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MORAL REASONING STRATEGIES AND WISE CAREER DECISION MAKING AT SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY: FINDINGS FROM A UK-REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE

by SHANE MCLOUGHLIN , ROSINA PENDROUS ,
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ABSTRACT: Ofsted requires UK schools to help students understand the working world and gain employability skills. However, the aims of education are much broader: Education should enable flourishing long after leaving school. Therefore, students' career decisions should be conducive to long-term flourishing beyond career readiness and educational attainment. In this mixed-methods study, we asked a representative sample of UK adults to reflect on their career decision-making processes at school and at university. We also measured current levels of self-reported objective (e.g., financial security) and subjective (e.g., subjective well-being) flourishing. The open-ended career decision reflections were coded for three moral reasoning strategies: virtue ethical, consequentialist, and deontological. Using correlations and structural equation modelling, we examined the association between the propensity for using each moral reasoning strategy in past career decisions and current flourishing. Virtue ethical moral reasoning in relation to career decision-making predicted aspects of flourishing most strongly and frequently. Consequentialist reasoning weakly and infrequently predicted aspects of flourishing. Deontological reasoning either did not predict flourishing at all, or negatively predicted flourishing. Our results suggest that the reasoning strategy behind career decisions people take in school or university is important to consider in UK careers provision, and current best practice.

Keywords: moral reasoning, flourishing, virtue ethics, career choice, Gatsby Benchmarks

CAREER DECISION MAKING IN THE UK

To be considered 'Good' or better by Ofsted within the 'Personal Development' category, UK schools must 'prepare students for future success in education, employment and training' (Ofsted, 2022) in accordance with the eight Gatsby Benchmarks (The Gatsby Foundation, 2022) for good career guidance. These are:

- (1) A stable careers programme
- (2) Learning from career and labour market information
- (3) Addressing the needs of each pupil

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- (4) Linking curriculum learning to careers
- (5) Encounters with employers and employees
- (6) Experiences of workplaces
- (7) Encounters with further and higher education
- (8) Personal guidance

These benchmarks are laudable and typically focus on helping students gain knowledge about jobs and the labour market, and how students can develop the skills for these jobs. In this way, careers education in the UK concerns ‘what’ to do with our education. Researchers from the University of Derby evaluated the effects of implementing Gatsby’s career guidance on school attainment (2016–2019) and found that attainment of these benchmarks predicted higher GCSE results and increased ‘career readiness’ scores (Hanson, 2021). Careers advisors noted that improved careers guidance programmes meant that they spent more time providing personalised guidance rather than careers education *per se*. Moreover, teachers observed increased engagement in class, perhaps reflecting increased meaning and purpose amongst learners (Ibid.).

Within higher education in the UK, there is no statutory guidance on what career guidance students should receive (Long and Hubble, 2022). Long and Hubble (2022) outline the state of careers guidance in higher education institutions (HEIs) in England, emphasising the roles of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) in supporting careers practitioners and conducting research on graduate employability respectively. HEIs offer a range of services, including careers advice, CV and application assistance, interview skills, and networking opportunities. There is a focus on skills development, with many degree curricula focused on developing employability skills and offering extra-curricular support to help students develop soft skills (e.g., English language support for those whose native language is not English). Long and Hubble also highlight various other initiatives for students with disabilities and those aiming for self-employment or business start-ups. Careers services work to improve engagement with students and employers, and they collaborate with external stakeholders like regional/local business associations, district councils, and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Recommendations included that HEIs would encourage students from disadvantaged backgrounds to use career services, offering support like mentors, alumni networks, and specialist outreach programs. Finally, the Augar Review of post-18 education (Augar, 2019) stresses the importance of access to information, advice, and guidance on alternatives to higher education and different study modes.

While the governmental and HEI focus on developing skills is essential for graduates to succeed in the job market and move into ‘graduate-level’ jobs, an exclusive emphasis on skills might overlook the importance of personal qualities, such as resilience, adaptability, and empathy that can help people to

flourish across different sectors and job levels. These personal qualities, although harder to quantify, are vital for graduates to thrive in diverse professional environments, work effectively in teams, and for the flourishing of individuals and society in general. This general focus on skills rather than character traits/attributes/qualities is also seen elsewhere. For instance, the government's white paper 'Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth' (UK Department for Education, 2021) focuses on the purpose of careers education as being to help develop lifelong skills and *economic* growth. This focus on career outcomes does not focus on *personal* growth, which is central to the broader goals of education, as outlined below (see also Cronon, 1998). While we cannot always foresee the kinds of skills that will be required in the future (whether graduate jobs or otherwise), character traits have broader cross-context applicability. For example, not that long ago, computer coding was seen as a key skill that almost everyone would benefit from learning in the future (see Contreras and Siu, 2015). Since then, it has become easy for anyone to write complex computer code using natural language commands by using artificial intelligence suites such as Chat GPT. While computer coding is of course still important, the market demand is likely to be lower now. However, the need for an ethical proclivity to use technology thoughtfully and responsibly such that it benefits humanity endures beyond the trivialities of the skills valued by the market at a particular point in time.

THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

Disillusioned by the increasing preoccupation with mere academic achievement, many leading philosophers of education champion flourishing as the overarching purpose of education (Brighouse, 2006; Kristjánsson, 2020; White, 2011; Wolbert *et al.*, 2019). Elements of this vision are reflected in OFSTED's endorsement of moral character education, which acknowledges the importance of long-term personal goals and commitments to others as central to living a fulfilling life (UK Department for Education, 2019). Whilst there are different conceptions of flourishing, proponents agree that if the central aim of schools is to prepare pupils for flourishing overall as human beings, then more attention should be paid to the sort of goods which facilitate said flourishing (Wolbert *et al.*, 2019). A particularly thorough defense of flourishing as *the* aim of education comes from Kristjánsson (2020), who, writing from an explicitly neo-Aristotelian virtue ethical perspective, highlights the false dichotomy between educating for flourishing and educating for more instrumental aims. Indeed, as teaching virtues of character to pupils is believed to improve grade attainment and employability (UK Department for Education, 2019, p. 4), one can simultaneously uphold the intrinsic value of flourishing without undermining the need for more traditional educational outcomes.

