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Character, Caricature, and Gossip

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ABSTRACT

Gossip is rarely praised. There seems little virtuous that is about talking behind someone's back. Whether there is anything virtuous about gossip, however, depends on the kind of gossip. Some gossip is idle, but some evaluative gossip promulgates and enforces norms. When properly motivated, such gossip effects positive change in society and counts as gossiping well. The virtue of gossiping well even includes some kinds of false gossip, namely the sort that exaggerates a pre-existing trait, thereby creating a caricature of a person's character in order to establish a moral exemplar (or anti-exemplar).

1. INTRODUCTION

Gossip is a nearly ubiquitous speech act. Almost everyone does it. A lot of gossip is about people's character, especially their vices. It is not surprising then that it has long been disparaged. Yet it has largely been bereft of philosophical analysis, but for a bit of recent attention (Holland 1996; Cuonzo 2008; van Niekerk 2008; Bertolotti and Magnani 2014). Westacott (2011) considers the moral permissibility of gossip, but without reaching any conclusions. This article argues that gossiping well is a virtue. This is not to say that all gossip is virtuous. Several limitations must be placed on gossip, but there remains a range of cases in which one can gossip well. Interestingly enough, the virtue of gossip includes some instances of false gossip in which someone's character is caricatured. The permissibility of some kinds of caricature is then important for virtue ethics generally due to the role false gossip can play in creating moral exemplars.

2. DEFINING GOSSIP

In order to focus on the moral status of gossip, we first need at least a working conception of the speech act. At its core, gossip is a kind of asserting; to gossip is to assert something of someone other than the speaker and addressee. The subject of gossip is people. You can gossip about one person or a group of people, but not about other things like plants, dogs, or houses. Beyond this, defining gossip enters much murkier waters. A set of necessary and sufficient conditions will likely be open to alleged counterexamples that some (but not all) take to be instances of gossip. For our current purposes, however, it suffices to note four conditions that typify

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gossip but are not necessary conditions. First, gossip can be either true or false. Second, it may be unsubstantiated or not. Third, gossip is typically about a person who is not part of the conversation (though it may still count if the person is within earshot). Fourth, usually gossip is directly or indirectly about a person's actions ("Frank cheated") or traits ("Frank's a cheater"). Part of the reason that people often attribute traits to others is that trait ascriptions are informationally richer than action ascriptions. Saying Jane lied only tells the addressee what Jane did once. Calling Jane a liar, however, not only relates that Jane has lied, but also relays two other pieces of information. It explains Jane's behavior: she is disposed to lying and does so because she has a robust and reliable character trait that prompts her to lie. Additionally, because she has this character trait, Jane will likely lie again.

One important point remains in conceptualizing gossip, namely what we gossip about. In most contexts, telling someone else, "Jane is at dinner" is boring and not gossip. There has to be something juicy or scintillating about what is asserted of a third party. There are a variety of ways that an assertion can be scintillating enough to count as gossip, but most of these ways can be captured by distinguishing between what we'll call evaluative and idle gossip. Evaluative gossip evaluates a person's behavior or character relative to some norm. Negative evaluative gossip notes that a norm has allegedly been violated, such as, "Martin is a gossip."¹ The allegedly violated norm need not be a moral norm. People are gossiped about for violating many different kinds of norms, including legal, aesthetic, political, epistemic, or descriptive norms. Saying "Look at what John is wearing; he has the worst fashion sense ever" is not necessarily attributing a moral failing to John. Negative evaluative gossip not only describes an alleged norm violation, it also claims that the wrongdoer should be condemned. Though less common, evaluative gossip can also be positive, such as "Frank is a sweetheart." In this case a norm is often being fulfilled or surpassed. This form of evaluative gossip commends, instead of condemns, the person in question.

Idle gossip on the other hand is scintillating for some reason other than a norm violation by the person in question. The topic under discussion might be taboo. In our culture, it is generally regarded as inappropriate to discuss other people's incomes. So telling someone else about Jane's salary is gossip, even though the size of the salary does not violate a norm. Idle gossip can also include cases in which a norm is allegedly violated, but no condemnation is also expressed.

