

Virtue Trade-Offs in Everyday Life

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Is it usually possible to be virtuous in all ways, or do people experience ubiquitous trade-offs among moral virtues? Past work has examined a limited set of virtue pairs (e.g., honesty vs. compassion, fairness vs. loyalty) and focused on situations in which trade-offs are likely to occur. Across 2 day reconstruction method studies featuring representative U.S. samples, we investigate the frequency and experience of trade-offs among 12 virtues in everyday life. In Study 1 ($N = 377$), participants reported virtue conflicts during 12,385 episodes across 1 week. In Study 2 ($N = 988$), participants elaborated on one trade-off episode. Trade-offs most often involved honesty and courage, and coding of open-ended responses showed that many (but not all) trade-offs reflected a general tension between benevolence and integrity. Overall, however, prevalence estimates suggested that virtue enactments tend to be largely compatible in daily life. People felt less happy when they experienced a virtue trade-off, but it also mattered how they resolved them. People most often prioritized one virtue over the other (57%) but were most satisfied with their decision in the rare cases (12%) when they overcame the trade-off by showing high levels of both virtues. Finally, there was a general mismatch between people's proclaimed virtue preferences and which virtues they prioritized when they experienced an everyday trade-off (e.g., people prioritized honesty the most in the abstract but the least in everyday decisions). These findings highlight the importance of studying moral decision-making in ecologically valid contexts and have implications for moral education.

Keywords: virtue trade-offs, moral dilemmas, moral trade-offs, daily life, moral decision making

Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000608.supp>

Luis returns from a job interview exceedingly confident. During dinner, he asks his wife Sofia, grinning, "How does my outfit look? I think I nailed the look." Sofia hesitates. Truthfully, the suit is too tight due to Luis' recent weight gain. If she is honest, she risks hurting his feelings. However, if compassion leads her to lie, sparing his feelings, she sacrifices honesty. Sofia's encounter illustrates how everyday dilemmas—like whether to be honest or to spare another's feelings—reveal the complexities of moral choice.

Most psychological work on moral dilemmas has focused on extreme or unusual dilemmas. Frequently, this research involves thought experiments (e.g., hypotheticals involving eating dogs, sibling incest, and trolley dilemmas) designed to test the basis of

moral decision-making (e.g., Greene & Haidt, 2002; Greene et al., 2001; Haidt et al., 1993). For example, trolley dilemmas exemplify the conflict between a deontological prohibition on intentional harm and a utilitarian calculus of minimizing harm. Trolley-type dilemmas have enabled tightly controlled tests of theories of moral judgment (Greene et al., 2008; Greene et al., 2001). However, this same experimental control limits ecological validity: Sacrificial dilemmas are often extreme, contrived, and stripped of the relational context that shapes moral decisions (Bauman et al., 2014; Earp et al., 2021; Hester & Gray, 2020; Schein, 2020; Yudkin et al., 2025).

What types of moral dilemmas do people actually face in everyday life, and how do they experience and resolve them? Here,

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All study materials and the data and R code required to reproduce the results reported in this article are available on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/ztxcd>. Because the raw data sets include potentially identifying information, only cleaned data sets have been shared on the Open Science Framework. Raw data sets are available upon request. Data collection and analysis plans were preregistered at <https://osf.io/vrddb> (Study 1) and <https://osf.io/bavyn> (Study 2). All authors have no conflicting interests to report.

The authors thank Geoff Goodwin, Ryan Wheat, Yena Kim, Austin Smith, Nicholas DiMaggio, and audiences at the London Business School Moral Psychology and Behavioral Ethics Conference, Rotman School of Management, Moral Psychology Research Group, University of Kent, Yale School of Management, Society of Personality and Social Psychology Moral Psychology Preconference, Association of Research in Personality

Conference, and Society of Philosophy and Psychology Conference for the helpful feedback. The authors also thank Tori Trammell for research assistance with coding open-ended responses.

Qilin Zhang played a lead role in conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, visualization, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing and an equal role in supervision. Jeremy Jacobson played a supporting role in conceptualization, investigation, methodology, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. Benjamin Hardin played a supporting role in conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, visualization, and writing—review and editing. Jessie Sun played a lead role in methodology, supervision, and writing—review and editing and an equal role in conceptualization and writing—original draft.

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we address such questions by investigating trade-offs among the expressions of a large set of moral virtues in everyday life.

What Is a Virtue Trade-off?

Standard philosophical definitions conceptualize moral dilemmas as situations in which there are “moral reasons to do each of two actions, but doing both actions is not possible” (McConnell, 2024). Here, we explore a type of moral dilemma: virtue trade-offs. We define virtue trade-offs as a dilemma in which a person faces a decision between acting according to two virtues that are in tension with each other, such that expressing a high level of either virtue would make it difficult to simultaneously express high levels of the other. Here, we use the term “virtue” as shorthand for traits that are widely considered to be morally good (e.g., honesty, compassion, fairness, and loyalty; Furr et al., 2022; Hardin, Scott, & Sun, 2026; Sun et al., 2025). “High levels” of a virtue refer to strong behavioral expressions of the virtue (e.g., telling the complete truth rather than excluding parts of it).

Our definition focuses on the observable degree of virtue-relevant behavioral expressions while omitting additional criteria that some philosophical definitions of “virtue” require (e.g., right motivation, situation-specific optimality, a golden mean between deficiency and excess; Grant & Schwartz, 2011; V. Ng & Tay, 2020; Ratchford, Pawl, et al., 2024). Thus, we seek to answer the empirical question “Do people perceive trade-offs between expressing high levels of two virtues?” which is distinct from the philosophical question “Can two fully realized virtues (as defined by a particular philosophical account) truly conflict?” By focusing on observable levels of virtue-relevant behavior, we adopt a tractable and ecologically valid approach that allows investigation of perceived tensions between virtue expressions.

Our definition of virtue trade-offs is also distinct from the types of everyday moral dilemmas that Yudkin et al. (2025) examined using Reddit’s “Am I The Asshole?” forum. Whereas the standard philosophical conception of a moral dilemma emphasizes trade-offs between competing moral concerns, Yudkin and colleagues adopted a much broader definition of everyday moral dilemmas as “difficult situations” in daily life in which the morally appropriate action is uncertain (p. 1). Accordingly, of the 29 dilemma types they identified, only three plausibly involve virtue trade-offs (e.g., honesty vs. compassion; fairness vs. loyalty). Most instead reflect clearly immoral or morally questionable behaviors (e.g., harm, theft, rudeness) or failures to meet relational obligations rather than moral dilemmas wherein multiple moral reasons point in conflicting directions. Thus, Yudkin and colleagues provide a rich catalog of the various ways in which people might be worried about being in the wrong in everyday life, but provide only limited information on everyday dilemmas between competing moral concerns more generally, and between competing virtues more specifically (the focus of the current article).

How Often Do People Experience Various Virtue Trade-offs in Everyday Life?

Empirical data on the prevalence of various virtue trade-offs in daily life would inform philosophical debates about whether virtues are unified (e.g., if a person is kind, they must have all other virtues),

mutually independent (e.g., a person may be kind without being honest, courageous, or loyal), or mutually incompatible (e.g., if a person is kind, they cannot be honest; Badhwar, 1996). If people almost always perceive trade-offs between certain pairs of virtues, this would support the idea that certain pairs of virtues are mutually incompatible. If people perceive trade-offs between some pairs of virtues more than others, but such trade-offs are relatively infrequent, then this would support a weak incompatibility thesis, such that certain pairs of virtues are less compatible, but not inevitably so. Finally, if people rarely or never perceive virtue trade-offs in daily life, this would rule out the idea that certain pairs of virtues are mutually incompatible (but would not adjudicate between the unity and independence theses).

The existing psychological literature on virtue trade-offs largely leans toward a version of the incompatibility thesis. For example, trade-offs between honesty and compassion have been claimed to be “ubiquitous” (Levine et al., 2020; Levine & Lupoli, 2022). Some empirical research shows that virtues can come into conflict. However, much existing work engineers situations to generate tensions between virtues. For example, to study fairness–loyalty trade-offs, researchers have used vignettes to test hypothetical decisions in whistleblower dilemmas (Waytz et al., 2013). Similarly, to examine honesty–compassion trade-offs, the “bad essay” behavioral paradigm involves choosing between providing honest feedback or lying to protect another’s feelings (Jampol & Zayas, 2017; Lupoli et al., 2017; Paul et al., 2022). Such studies show that virtues can conflict in specific situations, but not how often they do outside of the lab.

To test and inform philosophical theories regarding which virtue pairs are less compatible, it is important to know which trade-offs are more prevalent (e.g., are honesty–compassion trade-offs more common than fairness–loyalty trade-offs?). However, research has largely examined a limited set of trade-offs: honesty versus compassion, fairness versus loyalty, honesty versus loyalty, and patience versus courage (cf. Hardin, Scott, & Sun, 2026). Considering that many other virtues exist (e.g., gratitude, wisdom, responsibility, forgiveness), additional trade-offs may have been overlooked. Because studies typically examine one virtue pair at a time, we also do not know how various trade-offs compare in their prevalence. To more comprehensively investigate potential trade-offs among a larger set of virtues, Hardin, Scott, and Sun (2026) asked participants to report their beliefs about how increasing each of 15 virtues and 13 vices would affect other virtues and vices. They found very little evidence for trade-offs. Instead, participants tended to believe that virtues facilitate one another (e.g., that becoming more honest would increase levels of compassion). Still, these findings rest on abstract intuitions rather than on people’s everyday experiences. Thus, we still lack data on how often people encounter virtue trade-offs in everyday life and what these everyday trade-offs look like.

Some prior work suggests that trade-offs between specific virtues may reflect broader prototypes. For example, trade-offs between compassion and honesty in difficult conversations (see Levine et al., 2020, 2025; Levine & Lupoli, 2022), loyalty and fairness in whistleblower dilemmas (Dungan et al., 2015; Dungan et al., 2019; Misch et al., 2018; Waytz et al., 2013), and loyalty and honesty in snitching or tattling dilemmas (Berry et al., 2024; Hildreth & Anderson, 2018) highlight a broader tension between integrity and

benevolence-based virtues—when one can impartially apply a general principle (integrity) or make an exception to benefit a specific person or group (benevolence; Moore et al., 2019). Other trade-offs may arise when virtues demand opposite behaviors. For example, patience may call for inhibition or restraint, whereas courage may call for action or assertiveness (Ratchford, Cazzell, et al., 2024). A student experiencing discrimination in the classroom might face a trade-off between confronting the instructor immediately (exercising courage) or waiting for a more appropriate moment to address the issue (exercising patience). Thus, many virtue trade-offs in daily life may be summarized by the broader themes of benevolence versus integrity and action versus inhibition.

Finally, understanding the prevalence of virtue trade-offs also has practical implications for moral education. Many moral education efforts—especially in the character education tradition—have predominantly focused on cultivating individual virtues (see Berkowitz, 2012; Lickona, 1999). If people rarely encounter virtue trade-offs, then a “bag-of-virtues” approach is likely sufficient. If, however, certain virtue trade-offs are pervasive in daily life, then successful moral education will involve helping people navigate those trade-offs (see Cooke & Carr, 2014; Grossmann et al., 2020; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022).

