

What Do We Mean by Virtue?

Robert Watts Thornburg



THIS UNIVERSITY CHAPLAIN TAKES A PRAGMATIC APPROACH to the question, “Can virtue be taught in the university?,” which may seem cynical at first glance. There are significant difficulties in answering the question, including the lack of an adequate definition of terms, the overwhelming influence of Christian and western approaches to the question, the “unvirtue” experienced by many learners and the innate resistance of students to hearing the word “virtue.” Constructive solutions include avoiding theoretical propositional approaches, fostering moral seriousness, making discussion immediate and relevant to learners and, finally, creating communities in which to pursue the search. Not “Virtue” but “virtues” are possible to teach and are already evident in student populations.

VIRTUE: what a sweet romantic word! The very notion of putting the words “virtue” and “university” in the same sentence strikes many folks I know as an oxymoron. When, as a University Chaplain, I mention the word “virtue” to students or staff, they give me the quiet benign smile that says: “That’s the kind of thing you people (translate: clergy) always want us to talk about.” Therein lies the problem, and my own difficulty in discussing the question of teaching virtue in any university setting. The word itself carries much baggage, a great variety of meanings springing from

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individual personal histories, leading inevitably to the first question: “What do you mean by virtue?”

Certainly, we must start the discussion with the philosophical history of the concept in Plato and Aristotle, even delve into Saints Augustine and Thomas, who had much to say on the subject. But any discussion of virtue, or any thought of teaching it, is burdened by a host of immediate contemporary meanings that have already tilted the discussion in a way that makes teaching, learning, or even talking about virtue nearly impossible without clearing away the underbrush.

Let me share my own biases in the discussion. While I teach some in the university, my primary responsibility is as the University Chaplain. I am a Protestant Christian, with solid grounding in my own denominational tradition, and an equally strong commitment to the values of a religious pluralism that learns and respects the traditions and values of other Christian and Jewish traditions, and the wonderful variety of other religious traditions which thrive and flourish on campus. I know that each of our religious organizations is committed to teaching virtue, as they define and understand it. But, it is probably not a surprise that these groups find great difficulty in coming to any clear consensus on the meaning of virtue in modern life, and even greater difficulty in agreeing on what to teach and how to teach it.

We must start by trying to define what is meant by virtue. Clearly, much of the discussion emanates from the dialogues of Plato, and there are pages and pages of contemporary “dialogue” that seem intended mostly to prove the near impossibility of any agreement on what virtue is, then or now. A quick summary reminds us that Plato distinguishes four virtues: wisdom, temperance, courage and justice; holiness was thrown in occasionally and the count goes to five virtues. Some unnamed “fathers of the church” added three theological virtues—faith, hope, and love or charity—taken from one of St. Paul’s lists (I Cor 13). That might make seven, although it seems probable that the number seven was attached to virtues in order to balance the seven deadly sins, about which we know a great deal more, and on which there is a much higher level of agreement.

There are many places where the university does, in fact, inculcate virtue in students. Often it is unintentional, seldom is it a part of the formal curriculum, and not always is it taught by those teachers called “professors.” For, when the question of how to teach virtue is put in parallel examination with other subjects taught in the university, it seems very clear that, while it is possible to teach objective facts (as in science or

math), or to teach clear logical propositions, virtue, in the most important and meaningful sense, is not reducible to propositions to be thus taught and learned without reference to behavioral responses and experiences.

I will not start by addressing the question of context in a formal classroom setting for the teaching of virtue. Any such project is probably doomed before it begins, not only because it is impossible to reach a common definition of virtue, but because the learners I know would resist with the greatest determination any such attempt at what seems to be moral, social, and cultural indoctrination. But, from my biased perspective, I will first raise questions as to who teaches virtue and, more important, how do students learn it? Most specifically, by what standards, measures and determinants could we decide whether such teaching and learning was effective or not?

Even after granting hours of discussion required to translate wisdom, temperance, courage and justice from their pre-common-era meaning to our modern language and situation, a question arises: would these four categories be taught as virtues today? If we add to them holiness, faith, hope and love, might it not seem like a course in early Christianity—scarcely the education in virtue to be introduced in the highly secularized setting of the modern university?

A search for a commonly recognized and understood definition of the concept of “virtue” is complicated by the historical developments in which Christian theology took the four cardinal virtues of Plato, added the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, and then systematically “Christianized” the whole mix as the basis for the Christian ethical system. Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas were chief among those who have given the Christian Church a very solid basis on which to build moral theory and practice. So successful were their efforts, that I doubt it is possible to think of virtue in our time without a considerable residue from their monumental intellectual constructs. As a Christian and a pastor, I celebrate their achievements as well as the moral and social developments that have followed their efforts, but unless we plan to teach virtue specifically as a Christian and Western phenomenon, it will probably not be possible to remove Augustine’s and Thomas’ impact from nearly every common understanding of the concept of virtue in our own society.