While I will argue that some evaluative gossip is virtuous, idle gossip has little to recommend it. Idle gossip differs from evaluative gossip both in terms of motivation and normative function. Evaluative gossip can be properly motivated and serve as a means of norm promulgation and enforcement for the good of others. I will set idle gossip aside and any subsequent mention of 'gossip' will refer to evaluative gossip.

3. GOSSIP AS NORM PROMULGATION AND ENFORCEMENT

Consider the following case. Alex tells Beth, "Charlie is a cheater." Beth already knew that Alex and Charlie recently played a game together and that Alex lost. Besides describing Charlie's character, Alex conveys his negative evaluation of Charlie. This evaluation is the basis for gossip's two important normative functions. First, gossip is a form of norm promulgation, since it explains a norm to the

addressee by means of an example not to emulate. Second, it enacts norm enforcement. The manner of the enforcement depends on the whether the evaluation is negative or positive.

Gossip as a means for norm promulgation is relatively straightforward. A gossiper intends for the audience to recognize that a norm exists related to the description of the third-party. This norm provides the reason for gossiping. In this example, Alex communicated to Beth that there is a norm against cheating and Charlie's trait of being a cheater violates that norm. This norm is not limited just to Charlie. Alex indicates that the norm extends to others as well, including Beth.² When the norm in question is a moral norm, gossip is a form of moral education, since it elucidates the existence or nature of a moral norm.³

Besides promulgating the norm, evaluative gossipers intend to initiate a form of norm enforcement. Negative evaluative gossip doesn't just note the norm violation but condemns this and similar norm violations. It enacts distributed, third-party, bidirectional norm enforcement. It is bidirectional in that it condemns the alleged wrongdoer and threatens a similar response to the addressee, should he or she likewise violate the norm in question.⁴ It is a distributed, third-party means of punishment because the act of norm enforcement is distributed among the speaker and those who hear (and perhaps repeat) the gossip. Second-person punishment only by the individual(s) wronged often is an insufficient means of norm enforcement. Likewise punishment by a single third person may be inadequate. There is no leviathan—no external actor independently strong enough—to enforce the norm. So, people jointly share the burden of enforcing norms. The collective effect is ostracism.

Ostracism is an old practice. The ancient Athenians practiced ostracism, where the citizens voted to exile someone from the city for ten years. The modern social practice of ostracism differs in that there is no vote, but the effect remains social (if not geographic) exclusion. A more contemporary example of ostracism (through gossip no less) comes from the American Revolution. The committees of correspondence published names of Americans who were not observing the boycott of British goods. Furthermore, this practice has been observed in nonhuman animals: Nishida et al. (1995) report a group of chimpanzees ostracizing a young, ill-mannered chimpanzee, suggesting that ostracism has a long evolutionary history, predating humans.

The case of Alex and Charlie demonstrates ostracism through gossip. Let's suppose that Alex and Charlie were playing a kind of prisoner's dilemma game, wherein each either cooperates or cheats. If one cheats and the other cooperates, the cheater is rewarded and the other suffers. Charlie cheated and Alex cooperated. After losing, Alex regards Charlie's cheating as a norm violation.⁵ Alex can punish Charlie by refusing to play with him again. However, if other players are plentiful, Charlie is not significantly harmed and he doesn't have a reason to stop cheating. Yet, whether others will play with Charlie depends on his reputation. Alex can damage that reputation by gossiping about him. Once Beth has heard about Charlie being a cheater, she is less likely to play a type of prisoner's dilemma game with him. She can also spread the word about Charlie to others, who can in turn continue passing on the gossip. The wider the gossip spreads, the greater the extent of Charlie's ostracism.

De Pinninck et al. (2010) modeled gossip in this manner as a form of distributed norm enforcement through ostracism. They found that as the percentage of gossipers increased in a society, the rate of norm violations decreased, the utility of norm violation decreased, and the utility of norm-conforming behavior increased, all at geometric rates. It's worth noting that their analysis accounted for cases in which the ostracism was not total, i.e., some members of the community ostracized norm violators, but not everyone. It need not be the case that the gossip reaches everyone. Even if gossip has transmitted a norm violator's reputation to only part of a community, the partial ostracism can still be an effective means of norm enforcement. Of course, the greater the extent of the ostracism, the more effective the norm enforcement is.