That said, educating for flourishing is arguably a more substantial aim than educating for moral character since it implies that education as a whole, rather than purely moral education, ought to be directed towards this end (Kristjánsson, 2020). The two, however, are intrinsically linked because virtues, *as acquired stable traits of character*, are conducive to and partly constitutive of *eudaimonia* (i.e., flourishing; Cokelet and Fowers, 2019). Explaining this connection requires appealing to Aristotle's function argument in which he proposes that all things have a characteristic activity, derived from our function (*ergon*), and that performing this well makes something good (Aristotle, 2014, 1097b25). As our unique human function (as distinguished from other species) is to reason, reasoning well implies 'living well and faring well' (Ibid., 1095a18). Furthermore, reasoning well involves practicing – frequently and consistently – virtues such as honesty, gratitude, and compassion in order that they become part of our character, understood as the moral subset of our personality (Wright *et al.*, 2020). This is because the kind of reasoning that contemporary Aristotelians tend to be most interested in is practical reasoning (*phronesis*), rather than abstract theoretical reasoning, and the former is precisely about excellence in decision-making about everyday life choices, such as which career to pursue. Indeed, a contemporary model of practical reasoning, the Aristotelian *Phronesis* Model (APM), makes visible how there are four central functions of *phronesis*: the *constitutive function* (or moral sensitivity) which concerns perceiving the morally important aspects of a situation and what constitutes the correct response; the *integrative function* (or moral adjudication) which concerns deliberation between conflicting virtue demands through a process of checks and balances; the *blueprint function* (or aspired moral identity) which concerns a person's overall conception of how their actions contribute to a flourishing life; and the *emotion regulation* function which concerns infusing emotions with reason in order to cultivate the appropriate emotional reaction (Darnell *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). According to the APM, *phronetic* decision-making involves the integration of all four components. So, when virtue ethicists speak of practical reasoning, they do not mean simply reasoning *qua* adjudication, but this more comprehensive understanding. The connection to virtue and orientation towards the good life also entails that practical reasoning is inherently moral in method, outcome, and aims. Taking this conception of *phronesis* into account, flourishing involves 'virtuous, reason-infused activity, suitable and peculiar to human beings, achieved over a complete life' (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 9).

Eudaimonic accounts of flourishing concern objective well-being, that is, objective facts about how a person's life is going that can, in theory, be perceived from the outside (Ibid., p. 6). Despite being able to imagine flourishing purely as objective well-being, ideally this will be accompanied by subjective well-being. For Aristotle, a disharmony between the two is, indeed, unlikely because a flourishing life is usually accompanied by a sort of pleasure,

or feeling of flow, since just acts are, for example, pleasant to the lover of justice (Aristotle, 2014, 1099a10–11). In essence, this entails that humans are psychologically wired to ‘enjoy the exercise of our realised human capabilities’ (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 8).

However, whilst necessary, Kristjánsson does not consider virtues sufficient for a flourishing life, and accordingly proposes two important preconditions that must be factored in when establishing criteria for flourishing: *external necessities* and *a sense of meaning and purpose* (Kristjánsson, 2020, pp. 33–43). The former essentially comprise ‘favorable enabling circumstances’, such as physical health and sufficient wealth, ‘that are largely beyond the agent’s own direct control’ (Ibid., p. 33). In the context of education, this entails that promoting student flourishing will be a politically laden endeavor, because whether one’s basic needs are met or not is closely linked to pervasive societal issues such as structural injustice (Ibid., pp. 37–38). An important caveat to bear in mind here is that Kristjánsson proposes flourishing as a ‘satis concept’, a kind of threshold concept which makes the criteria for flourishing less demanding and thus attainable for more people by framing it as a minimal requirement (Ibid., p. 10). Nonetheless, due to the complexity of factors affecting flourishing, questions about the extent to which being deprived of a particular precondition prevents one from reaching even this lesser benchmark remain open (Ibid., p. 36).

Regarding the latter precondition, some scholars comprehend flourishing purely as a quest for meaning/purpose, yet Kristjánsson does not consider them sufficient for flourishing because, on an Aristotelian account, the constituents of flourishing must have intrinsic moral value (Ibid., p. 40). As one can readily imagine being driven by an immoral purpose (see McLoughlin and Roche, 2022), flourishing must go beyond merely this. Living one’s life in a meaningful – i.e., ‘subjectively purposeful and objectively valuable’ – way therefore remains a necessary precondition (Ibid., p. 11). As this meaning must be autonomously chosen and subjectively sought, this account accommodates pluralism by acknowledging that the route to flourishing will be unique to each individual’s biological and social situation and context. Appreciation of this with regard to the purpose of education is tacitly shown, for example, in the Graduate Outcomes Survey (HESA, 2020), which assesses both objective outcomes and subjective wellbeing.

It should be clear from this explanation that good decision-making, i.e., practical reasoning, is key to actualising flourishing. In the context of career-related decision-making, the Gatsby Benchmarks can help people consider their options well, but ultimately do not ensure people make career decisions for the right reasons. Similarly, the absence of legislation regarding career guidance in higher education and the explicit focus on employability skills within HEIs means the same may apply across higher education contexts. And yet, there is relatively little research on career motivations within UK HEIs (see Elias,

2021). If educators are to truly prepare pupils for the tests of life and not simply a life of tests, then we must understand better and more clearly the kind of career-related reasoning that best facilitates flourishing.

MORAL REASONING

There are three core normative moral reasoning strategies that one might employ in the pursuit of flourishing, and these can be applied in relation to career decision making too. They are briefly outlined below.

