

# Moral Disjunction and Role Coadunation in Business and the Professions

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We consider the problem of moral disjunction in professional and business activities from a virtue-ethical perspective. Moral disjunction arises when the behavioral demands of a role conflict with personal morality; it is an important problem because most people in modern societies occupy several complex roles that can cause this clash to occur. We argue that moral disjunction, and the psychological mechanisms that people use to cope with it, are problematic because they make it hard to pursue virtue and to live with integrity. We present role coadunation as a process with epistemic and behavioral aspects that people can use to resolve moral disjunction with integrity. When role coadunation is successful, it enables people to live virtuous lives of appropriate narrative disunity and to honor their identity-conferring commitments. We show how role coadunation can be facilitated by interpretive communities and discuss the emergence and ideal features of those communities.

**Key Words:** virtue ethics, professional ethics, moral disjunction, role morality, differentiated virtue, integrity

The obligations attached to a business or professional role may lead its holder to behave in a way that seems unethical. For example, salespeople may feel that they ought not to reveal information that might jeopardize a deal, a lawyer may feel compelled to mislead a jury to defend a guilty client, or a manager may believe that it is appropriate to bully subordinates to make them work harder. People who are led to behave unethically by their roles may nevertheless be guided by high moral standards in their private lives. When the moral standards of a role clash in this way with someone's personal morality, that person experiences *moral disjunction*.

From a virtue-ethical perspective, moral disjunction is dangerous because it inhibits the pursuit of virtue and, hence, makes it very hard to live with integrity. The virtues are character traits that dispose individuals to respond appropriately to the demands of the world in every area of life, and hence virtuous people are always

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virtuous people, irrespective of the context in which they act (Swanton 2003, 59, 69–70). Virtue ethics therefore emphasizes the importance of integrity: that is, of a person's capacity to pursue the virtues in a coherent way across all of the narrative threads of his or her life (MacIntyre 1999b, 317; Moore 2017, 81–82; Solomon 1992, 168–74). Living without integrity is uncomfortable because it means that a part of one's life is in some way unsatisfactory. Moral disjunction undermines integrity, and consequently, people often respond to it by telling themselves untrue stories about their lives or by abandoning morally important commitments. When they do so, they make it even harder for themselves to live with integrity.

The purpose of this article is to understand what would be necessary for people to respond with integrity to moral disjunction. We refer to the process by which they achieve this goal as *role coadunation*. Role coadunation is built on strong epistemic foundations: it requires role holders to possess a sufficient level of technical expertise in the role, to appreciate the role's impact on the world, and to know what it means to be virtuous within the role. In addition, role coadunation requires the role holder to understand how the role fits with the rest of his or her life. Only role holders who have this knowledge can hope to find a way to make sense of the different commitments in their lives and to harmonize them in a virtuous way. We argue that role coadunation is often more effectively performed with the support of an *interpretive community* whose most important task is to help role holders to acquire the knowledge that role coadunation requires. Well-functioning interpretive communities are sufficiently diverse to ensure that the views of non-role holders are heard.

Our article contributes to a literature that asks whether there is a "role morality" that is distinct from "ordinary morality." Some authors hold that there is no such thing as role morality, because the moral standards that govern behavior in a role are the same as those that govern all other behaviors (e.g., Andre 1991; Luban 1988; Postema 1980); others argue that there is a meaningful distinction between role morality and ordinary morality (e.g., Carr 1968; Dare 2020). Christine Swanton's (2021a, 159) integrationist view lies between these two positions. Swanton argues that behavior is properly differentiated by factors like role, life narrative, culture, and history, but that ordinary morality anchors any differentiation. We engage with Swanton's work in three ways. First, we show how appropriate virtue differentiation helps people to resolve moral disjunction in business and professional roles. Second, we examine the ways in which virtue differentiation occurs in those roles, and we highlight the central importance of interpretive communities in this context. And, third, we explore in detail the relationship between role and narrative virtue in business and the professions.

Our account of role coadunation speaks to common arguments about virtue, modernity, and work. A prominent school of thought holds that virtue is acquired through the pursuit of a practice that generates goods internal to itself: for example, woodwork is a practice, because the goods experienced by a skilled woodworker are available only to practitioners (MacIntyre 2007, 187–91). By this account, the Industrial Revolution undermined the pursuit of virtue. The argument runs as follows. Industrialization increased the efficiency of production by deploying new forms of capital and through the division of labor. As a result, many people came to

experience work as a repetitive activity, alienated from its product and valuable only because of the external goods, like money, that it brings. And, the argument concludes, work that is concerned only with external goods is corrupting because it leaves no room for the virtues: the consequence is the sort of moral disjunction with which this article is concerned (MacIntyre 2007, 227–28).

A practice-based account of virtue naturally leads to the question of whether the roles that structure modern life sit within practices, and a range of studies have advanced our understanding of practices and modern roles by performing careful analyses of this question for specific activities, such as nursing, teaching, financial advising and trading, and firefighting (Sellman 2000; Dunne 2003; Hager 2011; Wyma 2015; Dawson 2015; West 2018; Sinnicks 2019; Rocchi and Thunder 2019). By MacIntyre's telling, because most business activity is concerned with the acquisition of external goods, business cannot be a practice, and consequently, our business-oriented society is inimical to the virtues (for a discussion, see Sinnicks 2021). A more nuanced position is presented by Moore (2017), who draws on MacIntyre's account of institutions as social structures that support practices. Moore argues that maintaining the institutions of business generates some internal goods and, hence, can inculcate the virtues. For Moore, then, even organizations that retain only "vestiges of a practice" could still promote the virtues by becoming more practice-like (Moore 2017, 145–46; see also Bernacchio 2021, 230–31).

Our approach has a different emphasis. Rather than asking whether some small and highly educated part of the workforce has the good fortune to occupy jobs that inculcate virtue, or whether wholesale, and possibly revolutionary, changes to job descriptions would spread that good fortune more widely, we ask how people born into today's world can learn independently and collectively how to weave the various strands of their lives together in a virtuous way. Our analysis therefore suggests a way in which a well-lived life could play out in complex business and professional roles, and it helps us to understand the moral role played by the communities of people that interpret and comment on the goals and moral standards of particular roles.

We present our argument as follows. We start by discussing the importance of social roles in modern life, and we show how the behavioral expectations attached to roles can generate moral disjunction. The following sections outline the reasons why moral disjunction and the psychological mechanisms that people use to cope with it are undesirable from a virtue-ethical perspective. Our account of role coadunation follows; we devote a section each to its epistemic and behavioral aspects. The article concludes with a discussion of the emergence, composition, and functioning of the interpretive communities that support role coadunation.

## ROLES AND MORAL DISJUNCTION

Modern lives are structured around multiple social roles, and the demands of those roles can generate moral disjunction. In this section, we explain how roles structure social life, and how they come with strong behavioral expectations that may clash with personal morality.

*Roles and Role-Play*

To a great extent, social life is role-play. When people enter a store to purchase goods, they view themselves as “shoppers”; the shopper deals with a person who views himself or herself as a “salesperson.” “Shopper” and “salesperson” are social statuses; that is, they identify a position in a complex social order (Linton 1936; Gould 2002; Jensen and Roy 2008; Jensen, Kim, and Kim 2012). The interaction between the shopper and the salesperson is governed by expectations that guide the behavior of both status holders; that is, both shopper and salesperson are performing a social *role*. Similarly, a lawyer and a client, a police officer and a suspect, a parent and a child, and the participants in a boardroom discussion are all performing roles (Biddle 1979, 1986; Merton 1968). Social life therefore depends on our common understanding of roles.