Missing from the simplified model of De Pinninck et al. is the bidirectionality of the norm enforcement. Gossip enforces the norm for the audience as well. This enhanced picture of gossip accords with a growing body of empirical research in social psychology and computer modeling that finds gossip performing a number of potentially useful social functions, including being a low-cost mechanism for punishing norm violators (cf. Dunbar 2004; [Feinberg et al. 2012](#), summarizing many studies), encouraging groups with diverse norms to self-sort ([Savarimuthu et al. 2013](#)), and strengthening social relationships ([Shaw et al. 2011](#)). When we gossip about others, we engage in limited ostracism and encourage others to do so as well. The ostracism is limited in two ways. First, it is often only temporary and can be lifted later. Societies typically have means by which people can repair their reputations damaged by gossip and have the ostracism lifted. Apologies sometimes suffice, for instance. For more egregious norm violations, some demonstration of a change of heart is required. Second, the ostracism can be, and often is, situationally limited instead of total, in that someone is ostracized from only one facet of social interaction, but not necessarily others. Alex ostracizes Charlie by refusing to interact with him again (at least within the confines of the game) and encouraging Beth to do likewise. But Alex may still engage in other social interactions with Charlie.⁶

Positive gossip has similar normative functions. In terms of norm promulgation, the norm is explained in terms of a positive example to emulate. Suppose David says to Emily, "Fiona is courageous." David's gossip to Emily about Fiona makes Fiona an exemplar of courage. For norm enforcement, pro-gossip functions as a distributed, low-cost form of endorsement. Not only will David continue to interact with Fiona, but David encourages Emily and others to do so as well. Fiona is rewarded, but there may be a cost to others for rewarding her. That cost is distributed though the society by means of the gossip.

4. LIMITS OF GOSSIP

That gossip can perform the useful functions of norm promulgation and enforcement does not ipso facto establish that all evaluative gossip is virtuous or even permissible. There are a host of contexts wherein gossip is not morally permissible. It is beyond the scope of this paper to catalogue all these various contexts, but a brief review of some limitations is warranted.

First, whether gossip is permissible depends on the norm in question. Many norms should not be enforced. Lamentably, gossip can be and has been used to enforce all manner of morally atrocious norms. The moral permissibility of an instance of gossip predominately depends on the moral status of the norm it enforces. Instances of gossip that enforces immoral norms are not morally permissible. It's a separate project to determine which norms are morally justified. Some norms are clearly unjustified. Ellwardt et al. (2012) found that negative gossip often targets those "of low informal status." Gossip becomes clearly impermissible when it serves to reinforce an unjust social order. Additionally, gossip can trigger stereotype threat. When one is reminded that he or she belongs to a negatively stereotyped group, one tends to perform as the stereotype claims (Schmader 2008). For instance, gossip about a woman as being a gossip, ambitious, or weak is pernicious precisely because of existing stereotypes against women. Such gossip, especially when the subject is a member of a marginalized group, reinforces oppression. Therefore, we should *ceteris paribus* abstain from gossip that reinforces stereotypes. Alfano (2014) considers these issues at length as related to second-person trait attributions (as opposed to third-person attributions), most of which is immediately applicable to gossip as well.

A second consideration is how much utility is gained from norm conformity and how much is lost by norm violation. If a higher rate of norm conformity gains little utility, it may not be permissible. Third, the amount of gossip is important. As mentioned, De Pinninck et al. (2010) model gossip as a means of distributed norm enforcement and report that an increase in the number of gossipers increased utility for norm conformers and decreased utility for norm violators at a geometric rate. At a certain point, though, adding one more gossiper produces very little difference in the overall public good. Nearly everyone in the society has already heard about the norm violators already and the ostracism is practically total. This finding suggests that gossip may be a virtue. Too little gossip and norms are not sufficiently enforced. But we don't want or need too much gossip, which could be either too many gossipers or gossipers gossiping too frequently. Not every norm violation requires widespread gossip for the norm to be enforced.

To be sure, other limitations are warranted for using gossip for norm promulgation and enforcement. We probably shouldn't attribute vices to young children, for instance. Determining what all these limits are is a large and important project best left for a time when the full attention it deserves can be given.