Deontology

Rooted in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (2018), deontological ethics – from the Greek *deon* or duty – judges the morality of an action on its adherence to rules or principles. As a rationalist, Kant maintains that reason rather than experience is the foundation of practical knowledge and, further, that good will is the source of all moral value. Intentions rather than consequences of actions are morally salient. For Kant, moral demands are categorical imperatives – ends in themselves – which we have a perfect or imperfect duty to do. The two central formulations of the categorical imperative comprise 1) *the universal law formulation*: act in accordance with a maxim that you rationally will everyone to act by, and 2) *the humanity formulation*: treat others as ends in themselves and never as means to an end. As postulates of practical reason, the principles derived from these imperatives are universal truths; thus to reject a moral demand is akin to making a logical error.

In the context of career decision-making this would entail reasoning to do with rules, principles, obligations, duties, codes, norms, or logic. It might translate as acknowledging family expectations, one's obligations to significant others, or sticking with a norm, for example, going to university because most people in one's school did so (as long as such expectations and norms are considered rational and universalisable to other agents in a similar situation).

Consequentialism

In its most basic form, consequentialism, of which utilitarianism is an instantiation, concerns reasoning about actions that secure the best consequences. These consequences can be evaluated according to different metrics such as happiness, subjective well-being, ideal goods, or the satisfaction of interests or preferences. Jeremy Bentham's famous 'principle of utility' is attributed to classical utilitarianism and proposes that one should always act to maximise happiness and minimise pain for the majority of those affected by one's actions (Bentham, 1823). Grounded in psychological hedonism – the belief that people are primarily motivated by pleasure – classical utilitarianism can be divided into two

main forms: act and rule. *Act utilitarianism* judges the morality of an action purely on its consequences case-by-case; whereas for *rule utilitarians* an action is right when it complies with those rules which, if universally followed, would lead to the greatest happiness. Some forms of utilitarianism value different types of pleasure to different extents, or shun a focus on pleasure altogether – such as preference utilitarianism (Singer, 2011).

In the context of career decision-making this will translate into reasoning which leads to the best outcome for the greatest number of people, or is self-serving if the focus is simply on the overall value for the agent as other agents are not considered to be directly affected. This could entail increasing subjectively valued consequences for oneself, or doing what seems instrumentally important, i.e., engaging in self-serving means-end reasoning only (see McLoughlin and Roche, 2022).

Virtue Ethics

Unlike other normative theories, virtue ethics focuses not on the act but on the moral character of the agent. It views the cultivation of virtues as central to flourishing both as an individual and as a society, with these virtues constituting our character. On an Aristotelian account, the intellectual (rational) meta-virtue of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, is central to virtuous character development because it enables deliberation and choice regarding the appropriate course of virtuous emotion and action in all situations (Darnell *et al.*, 2019). Imagine here the analogy of a wise conductor guiding an orchestra to reach the correct notes. Since *phronesis* infuses dispositional emotions with reason, emotions can be morally creditworthy. Further, since virtue proper is a combination of both virtuous emotion and virtuous action, this implies that for something to be virtuous, it must be appropriately motivated by virtuous emotion. A moral action alone is not sufficient.

In the context of career decision making, this reasoning will concern the exhibition or development of positive traits of character (i.e., moral, intellectual, civic, and potentially performance virtues, so long as the latter are not purely self-serving), in addition to considerations about flourishing (i.e., subjective and objective well-being). Those applying virtue ethical reasoning will be motivated by virtuous emotion to contribute to the common good, with their decisions imbued with meaning and purpose. They might also be committed to improving their own reasoning and judgment to better enable them to act well and live well in society.

WISE CAREER Decision-Making

Taking the aforementioned normative moral reasoning strategies into account, in this paper we define ‘wise’ career decision-making in terms of the kind or

combination of reasoning strategies that best predict individual flourishing. This means that we are defining ‘wise career decision-making’ teleologically, with flourishing as the criterion. Since, ideally, objective well-being will accompany subjective well-being, we choose to measure both types, in order to give a more encompassing assessment of flourishing, and indeed wisdom, in the context of career decisions. Notice that although we offer this operational definition of wise career decision-making for present purposes, we stop short of arguing that this is the only reasonable definition. Our theoretical assumption here – that flourishing is the aim of education and indeed of human life – is inherently controversial (Carr, 2021). For example, ‘Human Capital Theory’, which prioritises economic benefits for individuals and society, will not share this assumption.

AIMS

In this study, we aimed to find out whether employing different moral reasoning strategies when making career decisions at school or university would differentially predict flourishing. If normative moral reasoning strategies do differentially predict flourishing, this will provide evidence that schools should not just strive to meet the Gatsby Benchmarks (focused on ‘what’ students need to know when making career decisions), but to help their students make career decisions for the ‘right’ (flourishing-conducive) sorts of reasons, as long as they subscribe to a view of flourishing as the main aim of education/schooling. Similarly, this would suggest the need for an increased focus on character development and graduate attributes within HEIs, in addition to the current focus on skill development.

METHOD

Participants

We recruited 500 participants using Prolific Academic (<https://www.prolific.co/>) paying them at a rate of £9.00 per hour for 30 minutes of their time (£4.50 total). Prolific provides high quality data with high levels of participant comprehension and attention, and apparently low levels of dishonesty (Peer, 2022). Participant recruitment parameters were adjusted to provide a UK-representative sample, such that the relative proportions of age, sex, and ethnicity represent the diversity of the UK in accordance with census data from the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS). After removing participants who withdrew from the study 491 participants remained. Participant demographics are summarised in [Table 2](#).

Design

This was a cross-sectional survey study with a quasi-longitudinal component. Specifically, we surveyed a UK-representative sample of adults, measuring their current levels of flourishing (two different measures, detailed below). We also asked them to reflect on how they made career-related decisions in the past, (i) when about to leave school, and (ii) if applicable, when about to leave university. We coded for moral reasoning strategies when making these career-related decisions and used these to predict present levels of flourishing. In this way, we aimed to identify which moral reasoning strategies, when making career decisions, predicted flourishing later.