The roles that are attached to social statuses are themselves social constructs. The role of “shopper” exists only because of our collective understanding of the rules according to which certain goods are exchanged, and a shopper behaves in a particular way in a particular context because she or he is expected to do so. The social norms, beliefs, and preferences that underpin role expectations are influenced by social context (Searle 1995), and hence the same role in two different cultures, or at two different points in history, may come with significantly different behavioral expectations. For example, a lawyer may be expected to engage in corruption in some cultures, whereas in others, that kind of behavior would be vehemently condemned. It may be that, in some cases, a change in shared expectations with regard to a business activity is so deep that one can no longer say that it involves the same role: for example, if a society came to believe that, in some circumstances, its doctors no longer had a fiduciary responsibility to the sick and could instead prioritize financial interests, then it might be more appropriate to give their activity a new name, such as “schmoctoring” (Applbaum 2000, 51). Nevertheless, when a certain level of consensus exists with regard to the content of a role, each set of people in that role normally exhibits characteristic behaviors (Biddle 1979; Burt 1982): parents nurture and educate their children, doctors promote good health and alleviate suffering in their patients, and so on.

Roles are “facilitating as well as constraining” of human action (Sunstein 1996, 922); that is, roles facilitate complex human interaction because, in limiting the range of behavioral patterns that is socially permissible in each context, they reduce the unpredictability of social interaction and so reduce the cognitive burden imposed by social life. Some authors have claimed that, because they constrain behavior, social roles unacceptably reduce, and perhaps even deny, individual freedom (Adorno 1973, 2000, 2006). Relatedly, excessive identification with social roles may distort people’s perceptions of their own and others’ needs and interests (Reeves and Sinnicks 2021). A less pessimistic argument holds that it may be desirable for individuals to adopt role-derived reasons for action, and that they can do so without experiencing any diminution of their individual freedom (Chappell 2020). But, even if they are freely accepted, role-related reasons for action may, as a matter of fact, lead to behavior that would be unacceptable if exhibited

outside of the particular role that dictates it (Applbaum 2000; Oakley and Cocking 2001), and such behavior may be in opposition to the role holder's moral standards. It is to this possibility that we turn next.

### *Moral Disjunction*

Moral disjunction occurs when the collectively held behavioral expectations associated with a business or professional role violate personal morality. The standards of personal morality that we have in mind derive from the virtues for, as Annas (2011, 102) says, it is hard to imagine that a person could consciously nurture a "commitment to badness:" that is, a commitment to be a better liar or a better coward (say). If, as we do, one accepts Annas's position, then moral disjunction is a problem that occurs when the social expectations associated with a role are inconsistent with a personal desire to live virtuously.

To illustrate moral disjunction, consider the LIBOR rigging scandal. LIBOR, or London Inter Bank Offered Rate, is a market reference interest rate intended to reflect the price at which banks could borrow short-term funds from one another. LIBOR is being phased out in the wake of the revelation that banks systematically misreported their borrowing rates to generate profits on their derivatives trading books. Brokers involved in LIBOR rigging claimed that they were merely doing their jobs, and many other bankers agreed with them (Enrich 2017, 95, 266, 316); for example, in interviews with the United Kingdom's Serious Fraud Office, the derivatives trader Tom Hayes claimed that "I have told you from the beginning that [rigging the LIBOR fix] was just part of doing my job" (Enrich 2017, 333). It is clear from these and other public statements on the scandal that derivatives traders believed that their role required them to engage in this sort of misrepresentation. And yet the same people had families for whom they cared, and they were often active in their communities (one of them volunteered at a retirement home, for example: Enrich 2017, 302). There is therefore strong evidence that derivatives traders operating in the LIBOR markets experienced moral disjunction. It seems likely that this is a more general problem in finance: Cohn, Fehr, and Maréchal (2014) present evidence that financial market professionals behave differently in their professional and personal lives.

Moral disjunction is not restricted to the financial sector; it pervades modern societies, because the functioning of those societies is dependent on the performance of complex social roles. The literature on role ethics discusses a number of cases that could be characterized as instances of moral disjunction. For example, Dare (2021, 235) reports a situation in which two lawyers "faced an appalling conflict between the well settled norms of their roles as lawyers and the norms of ordinary morality" because lawyer-client privilege prevented them from disclosing that their client was guilty of a murder for which another person had been imprisoned for life. Likewise, Applbaum (2000, 48–49) discusses a legal case in which a doctor felt that his role as an insurance company expert justified his failure to disclose a life-threatening ailment to a victim of a car accident.

It is common to justify the behavioral standards associated with business and professional roles in terms of "efficiency" (see, e.g., Weber 1946, 337; Simon

1957, 39–41; Williamson 1975, 17). But the normative force of an argument founded on efficiency is not obvious. Indeed, the emotivist philosophers of the mid-twentieth century held that there is no objective reason to favor *any* normative standard (Ayer 1936; Hare 1952) and, hence, that normative statements were merely expressions of approval that, when they were deployed in an argument, were really attempts to exert power. Some authors have argued that emotivism informs modern management, which, by their account, is largely concerned with the exertion of this type of persuasive power (MacIntyre 2007, 30). It may be almost impossible for managers to avoid embodying emotivism and so behaving manipulatively (MacIntyre 2007, 23–27), but they are possessed of agency and may nevertheless succeed in doing so, especially if they are supported by appropriate governance structures (Moore 2017, 106–7; 2012; Sinnicks 2018). We wish to deny the emotivist claim that the logic of bureaucratic efficiency has the same moral standing as any other reason for action. Such a denial gives people in business and professional roles a reason to resist emotivist logic and grounds our investigation of moral disjunction; in turn, our denial is founded on the virtue-ethical position that some human characteristics are objectively excellent. To pursue this line of reasoning, we now turn to a discussion of moral disjunction and virtue ethics.

### MORAL DISJUNCTION AND VIRTUE ETHICS

From a virtue-ethical perspective, moral disjunction is undesirable because it makes it very hard for people to pursue the virtues in their business and professional roles. It is impossible to live well if one pursues the virtues in only one part of one's life: the virtues are character traits that dispose an individual to respond in the right way in every part of his or her life, and hence virtue requires that one live with integrity. Accordingly, this section explains how a well-lived life is constituted by the virtues and what it means to live with integrity.

Virtue ethics stresses the importance of character in moral decision-making. This bottoms out in reasons for action: whereas a consequentialist takes a kind action because of the consequences it has for its target, and a deontologist takes it in response to a perceived duty, a virtue ethicist takes a kind action *because it is kind* (Hursthouse 1999, 3, 121–40). Virtue ethics therefore enjoins us to develop the sort of character that leads us to choose kind actions because they are kind, courageous actions because they are courageous, and so on (Hursthouse 1999, 26–34). That is, the virtues are excellent character traits: they enable us to identify the right action and then ensure that we actually take it. Following this observation, Anscombe (1958) argued, against the emotivist theories that dominated moral philosophy as practiced by many of her contemporaries, that ethics could be grounded on objective judgments about the nature of honesty, courage, and the other virtues. But to complete the virtue-ethical account, we need a reason to believe that people ought to pursue the virtues rather than some other set of character traits or, for that matter, no character traits at all. The reasons that we use in our analysis come from two modern approaches to virtue ethics.



The first reason is furnished by neo-Aristotelian accounts, which claim that people should pursue the virtues because doing so is characteristically good for them. Scholars working in this tradition argue that a person rationally pursues virtue because it is the foundation of a well-lived or flourishing life. This type of flourishing is a form of happiness that is usually referred to by its Greek name *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is properly applied to an entire life and, hence, is not the type of moment-by-moment hedonic pleasure with which some utilitarians are concerned; rather, it is a form of moralized happiness whose precise form depends on social context and individual circumstances.

It follows from this description that, although neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics claims that people rationally pursue *eudaimonia*, it does not provide a formula for achieving it; rather, individuals must select immediate and intermediate goals for themselves so that they can steer the arc of their lives toward *eudaimonia*. To identify those goals, people reflect carefully on the circumstances of their lives, identify aspects of their lives that are in some important way unsatisfactory, and find ways to change those aspects. That might involve a decision to be kinder to subordinates, to move between jobs, or to be more respectful toward a spouse, for example. This sort of reflective decision-making proceeds throughout a life and, by a neo-Aristotelian account, is an essential component of the flourishing that constitutes *eudaimonia* (Annas 2011, 124; Sokolowski 2004, 511).