5. THE VIRTUE OF GOSSIPING WELL

A few things can now be said about what counts as gossiping well. It is evaluative, not idle. It produces the positive consequences of limiting future norm violation or promoting future norm conformity by the addressee or subject of the gossip (and typically both). It also informs or reminds others of morally acceptable norms. Gossiping well does not harm the addressee through stereotype threat. It also mustn't be done too often, since as De Pinninck et al. show, too much gossip becomes ineffective, perhaps being even counterproductive by making it so that no one is listening anymore.

The question then is whether gossiping well is virtuous. For minimalist, consequentialist accounts of virtue like Driver (2001, *forthcoming*), the foregoing discussion of gossip's effects suffices. If more is required for a trait to constitute a virtue than good consequences, additional support for the virtue of gossiping well can be given. First, we can look for a moral exemplar who gossiped well, and we needn't look far. Socrates gossiped. For example, Socrates tells others how Chaerephon was a "wild man" (*Charmides*, 153b) and "impulsive in any course of action" (*Apology*, 21a). He calls Pericles's sons "idiots" (*Alcibiades*, 118e). He relates how Hippocrates barged into Socrates's house one night and woke him (*Protagoras*, 310b).

To claim that gossiping well is a virtue requires more than just examples of virtuous people who gossiped. Most virtue theory contends that motives matter, and gossip will not be an exception. Snow (2010), for instance, contends that virtue is a form of social intelligence with a proper motivation. Gossiping well fits this description.

Social intelligence, Snow says, is a form of expertise that enables one to navigate social or interpersonal interactions in order to strategically pursue one's goals. Achieving one's goals can be severely hampered by a wide variety of norm violators, including liars, cheats, bullies, and braggarts. It takes a kind of social intelligence to perceive when and know how to inhibit those norm violations that makes it harder for one to achieve one's goals. Gossiping all the time or about any and every norm violation would not be strategically wise. One must gossip at the right time, to the right person, about the right person, and regarding the right norms. For instance, if I judge that Barry's constant bragging is highly unlikely to ever hamper my goals or those of others I care about, then I generally shouldn't gossip about that person. Alternately, if Dakota's dishonesty seems likely to threaten my achieving a life goal (either directly or indirectly), then strategically gossiping is prudent. The gossip effects ostracism in order to limit Dakota's chances of harming me in the future.

The motivation for gossip need not be so self-centered, however. Consider again Alex's gossip about Charlie. Suppose that Alex knows he will never interact with Charlie again, but Beth will. In that case, Alex exhibits the virtue of gossiping well if he gossips about Charlie to Beth in order to warn Beth. Here the gossip is not motivated out of a morally impermissible desire for revenge, but rather motivated out of a desire to achieve a "virtue-relevant social goal" (Snow 2010, 54) of protecting others from norm violators. If that motivation is removed, Alex would construe the situation differently, and if he still gossiped, he would do so for different, potentially vicious reasons.

As noted earlier, gossip need not be negative, such as David gossiping about Fiona's courage. Here the virtuous good that motivates the gossip can be intended to be for the benefit of the speaker, addressee, and the subject of the gossip. David wants to encourage Emily to be courageous like Fiona. David might also be motivated out of self-interest as well, if he judges Fiona's courage to be potentially advantageous to his achieving some life goal. David's gossip is an instance of a properly motivated social intelligence, since it is an effective strategy in a wide array of social interactions for achieving one's goals and the motivation is to reinforce others' virtuous behavior. Gossiping well, whether negative or positive, aims at social harmony.

Positive gossip bolsters pre-existing social harmony. Negative virtuous gossip aims to promote social harmony by limiting further discord from pre-existing norm violations.