Measures

The Well-Being Assessment

The Well-Being Assessment (WBA; Weziak-Bialowolska, 2021) is a 40-item self-report scale indexing six domains of subjective and objective human flourishing: Emotional Health (EH), Physical Health (PH), Meaning and Purpose (MP), Character Strengths (CS), Social Connectedness (SC), and Financial Security (FS). This measure has been extensively validated in general and workplace settings showing good convergent validity with objective measures. For example, EH correlates with actual depression and anxiety diagnoses from medical insurance claims, and PH scores were associated with diagnosed obesity and migraines, with other aspects of flourishing following predictable patterns of correlation with other measures of interest.

Comprehensive Index of Thriving

The Comprehensive Index of Thriving (CIT; Su *et al.*, 2014) is a 54-item self-report of flourishing across 18 subscales related to Relationships (Support, Community, Trust, Respect, Loneliness, Belonging), Engagement, Mastery (Skills, Learning, Accomplishment, Self-Efficacy, Self-Worth), Autonomy, Meaning and Purpose, Optimism, and Subjective Well-being (Life Satisfaction, Positive Feelings, Negative Feelings). This also shows good convergent validity, with its subscales correlating as predicted with other measures of psychological well-being, clinical anxiety and depression screening/diagnostic tools, and health-related questions.

Value Clarity Questionnaire

The Value Clarity Questionnaire (VCQ; McLoughlin *et al.*, 2022) is a seven-item self-report measure of the degree to which people have articulated the personal characteristics/traits that are important to them. The VCQ also shows convergent validity, correlating with measures related to well-being, purpose in life, and personality (e.g., in the expected directions, with expected magnitudes).

TABLE 1. Free-text response questions and their conditional presentation

Question number	Question text	Displayed to
1	Please take a few minutes to tell us about the reasons why you decided to work within your selected occupation (see your response below)	All
2	Please tell us about your decision-making process when considering what your next career step will be.	All
3	When you were at school , what were your main reasons for choosing what you were going to do next (e.g., a university course, full-time work, or an apprenticeship)?	All
4	If you could give your younger self any career-related advice when about to leave school, what would that be?	All
5	Please expand on anything that affected your career decisions when leaving school that you are glad you factored into your decision-making process.	All
6	Please expand on anything that affected your career decisions when leaving school that you wish you had left out of your decision-making process.	All
7	When you were at university , what were your main reasons for choosing your next career step (e.g., further study or working full time)?	Those who selected 'highest formal qualification' = Bachelor's Degree/Master's Degree/Doctoral Degree
8	If you could give your younger self any career-related advice when about to leave university, what would that be?	Those who selected 'highest formal qualification' = Bachelor's Degree/Master's Degree/Doctoral Degree
9	Please expand on anything that affected your career decisions when leaving university that you are glad you factored into your decision-making process.	Those who selected 'highest formal qualification' = Bachelor's Degree/Master's Degree/Doctoral Degree

(Continued)

TABLE 1. (Continued)

Question number	Question text	Displayed to
10	Please expand on anything that affected your career decisions when leaving university that you wish you had left out of your decision-making process.	Those who selected 'highest formal qualification' = Bachelor's Degree/Master's Degree/Doctoral Degree
11	Please tell us about any sacrifices in your life that you have made for your career . (For example, spending less time with friends to focus on your career)	All
12	Please tell us about any sacrifices in your career that you have made for other aspects of your life . (For example, earning less money to have more free time)	All
13	Please expand on whether you have any regrets about your career-related decisions to date.	All
14	If given a chance, would you have done anything differently, and why?	All
15	Please tell us about any role-models, mentors, or peers that have influenced your career decisions.	All

Open-Ended Questions: Career Decisions

Questions on career decision making (see Table 1) were answered within our survey in free-text response boxes. Questions were designed and ordered in such a way so as to elicit open reflections on decisions, sacrifices, regrets, and influential role models across each key decision-making stage, while also being specific to each key decision stage to avoid repeated information across all questions. Participants did not have a word limit for each question and were only shown relevant questions based on their prior demographics to avoid irrelevance. We wanted to determine participants' propensity for virtue ethical, consequentialist, and deontological reasoning according to a deductive coding framework devised in keeping with contemporary guidance (Roberts *et al.*, 2019) prior to data analysis. Therefore, an expert in normative moral reasoning (EH) used latent content analysis to code, for each question, whether each moral reasoning strategy was present (1) or not (0). This approach is systematic and suitable for large quantities of textual data and allows for subsequent quantitative inferences (White and Marsh, 2006). To establish inter-rater reliability, a second expert in normative moral reasoning (KK)

was asked to indicate agreement with the first coder across all three categories (1/0 for 10% of the participants ($N = 50$ approx.)). For each participant, we averaged the scores for each of the three moral reasoning strategies to produce a composite mean score for virtue ethics, consequentialism, and deontology respectively. Some questions (Table 1, Qs 11–14) were less relevant for this, so they were excluded from the calculation of these composite scores.

Procedure

This study was advertised on Prolific Academic such that interested participants (based on the study's contents and remuneration offered) could opt into the study if interested. Interested participants were redirected to the Qualtrics survey from Prolific, if initially interested. On Qualtrics, participants first read an information page with information about the study including how long it was expected to take, remuneration, any potential risks, the voluntary nature of the study and right to withdraw, and the purposes for which their data would be processed. If participants were willing to proceed, they affirmed their consent to take part. When the study began, participants first completed a demographic survey that included questions regarding their occupational details. Next, they answered our open-ended questions regarding their past career decisions. Then, they completed the two flourishing measures, followed by the VCQ. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Analysis Plan

We coded open-ended responses to questions about participants' career decision making using latent content analysis (Kleinheksel, 2020), applying a coding framework derived from the conceptual literature on normative moral reasoning. The coding framework is openly available at <https://tinyurl.com/CareerWisdom1>. We planned to use zero-order correlations and structural equation modelling (SEM) to examine the associations between and objective (self-reported positive 'facts' about one's life) and subjective (self-reported affective evaluations of one's life) flourishing using the three normative moral reasoning strategies, respectively. A SEM allows for concurrent prediction, meaning it can simultaneously test multiple relationships between variables while controlling for other factors that may influence the results. This is superior to using simple zero-order correlations because it provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between variables; zero-order correlations alone would only examine the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables. See Schreiber and colleagues for a more detailed discussion around SEM (Schreiber, 2006). Although planned, this was still an exploratory analysis, given (to the best of our knowledge) the empirical novelty of this topic.

