliability</i>		0.40 (0.78)	0.93**	2.40	1959.33

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Virtue	Pattern (1901–2000)	Rating (SD)	<i>r</i>	<i>d</i>	% Change
<i>diligence</i>		0.38 (0.70)	−0.88**	−2.88	−65.00
<i>thankfulness</i>		0.37 (0.73)	−0.93**	−3.32	−83.51
<i>gentleness</i>		0.37 (0.75)	−0.93**	−3.61	−69.27
<i>sacrifice</i>		0.37 (0.73)	−0.92**	−2.68	−47.45
<i>determination</i>		0.35 (0.77)	0.08	0.10	2.48
<i>benevolence</i>		0.34 (0.73)	−0.78**	−3.81	−64.95
<i>fortitude</i>		0.32 (0.68)	−0.86**	−4.36	−73.38
<i>purity</i>		0.31 (0.76)	−0.75**	−3.16	−41.65
<i>temperance</i>		0.30 (0.74)	−0.52**	−1.58	−63.08
<i>faith</i>		0.30 (0.78)	−0.81**	−2.21	−36.98
<i>hospitality</i>		0.29 (0.78)	−0.95**	−2.32	−50.17
<i>appreciation</i>		0.26 (0.78)	−0.63**	−0.25	−7.14

Note: \*\**p* < 0.01.

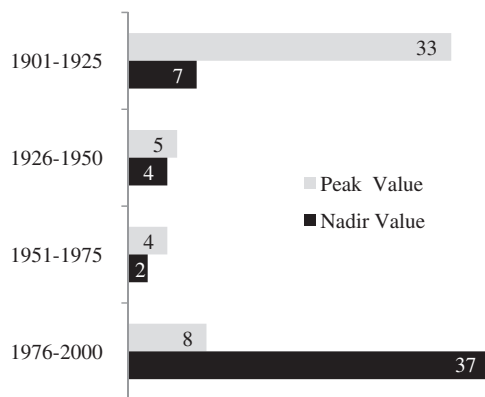


Figure 1. Frequency of virtues at their peak and nadir values by time period (Study 2).

virtually did not exist until late nineteenth century. The use of the conceptually related *sacrifice*, on the other hand, declines during twentieth century. It is also noteworthy that some of the virtues that evinced the most precipitous declines (e.g. *humility*, *kindness*,

*gratitude*, *charity*) are those that religions, and Christianity in particular, traditionally seek to cultivate.

Turning our attention to virtue words that increased in frequency, three out of eight seem to have technical meanings that compete with their use as virtue words. This was very much true for *reliability*, which appeared frequently in statistics and engineering books (e.g. *statistical reliability*, *reliability engineering*). It was true to a lesser extent for *tolerance* (e.g. *immune tolerance*, *drug tolerance*) and *integrity* (e.g. *ecological integrity*, *structural integrity*). Given these ambiguities, it is hard to make inferences about the use frequency of the words in their virtue sense – it might have risen, fallen, or stayed the same over time.

Of the remaining three virtues showing significant increase, two are related to the ability to deliver (*discipline* and *dependability*). We surmise that this phenomenon reflects heightened interest in these virtues in work and production contexts. Supporting this, the frequency of virtues indicating dependability in the context of interpersonal relationships (*faithfulness* and *fidelity*) declined over the century, and the frequency

of *loyalty* did not evince a significant change. The final virtue with a rising pattern, *fairness*, is crucially important in exchange settings. This suggests that virtues that increased in their frequency over the twentieth century are disproportionately concentrated among those beneficial to economic production and exchange. It should be noted, however, that other virtues that might also be desirable in production and exchange settings did decline in frequency (e.g. *honesty*, *sincerity*, *diligence*, and *perseverance*). Moreover, there are no hard lines dividing virtues as economically relevant and irrelevant: Virtues that matter in the economic domain oftentimes also matter in the non-economic domain and vice versa.

### General discussion

We reported two studies that tracked the appearance of words related to moral character and virtue in American books during the twentieth century. The results were consistent over the two studies and evinced a general decline in the use of these words. We conclude that, in keeping with the larger trends in the moral landscape of the USA, and particularly the increase in individualism, the attention paid to concepts of moral character and virtue has declined over the course of the twentieth century.