Therefore, we must go to a much more basic human level if we are to accomplish what we must presume to be the intention of those who framed this question for our time and our academic situation. Are we able to come to agreement that the contemporary question is whether virtue

can be taught—inclusive of concern for our values, moral growth and character—in this socially and religiously pluralistic society? If my discussion can be allowed the latitude of expanding the original question in these directions, I believe we can find ways of teaching virtue in any particular campus setting.

But first, we have a significant problem. At the risk of sounding a bit like Dr. Seuss, I would like to suggest that perhaps students learn “unvirtues” from the example of some of their elders and the impact of the culture. Whatever traits of character and personal integrity we include in our own list of “virtues,” the opposite traits are not simply “vices” but the negative influence of the policies, actions and attitudes of those to whom students look for examples of moral courage, justice, wisdom, temperance, and even holiness. The total impact of what many students see as hypocrisy among faculty, administrators, and public figures in areas of ethical behavior and personal relationships promotes a level of cynicism that far outweighs any instruction in virtue.

Sadly, graphic examples and their tragic consequences are easy to find. For example, where is the moral courage to speak forcefully and clearly against anti-Semitic language or symbols? When incidents of racial, religious, or ethnic intolerance are ignored, moral courage may be taught in theory without any significant learning on the part of students. If there is only a token response to the need for employment of minority persons in any work-place, the concept of justice is likely to take a beating in the moral lives of students, no matter what theory is being proclaimed. As students kill themselves in waves of binge drinking without swift and immediate official response, any notion of temperance is lost. Both the ancient authors in classical Greece and the witnesses of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures regard wisdom as vital to the moral life in general and to any virtue in particular. But the highly specialized and increasingly compartmentalized learning that students see in their own majors—and throughout the entire university—offers neither the depth nor the breadth to convey that classical integrative wisdom, which directs and guides all the other virtues. In all of these cases I have consciously used the classic cardinal virtues as a most elemental hermeneutic for understanding their applicability in the modern age. However, I am equally convinced that the same fate would befall any of the more contemporary renderings of virtue. If I had to draw up my own list of four critical virtues to emphasize today, they would be honesty, integrity, civility, and good will.

In my experience with students, the negative impact of “unvirtue” is sufficient to make any positive or normative teaching less potent, for the students have already seen and known what they believe to be the real values regardless of what is proclaimed. It is scarcely necessary to whip up passions against the culture of violence and meaninglessness found on most television and internet offerings. Suffice it to say that when students who watch afternoon soap-operas in the school’s dining hall are least adversely affected, it is clear that the impact of the surrounding culture is certainly not conducive, and probably most antithetical, to any learning of virtue by whatever definition or listing we give the concept.

In nearly all the universities I know, there is an attempt to uphold standards of behavior by the restrictions and regulations put on students with regard to their conduct. My most cynical friends observe that the number and strictness of university statutes against excessive use of “substances” has come only in the wake of tragic deaths of students from a drug overdose or abuse of alcohol. The implication is that the only virtue to be found is that of prudence, evidenced by the fact that student enrollment drops seriously when parents believe that there is no level of control put on students.

Since the demise of nearly every instance of what was once called “*in loco parentis*,” university policy seeks to teach a kind of virtue by coercion. This amounts to more teaching of “unvirtue.” For example, the university’s attempt to control cohabitation in residence halls is openly scorned and ridiculed by the students for whom it was originally intended as a protection. Indeed, there are few places where the dictum—all attempts to regulate student behavior by laws only give greater opportunity to creative folks to get around the new regulations—makes the initial reason for the regulation more problematic. Complicating this is the fact that there are sometimes alleged differences in the application of sanctions for similar offenses, giving the impression of favoritism. Certainly, such inconsistencies systematically decrease the possibility for teaching either temperance or wisdom.

Toward Some Constructive Solutions

Perhaps it is too easy to enter into the old sophists’ game and simply play with the words and ideas that so easily lend themselves to misunderstanding and wrong interpretation. I believe that there are few if any serious faculty,

staff or administrators who do not care about the personal and moral lives of the students and, in spite of difficulties involved, believe that adults on campus do have a role to play in this broader question of the education of the whole student. It seems equally clear that after the tempestuous times of the late '60s and early '70s, campus educational philosophy, in general, has turned away from formal attempts to bring any religious, social or moral standards and has allowed dominant individuals to guide (or fail to guide) students in any moral matters, except perhaps for the question of cheating on exams and papers.

If we do believe that the campus is a community in which learning takes place in classroom, residential life, and all the interactions of students and others on campus, what elements might help these communities to become places where thoughtful, critical interaction of many community members takes place? This interaction should not coerce students by some imported moral and political agenda. This interaction should respect individual differences of students' racial, religious, cultural backgrounds and political and ethical standards. However, it should also insist that there are methods by which some of the wisdom of the ages, and the accumulated experiences of peers and mentors, can help students build elements of character and integrity that will follow them into professional, business and family life. I believe there are four procedural criteria that must guide us with respect to helping students achieve high standards in moral development and personal integrity.