The second reason to pursue virtue derives from target-centered virtue ethics, which holds that virtuous people are more likely to respond appropriately to the demands of the world (Swanton 2003, 2021a). Target-centered virtue ethics determines whether character traits are virtues by evaluating those traits “according to their point or function as virtues of character in the life of a good human being” (Swanton 2021a, 134). The point, or *target*, of a virtue could be an environmental good or the good of another person, for example. A virtuous act is one that hits the target of a virtue. For example, a benevolent act promotes the good of another person in the right way, at the right time, and for the right reasons (Swanton 2021a, 7). Target-centered virtue ethics is a non-eudaimonistic account that acknowledges that, in some circumstances, behavior that is objectively virtuous does not feel particularly good for the person exhibiting it. For example, it is hard to describe a person who willingly goes to the gallows to save a friend as “flourishing,” and yet that person’s choice may be generally viewed as admirable. Target-centered virtue ethics accepts that, if it were virtuous to go to the gallows, then that would make it the right thing to do, but it denies that the right action in this case would necessarily lead to *eudaimonia*. This account holds that people should develop a virtuous character because, in doing so, they learn how to identify right actions and, hence, become more likely to hit the target of the virtues; pursuing the virtues is likely to help a person to flourish, but flourishing alone does not justify the pursuit of virtue.

In short, virtue ethics calls for the acquisition of virtuous character traits, and, precisely because the virtues are deeply entrenched character traits, they should inform every aspect of our lives. Hence, for example, if people are aware of the situations in which, say, compassion is required in their personal lives, but they

never consider compassionate responses in their professional roles, then the compassion that they do exhibit may be the right action, but it is not a virtue. This type of situation is precisely what characterizes moral disjunction. The danger of moral disjunction, then, is that it may cause individuals to act in morally inconsistent ways, and so fail to develop a virtuous character. Such failure constitutes a lack of integrity.

Integrity is a virtue pertaining to life narratives, and it has a formal and a moral aspect. The formal aspect requires that a person integrate the various parts of his or her personality into a harmonious self. What this means is the subject of some debate. A prominent formal interpretation of self-integration is due to Frankfurt (1971), who argues that it manifests when a person's hierarchy of desires is fully harmonized and the person fully identifies with those desires at the highest level. But Frankfurt's formal analysis is open to criticism, because it does not discriminate between different types of desires and because it demands a very extreme form of consistency. The first of these problems is addressed by McFall (1987), who argues that the desires that are relevant to integrity depend on identity-conferring commitments which a person would regret abandoning and whose potential importance is recognized by reasonable others. The second problem arises because it seems intuitively clear that a person of integrity could have several identity-conferring commitments that are sometimes imperfectly integrated and that a perfectly integrated life may sometimes be undesirable (Dare 2021; Cox, La Caze, and Levine 2014). In line with this observation, Swanton (2021a, 167) identifies the virtue of appropriate disunity, which is achieved by "an agent who is disposed to lead a life that is neither so disunified that she cannot handle it nor so unified that her life lacks variety or challenge." In this article, we take the view that the formal aspect of integrity requires the type of consistency favored by McFall and Swanton: that is, that a person of integrity is one who has identity-conferring commitments that are appropriately disunified.

The moral aspect of integrity relates to the content of a person's identity-conferring commitments. A consistent or coherent set of values is insufficient grounds to say that a person has integrity: Koonz (2003) notes that some Nazis were consistently and even thoughtfully Nazis in every aspect of their lives, but, although their commitment to Nazism was identity conferring, one still cannot attribute integrity to Nazis. Hence, in addition to appropriately disunified identity-conferring commitments, integrity requires that those commitments reflect values that a reasonable person would view as morally defensible (McFall 1987). Swanton (2021a, 167) refers in this context to the virtue of overall narrative goodness, which requires that the various narrative threads of a life be virtuous.

In virtue ethics, integrity is a prerequisite for all of the other virtues. The reason is that, as already noted, the virtues are character traits that manifest across all aspects of a life, so that integrity is the capacity to be the same type of person in every social context (MacIntyre 1999b, 317; Moore 2017, 81–82; Solomon 1992, 168–74). For Swanton (2021a, 171), integrity contributes to the goodness of a life by helping people to hit the targets of the relevant virtues. It follows that integrity cannot amount to consistency of action, because, for example, consistently addressing children and adults in the same way would eventually cause a failure to hit the targets of virtue.



Furthermore, target-centered virtue ethics identifies a number of virtues relating to life narratives. Those include the virtue of appropriate narrative disunity, which, as we have already explained, requires integrity. Neo-Aristotelians identify two more reasons that integrity is important: first, a lack of integrity results in an inability fully to exercise one's moral agency, and second, a life without integrity has an unintelligible narrative that cannot be ordered toward *eudaimonia* (MacIntyre 2016, 228–29; 2007, 205; 1999b). People possessing the virtues of appropriate narrative disunity and overall narrative goodness pick the right projects and pursue them with constancy (Beadle 2013; MacIntyre 1999b, 318); one could therefore characterize integrity from a virtue-ethical perspective as a propensity to take one's life seriously (Cox, La Caze, and Levine 2014).

We have argued that moral disjunction is troublesome from a virtue-ethical perspective because it undermines the pursuit of virtue and, hence, is a barrier to integrity. But one need not be a philosopher to grasp the basic point that certain role requirements are uncomfortably incompatible with basic notions of morality, and any individual experiencing moral disjunction will, at least to some extent, be aware of that incompatibility. As we have already noted, it is very unlikely that anyone could deliberately assume a “commitment to badness” (Annas 2011, 102); consequently, it is natural that people experiencing moral disjunction will, consciously or unconsciously, seek ways to cope with it. For some, the only available solution will be to abandon the role altogether. For those who remain in the role, it is likely that one or more psychological coping mechanisms will eventually manifest. We now turn to a discussion of such mechanisms, their implications for integrity, and a possible virtuous response to moral disjunction.

## RESPONSES TO MORAL DISJUNCTION

The fact that role expectations sometimes clash with the demands of virtue can be psychologically damaging, and we identify three strategies that people use to cope with this sort of clash. We claim that each of those strategies undermines the pursuit of integrity and, hence, of virtue. This analysis reveals the need for the conscious process for dealing with moral disjunction that we present at the end of this section.

Moral disjunction is psychologically uncomfortable because it challenges notions of self. When we talk about a person's notion of self, we have in mind the person's “imaginary of authenticity” (Costas and Fleming 2009, 354, 358). An imaginary of authenticity is a narrative that one maintains to explain one's social roles, one's choices, and one's motivations. For example, one person might imagine her authentic self as an honest person who is motivated by social justice and actively engaged with her community, with sculpture, and with a political party; another might conceive his authentic self as a generous and kind person who is focused on amateur dramatics, family, and cross-country running. A person's imaginary of authenticity is the person's view of who he or she really is; it “is conceived as a workable fantasy of a unique and coherent self” (Costas and Fleming 2009, 358) that makes sense of the person's past and present, and informs the decisions that construct the person's

future. Individuals are therefore the authors of, and the lead players in, a life narrative that constitutes their authentic selves (MacIntyre 2007, 209–14).

Most people construct their imaginary of authenticity in their private lives, and because they typically want to live well, their imaginary of authenticity is oriented toward the virtues. Moral disjunction is therefore more commonly experienced when people feel that they cannot be true to their authentic selves at work. We consider three possible strategies for dealing with the psychological discomfort caused by moral disjunction: *disidentification*, *disengagement*, and *discardment*. We discuss each in turn, and we conclude that none is consistent with the demands of integrity.

### *Disidentification*

*Disidentification* occurs when a person plays a social role while maintaining a belief that the role-play does not constitute a part of his or her imaginary of authenticity. For example, a derivatives trader who understood that his manipulation of LIBOR rates was wrong but who convinced himself that his trader identity was a mask that he wore at work, so that trading was not part of his “real life,” would have successfully disidentified. Researchers have demonstrated that disidentification is commonly used to minimize the discomfort experienced by people who find themselves in a work role that they view as inconsistent with their authentic selves (Elsbach 1999; Pratt 2000; Elsbach and Bhattacharya 2001; Brown and Humphreys 2006). Disidentification succeeds by allowing workers to feel that they have protected their real selves from the smothering embrace of entrenched corporate power (Kosmala and Herrbach 2006; Van Maanen 1991; Mumby 2005).

