
Can Virtue Be Taught?

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Plato's *Meno* starts with a barrage of outrageous questions put to Socrates by the brash and impatient young man for whom the dialogue is named: "Can you tell me, Socrates, is human excellence (*areté*) something teachable? Or, if not teachable, is it something to be acquired by training? Or, if it cannot be acquired either by training or by teaching, does it accrue to me at birth or in some other way?" As we might predict, Socrates tosses the questions back to Meno instead of trying to answer any of them. Then, in his own meandering way, Socrates follows Meno to the rather tentative conclusion that if we could find teachers of "human excellence," or virtue, we might be able to teach it, but, as we cannot find teachers, virtue cannot be taught.

All of this seems to have been lost on those who insist these days that our educational institutions teach virtue—whether or not we can find anyone capable of teaching it. In this regard, the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, formerly president of the University of Notre Dame, made an uncharacteristically foolish comment during the Watergate scandal some years ago. Noting that the men who committed the Watergate break-in were lawyers and therefore (presumably) educated men, he suggested that this incident exposed the basic failure of our educational system. That is to say, our educational systems have failed because they did not succeed in teaching these particular burglars to be virtuous. The irony of this comment coming from a man of the cloth should have been obvious to all, but I shall pass it over to note some other oddities about the remark and the subsequent sense of outrage against institutions of education in

general and institutions of higher education in particular, resulting from their failure to teach virtue.

To begin with, Father Hesburgh assumes that there is an inherent connection between schooling and education, which is questionable. On the face of it, a self-taught man like Eric Hoffer is arguably better educated than most of the Ph.D.'s stalking the halls of academe. Sad to say, there seems to be no correlation whatever between the amount of time one spends in school and the level of education one has in the end. So much depends on the school and what a person does while he or she is there. But, more importantly, the suggestion that schools should have anything whatever to do with virtue is a claim that needs to be argued, especially in light of Socrates' response to Meno.

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As in the case of Plato's dialogue, we must begin with an examination of just what virtue is. Unlike Meno, we are fortunate to have Aristotle to assist us, and he has told us that "human excellence" is fundamentally a matter of character. Once character has been formed, we can begin to discuss what he calls "intellectual virtue," which is peculiar to humans but impossible without sound character. This latter quality is called "moral virtue" by Aristotle, and it is primarily a matter of conditioning—what Aristotle calls "habit" or "disposition" (*éthos*). Moral virtue is learned by repetition; intellectual virtue can be taught and is the appropriate concern of the schools. Moral virtue is acquired, if it is acquired at all, at a very early age. And while it is not clear just how "early" this age is, we might recall Plato's abortive attempts to educate Dion's son in Syracuse. These repeated attempts failed because the young man was already vain, undisciplined and self-absorbed by the time Plato started to work with him. The last attempt nearly cost Plato his life and, later at the Academy, the story probably made a powerful impression on Plato's pupil Aristotle. In addition, Aristotle had a number of other examples of bright and promising young men gone awry—notably Alcibiades, for whom not even the friendship of Socrates could be a palliative.

We now know, from the findings of psychologists, that what Aristotle called "moral virtue," or "character," is formed quite early. Freud thought it was formed by the time a person is five years of age. This would suggest that by the time young people start their formal schooling, or very soon thereafter, their character is already essentially formed. What does this mean? Specifically, what impli-

cations does it have as far as the role of education and its relationship to building sound character are concerned? To be sure, there is a popular assumption, reflected in Father Hesburgh's comment, that educated people ought to be good people. But is there any reason to assume any connection whatever between sound character and sound education? More to the point, is there any good reason to require that college students take certain kinds of courses—ethics, for example—on the grounds that those courses will help to make those students better people? Can we make sense out of the claim that virtue is teachable and that our colleges should be producing people who are better *people* for having spent roughly four years there? We should probably suspect from some of Socrates' hints that much of our thinking is wrong-headed—not all of it, but much of it. To clarify things a bit, let us recall some of the things Aristotle said later on the same subject.