How Do People Experience and Resolve Everyday Virtue Trade-offs?

When people encounter virtue trade-offs in everyday life, how is their well-being affected? How much do people struggle to know how best to proceed? Are they more likely to regret using certain resolution strategies? If we find that virtue trade-offs involve substantial moral struggle and that people are more likely to regret certain strategies, this would suggest that everyday moral dilemmas have implications for well-being. In addition, if we find that people rely on a limited repertoire of resolution strategies, this would suggest a need for moral education that helps people to more fully assess the options that are available to them and to implement the best strategy for a given situation.

Existing work provides limited insight into how people experience and resolve virtue trade-offs in everyday life. Several studies have focused on third-party moral evaluations of others’ actions in trade-off scenarios, finding, for example, that people judge fair disloyalty as more moral than unfair loyalty (Berry et al., 2024), disloyal honesty as more moral than loyal dishonesty (Hildreth & Anderson, 2018), and benevolent dishonesty as more moral than hurtful honesty when the former prevents unnecessary harm (Levine & Lupoli, 2022). Such studies shed light on how people judge others’ trade-off decisions but tell us nothing about moral actors’ own experience and decision making in these scenarios.

Studies of moral actors’ own decision making have also been limited because they often rely on hypothetical or artificial paradigms that fail to capture the full range of strategies available in real-world contexts. Levine et al. (2020) described four strategies for navigating virtue trade-offs: (a) a trade-off strategy (what we later refer to as prioritization), which involves showing high levels of one virtue and low levels of the other (e.g., Sofia telling the blunt truth to

Luis or lying to spare his feelings); (b) a compromise strategy, which involves moderate levels of each virtue (e.g., Sofia might tell a partial truth: “The suit might be a smidge small, but you look great!”); (c) an avoidant strategy, which involves low levels of both virtues (e.g., Sofia may pretend to take a phone call to avoid the conversation); and (d) an integrative strategy, which involves finding a way to exhibit high levels of both virtues (e.g., telling Luis that his suit fits poorly in a kind and helpful way that makes benevolent intentions clear).

However, many commonly used paradigms capture only a subset of these possibilities. For example, the “bad essay” paradigm, in which participants quantitatively rate a poorly written essay (e.g., on a 0–100 scale; Lupoli et al., 2017; Paul et al., 2022), limits resolution strategies to prioritization (i.e., low or high scores) or compromise (i.e., middling scores). Similarly, hypothetical paradigms for studying whistleblowing decisions typically either force participants to make a binary choice between whistleblowing or staying silent (Misch et al., 2018) or ask them to report how likely they would be to whistleblow (Dungan et al., 2019; Waytz et al., 2013). These methods prevent participants from using more creative and nuanced strategies (e.g., integrating virtues) that may be available to them in everyday life.

Moral actors’ predictions of how they would resolve hypothetical virtue trade-offs may also diverge from their real-world decisions. Attitude–behavior and intention–behavior gaps (Bravo & Farjam, 2022; Sheeran & Webb, 2016) have been well-documented across many decision-making contexts. Such gaps may arise because people may draw on different psychological processes when reasoning about hypothetical versus real choices (Vlaev, 2012) and because hypothetical scenarios often strip away important contextual information (FeldmanHall et al., 2012) and are less emotionally involved (Moore et al., 2019). For example, Moore et al. (2019) argued that during intended and abstract decisions, people rely on abstract principles and rational thinking, which makes integrity-based virtues more salient. However, when a decision is made in a real, emotionally involved context, the affective experience can overwhelm moral reasoning and push individuals toward benevolence-based virtues that resonate more with their immediate feelings. Accordingly, Moore and colleagues predict that people often intend to act with integrity but end up prioritizing benevolence when they make actual decisions in more affect-rich environments.

In contrast to artificial or hypothetical decision-making paradigms, Dungan et al. (2019) used a retrospective design to study fairness–loyalty whistleblower dilemmas among federal workers. Those who were more concerned about the fair treatment of others outside their organization were more likely to report unethical behavior, whereas those who were more loyal to their organization were less likely to do so. This study provides ecologically valid evidence for the idea that a person’s concern for relevant virtues predicts their decision in trade-offs. Still, this study focused on predicting the act of whistleblowing, such that internally reporting the wrongdoing to an immediate superior according to company standards (thus balancing loyalty and fairness) and disregarding all loyalties and company policies by immediately whistleblowing to a major news outlet were both categorized as whistleblowing. This obscures distinctive resolution strategies

that likely reflect different moral reasoning and produce different consequences.

Last, little is known about the well-being consequences of virtue trade-offs. Given that goal conflict is linked to lower well-being (Gray et al., 2017), and that trade-offs may make it difficult for people to fulfill all of their goals, experiencing a virtue trade-off may reduce momentary well-being. Well-being consequences may also be moderated by resolution strategies. For example, strategies that integrate competing virtues may reduce the well-being costs of trade-offs by helping people reconcile competing moral goals. Consistent with this possibility, research suggests that integrating competing goals (vs. not) is associated with greater well-being outcomes (van Dierendonck et al., 2009).

The Present Study

To summarize, past work on virtue trade-offs has typically targeted or created situations in which virtue trade-offs are likely to occur, often focusing on third-party moral evaluations and hypothetical decisions. Such studies show that people can experience salient trade-offs between competing virtues in certain situations. However, it is unclear how often people do experience and resolve trade-offs in everyday life. Moreover, because past work has examined a limited set of virtues, it is possible that important trade-offs have been overlooked. This project comprehensively investigates how people experience and resolve trade-offs among a large set of virtues in everyday life. In Study 1, we examined the frequency of virtue trade-offs using a 7-day day reconstruction method (DRM) paradigm. In Study 2, participants completed a 1-day DRM and elaborated on how they experienced and resolved one virtue trade-off that day.

Ethics Statement

Data collection procedures for both studies were approved by Washington University in St. Louis's Institutional Review Board (IRB ID: 202309197, Title: "DRM Virtues").

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the studies. We pre-registered stopping rules, exclusions, and analysis plans at <https://osf.io/vrddb> (Study 1) and <https://osf.io/bavyn> (Study 2). See [Supplemental Materials](#) for changes to the recruitment procedures (which were made in response to low response rates). Any non-pre-registered analyses are flagged as such. All study materials and the data and code required to reproduce the results reported in this article are available at <https://osf.io/ztxcd>.

Study 1 used data from a larger project on moral opportunities in everyday life. Other projects that use this data set focus on how often people perceive opportunities to enact each virtue (Hardin, Zhang, & Sun, 2026) and how virtue traits and situational affordances predict virtue enactments (Hardin & Sun, 2026). The analyses in this article are novel and have not been previously reported.

Study 1

Method

Participants

We aimed to recruit a sample of 300 participants after exclusions, in order to have 80% power to detect a between-person correlation of $r = .16$ or greater (for another project using these data to examine trait-state correlations; Hardin & Sun, 2026). To do so, we recruited 412 Prolific Academic participants to complete a baseline survey and a 7-day repeated DRM (Kahneman et al., 2004) study. Participants received \$3.50 for completing the baseline survey, plus \$6 for each DRM survey they completed. Participants who completed at least one DRM survey received a personalized report based on their DRM responses, and those who completed at least five DRM surveys also received a \$6 bonus. Thus, participants could earn up to \$51.50 if they completed all parts of the study.

Participants were recruited in three batches—two initial test batches and one main batch (for details, see [Supplemental Material, Section 1.1](#)). The final batch of participants was recruited to be representative of the U.S. population in terms of sex, age, ethnicity, and political affiliation, using Prolific Academic's quota-based sampling method (see [Table 1](#) for demographic information and the [Supplemental Material, Section 1.2](#), for comparisons with U.S. population proportions). A total of 443 people began the intake survey. As preregistered, we excluded participants who did not complete the intake survey ($n = 42$) or who did not complete at least 1 DRM survey ($n = 30$). Additionally, five participants were excluded because all of their DRM responses were excluded (described below). After applying these exclusions, the final sample comprised 377 participants.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Studies 1 and 2

Variable	Study 1 ($N = 377$)		Study 2 ($N = 988$)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Age				
Range	18–83	—	18–95	—
<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	42.93 (14.72)	—	42.11 (15.55)	—
Gender				
Male	166	44	448	45
Female	199	53	521	53
Self-describe	10	3	13	1.4
Not disclosed	2	0.5	6	0.6
Ethnicity				
Asian	28	7	74	8
African American	46	12	121	12
Multiracial	35	9	88	9
Hispanic	—	—	70	7
White	246	65	606	61
Other	21	6	21	2
Not disclosed	1	0.3	8	1
Political affiliation				
Republican	71	18	318	32
Democrat	112	30	428	43
Independent	161	43	194	20
Not disclosed	33	9	43	5

Note. — = not measured.

Procedure

Participants first completed an intake survey in which they answered trait questionnaires (described below) and were trained on virtue definitions (see [Appendix](#)), the protocol for the DRM component of the study, the concepts of virtue opportunities and conflicts, and how to use the conflicts matrix (see [Supplemental Material, Section 1.3](#), for details on the training protocol).

For the next 7 days (starting the day after the intake survey), participants received a survey link (via Prolific) each evening. To ensure that participants completed each DRM survey toward the end of the intended day, each participant's survey links were posted at 5 p.m. and expired at 5 a.m. the following morning (in the participant's time zone). In each DRM survey, participants first divided their day into episodes from the time they woke up until the time they completed the survey. For each episode, participants provided a name for the episode, indicated start and end times, and, optionally, wrote a brief text description of what they did and how they felt during the episode. Participants were required to list at least eight episodes and could list as many as 20. Participants then reported on their experiences (described below) during each of six randomly selected episodes.

As preregistered, we excluded (a) any entire DRM reports that were completed in less than 4 min ($n = 20$) and (b) any individual episodes that were completed in less than 30 s ($n = 827$). We also implemented two additional, non-preregistered exclusion criteria based on issues we detected during data cleaning: (c) 283 episodes were excluded because participants misunderstood the instructions and described episodes from the previous night in which they were sleeping, and (d) 28 DRM reports were excluded due to incoherent times (e.g., one response indicated that Episode 1 ran from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Episode 2 from 12:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., and Episode 3 from 6:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.). After excluding 1,265 invalid episodes (9%) within the remaining DRM reports, a total of 12,385 episodes remained ($M = 31.6$ episodes per participant).

Measures

Virtue Selection. To investigate conflicts between virtues, we first had to decide which virtues to measure. Because there is no definitive taxonomy of virtues, we began by reviewing several taxonomies of virtues and moral values (e.g., VIA Character Strengths, Peterson & Seligman, 2004; CIVIC, Ng et al., 2018; moral foundations theory; Graham et al., 2013) and other studies on the factor structure of virtues (Callina et al., 2019; Cawley et al., 2000; Chopik et al., 2021) to collate a list of candidate virtues. To be comprehensive, we also surveyed nonacademic sources by conducting a Google search for additional lists of virtues, asking ChatGPT (Version 3.5; OpenAI, 2023) to provide example virtues, and reviewing lists of virtues central to Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism (e.g., the four cardinal virtues).