Disidentification is a strategy that enables a life simultaneously to exhibit several distinct narrative threads. However, although it may be a rational response to the psychological discomfort caused by moral disjunction, it provides only short-lived and superficial relief (Brown and Matsuo 2020, 169; Rozuel 2011, 696). Moreover, some authors argue that fragmenting a life across several narrative threads is morally problematic, because doing so may preclude a clear sense of self and so undermine the reasoning that underpins moral choices (Frankfurt 1971; Williams 1981). Vicious behavior may ensue when reasoning is impaired in this way (Aristotle [350 BC] 2009), and when a life is fragmented, it may be impossible to ascribe meaning or purpose to it and, hence, to pursue the good (MacIntyre 2007, 217; 2016, 228).<sup>1</sup>

It is important to distinguish the morally unacceptable fragmentation caused by moral disjunction from other, acceptable, types of fragmentation. As a practical matter, real lives are messy, and good people usually have life narratives that are fragmented to some extent (Dare 2021); the requirement that a life be perfectly unified therefore seems unrealistic and impossibly demanding (Swanton 2021a,

<sup>1</sup> MacIntyre (1999b, 322) identifies a related problem of compartmentalization, which arises when a person is unable to assess different roles from a position that transcends the person. Compartmentalization is not a “strategy” and, hence, is distinct from disidentification. However, it seems possible that prolonged disidentification could lead to compartmentalization in the sense that MacIntyre uses the word.

154). For example, a budding artist who tells herself that her mundane call center job does not express her true self is disidentifying and has a disunified life narrative. But the call center work does not demand vicious behavior and does not, in principle, cause moral disjunction; if it enables her to pursue her primary life goals, then it makes sense for the artist, and it may be admirable. The artist's life exhibits what Swanton (2021b) calls the virtue of appropriate disunity.

However, when disidentification is a response to moral disjunction, it cannot be justified from a virtue-ethical perspective. To see why, suppose that a person imagines his authentic self to be kind and courageous and that he takes a job in which, because he fears his superiors, he bullies his subordinates. That person may attempt to deal with the resultant moral disjunction by disidentifying from his work self and excluding his cruel and cowardly behavior toward his colleagues from the facts that he uses to sustain his imaginary of authenticity. But this position is unsustainable, because virtues, as character traits, are dispositions that manifest in all areas of life. This person could claim to *do* kind and courageous things in his private life but cannot claim to *be* a kind and courageous person. Swanton (2021b, 31) characterizes the problem in this case as a violation of the requirement that a life exhibit overall narrative goodness.

### *Disengagement*

To explain how people can engage in harmful conduct without experiencing psychological pain, Albert Bandura (1990a, 1990b, 1999, 2002, 2016) has theorized *moral disengagement*, which is the process by which people selectively exclude some activities from normal moral consideration so that they can maintain a positive self-image. Bandura was an early contributor to a psychology literature that denies the claim that moral reasoning is performed by rational and autonomous agents and instead characterizes moral behavior as resulting from the interaction of social, cognitive, and affective influences (see also Haidt 2001). That interaction gives rise to self-evaluative, affective, and behavioral reactions that together constitute the self-regulatory mechanisms that mediate moral reasoning and moral actions. Under normal circumstances, individuals avoid immoral behavior to avoid self-condemnation, and they choose to behave morally because doing so reinforces their sense of self-worth (Bandura 2002, 102; 2016, 29; see also Blasi 1983). Bandura's central claim is that people are only able to do bad things without experiencing psychological discomfort if their self-regulatory mechanisms have been deactivated. This deactivation generates moral disengagement: it can occur through the redefinition of a person's actions so as to make those actions appear less harmful or seem morally justified, through a displacement or diffusion of responsibility, or through the dehumanization or blaming of the victims. Moral disengagement is not about convincing one's peers that one has not behaved unethically; it requires one to convince oneself (Bandura 2016, 33–34). However, it is not necessarily a purely individual phenomenon: some social systems are structured in such a way that they only function if different people, engaged in different tasks, contribute to a harmful outcome. In those cases, participants exonerate each other from moral responsibility; collective moral disengagement therefore arises out of “synergistic group dynamics” (Bandura 2016, 100).

Moral disengagement appears to have been common among the derivatives traders who were caught up in the LIBOR scandal. In line with this claim, Enrich (2017, 105) identifies a common perception among participants in the financial sector that they “[operated] within a closed system facing off other predatory professionals.” Tom Hayes, who received a lengthy jail sentence in 2015 for his manipulation of the LIBOR fixing, reportedly “didn’t spend much time thinking about whether what he was doing was right or wrong. Those weren’t values he assigned to his job” (Enrich 2017, 185). That is, traders like Hayes appear to have managed to deactivate their self-regulatory mechanisms by situating their trading activities in an amoral space. This seems to be a clear case of collective moral disengagement. Something similar appears to have occurred when many Enron employees convinced themselves that the manipulation of earnings reports was a technical, rather than a moral, decision (Newman et al. 2020; for an outline of the Enron case, see McLean and Elkind 2013).

Bandura (2016, 26) claims that moral disengagement “resolves the conflict between virtue and harm,” because it “enable[s] virtuous individuals to behave in harmful ways but still retain a self-view as virtuous.” We disagree with this claim. It is true that moral disengagement is a way for people to cope with moral disjunction and to protect an imaginary of authenticity that is oriented toward the virtues. However, we do not think that it resolves the conflict between virtue and harm. Individuals who are morally disengaged cannot be virtuous, for their vicious behavior in certain situations is compounded by the fact that moral disengagement suppresses or distorts morally relevant information (Moore 2008, 133–35), so that they cannot understand what the virtues require in those situations. Disengaged people tell themselves a false story about their behavior: their lives therefore lack the virtue of narrative accuracy, and they misunderstand who they are (Swanton 2021a, 166). The consequence of that is a lack of integrity and the resultant inability to build a meaningful life narrative in pursuit of *eudaimonia* (MacIntyre 2007, 217; 2016, 229). As in the case of disidentification, a morally disengaged person can *do* virtuous things when his or her self-regulatory mechanisms are activated, but he or she cannot *be* virtuous because, if the virtues are character traits, then they should be deeply entrenched and so motivate behavior in every context.

### *Discardment*

We use the term *discardment* to refer to situations in which people inhabit one role so fully that the behavioral expectations associated with that role drive their actions in all aspects of their lives. A celebrated fictional example is the butler in Ishiguro’s (1989) *Remains of the Day*, who identifies so closely with the demands of his professional role that he denies the need to mourn his dead father; similarly, members of the Night’s Watch in George R. R. Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire* novel series swear to “live and die at [their] post” and, hence, discard every personal commitment from their lives (Martin 1996). MacIntyre (2007, 29) is speaking of discardment when he describes managerial “characters” in whom “role and personality [are] fused.” People in organizations sometimes overidentify with their work role to the extent that they may engage in pro-organizational workplace crime

(Vadera and Pratt 2013; Dukerich, Kramer, and Parks 1998). Wieland (2021, 220) identifies a form of discardment when she discusses willful self-abnegation in cases of extreme religious devotion. And Zimmerman (2003) argues that some people may discard their selves entirely to withstand the vicissitudes of their work environments; it is conceivable, for example, that a LIBOR trader who mixes only with other traders and brokers might manage to suppress his or her nonwork self entirely.

Discardment is a way to avoid moral disjunction, but it undermines the pursuit of virtue, and it constitutes a loss of integrity. Successful discardment renders personal morality irrelevant so that conflict dissipates and moral disjunction is impossible. Discardment prevents people from tailoring their behavior appropriately to the context and, hence, from pursuing the virtues across their lives. Moreover, because personal morality is typically aligned with the virtues, if discardment resolves moral disjunction in favor of a problematic work role, then it necessarily involves the embrace of some vicious behavioral patterns. For this reason, and because people typically want to view themselves as good, it is unlikely that discardment could occur without at least some level of moral disengagement.