6. FALSE GOSSIP

Must gossip be true to be virtuous? While it might seem intuitive to dismiss false gossip, we should be mindful how easy it is to engage in false gossip. Extensive empirical evidence demonstrates both that we attribute traits on the basis of very little behavioral evidence (spontaneous trait inferences [Uleman, Newman, and Moskowitz 1996]) and also that we overemphasize traits as sufficient explanations for the observed behaviors (the fundamental attribution error [Ross and Nisbett 2011]). Imagine that while you are driving another driver cuts you off to barely make an exit. A common response would be first to infer that the other driver is reckless, and then to infer that his recklessness explains his behavior. This explanation includes the prediction that the driver will likely continue to drive recklessly. It might be, however, that some situational factor superseded the other driver's actual disposition to careful driving, such as rushing someone to the hospital. Both spontaneous trait inferences and the fundamental attribution error are widespread and demonstrate that we attribute traits to explain all or almost all of the behavior that prompted the attributions. Therefore, plenty of our attributions of traits, including virtues and vices, are false. Articulating these attributions often counts as gossip.

There are three ways such gossip can be false. In the example introduced in section 3, Alex's gossip would be false if Charlie in fact did not cheat, which we can call flagrantly false gossip. Second, Alex engaged in specious-trait gossip if Charlie does not possess the attributed trait.⁷ Finally, it is exaggerating gossip if the attributed trait is supposed to provide all or most of the explanation for Alex's behavior, when it in fact explains much less. Gossip of this type isn't precisely false, since the person under discussion does have the mentioned trait. It does imply that the sole (or at least main) explanation for Charlie's cheating is his trait of being a cheater. But the trait sometimes is only a minor part of the explanation. Suppose, to vary the example, that the driver is actually reckless and usually does drive recklessly. This time, however, situational factors were largely responsible for his poor driving: he was rushing someone to the hospital in an emergency. Blaming his driving on his trait of recklessness then is an example of the fundamental attribution error. People are highly prone to this error, which leads to exaggerating gossip. Such gossip also creates the dubious expectation that Charlie will reliably behave that way again.

Whether gossiping well can include false gossip depends on the type of false gossip. All three varieties of false gossip are still a form of moral education. Virtue and vice attributions need not be true to be effective at raising awareness of a moral norm. These attributions often make moral exemplars or anti-exemplars out of people who are neither. Furthermore, false gossip still produces distributed, third-party, bidirectional norm enforcement.

Flagrantly false gossip can effectively achieve these functions, but looks especially pernicious and coldly utilitarian, to the point that there seems little virtuous about it. There is nothing virtuous about stretching the truth so far by vilifying Charlie as a

cheat if he'd never behaved that way. Furthermore, unlike specious-trait and exaggerating gossip, flagrantly false gossip is often more transparently false. It is easier to find out whether Charlie actually cheated than whether he has a trait that reliably disposes him to cheat. Consequently, flagrantly false gossip is a less effective means of norm promulgation and enforcement. If the audience comes to know that Charlie didn't cheat, they will be far less inclined to ostracize him and might dispute the legitimacy of the norm against cheating. So if gossiping well does include instances of false gossip, it can only be specious-trait gossip or exaggerating gossip.

These two types of false gossip create caricatures of people. Instead of distorting physical features, they sketch distorted pictures of people's personalities. They magnify the frequency or power of character traits. By calling false gossip caricatures, I do not mean to condemn the caricatures sketched in virtue and vice attributions. Political cartoonists exaggerate, but in doing so point to more important, less readily apparent truths. When we attribute virtues or vices to someone, we sketch a moral caricature, exaggerating a moral feature. The fact that the person behaved a particular way is embellished to paint the person as a villain or a hero. The virtue of gossiping well sometimes includes such false gossip.

Consider these examples of false gossip: "Cara is generous" and "Christopher is greedy." These statements, when spoken to someone other than Cara and Christopher, vilify Christopher and extol Cara. They either lack the attributed trait or the trait was only a partial explanation of their behavior. In that case, Cara is not the hero and Christopher is not the villain they are made out to be. Cara will not live up to the hype; she won't regularly and reliably behave generously when appropriate in varying situational circumstances. Christopher won't always act greedily; sometimes he'll be better than he's portrayed. Despite the inaccuracy, false gossip sometimes is consistent with the virtue of gossiping well because the right kinds of false gossip are a form of moral education, they produce more harm than good, and they are virtuously motivated.

One might object to this general argument that falsely gossiping about Cara or Christopher in this manner actually does more harm than good. The argument is a bit different depending on whether a virtue or vice is attributed. In considering this objection, important differences will emerge between positive and negative gossip, as well as between specious-trait and exaggerating gossip.