In deciding on a final set of virtues, we aimed to (a) select virtues that were representative of the various higher order categories that have been proposed across different virtue taxonomies (e.g., warmth, justice, temperance, fortitude, intellect; Baehr, 2017; Chopik et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2018; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), (b) balance the goals of parsimony and comprehensiveness, and (c) only include virtues that were largely conceptually independent of one another (e.g., we excluded love on the basis of being too closely

related to compassion, and intellectual humility on the basis of being a specific type of humility). The final set of 12 virtues comprised compassion, courage, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, honesty, humility, loyalty, patience, respectfulness, responsibility, and wisdom.

Trait Measures. Participants completed trait measures of the 12 key virtues for this study, as well as moral attentiveness, neuroticism, and general moral character. See [Table 2](#) for measures, example items, and anchors. See [Supplemental Table S1](#) for descriptive statistics. For each scale, composite scores were created by averaging across all items for the scale (after reverse-scoring negatively keyed items).

We used the virtue trait measures to test whether people who have higher levels of one virtue show a smaller decrease in enactments of that virtue when they experience a conflict that involves that virtue.

We explored moral attentiveness, neuroticism, and general moral character as three traits that could plausibly predict greater frequency of virtue conflicts. People who are more morally attentive chronically perceive and consider the moral aspects of life (S. J. Reynolds, 2008). It is therefore plausible that morally attentive people would detect more moral conflicts. Neuroticism is defined by the experience of negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, and anger (Soto & John, 2017). Given that neuroticism is linked with greater threat sensitivity (DeYoung, 2015) and given that virtue conflicts could feel emotionally threatening, it is plausible that more neurotic people might notice more moral conflicts. Finally, people who are generally more moral may have a stronger commitment to multiple virtues. This might increase a highly moral person's likelihood of experiencing conflicts between various strongly valued virtues.

Episode Measures. In each daily DRM survey, participants reported—in this order—on their (a) well-being, (b) virtue opportunities, (c) virtue conflicts, (d) situation features (not relevant to this article), and (e) virtue enactments in each of six randomly selected episodes. Participants completed all questions for a given episode before moving on to the next episode. See [Supplemental Table S1](#) for descriptive statistics. The start and end time of the episode and participants' episode description were piped into the prompt of each question to remind participants of which episode they were reporting on.

State Well-Being. At the beginning of each episode, participants reported how much happiness and meaning they experienced during that episode, using one face-valid item per episode ("How [happy did you feel/meaningful were your experiences] during this episode?"; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Virtue Opportunities. To assess participants' subjective perception that they had the opportunity to express virtues (i.e., that the virtues were relevant), participants were asked, "During this episode, did you have the opportunity to be either more or less ____? (please select all that apply)," and presented with a checklist of the 12 virtues. Importantly, this item was intended to capture whether participants felt they could have expressed higher or lower levels of that virtue, rather than whether they actually enacted the virtue or experienced the situation as involving a moral dilemma (see [Supplemental Material, Section 1.3](#), for definitions that participants were trained on). The checklist also included sociable, worried, and curious (not relevant to the current article) and "none of these." The order of checklist items was randomized (except for "none of these," which was always presented last) for each episode.

Table 2
Overview of Trait Measures in Study 1

Trait	Measure	No. of items	Example item	Anchor
Compassion	BFI-2 (Soto & John, 2017)	4	"Is compassionate, has a soft heart"	1 = disagree strongly 5 = agree strongly
Courage	CIVIC (Ng et al., 2018)	5	"I refuse to let fear stop me from doing what is right"	1 = very much unlike me 4 = very much like me
Fairness	IPIP-VIA-R (Blumenke et al., 2021)	4	"Treat all people equally"	1 = does not apply at all 5 = applies completely
Forgiveness	IPIP-VIA-R (Blumenke et al., 2021)	4	"Allow others to make a fresh start"	1 = does not apply at all 5 = applies completely
Gratitude	IPIP-VIA-R (Blumenke et al., 2021)	4	"Am an extremely grateful person"	1 = does not apply at all 5 = applies completely
Honesty	Trait Truthful Communication Scale (C. J. Reynolds et al., 2025)	6	"I tell the truth, even when it could cause problems for me"	1 = strongly disagree 5 = strongly agree
Humility	HEXACO-PI-R (Ashton & Lee, 2020)	4	"I am an ordinary person who is no better than others."	1 = strongly disagree 5 = strongly agree
Loyalty	MCQ (Furr et al., 2022)	4	"I want to be loyal even when it's hard."	1 = strongly disagree 5 = strongly agree
Patience	IPIP-HEXACO (Ashton et al., 2007)–selected items (see note)	4	"Rarely get irritated"	1 = does not apply at all 5 = applies completely
Respectfulness	BFI-2 (Soto & John, 2017)	4	"Is respectful, treats others with respect."	1 = disagree strongly 5 = agree strongly
Responsibility	BFI-2 (Soto & John, 2017)	4	"Is reliable, can always be counted on."	1 = disagree strongly 5 = agree strongly
Wisdom	Global Wise Reasoning (Brienza et al., 2018)–selected items (see note)	4	"I often consider multiple ways how social events may unfold."	1 = strongly disagree 5 = strongly agree
Moral attentiveness	Moral Attentiveness (S. J. Reynolds, 2008)	12	"I often reflect on the moral aspects of my decisions."	1 = strongly disagree 7 = strongly agree
Neuroticism	BFI-2 (Soto & John, 2017)	4	"Is emotionally stable, not easily upset." (R)	1 = disagree strongly 5 = agree strongly
General moral character	MCQ (Furr et al., 2022)	4	"I am a person of strong moral character."	1 = strongly disagree 5 = strongly agree

Note. (R) means the item was reverse scored. For patience, items were selected to be representative of our definition of a patient person as someone who "waits calmly in the face of frustration, adversity, or suffering." For wisdom, we selected items based on coverage of the facets of wisdom as defined by Brienza and colleagues, our definition of a wise person as someone who "exercises sound judgment based on knowledge, experience, and consideration of all relevant factors," and a confirmatory factor analysis of the four items we selected (based on data from Brienza et al., 2018). BFI-2 = Big Five Inventory-2; CIVIC = Comprehensive Inventory of Virtuous Instantiations of Character; IPIP-VIA-R = International Personality Item Pool–Value in Action scale; HEXACO-PI-R = HEXACO Personality Inventory–Revised; IPIP-HEXACO = International Personality Item Pool–HEXACO; MCQ = Moral Character Questionnaire.

Virtue Conflicts. After answering the virtue opportunities question, participants were then asked, “During this episode, did you experience a conflict between any of these behaviors (i.e., that you couldn’t show high levels of both behaviors at the same time)?” This question only appeared when participants reported perceiving opportunities to enact more than one virtue. Participants were shown a matrix populated with the list of virtues that they selected in the virtue opportunities question. Because this project focuses on trade-offs between virtues, the nonvirtue behaviors (sociable, worried, and curious) never appeared in the conflict matrix. As shown in Figure 1A, the matrix contained one row for each virtue that was perceived as relevant, plus a row labeled “no remaining conflicts.” The matrix also contained up to three columns that were labeled “Conflict [1–3]: It was NOT possible to be both...”

If participants indicated that two virtues were relevant, only one column appeared (as there is only one possible conflict between two virtues). Due to a human calculation error, if participants indicated that three virtues were relevant, only two columns appeared (even though there are three possible conflicts among three virtues). If participants selected four or more virtues, three columns appeared. We limited the number of columns to three because pilot data suggested that it was extremely rare for participants to report more

than three virtue conflicts (only 4% out of all conflict episodes) in a single episode.

To report a virtue conflict, participants checked two boxes to indicate which two virtues were in conflict during the episode. For example, Figure 1A illustrates a conflict between fairness and compassion. Participants used the “no remaining conflicts” option to indicate that they experienced no conflicts (by selecting this option in all columns), only one conflict (by selecting this option in Columns 2–3; see Figure 1A), or only two conflicts (by selecting this option in only Column 3).

Virtue Enactments. Momentary virtue enactments were measured with one face-valid item per virtue (“How [virtue] were you during this episode?”; 1 = *not at all [virtue]*, 4 = *moderately [virtue]*, 7 = *extremely [virtue]*). The order of virtues was randomized for each episode.

Data Analyses

All data analyses for both studies were conducted using R software (R Core Team, 2024; Version 4.4.0). All trait scores were transformed into *z* scores prior to analyses.

Frequency of Virtue Conflicts. We estimated how often people experienced any virtue conflict, as well as each of the 66

Figure 1

Example of Virtue Conflicts (Study 1) and Virtue Trade-offs (Study 2) Matrices

(A)	Conflict 1: It was NOT possible to be both...	Conflict 2: It was NOT possible to be both...	Conflict 3: It was NOT possible to be both...
Fair	☒	☐	☐
Respectful	☐	☐	☐
Compassionate	☒	☐	☐
Loyal	☐	☐	☐
Courageous	☐	☐	☐
No remaining conflicts	☐	☒	☒

(B)	1. High levels of __ would make it DIFFICULT to show high levels of __	2. High levels of __ would make it DIFFICULT to show high levels of __	3. High levels of __ would make it DIFFICULT to show high levels of __
Courage	☐	☒	☐
Loyalty	☒	☐	☐
Humility	☒	☐	☐
Fairness	☐	☐	☐
Forgiveness	☐	☒	☐
No remaining tradeoffs	☐	☐	☒

Note. Panel A illustrates how participants would use the matrix to report one virtue conflict (fairness vs. compassion) in Study 1. Panel B illustrates how participants would use the matrix to report two virtue trade-offs (humility vs. loyalty and courage vs. forgiveness) in Study 2. To report no conflicts/trade-offs, participants would select “no remaining conflicts/trade-offs” in the columns that appeared. In both studies, participants were trained on how to use these matrices (for details, see materials posted on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/ztxcd/files/vwxjz>, Study 1 and <https://osf.io/ztxcd/files/wph8t>, Study 2).

specific virtue conflicts, as a percentage of (a) overall time and (b) time when the virtues had the potential to come into conflict.

Across All Episodes. To estimate the absolute percentage of time in a typical week that virtue conflicts occurred across all 12,385 episodes (irrespective of whether any virtues were relevant), we calculated a weighted percentage using the following procedure (following standard practices in DRM research, e.g., Hudson et al., 2020; Knabe et al., 2010): First, we created a binary variable to indicate whether a participant reported no virtue conflicts (coded as 0) or at least one conflict between virtues (coded as 1) in an episode.¹ Next, we multiplied this variable by the length of the corresponding episodes divided by the total length of all episodes that the participant reported across the week. Then, we summed these percentages to estimate the percentage of time that any virtue conflict occurred for each participant. For example, if a participant reported episodes spanning 20 hr, with virtue conflicts in two of these episodes lasting 0.5 hr and 2 hr (respectively), the weighted percentage of time during which this participant experienced any virtue conflict would be $(1 \times (.5/20) + 1 \times (2/20)) \times 100 = 12.5\%$ of the time. Finally, we averaged these percentages across participants to estimate the typical amount of time during the week in which virtue conflicts occur.

To determine the percentage of time each virtue pair came into conflict (across all episodes), we used the same calculation, with one change: Instead of calculating one percentage for the presence of any virtue conflict, we calculated a percentage for each possible virtue pair.