Finally, discardment involves a sacrifice of integrity, because people of integrity accept that commitments across all parts of their lives have the capacity to generate valid claims on them; integrity therefore requires people actively to monitor their performance across their various roles to ensure that “no part is left out” from their search for coherence (Davion 1991, 185). Discardment precludes this sort of monitoring and, in particular, prevents people from acknowledging the moral strength of their personal commitments.

We have now shown how the behavioral expectations associated with social roles can cause moral disjunction, and we have examined three strategies that allow people to deal with the resultant psychological discomfort. We have argued that each of those strategies undermines integrity. People who are faced with moral disjunction therefore need an alternative way to cope with it. The following section addresses this need.

### *Role Coadunation*

In different ways, each of the three strategies that we have identified for coping with moral disjunction succeeds by suppressing morally relevant facts. Disidentification works when people manage to disavow the morally important fact that their selves are constituted by their behavior in every part of their lives. Disengagement succeeds when people manage to exclude activities from moral consideration, even though those activities are morally important. And discardment succeeds when people cease to acknowledge the real moral strength of commitments in their personal lives.

We claim that a virtuous response to moral disjunction has an epistemic and a behavioral aspect. The epistemic aspect rests on a *complete reading* of the situation that omits nothing and denies no moral facts, and the behavioral aspect is constituted by the capacity to use a complete reading to perform an *integrated enactment* of a role in a way that allows for a life of integrity. Both aspects relate to the focal business or professional role, and also to the life narratives of individuals who hold that role. And the two aspects are tied up in one another: it is impossible to

understand a role without performing it, and it is impossible to perform a role with integrity without understanding that role and how it fits with one's life narrative. People who can make a complete reading and then perform an integrated enactment of a role are able thereby to unify the disparate strands of their lives. When they do so, we say that they are engaged in *role coadunation*, from the Latin verb *coadunare*, meaning "to join together" or "to make one."

To explain role coadunation, we discuss in turn its epistemic and behavioral aspects, and we show how they relate to the content of both a role and the life narratives of people who occupy that role. Each aspect of role coadunation bottoms out in individual understanding and behavior, but, in order that individuals can understand their roles and enact them virtuously, they may need the support of others. As a practical matter, knowing and doing are closely bound up, and hence the epistemic and behavioral aspects are developed together.

### COMPLETE READING

A complete reading is the epistemic aspect of role coadunation. To achieve a complete reading, people must understand their business or professional roles and also how those roles fit into their life narratives. In practice, these types of understanding are achieved in tandem, but for reasons of conceptual clarity, we consider each in turn. Much of the hard work required to learn role content and to understand what constitutes virtuous behavior in that role is performed in communities. We therefore conclude this section with a discussion of the social networks that facilitate complete readings.

#### *Understanding Role Content*

A person can only make a complete reading of a role if he or she understands its content. By this, we mean that the person must know what the role demands, what impact its enactment has on the world, and also how to exhibit the virtues when occupying it. We therefore start our discussion of role understanding by explaining how role demands are learned.

The sociology literature identifies four stages of role learning: out-of-role exposure, mimicking, tacit knowledge acquisition, and role reflection. Out-of-role exposure ensures that social actors have some understanding of that role even before they deliberately attempt to learn about it. Their understanding is acquired partly through direct contact with role holders and partly through the consumption of movies, novels, and online material. For example, new lawyers approach their jobs with a superficial understanding of its content derived from out-of-role exposure; they may even adopt social mores, relating, for example, to dress and personal style, that they associate with the role (Biddle 1979, 318). But people who understand lawyering solely in terms of their out-of-role exposure to press comment, gossip, and popular culture have at most a shallow understanding of that role; deeper learning relies on practice and immersive experience.

The most basic experiential knowledge of a new role is acquired by observing and mimicking the behavior of more senior practitioners. Observing allows the learner to



understand how to recombine and reproduce examples of domain-specific knowledge and behaviors in contextually appropriate ways (Bandura 1971). This type of mimicking allows learners to identify role-appropriate behavior in the most common social circumstances, but it need not endow them with a sophisticated appreciation of the reasons for acting in a particular way. Consequently, they are unlikely to be able in unfamiliar social contexts to adapt their behavior in role-appropriate ways.

The ability to adapt to unfamiliar contexts is likely to require the tacit knowledge that is inherent to any social practice (Polanyi 2009). Tacit knowledge acquisition relies on more than mimicking: it takes place as actors learn the nuanced expectations of others, including their peers, role models, and mentors (Biddle 1979, 148). This type of learning constitutes a form of apprenticeship, and it enables neophytes to see themselves from the perspective of others. They thus learn to internalize the expectations others have of the role; at the same time, they are likely also to internalize the attitudes and predilections of other role holders (Biddle 1979; Mead 1934, 162). Hence learning is an experiential process that results from apprentices' interactions with their environment (Kolb 1984; Kolb and Kolb 2009). Experiential learning does not occur solely in apprentice relationships, nor within single organizations; it also happens when communities of practice bring together practitioners from a range of organizations to share knowledge, raise standards, and foster a shared sense of purpose (the term *community of practice* is from Lave and Wenger 1991; for a review, see Nicolini et al. 2022).

Role expertise requires the ability to reflect on a role (Schön 1983). That ability may be acquired through long experience, but an apprenticeship is a quicker and possibly more effective path, because apprentices are able to interrogate their mentors and learn how those mentors reason (Brown and Treviño 2014; Lankau and Scandura 2002). As a result, apprentices learn correctly to anticipate the behavior of their mentors in situations that the learners have never observed in practice (Bandura 1971, 1:10). When role holders become experts, they are able to identify the right response to each specific situation in an intuitive way, and they implement that response faster than a novice could (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986; Dreyfus 2004).

In short, technical expertise in a role requires a particular kind of education, a deep immersion in the relevant environment, the acquisition of tacit and explicit knowledge, and the development of reflective skills. This learning process generates the expertise needed to identify and respond to relevant information concerning the role and, hence, significantly increases the likelihood that a role occupant will perform a complete reading of his or her situation. But, to choose the right action, the role occupant must also understand how the virtues are manifested in the role and how the role relates to the rest of his or her life. The following section discusses this requirement.

### *Understanding Differentiated Virtue*

The virtues are learned by doing, and that doing always happens in particular contexts. Character traits are developed as people engage with the practical problems that the world presents, reflect on their choices, and attempt to modify their motivations and habits in response to their experience. A virtue-ethical account of moral

learning must therefore recognize the importance of both experience and context. Our discussion in this section starts with the analogy between skill and virtue. We then address contextual factors in light of Swanton's (2021a, 161) account of differentiated virtue, which explains how roles and individual life narratives give shape to the virtues.

Virtuous behavior is rather like a skill. A woodworker learns through repeated practice how best to turn a table leg, and a person learns through the repeated performance of kind acts how best to be kind. Learning virtue, like acquiring role expertise, requires careful and reflective practice that is often aided by the guidance of expert mentors (Narvaez and Lapsley 2005; Dunne 2020). In addition to transferring technical know-how, mentoring relationships can facilitate moral learning (Dunne 2020); that the dialogue between apprentice and mentor can lead to better, arguably wiser decisions is well documented (Moberg 2007; Staudinger and Baltes 1996; Athanassiou and Nigh 1999).

While virtuous behavior is often an instinctively deployed skill, it is not thoughtless. Like a skilled woodworker, the virtuous person can explain her or his actions (Annas 2011, 25–29). Virtue ethics thus highlights the developmental nature of morality; this is in line with Kohlberg's (1981, 1984) account of moral development, which requires progression through cognitive stages that involve increasingly complex reasoning. Finally, which virtues are developed, and how, depends on embedded contexts (Narvaez and Lapsley 2005; Snow 2015).

