

Can Virtue be Measured?

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Can virtue be measured? The answer to this question is “yes, but.”

What is particularly interesting about the question is the response that it receives from classroom practitioners. The teachers we consulted in the preparation of this paper were all members of the “Character Action Group” at EAGLE College Prep South Mountain. All are personally committed to character education, and pledged to further it in their school. Yet all separately and unanimously expressed skepticism about the possibility of measuring virtue, even as they affirm that it is an achievable goal. As one of our colleagues wrote, we measure virtue “all the time on some cursory level when we interact with people.” Yet, “I am not sure how we fully measure these virtues – even in the most anecdotal sense.”

From a historical perspective, this is an odd attitude. Virtue has, for the entire history of the concept, been something that people who praised it believed they could measure. If we are to achieve the possibility of measuring virtue again, we must understand how that measurement was once conceived.

For the Greeks, the word that expressed the concept of virtue was *arête*, which simply meant excellence. Homer in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* gave the ultimate expression to this cultural ideal. Achilles, as he ravaged the warriors of Troy, was expressing *arête*. So was Odysseus as he plotted to take Troy by means of a wooden horse, or planned to kill the suitors who clung about his presumably widowed wife. Olympic champions were the quintessential achievers and expressions of *arête*.

Plato, and probably Socrates before him, upset this concept by moralizing it. Achilles, while a very good killer, is not a particularly likable or noble character. When Socrates in his *Apology* suggests that the best judicial punishment for him is to be given free meals for life in the Prytaneion, along with the Olympic medalists and members of the Athenian executive body, he is not simply (and unwisely) thumbing his nose at his jury. He was suggesting that his life-long pursuit of the good was true *arête*, not the feats of Achilles or those of winners of the Olympiad, and should be rewarded accordingly. But note that Socrates, and Plato, believed that *arête* was something that could be observed, rewarded, praised, and emulated. In this they still agreed with Homer.

So did the Romans, who gave us the actual word virtue. *Virtus* means manliness, and to possess manliness meant that one could act for the benefit of the republic. Virtue was expressed through one’s visible deeds, preferably through one’s service to the state, but also in other acts that benefited the commonweal. The historian Sallust, in the preface to his *Catiline’s Virtues*, wrote:

whatever men accomplish – e.g. in farming sailing building – is indebted to VIRTUE. but many mortals, servile to stomach & sleep, unlearned & uncultured, shuffle through life like tourists. whose bodies are for pleasure, their soul a burden. their lives & deaths weigh equally little on me, since silence surrounds each (Levine).

Not surprisingly, the founding generation of America, with its rich appreciation for classical tradition and

precedent, was equally confident in its own ability to measure virtue. However, their neoclassicism was intermingled with the practices of 16th and 17th century Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. When George Washington in his teens copied out rules concerning behavior, he was but the most recent student to learn manners while practicing his penmanship from a volume originally written by a French Jesuit. Benjamin Franklin's systematic inventory of his virtues was as much a part of his Puritan heritage of soul-examination as from his Enlightened, scientific, and pragmatic proclivities. And in the early years of the American Republic, numerous "Democratic societies" founded by men for their mutual intellectual and moral improvement proved essential to the political and cultural conflicts of the 1790s, and to the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1800.

Why then, has the idea of the impossibility of measuring virtue taken such a powerful hold upon so many minds?

It could be that modernism, having originally accepted the measurement of virtue, while bringing its own methods to bear upon that task, has gradually rejected the possibility of so doing. It might be that we regard them as "real but intangible characteristics, or more radically of doubting that there are such things at all" (Haldane).

Or it could be that this is a legacy of Nietzsche. We have moved from the "Science of Virtue" to speaking of the "Art of Virtue", even by those committed to the practice of virtue like the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch. Yet, despite the reticence to speak of measuring virtue, we do so informally all the time. We assess it in our daily lives, or, if not in our own, the lives of others. "...We worry about whether we are good people, we look for ways to better ourselves, and we try to raise our children to be honest, trustworthy, and helpful, to have, in a word, good characters" (Snow).

Perhaps the reticence we have found in EAGLE staff is in part because of a self-selection effect. Casual observation certainly suggests that those most interested in virtues and their cultivation are often unable to articulate methods for measuring and quantifying those virtues. And teachers, perhaps particularly in charter schools, are so accustomed to various tests and measurements in all parts of their academic curriculum that they may

be hesitant to extend those measurements to the one part of the curriculum that lacks them.

Yet the pressures to measure virtue in charter schools, or any other schools, are not trivial. To receive funding from any federal agency or philanthropic organization requires measurement. Parents expect that when they send their children to a school, particularly one that they have chosen, their children will gain certain capacities. And most fundamentally, it is important to know whether or not a thing exists. It would be more than a little sad if virtue were something that was highly prized, yet dismissed as a concept that cannot be taught or measured.

So, it would seem that virtue must and should be measured. At the same time, we must reject the pretense maintained by some measurers that virtue can be understood purely by the observation of behavior. It must first be interpreted through a conception of good and bad. As John Haldane observes:

Here someone might say that one doesn't have to share that conception, it could simply be a matter of looking at conventional norms and standards. But then one could not claim to draw any conclusions about virtue as such and about the capacity of education to induce or develop it (Haldane).

But to accept that presupposition requires us to recognize that the measurement of virtue is not simply quantitative but also unavoidably qualitative (Haldane).

Moreover, while we engage in qualitative measurement, we must be careful not to break the very thing we're attempting to understand. The "teaching to the test" approach so feared in academics also applies to character education, and its effect upon character might be far worse than upon the intellect. (Imagine an entire school habituated to respond as teachers or administrators carry out virtue testing) (Siegel). Given the qualitative nature of virtue, its measurement will always be difficult and therefore expensive – increasing the pressure to teach to the test (Haldane).

Finally, part of the effect of technology upon modern life has been to enhance short-term vision at the expense of a broader perspective. The feeling of mastery

that technology gives its users applies as much to the survey as it does to the automobile, the airplane, or the smartphone. It leads the user to find satisfaction in the immediate. This perspective is completely at variance with the goals of character education.

Therefore, we believe that while we should measure virtue, we must do so with the greatest possible care and circumspection. A way that might enable us to do that would be to allow test “subjects” to tell their own stories, rather than employing questionnaires or “closed-ended” methodologies (Delva). This will be difficult to do, will take time, and as a result will be more expensive than more quantitative methodologies. Such an approach is incongruent with preferences for statistical precision. But we would suggest that it does less harm and goes with the grain of character development. In developing our character, after all, we come to understand the difference between our story as we want it to be and as it actually is. To relate those stories, and hopefully the new story that results from the ensuing struggles, would itself be part of character development.

Delva, Allen-Meares & Momper, 2010, p. 31

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