The bulk of the second book of *The Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle deals with the doctrine of "the mean" and contains a careful analysis of the process of deliberation. These topics have received considerable attention over the years, with good reason, but there are several chapters at the beginning of the second book that are of considerable interest as well. It is in those chapters that Aristotle spells out his idea of the importance of early habit formation: the basis of moral virtue, or character. Sound moral character is formed "right from early youth," as Plato says, and arises out of the disposition to "find pleasure or pain in the right things." In modern dress, the doctrine seems entirely plausible. If a parent wants his or her child to be considerate, honest and trustworthy, let us say, then that parent will encourage the child to practice activities generally recognized as considerate, honest, and trustworthy and make sure the child takes pleasure in those activities—and not in their opposites. In contemporary terms, then, Aristotle seems to be talking about positive and negative reinforcement. We reward "right actions" so the child will take pleasure in those actions, and we punish wrong actions so the child will not find them pleasurable. What is important, however, is not the label we place on this sort of training. What is important is the insight that if we want children to become considerate, honest, and trustworthy, we will see to it that they take pleasure in those actions. The result will be that those kinds of actions become a matter of habit or disposition. As the child grows

Character formed "right from early youth."

older, he or she will incline toward right actions and away from wrong actions. This is true of all virtuous actions: repetition and reward will instill the disposition to be virtuous. Aristotle is here recognizing the important psychological fact that unless a person *wants* to be a good person—that is, unless he or she takes pleasure in right actions—he or she will not be one. Virtue, at this level, has more to do with will than it does with intellect.

Sound reasoning rooted in right willing.

The fact that Aristotle's emphasis on practical reasoning has received the lion's share of attention over the years should not blind us to this fundamental insight that forms one of the cornerstones of his ethical system. Without sound moral character, no amount of reasoning will be effective. Unless a person finds honesty, reliability, and consideration of others to be pleasurable, no syllogism will ever cause that person to act in an honest, reliable, or considerate manner. For Aristotle, deliberation has to do with means, not ends. If one wants to be healthy, one will exercise. A practical syllogism will lead straight to this conclusion. But unless one wants to be healthy (because he realizes that this, in turn, will help make him happy), one will never do a single push-up or jog a step. Similarly, unless one is disposed to be kind and considerate to others, he will never select the appropriate means to other-directed actions. Everything depends upon disposition or character: the kind of person one is is determined by whether one takes "pleasure in the right things."

In the end, then, virtuous actions require sound moral character, and, as one grows in experience, they also require deliberation and choice. At this stage, Aristotle shifts focus to discuss "intellectual virtue" (*nous*), which is that virtue which is peculiar to humans and which would appear to be a major part of the education the young person receives as he or she matures. Though it may be difficult in a particular case to tell precisely where moral virtue leaves off and intellectual virtue begins, the latter has to do with the development of the thought process—specifically, the development of reason and "practical wisdom." It has to do with choice and the "mean relative to us."

Moral and intellectual virtue not discrete.

We must guard against the mistake of supposing that Aristotle, or anyone else who adopts his scheme, regards moral and intellectual virtue as discrete entities—compartments of the human psyche, as it were, like boxes marked "early" and "late." It is more likely, and more in keeping with common sense and modern behavioral psychology, that the transition from moral to intellectual virtue is

developmental, that is to say, a more disciplined intelligence and lively imagination bring about heightened sensibility and help us to realize hidden possibilities of moral character. Though the precise relationship between the two types of virtue seems shrouded in mystery, what we can say with some assurance is that as young people begin to become self-directed they also usually become more emotionally mature and develop greater moral refinement. This is, assuredly, one of the major benefits of a “humanistic” education: confrontation with some of the best works of the human imagination makes each of us a more complete and “better” person in the sense that we become more aware than we were of our common human nature and the obligations that accompany membership in the human community. Learning can, and does, bring about important changes in our disposition to make certain choices. But these changes are impossible to forecast and non-programmable. Moral virtue, therefore, could never provide a focus for educational theory. The aim of the latter is, and must remain, the attainment of intellectual virtue—or, as Robert Hutchins would have it, making young people “as intelligent as possible.” Moral virtue is, for all intents and purposes, unteachable after one leaves early childhood.

This raises an important question in light of the social pressure that currently stresses the attempt to “teach values” and “morality” in institutions of education—including institutions of higher education. What point can there be in, say, requiring undergraduate business majors to take a course in business ethics or medical students to take a seminar in professional ethics? If character is virtually formed and these young people are already disposed to right or wrong actions, what point is there in trying to “teach values”? The answer seems quite clear: there is little point whatever if our goal is to *reform* character, whereas these subjects can be extremely important ways to *refine* character. Because imagination, intelligence and will are not discrete entities, the development of intellectual skills clearly also involves the refinement of sensibilities and the heightening of imagination as the student’s world becomes larger. But if change is to occur, the avenue through which it will occur late in life is human reason. “Intellectual virtue” is the only plausible objective in formal education. Indeed, it is what the liberal arts, properly understood, have always attempted to help develop.