Ethics

This research study was granted ethical approval by the University of Birmingham (Ref: ERN_22-0613) and was conducted in accordance with the BPS code of ethics (Oates, 2021) and the code for internet-mediated

TABLE 2. Demographics of sample compared to demographic data from the office for national statistics (ONS) to evidence representativeness

ONS Categories	% England and Wales	% Current Sample
Sex ¹		
Female	51%	252 (51.3%)
Male	49%	238 (48.5%)
Other	N/A	1 (0.2%)
Age ¹		
Under 15	17.4%	N/A
15–64	64.1%	428 (87.3%)
65+	18.6%	62 (12.7%)
90+	0.9%	N/A
Ethnicity ²		
White/White British	84.8%	418 (85.1%)
Asian/Asian British	8%	31 (6.3%)
Black, African, Caribbean/Black British	3.5%	16 (3.3%)
	1.8%	14 (2.9%)
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups	1.9%	4 (0.8%)
Other		
Employment (16–64 years old) ³		
Unemployed	3.5%	21 (4.9%)
Employed	75.5%	328 (77.2%, inc. self-employed)
Economically inactive	21.7%	76 (17.9%)
Redundancies	2.4%	Unknown
Employment type (of 16–64 years old Employed) ⁴	77%	22 (79.3%)
Full-time	23%	58 (20.7%)
Part-time		
Median salary (£) ⁵		
Full-time weekly (annum) salary	£640 (£640 x 52 = £33280 per annum)	£32000 per annum
Part-time weekly (annum) salary	£228 (£228 x 52 = £11440 per annum)	£12000 per annum
Occupation ⁶		
Managers, Directors, And Senior Officials Professional	10.3%	44 (9.0%)
	25.7%	138 (28.1%)

(Continued)

TABLE 2. (Continued)

ONS Categories	% England and Wales	% Current Sample
Associate Professional And Technical	14.6%	50 (10.2%)
Administrative And Secretarial	10.6%	80 (16.3%)
Skilled Trades	8.9%	22 (4.5%)
Caring, Leisure, Other Service	8.1%	31 (6.3%)
Sales And Customer Service	6.8%	43 (8.8%)
Process, Plant, and Machine Operatives	5.6%	7 (1.4%)
Elementary	9.4%	13 (2.6%)
Marital status (16+) ⁷		
Married or Civil Partnered	50.6%	231 (47%)
In a relationship/Cohabiting	N/A	119 (24.2%)
Single	N/A	107 (21.8%)
Divorced	N/A	23 (4.7%)
Widowed	N/A	8 (1.6%)
Bachelor's degree and above ⁸	33.8%	100 (31.6%)

Note: ONS data (2019–2021) are for England and Wales; we did not collect data on countries within the UK to compare Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland data. Where totals do not add up to 100%, this reflects missing data; participants were allowed to skip any questions they did not want to answer. Estimates are those most readily accessible to us via the ONS pages.

¹2019 ONS Figures: Population and household estimates, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

²2019 ONS Figures: Population estimates by ethnic group and religion, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

³2022 ONS Figures: Employment in the UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

⁴2021 ONS Figures: Full time and part time employment - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures (ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk)

⁵2020 ONS Figures: Average weekly earnings in Great Britain - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

⁶2021 ONS Figures: Employment by occupation - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures (ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk)

⁷2020 ONS Figures: Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

⁸2021 ONS Figures: Education, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

research (Kaye, 2021). Although the survey involved reflecting on one's career journey, regrets, and current levels of flourishing, we anticipated that the risk of distress from this was low. To proportionally mitigate this potential distress, however, participants were informed about these risks in advance of agreeing to participate and debriefed. This study answers the third research question outlined in the approved ethics application, mitigating potential concerns about bad research practice (e.g., hypothesising after the results were known). Our data and analyses are openly available at the link above.

RESULTS

Sample Representativeness

To test the degree to which our sample represented the general UK population, we compared our demographics with ONS census data. The available ONS data were for England and Wales, while our sample was ‘UK representative’ (i.e., including Northern Ireland and Scotland). However, as [Table 2](#) shows, our sample was nonetheless generally consistent with the ONS data, with the main anomaly being that we did not include those under 18 years of age.

Coding Fidelity

The first coder adopted latent content analysis (Kleinheksel, 2020), applying the coding framework to code each qualitative response to indicate whether virtue ethical (1/0), consequentialist (1/0), or deontological (1/0) reasoning was present for 491 participants across eleven qualitative variables. This amounted to approximately 5400 qualitative responses rated across each of three normative moral reasoning types. The second rater indicated agreement (1) or disagreement (0) with the first rater’s three codes for 560 of these qualitative responses. In total, there were 535 instances of agreement between the raters across all three normative moral reasoning categories, and 25 disagreements. Due to the low instances of disagreement (4.46%), we retained the original ratings. Across all open-ended questions asked, the most commonly used moral reasoning strategy was Consequentialism (2143 times), followed by Virtue Ethical (1024) and Deontological (649).

Predicting Flourishing with Moral Reasoning Strategies

We correlated composite scores for the three normative moral reasoning strategies, virtue ethical reasoning, consequentialist reasoning, and deontological reasoning, with measures of flourishing and their subscales (see [Table 3](#)). Of the three strategies, virtue ethical reasoning most consistently correlated with measures of flourishing, with consequentialism only weakly correlating with autonomy, and deontology weakly but negatively correlating with aspects of flourishing in several cases.