The worry for Christopher is that the punishment does not fit the crime. He is either not actually greedy or not so greedy, though he did at least act that way once. Yet he is being ostracized on the presumption that he is avaricious and will reliably behave that way, and so must be excluded from society for its protection. False gossip typecasts people as villains. So this worry is not unfounded. Some false gossip of this type, however, still is a kind of virtuous gossiping well for two reasons. First, the gossip can function as a way to diminish the likelihood that Christopher will behave greedily in the future because it modifies the situational factors influencing his behavior. Since it is false gossip, either Christopher was incontinent or he acted greedily merely in part because of avarice. Either way, situational factors played some role in his behavior. Ostracism by those hearing the gossip incentivizes future norm conformity, which tweaks the situational factors Christopher will encounter in the future.

Further, Christopher did violate a moral norm by behaving greedily, so some penalty for that violation is merited. Additionally, various mechanisms exist for Christopher to repair his reputation, such as apologizing. Second, recall that gossip also serves a means for norm enforcement for those hearing the gossip. The audience realizes the potential for ostracism if they behave greedily, regardless of whether the gossip is true or false.

While both specious-trait and exaggerating gossip can achieve some good through norm enforcement and promulgation, that good must be weighed against the harm done to Christopher. The kind of false gossip makes no difference in the amount of harm. Either way, he is ostracized to the extent that the gossip is repeated. Nevertheless, there are two reasons that exaggerating gossip sometimes counts as virtuous, but not specious-trait gossip. First, if the attribution is specious-trait false gossip, then he completely lacks the vice. Avarice was neither present nor the cause of his greedy behavior; situational factors were. In that case, Christopher is more victim of circumstance than the villain he's made out to be. Alternatively, if it's exaggerating gossip, Christopher does possess the attributed vice. There is something truly villainous about him. Therefore, more of the harm inflicted by the gossip is merited. Furthermore, the extent of the exaggeration makes a moral difference. Specious-trait gossip is clearly contrary to the virtue of honesty, while exaggerating gossip might not be. After all, exaggerating gossip is literally true but only implies an exaggerated explanation and false prediction.

Second, since specious-trait gossip is more exaggeration than truth, we should demand that it do more good or prevent more harm to justify it. Yet typically the opposite is the case. In cases of specious-trait gossip, there is no character-based reason to expect Christopher to behave greedily again. But the gossip still ostracizes him on the presumption that he will behave that way. The chance of Christopher behaving greedily again is largely determined by situational factors. Thus, it is unclear how much future harm is prevented by specious-trait false gossip. For exaggerating gossip, however, Christopher is at least somewhat likely to behave greedily in the future, even if he won't reliably do so. Ostracizing him may prevent his greed from harming others in the future. The threshold required for justifying specious-trait gossip is much higher, and barring evidence or argument that this threshold can be reached, specious-trait false gossip should generally be eschewed.

The worry for Cara is similar in that either she is not truly generous or her generosity only partially explains her generous behavior. While she likely will gladly reap the benefit of the endorsement, one might worry that problems will develop later when she fails to live up to that gossip. Any harm to Cara is not immediate but delayed until she ceases to fulfill her role as a heroic moral exemplar of generosity. Such a failure is likely to occur since she won't reliably behave generously. She may feel disappointed in herself, or others may be disappointed in her. The answer here is that gossip changes the situational factors in Cara's favor, giving her additional incentive to behave generously in situations that she might not have otherwise. The endorsement stemming from gossip can help her behave generously more reliably. Exaggerating gossip is likely to be far more effective on this point than specious-trait gossip. The former aims to strengthen a pre-existing virtue, while the latter can only

manipulate situational features. Furthermore, exaggerating gossip encourages norm conformity by the audience, even if the alleged hero is not actually so heroic. The benefits to Cara and the addressees of gossip can outweigh any future harm.

To summarize, given the right motivation, positive exaggerating gossip appears consistent with the virtue of gossiping well. Negative exaggerating gossip involving vice attributions can also be virtuous, though in a smaller of range cases. Negative specious-trait false gossip, however, usually does produce more harm than good, and—absent a compelling argument for overwhelming good in a particular case—is contrary to the virtue of gossiping well.