Our findings rely on a method that is free of self-report and desirability biases, yet, this method also presents some unique difficulties. First, some of the words we tracked have meanings other than their virtue sense. Sometimes, these non-virtue meanings are the primary meanings of the word (e.g. *reliability*, *ethics*, *character*, *love*, *discipline*). We saw how *reliability* often appeared in books as a technical term. Another example is *hospitality*, the frequency of which starts to rise in the 1980s after a steady decline for seven decades. This rise is most likely due to the emergence of uses such as *hospitality industry* and *hospitality business*, and not due to a rekindling of hospitality as a virtue. To the extent that the examined words have meanings outside their virtue sense, we need to be cautious in our inferences from the data. That said, the validity of our general conclusion remains intact, as we report declines for a large number of words which are exclusively or primarily virtue and morality terms.

Another difficulty characterizing our method is the omission of context. Even when a word is used in its virtue sense, this does not necessarily mean that the virtue was being affirmed or endorsed. It is entirely possible that the original passages condemned a virtue (e.g. 'politeness is hypocrisy'). That, however, is unlikely to hold for a large number of cases. Moreover, even a negative use of virtue words indicates that moral ideals are part of the cultural

conversation and provide an opportunity for the reader to reflect on issues of right and wrong.

The method by which we obtained the list of virtue words in Study 2 lends further credence to our conclusions. Because the selection was based on a modern sample's ratings, it is biased toward a contemporary vocabulary. Ratings by present-day participants eliminated virtue words such as *magnanimity*, *forbearance*, *tact*, and *discretion*, which were more characteristic of the early twentieth century moral terminology. This suggests that the shrinking of the moral conversation throughout the century is possibly larger than what we document here. Had we compiled our virtue list according to virtue ratings from the beginning of the twentieth century, the results would have looked more striking.

Notwithstanding the limitations of our method, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that morality- and virtue-related words have for the most part been diminishing from the American vocabulary in the twentieth century. This phenomenon is not too surprising if the larger moral and cultural climate of twentieth century America is taken into account: In this 'century of the self' (Curtis, 2002), an increasingly individualistic ideology allowed and even encouraged people to pay attention to their own needs and desires at the expense of the needs and desires of others. This hyper-individualism, possibly combined with the gradual fading of religious discourse from public life, eroded a shared moral framework. We contend that our results highlight this erosion, by demonstrating the collective memory's shrinking moral vocabulary.

Do our findings mean that people today are less moral and virtuous than they were a century ago? Although such a conclusion would be a stretch from the data, we know that moral values and virtues require a supportive sociocultural environment to flourish (Hunter, 2000). Values and virtues can be primed by immediate situational cues such that they will have an effect on behavior (Maio, Pakizeh, Cheung, & Rees, 2009). A lexicon of morality and virtue concepts is an integral part of this supportive structure, and its fading from public arena may thus inflict personal and societal costs.

In the absence of a shared moral lexicon, confusion about moral issues seems a likely outcome, even if not outright moral depravity. In line with this, Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, and Herzog (2011) found in recent interviews that a majority of young Americans regarded morality as a matter of personal choice. This moral individualism was accompanied by extreme moral relativism – young adults repeatedly reported refraining from judging anyone on moral matters (such as cheating and stealing), as they argued people are entitled to their moral opinions. The authors concluded that emergent adults' thinking about moral issues was 'not particularly consistent, coherent, or



articulate' (Smith et al., 2011, p. 20). The declining cultural salience of morality and virtue notions documented here may be partly responsible for this confused moral outlook of young Americans – they have not been socialized to think about issues of right and wrong, and they simply lack the vocabulary for it.

If virtues are indispensable to individual and societal well-being as ancient philosophical and current empirical queries suggest, and if they require favorable cultural conditions to thrive, then our findings are concerning. We believe that a virtue-salient culture would provide a more fertile ground for individual and societal flourishing than one where concepts of moral excellence are at the fringes of public conversation.

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