When Virtues Had the Potential to Come Into Conflict. For virtues to come into conflict, at least two virtues must be relevant. This is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for virtue conflicts because there may be situations where multiple virtues are relevant but not in conflict. We therefore repeated the analyses above but limited the denominator to (a) the 6,187 episodes in which at least two virtues were relevant (for any conflict) or (b) episodes in which both virtues in a given pair were relevant (for specific virtue conflicts). This approach provides a clearer picture of how often conflicts occur when virtues have the potential to come into conflict. This also helps distinguish genuine tensions between specific virtues from the fact that some virtues (e.g., patience, responsibility) are more frequently relevant in daily life than others (e.g., courage, forgiveness; Hardin, Zhang, & Sun, 2026).

Multilevel Models. We conducted multilevel modeling analyses using the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2015) to (a) predict state virtue enactments from the presence (vs. absence) of conflicts that involved each respective virtue, (b) examine trait predictors of the frequency of virtue conflicts, and (c) predict well-being from the presence (vs. absence) of virtue conflicts. All multilevel models included random intercepts and random slopes for each participant and used person mean-centered predictors.

Results

How Often Do People Experience Virtue Conflicts in Everyday Life?

Total Prevalence of Virtue Conflicts. The main goal of Study 1 was to examine how often people experience virtue conflicts in everyday life. To provide context on the frequency of virtue conflicts, it is helpful first to know how often virtues were relevant. Participants perceived opportunities to express at least one virtue 77.1%

of the time (also reported by Hardin, Zhang, & Sun, 2026) and opportunities to express at least two virtues 51.5% of the time. In other words, virtues could potentially come into conflict approximately half the time. However, participants reported experiencing a conflict between any two virtues only 9.4% ($SD = 16.7$) of the time across all episodes and 15.8% ($SD = 27.3$) when at least two virtues were relevant.

Although there was substantial variability in how frequently different people experience virtue conflicts, we found little evidence that participants' trait levels of moral attentiveness, neuroticism, and general moral character predicted individual differences in the perceived prevalence of virtue conflicts (for details, see Supplemental Material, Section 3.2 and Supplemental Table S3). These nonsignificant findings suggest that the perception of virtue conflicts in everyday life may be shaped less by broad dispositional traits and more by the specific situations people encounter in daily life.

Prevalence of Specific Virtue Conflicts. Next, we asked how often people experience each of 66 possible conflicts between pairs of 12 virtues. Specific virtue conflict frequencies ranged from 0.04% (loyalty vs. wisdom, loyalty vs. respect, humility vs. patience, humility vs. fairness) to 1.24% (patience vs. responsibility) across all episodes (see Supplemental Figure S1) and 0.6% (humility vs. responsibility) to 11.6% (patience vs. courage) when both virtues were relevant (see Figure 2A). This suggests that the prevalence of any particular virtue conflict is rare—even for the most common conflicts (e.g., patience vs. courage), there was no conflict almost nine out of 10 times when both virtues were relevant.

How Do People Respond to Virtue Conflicts?

Study 1 was not specifically designed to investigate the consequences of virtue conflicts. However, to provide some initial insight into how people respond to virtue conflicts, we tested whether virtue conflicts predicted momentary well-being and virtue state enactments.

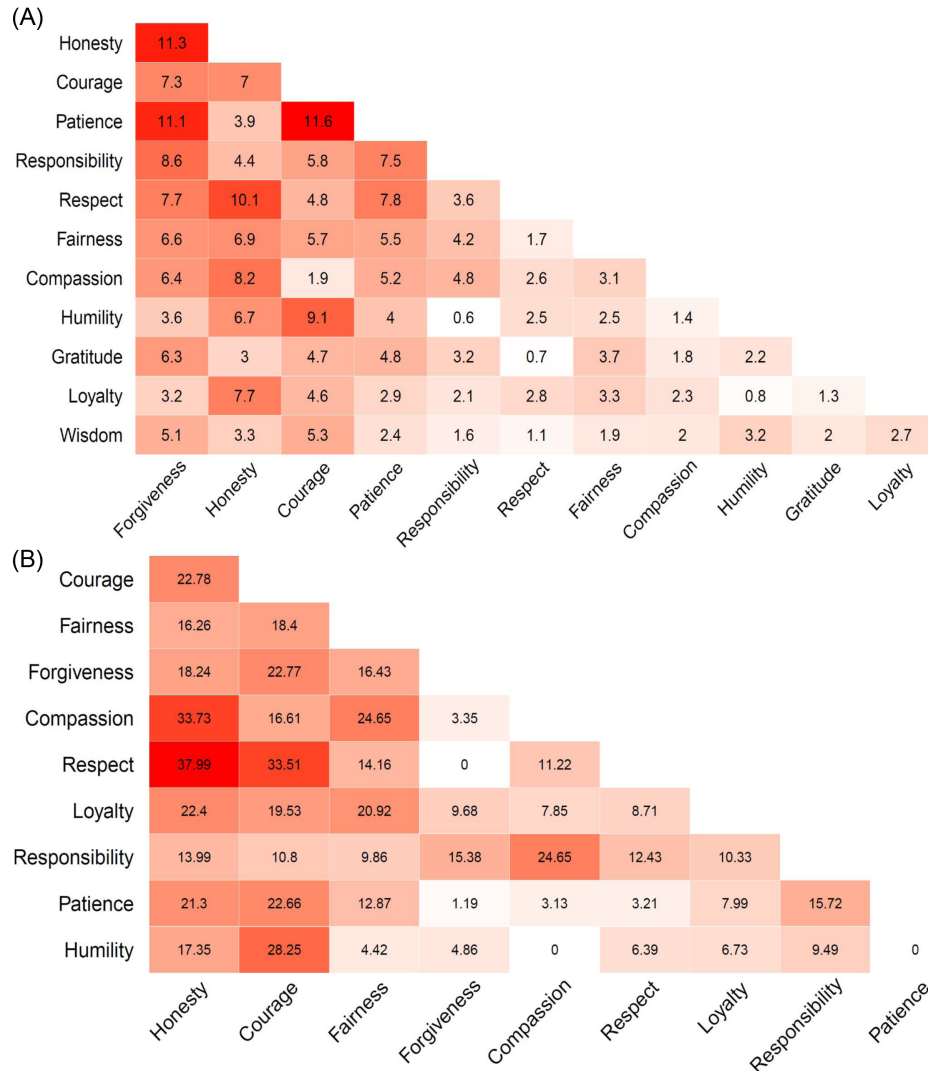
Well-Being. Simultaneously pursuing two conflictual moral goals may induce goal interference (Gray et al., 2017), which is associated with more distress and lower positive affect. We therefore explored whether virtue conflicts predicted decreased momentary happiness and meaning. Indeed, two non-preregistered multilevel models showed that people experienced slightly less happiness ($\beta = -0.08$, 95% CI = $[-0.09, -0.06]$, $p < .001$) and meaning ($\beta = -0.08$, 95% CI = $[-0.09, -0.06]$, $p < .001$) during episodes when they experienced a virtue conflict (vs. not).

Virtue Enactments. Next, we tested how virtue enactments differ when people experience a conflict involving that virtue (vs. not). This provides clues about how people resolve these conflicts (for more details, see Supplemental Material, Section 3.3). Consistent with some combination of prioritization, compromise, or avoidance strategies, people reported enacting lower levels of a virtue during episodes in which that virtue was involved in a conflict (vs. not) for 9 out of 12 virtues (see Supplemental Table S4). We found little evidence that higher trait virtue levels of a given virtue buffered against such reductions in state expressions of that virtue (see Supplemental Table S5). Providing more direct evidence for the use of prioritization strategies, people also reported a larger absolute difference in virtue

¹ Note that due to a typo, the preregistration incorrectly stated ">1" ("more than one conflict"), when we intended for this to be "≥1" ("at least one conflict").

Figure 2

Frequency of Virtue Conflicts (Study 1; Panel A) or Virtue Trade-offs (Study 2; Panel B) for Each Virtue Pair When Both Virtues Were Relevant



Note. This graph shows the percentage of time that participants reported a conflict (Study 1; Panel A) or trade-off (Study 2; Panel B) between a given pair of virtues when both virtues in that pair were perceived as being relevant. For example, Study 1 participants perceived a conflict between patience and honesty 3.9% of the time when both honesty and patience were perceived as relevant (see Panel A). See the online article for the color version of this figure.

state enactments when they conflicted with each other (vs. not), $b = .27$, 95% CI [.16, .38], $p < .001$. Study 2 builds on these results by directly measuring a range of conflict resolution strategies.

Discussion

Study 1 revealed that conflicts among 12 virtues rarely occurred in everyday life. However, people might perceive trade-offs between virtues, without seeing them as being strictly incompatible (as implied by the conflicts framing). For example, people might sometimes find a way to integrate and show high levels of both virtues simultaneously. In addition, some of the higher prevalence conflicts (e.g., patience vs.

forgiveness) were not intuitive, raising questions about whether participants correctly understood the concept of a virtue conflict. Finally, Study 1 focused on the prevalence of virtue conflicts but, due to survey space constraints, provided limited insight into how people experience and resolve them. Study 2 addresses these limitations.

Study 2

Method

Participants

We recruited 1,001 Prolific participants who were largely representative of the United States, sampling based on age, gender,

ethnicity, and political orientation (using Prolific Academic's quota-based sampling method) and who did not participate in Study 1. We determined this sample size based on the expectation of 10,000 raw episodes and 500–700 participants who reported at least one trade-off in these episodes. Based on the frequency of virtue conflicts in Study 1, we expected to have at least some representation of each virtue pair and at least 20 episodes for most pairs.

Participants were paid \$8 USD for completing a survey (described below) with a median completion time of 44 min. As preregistered, we excluded 19 participants for completing the survey in less than 6.5 min and 13 participants because of clear signs of nonserious responding. After these exclusions, 988 participants remained. See [Supplemental Material \(Section 1.1\)](#) for additional recruitment details. See [Table 1](#) for a summary of participants' demographic characteristics and the [Supplemental Material \(Section 1.2\)](#) for comparisons with U.S. population proportions.

From these remaining participants, we also excluded 428 reports based on preregistered criteria for invalid reports (e.g., episodes when participants were sleeping). After these exclusions, 9,452 valid reports remained for analysis, estimating the frequency of trade-offs. Analyses of follow-up questions about a trade-off episode (e.g., resolution strategies) required participants who reported at least one trade-off and demonstrated a clear understanding of it. We therefore excluded 385 participants who reported no trade-offs that day and 273 participants who misunderstood the concept (described below), resulting in a final sample of 330 participants for these specific analyses.

Procedure

First, participants reported their general virtue preferences (described below) and were trained on virtue definitions (see [Appendix](#)), how to complete the DRM survey, the concept of a virtue trade-off, and how to use the trade-offs matrix. Unlike Study 1, participants in Study 2 only completed a day reconstruction for 1 day. We made this change to reduce participant burden given that the survey included extensive follow-up questions. Accordingly, in Study 2, participants began the DRM portion of the study immediately after the training and were required to list at least 10 episodes (but could list up to 20 episodes). To ensure participants had experienced enough episodes to report on in the DRM portion, we restricted the participation time from 7 p.m. to 2 a.m. in the participant's time zone.