A SEM (see [Figure 1](#)) was used to understand how well a latent moral reasoning variable would predict latent self-assessed objective and subjective flourishing. Objective flourishing here was a manifest latent variable concerned with self-reported facts pertaining to participants’ lives. This was defined as scoring higher in CIT Mastery: Skills, CIT Mastery: Learning, CIT Mastery: Accomplishment, CIT Relationships: Support, WBA Financial Security, WBA Physical Health, Work Autonomy, and Relationship Status (recoded as single or divorced [1] in a relationship or married/civil partnered [2]). Subjectively assessed flourishing was defined as self-reported affective evaluation of one’s

TABLE 3. Correlations between flourishing measures and normative moral reasoning strategies

	Virtue ethics	Consequentialism	Deontology
Virtue ethics	—		
Consequentialism	.353 ***	—	
Deontology	-.088	-.298 ***	—
VCQ: Total	.153 ***	-.009	.024
WBA CS: Total	.233 ***	.089	-.049
WBA FS: Total	.026	-.059	-.111 *
WBA SC: Total	.143 **	.059	-.068
WBA MP: Total	.208 ***	.112 *	-.070
WBA PH: Total	.044	.099 *	-.096 *
WBA EH: Total	.096 *	.031	-.114 *
CIT Relationships: Support	.139 **	.128 **	-.040
CIT Relationships: Community	.142 **	-.001	-.010
CIT Relationships: Trust	.079	-.008	.002
CIT Relationships: Loneliness	.095 *	.060	-.018
CIT Relationships: Belonging	.094 *	.037	-.068
CIT Relationships: Total	.146 **	.056	-.038
CIT Engagement: Total	.201 ***	.010	-.018
CIT Mastery: Skills	.209 ***	.068	-.050
CIT Mastery: Learning	.196 ***	.112 *	-.108 *
CIT Mastery: Accomplishment	.184 ***	.026	.007
CIT Mastery: Self-Efficacy	.222 ***	.116 *	-.141 **
CIT Mastery: Self-Worth	.115 *	.094 *	-.055
CIT Mastery: Total	.234 ***	.107 *	-.093 *
CIT Autonomy: Control	.275 ***	.172 ***	-.056
CIT Meaning: Purpose	.071	-.000	-.015
CIT Optimism: Total	.203 ***	.103 *	-.049
CIT SWB: Life Satisfaction	.196 ***	.097 *	-.081
CIT SWB: Positive Feelings	.127 **	.094 *	-.132 **
CIT SWB: Negative Feelings	.113 *	.035	-.099 *
CIT SWB: Total	.154 ***	.079	-.112 *

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; VCQ = Value Clarity Questionnaire, WBA = Well-being Assessment, CIT = Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving, CS = Character Strengths, FS = Financial Security, SC = Social Connectedness, MP = Meaning and Purpose, PH = Physical Health, EH = Emotional Health, SWB = Subjective Wellbeing.

life. These variables included CIT Subjective Well-being: Life Satisfaction, CIT Subjective Well-being: Positive Feelings, CIT Subjective Well-being: Negative Feelings, CIT Optimism, CIT Meaning and Purpose, CIT Self-Efficacy, and CIT Self-Worth. The model converged, showing excellent fit on a range of commonly-used model fit indices ($\chi^2[132]=290$, $p < .001$, $CFI=0.99$, $TLI=.99$; $SRMR=0.05$; $RMSEA=0.05$, 90% $CI [0.04-0.06]$), with Moral Reasoning being associated with both Objective Flourishing ($\beta=0.31$, $p < .001$) and Subjectively-assessed Flourishing ($\beta=0.28$, $p < .001$).

Qualitative Extracts

Having identified our main findings within the overall sample using quantitative methods, we will now present quotations from our participants to illustrate archetypal deontological, consequential, and virtue-based responses to our questions regarding past career choices. In this way, we hope to concretise for the reader the kinds of reasoning that were found to be more or less predictive of present levels of flourishing within our UK-representative sample. While it is beyond the scope of the current paper to provide an overview of deontological, consequential, and virtue-based responses for every question we asked, we focus more specifically here on answers to Q1 ('Please take a few minutes to tell us about the reasons why you decided to work within your selected occupation'). We have underlined key phrasing that factored into their 'fit' with their respective normative moral reasoning strategy. In total, 194/491 respondents provided a response to Q1 that included some element of deontological reasoning, 322/491 respondents provided a response to Q1 that included an aspect of consequentialist reasoning, and 130/491 respondents provided a response to Q1 that was consistent with virtue ethical reasoning.

Deontological

Deontological reasoning did not correlate positively with any of the 27 flourishing indices, and negatively correlated with nine of them. Therefore, the following examples of deontological reasoning in response to our questions about how participants made career decisions are examples of the kinds of reasoning that were not generally conducive to flourishing (although, this may vary from individual to individual given contextual idiosyncrasies).

"My choice of career was an accident. I used to work for an insurance company, who were about to build a bespoke application, I was seconded to the project to provide business insight, and help with the final product review and test. I was then asked to join the team full time"

"It wasn't something I aimed for, but rather something I fell into. I intended to go into something IT or Business based but didn't expect to be in an Analytical role."

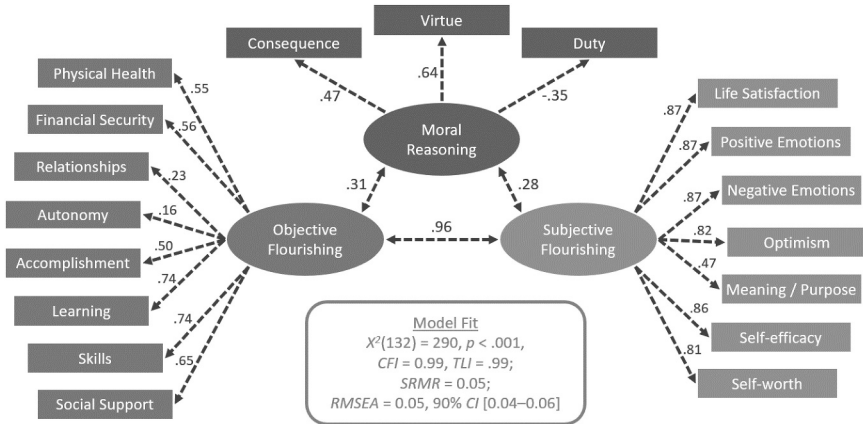


Figure 1. Path diagram for a structural equation model in which moral reasoning about career decisions was related to (standardised beta weights) subjective and objective flourishing

"I work as a middle manager in a public sector organisation. This is by accident rather than design. After completing a master's [degree] in City and Regional Planning I was employed (4 years) by a property consultancy as a planning consultant. This came to an end as a result of being made redundant due to the international financial crisis. I then was in a position where I needed to get any job that I could and ended up working for a university. From there, I was fairly limited in terms of what jobs I was able to move into, but found a job (my current one) that matched my particular skillset that I'd developed in the university - organisational planning and research."