One final point is worth mentioning in favor of exaggerating gossip. Virtuous exaggerating gossip need not be in conflict with the virtue of honesty. One should be honest, but not always. Positive exaggerating gossip is a rare exception in part because it demonstrates the virtue of faith in humanity (Preston-Roedder 2013). It can help others to live up to the virtues attributed to them and encourage others to emulate their examples. Gossiping in this way may not be descriptively accurate, but it expresses the hope and faith in people that they are or can become the heroic moral exemplars their caricatures make them out to be.

7. VIRTUE ETHICS AND GOSSIP

The capacity for false gossip to produce moral exemplars and anti-exemplars raises the question of whether we need to create moral exemplars and anti-exemplars through false gossip. For virtue ethics, moral exemplars are supposed to serve a critical role in moral development. One learns how to be virtuous, at least in part, by emulating those already virtuous. Moral exemplars cannot be entirely fictional characters; at least some must be real people (Zagzebski 2010, forthcoming). Moral exemplars may be distant figures either historically (such as Socrates, Confucius, or Buddha) or spatially (the Pope or the Dalai Lama). But moral exemplars who are closer in time and space, being members of one's own community, are easier to observe and emulate. If we assume that virtues (and vices) are fairly common and robust against overriding situational factors, then there is little need for false gossip. There will be enough to heroes and villains to gossip about as moral exemplars and anti-exemplars.

Recently, however, these assumptions have been challenged by two new variants of virtue ethics as the field has endeavored to become more empirically accurate. First, there are those that claim that virtues and vices are rare (cf., Miller 2003; Swanton 2003; Lott 2014). In general, they claim, we find little empirical evidence that people reliably behave virtuously. Yet this shouldn't trouble us because not many people are virtuous. Miller (2003) draws upon Plato and Aristotle, both of whom regard developing a virtue as a long process that few complete. Miller contends, following Aristotle (*Ethics*, 1152a25–27), that most people are continent or incontinent, not virtuous or vicious. In that case, most people are not and will not become virtuous. But it does not follow that virtue ethics, says Miller, cannot be useful as a guide for life. Moral education can make them more continent (and closer to virtuous) than they would otherwise be.

A second recent move in virtue ethics has been to develop an updated account of virtues and vices based on recent work on traits in psychology (cf., Sabini and Silver 2005; Snow 2009; Russell 2009). In their recent books, Snow (2009) and Russell (2009) separately appeal to the cognitive-affective personality system (CAPS) developed by psychologists Mischel and Shoda (1995). Mischel and Shoda have found significant correlation between CAPS traits and people's behavior. The CAPS model also emphasizes individuals' construal of situations in determining whether or not a situation is sufficiently similar to other situations in which a trait was applicable. Snow and Russell both argue that the CAPS model can serve as a theoretical foundation for virtues and virtue ethics.

If the virtue-is-rare variant is correct, then there are few truly virtuous exemplars available for us to imitate. The worry is that if virtue is sufficiently rare, most of us will never encounter a truly virtuous person. For most people, the only exemplars available will be spatially or historically remote. While Confucius may have been one of the rare virtuous people, we know relatively little about him and how he lived his life. So it is hard to imitate his example as a moral exemplar. Thus, it seems that for the virtue-is-rare variant of virtue ethics to be an effective means of moral education—as Miller stipulated it is—then additional moral exemplars will be needed. False gossip can supply them.

The empirically-grounded-traits version of virtue ethics will have a similar problem. While this theory establishes an empirical basis for traits, it admits that traits are not the whole explanation of a behavior. Mischel (1968) did find a correlation between traits and behavior, but that correlation has a *ceiling* of 0.3 (out of 1.0). In other words, traits do play an important part in governing and explaining our behavior, but it's only part of the story. Situational factors are also part of the explanation. The problem again occurs with moral education and exemplars. Supposing that Cara truly has the virtue of generosity; then gossiping about her generosity serves as moral education by calling on others to emulate her. This gossip, however, will also be taken as a trait-based explanation for why Cara behaved as she did. Such an attribution, however, will not be taken as a partial explanation unless either (a) the attribution is told to someone already acquainted with the relevant academic literature or (b) the limited extent of the explanation is made explicit.