Participants then reported on their state happiness, virtue opportunities, and virtue trade-offs during each of 10 randomly selected episodes. Participants who experienced at least one virtue trade-off ($n = 603$) completed follow-up questions about one randomly selected trade-off episode (described below). All other participants ($n = 385$) completed filler questions designed to equate the length of the survey for all participants (for details, see [Supplemental Material, Section 1.5](#)). Finally, all participants completed a demographic questionnaire.

Measures

Virtue Selection. Study 2 included 10 virtues, which comprised the list from Study 1, minus gratitude and wisdom (as these were rarely involved in virtue conflicts in Study 1).

Abstract Virtue Preferences. Rather than measuring virtue traits (as in Study 1), we measured virtue preferences using a

forced-choice format because this maps more closely onto how we assess virtue preferences in the DRM component. To do so, we adapted the Moral Foundations Conflict Task ([Ahluwalia-McMeddies et al., 2025](#)) to create 45 forced-choice questions that involved pairwise comparisons of the 10 virtues included in Study 2. For each virtue pair, participants were asked, "Is it better to be someone who is," and were presented with two response options (one for each virtue, e.g., "Compassionate, has a soft heart" and "Honest, tells the truth"). The orders of the questions and the response options were fully randomized. Because participants had not yet reviewed the definitions of the 10 virtues at this point in the study, we included a brief phrase (e.g., "has a soft heart") to clarify the meaning of each virtue (see Codebook for the wording of all response options).

We used two complementary indices in the analyses: (a) which virtue participants selected for a given pairwise comparison and (b) the percentage of times that each virtue was selected across all pairwise comparisons. The first metric allows us to more directly ask whether baseline preferences in a given pairwise comparison predict which virtue people prioritize when they encounter that specific virtue trade-off in everyday life. The second metric provides a complementary measure of people's overall preference for one virtue over the other nine virtues. While this is less well-matched to a particular trade-off in daily life, it is a more reliable measure of overall preferences for a given virtue (because it is based on nine items rather than one).

Episode Measures. All participants reported on state happiness, virtue opportunities, and virtue trade-offs (in this order) for each of the 10 randomly selected episodes. Participants completed all questions for a given episode before moving on to the next episode. See [Supplemental Table S2](#) for descriptive statistics.

State Happiness. Participants reported their state happiness using the single-item measure from Study 1. We did not measure meaning in Study 2, as results were similar for happiness and meaning in Study 1.

Virtue Opportunities. Participants answered the same virtue opportunities question as in Study 1, except that response options only comprised the 10 virtues included in Study 2, plus "moral" (which was included for purposes not relevant to this study).

Virtue Trade-offs. In Study 1, participants were asked whether they experienced a conflict between the various behaviors, such that they "couldn't show high levels of both behaviors at the same time" (see [Figure 1B](#)). However, participants may have interpreted the question as asking whether they struggled to show high levels of both virtues (rather than whether they faced a choice between showing high levels of one virtue vs. the other). The use of "conflict" and "couldn't" also implies a strict incompatibility between two virtues, such that it is impossible to show high levels of both virtues. However, there may be less extreme situations in which people perceive a trade-off between two virtues but could find a way to integrate them by showing high levels of both virtues (e.g., telling a hard truth in a compassionate way).

To address these issues, in Study 2, we revised the prompt to ask, "Did you experience a trade-off between any of these behaviors, such that showing high levels of one behavior would make it difficult to show high levels of the other behavior?" and revised the header of each column of the trade-offs matrix to read, "High levels of __ would make it DIFFICULT to show high levels of __" (see [Figure 1B](#)). These changes emphasize the causal relation between expressions of each virtue and lower the threshold to allow a wider range of trade-off situations to be included.

Trade-off Follow-Up Questions. Participants who experienced a virtue trade-off that day provided detailed information about one randomly selected trade-off episode. First, participants described what was happening during the episode in an open-ended question (using at least 10 characters). They then completed the following measures about that episode (in the following order). For each trade-off episode, we randomly selected which virtue appeared as “Virtue 1” or “Virtue 2” to control for order effects, but which virtue appeared as “Virtue 1” or “Virtue 2” was held constant across all follow-up questions for a given participant.

Explanation. To assess whether participants correctly understood the concept of a trade-off and explore more general trade-off themes (see the Data Analyses section for coding procedures), we asked participants, “Could you tell me why showing high levels of [Virtue 1] would make it difficult to show high levels of [Virtue 2] (or vice versa) in this situation?” Participants provided open-ended responses using at least 10 characters. We list example open-ended responses in Table 3 and report all open-ended responses along with the virtues involved in the trade-off and the broader trade-off themes (described below) in a spreadsheet on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/ztxcd/files/v86ke>).

Virtue Enactments. Participants reported how much they expressed each of the 10 virtues included in this study, using the same virtue enactment measure as in Study 1. These measures were included to assess the validity of the resolution strategies question (described below).

Moral Struggle. Participants rated how much they struggled to resolve the trade-off on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by *not at all* and *very much*.

Decision Satisfaction. Participants rated how satisfied they were with how they resolved the trade-off on a 7-point scale anchored by *not at all* and *extremely*.

Actual and Ideal Trade-off Resolution Strategies. To assess actual resolution strategies, participants selected one of five options (in line with Levine et al., 2020): (a) “I prioritized [Virtue 1] over [Virtue 2]” (i.e., prioritization of Virtue 1), (b) “I prioritized [Virtue 2] over [Virtue 1]” (i.e., prioritization of Virtue 2), (c) “I tried to be a little bit [Virtue 1] and [Virtue 2]” (i.e., compromise), (d) “I found a way to show high levels of both [Virtue 1] and [Virtue 2]” (i.e., integration), or (e) “I avoided making a decision” (i.e., avoidance). To assess ideal resolution strategies, participants reported how they would resolve this trade-off if they were in this situation again by selecting one of the same five options (but reworded in the hypothetical, e.g., “I would prioritize [Virtue 1] over [Virtue 2]”).

As a validity check, we compared the average state enactment of two virtues in the trade-off for each resolution strategy. Preregistered analyses revealed the predicted pattern for each strategy: Average enactment was highest for integration, middling and statistically indistinguishable between compromise and prioritization, and lowest for avoidance (see Supplemental Material, Section 3.4, Supplemental Figure S5). We also examined the discrepancy in state enactment between the two virtues within each resolution strategy. Based on their definitions, we expected integration and compromise to yield little to no difference in virtue enactment. Contrary to this expectation, all strategies showed an average discrepancy of no lower than 1 scale point on the 1–7 Likert scale, with prioritization producing the largest gap (see Supplemental Table S6).

Affected Parties. Finally, participants indicated who would benefit and who would be harmed (in that order) by their decision to prioritize one virtue or the other (four questions; “Who would have [BENEFITED/been HARMED] if you showed high levels of [Virtue 1/Virtue 2] in this situation?”). For each of the four questions, they could select up to three affected entities from a checklist that included options adapted from Sun et al.’s (2024) study: myself, my romantic partner(s), my family, my friend(s), my coworkers/company, my country/people in my country, all people, nonhuman animals, the environment, future generations, other (please specify), and no one.

As preregistered, we recoded these responses into six binary variables that represented whether the trade-off affected (a) the self (myself), (b) a close other (romantic partner, family, or friend), (c) a distant other (coworkers/company, my country/people in my country, all people, or future generations), (d) nonhuman entities (nonhuman animals or the environment), (e) other (other—please specify), and (f) no one (no one). For each category, 0 = the entity was not mentioned in any of the four harms/benefits questions and 1 = the entity was mentioned in at least one of the four harms/benefits questions. A surprisingly high percentage of responses (23.9%) initially fell into the “other” category. Because participants’ open-ended descriptions of these “other” entities revealed that almost all of these cases reflected one of the five non-other categories, we recoded these responses (in a deviation from the preregistration; for details, see Supplemental Material, Section 1.6).

Data Analyses

As a reminder, all 988 participants were included in the estimates of the prevalence of virtue trade-offs, but only the 330 participants who (a) experienced a virtue trade-off that day and (b) demonstrated a correct understanding of the concept of a virtue trade-off (based on their responses to the open-ended questions; see below for details) were included in subsequent analyses about the experience of virtue trade-offs (e.g., who was affected, resolution strategies).

Prevalence of Virtue Trade-offs. We used the same procedure as Study 1 to estimate how often people experienced any virtue trade-off, as well as each of the 45 specific virtue trade-offs, as both a percentage of overall time (i.e., out of all 9,452 episodes) and as a percentage of times when virtues had the potential to be involved in a trade-off (i.e., in the 4,405 episodes in which at least two virtues were relevant). Unlike Study 1, however, we preregistered a procedure for correcting the prevalence estimates for misunderstandings (identified via codings of participants’ open-ended responses; described below). We report the misunderstanding-corrected prevalences in the main text (but raw prevalences can be found in the Supplemental Material, Section 3.1; see Supplemental Figure S2).

Coding for Misunderstandings. Two research assistants coded each trade-off episode for possible misunderstandings based on participants’ open-ended trade-off episode descriptions and explanations of why showing high levels of one virtue would make it difficult to show high levels of the other virtue. To provide additional context, coders also had access to the basic details about the episode (in the format: “[Episode number]: [Episode name] beginning at [Start time] and ending at [End time], [Episode notes]”). Coders coded each episode as “no misunderstanding” or into one of six misunderstanding categories (for details and

frequencies, see [Supplemental Material, Section 1.7](#)). Based on [Altman's \(1990\)](#) benchmarks, interrater agreement was “good” for whether there was a misunderstanding ($\kappa = .63$) and “moderate” for which of the seven categories applied ($\kappa = .41$; [Fleiss, 1981](#)). For episodes in which the two coders disagreed, the first author served as a tiebreaker. For details on the coding procedure, see the coding guide (<https://osf.io/ztxcd/files/2vsxb>).

Correcting for Misunderstandings. As preregistered, we adjusted for misunderstandings to better estimate the true prevalence of virtue trade-offs. To adjust the overall prevalence estimates, we multiplied the prevalence of virtue trade-offs across all episodes and for relevant episodes by the proportion of valid trade-off episodes (i.e., 54.7%). To adjust the prevalence estimates for each virtue pair, we adjusted for virtue-pair-specific misunderstanding rates because virtue pairs differ in the proportion of episodes reflecting misunderstandings (see [Supplemental Figure S3](#)). We report misunderstanding-corrected prevalence estimates in the main text (for the unadjusted estimates, see [Supplemental Figure S2](#)).

Coding for Broader Trade-off Themes. We used conventional content analysis to derive broader trade-off categories from participants' open-ended responses ([Hsieh & Shannon, 2005](#)). Trained coders then applied this coding scheme to all episodes.

To develop a coding taxonomy, the first, third, and last authors independently read through participants' open-ended episode descriptions and explanations of why the virtues came into trade-offs and sorted them into smaller buckets of responses that shared commonalities. We primarily relied on our expert judgment, but for further brainstorming, we also used our university's secure version of ChatGPT4 to identify potential topics based on responses to the two open-ended questions. See the Open Science Framework for the full prompt and output of this ChatGPT4 conversation. These three authors met to compare their taxonomies (and ChatGPT's themes) and to decide on the initial taxonomy as a team.