"I left school at a young age and didn't know what I wanted to do, I joined the civil service as there was little else available at the time."

"My aunts and several other family members were teachers and from a young age my mum said I always played at being a teacher. Throughout my school days I never changed my mind."

"I was advised by my coach at that time to move into a Customer Service job, when I was unemployed."

"I had done some work experience at the office I work in and when I finished university, I was offered a maternity contract which I took up. I didn't entirely choose this career, but I needed a job and as it was offered to me so I easily accepted. I've continued with the same company and worked up through a few promotions."

"Family are involved in roofing which led me to become a roofer"

Consequentialist

Consequentialist reasoning correlated positively with 11 out of 27 indices of flourishing, and so the following examples of consequentialist reasoning in relation to career decision-making should be considered to be generally better than deontological reasoning.

"My selected occupation is Human Resources. My original reason for this was to help businesses make the most of their people resources, whilst at the same time optimising the experience for employees."

"It was a vocation that interested me, had good job prospects (site supervision, office design, professional development), and was a shortage area of professional expertise. I ended up in the water industry, and worked on sludge, wastewater and water supply projects with three different water companies over a 40-year career, as a professional qualified Chartered Engineer."

I am currently a student - I decided to be a student to further my education in my current degree and get a job in that area.

"Regular hours, no weekends or bank holidays and no heavy lifting, non-toxic environment. Previously [I] worked in a career that required all of the aforementioned and [it] was detrimental to my mental and physical health."

"Seemed like a well-paid job at the time relative to other areas when balanced against competitiveness and job requirements. The actual job seemed interesting at the time and varied."

"I wanted something that used a mix of my computer skills and "soft" skills, and wasn't too difficult (at least, not difficult all the time). I find that if I work too hard, I don't enjoy my relaxing time enough. I also find if I do one thing all the time it is less fun, so hopping between keyboard and face-to-face contact attracted me."

"I decided to work within the carpentry sector as it is very much a demanding sector; I enjoy hands-on work and find the pay rewarding. I'm not a fan of being stuck in the office, so it was a good choice for me."

"Worked in finance, property and finally decided to join a law firm and ended up being a legal secretary. The pay and the people I work with make it enjoyable."

Virtue Ethical

Virtue ethical reasoning correlated positively with 23 out of 27 indices of flourishing, with these relationships all being stronger than the positive relationships between consequentialist reasoning and flourishing, apart from in a single instance (physical health). Therefore, the quotations below should be considered to be generally illustrative of better reasoning strategies to adopt when making career decisions compared to both deontological and consequentialist reasoning.

"I used to work as a care assistant at a care home, I chose this job because I'm a very caring person and always felt great after taking care of elderly patients."

"I studied psychology in university and have always had an interest in mental health and understanding it more. I enjoy working with people to help them reach

their goals and to be there to help them consider things differently and begin to make changes in their lives."

"I wanted to do something that would help people and suited my temperament."

"To help others in need and people who are less fortunate in this country."

"I decided to work in this area because it's a fulfilling job. It requires helping people which was what attracted me to it."

"I'm adopted, my adoptive parents also fostered - I grew up understanding not every child had the same chances as me. Politically, I am also interested and invested in social justice."

"Had no particular preference, started out studying accountancy whilst working for a Local Authority, decided that I wanted to do something which actually produced something tangible and persuaded my employer to allow day release to do various building studies courses and eventually [redacted]. Councils were largely prevented from building new housing in the 80s and 90s so decided to join a housing association ending up as [redacted: manager of a division], before rejoining a Local Authority as [redacted: director role]. Therefore, most of my career has been predicated on providing affordable housing for those most in need which gave me considerable job satisfaction."

DISCUSSION

Across these analyses, propensity for adopting normative moral reasoning strategies at school and, if applicable, at university when making career decisions were differentially associated with both objectively and subjectively self-assessed flourishing. Observation of the patterns of correlations clearly showed Virtue Ethical career decision-making to be most highly correlated with 23/27 indices of flourishing across the WBA, CIT, and VCQ measures. Consequentialist career decision-making was associated with 11/27 flourishing indices. The relationships between flourishing indices and Consequentialist moral reasoning were weaker than they were with Virtue Ethical moral reasoning in virtually all cases, with one exception: Consequentialist reasoning was weakly associated with physical health, but Virtue Ethical reasoning was not associated with physical health. Deontological reasoning was negatively related to 9/27 indices of flourishing and not positively related to any.

The patterns observed in the correlation table were also reflected in the SEM model. A moral reasoning latent variable entailed greater Virtue Ethical reasoning ($\beta = .64$), some degree of Consequentialist reasoning ($\beta = .47$), and lower Deontological reasoning ($\beta = -.35$). The moral reasoning latent variable was about equally good at predicting objective ($\beta = .31$) and subjectively assessed ($\beta = .28$) flourishing, which is perhaps unsurprising as both kinds of flourishing were strongly related to one another ($\beta = .96$). That is, perhaps counter-intuitively, Consequentialist, 'outcome-focused' reasoning was not the most conducive to either objective or subjective flourishing outcomes.

Those who adopted Virtue Ethical reasoning in relation to their career choices also adopted some degree of Consequentialist reasoning but were no more or less likely to adopt Deontological reasoning. Those who adopted Consequentialist reasoning were less likely to adopt Deontological reasoning but were no more or less likely to adopt Virtue Ethical reasoning.