To understand what virtue demands, it is first necessary to understand the context in which it is to be exhibited (Hartman 2013, 150–51). The way that a soldier and a monk exhibit courage is often very different, for example; so, too, is the meaning of kindness for a person teaching in a kindergarten and a medical school. Christine Swanton addresses the importance of context in her discussion of basic and differentiated virtues. A *basic virtue* is “virtue understood at a high level of generality ... or abstraction” (Swanton 2021a, 160; see also Swanton 2021b, 19; 2020, 50). So, for example, the basic virtue of courage corresponds to what people perceive as courage without having to refer to a person's role, life narrative, or cultural context. To understand what a basic virtue demands in a given context, the virtue must be “contoured” by the relevant contextual features (Swanton 2021a, 161). That contouring generates *differentiated virtue*. Differentiation could reflect cultural or historical factors, social roles, or individual life narratives; for the purposes of this article, we focus on differentiation by social role and life narrative.

Basic and differentiated virtue have an important and complex relationship. First, basic virtue anchors differentiated virtue in the sense that it prevents differentiation from amounting to a form of wrongness. For example, basic virtue should tell a manager the difference between being, on the one hand, tough and fair and, on the other hand, cruel. Second, differentiated virtue gives substance to basic virtue by providing the contextual information needed to understand what the target of the virtue is in a particular situation. One cannot understand precisely what it means to be kind until one knows the context in which one acts. In short, as Swanton (2021a, 162) states, “basic and differentiated virtue are mutually constraining.”

A complete reading of a role requires an understanding of how virtue is differentiated by that role and by the role holder's life narrative. First, like the basic virtues, role-differentiated virtues are learned by doing and by reflecting on doing; that learning depends to a large extent on the processes described in the previous section. An important account of situated moral learning comes from Alasdair MacIntyre (2007), who argues that the virtues are learned through participation in *practices*. MacIntyre defines a practice to be a complex, coherent social activity with its own standards of excellence that generates internal goods that are only available to its practitioners (MacIntyre 2007, 187). Internal goods are therefore inseparable from the practice and are in contrast to external goods, such as money or power, that are available to anyone (MacIntyre 2007, 191). MacIntyre claims that practices provide "the arena in which the virtues are exhibited and in terms of which they are to receive their primary, if incomplete, definition" (187). This is because one can achieve the internal goods of a practice only by possessing and exercising the virtues (MacIntyre 2007, 191, 196). MacIntyre is concerned with the way that a particular type of role-differentiated virtue is learned, but he would not accept that many of the business and professional roles with which this article is concerned sit within practices. We take the view that virtue can be differentiated by any role and, hence, that situated moral learning must necessarily extend beyond MacIntyrean practices. But, in every case, learning is accomplished by performing a role and reflecting on the way the role constrains, and is constrained by, basic virtue. That reflection could be solitary, but, as we discuss later, it is often a social activity.

Individual life narratives are the second dimension along which virtue is differentiated for role holders. Virtue ethics attributes normative force to the sequence of events and identity-conferring projects and commitments that, together, constitute a directed life narrative (see, e.g., MacIntyre 2007, 205–19; Swanton 2021a, 164). A clear understanding of how a role fits with a life narrative is therefore an essential component of a complete reading; it allows the role holder to achieve an undistorted picture of his or her life narrative and so to exhibit the virtue of narrative accuracy (Swanton 2021a, 166). To illustrate the subtlety of a complete reading of a life narrative, consider Jon, an oil worker with no other employment opportunities whose life narrative includes identity-conferring commitments to environmental activism and to the care of a relative, Bran, who is rendered immobile by a disability.<sup>2</sup> The oil worker role is virtue differentiating in itself: courage manifests differently for the oil worker and the carer roles, for example. But, in addition, Jon's commitment to environmentalism may create moral disjunction because he may perceive the extraction of fossil fuels as a moral wrong. And, at the same time, Jon's commitment to the care of Bran prevents him from seeking alternative employment in another location. Jon's recognition of his personal commitments precludes discardment; absent disidentification and disengagement, Jon will be able to make a complete reading of his situation that foregrounds the potential incompatibility of his various commitments. He could do this

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the challenging nature of this example.

alone, but it might be a social activity; we will see how when we return to Jon in the next section.

We have now explained how a complete reading of a role draws on two skills. First, a complete reading employs technical expertise of the role that facilitates an understanding of its content and its impact on the world. Second, the quality of a complete reading depends on the role holder's capacity to identify the targets of the virtues in light of the role and the role holder's life narrative. The more developed these skills are in a role holder, the more likely he or she is to consider all morally relevant information and, hence, to identify the integrated enactment that allows him or her to live with integrity.

### *The Epistemic Contribution of Interpretive Communities*

A complete reading may be achieved individually, but in practice, it is often more easily and effectively performed collectively. In this section, we show how complete readings can be improved with the support of an interpretive community that helps role holders to uncover morally relevant information and to understand how virtue should be differentiated.

Because it requires an awareness of all morally relevant facts, the complete reading of a role must include an appreciation of the impacts of that role on the world. Such an appreciation may not be easy to achieve from within the role, because many business and professional roles appear to their holders to exist within a closed social system. When that happens, role holders may become blind to the effect that their activities have on other people, groups, and the environment, and they may find it very difficult, if not impossible, to understand how virtue should be differentiated in that role and for each individual holder. Stanley Fish (1976, 1980) refers to a community of readers who establish common conventions for making sense of, and so creating, literary works as an *interpretive community*; we adopt the same term to refer to a community of people who can make moral sense of a social role.

Modern virtue ethics acknowledges the importance of communities and of the epistemic and virtue-supporting functions that they play, but it does not study the types of interpretive communities that we have in mind. MacIntyre notes that, without a community to provide a set of "givens" by maintaining cultural stories and common understandings of purpose, it would be impossible to embark on a life that pursued the virtues (MacIntyre 2007, 216; 1999a, 74). And communities play an important role in teaching their members what is virtuous and how to reason independently about the virtues (MacIntyre 1999a, 71). While MacIntyre (1999b) does discuss the ways in which communities can help people to make sense of their identities and practical choices, his analysis is typically not concerned with roles (MacIntyre 1999a, 95). When he discusses the communal interpretation of roles, he generally does so in the context of practices, and, as we have already noted, many modern business and professional roles cannot be viewed as sitting within a practice: for MacIntyre (1999a, 96–97), practice-oriented interpretation is performed in a relatively narrow community of "expert coworkers." He presents a discussion of the ways in which market-oriented activities are embedded in the wider networks of relationships of giving and receiving that, by fostering noninstrumental giving and

allowing people to acknowledge their mutual dependence, serve to foster the virtues (MacIntyre 1999a, 117). That type of embedding could enable people to pursue the virtues in non-practice-oriented organizations (Bernacchio 2018), but it does not constitute the type of wide-ranging, sometimes deliberately designed, and role-focused network that constitutes an effective interpretive community.

In performing a complete reading, an individual role holder may rely on one interpretive community to determine how the role relates to his or her life narrative, and on another to uncover role-related information. Narrative-related information is most directly accessible by the individual concerned; however, that individual might need others to trigger deeper reflection or to point out blind spots caused by coping strategies, such as moral disengagement and disidentification. For example, Jon the oil worker might only be able to appreciate how his role fits, or does not fit, with his life narrative as a result of conversations with his relative Bran, his friends, other environmentalists, or candidates for political office.

The role-related information required for a complete reading might only be revealed by a much larger and more diverse interpretive community. Such a community ideally comprises overlapping networks of people with different levels of technical skill and different moral perspectives. Diversity within the interpretive community is important to neutralize the artificial sense of separation often caused by the deep immersion necessary to achieve technical expertise in complex roles. This type of separation can be countered by viewing oneself from a perspective that is external to any particular role, and that external perspective can be achieved through critical dialogue in the right milieu (MacIntyre 1999b, 321–22). A great deal of clarity and creativity can be achieved through the dialectical interaction of actors with different backgrounds and different points of view (Brown and Duguid 1991; Powell, Koput, and Smith-Doerr 1996; Burt 2004; Subramaniam and Youndt 2005).