Then, two research assistants (including the second author) were trained on this coding taxonomy by the first author. They then individually coded each trade-off episode into the five broader trade-off themes in this taxonomy (plus an “other” category), based on participants' responses to the two open-ended questions. The coders agreed on 73% of the responses ($\kappa = .65$) in the initial round of coding. Disagreements were resolved by the first author.

The five initial categories counted for 91.2% of the episodes, with 8.8% in the “other” category. Based on team discussion, it appeared that most of these “other” episodes involved action versus inhibition trade-offs—situations in which participants were struggling to decide between taking bold action and holding back—either to wait for a better time, avoid acting impulsively, or show restraint and respect for others. We therefore performed another round of coding to categorize the “other” episodes into either action versus inhibition trade-offs or not ($\kappa = .61$). After this second round of coding, only 2.12% of episodes remained in the “other” category. The final taxonomy therefore comprised six broader trade-off themes (plus an “other” category; see [Table 3](#)).

Correspondence Between Abstract Preferences and Actual Prioritization. We used two complementary approaches to test the correspondence between participants' abstract virtue preferences and which virtue they prioritized in an actual trade-off in everyday life (for the 189 participants who used a prioritization strategy). First, we computed the phi correlation (ϕ) between participants' decision in the abstract preference questions and their actual

decision for the specific virtue pair involved in the actual trade-off (e.g., honesty vs. compassion). Second, we ran a linear probability model ([Gomila, 2021](#)) predicting which virtue was prioritized in a daily life trade-off from the difference in the percentage of times that each virtue was selected across all relevant pairwise comparisons in the abstract virtue preferences task. For example, if honesty was preferred eight out of nine times and compassion was preferred 5 times, the difference was calculated as $8/9 - 5/9 = 3/9$. Positive scores indicate that people generally value honesty more than they generally value compassion, whereas negative scores indicate that people generally value compassion more than they generally value honesty. We used this difference variable to predict whether honesty (coded as 1) or compassion (coded as 0) was prioritized.

Results

How Often Do People Experience Virtue Trade-offs in Everyday Life?

First, we revisited the question of how often people experience virtue trade-offs in everyday life. Having lowered the threshold to ask about “trade-offs” rather than “conflicts” (as in Study 1), we expected that the prevalence estimates would be higher in Study 2. Indeed, participants reported experiencing a trade-off between two virtues 12.5% of the time across all episodes and 26.3% of the time when at least two virtues were relevant. These are higher than the estimates for conflicts in Study 1 (recalculating Study 1 estimates for the 10 virtues we included in Study 2: 9.4% across all episodes and 15.8% across relevant episodes). Importantly, people perceived opportunities to express at least one (77%) or at least two virtues (47.7%) at similar rates as Study 1 (recalculating Study 1 estimates for the 10 virtues we included in Study 2: 69.4% for at least one virtue; 42.5% for at least two virtues). This suggests that the revised wording uncovered more trade-offs with minimal impacts on perceptions of virtue opportunities.

Similarly, the trade-off prevalence estimates for the specific virtue pairs tended to be higher compared with Study 1, ranging from 0% (respect vs. forgiveness, compassion vs. humility, patience vs. humility) to 3.17% (respect vs. honesty) across all episodes (see [Supplemental Figure S1B](#)) and 0% (respect vs. forgiveness, compassion vs. humility, patience vs. humility) to 37.99% (respect vs. honesty) when both virtues were relevant (see [Figure 2B](#)). Overall, however, a non-preregistered vector correlation (based on the 45 virtue pairs from Study 2) showed that the prevalence estimates for relevant episodes for Study 1 were highly correlated with uncorrected prevalence estimates for relevant episodes in Study 2, $r = .56$, 95% CI [.34, .75], $p < .001$. This means that although the prevalence estimates were higher on average in Study 2, the virtue pairs that were more often involved in a conflict in Study 1 also tended to be more often involved in a trade-off in Study 2.

Recall, however, that some of the higher prevalence conflicts (e.g., patience vs. forgiveness) in Study 1 were not intuitive, raising the possibility that participants sometimes misunderstood the concept of a virtue conflict. Study 2 revisits the question of which virtue pairs are more often involved in trade-offs, after correcting for misunderstandings. As shown in [Figure 2B](#), patience versus forgiveness was no longer one of the most prevalent trade-offs when both virtues were relevant, applying only 1.19% of the time after

correcting for misunderstandings (vs. 22.62% in the raw prevalence estimates; see [Supplemental Figure S2B](#)). Thus, correcting for misunderstandings helps clarify which specific virtue trade-offs are more versus less prevalent.

Summarizing Broader Trade-off Themes

Up to this point, we have focused on trade-offs between specific virtues (e.g., honesty vs. compassion). However, for parsimony, we also aimed to identify broader trade-off themes based on participants' open-ended responses. As shown in [Table 3](#), we identified six broader trade-off themes (plus one "other" category). Approximately half of the trade-offs (50.92%) arguably reflected four different varieties of benevolence versus integrity dilemmas ([Moore et al., 2019](#)): considering others' feelings versus telling the truth (30.91%), having empathy for specific people versus treating people equally (10%), showing grace versus holding others accountable (7.27%), and backing someone up versus telling the truth (2.73%). We also

identified two additional themes that seemed distinct from benevolence versus integrity dilemmas: trade-offs between engaging with someone in a warm/caring manner and effectively fulfilling responsibilities (40.30%) and trade-offs that involve taking actions versus inhibiting impulses (6.67%).

Who Would Be Affected by Virtue Trade-offs?

Next, we examined how often people expected that different social entities would be affected (i.e., harmed or benefited) by a person's decision to prioritize one virtue or the other in a trade-off episode. Participants anticipated that the overwhelming majority of virtue trade-offs would affect the self (81.5%), followed by close others (i.e., romantic partner, family, or friend; 60.9%), distant others (i.e., coworkers/company, my country/people in my country, all people, or future generations; 47.6%), nonhuman entities (9.1%), and other entities (3%). There were almost no trade-off episodes that affected no one at all (0.6%). Finally, the vast majority of trade-offs

Table 3
Prevalence of Broader Trade-off Themes Based on Codings of Open-Ended Responses

Theme	% of trade-offs	Top 3 virtue pairs	Example
Engaging with self/others in a warm/caring manner versus effectively fulfilling responsibilities	40.3	Patience versus responsibility Compassion versus responsibility Respectfulness versus responsibility	There were things I wanted to get done, but I needed to take time out of my day to call my mother.
Considering others' feelings versus telling the truth	30.91	Honesty versus respectfulness Compassion versus honesty (tie) Honesty versus patience (tie)	There are a lot of things I could say to her but will not because I am being respectful.
Having empathy for specific people versus treating people equally	10	Fairness versus patience Compassion versus fairness (tie) Fairness versus loyalty (tie)	Some students who have behavioral issues require me, as a teacher, to have more patience with them when it comes to discipline and expectations. However, my classroom expectations are firm and consequences and expectations should be equal in order to be fair. So sometimes being more patient with some students makes it hard to be fair.
Showing grace versus holding others accountable	7.27	Fairness versus forgiveness Forgiveness versus responsibility Courage versus forgiveness	Someone was late to the meeting, and I wanted to be patient. However, people in my team know how important it is to show up on time so I wanted to be patient and let it slide. But if I wanted to be fair, I would need to hold the responsible party accountable.
Taking action versus inhibiting impulses	6.67	Courage versus patience Courage versus humility Courage versus responsibility	If I had been more patient, I may not have been as courageous to continue the conversation at the first sign of pushback or even been able to start the conversation at all.
Backing someone up versus telling the truth	2.73	Honesty versus loyalty Fairness versus loyalty Compassion versus loyalty (tied with multiple others)	I am always going to be loyal to my wife, and that means effectively taking her side what to her seem like a dispute with her sister. This was not the time to be a completely dispassionate objective reliable narrator, and so perfect honesty was not on the menu, let us say.
Other	2.12	Honesty versus responsibility Only one instance each for the remaining virtue pairs	If too honest on the applications, it might be misread and I would be taken out of consideration. (Sometimes the applications ask if you are ok with a certain salary and you answer "yes" when you really think the salary is not enough.)

Note. Top 3 virtue pairs = the three most frequent specific virtue pairs for each theme. Some examples are excerpted from a longer response.

were perceived as affecting both the self and other people (76%), rather than only self (6%) or only others (17%).

What Is It Like to Experience a Virtue Trade-off?

We now turn to questions about how people experience and resolve virtue trade-offs in everyday life. Replicating the results in Study 1, people reported feeling less happy during episodes when they experienced a virtue trade-off (vs. not), $\beta = -0.11$, 95% CI $[-0.13, -0.08]$, $p < .001$. People also reported struggling moderately with how best to resolve virtue trade-offs ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.63$). These findings suggest that people experience virtue trade-offs as a genuinely distressing and challenging goal conflict (Gray et al., 2017), rather than as a trivial or inconsequential observation.

How Do People Resolve Virtue Trade-offs?

When confronted with a virtue trade-off situation, do people typically prioritize one virtue over the other, compromise by showing a little of each virtue, or avoid making a decision altogether? Do people sometimes even transcend the trade-off, finding a way to show high levels of both virtues (i.e., integration)? Moreover, when people prioritize one virtue over the other, which virtues are more likely to be prioritized? In this section, we address each of these questions descriptively. We also consider possible predictors of people's decisions, as well as how satisfied they were with their decisions.

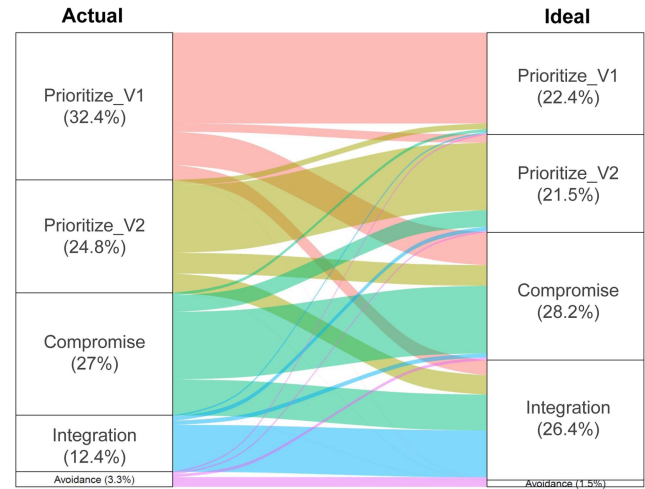
Trade-off Resolution Strategies. To resolve a virtue trade-off, participants tended to prioritize one of the virtues (57.27%), followed by making compromises (26.97%), integrating both virtues (12.42%), or avoiding making a decision (3.33%; see Figure 3). In other words, prioritization dominates, but people use a variety of strategies for resolving virtue trade-offs. We explored but found no evidence that resolution strategies could be predicted by the extent to which people struggled with the decision, which social entities would be affected, or abstract virtue preference strength (see Supplemental Material, Section 3.5).