First, avoid propositional or rationalistic instruction. Thoughtful, relevant growth in the realms of any human relations does not proceed from facts and propositions, no matter how true or obvious they seem to be. The nation has been flooded by facts on deaths caused by cancer from smoking, yet large numbers of students still smoke. There is a downturn in the total number of smokers, but I will argue that this does not come from the facts on the package, billboards or TV ads, but from peer pressure induced by a long and sustained educational campaign. Equally true, significant personal change does not come from slogans, propositional statements or dictums dropped down—as it were—from heaven as moral absolutes on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. When a student (or anyone else) is not involved personally and deeply in deciding what significant issues deeply affect interpersonal and moral dimensions of life, the possibility of change remains very remote.

Second, foster moral seriousness. Much of our society is characterized by the response that includes a shrug of the shoulders and the ubiquitous

word: “whatever.” I take this to mean that this person is in moral free-float, and whatever happens will happen. While this is neither the time nor the place for a discussion of fatalism, it seems clear that until one is deeply and personally involved in outlining the issues and questions that are important for that person, there is little or no chance that he or she will seriously consider any other understanding or belief that might change his or her perspective.

Third, keep guidelines relevant and meaningful. Theoretical as well as theological abstractions tend to float over the heads of students and others alike. I do not count this as an immature need for an instantaneous response, for many of the most important changes in living and attitudes take a very long time to come to fruition. But if a virtue is not rooted in the reality that one perceives, it is not likely that it will take root. There is an aphorism from the Tree of Wisdom, written by a Tibetan Buddhist:

Although a man may be learned in written works
Yet if he does not apply [what he knows]
[He resembles] the blind man, who even with a lamp
in his hand cannot see the road.

As one who has attempted for many years to help students learn religious faith and understanding, the quest for relevance and applicability is necessary to grow in faith or any virtue.

Finally, create a collective rather than an individual context. This dictum seems to run counter to much of our society. The teaching of virtue, taken as a whole or in any one of the many components to which we wish to assign it, must have a corporate element rather than a strictly individualistic context. The much maligned 12-step groups remain one of the few effective methods by which people can kick alcoholism. They rely, largely, on persons of similar needs simply “telling their story.” As one feels the compelling force of unconditional acceptance within these communities, we see genuinely significant change for the better.

Where are the places where virtue is learned, and by whom is that virtue taught? Even in the face of all that is negative and destructive in the lives of students, I believe we have all seen or know of significant and genuine instances of students who learn virtues that are relevant to their daily lives. While there is still no one, single definition of what virtue is, or virtues are, we all live on the premise of a famous folk philosopher: “I may not be able to define it, but I know it when I see it.” I think I can begin to identify the steps involved in the teaching and learning of virtue.

There seems to be implied in the question “Can virtue be taught in the university?” the notion that there might be one “virtue” or list of “virtues” that could be generally applicable to our whole community. It is this assumption that I believe to be wrong. When we have systematized and sanitized virtues sufficiently to be applicable to a large group of students, I believe we have removed the core dynamic that makes any such virtue vital and important enough to be worth learning. Clearly, the specifics of what virtue is taught will probably be different from place to place, time to time, and from one group to another. If courage is a virtue to be learned, can it be taught in a case study method that might put me into a situation in which I am called on to react with courage to an offensive remark that might be racially insensitive, or sexist or homophobic? We begin with moral seriousness on the issue, apply it in an area of relevance for the life of the student, and reinforce it by peer support and/or the peer pressure of the group. This illustration is taken from a training session with Resident Advisors for whom this is a real and crucial issue.

Who gets to decide the issues to be confronted, and the virtues that are the appropriate response to those issues? If I follow my own guidelines, it will be necessary to find within any smaller community of the university, the issues that are vital or important for them, and those responses that would seem valuable and appropriate. Usually, I would not refer to the desired responses as “virtues,” lest the very word spook out the participants.

Over the years, I have watched numbers of smaller communities within the university wrestle with the issues that confront them, and then find many different ways in which the members learn to develop the responses that will solve the problems, relieve the tensions, or facilitate harmony within the groups. Certainly there is no single method of learning or teaching, but the context is nearly always the same: a community of like interests and caring; a consensus on a vital problem or issue that must be confronted; a response requiring the most effective response in the solving of that problem. Each community will have different issues and different means of solution. What is a problem for the men’s basketball team will not be the same problem for the Chapel choir, or for the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Alliance. Would that mean there is no general consensus on what virtues are among the various groups? I doubt very seriously if those three could agree on classic names for the traits learned in solving these problems. It would seem clear to me that the process, if analyzed in depth, would surely provide a pattern that would make a great dissertation topic.

Does this seem to end as a counsel of despair? Certainly not. It says that probably the classroom and professors are only a small part of any campus mixture, and certainly there are times when virtue will be learned in the classroom as well. Virtue or virtues can be taught in the university, but certainly not by the conventional means we have usually brought to bear. It may be time to formalize new ways of learning.