Strengths and Limitations of the Current Study

Flourishing measures have been critiqued in the literature recently for not having a strong theoretical basis for what the dimensions of flourishing might be (Fowers, 2022). However, researchers agree that flourishing should be measurable in degrees (e.g., on a scale), that it is multidimensional, and that flourishing encompasses more than positive emotion and life satisfaction (Fowers, 2022). One strength of this study is that we used multiple flourishing measures, tapping into both objective and subjective aspects of flourishing. In this way, we have cast a purposefully wide net with the measures adopted, so that, rather than emphasising particular results (e.g., Virtue Ethical reasoning correlates with Optimism at $r = .20$), our findings are assessed as a whole (Virtue Ethical reasoning correlated with 23/27 flourishing measures). We believe this to be suitably cautious, given the exploratory nature of this study, allowing readers to see that the results are representative and not cherry-picked.

This study employed a UK representative sample allowing these findings to be generalised to the UK population. An advantage of this is that we explored views of those who are currently making key decisions as well as those who are retired with hindsight across their whole career history. This also spread the risk of recall bias and potentially even social/political challenges in employment (e.g., the 2008 recession) across participants. However, even though the overall sample is UK-representative, we must exercise caution in that we may not have a representative sample of minority demographics. Future research should purposively sample populations under-represented within the current study, especially those from less wealthy backgrounds where career decisions are likely to be more restricted due to their material conditions (see Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997).

A major strength of this study is that it approached the question, ‘*what does it mean to make a wise career decision?*’ empirically, not just conceptually. While the authors had preconceptions as to what would constitute ‘wisdom’ drawn from expertise in the philosophy of education and character education literature, there was no way for this bias to affect participants’ responses. In this study, we conceptualised ‘wise’ teleologically, with the flourishing of oneself and others as the ultimate aim of education (Brighouse, 2006; Kristjánsson, 2020). The findings from this study allow us to conceptualise the role of the teacher/career guidance counsellor as being more than just someone who churns out workers to fuel the economy, but as someone who helps people to flourish in a society worth living in.

This study was cross-sectional, asking participants to reflect at a single time point on past decisions to predict present flourishing levels. Therefore, participant responses may be subject to retrospectivity bias to some degree and prevent us from inferring that virtue ethical reasoning about career decisions *causes* flourishing. It could even be the case that participants who flourish *generally* adopt virtue ethical reasoning (i.e., it is a trait) and so they supposed that they must have used this strategy when making career decisions too. On the other hand, participants were not told what the three normative moral reasoning strategies we sought to code for were and so they were naïve to the planned analyses, minimising worries over demand characteristics. Moreover, this study was quasi-longitudinal in that we attempted to use retrospectively sought information about past career decision-making processes to predict current flourishing. In future, establishing temporal precedence will be important for inferring causality in longitudinal studies of a larger scale.

We must also exercise caution over the specifics of these results as this was an exploratory study, rather than confirmatory. However, there was a consistent pattern of virtue ethical reasoning around career decisions predicting aspects of flourishing, while the other normative moral reasoning strategies were either weaker or negative predictors of flourishing. This is consistent with what might be predicted from contemporary character education literature (Kristjánsson, 2020; The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). This gives the authors confidence in the general conclusion that, in making career decisions, the reasoning behind decisions people take about their next career step is important, which is not currently reflected in the Gatsby Benchmarks to which school careers programs in the UK are beholden by Ofsted.

From a philosophical perspective, the findings of this study add grist to the mill of virtue ethical accounts. The findings are novel in the sense that although links between virtue ethical decision-making and various flourishing-related variables have been established in the relevant literatures before (e.g., Arthur, 2021), this is – to the best of our knowledge – the first time that a link has been explored and identified between students' virtue-ethically motivated career choices and flourishing.

From a policy perspective, there are a number of important implications of these findings. Firstly, these findings suggest that it might be prudent to revise the Gatsby Benchmarks for careers education in secondary schools. Specifically, it is crucial to integrate virtue ethics and character education alongside technical skills and career planning, both of which currently sit alongside but separate to one another within Ofsted's school inspection handbook. This can be achieved by training career advisors to emphasise the importance of virtues and moral reasoning in career choices, and implementing activities that require students to reflect on their aspired virtues and strengths in relation to their career goals. Additionally, engaging with ethical role models from various industries can inspire students to adopt virtue ethical reasoning in their career paths.

Thereafter, higher education policy in the UK should shift its focus from employability skills to a broader conception that also includes personal character development and key graduate attributes. This can be done by (i) redefining graduate success to encompass personal growth, moral character, and ethical behavior, (ii) encouraging universities to incorporate character education in their degree programs, and (iii) enhancing careers services to provide guidance on personal character development and ethical considerations in career decision making. Collaboration with employers to promote graduate attributes that go beyond technical skills and implementing systems to assess and report on students' personal character development can further reinforce the importance of ethical reasoning and personal growth in higher education.

CONCLUSION

This article asked what it means to make a wise career decision, with 'wise' being defined as that which is conducive to both subjective and objective aspects of self-reported flourishing. Our results from a UK-representative sample consistently indicate, across several analyses and measures, that a wise career decision is, at least in part, one that adopts a virtue ethical moral reasoning strategy, with consequentialist moral reasoning being less positive, and deontological moral reasoning strategies potentially detrimental. Therefore, it is important that careers provision in the UK incorporate a virtue ethics focused character educational component such that students choose careers that they believe will nurture their characters and enable them to flourish in accordance with both subjective and objective measures. In this way, schools will be able to meet Ofsted's criteria for 'Outstanding' personal development, which entails both excellent career provision and developing exemplary character within their pupils. Likewise, HEIs can reassess their approach to careers education and adopt character-focused programs that emphasise virtue ethics, ethical decision-making, and personal development alongside traditional employability skills. By integrating character education into curricula and university-wide initiatives, HEIs can better prepare graduates to navigate the complexities of modern working environments while prioritising their personal growth, moral integrity, and holistic well-being. This shift in focus will not only foster a more ethically responsible workforce but also contribute to a more compassionate and flourishing society that values the virtues of its citizens as much as their technical skills and achievements.

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