To illustrate the ideal composition of interpretive communities for role-related information, we consider again the cases of Jon the oil worker and of Tom Hayes, the trader convicted of LIBOR manipulation. For Jon to make a complete reading, he should include in his interpretive community actors capable of understanding all of the ramifications of fossil fuel extraction for the environment and his local community, such as people working in the nonrenewable and renewable energy sectors as well as nongovernmental organizations, local residents, politicians, and journalists.

Tom Hayes's interpretive community included the network of expert traders and brokers who engaged in the quotidian business of trading derivatives. But that network experienced the market as a technically complex closed system that was largely divorced from the rest of their lives. For example, Enrich (2017, 348) reports that Hayes believed that his LIBOR-linked trades were part of a "closed-loop system" and that they had no impact outside this world. Hayes therefore failed to achieve a complete reading of his role. To do so, he could have included in his interpretive community others who could bring a variety of specialisms to bear on his role. For example, he could have included journalists, who are less concerned with market technicalities than interest rate swaps traders are but, because their role requires them to make sense of the market for their nonspecialist readers, are

arguably better at identifying ethical blind spots. Similarly, Hayes could have engaged with regulators, because they have a holistic understanding of the linkages between financial markets, and between professional and retail investors, and so are better able to appreciate that, like every other business activity, swaps trading is not a closed system. And, of course, lawyers and judges could also have been included in Hayes's interpretive community.

To summarize our argument so far: the epistemic aspect of role coadunation is a complete reading, which consists in uncovering information about the role, its impacts on the world, how it shapes basic virtue, and how it fits with an individual's life narrative. That information can be accessed only by developing technical expertise and engaging in reflective practice. In addition, it may require dialogical interaction with one or more interpretive communities. Achieving a complete reading renders integrated enactment possible.

### INTEGRATED ENACTMENT

Integrated enactment is the behavioral aspect of role coadunation. It is the art of enacting a role in a way that allows the role holder to live with integrity: that is, to exhibit the virtues of appropriate narrative disunity and overall narrative goodness. Integrated enactment must therefore afford an appropriate degree of respect to each of the role holder's identity-conferring projects and commitments in a virtuous way. We start this section by discussing different ways in which a role holder can engage in integrated enactment; we then analyze the contribution that interpretive communities can make to this part of the role coadunation process.

#### *Appropriate Disunity, Overall Goodness, and Role Coadunation*

How a person achieves integrated enactment depends on the information acquired in the complete reading and on whether problems are uncovered concerning the role or its relationship to the role holder's life narrative. We address each of these possibilities in turn.

Role-related information in cases of moral disjunction should include the fact that at least some of the behavioral patterns associated with the role contradict basic virtue. When that happens, integrated enactment requires that the role holder modify those behaviors to preserve overall narrative goodness. This modification could take one of three forms. First, the role holder could make minor adjustments to his or her actions, if it is possible to do so without generating organizational conflict, exclusion from a professional body, or complicity with organizational wrongdoing. Second, if the complete reading demonstrates that the behavioral problems are organization specific, then the role holder can either leave the organization or attempt to alter the way in which the role is performed within the organization. For example, an academic working at a university that is so obsessed with rankings that it misrepresents its students' employment outcomes or its faculty research output can resolve moral disjunction by seeking employment with a more honest institution. Alternatively, he or she could attempt to change the way the institution operates; doing so would be possible only if the academic had sufficient power, and it could



also require the support of an interpretive community. Third, if the complete reading determines that the problem is not organization specific, then the role holder may attempt to change the behavioral expectations associated with the role; doing so would certainly require the support of an interpretive community. We discuss the behavioral contribution of interpretive communities below.

A complete reading may also demonstrate that moral disjunction is caused by the relationship between an individual's life narrative and the behavioral expectations associated with his or her role. This could occur because, in addition to being differentiated by an individual's role, the virtues are differentiated by the events, projects, and commitments that make up a life narrative (Swanton 2021a, 164; 2021b).

To illustrate the complexity of integrated enactment when narrative-related problems are uncovered in a complete reading, we return to Jon, the oil worker who is also an environmentalist and a carer for Bran, the relative who is rendered immobile by a disability. For the sake of argument, we assume that the role of oil worker does not in itself demand vicious behavior.<sup>3</sup> After performing a complete reading, Jon may realize that narratively differentiated virtues cause him to experience moral disjunction, because his oil work appears incompatible with his identity-conferring commitment to environmentalism. The complete reading reveals further complications, because his hometown has no other employment opportunities, and Jon's commitment to Bran's care prevents him from moving. Jon faces a very difficult choice: if he continues to live in the same location to care for Bran, then he may disrespect his commitment to environmentalism; if he moves to an area where he can find a job that does not clash with his environmentalism, then he may disrespect his commitment to Bran. If Jon cannot find a way to reconcile his roles, then he may be forced to make the tragic decision to give up part of himself by abandoning one of his identity-conferring commitments. Role coadunation in that case would resolve Jon's moral disjunction, but, because he would leave part of himself out, he would sacrifice a degree of integrity. There are two ways for Jon to avoid this sacrifice: he could remain in his roles but change the way he enacts them, or he could use his complete reading to make sense of the disunity in his life. We consider these possibilities in turn.

If Jon can change the way he enacts the roles that generate conflicting narrative threads, then he need not abandon one of them. Jon could have explored options for doing so as part of the complete reading, either on his own or with the help of an interpretive community. For example, he could modify the role he occupies in his organization, perhaps by participating in the company's transition to renewable energy. He could associate with others in his community to push for the creation of other types of employment in the area: if that push was successful, he could seek a different work role; if it was not, then he would at least have exercised his agency in a way that respected his identity-conferring commitments. Jon could also move out of

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<sup>3</sup> Although we believe it important that fossil fuels be phased out as soon as possible, certain types of extraction may be defensible during the phase-out period. A complete discussion of the morality of fossil fuel extraction is outside the scope of this article.

the area, hire a good and kind person to care for Bran, and visit him frequently; alternatively, Jon could attempt to move Bran to a different location, however difficult that might be. Whatever option Jon ultimately selects, his choice will be made with complete awareness of its moral implications.

Even if it is impossible for Jon to change the ways that his roles are enacted, an informed exercise of his agency may allow him to resolve his moral disjunction without experiencing a tragic loss of identity and integrity. This is possible only if Jon successfully performs a complete reading that prevents him from succumbing to one of the psychological coping mechanisms that we identify earlier. Integrated enactment in this case starts from an understanding of which of his identity-conferring commitments has the most moral force in his life. Suppose, for example, that Jon's complete reading reveals that caring for Bran is the most important of his commitments. Then, provided his work is not vicious in itself, Jon can accurately characterize his oil work as a sacrifice he makes in order that he can respect his most important commitment. With this characterization, Jon's life exhibits appropriate narrative disunity; that conclusion is only valid in this particular case, for, if Bran were not Jon's concern, then Jon could not justify his oil work in the same way. Moreover, if Jon decides to stay at the oil company, then he will likely reaffirm his commitment always to behave in an environmentally friendly way in his nonwork roles and so avoid the total obliteration of that thread of his life narrative. Resolving his moral disjunction in this way also requires him to exhibit the virtues of narrative transition and flexibility: that is, to move smoothly between, and to accommodate appropriately, different narrative threads, without allowing any to exert an excessive influence on the others (Swanton 2021a, 167–68). In this case, Jon cannot be said to engage in meaningful work (Beadle and Knight 2012; Sison, Ferrero, and Guitián 2016; Sinnicks 2021; Yeoman 2014), but his life is nevertheless meaningful and directed to the pursuit of virtue.

### *The Behavioral Contribution of Interpretive Communities*

Although the most important thing that interpretive communities do is to ensure that the complete reading is accurate and unbiased, they also have a significant role to play in integrated enactment. Interpretive communities are able to alter role expectations in a way that individual actors typically cannot. This is because roles are socially constructed and rely on collective intentionality (Searle 1995, 45–50). Consequently, changes to role expectations require a sufficiently large number of people to foreground the expectations, and then deliberately to change them. This could occur at the level of a specific organization, or it could involve a general reconceptualization of a problematic role. Of course, this depends on the effective operation of the interpretive community, and it is to this topic that we now turn.