Satisfaction With Resolution Strategies. When do people tend to be more satisfied with how they resolved a virtue trade-off? To capture decision satisfaction, we asked participants how they would resolve the trade-off if they were in this situation again, assuming that participants' choice to retain or switch from their original strategy, respectively, reflected higher versus lower levels of decision satisfaction. Overall, a non-preregistered chi-square test of independence revealed a significant difference in the proportion of each resolution strategy between the original and hypothetical choices ($p < .001$, based on a Monte Carlo simulation with 5,000 iterations). 58.4% of participants retained their original strategy, but this percentage differed by strategy in a way that aligned with a direct measure of decision satisfaction (see Supplemental Material, Section 3.6, Supplemental Table S7). Those who were able to integrate both virtues overwhelmingly said that they would do so again (82.9%), whereas smaller majorities of prioritizers (61%) and compromisers (55%) endorsed repeating their strategy. Fewer than half of avoiders (45%) said they would choose avoidance again.

Figure 3 shows that the biggest gap between actual versus ideal strategies was for integration (actual = 12%, ideal = 26%); 29.2% of

Figure 3

How Do People Resolve (and Wish They Had Resolved) Virtue Trade-offs in Everyday Life?



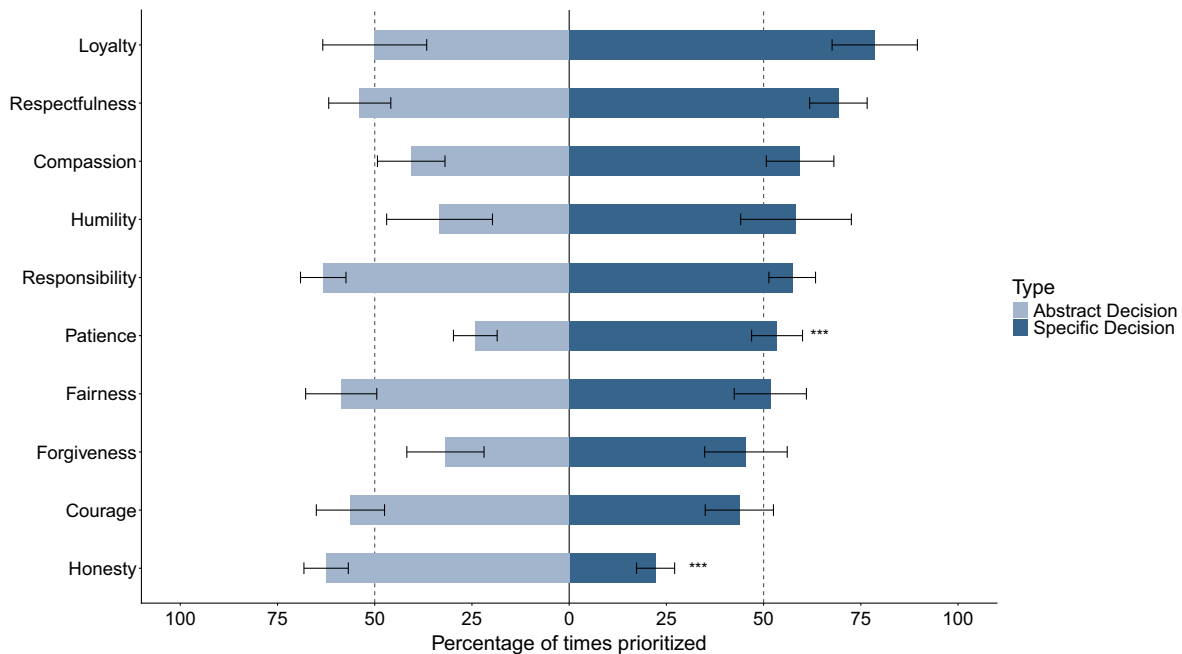
Note. Actual = how participants resolved the trade-off; ideal = how participants would have resolved the trade-off if they were in this situation again. The streams connecting actual and ideal strategies illustrate consistency and shifts in resolution strategy preferences. For example, the thin stream connecting Prioritize_V1 (actual) with Prioritize_V2 (ideal) shows that only a few participants would prioritize the other virtue instead, whereas the thick stream connecting integration (actual) with integration (ideal) shows that the vast majority of participants who used the integration strategy would choose the same strategy again. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

compromisers and 13.2% of prioritizers wished they had integrated both virtues instead. Some compromisers (16%) wished they had prioritized and vice versa (20%). However, full preference reversals were rare: Only 5.3% of those who prioritized one virtue wished they had prioritized the other virtue instead.

Finally, collapsing across resolution strategies, people also tended to feel less satisfied with their decision when they reported struggling more with the decision, $\beta = -0.15$, 95% CI $[-0.25, -0.04]$, $p = .007$.

Which Virtues Do People Prioritize? When people prioritized one virtue over the other, loyalty, respectfulness, and compassion were prioritized the most, whereas forgiveness, courage, and especially honesty were prioritized the least (see Figure 4, right side). There was no statistically detectable correspondence between which virtues people preferred in the abstract and which virtues people prioritized in real-world decisions ($\phi = .08$, 95% CI $[-.06, .22]$, $p = .27$; $\beta = 0.13$, 95% CI $[-0.01, 0.27]$, $p = .07$).

To further explore discrepancies between abstract preferences and real-life decisions, we conducted a set of non-preregistered analyses comparing the proportion of times each virtue was prioritized at baseline versus in everyday life. McNemar's tests (which account for the paired structure of the data) showed that honesty was prioritized less often in everyday life compared with in the abstract, whereas the reverse was true for patience. However, because some virtues were rarely involved in trade-offs, there was limited statistical power for some of these comparisons (e.g., only 26 observations involved humility).

Figure 4*Which Virtues Do People Prioritize in the Abstract and in Everyday Life?*

Note. Abstract decision (left side) = decision in the baseline preference survey. Specific decision (right side) = decision in an actual trade-off episode in everyday life. To maximize the comparability of the baseline versus actual decisions, percentages for the abstract decision are based on the same virtue pairs that were involved in the trade-offs that each participant completed follow-up questions about. For the *x*-axis, >50 means that this virtue was generally prioritized over the others, whereas <50 means that this virtue was generally deprioritized. This figure only includes participants who resolved a trade-off via prioritization (as opposed to compromise, integration, or avoidance) and showed no misunderstanding ($n = 189$). The virtues are ordered from most to least highly prioritized in everyday life. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

*** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Study 2 demonstrated that virtue trade-offs were perceived more frequently than virtue conflicts in Study 1. These trade-off episodes generally affected both the self and others and were associated with lowered momentary well-being (compared with episodes when no trade-offs were perceived). To resolve a trade-off, participants mostly prioritized one virtue over the other. Occasionally, however, participants were able to find ways to transcend trade-offs by integrating both virtues and, in doing so, experienced the greatest satisfaction with how they had resolved the trade-off. Finally, there was little correspondence between people's baseline virtue preferences and which virtue they prioritized in everyday trade-offs. This discrepancy was especially striking for honesty, which people claimed to prioritize highly in the abstract but were least likely to prioritize in an actual trade-off.

General Discussion

Are virtue trade-offs ubiquitous or rare in everyday life? What do everyday virtue trade-offs look like, and how do people resolve them? To answer these questions, we used DRM across two studies to observe virtue trade-offs as they occur in everyday life. We found that people perceived virtue trade-offs 26.3% of the time when at least two virtues were relevant. Many of these

reflected benevolence–integrity dilemmas, but additional types (e.g., taking action vs. inhibiting impulses) also emerged. People felt less happy when they experienced a virtue trade-off (vs. not) and struggled somewhat with how to resolve them. Trade-offs were largely resolved by prioritizing one of the two virtues, but people sometimes avoided making a choice, compromised, or even transcended the trade-off by showing high levels of both virtues. Finally, people's self-proclaimed virtue preferences generally failed to predict which virtues they actually prioritized when faced with a trade-off in their daily life. We discuss each of these findings and their implications in turn.

Virtue Expressions Are Perceived to Coexist Harmoniously (Most of the Time)

Research on moral decision-making highlights dilemmas and “ubiquitous” trade-offs between competing moral concerns (Bauman et al., 2014; Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Levine & Lupoli, 2022). However, do conflicts such as whistleblower and prosocial lying dilemmas reflect inherent tensions between virtues, or are these exceptions to a generally harmonious coexistence among virtues (Hardin, Scott, & Sun, 2026)? We found that people perceived a conflict 15.8% of the time and a trade-off 26.3% of the time when at least two virtues were relevant. In other words, people perceived virtues to be compatible three quarters of the time when virtues had the potential to come into conflict. Even for the virtue

pair that showed the highest rate of trade-offs (honesty vs. respectfulness), the two virtues were still compatible more than 60% of the time when both virtues were perceived as relevant. Overall, these results paint a nuanced portrait of the (dis)unity of virtues (Badhwar, 1996): Virtue compatibility appears to be the norm, suggesting that virtues are not inherently or inevitably in conflict with one another (as the mutual incompatibility thesis would imply). At the same time, people also experience virtue trade-offs a nonnegligible portion of the time, suggesting that virtues are not entirely unified in people's experiences and that certain virtues may instead be weakly incompatible.

However, these frequencies should not be interpreted as literal point estimates because our approach likely overestimates the prevalence of trade-offs, for several reasons. First, whereas the question about virtue conflicts was embedded among many questions in Study 1, Study 2 asked participants to repeatedly report their well-being, virtue opportunities, and trade-offs for each episode. Second, asking Study 2 participants about their baseline virtue preferences at the start of the survey may have increased the salience of virtue trade-offs, causing participants to be more likely to report a virtue trade-off that day (see Supplemental Material, Section 1.4, for details of a pilot study that found a trend in line with this concern). Third, in both studies, participants recalled episodes at the end of the day rather than reporting on them in the moment. It is therefore possible that participants sometimes only realized that there was a virtue trade-off upon reflection, without experiencing it as such in the moment. Each of these features could have caused participants to report more trade-offs than they experienced. Most importantly, the duration-weighting method assumes that trade-offs lasted the entire length of the episode, which is unlikely to be true in many cases (especially for long episodes).

Assuming that the prevalence of virtue trade-offs was somewhat overestimated, virtues are likely even more compatible than the absolute estimates from the present studies suggest. Importantly, however, we have no reason to believe that the prevalence of trade-offs would be inflated more for some virtue pairs than others. If so, then our findings regarding which virtue pairs are more versus less compatible should be robust across different daily life methods. Supporting this assumption, in a separate project, we found that conclusions about which virtues were more often relevant in everyday life were highly robust across DRM and ESM data collection approaches (Hardin, Zhang, & Sun, 2026). In short, while absolute point estimates are likely inflated, this does not affect interpretations of the relative frequency of trade-off types.

The Content of Everyday Virtue Trade-offs

Past work on virtue trade-offs has focused on a limited set of virtue pairs (honesty vs. compassion, honesty vs. loyalty, loyalty vs. fairness, and courage vs. patience) and has typically only examined one virtue pair at a time (cf. Hardin, Scott, & Sun, 2026). By including 12 virtues in Study 1 and 10 virtues in Study 2, we showed that participants report almost every possible trade-off. This points to additional trade-offs (e.g., courage vs. humility, responsibility vs. compassion, honesty vs. patience) that are ripe for future investigation.