It would seem that the prudent response for the empirically-grounded-traits variant is to meet condition (b), i.e., make attributions like, "Charlie is a cheater, but that is only part of the reason why he cheated, and we can't predict with a high degree of confidence that he will cheat again in similar conditions." Even ignoring the soporific and counterproductive effect this prolixity produces, this degree of empirical precision is ill suited for establishing moral exemplars. Suppose that after Emma stands up to a bully, someone says, "Emma is courageous, but that's only a partial explanation for why she behaved courageously just now, and it is quite possible she won't reliably act that way in the future." We cannot be terribly confident in predicting future courageous behavior. It is fair to ask how much of an exemplar a person is if she is only an exemplar part of the time. In truth, she isn't much of an exemplar anymore. Thus, if Emma is to serve as a moral exemplar of courage, condition (b) should not be

met. Doing so will exaggerate Emma's character, creating a caricature of her virtue. Such false gossip, however, may be the only means by which there can be local moral exemplars, according to the empirically-grounded-traits variant.

While both variants of virtue ethics will require the use of false gossip for moral education through moral exemplars, the kind of false gossip required differs. The empirically-grounded-traits variant relies on exaggerating gossip. The moral exemplars do possess the virtue; only its power is being embellished. The virtue-is-rare account, however, requires specious-trait false gossip. At least most of the moral exemplars necessary for moral education will lack the virtues attributed to them. Earlier, I argued that some exaggerating false gossip counts as gossiping well, but specious-trait false gossip does not. If this is correct, it undermines the virtue-is-rare positions of Miller, Swanton, and Lott. If virtues are rare, then genuine moral exemplars will be generally lacking. Moral education by means of moral exemplars will typically require some degree of morally impermissible specious-trait false gossip.

8. CONCLUSION

If gossiping is wrong, then spreading false gossip should be even worse. Yet, not only can one gossip well, in some cases false gossip is virtuous. It teaches by making people into moral exemplars and anti-exemplars. Virtuous false gossip, however, must only exaggerate—not invent—character traits to create a caricature of a person. While this endorsement of gossiping well as a virtue is interesting in its own right, it has significant implications for virtue ethics. If we think that virtues are rare, but moral exemplars necessary, then gossip is needed to invent exemplars by attributed virtues that don't exist. But such gossip dooms those gossiped about. Hence, we should be reticent to endorse any version of virtue ethics that simultaneously asserts that virtues are rare and moral education by moral exemplars is feasible. More preferable is a version of virtue ethics that recognizes the common existence of virtues and their limited power, for such a theory only requires exaggerating people's virtues to make them into moral exemplars.⁸

NOTES

1. This utterance is interestingly paradoxical, since the speaker condemns the subject for what the speaker is doing himself, namely gossiping.
2. There are examples of gossip where the norm does not apply to everyone, sometimes including the speaker or the addressee. That the norm exists and has allegedly been violated is still communicated, even if the audience members know it does not apply to them. In such cases, the norm enforcement is not bidirectional, as there is no suggestion of enforcement relative to the addressee, to whom the norm does not apply.
3. In many cases, the speaker also makes a commitment to the addressee not to violate the norm. Alex signaled to Beth that he won't cheat her, and so she can trust him to cooperate. Such commitments by the speaker are not, however, always present either because the norm in question does not apply to the speaker or because the speaker is already violating it as well.
4. Gossip can be about those outside of one's social circle whom one cannot ostracize, such as the dead or celebrities. In these cases, there is no ostracism, only condemnation. The threat of ostracism remains to the addressee if he or she violates the norm later. The possibility of gossiping about the dead or celebrities is precisely why ostracism is absent from the definition of gossip.
5. There is empirical evidence suggesting that cooperation is regarded as a norm for the prisoner's dilemma, including Roth (1993).

6. Gossip can also serve as merely a threat of ostracism, which can sometimes be enough to induce norm conformity. This can only happen, however, when the person being gossiped about hears of that gossip. Gossip as actual ostracism does not require the subject of the gossip to be aware of the gossip in order to be effective.
7. These first two kinds of false gossip are not mutually exclusive. It could be that Charlie neither cheated nor has the trait of being a cheater.
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