## EFFECTIVE INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

We have now presented role coadunation as a virtuous way to address the problem of moral disjunction in business and professional life, and we have discussed its epistemic and behavioral components. We have described the role that interpretive

communities play in role coadunation, but we have not discussed the features that a well-functioning interpretive community has, nor the ways in which its functioning could be impaired. We consider each of these questions in turn.

A well-functioning interpretive community involves a sufficiently broad spectrum of people: first, to ensure that the complete reading it facilitates has no biases or omissions and, second, to enable changes to the collective intentionality that underpins social roles when such changes are required for integrated enactment. To that end, the interpretive community that provides role-related support for role coadunation should ideally satisfy four conditions. First, it should provide a “conducive environment” (Beadle and Moore 2006, 78) in which the pursuit of virtue is promoted. An important implication of this statement is that membership of an interpretive community is itself a role that must be pursued virtuously.<sup>4</sup> Second, it should contain people who understand the role that it interprets. Third, it should include actors who are sufficiently distant from the role that they are not blinded to its broader consequences. To ensure that all consequences are examined, the community should include people who can speak on behalf of the voiceless (for a related point in the context of political deliberation, see MacIntyre 1999a, 130). Fourth, the interpretive community should contain formal or informal channels of communication that allow its members to exchange opinions and to challenge one another’s views. For that challenge to occur, people within interpretive communities should be able to speak with candor, and they should be respectful of one another’s contributions (MacIntyre 1999a, 111).

We contend that the four conditions are most likely to be met for a role that has a long tradition, so that there are clear understandings of what the role entails, and how it should be enacted, that can serve as the basis of discussion within the community. The interpretive community that provides narrative-related support is necessarily narrower, because it must comprise people who understand the agent’s life narrative; nevertheless, it should be a conducive environment, and it should be sufficiently diverse to uncover blind spots and biases.

Some interpretive communities emerge organically; others require deliberate nurturing. Roles that have long traditions of excellence and that are more deeply embedded in social life, like teaching, are naturally the subject of generalized and relatively informed interpretation and, hence, are automatically endowed with a broad interpretive community. The interpretive community for complex activities that the general public cannot easily comprehend must be deliberately designed:<sup>5</sup> this task is hard, because of the risk that it will smother emergent cross-institutional groupings (Brown and Duguid 1991, 49).

One way to seed interpretive communities is through professional bodies, although a well-functioning interpretive community should extend beyond practicing members of the profession. The professions have formal procedures and fora for establishing, promulgating, and enforcing their rules (Moore 2018). Professional

<sup>4</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to highlight this point.

<sup>5</sup> A deliberately designed interpretive community may, over time, become institutionalized to such an extent that role holders perceive it as a natural part of the social order.

bodies do not necessarily have formal channels for communicating their understanding of their role. Nevertheless, the results of their deliberations are codified and widely disseminated; consequently, the activities of actors like lawyers, accountants, and doctors are subjected to the scrutiny of a free press, the political establishment, regulatory bodies, and civil society. Relatedly, Herzog (2019) argues that ethical standards in banking would be improved if bankers were compelled to join a professional association. She recognizes the epistemic value of collective deliberation within such an association, and she mentions the possibility that the association could establish a dialogue with other parts of society. It is essential that interpretive communities foster this type of wide-ranging dialogue so as to ensure that role holders do not see themselves as operating within a closed system.

Some nonprofessional activities do not have an interpretive community. For example, interest rate swaps trading in the years prior to the LIBOR fixing scandal was not a professional activity: it was subject to minimal formal regulation, and there was no attempt among its practitioners to identify appropriate standards for their business. Nonpractitioners were therefore ignorant of the mechanics, the purpose, or the norms that governed the business; there simply was no interpretive community. This may explain the apparent widespread failure to make a complete reading and, hence, the absence of role coadunation among LIBOR traders. Perhaps unsurprisingly, almost all market practitioners reported profound dissatisfaction with their professional lives (Enrich 2017, 132). When a nonprofessional activity has no interpretive community and is not amenable to professionalization, one possible way to create an interpretive community might be by establishing a multistakeholder initiative (for an account of contestation and deliberation in multistakeholder initiatives, see Arenas, Albareda, and Goodman 2020).

Tradition is of critical importance to the existence and functioning of interpretive communities even in nonprofessional contexts, because interpretive communities coalesce around understood ways of doing business and around well-established groups of practitioners. For example, there are no legal barriers to becoming a journalist in most countries, so that, by our account, journalism in those countries is not a professional activity. But journalists nevertheless operate within a centuries-old tradition that revolves around the way they engage with contacts, the way in which printed media are distributed to the public, and the ways in which the laws of libel and slander can be used to hold journalists accountable. Each element of the journalistic tradition is well understood by long-established coterie of people, and the sum of those coterie constitutes the traditional journalistic interpretive community.

Technological shocks can disrupt the traditions surrounding a role, and so undermine its interpretive community, by rendering traditional channels for collective reflection optional or obsolete. This occurs when traditional gatekeepers can no longer mediate access to a role. Consider, for example, the way that the internet has changed the role of journalists. The growth of digital media has enabled people to consume and produce news at virtually no cost, often through social media platforms. Some commentators have suggested that these changes engendered an avalanche of misinformation and a tendency for news outlets to use sensationalist

headlines to compete for attention (see, e.g., Waisbord 2018, 1868). We claim that one of the reasons for these effects is that the internet has enabled independent journalists to bypass the traditional gatekeepers to their role: one no longer needs the acceptance of an existing publication to disseminate facts and opinions, and similarly, that dissemination does not depend on the goodwill of distributors and stores. This has enabled new forms of journalism that do not engage with traditional journalistic interpretive communities. A person who disseminates journalistic content through digital platforms is able completely to disengage from critical voices in the traditional interpretive community, and criticism received through digital platforms is, at least at the time of writing, mostly unfiltered and hard to interpret. As a result, it is hard for new media journalists to achieve a complete reading of their role and so to engage in role coadunation in case moral disjunction arises.

### CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued that the reason that moral disjunction is so common today is that people who are born into modern societies often occupy several complex roles and that those roles sometimes demand behavior that clashes with personal morality. Moral disjunction is problematic from a virtue-ethical perspective because it undermines the pursuit of virtue and, hence, makes it very hard to live with integrity. Moral disjunction causes psychological discomfort because it threatens the imaginary of authenticity, which is typically virtue oriented. To avoid this discomfort, people can resort to disidentification, disengagement, or discardment; we claim that these strategies are morally wrong because they undermine integrity. We conceptualize role coadunation as a process by which people can resolve moral disjunction virtuously. Role coadunation has an epistemic and a behavioral component. When it is successful, it enables people to live virtuous lives of appropriate narrative disunity and to honor their identity-conferring commitments; that is, role coadunation allows people to take their lives seriously. Role coadunation is often performed with the aid of interpretive communities; we have discussed the emergence and composition of those communities as well as the ways in which they may malfunction.

In theorizing role coadunation, we identify practical measures that can prevent and respond to the problem of moral disjunction and so reduce the chances of ethical missteps in business and the professions. The most important implication of our work in this regard is that people in these contexts should engage with effective interpretive communities. It follows that, when there is no effective interpretive community, one should be created. Responsibility for doing so could devolve to an organization, a professional body, a regulator, or a multistakeholder initiative. Relatedly, in order that their employees do not experience their work roles as elements of a closed system, organizations should communicate their activities to interpretive communities in a way that is comprehensible to nonexperts.

We have examined the consequences of role coadunation for individuals, but we have not discussed two difficult policy conclusions that emerge from our work. First, in some circumstances, a role might systemically generate such severe moral

disjunction for its occupants that the morally correct action is to abolish it. This situation could arise when role expectations are so strongly institutionalized that it is almost impossible to change them. Second, regulators concerned with preventing unethical behavior in emerging or disrupted sectors should prioritize creating effective interpretive communities over rapidly codifying standards of conduct. This is because, absent the capacity to make a complete reading of the relevant roles, practitioners might find it very hard to resist the urge to comply in form rather than substance with regulations. We leave these important topics for future research.

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