Our comprehensive approach also revealed which trade-offs are more frequent in everyday life. For specific virtue trade-offs, controlling for base rates of virtues' relevance, honesty-respect,

honesty-compassion, and courage-respect trade-offs were particularly prevalent, whereas other virtues seemed largely compatible (e.g., forgiveness-respect, humility-compassion, patience-humility). Overall, honesty and courage were the two virtues that were most often involved in trade-offs (again, controlling for base rates of virtues' relevance), whereas gratitude and wisdom were rarely involved (and were therefore dropped in Study 2). Although potential conflicts involving honesty have received substantial attention, we are aware of only one study that examined a courage-related trade-off (Ratchford, Cazzell, et al., 2024). Future research could investigate why honesty and courage conflict more often with other virtues.

Character education programs have historically centered on cultivating individual virtues (Berkowitz, 2012; Lickona, 1999). However, considering that people encounter virtue trade-offs with nontrivial frequency in everyday life, moral education should also teach people how to navigate such trade-offs. This recommendation aligns with contemporary virtue-education frameworks that foreground practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as an integrative, decision-guiding capacity to help people navigate situations where virtues collide (Cooke & Carr, 2014; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022; Kristjánsson, 2024).

Analyses of broader trade-off themes in the open-ended responses showed that approximately half of the trade-offs arguably reflected varieties of benevolence-integrity trade-offs (e.g., considering others' feelings vs. telling the truth; having empathy for specific people vs. treating people equally; Moore et al., 2019). In addition, we found a highly prevalent trade-off between engaging with someone in a warm/caring manner versus effectively fulfilling responsibilities (40.3%)—many of which were reminiscent of work-family conflicts (Kossek & Lee, 2017). We also found a less common trade-off between taking action versus inhibiting impulses (6.67%; Ratchford, Cazzell, et al., 2024). These open-ended responses (available on the Open Science Framework) also provide a rich repository of everyday virtue trade-offs that could be used to develop more realistic stimuli for future vignette-based studies or scenario-based activities for improving practical wisdom in moral education (Kristjánsson, 2024).

Well-Being Implications of Everyday Virtue Trade-offs

Compared with the high-stakes moral dilemmas featured in the traditional moral judgment and decision-making literature, everyday virtue trade-offs reflect more quotidian aspects of moral decision-making. However, this does not mean that everyday virtue trade-offs are trivial or inconsequential. Indeed, people (a) felt less happy when they experienced a virtue trade-off (vs. not), (b) struggled moderately with knowing how best to resolve them, and (c) often regretted how they resolved them (as we expand on below). Our findings are consistent with the well-established connection between goal conflict and psychological distress (Gray et al., 2017) and suggest that people experience virtue trade-offs as genuine goal conflicts. In addition, consistent with work showing that integrative strategies are associated with better well-being outcomes (van Dierendonck et al., 2009), we find that both the occurrence of virtue trade-offs and how people navigate them have implications for well-being. This finding contributes to a small but growing literature on the links between everyday moral experiences and well-being (Hofmann et al., 2014, 2018; Taher et al., 2025; Waytz & Hofmann, 2020).

How People Resolve Virtue Trade-offs

Highly controlled moral decision-making paradigms often limit people's options for resolving dilemmas to one strategy: prioritization. By contrast, we examined a wider range of resolution strategies (Levine et al., 2020). Levine et al. (2018) showed that people rarely chose to avoid a difficult conversation (<15% of decisions in a behavioral paradigm; Studies 5–6). Likewise, we found that people rarely avoided making a decision (3.3%) when faced with an everyday virtue trade-off. Instead, prioritization was by far the most common strategy (57% of decisions), followed by compromise (27%) and integration (12%). People were most satisfied with their decision when they transcended the trade-off by integrating both virtues and were least satisfied with avoidance.

The rarity of integration compared with prioritization is consistent with past work, which suggests that people tend to default to “conventional” solutions that select one side of a moral dilemma at the expense of the other (Zhang et al., 2018). What is more surprising, considering that integration is ostensibly an ideal strategy that maximizes decision satisfaction, is that only 26% of participants said they would attempt to integrate both virtues if they were in the situation again. This might be because some people strongly favor one virtue over another (so they chose prioritization) or because integrative solutions are less accessible (i.e., if people were unable to come up with an integrative solution in the first place, they may continue to be unable to imagine how both virtues could be satisfied if they were in the situation again). Rates of integration varied by virtue pair (5%–28%; see Supplemental Table S8), which suggests that it may be more feasible to integrate some virtues than others. Future studies should capture both decision-makers' and third-party observers' perceptions of the desirability and possibility of integration in each trade-off situation, investigate when integration is more feasible, and collect open-ended behavioral descriptions to better understand what integrative and other resolution strategies look like in practice. Such insights could further inform the debate about virtue (dis)unity and guide the development of interventions to help people effectively integrate competing virtues.

Mismatch Between Abstract and Actual Decisions

When people prioritize one virtue over the other, which virtues do they tend to prioritize? Consistent with past work suggesting that attitudes, intentions, and hypothetical choices may diverge from actual decisions (Bravo & Farjam, 2022; FeldmanHall et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2019; Sheeran & Webb, 2016; Vlaev, 2012), we found a general mismatch between baseline virtue preferences and actual decisions. This illustrates the importance of capturing real-world decisions rather than relying only on hypothetical decision-making paradigms.

We found especially strong discrepancies for patience and honesty. People were far more likely to prioritize patience in actual decisions (54%) than in the abstract (24%) and prioritized honesty the least in actual decisions (22%) despite prioritizing it the most in the abstract (63%). One possible explanation for this disconnect is that people have a stronger preference for inaction for more concrete moral decisions compared with more abstract moral judgments (N. L. Ng & Gawronski, 2025). This might explain why people tend to prioritize patience (which often involves passivity and restraint) and deprioritize honesty (which often involves overcoming hesitancy to tell a hard truth) in everyday dilemmas.

Our finding that people tend to deprioritize honesty in actual (vs. abstract) decisions also supports Moore et al.'s (2019) prediction that people often intend to prioritize integrity when reasoning in the abstract but fail to do so when they make actual decisions. They argue that when decisions are made in real, emotionally involved contexts (as opposed to affect-poor planning contexts), people are more likely to prioritize benevolence than integrity because benevolence is more strongly motivated by a person's affective response to a person in need.

Finally, according to the experience-outcome model of honest conversation, being honest can involve immediate, concrete, and visceral costs (including harm) that precede abstract, longer term benefits (Levine et al., 2025). While this theory focuses on explaining why people procrastinate on difficult conversations, anticipated immediate harm could help explain why people fail to prioritize honesty more generally when faced with a virtue trade-off in daily life. Supporting this idea, non-preregistered analyses showed that when asked directly about the potential harm of prioritizing each virtue involved in a given trade-off, 69% of Study 2 participants who experienced an honesty-related trade-off anticipated that prioritizing honesty would cause harm, whereas only 32% anticipated that deprioritizing honesty would cause harm. In fact, out of 10 virtues, people anticipated the greatest harm if they prioritized honesty (see Supplemental Figure S7).

Limitations and Future Directions

We extensively workshoped the definition of a virtue trade-off, tested two different prompts, provided extensive training for the definitions of virtues and trade-offs at the beginning of the survey, and required that participants pass a comprehension check that assessed their understanding of virtue trade-offs. Despite these efforts, 45.3% of the open-ended responses reflected a misunderstanding in Study 2. In retrospect, the new wording (“showing high levels of one behavior *would make it difficult* to show high levels of the other behavior”) appeared to facilitate a new “ego depletion” misunderstanding of trade-offs. Future studies should further refine the definition and explanation of a virtue trade-off to reduce rates of misunderstanding.

Methodologically, we used the DRM rather than ESM to investigate virtue trade-offs in everyday life. As mentioned, the duration-weighting method used to estimate the total duration of virtue trade-offs from DRM reports likely overestimates the absolute prevalence of virtue trade-offs relative to using ESM. In addition, past work suggests that DRM produces stronger estimates of situational influences on positive affect compared with ESM, likely because retrospective judgments incorporate beliefs about what those situations are supposed to feel like (Lucas et al., 2021). Thus, if people tend to believe that virtue trade-offs are unpleasant, our use of DRM may have overestimated the strength of the negative association between perceived virtue trade-offs and momentary well-being.

Additionally, while we comprehensively explored everyday trade-offs among a large set of moral virtues, we did not investigate the entire landscape of everyday moral dilemmas. Many moral dilemmas in everyday life may involve trade-offs not between two virtues but between two affected parties for the same virtue. For example, people may face dilemmas about who to be loyal (e.g., whether to take your mother's or romantic partner's side in an argument) or compassionate to (e.g., whether to donate to a global

poverty charity vs. a close friend's GoFundMe). Future studies should compare the prevalence and experience of various kinds of moral dilemmas in everyday life.

Finally, although our participants were representative of the United States on key demographic features, the extent to which these findings generalize to other cultural contexts remains unclear. Cultural settings may shape opportunities for virtue expression (Hardin, Zhang, & Sun, 2026) and, in turn, the frequency and types of trade-offs people encounter in daily life. Future research should therefore examine generalizability to other cultural contexts.

Conclusion

Across two studies, we comprehensively investigated the relative prevalence and experience of everyday virtue trade-offs. We uncovered a greater variety of trade-offs than have been explored in the moral decision-making literature to date. Overall, however, we found that people typically perceived virtues to be compatible rather than in conflict. People felt less happy when they experienced a virtue trade-off, but how they resolved them also mattered for well-being. People most often prioritized one virtue over the other, but some were able to make compromises or even transcend the trade-off by integrating both virtues. Finally, people's abstract virtue preferences did not significantly predict which virtues they prioritized in everyday decisions. Together, these findings shed light on the experience of everyday moral dilemmas and underscore the importance of studying moral decision-making in everyday contexts.

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Appendix

Definitions for Virtues and Key Terms in Studies 1 and 2

Term	Definition
Compassion	A compassionate person feels sympathy for others and is helpful and unselfish.
Honesty	An honest person consistently tells the truth and refuses to cheat or steal in order to get ahead.
Respect	A respectful person is careful not to cause inconvenience or offense to others.
Fairness	A fair person is impartial and unprejudiced in how they treat others.
Responsibility	A responsible person is committed to meeting their duties and can be relied on by others.
Loyalty	A loyal person shows firm and consistent support to a person or institution and does not shift their allegiances easily.
Courage	A courageous person acts on their convictions in the face of fear.
Humility	A humble person has a modest estimation of their abilities and their own self-importance.
Gratitude	A grateful person feels and expresses a deep sense of thankfulness in life and for others (Study 1 only).
Patience	A patient person waits calmly in the face of frustration, adversity, or suffering.
Wisdom	A wise person exercises sound judgment based on knowledge, experience, and consideration of all relevant factors.
Forgiveness	A forgiving person is understanding and grants second chances when they are wronged or disappointed by others.
Morality	A moral person does the right thing, leads an ethical lifestyle, and acts for the benefit of others and the greater good.
High level	To show a high level of a behavior is to exemplify the given behavior. For example, showing a high level of compassion means that you felt sympathy and were helpful and unselfish with others.

Note. Gratitude and wisdom were only included in Study 1. Morality and high level were only included in Study 2. All other terms were included in both studies.

Received October 6, 2025
Revision received April 16, 2026
Accepted April 28, 2026 ■