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By reading literature the young person lives vicariously and

grows in human sensibility; by studying history, the horizons of that person's experience are extended and his or her sympathies are deepened; by studying philosophy the student discovers seminal ideas, analytical skills are sharpened and the student learns the difference between reasonable and unreasonable claims. The process of education—to the extent that it sharpens intellectual skills, imagination, memory, analysis, and synthesis—can make us better thinkers. To the extent that it deepens our sensibilities, it can take us out of ourselves and increase our awareness of the world of which we are a part. But we cannot expect education suddenly to transform a callous and uncaring person into an Albert Schweitzer or a Mother Teresa.

In a word, a course in business ethics will not make an undergraduate business major an honest employee when she goes to work after graduation. But it will sharpen her analytical skills and make her aware of the subtleties of rationalization and wary of sophistry. If it is well taught, it will help that student to appreciate careful argumentation and reasoned judgment and make her suspicious of their opposites. It will not, it cannot, make that person a good person. It will not cause her to take pleasure in being honest or courageous, even though it may help her to see which actions are likely to lead to those ends if she finds them pleasurable. By no means are such courses a waste of time; but we delude ourselves if we think they will make our students good people if they are not *disposed* to be good people long before they enroll in our classes. As Aristotle has shown, what we normally mean by "goodness" has more to do with the sorts of things we take pleasure in than it does with the choices we make to get us to pleasurable ends.

This is not all that can be said on this subject, of course. The student's notion of what is pleasurable can and frequently does change with age. In more mature years the student will almost certainly discover new arenas within which great treasures are stored and future pleasure might be taken. As I have noted, the movement from moral to intellectual virtue is developmental—intellect, will, and imagination are not discrete entities. Many pleasures previously unknown to that student can be discovered even in the period we call "higher" education, and he or she may well discover a new range of exciting possibilities and continue to grow and experience new delights. This is one of the great benefits of education. There are pleasures literally too numerous to mention within the worlds of

literature, the fine arts, history, mathematics, science, and philosophy. We cannot say with any assurance, however, that in particular cases these pleasures will be ones that dispose the person to perform virtuous actions. For the most part, the latter pleasures are molded into our character long before we enroll in our first college class, engage in dialogue with fellow students, visit museums and galleries, or sit in auditoriums. To be sure, change in a person's disposition can occur late in life, and sometimes this change is profound. But, as a rule, one is not a better person because she now takes pleasure in the writings of James Joyce or the symphonies of Brahms, whereas yesterday she did not. One is better off, perhaps, and more fully developed (certainly more interesting) as a person, but not a bit more honest, trustworthy, or caring. We must be clear about this, because education's supposed failure to make students better people usually results from the failure to distinguish between "reforming" and "refining" young people. The latter is a legitimate goal of education, the former is not.

What *can happen* as a result of humanistic studies is that we become more fully aware of the consequences of our actions, the range of our influence, and the boundaries of our world. The kinds of things we find pleasurable can change, and this can result in a reorientation of the personality. The "humanizing effect" of studies in the disciplines that make up the humanities does, indeed, enrich and elevate our lives. It can make a person aware that the honesty he owes to another he owes to everyone, because obligations are owed to all, not only to some. The humanities do invariably enlarge one's world: they deepen sensibilities and expand horizons so that one can see more clearly and vividly what makes up human life and how much alike we all are. This will make a person more sensitive and considerate if he or she is already disposed to care about others. If, however, the disposition is not already present, it is doubtful that any profound change can occur. It certainly is not to be expected.

Obligation to another is obligation to all.

There are a great many lessons to be learned by thinking through Aristotle's argument and adopting his distinction between "moral" and "intellectual" virtue. Some of these lessons have important repercussions for the philosophy of education and for those who would incorporate the teaching of values into our schools. We can reinforce but we cannot "teach" moral values. More to the point, the effort to do so detracts from what the schools can do if they focus

their energy upon the central purpose of putting young people in possession of their own minds. Autonomous persons are able to make their own decisions about the means most appropriate to desired ends. That is, education—and especially higher education—ought properly to focus on enabling young people to make reasonable, informed choices. But we must be aware that the correctness of the ends toward which those choices are directed is a matter of character, which is formed, for the most part, “in early youth.”

*State cannot
play roles of
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Church.*

For Aristotle the problem of raising the young was easier than it is for us, because the *pólis* played multiple roles in educating young people. That is why Socrates was not worried about leaving his sons in the care of his city after he died. But for us it is a mistake to expect the state or any social institution other than the family and the Church to play the role that has always properly belonged to the latter entities. This is especially so given the fact that, when compared with the Athenian City-State, the modern Nation State totters on the brink of moral bankruptcy.

If people like Haldeman and Erlichman made the wrong choices (and assuredly they did), it is because they found pleasure in the wrong ends. This is not the fault of the educational institutions in which these men spent time along the way to Watergate. Assuredly, by the time they entered those institutions the character of the two men was already formed.